

DIRECTIONS FOR THE DELIVERY OF THE 7 MAY 2026 SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT ELECTION

BACKGROUND

1. The Local Electoral Administration (Scotland) Act 2011 (S.4A) gives the Convener of the Electoral Management Board for Scotland (EMB) authority to make directions to Returning Officers (ROs) and Electoral Registration Officers (EROs) in relation to the exercise of their functions in delivering the Scottish Parliament election.

PURPOSE OF DIRECTIONS

2. The EMB coordinates delivery of the election across Scotland with a focus on the interests of the voter. The overall goal is to deliver results that will be accepted and trusted as accurate, resulting from election processes that are accessible, consistently delivered, efficient and secure.
3. This goal is achieved through a consistent voter experience and a resilient approach to all planning and implementation. Any Directions the Convener has determined as appropriate will assist ROs, EROs and other persons in carrying out their functions in pursuit of this aim.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE DIRECTIONS

4. The Convener has been making formal Directions to ROs and EROs to support the delivery of Scottish Parliament Elections since 2016 with informal recommendations made in 2011. Directions covering Scottish Local Government Elections have been made by the Convener since 2012.
5. Directions for the 2026 Scottish Parliament Election are based on significant precedent, taking account of the lessons learned by the whole community from previous events. The experience of the administration of the UK Parliamentary General election in 2024, particularly the challenges around print and postal vote administration, has informed the development of these Directions. They are further intended to anticipate risks and challenges that may arise.

CONSULTATION

6. As required by legislation, the Directions have been the subject of formal consultation within the EMB, which includes both ROs and EROs, and with the

Electoral Commission. The final Directions reflect issues identified and comments made in those consultations.

7. There have also been informal discussions with print and IT contractors and with Royal Mail, to ensure that key suppliers are aware of the production schedules that will be required by the Directions. The Directions, as draft proposals, were presented to ROs and EROs and Electoral Administrators at an event hosted by the EMB and Electoral Commission on 7 October with opportunity following the event for their comment and feedback.
8. Following discussion at the conference, the EMB approved this final set of Directions at the end of October 2025. Following the Board's approval, The Convener is now content formally to make the Directions which are presented below. The table below provides a full statement of the Directions with a short commentary where clarification might be useful, as has been the convention with the Directions that have been made for previous elections.

GOULD PRINCIPLE

9. These Directions are being made formally on 3 November 2025 ahead of the 6-month window required by the Gould Principle. The draft Directions have previously been widely circulated such that ROs and EROs have been able to incorporate them into their planning.

ACCESSIBILITY

10. In February 2024, in support of the delivery of the UK Parliamentary General Election, the Convener of the EMB identified a series of *recommended* measures to be taken by ROs and EROs to improve the accessibility of elections. No specific direction is being made in this area for the Scottish Parliament Election in May 2026. However, the Electoral Commission is producing statutory guidance with respect to the accessibility of elections and the recent legislation (The Scottish Parliament (Elections etc.) (Miscellaneous Amendments) Order 2025 14(4D)) requires ROs to have regard to that guidance.
11. The general principles and actions that were identified in the [February 2024 recommendations](#) remain relevant and valid and ROs and EROs will wish to review those as they put their plans in place for May 2026.

SCOPE FOR ADDITIONAL DIRECTIONS

12. An effort has been made to minimise the number of Directions rather than adding to the rules. That said, the Convener of the EMB may make additional Directions in response to new information or changes in circumstances affecting the election. Any such Directions made would only be to support consistency of administration or to promote resilience and contingency. Recognising the Gould Principle, additional Directions within 6 months of the election will be avoided if possible.

ONGOING SUPPORT

13. The Convener, Members of the EMB, its officers and advisers are available to offer support and advice to ROs and EROs in the planning and delivery of the election. The Board will also engage with the Electoral Commission to access intelligence gained from their performance standards processes. This will support and inform the EMB's own oversight of the planning and delivery of the election.
14. The Convener gives a briefing at each SOLACE meeting, allowing Chief Executives collectively to consider election issues. He is available to Returning Officers at that meeting or any other time to discuss concerns around the delivery of electoral events. In addition, the broader community of electoral professionals in Scotland is supportive, experienced and willing to offer advice, expertise and support.

BRIEFING EVENTS SEMINARS AND OTHER RESOURCES

15. The EMB, jointly with the Electoral Commission, has planned a series of seminars for RO and ERO staff in the coming months to cover specific practical elements of planning for the delivery of the 7 May election. All ROs and EROs should ensure that they are represented at these events.
16. The Electoral Commission offers a suite of guidance, forms and resources to assist Returning Officers. The EMB may also make available additional resources to both Regional and Constituency Returning Officers to assist in the administration of the election, including a template to allow RROs to calculate the allocation of seats for each Region.

DIRECTIONS FROM THE CONVENER OF THE EMB

	WORKSTREAM	DIRECTION
1	Ballot Papers Ballot Paper Colour	Ballot Papers for the Scottish Parliament election on 7 May 2026 are to be the same colours as were used in previous elections to the Scottish Parliament (2007, 2011, 2016 and 2021) i.e., PEACH (Regional Papers) and LILAC (Constituency Papers). <i>Comment</i> <i>Each voter is issued with two ballot papers: a Regional Paper and a Constituency Paper. The Scottish Parliament (Elections etc.) Order 2015 only requires that the colours are different. Consideration has been given to the usual issues that affect the choice of colour for ballot papers, i.e.</i> <i>a consistency of colours across Scotland to support national information and political campaigns;</i> <i>a preference to avoid colours that are identified with political parties or particular policy campaigns;</i> <i>an avoidance of colours or colour schemes that might prove challenging to those with visual impairment; and</i> <i>a preference that colours should be clearly different from one another so that papers are easily distinguished in a “rummage” of boxes.</i> <i>Print production methods may vary with some suppliers using coloured paper and others a colour wash process, but for reference it is expected that the colours will conform to Lilac as Pantone 2692 and Peach as Pantone 138.</i>

	WORKSTREAM	DIRECTION
2	Notices Publication of Notice of Election	Returning Officers are directed to publish the Notice of Election on Monday 16 March 2026, allowing nominations to be taken from the following day, Tuesday 17 March 2026. <i>Comment</i> <i>The Notice of Election can be published at any point between Monday 16 March and Wednesday 25 March. A uniform publication date across Scotland provides consistency around the start of the nominations period and assists planning for campaigners, candidates and agents. The consistency also supports communication with voters and general public awareness of key dates.</i> <i>An early date allows the nomination period to be as long as possible. This benefits candidates and agents and allows RO teams, especially those with responsibility for Regional nominations, to resource and plan for accepting nominations more effectively.</i>
3	Poll Cards Date of dispatch of poll cards	Returning Officers should dispatch poll cards between Tuesday 17 March and Wednesday 18 March. <i>Comment</i> <i>Legislation (Rule 24 Sch 2 Of the SP Order 2015) requires Returning Officers to issue poll cards as soon as is reasonably practicable after publishing the Notice of Election.</i> <i>This date would imply a registration deadline of around 6 February for a newly registered elector to be included in this first issue of poll cards. Poll cards will be issued on the basis of the March register and the deadline for inclusion in this register is 6 February.</i> <i>A two-day window is being directed rather than a single date to promote consistency in voter experience across Scotland while allowing flexibility for Returning Officers who work with different suppliers of key support services.</i>

	WORKSTREAM	DIRECTION
4	Absent Voting First dispatch of postal ballot packs	The first issue of postal votes should be dispatched, by first class post, between Wednesday 15 April and Friday 17 April. <i>Comment</i> <i>Legislation states that postal ballot papers and postal voting statements should be issued as soon as is practicable. Nominations will close at 4pm on Wednesday 1 April 2026.</i> <i>A consistent date of dispatch/receipt by voters will support national communication and voter awareness activities by the RO and the Electoral Commission and allow political parties and others to plan their own campaigns.</i> <i>This would mean that if an elector who is already registered applies for a postal vote by 23 March, then it should be in this first issue.</i> <i>A consistent final issue date of postal votes will also be agreed.</i>
5	Second Interim Election Notice of Alteration (SIENA) Publication Date	Electoral Registration Officers must publish the Second Interim Election Notice of Alteration (SIENA) on 10 April 2026. <i>With publication of the SIENA on 10 April 2026, a second issue of postal votes is able to pick up those electors who have applied for a postal vote since the first issue, ensuring they get their postal packs as quickly as possible and do not have to wait until the final issue. This second issue would be dispatched around 20 April, but this direction is for a consistent SIENA publication rather than a consistent date of dispatch for the interim issue of postal votes.</i>

	WORKSTREAM	DIRECTION
6	Absent Voting Final Dispatch of Postal Votes	ROs must ensure that there is at least one additional issue of postal ballot packs. The final dispatch to all validly registered postal voters should be handed over from printers to the postal services on Tuesday 28 April using the Final Election Notice of Alteration (FENA). <i>Comment</i> <i>Note the 5pm, Tuesday 21 April deadline for requests for a new postal vote or to change or cancel an existing postal vote or proxy appointment, for those electors who are already registered. This does not preclude ROs from issuing postal vote packs at other times if necessary, e.g. because an elector is going to be on holiday or away on business by the time of the next issue of postal votes, and the RO decides, as they can, to issue an individual postal vote pack.</i> <i>The postal ballot packs dispatched must include postal votes being sent to electors who are temporarily overseas e.g. on a holiday. There is no special provision for overseas voters, although their numbers will be limited under this franchise. There will be service voters and those away for holidays/students with overseas ballot paper addresses.</i>
7	Ballot Papers Ballot Paper Numbering Protocol for Regional Ballot Papers	Regional Returning Officers must implement a ballot paper numbering protocol such that each paper is uniquely numbered, different from any other paper in that contest. <i>Comment</i> <i>Ballot papers must be numbered such that each ballot paper is unique at the relevant poll. (Ballot paper numbers are distinct from the Unique Identifying Mark (UIM)).</i> <i>No specific recommendation is being given on how this should be achieved across the country and different approaches might be appropriate in different circumstances. Options for RROs would include the use of prefixes to the ballot paper number or allocations of sets of numbers to constituencies.</i> <i>The fundamental requirement is to ensure that no contest has multiple papers with the same number.</i>

	WORKSTREAM	DIRECTION
8	Ballot Papers Official Mark	The official mark on ballot papers issued in polling stations should be different from that on papers issued in postal vote packs. <i>Comment</i> <i>The Scottish Parliament (Elections etc.) Order 2015 requires both Constituency and Regional ballot papers to carry an Official Mark. While the Official Mark is to be determined by the Constituency Returning Officer, RROs must ensure that the Mark is consistent across all Regional Papers.</i>

9	Verification and Count Count Timing	Returning Officers must ensure that the first ballot boxes are opened at 9am on Friday 8 May 2026, to allow the verification and counting of constituency and regional ballot papers in their constituencies to begin. For the avoidance of doubt, there is to be no overnight verification of ballot boxes or counting of votes. If ROs choose to verify the unused, spoilt and postal votes at the close of poll and overnight, which they are free to do, then observers, candidates and their agents must be able to attend these processes. Comment <i>For the Returning Officers and the EMB, the priority is the production of accurate results in which the voter can have full confidence. Accuracy is always more important than speed. For local government elections in Scotland a “next day count” is well-accepted procedure and acknowledged as allowing a greater level of resilience within Election Teams while supporting accuracy.</i> <i>The same arguments apply to elections to the Scottish Parliament and are further amplified given the complexities of handling two ballot papers and the need for communication between CROs and RROs for calculation of the Regional Result and seat allocation. The factors supporting the delivery of a next day count include:</i> <i>• accuracy of the process with a reduced scope for error from rested rather than fatigued staff;</i> <i>• resilience of systems and venues, with problems easier to resolve during daytime;</i> <i>• staff welfare, recognising that key members of the election teams will often have been working for well over 24 hours by the conclusion of an overnight count;</i> <i>• staff availability, with a daytime count freeing polling staff and others to assist at the count;</i> <i>• time to allow for the authentication of late postal votes which needs to be completed before verification can be concluded; and</i> <i>• better public engagement, with results coming through the late afternoon ready for the 6pm news rather than throughout the early hours of the morning.</i>
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	WORKSTREAM	DIRECTION
		<i>There are well-engineered and tested controls in place for each verification/count operation to ensure that the results are correct. However, holding the count the day following the poll allows the effective use of fresh and rested staff. This in part mitigates the risk of any errors which would otherwise need to be corrected.</i> <i>Returning Officer planning must include an element of risk management, considering how we can best minimise the known challenges that we face in planning, preparation and delivery. An overnight count brings additional risk to an already complex process.</i>

PERFORMANCE MONITORING

17. It is not in the remit of the EMB to monitor the performance of ROs and EROs. However, legislation gives the Convener power to make these Directions and ROs and EROs are required to comply with them as they would with the other election rules. If an RO or ERO has any concerns about their ability to follow any of these Directions locally then they should raise this with the Convener of the EMB immediately and he will be happy to discuss. The Electoral Commission will monitor compliance with these Directions in their usual performance monitoring engagement and activity.

TIMETABLE FOR THE SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT ELECTION ON THURSDAY 7 MAY 2026

18. Under the Scottish Elections (Reform) Act 2020, an ordinary general election to the Scottish Parliament is required to be held no later than Thursday 7 May 2026. The date of the poll may be varied by up to a month by the monarch, on proposal by the Presiding Officer. New legislation may affect the times and dates set out below.
19. The days which are disregarded in calculating the timetable are Saturday, Sunday, bank holidays and any day appointed for public thanksgiving or mourning. The timetable may change in the event of days being appointed for public thanksgiving or mourning.

Timetable for the Scottish Parliament election on Thursday 7 May 2026

Under the [*Scottish Elections \(Reform\) Act 2020*](#), an ordinary general election to the Scottish Parliament is required to **be held no later than Thursday 7 May 2026**. The date of the poll [*may be varied by up to a month*](#) by the monarch, on proposal by the Presiding Officer. New legislation may affect the times and dates set out below.

The days which are disregarded in calculating the timetable are Saturday, Sunday, bank holidays and any day appointed for public thanksgiving or mourning. The timetable may change in the event of days being appointed for public thanksgiving or mourning.

EVENT	WORKING DAYS BEFORE POLL (DEADLINE IF NOT MIDNIGHT)	DATE (DEADLINE IF NOT MIDNIGHT)
Publication of notice of election	Not later than 28 days and not earlier than 35 days	Between Monday 16 March and Wednesday 25 March DIRECTED AT 16 MARCH
Delivery of nomination papers	From the day after the publication of the notice of election until the 23rd day (4pm)	Not later than 4pm on any working day after publication of notice of election until 4pm on Wednesday 1 April
Deadline for delivery of nomination papers	23 days (4pm)	4pm on Wednesday 1 April
Deadline for withdrawals of nomination	23 days (4pm)	4pm on Wednesday 1 April
Making objections to nomination papers	During the hours allowed for delivery of nomination papers on the last day for their delivery and the hour following. No objection may be made in the afternoon of the last day except to a nomination paper delivered within 24 hours of the last time for its delivery.	Objections can only be made on Wednesday 1 April (until 5pm). Until 12 noon on Wednesday 1 April objections can be made to all delivered nominations Between 12 noon and 5pm on Wednesday 1 April objections can only be made to nominations delivered after 4pm on Tuesday 31 March

EVENT	WORKING DAYS BEFORE POLL (DEADLINE IF NOT MIDNIGHT)	DATE (DEADLINE IF NOT MIDNIGHT)
Deadline for the notification of appointment of election agents	23 days (4pm)	4pm on Wednesday 1 April
Publication of statement of persons nominated, including notice of poll and situation of polling stations	If no objections: on 23 days (at 5pm) If objection(s) are made: Not before objection(s) are disposed of but not later than 24 hours after the last time for delivery of nomination papers.	If no objections: at 5pm on Wednesday 1 April Objection(s) made not before objection(s) are disposed of but not later than 4pm on Thursday 2 April
Publication of first interim election notice of alteration	23 days	Wednesday 1 April
Deadline for receiving applications for registration.	12 days	Monday 20 April
Deadline for receiving new postal vote and postal proxy applications, and for changes to existing postal or proxy vote.	11 days (5pm)	5pm on Tuesday 21 April
Deadline for receiving new applications to vote by proxy (not postal proxy or emergency proxies)	6 days (5pm)	5pm on Tuesday 28 April
Publication of second interim election notice of alteration	Between 22 days and 6 days	Between Thursday 2 April and Tuesday 28 April (inclusive) DIRECTED AS 10 APRIL
Publication of final election notice of alteration	5 days	Wednesday 29 April
Deadline for notification of appointment of polling and counting agents	5 days	Wednesday 29 April
Deadline for notification of appointment of sub-agents	2 days	Tuesday 5 May
Polling day	0 (7am to 10pm)	7am to 10pm on Thursday 7 May

EVENT	WORKING DAYS BEFORE POLL (DEADLINE IF NOT MIDNIGHT)	DATE (DEADLINE IF NOT MIDNIGHT)
Last time for re-issue of spoilt or lost postal votes.	0 (5pm)	5pm on Thursday 7 May
Deadline for emergency proxy applications	0 (5pm)	5pm on Thursday 7 May
Last time to alter the register due to clerical error or court appeal.	0 (9pm)	9pm on Thursday 7 May

REGIONAL RETURNING OFFICER RESPONSIBILITIES*

REGION	REGIONAL RETURNING OFFICER	CONSTITUENCIES
Central Scotland and Lothians West	North Lanarkshire	Airdrie; Almond Valley; Bathgate; Coatbridge and Chryston; Cumbernauld and Kilsyth; Falkirk East and Linlithgow; Falkirk West; Motherwell and Wishaw; Uddingston and Bellshill
Edinburgh and Lothians East	City of Edinburgh	East Lothian Coast and Lammermuirs; Edinburgh Central; Edinburgh Eastern, Musselburgh and Tranent; Edinburgh North Eastern and Leith; Edinburgh North Western; Edinburgh Northern; Edinburgh South Western; Edinburgh Southern; Midlothian North
Glasgow	Glasgow	Glasgow Anniesland; Glasgow Baillieston and Shettleston; Glasgow Cathcart and Pollok; Glasgow Central; Glasgow Easterhouse and Springburn; Glasgow Kelvin and Maryhill; Glasgow Southside; Rutherglen and Cambuslang
Highlands and Islands	Highland	Argyll and Bute; Caithness, Sutherland and Ross; Inverness and Nairn; Moray; Na h-Eileanan an Iar; Orkney Islands; Shetland Islands; Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch
Mid Scotland and Fife	Fife	Clackmannanshire and Dunblane; Cowdenbeath; Dunfermline; Fife North East; Kirkcaldy; Mid Fife and Glenrothes; Perthshire North; Perthshire South and Kinross-shire; Stirling
North East Scotland	Aberdeen City	Aberdeen Central; Aberdeen Deeside and North Kincardine; Aberdeen Donside; Aberdeenshire East; Aberdeenshire West; Angus North and Mearns; Angus South; Banffshire and Buchan Coast; Dundee City East; Dundee City West
South Scotland	Dumfries and Galloway	Ayr; Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley; Clydesdale; Dumfriesshire; East Kilbride; Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire; Galloway and West Dumfries; Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse; Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley; Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale
West Scotland	Renfrewshire	Clydebank and Milngavie; Cunninghame North; Cunninghame South; Dumbarton; Eastwood; Inverclyde; Paisley; Renfrewshire North and Cardonald; Renfrewshire West and Levern Valley; Strathkelvin and Bearsden

CONSTITUENCY NAME	RETURNING OFFICER*
Aberdeen Central	Aberdeen City
Aberdeen Deeside and North Kincardine	Aberdeen City
Aberdeen Donside	Aberdeen City
Aberdeenshire East	Aberdeenshire
Aberdeenshire West	Aberdeenshire
Banffshire and Buchan Coast	Aberdeenshire
Angus North and Mearns	Angus
Angus South	Angus
Argyll and Bute	Argyll and Bute
Edinburgh Central	City of Edinburgh
Edinburgh North Eastern and Leith	City of Edinburgh
Edinburgh North Western	City of Edinburgh
Edinburgh Northern	City of Edinburgh
Edinburgh South Western	City of Edinburgh
Edinburgh Southern	City of Edinburgh
Clackmannanshire and Dunblane	Clackmannanshire
Dumfriesshire	Dumfries and Galloway
Galloway and West Dumfries	Dumfries and Galloway
Dundee City East	Dundee City
Dundee City West	Dundee City
Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley	East Ayrshire
Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley	East Ayrshire
Strathkelvin and Bearsden	East Dunbartonshire
East Lothian Coast and Lammermuirs	East Lothian
Edinburgh Eastern, Musselburgh and Tranent	East Lothian
Eastwood	East Renfrewshire
Falkirk East and Linlithgow	Falkirk
Falkirk West	Falkirk
Cowdenbeath	Fife
Dunfermline	Fife
Fife North East	Fife
Kirkcaldy	Fife
Mid Fife and Glenrothes	Fife
Glasgow Anniesland	Glasgow City
Glasgow Baillieston and Shettleston	Glasgow City
Glasgow Cathcart and Pollok	Glasgow City
Glasgow Central	Glasgow City

CONSTITUENCY NAME	RETURNING OFFICER*
Glasgow Easterhouse and Springburn	Glasgow City
Glasgow Kelvin and Maryhill	Glasgow City
Glasgow Southside	Glasgow City
Caithness, Sutherland and Ross	Highland
Inverness and Nairn	Highland
Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch	Highland
Inverclyde	Inverclyde
Midlothian North	Midlothian
Moray	Moray
Na h-Eileanan an Iar	Na h-Eileanan an Iar
Cunninghame North	North Ayrshire
Cunninghame South	North Ayrshire
Uddingston and Bellshill	North Lanarkshire
Airdrie	North Lanarkshire
Coatbridge and Chryston	North Lanarkshire
Cumbernauld and Kilsyth	North Lanarkshire
Motherwell and Wishaw	North Lanarkshire
Orkney Islands	Orkney Islands
Perthshire North	Perth and Kinross
Perthshire South and Kinross-shire	Perth and Kinross
Paisley	Renfrewshire
Renfrewshire North and Cardonald	Renfrewshire
Renfrewshire West and Levern Valley	Renfrewshire
Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire	Scottish Borders
Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale	Scottish Borders
Shetland Islands	Shetland Islands
Ayr	South Ayrshire
Clydesdale	South Lanarkshire
East Kilbride	South Lanarkshire
Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse	South Lanarkshire
Rutherglen and Cambuslang	South Lanarkshire
Stirling	Stirling
Clydebank and Milngavie	West Dunbartonshire
Dumbarton	West Dunbartonshire
Almond Valley	West Lothian
Bathgate	West Lothian

*Designation of Returning Officers according to [The Scottish Parliament Elections \(Regional Returning Officers and Constituency Returning Officers\) Order 2025](#)