

Review Report

Scottish Parliament Election 7 May 2026

**The Electoral Management Board for Scotland's
review of feedback from Returning Officers, Electoral
Registration Officers & their teams**

Report to the Electoral Management Board

June 2026

EMB | Electoral Management
Board for Scotland

Outline

1. This paper gives a summary of the Electoral Management Board for Scotland's (EMB) review of the delivery of the Scottish Parliament Election on 7 May 2026. The focus is feedback provided in May and June 2026 from Returning Officer (RO) and Electoral Registration Officer (ERO) teams across Scotland. There has also been discussion within the EMB and with other partners / stakeholders including Police Scotland and the Electoral Commission.
2. The Electoral Registration Committee (ERC) of the Scottish Assessors Association (SAA) have undertaken a similar review with EROs in Scotland. Some issues in this report refer to EROs, but the focus is on the electoral administration work of the ROs.
3. This is not a full account of the statistics of the election, which are available elsewhere, e.g. at [SPICE](#) and the [House of Commons Library](#). An analysis of the [results is also available on the EMB website](#). Rather, the focus is the comments of teams immediately following the event as they reflected on the challenges and identified lessons learned.
4. A debrief event was held on 19 May 2026 to which all ROs and EROs across Scotland were invited. The agenda allowed discussion of the delivery of the whole election, but was shaped around the topics which had been highlighted for attention in the days following the poll:

Count Timing (day time)	Accessibility provisions	Royal Mail, poll cards/letter and postal votes
Nominations, party names, and statutory notices	Behaviour of Media	Experience on polling day / registers etc
Publication of results	Count processes/speed	Anything else (police, candidate security etc)

5. In addition to the 19 May debrief session, a survey was circulated to all RO teams seeking comment on issues relating to the resourcing and administration of this election.
6. This paper provides a summary of both the 19 May discussion and of the feedback from RO teams survey.

Purpose

7. This report summarises the main findings of these recent debrief exercises and highlights priority actions to be considered for implementation ahead of future elections, especially the Scottish Local Government Elections in May 2027.

Overall Summary

8. Overall the delivery of the election was successful. Results were produced accurately, in good time and with no challenge. There was efficient administration by ROs and EROs with strong support from the EMB, Electoral Commission, council resources and Police Scotland.
9. However, there were a number of severe strains on the system arising from the complexity of the operation, especially with respect to the regional elements of the election and the overall capacity of the infrastructure.

Key Findings

10. **Daytime counting.** There was a strong consensus in favour of daytime counts. The benefits previously identified when the count timing was directed were apparent in practice: improved staffing availability, reduced fatigue, reduced costs and a generally lower operational risk. A daytime count should be the default position for future Scottish Parliament Elections.
11. It was generally felt that it would have been more difficult to recruit staff for an overnight count. Some candidates and agents preferred the timing, although this was not universal. Overnight counts would have left some staff working for well over 24 hours which remains a health and safety concern and a potential risk to the integrity of the process.
12. **Size of the Regional Paper.** The size of the Regional Papers was identified as a significant operational challenge for all ROs at all stages of the election: polling, postal voting and the count. The logistical issues at the count were particularly noted by ROs. The large papers slowed the count process, made adjudication more complex and put additional demands on the number and activity of count staff. There were also reports of voters being puzzled by the large number of options. At polling, the paper was difficult to handle for voters and led to ballot boxes being filled quickly.
13. One option suggested was to increase the deposit to stand in the Region, so that it becomes a multiple of the constituency deposit. The argument is that a regional nomination is effectively contesting multiple constituencies and the deposit should

reflect that. Certainly the proliferation of candidates/parties on the regional paper is impacting several operational elements of the election and adding to voter confusion.

14. **Staffing Pressures.** For polling and the count ROs face ongoing recruitment and retention challenges. There are problems with late withdrawals and “no-shows” at both polling and the count. Daytime counts mitigated risk but did not resolve underlying issues. At polling it is increasingly difficult to recruit the volume of suitable staff. Within core teams council resources are limited and it is a challenge to release the skilled and experienced staff needed to resource a successful election.
15. **Postal Voting, Poll cards and Royal Mail support.** Postal voting was generally well managed and supported by Royal Mail with few complaints of lost or undelivered postal vote packs. However there were significant concerns around the reliability of poll card/letter delivery and the effectiveness of poll letters as a mode of communication with voters. The letters may be less visible to voters and liable to be ignored. The cost of postage for both poll cards and letters is close to being the largest single cost of each election. The speed of delivery of poll letters was also a concern and there were suggestions that first-class postage may be required if performance does not improve, which would further add to the costs.
16. **Accessibility.** The new accessibility measures: the tactile overlays, audio ballot papers and training videos, were well received and assessed as excellent examples of partnership working following the engagement with RNIB and Sight Scotland. However there was a low reported uptake of the measures at polling. Additional communication and promotion may help but there was a feeling that there must be proportionality in the actions taken and a broader offering to other communities.
17. **Nominations and Guidance for Candidates and Agents.** There were issues with poorly completed nomination papers and confusion around the rules. For example the “description” on the constituency paper was often interpreted as something in different from the party name.
18. There was comment that candidates and agents were not taking note of the wide range of guidance provided from ROs and from the Electoral Commission. It may be over-complex or may reflect a changing attitude to guidance with an unwillingness to read documentation. Whatever the cause, there is a broad perception that party agents were less experienced and nominations less well organised and less well completed than in previous elections.
19. **Directions, support and guidance.** The EMB directions, seminars and support were well valued, and the Electoral Commission support and guidance was seen as responsive and helpful when required. The written guidance from the Electoral

Commission while comprehensive and helpful received some criticism in that the move to the html format has made it more difficult for some to find specific topics.

20. Count Processes and Infrastructure. Several RO teams had implemented mini-count models for the first time, and this innovation was seen as a positive step allowing better transparency, control and audit trails. However the count remains a focus of attention for future improvement, including the physical constraint of venues, staff availability, staff fatigue and the logistics of handling very large papers. In a small number of constituencies the counts did take longer to complete often due to limited venue capacity.

21. Media pressures and the publication of results. There was some tension with broadcast and print journalists at some count venues with complaints that the ROs were too strict in controlling the access of media to the count floor. The publication of results was inconsistent with complaints from journalists that the full results were not made available on line as soon as counts were complete.

22. Resilience. RO and ERO teams are committed professionals who operate robust and effective processes. However resources and capacity are limited and the overall infrastructure is fragile. To promote future resilience there were suggestions of simplification of processes, for example with respect to ballot paper design; strengthening workforce capacity and appropriate consistency and coordination at a national level.

23. Other elements. The support from Police Scotland was universally appreciated. There had been some concerns in the preparation period around the risk of candidate intimidation and potentially challenging behaviour at campaigning, polling and the counts but no issues arose. The Police Scotland support in advance of the election was excellent, proportionate and responsive with a clear and well communicated command structure.

24. Specific challenges faced by individual RO and ERO teams are being dealt with through targeted support from the EMB and Electoral Commission.

Recommendations for Board Consideration

25. This paper is only an overview of the issues identified by the RO and ERO teams. Some additional detail is given in the appendices. The following are presented as areas for future consideration and action.

Daytime counts to be accepted as the default	Consider options for limiting size of the Regional paper	Consider options for a workforce strategy
Review effectiveness and role of poll cards	Continue engagement with disability groups to promote use of accessibility measures	Consider routes for consistent result publication
Engage with media to agree count code of conduct	Partnership work with the Electoral Commission to review guidance for candidates	Count processes and venues - capacity review

Actions

Issue	Status	Rationale	Actions
Daytime Count	● Green	Strong consensus and proven effectiveness	Formalise as default position for Scottish Parliament Elections
Regional Ballot Paper	● Red	Major operational constraint impacting multiple stages	Policy review (candidate deposits, ballot design) in partnership with Scottish Government and Electoral Commission as appropriate
Workforce and Staffing	● Red	Persistent recruitment and resilience issues	EMB working group to develop workforce strategy considering succession planning, training, shared support etc

Poll cards	● Amber	Concerns effectiveness and role	Review purpose, format and delivery methods; e.g. email /app options
Accessibility	● Amber	Good tools and successful partnership working with RNIB etc but low uptake / awareness and need to address needs of additional communities.	Communications work with disability groups and wider reach to other excluded communities.
Result publication	● Amber (low)	Concern limited to a few specialists; results were available but not always consistently	Consistency could be achieved with common templates, checklists and potential single portal
Media relations	● Amber (low)	Some inconsistency and tensions	National engagement with media to agree code of conduct / expected behaviour
Nominations	● Amber	Quality and understanding issues	Simplify and strengthen guidance and consider how best to support candidates as stakeholders
Count Processes & Venues	● Amber	Operational strain from complexity of process, limited capacity of venues	Review layouts, training, and resourcing; Consider “best practice” count template.

Appendix 1 Scottish Parliament Election 2026; Directions to Returning Officers and Electoral Registration Officers from the Convener of the Electoral Management Board for Scotland

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	<p>Ballot Papers</p> <p>Ballot Paper Colour</p>	<p>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).</p> <p>Comment</p> <p><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></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <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> <p><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></p>

	WORKSTREAM	DIRECTION
2	<p>Notices</p> <p>Publication of Notice of Election</p>	<p>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.</p> <p>Comment</p> <p><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></p> <p><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></p>
3	<p>Poll Cards</p> <p>Date of dispatch of poll cards</p>	<p>Returning Officers should dispatch poll cards between Tuesday 17 March and Wednesday 18 March.</p> <p>Comment</p> <p><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></p> <p><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></p> <p><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></p>

	WORKSTREAM	DIRECTION
4	<p>Absent Voting</p> <p>First dispatch of postal ballot packs</p>	<p>The first issue of postal votes should be dispatched, by first class post, between Wednesday 15 April and Friday 17 April.</p> <p>Comment</p> <p><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></p> <p><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></p> <p><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></p> <p><i>A consistent final issue date of postal votes will also be agreed.</i></p>
5	<p>Second Interim Election Notice of Alteration (SIENA)</p> <p><i>Publication Date</i></p>	<p>Electoral Registration Officers must publish the Second Interim Election Notice of Alteration (SIENA) on 10 April 2026.</p> <p><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></p>

	WORKSTREAM	DIRECTION
6	<p>Absent Voting</p> <p>Final Dispatch of Postal Votes</p>	<p>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).</p> <p>Comment</p> <p><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></p> <p><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></p>
7	<p>Ballot Papers</p> <p>Ballot Paper Numbering Protocol for Regional Ballot Papers</p>	<p>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.</p> <p>Comment</p> <p><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></p> <p><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></p> <p><i>The fundamental requirement is to ensure that no contest has multiple papers with the same number.</i></p>

	WORKSTREAM	DIRECTION
8	<p>Ballot Papers</p> <p>Official Mark</p>	<p>The official mark on ballot papers issued in polling stations should be different from that on papers issued in postal vote packs.</p> <p>Comment</p> <p><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></p>

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

*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.*

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:

- *accuracy of the process with a reduced scope for error from rested rather than fatigued staff;*
- *resilience of systems and venues, with problems easier to resolve during daytime;*
- *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;*
- *staff availability, with a daytime count freeing polling staff and others to assist at the count;*
- *time to allow for the authentication of late postal votes which needs to be completed before verification can be concluded; and*
- *better public engagement, with results coming through the late afternoon ready for the 6pm news rather than throughout the early hours of the morning.*

	WORKSTREAM	DIRECTION
		<p><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></p> <p><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></p>

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	<p>If no objections: on 23 days (at 5pm)</p> <p>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.</p>	<p>If no objections: at 5pm on Wednesday 1 April</p> <p>Objection(s) made not before objection(s) are disposed of but not later than 4pm on Thursday 2 April</p>
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

EVENT	WORKING DAYS BEFORE POLL (DEADLINE IF NOT MIDNIGHT)	DATE (DEADLINE IF NOT MIDNIGHT)
Polling day	0 (7am to 10pm)	7am to 10pm on Thursday 7 May
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

REGION	REGIONAL RETURNING OFFICER	CONSTITUENCIES
West Scotland	Renfrewshire	Clydebank and Milngavie; Cunninghame North; Cunninghame South; Dumbarton; Eastwood; Inverclyde; Paisley; Renfrewshire North and Cardonald; Renfrewshire West and Lavern 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

CONSTITUENCY NAME	RETURNING OFFICER*
Glasgow Cathcart and Pollok	Glasgow City
Glasgow Central	Glasgow City
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

CONSTITUENCY NAME	RETURNING OFFICER*
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](#)

Appendix 2 – EMB Activity to Support ROs and EROs

Joint Conference 7 October 2025	Joint conference with the Electoral Commission, supporting a range of elements related to preparation for the Scottish Parliament elections. Material is available on the EMB website and an important element was the checklist for EROs and ROs to use in assessing readiness.
Count Best Practice Workshops	Series of 3 online workshops discussing the essential elements of manual counts, best practice and allowing sharing of layouts and documentation. Seminar on 25 February 2026 slides available
Nominations and Proof Reading Seminar	Well attended seminar 3 March 2026 covering the principles and practice of taking nominations the Scottish Parliament election and of proof reading documents.
Recount Principles Seminar	Seminar for ROs on 29 April covering issues around recounts. Well attended.
Signature Verification workshops	As in previous years the Forensic Science Service of Police Scotland provided two seminars on the principles to be applied in signature verification around postal vote verification. Over 100 RO staff attended form across Scotland.

Support and Guidance in response to day to day issues in delivery

The EMB was called on to provide a range of ad hoc advice and support through the election period on issues covering preparation for the count, polling, nominations and relations with candidates and agents.

Appendix 3 – Summary of discussion at Debrief session on 19 May 2026

Workstream	Key Points for action/review
<p>Count Timing <i>(assessing the direction for the count on the following day)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unanimous support for day time count <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Release of additional staffing resource to deliver the count ○ Sheer length of the count making an overnight schedule difficult and potentially impossible to staff ○ Time added due to difficulties in handling the large Regional paper ○ Time available for processing of final postal votes handed in at polling stations which were more numerous than expected • Change still requires a long shift of work for some staff - receipting boxes and verification of unused (if undertaken overnight) • Assumption that this will be the default for all future SP counts <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Note that this might not be popular with all stakeholders – some politicians and media remain dissatisfied with the change
<p>Royal Mail Performance</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Generally there was a sense that performance of Royal Mail had been much better than expected. This was especially true with respect to postal votes. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ EMB/SAA engagement with Royal Mail seen as a positive move to be continued • Postal vote delivery had very few issues of late or failed delivery. • Much more concern expressed that there had been poor performance with respect to the delivery of poll cards/letters. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Some fear that the use of second class post for poll cards under new delivery regime means that delivery is slower or less reliable. ○ Also cards go so early they may be mislaid or forgotten ○ Also concern that use of letters may mean that the envelopes are ignored – ie they are delivered but the voter doesn't realise what it is that they have received. (EROs and ROs reported large numbers of phone calls from voters who had not received a poll card) ○ The use of poll cards has been discouraged by Royal Mail since they are more difficult to process, so reverting to them may be challenging. ○ The use of first class post may be an option but would be expensive to the Scottish Government in the funding of the election

Workstream	Key Points for action/review
	<p>Action</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need for engagement with Government on the function of the poll card and what is the best way to communicate with voters. • Consider reverting to card not letter • Review whether switch to first class is justified.
<p>Behaviour of the media at Counts</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In several counts, especially those with high profile candidates, there were some tensions with journalists and broadcast media. There was an expectation by media that they would be able to roam freely on the main count floor. However ROs give priority to integrity of the count, secrecy of the ballot and space for count staff and official observers and agents. • In some cases the behaviour of the media was seen as bullying with threats that the RO would be singled out as preventing free reporting. • Many ROs have designated media area, separate from the count tables allowing visibility of the process. • Media have no formal role in delivering the count or in scrutinising it. They are there to report but the priority is the process. • Issues were not universal – some had good positive relations with journalists. • Briefings, prevent visits to the venue and a single point of contact through a press officer were recommended. <p>Action</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Potential for EMB future recommendation or direction in future. • Need for engagement with media – potential to develop a 'code of conduct' for media • Space and venues differ with respect to what is appropriate locally
<p>Accessibility provision</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus of the discussion was very much on the new ballot paper overlay and accompanying audio ballot papers. • There was agreement that this had been a positive move and a good example of partnership working with RNIB / Sight Scotland in the development of the overlay and the training videos. The rollout of the material and training was popular and adopted by all. • However use of the overlay was poor with little uptake at polling as reported by ROs.

Workstream	Key Points for action/review
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RNIB seemed to be more involved and proactive than had been anticipated. ROs were given option of adopting different methods of audio provision – helplines, recorded audio or text to speech – but the RNIB “audit” pushed all towards the audio files hosted on line. • Some felt the focus on the visually impaired community was disproportionate – great effort was put in at cost to provide the support and train staff but the demand at polling was minimal. • There were some requests for the overlays to be provided to postal voters. ROs supported this where possible but the complexity of the postal pack means that independent postal voting is going to be a significant challenge.
<p>Nominations, statutory notices etc</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Several RO teams noted that the Regional paper was simply too big. This introduced challenges with respect to the handling of the paper at polling and the count and the production of postal packs. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Limiting the length or changing the shape of the paper was discussed – this would need action from Scottish Government ○ as would increasing the amount of the deposit, potentially matched by a reduction in the threshold for the return of deposit. This may be a barrier or deterrent to less serious candidates. The current deposit is the same as for a constituency but the electorate is 9 or 10 times as large. • The quality of completion of nomination papers was often poor, even from the larger parties. This is disappointing given the effort that goes into briefing and the provision of guidance from ROs and from Electoral Commission. • There is a feeling that candidates and agents do not read the guidance that is produced – possibly because there is too much of it. • There is also confusion on the constituency nomination with respect to “description” which is the party name not the party description <p>ACTION</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scottish Government to be asked to consider review of deposit or other ways to discourage frivolous nominations • Review guidance material provided to candidates and agents so that the essentials are clear without overwhelming the reader • Electoral Commission to be asked to review design of nomination papers to make completion more straight forward.

Workstream	Key Points for action/review
<p style="text-align: center;">Results publication</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EMB had received a letter expressing concern about the speed and completeness of the publication of results and data. BBS Open Letter on Improving Scottish Parliament Results Reporting – Ballot Box Scotland Issue was particularly around publication of regional results by constituency • All ROs had been requested to submit declaration to generic EMB mailbox to allow compilation of results. These were not sent by all ROs. • The results were all generally available on websites soon after declaration. • The only complaint was the letter referenced above – it is only academics and some bloggers that are looking for detailed data and they generally do not need it immediately. • A single site of data may be useful to provide consistency and a simple well signposted source for example similar to the Welsh EMB - Election results Vote.Wales <p>Action</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The EMB will consider and seek views on whether a framework or direction was required around this. • There is no desire for something onerous or cumbersome, nor to take autonomy from the local RO. • EMB will discuss in advance of the election in 2027.
<p style="text-align: center;">Count Processes</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The EMB had run seminars in advance of the election on Good Practice in Verification and Count. Some ROs had adopted new count approaches – mini count model • There was a request of additional guidance / training in adjudication with a specific example requested to be added to be Electoral Commission booklet/ placemat. (Good Guy/Not good guy) • There is often little interest in the Regional count and it can be difficult to get agents to attend adjudication of regional papers. • The large regional paper made adjudication difficult physically – some adopted digital projectors • There was some challenging behaviour and tension around RO ballot paper adjudication, and skills in de-escalation during this process were needed. This was an issue with respect to the newer parties although some noted that this was not universal across Scotland. • Some agents seemed to be ignorant with respect to the verification process despite briefings and guidance

Workstream	Key Points for action/review
	<p data-bbox="427 220 528 248">Action</p> <ul data-bbox="479 288 1514 363" style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="479 288 1319 320">• Consider additional training and guidance on adjudication <li data-bbox="479 328 1514 363">• Consider how best to manage potential tension at SLGE election in 2027
<p data-bbox="210 539 398 568">Other Issues</p>	<ul data-bbox="479 440 1912 632" style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="479 440 1912 515">• Police - the planning and support of Police Scotland at this election was well appreciated. Structures and engagement were much better than previous experience. <li data-bbox="479 523 1912 632">• ERO issues - ROs need to give certainty around print timetables / any late shift in print requirements – due to the impact on the ERO processes and data provision. Changes are inevitable sometimes but communication around is needed. Definite lesson for 2027

Preparing for SPE 2026 – RO / ERO checklist

Key actions to prioritise and cascade by the end of the year as you develop your plans.

Electoral Registration Officers

Legal changes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Review and understand new legal responsibilities<input type="checkbox"/> Assess impact on established processes / procedures<input type="checkbox"/> Cascade to relevant staff<input type="checkbox"/> Consider if and how changes need to be communicated to local stakeholders.
Project planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Engage with CRO / multiple CROs to collaborate and plan approach<input type="checkbox"/> Discussions should include:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Legislative and process changes<input type="checkbox"/> Risks<input type="checkbox"/> Contingency plans<input type="checkbox"/> Boundary changes<input type="checkbox"/> Cross boundary factors<input type="checkbox"/> Processes and data flow<input type="checkbox"/> Protocols / procedures / records<input type="checkbox"/> Communication between teams<input type="checkbox"/> Accessibility<input type="checkbox"/> Engagement and awareness
Boundary changes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Implement any boundary changes and subsequent polling district and place reviews changes<input type="checkbox"/> Ensure changes are robustly checked and accurately reflected in registers and data<input type="checkbox"/> Test for quality assurance
Cyber-security	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Prioritise Cybersecurity as a key risk in all your plans and delivery<input type="checkbox"/> Engaging with the latest guidance, information and developments.<input type="checkbox"/> Ensure staff are alert to risks and are familiar with the plans for incident response
Reserved postal vote reapplication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Continue to manage and review the reserved postal reapplication process<input type="checkbox"/> Report concerns and responses to the SAA ERC, recording and monitoring progress.

OAVA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Maintain sight of progress with convergence <input type="checkbox"/> Identify the preparatory work your teams need to undertake <input type="checkbox"/> Consider how this impacts SPE 2026 preparation & delivery <input type="checkbox"/> Review risks in the timing and challenges of communication when engaging with voters

Returning Officers

Legal changes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Review and understand new legal responsibilities <input type="checkbox"/> Cascade to relevant staff <input type="checkbox"/> Assess impact on established processes/ procedures <input type="checkbox"/> Consider how these changes may require to be communicated to local stakeholders.
Lessons learned	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Review lessons learned and challenges from UKPGE 2025 and SPE 2021, for example <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Staffing /overall resilience <input type="checkbox"/> Postal vote delivery challenges <input type="checkbox"/> Engagement and communication with stakeholders across multiple channels and audiences
Project board	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Establish a Project Board including the ERO and Police Scotland SPOC, and those with expertise in communication, engagement, accessibility, and (cyber)security <input type="checkbox"/> Agree schedule of meetings, standing agenda includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> review of project plan, risk register & contingency plans <input type="checkbox"/> boundary changes <input type="checkbox"/> cross boundary factors <input type="checkbox"/> protocols / procedures / records <input type="checkbox"/> communication between teams <input type="checkbox"/> engagement and awareness, communication plans <input type="checkbox"/> accessibility provisions <input type="checkbox"/> security and cyber concerns
Boundary changes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Ensure the constituency boundary changes are actioned <input type="checkbox"/> Implement any changes from resulting polling district / place reviews <input type="checkbox"/> Checked all changes to ensure they accurately reflect new boundaries and reflected in registers <input type="checkbox"/> Ensure plans are in place to test data and files well in advance of key printer deadlines

Regional planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Schedule regular meetings with the RRO <input type="checkbox"/> Agenda includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> project and contingency plans <input type="checkbox"/> communication across the region / contact and enquiry handling <input type="checkbox"/> local approaches to delivery that need to be highlighted to staff and stakeholders <input type="checkbox"/> communication of regional totals and test of processes
Accessibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Review revised statutory guidance and your planned approach <input type="checkbox"/> Review plans for engagement and communication with voters and those that support them <input type="checkbox"/> Consider how you deal with requests for support and adjustments for voters <input type="checkbox"/> Ensure that training plans are in place so staff are confident in supporting voters and using available equipment
Safety and Security	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Assess level of threat, risk and challenges at your election <input type="checkbox"/> Take note of contentious campaigns, local previous and current issues <input type="checkbox"/> Consider how you will manage any issues and incidents <input type="checkbox"/> Embed into project, risk and contingency planning
Cyber-security	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Prioritise cybersecurity as a key risk in all your planning and delivery <input type="checkbox"/> Engage with the latest guidance, information and developments. <input type="checkbox"/> Ensure staff are alert to risks and are familiar the plans for response in the event of an incident

Useful links

EMB Convener's directions

Directions for the Scottish Parliament elections 2026 will be published on the EMB website in the coming weeks, alongside other processes and templates for communicating regional results in due course. [Electoral Management Board for Scotland](#)

Electoral Commission guidance and resources

Candidate and Agent guidance for the Scottish Parliament election, published 19 September 2025. [Guidance for Candidates and Agents at Scottish Parliament elections | Electoral Commission](#)

RO and ERO guidance for the Scottish Parliament election will be republished in November 2025.

- [Electoral Registration Officer | Electoral Commission](#)
- [Returning Officer | Electoral Commission](#)

Updates

Electoral Administration bulletin – Scotland gives key updates to Electoral Commission guidance and resource updates, requests for data and returns and key changes to processes. Subscribe at [EA Bulletins | Electoral Commission](#)

Help, advice and support

**Electoral Management Board for
Scotland (EMB)**

07568 102648 / 0131 469 3126
chris.highcock@edinburgh.gov.uk

The Electoral Commission

0131 225 0200
infoscotland@electoralcommission.org.uk

October 2025.

Appendix 5 Count Completion Times

A basic analysis of the times at which counts were completed. Where possible this is based on the times of declaration but if data was not available it is taken from the time the result was reported by the BBC. The focus here is on constituency declarations. The Regional Count times were subject to more factors influencing the process such as the varying length of papers, staffing levels and venue floor space.


