

The logo for the Electoral Management Board for Scotland (EMB) is located in the top left corner. It consists of a dark blue square containing the letters 'EMB' in a large, white, sans-serif font. Below the letters, a thin white horizontal line separates them from the text 'Electoral Management Board for Scotland', which is written in a smaller, white, sans-serif font.

EMB

**Electoral Management
Board for Scotland**

30 SEPTEMBER 2026

Strategic Plan:

2027/28-2031/32

ELECTORAL MANAGEMENT BOARD FOR SCOTLAND

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. The Electoral Management Board for Scotland (EMB) has a new legal personality as a Body Corporate with new responsibilities and resources. Building on a solid foundation as a fundamental part of the administrative structure for elections in Scotland there will be continuity from the past. The purpose and expertise remain.
2. However, with a more robust structure and resources the EMB has opportunity to address some of the major challenges facing the sector. Its new structure gives additional responsibilities in terms of governance.
3. Operationally the Board will maintain its previous work but be enhanced with additional resources, focus and capacity. This will be event specific – ensuring ROs and EROs are prepared for the next election (immediately the 2027 Council Elections); then building capacity in a sector that repeatedly has to do more with less; and finally ensuring that future policy changes are informed by the reality of our experience and of the institutional landscape on the ground in Scotland. Cooperation with the Electoral Commission remains important and valued.
4. These operational themes align with the basic functions of the Board as defined in the Local Electoral Administration (Scotland) Act 2011, as amended by the Scottish Elections (Representation and Reform) Act 2025: coordinating Scottish elections through assisting Returning Officers and Electoral Registration Officers and promoting best practice in Scottish elections by providing information, advice or training.
5. This Strategic Plan is a broad road map translating those functions into actions to support and develop the electoral community in Scotland so that, ultimately, voters benefit from elections in which they can have full confidence.

BACKGROUND

6. This is the first five-year strategic plan prepared by the EMB since it became a body corporate, on 1 April 2026, when the relevant sections of the Scottish Elections (Representation and Reform) Act 2025 were commenced. That date represented a “soft launch” for the Board as it was then fully occupied with the coordination of the 7 May Scottish Parliament Elections.
7. The Board in this new form is building on a foundation developed since the EMB was created by the Local Electoral Administration (Scotland) Act 2011. The EMB’s general purpose is to coordinate the delivery of elections in Scotland. That work has seen the board’s foundation develop:
 - **EMB history and reputation** – the Board has operated successfully over the last 15 years and has become a valued and recognised element in the architecture of democracy in Scotland and across the UK.
 - **Supported the delivery of major electoral events since 2011** – that history has seen it support the delivery of major electoral events including referenda, local parliamentary and European elections.
 - **Consistency: in the voter facing elements** – the Directions issued by the Convener have achieved consistency in the voter facing elements of the election valued by voters, candidates, parties, campaigners and both RO and ERO teams.
 - **Contingency: resilience and risk management** – the Board has worked to ensure that RO and EROs are applying sound project and risk management principles to deliver robust events.

- **Clear vision** - the Board as shaped its operations around a clear vision “...to deliver results in which all can have full confidence”. This informs and assesses all that it does.
 - **Principles** – the vision is articulated through four principles accessibility, consistency, efficiency, integrity.
8. These foundations have been expressed in the EMB’s previous annual reports and in its commentaries on the Directions issued by the Convener in support of each election.

A STRATEGIC PLAN

9. The Scottish Elections (Representation and Reform) Act 2025 requires the Board formally to plan how it will perform its functions and subsequently to report on actions to achieve the plan.
10. The Board must, at least 6 months before the start of a 5-year period, submit to the Parliamentary corporation a strategic plan setting out, for that 5-year period:
- a) the Board’s strategic and policy priorities relating to its functions;
 - b) how it proposes to achieve them;
 - c) timetables for doing so; and
 - d) estimates of the costs of doing so.
11. This plan fulfils that requirement.

THE FUNCTIONS OF THE ELECTORAL MANAGEMENT BOARD FOR SCOTLAND

12. Under Section 1(2) of the Local Electoral Administration (Scotland) Act 2011 the EMB has the general functions of **co-ordinating the administration** of (a) Scottish parliamentary elections, and (b) local government elections in Scotland.
13. Section 1(3) of the Act clarifies those functions to include:
- a) **assisting** regional returning officers, constituency returning officers, local authorities and other persons in carrying out their functions **in relation to Scottish parliamentary elections**,
 - b) assisting returning officers, local authorities and other persons in carrying out their functions **in relation to local government elections**, and
 - c) **promoting best practice** in Scottish parliamentary elections and local government elections by providing information, advice or training (or otherwise)
14. This strategic plan identifies three operational themes. For each, the plan identifies how it aligns with the legal functions of the EMB and defines a timetable for delivery against the theme.

CONTINUITY – THE EMB IS NOT A NEW BODY

15. While the EMB has changed its legal structure, becoming a body corporate as a development from its previous incarnation as a statutory committee, there is a clear continuity with this successful past.
16. The Convener, the members of the Board and the advisers to the Board are the same individuals and continue in their roles with the same passion, mission, experience and expertise.
17. The overall approach of the EMB will continue to be consensus where possible, guidance where helpful and direction if necessary.
18. The EMB has an accepted, unique and valued role within the electoral terrain of Scotland. It is neither a regulator nor a policy maker but provides the infrastructure for those who deliver. It is an advocate and supporter for the ROs and EROs.

19. The EMB is now building on experience, bringing innovation based on knowledge of what has worked and what has not.

UNIQUE ROLE

20. The EMB has a clear and unique role in terms of the delivery of electoral events in Scotland. Its legal functions are clearly different from but complementary to those of the Electoral Commission, the statutory regulator and provider of guidance. Fundamental to the EMB's work programme and strategy is partnership with the Electoral Commission to ensure that there is synergy. The Board and the Commission are committed to avoiding confusion, minimizing duplication, maintaining co-operation.
21. The Electoral Commission provides guidance, public awareness, performance standards, advice, observation, reporting. The EMB offers support, the promotion of best practice, coordination of election delivery, capacity building and enhanced resilience.
22. This strategic plan and the corporate plan of the Electoral Commission align together across key areas.

THE NEW EMB – LEGAL STRUCTURE AND GOVERNANCE

23. The Scottish Elections (Representation and Reform) Act 2025 adjusted the constitution of the Electoral Management Board for Scotland (the "EMB"), giving it a separate legal personality as a "body corporate".
24. In addition, the EMB is now subject to the Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act 2002 and reports to and is under the oversight of the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body ("SPCB")
25. The 2025 Act also changed rules around eligibility for membership and established two Deputy Convener posts, one from the ERO members and one from the ROs.
26. The transition to the new structure is in parallel to additional resource being made available to the Board with more dedicated time provided by the Convener and Secretary.
27. Additional staff are to be recruited in late 2026 to support the work outlined in this plan as explained further in subsequent paragraphs.

DEVELOPMENTS TO SUPPORT THE NEW STRUCTURE

28. There are several revisions and enhancements required to facilitate operation in this new structure. These include changes in overall governance, the EMB's infrastructure and its resourcing.
29. With respect to Governance, under section 69 of the Scottish Elections (Representation and Reform) Act 2025 the EMB now has a responsibility to report to the Scottish Parliament Corporate Body, presenting its 5-year Strategic Plan and budget. The EMB will also need to implement systems to manage any Freedom of Information requests and to monitor and manage its financial systems.
30. The Board's infrastructure will also need to be enhanced. As noted below there is a need for administration staff. The EMB website will also be refreshed to ensure that it meets the needs of its users.
31. Additional professional support is also to be recruited in the form of a Projects and Operations Manager to take responsibility for the support of Board meetings, specific projects, support to ROs and EROs and the management of the website.

A VULNERABLE SECTOR SUBJECT TO CHANGE

32. The risks and challenges facing ROs and EROs are clear. Elections must be delivered under increasing scrutiny with limited resources. The infrastructure is fragile is a reliance on a small number of key staff. There are a very small number of critical suppliers – Royal Mail, Printers and IT suppliers - failure in any of these impacts the whole electoral process. Staff recruitment for the foundational activities of polling and count is becoming increasingly difficult. The EMB's work programme is intended to address these vulnerabilities to produce an enhanced and resilient infrastructure.
33. ROs and EROs are operating in a sector that is likely to be subject to significant structural change resulting from the Scottish Government's Public Sector Reform agenda. With reviews of the number, functions and funding of Local Authorities and Valuation Joint Boards the architecture of this area of the public sector could change significantly. Those that delivery elections and registration activity are part of the public sector and the EMB will require to be aware of the opportunities of Public Sector Reform as well as the potential risks that it will present.

EMB WORK PROGRAMME IN THE PERIOD OF THIS PLAN 2027-2032

34. The EMB's basic work will continue within the new structure coordinating the work of ROs and EROs and promoting best practice across the work of those delivering elections. However, the enhancement of the Board will see a more robust infrastructure and the opportunity for more workstreams.
35. Work in the period of this Plan will be shaped around three operational themes:
- a. **Preparation for the next Election** - Event Specific
 - b. **Capacity Building** - Event agnostic
 - c. **Shaping the Future** – Anticipating and Advising on Policy Development

SCHEDULED ELECTIONS IN THE PERIOD APRIL 2027 TO MARCH 2032

36. During the period of this plan Scotland will face the following scheduled elections.
37. There will inevitably be other electoral events within this period including by-elections to both councils and Parliament.

Electoral Event	Role of the EMB
May 2027 – Scottish local government elections	Coordination of the elections across the 32 local authorities to elect members in each of the 355 Wards. Votes are counted electronically with a system procured nationally by the EMB working with the Scottish Government.
No later than 15 August 2029 – UK Parliament election	The EMB has no statutory role in the coordination of the UK election. However given its position in the landscape it has acted to support ROs and EROs where appropriate and to ensure a degree of consistency in delivery.
May 2031 – Scottish Parliament election	Coordination of the elections across the 72 Constituencies and 8 electoral Regions, supporting Returning Officers, Regional Returning Officers and Electoral Registration Officers.

OPERATIONAL THEME: 1 PREPARING FOR THE NEXT ELECTION

Operational Theme	Alignment with EMB functions	Timescale
Preparing for the next election (i.e. the Scottish Local Government Elections to be held on 6 May 2027)	• Co-ordinating the administration of local government elections in Scotland; • Assisting returning officers, local authorities and other persons in carrying out their functions in relation to local government elections; and • Promoting best practice local government elections by providing information, advice or training (or otherwise)	• Directions to be issued by the Convener of the EMB by 5 November, 6 months ahead of the polls • Polling Day – 6 May 2027 • Count – 7 May 2027
Costing – proposed work is costed within the EMB budget detailed below		

38. The EMB has a constant theme in its work of ensuring that ROs and EROs have an appropriate degree of preparedness for the next election. The schedule for some elections is known with Scottish Parliament and Scottish Local Government elections on a fixed 5-year cycle. The EMB has no formal role around UK Parliamentary elections, however traditionally it has worked to coordinate the delivery of the polls, and such events can be scheduled at any point and at short notice.
39. A structured programme of work is currently in place and in planning to support ROs and EROs in the delivery of the next major election: the Scottish Local Government Elections on 6 May 2027.
40. The focus again is consistency in the voter-facing elements and adequate contingency to ensure a suitably resilient operation. This will be facilitated through a framework of directions, supported by training seminars. Some of these will involve partnership with the Electoral Commission. The EMB also works with other stakeholders such as the AEA.
41. The delivery of the eCount project is fundamental to all this work. This is a major and costly project which will generate the results of the elections in the 355 wards. Again, the interests of the voter must be prioritised in the production of sound results in which all can have full confidence. The EMB has a key role in the oversight of this project working closely with the Scottish Government and with the appointed suppliers.
42. Elements of the work programme preparing for 2027.

Review lessons
from 2022 & 2026

Prioritised visits to
RO Teams

Joint Conference
November 2026

Training Seminars -
nominations,
count, adjudication
media etc

eCount, Print,
Royal Mail liaison
with suppliers

Ongoing support
and advice

43. Work to prepare the sector for the forthcoming election will include:

- Review of lessons learned from previous similar event
- Development of Directions to deliver consistency and resilience, to be issued by 5 November 2026
- Training / education – specific to the event: seminars will cover nominations, eCount, adjudication, accessibility
- Engagement with suppliers – eCount, Royal Mail, Print, IT suppliers
- Ongoing support – ad hoc advice and guidance throughout process
- Stakeholder support - Government, media, candidates, political parties
- Advocating for the voter – keeping the Voter at the Centre; including accessibility developments

SPECIFIC WORK BUILDING ON THE EXPERIENCE OF THE SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT ELECTION IN 2026

44. The first action, preparation for the next election, is a review of the lessons taken from the previous polls. [The review exercise following the May 2026 Scottish Parliament Election](#) identified a series of actions to be taken in preparation for May 2027. These included:

- Continued engagement with disability groups to promote use of accessibility measures
- Discussion with media to agree a count code of conduct at verification and count
- Consideration of routes for consistent result publication across Scotland

45. The EMB is working on each of these issues.

DIRECTIONS FROM THE CONVENER

46. Under sections 5 and 6 of the Local Electoral Administration (Scotland) Act 2011 The Convener of the EMB has power to give directions in writing to returning officers and electoral registration officers about the exercise of their functions in relation to local government elections.

47. Before giving a direction under these sections the convener must consult the other members of the Board and the Electoral Commission.

48. The Convener has made directions under these sections for all Scottish Local Government Elections since 2012 with the aim of ensuring consistency in voter experience and assuring adequate contingency among electoral administrators. The Directions made for the 2022 Scottish Local Government Elections are [available on the EMB website](#).
49. Directions for the May 2027 elections are currently in draft and will be offered for consultation in October 2026. The Convener intends to make the directions by 5 November 2026, meeting the Gould Principle, whereby electoral law should not be changed within six months of an election that the change would impact, giving ROs and EROs adequate time to plan for the implementation of the directions.

OPERATIONAL THEME 2: BUILDING CAPACITY

Operational Theme	Alignment with EMB functions	Timescale
Building Capacity among Returning Officer and Electoral Registration Officer Teams	Promoting best practice local government elections by providing information, advice or training (or otherwise)	- Develop standard models and materials- target end 2029 - Common training options- target end 2029 - Workforce Strategy target end 2028 - Negotiate national contracts- target end 2029 - Shared services/joint delivery options - target end 2029 - Royal Mail negotiations and problem resolution – target end 2026
Costing – proposed work is costed within the EMB budget detailed below		

50. The second broad operational theme for this Strategic Plan is work shaped around capacity building. This is fragile sector facing capacity pressures across local government and significant staff turnover and loss of expertise.
51. After each election the observation is made that elections are delivered by small teams with limited resources, drawn from local authorities who are themselves facing severe resource and budget constraints. The technical knowledge is held by a small group of officers unique in their authorities.
52. Each electoral event delivered in Scotland highlights the fragility of the infrastructure. Resources are reducing, administrators face many competing demands and there are increasing difficulties in filling vacancies with suitable staff. The EMB has a continuing concern threaded through all its work to develop the capacity of the sector so that there is sufficient capacity and appropriate resilience. The EMB will support as well as encourage sensible contingency planning and work across the nation to build partnerships, support and networks.
53. The delivery of elections has been recognised as critical national infrastructure, but this recognition has not been accompanied by appropriate resource or funding. The overall infrastructure is fragile and often at its limit, yet this is critical infrastructure fundamental to civil society.

54. If the current overall institutional framework remains, there is a need to build capacity and add resilience and robustness so that risks can be navigated and challenges absorbed without a failure at a fundamental point in the process.
55. Within this theme of work initial ideas being explored include:
- Focussed training - building expertise in key areas across RO & ERO Teams
 - Common solutions / shared services – exploring what can be done to build a more resilient sector e.g., national framework contracts, regional networks, consistent approaches to common activities, advocacy with main suppliers.
56. Already the Board is working around:
- Resolving common concerns with Royal Mail
 - Investigating a national contract for print
 - Reviewing options for a national IT service for EMS systems
 - Developing national training solutions for polling and count staff and
 - “Off the shelf” models for e.g. count, nominations, polling reviews, to deliver consistency of best practice.
57. One aspect of the challenge is to be open to considering how best to deliver efficiency while retaining local responsibility for the delivery of elections in which local voters can have full confidence. There are opportunities for economies of scale and innovative approaches and the EMB is committed to identifying and developing these.
58. Specific issues were identified from the review of the 2026 Scottish Parliament Election which very much feed into the longer-term horizon of this theme of work. These include:
- Considering the options for a workforce strategy for Elections (polling and count)
 - Reviewing the effectiveness and role of poll cards given changing modes of engagement and communication
 - Partnership work with the Electoral Commission to review guidance for candidates / agents, given that candidates and agents seem increasingly ill-prepared for the elections
 - Development and deployment of a best practice model for manual counts with all required template documentation
 - A review of venue capacities and availability so that operations are less impacted by inappropriate venues.



OPERATIONAL THEME 3: SHAPING THE FUTURE

Operational Theme	Alignment with EMB functions	Timescale
Shaping the future / Modernising Elections	Promoting best practice local government elections by providing information, advice or training (or otherwise)	- Promotion of structural change across the sector – target end 2028 - Reaction to automated registration – target end 2027 - Digital options for poll cards – target end 2027 - Input to revised legislation - ongoing - Support for pilots for new voting methods – target end 2027 - Utilisation of new technology in polling – ongoing
Costing – proposed work is costed within the EMB budget detailed below		

59. ROs and EROs face increasing pressures to deliver efficient, secure and trusted elections, working within a complex electoral system which lacks resilience. The legal framework that underpins how elections are run has evolved in a piecemeal way, which makes effective delivery more challenging. There are severe resource pressures across finance and staffing. The society within which elections are delivered is undergoing rapid change with an expectation of greater flexibility in how services are delivered and increased use of digital options.

60. Anticipating and Advising on Policy Development is vital. The legal, organisational, constitutional and institutional environment for elections in Scotland is complex. UK vs Devolved rules, multiple stakeholders with competing agendas and ambitious plans for change that do not always accommodate existing differences and structures.
61. There is a need for change, but uninformed change can create long lasting challenges that can be difficult to resolve. Policy makers need to be informed by the expertise, knowledge and experience of the professionals in the sector.
62. Vital future policy developments must build on experience and recognise the reality of devolution. This means that the EMB must work to shape and inform the response to:
- UK Representation of the People Bill
 - Electoral Reform Bills in Scotland
 - Divergence vs Devolution
 - Major structural change – e.g. automated registration
 - Implementation of new technologies
 - Challenges of AI etc
 - A more contentious political atmosphere
 - Threats to candidates, administrators
 - Staffing challenges for traditional polling
 - Public Sector Reform
63. Much of this work will require collaboration with partner and relevant stakeholder organisations, including primarily the Electoral Commission who have their own work programme to support the modernisation of elections.

Promotion of
structural change
across the sector

Reaction to
automated
registration

Digital options for
poll cards

Input to revised
legislation

Support for pilots
for new voting
methods

Utilisation of new
technology in
polling

64. There are exciting opportunities to utilise new technology in support of the elector across many elements of the election including enhanced accessibility, early voting options, transition away from poll cards to digital options and the use of additional automation at count.
65. Some of these would require revised legislation and the EMB will work with UK and Scottish Government to pilot these options in future elections.

NEXT STEPS

66. Key immediate actions to move work forward around these operational themes will cover:

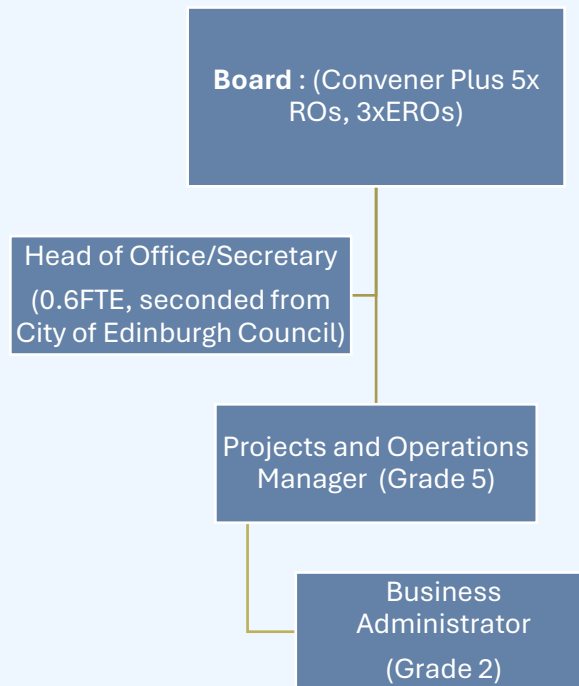
- **Recruitment of Staff** – the EMB needs an enhanced resource to achieve its objectives. agree Job Descriptions, submit staffing structure to SPCB and commence recruitment for “Projects and Operations Manager” for EMB; plus admin support
- **Website** - refresh
- **Full Support for delivery of SLGE2027** – Directions, Conference, Seminars, Support
- **Visits to ROs and EROs** – the Convener and Secretary are undertaking a prioritised series of visits to meet, learn from and assess needs of RO and ERO teams across Scotland to inform both training and capacity building activities

67. Throughout all this work the EMB remains committed to the coordination of its activities with the Electoral Commission to give synergy not duplication.

Immediate Actions 2026/27	• Outline	Schedule
Recruitment of Staff to EMB	• Projects and Operations Manager • Admin Officer	• Recruitment to commence September 2026
Website	• EMB Website to be refreshed	• Target completion Spring 2027
Full Support for delivery of SLGE2027	• Directions to be issued by Convener • Conference for ROs and EROs • Specific Seminars for ROs and EROs • Ad hoc Support for RO and ERO teams	• Direction issued by 5 November 2026 • Conference 24 November 2026 • Seminars from December 2026 through April 2027 • Ongoing ad hoc support
Visits to ROs and EROs	• Convener and Secretary of the EMB undertaking visits to all RO and ERO teams	• Prioritised visits commenced June 2026

ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE

68. The constitution of the EMB is defined by Section 69 of the Scottish Elections (Representation and Reform) Act 2025, with the membership of the Board continuing as prescribed in the local Electoral Administration (Scotland) Act 2011.
69. The Board reports to the Parliamentary corporation (the Scottish Parliament Corporate Body).
70. The Organisational Structure for the initial period of the plan is given below.



71. This structure will require the recruitment of the Projects and Operations Manager and the Business Administrator.
72. Initially the Head of Office/Secretary to the EMB is on a 0.6FTE basis seconded from the City of Edinburgh Council. It is likely that this will develop into a full time post and secondment within the period of this plan.

ELECTORAL MANAGEMENT BOARD FOR SCOTLAND BUDGET FOR 2027/28

73. As submitted to the Scottish Parliament Corporate Body on 27 August 2026

EMB	Budget Bid for 2027/28 £	Indicative Budget Bid for 2028/29 £	Indicative Budget Bid for 2029/30 £	Indicative Budget Bid for 2030/31 £	Indicative Budget Bid for 2031/32 £
Total Staff Costs	263,871.21	325,178.62	330,853.92	336,530.65	342,405.00
Total Staff Related Costs	19,500.00	19,500.00	19,500.00	19,500.00	19,500.00
Total Property Costs	3,000.00	3,000.00	3,000.00	3,000.00	3,000.00
Total Professional Fees	30,000.00	30,000.00	30,000.00	30,000.00	30,000.00
Total Running Costs	31,750.00	31,750.00	31,750.00	31,750.00	31,750.00
Total Revenue Costs	348,121.21	409,428.62	415,103.92	420,780.65	426,655.00

OUR ROLE

74. The EMB's "**general function of coordinating the administration of local government and Scottish Parliament elections**" involves two specific roles:

- (a) assisting local authorities and other persons in carrying out their functions in relation to local government elections; and
- (b) promoting best practice in local government elections by providing information, advice or training (or otherwise).

75. The over-riding goal is to ensure that the interests of the voter are kept at the centre of all election planning, delivery and administration.

OUR OBJECTIVE

76. With respect to specific electoral events this function translates into a single clear objective: "**....to deliver a result that will be trusted as accurate.**" The currency of elections is **trust**. Confidence in the result is fundamental to the democratic process and is predicated on confidence in all stages of the process of planning and delivering an electoral event.

OUR PRINCIPLES

77. The EMB shapes its work around four key principles:

- **Accessibility** - there should be no barriers to any voter taking part;
- **Consistency** - voters should have the same experience wherever they are in Scotland;
- **Efficiency** - electoral events will be administered efficiently; and
- **Integrity** - electoral events will produce results that are accepted as accurate.

OUR APPROACH

78. The Board has the privilege of supporting a close and mutually supportive community of electoral professionals in Scotland. The preferred approach is always to operate through a progression of **consensus** where possible, **guidance** where helpful and **direction** if necessary.

Edinburgh
30 September 2026