



*Scottish Assessors' Association*

## **Response to the House of Commons Public Bill Committee of the House of Commons call for evidence to support their scrutiny of the Representation of the People Bill by the Scottish Assessors' Association**

The Scottish Assessors' Association (SAA) is a voluntary non-statutory body that represents the 14 lands valuation Assessors appointed in terms of section 27(2) of the Local Government etc. (Scotland) Act 1994. The SAA has been in existence in one form or another since 1855, and has as its purpose:

“to encourage amongst its members the exchange of ideas regarding their statutory duties; to record results of discussions on all subjects brought before its meetings; to promote consistency in the operation of the Valuation, Council Tax and Electoral Registration legislation; to act as a consultative and advisory body; engage in partnership work both internally and externally with organisations and public bodies; and to represent the collective interests of its members in carrying out their duties”

Thirteen Assessors are also appointed Electoral Registration Officers (EROs) for 30 local authorities. However, the SAA Electoral Registration Committee's membership includes all fifteen Scottish EROs, appointed in terms of section 8 of the Representation of the People Act 1983 by the 32 local authorities in Scotland, and their senior staff. The Electoral Registration Committee (ERC) therefore comprises the fifteen individuals who are personally responsible and accountable for the delivery of electoral registration in Scotland.

The ERC meets approximately every month. Representatives from the Electoral Commission, Scottish Government, Boundaries Scotland/Boundary Commission for Scotland and UK Government attend the committee meetings although they are not committee members. The Committee therefore facilitates dialogue between Scottish EROs and partner organisations. It also acts as the principal forum to share good practice, agree timetabling, and a common approach to registration amongst Scottish EROs which in turn provides a consistent registration experience for the elector. Examples of this are as follows.

- The ERC has agreed a single date to be used across Scotland for Second Interim Updates to the Registers ahead of Elections.
- The ERC has worked together to ensure that rejected postal vote notification letters are issued across Scotland at the same time.
- The ERC has agreed a common timetable across Scotland for the refresh requests for Absent Vote Identifiers

- The ERC has organised national campaigns across Scotland to promote awareness of the Annual Canvass, and a variety of recent changes to legislation.
- The ERC has developed a common Data Sharing Agreement for Scottish EROs to facilitate the exchange of information in connection with the registration of young electors.
- The ERC has also sought to help EROs to consistently implement changes in legislation introduced by both Scottish and UK Governments.

## Background

1. A Public Bill Committee has been appointed by the House of Commons to scrutinise the Representation of the People Bill which was introduced to Parliament on 12 February 2026. The Bill passed its second reading on 2 March and is now in its Committee stage.
2. The Bill develops a number of recommendations that were made in the Government's report *Restoring Trust in our Democracy: our strategy for modern and secure elections*. Several of the recommendations in that report were responses to challenges experienced at the UK Parliamentary General Election in July 2024. Other elements of the Bill pick up Government commitments to act to improve voter registration, address voter ID rules, give 16 and 17 year-olds the right to vote in all UK elections, and to protect democracy by strengthening the rules around donations to political parties.
3. The Chair of the SAA ERC was invited to give oral evidence to the Committee at their meeting on 18 March 2026. This written evidence is submitted by the SAA to provide brief comment on a number of areas that are addressed in the Bill.
4. The SAA is grateful for the opportunity to make these comments to the Committee and will happily engage further on any of these topics as the consideration of the Bill continues.
5. Not every topic in the Bill is covered in this response. The focus is on those areas where the SAA has particular concerns or comments with respect to implementation by the Electoral Registration Officers that the SAA represents. The development of, and decisions on, policy are for Parliament.
6. A more immediate context for the comments offered in this paper is the SAA's Response to the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee (PACAC) of the House of Commons call for evidence to support their review of the 2024 UK Parliamentary General Election, which was submitted to that committee on 27 January 2025. That response is available on the Parliament website at <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/135644/pdf>. That response addressed some of the policy areas with which the current Bill is concerned and to which it is reacting.

## General Comments and Observations on the Bill

7. There are a range of major changes proposed in this Bill. Some of them make fundamental changes to the electoral process for UK elections. These need to be carefully considered as consequences across the whole of the electoral process from registration through polling, postal voting and the count are not always easy to trace.
8. A crucial principle well-articulated in the Gould report into the Scottish Parliament election in 2007 is that any changes to electoral legislation should be clear and in place at least six months before they are due to be implemented or complied with. Many of the changes proposed in the Bill will be specified in secondary legislation. This will need to be understood and in place ahead of the next UK Parliamentary General Election. The scale of change is significant and cannot be rushed. The UK's electoral community will need as much time as possible to plan for and implement the changes.

## Votes at 16

9. The nature of the franchise is a policy matter for Parliament to determine. 16 and 17-year-olds can already vote in Scottish Parliament elections and local elections in Scotland. The extension of the franchise to these younger voters' dates to 2014 when 16 and 17 year-olds were included in the franchise for Scotland's referendum on independence via a young person's register and shortly thereafter for all Scottish elections when the franchise was extended for the local government register.
10. The Bill proposes that in Scotland and Wales, electors under 18 who apply to register to vote in devolved polls will be automatically added to the UK Parliamentary register. They will not need to make a further application as long as the Electoral Registration Officer believes they are eligible.
11. Giving a consistent date for the age of attainment for all elections across the UK will offer a number of benefits. It should make basic rules about elections easier to understand for the voter and for candidates. Consistency between devolved and reserved polls will also make the delivery of elections simpler for electoral professionals.
12. However, for these benefits to be realised there should be as much alignment as possible between the new UK rules and approach to extension of the franchise to these younger voters and that which has been applied, developed and communicated successfully in Scotland since 2014. There are many lessons to be learned from the experience of Scotland and care should be taken to ensure the maximum possible alignment between UK and Scottish approaches rather than adding further unhelpful divergence.
13. It should be noted that "Votes at 16" means that young people from the age of 14 will be able to be registered. Care will need to be exercised to ensure that the differing available sources of data for identifying 14 and 15 year-olds who may be eligible to register within the nations of the UK are considered when designing any systems to

support the registration process. Safeguards will need to be in place to protect the information of under 16s.

14. Consideration will also need to be given to the ID verification process that is required as part of the registration and absent vote application procedure to ensure that any data sets that are required to be used are available and appropriate for 14-17 year olds.

## Registration of Voters

15. All elections are predicated on an accurate and complete register. Such registers are fundamental to democratic participation. In order to participate as voters, individuals need to be correctly registered.
16. Currently, a person must make an application to be added to an electoral register. This can be done via a paper application or through the "Register to Vote" platform on GOV.UK. This allows for identity verification to be carried out and for an ERO to assess eligibility.
17. The Bill makes a range of proposals with respect to voter registration, but the most significant is a move towards Automated Voter Registration (AVR). AVR would add an eligible person to the electoral register without them making an application. It could also allow changes to an existing register entry without any application from the voter. The Bill outlines a high-level system for AVR including notification process.
18. This is a fundamental change to the process for electoral registration that has been in place in general terms since the Representation of the People Act 1918, with the last major change being the introduction of individual electoral registration in 2014.
19. The recent experience of the introduction of Online Absent Vote Application (OAVA) has many lessons that the Government needs to consider in any change to registration, especially where there is divergence between the nations of the UK. The divergence between absent vote applications in the reserved and devolved polls has created confusion for voters and a costly effort in achieving convergence.
20. AVR has many superficial attractions, but the system would need to take account of concerns around accuracy and eligibility verification, privacy and data sharing concerns and overall administrative complexity. The recent pilots in Wales, which were only applicable to the Local Government Register, were evaluated by the Electoral Commission and they described processes required as time consuming and labour intensive. It would be an additional activity supplementing the normal registration activities already undertaken by EROs.
21. The SAA welcomes the provision within the Bill to undertake pilots of AVR and is strongly of the view that before any version of AVR is introduced this provision must be utilised. Extensive pilots need to be undertaken to ensure that the desired outcomes of additional completeness and accuracy of the register are achievable

and sustained in the longer term while not adversely impacting public confidence in the integrity of the registers.

22. For the Parliamentary register there are three principal criteria for eligibility to be registered and these are age, residency and nationality. Any data source used for a registration pilot has to be measured against the ability to deliver against these three key criteria to a reasonable degree of certainty while also being current and accurate.
23. As noted above, divergence would be a particular challenge were the proposals limited to the reserved register. There are currently Regulations in force within Scotland that would allow pilots of AVR on the local government register and there may be an opportunity to undertake joint pilots that would open up the range of available data sources and potentially allow better outcomes across both the UK Parliamentary and Local Government registers.
24. A more complete register would not necessarily lead to greater engagement and participation in the democratic process. Actual voting levels may well remain consistent, with lower turnout percentages a potential consequence which may undermine overall confidence in the system.
25. The provisions in the Bill around extending the validity of an anonymous registration from 1 year to 3 seem sound and sensible and in the elector's interest.
26. The Bill proposes to change the deadline for receipt of applications to register from midnight on day 12 before the poll to 5pm on the 12<sup>th</sup> day before the poll. This is a welcome change that will allow a consistency of messaging to electors where many other deadlines are also 5pm, such as the postal and proxy voting deadlines. It also removes any expectation that an ERO will be able to resource any enquiries close to a midnight deadline.
27. The Bill proposes to change the edited register from an opt out register to an opt in register. The existence of the edited register has caused some confusion for electors in the past and care will need to be exercised in how the transition from an opt out to an opt in register is undertaken and how the preferences of existing electors are to be captured.

## **Conduct of Elections**

28. This section of the submission will concentrate on the experiences of EROs within the process, however it is recommended that it is read in conjunction with the Electoral Management Board for Scotland (EMB) submission on Conduct of Elections.
29. The Bill proposes changes to the absent voting system with the intention of improving flexibility and resilience. There are proposals to move the postal vote application deadline three days earlier. The SAA and EMB evidence to PACAC rehearsed the various issues that impacted on the problems with postal voting in 2024. They were due to a short notice election being called during the Scottish school holidays within an already tight timetable. The fundamental problem identified was that the UK timetable is too short with the deadline for nominations being too close to polling day.

30. The ideal solution would be to lengthen the timetable to that used for devolved elections in Scotland where there is a longer period for the production of postal votes and thus less pressure on printers. In the absence of that change, an earlier deadline for postal vote applications will help to increase the timeframe to process, print, deliver, and for electors to return postal votes. However, the earlier deadline will reduce the amount of time between Poll Card receipt and the deadline giving the elector less time to react if they don't currently have an absent vote and would like one. It will also remove the option for any electors who register close to the registration deadline to apply for a postal vote.

## **Conclusion**

31. As detailed above there are many parts of the Bill that will bring positive change to both EROs and electors, many of the proposals will require careful consideration on how they are implemented and much of this is likely to be contained within secondary legislation.
32. The SAA is grateful for the opportunity to submit this for consideration by the Committee and will happily engage further on any of these topics as the consideration of the Bill continues.