

Groom by-election Service plan V4.0

Service Plan 2020

Foreword

The AEC is committed to providing the highest standard of electoral services for the Groom by-election. During the COVID-19 pandemic, this includes a range of safety measures for voters, AEC staff and other participants.

We have introduced a range of COVID-19 safety measures at voting venues and through the entire by-election process, including the receipt and declaration of nominations, the management of election materials and at our counting centre.

The operating model for this by-election includes social distancing and hygiene measures that conform to federal and local health advice and are within the legislative framework of the *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*. The infection-control advice the AEC is following has been provided by the Australian Government's Chief Medical Officer, and Queensland health authorities.

It is also important to note these measures, which must be enacted to protect the community, will inevitably slow the voting process. Whilst we are implementing measures to try to reduce this impact, the AEC thanks all electors and participants for their patience and adherence to the new measures in the polling place and at our count centre.

The counting of votes will also take longer due to the measures in place in polling places and at our counting centre. The expected increase in postal and pre-poll votes cast will also impact the speed of the count, noting the legislative requirement to wait 13 days after election day for the return of postal votes.

As a result, it is likely to take longer to formally declare a final result in this by-election compared with previous federal by-elections but, as per our normal practice, the AEC will do everything possible to provide an indicative result on polling night.

The AEC is committed to continuous improvement. This service plan outlines the key election services and standards that will underpin the AEC's delivery of the 2020 Groom by-election during a pandemic.

Should you have any comments on the service plan or the AEC's delivery on these commitments, I would ask you to take the time to let us know through our [online enquiry form](#) so we can consider your feedback as we continue to improve the delivery of election services.

Tom Rogers
Electoral Commissioner

Overview

The Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) is the independent statutory authority responsible for the conduct of federal by-elections.

A by-election must be held when a House of Representatives seat falls vacant; this may be for reasons such as the death, resignation, absence without leave, or other ineligibility of the sitting member.

On Friday 18 September 2020, the sitting member for Groom resigned his seat in the federal Parliament. The Groom by-election is required as a result of this resignation.

The timing of a by-election is determined by the Speaker of the House of Representatives in the Australian Parliament.

COVID-related measures for the Groom by-election

This service plan outlines key processes in the operation of the by-election including what modifications or enhancements are being implemented due to COVID-19.

It should be noted that these modifications and enhancements were successfully used in the Eden-Monaro by-election in New South Wales in July of this year.

Agency purpose

The purpose of the AEC is to maintain an impartial and independent electoral system for eligible voters through active electoral roll management, efficient delivery of polling services, and targeted education and public awareness programs.

AEC Values

The AEC values and commitments are an essential component of our operating environment and frame how AEC staff work. The AEC's focus is on electoral integrity through the values of quality, agility, and professionalism.

By-election timetable

A number of essential steps are involved in conducting a by-election.

These steps, according to the Australian Constitution and the *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918* (the Electoral Act), begin with the issue of the writ (a document commanding an electoral official to hold an election) and end with the return of the writ after the votes have been counted and the results declared.

The Groom by-election will be conducted according to the following [timetable](#).

Activity	Date
Issue of the writ	The writ for a by-election is issued at the discretion of the Speaker of the House of Representatives
Close of rolls	Rolls close at 8pm, seven days after the issue of writ
Close of candidate nominations	Nomination close at 12 noon, between 10 and 27 days after the issue of writs
Declaration of candidate nominations	Nominations are publicly declared 24 hours after nominations close
Early voting commences	Early voting (pre-poll voting) is available from the fifth day following the declaration of nominations
Last day for receipt of postal vote applications	Postal vote applications must be submitted by 6pm on the Wednesday prior to election day
By-election day	Election day is fixed between 23 and 31 days after the date of nominations
Last day for receipt of postal votes	13 days after election day
Return of the writ (latest date)	Writs must be returned within 100 days of their issue

AEC service standards

The AEC is committed to upholding five key service standards.

1. Voters and candidates receive timely and accurate information

Communication

The AEC will support effective participation in the Groom by-election by ensuring information provided to the voting public and candidates is timely, accurate, comprehensive and easy to understand.

The AEC will provide public information, in three phases, to:

- provide eligible electors with a final reminder to enrol or update their details on the electoral roll
- ensure electors are aware of their voting options, even if they are unable to get to a polling place on by-election day, and
- support voter participation by ensuring electors are advised how to cast a formal vote as instructed on the ballot papers and are encouraged to turn out to vote on by-election day.

A range of public awareness materials will be produced to support voters. These materials include newspaper advertisements, media releases, as well as key information available on the AEC's social media channels and via the by-election link on the homepage of the [AEC website](#).

During the early voting period, an official guide to the by-election will be delivered to households across the electoral Division of Groom. This guide will provide information on where, how and when to vote, what to do if you cannot get to a polling place on by-election day, and how to complete your ballot paper correctly. The guide will be made available on the AEC website and in the alternate formats of Braille, large print, audio and e-text.

In addition, general information about how to vote remains available on the [AEC website](#) in 29 languages (*A guide to enrolling and voting*, and *How to make your vote count* factsheets).

For this by-election, information will be accessible to voters who speak a language other than English via the **telephone interpreter service**, which is available in more than 16 languages. The National Relay Service is also available for people who are deaf or have a hearing or speech impairment.

During the election period, the AEC's 13 23 26 telephone number will provide a specific Groom by-election service which will operate daily from 9.00am to 5.00pm AEST.

The AEC's [online enquiry form](#), which is always available, will be monitored and any enquiries received via this form will be answered in an efficient and accurate manner.

The AEC is committed to the provision of services through a range of channels. Should a member of the public be looking for information, wish to ask a question, provide feedback or make a complaint, they can do so online ([AEC website](#)), on the phone (13 23 26) or at any AEC office.

Prospective candidates and taking nominations

Prospective candidates will also be provided with a range of information and services. The [AEC website](#) serves as a central information hub providing candidate nomination forms (including the qualification checklist), the [Nominations Guide](#) and the [Candidates Handbook](#), which provides guidance on standing for election to the Australian Parliament. The AEC will also hold a face-to face briefing for candidates to raise questions and be given assistance in accessing and understanding candidate information materials.

People wishing to nominate for the by-election will need to make an appointment with the Divisional Returning Officer for Groom before attending the AEC office to lodge their nomination forms. At the office, hand sanitiser will be available at the entrance, on all meeting tables, and on the way out. AEC staff may wear surgical masks, and social distancing of 1.5 metres will be in place wherever possible between staff and nominees.

Where possible AEC staff will also seek to minimise the amount of back-and-forth handling of forms. Contactless Eftpos facilities will be available for candidates to pay their nomination fee.

Ballot draw

Social-distancing rules will apply to everybody attending the ballot draw and seating will be appropriately spaced. Hand sanitiser will be at the entrance and exit of the venue.

AEC staff performing the ballot draw will observe necessary personal hygiene measures and sanitise the equipment used.

Campaigning at polling places

Whilst the AEC has no legislative jurisdiction or responsibility for campaigners outside six metres of the entrance to the polling place, we acknowledge that the current COVID 19 environment may impact on their ability to hand out how-to-vote cards as they ordinarily would for any other federal electoral event. Parties and candidates will need to ensure that those campaigning on their behalf near a polling venue have fully informed themselves of QLD Government health restrictions and laws in place regarding social distancing, and that they abide by these directives.

2. The AEC delivers a high quality service

Enrolment services

Australian citizens, aged 18 years of age or older, enrolled for the electoral Division of Groom are required by law to vote in the by-election.

The electoral roll for the Groom by-election will close at 8pm AEST Monday 2 November 2020. Voters are able to enrol or update their enrolment details online. Enrolment applications are also available at any AEC office or Australia Post outlet in the electoral Division of Groom.

Voters are able to [check their electoral enrolment](#) online at any time during the by-election period.

Early voting services

Groom by-election voters who are entitled to cast an early vote can do so in person or by post.

A person is entitled to an early vote if, on polling day, Saturday 28 November 2020, they:

- are outside the electoral division where they are enrolled to vote
- are more than 8km from a polling place
- are travelling
- are unable to leave their workplace to vote
- are seriously ill, infirm or due to give birth shortly (or caring for someone who is)
- are a patient in hospital and can't vote at the hospital
- have religious beliefs that prevent them from attending a polling place
- are in prison serving a sentence of less than three years or otherwise detained
- are a [silent elector](#)
- have a reasonable fear for their safety.

Early voting centres will operate for the Division of Groom by-election and the details of these locations will be available at www.aec.gov.au.

Groom voters who are elsewhere within Queensland will be able to cast an early vote at **any AEC office** throughout Queensland during weekday local business hours from Wednesday 11 November 2020.

Alternatively, voters who are entitled to an early vote can apply for a postal vote at www.aec.gov.au or on a paper application available at AEC offices. Postal vote applications must be received by the AEC before 6pm Wednesday 25 November 2020.

Postal voting

Postal voting will be an important voting option available to eligible Groom electors. Postal voting helps minimise contact and movement, and given the COVID-19 environment, it is anticipated that a greater number of voters will meet the eligibility criteria under the legislation to apply for a postal vote in this by-election.

Overseas

Groom voters who are living, working or holidaying overseas can apply online for a postal vote at www.aec.gov.au.

It is requested that voters overseas both apply for a postal vote and return their ballot papers as soon as possible to ensure they receive and return their ballot papers within all legislated time limits. Ballot papers must be completed before 6pm AEST on Election day and then be received by the AEC by 6pm AEST on the Friday, 13 days after Election day.

Voting for residents of aged care facilities and hospital patients

The AEC is very conscious of the health and safety of voters during the by-election; particularly those who are potentially vulnerable to infection. Accordingly, we have adopted special measures to protect residents of aged care facilities and hospitals in the Groom electorate during these extraordinary times, whilst still ensuring they can exercise their right to vote. Based on medical advice, the AEC will be providing effective alternatives to mobile polling (which are normally a feature of electoral events). Specifically, the AEC has established a support team for these facilities and has already provided enrolment forms and general postal vote applications for residents to complete and return to the AEC. Residents of aged care facilities and hospitals will have the option to either vote via a postal vote delivered directly to their facility; telephone voting for those who are blind or low vision; or by attending a polling location (depending on their personal circumstances), which will have health and safety measures in place.

The AEC will also maintain ongoing contact with aged care facilities and relevant hospitals in the Division of Groom to provide support, answer questions and deliver additional enrolment and postal vote application forms, if needed.

Blind and Low Vision

Groom voters who are blind or have low vision can cast a vote in secret by telephone from any location within Australia for the Groom by-election.

Telephone voting is a simple two-step process, voters who are blind or have low vision will be invited to first register for a telephone vote by calling 1800 913 993 for this election. They will not need to give their name when they then call back and vote using the telephone voting service. Their registration number and pin will be used to mark their name off the electoral roll, ensuring the voter's identity remains secret.

This service is operated by the AEC and allows registered voters to cast a secret vote without attending an AEC office or polling place. The blind or low vision telephone voting service is available between 8:30am and 5:30pm AEST Monday to Friday during the pre-poll period and 8am to 6pm AEST on polling day.

Please note that the times given relate only to the Groom by-election and may not be consistent with phone service availability for the next federal election.

Voting at polling places

If on arrival voters are not able to immediately enter the polling place, they will be required to queue outside where social-distancing rules will be in place. Extra queue controllers that have been appropriately trained in social-distancing rules and the traditional "six-metre rule" regarding campaigners will be outside the polling place to ensure adherence to these important measures.

The number of voters entering a polling place will be counted at the door to limit the number of people inside the polling place at any one time. Hand sanitiser will be available at the entrance to the polling place and at each ballot-paper issuing point and when exiting the polling place. Signage about hygiene and social distancing will be prominent in the polling place for voters and staff.

Where possible a "sneeze shield" will be installed at all ballot-paper issuing points, and issuing tables will be sprayed regularly with sanitising spray throughout the day and whenever issuing staff are rotated. Voters will be encouraged to bring their own pencil or pen to the polling place but electors will also be offered a single-use pencil when handed their ballot papers.

Voting screens will be separated by a distance of 1.5 metres and the plastic writing surface inserted into the voting screen will be regularly cleaned with sanitising spray throughout polling day.

AEC staff may wear surgical masks and will under no circumstances share their bibs or lanyards with other staff.

Photo opportunities of the inside of a polling place will only be allowed when there is a sufficiently low number of voters present so social distancing can be maintained, and when the Officer in Charge approves.

Voting services on by-election day

On by-election day, Saturday 28 November 2020, Groom voters will be able to vote between 8am and 6pm AEST at any of the polling places that will be open across the electoral Division of Groom.

A full list of polling places will be available at www.aec.gov.au.

During training

Our online training suite has been enhanced to include a new online training module on the required health measures put in place for this by-election. This will be mandatory for all AEC staff and temporary election workers working at this by-election. Where AEC staff conduct face-to-face training, social-distancing rules will be observed and all of the health measures that will be applied throughout the by-election will also be observed throughout the corresponding practical exercises. Hand sanitiser will be available on arrival and exit, and participants will wash or sanitise their hands before and after each practical exercise.

3. Votes will be counted in accordance with the Electoral Act and the public and stakeholders have confidence in the result

Counting

The AEC will ensure count processes produce a timely and accurate result and are managed in a transparent manner.

The by-election results will be communicated to the public in a clear and timely way. The AEC's official results centre, the Tally Room on the AEC website, enables the public, candidates and scrutineers to follow vote counting on by-election night and progressive results until the final outcome is declared.

The Tally Room can be accessed on by-election night from 6pm AEST and will be updated as results are entered into AEC systems. Divisional level results are available on by-election night, with individual polling place details available in the following week.

Counts conducted in polling places on by-election night provide indicative results only. As counting continues in the weeks following by-election night, updates are made to the Tally Room as re-checked results and “fresh” results from declaration votes become available.

Counting on election night at polling places

After 6pm AEST, when the counting commences at polling places, hand sanitiser for all polling place officials and scrutineers will be at the polling place entry point, at each sorting and counting table, and at the exit to the polling place.

Ballot boxes will be cleaned with sanitising spray before they are opened for counting on the tables. Staff will sanitise their hands immediately before and after they handle ballot-box tags.

Both staff and scrutineers may wear surgical masks, and no sharing of bibs or lanyards will be allowed. If practicable, “sneeze shields” may be used at each counting and sorting table to separate scrutineers from counting staff.

There will be signs outlining the hygiene and social distancing rules, and those who do not adhere to the rules will be requested to leave.

The area used for polling and counting at each polling place will be fully cleaned after election night.

Counting at AEC out-posted centres

Hand sanitiser will be available at the entry and exit of the out-posted centre (OPC), at each sorting and counting table and in breakout areas.

The outside surfaces of election materials returned to the OPC – including ballot boxes transported on election night from pre-poll voting centres – will be cleaned with sanitising spray on arrival.

Ballot boxes will be cleaned with sanitising spray before opening, and staff will wash or sanitise their hands after handling ballot-box tags, and before and after each count of ballot papers. Surgical masks may be worn both by staff and by scrutineers and, if practicable, “sneeze shields” will be used at each counting and sorting table to separate scrutineers from counting staff.

The OPC will be set up with prominent hygiene signage and 1.5-metre standard markings on the floor. There will be regular cleaning of surfaces, equipment and breakout areas during operational hours. Only single-use water bottles will be allowed, all plates and cutlery must be disposable, and there will be no provision for the serving of coffee or tea inside.

All equipment used for scrutiny will be cleaned before installing and it will also be regularly cleaned during use and before return. Additional Security Officers, Hygiene Officers and a WHS officer will be present in the OPC to ensure everyone’s safety and adherence to the health measures. They will be wearing distinctive bibs.

Deep cleaning of the OPC will occur overnight and at the conclusion of the counting.

When counting postal votes

The outside of all transport containers used by Australia Post or couriers will be sprayed with sanitising spray prior to opening.

Hand sanitiser will be regularly applied by staff before opening batches of postal-vote envelopes and the extraction of ballot papers. Staff will also wash or sanitise their hands immediately before and after each count or when they handle batches of ballot papers.

Surgical masks may be worn by both staff and scrutineers.

At the declaration of the poll

Social-distancing rules will apply to all in attendance and seating will be appropriately spaced. Hand sanitiser will be at the entrance and exit of the venue.

4. The public and stakeholders have confidence that the electoral process is well managed

The Electoral Act

The Electoral Act prescribes how a federal election, including a by-election, is to be conducted. All policies, processes and procedures implemented by the AEC during the by-election are designed to operate within the prescribed boundaries of the Electoral Act.

The AEC is committed to: delivering processes that uphold electoral integrity and engender voter and stakeholder trust in the result; and to ensuring the security and sanctity of the ballot paper at all times.

The AEC has in place, and will demonstrate at the by-election, clear and established safeguards for the handling of ballot papers by AEC staff, temporary election staff and contractors. This is supported by the use of visual identification requirements for AEC staff, visitors and scrutineers that provide for consistency across polling places and counting centres during the by-election.

Candidates are not permitted to observe the counting of votes for elections in which they are candidates. Candidates do have the right to appoint scrutineers as personal representatives to observe both the voting and the counting of votes on their behalf at every polling place and scrutiny centre. A [Scrutineers Handbook](#) is available to support the role of scrutineers.

The AEC is committed to treating complaints seriously, promptly and in line with the AEC's [complaints management policy](#). Complaints received during the by-election period will be managed according to the principles and processes set out in the policy. Complaints about possible electoral fraud will be managed according to the AEC's fraud control policy and procedures. Information on how to report any suspected fraud is available on the [AEC website](#).

5. By-election processes will conform with federal, state and local health advice

COVID-19

The by-election will be delivered in accordance with the COVID-19 operating model (incorporated within this service plan) as endorsed by the Chief Medical Officer, and reviewed by Queensland health authorities.

Achieving the AEC Service Standards

The AEC is committed to upholding five key service standards.

The AEC will support effective participation in the Groom by-election by ensuring information provided to the voting public and candidates is timely, accurate, comprehensive and easy to understand.

The AEC will conduct a public information and education campaign and will deliver an official guide for the by-election to households across the division. Information will also be available on the AEC website including information in accessible formats. The AEC will provide services to assist people living with disability to ensure they are not disadvantaged from participating in the electoral process.

Prospective candidates will also be provided with a range of information and services. The AEC website serves as a central information hub providing guidance on standing for election to Parliament.

Standard 1: Voters and candidates receive timely and accurate information

Achieved by:

The AEC will provide timely and accurate information using appropriate technology and channels.

Details of voting centres (early voting centres and polling places) will be published on the AEC website a minimum of 48 hours prior to being open to the public.

Information published on the AEC website about the location and accessibility of voting centres (early voting centres and polling places) will be accurate.

Preliminary results will be published as soon as they are available.

Standard 2: The AEC delivers a high-quality service

Achieved by:

AEC staff will be courteous and professional in all their dealings with the public and candidates.

Polling places will be inspected and assessed for accessibility. Polling place accessibility rankings will be made available on the AEC website.

Enrolment claims received by the Close of Roll deadline will be processed in time for the by-election.

Postal vote packs will be dispatched upon receipt of a valid and complete application (once ballot papers are available), according to the following timeline:

- Prior to the Monday before election day
 - Paper postal vote applications – within five business days of receipt
 - Online postal vote applications – within three business days of receipt.
 - From the Monday before polling day
 - Paper and online – within two business day of receipt.
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Voting locations (including early voting centres and polling places) will open in accordance with advertised dates and times.

Standard 3: Votes will be counted in accordance with the Electoral Act and the public and stakeholders have confidence in the result

Achieved by:

After by-election night, accurate count information will be progressively updated on the AEC website.

Ballot papers (both used and unused) will be accounted for.¹

¹ The AEC will follow established processes to account for ballot papers from the time they are printed, issued to an elector, placed in a ballot box (or discovered as discarded or returned as spoilt), counted and then placed in long term storage prior to statutorily authorised destruction. The AEC will also follow established processes to account for ballot papers that are not issued, from the time they are printed until statutorily authorised destruction.

Standard 4: The public and stakeholders have confidence that the electoral process is well managed

Achieved by:

The writ for the by-election will be returned in accordance with the relevant legislation.

The AEC's conduct of the by-election is upheld in the event of any challenges to results taken to the Court of Disputed Returns.

All instances of apparent multiple voting will be reviewed and dealt with in accordance with AEC policy and procedures and within statutory timeframes.

All instances of apparent non-voting will be reviewed and dealt with in accordance with AEC policy and procedures and within statutory timeframes.

Standard 5: By-election processes will conform with federal, state and local health advice

Achieved by:

The by-election will be delivered in accordance with the COVID-19 operating model (incorporated within this service plan) as endorsed by the Chief Medical Officer, and reviewed by Queensland health authorities.
