

March 2024

Cook by-election

Service Plan

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Foreword

The AEC is committed to providing the highest standard of electoral services for the Cook by-election. We are committed to continuous improvement, and we have taken lessons from our experiences conducting recent electoral events including the 2022 Federal Election and the 2023 Referendum which we can apply to the Cook by-election. This service plan outlines the key election services and standards that will underpin the AEC's delivery of the 2024 Cook by-election.

Electoral integrity remains at the core of our operations. We are committed to a high-quality, trustworthy, and transparent by-election. Ensuring the security and integrity of ballot papers is integral to the AEC maintaining an impartial and independent electoral system. The AEC's operations and procedures mean that all ballot papers are tracked, secure and accounted for at all times.

The AEC is responsible for providing the Australian people with an independent electoral service; political neutrality (real and perceived) must underpin our day-to-day business activities. To achieve this all our staff, as well as suppliers, are required to follow our strict Political and Issue Neutrality Policy. All key by-election suppliers have been advised of the importance of their political and issue neutrality obligations under their agreements with the AEC.

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 our 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.

The Cook by-election will be held to fill the vacancy following the resignation of the House of Representatives Member for Cook, Mr Scott Morrison.

On Monday 11 March 2024, the Speaker of the House of Representatives announced the Cook by-election would be held on Saturday 13 April 2024. The writ was issued the same day as the announcement.

Agency purpose

The AEC is the independent statutory authority responsible for the conduct of federal elections, referendums, and by-elections. Our purpose 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.

In line with the *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918* (Electoral Act) we do this by:

- conducting successful electoral events, including federal elections, by-elections and referendums, and industrial elections and ballots
- ensuring confidence in the Commonwealth Electoral Roll
- regulating political party registrations and financial disclosure
- supporting electoral redistributions
- undertaking public awareness activities.

Compulsory voting maintains a high level of participation in electoral processes and the AEC works hard across the electoral cycle to increase opportunities to engage and enhance access for all eligible Australians.

More information on how we have designed elements of our service offering to meet the needs of these electors during this by-election is outlined throughout this document.

AEC values

The AEC and Australian Public Service (APS) values are an essential component of our operating environment. The APS values and code of conduct are fundamental to our work. The AEC values and commitments frame how AEC staff work in delivering our services - our focus is on **electoral integrity** through the values of **quality**, **agility**, and **professionalism**.

By-election timetable

Several 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 Cook by-election will be conducted according to the following timetable.

Activity	Date
By-election date announced	Monday 11 March 2024
Postal vote applications open	Monday 11 March 2024
Issue of the writ	6 pm (AEDT) Monday 11 March 2024
Close of rolls	8 pm (AEDT) Monday 18 March 2024
Close of candidate nominations	12 noon (AEDT) Thursday 21 March 2024
Declaration of candidate nominations	12 noon (AEDT) Friday 22 March 2024
Early voting commences	Tuesday 2 April 2024
Last day for receipt of postal vote applications	6 pm (AEST) Wednesday 10 April 2024
By-election day	Saturday 13 April 2024
Last day for receipt of postal votes	Friday 26 April 2024
Return of the writ (latest date)	On or before Wednesday 19 June 2024

Election delivery

The AEC election delivery principles underpin delivery at the next by-election.



Integrity of the result

- safe custody and handling of ballot papers
- maintaining integrity of a person's lawful right to vote by providing a wide range of voting services nationally and internationally for all eligible Australians
- facilitating ballot paper formality
- all electoral processes undertaken in compliance with the Electoral Act
- all recent legislative changes implemented

Good customer service and positive customer experience

- provide an improved voter experience at the election
- voters and candidates receive timely and accurate information
- staff will be courteous and professional in all their dealings with the public and candidates

Efficient processes and procedures

- continue to build staff capability and provide an improved experience for AEC staff in delivering the election
- further integrate planning across all levels of the AEC
- maintain the ability to mobilise and deliver electoral events whenever they are called

AEC service standards

The following five election service standards will guide the AEC in delivering the Cook by-election.

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.

The [AEC website](#) serves as a central information hub providing candidate nomination forms (including the qualification checklist), the [Nominations Guide for Candidates](#), and the [Candidates Handbook](#), which provide guidance on standing for election to the Australian Parliament.

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.

During the early voting period, an official guide to the by-election will be delivered to households across the electoral Division of Cook.

During the election period, the AEC's 13 23 26 telephone number will provide a specific Cook by-election service which will operate daily from 9am to 5pm AEDT/AEST.

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 19 languages. The National Relay Service is also available for people who are deaf or have a hearing or speech impairment.

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.

Standard 2: The AEC delivers a high-quality service

Achieved by:

Applications for enrolment received by the close of roll deadline will be processed in time for the by-election.

Early voting centres will operate for the Division of Cook by-election and the details of these locations and voter eligibility will be available online ([AEC website](#)).

Alternatively, voters who are entitled to an early vote can apply for a postal vote at [AEC website](#) or on a paper application available at AEC offices. Postal vote applications must be received by the AEC before 6pm (AEST) Wednesday 10 April 2024.

The electoral roll for the Cook by-election will close at 8pm (AEDT) Monday 18 March 2024.

Voting locations (including early voting centres and polling places) will open in accordance with advertised dates and times.

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

Polling place accessibility ratings will be made available on the AEC website.

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

Achieved by:

After the close of polls, up-to-date count information will be progressively published on the AEC website.

Ballot papers (both used and unused) will be accounted for using established processes.

Appointed scrutineers observe electoral processes, including counting of votes, to ensure transparency and integrity in the conduct of the by-election.

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 will be 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.

Complaints will be managed in accordance with the AEC's [Complaints Management Policy](#).

Standard 5: The AEC continues to be conscious of the health and safety requirements

Achieved by:

The AEC will comply with relevant health and safety requirements.

Achieving the AEC service standards

1. Voters and candidates receive timely and accurate information

Communication

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

The AEC will communicate with eligible electors in the Division of Cook to provide information about the by-election and encourage participation. This will include some advertising, social media content and outreach to local community organisations. Up-to-date information will also be available on the AEC website.

Information about enrolment and voter services is available on the [AEC website](#).

An interactive [practise voting tool](#) is available on the AEC website, with easy-to-follow instructions on how to complete your ballot paper correctly. In addition, translated information is available in 34 languages.

An official guide will be delivered to households across the electoral Division of Cook. The 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.

During the election period, the AEC's national telephone number, 13 23 26, will operate. A telephone interpreter service is available which includes 19 dedicated language lines and a general line for other languages. The National Relay Service is also available for voters (or any other person) who may need assistance contacting the AEC.

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, on the phone, or at an AEC office. The AEC's [online enquiry form](#) will be monitored in real time and any enquiries received via this form will be answered in an efficient and accurate manner.

Taking nominations

Prospective candidates will 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 [Nomination guide for candidates](#), and the [Candidates handbook](#), which all provide guidance on standing for election to the Australian Parliament.

2. The AEC delivers a high-quality service

Enrolment services

The AEC aims to deliver a high-quality service which allows voters to ensure their enrolment is up to date and facilitates voting based on individual circumstances.

The electoral roll will close at 8pm (AEDT) Monday 18 March 2024. Voters are able to [enrol](#), [check their current electoral enrolment](#), [update their enrolment details](#), or [check the progress of their enrolment application](#) online. Enrolment applications are also available at any AEC office and on the [AEC website](#). A full list of AEC offices is available on the [AEC website](#). The preferred method of enrolment is online.

Early voting services

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 they meet the [eligibility requirements](#) listed on the AEC website.

Postal voting

Voters who are entitled to a postal vote can apply at aec.gov.au which is the preferred method of application or by using a paper application form available at AEC offices. Voters may also receive postal vote applications from candidates and political parties, which may be returned via the party or directly to the AEC. Postal vote applications must be received by the AEC before 6pm (AEST) on Wednesday 10 April 2024.

Voting for residents of aged care facilities

The AEC will be offering mobile polling in the Division of Cook. Details regarding the locations that mobile polling teams will be visiting will be available at aec.gov.au.

The AEC continues to be conscious of the health and safety of voters and will comply with the health and safety measures of each facility.

Postal voting will be available to voters who cannot be visited by a mobile polling team. Voters can also attend an early voting centre or polling place on by-election day.

Voting for people who are blind or have low vision and Antarctic voters

Any voters who are blind or have low vision will be able to vote via the telephone voting service. This service is operated by the AEC and allows registered voters to cast a secret vote from any location, without attending an AEC office or polling place.

Voters working in Antarctica, or in transit to or from Antarctica on by-election day, are also eligible to register and vote using the telephone voting service.

Information can be found on the [AEC website](#).

Overseas voting

Cook voters who are living, working, or holidaying overseas can apply online for a postal vote at 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 polling day and then be received by the AEC by Friday 26 April 2024.

Voting on polling day

On by-election day, Saturday 13 April 2024, polling places across the Division of Cook will be open between 8am and 6pm AEST. A full list of polling places will be available at aec.gov.au.

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

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

Counting the votes

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.

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 (e.g. postal votes) become available.

Candidates 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 counting centre. Scrutineers in an election must not wear or display any badge or emblem of a candidate or political party in a polling place on by-election day. Scrutineers must not actively seek to interfere with or attempt to influence a voter or communicate with any person in the polling place except so far as is necessary in the discharge of the scrutineer’s functions. A [Scrutineers Handbook](#) is available to support the role of scrutineers.

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

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, engender voter and stakeholder trust in the result, and ensure the security and sanctity of the ballot paper at all times.

The AEC has clear and established safeguards in place for the handling of ballot papers by AEC staff, temporary election staff and contractors, which will be demonstrated at the by-election. AEC staff, official visitors and scrutineers are required to wear badges and/or vests at polling places and counting centres so they can be easily identified.

The AEC upholds the sanctity of the ballot paper in all its forms and at all times.

1 All ballot papers remain ‘live’ from printing through to statutorily authorised destruction.

2 The security, integrity and accountability of ballot papers must be preserved at all times – including transit and storage by the AEC, contractors, or other third parties.

These two maxims of ballot paper handling must never be breached and must underpin AEC operations, culture and standards.

The AEC is committed to treating complaints seriously, promptly, and in line with the AEC’s [Complaints Management Policy](#). Complaints can be lodged using the AEC’s [online enquiry form](#) or by calling the AEC’s national telephone number 13 23 26. 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](#).

The AEC is determined to combat disinformation. The AEC's active and, at times, forthright approach to social media engagement is a key part of combatting electoral mis and disinformation online. The AEC will also have a disinformation register for the Cook by-election that will list prominent pieces of disinformation regarding the by-election process. The AEC encourages voters to stop and consider when they encounter electoral communication, and to think about whether the information is reliable, current, and safe.

5. The AEC continues to be conscious of the health and safety requirements

The health and safety of voters, staff and visitors is important to us. The AEC understands its obligations in complying with legal requirements, including the Workplace Health and Safety Act. As is standard for federal electoral events, the AEC supports general good hygiene measures.

Good general hygiene measures in polling places

For the Cook by-election, voters, staff and visitors should practise good personal hygiene, including:

- Using the available hand sanitiser on entry and exit at polling places.
- Voters can bring their own pencil or pen, and pencils will also be available.

To support work health and safety measures:

- The officer-in-charge of each polling place will have overall responsibility for ensuring that health and safety measures are implemented and maintained during the polling period.
- AEC staff are aware they have a responsibility to prioritise health and safety, including completing required work health and safety training.
- AEC staff and visitors to count centres can wear face masks if preferred.
- AEC staff are encouraged to stay home if they are unwell.

Further information

For more information on the Cook by-election visit the [AEC website](#) or call 13 23 26.