

September 2023

# 2023 Referendum

Service Plan

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# Foreword

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The AEC is committed to providing the highest standard of electoral services for the referendum. We are committed to continuous improvement, and we have taken lessons from our experiences conducting by-elections and the 2022 federal election during the COVID-19 pandemic to further improve event delivery for the referendum. This Service Plan outlines the key voting services and standards that will underpin the AEC's delivery of the 2023 referendum.

Electoral integrity remains at the core of our operations. We are committed to a high-quality, trustworthy, and transparent referendum. 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 referendum suppliers have been advised of the importance of their political and issue neutrality obligations under their agreements with the AEC.

The 2023 referendum will have the best base for democratic participation than any federal electoral event in Australia's history. Targeted initiatives have resulted in over 17.5 million Australians enrolled to vote, with the estimated national enrolment rate at 97.5 per cent, up from 97.1 per cent since the end of 2022.

The AEC is committed to improving the voter experience for voters who are in remote or very remote areas of Australia. Following community consultation, our service offering has been expanded to better support people to access voting services: We will be visiting approximately 35% more remote communities this referendum than we have in the past and spending at least 80% more time in communities.

We will continue to have a range of COVID-19 safety measures for voters, AEC staff and other participants through the entire referendum process, including the management of referendum materials and at our counting centres. Some of the measures implemented at the federal election will be the same, such as employing a hygiene officer in every polling place, and some will be different. For example, the easing of restrictions has allowed us to deliver higher levels of mobile polling and our mobile polling service offering will return to pre-pandemic levels.

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 services.

Tom Rogers

Electoral Commissioner

## Overview

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The Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) is the independent statutory authority responsible for the conduct of the referendum.

The only way to change the Australian Constitution is by holding a referendum. This means that the Constitution cannot be altered without 'the approval of the people'. Federal Parliament decides on the proposed change to the Constitution to put to voters. A proposed law outlining the changes to the Constitution must be passed by both houses of Parliament - or passed twice in either the House of Representatives or the Senate.

A referendum must then be held no sooner than two months and no later than six months after the bill has passed Parliament.

The Governor-General issues a writ (the formal instruction to run the referendum) which, like an election, must be held on a Saturday.

## Agency purpose

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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) and the *Referendum (Machinery Provisions) Act 1984* (Referendum 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 Australian's.

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

## Values

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The AEC and 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**.

# COVID-19 safety measures

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This Service Plan details the key modifications to AEC processes that are being implemented to support COVID-19 safety. These are in line with the current external environment and in accordance with current advice from relevant health authorities.

## Referendum timetable

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Several essential steps are involved in conducting a referendum.

These steps, according to the Australian Constitution and the Electoral Act, Referendum Act and the *Constitution Alteration (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice) Act 2023*, begin with the issue of the writ (a document commanding an electoral official to hold an election or referendum) by the Governor-General and end with the return of the writ after the votes have been counted and the results determined.

The referendum will be conducted according to the following [timetable](#).

Activity	Date
Referendum date announced	Wednesday 30 August
Issue of the writ	Monday 11 September 6pm AEST
Postal vote applications open	Monday 11 September
Close of rolls	8pm Monday 18 September
Remote mobile polling commences	Monday 25 September (3 weeks before polling day)
Other early voting commences	Monday 2 October (2 weeks before polling day)
Last day for receipt of postal vote applications	6pm Wednesday 11 October
Referendum voting day	Saturday 14 October
Last day for receipt of declaration votes	Friday 27 October
Return of the writ	On or before Wednesday 20 December

# Referendum story



## Referendum story



### 1 REFERENDUM ANNOUNCED

The government announces its intention to hold a referendum. Once the referendum legislation passes, the writ may be issued at any time between stages one and six.

### 2 REFERENDUM WORKFORCE

Approximately 100,000 temporary workers are recruited, engaged and trained in just a few weeks. These frontline staff deliver democracy in polling places, remote voting locations and counting centres across Australia.

### 3 VOTER ENROLMENT

Eligible voters can enrol or update details any time before the Close of Rolls. The certified list of voters is then prepared and distributed.

### 4 REFERENDUM COMMUNICATION

Important referendum information communicated to all Australians via a range of media and languages.

### 5 YES/NO PAMPHLET CONTENT

Parliamentarians submit the official cases for voting yes and no to the AEC.

### 6 BALLOT PAPER AND PAMPHLET DESIGN

Ballot papers and pamphlets are designed, printed, and delivered across Australia in preparation for early voting.

### 7 VOTING COMMENCES

Remote mobile polling commences 19 days before voting day. A range of voting services commence 12 days before the day of the referendum. In-person overseas voting will be offered at a large number of posts.

### 8 PREPARING FOR VOTING DAY

About 7,000 polling places will be open on voting day staffed by over 100,000 temporary workers.

### 9 VOTING DAY

Polling places are open from 8.00am to 6.00pm local time.

### 10 VOTING NIGHT

After 8.00pm on voting day, ballot papers are counted, scrutinised, packaged and securely transported to central counting centres.

### 11 COUNTING OF REFERENDUM VOTES

Votes are counted and verified within each division with scrutineers observing.

### 12 RESULT IS ANNOUNCED

After voting day, the state, territory and national results will be progressively announced.

### 13 DAY THIRTEEN

To be included in the count, ballot papers must be received by the 13th day after voting day.

### 14 THE WRIT IS RETURNED

Once all counting is complete and the result is certified, the writ is returned to the Governor-General.

### 15 REFERENDUM PACK UP

All ballot papers (used and unused) are stored securely, and all other material is either stored or recycled.



The delivery of this referendum will comply with the relevant jurisdictional health guidelines in place at the time.



# Referendum delivery

The AEC delivery principles underpin delivery of the referendum.



## 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 referendum processes undertaken in compliance with the Electoral Act and the Referendum Act
- all recent legislative changes implemented.

## Good customer service and positive customer experience

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

## Efficient processes and procedures

- continue to build staff capability and provide an improved experience for AEC staff in delivering the referendum
- 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

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The following five service standards will guide the AEC in delivering the referendum.

## Standard 1: Voters receive timely and accurate information

### Achieved by:

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

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.

An official guide and a Yes/No case pamphlet for the referendum will be delivered to households across Australia.

During the referendum period, the AEC's national telephone number, 13 23 26, will operate daily from 9am to 5pm 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.

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## 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 referendum.

Early voting centres will operate for the referendum and the details of these locations and voter eligibility will be available on the [AEC website](#).

Alternatively, voters who are entitled to an early vote can apply for a postal vote on the [AEC website](#) or on a paper application available at AEC offices. Postal vote applications must be received by the AEC before 6pm Wednesday 11 October.

The electoral roll for the referendum will close at 8pm Monday 18 September.

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.

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

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### Standard 3: Votes are counted in accordance with the Electoral Act and Referendum 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 referendum.

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

#### Achieved by:

The writ for the referendum will be returned in accordance with the relevant legislation.

The AEC's conduct of the referendum will be upheld in the event of any challenges to results taken to the High Court.

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: Referendum processes are informed by health advice

#### Achieved by:

The referendum will be delivered in accordance with COVID-19 measures as guided by relevant health advice.

# Achieving the AEC service standards

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## 1. Voters receive timely and accurate information

### Communication

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

The AEC will implement a national public information and advertising campaign to support voters to enrol and participate in the referendum. This is an integrated, multi-channel campaign with information provided at key stages across the referendum period.

Information about enrolment, voter services and how to complete the referendum ballot paper is available on the [AEC website](#) and will be delivered across multiple channels and touchpoints as part of the AEC campaign.

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.

In the lead up to the referendum, an official guide will be delivered to households across Australia. This will be provided together with the yes/no referendum pamphlet. The guide will provide information on where and how to vote, what to do if you cannot get to a polling place on referendum day, and how to complete your ballot paper correctly. The pamphlet will include the 'yes' and 'no' cases prepared by members of Parliament. This information will be translated into a range of languages and made available on the [AEC website](#).

During the referendum 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.

## 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 Monday 18 September. 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.

### Remote voter services

Voters who are in remote or very remote areas of Australia will see an expanded service offering to enable participation and better support people to access voting services. Changes to the Referendum (Machinery Provisions) Act now allow the AEC to conduct mobile polling in remote locations up to 19 days prior to voting day.

### Postal voting

Voters who are entitled to a postal vote can apply on the [AEC website](#) 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 third parties, which may be returned via them or directly to the AEC. Postal vote applications must be received by the AEC before 6pm on Wednesday 11 October.

### Voting for residents of aged care facilities

The AEC will be offering an increased mobile polling service compared to the 2022 federal election. Details regarding the locations that mobile polling teams will be visiting will be available on the [AEC website](#).

There will be no mobile polling in hospitals.

Postal voting will be available to voters who cannot be visited by a mobile polling team. In-person early voting and voting on voting day is also available.

## 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 secure 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 voting day, are also eligible to register and vote using the secure telephone voting service.

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

## Overseas voting

Eligible Australians who are overseas and enrolled can vote in person at an Australian overseas voting centre.

Australian overseas voting centres will be available at a number of Australian embassies, consulates and high commissions around the world.

Eligible voters who are living, working or holidaying overseas can apply for a postal vote or register as an overseas elector on the [AEC website](#). Voters should allow sufficient time for their application to be processed by the AEC, postal vote materials to be sent to an overseas address, and their completed postal vote to be returned to Australia in time to be included in the count. The ballot paper must be completed before 6pm on voting day and then be received by the AEC by midnight on Friday 27 October.

A full list of Australian overseas voting centres with opening dates and times will be published on the [AEC website](#).

## Voting on voting day

On voting day, Saturday 14 October, polling places across Australia will be open between 8am and 6pm local time. A full list of polling places will be available on the [AEC website](#).

## Sustainability

The AEC is conscious of our environmental impact and has adopted several initiatives to proactively reduce waste. All AEC cardboard materials have been redesigned to be lighter, stronger, and easier to be recycled and reused. Traditional AEC branding and colouration has also been removed, further making the product more attractive to be retained and repurposed by polling places such as schools. Other materials are reused wherever possible.

### **3. Votes are counted in accordance with the Electoral Act and Referendum 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. To become law, the proposed alteration to the Constitution must be approved by a [‘double majority’](#): a national majority of electors, and a majority of electors in a majority of states.

The referendum 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 and scrutineers to follow vote counting on referendum night and progressive results until the final outcome is announced.

The Tally Room can be accessed on referendum night from 6pm and will be updated as results are entered into AEC systems.

The AEC's operations and procedures mean that all ballot papers are tracked, secure and accounted for at all times.

Counts conducted in polling places on referendum night provide indicative results only. As counting continues in the weeks following referendum night, updates are made to the Tally Room as re-checked results and “fresh” results from declaration votes (like postal votes and out-of-area votes) become available.

For the referendum, scrutineers can be appointed by the Governor-General, the Governor of a State, the Chief Minister of the Australian Capital Territory, the Administrator of the Northern Territory (or persons authorised by those people to appoint scrutineers), and registered officers of a registered political party. An officer or scrutineer must not wear or display a badge or emblem in support or opposition to a proposed law for the alteration of the Constitution in a polling booth on voting day for the referendum. 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 Referendum Act sets out how a referendum is to be conducted. All policies, processes and procedures implemented by the AEC during the referendum are designed to operate within the boundaries of the Referendum 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 staff and contractors, which will be demonstrated at the referendum. 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 referendum 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 referendum that will list prominent pieces of disinformation regarding the referendum 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. Election processes are informed by health advice

The AEC takes the safety of our election workers and voters seriously.

This Service Plan includes any adjustments to AEC processes related to COVID-19. The AEC continues to work closely with relevant health authorities to ensure COVID-19 safety measures are guided by relevant health advice and other sources of information including the *Work Health and Safety Act 2011* and Safe Work Australia.

In accordance with current advice, the AEC is implementing work health and safety risk mitigation strategies throughout the referendum process and includes staff training. As COVID-19 restrictions have eased significantly and enabling legislation has sunsetted, secure telephone voting is not available for the referendum for COVID-affected voters.

### **COVID-19 safety measures in polling places**

The AEC takes the safety of our workers and voters seriously. We have appropriate measures in place to minimise the spread of COVID-19 including:

- AEC staff, voters, and visitors will be strongly encouraged to wear face masks in polling places and continue to practise good personal hygiene.
- Hand sanitiser will be available on entry and exit at all polling places.
- Hygiene officers will undertake regular touchpoint cleaning and will ensure COVID-19 safety measures are in place. Cleaning by the hygiene officer is in addition to routine cleaning arrangements in our venues.
- Signage about personal hygiene and physical distancing will be prominent in all polling places.
- Physical distancing of 1.5m will be maintained wherever possible.
- There will be clean pencils available, and voters are also able to bring their own pencil or pen. Voters will be asked to deposit their used AEC pencil in the box at the exit to the polling place so that the pencils can be sanitised by the hygiene officer after every use.

The officer-in-charge of each polling place will have overall responsibility for ensuring that AEC COVID-19 safety measures are implemented and remain in place during the polling period. In addition, all workers on an AEC site have a responsibility to ensure they are acting with COVID-19 safety as a priority.

### **COVID-19 safety measures during counting**

- AEC staff and visitors to a count centre will be strongly encouraged to wear face masks and continue to practise good personal hygiene.
- Signage about personal hygiene and physical distancing will be prominent in all counting centres. Where possible, sort and count tables will be positioned to allow for physical distancing.
- Hand sanitiser will be available on entry and exit, work areas and common areas (such as kitchens). Masks will also be available.
- Regular touchpoint cleaning will be undertaken as well as regular cleaning of surfaces, and breakout areas during operational hours.



## Training

All early voting and polling day staff will receive online COVID-19 related WHS training.

A WHS briefing will be delivered at each counting centre to all staff. This is to ensure staff are aware of local WHS information and their responsibilities as a worker. The briefing will cover:

- COVID-19 safety measures including personal protective equipment use and disposal and physical distancing
- the role of First Aid Officers and Emergency Wardens
- emergency procedures
- first aid room and equipment
- work area and housekeeping
- workplace hazards and fatigue management
- reporting hazards and incidents.

## Further information

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For more information on the referendum visit the [AEC website](#) or call 13 23 26.