



**The Health and  
Social Care  
Alliance  
Scotland  
(the ALLIANCE)**



**Electoral Commission consultation on  
accessibility of the Scottish Parliament  
elections May 2026**

**ALLIANCE response**

**12 June 2026**

## Introduction

The Health and Social Care Alliance Scotland (the ALLIANCE) welcome the opportunity to respond to the Electoral Commission's consultation on the accessibility of the Scottish Parliament elections in May 2026. Our response centres on the experiences of people who are Deaf, Deafblind who have Visual Impairments, who have repeatedly highlighted the barriers they face to participation in democratic process, and called for changes in inclusive communication.

Over the last three years, the ALLIANCE has carried out a range of lived experience research with people who are Deaf, Deafblind who have Visual Impairments. Evidence from this range of research has informed our response, alongside additional targeted input from our members across Scotland on their experiences of voting in the May 2026 elections.

## Information (Scotland)

Information from the local council, political parties and candidates, the Electoral Commission and others.

Question 1: Do you have any feedback from your users on any information they may have received? This may include: information about when the election was happening, location of the polling station, how to vote in the election(s); information about the candidates standing for election and what they would do if they won. You may wish to think about:

- How easy it was to access and understand information
- The formats users received it in (paper, email, online, etc.)
- Whether these formats were accessible for them
- Whether information arrived in time to be useful

People who are Deaf, Deafblind, or who have Visual Impairments typically experienced more barriers to accessing information about elections. In particular, people reported difficulties accessing information about accessing the new tactile voting overlay (for people with Visual Impairments), and limited accessible information on candidates and party manifestos.



Information on local polling and candidates was typically shared via printed information in size 12 font, with sometimes – but not always – a small item at the end of the relevant letters or leaflets indicating that the recipient could request information in alternative formats if required. One ALLIANCE member suggested that changing the location and size of the text signalling alternative formats (to the header/start of the printed material) would be helpful – then recipients would not have to navigate (or request someone else navigate) a lengthy section of small print English text before finding the section relevant to their accessibility needs.

Deaf BSL users highlighted the need for BSL interpretation and captions for election material – particularly from candidates and parties. One ALLIANCE member highlighted that there is an urgent need for accessible election materials aimed at Deaf young people. Several people reflected that social media content around the election should meet minimum standards for accessibility – including alt. text, captions, and BSL translations and interpretation.

Of the party manifestos, only the SNP manifesto was published in BSL. Most manifestos were not freely available in large print or Easy Read. Our members also reported that it was frequently difficult to locate a plain text version of each party manifesto that was accessible for screen readers (e.g. a locked Word .docx or .pdf). Interactive web-based versions of party manifestos were difficult to navigate with screen readers, without a clearly signposted alternative format, and not every image included alt. text. It should be noted that alternative formats were available from parties on request – but pro-active provision of inclusive communication should be the default to ensure parity of democratic access. Furthermore, both BSL translation and Easy Read typically take 1-2 weeks to produce (or more) – so time and budget should be built into planning for manifesto launches and campaigning.

Finally, there was limited provision of Electronic note-takers and BSL-English interpretation at most local hustings and election events, and little



consideration given to the venue selected in terms of accessibility for people who are Deaf, Deafblind, or who have Visual Impairments (although members did comment positively on the exceptions, typically linked to Deaf clubs and sensory centres). One member shared that polling station staff were not familiar with sighted guiding. Another reflected that their local polling station staff did not understand the venue's hearing loop systems.

## Voting at the election

Question 2: In the most recent election, to the best of your knowledge did your users vote or were they intending to vote – in similar numbers, more, or fewer compared with previous elections?

- In higher numbers.

Question 3: Can you tell us what factors you think influenced whether your service users voted, or intended to vote, in more, similar or fewer numbers than in previous elections? Please comment on:

- Reasons for turnout (higher, lower or unchanged)
- Factors that might have increased participation
- Reasons for choosing a particular voting method (in-person, postal, proxy)

Members spoke positively about their hopes of voting independently via the new tactile voting overlays (although this did not always go smoothly), and about the helpfulness of companions when voting in person.

## Postal and proxy voting

Question 4: Please tell us about your users' experience of applying for a postal or proxy vote. You may wish to comment on:

- Ease of applying
- Difficulties encountered
- Level and type of support needed



N/A

Question 5: Please tell us more about your users' overall experience of **voting by post**. You may wish to comment on:

- Ease of completing and returning the postal vote
- Difficulties encountered
- Whether users required support
- Ability to vote independently and in secret

Our members reported that people who are Deaf, Deafblind and who have Visual Impairments primarily opted for postal votes, due to in person accessibility concerns. However, several people with Visual Impairments reported issues this year. One person shared the following:

“Signing a postal vote without assistance or inadvertently spoiling your ballot paper is challenging.”

People shared that there is appetite for a digital option that offers people with Visual Impairments the levels of confidentiality and independent voting afforded to sighted voters. Currently, postal voting remains inaccessible for people with no visual field or leaves them reliant on assistance from another person to complete their vote.

One person was frustrated that the new tactile voting overlay was not made available to them for use with their postal vote – and despite repeated requests, their local Electoral Registration Office did not have information readily available and were unable to help (over a period of several weeks). They shared their full experience as follows:

“I was very encouraged to find out about the new and improved technology designed to improve the voter experience for people with a Visual Impairment. Specifically, I had a strong interest in the new tactile voting overlays, as I had previous experience of using the



old tactile voting devices, which were very challenging to use, and were often not the correct size to cover the ballot paper. As a result, I had never previously been able to vote independently, requiring support from family members, or a member of polling station staff.

[...]

I contacted my local Electoral Registration Office (ERO) to ask these questions, and after a delay of over two weeks, was advised that they were unsure what the situation was, and that they would need to get back to me. By this point, my postal vote had arrived, and I was delaying completing it in the hope that I would be able to vote independently. However, after hearing nothing in the following week, I decided to ask a family member for support to complete my vote, meaning that once again, my right to a secret vote had been denied. At the time of writing [June 2026], I have still not received any more information from my local ERO.

I was informed by a Visual Impairment focused organisation that the aim for this election was to roll out the new technology within polling stations in the first instance. Whilst this is understandable, it would have been better to have been informed about this when asking the question, and advice should have been provided to all returning officers. Whilst this may have happened, it does not feel like there was equality of understanding, and the situation may have varied across the country.

Whilst I am disappointed and dissatisfied with my experience at this election, I am hopeful that this will be a learning experience for the future, and hope that all voters will be considered on an equal basis in the future.

I am concerned that the accessibility discussions exclusively focused on in-person voting, and it did feel like postal voters were not being considered in the process.”



## Polling station voting

Question 6: For any users who voted at a polling station, what feedback did your users share about their experience voting in a polling station? In your answer, please think about the following:

- Whether they voted independently or with assistance
- Whether they used equipment
- Experience with staff

Overall, many of our respondents indicated positive experiences in polling stations – although there were still persistent barriers for some groups. One member organisation, who had provided substantial support for people in the run up to the election, shared the following reflection:

“Our blind and partially sighted users fed back that the centre was easy to navigate on the day of the election. [...] This reflects well on the communication and guidance from election staff who were on site meeting all visitors on the day.”

Others experienced more barriers – including difficulty accessing tactile voting overlaps, with staff unsure of how to support people with Visual Impairments.

Among Deafblind voters, people reported that the colour of the voting slips was a real issue, as the differentiation was very difficult for someone with low vision – for some Deafblind people and in specific lighting conditions, voters reported that pale peach and pale lilac looked the same. ALLIANCE members recommended that the design of voting papers should follow accessibility guidance on the use of contrasting colours, size, and font to support people with low vision. Such a change would be useful in improving accessibility and should not be associated with substantial extra costs.

As indicated in the response to a previous question, some members who had registered for a postal vote were forced to use a polling station against



their preferences, due to delays in the provision of accessible support and answers to questions.

Question 7: For any users who voted with a companion, what feedback did they share? In your answer, please think about the following:

- Awareness of the right to take a companion
- How the process worked for them
- Staff awareness and support
- Usefulness of taking a companion

The ALLIANCE heard from a range of Deafblind people who voted with support from a companion. One of our members shared the following reflection:

“We asked all members that wanted to support of another (either a Guide-Communicator or family member) to let us know (if they wanted to) and we would phone the individual polling stations. We did that for quite a few and it seemed to go very smoothly in relation to support in the booth not being challenged. There was also a good attempt to make people feel comfortable and to accommodate them.”

In two instances, Guide-Communicators reported that Deafblind people were given a different table to fill in the voting slips. As a positive, this gave more space for voting support. However, it also limited people’s privacy as there were no side panels so people queuing could see what was being written. This lack of privacy was a concern when written English is translated into BSL (tactile or Visual Frame). While it is unlikely many other people in the polling station understood BSL, as a visual language this lack of privacy screens meant that it was possible for people within the hall to see who the Deafblind person was voting for. Greater privacy for BSL users would have been helpful, and we recommend that this consideration should be included in guidance in subsequent elections.



Question 8: The Returning Officer at the local authority must provide reasonable equipment to enable or make it easier for people to vote. Before polling day, it's also possible to ask for different equipment/changes to help people vote when they go to the polling station. What were your users' experiences of requesting or using equipment to help them vote in a polling station, if needed? You may wish to comment on:

- Awareness of available equipment
- Requests made and how
- Support provided by staff
- Whether equipment helped them to vote

Several of our members with a Visual Impairment reported problems accessing a tactile overlay for in person voting. Some people welcomed that information on overlay use was in Braille. However other people, who could not read Braille, reported difficulties in using the overlay and shared that they struggled to vote in person.

People reported that they had to keep lifting the tactile overlay up to identify the candidates and parties to which each box related. Guide-Communicators supporting Deafblind people felt that it was a long and arduous process. They reported that they felt under pressure to make sure that they were systematically signing all the names and where the boxes were in relation to names so that the Deafblind people they were supporting could independently put their crosses in the relevant boxes.

Overall, people reported that the tactile overlay worked well for people with a good level of Braille competency but did not support people with Visual Impairments and limited Braille fluency. People suggested having a transparent paper or the names of candidates on the guide next to the box as a possible solution.

Question 9: Overall, what were your users' experiences of voting in polling stations? In your answers, please think about the following:

- Ability of your users to vote independently



- Ability of your users to vote in secret (if they wanted to)
- Helpfulness of the polling station staff (e.g. support and provision of equipment)
- Satisfaction with how they were treated by polling station staff

Overall, we received reports of people with Visual Impairments unable to vote independently with confidence (either because of a lack of support for postal voting, or issues with the tactile overlay). Deafblind BSL users reported generally good experiences with companion support, but two people highlighted potential privacy issues around the visibility of signed communication when voting. Staff were generally reported to be supportive and helpful.

**Question 10: Is there any other feedback you would like to pass on about how voting could be improved for your users?**

In some cases, long queues to vote impacted people waiting to vote. One member suggested that it would be useful to have expedited disability access for people when there are long queues; prioritising people who may struggle to navigate busy crowds, stand or wait for long periods of time, or who may only have support from a companion/Guide Communicator for a limited period. These options could be included in future considerations and guidance for polling stations.



## About the ALLIANCE

The Health and Social Care Alliance Scotland (the ALLIANCE) is the national third sector membership organisation for the health and social care sector. We bring together over 3,500 people and organisations dedicated to achieving our vision of a Scotland where everyone has a strong voice and enjoys the right to live well, with dignity and respect. Our members are essential in creating a society in which we all can thrive, and we believe that by working together, our voice is stronger.

We work to improve the wellbeing of people and communities across Scotland by supporting change in health, social care and other public services so they better meet the needs of everyone in Scotland. We do this by bringing together the expertise of people with lived experience, the third sector, and organisations across health and social care to shape better services and support positive change.

**The ALLIANCE has three core aims. We seek to:**

- **Empower people with lived experience:** we ensure disabled people, people with long term conditions, and unpaid carers are heard and that their needs remain at the heart of services and communities.
- **Support positive change:** we work within communities to promote co-production, self management, human rights, and independent living.
- **Champion the third sector:** we work with, support and encourage co-operation between the third sector and health and social care organisations.

The ALLIANCE is committed to upholding human rights. We embed lived experience in our work and aim to ensure people are meaningfully involved at every level of decision-making. Working together creates positive, long-lasting impact.



We work in partnership with the Scottish Government, NHS Boards, universities, and other key organisations within health, social care, housing, and digital technology to manage funding and develop successful projects. Together, our voice is stronger, and we can create meaningful change.

## **The Scottish Sensory Hub**

The Scottish Sensory Hub provides a platform for the voice of lived experience for anyone in Scotland with lived experience of Deafness, Deafblindness or Visual Impairment. It was launched in 2021 and draws experience from deafscotland (formerly the Scottish Council on Deafness) and SCOVl (Scottish Council on Visual Impairment).

Lived experience is at the heart of everything the Scottish Sensory Hub does. The Sensory Hub acts as a bridge between the Scottish Government, public bodies, the third sector, and individuals, and enshrines a human rights-based approach for all. The Scottish Sensory Hub was founded to provide a strategic forum for cross-sensory input into policy and practice. It focuses on three key areas to promote living a good life – communication, information, and mobility.

## **Contact**

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