

From: [REDACTED]@sls-scotland.org.uk>
Sent: 27 June 2024 13:51
To: Jean Blair <Jean.Blair@sqa.org.uk>
Subject: RE: SLS Response

Afternoon, Jean!

Thanks for your email. As I said, I'm back at work from 22nd July, so any time after that I can meet with you. My SLS colleagues will still be on holiday, but I am happy to meet with you and then for all of us to meet after schools return – whatever is necessary. We can certainly try and drum up support for marker recruitment and retention and we can discuss that at our meeting. I definitely think ADES is the way forward with any changes to the 2026 Easter holidays, but I know some LAs will not be willing to move! But we shall see!

Off to California on Saturday, so I think the sun will be shining – but maybe not too strongly and not at too high a temperature!! Enjoy your holidays, too!

Stay safe!

[REDACTED]

From: Jean Blair <Jean.Blair@sqa.org.uk>
Sent: Thursday, June 27, 2024 11:51 AM
To: [REDACTED]@sls-scotland.org.uk>
Cc: Fiona Robertson <fiona.robertson@sqa.org.uk>; [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]@argyll-bute.gov.uk>; [REDACTED]@kingspark-sec.glasgow.sch.uk>
Subject: RE: SLS Response

Morning [REDACTED]

Many thanks for your email.

I'm pleased to hear that the change to the start of the exam timetable has been well received by colleagues.

I'll be in touch to arrange a follow up discussion about what practical support SLS can provide going into next session. Once the timetable is published, we are always in receipt of correspondence about the timing of exams and I think a meeting late July/early August would be useful in agreeing an approach and lines of communication.

I also advised that the compression of the timetable creates operational challenges and again, a conversation about how these can be eased will be important in ensuring the diet is delivered successfully. I believe SLS can help us with issues such as marker recruitment and retention.

Like SLS, SQA is not usually involved in conversations about the setting of Easter holidays but as we are agreed that these dates need to be explored for 2026, I shall make enquiries with ADES colleagues about how best this conversation can be taken forward.

In the meantime, I hope you enjoy your holiday and that the sun shines!

Kind regards

Jean

Jean Blair
Director of Operations

t: [REDACTED] | **e:** jean.blair@sqa.org.uk | **w:** <http://www.sqa.org.uk>
Scottish Qualifications Authority
24 Wester Shawfair, Lowden, Dalkeith, Midlothian EH22 1FD

From: [REDACTED]@sls-scotland.org.uk>
Sent: Wednesday, June 26, 2024 5:19 PM
To: Jean Blair <Jean.Blair@sqa.org.uk>
Cc: Fiona Robertson <fiona.robertson@sqa.org.uk>; [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]@argyll-bute.gov.uk>; [REDACTED]@kingspark-sec.glasgow.sch.uk>
Subject: RE: SLS Response

Dear Jean,

Many thanks for your email and for the confirmation that the 2025 SQA Exam Diet will now commence on Monday 28th April 2025. SLS warmly welcomes this decision, and we stick by our offer to help and support you in communicating and supporting this change to the public.

I was at an SLS Presidential Team meeting with [REDACTED] and the rest of the Presidential Team when your email came in and we were all delighted at this change of date. We feel it is certainly the best option for Scotland's learners, but we are aware of the rise in coincident exams, etc., and of your concerns about the procedures being slightly contracted within the time available. We are also happy to help address any representations on the issues of coincident exams, which will rise, but which SLS members feel is manageable in schools. This also happens in prelims/assessment weeks, and often cannot be avoided.

SLS is also happy to engage with SQA further regarding the 2026 Diet and the timings of the Easter Holidays, although that might be more for ADES and CoSLA to deal with, but we would be happy to back you in that regard.

I shall look forward to hearing from you about what practical support and assistance we in SLS can be provided on this. I am on leave from noon on Friday for three weeks but will be back at work from Monday 22nd July. Happy to be in touch thereafter. I shall inform SLS members of this change of date of the commencement of the 2025 Diet in my first Update of the new session on Friday 16th August, but only once SQA has announced it officially.

Thank you again for listening to us and allowing us to work so collaboratively and collegiately together for the benefit of Scotland's learners!

Wishing you a very enjoyable summer and that Results Day 2024 goes as planned!

Stay safe!

[REDACTED]



[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] - SLS

[REDACTED]

Email: [REDACTED]@sls-scotland.org.uk

[School Leaders Scotland – Take a leap and join the leaders! \(sls-scotland.org.uk\)](https://sls-scotland.org.uk)

[REDACTED]

Twitter: @LeadersScotland

Speaking on behalf of Scottish School Leaders, Acting on behalf of Scotland's Young People

From: Jean Blair <Jean.Blair@sqa.org.uk>

Sent: Wednesday, June 26, 2024 12:03 PM

To: [REDACTED]@sls-scotland.org.uk>

Cc: Fiona Robertson <fiona.robertson@sqa.org.uk>; [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]@argyll-bute.gov.uk>; [REDACTED]@kingspark-sec.glasgow.sch.uk>

Subject: RE: SLS Response

Dear [REDACTED],

Thanks very much again for taking the time to consider the difficult situation we face in the timing of the Easter holidays and the start of the exam timetable in 2025. I'm grateful to you and your colleagues for your help in addressing the challenges which we will face as a system next year and what the implications might be for learners.

Your email is clear in setting out the collective view of SLS colleagues that the exam timetable in 2025 should start on 28 April. In reaching this view, I can see that you shared the data with colleagues about what impact changes to the exam timetable start dates would have on learners in terms of coincident exams and learner workload over the period of the timetable. I understand that in discussing these scenarios, SLS has concluded that the level of coincident and workload are manageable at school level. I welcome this view and on that basis, we will move the timetable to start on Monday 28 April with the last exam on Friday 30 May (contingency day of Monday 2 June). I believe this will also address the concerns of other stakeholders, such as ADES, represented on our Timetable Advisory Group who have expressed similar views to the Cabinet Secretary. I think there is something for us to reflect on in terms of how members are engaging with timetable discussions and I think we are all agreed that we need to revisit Easter holidays for 2026.

I'm grateful to you and [REDACTED] for meeting with Martin Ingram to work through the impact of changes to the timetable if it were to start on 28 April. We had discussed a range of other options including starting on the Thursday or Friday. I'm sure you'll understand that having walked through these scenarios, either of these two options would have reduced the number of coincident exams and addressed learner workload and though the additional remodelling has brought the figure down to 296, this remains a record high on coincident levels. Based on many years of leading the work on the

timetable, we will get representations on this and I welcome your offer of support to help address this.

In summary, in moving the exam timetable to start on 28 April, the data based on 2024 entry figures shows the following implications for learners:

Considerations	23 April	28 April
Coincident exams	155	296
3 exams on one day	4 days (8 learners in total)	5 days (10 learners in total)
2 subjects on a day	7,262 learners	7,688 learners
Number of days with one exam for 100% of learners	15	8
Number of days with more than one exam per day for learners	12	16

As I have explained in previous correspondence, SQA needs 15 weeks between the start of the timetable and certification day and there are risks to the safe and secure delivery of the diet in starting later, such as the compression of events and completing marking and quality assurance processes to standard in time for certification. I remain concerned about the operational challenges that this timetable will present and the dependency we have on the support of the system to provide sufficient markers over the duration of the marking and quality assurance period.

Thanks again for the offer of help in supporting and explaining how we have arrived at these revised dates. I will be in touch with you to see what practical support and assistance can be provided on this and with securing sufficient resources to ensure the diet is delivered successfully for learners in 2025.

In the meantime, I shall also write to the Timetable Advisory Group explaining the change of dates.

I really appreciate your time and that of your colleagues and I'll look forward to working with you in the weeks ahead.

Kind regards

Jean

Jean Blair
Director of Operations

t: [REDACTED] | **e:** jean.blair@sqa.org.uk | **w:** <http://www.sqa.org.uk>
Scottish Qualifications Authority
24 Wester Shawfair, Lowden, Dalkeith, Midlothian EH22 1FD

From: [REDACTED]@sls-scotland.org.uk>

Sent: Thursday, June 20, 2024 12:16 PM

To: Jean Blair <Jean.Blair@sqa.org.uk>

Cc: Fiona Robertson <fiona.robertson@sqa.org.uk>; [REDACTED]

██████████@argyll-bute.gov.uk>; ██████████@kingspark-sec.glasgow.sch.uk>

Subject: RE: SLS Response

Dear Jean,

Many thanks for the call yesterday and the details you set out for me regarding the various possibilities for the start of the 2025 Exam Diet and the implications of each of them for workload, candidate workload, coincident exams, candidates having 3 exams on one day, those having two exams on one day, etc. This was very helpful. I passed all this information on to the members of the SLS Presidential Team and I have had individual conversations (written and/or oral) with them regarding the choices. I have also extended the consultation wider and spoken with two SQA Co-ordinators this morning, and with five members of our SLS Council, across the state and independent sectors.

The view was unanimous that the 2025 Exam Diet should begin on Monday 28th April. The main question we have used is: what's best for the young people? And members consulted all feel - geographically, sector-wise and across the SIMD spectrum - that starting the Diet on 28th April will be of far more help, support and benefit to Scotland's learners than starting it on 23rd April.

Whilst a number of young people will be affected by the rise in coincident exams (from 155 to 296) our members feel this is manageable at school level. I also remember that when ██████████ and I started our meeting with Martin Ingram with the exam timetable beginning on 28th, that there were 420 coincident exams, but we managed to get that down to 296 and both ██████████ and I felt this was acceptable, and this has been backed by the other SLS members I have spoken to today and yesterday. There was another version of the timetable which had 796 coincident exams, and we agreed that would not be acceptable!

The other concern was for the number of candidates with two exams on the one day (although not coincident) and although the number estimated goes from 7262 to 7688 this is still less than a 6% rise and is something members feel is also manageable, given the total number of candidates across the board.

To give you a taste of the feeling from members, here are some of the comments I received:

- "Far too tight - there is no flexibility for schools when coming back from the holidays – no wriggle room for picking up kids and getting them prepared for exams."
- "Disadvantaged kids value the time between the holidays and the exams to touch base with their teachers."
- "If we start exams a day after the holidays, there is a huge number of kids we will not see at all."
- "This time between the holidays and the exams is crucial due to a lack of support from home for our kids – both academic and pastoral!"
- "Yes, we run an Easter school, but we do not get the kids in, so the days between the holidays and the exams are crucial."
- "We run 'Immersion Days' after the holidays for pupils to get ready for the exams and as we are in a very disadvantaged area, these are crucial for getting kids prepared. Many parents here have not sat NQ exams so don't

realise what needs to be done to get their kids through, so the Immersion Days are crucial for improving the attainment of our young people. It's about narrowing the gap!"

- "These stats [for coincident exams, etc.] do not frighten me. They are not scary. Staff want and need to touch base with their classes between the holidays and the exams! We can manage this!"
- "After the holidays, their body clocks are all wrong and their days have moved round, so they need time to get back to a routine where they are ready to start an exam at 9 a.m.!"
- "There is a risk of the kids being deskilled [if we start a day after the holidays]."

Overall, there was a clear and shared view, that the positive impact of starting the Exam Diet on Monday 28th April totally outweighed the impact of starting the exams on 23rd April for the vast majority of learners, if not all.

The issues you outlined regarding coincident exams, two exams on one day, could be eased by using the Contingency Day and the feeling of all members consulted was that this would be a sensible use of that day.

One Head Teacher in a large independent school summed it up thus: "Starting on 23rd is disadvantaging those who are already disadvantaged! For the majority of young people, the start right after the holidays is not a good educational position." And so this reflects the SLS position very succinctly.

We are happy to stand by you in this decision and will gladly support, defend and clearly justify a move of the start of the 2025 exam diet to Monday 28th April 2025, in a spirit of co-operation, collaboration and in the clear, best interests of Scotland's learners.

I am happy to discuss this further and please be assured that SLS is there to help in any way to deliver this.

Yours

[Redacted Signature]



[Redacted Name]

[Redacted Title]

[Redacted Name] - SLS

[Redacted Address Line 1]

Email: [Redacted Email]@sls-scotland.org.uk

[School Leaders Scotland – Take a leap and join the leaders! \(sls-scotland.org.uk\)](https://sls-scotland.org.uk)

[Redacted Twitter Handle]

Twitter: @LeadersScotland

Speaking on behalf of Scottish School Leaders, Acting on behalf of Scotland's Young People

From: Jean Blair <Jean.Blair@sqa.org.uk>
Sent: Wednesday, June 19, 2024 4:11 PM
To: [REDACTED]@sls-scotland.org.uk>
Subject: RE: SLS Response

Thanks [REDACTED], if you could come back to me by tomorrow lunchtime that would be really helpful.

Kind regards

Jean

Jean Blair
Director of Operations

t: [REDACTED] | **e:** jean.blair@sqa.org.uk | **w:** <http://www.sqa.org.uk>
Scottish Qualifications Authority
24 Wester Shawfair, Lowden, Dalkeith, Midlothian EH22 1FD

From: [REDACTED]@sls-scotland.org.uk>
Sent: Wednesday, June 19, 2024 3:46 PM
To: Jean Blair <Jean.Blair@sqa.org.uk>
Subject: RE: SLS Response

Thanks, Jean. Will get back to you as soon as I can.

[REDACTED]

From: Jean Blair <Jean.Blair@sqa.org.uk>
Sent: Wednesday, June 19, 2024 3:18 PM
To: [REDACTED]@sls-scotland.org.uk>
Cc: Fiona Robertson <fiona.robertson@sqa.org.uk>
Subject: RE: SLS Response

Thanks for getting in touch, [REDACTED]

I totally understand it's important that you are able to gather the views of your team and that you need time to do this.

Let me know if you need to discuss any issues again too.

Regards

Jean

Jean Blair
Director of Operations

t: [REDACTED] | **e:** jean.blair@sqa.org.uk | **w:** <http://www.sqa.org.uk>
Scottish Qualifications Authority
24 Wester Shawfair, Lowden, Dalkeith, Midlothian EH22 1FD

From: [REDACTED]@sls-scotland.org.uk>
Sent: Wednesday, June 19, 2024 3:03 PM
To: Jean Blair <Jean.Blair@sqa.org.uk>
Cc: Fiona Robertson <fiona.robertson@sqa.org.uk>
Subject: SLS Response

Jean

I am struggling to meet the deadline. I have not heard from half the team yet as they are in school, and things are most likely hectic! I have emailed and texted them all. I just have to sit tight and wait for the replies!! Once schools close within the hour, I hope to hear from the rest of them. Will get back to you as soon as I can and hopefully by 5pm.

[REDACTED]



[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] - SLS
[REDACTED]
Email: [REDACTED]@sls-scotland.org.uk

[School Leaders Scotland – Take a leap and join the leaders! \(sls-scotland.org.uk\)](https://sls-scotland.org.uk)

[REDACTED]
Twitter: @LeadersScotland
Speaking on behalf of Scottish School Leaders, Acting on behalf of Scotland's Young People

From: [REDACTED]@sls-scotland.org.uk>
Sent: 28 June 2024 13:02
To: CabSecforES@gov.scot
Cc: [REDACTED]@argyll-bute.gov.uk>; [REDACTED]@kingspark-sec.glasgow.sch.uk>;
Fiona Robertson <fiona.robertson@sqa.org.uk>; Jean Blair <Jean.Blair@sqa.org.uk>
Subject: RE: Timing of the 2025 and 2026 SQA Exam Diets

Dear Cabinet Secretary,

I refer to my email to you below of 14th June 2024 about the concerns from SLS members regarding the timing and commencement date of the 2025 SQA Exam Diet.

Further to my email, Fiona Robertson and Jean Blair reached out to SLS and we had a number of very fruitful and helpful conversations on the matter. Jean was very diligent in giving me facts and figures about the impact of starting the exams on dates later than the planned date of Wednesday 23rd April. I am very grateful to her and Fiona for the time they spent briefing me on the background and the salient concerns on their side about the diet timetable, including figures on the number of candidates with three exams on one day, the number of candidates with coincident exams (running at the same time), those with 2 exams on the one day, etc., for each of the possible start dates. This information was based on the 2024 candidate numbers which is the best guide available at the moment for 2025.

I then shared all this information with the members of the SLS Presidential Team and I had individual conversations (written and/or oral) with each of them regarding the choices. I also extended the consultation wider and spoke with two SQA Co-ordinators who are members and five members of our SLS Council, across the state and independent sectors.

The view was unanimous that the 2025 Exam Diet should begin on Monday 28th April. The main question we used was: what's best for the young people? And the members who were consulted all felt - geographically, sector-wise and across the SIMD spectrum - that starting the Diet on 28th April will be of far more help, support and benefit to Scotland's learners than starting it on 23rd April. Whilst a number of young people will be affected by the rise in coincident exams, our members felt this level of coincident exams and the consequential workload are manageable at school level.

One Head Teacher in a large independent school summed it up thus: "Starting on 23rd is disadvantaging those who are already disadvantaged! For the majority of young people, the start right after the holidays is not a good educational position." This reflected the SLS position very succinctly.

I communicated our clear, unanimous view to Jean Blair and Fiona Robertson and said that SLS is happy to stand by SQA in this decision and will gladly support, defend, and clearly justify a move of the start of the 2025 exam diet to Monday 28th April 2025, in a spirit of co-operation, collaboration and in the clear, best interests of Scotland's learners.

I was delighted to receive an email back from Jean on 26th June informing SLS that SQA has now agreed to move the timetable to start on Monday 28 April with the last exam on Friday 30 May (contingency day of Monday 2 June). Both SQA and SLS believe this will also address the concerns of other stakeholders, such as ADES.

SLS warmly welcomed this decision, and we stick by our offer to help and support SQA in communicating and supporting this change to the public.

I was at an SLS Presidential Team meeting when Jean's email came in and we were all delighted at this change of date. We feel it is certainly the best option for Scotland's learners, but we are aware of the rise in coincident exams, etc., and of SQA concerns about the procedures being slightly contracted within the time available. We are happy to help SQA address any representations on the issues of coincident exams, which will rise, but which SLS members feel is manageable in

schools. This also happens in prelims/assessment weeks, and often cannot be avoided.

SLS is also happy to engage with SQA further regarding the 2026 Diet and the timings of the Easter Holidays, although that might be more for ADES and CoSLA to deal with, but we would be happy to support these moves. I have just heard that a meeting is being arranged to discuss this, which is very welcome.

I have to say we feel that SQA's response to my email below to you has been very positive, empathetic, and very much in a spirit of collaboration and collegiality. We have worked together in consultation and found a solution which, despite causing a possible rise in coincident exams, is overall undoubtedly the best, equitable solution for Scotland's learners.

Wishing you a very enjoyable summer,

Yours,

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] - SLS

[REDACTED]

Email: [REDACTED]@sls-scotland.org.uk

[School Leaders Scotland – Take a leap and join the leaders! \(sls-scotland.org.uk\)](https://sls-scotland.org.uk)

[REDACTED]

Twitter: @LeadersScotland

Speaking on behalf of Scottish School Leaders, Acting on behalf of Scotland's Young People

From: [REDACTED]

Sent: Friday, June 14, 2024 8:48 AM

To: CabSecforES@gov.scot

Cc: [REDACTED]@argyll-bute.gov.uk>; [REDACTED]@kingspark-sec.glasgow.sch.uk>

Subject: Fwd: Timing of the 2025 and 2026 SQA Exam Diets

Dear Cabinet Secretary,

I am writing to you with regard to concerns from SLS members about the timing of the 2025 and 2026 SQA Exam Diet.

I wrote to the Chief Examiner at the start of May and she responded later in the month, which then resulted in a fruitful Teams meeting between SLS and SQA officials. Fiona Robertson then invited me and our Vice President, [REDACTED], to meet with one of their officials who deals with the timetabling of the Exam Diet. We readily agreed to this meeting and [REDACTED] and I spent the morning

of Friday 31st May with Martin Ingram at SQA in Lowden. This was a very hands on meeting, where the three of us looked at exam times, candidate numbers, coincident exam numbers and managed to move a few exams around to allow for the exam diet to start on Monday 28th April, rather than the previous Wednesday, which would be one day after most schools returned from the Easter break, as Easter is late and that weekend.

This was the main concern of members that pupils would return to school immediately after the Easter break and go straight into the exams without any chance to see their teachers and get back into the way of learning, as not all pupils spend their Easter holidays swotting!

While we acknowledge that Easter 2025 is late, surely this is something a proactive, pupil-centred organisation would have factored in already and would certainly be looking to resolve, instead of constantly finding barriers to put in the way of it.

After our meeting at Lowden, [REDACTED] and I left the building convinced there was a definite solution to this problem, and that by moving several exams to different days, we had a better timetable that would allow candidates time to revise between the holidays and the commencement of the Diet. The use of the contingency day on June 2nd was also discussed, plus the addition of June 3rd as the new contingency day was also tabled.

The SLS Presidential Team met with SQA officials again on Monday 10th June. This item was discussed. Sadly we got the impression that having done some further work (especially regarding coincident exams, pupils' workload and the impact on SQA procedures) that there would be no movement on the part of SQA. We are astounded at this. The SQA's reputation is again on the line and once more they are giving the impression of not listening to information from schools about the impact of their procedures on our young scholars.

We understand that various options have been submitted you as Cabinet Secretary. SQA failed to share any other possible alternative solutions that have been shared with you, so we are in the dark about what they may be. However, we hope that one of them options will enable the 2025 exam diet's start date to Monday 28th April 2025 and we earnestly encourage you to choose that option.

The reaction of the SQA to sticking to its guns no matter what, not giving even an iota of leeway, really underlines the need for a replacement organisation, with more empathetic leaders at the helm. This move of dates is without doubt a matter of equity.

I hope you will appreciate the view of SLS members in trying to move the Diet back to allow time for our young people to achieve better.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED], School Leaders Scotland
Sent from my iPad

Begin forwarded message:

From: Fiona Robertson <fiona.robertson@sqa.org.uk>

Date: 24 May 2024 at 17:06:30 BST

To: [REDACTED]@sls-scotland.org.uk>

Cc: [REDACTED]@pkc.gov.uk, [REDACTED]@argyll-bute.gov.uk>, [REDACTED]@kingspark-sec.glasgow.sch.uk>, Jean Blair

<Jean.Blair@sqa.org.uk>, Martin Ingram <Martin.Ingram@sqa.org.uk>

Subject: RE: Timing of the 2025 and 2026 SQA Exam Diets

Further to our meeting of yesterday, I thought it might be helpful to drop you a note of what we agreed as next steps.

First of all, we are agreed that a late Easter and associated changes to Easter holidays in 2025 (and 2026) have prompted the concern. We outlined the extensive engagement undertaken this year on the exam timetable, including with SLS colleagues, and the current version of the timetable has been developed after careful consideration of coincident exams, learner workload, and the implications for assessment arrangements. These considerations, along with religious observance, bank holidays and the time needed to mark and quality assure courses, has resulted in the optimal timetable starting one day later than this year on 23 April.

During the meeting, Jean Blair offered to explore options with you in re-modelling the timetable to start later than 23 April. However, we highlighted that increases in coincident exams and the number of exams which learners take over a day or week will likely be a concern.

highlighted a number of wider issues, including UCAS UK-wide deadlines, assessment burden and priority appeals deadlines. We are happy to have wider conversations about these issues, but we also need to be realistic about next year. I am also very conscious that teachers want to take a well-deserved holiday over the summer, so extending marking or bringing forward priority appeals is not possible. We agreed that a system-wide conversation about Easter holidays in 2026 is necessary – and there should be a wider conversation with the Scottish Government, COSLA and ADES.

To conclude, Martin Ingram will be in touch to explore what other options may be available. As highlighted above, any changes would need to be carefully considered and have system-wide support.

I hope this is helpful.

Kinds regards

Fiona

Fiona Robertson
Chief Executive
Scottish Qualifications Authority
w: <http://www.sqa.org.uk>

The Optima Building, 58 Robertson Street, GLASGOW G2 8DQ | 24 Wester Shawfair, Lowden, Dalkeith, Midlothian EH22 1FD

From: Fiona Robertson

Sent: Wednesday, May 22, 2024 9:54 AM

To: @sls-scotland.org.uk

Cc: @pkc.gov.uk; Bain, @argyll-bute.gov.uk>; @kingspark-sec.glasgow.sch.uk>; @sqa.org.uk>

Subject: RE: Timing of the 2025 and 2026 SQA Exam Diets

██████████

Thank you for your follow-up e-mail. I had no record of your original email of 1 May and I asked my office to look into what has happened. I understand there has been a simple human error here – please accept our apologies.

I will obviously respond to your letter, but I think it would be helpful if you could discuss. You will know that we need to balance a range of issues in finalising the timetable so that we can deliver for learners. The development of the timetable involves a range of stakeholders every year, including SLS and ADES. I understand ██████████ was on the group providing advice this year.

██████████ in my office will confirm some times that we could meet, with Jean Blair, later today or tomorrow. I hope that is possible. Let us know if you wish to be joined by SLS colleagues.

Kind regards.

Fiona

Fiona Robertson
Chief Executive
Scottish Qualifications Authority
w: <http://www.sqa.org.uk>

The Optima Building, 58 Robertson Street, GLASGOW G2 8DQ | 24 Wester Shawfair, Lowden,
Dalkeith, Midlothian EH22 1F

From: ██████████@sls-scotland.org.uk>
Sent: Tuesday, May 21, 2024 5:50 PM
To: Fiona Robertson <fiona.robertson@sqa.org.uk>; Jean Blair <Jean.Blair@sqa.org.uk>
Cc: ██████████@pkc.gov.uk; ██████████@argyll-bute.gov.uk>; ██████████@kingspark-sec.glasgow.sch.uk>
Subject: RE: Timing of the 2025 and 2026 SQA Exam Diets

Dear Fiona

I refer to my email of 1st May below to you and I wondered if you could give me an indication that you will be changing the date of the exam diets in 2025 and 2026, as requested, or finding another solution which takes into consideration the views of young people and the stresses and strains on them as they come to their exams as well as the views of the teachers and school leaders who facilitate the working of the exams.

I look forward to hearing from you very soon.

Yours

██████████

██████████

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] - SLS
[REDACTED]
Email: [REDACTED]@sls-scotland.org.uk

[School Leaders Scotland – Take a leap and join the leaders! \(sls-scotland.org.uk\)](https://sls-scotland.org.uk)

[REDACTED]
Twitter: @LeadersScotland

Speaking on behalf of Scottish School Leaders, Acting on behalf of Scotland's Young People

From: [REDACTED]
Sent: Wednesday, May 1, 2024 3:56 PM
To: Fiona Robertson <fiona.robertson@sqa.org.uk>
Cc: [REDACTED]@pkc.gov.uk
Subject: Timing of the 2025 and 2026 SQA Exam Diets

Dear Fiona,

Timing of the 2025 and 2026 SQA Exam Diets

I hope this finds you well. The SQA diet is in full flow now and all seems to be going well. Not sure if the Music Technology exam went Ok, as I saw something on Twitter/X about it! I've had no complaints at all – so far- about the diet. Fingers crossed this continues!

However, some SLS Head Teacher members have raised a concern about the timing of the 2025 and 2026 Diets, which I feel I need to share with you. For 2025, SQA has sent notice that the exams are due to start on Wednesday 23 April 2025. The exam dates have crept forward in recent years and the diet has grown in length. Whilst this year's diet commenced on Monday 22 April 2024, the vast majority of schools had one week back with the senior school which is important to get some young people back on track with work and do last-minute revision.

Next session in 2025 the holiday starts on Monday 7 April – and this means a return to school on Monday 21 April in most authorities. However, this being Easter Monday, we return on Tuesday 22 April. SQA exams start the next day on Wednesday 23 April. So, schools will have one day of pupils back in school, and it is unlikely most young people will be in. This is a concern as some young people definitely require the routine of school to get ready for exams. Whilst I appreciate that putting together an exam timetable is a complex task, it is extremely worrying that no account has been taken of the fact that young people will not be with their teachers for the crucial two weeks prior to their exams starting. This will, no doubt, have a negative impact on their overall attainment and performance.

In addition, schools will need to have the last day for S6 on Friday 4 April, before the Easter holidays. (Whether we like it or not, that is now a "rite of passage", and it is not as simple as saying, just cancel it).

None of this is ideal for any school and the concerns for the following year, 2026, are greater still. Easter is at the start of the holiday so we will be off school from Good

Friday, 3 April, and start back on Monday 20 April. If the timetable for 2025 is anything to go by, SQA may look to start the 2026 exams on Tuesday 21 April. This is a real problem. It almost feels like we are there to serve the SQA rather than the SQA is there to work with us to meet the needs of young people.

In addition, the issue of having any sort of S6 last day before the holiday is a headache for Catholic Schools in particular as they should not be having anything of that nature on Holy Thursday, 2 April, or really during Holy Week, the entire last week of term.

However, this earlier starting date is an issue for everyone, as coming straight back into the exams is not conducive to good attainment. We also fear that an extended break away from their teachers will disadvantage the most disadvantaged candidates disproportionately, particularly in schools where there are exceptionally high levels of deprivation and the consequent lack of educational support in many households.

Additional to this is the fact that all school deadlines will need to reflect this lack of teaching weeks, post Easter. Whilst this might make the lives of SQA easier, it does the opposite for schools and the most important stakeholders – our young people – who will be under significant pressure to complete courses and then revise without the support of their expert teachers.

Finally, this puts undue pressure on teaching staff to ensure that there is provision over the Easter holiday for our senior phase pupils. Many schools offer Easter revision classes, but I fear this change of teaching contact after the holiday will make this feel more compulsory, not something we wish. Teachers across Scotland work incredibly hard all year long but especially in the January to March term and this change will have a direct impact on their capacity to take a much-needed holiday at Easter.

Either of the following two proposals would solve the issue:

SQA exam diet is ideally pushed back to Monday 28 April 2025 starts and starts on Monday 27 April 2026

or

We dispense with the first two full weeks of April holiday and have the 2026 holiday from Monday 30 March 2026 until Friday 10 April returning on Monday 13 April. The middle weekend would be Easter weekend. That would be an issue for the 32 Local Authorities, and some may already have taken this course, if they have agreed their holiday dates.

This issue is a significant headache for all schools and a decision which appears to have been taken to meet the needs of the SQA with no regard for the practicalities of school life. SQA are providing a service to Scottish schools. Of late it feels to many of my members, that we are at your mercy. However, I am hoping you can help resolve this issue through the first option! I look forward to hearing from you. I have cc'd [REDACTED] into this email, as she may also be able to help resolve this issue.

Stay safe!

Yours

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] - SLS

[REDACTED]

Email: [REDACTED]@sls-scotland.org.uk

[School Leaders Scotland – Take a leap and join the leaders! \(sls-scotland.org.uk\)](https://sls-scotland.org.uk)

[REDACTED]

Twitter: @LeadersScotland

Speaking on behalf of Scottish School Leaders, Acting on behalf of Scotland's Young People

From: [REDACTED]@sls-scotland.org.uk>

Sent: 30 January 2025 13:26

To: John Booth <John.Booth@sqa.org.uk>

Cc: [REDACTED]@kingspark-sec.glasgow.sch.uk>

Subject: Re: Confidential draft comms

Dear John

Checkmate! I see you are right. Hoist by my own petard!

I think we didn't quite realise the diet would then be 3 days shorter as we were still hoping for the use of the Contingency Day!

We are happy to go ahead with the statement you sent last night.

'We continue to share feedback and work with SQA and other partners in the best interests of both learners and our members. The delayed start to the exam period was designed to allow learners to be more exam-ready after the later Easter holidays. As a consequence, this led to an increased number of learners having exams close together or coincident. We therefore agree with the changes made by SQA to reduce the impact of coincident and consecutive exams on learners.'

Apologies also for taking so long to reply but I have been in meetings this morning and then had to consult with the Presidential Team.

[REDACTED]

Sent from my iPhone

On 30 Jan 2025, at 09:32, John Booth <John.Booth@sqa.org.uk> wrote:

Thanks [REDACTED]. I'm obviously at a disadvantage here as wasn't directly involved in discussions and exchanges last year, but Jean passed this email to me which looks clear to me that SLS were aware and content with the diet ending on 30th May (see bold and underlined text).

Let me know what you think.

Thanks

John

From: [REDACTED]@sls-scotland.org.uk>

Sent: 28 June 2024 13:02

To: CabSecforES@gov.scot

Cc: [REDACTED]@argyll-bute.gov.uk>; [REDACTED]@kingspark-sec.glasgow.sch.uk>; Fiona Robertson <fiona.robertson@sqa.org.uk>; Jean Blair <Jean.Blair@sqa.org.uk>

Subject: RE: Timing of the 2025 and 2026 SQA Exam Diets

Dear Cabinet Secretary,

I refer to my email to you below of 14th June 2024 about the concerns from SLS members regarding the timing and commencement date of the 2025 SQA Exam Diet.

Further to my email, Fiona Robertson and Jean Blair reached out to SLS and we had a number of very fruitful and helpful conversations on the matter. Jean was very diligent in giving me facts and figures about the impact of starting the exams on dates later than the planned date of Wednesday 23rd April. I am very grateful to her and Fiona for the time they spent briefing me on the background and the salient concerns on their side about the diet timetable, including figures on the number of candidates with three exams on one day, the number of candidates with coincident exams (running at the same time), those with 2 exams on the one day, etc., for each of the possible start dates. This information was based on the 2024 candidate numbers which is the best guide available at the moment for 2025.

I then shared all this information with the members of the SLS Presidential Team and I had individual conversations (written and/or oral) with each of them regarding the choices. I also extended the consultation wider and spoke with two SQA Co-ordinators who are members and five members of our SLS Council, across the state and independent sectors.

The view was unanimous that the 2025 Exam Diet should begin on Monday 28th April. The main question we used was: what's best for the young people? And the members who were consulted all felt - geographically, sector-wise and across the SIMD spectrum - that starting the Diet on 28th April will be of far more help, support and benefit to Scotland's learners than starting it on 23rd April. Whilst a number of young people will be affected by the rise in coincident exams, our members felt this level of coincident exams and the consequential workload are manageable at school level.

One Head Teacher in a large independent school summed it up thus: "Starting on 23rd is disadvantaging those who are already disadvantaged! For the majority of young people, the start right after the holidays is not a good educational position." This reflected the SLS position very succinctly.

I communicated our clear, unanimous view to Jean Blair and Fiona Robertson and said that SLS is happy to stand by SQA in this decision and will gladly support, defend, and clearly justify a move of the start of the 2025 exam diet to Monday 28th April 2025, in a spirit of co-operation, collaboration and in the clear, best interests of Scotland's learners.

I was delighted to receive an email back from Jean on 26th June informing SLS that SQA has now agreed to move the timetable to start on Monday 28 April with the last exam on Friday 30 May (contingency day of Monday 2 June). Both SQA and SLS believe this will also address the concerns of other stakeholders, such as ADES.

SLS warmly welcomed this decision, and we stick by our offer to help and support SQA in communicating and supporting this change to the public.

I was at an SLS Presidential Team meeting when Jean's email came in and we were all delighted at this change of date. We feel it is certainly the best option for Scotland's learners, but we are aware of the rise in coincident exams, etc., and of SQA concerns about the procedures being slightly contracted within the time available. We are happy to help SQA address any representations on the issues of coincident exams, which will rise, but which SLS members feel is manageable in schools. This also happens in prelims/assessment weeks, and often cannot be avoided.

SLS is also happy to engage with SQA further regarding the 2026 Diet and the timings of the Easter Holidays, although that might be more for ADES and CoSLA to deal with, but we would be happy to support these moves. I have just heard that a meeting is being arranged to discuss this, which is very welcome.

I have to say we feel that SQA's response to my email below to you has been very positive, empathetic, and very much in a spirit of collaboration and collegiality. We have worked together in consultation and found a solution which, despite causing a possible rise in coincident exams, is overall undoubtedly the best, equitable solution for Scotland's learners.

Wishing you a very enjoyable summer,

Yours,

John Booth
Director of Communications, SQA

From: [REDACTED]@sls-scotland.org.uk>
Sent: 29 January 2025 20:31

To: John Booth <John.Booth@sqa.org.uk>

Subject: Re: Confidential draft comms

Hi John,

Many thanks for your email. I am afraid at the moment I cannot agree to these changes. I may be getting old and forgetful, but I do not recollect SLS agreeing to the shortened exam diet following from the delayed start to 28th April. We had assumed the diet would be the same length.

We did discuss using the contingency day and/or extending it by one day and we left it with SQA to take it to Fiona Robertson. It was then decided to cut it and it was really only when the final timetable was agreed that we realised the exam diet was shorter and thus the exam timetable had to be reorganised, as I recollect. We then went along with it.

Now, as the late Queen said, recollections may differ! If you could find a minute of SLS agreeing to a shortened diet, I will agree to your revised quotation.

I do realise this will delay the comms going out but I feel that the fact the exam diet is 3 days shorter is an important fact here.

Many thanks

██████████

Sent from my iPhone

On 29 Jan 2025, at 17:16, John Booth <John.Booth@sqa.org.uk> wrote:

Hi ██████████

Just picking this up from [REDACTED] I think the insertion of 'as a consequence of reducing the exam period' gets us back into the issue we discussed the other day about what the Scotsman reported from SLS i.e. it looks like SQA decided to reduce the exam period by not extending the back end when in fact that was a collectively agreed position.

Could we go with:

'We continue to share feedback and work with SQA and other partners in the best interests of both learners and our members. The delayed start to the exam period was designed to allow learners to be more exam-ready after the later Easter holidays. As a consequence, this led to an increased number of learners having exams close together or coincident. We therefore agree with the changes made by SQA to reduce the impact of coincident and consecutive exams on learners.'

Good to get your thoughts (and thanks for agreeing to supply a quote – it is very helpful).

John

John Booth
Director of Communications, SQA

From: [REDACTED]@sls-scotland.org.uk>

Sent: 29 January 2025 16:33

To: [REDACTED]@sqa.org.uk>; [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]@southlanarkshire.gov.uk>

Cc: Jean Blair <Jean.Blair@sqa.org.uk>; Martin Ingram <Martin.Ingram@sqa.org.uk>; [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]@sqa.org.uk>

Subject: RE: Confidential draft comms

Hi [REDACTED]

I see what you mean about the flow, but I would rather the following:

'We continue to share feedback and work with SQA and other partners in the best interests of both learners and our members. ~~We now acknowledge~~ The delayed start to the exam period was designed to allow learners to be more exam-ready after the later Easter holidays. As a consequence of this ~~then-reducing the exam period due to the Easter holidays~~ led to an increased number of learners having exams close together or coincident. We therefore agree with the changes made by SQA to reduce the impact of coincident and consecutive exams on learners.'

So our statement would read:

'We continue to share feedback and work with SQA and other partners in the best interests of both learners and our members. The delayed start to the exam period was designed to allow learners to be more exam-ready after the later Easter holidays. As a consequence reducing the exam period led to an increased number of learners having exams close together or coincident. We therefore agree with the changes made by SQA to reduce the impact of coincident and consecutive exams on learners.'

Hope this is OK.

■

From: [REDACTED]@sqa.org.uk>
Sent: Wednesday, January 29, 2025 3:20 PM
To: [REDACTED]@sqs-scotland.org.uk>; [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]@southlanarkshire.gov.uk>
Cc: Jean Blair <Jean.Blair@sqa.org.uk>; Martin Ingram <Martin.Ingram@sqa.org.uk>; [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]@sqa.org.uk>
Subject: RE: Confidential draft comms

Hi [REDACTED]

Many thanks for turning this around so quickly.

I'm happy to adopt your changes with the small exception of the text in black which I believe flows better from a comms perspective.

Can you let me know if you're happy for me to proceed.

Kind regards

[REDACTED]

From: [REDACTED]@sqs-scotland.org.uk>
Sent: 29 January 2025 15:02
To: [REDACTED]@sqa.org.uk>; [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]@southlanarkshire.gov.uk>
Cc: Jean Blair <Jean.Blair@sqa.org.uk>; Martin Ingram <Martin.Ingram@sqa.org.uk>; [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]@sqa.org.uk>
Subject: RE: Confidential draft comms

Hi [REDACTED]

I have now consulted with members of the SLS Presidential Team and we would be happy to go with this edited version (changes in blue). I hope this is agreeable. Please let me know what you think. I hope this allows the Comms team to get this information out to centres tomorrow, as planned.

Graham

'We continue to share feedback and work with SQA and other partners in the best interests of both learners and our members. ~~We now acknowledge~~ Whilst the delayed start to the exam period was designed to allow learners to be more exam-ready after the later Easter holidays, a consequence of this ~~then reducing the exam period due to the Easter holidays~~ led to an increased number of learners having exams close together or coincident. We therefore agree with the changes made by SQA to reduce the impact of coincident and consecutive exams on learners.'

From: [REDACTED]@sqa.org.uk>
Sent: Wednesday, January 29, 2025 2:32 PM
To: [REDACTED]@sls-scotland.org.uk>; [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]@southlanarkshire.gov.uk>
Cc: Jean Blair <Jean.Blair@sqa.org.uk>; Martin Ingram <Martin.Ingram@sqa.org.uk>; [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]@sqa.org.uk>
Subject: RE: Confidential draft comms

Many thanks for letting me know [REDACTED]

Kind regards
[REDACTED]

From: [REDACTED]@sls-scotland.org.uk>
Sent: 29 January 2025 14:31
To: [REDACTED]@sqa.org.uk>; [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]@southlanarkshire.gov.uk>
Cc: Jean Blair <Jean.Blair@sqa.org.uk>; Martin Ingram <Martin.Ingram@sqa.org.uk>; [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]@sqa.org.uk>
Subject: RE: Confidential draft comms

Hi [REDACTED]

Sorry I have been out of the office today and visiting a number of members, so just back to see these emails. I am going to look at the statement and consult with the SLS Presidential Team. I think the statement will need a bit of changing but hope very much to get back to you later this afternoon.

[REDACTED]

From: [REDACTED]@sqa.org.uk>
Sent: Wednesday, January 29, 2025 1:48 PM
To: [REDACTED]@southlanarkshire.gov.uk>; [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]@sls-scotland.org.uk>
Cc: Jean Blair <Jean.Blair@sqa.org.uk>; Martin Ingram <Martin.Ingram@sqa.org.uk>; [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]@sqa.org.uk>
Subject: RE: Confidential draft comms

Many thanks [REDACTED], much appreciated

From: [REDACTED]@southlanarkshire.gov.uk>
Sent: 29 January 2025 12:09
To: [REDACTED]@sqa.org.uk>; [REDACTED]@sls-scotland.org.uk
Cc: Jean Blair <Jean.Blair@sqa.org.uk>; Martin Ingram <Martin.Ingram@sqa.org.uk>; [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]@sqa.org.uk>
Subject: RE: Confidential draft comms

Hi [REDACTED]

There's a wee typo in the quote you've prepared. Can I suggest the following which includes minor edits but retains the core message:

It is important that all partners continue to listen to feedback from across the education community and take appropriate action when needed. We support the updated 2025 exam timetable as it reduces the exam workload for many learners and for the staff supporting them during the exam period.

Best wishes

[REDACTED]

From: [REDACTED]@sqa.org.uk>

Sent: 29 January 2025 11:37

To: [REDACTED]@southlanarkshire.gov.uk>; [REDACTED]@sls-scotland.org.uk

Cc: Jean Blair <Jean.Blair@sqa.org.uk>; Martin Ingram <Martin.Ingram@sqa.org.uk>;

[REDACTED]@sqa.org.uk>

Subject: Confidential draft comms

Importance: High

Hi S [REDACTED] and [REDACTED]

We're working through the draft comms while Martin and his team process changes to the 2025 timetable.

I'd be grateful if you would comment on the attached drafts (centre message and news item) at your earliest convenience. You'll see I've provided a suggested quote from each of you – please change this as you see fit, I'm just giving you a starter for 10.

We are making good progress with editing the timetable and I'd like us to have the comms ready by tomorrow morning if possible. If we are ready tomorrow morning then there's a chance we could communicate with centres tomorrow afternoon – as long as the timetable is ready.

If we miss tomorrow's slot then the comms will be issued on Monday morning.

Our plan is to publish on Connect and the SQA website alongside a message for centres – followed by a news release. We'll also email key educational stakeholders and provide social media updates to ensure maximum reach of the message.

The team are also working on a Q&A for customer-facing colleagues and I'd be happy to include any questions that you think we will be asked.

Kind regards

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Communications & Engagement, Communications Directorate

t: [REDACTED]@sqa.org.uk | w: <http://www.sqa.org.uk>

Scottish Qualifications Authority

The Optima Building, 58 Robertson Street, Glasgow, G2 8DQ