



Chloe Smith MP
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FAO RETURNING OFFICERS AND ELECTORAL REGISTRATION OFFICERS

I am writing to thank you and your election teams for the work you have undertaken on the annual canvass during the COVID-19 pandemic.

I am also writing to reassure you of the steps the UK Government and our partners are taking to ensure the resilience of the annual canvass, registration activities and elections in these unprecedented times.

May 2021 polls

I know you, like us, will have been looking ahead to the May 2021 polls. My officials, together with Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, Electoral Commission, Association of Electoral Administrators, Society of Local Authority Chief Executives, Local Government Association, Public Health England, representatives of political parties and other partners, have been working together to understand the impact of COVID-19 on the delivery of the local and mayoral elections in England and the Police and Crime Commissioner elections in England and Wales in May 2021.

I understand a number of Returning Officers and Electoral Registration Officers, and members of their teams, have been involved in this work and I am grateful for your contribution.

It is my view that, following this analysis work with partners and based on the information currently available, polls can be delivered safely and securely, and the risk of transmission substantially reduced, if COVID-19 secure guidelines are followed closely.

Legislation

I believe there is no necessity for significant changes such as imposing an all-postal vote or changing polling days or times (which would require primary legislation). The UK Government remains of the view that all-postal voting increases fraud risks, and removes choice from voters who wish to cast their vote in person.

I am considering a potential smaller change to legislation to support electors with absent voting. An update on this will be provided in due course.

By-elections

As you know, Parliament legislated to push back the May 2020 elections and subsequent local by-elections to May 2021, and the UK Government continues to operate on that basis. We are not changing that legislation, meaning that you should not expect any kind of elections to be able to take place before May 2021.

This decision was made to give Returning Officers and Electoral Registration Officers certainty on the timing and combination of elections at the start of the year. It would be disruptive for local elections teams to plan for a poll before May 2021, for it to then be postponed again.

Support for local decision making for May 2021 polls

It is crucial for us all to recognise that restrictions to control the virus and protect people's health are rightly under constant review. This includes variations across the country as we are now able to better identify outbreaks at an early stage and take steps to ensure appropriate local intervention.

I fully appreciate the delivery of these polls will present new challenges as, like many other sectors and public services, electoral administrators will have to make changes according to the guidance. I am grateful for your leadership in ensuring these preparations are made in order to deliver polls in your area.

I am listening closely to feedback from the electoral community on planning for the May 2021 polls, and I address some of these concerns below.

The issue of funding has been raised. Elections and other polls will continue to be funded in the same way; the Cabinet Office will, as usual, fund what is necessary for the efficient and effective running of the Police and Crime Commissioner elections. The costs of neighbourhood planning referendums will continue to be reclaimed from the Government (MHCLG) by local planning authorities. Local authorities will continue to fund the cost of all other local elections.

This Government has provided a total of £4.3 billion to local authorities to help with pandemic costs, including £3.7 billion in un-ringfenced funding. This is in addition to Core Spending Power (CSP) being expected to rise from £46.2 billion to £49.1 billion in 2020-21, an estimated 4.4% real terms increase.

My officials are working with the Association of Electoral Administrators on guidance to support Returning Officers with procurement and funding decisions for the May 2021 polls.

I have also heard concerns around the provision of appropriate venues. My officials are working with electoral partners to understand the requirement and to provide support to Returning Officers so they can ensure adequate provision of venues for polling stations.

The electoral sector will no doubt welcome plans from the Electoral Commission to provide supplementary guidance to support local decision making, and targeted public communications to support voter participation.

Four Nations approach to May 2021

I would also like to assure you that the UK Government, Scottish Government and Welsh Government will continue to work together on the delivery of polls and associated registration and campaigning activity, in accordance with each governments' responsibilities.

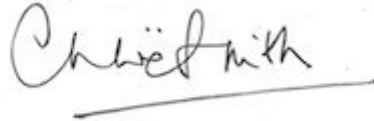
Publication of Registers

The UK Government is bringing forward legislation to delay the deadline for publications of this year's revised Parliamentary and English local government registers by two months, from 1 December 2020 to 1 February 2021.

Thank you

Finally, I am aware many election teams were rightly deployed to other areas of local authority business to ensure the health and safety of our citizens. This work has been fundamental in the COVID-19 recovery and is exemplary of our public service's commitment to the welfare of our nation.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Chloe Smith". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a horizontal line that serves as a separator between the signature and the printed name below.

Chloe Smith MP
Minister of State for the Constitution and Devolution