

The Association of Electoral Administrators



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Dear Minister,

We would firstly like to thank you for taking the time to meet with our Chief Executive and Deputy Chief Executive on 26 April and for your letter to them following yesterday's meeting of the Elections Co-ordination and Advisory Board (ECAB), which was received this afternoon.

We are also grateful for you agreeing to present the keynote speech at the AEA National Seminar on 16 July in Nottingham. Your commitment to the Association's members and the invaluable work they do in delivering highly professional electoral services across the UK is greatly appreciated.

As you know, the AEA has published a number of reports after key electoral events, including the EU referendum in 2016 and the unscheduled UK Parliamentary general election last year. We sincerely hope that the recommendations made, many of which accord with those of other stakeholders such as the Electoral Commission, have been of use in improving recognition of the pressures faced by the wider electoral community and the need for effective modernisation.

We will return to those recommendations shortly but in the meantime, you may wish to note that we will not be issuing a report following the elections on 3 May even though a number of key challenges were once again faced by returning officers, electoral registration officers, electoral administrators and commercial suppliers, not least in the eight areas that successfully piloted voter ID in polling stations or enhanced postal voting checks.

We did however consider it appropriate to bring three specific matters to your attention in the spirit of continued cooperation.

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The first of these is to place on record the Association's congratulations to all those involved in the successful delivery of the polls on 3 May. Local government elections are often seen as "less important" than national polls, but the AEA understands that every type of electoral event presents its own unique set of challenges. In many respects, administering local polls is often more technically difficult than national elections.

It was reassuring to note that because of the need to work more closely than normal with the pilot authorities in developing and observing the delivery of the pilots, Cabinet Office officials came to appreciate that the same level of care, attention and commitment is necessary for local elections as for national polls, and that a great deal of respect and admiration is due to those delivering the process.

The second matter, which was expressed at the ECAB meeting, is to recognise the generally progressive and open manner in which you and your officials have consulted with the Association and its members over electoral reform. It is often very easy to level criticism but we must commend the fact that the Association has been, and continues to be, recognised as an integral partner even when our views may be challenging and not necessarily in accord with the Government's thinking.

We are reassured that our input to canvass and registration reform, to the development of the voter ID pilots, to discussions about the electoral implications post-EU exit and improving accessibility to electoral processes is sought and is well-regarded.

That is not to say that everything is perfect and we continue to have serious misgivings about a number of issues, including but not limited to the continued funding of electoral services (both registration and elections), duplicate registrations, the removal of unnecessary bureaucracy in electoral registration processes and ongoing issues with election timetables.

Which leads us to the third matter, one which you recognise in your letter today. Whilst we appreciate you and your officials have a great number of demands on your time, we remain disappointed that we have yet to receive a formal response to the recommendations made in our 2017 report¹.

The Association spent a great deal of care and attention, and indeed resources, in researching and compiling what we consider to be a fair and

¹ [It's time for urgent and positive Government action – The AEA's review of the 2017 local government elections and the UK Parliamentary general election](#)

balanced review of the issues faced by the wider electoral community in successfully delivering the democratic process across the UK. We remain concerned that unless urgent and appropriate action is taken in a number of areas, the many weaknesses and contradictions identified in current systems and procedures will continue to introduce unnecessary and untenable risks into the process at the next national polls.

The Association strongly supports the principle that the interests of electors should be the primary focus of any changes to electoral registration and election processes. However, it is essential that full and proper consideration is given to associated administrative issues in order to ensure that the system can be successfully administered.

We do not feel there is any particular merit in repeating all of the recommendations made last year as you will have full access to them but would like to reiterate the points made when you met Peter and Laura and which were further touched on at ECAB. Much of the change we have identified is very technical in nature and, on the face of it, of little direct interest to the electorate or, at the risk of being controversial, politicians.

We are firmly of the opinion that areas including, but not limited to, electoral registration and elections deadlines, absent voting arrangements, the use of commonly-used names, nomination procedures and access arrangements to electoral registers need to be urgently reviewed and any identified improvements made as soon as possible. Current progress in giving due consideration to these areas is at best slow.

Credit must go to successive Cabinet Office Ministers in sponsoring workstreams such as the Modernising Electoral Registration Programme and the Electoral Integrity Programme, which are beginning to address some of the issues we and other stakeholders have identified. However, we believe there is much more that could be done to introduce significant improvement to the management of electoral processes and reduce risks.

If appropriate commitments were to be made in the areas that fall outside the current scope of the programmes identified above, we believe that many of the issues and problems faced by administrators in recent years would be alleviated.

As identified earlier, the AEA took a conscious decision not to produce a post-election report on this occasion as most of the recommendations previously made remain unchanged.

However, we wanted to reiterate that as the professional body representing the interests of electoral administrators in the UK, we remain

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concerned that without action being taken to address the less high-profile, more technical, issues referred to in our 2017 report, the risk of system failure will rise, the wellbeing of our members will continue to be adversely affected and public-trust in our democratic processes will be damaged.

The AEA and its members are dedicated to ensuring that this does not happen and you have our commitment that we will continue to provide expert advice and support as required.

We are grateful for you taking the time to write to Peter and Laura following yesterday's ECAB meeting and for providing reassurances of your commitment to continuing to work with the AEA and the wider electoral community in the ongoing reform of electoral services.

On behalf of those colleagues who administer the system, we ask that alongside the progressive work being done by your officials around canvass reform, the development of better metrics, voter ID and other anti-fraud measures, due and proper consideration and commitment is given to addressing those areas that currently fall out of scope and/or are seen as of lesser importance.

We welcome the opportunity to discuss these matters further with you and your officials.

Yours sincerely,



Andy Tiffin
Chairman



Peter Stanyon
Chief Executive

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