

The Association of Electoral Administrators



Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP
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Date: 06 November 2019

Dear Mr Williamson,

Preparation for the December election and use of school facilities

I am writing to express our extreme disappointment at your letter of 5 November 2019 to Chief Executives of local authorities across the United Kingdom.

The Association of Electoral Administrators represents the professionals who deliver the electoral process. We have received universally concerned feedback this morning about the complete lack of knowledge and understanding demonstrated in your letter as to how challenging it is to deliver an election at short notice, particularly when Parliament set the date of poll in December with all the associated issues a winter election brings.

Your intervention has been unhelpful for several reasons, not least its timing. We question why this letter was sent out so late, after most polling stations have already been booked. Our members have been working tirelessly to negotiate access to all venues designated as polling places, which is both time consuming and difficult. That work needed to be done urgently because there is a legal duty on Returning Officers to distribute poll cards to electors as soon as practicable after publication of Notice of the Election, which in many constituencies will be tomorrow.

Your letter, however well-intended, also completely contradicts the legal provision that rooms in publicly-maintained buildings must be made

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available to Returning Officers, and indeed candidates. In fact, there is an expectation that greater use is made of such facilities in order to keep election costs down. It would be far more helpful if your own Department assisted Returning Officers by reminding schools of this legal obligation rather than adding further to the challenges faced.

I would also like to challenge your statement that "in every community there will be alternatives". That is simply not the case. In many parts of the United Kingdom, including towns and cities but especially in rural areas, there are simply no alternatives to the venues designated as polling places.

It is reassuring that Government has recognised that the additional costs likely to be incurred because of the timing of this election will be reimbursed. However, we wait to see how onerous a task that will eventually prove to be as experience has shown that the settlement of claims from previous national polls is a painfully slow and arduous process, with numerous claims for the 2017 Parliamentary election still not settled.

We recognise the inconvenience that this election will cause, none of it the fault of Returning Officers and their employing local authorities, and every effort is being made by the electoral community to work with schools and other public premises to mitigate those difficulties. However, the simple truth of the matter is that when Parliament decided to hold the poll in December, at short notice, significant and unintended consequences followed.

The role of Returning Officers and their staff is to deliver a safe and secure election, which is what they will do.

Yours sincerely,



Peter Stanyon
Chief Executive