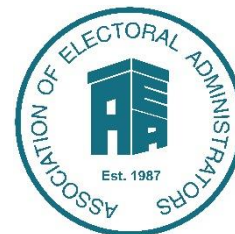


The Association of Electoral Administrators



Chloe Smith MP
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Date: 10 March 2020

Dear Minister,

Covid-19

I hope you are well and congratulations on your recent promotion.

I know you and your Cabinet Office colleagues are already discussing the May polls in relation to Covid-19. We are reassured by the dialogue also taking place between the UK Government and partners responsible for delivering elections.

While accepting the situation regarding Covid-19 is changing on a daily basis, I would appreciate you and your team giving urgent thought to the risk the virus is bringing to the 7 May polls, and how government plans to mitigate this risk to ensure candidates and electors are still able to engage in the democratic process. I thought it would be useful to outline specific concerns of the Association of Electoral Administrators and our members.

Nominations

We are concerned that some candidates may be reluctant to visit council offices to deliver their nomination papers. Many areas have local elections, including parish councils, where candidates are often older members of the community and so are more at risk. The law requires nomination papers to be delivered by hand, so attending public buildings is required.

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Last week a council in Devon had to close its main office as a staff member had travelled to a high-risk area and had developed potential symptoms. If this happened during the nomination period, candidates would potentially be unable to deliver nomination papers so could, in the worst case, be unable to stand for election.

Polling stations

While the number of people attending a polling station at any one point is relatively small, hundreds of people will visit the premises over the course of a day. There are concerns about what measures should be put in place to sanitise stations as the day progresses – for example polling booths, pencils and the main reception desk. It would be useful for Returning Officers to have some guidance from the Cabinet Office about good practice and whether hand sanitiser should be made available for voters. We will also be encouraging our members to think about promoting any measures they are putting in place to reassure voters and encourage them to turn out.

Some temporary staff are already turning down polling station work due to the risk of contracting the virus. Returning Officers will work hard to recruit new people, but if the outbreak worsens as we approach 7 May, we are worried that there will simply not be enough staff to keep all stations open. This could be made worse if someone who attends polling station training were to show symptoms, leading to all staff at that training session needing to self-isolate.

As previously outlined, if council offices are forced to close, this could impact the preparation of ballot boxes or prevent them from being collected. While we are hopeful local arrangements could be made, we would imagine councils would be reluctant to reopen without deep cleaning having taken place.

Postal voting

Information on how Covid-19 can be spread is inconsistent. Our members are already reporting voter anxiety about whether a postal vote could 'carry' the virus, combined with questions from temporary staff employed to open the millions of envelopes that will be returned. We fear that some voters, particularly those in high-risk groups, will neither want to attend a polling station or have a postal vote.

Election counts

The count is where a large number of people will be gathered in one space for an extended period. It is important that candidates and their agents can observe proceedings. If the outbreak is, as is predicted by some, at its peak in May, we would be disappointed if candidates were reluctant to attend. The need for transparent and observed processes are essential.

Suppliers

For completeness, we would also like to put on record our concerns about suppliers, given the small number of partners who work with our members to deliver elections.

If an election printer had to close – even temporarily – as a result of the virus, there could be many Returning Officers who would not receive postal voting packs or ballot papers. There is insufficient capacity within the market to offset one of the main providers being unavailable at short notice. The impact of this would be significant and could see some Returning Officers unable to deliver the polls, despite having followed all usual steps and procedures.

Electoral administrators

If members of an electoral services team or a Returning Officer were to catch the virus, individual Returning Officers may be unable to deliver the polls. This could also cause difficulties in areas with combined area elections for Police and Crime Commissioners and Combined Authority Mayors. With polls in every council area within England and Wales, it is unlikely that there would be other administrators available to support them. This leads to concerns about the legal position if one area of the country was unable to participate. We would hope that government would look to help any Returning Officer facing such challenges to ensure electors are given the opportunity to vote at a future date.

Potential postponement

We would also urge you to look at the legal basis for postponing polls, both for individual areas and across the UK, should the situation worsen as we approach 7 May. This would include making arrangements for the implementation of boundary reviews and newly formed Councils.

This would also need to apply to any other poll that would be taking place after that decision is made, to include by-elections and other ballots that are run on a regular basis.

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We look forward to continuing to work closely with your officials but in the meantime would appreciate you considering the specific concerns raised in this letter.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Peter Stanyon". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'P' and a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Peter Stanyon
Chief Executive

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