

The Association of Electoral Administrators

Policy Position Paper – the use of schools as polling places

Great Britain only

1. Introduction

This paper outlines the AEA's views of, and highlights issues related to, the use of schools as polling places at elections and referendums.

2. Legislative Background

2.1 Use of schools

In England and Wales, the returning officer is entitled to use schools maintained or assisted by a local authority for use as a polling station. This includes schools which receive grants from money provided by Parliament, Private Finance Initiatives (PFI) schools, academies and free schools.

Any room in the school should be provided to the returning officer free of charge with only the costs of heating, and lighting etc. being charged¹. Similar legislation also applies to other polls, for example, Police and Crime Commissioner, Mayoral and national referendums.

In Scotland, rooms in schools which can be used free of charge as a polling station do not include independent schools as defined in the Education (Scotland) Act 1980.

3. Key Issues

3.1 Use of schools

Polling places are designated by local authorities, not returning officers. Returning officers are legally obliged to comment on such designations during statutory polling district and polling place reviews and may recommend that certain schools be avoided where there are suitable alternatives. However, it is the case that after many such reviews, schools are the only feasible location available in some areas. Schools are generally well-known local venues serving their immediate localities, are accessible and are maintained by the public purse.

Returning officers must then site the polling station within the designated polling place.

Returning officers generally work closely with head teachers to avoid the need for schools to close particularly where the polling does not impinge on the normal working practices of the school and security arrangements for pupils and staff. It is not a requirement for a school used as a polling station to close. If voting can take place without compromise to security arrangements, safeguarding or interruption to education, it is possible for the school to remain open. Returning officers are fully aware of the disruption caused to many schools but they equally have a duty to administer the electoral process according to law.

¹ Rule 22(1) of the Parliamentary Election Rules, Rule 20(1)(a) of the Principal Areas Rules, and Rule 20(1)(a) Parishes and Communities Election Rules



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A school takes the decision about whether it closes, not the returning officer. Safeguarding clearly plays a part, but there are many examples where polling takes place alongside education.

Where schools are designated as a polling place, they are given the ordinary day of election (the first Thursday in May) and have the option to use an INSET day to mitigate the impact on staff, pupils and parents. Problems arise when unscheduled polls take place, especially if there are more than one in a year, as in 2019.

4. AEA Policy Position

- Schools and other publicly funded buildings should be made available to the returning officer for use as polling places where suitable alternatives are not available.
- The Education Departments within the UK Government and the devolved nations should work closely with head teachers to make sure they are aware of their legal obligations and those of returning officers.
- In our recent [post-election statement](#) we made the following recommendation which also applies to the devolved nations:

We urge the UK Government to take a more joined-up approach to assist EROs and ROs to deliver democratic processes more efficiently and with greater collective ownership and understanding than at present.

5. Further Information

The Association of Electoral Administrators was founded in 1987 and is the professional body representing the interests of electoral administrators in the United Kingdom. We are a non-governmental and non-partisan body with just under 2,000 members, the majority of whom are employed by local authorities to provide electoral registration and election services. Eleven regional branches of the Association cover the United Kingdom.

Further details on the legislative background connected to this policy position are available on request.

If you require any further information, please contact Angela Holden, AEA Policy Manager – angela.holden@aea-elections.co.uk or 0775 2630497.

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