

The Association of Electoral Administrators



Rt Hon Nick Gibb MP,
Minister of State for School
Standards

Lord True CBE,
Minister of State for the Cabinet
Office

Peter Stanyon

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Dear Sirs,

I am writing to express dismay on behalf of electoral administrators over today's letter to Returning Officers and Headteachers about the use of schools as polling stations.

We recognise the inconvenience this election potentially causes after a year of disrupted schooling. None of this is the fault of Returning Officers or Headteachers, and every effort is being made by the electoral community to mitigate the difficulties posed. You are, however, correct to state that it is not possible in all cases to avoid using schools as polling stations.

Local authority election teams are legally obliged to regularly review current and potential polling stations venues. The review criteria require polling stations to be in easy reach for all electors in a defined electoral area. They should ideally be accessible for people with disabilities, and they must be affordable.

In some areas only schools meet these criteria, particularly as it is a legal requirement for publicly funded premises to make themselves available free of charge to Returning Officers.

For years, Returning Officers have been strongly encouraged by the Government to take account of the legal provisions in place and use publicly funded buildings to reduce the costs of elections. This directly conflicts with your statement today, just as it did in 2019 when a similarly unhelpful letter was sent to Returning Officers ahead of the unscheduled UK Parliamentary General Election.

The availability of suitable venues for polling stations is already limited in many areas, both urban and rural. For 6 May elections, this has understandably been compounded by the block-booking of many community and commercial venues as coronavirus testing or vaccination centres. In

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addition, in many cases, suppliers of temporary buildings do not have the capacity to assist and have cancelled election-related contracts as a direct result of responding to Covid demands.

The announcement of extra funding for coronavirus-related election expenses last week, while welcome, has come too late to affect the polling station booking process. It must also cover a host of additional expenses across each local authority area, not just venues.

There is limited time available for election teams, many of whom are working from home under current lockdown regulations, to restart the search for alternative premises and assess their suitability, including undertaking full risk assessments. With business premises likely to be closed, this task would already be even more difficult.

I must also highlight the short deadlines elections teams are working to. Poll card data is being sent to printers as we speak, with already agreed venue data included. It would therefore be impossible to change a venue without reprinting and potentially resending poll cards, all at unnecessary cost.

While public health guidance on cleaning and ventilating venues after polling stations close is welcome, I cannot underline strongly enough that these tasks cannot fall on polling station staff.

Polling station teams already work from 6am until after 10pm on polling day to prepare the station, administer the poll and transport all materials from each polling station, including the sealed ballot boxes, back to election counts as quickly as possible after the close of poll. Electoral administrators are already reporting difficulties recruiting polling station staff in this pandemic, and additional hours and duties are likely to exacerbate this problem.

Earlier this week, I asked Cabinet Office officials to take the issues electoral teams are experiencing into account and avoid putting barriers in the way of administering probably the most complex set of elections in a generation.

Today's letter has regrettably introduced a very high barrier and demonstrates a complete disregard for the valuable work electoral administrators do on behalf of citizens.

Yours faithfully,



Peter Stanyon
Chief Executive

c.c. Chloe Smith MP, Minister of State for the Constitution and Devolution

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