

PACAC (Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee)

House of Commons · London SW1A 0AA

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Chloe Smith MP
Minister of State for the Constitution and Devolution
By email

28th January 2021

Dear Chloe,

Covid-19: Government preparations and contingency planning for local elections in May 2021

On 6 January 2021, the Prime Minister stated that local elections would go ahead as scheduled on 6 May 2021, but that the Government was keeping the situation “under review”,¹ a position you iterated in response to an Urgent Question on 13 January.

Further to the Government’s commitment to keep the House updated on planning and preparations for the May 2021 local elections, we would welcome your response to the questions set out below by Friday 5 February. This information is vital to enable meaningful parliamentary scrutiny of the Government’s expected forthcoming guidance on holding safe and fair elections under Covid-19 restrictions, and any contingency measures or legislation the Government deems necessary and proportionate.

Practical measures or adjustments for voters, parties and campaigners and electoral administrators

Assuming no change in the scheduled date of the local elections, please could you provide a detailed update on the practical measures or adjustments the Government considers **necessary and proportionate** to ensure:

a) **voters** can participate safely and securely, either in person, by proxy or by post, including (but not limited to) the following areas:

- What barriers are there to postal voting and how is the Government addressing these?
- What measures are planned to support absent voting at short notice and when will the necessary [secondary] legislation and/or guidance be brought forward?
- What other measures are being considered for at risk and vulnerable groups?

¹ HC Deb, 6 January 2021, col [748](#)

b) a level playing for **parties and campaigners**

Following your recent letter² to the Parliamentary Parties Panel stating that Covid-19 restrictions do not support door-to-door campaigning or leafleting by individual political party activists:

- What, if any, analysis has the Government conducted on whether and, if so, to what extent, smaller parties or campaigners may be impacted relative to incumbent candidates by the Government's advice not to campaign on the doorstep or use other non-digital forms of campaign material?
- Should there be exceptions and if so, why?
- What is the Government's assessment of whether such restrictions could impact the ability of voters to make an informed choice?
- What constitutes "appropriate conduct" in the run up and during an election period itself?

c) **electoral administration staff** can do their jobs safely.

Furthermore, should such measures be tailored according to region, depending on infection levels and/or progress in vaccination rollout?

Costs of mitigating measures

You recently highlighted that "the Government had provided a total of £4.3 billion to local authorities to help with pandemic costs, and, on 17 December last year, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government allocated to councils in England a further £1.55 billion non-ring-fenced grant for covid-19 pressures which explicitly included the concept that the money might need to be used to support the running of covid-secure local elections".³

What, if any, additional funding will the Government make available to local governments to meet the costs of holding these elections and on what basis?

² [Letter](#) from Chloe Smith MP to Members of the Parliamentary Parties Panel dated 22 January 2021.

³ HC Deb, 13 January 2021, [c322](#)

Guidance to affected groups

On 13 January, you undertook “to give people guidance in good time” ahead of the polls.⁴

- What will the guidance cover?
- To whom will the guidance be directed (for example, will it be targeted at administrators, voters and/or parties and campaigners)?
- Which stakeholders or bodies are being or have been consulted in drawing up the guidance?
- When will the guidance be made available?

Contingency legislation: how will a decision to delay the elections be determined and what are the expected timescales?

As you are aware, legislation is in place in Wales and Scotland to delay the polls if necessary. On 13 January, you stated “that to change the date of these elections at this stage would require primary legislation, which is a high bar and it is not something to be taken either lightly or quickly”.⁵

- What factors will determine whether a change in date of the elections or any associated timetable (for example, the number of days the elections are conducted over) is necessary and proportionate?
- What, if any, contingency legislation is being considered and why?
- What timescales is the Government working to?
- Given the lead-in time to prepare for elections and the related costs for electoral administrators, local government, parties and campaigners, does the Government consider it should provide ‘reasonable notice’ of the Government’s intention to delay the elections (to avoid disrupting candidates’ campaigns and preparations of election officials) and, if so, by what date?

Consequences of delaying the election

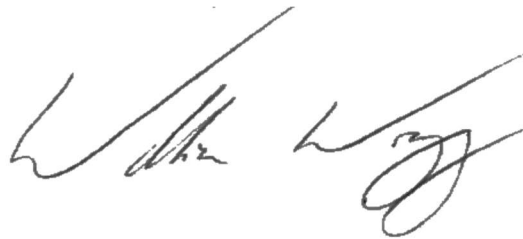
- If elections need to be delayed, what actions need to be taken (for example, passing legislation) to give effect to the decision – and what would the required timescales be for these actions?

⁴ HC Deb, 13 January 2021, [c316](#)

⁵ HC Deb, 13 January 2021, [c324](#)

Finally, has the Government looked at any elections that have taken place internationally during the pandemic to learn lessons for running covid-secure elections, and what were your conclusions?

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee and to the Chair of the Lords Constitution Committee. I will be placing this letter and your response into the public domain.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'William Wragg', written in a cursive style.

William Wragg MP
Chair, Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee