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Chair, Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee
House of Commons
London
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Dear William,

Government preparations and contingency planning for local elections in May 2021

Thank you for your invitation to provide evidence to the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee inquiry into Government preparations and contingency planning for local elections in May 2021. During the evidence session, the Committee asked the LGA to provide more information around the funding arrangements for the local elections that are due to be held in May 2021. I hope this letter provides you with the required detail of the current funding arrangements and why the Government's proposed financial provision may not be sufficient.

The key points I would like to bring to the Committee's attention are:

- This year's elections are the most complex set of elections councils have ever run and are taking place in the context of a pandemic. This will have an impact on costs.
- These challenges have been compounded by a lack of clear and early guidance from Government, including on what funding is available and how it will be distributed.
- Additional costs will vary from council to council depending on the combinations of elections taking place, the local geography and demographics, the types of available venues, and the public health requirements to keep election activities safe.
- Key examples of additional election costs due to COVID include an increase in absent voting, costs of polling and count venues, additional staff, additional equipment and PPE for voters, staff and candidates/observers, and costs associated with resilience arrangements to ensure business continuity.
- Government has recently made some additional funding available specifically to help make elections COVID-safe. However, the true costs of the elections are not yet known, and we believe the available funding is likely to be insufficient.
- The level of funding available for elections should be kept under review as the real-world costs and implications become known.
- There are a range of other actions which Government could take to help councils ensure that the elections are safe and fair, such as a commitment to allow physical campaigning and clarity on areas of tension between the Coronavirus Regulations and electoral law.

How elections are funded

In England, spending for local elections can be broadly split into two types of activities: maintaining of the electoral register by core election teams, including registration activities, and the delivery of elections themselves.

Costs which relate to registration activities are the responsibility of the authority which maintains the relevant electoral register (shire and metropolitan districts, and unitaries, including London boroughs), and includes the registration of postal and proxy voters. The number of registered postal and proxy voters is expected to increase this year and these costs will be borne entirely by the registering authority.

The cost of delivering an election are the responsibility of the relevant local authority, irrespective of which council delivers it. For example, in two-tier areas where a county election is taking place, the district will then staff and run the election; the costs of running the election are then passed to the county. The situation is similar with combined authority and parish and community elections.

Central Government fund Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) elections by setting a maximum recoverable amount. Government also publish guidance clarifying what costs can be reclaimed ahead the polls. Government has not yet published this guidance for the May 2021 elections.

When several elections occur at once, as they will this year, the relevant authorities are responsible for their proportion of the costs. Due to the double set of elections and the moratorium on by-elections, there are many areas with multiple polls this year, which will make the portioning of costs particularly complex.

Additional costs of May 2021 elections

As I alluded to during the evidence session, the May 2021 elections are the most complex set of elections local authorities have ever had to deliver. This will have an impact on the costs associated with running the polls and making them COVID-safe.

The combination and volume of polls taking place are uniquely challenging. On top of this, election staff must reassess every election process to reduce the public health risk to staff, candidates, and voters, while ensuring the resilience of the democratic process. These challenges have been compounded by a lack of specific and consistent Government guidance on how aspects of the elections will be conducted safely, for example whether Perspex screens are required or not and whether schools can be used as polling stations. There are also concerns about how local authorities will pay for the additional costs due to the pandemic if Government does not agree to cover them.

Additional costs due to COVID and the combination of two sets of elections in one year are apparent at each stage of the election process and vary from council to council. This will depend on the combination of elections taking place, the local geography and demographics, the types of available venues, and public health requirements to keep election activities safe. Key examples include:

- an increase in absent voting;
- costs of alternative and larger polling and count venues;
- more days to complete the count;

- additional staff for polling and count activities;
- additional equipment and PPE for staff, observers and voters; and
- the cost of resilience arrangements to ensure business continuity.

Postal and proxy voting

Postal and proxy voting are the only absent voting options available to voters who may not feel comfortable attending a polling station in May. NHS England has [recently confirmed](#) that it is now permissible to use the Clinically Extremely Vulnerable patients list to inform this group of their voting options. Due to this and the current national restrictions, councils are expecting, and are beginning to see, an increase in postal and proxy voting applications ahead of May's elections.

An increase in postal voting applications will naturally increase the cost of printing postal ballots and postage by a factor of the number of additional voters. This number will increase again in areas where there is more than one ballot package per voter due to the combination of multiple polls. Additional workforce-hours will also be required to open and verify those ballots when they are returned, and councils will need additional resources to support this activity.

These additional costs are directly related to the current public health context and the promotion of voting options to voters; they should therefore be viewed as additional costs due to pandemic, not the usual costs of maintaining the electoral registers and delivering the elections.

Polling and count venues

Councils use a range of local venues as polling and count venues for elections; they are typically chosen for their accessibility, location and affordability. However, many venues are not and cannot be made COVID-safe for election activity, because they do not have appropriate facilities and/or do not allow for adequate social distancing and one-way systems within the venue. Many suitable venues are closed or are being used for other COVID-19 programmes, such as testing or vaccine centres. Some suitable venues are schools and there is an understandable reluctance to lose further school days for any reason, including polling.

On 11 February, Department of Education and Cabinet Office [ministers wrote to](#) Returning Officers and Headteachers of schools in England to confirm that they expect Returning Officers to avoid using school premises as polling stations, but that this may be necessary in some cases. We understand the concerns about using schools as polling venues when children have been absent from school for such a period already. However, this letter has led to some schools withdrawing as possible polling venues, even where there are no other viable alternatives.

Other suggestions, such as the use of commercial venues, may be an option where they are able and willing to open. However, this will undoubtedly be more expensive than usual polling and count venues and will have additional costs associated with opening-up and making the venues safe for public use after being closed for many months. These costs will vary depending on individual circumstances and will not be confirmed yet due to the challenges of securing these venues. **Assurance that these costs will be met centrally would give councils the flexibility to use more expensive venues instead of schools where this is a possibility.**

There are similar issues with count venues, which usually require large groups of people to come together to complete the count over a couple of days and to observe the democratic process. Social distancing effectively halves the number of people who can be in usual count venues. This restriction either means that counts may take twice as long to complete with less staff or larger venues are required to accommodate more count teams.

This issue is particularly acute where there are multiple polls to be counted; staff must verify all the votes simultaneously before counting can begin and large venues are therefore required to allow for social distancing between staff members and counting bubbles. Usually, local election counts would take place over a one or two days, but in some areas this year, the number of polls will mean that counting has to take place over three or four days, doubling the venue hire costs of the count. Again, this will vary depending on the combination of polls.

For some elections the count must be conducted within a set number of days, for example for parish and local council elections, elected members must be signed into their roles by the end of the fourth day after the election. This means that some areas are under incredible pressure to complete their counts quickly despite the restriction to the number of people they can have present in the count venue. To achieve this, councils are considering having additional count venues which would allow them to complete the count in the usual timeframe whilst maintaining social distancing. **This will come at an additional cost and could be addressed more easily by relaxing the requirement for new members to be signed in by the fourth day. If councils were allowed until the close of the day after all count results in the local area were returned to sign in new members, then this would allow count to be conducted in fewer venues over a longer period of time and would provide the resilience of the elections by allowing for extra contingency days to the count.**

Staffing polling stations

Returning Officers are responsible for ensuring that the elections are safe and fair and rely on Electoral Commission guidance to understand how to accomplish this. This year will be particularly challenging, and the guidance suggests a range of additional measures which may be needed, including additional staff roles.

The guidance suggests that additional staff are required to act as a marshal and greeter at the polling station. The greeter would ensure that voters are aware of the public health advice on using the polling station including wearing a mask, cleansing hands and following the one-way system within the polling stations, and ensuring that social distancing is being adhered to outside the polling station. A second additional staff member would need to clean down touchpoints within the polling station regularly and between individual voters. [The guidance](#) also suggests that additional Polling Inspection Officers will be necessary to reduce the number of sites one Officer inspects and therefore reduce the likelihood of cross-contamination between different polling sites.

This guidance drastically increases the amount of staff required for polling stations at a time when electoral managers are concerned about recruiting the usual complement of staff due to safety concerns and the older demographic of the electoral workforce. Many councils have told us that it will not be possible for them to achieve these staffing numbers across their polling stations. They are considering other options including increasing the rate of pay to incentivise recruitment or consolidating polling stations into larger polling stations covering a larger area and population which would reduce the staff required but increase the venue costs.

Again, concerns about this will vary depending on the area, as will the solutions and additional funding required to overcome these barriers. **Councils are working now to recruit and train the necessary staff, and it will not necessarily be possible to assess the real costs involved until much closer to the election. However, councils need to be confident that the any additional costs of staffing incurred in line with the Electoral Commissions guidance will be covered by central Government funding.**

Equipment, PPE and other COVID-safe measures

According to Electoral Commission guidance and the recent Polls Delivery Plan published by the Cabinet Office, these elections will be materially different to elections that have taken place before. Voters will still have the option to vote in person, and there will be a range of measures in place to ensure that venues are COVID-safe:

- polling stations will be socially distanced, both inside and outside of the venue
- there will be a limit on the number of people inside the polling station at one time
- masks will be mandatory for staff and voters within the polling station
- voters should bring their own pencils, but single-use pencils or regularly cleaned pencils should be available for people to use
- screens are likely to be in place to protect polling staff
- there will be hand sanitiser readily available for staff and voters; and
- touchpoints will be regularly cleaned.

Councils will need to ensure that all these measures are in place; this will require additional hygiene supplies, cleaning equipment, pencils, additional masks for voters, additional signage and markings to explain how to use the polling station safely, and PPE/masks and screens to protect staff. Similar equipment will be required at count venues to ensure that they are also safe.

These supplies and equipment represent a significant additional cost to councils. Some councils have told us that they expect the cost of Perspex screens for their polling and count venues alone to cost them up to £60,000. **Electoral Commission guidance stops short of mandating the use of screens, but the Cabinet Office Polls Delivery Plan, published on the 5 February 2021, clearly sets out the expectation to electoral staff and voters that there will be 'glass screens' in place at polling stations. If this is the expectation set by the Cabinet Office as to what a COVID-safe polling station looks like, then again costs incurred in line with this guidance must be reimbursed by central Government.**

Resilience arrangements

Returning Officers are also required to provide resilience to election processes, including having additional reserve staff and venues. This is particularly important during the pandemic as it is more likely that these resilience arrangements will be required. Back-up staff and venues will increase the costs associated with the election.

Government funding available

During the Government's [Spending Review announcement](#) in November 2020, the Government announced £1.55 billion of unringfenced grant funding to manage the immediate and long-term impacts of the pandemic in 2021-22.

In mid-December, the Government confirmed that councils would receive the funding in April 2021 and that distribution will be determined using the COVID-19 Relative Needs Formula, which uses the combination of variables associated with local authority spending on the COVID-19 pandemic. **The formula does not take into account the number of polls taking place in each area and other relevant factors that may lead to additional costs, and so fails to account for this added expenditure in its distribution.**

[The guidance sets out](#) the service areas that Government expected this funding to address including adult social care, children's services, public health services, household waste services, shielding clinically extremely vulnerable, homelessness and rough sleeping, domestic abuse, managing excess deaths, support for re-opening the country and, additional costs associated with local elections in May 2021.

Since the announcement of this funding in November, the pandemic has worsened. The new variants' impacts, a third lockdown and the new vaccination programme, have put additional and unexpected pressure on local authority capacity and finances in-year and in the next financial year. Government recognised this impact on council finances in a letter in January 2021, which stated that the expectation had changed and that councils should spend the majority of the £1.55 billion unringfenced grant on adult social care. This makes it very unlikely that local election teams will be able to draw funding from this grant and some have already told us they do not expect to access this funding stream because of the demand from other frontline services.

On the 5 February, Government published their Poll Delivery Plan and announced some additional funding to support the COVID-safe running of the elections. £16 million additional funding was announced to make PCC elections COVID-secure, which constitutes an uplift of 25 per cent of the agreed funding for PCC elections.¹ £15 million [funding was announced](#) to make local government elections safe, which is less than 10 per cent of the costs of running local elections in a usual year, without the compounding factor of running two sets of elections in one year.²

The LGA welcomed the announcement of extra funding, as it showed a clear recognition that delivering these elections are exceptionally challenging and will result in considerable additional cost. **However, we know that councils are making key financial decisions now to ensure that the elections are delivered safely and fairly. We believe that it is likely that this funding will be insufficient to cover the true costs of the election and that Government should commit to funding the full additional costs of these elections due to COVID to allow Returning Officers to make decisions that are safe and financially sound.**

Estimated costs

This year every eligible voter in England will have a vote of some kind, and in many cases, there will be multiple polls going ahead at once. The impact of this will vary from council to council, and so will the costs of delivering the posts. Councils are working to assess the scale and cost of vital extra measures to ensure everyone's safe involvement in the elections. **The**

¹ Government announced £61 million for the usual costs of running the PCC elections and £16 million for the additional costs of the PCC elections due to COVID

² In 2018/19 the local election costs were £152 million and in 2017/18 the local elections costs were £174 million, £15 million amounts to approximately 10 per cent of the costs of running the election in 2018/19. This does not account for the additional costs of running two sets of elections in one year which is unprecedented and would be expected to increase the overall cost of running the polls.

level of additional government financial support will need to be kept under review as the real-world costs and implications become known.

The latest financial returns about the impact of COVID-19 submitted by councils to central government showed that, taking 2020/21 and the first three months of 2021/22 together, councils estimated £14 million in additional elections costs. This was prior to the Government's decision to go ahead with elections and prior to the Government's issuing of guidance about how elections should be held, meaning it is a significant underestimate. Indeed, many councils did not include additional financial costs of elections in the most recent set of returns.

We are working to gather further information about these additional costs and in many cases are finding that these costs might in fact amount to much more than 10 per cent of the usual local election cost. Councils have indicated to us that the estimated additional costs of these elections due to COVID range from 25-70 per cent of the usual costs of elections depending upon their local circumstances.

One particular council holding only a PCC election in May, has estimated that the additional costs associated with PPE, cleaning, additional staffing, alternative venues and postal voting printing and postage will increase by 68 per cent compared with the costs last time they held a PCC election. If other areas experience a similar increase for just PCC elections alone, the current 25 per cent uplift for PCC elections announced by Government on 5 February will not be sufficient to cover the costs.

Councils with multiple polls in May are reporting a similar range of estimated additional costs, and the combination of two sets of elections alongside other polls, such as neighbour referenda, is expected to increase the costs substantially compared to a routine local election year. This view is supported by evidence from the eight Scottish by-elections which took place between October and November 2020 during the pandemic but before the impacts of the new variants were being felt in the UK. These were generally single ward elections for casually vacant council seats. In some councils, these elections were 60 per cent more expensive than normal by-elections due to measures to make them COVID-safe. [According to the Electoral Commissions review](#) of the by-elections, Returning Officers across all the councils that held by-elections commented that it was more expensive to run elections during the pandemic.

Flexibilities and clarifications

As discussed at your Committee's evidence session on this inquiry, several issues remain around council capacity, the availability of sufficient electoral workforce, availability of suitable venues and the resilience of expert electoral staff and electoral process. Other flexibilities, clarifications and commitments that are needed from Government to ensure safe and fair election, include:

- Commitment to allow physical campaigning, such as leafleting and door-knocking as soon as possible as a priority
- Clarity on areas of tension between the Coronavirus Regulations and electoral law, for example, what is the expectation if someone who should be self-isolating due to COVID-19 attends a polling station or a non-exempt person refuses to wear a mask
- Specific and consistent public health guidance for elections to support decision-making in this difficult context
- Commitment that core electoral staff will be added to vaccination priority list and an extension of testing facilities to all election staff to protect the resilience of the elections

- Clarity as to the detail of expected legislative change around the nominations process for local elections and the provision of a new COVID emergency proxy
- Legislative change to allow for nomination papers to be submitted digitally to reduce the number of unnecessary contacts between candidates/agents and electoral staff
- Legislation to relax the requirement for newly elected local members (parish councillors, local authority councillors, local and combined authority mayors) to be signed into office by the end of the fourth day; instead allow local authorities the flexibility to sign members into office the days after all the local results have been returned to support safe counting practices.

Funding is one of many aspects of the preparation for elections which councils are concerned about. **Clarity that Government will support council finances to deliver the elections will ensure councils can provide the necessary public health protection for candidates, voters and staff without diverting funding and resources away from other frontline services to deliver the elections.**

I hope that this further information is helpful to the Committee, and if the LGA can be of further assistance please do let me know.

Best wishes,

Cllr James Jamieson

Chairman of the Local Government Association