



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

25th February 2021

Dear Chloe,

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

Thank you for your response of 8 February¹ to our letter of 28 January² regarding the Government's preparations and planning for the local elections in May 2021.

As you are aware, the Committee held an oral evidence session with representatives from the electoral community on this matter on 9 February.³

Taking into account the Government's May 2021 Polls [Delivery Plan](#) published on 5 February, your response of 8 February and written and oral evidence received to date, we ask that you respond to the Committee's outstanding and/or additional queries highlighted in bold below within ten working days.

Equality impact

The Delivery Plan sets out the Government's approach to how the polls should proceed. It "recognise[s] that the pandemic may change people's needs and preferences" and notes that there will be targeted communications for "Clinically Extremely Vulnerable people". However, the impact will not be limited to clinically at-risk groups. **Has the Government conducted an equality impact assessment of holding these elections during the pandemic? We ask that you share the Government's analysis on the equality impact or explain why such an assessment has not been undertaken.**

¹ [Letter](#) from Chloe Smith MP to the Chair of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee dated 8 February 2021

² [Letter](#) from the Chair of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee to Chloe Smith MP dated 28 January 2021

³ Oral evidence: Covid-19: Government preparations and contingency planning for local elections in May 2021, [HC 1199](#)



Practical measures and guidance for campaigners - implications of restrictions on traditional doorstep campaigning and leafleting

The Delivery Plan stresses that the Government “has been clear that leafleting and door-knocking by party activists is not permissible” under current lockdown restrictions and that “[f]urther information on permitted face-to-face campaigning and organising, including the delivery of leaflets by party volunteers, or independent candidates and their supporters, will be published before the beginning of the regulated election period.” The Government has committed to engaging with the political parties through the Parliamentary Parties Panel on this guidance, prior to its formal publication.

The Committee has heard concerns about the risks of the guidance not being implemented uniformly and confusion over whether the guidance is legally binding and the involvement of the police. Voters and campaigners must be clear about what is permissible and what is not permissible.

Are the current guidelines on campaigning legally binding and what assessment has the Government made of whether these restrictions may disproportionately impact certain parties and campaigners, or the ability of voters to make an informed choice? Furthermore, how will any updated guidance be communicated and enforced?

The Delivery Plan states that the Government “has already uprated election expenses for council candidates, which will provide greater opportunity for such candidates to campaign via digital channels and utilise paid-for delivery services in their regulated election period”. However, the Committee took evidence that this uplift is simply in line with inflation.

Furthermore, the Committee noted concerns about campaigners’ access to different forms of campaigning, particularly “free or low-cost options” and that Royal Mail does not deliver ward-by-ward (it only delivers postcode to postcode).

Has the Government reviewed arrangements for funding the mailings of these elections and is there a case for the Government to liaise with and/or instruct Royal Mail to enable ward-by-ward deliveries according to ward boundaries?

The costs of mitigating measures and funding for local authorities

The Government has provided a range of figures on funding Covid-secure elections in recent debates and publications:

- “[T]he Government had provided a total of £4.3 billion to local authorities to help with pandemic costs”;⁴
- “[O]n 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

⁴ HC Deb, 13 January 2021, [c322](#)



the money might need to be used to support the running of [C]ovid-secure local elections”.⁵ The Government’s Delivery Plan further clarified that the Government “indicated when announcing allocations that local election costs should be considered locally as a priority for which this funding can be used.”

- “There will be an estimated £92 million of government funding that will be provided to Returning Officers and local authorities for the elections; of this, £31 million is an uplift to directly address costs associated with making the elections C[ovid]-secure”, which is “for reasonable additional costs” that might be used to “fund the hiring of alternative venues, procure additional PPE, hire additional staff, or for cleaning to minimise disruption to schools.”⁶

The level of funding is difficult to disaggregate. Furthermore, it is unclear how the funding will be distributed, as the additional costs incurred by local authorities to ensure Covid-19 safe elections will depend on a range of factors (including the availability of suitable polling and count venues, levels of absent voting and staffing requirements and availability) and be impacted by the number or combination of elections taking place and local geography and demographics.

What additional funding (over and above the Government’s pre-existing commitments to fund the Police and Crime Commissioner elections) has the Government made available to local governments to meet the additional costs of making these elections Covid-19 secure, and on what basis will this be distributed? Furthermore, will funding for local authorities be reviewed as the actual costs of implementing necessary measures become known?

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.

Thank you for your consideration.

With all best wishes,

William Wragg MP
Chair, Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee

⁵ HC Deb, 13 January 2021, [c322](#)

⁶ May 2021 Polls [Delivery Plan](#) of 5 February 2021