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Letter: Coronavirus and its impact on the May polls You are in the Key
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updated: 12 March 2020 Summary of the letter Date: 12 March 2020 To: Chloe Smith MP,
Minister for the Constitution and Devolution CC Rt Hon Michael Gove MP, Chancellor of
the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office Address: Cabinet Office,
70 Whitehall, London, SW1A 2AS From: Bob Posner, Chief Executive Format: Sent by
email Full letter Dear Minister, In light of the current and emerging situation
around Covid-19 in the UK, I wanted to write to set out the Commission's concerns
about the real risks to the successful delivery of the scheduled 7 May 2020
elections. We have been in close contact with a range of key stakeholders across the
electoral community – including the Association of s, Solace, the Greater London
Returning Officer, the Wales Electoral Coordination Board, and of course your
officials – to assess the risks, and to identify and take forward appropriate
mitigations to enable the delivery of the elections. While this work is continuing,
it has already become clear that the risks are so significant as to raise serious
concerns about the polls continuing to their current timetable. Although polling day
is not until 7 May, preparations for the elections are already well underway and
indeed publication of notice of election – which marks the start of the formal
timetable – will take place later this month. This means that a decision now needs to
be taken, by Government and as appropriate by Parliament, whether to proceed with the
scheduled 7 May polls. So voters can cast their ballot, polling station venues need
to be secured, set up, staffed and accessed; we already know that local authorities
have concerns about their ability to ensure this, particularly at the same time as
continuing to manage other key services in the current circumstances. It is also
vital that voters are able to hear the positions of candidates, parties and
campaigners before they cast their vote; however, many forms of campaigning may not
be possible, leaving insufficient space for the arguments to be heard. We also
anticipate that as a result of the direct and indirect impacts of Covid-19, there
will be significant numbers of registered electors who in practice will not have
opportunity to vote, or feel inclined to vote. While increased access to post and
proxy voting may provide a partial solution for some electors, it would create
further and additional pressures and risks in other parts of the system. Clearly any
decisions to delay elections which are due is significant and would not normally be
desirable; however, we are in unprecedented times. The risks to delivery that have
been identified are such that we cannot be confident that voters will be able
to participate in the polls safely and confidently, nor that campaigners and parties
will be able to put their case to the electorate. We therefore call on the Government
to take steps to provide early clarity to all those with an interest in the electoral
process; and on the available information and position we recommend the Government
now delay the 7 May polls until the autumn. In this context we are also mindful that
the Chief Executives of local authorities and their staff across the country are
necessarily focussed on the ongoing management of the impacts Covid-19 is having on
their localities. Similar impacts could also be expected to affect the effective
delivery of by-elections during the intervening period, and we would hope that this
could also be addressed at the same time by providing that these could also be
deferred. Looking further ahead, there may also be a potential impact on annual
canvass activity across the UK, and this is something that it will be important for
Government to return to with us in due course. The Commission stands ready to provide
further advice and take or co-ordinate necessary actions, as may be of assistance to

the Government in this matter. Related content Donations and loans Find out about donations and loans to a political party, individual or other organisation Register to vote All you need to register to vote is 5 minutes and your National Insurance number. Registers of unincorporated associations Download and view the registers of unincorporated associations Our Commissioners