

Key considerations for the delivery of the May 2021 polls: polling stations

Purpose

The coronavirus pandemic is continuing to impact how we live in Great Britain and will present particular challenges for Returning Officers (ROs), Electoral Registration Officers (EROs) and their teams in preparing for and delivering the 2021 polls. To support you in planning for and delivering the May 2021 polls the Commission has issued supplementary guidance documents that focus on key parts of the electoral process.

The purpose of this document, which has been developed in close consultation with the AEA, Solace and Cabinet Office as well as our national public health bodies, is to support you with the decisions you may need to take to manage the particular challenges faced locally and nationally as a result of the current public health situation in relation to the management and set up of polling stations at the May 2021 polls.

It should be read alongside our [core guidance for electoral administrators](#). It has been designed to build on the guidance on risk assessments, staffing, training and venues which was set out in the supplementary guidance document on [planning considerations for the 2021 polls](#). Further detailed guidance on the processes to be followed within polling stations on polling day itself will follow with the publication in early 2021 of updated versions of the polling station handbook, and this will also be reflected in updated template polling station staff briefing presentations.

This guidance is a living document in recognition of the changing landscape and ongoing developments in public health advice and government regulations. We are aware that the UK Government is currently considering introducing legislation on the management of absent vote processes – for example through the extension of provisions for emergency proxies – which would have an impact on polling day. We will update this document as and when there is any additional information to reflect.

There are general public health principles that everyone should follow in all aspects of daily life to help mitigate the risk of the spread of coronavirus, and these should underpin all aspects of your preparations for the elections:

1. Maintain social distancing
2. Clean hands regularly
3. Avoid touching your face
4. Limit your number of contacts
5. Wear a face covering, where necessary
6. Self-isolate and get a test, where necessary

Polling stations

Communication

How will you...?

- **Communicate what to expect when voting in person**
 - It will be important to communicate to voters what they can expect when they vote at the elections, helping them to have the information they need to plan for how to vote safely. As part of this, you can also start to manage expectations as to what polling stations will feel like, giving voters an early indication of what social distancing and hygiene measures will be in place – for example, you can highlight that voters can expect to see many of the measures we've all become used to over recent months in banks, shops and other indoor spaces, such as hand sanitiser, floor markings and face coverings.
 - As part of phase 1 of our public awareness communications work, as outlined in [EA Bulletin 290](#), we have already produced a range of template communication resources to support you with raising awareness that polling stations will be safe places to vote, including social media templates and an FAQ resource for use on your website locally. These resources are available on our [democratic engagement webpages](#). Further information and resources will follow in the subsequent phases of the public awareness work, and we will keep you updated on the development of these through the EA Bulletin.
 - You will need to think about what communication channels you have available and how you can maximise opportunities to communicate your key messages locally, including through existing social media or other local authority communication channels, as well as local press and radio. You should consider how you can work with partners, such as local groups representing people with disabilities, to help target your messages effectively. You should also look for opportunities to add additional messaging about options for voting and what to expect when voting in person to any other planned written communications to electors, for example you could add wording to your poll cards, or to Household Notification Letters (HNLs) if you are planning to send them.
 - Co-ordinating your publicity with other neighbouring local authorities could be helpful, particularly where you have elections that cross local authority boundaries, and will help to ensure that you can collectively reach as many electors as possible with a consistent message.
 - As well as proactively communicating key messages, it will be important to have a plan in place to enable you to respond to questions and comments received through all channels, helping to ensure you can provide accurate, timely and consistent responses, which will help to ensure voters' confidence in the election process.

○ Engage with political parties, candidates and other stakeholders?

- It will be important to engage with candidates, agents, parties and campaigners to ensure that they are fully aware of any adaptations to your usual processes for managing polling stations in light of coronavirus, ensuring that all key stakeholders receive the same information in the interests of fairness and consistency. For example, you should provide information as early as possible about how social distancing will be maintained in polling stations and what measures you are taking to protect voters, your staff and any observers, as well as what attendees will be required to do and can expect to see in these venues. You should also remind them of the guidance on the conduct of tellers, highlight the importance of tellers maintaining social distancing with each other and with voters, and explain how any arrangements for queuing outside the polling station will impact on where they are able to be located.
- You should also inform candidates, agents, parties and campaigners of your plans to promote voter awareness around voting options and what to expect in polling stations. This will help them to reflect the key messages for voters in their own public awareness and engagement activity.
- You could cover these messages as part of your briefings for candidates, agents and parties, and may also find it helpful to provide written explanations. However you do it, communicating the messages clearly and consistently can help to manage expectations and address concerns in advance of polling day. The Commission will also be producing guidance for candidates and agents to help them understand the changes to the election process that they can expect to see as a result of the coronavirus pandemic and to give them the information they need to be able to participate in the elections safely and with confidence. We will update you when this guidance is available so that you can share it with candidates and agents in your local area.

Managing polling station voting

How will you...?

○ Determine what roles you will need?

- As outlined in our supplementary guidance on [planning for the 2021 polls](#), you should consider carefully what additional roles you may need to be carried out at these polls as a result of coronavirus measures:
 - Regular cleaning throughout the day of touchpoints such as doors, polling booths and any writing implements you provide, is recommended by public health authorities.
 - At recent local by-elections in Scotland, 'greeters' were employed at many polling stations to control queues and manage entry to the station for social distancing purposes, as well as to encourage voters and other stakeholders attending the polling station to abide by the public health measures in place, such as the wearing of face coverings and sanitising their hands on entry and exit, and to answer any questions about what to expect inside the venue.

- You may also want to make provision for polling station staff to be able to take regular breaks, especially where staff are wearing face coverings in polling stations.
- To help ensure that you can manage requirements on polling day as efficiently as possible, you should think about how you can facilitate the flexible use of staff across your polling stations as needed. However, as well as ensuring that any re-deployment of staff to a different polling station would not have a negative impact elsewhere you should ensure that you give consideration to limiting the amount of contacts each individual makes as far as is possible.
- You will also need to consider the number of polling station inspectors (PSIs) you will need to manage all aspects of the process safely and effectively. For example, you may need more PSIs than usual, particularly if you reduce the number of stations that each PSI is responsible for in order to limit the number of contacts one person needs to make during the day.
- Where circumstances allow you could appoint staff at a polling station based on existing households or 'bubbles'. This approach has been used successfully at local government by-elections in Scotland, where poll staff from the same household have been appointed to work at the same polling station.
- **Determine what additional equipment you will need?**
- In order to ensure that polling stations are safe places for voters, staff and other attendees, you will need to consider what additional equipment you will need. This could include:
 - Tape for floor markings - In order to ensure that social distancing can be maintained at all times, floor markings inside and outside the polling station will help to manage queues, maintain distance between staff members, and between staff and voters, and establish a one way system around the polling station. It may be helpful to discuss the use of floor markings with the building owner in advance.
 - Additional signage – Signs will be needed to remind voters of the need to follow public health guidelines such as social distancing, the wearing of face-coverings and only entering if symptom-free. We plan to make template signs available and will provide more information on these in a future EA Bulletin.
 - Hand sanitiser - Hand sanitiser should be available on desks and at both the entrance and exit to the polling station, with voters encouraged to clean their hands on entry and exit.
 - Perspex screens - Government [guidance](#) states that if steps have been taken in line with [Health and Safety Executive guidance for COVID-19 secure workplaces](#) to create a physical barrier between workers and members of the public, staff behind the barrier will not be required to wear a face covering.
 - Face coverings – the use of face-coverings will be required for all individuals in a polling station (unless they are subject to an exemption or are a member of staff working behind an individual screen) in line with [government regulations](#). All staff should have a face covering available, as while they may not wish to wear it if behind an individual screen, they will need to wear one when moving around the polling station. Whilst the majority of voters will likely

be in possession of their own personal face covering, and will have been encouraged to bring it with them to vote, you should have a stock of face coverings available to provide to those who have not brought their own face covering, and people should be advised to dispose of these face coverings themselves after they have left the polling station.

- Additional pencils - Whilst all voters should be encouraged to bring their own pen or pencil to the polling station, you will need to ensure you have a spare stock of single-use or 'cleaned' pencils available to provide for use where needed.

○ **Set-up and manage polling stations?**

- There are some general principles for the set-up and management of polling stations that you should reflect in your plans and local arrangements:
 - One-way systems should be set-up in polling stations to ensure that social distancing can be maintained; this would be aided by the use of floor markings and additional signage, and hand sanitiser should be made available on entry and exit to the polling station.
 - Floor markers and signs should be used to establish a safe distance between the polling staff, and between polling staff and voters. You could also place markers outside, to support safe queueing to enter the polling station.
 - You will need to have signage in place to inform voters of the requirement to wear a face-covering. Signs should also be in place to remind anyone entering the polling station that they should only do so if well and free of coronavirus symptoms.
 - You will need to consider the appropriate layout of desks and polling booths to help maintain distance between the polling staff, and between polling staff and voters at all times. Hand sanitiser will also need to be provided on all desks.
 - Everyone working with shared documents and papers, including in the polling station, should take great care to only be present if well, avoid touching their faces, and regularly and frequently clean their hands. More detailed guidance on the process of handling ballot papers will be provided in the polling station handbook.
 - Regular cleaning throughout the day of touchpoints, such as doors, polling booths and any writing implements, is recommended by public health authorities. You will also need to consider what, if any, additional cleaning of venues is needed pre- and post-poll in line with your risk assessments and any contractual requirements for each venue.
 - The UK Government have confirmed that there will be no test and trace requirement to record the contact details of those entering a polling station for the purposes of voting, even where the polling station is located in a building where it would usually be required. You should nevertheless still ensure you maintain a clear audit trail of all those who are present in polling stations for the purpose of observing proceedings.

- It will be important to ensure that all signage and safety measures are in place before the poll(s) open. In light of the additional requirements for the safe set-up of polling stations, you should consider the desirability and practicability of setting up polling stations the night before the poll, or whether staff should be instructed to arrive earlier than usual to set up.
- You should ensure that all staff have been fully trained and briefed to understand the requirements for the layout and management of polling stations as part of any polling station staff training and/or written instructions issued in advance of the day. We will be providing further detailed guidance to support the practical set-up and management of polling stations in the updated polling station handbooks, and this will also be reflected in updated template briefing presentations for polling station staff.

How will you...?

ÿ Prepare equipment and sundries safely?

- As outlined in our supplementary guidance on [planning for the 2021 polls](#), you should make an early assessment about the suitability of any venue being used for election activities, including ensuring the venue is well ventilated as per [HSE guidance](#) and able to allow social distancing, and identify any necessary adaptations
- You should manage any of your staff who are preparing equipment and sundries to work in 'cohorts' or 'bubbles' (to limit social interaction as per [HSE guidance on working safely during the coronavirus outbreak](#)) wherever possible. For example, you could allocate different electoral areas and/or separate staff 'bubbles' to different rooms or parts of the room, to reduce the number of staff in each place at any given time.
- Everyone working with shared documents and papers should take great care to only be present if well, avoid touching their faces, and regularly and frequently wash their hands. You will need to provide access to hand washing facilities and have hand sanitiser readily available.

ÿ Manage the pickup / delivery of equipment and sundries?

- You will need to determine how you can safely manage the collection or delivery of materials for polling stations, in order to ensure that social distancing can be maintained and appropriate hygiene measures put in place. For example:
 - Allocating staggered time-slots for staff to pick-up the necessary materials could help to minimise the number of people present at any time
 - Using a range of pick-up points for polling station materials could also help to limit the number of contacts
 - Arranging the delivering of bulky equipment directly to polling stations in advance of polling day may also be helpful in minimising the amount of people needed to attend other venues to collect materials
- If you are delivering equipment directly to polling stations, you will need to ensure any contractors used are able to demonstrate that their arrangements are in line with government and public health guidelines. You should ensure hand sanitiser and face coverings are available for contractors making deliveries.

- You will need to develop a process to enable you to safely retrieve any materials and equipment in the event that polling station staff drop out at short notice, having already collected the materials. For example, agreeing a non-contact handover, taking cleaning materials to wipe down any surfaces that could act as touchpoints and ensuring regular handwashing by anyone making contact with materials.
- You will also need to have a process in place for updating the absent voting lists with any emergency proxy appointments that are granted close to the day of poll. More guidance on this is included in our [supplementary guidance on absent voting](#).