



Department  
for Education



Cabinet Office

11 February 2021

**Use of school buildings for polls on 6 May 2021**

To: Returning Officers and Headteachers of schools in England

Dear colleagues,

The Government has confirmed that the May polls will go ahead as planned, with council, Mayoral and Police and Crime Commissioner elections taking place alongside a number of local by-elections, and referendums in some areas. Many of these polls were delayed from last year. It is important for our democracy that our elections take place even during the pandemic. Right now, the decisions taken by elected officials are more important than ever and voters must be given their say.

In Government we are working across departments and with Public Health England and the electoral sector, including the Electoral Commission, to support Covid-secure elections. This includes providing clear guidance to Returning Officers who have responsibility for the conduct of the elections.

We are sending this letter to Returning Officers and Headteachers this year because we recognise there are particular concerns about the use of schools as polling stations. This year all children have missed vital time at school and the Government is committed to minimising any further disruption to pupils' education. We know that Returning Officers are acutely aware of this and are seeking to avoid using schools as polling stations. We support this approach of avoiding schools where it is practically possible to do so; in particular, we are clear that where schools would be required to close, Returning Officers should look to other available venues first. There may be other venues locally that can be considered, such as places of worship, gymnasiums, or other community or commercial venues. This should be an opportunity to support local businesses and we would very much encourage you to work to find viable alternatives to schools in your local area.

We know that it will not be possible in all cases to avoid use of schools. Where there are no alternative premises, we know that schools and Returning Officers will, as usual, work together to minimise any disruption and keep the school open where that is possible.

To support these efforts, the Government is making an estimated £31 million of additional funding available for local authorities, which can be used in these exceptional circumstances, to pay for alternative venues and find creative solutions. This brings the total of central Government funding for these elections to an estimated £92 million. In the case of Police and Crime Commissioner elections, this is a commitment to meet all reasonable additional costs of the elections as part of the usual funding process with national Government. For the local elections an additional £15 million is being made available to authorities to help them to meet the extra costs of these polls.

Should it be impossible to avoid using a school as a polling station, the additional funding set out above should be used to meet the costs of additional measures to minimise disruption in schools and costs of cleaning, including any cleaning to take place after polls close, so that schools can immediately reopen the following day. The Deputy Chief Medical Officer, Professor Jonathan Van-Tam, and Public Health England advise that the following measures would be broadly proportionate at handover points:

- Ventilate any rooms used via full window and door opening to fresh outside air for at least 1 hour; and
- After ventilation, sanitise all hand touchpoints (e.g. door handles, rails, seats used by polling officers, desks).


This should be possible in this timeframe, and would likely take around 1 hour, after the requisite ventilation time, for a small cleaning team in an average polling station. Broader guidance on cleaning to make your workplace Covid-secure is available from the Health and Safety Executive.

We recognise that the success of polling arrangements are built on local relationships, often developed over years, between Returning Officers and Headteachers and your expert knowledge of the communities that you serve.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank you all for the work you are doing to support young people and our democracy at this very challenging time.



**Rt Hon Nick Gibb MP**  
**Minister of State for School**  
**Standards**



**Lord True CBE**  
**Minister of State for the**  
**Cabinet Office**