

Key considerations for the delivery of the polls: polling stations

Purpose

The coronavirus pandemic is continuing to impact how we live in Great Britain and presents particular challenges for Returning Officers (ROs), Electoral Registration Officers (EROs) and their teams in preparing for and delivering polls. To support you in planning for and delivering polls the Commission is issuing 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 Wales Electoral Practitioners Working Group (WEPWG), the Wales Electoral Coordination Board (WECB) AEA, Welsh Government and the Cabinet Office as well as with Public Health Wales, 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 polls.

It should be read alongside our [core guidance for electoral administrators](https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/i-am-a/electoral-administrator). 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 and delivering polls during the coronavirus pandemic](https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/media/7580). Further detailed guidance on the processes to be followed within polling stations on polling day itself can be found in the polling station handbook, and is also reflected in template polling station staff briefing presentations updated for use at the 2021 polls.

This guidance is a living document in recognition of the changing landscape and ongoing developments in public health advice and government regulations.

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, helping them to have the information they need to plan for how to vote safely. You can manage expectations as to what polling stations will feel like, giving voters an 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.
	+ 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, 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 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 has produced [supplementary guidance for candidates and agents](https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/media/8167) 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.

Managing polling station voting

How will you...?

* **Determine what roles you will need?**
	+ As outlined in our supplementary guidance on [planning and delivering polls during the coronavirus pandemic](https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/media/7580), you should consider carefully what additional roles you may need to be carried out at 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.
		- During the May 2021 polls many local authorities employed staff at 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 individuals 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.
* **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.
	+ 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](https://gov.wales/face-coverings-guidance-measures-be-taken-employers-and-managers-premises) states that if staff are effectively separated from customers by something like a Perspex screen, they are not considered to be in a public area and so the requirement to wear a face covering does not apply. However, if there is more than one member of staff working behind the screen and social distancing cannot be maintained, you would be expected to require the use of face coverings unless there was a good reason not to..
	+ 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](https://gov.wales/face-coverings-guidance-measures-be-taken-employers-and-managers-premises). 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. Detailed guidance on the process of handling ballot papers is 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.
		- In regard to the use of Test, Trace, Protect, Welsh Government have advised that they will continue working with partners to consider any requirements at polling stations. We will update this document when more information is available. Regardless, you should 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 have provided further detailed guidance to support the practical set-up and management of polling stations in polling station handbooks, and template briefing presentations for polling station staff.

How will you...?

* **Prepare equipment and sundries safely?**
* As outlined in our supplementary guidance on [planning and delivering polls during the coronavirus pandemic](https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/media/7580), 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](https://www.hse.gov.uk/coronavirus/equipment-and-machinery/air-conditioning-and-ventilation.htm) and able to allow social distancing, and identify any necessary adaptions
	+ 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](https://www.hse.gov.uk/news/assets/docs/working-safely-guide.pdf)) 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.
* **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 guide on absent voting](https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/media/7688).