



Your Ref: Legal/CC/JG

David Isaac CBE  
Equality and Human Rights Commission  
Fleetbank House  
2-6 Salisbury Square  
London  
EC4Y 8JX

23<sup>rd</sup> April 2018

Dear David,

As the responsible Minister I am writing to you in response to Clare Collier's letter of 11 April regarding the voter identification (ID) pilot scheme running in five local authority elections on 3 May this year. I welcome the opportunity to discuss the importance of promoting equality and diversity and highlight the work we continue to do around improving accessibility to elections and securing our democratic processes.

I know you will fully agree that the British public deserves to have confidence in our democracy. There is clearly the potential for electoral fraud in the systems we have. Electoral fraud is not a victimless crime. The impact of electoral fraud on voters can be significant and takes away their right to vote as they want – whether through intimidation, bribery or by impersonating someone and casting their vote. In line with our manifesto commitment, we therefore remain committed to legislating that a form of identification must be presented before voting, reforming postal voting and improving other aspects of the elections process to ensure that our elections are fit for the future.

The Electoral Commission welcomes the voter ID pilots as a positive first step towards implementing its 2014 recommendation that an accessible, proportionate voter identification scheme should be introduced in Great Britain. Sir Eric Pickles clearly identified tackling the capacity for electoral fraud as a part of wider improvement to the integrity of elections and democracy. We already ask that people prove who they are in order to collect a parcel from the post office or rent a car and we believe it is right to take a more robust approach to protect the integrity of the democratic process. In addition, voter ID is a familiar and successful part of voting around the world, in places such as Northern Ireland, Canada and others.

This belongs in the context where Individual Electoral Registration (IER) was introduced, with cross-party support, with the aim of reducing electoral fraud and has already made voter registration more secure. It has revolutionised electoral registration. Under the old system a 'head of household' could register any number of other people without having to prove they existed. That is no longer acceptable. Now each individual has to apply individually and provide a date of birth and national insurance number which are then verified against Government records to check the applicant is who they say they are. We have received over 32 million applications to register under IER and it has brought us into line with every other serious democracy in the world. IER and voter ID are important steps to ensuring the public can have confidence in the systems that underpin our democracy. The electoral register used for the 2017 General Election was the largest ever, with 46.9 million people registered.

The powers to make the pilot scheme orders are contained in section 10 of the Representation of the People Act 2000 which enable changes to be made to the rules regarding the conduct of elections. The Local Authorities (Mayoral Elections) (England and Wales) (Amendment) Regulations 2017 and the Combined Authorities (Mayoral Elections) (Amendment) Order 2017 were both made to enable the piloting scheme powers to be extended to mayoral elections and combined authority elections. These were debated in Parliament and a resolution passed in both Houses.

The voter ID pilot schemes are taking place in Bromley, Gosport, Swindon, Watford and Woking. Peterborough will also pilot voter ID for proxy voters. All local authorities have volunteered to take part in the pilots. The pilot authorities have each reflected their preference for the form and combination of ID as they best understand the needs of their electors. I have taken the opportunity to speak to each local authority personally about the design of their pilot and the methods they have applied to ensure that their electors are aware of voter ID and that each elector's needs are understood. Returning Officers have assured me that, as is their responsibility for every poll, a key objective for their successful delivery of voter ID has been to ensure its reach into every community and to every voter. As I would expect each local authority was able to talk about the strength of their relationships with the local groups whose needs they consider when implementing any change.

No-one will need to purchase identification documents to be able to vote in the pilots scheduled for May 2018 and the valid identification will not be limited to a passport or driving licence. The pilots are testing a broad range of photographic and non photographic ID, including poll cards. Voters can use a wide variety of ID, from marriage certificates and passports to bus passes depending on where they live. If voters don't have the required ID local authorities are providing alternative or replacement methods. For example, voters in Gosport who state that they do not have any of the forms of photographic or non photographic ID required will be issued with an electoral identity letter free of charge by the Returning Officer. You can find more information about each pilot and the types of ID being piloted on [gov.uk](http://gov.uk).

The Cabinet Office has worked with the local authorities' communications and electoral services teams to develop public awareness campaigns. Each local authority has drawn on local audience insight to develop comprehensive plans across digital, press, advertising and stakeholder engagement. The campaigns have been developed with advice from the Government Communications Service, Behavioural Insights Team and the Association of Electoral Administrators.

You raise a question about the impact on voters with protected characteristics such as transgender people or those with disabilities. I am satisfied that these have been specifically raised and considered from early in the development of the pilots. Each local authority has completed an equality impact assessment, which has been subject to expert and detailed scrutiny from Cabinet Office, the Electoral Commission and the Association of Electoral Administrators. The authorities are building on their expertise and local knowledge and engaging with local groups to take into account the needs of all of their respective electorates.

The Electoral Commission is responsible for carrying out an independent, statutory evaluation of the pilot schemes and will publish its findings in the summer of 2018.

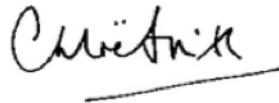
More broadly, it is worth outlining here the many other steps that the Government is taking to improve accessibility of electoral and registration processes. The Government is committed to improving the accessibility of elections for disabled people and is currently in the process of analysing the responses to its Call for Evidence, which will enhance understanding of the barriers disabled people face in registering to vote and voting, and how these can be

addressed. A report of key findings and recommendations will be produced in partnership with the Cabinet Office chaired Accessibility of Elections Working Group, which provides expert opinion and advice to the Government on how future elections can be made more accessible from leading charities, NHS clinical specialists and key electoral stakeholders. In addition, representatives from RNIB and MenCap have met with the local government officials organising and running the voter ID pilots and have given advice on issues that could arise and how to address these.

We have also continued to improve our electoral registration process to make it as accessible as possible to ensure that every voice counts. As part of this we have recently legislated to improve the system of anonymous registration to make it more accessible for survivors of domestic abuse. The changes make it easier for an estimated 12,000 survivors of domestic abuse living in refuges to register to vote anonymously as well as those living elsewhere. Whilst the changes are focussed on survivors of domestic abuse, others would also benefit from the improved accessibility of the scheme.

I hope you find this information helpful. We would be pleased to host you at Cabinet Office to meet with senior officials and would be pleased to work with the EHRC on the future of our democratic processes.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Chloe Smith', with a horizontal line underneath it.

**CHLOE SMITH MP**