



Chloe Smith MP  
Minister of State for the Constitution and Devolution  
Cabinet Office 70 Whitehall London SW1A 2AS

Our ref: MC2021/06778

25 March 2021

Dear Mr Stanyon,

As set out in the Government's Delivery Plan for the polls due to be held on 6 May, the Government is continuing to put in place measures to support the electoral sector to deliver these polls successfully and securely.

I have today laid before Parliament the indemnity the Government is providing to Returning Officers for the local elections and referendums. I have also provided a separate statement regarding the progress being made to prepare for the polls and to update Parliament on the expectations for the timing of the count and announcement of results.

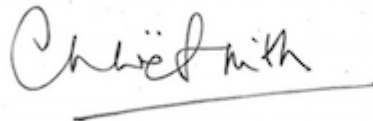
As I have discussed with you and many of your members before, I am aware that many Returning Officers are considering carefully how they can conduct the verification and count, which have historically often been large and complex events, in a COVID-secure way. The Government has been working with the Electoral Commission to update their [guidance on the verification and count process](#) in the context of the pandemic, in line with prevailing COVID restrictions. The announcement of results will, as usual, be made as soon as is practicable after the close of the polls. However, it is important to be clear to everyone involved that due to the additional measures in place to make the counts COVID-secure, it may be the case that each stage of the count will take longer than in previous years.

In order to further support the sector with delivering these elections, I have today also published further [information on the May 2021 polls](#), designed to answer some of the frequently arising questions and issues that have been raised with me and my officials. Where we can usefully provide that clarity at a national level, we are keen to do so in order to support effective decision-making locally; I know, for example, that uncertainty has arisen in some areas following recent media reporting of a requirement to 'quarantine' ballot boxes or papers ahead of a count. Let me reassure you that **advice from Public Health England, as set out in this document, is there is no need to quarantine ballot papers or postal**

**votes**, and polling staff are advised to use hand sanitiser and wash hands regularly after handling ballot papers, postal votes and ballot boxes. This guidance document, along with the Government's guidance on [COVID-secure campaigning](#), will continue to be updated as necessary in the lead up to the May polls.

I would like to once again express my gratitude for the tireless efforts and exceptional dedication of all those involved in the delivery of these polls in such exceptional circumstances. I have every confidence in the ability of the Returning Officers and their teams to run these polls in a way that meets the highest standards of both public safety and democratic integrity. The Government remains resolute in its ongoing commitment to supporting the sector, to ensure that democracy is not cancelled due to COVID-19.

**Yours ever,**

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Chloe Smith". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a horizontal line.

**Chloe Smith MP**  
**Minister of State for the Constitution and Devolution**