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Dear Head Teacher

I am writing to you regarding the letter received by all Headteachers and Returning Officers on Friday 11 February, concerning the use of schools as polling stations.

Over the years schools and the Elections Office have developed a good working relationship, with schools being used as polling stations to enable the democratic process to run smoothly, with minimal disruption to children's education.

We are especially grateful to the significant proportion of schools who promptly agreed to allow us to use their site as a polling station in May 2021, following confirmation that the election would go ahead.

We appreciate that these last 12 months have been very challenging and disruptive for everyone, and we wish to do as little as possible which will cause further disruption.

Staff are already hard at work putting plans into place to make the agreed venues as covid safe as possible, for electors, polling staff, and others who will be on site during the day.

Unfortunately, at this late stage in the elections process, it will not be possible to change the venues we have in place as polling stations especially where agreement had already been reached. However, we are happy to work with schools in order to minimise disruption.

As acknowledged by the Department for Education and the Cabinet Office it is not always possible for Returning Officers to avoid using schools as polling stations.

Schools are ideal places to use as polling stations as they are usually well-known locations within the local community and meet all accessibility requirements, which private premises may not. They are also a constant presence within the area, whereas private premises are subject to closure or change of usage rendering them inaccessible for the purposes of voting.

In a number of cases, schools are the only suitable polling station locations within a local area. Current and potential polling stations venues in each electoral area are under almost constant review, and schools are only used where there really is no other suitable alternative.

As such, the availability of suitable venues for polling stations is already limited in many areas. This is understandably heightened this year due to the block-booking of many community and commercial venues as coronavirus testing or vaccination centres.

Although additional funding has potentially been made available, it does not necessarily mean we will be able to source an alternative venue at this late stage.

Unfortunately, the letter from the DfE does not take into account that our polling stations have to be finalised within the next two weeks due to the need to send out our poll cards advising electors where they need to cast their vote. The timing of the letter has meant that we do not have the ability to source new venues, especially as those venues have to be within a specific geographical location.

As the Government has highlighted, the law around schools' obligations to provide the Returning Officer with a room within a school to use as a polling station, is unchanged. Where a room can be provided there is no requirement for the school to close although the school maintains that discretion if they feel they have no alternative.

We are happy to work with the school to reach an agreement over how the school premises can be best utilised on the day, with as minimum disruption as possible. However at this late stage, we cannot move away from the use of schools as polling station venues without significantly risking the running of the election.

I do appreciate your continued support in these very challenging times.

Yours sincerely



Robert Connelly
Returning Officer for Birmingham City Council