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23 August 2021

Dear Mr Colquhoun,

Thank you for your letter of 19 July, regarding the introduction of voter identification in the Elections Bill, and the accessibility of the voting process for blind and partially sighted people. The Government firmly believes that it is important that everyone who is eligible can participate in our democratic process.

In its manifesto for the 2019 election, The Government committed to introduce this measure to protect the integrity of our democracy. Everyone who is eligible to vote will still have the opportunity to do so. Any eligible voter who does not have one of the forms of required photographic identification will be able to apply for a free Voter Card from their local authority. We take your point that this will be an additional step for some people and that it needs to be as easy as possible. We are specifically examining the option for the application process to look at both paper-based and digital processes and will have your steer in mind.

In relation to your research on appetite to engage, it will be helpful to understand what lies behind the responses and it may be that there are concerns or assumptions about what would be required that we can address or dispel. I was pleased to be able to discuss some of these issues with your colleague, Mike Bell, at a recent roundtable we held with organisations representing people with disabilities, and I would be very keen to engage further with you to make sure that we get these changes right.

We will, of course, continue to involve charities and civil society organisations alongside the Electoral Commission and local authorities to make sure that reforms, including the provision of a Voter Card, are delivered in a way that is inclusive for all voters. This Government takes its Public Sector Equality Duty extremely seriously and has taken due regard to this duty throughout the planning for implementation.

You have also mentioned the RNIB's Turned Out report on the experience of blind and partially sighted voters on 6 May. We welcome reports which set out relevant issues, such as this, and will carefully consider the points raised in the report. It is clear from some of the experiences detailed in the report that we have further to go to ensure everyone is confident in their voting experience, and that is something I hope we can do collectively.

We were pleased to be able to carry out testing of accessible voting solutions with the RNIB and Broadland District Council at the recent elections in May and we are currently considering the readouts from that and next steps for how blind and partially sighted voters can be best supported. I am happy to assure you that we are considering the issues and are very much aiming to further enhance opportunities for blind and partially sighted people to engage, as you suggest we should.

To support changes more widely and to achieve this the Government has introduced a number of measures to support the accessibility of elections in the recently introduced Elections Bill - such as removing restrictions on who can act as a companion to support voters with disabilities to cast their vote and placing, for the first time in electoral law, a broader requirement for Returning Officers to consider the needs of disabled voters when providing equipment for polling stations. This will be supported by guidance from the Electoral Commission, produced in partnership with the Government-chaired Accessibility of Elections Working Group. That is a group that we would welcome your involvement with if you are able to contribute to it as either a regular or occasional attendee.

Thank you again for your letter. I hope the above response reassures you of the Government's continuing commitment to ensuring elections are accessible for all those eligible to vote.

**Yours ever,**

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

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