

Scottish General Election (Coronavirus) Bill

Scottish Parliament: Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee

November 2020

The Scottish General Election (Coronavirus) Bill as introduced allows arrangements to be put in place for the Scottish general election in response to Covid-19.

What are your views on the power to allow Ministers acting by regulations to permit physical polling to take place over multiple days?

Whilst Age Scotland understands and supports the intention behind this power to allow for physical distancing measures to be followed, we are concerned by the following subsection of the Bill:

Subsection (4) provides that the regulations may specify particular days or times when certain descriptions or categories of persons eligible to vote in person may do so. This would, for example, allow provision to be made requiring voters of a particular age, or in a particular area, who do intend to exercise their right vote, to do so only on specified days or at specified times.

Introducing measures that will restrict people voting on certain days or times by age groups will likely cause confusion and would, therefore, require clear and inclusive communication in advance. This would be essential to ensure that no one is prevented from voting and should be done using a variety of methods that don't rely on online information and advice only.

We worry that requirements for age groups to vote at a certain time or day may negatively impact unpaid carers who would normally support an older person to vote and who may not be able to vote at the same time. We are also concerned that grouping potentially vulnerable people together at one time, and in one place, may be an off-putting idea for many older voters. If this measure is deemed necessary, it is essential that older people are given priority to vote first.

Age Scotland has received many phone calls and emails in recent months from older people who feel they are no longer valued by society and are made to feel like a burden. We would be very concerned of the potential impact of restricting the time when an older person could vote in terms of their mental health and wellbeing, especially if this change is made without a substantial information campaign to accompany it.

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Age Scotland is a registered charity (#SC010100), and company limited by guarantee (#153343), in Scotland at the above address.

Do you agree with the deadline for applications to vote by post being moved forward to 6 April 2021?

Age Scotland understands the need to process postal applications but we worry that changing the deadline may have a negative impact on older people and unpaid carers who may want to vote by post, in particular those who would be doing so for the first time. If the anticipated large volume of registrations for postal votes is expected to be difficult to manage, recruiting additional staff to process registrations would lessen the risk of people missing the deadline to register and then disenfranchising themselves.

If, however, a shortened deadline is necessary, we reiterate again the importance of clearly communicating these changes. This cannot be digital by default, but must include traditional forms of communication in order to be as inclusive and accessible as possible considering that only 66% of adults over 60 use the internet.¹ Information on these changes should also be produced in different formats, such as easy read, audio, braille, and a variety of different languages.

Are there any other matters that you would like to comment on in relation to the Bill?

Age Scotland would like to stress again the need for inclusive communication regarding any changes as part of the measures needed due to the current COVID-19 pandemic and call for a full equality impact assessment to be carried out for this Bill.

We also welcome the provision in the Bill for emergency proxies. This can allow those who are forced to self-isolate on polling day to safely exercise their democratic right.

While the issue is not addressed in the Bill, we believe it is important to note that polling station staff often fall into the older age group. This could lead to difficulties in delivering the election if high numbers of older polling staff do not volunteer due to health concerns. It is essential that measures to mitigate this, such as the provision of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), be considered in further detail.

¹ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scottish-household-survey-2019-key-findings/pages/9/>

Want to find out more?

As Scotland's national charity supporting people over the age of 50, Age Scotland works to improve older people's lives and promote their rights and interests. We aim to help people love later life, whatever their circumstances. We want Scotland to be the best place in the world to grow older.

Our Policy, Communications and Campaigns team research, analyse and comment on a wide range of public policy issues affecting older people in Scotland.

Further information

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