Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO ELECTORAL COMMISSION REPORTS ON THE 2024 ELECTIONS

The UK Government's response to the reports of the Electoral Commission on the 2 May 2024 Local, Police and Crime Commissioner and Mayoral elections in England and Wales, and on the 4 July 2024 UK Parliamentary general election.

Foreword

I am pleased to publish the Government's response to the Electoral Commission's reports on the polls of 2 May 2024 and the UK Parliamentary general election. With consecutive local and UK Parliamentary elections in 2024, against the backdrop of a complex series of reforms to electoral law and Parliamentary boundary changes for many areas, these were a challenging set of polls to deliver. I and all my colleagues remain ever grateful to returning officers, electoral registration officers and their teams for their ongoing hard work and dedication to the successful delivery of our democracy.

The UK's democratic systems and institutions are strong and are rightly held the world over as an example of democracy. However, undermining of public trust in politics has led to a crisis of confidence in our political system. This Government is committed to transforming the public's relationship with and trust in our politics, demonstrating through our actions that Government is here to put the interests of the country first. Through the cleaning up of politics to ensure the highest standards of integrity and honesty, through further devolution of power to communities, through ensuring respect and collaboration across the different governments – and levels of government – that make up the United Kingdom, and through upholding the integrity of our elections, we are determined to show people that we are the government of public service.

This current lack of trust in politics is evident through the number of eligible citizens still not registered to vote, and in falling turnout figures over recent elections. Evolving security risks, ever-increasing levels of intimidation and harassment, and concerns around foreign interference all contribute to this undermining of trust.

As set out in our manifesto, this Government is committed to strengthening our democracy and encouraging full participation in our elections. That all eligible electors have a voice is an essential aspect of democracy, and this Government is

committed to increasing participation in our elections to ensure a wider range of voices are properly heard and people's views are fairly represented. We will work closely with the Electoral Commission and stakeholders across the sector to deliver upon our priorities to improve registration, extend voting rights for all UK elections to 16- and 17-year-olds, ensure we have appropriate voter ID rules, and strengthen the political finance framework.

Of equal importance is ensuring the safety of those participating in democracy. Thoughtful and respectful debate underpins our politics. We come from a multitude of diverse backgrounds and viewpoints, and values are often sincerely held and passionately argued, but where healthy argument spills over into harassment, intimidation and abuse it is simply unacceptable. We must also recognise the absolute horror and tragedy when this behaviour escalates to result in the murder of Members of Parliament, most recently Sir David Amess in 2021 and Jo Cox in 2016. We will work with the Electoral Commission, the Police, security services and other partners to understand and take concrete action to tackle these behaviours, to protect those standing and working in our elections, and to ensure the safety of our elected members.

Alongside delivery of these important reforms, we must also examine and review our current processes and be prepared to make changes where they are necessary. As announced in an open letter to the electoral sector in October 2024, the Government has launched a strategic review of electoral registration and conduct in response to the administrative challenges we know are faced by the electoral sector. We are working in partnership with the sector to identify the biggest challenges and pain-points in our current processes, some of which are drawn out in the Commission's reports, and to develop practical and pragmatic approaches to address them.

In parallel to this response to the Electoral Commission's reports, I am also pleased to publish the findings of an independent, nationally representative public opinion survey related to voting in the UK, undertaken by Ipsos. Further work will follow, with this research contributing, alongside other evidence, to the Government's evaluation of the impact and implementation of the Elections Act 2022 at the UK Parliamentary general election due to be published in Spring 2025. We will act as necessary on the outcomes of this evaluation.

As these several strands of work develop over the coming months, the Government will work closely with the Electoral Commission and colleagues from across the sector to further understand and assess the impact of recent and future reforms. I am pleased to announce that we will be bringing all this work together into an overall Government Strategy for Elections, to be published later this year, setting out the Government's approach to elections and electoral reform for this Parliament.

We are the custodians of an internationally renowned democracy that has endured and evolved over hundreds of years; we will protect our democracy, fix its foundations, and ensure it continues to grow to become stronger, more inclusive and more vibrant than ever before.

Rushanara Ali MP

Introduction

The Government is grateful to the Electoral Commission for its report on the July 2024 UK Parliamentary general election and the May 2024 elections, and for its report on voter identification at the UK Parliamentary general election. There are many positives to note from their findings, especially that the elections which took place last year, both in May and in July, were well run, with consistently high levels of satisfaction with the processes of registration and voting.

Of particular note is that 83% of the public report a high confidence in the polls and 87% say they believed that the polls were free from fraud and abuse. This is a marked increase since 2019 and is testament to the efforts from across the electoral community in the intervening period. Also of note are the high proportion of electors who were able to vote at the General Election using their preferred method, and the high levels of awareness across Great Britain of the need to bring identification when voting in person at a polling station. This Government is committed to reviewing and improving voter ID to ensure accessibility for legitimate voters, but we are pleased to see high levels of awareness of the requirement and this will feed into our decisions on the proposals we will bring forward on the policy.

The Electoral Commission's findings also highlight, however, a number of challenges faced by electors and electoral practitioners which cannot be overlooked. For example, there is clearly more to be done to make it easier for disabled people to access the support to which they are entitled in order to be able to vote. Action is also required to tackle the unacceptable intimidatory and abusive behaviour some candidates face when standing for public office, to reduce risk to delivery through improved electoral processes, and to widen participation in our democracy.

This Government has a broad and bold ambition to fix the foundations and bring stability for everyone concerned about the way in which our elections are delivered, thereby protecting and enhancing our precious democracy well into the future. We welcome the Electoral Commission's analysis and have carefully considered their findings. Within this response we seek to address each recommendation, including those made in their report on voter identification at the UK Parliamentary general election published in September 2024. Where possible, we have grouped recommendations, in order that similar themes are discussed together.

Voter Identification

Voter Authority Certificates, List of Accepted Identifications and Alternative Options*
*Recommendations taken from EC Report: *Voter ID at the 2024 UK general election*, published September 2024

Recommendation 1: Improve take-up of the Voter Authority Certificate

The UK Government should undertake and publish a review of the design, implementation and use of the Voter Authority Certificate, in order to encourage greater take-up and usage by people who don't have any other form of accepted ID.

This review should consider:

- *Whether the deadline for Voter Authority Certificate applications could be moved closer to polling day, to improve availability and accessibility for voters who do not have any other form of accepted ID. The current application deadline of six working days before polling day is significantly earlier than the original policy intention.*
- *Whether Voter Authority Certificates could be issued digitally, and whether that could reduce reliance on physical printing and postal processes and allow for quicker issuing to voters. The Government should learn from the Proof of Age Standards Scheme (PASS) that now issues digital proof of age scheme cards.*

The review should also take into account any learnings from the implementation and take-up of the Northern Ireland Electoral Identity Card.

Electoral Registration Officers and their staff must still be able to process applications and issue Voter Authority Certificates to voters in time for them to be able to vote, alongside other essential duties taking place in the days before polling day. Any potential changes to application deadlines must therefore take into account the operational impact and workability of a later deadline. Planning for changes must also consider the level of dependency on printers and postal services to deliver certificates to voters.

Recommendation 2: Review the list of accepted ID

The UK Government should undertake and publish a review of the current list of accepted forms of ID, to identify any additional documents that could be included to improve accessibility for voters.

This should include a particular focus on forms of ID that would support people who are least likely to have documents on the current list, including people from a lower social grade (C2DE), disabled people, and those who are unemployed. For example, travel passes that have sufficiently secure application processes such as the Jobcentre Plus Travel Discount Card.

The Government should consider whether the security criteria for application and issuing processes are appropriate and proportionate when assessing whether to add new documents to the list. For example, the 18+ Student Oyster photocard.

Any changes to the list of accepted forms of ID should be confirmed in legislation at least six months before polling day, in time for details to be included in public awareness materials and activities, and in guidance for polling station staff ahead of polling day for any scheduled elections.

We will work with the Government to ensure that voter ID can be delivered in a way that is accessible, workable and secure.

Recommendation 3: Provide options for voters who do not have or cannot access any form of accepted ID

The UK Government should enable registered voters who do have accepted ID to make an attestation at their polling station on behalf of someone who does not have any form of accepted ID (also referred to as 'vouching').

The voter ID requirement currently assumes that people either have an accepted form of ID or are sufficiently aware and motivated to apply for a Voter Authority Certificate by the deadline. This means that voting is effectively not accessible for anyone without ID who misses the application deadline, becomes aware of the requirement and availability of the Voter Authority Certificate close to polling day, or only decides they want to vote on polling day (or close to polling day).

In the limited and exceptional circumstances where a voter cannot access any other form of accepted ID, allowing attestation would still provide a safeguard by requiring a formal link to a named elector who has had their own identity verified. Further options for attestation of a voter's identity might also be feasible, including by trusted organisations such as local authorities.

As we have highlighted previously, attestations are already a legitimate option for verifying identity in other parts of the electoral process, for example in applications to register to vote and applications for Voter Authority Certificates. Attestations in these circumstances are not subject to any further assurance processes, and the Government should consider whether a different standard remains appropriate for proving identity at the polling station.

Attestation is used in federal elections in Canada as a way to improve the accessibility of their voter ID requirement for particular groups who are less likely to have access to the required proof of ID.

The additional administrative burden of attestation (as compared to presenting another form of accepted ID) would be limited to the time required for the voter and the attestor to complete a declaration form.

Response:

The Government is committed to ensuring everyone who is eligible to vote is able and supported to do so, whilst also ensuring the security of our electoral system. We are also committed to closing the huge democratic gap that exists in our country, in which millions of people do not vote and are not registered to vote.

It is unacceptable when legitimate voters are prevented or discouraged from voting. This is why this Government is committed to reviewing and improving the voter ID rules. We note the finding that 0.08% of voters at the polling station in the UK Parliamentary general election were unable to vote due to not presenting accepted

ID. In absolute numbers, this equates to around 16,000 voters – or one in 1,200 - who were unable to vote. Of even more concern is the wider impact of the voter ID policy, with 4% of non-voters surveyed citing voter ID as one of the reasons they did not turn out to vote. This barrier must be addressed, and so this Government is committed to reviewing and, where necessary, making changes to the voter identification policy to address any aspects that prevent or discourage legitimate electors from voting.

In line with our manifesto commitments, we are presently undertaking a thorough review both of the list of identifications currently accepted in polling stations and of the wider voter ID policy, in order to consider if any changes or additions to the list would be appropriate or if any changes to the wider policy would be beneficial. As part of this process, we will assess the documents that the Commission has suggested for consideration in their report, for example the Jobcentre Plus Travel Discount Card.

Whilst this review continues, we have already made legislation to add the HM Armed Forces Veteran Card to the list, fulfilling a clear manifesto commitment and bringing parity between veterans and serving personnel with the identification accepted in polling stations. This expansion to the list will come into force for the May 2025 polls. We would like to provide practitioners with the assurances that this will be the only change made to the rules ahead of the May polls; we understand the need for appropriate time to be allowed where possible for electors and electoral teams to adjust to changes being made before new rules apply to relevant polls.

The Commission's comments and suggestions on potential changes to the Voter Authority Certificate (VAC) policy are noted. The VAC is an essential aspect of the voter identification policy, ensuring that all electors have access to an accepted form of identification, free of charge. We welcome all suggestions and feedback on how to improve this important part of the voter ID policy and will review the aspects of the VAC that the Commission have recommended.

We note the Commission's suggestion regarding the shortening of the VAC application deadline and appreciate that a deadline closer to polling day may provide greater access to the VAC for electors, thereby potentially reducing the number of legitimate voters prevented from voting due to lack of accepted ID. As the Commission has pointed out, this requires a balance between expanding access to VAC and the workability of the policy. We must be confident that electoral administrators and suppliers have sufficient time to process VAC applications and ensure electors receive them in time for polling day.

We also note the Commission's suggestion to explore the possibility of issuing VACs in a digital format. Digital IDs are becoming increasingly common, and a digital VAC could provide benefits, particularly in terms of convenience for the elector. There would be several challenges to overcome, such as ensuring a digital VAC was suitably secure as well as developing the necessary infrastructure to distribute them. We are exploring digital versions of identification documents in general as part of our review of the voter ID policy, and will, alongside this, consider the possibility of introducing digital VACs. If digital VACs prove to be a feasible option, this may further support consideration of a change in application deadline, and we will work

with the sector to explore this possibility if it arises. We will provide an update on this work in due course. This exploration is being carried out in parallel to the Government's wider ambition to modernise and improve ways for people to interact with government digitally. This includes exploring the role of digital verification services certified against government standards, alongside the GOV.UK wallet. As announced in January, the GOV.UK wallet will allow users to securely store government-issued documents on their phone, should they choose to, simplifying access to and use of documents such as digital IDs. The Veteran Card and digital driver's licence will be the first such documents to be available via GOV.UK wallet and, as above, we are considering the possibility of using of digital versions of identification documents in the polling station as part of our review of voter ID.

The Commission raises the idea of allowing attestation in the polling station for voters who are unable to produce a form of accepted ID, sometimes also referred to as vouching. This is a process by which instead of a voter showing ID, another individual shows their ID and confirms the identity of the voter. There are potential advantages to such a system – it could support the small minority of electors who did not have ID and had not applied for a VAC, as well as those who may have lost their ID in the lead up to the election (though we do note the latter group would also have access to an emergency proxy vote to allow them to vote). We will consider the merits of and possible approaches to implementing such a system.

Conclusions from the Government's review of the voter identification policy, including outcomes of the above considerations, will be brought out in the Government's Strategy for Elections, to be published later this year.

Barriers to Voting

Accessibility Measures

Recommendation 1: Awareness of the accessibility support available at the polling station should be increased

More can be done to improve awareness of the support available for voters in polling stations.

Online and offline information should explain the support available to voters. This includes making clear what support voters can expect in polling stations, and how they can request additional equipment or support.

This information should be provided on poll cards and local authority websites in a timely manner in advance of the election. It should also be provided to voters in polling stations. We will look at whether our guidance for Returning Officers needs to be more specific or clearer about how to provide this information.

We will also look at whether the Election Information tool we run with Democracy Club could be used to provide information for voters about the support they can access at their own local polling station.

We will continue to raise awareness among voters. This includes working with the UK's governments, local authorities, charity and civil society organisations. We will also work with local and national media to get the word out about the support available. We will identify and share examples of good practice and relevant learning.

The Scottish and Welsh governments are intending to introduce new legislation so more support is provided at devolved elections in Scotland and Wales. We will work with officials, administrators and civil society organisations to support them to make sure those changes work for voters.

Response:

The Government is firmly committed to supporting disabled people to vote via whichever method they choose. We also recognise the importance of all citizens having a good understanding of elections, the electoral process, and how to participate in our democracy. Improving public knowledge about elections will help to improve participation in them.

We recognise the work already undertaken by Returning Officers to support disabled people to vote in polling stations and the proactive provision of equipment in this regard is encouraging. We also note the positive feedback on the usefulness of the Electoral Commission's guidance and on the training to support staff in delivering the accessibility requirements, with 84% of administrators reporting finding the guidance useful or very useful, and most polling station staff feeling well trained and confident in assisting disabled voters.

Despite the positive findings outlined above, the experiences of disabled people at polling stations show there is still room for improvement. The Government is especially clear that more should be done to ensure disabled people are aware of the support available to them, and how to request and access it. We will therefore continue to work with the Electoral Commission, disabled peoples' organisations and Returning Officers and their teams to consider what support and equipment is provided and the best approaches to ensuring awareness of this support amongst disabled people. We are, for example, working closely with councils who went beyond making available the recommended minimum list of equipment to provide additional or bespoke support for disabled voters to understand how they approached the requirement and what engagement they did with their local community to develop their strategy. We will be looking to share the experiences and examples of good practice from these councils to support the wider electoral community.

We recognise the leading role of the Electoral Commission and Returning Officers in this space. The Government's Accessibility of Elections Working Group, which brings together disability groups, electoral practitioners, the Electoral Commission, and government officials to consider policy, legislation, guidance, and communications,

continues to support this work and provides a useful forum for the discussion of the experiences of disabled voters in all aspects of elections. The Government intends to use the Group to facilitate further sharing of experiences and good practice from the UK Parliamentary general election and to collaborate on developing and realising ideas for improving future awareness of the support available.

We keep the content of forms and prescribed content under review and will continue to work with representative bodies, the Electoral Commission and those delivering elections and their suppliers on how improvements can be made once the Commission has reviewed its guidance for Returning Officers.

Delays to postal voting

Recommendation 2: Postal voting systems should be reformed to improve the service for voters and strengthen resilience

Postal voting systems did not work well enough for some voters this year. This meant that they did not receive their postal votes in time to complete and return them before polling day.

In a limited number of areas, this was because of errors or problems with suppliers. In other cases, voters did not understand when they should expect to receive their postal votes. This meant that they were not able to choose a different way of voting that would better suit their circumstances.

The system of absent voting (including postal voting and voting by proxy) should be reformed to improve the service for voters and strengthen resilience for future elections.

Key areas for potential reform and improvement include:

- *Improving the information that is given to voters before and after they apply to vote by post – so that they understand when they should expect to receive their postal vote, and can decide if they need to choose a different way of voting*
- *Considering whether the current deadline for postal vote applications allows enough time to process applications and issue postal votes so that voters can complete and return them before polling day*
- *More flexible rules for reissuing postal votes to voters who have not received theirs, so that they can be sent out sooner than the current deadline of four days before polling day*
- *Allowing postal voters to cancel their postal vote or appoint a proxy to vote on their behalf instead, if they have not received their postal vote in time to complete and return it before polling day*
- *Exploring whether other forms of voting before polling day could give voters better alternatives to postal or proxy voting – this could include early voting or other forms of flexible voting*

- *Considering whether the funding available to pay for postal votes to be printed and issued is enough to meet increasing demand, and improving the contractual and supplier base to provide the level of service that voters expect.*

These reforms may need changes to legislation or funding. The UK's governments and others across the electoral sector should develop solutions. Drawing on this evidence base, we will work to identify effective solutions and ensure any changes improve accessibility, are workable in practice, and are clearly communicated to voters, campaigners, and electoral administrators.

Response:

Any instance of eligible people being unable to vote is unacceptable and this government is determined to act to ensure all legitimate voters are able and supported to cast their vote, whether that is at the polling station or via postal or proxy vote. The Government acknowledges there are aspects of the system for voting by post and by proxy that warrant review and recognises the Commission's findings in relation to postal voting.

We are pleased to see that many postal voters were able to return their ballot without any issues at the General Election, and the majority of people who voted by post were satisfied with the method. However, aligning with anecdotal feedback we have heard from other sources, the Commission has highlighted that a number were not able to complete and return their postal votes ahead of polling day, with their report drawing out many of the factors contributing to this finding. The Government also acknowledges the Commission's finding that the timing of the 2024 General Election – during the school holidays in Scotland and Northern Ireland – likely contributed to the volume of postal votes applied for, thereby exacerbating problems with capacity in Scotland.

Localised issues did emerge around the printing and delivery of postal votes at the UK Parliamentary general election. Close working between the Government, the Electoral Commission, local authorities, print suppliers and the Royal Mail throughout the election period allowed issues to be identified and resolved as they arose, and we will continue to do this for future polls should it prove necessary. We would much prefer that it does not, and that changes can be brought forward which would resolve existing issues and preclude them arising in the future.

The Government is currently undertaking a strategic review of electoral registration and conduct processes, working in partnership with the electoral sector to look in detail at the existing rules and procedures in an effort to tackle challenges faced in the administration of elections. When looking at the current rules and processes, we must ensure accessibility of the postal voting system is properly balanced against the need to ensure the security of the process is robust and that the opportunity for postal vote fraud continues to be minimised.

Several of the recommendations made by the Commission with regards the system of postal voting are being considered as part of this review, including exploration of

the benefits of moving the statutory deadline for applications for postal votes, examination of the rules around the cancellation and reissue of postal votes, and looking at how the information provided to electors on postal voting and associated timescales could be improved. We will also continue to work with all suppliers, including print suppliers and the Royal Mail, to support the timely and quality service required by administrators.

We will communicate the outcomes of this review, and any solutions which are being taken forward to ensure the postal voting system is fit for purpose in future elections, as part of our overall Government Strategy for Elections, to be published later this year.

Overseas Electors

Recommendation 3: Overseas voters need better systems to ensure their votes can be counted

The options for voting by British and eligible Irish citizens overseas do not work well enough. There is not enough time for many overseas voters to receive and return a postal vote in time to be counted. Some overseas voters do not know anyone in the UK that they can appoint as a proxy to vote on their behalf instead of relying on postal voting.

The systems of voting for overseas voters should be reformed to improve the service so that their votes can be counted. The UK can learn from the experiences of other countries that provide different ways of supporting their citizens overseas to vote in elections, including Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States.

Key areas for potential reform and improvement include:

- *Considering whether the current deadline for registering as an overseas voter allows enough time to process applications and issue postal votes for overseas voters to complete and return them before polling day*
- *Considering whether postal voting should be the default option for all overseas voters when they register (unless they choose to vote in person or appoint a proxy) – so that more postal votes can be issued at the earliest possible point in the timetable*
- *Exploring how to send postal votes to overseas voters earlier in the election timetable – for example by sending a blank ballot paper before the candidate nomination deadline has passed, or allowing voters to securely download and print their own ballot paper, then post it (rather than relying on post arriving from the UK)*
- *Exploring whether some overseas voters could vote in person at an embassy or consulate in the country where they live, instead of relying on postal voting*
- *Exploring whether telephone-based assisted voting, as used in Queensland Australia, could be made available to overseas voters who cannot rely on the postal service.*

These reforms may need changes to legislation or funding. The UK Government and others across the electoral sector should develop solutions. Drawing on this evidence base, we will work to identify effective solutions and ensure any changes improve accessibility for voters and are workable in practice.

Response:

The Government recognises the Commission's findings with regards the difficulties faced by British citizens living overseas when trying to participate in UK elections. These difficulties are longstanding and have been noted in previous reports by the Commission. Overseas electors are legitimate voters who should be able to exercise their vote without unnecessary barriers, and we will consider options to support voting by overseas electors in general.

As part of our review of electoral registration and conduct, the Government, in partnership with electoral practitioners and the Electoral Commission, is examining several aspects of the system for overseas electors, with a view to identifying practical solutions to some of the challenges faced. Deadlines and voting methods for British citizens living abroad are being considered as part of the review, especially taking into account the practicalities and timelines involved in sending and returning a postal ballot to an address overseas. Communication with overseas electors to ensure they are made aware of their voting options and the relevant timelines also has a vital part to play in supporting British citizens living abroad to successfully cast their vote and to ensure they make the most appropriate and timely choice of voting method. As such, the best approach to communications is being considered.

We have considered whether UK citizens living abroad could vote in UK elections at local consular and embassy buildings and there is a concern that this approach would result in significant logistical and administrative burdens that could compromise the efficiency and expediency of elections. This includes how ballot papers for all 650 constituencies would be made available at embassies and how votes would then be counted in a timely manner. Importantly, allowing voting in embassies would remove direct control of the process from Returning Officers, and may limit the opportunity for effective oversight and scrutiny of electoral processes. It is also worth noting that many UK citizens living abroad may not live near a UK embassy or consulate and so would derive no benefit from the provision of this option for voting. That said, we shall continue to bear this option in mind for the longer term should evidence support it being a viable option in the future.

We have also noted the Commission's suggestion to introduce telephone-based assisted voting for overseas electors. This would be a significant change to voting at UK elections and would raise a number of technical and logistical issues, which would need to be worked through further to ascertain whether such a process would be viable.

Whilst we may consider these two suggestions further in the longer term, we are not actively looking at them at present as part of our review of electoral registration and

conduct. This is because the review is focusing on examining issues and proposing solutions that could be viable more immediately.

Outcomes from the consideration of the Commission's other recommendations on overseas voters, as outlined above, will be shared as part of the Government's Strategy for Elections.

Campaigning

Abuse and intimidation

Recommendation 4: Changes are needed to deter and respond to increasing levels of abuse and intimidation of candidates and campaigners

Candidates are reporting increasing concerns about abuse and intimidation that they have experienced at recent elections. These unacceptable actions risk putting off people wanting to stand for election. They also mean that voters may be prevented from hearing about policies and debates from a range of campaigners.

We will work with partners across the wider electoral community to understand what is driving abuse and intimidation, and to collectively develop effective responses to tackle these problems. We will support the Speaker's Conference on threats against candidates and MPs, as well as the work led by the Home Office, the Defending Democracy Taskforce and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

Police forces and prosecutors must continue to treat allegations and cases of election-related intimidation seriously. They must demonstrate that those committing offences against candidates and campaigners will face significant sanctions. Political parties must also play their part in strengthening deterrents. Key areas for potential reform and improvement include:

- *Ensuring that political parties include membership rules that explicitly emphasise respect for other campaigners, and enable them to take appropriate action to sanction members if they are found to have abused or harassed another campaigner (for example removal of membership or deselection as a candidate)*
- *Ensuring that the penalties for those found guilty of criminal offences committed against candidates, campaigners or elections staff reflect the wider impact as attacks on the democratic process.*

There are opportunities to further strengthen protections for candidates and voters within the electoral process, including:

- *Extending the Welsh Government's approach and legislation protecting the home addresses of candidates acting as their own election agents, to cover all UK elections*
- *Considering, with police forces and Returning Officers, whether to establish secure zones where campaign activity would not be allowed around specific risk-assessed polling stations or count venues.*

There is also scope to strengthen coordination and the proactive support offered to candidates ahead of and during elections, including:

- *Ensuring candidates receive clear information and guidance about how to access support – this could involve requiring candidates to provide police forces with contact details to allow them to share essential information and make contact in an emergency*
- *Having a dedicated point of contact for candidates and campaigners, where they can request support and resources to deal with abuse and intimidation*
- *Ensuring longer-term, stable funding arrangements for security support for candidates and elected representatives, including for local councillors and candidates, as has been proposed for MLAs in Northern Ireland. This support should be properly advertised and signposted so that candidates know it is available and something they can use.*

Given the volume and scale of online abuse experienced by candidates and campaigners, social media and online platforms should do more to help develop improved screening tools for candidates' digital profiles, to remove abusive content and identify perpetrators. These could be developed and delivered by individual digital/social media companies, or centrally, with civil society. Ofcom, the communications services regulator, should also consider how the new duties and responsibilities introduced by the Online Safety Act could be developed in the future to improve online protections for candidates and campaigners.

More widely, it will be essential to ensure there is a clear shared understanding of what constitutes unacceptable behaviour towards candidates and campaigners, as opposed to robust political debate. This is needed to support a consistent approach that protects candidates and gives them the confidence to participate. This should particularly take into account the differential experiences of those most affected by abuse and intimidation (including women, people from ethnic minority backgrounds, and disabled people).

These changes will require coordinated effort from a range of organisations from across the electoral and law enforcement sectors, including political parties and campaigners, local authorities, police forces and prosecuting authorities.

We will conduct research with the public to develop a clearer understanding of where the threshold lies between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. We will continue to raise awareness of the fact that abusive behaviour towards campaigners and elected officials is never acceptable. We will also make sure that candidates and campaigners understand what is considered abuse and intimidation and know how to report it.

Response:

The polls in 2024 saw unacceptable harassment and intimidation directed towards candidates, campaigners and electoral staff, both online and in the real world. This Government is clear that intimidation and abuse of those participating in public life has no place in our society and cannot be tolerated. The safety of candidates and elected office holders is paramount to the integrity of elections. Intimidation can also have the knock-on effect of deterring people from standing for election. It is important for a healthy democracy that we see high numbers of people from a diverse range of backgrounds coming forward to stand and to campaign.

During the General Election period, candidates had access to police-led security briefings, a dedicated police contact for advice on security matters – available year-round to MPs - as well as access to Home Office funded private security if needed. Candidates were also issued with security advice and guidance which was made available on GOV.UK. This guidance brought together expertise from across the security community, including the Police, the National Protective Security Authority, National Cyber Security Centre and others, to help candidates implement personal protective security measures. The Electoral Commission helped to ensure candidates were made aware of and could access this advice, guidance and support.

This Government is committed to continuing to ensure the safety and security of election candidates. It is clear that there is much more to do, and we are already going further. The Police are now providing all locally elected representatives and local candidates with dedicated leads in every local police force. The Joint Election Security and Preparedness Unit will continue to coordinate cross government work on candidate security and to iterate and test our preparedness and response through our election security exercising programme. Building upon the experiences of the 2024 polls, we are working with the Electoral Commission, political parties and other stakeholders to improve candidate awareness of and access to security measures, and to make these measures available where appropriate to campaigners and electoral administrators. As set out in our English Devolution White Paper in December 2024, we are also proposing to remove the requirement for councillor's home addresses to be made public. Publication of this personal information can risk members or their families being subject to violence and intimidation. We believe it should be put beyond doubt that councillors and Mayors do not need to declare their home address to the public.

The law already provides that those convicted of intimidation or abuse of candidates, campaigners or elected office holders may be subject to a five-year ban from standing for, or holding, elective office, in addition to any standard punishment imposed on that offender in recognition of the conviction for the underlying criminal offence. However, we are clear that more action must be taken to tackle this unacceptable behaviour.

This Government will also go further to address the causes of candidate and campaigner harassment and intimidation to tackle its destructive impact on our democracy. There is ongoing work across Government to evaluate the nature and scale of harassment and intimidation of candidates and campaigners, working

across a range of priority areas to build resilience as we approach future democratic events.

The Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government is also working closely with other Departments, coordinated through the Defending Democracy Taskforce, to examine what the evidence tells us about the experience of candidates during the General Election and about the types of intimidation and harassment behaviours that are most prevalent and need addressing urgently. The Electoral Commission's report and recommendations will also be extremely helpful in building that evidence base, as will the work of the Speaker's Conference. The Government commits to working with the Speaker's Conference through the submission of evidence to their inquiry.

We will draw the necessary conclusions about required government intervention in due course, whilst carefully considering the evidence and recommendations drawn from the work detailed above. We will also utilise our ongoing review of electoral registration and conduct, discussed above, as a vehicle for further evaluation.

Addressing harassment and intimidation is a government priority. We will continue to bring together a large range of departments and agencies to drive a whole of Government response and ensure that participation in public life remains diverse and thriving.

Nominating candidates

Recommendation 5: The process of candidate nominations should be reviewed

A small number of people took advantage of the limited requirements and checks for nominating candidates at the UK [Parliamentary] general election. This meant that voters in 11 constituencies were at risk of being misled about who they were able to vote for as candidates. The Returning Officers in those constituencies were put in a difficult position because they did not have clear powers to prevent voters being misled by these candidates.

The requirements and checks for nominating candidates should be strengthened to make it harder for candidates to mislead voters about their true identity. Voters must now provide proof of their identify when they register to vote, apply for an absent vote or cast their vote at a polling station – but candidates do not have to provide any proof of identity to be nominated.

Key areas for potential reform and improvement include:

- *Considering whether candidates could be required to provide proof of their identity as part of the nomination process – this should consider the impact on the accessibility, security and practical workability of the nomination process if providing and checking proof of identity could only be carried out in person*

- *Looking again at the Law Commission's previous recommendation that 'Returning Officers should have an express power to reject nominations that use a candidate's name which is designed to confuse or mislead electors or to obstruct the exercise of the franchise, or is obscene or offensive' – while continuing to protect the impartiality that Returning Officers need to administer election processes*
- *Reviewing the definition of offences (and penalties) for candidates making false statements in nomination papers to ensure that these continue to offer an appropriate and realistic deterrent to abuse of the nomination process.*

Election law also requires candidates at a UK [Parliamentary] general election to make a declaration that they have not agreed to be nominated in more than one constituency. Making a false statement about this would be an offence. In practice, however, there is currently no mechanism to easily identify whether any candidates have agreed to be nominated in more than one constituency. It may also be necessary to develop a process for collating details of all candidates at a general election, in order to identify whether any have been nominated in more than one constituency.

Response:

The Government is aware of the issues experienced by some Returning Officers relating to nominations at the last General Election. It is essential that we have robust processes in place to ensure candidates standing for election are legitimate and are following the rules, and that electors can readily identify who they are voting for, whilst balancing these issues with the growing concerns over candidate security and safety.

It is important that people are not deterred from standing for elected office. That would deny the electorate capable and skilled candidates to choose from and mean that Parliaments and councils might suffer from a lack of suitable advocates and representatives. Hence, we are considering various aspects of the nominations process as part of the Government's strategic review of electoral registration and conduct and will include the recommendations made by the Commission as part of this process, with outcomes of these considerations published later this year as part of the Government's Strategy for Elections.

Delivering the elections

Suppliers and systems

Recommendation 6: Challenges to the resilience of the electoral system, including funding, should be addressed

The changes introduced by the Elections Act contributed to the workload of administrators. There is a clear sense in the feedback we received that administrators felt they 'got through it' despite these challenges, rather than being fully confident that they had sufficient time and capacity and fully functioning operational resources to support them to run the poll.

Broader local authority resilience remains a significant concern. It is reliant on a complex and fragmented funding framework, and underpinned by an outdated and increasingly complex system of electoral law.

Without significant change, including in the funding of elections, there continues to be the risk of administrative errors or failure of electoral administration processes in both the short and long terms. The UK Government has recently announced a strategic review of electoral registration and conduct. In a letter to the electoral sector, it acknowledged that 'piling change upon change into an already busy and complex sector introduces ever increasing risks to the delivery of our elections.'

As part of its strategic review, the UK Government should consider whether the funding to run general elections continues to be appropriate and adequate to deliver elections in a way that meets voters' expectations. This should include how work relating to electoral registration and absent voting applications can be more effectively resourced around significant electoral events, such as general elections. There is also a need for a comprehensive risk assessment of capacity and resilience within the sector, including the supplier market. Each of the UK's governments should set out how they will make progress towards simplified, modernised, and consolidated election law, building on the comprehensive and well-supported recommendations of the UK's Law Commissions.

Response:

The Government has inherited a local government in crisis. We are committed to resetting the relationship with our partners in local authorities, and to rebuilding local government.

The Government recognises the scale of the challenges faced by electoral administrators in the delivery of the General Election and the hard work that goes in to delivering these high profile, short notice events. This is particularly stark against the backdrop of the wider challenges faced by local government. Whilst the responsibility for the delivery of elections lies with statutorily independent officers, we acknowledge the need for more integrated solutions, be they legislative, digital, or otherwise. As part of the strategic review of electoral registration and conduct, the Government is actively considering the resilience of the country's electoral delivery infrastructure. This work is being undertaken in collaboration with the Commission and wider electoral sector and if further work is needed beyond the scope of the review, we will continue to explore the options.

We note the Commission's finding that the changes brought in by the Elections Act have contributed to additional pressures on and workload for administrators. Support for local authority elections teams was provided by the previous Government for the UK Parliamentary general election, and this Government will continue to support local government, including through the ongoing provision of additional New Burdens funding, and by ongoing development of digital services, as well as through the current review of electoral registration and conduct.

In response to the recommendations on funding, the Government notes that a review of elections funding was conducted in 2023/24 resulting in updated guidance for Returning Officers regarding the costs that can be reimbursed from the Consolidated Fund, and this Government will examine the impact of this updated guidance. We recognise the need to ensure that funding arrangements evolve to meet the demands of a changing electoral landscape and will continue to work closely with stakeholders to address emerging issues and ensure that funding supports the delivery of elections in a way that meets voter expectations.

A change to the elections funding regime to cover all 'significant electoral events' would require a significant change to, and would have wider impacts upon, the funding regime for local authorities. A comprehensive review of the broad structure of election funding delivery would therefore be required, including understanding the options and consequences for local authorities of such a change, and so would require work over a longer time period.

Whilst consolidation of electoral law would be helpful for those developing it and utilising it, there is, as ever, limited parliamentary time for any government to take through legislation to achieve the promises and intentions set out in manifestos and upon which it is elected. Such commitments to the electorate must be a priority but we will continue to look at areas which help to modernise and improve electoral process and delivery, as is being done initially through the review.

Digital delivery

Recommendation 7: Digital systems need improvement to better support electoral administrators

Administrators need to be able to rely on functional, joined-up digital systems to deliver their duties. This is especially important in the run-up to elections when they are under significant pressure to deliver.

The UK Government should work with the electoral community to continue to improve the digital systems that it provides. This includes working with EMS suppliers to ensure the central digital portal operates effectively with the systems that Returning Officers and Electoral Registration Officers use to run elections locally.

The UK Government should also ensure that it carefully manages the implementation of changes to digital systems, including thorough testing before changes are applied. This should include ensuring that operational advice from

electoral administrators is sought and taken into account before confirming whether and when changes will go live. In particular, the UK Government should improve the operation and functionality of the ERO portal to better support electoral administrators and ensure its integration and compatibility with EMS software.

Response:

The Government understands that electoral administrators rely on digital systems to support them in meeting their statutory duties. The implementation of the Elections Act 2022 introduced four new digital services into the elections space, and a new administrator-facing digital system run by Government – the ERO Portal – for the processing and determination by electoral registration officers of applications for Voter Authority Certificates, postal votes, proxy votes and registrations from overseas electors.

Since launch of the ERO Portal, the Government has continued to take feedback from users on the operability of the digital system, and has continued to design, develop and introduce new and improved functionality to support electoral registration officers in the delivery of their duties. We recognise the importance highlighted by the Electoral Commission of working closely with the electoral community to improve the digital systems provided by Government. We have and will continue to consult closely with users when developing ERO Portal functionality to ensure that our development priorities meet the needs of electoral registration officers and returning officers, and with Electoral Management Systems (EMS) suppliers to ensure operability and compatibility with EMS software.

We conducted a review of how the digital systems performed following the General Election, gathering feedback directly from electoral administrators. This feedback has informed the prioritisation of the development work that we have continued to deliver since the election on the ERO Portal and integration with EMS software.

To ensure transparency on what enhancements to expect and when, the Government has produced and shared with the electoral community a Digital Roadmap outlining the functionality being prioritised for development and delivery in the short, medium, and longer term, and this Roadmap continues to iterate based on ongoing feedback. Since the UK Parliamentary general election, significant functionality has been added to the ERO Portal, and the most recent Roadmap outlines further planned enhancements to address user needs. Regarding release timing, we recognise the importance of careful planning and will continue to consider operational needs to ensure changes are introduced at the right time.

Whilst we are committed to thorough testing before changes to the digital services are implemented, we acknowledge that some bugs may slip through. We will continue exploring ways to enhance our testing processes as we continue to refine the services and work promptly to address newly identified issues.

Conclusion

The Government is grateful for the ongoing work of the Electoral Commission and appreciates their views and recommendations on the 2 May 2024 polls and the 4 July 2024 UK Parliamentary general election. The vital work of the Commission, along with that of the wider electoral community, is invaluable, and never more so than now as we undertake work to fix the foundations of our electoral processes and embark on a new set of ambitious reforms to the way in which elections are delivered.

We look forward to continuing to work with all our partners as we enter this new phase of reform; delivering together these important changes which will strengthen and protect our vibrant democracy for many years to come.