

# Early preparations for the next UKPGE

## Background

A UK Parliamentary General Election (UKPGE) is a significant electoral event, often delivered within a compressed timetable. As the (Acting) Returning Officer (A(RO)) you have a personal responsibility to ensure the election is administered effectively and that, as a result, the experience of voters and those standing for election is a positive one.

Your work to deliver well-run polls will come under considerable scrutiny – from voters, candidates and political parties, and the media.

The level of interest in the UK Parliamentary election is likely to be significant. You should plan for the possibility of high turnout, and as a minimum you should assume that the turnout will be not less than the turnout at the last equivalent polls.

As the polls become closer, the context will continue to evolve as the campaigns pick up pace. You will need to be prepared to react to events both within your constituency and more broadly which could have an impact on the effective delivery of the polls.

The next election must be held by 28 January 2025 and will bring challenges and risks that will need to be planned for and managed. It will be held on new Parliamentary constituency boundaries and will be the first national poll to be delivered under Election Act 2022 changes.

The polls will likely be hard-fought, with many close contests in constituencies across the UK. The new constituency boundaries and evolving political landscape could mean that even in places where there have traditionally been large majorities this may no longer be the case. As such, the focus and circumstances could be different from anything experienced in your area before.

The requirements of Voter ID, postal vote handling, the expansion of the overseas elector franchise, changes to absent vote requirements including the ability to apply online for some types of absent vote, and accessibility for disabled voters add complexity to an already complex poll, impacting on the capacity and resilience of your staff to deliver well-run elections.

## How can you support your elections team and inform early preparations and decision making?

Your duties as (A)RO are separate from your duties as a local government officer. As (A)RO you are not responsible to the local authority but are directly accountable to the courts as an independent statutory office holder. As such you should ensure that you have insurance cover and that it is up to date. You should be prepared to demonstrate robust planning and decision-making processes in the event of any challenge to the election and a claim against the insurance policy.

While you can appoint one or more persons to discharge any or all of your functions as (A)RO, you cannot delegate your personal responsibility for delivering the elections.

Your elections team will undertake the operational administration of the election; however, your role is to:

- command the required staff and resources to deliver well-run polls
- draw in the necessary support, skills and expertise from across your own local authority
- oversee the planning, project management and risk management of the elections for which you are responsible and incorporate any lessons learnt from previous polls
- identify and oversee any actions necessary to mitigate any issues arising
- ensure that staff are appropriately trained to deliver the roles required of them
- support the staff administering the election and provide appropriate oversight of their work

The next UKPGE is likely to be announced at short notice. As (A)RO you will need to ensure that you regularly review your plans, capacity and resources to ensure you can take early action to address any issues. The purpose of this document is to start early discussions with your elections team to ensure that you are well prepared for the election when it is called and can provide your team with any support they need. As such it focuses on the areas of highest risk only; more comprehensive guidance can be found in our [core guidance for \(A\)ROs](#).

## Staffing

The recruitment of the necessary staff to deliver well-run polls has become increasingly difficult in recent years. The recent changes to polling station voting and the increased responsibility for polling station staff in particular, has meant larger numbers of staff are dropping out right up to the day of poll itself.

You should ensure that a whole council approach is taken to the delivery of the polls, including the release of staff to work in polling stations and at the count, and internal expertise and resource from HR teams is utilised to help manage recruitment of external staff.

To plan for this, you will need to be assured that your staffing needs have been determined by your elections team as early as possible so you can get all the resources you need.

Key areas to be covered should include:

- the analysis they have done about your staffing needs – both as part of the core team and additional staff for polling stations and the count
- the recruitment plan they have in place to obtain any additional staff at key times
- how they will need you to draw upon internal resources to support the delivery of the polls
- the contingency plans they have in place to manage any issues with obtaining the staff you need
- how and when the training of staff will be managed, including:
  - whether training will be designed and delivered in-house or outsourced and if this differs for distinct roles
  - how this would be managed in case of a snap UKPGE with little notice

## Venues

As part of the whole council approach to delivery of the poll you should work with your staff to identify where your influence can help with booking premises that have been problematic in the past. For example, late booking of schools to be used as polling stations once inset days have been allocated can create challenges for your staff. Taking a top-down approach of

notification and influencing in advance of the announcement of the poll can help ensure issues are dealt with early.

Your staff should have determined a polling scheme in line with any changes to your parliamentary boundaries and identified suitable polling stations, venues for postal vote issuing or opening, and verification and counting of the votes.

They should have in place:

- a work programme and resources to enable short notice booking of premises
- contingency plans in case venues are unavailable
- options for suppliers of temporary buildings
- a clear understanding of how polling schemes can be amended at short notice, and any scheme of delegation

### **Suppliers and external dependencies**

There is an increasing reliance on external suppliers for the delivery of the election, working through complex systems involving multiple different partners creating additional risks for A(RO)s. A UKPGE compounds the strain on the commercial suppliers involved, particularly where the poll is combined or overlaps with scheduled polls. Our [core guidance for \(A\)ROs](#) contains more on how to quality assure the work of suppliers.

#### IT and technical requirements

It is important that you are confident in the security, resilience, and reliability of your IT systems to help ensure that you are well placed to prevent any risk of cyber-attack.

The Electoral Management System (EMS) your staff use is also key in the delivery of the election, all administrative processes are managed and monitored by these IT systems. It is essential that the EMS is secure and well supported within the council IT infrastructure.

Your team should be confident in their use of their EMS software, and it is vital that you have engaged with your EMS supplier and confirmed that the system will be able to deliver all you require to deliver the election.

Your team should also be able to outline all contingency plans in place in the event of any system failure, including technical support in place to deal with issues and business continuity plans for dealing with system failures during an election timetable.

#### Print suppliers

Many people already choose to vote by post and experience has shown that large electoral events can lead to an increase in applications, and with the ability to apply online, this is likely to continue. It is important that you plan for how you will manage the risks in this supply chain to ensure that postal ballot packs can be delivered to everyone who has successfully applied to vote by post.

This includes the management of printing contracts, including consideration of the volume of other elections work your supplier is responsible for, budgetary constraints and contingency arrangements, as well as how the proofing and quality assurance processes are managed, be that in person or virtually.

Every year we are made aware of issues with ballot paper proofing, printing, and delivery, with election teams raising concerns about the capacity and resilience of their suppliers.

To mitigate against those risks your staff should be able to demonstrate clear contractual arrangements and lines of communication with print suppliers.

They should be able to explain any key considerations in place for managing a snap UKPGE and how they will work with their printers to manage any other polls taking place either at the same time or which overlap.

#### Mail delivery arrangements

As part of the contractual arrangements in place with print suppliers your staff should explain how they ensure retention of your oversight and control of election materials once they are in production and delivery chains, including decisions around tracking despatch and delivery.

### **Supporting participation and confidence**

Everyone should be able to participate in the election and have confidence in the result. As (A)RO, it is part of your role to ensure that everyone who wants to participate in the election can access clear information and support to enable them to do so.

#### Public awareness

You must take such steps as you think appropriate to encourage elector participation and in carrying out such activity you must have regard to any guidance issued by the Electoral Commission. As the first national poll run under new Election Act provisions, there will be significant changes to the voting process for a lot of voters. We provide [public awareness resources](#) to support the understanding of the requirement for photographic ID as well as guidance on [communicating the voting process and support available for disabled voters](#).

Your team should have public awareness plans in place to help encourage participation which should include working directly with internal communication colleagues as appropriate. Where your UK Parliamentary constituency covers more than one local authority area this should include a coordinated plan for public awareness activity that has been developed across the constituency.

#### Supporting disabled voters

New requirements were introduced in the Elections Act for ROs to provide reasonable equipment to enable or make it easier for disabled voters to cast their vote independently and in secret. You should be aware of the changes that have been put in place to provide assistance with voting to disabled voters to comply with your duties. This should include plans your team have developed about the provision of equipment at polling stations.

#### Supporting candidates and agents and ensuring confidence

To ensure that those who wish to stand for election are supported to do so, your team should have plans in place to deliver briefings for potential candidates and their agents, as well as written material that can be shared.

Your team should also have plans in place for how the count will be delivered in a transparent and timely way to ensure that everyone present can have confidence in the process and the count.

There will be an expectation among candidates, parties, and the media that the results will be declared as soon as possible after the close of poll. Your team should be able to explain how they plan to manage the expectations of candidates, parties, and the media.

Further information on [planning for communication activity](#), [supporting accessibility](#), [working with candidates and agents](#) and [delivering the verification and count](#) is available in our guidance for A(RO)s.