

# Report on the 2024 UK Parliamentary general election and the May 2024 elections



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# Summary

On 4 July 2024, people across the UK voted in the UK Parliamentary general election. The election was called on 22 May and followed scheduled elections on 2 May for Police and Crime Commissioners in England and Wales, as well as local and mayoral elections in England.

This report looks at how the May and July 2024 elections were run, how voters and campaigners found taking part, and what lessons can be learned for the future.

The May and July elections were the first in Wales and Scotland respectively where changes introduced by the [Elections Act 2022](#) applied – including the requirement for voters to show photo ID to vote in a polling station. We published [our analysis of voter ID at the UK general election](#) in September and made a series of recommendations to improve accessibility and support people who do not have accepted ID.

This was also the first UK general election since the extension of the franchise to British and eligible Irish citizens living overseas for more than 15 years.

The election was announced at the end of May, but polling day itself fell shortly after the start of the school summer holidays in Northern Ireland and Scotland. This made it harder for some people to vote and placed additional pressures on electoral administrators. To avoid these problems at future general elections, polling day should not be scheduled, if possible, during a major holiday period in any part of the UK.

Overall, the May and July 2024 elections were well-run, and voters continue to have high levels of confidence and satisfaction in the polls. However, we have identified a number of significant improvements necessary to support participation and trust in future elections. These include:

- reforming postal voting processes
- identifying ways for overseas voters to be able to vote securely and in time
- addressing the abuse and intimidation of candidates and campaigners
- reviewing the process of candidate nominations
- improving the operation of the digital systems relied on by electoral administrators

In this report, we set out specific recommendations for improvement. We stand ready to work with the UK's governments and the wider electoral community to address these challenges.

This report primarily focuses on findings from the UK general election however we also include information on the May 2024 polls where particular challenges emerged or there are significantly different findings.

# Voting at the elections

## Summary

### **The experience of voting at the 2024 UK Parliamentary general election**

- Public confidence in how elections are run remains high and most people are satisfied with the registration and voting processes. However, some groups of people are less likely to have a positive view of the election, including younger people, people from ethnic minority backgrounds, disabled people, and people in the C2DE social grade.
- Turnout fell significantly at this election to 60.0%, down from 67.5% in 2019. While this can be due to several factors, we continue to find that negative perceptions of party politics and politicians contribute to people's decisions not to vote.
- Most people found it easy to vote in person or by post, but a small number of voters told us they needed help to fill in their ballot paper.

People across the UK turned out to vote in the UK Parliamentary general election on 4 July 2024. The election was called shortly after scheduled elections in England and Wales on 2 May.

The UK general election was the first election at which the changes introduced by the Elections Act applied at a high-profile poll across the UK. This included the extension of the franchise to British and eligible Irish citizens living overseas for more than 15 years.

Around 48.2 million people were eligible to vote in the UK general election.

## Public confidence in elections is high

After each election we ask people who were eligible to vote for their views on voting and elections. This helps us understand if views have changed since the last comparable set of elections.

### **Most people continue to be confident that elections are well-run and are satisfied with registration and voting**

Our research with the public found that:

- most people (83%) said they were confident that the elections were well-run
- this was largely consistent across the UK (England 83%, Northern Ireland 85%, Wales 83%) although slightly lower in Scotland (79%)
- this also represents an increase since the 2019 UK general election when 69% of people in the UK said they were confident (England 69%, Northern Ireland 83%, Wales 71% and Scotland 72%)

Among the 10% of people who said they were not confident that the elections were well-run, the most common reasons given were the perceived unfairness of the voting system and a lack of information about candidates and/or parties. However, in Scotland, people were more likely than elsewhere in the UK, to refer to concerns around the timing of the

election in a holiday period and issues with postal voting (both directly experienced and issues they heard about in the media).

Across the UK, there are also high levels of satisfaction with the two key processes of registering to vote and voting:

- 80% of people were satisfied with the system of registering to vote, very similar to the level recorded in 2019 (78%). As with overall confidence, there is little variation across UK nations (England 80%, Wales 81%, Scotland 79%), with the exception of Northern Ireland where 86% of people said they were satisfied
- 90% of voters were satisfied with the process of voting, consistent with 2019 when 93% of voters were satisfied. This is similar across the UK (England 90%, Wales 90%, Scotland 88%), although again higher in Northern Ireland (95%)

These generally positive perceptions of the poll are reflected in views on electoral fraud – 87% of people said that they thought voting in general was safe from fraud and abuse (England 86%, Scotland 90%, Wales 88%, and Northern Ireland 88%). This is a positive change from the 2019 general election when 72% said that they thought voting was safe from fraud and abuse.

### **Some groups of people are consistently less likely to have a positive view of the election**

Despite high headline levels of confidence and satisfaction, there are differences along specific demographic lines, including age, social grade, disability and ethnicity.

#### **Age is a dividing line:**

- Older age groups are more likely to feel confident that the election was well run (86% of 65- to 74-year-olds and 87% of people aged 75 or over, compared to 75% of 18- to 24-year-olds)
- They are also more likely to say they are satisfied with the system of registering to vote (60% of those aged 75 or over said that they were 'very satisfied' with the registration system compared to 23% of 18- to 24-year-olds)
- Younger people are also less likely to believe that voting was safe from fraud or abuse (80% of 18- to 24-year-olds believe it was safe compared to 92% of people aged 65 or over)

#### **People in different social grades show significant differences in attitudes:**

- Among people in the [C2DE social grade](#), confidence in the running of the poll was lower (79% confident it was well run compared to 87% of those in the ABC1 social grade)
- Satisfaction with registration was also lower (83% were satisfied among ABC1s compared to 78% among C2DEs)
- Those in the C2DE social group (83%) are also less likely to feel voting is safe from fraud compared to ABC1s (90%)

#### **People from different ethnic backgrounds showed varying perceptions:**

- Overall, people from ethnic minority backgrounds are less likely to feel voting is safe (82%) compared to white people (87%)

- Asian people are less likely to believe that the election was well run (79%) compared to White (84%) or Black people (89%)
- Asian people are also less likely to be satisfied with the system of registering to vote (76% satisfied compared to 81% of White people and 87% of Black people)

### **Disabled people consistently have less positive views of the election:**

- Among those who say they are 'limited a lot' by a disability or long-term health condition, levels of satisfaction with registering and voting (75% and 85% respectively) are lower compared to people without a disability (82% and 92% respectively)
- Confidence in the running of the poll is also lower (78% of those 'limited a lot' by a disability or long-term health condition are confident compared to 85% of those without a disability)
- We explore the experiences of disabled people and the measures in place to assist people to vote later in this report

### **Participation improves people's perceptions of the election**

Whether people voted in the election is sometimes linked to differences in attitude. Some of the groups above are less likely to vote, in particular younger people and people in the C2DE social grade. As always, voters are more likely than non-voters to think the election is well run (88% compared to 58%). They were also more likely to think voting was safe from fraud or abuse (90% compared to 72%).

The variations in attitude towards the election are not all explained by whether someone voted. There are still differences, albeit reduced, across the demographic groups. But higher levels of participation at future elections could improve levels of confidence and satisfaction.

## **Turnout fell significantly at this election**

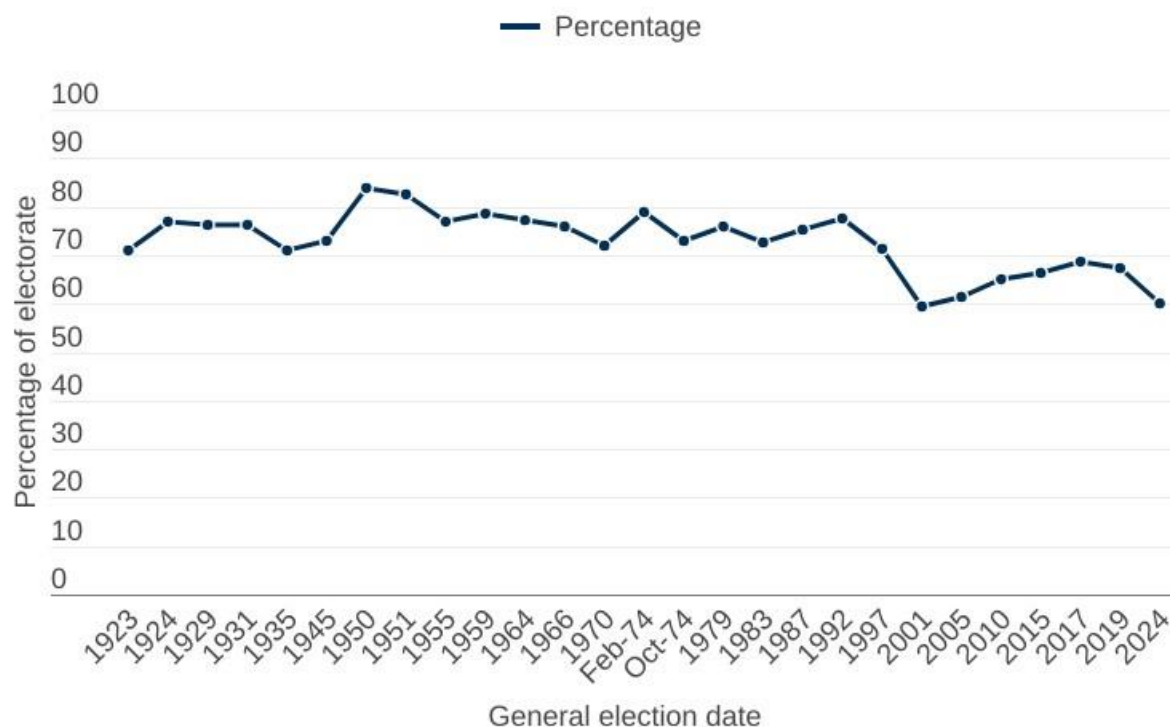
Turnout at the UK general election was 60.0%, down from 67.5% in 2019. This is the second lowest turnout at a UK general election since the introduction of universal suffrage in 1928, with only the 2001 election recording a lower turnout (59.4%).

### **Overall turnout at elections is steadily declining**

At recent UK general elections, variations in turnout have been largely driven by political factors. This included the perceived importance of the poll and the level of competition implied by opinion polling ahead of the election. For example, the 2024 election was widely expected to not be as closely contested as the four elections between 2010 and 2019. All four of these elections had a higher turnout than in 2024.

However, of more concern, the last 25 years have seen a downward shift in levels of turnout. There is no indication that the trend is reversing.

## UK general election turnout 1923 – 2024



Local elections in England, while always recording lower levels of participation than UK general elections, have seen a similar long-term decline. In the 1980s and early 1990s overall turnout in English local elections was between 40% and 50%. In recent years it is more common to see levels below 35%.

### Negative perceptions can lead people not to vote

We know from our research that some people choose not to vote or are unable to because of circumstantial reasons, including medical reasons, being too busy, on holiday, or away for work. However, we also consistently find that negative perceptions of party politics and politicians contribute to people's decisions not to vote. This includes a general lack of interest, the view that all parties are 'the same', a feeling that no party or candidate represented 'their views', and an absence of trust in politicians.

Falling levels of participation are concerning. They have the potential to negatively affect the public's trust in elections. It is particularly important that newly enfranchised voters choose to vote when they become eligible. Research has found that voting is a habit. When people do not begin to vote early in life, they are less likely to do so later.

Addressing this challenge is not straightforward. We believe an important part of the response is ensuring young people get [high quality education about democracy and elections](#) whether through schools, clubs or other relevant organisations.

### Most people were able to vote using their preferred method

Across the UK, 94% of voters said they had voted using their preferred method whether that was in person, by post or using a proxy. There were no significant differences across the nations of the UK or by demographics. In-person voters were more likely to say that

they voted using their preferred method (96%) compared to postal voters (91%), suggesting that some did choose to vote by post out of necessity.

We asked postal voters why they chose to vote by post and most (32%) said it was because they did not want to vote in person. However, some said it was because they did not have time to go to their polling station on 4 July (13%), were away on holiday (14%) or found it difficult to access or travel to their polling station (18%).

### **Voters found it easy to fill in their ballot papers**

Nearly all voters at the UK general election (98%) felt that it was easy to fill in their ballot paper, which is consistent with our research from the May 2024 elections.

This is also supported by the levels of rejected ballots at these elections. At the 2024 general election, 0.4% of ballot papers were rejected, due to being completed incorrectly or left blank. In 2019, this was 0.36%.

The rejection rate in London for the 2024 Mayoral election was similar, at 0.5%, significantly lower than at previous mayoral elections. Following a change in the law, the First Past the Post voting system was used for the first time at this election. Prior to 2024, the London Mayor was elected with the Supplementary Vote system, which asked voters for first and second preference choices. In 2021, 4.3% of first preference mayoral votes were rejected in London and in 2016 1.9% were rejected.

Usually there are fewer rejected votes in First Past the Post elections compared to other systems which require voters to mark the ballot multiple times. However, [the higher level of rejected votes in 2021](#) at the London Mayoral election was also due to issues with the design of the ballot paper and the high number of mayoral candidates.

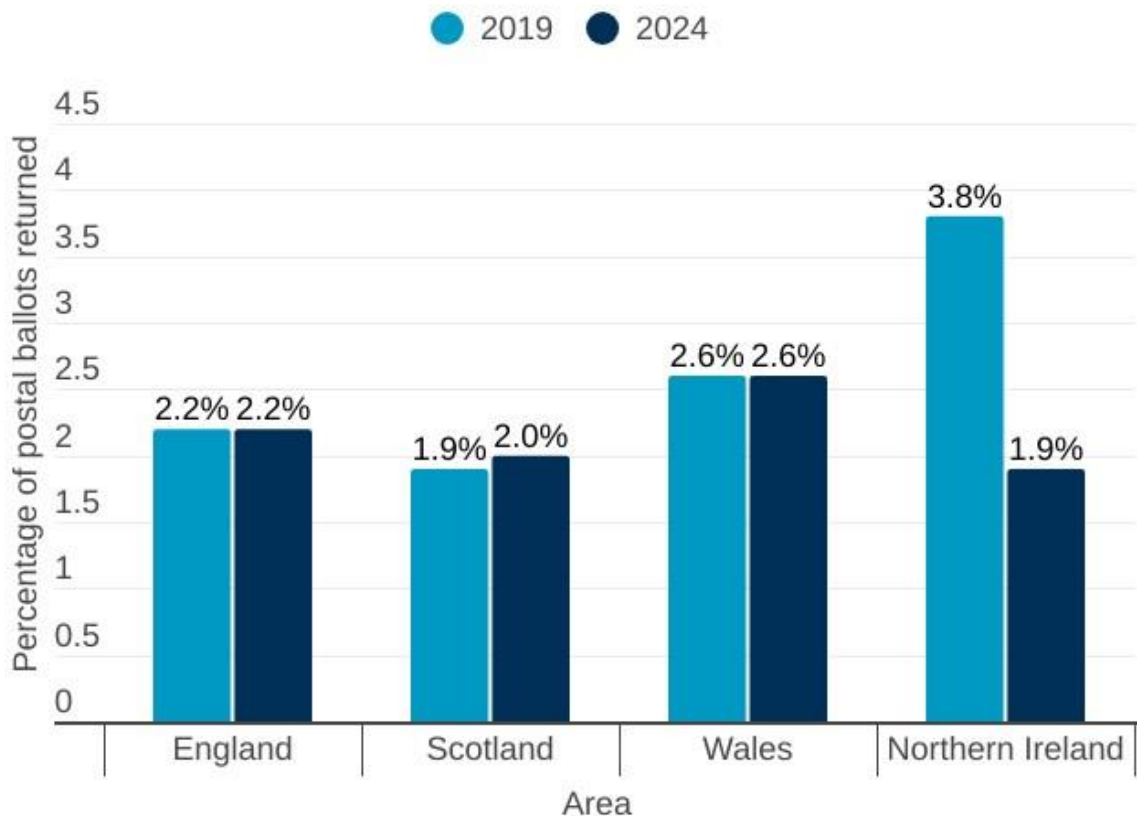
### **Postal voters found it easy to complete their postal ballots**

Most postal voters (96%) said it was easy to complete their postal ballot pack. There were no differences across the UK nations and limited variation by different demographics. The youngest voters, aged 18 to 24, were less likely to find it easy compared to those aged over 55, but 90% of 18- to 24-year-olds still said it was easy. Similarly, disabled people who said they are 'limited a lot' by a disability or health condition were less likely to say it was easy (93%) than people without a disability (98%), but perceptions were still very positive for all.

Data provided by Returning Officers on the proportion of postal votes rejected (where the personal identifiers of signature and date of birth cannot be verified) shows that levels of rejection are broadly similar to those recorded at previous polls. Overall, at the 2024 general election, 2.2% of returned postal votes (approximately 168,000 votes in total) were rejected and not able to be included in the count.



## Percentage of postal votes rejected at the 2019 and 2024 UK general elections



### Some people had help when voting

There was a small number of voters who said they needed help to fill in their ballot paper – 3% of those who voted in person and 3% of those who voted by post. In both cases, young people were more likely than older people to say they had help. Among in-person voters, disabled people who are ‘limited a lot’ by their disability or health condition, and people from ethnic minority backgrounds were also more likely to say they had help.

We asked these voters to choose the main reason someone helped them to vote. For postal voters, the main reason given related to the difficulty in following the instructions for completion. For in-person voters, responses were more evenly distributed although a quarter said it was related to a disability or health condition.

**Table 1: Reasons given by the 3% of voters who said they had help when voting**

Main reason for having help	In-person voters who had help	Postal voters who had help
I have a disability or health condition	24%	27%
I did not know who to vote for and asked someone to help me	20%	10%

Another adult insisted on helping me choose who to vote for	20%	9%
I took a child under 18 with me and they came into the polling booth	14%	N/A
The instructions were difficult to understand	N/A	43%
Another reason	22%	11%

Among both postal and in-person voters, some said that another adult had insisted on helping them choose who to vote for. We cannot judge from this data the degree to which the voter did not want help or the extent of any input from another person. However, it is possible that some of these instances involved assistance that the voter did not want or which they found coercive.

On polling day in both May and July, Electoral Commission representatives visited polling stations and observed a small number of instances where someone attempted to go into the polling booth with another voter. We also saw polling station staff stopping this happening, although the response was not uniform across all polling stations. Other accredited observer organisations, such as Democracy Volunteers and the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, also reported on instances in polling stations where the secrecy of the ballot requirement may not have been met.

The proportions involved here are small. Only 3% of voters overall told us they had assistance, and most of that help was sought for a specific reason. However, it is essential that all voters can vote without coercion or pressure. We will continue to provide information for voters about their rights. We will also ensure polling station staff have guidance that supports them to protect the secrecy of voting in polling stations. This includes knowing when and how to challenge behaviour which may breach the secrecy of the ballot, and to report allegations of potential offences under existing electoral law to the police.

# Barriers to voting at the elections

## Summary

### **Some voters experienced specific challenges when voting at the 2024 UK Parliamentary general election**

- More can be done to improve awareness of the support available for voters in polling stations. Although Returning Officers provided a range of accessibility equipment and support at polling stations, many people were not aware of the assistance available to them. This included the equipment that should be provided, as well as the help and support available from staff and companions.
- More than 1.3 million people applied to vote by post after the UK general election was announced, and this was the first UK general election at which people could apply online. However, some postal voters did not receive their ballot packs in time to complete and return them before polling day. Although these problems were not systemic, postal voting systems did not work well enough for some voters and should be improved.
- British and eligible Irish citizens who had lived overseas for more than 15 years could vote for the first time at the UK general election. However, the options for voting by overseas citizens do not work well enough and are in need of fundamental improvement.

Overall, most people who wished to vote at the UK general election were able to do so with confidence. However, our research has found that some voters continue to experience challenges when voting. These must be addressed to support participation and trust in future elections.

## Returning Officers provided support to disabled voters, but awareness of its availability needs improvement

The [Elections Act 2022](#) made changes to the support and equipment that Returning Officers can provide at the polling station to enable, or make it easier for, disabled people to vote independently and in secret.

There were also changes to who can be a 'companion'. Anyone who is 18 or over can now go with a disabled voter to the polling station and, if requested by the voter, provide support. The companion does not need to be eligible to vote at the election, but they must still complete a declaration before providing help.

These changes first applied at the local elections in England and Northern Ireland in 2023. The Police and Crime Commissioner elections were the first time they applied in Wales. The UK general election was the first time they applied in Scotland.

We provide Returning Officers with [guidance to support them in delivering the accessibility requirements](#). Ahead of the UK general election, the Convener of the [Electoral Management Board \(EMB\) for Scotland also issued recommendations](#) to support administrators in Scotland improve accessibility.

## Returning Officers provided support to voters at polling stations

Following the elections, we asked electoral administrators and polling station staff for their feedback on the accessibility support they provided. We also asked them if voters made any specific requests for support or equipment to be provided, beyond that which the administrator had already put in place. Responses to our surveys were voluntary, so they are not a representative sample of all administrators' views. Among the administrators who responded we found that:

- over four-fifths (84%) found our guidance on assistance with voting for disabled people useful, with over half (62%) saying it was very useful
- almost all polling stations provided most items from the list of equipment that should be provided as a minimum, as set out in our guidance
- electoral data returned shows that there were only 117 requests overall for specific equipment

Returning Officers can consider local factors when determining what support and equipment to provide, and where administrators told us that the minimum equipment was not provided it was nearly always where the equipment was not needed. For example, some polling stations will not have parking available or may not require ramps.

Most of the equipment that was made available at polling stations was provided proactively. A small number of administrators said they went beyond the minimum list of equipment because of local knowledge. Additional support they provided included:

- audio devices or QR codes to access the ballot paper in audio format
- Braille reference ballot papers
- hearing loops
- coloured overlays

As in recent elections, voters in Northern Ireland could access a telephone helpline to listen to the list of candidates standing in their constituency.

There were a limited number of requests from voters for specific support or equipment to be provided to enable, or make it easier, for them to vote.

Administrators said that they could meet many of the requests for specific equipment, but that this was not possible in all cases. Where requests could not be met, this was sometimes a result of the request arriving too close to polling day.



*We had someone request audio devices around a week before the poll and we were unable to do this in time.*

Others, such as alternative formats of ballot papers on which to mark one's vote, could not be provided at all. This was because ballot papers must follow the design and print specifications prescribed in legislation, and ballot papers used by postal and polling station voters must be the same in design and size.



*We were unable to meet a request to produce a ballot paper on different colour paper for a postal voter and the only reasonable adjustments that were acceptable to [them] would have required changing their method of voting*

*from postal voting to proxy arrangements, which we were unable to assist with as the deadline for changing absent voting arrangements had already passed.*

Some administrators also noted that funding played a role in their decision making.



*There is no problem sourcing accessibility equipment but there is always a concern over how much of the cost will be reimbursed by [the Elections Claims Unit]*

Many administrators told us that they had tried to engage with local disability groups and civil society organisations. However, some indicated that they experienced issues doing so, because the unscheduled nature of the UK general election left limited time to undertake specific engagement. Others received mixed reactions to their attempts to engage. Where administrators were able to work with local groups, they reported this had been helpful in informing training and the assistance provided.



*Elections team had specialised training from hearing loss and vision impaired local charities. This was built into polling station training sessions.*



*We engaged with disability groups and have used feedback to provide assistance and also disabled staff network to get the [perspective] of colleagues also.*

Some noted that the extent to which training could cover accessibility measures was limited as a result of the number of other changes made by the [Elections Act](#).



*We cover supporting those with disabilities in polling staff training. I would like to do more, but training, with all the new measures, now takes over two hours. There is only so much training and information you can provide to a member of staff who is only working one day, and may only do this once every few years.*

We asked polling station staff about their experiences. Among those who responded to our survey:

- the majority (93%) felt that they were well trained in supporting voters who needed additional assistance
- most felt confident that they would be able to assist disabled voters – including voters who are physically disabled (97%), blind or partially sighted (94%), deaf or have hearing loss (90%), or who have a learning disability (91%)
- over four-fifths (88%) felt that they would be confident assisting someone who needed to use a tactile voting device

In general, high numbers of polling station staff reported that the recommended minimum list of equipment was available in their polling station. However, despite many feeling that the equipment available was helpful, 14% of polling station staff reported that at least one

disabled voter experienced issues either accessing the polling station or completing the ballot paper.

## **Awareness of the new accessibility measures should be improved**

Our research with those who voted at the elections found that:

- Almost all adults (96%) who voted in person and told us that they have a disability or long-term health condition said that it was easy to get inside the polling station and vote. This was consistent across the UK (England 96%, Wales 96%, Scotland 97% and Northern Ireland 95%)
- Voters who say that they are limited a lot by their disability or long-term health condition were more likely to say that they went to the polling station with another person who helped them to vote (14%) than voters overall (3%)
- One-in-twenty of those voting in person with a disability or long-term health condition (5%) said that they needed additional assistance or equipment. Among this group, 74% said that they thought that the assistance or equipment they needed was available to them at the polling station (19% said no, 4% did not know and 3% preferred not to say)

We asked all those who have a disability or long-term health condition for their views on the experience of voting at the UK general election:

- 49% of voters agreed that the equipment, information and support that they need to vote is available, with 7% disagreeing
- 47% felt that staff at polling stations are properly trained to assist them with voting, while 6% disagreed
- 59% disagreed that the way elections are run at present prevents them from voting in person, with one in ten (9%) agreeing

Where respondents did not agree or disagree, they could choose one of the following options: neither agree or disagree, not applicable, don't know, and prefer not to say. Reasons for choosing these options could be that they did not need to use equipment or support to vote, or it could be because they had not been made aware of its availability.

We also asked civil society organisations and the people they support for feedback on their experiences at this year's elections, on the impact of voter ID and the new accessibility measures. The feedback provides a valuable insight into disabled people's lived experiences, although the number of responses and self-selecting sample means that they are not representative of the views of all disabled people.

Most people who fed back found it easy to register and vote. However, many people were not aware of the assistance available to them at the polling station. This included the equipment that should be provided, as well as the help and support available from staff and companions.



*Until your survey, I was not aware that it was possible to have assistance in a polling station.*



*More can be done to publicise the different ways to vote and what help and accessibility aids are available at polling stations.*

In some cases, where they had requested equipment, voters felt that staff were not familiar with how to use it.



*[Polling station staff could improve by] knowing the products and how they work, so that they can explain them without saying 'I'm not sure' and 'I think that is how it goes'. I had to tell the staff the difference between the large and small magnifier.*

In addition, some people raised concerns around:

- information provided by parties and candidates not always being in an accessible format
- the requirement to show photo ID and its impact on whether some respondents chose to vote at all or in person
- difficulties applying for and completing a postal vote
- issues with physical access to the polling station



*I required a person to assist me when voting by post, as the information was not in an accessible format, combined with the fact that I would not know which box I would be ticking, due to my total lack of vision.*



*It would've been helpful if there [were] wider openings for the doors because I barely was able to fit through the door.*

### **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.

## Postal voting delays affected some people's ability to vote, but overall turnout remained high

People who do not want to vote in person at the polling station can apply to vote by post or appoint a proxy to vote on their behalf. More than 1.3 million people applied to vote by post after the UK general election was announced, and this was the first UK general election at which people could apply online.

During the election, we received reports about some voters not receiving their postal ballot packs. These reports were primarily concentrated in Scotland, where polling day coincided with the summer holiday period, and in some areas of England. The reports were picked up by a wide range of media outlets.

Our analysis finds that there were no widespread, systemic issues with postal voting and that most people were satisfied with this method of voting. Across the UK, 89% of postal voters told us they were satisfied with the process of voting (95% in Northern Ireland, 91% in Wales, 89% in England and 85% in Scotland).

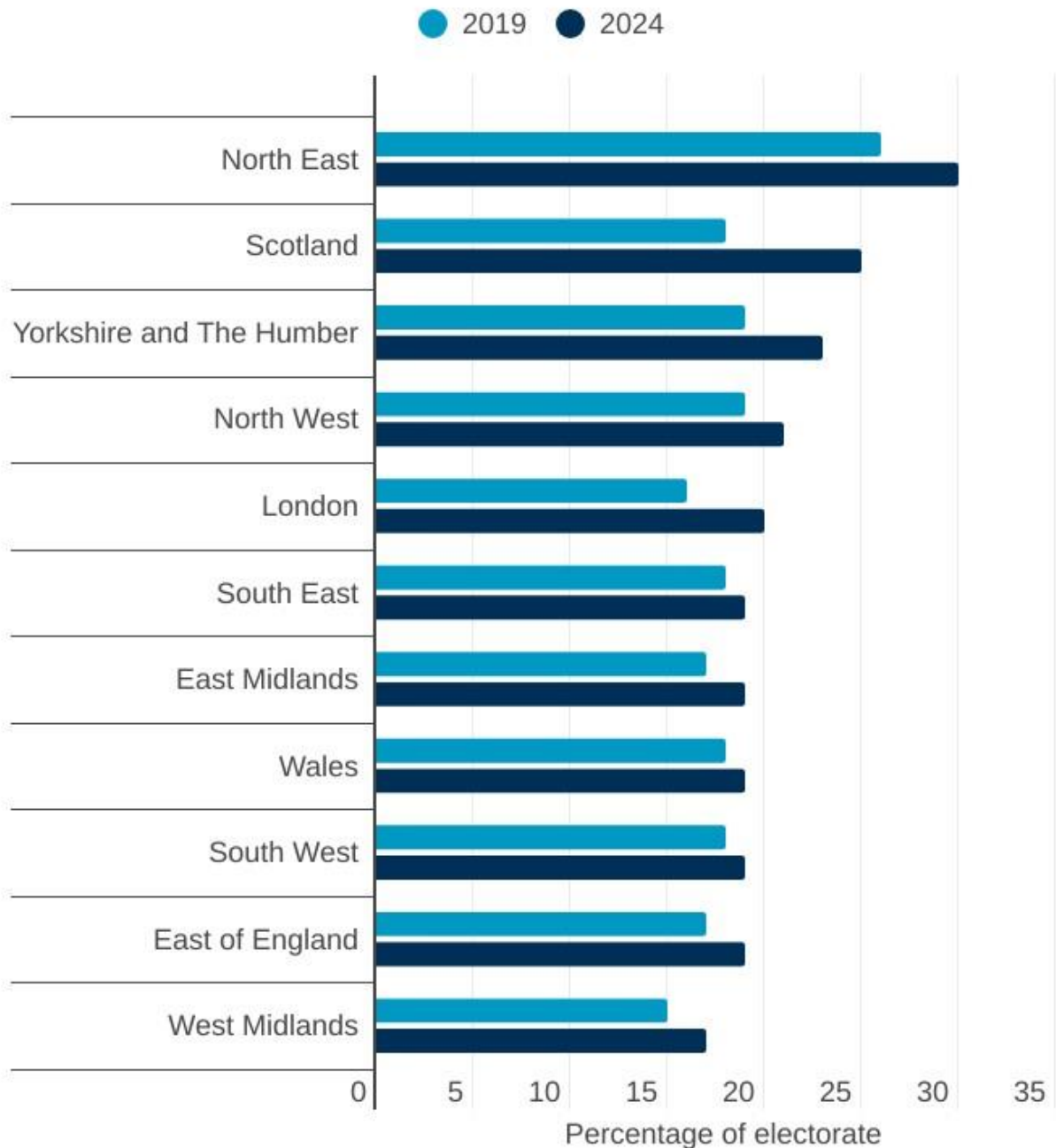
However, some voters did experience problems which stemmed from a number of issues including:

- the timing of the election
- the increase in absent vote applications close to the deadline (which could be done online for the first time)
- a lack of public awareness of the timing of postal vote delivery and the availability of proxy voting
- the timetable for a UK general election (which is shorter than for other polls, such as Scottish Parliament elections)
- problems with print and software suppliers

The overall volume of postal voting was not a key issue. There has been a notable increase in the proportion of people registered for a postal vote since the 2019 UK general election – from 18% to 20%. The Covid-19 pandemic was a significant driver for postal voting, and high numbers voted by post at elections between 2021 and 2023. In Scotland, there were slightly more postal votes issued at the 2021 Scottish Parliament election (just over one million) than at the 2024 UK general election (just under one million).



## Percentage of electorate with a postal vote across Great Britain



### Some voters may have expected postal votes to arrive earlier

The timing of the election during the summer holiday period meant that some people may have applied for a postal vote because they knew they were going to be away on polling day. It is not uncommon for postal ballot packs to arrive shortly before polling day.

However, many voters may have been unaware of this and expected to receive them in time to vote before they went on holiday. Some voters may also have been unaware of the option of voting by proxy or may not have had someone who could act as a proxy for them on polling day.

While simplifying the process for voters, the ability to apply online for an absent vote, rather than by completing a paper form or contacting their local registration office, may

have made it less likely that voters knew about the expected timing of postal vote delivery and the different voting options available to them (including by proxy).

Postal ballot packs are not processed and issued 'on demand'. They are processed, printed and dispatched in batches. At the 2024 UK general election:

- The first issue of postal votes occurred shortly after the close of nominations deadline on 7 June. People who already had a postal vote, or applied for one before 7 June, would have received their postal vote in this first round of dispatches
- People who applied shortly before the deadline to register for a postal vote were expected to receive their postal ballot pack as part of a second dispatch

Unlike other statutory processes, the deadlines for processing and issuing postal ballot packs are not set out in the legislation. However, there are several statutory deadlines which electoral administrators must take into account when planning:

- close of candidate nominations, 19 working days before polling day. Ballot papers cannot be printed before this deadline.
- register to vote, 12 working days before polling day
- applications to vote by post or proxy (GB only), 11 and six working days before polling day respectively
- applications to vote by post or proxy (NI), 14 working days before polling day
- applications for a replacement for lost postal votes, four working days before polling day. Prior to this, electoral administrators cannot reissue postal ballot packs to voters.

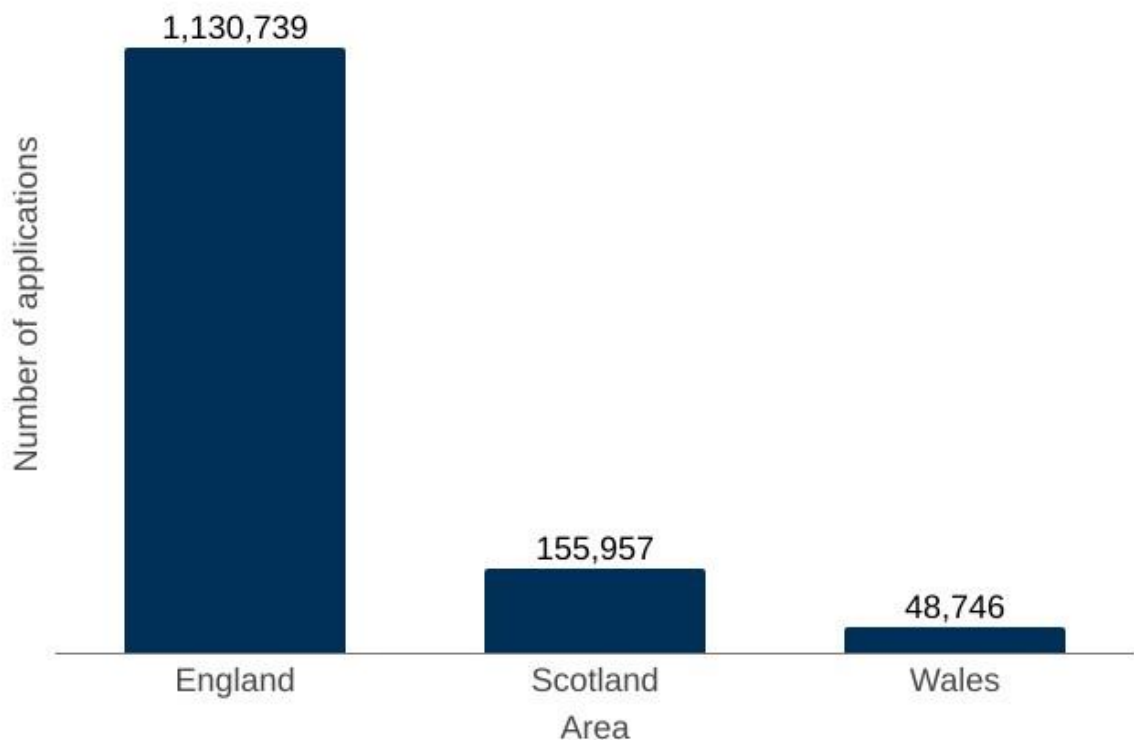
There is a limited timeframe within the election timetable for electoral administrators to process and issue postal ballot packs.

In Scotland, the convener of the Electoral Management Board for Scotland [issued a set of recommendations](#) ahead of the election to support Electoral Registration Officers and Returning Officers to promote consistency and to support effective contingency measures. This included recommending specific dates for the first issue of poll cards and postal votes.

### **Large numbers of applications added pressure to the system close to the deadline**

In addition to the timing challenges, there were 1.3 million applications for postal votes in Great Britain between the election being called on 22 May and the deadline on 19 June. This includes nearly 470,000 applications from 14 June onwards, when existing postal voters were starting to receive their postal ballot packs.

## Number of online postal vote applications (22 May – 19 June 2024)



Data is not available on the volumes of applications received ahead of previous UK general elections, but two factors suggest that the number of later applications was higher at this election:

- the ability to apply online is likely to have increased the number of applications received close to the deadline (as it has done with applications to register to vote)
- the timing of the election during the summer holiday period in Scotland and Northern Ireland meant that some people, who may have preferred to vote in person, would have been away on polling day and would have chosen to vote by post.

Postal votes need to be sent to electors and then returned. The more applications which are processed closer to polling day, the more postal votes will arrive with voters close to polling day and the greater the risk of delays in dispatch meaning some people are unable to vote.

In Northern Ireland, there was an increase in the number of postal vote applications, mainly attributed to the election coinciding with the school holidays. However, there did not appear to be significant issues for postal voters. This is probably because postal voting on demand is not available in Northern Ireland, there is an earlier deadline for applying for an absent vote, and because the Electoral Office of Northern Ireland processed applications on a daily basis, rather than in batches.

People in Northern Ireland must provide a Digital Registration Number (DRN) to apply for an absent vote. [Our previous research](#) found that the DRN posed a barrier to voters, given the volume of postal and proxy applications rejected due to a missing DRN. For the first time at the UK general election, the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland offered an online

look-up tool where voters could check if they were registered to vote and obtain their DRN. There was a notable decline in the number of applications rejected for not including a DRN at the UK general election, which suggests this service was effective.

### **Some areas had problems with suppliers printing and dispatching postal ballot packs**

With administrators working to demanding deadlines, it was crucial that they could rely on the external suppliers delivering print services. However, in Scotland specifically there were problems with supplier capacity to produce the required volumes in the time available. The election timetable is shorter for a UK general election (25 working days) than at devolved elections in Scotland (35 working days). Unlike for Scottish Parliament elections, the date of the UK general election is not fixed and this year coincided with the school holiday period. This led to an increased demand for postal voting in Scotland and exacerbated problems with capacity.

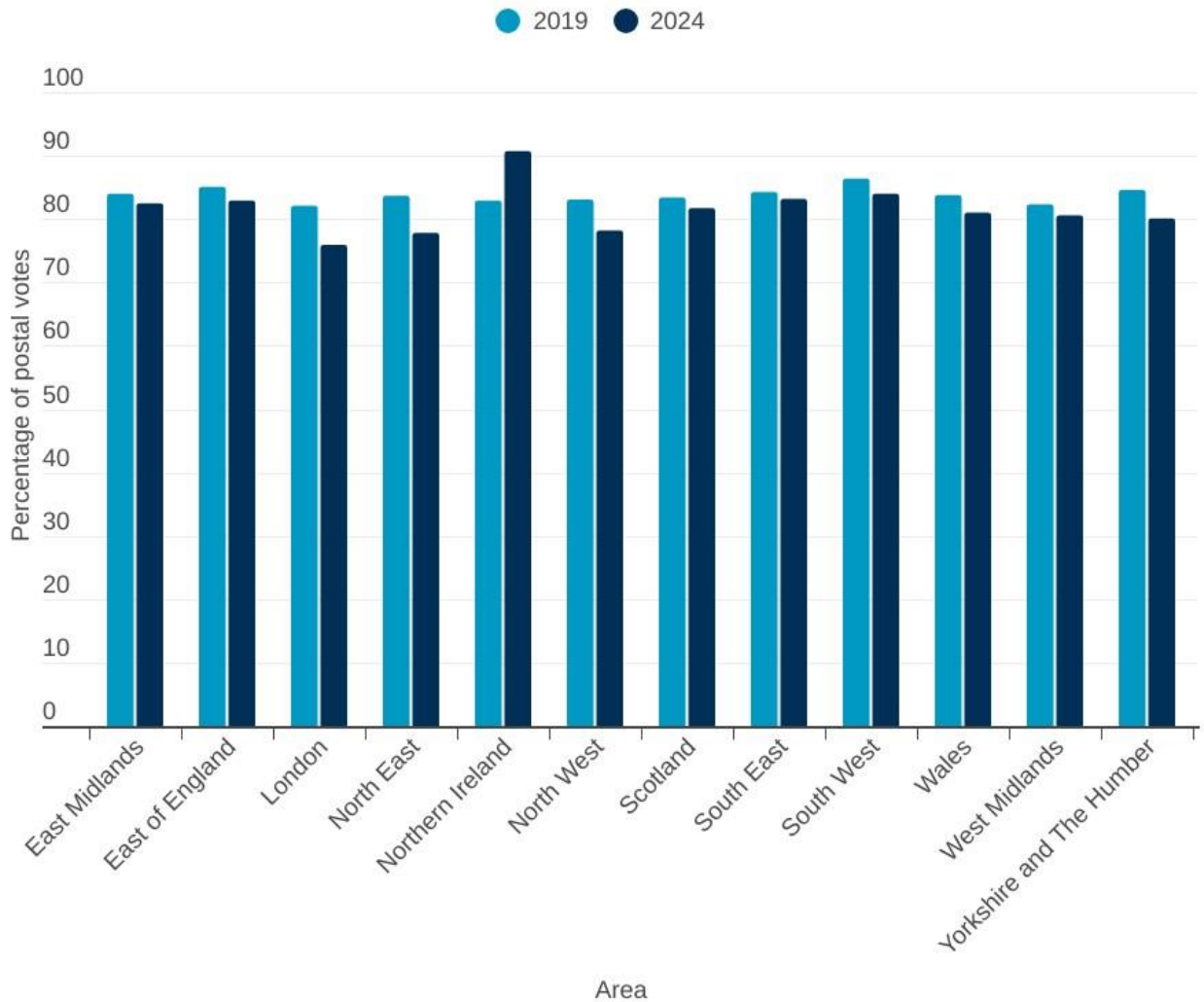
For example, in some areas, only around 50% of postal ballot packs were issued within the timeframes recommended by the EMB for the first batch of postal votes (18-19 June). This delay was understood to be partly due to a production breakdown. The second dispatch of postal ballot packs was also subject to delays in some areas. All of this was due to several factors, including the volume of later applications, production breakdowns, and timescales.

Because of the delayed delivery some postal voters experienced, some councils in Scotland set up [emergency drop-in facilities](#) for voters to obtain a replacement postal vote pack.

### **Overall postal voter turnout remained high**

Despite the issues faced by some voters, turnout among postal voters remained high although, as with overall turnout, it dropped in comparison to 2019 (80.7% of postal votes returned in 2024 compared to 83.9% in 2019). Although it is clear that some voters faced problems when trying to vote, there is no evidence of a widespread impact on turnout in Scotland in particular, where the drop in the proportion of postal votes returned was smaller than in many other areas.

## Postal vote return rates



### 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.

## Overseas voters continue to face barriers to participation

This was the first general election since the extension of the franchise to British and eligible Irish citizens living overseas for more than 15 years, removing the previous time limit.

More than 170,000 applications to register as an overseas voter were received between the introduction of this change on 16 January 2024 and the deadline for registering ahead of the general election. Around 110,000 of these applications came after the general election was announced on 22 May. The total number of overseas voters registered for the 2024 general election was 191,338.

This is fewer than the 234,000 registered to vote in the 2019 general election. We cannot survey a representative sample of overseas voters because there is no information on the total population. However, we did survey 500 UK citizens resident overseas via YouGov and found that awareness of the change in the franchise was low – only 26% said they knew about it.

### Overseas voters continue to struggle to participate using existing voting options

As at other recent polls, overseas voters faced significant difficulties when trying to participate in the election. We highlighted evidence of these issues in [our statutory reports on the 2015, 2017 and 2019 UK general elections](#), as well as following the [2016 EU referendum](#) and the [2019 European Parliament election](#). However, we have more detailed evidence for this election about the scale of the problem.

Overseas voters can choose to vote by post, by proxy, or in person if they will be in the UK on polling day. As with domestic postal voters, electoral administrators had limited time to issue postal ballots and receive them back by the close of poll. In addition, following the extension of the franchise, determining overseas voters' eligibility also took up a lot of administrators' time. Timescales were also more challenging for overseas

voters as it takes longer for a postal ballot pack to reach their country of residence and then be returned to the UK.

We do not have data on how many overseas voters voted by proxy. We do know that half (49%) of all registered overseas voters registered for a postal vote. Of these, only 52% returned their ballot paper in time to be counted in the general election. This means that around a quarter of all registered overseas voters were able to vote by post, without using a proxy.

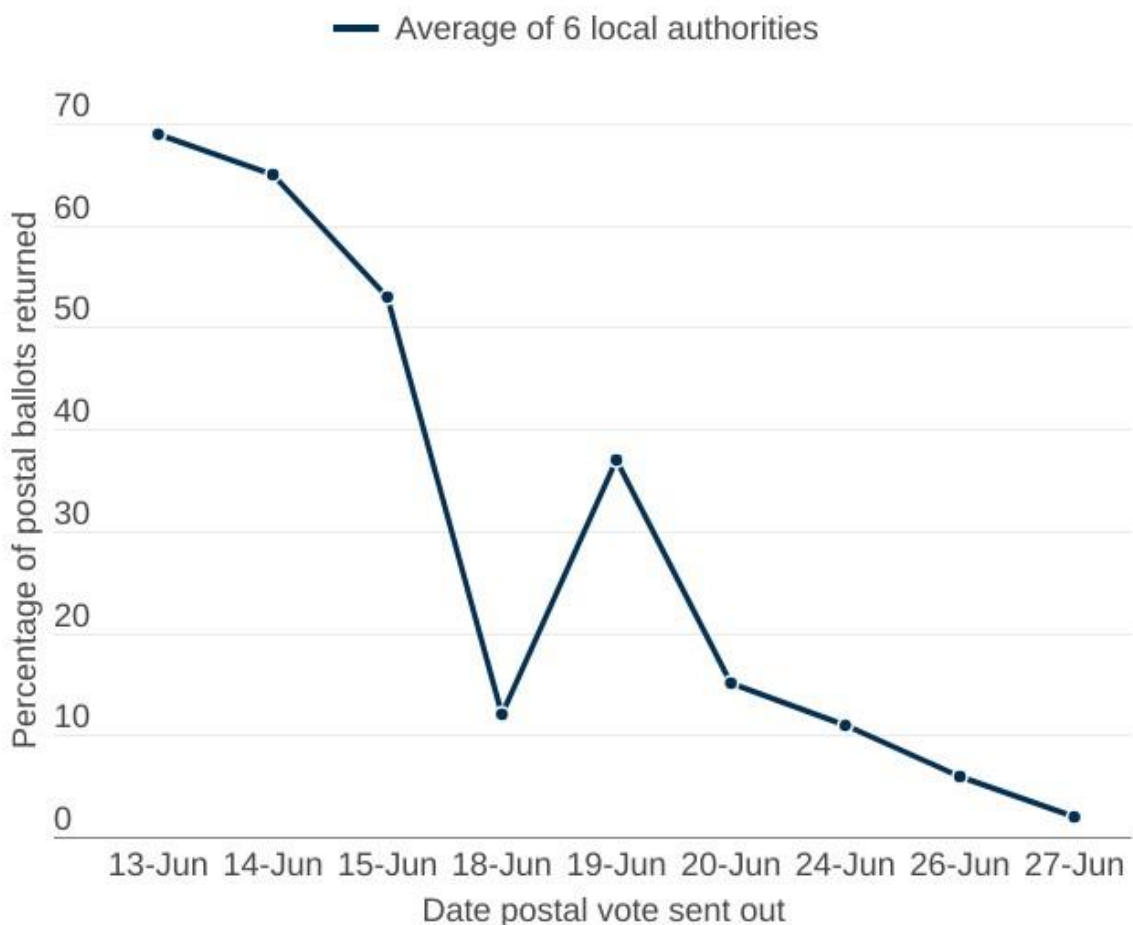
The average return rate for domestic postal votes is around 80%.

### Dispatch dates and destination country affected return rates for overseas postal votes

We do not have comprehensive data on the proportions of postal votes returned by either the date they were sent out or the country they were sent to. However, data from a small sample of local authorities shows some clear patterns.

Overseas voters who were sent their postal ballot packs in the first issues (from around 14 June) were more likely to return it before the close of poll. The chart below shows how return rates dropped for all batches following the first issue.

### Percentage of overseas postal votes returned by day sent out



While Returning Officers and suppliers prioritised overseas electors' postal votes, dispatching them as early as possible, this was only possible for overseas electors who were already registered for a postal vote. Those who applied after the election was called would have been unlikely to have their applications processed in time for inclusion in the first batch.

The overseas voter's country of residence is also a factor in how likely a vote is to be returned in time to be counted. This is partly because ballots take longer to arrive in and be returned from different countries. This results in different return rates across our sampled local authorities.

**Table 2: Overseas postal votes sent and returned by destination country**

Country	Number sent	Number received in time to be counted	Return rate (%)
Australia	559	31	6%
Canada	265	128	48%
France	956	712	75%
Germany	460	240	52%
Singapore	159	70	44%
Spain	418	135	32%
USA	910	342	38%

This data also suggests that distance is not the only factor affecting return rates. For example, the return rate from Spain is low compared to more distant destinations such as Canada, Singapore and the USA. This does not appear to be because the postal ballot packs going to Spain happened to be in later despatches. For example, based only on the first run of postal votes issued across the sample of local authorities, the return rate from Spain was 47% compared to 88% from France.

### **Overseas voters do not think the system works for them**

After the election, we asked overseas voters about their experience of the election.<sup>1</sup> We asked respondents if they were satisfied with the process of voting at the election – 46% told us they were satisfied, with 51% saying they were not.

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<sup>1</sup> We have gathered the views of overseas voters through two surveys: one through our external research agency, YouGov, and an in-house survey made available via a variety of channels. These included through British diaspora organisations and groups. We also sent it to voters who contacted us for information.



Overseas voters reported dissatisfaction with the time available for receiving and returning their postal vote.



*Unfortunately, I never got to cast my vote as my voting pack was not dispatched until 24 June even though I had submitted my application on the 6th. It typically takes 6–8 days for regular mail to reach the U.S., and so, as predicted, my voting pack only arrived on 3 July, the day before the election. This meant that it was impossible for me to return my ballot paper in time even using the fastest courier service. I would have needed two days at the very minimum.*



*The ballot paper arrived three days before polling day and I live in Ireland. There was no way it would have got back to London by post other than by sending it recorded delivery on a two day service which costs a lot.*

Voting by proxy was viewed as unsuitable for some people as a voter needs to have someone who they trust in the UK and who they can appoint as their proxy.



*I did not know anybody who I could appoint as a proxy to vote on my behalf so a postal vote was the only option.*



*Proxy voting only works efficiently if you have someone you trust in the constituency to be able to vote on your behalf. Without that, you either have to postal vote, travel to vote in-person, or do a proxy postal vote – the latter is incredibly complicated and risks further delays. I was lucky this time because I had a trustworthy partner to act as a proxy, but that may not always be possible.*

### **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

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The YouGov survey is likely to be more representative of British citizens resident overseas as a whole. However, this also means that, in line with the small number of overseas British citizens who are registered, only a small proportion of the sample were registered and tried to vote in the UK general election. Our second survey was more focused on those overseas voters already engaged with the election.

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.

# Campaigning at the elections

## Summary

### The experience of campaigning at the 2024 UK Parliamentary general election

- A record number of candidates stood at the UK general election. Despite the timing of the election, there was a robust and vibrant political debate, with campaigners engaging in a range of activities and voters being able to hear from a wide array of views.
- However, many candidates experienced unacceptable levels of intimidation and harassment, in particular directed at women and candidates from ethnic minority backgrounds. Over half of candidates responding to our survey said they avoided some form of campaigning because of fear of abuse.
- Abuse and intimidation risk putting off people wanting to stand for election, and can prevent voters being able to hear from candidates directly. 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.
- This was the first UK general election at which the digital imprints requirements applied. Candidates told us that they understood the requirement to include digital imprints and found it easy to comply with.
- The election presented new challenges to the nominations system, with reports of alleged fake candidates and multiple candidates of the same name. The requirements and checks for nominating candidates should be strengthened to make it harder for candidates to mislead voters about their true identity.

A total of [4,515 candidates stood for election](#) to the UK Parliament on 4 July, over a thousand more than at the 2019 UK general election. The candidates came from almost 100 political parties.

There were new UK parliamentary constituency boundaries for 584 seats (excluding four constituencies whose name only changed), whose candidates contested new seats or seats for which the boundaries (and electorate) had changed.

There were some changes in law ahead of the UK general election. For candidates and campaigners, this was the first UK general election at which the digital imprints requirements introduced by the [Elections Act](#) applied. It was also the first UK general election following a recent change to donation reporting thresholds, which meant parties were required to report donations over £11,180 (previously £7,500). Spending limits for political parties were also updated in line with inflation.

We will return to this in 2025 when we publish the spending returns from political parties and campaigners.

## Continued abuse and intimidation risks weakening public debate

Campaigning is a vital part of the democratic process. It allows voters to hear different views and make informed decisions. Political views can be diverse, and at time divisive.

Debate must be robust and open. But candidates must be able to campaign without feeling threatened.

After the elections in 2022 and 2023, our research highlighted that many candidates who responded to our survey reported experiencing some form of abuse or intimidation. As a result, we recommended that urgent action should be taken to address these problems.

In response to concerns about safety, a range of actors took steps to tackle abuse and intimidation in the run-up to the general election:

- For the first time, all candidates at the general election were offered basic security during the campaign. As part of Operation Bridger, they also had access to a dedicated, named, police contact in every force to raise concerns or threats against them
- The [Committee on Standards in Public Life](#) and [Equality and Human Rights Commission](#) called on parties and candidates to uphold standards of conduct and engage in respectful discourse
- We promoted a [campaign free from abuse and intimidation](#). We worked with the National Police Chiefs' Council, the College of Policing, the Crown Prosecution Service and the Police Service of Northern Ireland to publish [updated guidance to candidates](#).

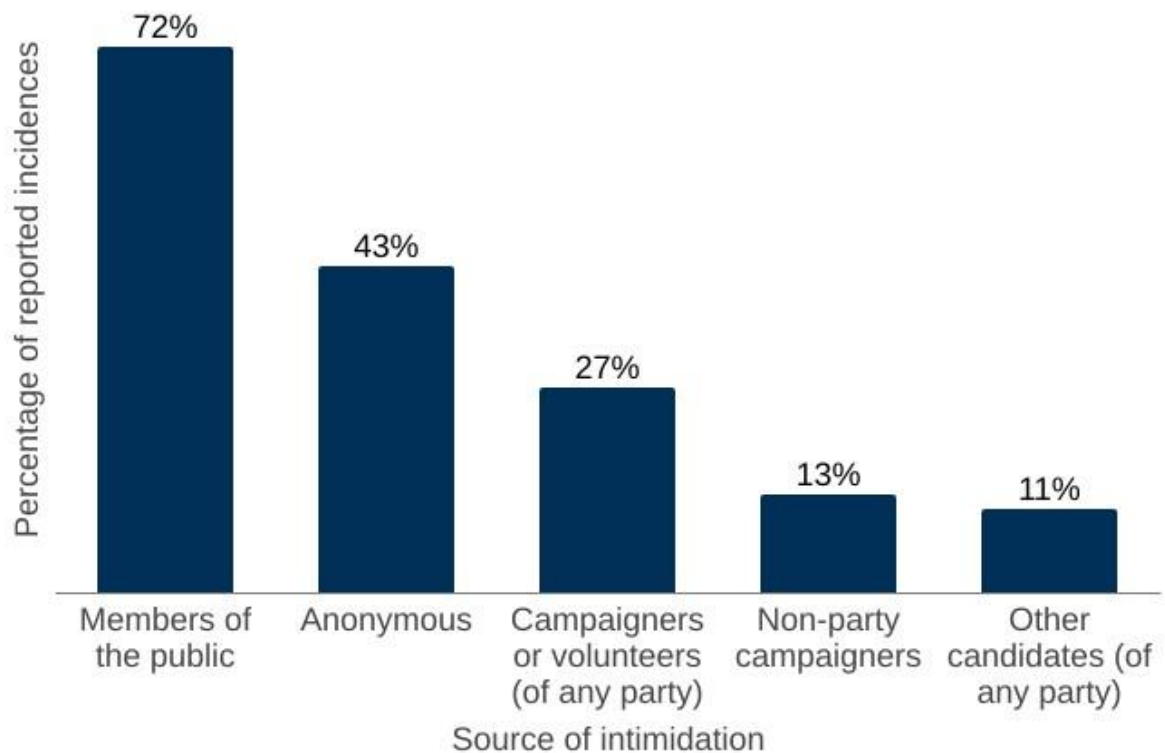
However, candidates and campaigners, and some electoral administrators, reported being subject to increased and unacceptable levels of abuse and intimidation online, on the campaign trail, at hustings, and at count venues. Ongoing international tensions in some cases led to an increase in antisemitic and Islamophobic abuse directed at candidates.

### **Many candidates continue to experience unacceptable levels of intimidation and harassment**

After the general election, we asked candidates whether they had experienced any problem with harassment, intimidation, or threats:

- Over half (55%) of respondents felt that they had some kind of problem with harassment, intimidation, or abuse, rating their problem a two or above on a one to five scale
- Just over one in 10 (13%) respondents said that they had a serious problem with abuse (a four or five out of five on the scale)

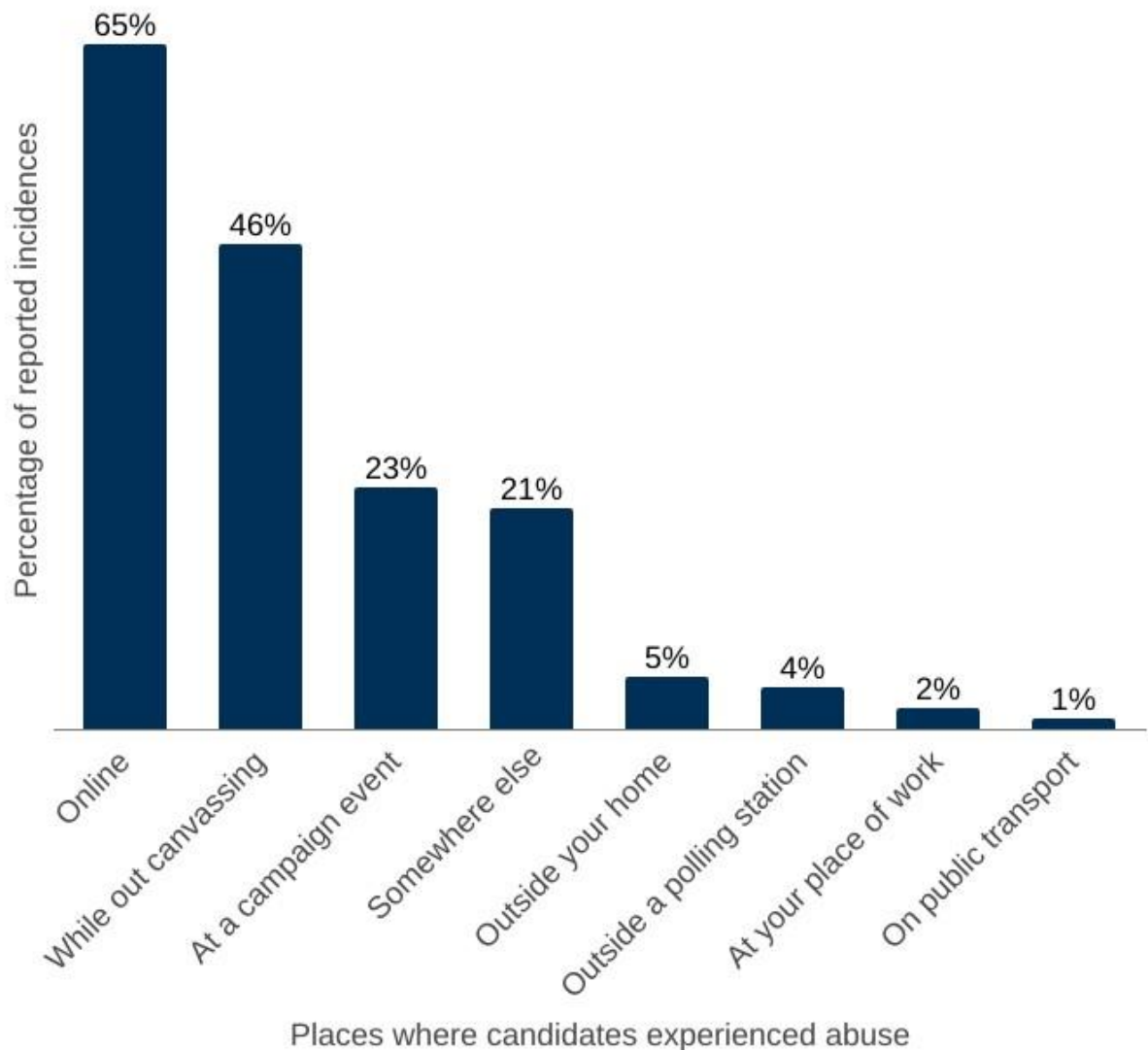
## Sources of harassment, intimidation and threats



We showed respondents a list of scenarios of abuse or harassment, including social media abuse, physical abuse, and threatening behaviour, and asked how often they had experienced them:

- Overall, 70% of respondents experienced one of the scenarios at least once during the UK general election campaign, with a quarter (26%) of candidates experiencing four different types of harassment, intimidation or abuse at least once
- A third of respondents were intimidated or intentionally made to feel unsafe at least once during their campaign. The same proportion had their campaign assets torn down or destroyed, while 30% had their property or campaign assets defaced or damaged.

## Where candidates reported experiencing harassment, intimidation and threats



During the campaign, we received reports of abusive and intimidatory campaign material, both online and in print, that did not include an imprint. This made it harder to identify the sources of the harassment.

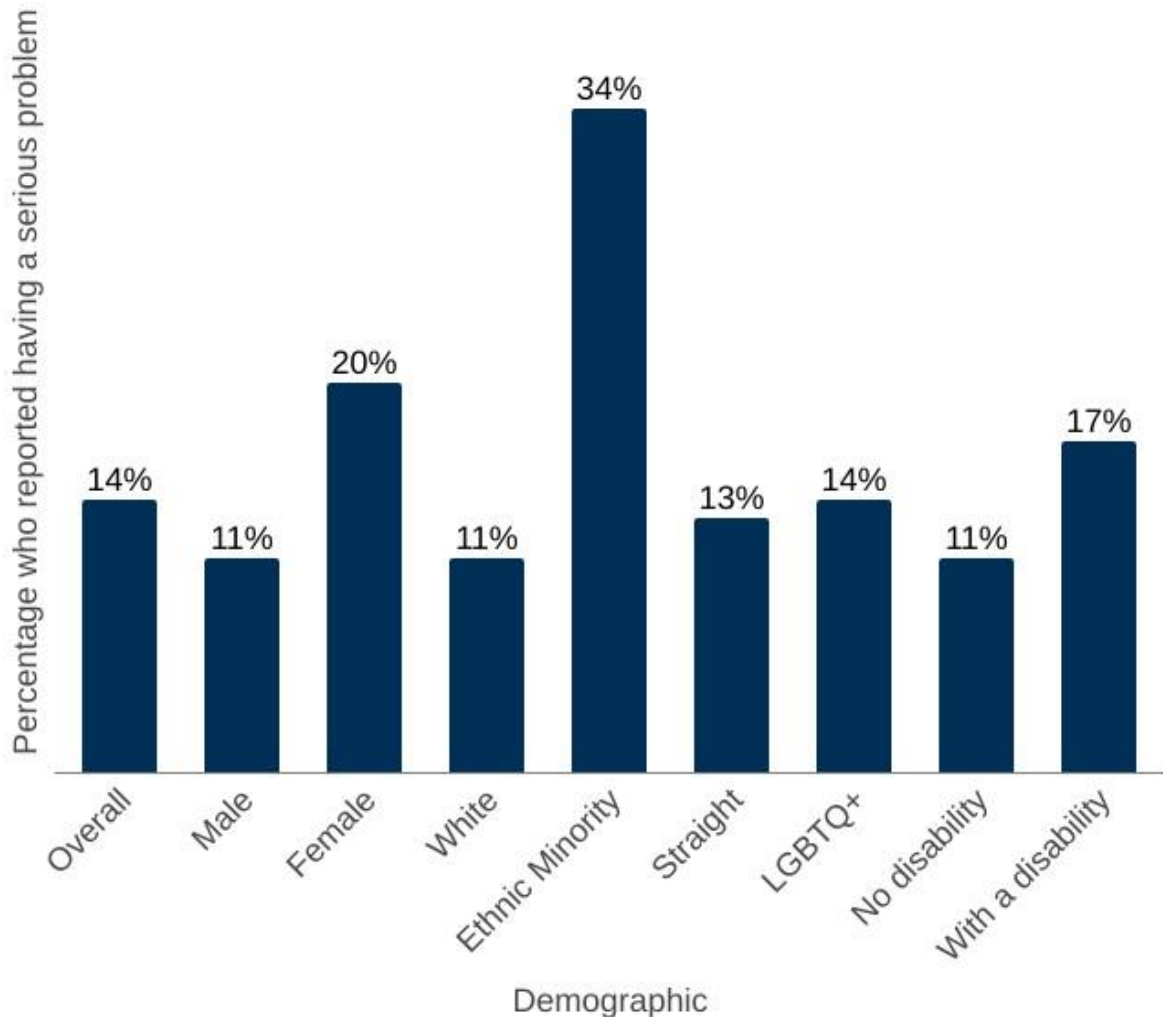
Abuse and intimidation can have a significant impact on candidates' campaign activity. The majority (56%) of respondents said they avoided some form of campaign activity at least once due to a fear of abuse:

- The activity candidates avoided doing the most was campaigning on their own. 44% of respondents said that they avoided doing so at least once. This rises to 66% of female respondents
- One third (32%) of respondents said they had avoided talking about or giving their opinions on controversial topics to avoid harassment
- Around one in five avoided using social media (23%), putting up campaign materials (20%), and attending face-to-face campaign activities (17%) at least once.

## Some groups of candidates were more likely to experience abuse and intimidation

Female respondents and respondents from ethnic minority backgrounds were more likely to report having experienced serious abuse.

### Candidate intimidation by demographic



When choosing from the examples of the intimidation experienced, female respondents to our survey were more likely than male candidates to report being touched, hugged, or kissed against their will.

In follow-up interviews, we spoke to four female candidates and received written evidence from others, including MPs and political parties, about their experiences of abuse. There was a clear feeling that the abuse and harassment they received during the campaign was targeted at them because of their gender, and that they received more abuse than men.



*When I was going around knocking on doors, I had really abusive males. They were just full-on, in your face saying [my party] was a load of crap and politics was wrong and they were swearing at you and, you know, it was really unpleasant. [...] I just stopped knocking on the doors and just leafleted in the end. My husband did most of the door knocking for me instead because being*

*a male he had a better rapport. But I still think that it's incredibly sad because they obviously don't respond to a female wanting to put themselves forward.*

**Female, England, 45-54; Received damage and destruction of campaign materials, social media abuse, and intimidatory behaviour.**



*I don't know how you address it. I don't know what the root cause of it is. I think the women bear the brunt of this because we're perceived as an easier target to convince not to [run].*

**Female, England, 45-54; Received threats of harm, intimidatory behaviour, damage and destruction of campaign materials, social media abuse, and was touched against her will.**

Respondents from ethnic minority backgrounds were more likely than any other demographic groups to say they experienced each of the intimidation scenarios we presented to respondents (apart from being touched, hugged, or kissed against their will).

They were also more likely to have:

- received offensive social media posts about their ethnicity (55%) or religion (41%) than all respondents (15% and 10% respectively)
- been intimidated or intentionally made to feel unsafe (58%) than women (39%), white respondents (32%) and men (31%).

Disabled respondents were twice as likely to have been physically attacked, hit, or had something thrown at them compared to respondents without a disability (10% versus 5%). They were also slightly more likely to have received social media abuse than those without a disability (60% compared with 51%).

**Cases of abuse and intimidation sometimes go unreported**

Only one in five (21%) of the respondents who told us they received abuse, harassment or intimidation reported it to the police.

The most common reason given for not reporting abuse was that candidates felt it was too low-level or was not serious enough to be worth reporting. Others said that they did not report it because they felt there was no point or that nothing would be done as a result.



*It was sufficiently minor to be annoying and hurtful rather than intimidating or threatening.*

**Male, Northern Ireland, 55-64; Received social media abuse**



*It was only on Twitter and there is no point. There is also no point in reporting it to Twitter because it never meets their thresholds for action anymore.*

**Female, Scotland, 35-44; Received social media abuse**





*[Abuse is] basically considered normal and I doubt anything would be done about it.*

### **Female, England, 45-54; Received social media abuse and was belittled or insulted**

When instances of abuse and intimidation were reported to the police, candidates reported mixed experiences with the response they received. When it came to dealing with reports of intimidation and abuse from candidates, our survey of [single points of contact](#) (SPOC) officers in police forces, who are responsible for providing advice about election-related crime, found that 61% of respondents were confident that they knew where to direct candidates to get advice or to report an issue.

Over half (53%) of SPOCs who responded to our survey said that the number of reports of threats, abuse and intimidation they received at this election had gone up in comparison to previous elections.



*[We] received less [Representation of the People Act 1983] type offences (imprints etc) but more complaints of harassment on social media, intimidation and physical assault. Most of the reports were between candidates and agents rather than intimidation or abuse from members of the public. The build-up in the final week prior to the election saw the most tension and increased reports. Many candidates reported 'threats' or harassment online which were not of criminal nature and more aligned to freedom of speech.*



*Candidates were harassed from hustings and canvassing, being chased in cars. Electoral posters were damaged and defaced. Material was created that was abusive and insulting (posters of candidates that had been doctored).*

### **Urgent action is needed to address abuse and intimidation**

Strong differences of opinion are a normal part of political debate and campaigning. But it is never appropriate to abuse or intimidate campaigners. Unacceptable behaviour and negative political rhetoric may prevent campaigners from undertaking legitimate activities and may put some people off standing as a candidate altogether.

Several legislative changes have been made in recent years across the UK to tackle these problems. The [Elections Act](#) introduced a new electoral sanction to deter individuals from intimidating candidates or campaigners, by barring those convicted of a criminal offence from standing for, being elected to, or holding elective office for five years. It also clarified which activities are considered undue influence on voters (which is when someone uses, or threatens to use, force or violence to make someone vote a certain way or not vote at all) to make the legislation easier to interpret and enforce.

Candidates' home addresses no longer need to be printed on ballot papers or shown on statements of persons nominated. The Welsh Government has extended this to candidates who are acting as their own election agent since 2022. They can provide a correspondence address which would be published in the statement of persons nominated and the public notice of the name and address of election agents instead.

Reasonable expenses which can be attributed to the protection of individuals or property do not count as election spending for candidates or parties. For example, hiring security,

using a PO Box to avoid publicising a home or office address on imprints, or purchasing antivirus software for protecting campaign computers.

In Northern Ireland, Stormont's Assembly Commission [announced it would set up a fund](#) to pay for increased security measures at the homes and offices of Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs).

While there has been progress in several areas, legislative change is only part of the response to the increasing levels of abuse and intimidation, which continue to have a detrimental impact on campaigning.

Following the general election, the Speaker of the House of Commons announced he would convene a [Speaker's Conference on abuse and intimidation](#). This is expected to consider 'the factors influencing the threat levels against candidates and MPs and the effectiveness of the response to such threats'. The Speaker's Conference will be central to developing effective responses to these problems and it is expected to 'make recommendations about the arrangements necessary to secure free and fair elections and the appropriate protection of candidates at future UK-wide parliamentary elections and of elected representatives thereafter.'

#### **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.

## Some voters did not receive the information they needed from campaigners

Campaigners engaged with voters in a range of ways ahead of the elections and many felt able to get their views across effectively. However, voters did not always receive information that was accurate, reliable or accessible to them.

### **Some candidates struggled to communicate with voters**

At a general election, candidates are entitled to free postage on an 'election address' (a leaflet) to voters in their constituency. The address must only include information relating to the election and is delivered by Royal Mail. There is a similar offering at mayoral elections, where candidates have an opportunity to tell voters about themselves and their policies in the mayoral booklet, which is produced by the local Returning Officer. For Police and Crime Commissioner elections, the [Choose My PCC](#) website collates information on candidates.

Candidates engaged with voters using a variety of methods. We found that:

- social media was the most used method, chosen by 83% of respondents
- over three-quarters of candidates told us they used leaflets/newsletters/flyers (78%) and a free election address via Royal Mail (75%)
- over half of respondents said they went canvassing door-to-door and attended in-person meetings (both 59%)
- around four in 10 respondents said they used posters or billboards (44%) or websites/digital advertising (41%)

Just under one in ten (9%) said they used artificial intelligence (AI) during their campaign. AI was used for a range of tasks, such as drafting responses to emails from voters, summarising manifestoes for campaign materials, generating images, and data analysis (e.g. for targeting purposes).

Fewer than half (48%) of respondents agreed that they were able to effectively get their views across to voters during the campaign and 39% disagreed (12% said they neither agreed nor disagreed). Of those who disagreed, the most common reasons given were:

- inequalities between big and small parties, and between parties and independents
- media bias or lack of media coverage
- issues with the Royal Mail freepost scheme
- short timescale due to the snap election announcement

Most reasons are common themes at previous elections, but issues with Royal Mail have become more prominent among candidates at the general election.

Around three quarters of respondents sent out leaflets as part of their campaign, both using Royal Mail's free election address (75%) and paying for postage themselves (78%). Around one in five who said they had difficulties getting their views across to voters mentioned the postal service in their reason (21%).



*Trying to communicate to over 70,000 people is beyond challenging. The Freepost is unreliable and often goes out before the postal votes.”*

**Male, England, 65-74**



*The Royal Mail Freepost scheme was patchy and many voters did not receive theirs. As a disabled candidate I am at a distinct disadvantage as I am unable to knock on doors. A lot of voters remarked on this. I feel discriminated against as there is no extra money available to help me campaign effectively.*

**Female, England, 45-54**



*We must change the Mayor Booklet to a link only on a website where people can view. The cost of a hard copy booklet is a waste of public money.*

**Electoral administrator, London**

At the mayoral elections in May 2024, some concerns were raised about the mayoral booklet, such as:

- the cost and effectiveness of producing printed mayoral booklets
- the burden on candidates in providing a statement, and on administrators editing them
- the inconsistent approach with PCC elections.

Any review of how printed candidate booklets are produced and distributed should consider how to ensure that options are accessible to all voters, including those who are digitally excluded.

Despite this, more traditional methods remain an effective way for candidates to communicate with the public. The most common ways people reported seeing information were:

- a leaflet or flyer from a candidate or political party (63%)
- TV news (48%)
- social media (39%)
- a news website (35%)
- TV debates (35%)
- word of mouth (24%)

Our research with the public after the general election also found that:

- most people thought it was easy to get information, including on voter ID (87% said it was easy), the different ways to vote, and the candidates and parties running for election (both 83%)
- the public were more uncertain on how easy it was to get information on applying for a Voter Authority Certificate, with only 36% saying it was easy and 54% saying they did not know (10% said it was difficult)

- over four in five (85%) agreed that there was enough information or coverage on the election, including voter ID (84%) and how to cast their vote (82%)
- just under three-quarters (72%) of people said they had enough information on candidates to make an informed decision.

### **Many people said they saw or heard misinformation during the election**

Ahead of the general election, we [published information and advice](#) for voters on how to engage confidently with campaign material and to think critically about material they saw and heard. We called on all campaigners not to mislead voters and to consider how their campaign material would be received, particularly when using generative AI. We worked with other organisations, including regulators and social media companies, to help people understand how candidates, political parties and other organisations campaign for their vote.

Our post-election survey found that:

- over half of people said they saw misleading or inaccurate information about political parties' policies (61%) and candidates (52%) at the general election
- fewer than one third (30%) saw misleading or inaccurate information about how the elections work
- around a quarter (24%) saw or heard a deepfake photo, video or audio clip about the election
- just over one in 10 (12% to 13%) people said they did not know whether they saw inaccurate or misleading information about policies, candidates or the elections,
- almost one-fifth (18%) said they did not know if they had seen or heard a deepfake, suggesting there is perhaps confusion among the public about being able to identify this type of content

The most common response to seeing or hearing misleading content was to ignore it (64%). Around half (49%) of respondents said they took specific action, such as fact-checking or reporting this information in some way. Of these, only one in 10 (12%) said they reported it to the platform they saw it on.

Younger people were somewhat more likely to say they took action (57% of those aged 18 to 34, compared with 46% of those aged 55 to 64 and 48% of those aged 65 to 74).

### **Candidates found the digital imprints regime easy to comply with**

The 2024 local elections and UK general election were the first large-scale electoral events, outside of Scotland, where imprints were required on some forms of digital campaign material. We first called for this change in 2003.

Imprints state who is responsible for publishing campaign material, providing transparency for voters about who is campaigning.

The Scottish Government introduced new requirements for imprints on digital campaign material for Scottish Parliamentary and local elections in December 2020. The rules were in force for the first time at the 2021 Scottish Parliament elections.

We provided [statutory guidance](#) explaining how the new digital imprints regime would operate, and met with parties, candidates and campaigners to inform them of this new requirement.

Responsibility for ensuring that digital material has a compliant imprint is split between us and the police, depending on the type of material. We received several complaints about potentially missing or non-compliant imprints during the elections. We communicated with parties, candidates and campaigners if a breach of the regime had been identified.

We did not see evidence of significant levels of non-compliance. Many of the complaints we received related to material that had a compliant imprint. Where we identified a breach, most campaigners responded to our advice and amended their imprints.

Most candidates who responded to our survey broadly agreed that they understood the requirements to include digital imprints (86%), and over two-thirds (69%) said it was easy to meet the requirement.

Our survey of SPOCs following this year's elections said they experienced several issues relating to digital imprints. Some of these issues were because of the number of reports received, while others came from uncertainty about how to interpret the legislation when responding to reports.

SPOCs told us that they would like more information and guidance about digital imprints, including about the application to social media. But it appears that they were generally able to resolve the queries or complaints they received.



*We received a few imprint allegations where the material was not promoting a party or candidate but was just anti a particular candidate or party. There doesn't seem to be much information on [Authorised Professional Practice] or in the legislation about this. It says that the material has to be promoting a candidate or party but can also include campaigning against a candidate, but there is no further information about what campaigning against a candidate would look like and whether anybody can commit this offence. We were unsure whether this was actually an offence so had to seek advice from [the Electoral Commission].*

SPOCs gave more detail in their response to our 2024 local elections survey. The issues they shared were:

- challenges determining which posts on social media constituted 'election material'
- the complexity of the regime
- the division of responsibilities between the police and the Commission, which meant it was not always clear who to approach
- character-limiting platforms making it difficult to include imprints within the post
- understanding whether [organic election material](#) required an imprint
- the need to clarify whether imprints should be on every post, or on a home page/profile.

We are doing further work to evaluate the implementation of the regime. It will consider how campaigners complied with it and whether we can recommend changes that would improve transparency for voters.

## Elections should be accessible to everyone

Parties published their manifestos in good time before the election, but not all were available in accessible formats, such as easy read or BSL, either at all or in good time. This can make it harder for some people to decide how to vote. This is an issue [we have highlighted previously](#), yet political parties routinely fail to provide information about their policies in accessible formats.

Political parties should make sure accessible versions of their manifesto are published at the same time. Disabled people should have just as much time as anyone else to understand what the parties stand for.

Currently, disabled candidates cannot access financial support to stand as candidates at UK general elections. The UK Government provided some financial support in the past, such as the [Access to Elected Office Fund](#), which ran between 2012 and 2015. This fund allowed disabled candidates to bid for funding for support, to ensure they were not disadvantaged due to the greater costs they may incur while campaigning due to their disability. The forms of support could have included items such as BSL interpreters, a personal assistant to assist with specific tasks, or taxi fares where no other suitable transport was available.

Equivalent funds are available for disabled people standing at devolved elections in Scotland and Wales. A similar scheme could be set up for reserved elections to remove barriers to candidates engaging in the democratic process, and to ensure voters can hear from a range of campaigners.

## Some candidates presented new challenges to the system

Candidates who responded to our survey were broadly content with the process of becoming a candidate and participating in the election. They had high levels of confidence that the election was well-run, and that voting was generally safe from fraud and abuse.

However, some raised issues around collecting signatures. This was compounded in some areas by reported difficulties getting hold of the electoral register from local authorities. They also raised issues with the paper-based system of forms, which many complained was an outdated approach.



*It is the year 2024 and we are still having to mess about with paper forms – I am sure some of the forms could be electronic, or at the very least scanned and emailed into the council. Also, when it comes to signatures, it was only when I was collecting these for my candidate that I found out a couple of people weren't even registered to vote (they thought they were) – so that was beneficial for them as it meant they were able to make sure they were registered, but it meant I had to run around looking for more people to sign the nomination form. We don't need signatures for other elections, so I'm not sure why this still exists for UK elections.*

**Male, Scotland, 35-44**



## **Some candidates posed a challenge to administrators and risked confusing voters**

During the election campaign, we received several reports of alleged fake candidates or multiple candidates with the same name standing in specific constituencies. In some cases, these nominations were intended to confuse or mislead voters, for example by seeking to impersonate a real candidate.

In one case, YouTuber Niko Omilana encouraged his followers to stand as a candidate under the name 'Niko Omilana' in at least 11 constituencies. It was unclear at the time – but subsequently established – whether, beyond the YouTuber himself, the other candidates had legally changed their name.

To stand for election a candidate must complete a set of nomination papers and sign a declaration of truth that the details they have provided are accurate. There is no requirement for a candidate to show ID as part of this, but it is an offence to provide a false statement on nomination papers, including to falsely confirm that they are not standing in another constituency. If a false statement was provided, the police have the power to investigate.

There are limited and specific grounds in the law for determining a nomination to be invalid. Under electoral law, Returning Officers must take the details provided in candidate nomination forms at face value, and accept the nomination if it meets the requirements. They do not have the power to investigate or research the information provided by the candidate.

However, some candidates may legally change their name. Others may be unaware of the rules and risk inadvertently breaking the law.

### **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 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 identity 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 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.

### **The system of co-option in Northern Ireland risks not following voters' decisions**

In Northern Ireland, vacancies in the Assembly and in the 11 local councils are filled through a process called 'co-option': instead of holding a by-election, the nominating officer of a political party fills the vacancy created by the resignation or death of one of their members. This is because these elections use the Single Transferable Vote system, so co-option is in place to ensure that the preference of electors at the previous election continues to be reflected.

Following the 2024 UK general election, four sitting MLAs and one councillor were elected as MPs, so they had to resign from their other elected positions. Through co-option, the vacancies in the Assembly were replaced by a sitting councillor. This created a further four vacancies to be filled in the local councils, also through co-option.

There has been an increase in use of co-option in recent years. For example:

- nine MLAs (10% of all MLAs) and 24 councillors (5% of all council seats) have been co-opted since the 2022 and 2023 elections respectively
- between May 2019 and December 2022, 90 council vacancies were filled through co-option
- between March 2017 and March 2022, 29 MLAs were co-opted into the Assembly.

Co-option removes democratic choice from voters and reduces transparency. This issue is likely to be exacerbated in 2027 when both the Assembly and local government elections are scheduled to take place.

A 'substitution list' provided by candidates at the time of nomination may be one possible solution to this issue. Ahead of the 2027 elections, we will engage with the UK Government and political parties to maintain integrity and confidence in the electoral process.

# Delivering the elections

## Summary

### **The experience of electoral administration at the 2024 UK Parliamentary general election**

- Electoral administrators were able to deliver well-run elections in challenging circumstances. However, there were new layers of risk and complexity added to an already stretched process. This included the timing of the UK general election, several new legislative changes, and new parliamentary boundaries.
- Local authority resilience is reliant on a complex and fragmented funding framework and underpinned by an outdated and increasingly complex system of electoral law. The challenges to the resilience of the electoral system – including funding – need to be addressed.
- The capacity and resilience of suppliers remain a key concern for electoral administrators. To continue to deliver well-run elections that meet voters' expectations, they need to rely on fully functional, joined up digital systems. This includes electoral management software and the digital systems that the UK Government provides.

Local authority officers and their teams are responsible for several, crucial processes. This includes electoral registration, managing the nominations process, absent voting, polling stations, and the counting of votes. Alongside these, the UK general election was the first time that administrators across the UK had to deliver the changes introduced by the Elections Act on a large scale at a high-profile poll.

## Pressures on the capacity and resilience of elections teams are increasing

The UK general election was challenging for several reasons. This included:

- its timing
- the number of legislative changes being implemented for the first time at a high-profile UK-wide poll
- the implementation of the new parliamentary boundaries.

Additionally, at a general election, the law requires that Returning Officers must start the count within four hours of the close of poll. Those unable to do so must submit their reasons to us (see Appendix B).

Feedback from electoral administrators reflected concerns of increasing complexity of administering elections. Similarly, around four in ten polling station staff (43%) who responded to our survey and who had worked at previous UK general elections said that their experience was more difficult compared with previous polls.

Despite significant changes and challenges to delivery processes, the elections were delivered successfully. However, the capacity and resilience of the broader electoral

system continues to be a key area of concern, especially with several, new, interconnected and complex changes layered onto an already stretched system.

### **Administrators had limited time to prepare for the UK general election**

The UK general election had to take place before the end of January 2025. It was widely reported that it would take place in the second half of 2024. However, the exact date of the election was not known until the announcement on 22 May.

The election was called less than three weeks after elections in England and Wales had taken place. For those in Scotland and Northern Ireland, polling day (4 July) coincided with the start of the school summer holidays.

The timetable for UK general elections, and the lack of a fixed date, meant that elections teams only had 25 working days to prepare for and deliver the election. This included processing the over 2.8 million applications to register to vote received between 22 May and the registration deadline on 27 June.

### **New processes and legislative changes placed additional pressures on administrators**

Since the [Elections Act](#), election teams have been responsible for several new activities. These include:

- processing Voter Authority Certificate and Anonymous Elector's Document applications
- the issuing of temporary Voter Authority Certificates or Anonymous Elector's Documents
- providing equipment and support in polling stations
- processing postal votes handed in at polling stations.

The general election was also the first time British and eligible Irish citizens, who were previously registered or resident in the UK and who have lived overseas for more than 15 years, were eligible to vote.

There was also an increase in the number of postal vote applications during the period before the application deadline compared to the last UK general election. This placed significant time and resource pressures on administrators, because they could not issue postal votes before the close of candidate nominations on 7 June. We cover postal voting in more detail earlier in this report.

Our survey of administrators asked respondents to rate on a one to five scale whether they had any issues with specific processes:

- around nine in 10 (89%) told us they experienced at least some issues (rated as a two or above) with processing domestic absent vote applications (both online and offline)
- 95% said they had issues with overseas applications.

Processing overseas voter applications took up a lot of administrators' time. Administrators responding to our survey reported multiple issues with voters not having the documentation to be able to register. There were fewer issues reported with more familiar processes, including domestic registration applications.

Duplicate and last-minute applications continue to be an issue. In some cases, administrators described the number received as ‘astronomical’ or ‘off the scale’. Our electoral data shows that 39% of register to vote applications in Great Britain received before the general election, were duplicates.



*We would often have more duplicates than new registrations taking up our time.*

There was a specific, additional challenge at the Greater London Authority (GLA) and London Mayoral elections in May, where votes were counted manually for the first time. They had previously been counted electronically since 2000. Although they managed to count manually without any problems, feedback from administrators highlighted the logistical and management challenge of manual counting over multiple days, including being able to find count staff and appropriate venues.

### **New constituency boundaries were an additional consideration for administrators**

New constituency boundaries were in place for the first time at this general election. Some candidates contested new or changed seats. There were also new combinations of local authorities within different constituencies due to changes in constituency boundaries. Many of the cross-boundary arrangements which administrators had developed for the 2019 general election no longer applied and new ones had to be put in place within the limited time available. This included arrangements for sharing information and the production and supply of voting materials, such as the details to include on the notices of election.

Almost a quarter of administrators responding to our survey said that they did not experience any problems in managing the new parliamentary boundaries. The remaining three-quarters did experience at least some issues. Some highlighted specific problems with using different Electoral Management Systems (EMS) across local authorities.



*Cross boundaries was an added risk to the election given that our partner authority didn't have the expertise to provide us with the information required on numerous areas without being asked and reminded.*



*Cross boundaries caused extreme problems with understanding and data management from colleagues. Extremely confusing for electors when applying for replacement postal votes which had to be collected in person from the take-on authority which is a considerable distance from the give-away authority. Cross boundaries impossible to explain to contact centre staff taking calls. All in all, I would say this was the biggest nightmare we had.*

### **Finding and retaining sufficient staff presented challenges**

We received feedback from 47% of local authorities after the elections. Comments and views received from administrators show that finding and retaining staff remains a key concern.

When asked to indicate how much of a problem they had with recruiting staff, we found that:

- 90% of respondents experienced problems recruiting polling station staff, with one-in-eight (13%) experiencing significant issues
- 93% of respondents said that they had experienced at least some issues retaining polling station staff between recruitment and polling day
- recruiting count staff was less of a problem, with a third (33%) of respondents saying that they had no issues

Comments from administrators highlighted that the increased complexity of the work, combined with the rate of pay offered, impacted their ability to recruit and retain staff. Others noted the difficulties created by the timing of the election during the holiday period in Scotland and Northern Ireland.



*The biggest single staffing issue remains the inability to recruit and retain Presiding Officers as their remit increases in amount and difficulty election on election, but their fees do not.*



*Difficulty in recruiting experienced staff due to the election taking place during Scottish school holidays.*

Administrators also highlighted how the requirement for the general election count to start within four hours of the close of poll affected recruitment and placed additional pressure on staff.



*Staff recruitment was a challenge as we couldn't use our polling staff.*



*It feels as though we are being pressed for quick results and are criticised if we take too long to complete. When everyone has been working 12+ hours a day for the past few weeks, being clear-headed is not easy creating delays to decision making.*



*For a lot of staff it is a 24 hour day and this is a concern.*

We are aware that at this year's elections there were several errors which could have impacted the confidence levels of candidates, agents and voters in the effectiveness and integrity of the electoral process. This included two issues at the May polls and two at the UK general election, where we concluded that the Returning Officers did not meet elements of our performance standards. Of these, three related to the counting and the declaration of results:

- **incorrect result declaration made:** at the May local elections in Maidstone, the Returning Officer read out the incorrect candidate due to an error on the results sheet for a parish council count
- **counting errors:** at the general election in Wandsworth, an error was made when tallying the totals, with 6,558 votes not included in the declaration made on election night. Once added, these did not change the election result. In Richmond, also for the general election, a spreadsheet error led to the total number of votes for one

candidate being under reported by 688 votes. The declared outcome did not change but it changed the results order.

The final issue occurred earlier in the electoral process:

- **polling districts swapped between wards:** during the May local elections in Epping Forest, an error, discovered after polling, resulted in 1,394 voters in one ward being instructed to vote for candidates in another ward. Following agreement from candidates, the votes were subsequently counted and the result declared.

Since the elections, we have engaged with the Returning Officers and their teams to identify the cause of the issues to prevent similar problems from arising in the future. We will continue to support the Returning Officers as they implement the necessary improvements to processes to help ensure that voters, candidates and political parties can continue to have confidence in the delivery of election processes.

## Administrators need to be able to rely on suppliers and systems

Elections are delivered through complex systems involving many different partners, including commercial suppliers. There are a limited number of suppliers and contractors who can provide services. Lack of capacity was a key concern for administrators. Administrators also raised concerns about the suitability of digital systems which they use to manage a range of election processes. This includes EMS systems as well as the Electoral Registration Officer Portal (EROP).

Throughout the election, we worked closely with electoral administrators, the UK Government, and key suppliers, including through the Electoral Coordination Advisory Board, to ensure any issues could be identified and, where possible, mitigated or resolved. In Wales and Scotland respectively, the Wales Electoral Coordination Board (WECB) and the EMB for Scotland went to great lengths to support the wider electoral community.

### **Electoral administrators raised concerns about the capacity and resilience of suppliers**

Thanks to their exceptional efforts and commitment, electoral administrators were able to make the system work well to deliver both the May and July elections. On the whole, suppliers and contractors delivered as required, and there were no widespread, systemic problems with delivery.

However, administrators raised concerns around the capacity and resilience of their suppliers, especially given the tight timeframes and high volumes at the general election. During the election, we received reports of some localised issues with the delivery of postal votes, with software suppliers, and with ballot paper proofing and printing.

Administrators responding to our survey also reported experiencing some problems with suppliers and systems. This included with the ERO portal, EMS or print providers, and Royal Mail.

In some cases, these problems exacerbated the issues covered in this report, including the volume of applications and the administration of postal voting.



*Volume of applications and the inability to adequately manage applications within the portal caused inefficiency and added risk. Duplicate registration applications were significant. Short timetable and little notice of the election prevented appropriate planning. No management information available at the portal prevented effective tracking of workload and bottlenecks.*



*We had issues with post not arriving (mainly polling cards, some postal packs), the length of time items were taking in the post (incoming and outgoing), and postal votes going to the wrong authority.*

The resilience of the supplier market continues to pose considerable risks to the delivery of elections. Forums like the WECB or the EMB for Scotland can ensure mitigations and contingencies are put in place. But supply chain failure risks disrupting the entire system.

### **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.

### **Digital systems do not always work well enough for administrators**

Ten years on since the introduction of [individual electoral registration](#) and the launch of the Individual Electoral Registration Digital Service (IERDS), there are now a number of digital services that electoral administrators are dependent on – this includes websites where voters can apply for an absent vote or request a Voter Authority Certificate, as well as the EROP. Both the IERDS and EROP are managed by the Ministry of Housing,



Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), which means that the UK Government is a vital service provider to Electoral Registration Officers and Returning Officers in a way that it was not previously.

In the run-up to and during both the May and July elections, administrators raised concerns about the operation and functionality of centrally provided digital systems, in particular the new online absent vote application process, as well as the compatibility between EMS systems and the centralised EROP. It was felt that having different digital systems (central and more localised) was resulting in reduced oversight and control of processes by Electoral Registration Officers and Returning Officers. In Scotland and Wales, a further issue was posed by the divergent requirements for reserved and devolved elections, given there is currently no mechanism to apply for an absent vote online for devolved polls.



*The interface with EMS and EROP for overseas electors is one of the most complex processes the team have ever had to deal with, it is a multi-stage, multi-screen, process with no logical flow.*



*The use of separate Government portals for VACs, postals and proxies which did not easily communicate with each other made things overly complicated and again took the core elections time away from other duties. Whilst this may improve efficiency for electors, it does the opposite for administrators and makes it extremely clunky when processing alongside the EMS.*

A consistent theme in feedback from administrators was that EROP was ‘not fit for purpose’, with many expressing frustration at ‘glitches’ and ‘clunkiness’. Feedback from administrators highlighted the limited functionality of the EROP and the fact it did not easily integrate with existing EMS software. Some administrators told us they had to develop workarounds to overcome these challenges. Processing duplicate applications and overseas electors were a particular difficulty with the software.



*From 22 May to deadline days, 26,000 register to vote applications received, 15,500 postal vote applications, 3,000 proxy application and 600 VAC applications. The EROP not developed enough to cope with these volumes. We had to bring in significant additional support to cope.*



*Having three separate systems for postal, proxy and overseas applications meant that some electors were disenfranchised. It is impossible to monitor where someone has applied in more than one portal – so, for example, an elector applies to register overseas and also asks for a postal vote at the same time. The [postal vote application] gets worked first, but because we don't know they have made an application to register as an overseas (either because it hasn't been processed yet or only very recently), the postal vote is attached to their current domestic registration. Literally the same day/a couple of days later the [overseas application] is processed – domestic registration is removed and so is the postal vote attached. Significant numbers of [overseas electors] found they had no postal vote because of this exact scenario.*

Reliance on centralised systems may also have had repercussions on the voter experience. Some administrators raised concerns with the information and messaging provided to both domestic and overseas voters with regards to when and/or how to apply for an absent vote, and when they might expect to receive their postal votes.

While improvements can and should be made to the voter-facing system, not least to ensure clearer messaging, more significant changes to the operation of digital systems are required to support administrators to deliver their duties.



*The single national portal for applications is beneficial to electors, but takes them out of the local conversation where more useful local knowledge about when we can send postal votes and considerations for sending postal votes overseas is available. The national portal back-ends this communication until after the application is made, frustrating voters who may have chosen a different option had they had all of the relevant information in advance. The performance of the EMS in sending communications to applicants is too slow to keep up with the volume of work coming through, requiring officers to run letters and emails overnight and on additional laptops to keep up.*

#### **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.

# Appendix A: Summary of recommendations

## List of recommendations

### **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.

### **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.

### **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.

#### **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.

### **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 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 identity 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 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.

### **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.

**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.



# Appendix B: Count statements

## Constituencies where the count did not commence on time

At a UK general election, the counting of votes must begin as soon as practicable within four hours of the close of poll. Returning Officers should ensure they take all reasonable steps to start the count by 2am.

If they cannot, they must:

- publish and send us a statement setting out the time at which counting did begin
- the steps taken to comply with the duty
- the reasons why the counting of votes did not commence by 2am.

We are required to publish a list of all constituencies where counting did not begin within the prescribed timescale:

- Angus and Perthshire Glens
- Arbroath and Broughty Ferry
- Braintree
- Dumfries and Galloway
- Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale
- North Northumberland
- Orkney and Shetland
- Witham