

Report on the May 2023 local elections in England

September 2023



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Executive summary

This report looks at how the May 2023 elections in England were run, how voters and campaigners found taking part, and what lessons can be learned for the future. We have reported separately on the [local elections in Northern Ireland](#).

On 4 May local council elections took place in many areas of England. There were also local mayoral elections in Bedford, Leicester, Mansfield, and Middlesbrough. These were the first elections in Great Britain where changes introduced by the Elections Act were in place.

Voters needed to show photographic identification (ID) to vote in a polling station, and this report draws on a wider range of evidence to build on our June 2023 [interim analysis](#). It confirms the interim findings that most people who wanted to vote were able to do so, but that some groups struggled to meet the ID requirement. Our evidence indicates that this stems from two overlapping issues: variations in levels of ownership of accepted ID, and in awareness of the new requirement. We have recommended changes to the UK Government to improve accessibility and support people who do not have accepted ID.

These elections also saw increased flexibility as to what support and equipment can be provided at polling stations to enable, or make it easier for, disabled people to vote independently. Although Returning Officers provided a range of support at polling stations, voter awareness of what is available continues to be low and more can be done to ensure disabled voters receive the support they need.

More generally, candidates engaged with voters in a range of ways ahead of the elections and voters found it easy to access information, although this did not necessarily lead to them feeling well-informed.

Concerns remain about the number of candidates experiencing intimidation or harassment however, with many telling us they experienced some form of harassment in this election at least once. Coordinated action from partners across the electoral community is needed to ensure candidates and campaigners can participate freely in the democratic process without fear of intimidation.

Significant changes to the process of voting added new layers of complexity and risk to already stretched electoral administration processes, and the capacity and resilience of election teams remains a key risk for future elections. Despite these challenging circumstances, electoral administrators were able to deliver well-run elections.

Further significant changes are expected to be implemented ahead of elections in 2024 and the next UK Parliamentary general election. To ensure electoral administrators can continue to deliver well-run elections that meet voters' expectations, the UK Government must ensure there is sufficient time and capacity and fully functioning operational resources to support them.

Summary of recommendations

Recommendation 1: Increase awareness of the support available for disabled voters

There is some evidence that levels of awareness of the support and equipment available, especially in polling stations, is still lower than it could be. This includes awareness of both the new accessibility measures and the existing provisions that are available (such as the possibility of asking a companion or polling station staff for help with voting).

We will continue to work with the electoral community, national and local civil society organisations, and the media to raise awareness of the support that is available for disabled voters. We will also work with them to further develop our voter information resources for disabled voters.

This work should include pro-actively ensuring voters are aware of the support and assistance that is available to help them vote, and how they can make a request for additional equipment or support – whether in advance of the election or on polling day.

Recommendation 2: Review the list of accepted ID

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

This should focus on forms of ID that would support people who are least likely to have documents on the current list, including disabled people and those who are unemployed.

Any changes to the list of accepted forms of ID should be confirmed in legislation in time for details to be included in public awareness materials and activities, and in guidance for polling station staff ahead of polling day.

Recommendation 3: Improve access to the Voter Authority Certificate for voters

The UK Government should explore whether the deadline for Voter Authority Certificate applications could be moved closer to polling day, to extend its availability for voters who do not have any other form of accepted ID.

The current deadline of six working days before polling day is significantly earlier than the Government's original policy intention – as set out in a policy paper published during the passage of the Elections Bill – which was for the deadline to be the day before polling day.

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

Recommendation 4: Provide options for voters who do not have or cannot access any form of accepted ID

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

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

In the limited and exceptional circumstances where a voter does not have access to any other form of accepted ID, allowing attestation would still provide a safeguard by requiring a formal link to a named elector who has had their own identity verified. Attestations are already a legitimate option for verifying identity in other parts of the electoral process, for example in applications to register to vote and applications for Voter Authority Certificates.

Recommendation 5: Polling station staff should continue to collect data on the impact of voter ID at future elections

Analysing data from the first scheduled elections where this requirement has been in place has helped to develop an understanding of the impact of the requirement and can now be used to help improve the experience of voters and polling station staff at future polls. There is no legal duty or explicit power for Returning Officers to report data for future elections until the next UK Parliamentary general election, which must be held by January 2025.

It would be a significant missed opportunity to learn and identify further improvements if Returning Officers did not collect and report data at the scheduled May 2024 elections, which will cover all areas of England and Wales.

The UK Government should ensure that Returning Officers are able to collect and report monitoring data on the impact of voter ID at future elections, including specifically at the scheduled May 2024 elections and at any UK Parliament by-elections held during 2023 and 2024.

This recommendation was first made in our June 2023 interim voter ID analysis.

Recommendation 6: The electoral community should work to improve the collection of data at polling stations for future elections

Accurate data recording and reporting is essential to ensure there is a clear and reliable picture of the impact of the policy. This is needed to support informed debate and help identify areas for improvement.

However, initial feedback from Returning Officers, polling station staff and observers suggests that some polling station staff found it difficult to record this additional data.

We will work with the UK Government, Returning Officers, and electoral administrators to review the data collection forms and guidance for polling station staff, so they are clear and user-friendly.

We will also work with local authorities and their training providers to make sure the ballot paper issuing procedure and data recording processes are fully explained to polling station staff. This should include guidance for polling station staff on the appropriate role of greeters and tellers.

This recommendation was first made in our June 2023 interim voter ID analysis.

Recommendation 7: The electoral community should take action to protect voter trust and confidence in the democratic system

Candidates and campaigners should be able to participate freely in the democratic process, ensuring that voters can hear from a range of voices and have confidence in our elections. However, abuse and intimidation continue to persist.

Tackling these problems will require coordinated action from a range of partners across the electoral community, including political parties and campaigners themselves as well as police forces and prosecuting authorities.

Campaigners should recognise the impact their choices have on how the public views our democratic system. They should actively discourage the use of inflammatory language and emphasise the importance of respect and constructive engagement with opposing viewpoints. Political parties should consider reviewing their membership criteria to include a clause explicitly emphasising respect for other campaigners and fostering a healthy political debate. The police and prosecutors must continue to treat allegations and cases of election-related intimidation seriously and demonstrate that those committing offences against candidates and campaigners will face significant sanctions.

We will continue to work with parties, campaigners, the police and prosecutors, and the wider electoral community to understand what is driving this intimidatory behaviour and collectively develop effective responses to ensure that campaigners can get their messages across to voters openly and directly without fear of intimidation.

Recommendation 8: Ensure centrally provided digital systems are operational and updated in good time ahead of scheduled polls

The UK Government should improve the operation and functionality of the central digital portal for processing Voter Authority Certificate applications, to better support Electoral Registration Officers dealing with applications particularly during the period close to polling day.

Administrators should be able to rely on a fully functional ERO portal especially in the immediate run-up to an election, when there is likely to be a peak in Voter Authority Certificate applications. Updates should not be released during the live election timetable for future sets of polls, to minimise disruption for EROs.

The UK Government should also ensure that any further digital infrastructure required to support new policy changes – in particular the new online absent vote application process – is available and fully operational in good time ahead of changes coming into force, to allow Electoral Registration Officers and Returning Officers to not only meet their legal duties but also provide the level of customer service that voters deserve.

Recommendation 9: Ensure that dependencies and delivery risks are carefully managed for future changes to elections

Further significant electoral administration changes are expected to be implemented ahead of elections in 2024, in addition to the new voter ID and accessibility policies that have been delivered for the first time this year.

To ensure they can continue to deliver well-run elections that meet voters' expectations, electoral administrators need to be confident that they will have sufficient time and capacity and fully functioning operational resources to support them.

Before making any final decisions about implementing the remaining Elections Act changes, the UK Government must carefully consider whether the necessary time and resources are, or will be, available. Any decisions must be informed by a robust analysis of available data and evidence about realistic levels of preparedness, particularly given the complex range of changes that must be delivered and the interdependencies between them.

The UK Government should publish its assessment of the evidence and the risks to successful delivery of the next set of Elections Act changes, and set out its proposals for mitigating those risks. This assessment should be available to Parliament and the wider electoral administration community so that it can be considered alongside draft legislation bringing these changes into effect.

Voting at the elections

The experience of voters at the May 2023 elections

- These were the first elections in Great Britain where voters needed to show photographic identification (ID) to vote in polling stations. There was also, for the first time, increased flexibility as to what support and equipment could be provided in polling stations to enable, or make it easier for, disabled people to vote independently and in secret.
- Our evidence indicates that public confidence in how elections are run in England remains high. Most people are satisfied with registration and voting processes and think that voting is safe from fraud and abuse. Public views on this year's elections are broadly consistent with comparable elections in recent years.
- Returning Officers provided a range of accessibility equipment and support at polling stations, although voter awareness of what is available continues to be low. We will continue to work with electoral administrators, charities, and civil society organisations to raise awareness, and to further develop our voter information resources for disabled voters.

On 4 May 2023, there were elections for local councillors in 230 local authorities in England. There were also local mayoral elections in Bedford, Leicester, Mansfield, and Middlesbrough. Around 27 million people were eligible to vote in these elections.

These were the first elections in Great Britain where changes introduced by the Elections Act 2022 were in place. In particular, there was increased flexibility as to what support could be provided in polling stations to enable, or make it easier for, disabled people to vote independently and in secret. For the first time in Great Britain, voters also needed to show photographic identification (ID) to vote in polling stations, and further evidence about the experience of the new requirement is highlighted in the next chapter of this report.

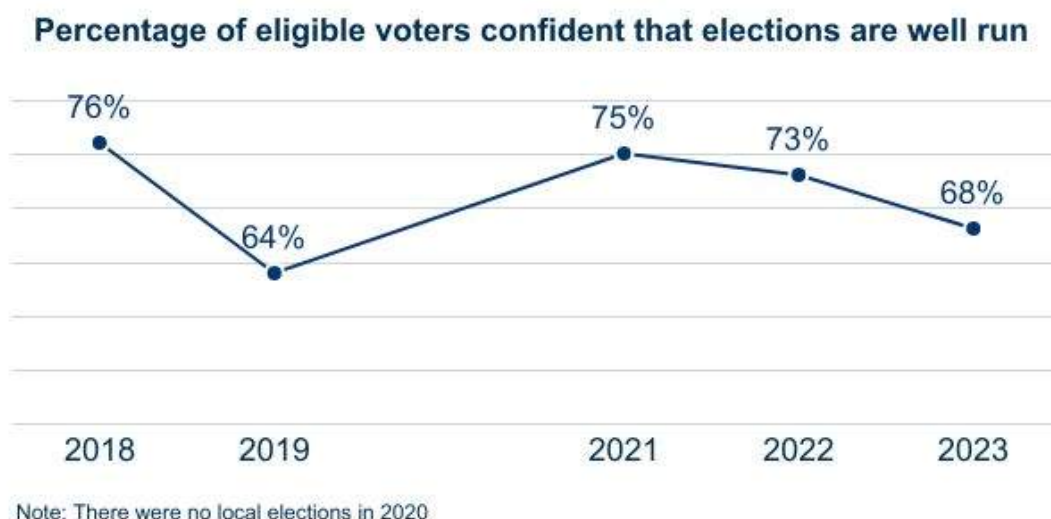
Public confidence in how elections are run remains high

After each election we ask members of the public 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 are confident elections are well-run and are satisfied with registration and voting processes

Our research with the public found that just over two-thirds (68%) of people said they were confident that the elections were well-run – this is consistent with the 64% who said they

were confident after the last comparable elections in 2019.



In 2023, the most commonly chosen reasons for being confident were:

- it was quick and easy to vote (56%)
- the polling station was accessible and easy to get to (47%)
- a lack of negative experiences when taking part in the election (46%)
- everyone having the opportunity to vote (41%)
- helpful polling station staff (37%)

Around one-in-seven (14%) people said they were not confident that the elections were well-run, in comparison to 10% after the 2019 elections. Those who did not vote were more likely than voters to say they were not confident. In 2023, the most chosen reasons were:

- people being unable to vote due to not having photo ID (46%)
- a lack of information about the elections or candidates (40%)
- the voting system being unfair, outdated or wanting a different voting system (32%)
- believing some people had difficulties registering to vote (26%)
- media, TV, and press coverage being biased (22%)

People continue to have high levels of satisfaction with the process of registering to vote and voting. Our research shows that:

- 77% of people in England were satisfied with the process of registering to vote – this is consistent with the levels of satisfaction reported after the most recent comparable elections held in 2019 (81%)
- 90% of voters were satisfied with the process of voting – this is consistent with 2019, when 91% of voters were satisfied

In addition, nearly all voters felt that it was easy to fill in their ballot paper, and there is no evidence to suggest that voters had problems with the change to the voting system (from Supplementary Vote to First Past the Post) in the four areas with local mayoral elections. We found that:

- in areas with local elections, 97% of voters said that it was easy, with 73% saying it was very easy – only 2% of voters said that they found it difficult
- in areas with mayoral elections, 95% of voters said that it was easy, with 78% saying it was very easy – only 3% of voters said that they found it difficult

Almost everyone who voted by post said that they knew how to complete and return their postal vote and found the postal voting instructions useful. Our research shows that:

- 96% of postal voters said that they found the written instructions (about how to vote and return their vote) included with their postal vote useful, with two-thirds (65%) saying they were very useful
- 94% of postal voters also said it was easy to complete and return their postal vote, compared to 5% who said it was difficult

Most people think voting is safe from fraud and abuse

Views about the safety of voting and whether electoral fraud is a problem were also consistent with the most recent comparable elections. Our research found that:

- 81% of people in England said they thought voting in general was safe from fraud and abuse, with the same proportion (81%) saying this after the 2022 elections
- some people were less likely to feel that voting was safe from fraud and abuse – this included younger people, people from an ethnic minority background, and those limited a lot by a disability
- when asked if they thought electoral fraud was a problem, 16% of people in England said that they thought it was – this is consistent with the 19% who saw it as a problem after the 2022 elections

Our research also found that:

- four-in-five voters (80%) in England said they thought voting was secret, while 8% said they thought it was not – this is in line with findings from the surveys we conducted after the 2021 and 2022 elections
- a similar proportion (82%) of voters said they thought voting was secure, with 55% saying it was very secure. Fewer than one-in-20 respondents (4%) said they thought voting was not secure – this is consistent with our findings in 2021 and 2022

A small proportion of voters (4% of people who voted in polling stations and 8% of people who voted by post) said that they had help completing their ballot paper. Younger voters and those limited a lot by a disability or long-term health condition were most likely to say they had help filling in the ballot paper.

For some people, help would have been provided in response to a specific request for assistance, including for example by a Presiding Officer or an officially declared companion. Nevertheless, it remains essential that voters are able to vote in secret, and we will continue to provide information for voters about their rights and ensure guidance for polling station staff supports them to protect the secrecy of voting in polling stations.

Few allegations of electoral fraud have been reported so far

Throughout the year, all police forces across the UK send us data about allegations of electoral fraud that they receive and investigate. Data collected so far shows that there were:

- two allegations of polling station personation, both of which resulted in the police taking no further action
- four allegations of postal vote personation – two resulted in the police taking no further action, while two are under investigation
- one allegation of proxy vote personation, which is under investigation
- one public order incident related to voter ID, which was reported by polling station staff – there were no lines of inquiry and the case was closed
- one allegation of assault against a member of polling station staff by a person who could not show accepted ID. The suspect has been charged with criminal damage and common assault

In spring 2024, we will publish our annual update on the number, type and outcome of the allegations reported to police forces during 2023.

Turnout at these elections was slightly lower than at recent comparable elections

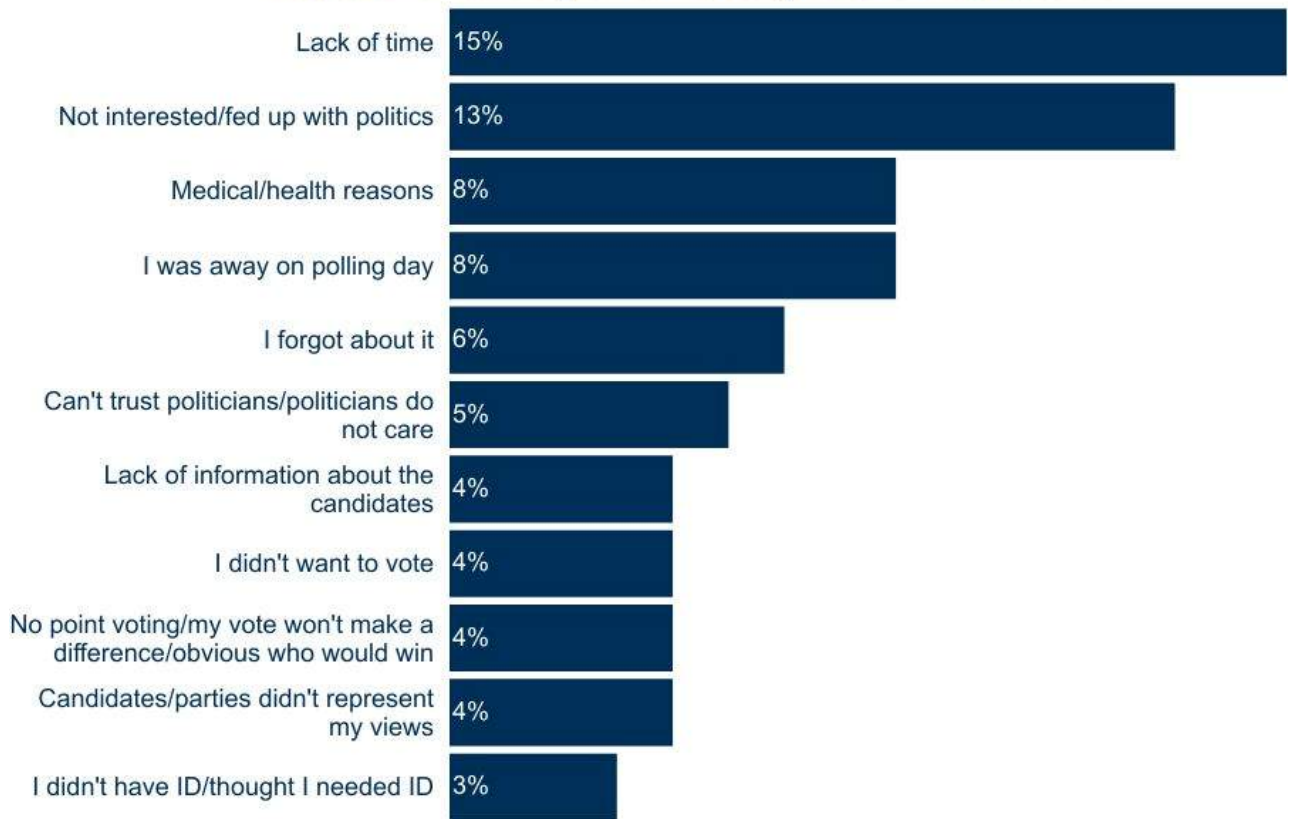
Turnout at these elections was 32.0%, which is slightly lower than at the last comparable set of elections in 2019, when it was 32.5%.

The most common reasons given by people who told us they did not vote were:

- a lack of time or being too busy at work (mentioned by 15% of non-voters)
- a lack of interest in, or being fed up with, politics (13%)
- medical reasons unrelated to Covid (8%)
- being away on polling day (8%)

Although it was not one of the most common reasons given, 3% of non-voters said they did not vote because they did not have ID, and 1% said it was because they did not agree with the requirement to show ID to vote at a polling station.

Most common reasons given for not voting in the 2023 local elections



Data collected from electoral administrators on postal votes and ballot papers shows that:

- 2.6% of returned postal votes (approximately 88,971 votes in total) were rejected and not able to be included in the count
- the most common reasons for postal votes being rejected was that the signature (27%) or date of birth (22%) on the postal voting statement did not match that previously provided to the Electoral Registration Officer
- 0.6% of all local election ballot papers (approximately 48,547) were rejected and not included in the count
- the most common reason for ballot papers to be rejected was because they were unmarked, with this accounting for over three-quarters (76.3%) of all rejected ballot papers

Most voters could vote using their preferred method

Of all registered voters, most people (81%) could vote in person at their designated polling station, but 19% applied to be sent a postal vote and 0.1% (23,414) appointed a proxy, of which 964 were an emergency proxy, including 249 people who appointed an emergency proxy due to their ID being lost or stolen.

Our research with the public found that most people who voted were able to use their preferred method:

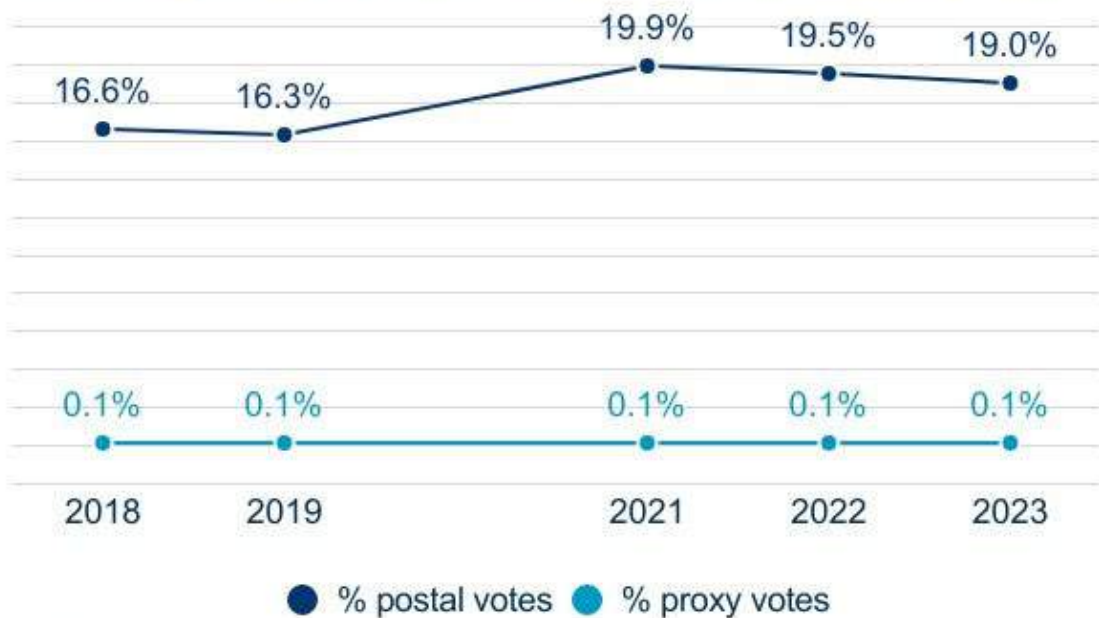
- 95% of voters said they were able to use their preferred method of voting, compared to 4% who said they were not
- groups more likely to have voted using their preferred method included older voters, white voters, those in employment, and those without a disability

Most people said that they found it easy to find information on how to vote either in person at a polling station or by post or proxy. Our research showed that:

- three-quarters (75%) of people said they found it easy to get information about the different methods of voting they could choose from
- 83% of people who voted in a polling station and 86% of people who voted by post said they found it easy to get information about different methods of voting

Data from local authorities indicates that the number of people voting by post and by proxy was consistent with the elections in May 2022 and in line with post-pandemic trends.

Percentage of eligible voters who opt for postal and proxy votes



Note: There were no local elections in 2020

There was little evidence that the new voter ID requirement had a significant impact on the number of people choosing to vote by post. Just over one-in-six (17%) of postal voters told us that these elections were the first time they had voted by post, and the most common reasons for choosing to do so were:

- wanting to avoid queuing at the polling station (24%)

- being away on polling day (24%)
- difficulties accessing or travelling to their polling station (24%)

Not having photographic ID, chosen by one-in-eight (12%) people who voted by post for the first time this year, was the seventh most chosen option as a reason for voting by post.

Returning Officers took steps to assist disabled voters at the elections but more needs to be done to raise awareness

Following changes in the Elections Act, electoral administrators now have increased flexibility on what support and equipment they can provide at the polling station to enable, or make it easier for, disabled people to vote independently and in secret.

Restrictions have also been removed on who can be a ‘companion’. Anyone who is 18 or over can now accompany a disabled voter to the polling station and, if requested by the voter, provide support. The companion no longer needs to be eligible to vote at the elections taking place, but they must still complete a declaration before assisting the voter.

Returning Officers provided a range of support at polling stations

Ahead of the elections, we published [guidance for Returning Officers](#) to support them to remove the barriers and challenges disabled voters face when voting at the polling station. Returning Officers were required to take this guidance into account when planning for and running the elections.

After the elections, we asked electoral administrators and polling station staff for their feedback about the accessibility support provided to voters and about any specific support requested by voters. We did not receive responses from all local authorities, and not everyone answered all the questions, but among the electoral administrators who responded to our questions on accessibility:

- over three-quarters (81%) found our guidance on assistance with voting for disabled voters useful, with over half (54%) saying it was very useful
- most of the equipment that was made available at polling stations was provided proactively by administrators, with a limited number of requests from voters for specific equipment
- almost all respondents said that they had met the minimum requirements for equipment and support, as set out in our guidance

However, follow-up responses suggest there may have been some misunderstanding of either the survey question or what constitutes a ‘minimum requirement’. When asked to select which items they had provided from a list of types of support and equipment, and at how many polling stations, responses indicate that some administrators did not provide the minimum equipment.

This may have led to an inconsistent provision of equipment and support for voters in some areas, which we are following up with the relevant Returning Officers. This was the

first year Returning Officers had to have regard to our guidance, and we will continue to work with them to ensure they understand what equipment and support they should make available so that elections are accessible.

Most survey respondents indicated that they had tried to engage with local disability groups to inform their planning and the implementation of the accessibility requirements. However, some electoral administrators noted that they had difficulties identifying or engaging with local groups, with a lack of capacity and time being a factor for some.



No difficulties as such, but more time was required to procure equipment, update polling station staff training and liaise with the equalities access officer.”



We don't have the capacity and resources to engage with local groups as much as we would like to.”



While the council invited and reached out to organisations, there was limited response. However, we believe this will come over time through continued invitations to work with us.”

The limits on capacity for local engagement also reflects feedback we have previously received from disability charities about the limited resources they have available, as well as concerns raised elsewhere about the capacity and resilience of electoral administrators. Some administrators also noted that funding played a role in their decision making.



It is not practical to provide audio devices and hearing loops within the New Burdens funding allocated.”



Hearing induction loops sat unused in our office waiting to be deployed – these were on request as we could not afford 160 of these.”

Most of the administrators responding to our survey said that they did not have any issues providing training for polling station staff on accessibility.

Among the polling station staff who shared their experiences, most were confident that they were able to assist disabled voters, including voters with a visual impairment (94% were confident) or a learning disability (90%). However, 9% of polling station staff reported that at least one disabled voter had problems with voting, with just under half (43%) of the staff reporting problems saying that it was due to problem with physical access to the polling station. In some cases, Returning Officers highlighted a lack of suitable alternative venues.



Rural polling stations tend not to be as accessible. No alternative venues unless required to travel outside of the polling district, which is less practical

for many. Staff were trained on how to assist those who are unable to physically enter the polling station.”



Two polling stations were not available, so had to find alternatives. One polling station was not accessible to wheelchairs (and no suitable alternative). Staff trained on how to enable people to vote where they cannot access the polling station.”

We will continue to work with electoral administrators and civil society partner organisations to identify and share examples of good practice.

Further work is needed to ensure disabled voters receive the support they need

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

- almost all (97%) adults who voted in person and told us they have a disability or long-term health condition said that it was easy to get inside the polling station and vote – one-in-10 in-person voters with a disability or long-term health condition said that they needed additional assistance or equipment
- voters limited a lot by a disability or long-term health condition were more likely to have gone to vote with another person who helped them vote (16%) compared with voters limited a little or not at all by a disability/long-term health condition (1%)
- those limited a lot by a disability or long-term health condition were most likely to say they had help filling in their ballot paper in the polling booth – 14% of these in-person voters said they had help, compared to 3% of in-person voters who said they were not limited by a disability or long-term health condition

We also asked all those who have a disability or long-term health condition for their views on the experience of voting at the May elections. Overall, we found that:

- 52% of voters agreed that they received the equipment, information and support that they need in order to vote, with 7% disagreeing
- 40% felt that staff at polling stations are properly trained to assist them with voting, while 7% disagreed
- 49% disagreed that the way elections are run at present prevents them from voting in person, with one in seven (15%) agreeing

After the elections, we asked civil society organisations and their service users for feedback on their experiences at this year’s polls, and on the impact of voter ID and the new accessibility measures in particular. This feedback provides a valuable insight into disabled people’s lived experience, although we only received a limited number of responses which means they are not representative of the views of all disabled people.

Overall, most people who fed back found it relatively easy to register and vote. However, some people raised concerns around:

- the lack of information in accessible formats, including about how to register and vote
- the impact of voter ID on those who have compromised or suppressed immune systems, and who continue to wear masks to protect their health
- difficulties applying for and completing their postal vote
- physical access to the polling station
- lack of clear signage at the polling station

In the feedback received, we also found that many people had low levels of awareness of the support and equipment available to assist those voting in person, such as help from a companion or polling station staff, or the provision of a large print ballot paper.



I wasn't aware that I could have had a large print ballot paper. I would have felt awkward asking for one then a big fuss to find one etc."

Recommendation 1: Increase awareness of the support available for disabled voters

There is some evidence that levels of awareness of the support and equipment available, especially in polling stations, is still lower than it could be. This includes awareness of both the new accessibility measures and the existing provisions that are available (such as the possibility of asking a companion or polling station staff for help with voting).

We will continue to work with the electoral community, national and local civil society organisations, and the media to raise awareness of the support that is available for disabled voters. We will also work with them to further develop our voter information resources for disabled voters.

This work should include pro-actively ensuring voters are aware of the support and assistance that is available to help them vote, and how they can make a request for additional equipment or support – whether in advance of the election or on polling day.

Voter ID at the elections

The experience of the voter ID requirement at the May 2023 elections

- These were the first elections in Great Britain where voters needed to show photographic identification (ID) to vote in polling stations. Our interim analysis highlighted evidence that some people found it harder than others to show accepted voter ID, including disabled people and the unemployed.
- We have now undertaken further data collection and analysis of evidence to establish a clearer picture of the impact of the new requirement. This analysis confirms the interim findings and indicates that this stems from two overlapping issues – the variations in ownership of accepted photo ID and in awareness of the need to show ID when voting in person.
- It is crucial that improvements are made at the earliest opportunity, particularly given there are important elections that are due to be held during the next 18 months, to improve accessibility and support those people who do not have an accepted form of ID.

These were the first elections in Great Britain where changes introduced by the Elections Act 2022 were in place. Voters needed to [show photographic identification \(ID\)](#) to vote in polling stations. Photographic ID has been a requirement for polling station voters in Northern Ireland since 2003.

Further work is required to ensure that elections remain accessible to all

We published our [interim analysis](#) of the new ID requirement in June 2023, using the information and evidence that was available at that time about how the new voter ID requirement was implemented and how voters found taking part. This report now draws on a wider range of information, including feedback from candidates, Returning Officers, polling station staff, election observers, charities and civil society organisations, and the police.

Our interim analysis highlighted key findings about the impact of the new voter ID requirement at the May 2023 elections. Our research found that:

- around 4% of all people who said they did not vote at the elections on 4 May listed the ID requirement as the reason – 3% said they did not have the necessary ID, and 1% said they disagreed with the new requirement
- at least 0.25% of people who tried to vote at a polling station in May 2023 were not able to because of the voter ID requirement – this was equivalent to approximately 14,000 people who were not issued with a ballot paper

- awareness of the need to bring ID to vote at a polling station was high – 92% of people were aware of the need to bring ID to vote at a polling station, although awareness was significantly lower among people who said they did not have an accepted form of ID (74%)
- awareness and take-up of the Voter Authority Certificate was low – awareness of the availability of the free Voter Authority Certificate stood at 57% in May 2023, and only 25,000 certificates were actually used as a form of ID on polling day

We also said that further work was needed to improve the collection of data on the impact of voter ID at future elections. We recommended that the UK Government should ensure Returning Officers are able to collect and report monitoring data on the impact of voter ID at future elections, and that work is also needed to improve the quality and reliability of data collected at polling stations in future.

There is evidence that the voter ID requirement had a greater impact on some groups of people

Our interim analysis highlighted evidence that some people found it harder than others to show accepted voter ID. We have now undertaken further data collection and analysis of evidence in a number of areas to establish a clearer picture of this impact.

This additional analysis confirms the interim findings and indicates that this stems from two overlapping issues – the variations in ownership of accepted photo ID and in awareness of the need to show ID when voting in person.

Some people did not have the ID needed

We know, from our previous research, that some groups were less likely to have one of the forms of accepted photo ID (in particular those renting from a social landlord, the unemployed, lower social grades, and disabled people). Our evidence indicates that at least some of these groups were more likely to have a problem voting in person on 4 May.

In our public opinion survey following the elections, 3% of all non-voters said they did not vote because they did not have the required ID, but this was higher for unemployed non-voters (8%) and for disabled non-voters who reported being ‘limited a lot’ by their disability or health condition (9%).

The Voter Authority Certificate is intended to allow those without ID to vote. However, we know that awareness of the Voter Authority Certificate was relatively low (57% of people with no photo ID were aware they could get a Voter Authority Certificate). While around 89,500 people applied for a Voter Authority Certificate before the elections, this is substantially fewer than the approximately 250,000 to 300,000 people that were estimated to need one to vote.

We do not have detailed data on Voter Authority Certificate applications, which we understand will be published by the UK Government in due course. Our public opinion findings suggest that Voter Authority Certificate applications were more likely to be

received from certain groups including disabled people, people from an ethnic minority community, and younger people. However, there is no evidence of a greater take up among the unemployed.

In addition, only around 25,000 certificates were used as a form of ID on 4 May. It is not clear why a significant number of people applied for a certificate but did not use it on polling day. From the public opinion data available, it appears that some did then choose to vote by post or by proxy rather than at a polling station.

Some people did not know they needed to show ID

While awareness of the ID requirement was relatively high, our research also shows that some groups were less likely to be aware than others (in particular younger age groups, people from an ethnic minority background, and people with no photo ID). Again, our evidence suggests that these lower levels of awareness meant that these groups of people were also more likely to have difficulties meeting the ID requirement.

We asked all non-voters to choose from a list of reasons why they did not vote. On average, 1% of those who did not vote said that this was because they went to vote without the required ID. However, this was higher among 18-to24-year-old non-voters and those non-voters from a mixed or black ethnic background (both 5%).

The proportion of voters turned away varied across local authorities

In order to further explore the different impact across the population, we have also used the data on voters initially turned away from polling stations in 18 local authorities (where the data was available at ward level) and compared it against census data for those wards in relation to the proportions of: non-white British population; long term unemployed/never worked in the population; and households with at least two dimensions of deprivation.

We find a moderate correlation between the numbers initially turned away from polling stations and all three additional factors. This finding suggests that the distribution of voters initially turned away was not random. We need to be cautious in drawing conclusions from this analysis. Firstly, this shows only a relationship, not any direct causation. Secondly, while the overall correlation for each of these factors is moderate, individual local authorities in the analysis can have much stronger or much weaker results. Finally, we have also highlighted some issues with the accuracy of the original polling station data, which could be distorting the findings.

However, taken together, the evidence available tells us that some people, in relation to socio-demographic factors, were more likely to have problems in meeting the ID requirement. Our analysis in relation to deprivation suggests that, on average, more deprived areas had a higher proportion turned away compared to less deprived areas. The particular types of voters who faced greater problems were:

- disabled people
- unemployed people

- people from ethnic minority communities (although it is not clear to what extent this varies between distinct ethnic minority backgrounds)
- younger age groups

The feedback we received through our charity partner organisations and directly from disabled voters supports these findings and provides additional evidence about the impact of the ID requirement on groups that are harder to reach through a public opinion survey (because of their size relative to the total population).

The LGBT Foundation and TransActual told us that many of their users said they chose not to vote or to vote by post instead, because of the ID requirement. This was often because of the perception of the extra complexity involved in polling station voting as a result of the ID requirement. For example, some people were concerned about whether gender markers (on their ID) would be checked at polling stations. There were also concerns about legal name changes and around gender presentation in their photographs.



*I felt actively discouraged to vote through new voter ID as a Trans person. My appearance has changed dramatically from when my current ID was issued.” **LGBT Foundation user***

RNIB reported mixed feedback. Some of its users were unaffected and had ID or could apply for a Voter Authority Certificate. However, it heard from others who chose postal voting “specifically because of the introduction of voter ID” as well as where people had “become disenfranchised by the voter ID requirements, as it added yet another barrier to an already inaccessible process which some blind and partially sighted people were unable to overcome”. In its anecdotal feedback, RNIB highlighted some issues users faced including being unable to afford to pay to travel to the council offices for support to apply for a Voter Authority Certificate. Another user nearly discarded their Certificate as the tactile marking was not clear and they thought it was junk mail, however they were stopped by a sighted friend.

Feedback via our own survey of voters with accessibility needs supports this:



I voted by post as the voter ID requirements, in addition to there being no accessible method of me voting secretly, caused me to change the way I voted.”



Requiring ID changes it from something you can do on your way to or from somewhere into something you have to make a specific trip for. It adds an extra step that makes it harder. Not requiring ID to vote would have made me vote.”

Grace Eyre, an organisation working with people with learning disabilities, autism and mental health conditions, was concerned that the mainly online nature of the Voter Authority Certificate application process was an issue, as many people with a learning disability are not online. They also felt that it required information the person applying may not easily be able to access. They reported most of their users who voted used a postal

vote to avoid needing to show ID and that “having voter ID adds significant anxiety to an already anxiety inducing process.”

Improvements are needed ahead of higher turnout elections

Elections are scheduled to take place across all of England and Wales in May 2024, including in London and Birmingham where there were no elections in May 2023. A UK Parliamentary general election must also take place before the end of January 2025. For many people, these elections will be the first time they will have voted since the requirement to show voter ID was introduced.

Our research indicates that the voter ID requirement is likely to have a larger impact at higher turnout elections such as a UK general election, where people who do not always vote at local elections may want to take part. We found that:

- people who said they do not tend to vote at local elections had significantly lower levels of awareness of the requirement (84% were aware) compared with those who vote more frequently at local elections (94%)
- people who never vote in local elections are less likely to have accepted ID (7%) than those who always vote in local elections (2%)

Changes must be made at the earliest opportunity to improve accessibility and support people who do not have accepted ID, particularly given there are important elections that are due to be held during the next 18 months. This should include both changes in the law and work to increase awareness of the voter ID requirement and the availability of the free Voter Authority Certificate, as recommended in [our interim analysis](#).

Recommendation 2: Review the list of accepted ID

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

This should focus on forms of ID that would support people who are least likely to have documents on the current list, including disabled people and those who are unemployed.

Any changes to the list of accepted forms of ID should be confirmed in legislation in time for details to be included in public awareness materials and activities, and in guidance for polling station staff ahead of polling day.

Recommendation 3: Improve access to the Voter Authority Certificate for voters

The UK Government should explore whether the deadline for Voter Authority Certificate applications could be moved closer to polling day, to extend its availability for voters who do not have any other form of accepted ID.

The current deadline of six working days before polling day is significantly earlier than the Government's original policy intention – as set out in [a policy paper](#) published during the passage of the Elections Bill – which was for the deadline to be the day before polling day.

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

Recommendation 4: Provide options for voters who do not have or cannot access any form of accepted ID

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

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

In the limited and exceptional circumstances where a voter does not have access to any other form of accepted ID, allowing attestation would still provide a safeguard by requiring a formal link to a named elector who has had their own identity verified. Attestations are already a legitimate option for verifying identity in other parts of the electoral process, for example in applications to register to vote and applications for Voter Authority Certificates.

Recommendation 5: Polling station staff should continue to collect data on the impact of voter ID at future elections

Analysing data from the first scheduled elections where this requirement has been in place has helped to develop an understanding of the impact of the requirement and can now be used to help improve the experience of voters and polling station staff at future polls. There is no legal duty or explicit power for Returning Officers to report data for future elections until the next UK Parliamentary general election, which must be held by January 2025.

It would be a significant missed opportunity to learn and identify further improvements if Returning Officers did not collect and report data at the scheduled May 2024 elections, which will cover all areas of England and Wales.

The UK Government should ensure that Returning Officers are able to collect and report monitoring data on the impact of voter ID at future elections, including specifically

at the scheduled May 2024 elections and at any UK Parliament by-elections held during 2023 and 2024.

This recommendation was first made in our June 2023 interim voter ID analysis

Recommendation 6: The electoral community should work to improve the collection of data at polling stations for future elections

Accurate data recording and reporting is essential to ensure there is a clear and reliable picture of the impact of the policy. This is needed to support informed debate and help identify areas for improvement.

However, initial feedback from Returning Officers, polling station staff and observers suggests that some polling station staff found it difficult to record this additional data.

We will work with the UK Government, Returning Officers, and electoral administrators to review the data collection forms and guidance for polling station staff, so they are clear and user-friendly.

We will also work with local authorities and their training providers to make sure the ballot paper issuing procedure and data recording processes are fully explained to polling station staff. This should include guidance for polling station staff on the appropriate role of greeters and tellers.

This recommendation was first made in our June 2023 interim voter ID analysis

Campaigning at the elections

The experience of campaigning at the May 2023 elections

- Most candidates engaged with voters in a range of ways ahead of the elections and felt able to get their messages across to voters effectively. Many also included information on the new voter ID requirement.
- Voters found it easy to get information, but some did not feel well-informed about candidates. We also identified and received concerns about the use of campaigning techniques and information (both online and in print) that could be perceived to be misleading. This risks undermining voters' trust and confidence in our elections.
- Concerns remain about the number of candidates experiencing intimidation or harassment, with many respondents to our survey saying they experienced some form of harassment in this election at least once. Candidates and campaigners should be able to participate freely in the democratic process without fear of intimidation. Tackling these problems will require coordinated action from a range of partners across the electoral community.

More than 25,000 candidates stood for election to English local authorities on 4 May 2023. Just under three-quarters of those candidates (72.1%) stood for either the Conservative, Labour or Liberal Democrat parties, and 13% stood for the Green Party. Candidates standing for other parties represented 7.6% of the total. A further 7.3% of candidates were independents who did not stand for any political party.¹

A total of 20 candidates stood for election as directly elected mayors across the four local authorities where those positions were contested.²

In [our report on the May 2022 elections](#), we recommended that the UK Government should review subscriber requirements for nominating candidates for different elected offices, and noted that the Government was planning to introduce changes for English local elections. The law was changed, from the May 2023 elections onwards, to reduce the number of signatures required to nominate candidates for English local elections from 10 to two.

¹ Democracy Club (2023), [English Local Elections 4 May 2023](#)

² House of Commons Library (2023), [Local elections 2023: Results and analysis](#)

Campaigners are engaging with voters but some people want more information

Most candidates engaged with voters in a range of ways ahead of the elections and felt able to get their messages across to voters effectively. Many voters also found it easy to get information, but this did not necessarily mean that they felt they had enough information.

Campaigners engaged with voters using a variety of methods and many included information on the new ID requirements

At the 2023 elections, people continued to receive information about candidates and parties from a range of different sources, and in a variety of formats. The most common ways people reported seeing information on parties and candidates were:

- a leaflet or flyer from a candidate or political party (63%)
- information on social media (17%)
- talking to a candidate or campaigner directly (11%)

Older people were more likely than younger people to have seen a leaflet or flyer or to have talked to a candidate or campaigner directly, while younger people were more likely to say that they had seen information on social media.

Findings from our survey of candidates were consistent with what voters reported, with the traditional campaigning methods being most used by candidates. We found that:

- more than nine-in-ten candidates used leaflets, newsletters and flyers (93%)
- over three-quarters used door-to-door canvassing (79%)
- around two-thirds said they used social media (66%)

Most candidates also reported that they included messages to inform people about the new voter ID requirement. The methods they used for informing voters about ID are consistent with the most used campaigning methods, with around three-quarters saying they spoke to voters about ID (75%) or included the information in leaflets, newsletters, and posters (74%), with some candidates also using social media posts (61%)

Most people found getting information easy, but some did not feel well-informed about candidates

Our research after the election found that:

- two-thirds of people (67%) said that they found it easy to find information on what the election was about/for
- a similar proportion (61%) said that they found it easy to find information on the candidates and parties running for election in the local elections

- in areas with mayoral elections, three-quarters (76%) of people said that they found it easy to find information on the candidates and parties standing in the mayoral election
- three-quarters (76%) of people said it was easy to get information on the types of ID that they could use at a polling station, with 39% saying this was very easy
- just over three-quarters of candidates who responded to our survey (77%) said they felt able to get their views across to voters effectively. While not directly comparable, due to the different elections taking place and the sample not being representative of all candidates who stood at the elections, this is consistent with the three-quarters of respondents (74%) who said this in 2022

Although most people surveyed said they found it easy to find information, this did not necessarily mean that they felt they had enough information. Our research found that:

- four-in-ten (43%) people agreed that they had enough information on candidates to make an informed choice, but almost a third (31%) disagreed
- people aged 18 to 34 years old and non-voters were more likely than average to say that they disagreed that they had enough information
- almost half (46%) felt they knew what the local elections were about, but over one quarter (27%) did not agree

Although evidence continues to suggest that people would like more information on candidates, there are still some challenges to meeting this need. In Bedford, candidates for the mayoral election decided not to use the opportunity that was available to include campaign material in an information booklet that would normally be sent to all voters by the Returning Officer. We understand that the candidates were not prepared to make the required contribution to the cost of printing the booklet and some had concerns about the environmental impact.

Misleading campaign techniques risk undermining voters' trust

During the election campaign we identified and received concerns about the use of campaigning techniques and information (both online and in print) that could be perceived as misleading. These came from, and related to, campaigners from across the political spectrum. For example, some leaflets and posters used colours normally associated with other parties, while other materials included inaccurate information (in some cases inadvertently) about voter ID, such as the types of identification that would be accepted.

It is for campaigners to decide on the content and format of their election materials, and it is essential to protect the space for them to get their messages across to voters ahead of polling day. However, campaigners must recognise the impact that their campaign choices have on voters' perceptions and confidence in elections, including their particular responsibility to provide accurate information about election and voting processes.

Candidates continue to experience intimidation and harassment

After each election we ask candidates about their experiences of taking part in the election. Responses cannot be directly compared due to the different elections taking place each year and the self-selecting nature of the sample, but responses show that many candidates continue to report having experienced intimidation and harassment.

Concerns remain about the number of candidates experiencing intimidation or harassment

[Our research following the 2022 local elections](#) highlighted that a notable proportion of candidates responding to our survey said that they experienced some form of abuse or intimidation. [Evidence collected by the Local Government Association \(LGA\)](#) has also found an increase in the number of councillors saying they felt at risk at least some of the time while fulfilling their role, due to rising levels of abuse and intimidation.

Ahead of the May 2023 elections, we highlighted the abuse faced by election candidates and called for a campaign free of intimidation, abuse or fear. We also worked with police and prosecution services to help candidates understand when behaviour goes beyond political debate and may be unlawful. The LGA and the Jo Cox Foundation [issued a joint call](#) for people to show respect and civility towards candidates standing in, and officials running, the local elections in May.

When asked about how much of a problem they had with harassment, intimidation, or threats in this election, 36% of candidates who responded to our survey said they had some kind of problem (rating this as a two or above on a scale of one to five). However, when shown a list of types of harassment and asked if they had experienced any of them during the campaign, 55% of respondents said that they had experienced one of the scenarios at least once.

The types of harassment that candidates reported having experienced most frequently included:

- abuse posted on social media (35%)
- someone intimidating or intentionally making them feel unsafe (24%)
- having campaign material torn down (18%)
- being insulted in person (18%)

When asked if they had avoided doing something as part of their campaign to keep themselves safe, 37% of respondents said that they avoided campaigning on their own.



As a woman, I feel anxious about putting my address on the ballot paper and campaign materials.”



I took precautions by not doing face to face meetings alone.”



The level of personal abuse on social media was the worst I've ever known. Particularly Twitter, where spam accounts seem to be created to do so. Furthermore, there was no real reporting criteria online that matched. It will deter people from standing in the future."

Only 12% of those who told us that they experienced harassment said that they reported it to the police. When it came to dealing with reports of intimidation and abuse from candidates, our survey of Single Point of Contact (SPOC) officers found that 54% of respondents (13 SPOCs) said that they were very confident that they knew where to direct candidates to get advice or report an issue, with 46% (11 SPOCs) saying they were reasonably confident.

The Elections Act introduces a new electoral sanction for those found guilty of intimidating candidates, campaigners, and elected representatives, which will come into force from 1 November 2023. This should strengthen the deterrent against intimidating behaviour by enabling someone to be banned from standing for elected office, as well as imposing criminal sanctions, such as a prison sentence or fine.

The UK Government has recently [committed](#) to explicitly exempt reasonable security expenses from contributing to spending limits for parties and candidates at certain elections, to ensure that these limits are not a barrier to providing necessary levels of security during election campaigns.

Recommendation 7: The electoral community should take action to protect voter trust and confidence in the democratic system

Candidates and campaigners should be able to participate freely in the democratic process, ensuring that voters can hear from a range of voices and have confidence in our elections. However, abuse and intimidation continue to persist.

Tackling these problems will require coordinated action from a range of partners across the electoral community, including political parties and campaigners themselves as well as police forces and prosecuting authorities.

Campaigners should recognise the impact their choices have on how the public views our democratic system. They should actively discourage the use of inflammatory language and emphasise the importance of respect and constructive engagement with opposing viewpoints. Political parties should consider reviewing their membership criteria to include a clause explicitly emphasising respect for other campaigners and fostering a healthy political debate. The police and prosecutors must continue to treat allegations and cases of election-related intimidation seriously and demonstrate that those committing offences against candidates and campaigners will face significant sanctions.

We will continue to work with parties, campaigners, the police and prosecutors, and the wider electoral community to understand what is driving this intimidatory behaviour and collectively develop effective responses to ensure that campaigners can get their messages across to voters openly and directly without fear of intimidation.

Delivering the elections

The experience of electoral administration at the May 2023 elections

- Electoral administrators were able to deliver well-run elections in challenging circumstances. However, significant changes to the process of voting added a new layer of complexity and risk to an already stretched process.
- The capacity and resilience of election teams remain a significant concern, especially looking ahead to the polls that are scheduled for 2024 and the further changes from the Elections Act that will need to be implemented.
- To ensure they can continue to deliver well-run elections that meet voters' expectations, electoral administrators need to be confident that they will have sufficient time and capacity and fully functioning operational resources needed to implement further electoral administration changes ahead of elections in 2024.
- Before making any final decisions about implementing the remaining Elections Act changes, the UK Government must carefully consider whether the necessary time and resources are, or will be, available.

Elections took place in 230 local authorities in England with local elections to district councils, most metropolitan boroughs (excluding Birmingham and London) and unitary authorities. Many local authority areas also had town and parish council elections, and there were local mayoral elections in Bedford, Leicester, Mansfield, and Middlesbrough.

Local authority officers and their teams were responsible for electoral registration, managing the nominations process, absent voting, polling stations, and the counting of votes for the elections. As a result of new requirements introduced by the Elections Act, electoral administrators were also responsible for processing Voter Authority Certificate and Anonymous Elector's Document applications, and issuing temporary Certificates or Documents, as well as providing equipment and support in polling stations to enable, or make it easier for, disabled voters to vote independently and in secret.

The capacity and resilience of electoral administration teams has been further stretched

Our reports on the May 2022 elections highlighted significant concerns about capacity and resilience of the UK's electoral administration systems and structures. In particular we noted that the changes being introduced by the Elections Act had the potential to increase the challenge of recruiting and retaining skilled and trained polling station staff for future elections.

Elections teams were able to deliver the May 2023 polls, despite the additional pressures and challenges of significant and complex legislative changes. However, there is evidence that capacity and resilience within the electoral administration community was further stretched this year, and that administrators were only able to make these elections work by exceptional efforts and commitment.

These remain key concerns for future elections, particularly looking ahead to the polls that are scheduled for May 2024 and the next UK Parliamentary general election which must be held by January 2025. We have already begun to work with senior representatives from the electoral administration community to consider these concerns, and there is a strong commitment to work together at a strategic level to tackle key challenges facing the sector in the medium to longer-term, including: electoral law reform; the role of technology; resilience and capacity of suppliers; resourcing of elections teams; and funding for elections.

Many Returning Officers again faced challenges finding staff and relied on support from areas without elections

We received feedback from 17% of local authorities after the elections. Comments and views received from administrators show that longstanding problems with staff recruitment remain a key concern.

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

- nearly a quarter (24%) of respondents said that they experienced significant issues recruiting polling station staff
- almost one-in-six (16%) said that they had significant issues retaining polling station staff between recruitment and polling day
- recruiting count staff was less of a problem, with over two-thirds of respondents (68%) saying that they had no issues

Comments from administrators highlighted a lack of experienced staff and a high number of recruits dropping out ahead of polling day, including some Presiding Officers (POs).



We really struggled with recruitment of polling station staff this year. We had lots of last-minute dropouts and several POs pulled out after the training.”



We have very low resilience amongst polling station staff and the core team. There are not enough experienced staff available to staff stations or the core team.”

The feedback also shows that the changes introduced by the Elections Act added a new layer of complexity and risk to an already stretched electoral system. In some cases, the higher levels of staff dropouts were attributed to the additional responsibilities added by the Elections Act changes. Administrators did, however, generally welcome the impact of the reduction in the number of subscribers required for local elections which came into effect for the first time at these elections.

Further changes are being introduced by the Elections Act, such as new restrictions on handing in postal votes at polling stations, which will mean Presiding Officers have more new responsibilities from May 2024 onwards. These have the potential to further increase the challenge of recruiting and retaining skilled and trained polling station staff for future elections.

Because elections did not take place in all parts of England this year, some electoral administration teams were able to call on neighbouring local authorities for support. This is not a sustainable long-term solution, however, and staffing is likely to remain a significant challenge. In May 2024, for example, elections will take place across all parts of England and Wales, so there will be no additional support available from neighbouring areas with no polls.

In addition to staffing challenges, there is continuing evidence that electoral administrators are finding it difficult to identify and book venues for polling stations. This creates additional work for administrators particularly if changes need to be made close to election day.



Polling stations were more challenging than usual, we were unsure whether two venues would be in use up until the days before the poll, despite being booked in November. Two polling stations lost their polling booths between them being delivered and polling day. A couple of venues changed the room the polling station was located in without prior consultation.”



A couple of polling stations were problematic to book, one cancelled just before the poll card data was sent.”

Additional pressures from new electoral processes exacerbated existing challenges and increased risks to well-run elections

The changes introduced by the Elections Act added a new layer of complexity and risk to an already stretched electoral system. For the May 2023 elections, there were a number of additional responsibilities for electoral administrators, including: processing Voter Authority Certificate and Anonymous Elector’s Document applications; issuing temporary Certificates and Documents; voter ID data collection at polling stations; and developing and delivering training to polling station staff on new processes.

Although feedback indicated that the new processes in themselves were relatively manageable at these particular polls – local elections with relatively low turnout and fewer than anticipated Voter Authority Certificate applications – administrators have nevertheless expressed significant concerns about the potential impact and risks at higher turnout elections, particularly the next UK Parliamentary general election.



Once we were aware of what we needed to do, the process was straightforward and with low numbers there were no challenges. I am more fearful for when the general election is announced, as voter turnout is likely to be double what it was for the locals.”



The election went very smoothly for us, though this was on a low turnout with quite high postal voting rates. The bigger unknown is how we would have dealt with considerably higher numbers for a poll with a much higher turnout, such as a general election.”

Comments from administrators also suggest that the additional pressures of delivering new processes exacerbated existing challenges and have increased the risk of administrative errors or failure.



Service provision becomes increasingly difficult each year and with each new burden. We are seeing growing challenges in the recruitment and retention of staff, both in casual election roles (polling stations, count etc.) and in the core team of electoral administrators. New burdens obviously add to this, particularly with the Elections Act which has been consistently rushed, with guidance provided at the last minute when regulations are rushed through.”

A number of electoral administration errors did occur at these elections that had the potential to affect levels of confidence of candidates, agents and voters in the effectiveness and integrity electoral process. We are aware of issues in eight local authorities, which have led us to conclude that the Returning Officers did not meet elements of our performance standards.

In three areas there were errors related to nominations and postal voting, directly impacting on candidates and voters:

- **The determination of nomination papers:** In Arun, a candidate who had submitted a valid nomination form was not included in the notice of uncontested election. In Bedford, nomination papers for a candidate were accepted without a home address form.
- **Errors relating to the production of ballot papers:** In East Devon, ballot papers included with the first issue of postal voting packs for one ward did not contain a party political emblem for one candidate, which led to the packs being reissued.

The other errors related to the administration of the count and declaration of results:

- **Votes not included in the count:** In Newcastle, 193 postal votes spread over 26 wards were not processed and therefore not included in the final results. Similarly, in North Lincolnshire, around 800 postal votes were found to have not been included in the count for one ward following the declaration of the result.
- **Inaccurate declarations of results:** In West Devon, an error in transposing the votes cast for four candidates in one ward led to the incorrect result being declared initially. In Oadby and Wigston, a miscalculation when tabulating the votes, led to incorrect results being published for one ward, although this did not affect the overall election outcome. In East Devon, the declaration of results was incorrect in recording the total number of votes cast for one candidate in one ward – this had no impact on the final result. In Pendle, there was an election petition after the wrong candidate

was announced as elected. This was due to the totals for the two candidates being mixed up and incorrectly transferred onto the declaration of result.

In all of these cases, election teams acted quickly to rectify the error, as far as was possible in each case, once they became aware of the issue. Once made aware of the issues, we were able to provide each of them with support and guidance to help them address their error.

Since the elections, we have worked closely with the Returning Officers and their teams as they have investigated what caused the issues to occur and identified actions to prevent similar issues arising in the future. We will continue to work with the Returning Officers as they implement the required improvements to processes to help ensure that voters, candidates and political parties can have confidence in the delivery of election processes.

Increasing reliance on suppliers highlights risks for Returning Officers

Elections are delivered through complex systems involving many different partners, including commercial suppliers. During the election, we received reports of some localised issues with the delivery of postal votes and with ballot paper proofing and printing, which raised administrators' concerns around the capacity and resilience of their suppliers.



Used Royal Mail 1st class post for delivery of all postal vote packs. Higher than usual requests for replacement postal vote packs from electors claiming not to have received initial pack. Currently liaising with both service providers (postal and printing)."



Our main issue was with the postal packs not being delivered by Royal Mail which led to over 200 needing to be re-issued. I believe other councils had similar problems. Issues with the post office in relation to returning postal votes. Frequently receiving postal votes for other authorities. More postal vote re-issues than in previous years because a postal vote was not received."

Feedback also suggests that significant changes to operational infrastructure during the election period – specifically updates to the central digital ERO portal (EROP) that is operated by a team at the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities – created unanticipated challenges for administrators when processing Voter Authority Certificate applications.



Functionality in the ERO portal was very limited at the start and not being able to send follow-up communications was difficult to track outside of the portal. A lack of proper information in the customer-facing website, i.e. no examples of an appropriate photo, meant a lot of applications had to be placed on hold to request a new photo to be provided. This created unnecessary extra work."



The only difficulty was the changing functionality of the EROP, and although the functionality improved, the extent of functions at the outset were limited.”

Recommendation 8: Ensure centrally provided digital systems are operational and updated in good time ahead of scheduled polls

The UK Government should improve the operation and functionality of the central digital portal for processing Voter Authority Certificate applications, to better support Electoral Registration Officers dealing with applications particularly during the period close to polling day.

Administrators should be able to rely on a fully functional ERO portal especially in the immediate run-up to an election, when there is likely to be a peak in Voter Authority Certificate applications. Updates should not be released during the live election timetable for future sets of polls, to minimise disruption for EROs.

The UK Government should also ensure that any further digital infrastructure required to support new policy changes – in particular the new online absent vote application process – is available and fully operational in good time ahead of changes coming into force, to allow Electoral Registration Officers and Returning Officers to not only meet their legal duties but also provide the level of customer service that voters deserve.

Implementation of policy changes must be carefully managed to minimise the risk to well-run elections

It is now a well-established and widely supported principle of effective electoral administration that Returning Officers need confirmation and clarity about changes to policy and legislation in good time to plan and deliver them. This principle, which was first highlighted after significant issues at the 2007 Scottish Parliament and local government elections, specifies that legislation should be clear at least six months before it is due to be implemented or complied with by voters, campaigners, or electoral administrators.

The experiences of and feedback from electoral administrators following the May 2023 elections have highlighted the impact of delays to the development and delivery of secondary legislation and operational infrastructure ahead of these polls.

Further changes will be introduced for the elections that are expected to be held in 2024, and administrators will have to deliver these alongside changes to UK Parliamentary constituency boundaries, polling district reviews, and the annual canvass. This will increase risks, which will be exacerbated without sufficient clarity and resources for administrators to prepare effectively well in advance of delivery.

Further significant changes to elections need to be carefully managed ahead of important polls in 2024

Further changes from the Elections Act are expected to be implemented ahead of the scheduled May 2024 elections taking place across England and Wales and the UK Parliamentary general election that must be held by January 2025. These include:

- the introduction of online absent vote application processes
- changes to commonly used names that can be used on ballot papers by candidates
- changes to arrangements and time limits for postal and proxy voting appointments
- the removal of the 15-year registration limit for overseas voters

Electoral administrators need early clarity and certainty about how and when these changes will be implemented, including any new or changed central digital infrastructure, so that they can prepare for and deliver well-run elections during 2024.

The experience of planning for the May 2023 elections highlights the impact and risks of delays to confirming legislation and delivery infrastructures, which are both key dependencies for the wider electoral community. The detailed secondary legislation specifying how the voter ID requirements would work in practice were not approved by Parliament until late December 2022, and the Voter Authority Certificate application service (hosted on gov.uk) did not go live until 16 January 2023. This not only made it more difficult to raise awareness of the new requirements with voters, but it also meant that detailed guidance for electoral administrators could only be made available with limited time for it to be considered before it needed to be implemented in practice.

Although the final secondary legislation for the changes that remain to be implemented is currently expected to be available by November 2023, Returning Officers will still be highly dependent on further new digital services that will be provided by the UK Government.

For example, introducing an online absent voting process will enable voters to apply for a postal vote and some types of proxy vote using a new online portal ahead of elections in 2024. While processing applications received online could be quicker than is currently the case for paper forms, the new portal system will need to be delivered with the necessary level of functionality to support quick and efficient processing from the outset. This will be particularly important if the online application process leads to larger volumes of applications, particularly close to key deadlines ahead of major polls (as has consistently been the case following the introduction of online voter registration since 2014).

The portal must also be made available sufficiently far in advance of the election period so that administrators have time to familiarise themselves with the portal, and to allow time for any issues with the technology to be identified and resolved before the election period and avoid updates being issued close to voter deadlines.

Electoral Registration Officers will also be dependent on digital services provided by the UK Government when processing applications from overseas voters who become eligible to vote following the removal of the 15-year limit. When determining applications, they will

need to use data from the Department for Work and Pensions to check the identity and, in some cases, the historical residence of overseas voters.

The context for implementing these changes for elections during 2024 is particularly complex, and Electoral Registration Officers and Returning Officers will be highly dependent on others to support and enable them to deliver their new statutory responsibilities:

- electoral law is already fragmented and complex, and the capacity and resilience of electoral administration teams are already stretched
- the electoral administration community is highly dependent on a range of commercial suppliers and external partners, including central government
- a UK Parliamentary general election could be called at any time and, once it is, must be delivered within a short timescale of less than six weeks
- the impact of the new online absent vote application option on application volumes in the weeks ahead of a major poll is unknown but may be significant
- widespread changes to UK Parliament constituencies must be implemented from late 2023, alongside a required review of local polling districts and polling places
- some new absent voting changes will only be implemented in Scotland and Wales for voters at UK parliamentary elections (and PCC elections in Wales), and not for voters at devolved elections

This context increases both the risks to delivery of future polls and the need for effective management and robust decision-making by the UK Government.

Recommendation 9: Ensure that dependencies and delivery risks are carefully managed for future changes to elections

Further significant electoral administration changes are expected to be implemented ahead of elections in 2024, in addition to the new voter ID and accessibility policies that have been delivered for the first time this year.

To ensure they can continue to deliver well-run elections that meet voters' expectations, electoral administrators need to be confident that they will have sufficient time and capacity and fully functioning operational resources to support them.

Before making any final decisions about implementing the remaining Elections Act changes, the UK Government must carefully consider whether the necessary time and resources are, or will be, available. Any decisions must be informed by a robust analysis of available data and evidence about realistic levels of preparedness, particularly given the complex range of changes that must be delivered and the interdependencies between them.

The UK Government should publish its assessment of the evidence and the risks to successful delivery of the next set of Elections Act changes, and set out its proposals for mitigating those risks. This assessment should be available to Parliament and the

wider electoral administration community so that it can be considered alongside draft legislation bringing these changes into effect.