

Greater protections for voters as government's Elections Bill achieves Royal Assent

Voters across the UK will benefit from greater protection against election fraud, more support for disabled people at the polling booth, and measures to prevent intimidation at the ballot box, as the Elections Bill receives Royal Assent today (28 April 2022).

The Elections Act also includes new anti-fraud measures for absent voters, the introduction of First Past the Post for mayoral and Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) elections and a new electoral sanction for those convicted of intimidation against a candidate, campaigner or elected office holder.

The legislation will require authorities to provide disabled voters with specialist equipment to support them to vote if needed, and allow anyone over the age of 18 to accompany them in the polling station.

The Act delivers on manifesto commitments to protect the integrity of democracy in the UK by introducing a requirement to show photographic identification when voting in person at polling stations. This greater level of protection, which already exists in Northern Ireland, will ensure the electoral system remains secure, transparent and fair for generations to come.

New measures will also expand participation in our democracy by removing the 15-year limit on British citizens overseas voting in UK Parliamentary elections.

Minister for Equalities and Levelling Up Communities Kemi Badenoch MP:

It is paramount we protect the integrity of our ballot, so our elections remain secure for generations to come.

Royal Assent now means we can eliminate election fraud and make elections more inclusive, ensuring that everyone who is eligible to vote will continue to have the opportunity to do so.

The Act will:

- Deliver on the government's commitment to stop postal vote harvesting by changing the rules so that people can apply for a postal or proxy vote online through a new online system for absent voters. Applicants can use the online platform as part of the register to vote process or, for those who are already registered, as a stand-alone online submission. These measures will introduce safeguards against the abuse of postal voting.

- Introduce photographic identification for voting in polling stations in Great Britain.
- Changes the voting system for mayoral and PCC elections to First Past the Post, meaning that the candidate who wins the most votes in each constituency is elected.
- Require authorities to provide voters with disabilities with specialist equipment to support them to vote if need, and allow anyone over the age of 18 to accompany disabled voters in the polling station.
- Removes the 15-year limit on British citizens overseas voting in UK Parliamentary elections, allowing any British citizen previously registered or resident in the UK to register to vote.
- Introduce a new electoral sanction for those convicted of intimidation against a candidate, campaigner or elected office holder. The sanction would ban offenders from standing for election for 5 years, as well as the punishment for the underlying criminal offence which can include a fine or imprisonment, depending on the severity of the intimidation.
- Update undue influence to include a wide range of harms, such as physical violence, damage to a person's property or reputation, undue spiritual pressure and injury, or inflicting financial loss.
- Update the political finance regulatory framework, by increasing transparency, fairness, and strengthening controls against ineligible foreign spending on electoral campaigning.
- Introduce a new digital imprints regime that will go much further than the print imprint regime, increasing transparency and empowering voters to make informed decisions about the material they see online.

Following today's Royal Assent, it is the government's ambition that implementation of the Act will happen within the lifetime of this Parliament. Local councils will receive support from the government's Electoral Integrity Programme to allow them to deliver the changes, and the Electoral Commission will communicate through campaigns with voters to inform them of the new requirements. The government will meet the cost of the new requirements which arise from the Act.

The new voter identification requirement will be rolled out through secondary legislation and will apply to UK Parliamentary elections across Great Britain, mayoral and council elections and local referendums in England, and Police and Crime Commissioner elections in England and Wales in addition to existing provisions for all Northern Ireland elections.

Government research shows 98% of electors already have an accepted form of identification, and those who do not can apply for a free Voter Card from their local council.