

Press release: Government launches consultation to protect political debate

Updated: Changed end date to 11:45pm on 28 October.

The government is launching its consultation today (Sunday 29 July) for a new electoral offence which aims to crack down on threats and abuse towards those standing for election.

The consultation, which will run until 11:45pm on 28 October, also seeks views on clarifying the electoral offence of undue influence of voters. Currently, a person is guilty of undue influence if they threaten electors to vote a certain way or stop them from voting.

The consultation will review whether the requirement to have imprints, which is added to election material to show who is responsible for producing it, should be extended to digital communications.

This would also have the benefit of increasing transparency in digital campaigning, in light of recent concerns about the potential risks of 'fake news' and foreign interference in future ballots.

Following on from the recommendations set out by the Committee on Standards in Public Life (CSPL) last year, the Prime Minister announced that the government will consult on a new offence that would be in addition to the current offence of electoral intimidation which relates to undue influence on voters.

The consultation also comes amid concerns voiced by politicians and campaigners on all sides about the increasing intimidation and abuse of people taking part in elections.

The proposals would toughen current electoral law, which includes provisions against undue influence of voters, by introducing a new offence to tackle intimidation of Parliamentary candidates and campaigners. This new law could see people stripped of their right to stand for or hold public office, should they be found guilty of threatening or abusive behaviour, either in person or online.

Extreme cases of intimidation are considered a serious criminal offence, punishable with a custodial sentence where evidence of sustained, pressurising behaviour intended to cause distress and impact campaigning is found.

Minister for the Constitution, Chloe Smith said:

This government recognises that rising intimidation in public life is stopping talented people from standing for election and putting voters off politics and we want to tackle this extremely serious issue.

We are consulting on three new measures that will protect voters, candidates and campaigners so they can make their choice at the ballot box or stand for public service without fear of being victims of misinformation or abuse.

We can't let intimidation of our candidates, campaigners, the public and those that serve us continue unchecked and I would encourage everyone to take part in this consultation.

Lord Bew, Chair of the Committee on Standards in Public Life, said:

Intimidation presents a real threat to the integrity, diversity, and vibrancy of our public life.

People of all backgrounds should not be put off from standing for public office as a result of intimidatory behaviour.

We warmly welcome that the government are implementing our recommendation to consult on a new electoral offence of intimidating Parliamentary candidates and introducing digital imprints.

The Electoral Commission identified these gaps in electoral law in evidence to our review, and these measures would play an important part in protecting candidates and voters at election time.