

Press release: Government safeguards UK elections

- New laws will bar people from running for office if found guilty of intimidating or abusive behaviour
- Online election material must clearly show who has produced it
- Consultation to strengthen laws on foreign donations will be launched

Protecting the integrity of UK elections is the focus of a package of new measures announced today, as Government cracks down on intimidation, influence and disinformation.

People who intimidate candidates or campaigners in the run up to an election will be banned from running for public office for five years.

Candidates, political parties and non-party campaigners will also be required to brand or 'imprint' their digital election materials, so the public is clear who is targeting them. This is a crucial step for helping prevent misleading political advertising online.

Minister for the Constitution, Kevin Foster, said:

There is no evidence that British elections or referendums have been compromised. One of Britain's most valuable safeguards is the use of pencil and paper to vote. But we need to review and refresh our analogue laws for a digital age, and ensure there are robust safeguards against hostile states, foreign lobbyists and shadowy third parties.

Following recommendations from the public, political parties and independent electoral bodies, the Government has committed to:

1. Legislate to introduce a new electoral offence of intimidating a candidate or campaigner during the run up to an election, either in person or online.

The new electoral offence has been developed to crack down on the intimidation and abuse being suffered by those at the forefront of public service. Intimidatory or abusive behaviour is a crime, which in extreme cases is already punishable with a custodial sentence.

2. Legislate to clarify the electoral offence of undue influence of a voter.

This offence, which includes acts or threats of violence to manipulate someone's vote, will additionally cover intimidation inside and outside the polling station. Clarifying the offence in electoral law will enable enforcement agencies to enact sanctions more effectively, to protect voters from undue influence.

3. Commit to implementing a digital imprint regime.

Candidates, political parties and non-party campaigners are currently required to have an imprint on any printed election material, to demonstrate that they have produced it. Extending this to include digital communications is essential for promoting fact-based political debate and tackling disinformation online.

The Cabinet Office will work closely with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and other stakeholders to confirm how such regulations will be put into practice and which third party organisations it would extend to. The Government will bring forward the technical proposal for this regime later on this year.

The Government sought views on each of these actions in a public consultation on 'Protecting the Debate', which was launched last year by the Prime Minister. The response, which will be published shortly, reveals that the majority of people who engaged were in favour of each of the three recommendations.

4. Launch a consultation on electoral integrity

The Government has also committed to strengthening the current provisions which protect UK politics from foreign influence. While there is no evidence that Britain's elections or referendums have been compromised by foreign interference, it is right that the Government safeguards against future risks.

The Government will take views of interested groups like the Parliamentary Parties Panel and the Electoral Commission to better understand the problems which Government could seek to address in the consultation, and to see what scope there is for broad cross-party agreement. The consultation may consider recommendations for increasing transparency on digital political advertising, including by third parties; closing loopholes on foreign spending in elections; preventing shell companies from sidestepping the current rules on political finance and on action to tackle foreign lobbying.