



Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: [Review of the 2024 general election,](#) [HC 487](#)

Tuesday 18 March 2025

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[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Simon Hoare (Chair); Richard Baker; Charlotte Cane; Sam Carling; Peter Lamb; John Lamont; Mr Richard Quigley; Luke Taylor.

Questions 171 - 228

Witnesses

[I](#): Rushanara Ali, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government; and Stuart Ison, Director for Elections, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Rushanara Ali and Stuart Ison.

Q171 **Chair:** Good morning, colleagues, and good morning to our two witnesses: Rushanara Ali, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, with responsibility for elections and election policy—Minister, welcome—and Stuart Ison, the Director for Elections at the Department. Mr Ison, you are welcome, too.

This is the final session of our inquiry into the review of the 2024 general election. Minister, you would like to make a brief opening statement, so the floor is yours.

Rushanara Ali: Thank you, Chair. I am grateful to be invited to this Committee and for the interest the Committee is taking in our work. This Government are absolutely committed to strengthening our democracy, encouraging full participation in our elections, and ensuring that all eligible electors have a voice and people's views are fairly represented. We are working closely with the Electoral Commission and stakeholders across the sector to deliver upon our priorities to improve registration, extend voting rights through all UK elections to 16 and 17-year-olds,



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ensure we have appropriate voter ID rules and strengthen the political finance framework.

Turning to the subject of harassment and intimidation, thoughtful and respectful debate must underpin our politics. We must ensure the safety of those participating in our democracy. We come from diverse backgrounds. Viewpoints are sincerely held and passionately argued, but where healthy argument spills over into harassment, intimidation and abuse, it is simply unacceptable. We are working with the Electoral Commission, the police, security services and other partners to take concrete action to tackle these behaviours, protect those standing and working in our elections, and ensure the safety of our elected Members and candidates.

Many elected representatives do not discuss the harassment they have faced as it can trigger further abuse and compromise their safety. My biggest regret is not speaking out about this more in the past. Since I came into Parliament, we have sadly witnessed two of our colleagues brutally murdered. The intimidation and harassment of elected representatives is not unique to one party or to certain regions, but is now widespread.

A report conducted by the Electoral Commission revealed that 55% of respondents reported experiencing harassment, intimidation or abuse. These are incredibly alarming figures and further reveal the fragility of our democracy and the increasing risk of standing for elected office.

The July general election saw a disturbing and worrying spike in intimidation and harassment. The Electoral Commission said some of the activities seen—including slashing tyres and targeting candidates' families—were totally unacceptable. It also said intimidation and abuse was putting people off campaigning. What we are talking about is often deliberate, co-ordinated and preconceived use of threats, intimidation, disinformation and violence. Many Members of this House and candidates who are not elected will have their own experiences. Some will have been scarred by that experience. Women and minority ethnic candidates were particularly affected, but men were, too.

I am no stranger to threats and intimidation. As far back as 2010, in my first election campaign, I experienced harassment and intimidation. In my first term as a Member of Parliament, threats to my life resulted in being advised to have a panic room in my house. Throughout my political career, there have been periods of high levels of tension that pose serious risks to my safety and those associated with me.

Even with that backdrop, the industrial scale of intimidation and threats that we experienced ahead of and during the 2024 general election was unprecedented. Co-ordinated disinformation, canvassers driven off the streets, death threats, and a campaign conducted with constant concerns for physical safety and against a backdrop of the fear of assault practically every day.



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During my campaign there were unauthorised leaflets, billboards put up in the area with fake Labour party logos plastered across them, and digital advertising vans following us and other canvassers. Videos were shared across community WhatsApp groups, threatening electors if they voted for me.

Another of my fellow female candidates, a Lib Dem candidate, was also the target of extreme hostility and abuse. We can never accept this level of abuse and the removal of elected representatives' rights as citizens to walk down the street or go to the shops without it compromising their safety and security.

To be clear, Chair, it is a small but significant minority whose behaviour and actions continue to put our democracy at risk. In my constituency and across the country, there were many brave campaigners of all backgrounds who stood up for democracy and bravely stood against the hate and hostility they witnessed. I am grateful to them. They are the stewards of our democracy, but they should not have had to work in such a hostile environment to protect our democracy. The horrors of fighting a general election in the face of industrial-scale harassment and intimidation took its toll on them. That cannot be allowed to happen in future.

While I am proud of our democracy, we must recognise it is a work in progress. Democracy is hard won and fragile. I want to put on the record, Chair, my thanks to you, in your capacity as Minister in the previous Government; to the former Security Minister and the Member for Tunbridge, Tom Tugendhat; to the former Member for Broxbourne, Sir Charles Walker; to Mr Speaker of the House of Commons; and to other colleagues in my own party and across other parties for their support of MPs during challenging times and fighting hard for our safety, including making sure resources were available for security.

In particular, I want to recognise the support my Op Bridger contact, Nick Cousins, in my borough, provided, and went above and beyond to ensure that I could remain safe in the face of such hostility. This Government take these risks and threats to our democracy seriously. Across Government, we are working hard to shore up our democracy and we are determined to protect voters, candidates, and election staff from intimidation, threats and violence.

I look forward to providing information in this hearing on this issue, as well as on the other issues that are the subject of interest, and I look forward to working with all the Committee members and across the House on this very important agenda.

Q172 Chair: Minister, thank you for those heartfelt yet at times chilling words. That is testimony to your commitment to public service. I do not think anybody on this Committee or anybody listening who could reasonably call themselves a democrat will have disagreed with a word you have said. Thank you for your unexpectedly kind words about my rather small



role as your predecessor in the last Government. They are appreciated. I think we are all heartened by the seriousness with which you, the wider Department and the Government are taking these issues, cross-cutting between those Departments that you have referenced.

Let us turn to electoral registration and conduct. By way of an umbrella point, Minister, this Committee is not so much trying to ascertain the minutiae of policy, but kicking the tyres to test the reliability and the robustness of the infrastructure that supports and delivers reliable elections which deliver results that both victor and defeated can have confidence in. I just couch this with: if you can have that to the forefront of your mind.

As you know, I had an adjournment debate in the House a few months ago, which you very kindly responded to. That effectively flagged the point that I want to open our questioning with. We all know the pressures on the Government timetable. The legislative timetable is always tight and competitive. The next general election is not that far away—I am sure that Mr Ison will nod in concurrence with this—and there was quite a lot of stuff delivered for the last general election that was quite close to deadline, giving those who were administering it little time to get their heads around it and—again to use this phrase—kick the tyres.

Anything that needs to be done in response to 2024, and indeed future proofing for 2029, needs to be done in a timely fashion, as I know you appreciate. In response to the Electoral Commission's report, the Government have launched a review rather than setting out a detailed position of response. May I ask why, and what are the terms of reference and scope of that review?

Rushanara Ali: Thank you for that question, Chair. You pointed out some of the challenges in overseeing the last election and ensuring that it was successfully conducted. What is really important is that we have an opportunity through undertaking a strategic review of electoral registration conduct, which was launched back in October. There was a time to reflect, to learn and to get the insights and experience of those who contributed to the election, the electoral administrators across the country and the Electoral Commission, of course. We feel it is important to make sure that by working in partnership with the Electoral Commission and the practitioners, we are able to identify, as you point out, some of the key challenges faced in the delivery of elections but also identify emerging challenges. That is to your point about making sure that we are in a position to build the resilience of the system and ensure that we are future proofing on emerging challenges.

Q173 **Chair:** Who is conducting the review?

Rushanara Ali: Stuart, do you want to get into this?

Stuart Ison: The Department launched the review in October last year. The review builds on some of the messages that you have heard from the



Association of Electoral Administrators and the Electoral Commission on the challenges that they saw during the general election, and indeed in the May polls last year. We are working very closely, through a series of workshops and meetings, with a range of different stakeholders to address those concerns and issues that have been raised with us.

To give you some examples of the issues we are looking at, they are issues around nominations, overseas electors and the 25-day timetable—those kinds of issues. What we are proposing to do during the summer is to bring forward proposals as to how we are going to address those challenges as part of a policy statement, which I would be very happy to talk to you about later on in the parliamentary session.

Q174 **Chair:** That takes me to my next question, which is: once that is conducted—I presume a set of skeleton proposals will emerge from it—what is the plan to engage with Committees of this House, Parliament more widely, the AEA and the Electoral Commission? Will Committees be given a chance to comment on the review in draft, and will there be a period of formal consultation on what the Government are proposing?

Rushanara Ali: I have taken a very close interest in the various Committees—this Committee as well as the MHCLG Committee and, of course, the other relevant Committees. Looking at the written submissions this Committee has received, as well as oral evidence, there are a lot of very important ideas and insights that we want to make sure that the review takes into consideration along the way. We will consider those carefully as we work to support the effective delivery of elections, and we will make the response available to you, Chair. As Stuart has said, we will be publishing the strategy for elections later this year—we hope before the summer recess—and we are very keen to engage with you through that process and get your input and this Committee's recommendations off the back of this inquiry.

Q175 **Chair:** This is a final one for me at this juncture. You mentioned in your opening remarks the cross-cutting nature of quite a lot of these things between Departments. We are living in a digital and social media-driven age, where every crank and conspiracy theorist can be positioned as an expert and learned voice in a particular area. Quite a lot of that speaks to me of the need for proactive engagement with colleagues in the Department for Education with regard to—I have three teenage children, and it makes me sound 106 when I use this phrase—how we equip our young about what it is to be a British citizen in a pluralistic, open, tolerant democracy. What are the expectations, responsibility and duties of the state and the citizen on how our elections work? Unless we nip that in the bud educationally, the cranks and the conspiracy theorists run a real risk of triumphing, don't they?

Rushanara Ali: Absolutely. In terms of a voting age of 16, this is an important agenda. We have already engaged with the Department for Education and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. The wider network of youth organisations is key, as is citizenship education, and



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obviously the Department for Education's curriculum review is an important part of that, and DSIT, as you point out. In terms of tech, the online harms Act introduced by the previous Government, which is coming into force, is also important in making sure that we have the safeguards in place for young people.

We see this as an important opportunity for the whole of Parliament to engage the next generation, because the evidence suggests that that participation is key. Young people at 16 can get a job, can join the Army and much else. It is important that the younger generation have a greater say in our democracy and can participate. However, you are right that we need to make sure that there are safeguards and protections, and the positive work with the Electoral Commission, which has an important role to play.

Separately, of course, there is the underlying work that has been going on from your time as Minister on the Defending Democracy Taskforce, led by the Home Office and the Security Minister, Dan Jarvis, who chairs that Committee. I sit on that Committee, too, along with colleagues across Government.

Chair: It is not just safeguarding, is it? It is the provision of critical thinking that is key.

Rushanara Ali: Absolutely.

Q176 **John Lamont:** Good morning. The Electoral Commission's assessment of the election last July was that it was well run. I wonder if the Government shares the Electoral Commission's conclusion.

Rushanara Ali: We do. It was broadly well run. Of course, there were particular challenges around the timing of the election, which the Chair is very aware of, and some of the issues affecting electoral administrators. I have seen some of the evidence that was given in the previous sessions around that challenge, and they rose up to that. In Scotland, in relation to holidays and the timing of the election, what became a snap election put on particular pressures. There were challenges but, despite that, it was conducted successfully and well, thanks to all the work of those involved. I want to put on the record the valiant effort that was made to make sure that we had a successful and safe election.

The other issue is in relation to what I raised in my opening statement: the high levels of harassment and intimidation that were experienced. Those are areas that we have to work on and address alongside some of the pressures around conducting the election at that time. There were—we can go into it later—also issues in relation to postal votes. Some 16,000 people were affected by that. Stuart, do you want to come in and add anything?

Stuart Ison: I can add to that if it is helpful to the Committee. I agree with the Minister that, overall, we agree with the Electoral Commission's findings that the election was well run. I know the Committee has talked



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to the AEA about one or two issues on counts in particular areas, which we are conscious of, but I do not want the Committee to take away a message that we are complacent in any way. We have done a lot of work to identify lessons from the general election.

To give you a flavour of that, postal voting is definitely an area we want to follow up on. We recognise that there are challenges, including in the timetabling arrangements for the 25-day pre-election period, which we need to look at. Of course, it is an ecosystem that delivers elections, ranging from local authorities, administrators, Royal Mail, returning officers and many others, including suppliers. Again, we are looking at that as part of our strategic review of registration and electoral conduct.

I won't say any more about it, but harassment and intimidation were clearly a key bit of learning that we need to take away. As the Minister said, we are working very closely with the Home Office, the police, and the security services on what we can do to very swiftly take action to address some of the challenges we saw in the general election.

Q177 John Lamont: I think we are going to come back to some of those issues later in the session, but how close did we come to something significantly going wrong in the election? I know there was reference to some particular challenges at one or two counts, which I will come on to a bit more broadly. As a Department, were you confident that the election did not come close to something seriously going wrong?

Stuart Ison: We build a lot of resilience into the way in which we plan for elections. We have good relationships with Royal Mail, with returning officers, and with suppliers. We meet with them regularly, both in the election period but also outside of it, so that when challenges arise we have the networks and plans in place to address them. That included working very closely with Royal Mail, with the suppliers, and with a range of other stakeholders, for example, when challenges in relation to postal votes in Scotland arose a week to 10 days before the election.

We are confident that we have the right plans in place but, as I said in my previous answer, we are not complacent and those need further action during this Parliament.

Q178 John Lamont: Thank you. We are going to come back to that, but in relation to the count at Wandsworth, which I have raised previously, you will know the wrong result was declared and the revised result did not change anything. However, in that constituency it could have done previously, given how close it has been. Are there any other examples that you are aware of where mistakes like that have been made, and what action have you taken since then to ensure that that does not happen moving forward?

Stuart Ison: No. I think Peter Stanyon from the AEA spoke about this during the session a month or so ago, Mr Lamont. He provided the reassurance that they were working with the returning officer to look at



what lessons can be learned from that particular incident. While we are keeping an eye on that, we are confident that all the right steps are being taken to make sure that that does not happen again on that particular count.

Q179 **John Lamont:** You are keeping an eye on that. Is that sufficient? For somebody who has been through the election process, as most of us around this table have, do you think keeping an eye on it is sufficient when such a significant error has been made?

Stuart Ison: We understand now why that error was made. Action has been taken to engage with the returning officer to explore why that happened, and we are confident that that is the right action to take and that it will not happen again.

Rushanara Ali: Just to add, I think it is very important that it is part of the work we do going forward. Picking up on the Chair's comments earlier about building resilience and capacity, it is important to make sure that local authorities with that responsibility have the appropriate support. I am aware that in the last general election we also had some 12,000 civil servants who were enlisted voluntarily to support the election, so it was a challenging environment, given the timing of the election. However, I am determined that we work through the areas where there may be emerging issues, including learning from past experience. We have to be very vigilant. These examples can knock confidence, and it is very important that we tackle underlying issues where they exist and support local areas where that is required.

Q180 **Chair:** Reverting to Mr Lamont's question about the counts, quite a lot of election law in the run-up to election day itself, and indeed up until the close of poll, is very prescriptive. There is a rubric that everybody follows that gives that uniformity of approach. There is still quite a wide variance in discretion for returning officers with regard to how votes are counted and how that data is recorded, the trigger for recounts, a full recount or bundle recount, and so on. As it is a national election to the national Parliament, are you open to thinking, Minister, about providing more realistic but restrictive operational guidance for the conduct of the count?

Rushanara Ali: The review is an important opportunity to feed in suggestions, and we are very interested in improvements and ideas for improvements that we can take into consideration. I know from my own experience the choice of venue can really matter. The space available can be an issue, which is linked to how practical it is for those who are in a venue, and security-related issues as well. You are right, Chair, to point out some of the potential issues that may still arise. We are open to ideas and very much looking forward to input from this Committee and recommendations that you propose.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed.

Q181 **Mr Richard Quigley:** Hello there. So, 2024 was the second lowest



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turnout ever, and you have said in your response to the Commission's report that that is at least in part due to the crisis in confidence in our political system. How concerned are the Government about the low turnout and do you have any plans to address it?

Rushanara Ali: You are right that it was a low turnout. In 2019 the turnout was higher, but over the last decade there have been various levels of turnout. It is of concern, and we have to do more as a society to engage people to participate. There are some 7 million to 8 million people who are not engaging and not registered to vote. As a Government, a priority for us is looking at how we build on what we have to engage people and encourage them to register to vote. Then, of course, there is the broader piece of work around participation and building trust.

The fact is that there has been a loss of confidence in certain aspects of our democracy. Some of it can be relevant to particular scandals and particular approaches to politics. We have a big agenda that we need to focus on. The voting age at 16 or 17 is an important opportunity to engage younger citizens. But in terms of the substance of policy, what this Government are doing around devolution, and the agenda around ensuring that people are closer to decision making, power and resource allocation, will be important.

Q182 **Mr Richard Quigley:** Thank you. Labour's policy on first past the post admits that there are flaws in the current voting system contributing to the distrust and alienation we see in politics. I have two questions around that. Has the ministry made any assessment about the nature of those flaws in the first-past-the-post system and what impact they have on distrust and alienation? Given that the Prime Minister has made restoring trust in politics a key priority, it is vitally important that the Government seek to understand the impact of first past the post and trust in politics. Do you have a view on that?

Rushanara Ali: While the Government recognise that it is not a perfect system, first past the post is a system that we wish to continue with, and reforming the voting system is not a priority for this Government. As I say, we are focused on how we ensure that those who are not registered to vote, not participating—that we do the broader piece of work to engage citizens in our democracy, encourage them to participate and address some of the underlying barriers that affect people's engagement in our political process. That is about tackling powerlessness. That is about doing the substantive work to raise living standards, to improve people's conditions so that they are able to see the benefits of good government. We are determined to ensure that we serve the people of our country.

Q183 **Luke Taylor:** Just to pick up a point there, the Labour party's policy states that flaws in the current voting system contribute to the distrust and alienation that we see in politics, yet you are saying that addressing that is not a priority for the Government. Is that right?



Rushanara Ali: Look, this Government have inherited a huge set of challenges: the economic challenges, the cost of living crisis, the post-pandemic after-effects in health and a whole range of social challenges. We are focused on tackling the issues that are affecting people's lives. As you will know—

Luke Taylor: This is specifically on trust in politics.

Chair: Mr Taylor, let the Minister answer your first question and then ask your next one.

Rushanara Ali: As you will know, there was the AV referendum in the 2010 to 2015 period, during the coalition Government. That referendum was not won by those who supported changing the voting system. Our focus is around making sure that we do everything we can to engage and support those who have not registered, but also certain groups who, due to some of the changes, been able to participate as effectively as we would like. For instance, the Electoral Commission has referred to disabled voters. We are focused on addressing the barriers that exist and acting quickly to address those.

Q184 **Luke Taylor:** Picking up on a comment from your opening statement, you said you want to ensure that all voters are fairly represented. As an example from your own constituency, you had a 56% turnout in your constituency and 34% of those voted for you. One in five voters in your constituency voted for you, and you were elected. Do you feel that all voters in your constituency are fairly represented?

Rushanara Ali: This is about the democratic system that we have operated in, which is first past the post. I respect our democratic system within which we are all elected, and we have a mandate. I could say the same about you.

Luke Taylor: Absolutely, and I am looking to improve that.

Rushanara Ali: Correct; you are. The Liberal Democrats had the opportunity with that referendum. The point here is that whether you are on the side of one particular system or another, the system we have in our country has served our country well and we should not delegitimise the democratic mandate that we have.

There are arguments about different systems and the merits of each of the systems that countries might choose to apply, but essentially what I am saying to you is that we have to focus on some of the challenges that are there and work where we can together on addressing those. That is my focus and that is the focus of this Government.

Q185 **Chair:** Is it not also true, Minister, that most systems will have flaws?

Rushanara Ali: Yes, absolutely.

Chair: You do not have to change the system to repair the flaws?



Rushanara Ali: Absolutely.

Chair: I do not want to turn this into a Liberal Democrat fringe meeting on the benefits of PR, as fascinating as that would be; I am sure we would all be buying front row seats.

Rushanara Ali: The Liberal Democrats had the opportunity to change the system, and they didn't.

Q186 **Charlotte Cane:** In the Government's response to the Commission's report, you say that public trust has been undermined. Could you outline how it has been undermined and explain how significant a crisis it is for the UK's political system?

Rushanara Ali: There are a whole range of issues, as I say, from how politics is conducted to the harassment and intimidation that, as I mentioned, can knock people's confidence and put people off. I have seen that. Others have seen that. We all have to be mindful of our own conduct in public life and this Government are determined to make sure we do all we can to address some of those issues.

This is not a new phenomenon, but we have to ensure that, as elected representatives and key institutions, we constantly work at engaging the electorate, engaging citizens and ensuring that they have a voice in our democracy, not just during elections but at other points. That is where the work that Government and civil society organisations do is key.

It is also about making sure that we provide the tools for the next generation to participate and engage, and to be aware of the values and importance of participating in our democracy. That means citizenship education. That means making sure that our education system allows young people the opportunity to connect with us and our Parliament and national Government, as well as regional and local government. There is a raft of things that we need to do to ensure that we build trust, from the younger generation all the way to others in wider society.

Q187 **Charlotte Cane:** What resource are you going to put into doing all those things, a lot of which people would say have been happening for some time? What resource are you going to put in to ensure that those things are happening and that it does improve trust?

Stuart Ison: To build a little bit on what the Minister has set out, first, talking about harassment and intimidation, there is a real focus after the general election in looking to the police and the security services, but also to a range of other stakeholders, to try to address these challenges in the system and make sure that we have an acute focus on it as we move into not just the general election—whenever that may be, '28 or '29—but also elections that are coming up in the short and medium term.

Secondly, as the Minister set out, we are also working closely with colleagues in the Department for Education and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport to look at ways in which we can engage with



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younger people—including those who will be eligible to vote at the next general election—to make sure that we can strengthen and make more robust that trust and understanding of our democracy.

There are a range of different workstreams that we are looking at. I have just given you a couple. This is not something that can be delivered by MHCLG. We are working very closely across Government with other agencies and wider society to deliver this. I don't for a second suggest that that is an easy task, but there is a significant body of work that was initiated following the new Administration coming into power last year.

Q188 Charlotte Cane: Can you give an example of something specific that has been done or is about to be done?

Stuart Ison: To give you a couple of examples, first, arrangements have been made to strengthen the support that is given to candidates in the forthcoming elections. Operation Ford is a new police initiative, which means there will be a member of the police specifically equipped to support candidates at the 2025 local elections and beyond. It is an enduring arrangement to support candidates and advise them on a range of different security matters. That is already being delivered by the Home Office and the police, so that is happening now.

To build on what the Minister has said on a completely different topic, we are working closely with the Department for Education as it conducts its review of the curriculum to look at ways in which we can build and strengthen education around democracy—and, for example, parliamentary processes like this—into education, particularly for secondary school students. They are two initiatives that are already happening.

Q189 Charlotte Cane: I am pleased to hear about the initiatives around protecting candidates, but I am not entirely sure that they are directly relevant to trust in our politics. They are relevant to participation and they are important, but I am not sure that they are relevant to trust. What is concerning me is that, as you say, there are elections going on at the moment. We are going through a process of reorganising local government. There will be significant elections to new forms of government for people in the next few years. There is an urgency about this, and I am not hearing any specific examples that suggest that urgency is really being addressed.

I felt this lack of trust strongly when canvassing—lack of trust at all levels of the system, people who do not believe that their vote is secret, people who do not believe it will make any difference and people who feel their vote has never counted because they have never ever elected someone who they voted for. I feel this lack of trust is all through there, and it is going to impact the elections in May. It is going to impact the unitary elections, and I do not see any urgent action.

Rushanara Ali: You are right, and it is not just now. There has been an ongoing issue around trust in politics, which is work that we all have to



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do to ensure that we can build trust. In our manifesto we set out that we will take action in relation to political finance, for instance, which is another area where some of the things that have happened in the past have knocked public trust. That is an area in our manifesto that we have made a commitment to look at and introduce reforms on that.

We are still in the early days of the Government. The review is important. Making sure we are drawing on the expertise of different parties as part of that to address these issues is going to be key, but I am afraid that there isn't a silver bullet. There isn't a magic bullet in rebuilding trust. We have to face up to the fact that in the last decade, there have been many issues that have raised concerns and have knocked public trust. To rebuild that is going to be a collective effort, a societal effort. That is why the work we do in communities, the work we do for the younger generation in relation to the education institutions, as well as the work we do in addressing the underlying barriers and threats to our democracy is key. Perhaps we will come on later to the issues around misinformation and disinformation and the way the online space can also fracture trust. That is an agenda that is key.

DSIT is part of the Defending Democracy Taskforce. The whole government approach to looking at some of the underlying issues that can also feed into distrust is also important, and we need to work through those. That is going to require painstaking work. It is going to require us all to put our collective intelligence and insights into addressing those issues, but there are no straightforward answers, I appreciate that.

Q190 Chair: Is it too simplistic to say that as long as people have confidence in the basics—and I do not think that many people do think about it—the rubrics work? You restore trust by the calibre of those standing or seeking election and the ability of Government, local councils and so on, to deliver, and trust is fostered through successful delivery or at least being able to demonstrate that delivery has been attempted?

Rushanara Ali: In relation to elections or—

Chair: No. Just the delivery and the moving of the dials of public policy and public service. People have trust in things that work.

Rushanara Ali: Broadly, there is trust in institutions, but obviously in some more than others, so it is important that we build on that—and, yes, delivery, responding to people's everyday concerns, responding to the real-life challenges they face. Our country has gone through multiple crises—the pandemic, the cost of living crisis—and people are still living through those, and we need to make sure that substantive work is done to address those.

Q191 Sam Carling: Minister, just now you were talking about the problem of turnout but also the problem of not enough people being registered to vote. Could you give us a little bit more detail about anything specific the Government are looking at doing to address that? I wonder particularly if



you have a view, or the Government have a view, on automatic voter registration, which I know the Electoral Commission has recommended.

Rushanara Ali: Again, we are very interested in proposals, and the review will pick up some of those issues. We are also looking, of course, at how government information and technology can play a role. We will need to look at those proposals in the round and identify areas and proposals that could go a lot further in making it easier for people to register and participate in elections.

Q192 **Sam Carling:** That is helpful. In terms of automatic voter registration specifically, I put it to you that that has been quite a long-standing recommendation from the Electoral Commission over probably a number of Governments. I just wonder if there is something specific that is needed in the Department to make a decision on whether that is something you want to take forward.

Rushanara Ali: We are looking into it. I do not know if you want to come in on the specifics.

Stuart Ison: Thank you, Minister. I have a couple of comments. You are right, Mr Carling. It has been a long-standing recommendation from the Electoral Commission, which we are now looking at. It is not a straightforward thing to deliver. We are doing a lot of exploratory work at the moment to see what is possible.

The reality is that there are an estimated 7 million to 8 million eligible voters who are either missing from the register or incorrectly registered, and the Government take the view that that is not acceptable. We are looking at a wide range of options, including using public data and online government services to try to help modernise registration and increase registration levels, while also looking at ways in which automatic registration might be possible. We will bring forward proposals as part of our policy statement, which we hope to publish before the summer.

Q193 **Sam Carling:** Thank you. To take a slightly different tack, this issue particularly affects young people. What discussions might the Department be having across Government to try to increase engagement in the political system with young people specifically?

Rushanara Ali: As I mentioned earlier, the role that Government Departments play together, particularly the Department for Education and DCMS, is crucial. Youth Parliaments are important—Mr Speaker hosted the annual event here—as is the engagement of representatives in encouraging young people.

More importantly, we are very interested in ways in which we can encourage and support young people to register. That is where the cross-government work around opportunities to nudge people—not just young people, but others who are not registered to vote—is going to be important. Ideas have been proposed around DVLA, for instance, and different forms of engagement that the public have with government



agencies and institutions. There is a pathway of different ways in which we can engage voters.

There is particular work that needs to be undertaken in relation to young people, and these are live discussions across Government at the moment. I have had meetings with the Schools Minister and the Minister in DCMS. The reduction in voting age to 16 and 17 is a seminal moment in which we can get young people engaged, but also for communities to be engaged in that process.

Q194 Sam Carling: Finally, one of the solutions that is sometimes talked about is increasing the level of political education and current affairs discussion going on in schools. I know one of the barriers to that is often cited as being that teachers are reluctant to talk about it for fear that they will appear political themselves. Is there consideration being given to partnership working with organisations like The Economist Educational Foundation, which produces quite a lot of materials and stuff for teachers that could be incorporated without too much additional resource from Government?

Rushanara Ali: The Electoral Commission has an important role to play and we are keen to see that happen even more. This is a great opportunity. Of course, other institutions that can play a part in that are going to be important. As I say, it is an exciting agenda. I spent a great deal of time starting up charities to support young people in leadership positions, and I am very proud to say that a number of young adults have stood for councils, become councillors, and even stood for Parliament across different parties. NGOs and other institutions play an important role in supporting that political participation and engagement, which then feeds through in terms of representation. I am very keen to work with as many institutions as possible to make sure we get this right.

Q195 Chair: Minister, you mentioned data in your answer to Mr Carling, and I think Mr Ison will attest to this. If you have not already engaged as a Department with the Cabinet Office, and CDL in particular, on how Government manages and shares between Departments government data as a collective rather than as a precious siloed resource—because you are right: DVLA, the Passport Office and DWP have a raft of data that could be deployed in a very bespoke way to drive self-registration without having to resort to automatic.

I remember we had some issues with certainly one other Government Department that just would not share the data of who it had registered disabled, as a way of a targeted Electoral Commission and departmental campaign to get them. It does seem to me that Government as a collective can be either the author of its own salvation or the author of its own condemnation with regards to how it handles data. Are there discussions going on with Cabinet Office on a concordat of data management?



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Rushanara Ali: There are a number of discussions across Government about the use and importance of data, as you say, and linked data, in terms of policymaking. I mentioned DVLA, but there are other opportunities to look at how we can use government data in relation to voter registration, and we are having discussions. The Defending Democracy Taskforce, which the Cabinet Office Minister is represented in as well, is important. That joined-up working is key. Again, we hope to say more later on in the year as we are able to identify those issues.

Chair: We will not tempt you to make an announcement now. Keep the powder dry.

Q196 **John Lamont:** Minister, do you think UK election law is too complex?

Rushanara Ali: I appreciate the point of the question, and we recognise that the current system of election law is complex. I know that in some quarters there have been calls to consolidate election law. We appreciate the strong sentiments around that, but simple consolidation would deny the opportunity for us to fix immediate problems. We have talked about some of the urgent issues that we need to address. That is why we have taken the approach of having a strategic review, so that we can make quick progress and improve things for administrators in a way that is practical and tangible. The way I would frame this is that we have to ensure that the system is resilient to immediate and medium-term risks, and we are determined to do that.

Q197 **John Lamont:** Going back to my earlier question on reforming the law and making it simpler, do you look at other international comparisons to see how other countries do it, to see if there is any better practice that we could adopt here?

Rushanara Ali: There are a whole range of areas within this brief where I have been keen to learn from international experience, and officials draw on that international experience, as well as, of course, experience from Scotland and Wales, making sure that we are able to draw on each of the nations' experiences. International experience is very important. Of course, it is not always exactly translatable, but it is very helpful to us. I do not know if you want to add anything to that.

Stuart Ison: Mr Lamont, to answer your question, we are sympathetic to some of the challenges that colleagues face, including the Electoral Commission. I know it has been making this point to you in previous sessions, that electoral law is complex, and we do not disagree with that. To reinforce what the Minister has said, first, consolidating electoral law is a complex piece of work that would take a great deal of time to deliver. It is probably the work of more than one Parliament.

We take the view, listening to stakeholders, that there are a number of challenges in the system that need to be addressed more quickly, and that is why we are conducting the strategic review to identify those pragmatic, practical changes that will make a difference to voters and to



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administrators, and to take risk out of the system in delivering safe elections. That is our focus.

Q198 **John Lamont:** Just to be clear are you saying that that longer piece of work has started but will take longer to do, or that it has not yet started?

Stuart Ison: I am saying that we are sympathetic to those views, we will continue to listen to the Electoral Commission and other stakeholders who bring forward those arguments, and we will take a view in due course. However, our focus at the moment is on delivering the strategic review that we have been talking about this morning.

Q199 **Peter Lamb:** I know the comment has been made that this is to enable the system to be made more readily accessible, or at least address a number of concerns currently being raised by electoral administrators. I am sure that you are aware that the Association of Electoral Administrators has already stated that its express preference is for a single piece of legislation resolving all these different aspects. Given the questions raised by Mr Lamont, could we ask why it is that the Department is not going to commence the longer period of work around resolving the issues with the complexities of election law, alongside the short-term fixes that you are currently discussing?

Rushanara Ali: I think we have made our position clear. The focus is about addressing the immediate issues as well as medium-term issues. The strategic review may well come back with further proposals that will take longer but, as Stuart has said, that is a much longer-term piece of work. It is important that we take action now and are pragmatic about addressing those issues that need to be addressed for forthcoming elections, so that we are taking action to make sure that the system is resilient.

Q200 **Peter Lamb:** With respect, Minister, that is not really what I asked. I acknowledge the short-term work that is being done now, but both you and Mr Ison have acknowledged that this is an area that needs to be addressed; that the reason it is not being addressed right now is to address the short-term fixes; and that it will take longer than a Parliament to do this work. Surely it is in everyone's best interest, alongside the short-term fixes being brought forward now, to commence the process of dealing with what everyone in the system appears to believe is a piece of work that needs to be done.

Rushanara Ali: What I am saying is that there will be certain proposals that will require longer. That will have to be taken into account. However, we are focused on ensuring that we have, we hope, a Bill coming—an elections Bill—subject to the Leader of the House providing further updates.

Chair: Oh, that great hurdle.

Rushanara Ali: That great hurdle; that is right. We are focusing on that.



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Stuart Ison: Just to be clear, I said we were sympathetic to the views of stakeholders who make those arguments. I do not think that there is a single view across the whole system, Mr Lamb, with respect, that would suggest that that is definitively the way forward. As the Minister has said, we will consider it in the longer term, but our focus now is on addressing those real challenges and those real pinch points in the system that need immediate attention from the Government.

Q201 **Chair:** On the point about the longer term—a phrase we all recognise and will have varying degrees of sympathy for—there is recognition across the parties and among the stakeholders that there is a piece of work that has long needed to be done, but the job of government is multifaceted and complex. What, if any, other routes exist not to initiate new policy, but to stress test existing law and bring it into one operational compendium? What other routes exist, through either a Speaker’s Conference or the Electoral Commission, to bring into one handy, go-to volume every question you wanted to ask about how to run a general election but were too afraid to ask? I suggest that as a working title; no commission. Anything that is innovative and new would obviously be within the purview of Government and Parliament to pass, but to passport that piece of vital work to a trusted third party—either the commission or the Speaker’s Office. You may not have an answer to that, and it may require further thought and consideration.

Rushanara Ali: We can maybe come back to you, but the important thing is that, to your point about stress testing, resilience and emerging challenges, there is a whole series of issues that we need to take into account—registration and much else. This is an opportunity to get those ideas and inputs now. Perhaps we can come back to you later on. We will then need to consolidate the proposals that come through to us, look at what is practically deliverable and ensure that the electoral sector is prepared for those.

We have not talked too much about implementation and delivery. You will know, Chair, from your experience that we need to make sure that proposals are appropriate and can be delivered by those who are on the frontline, and we need to make sure that they provide that input. We are very open to new innovations and ideas, but then the hard work needs to be undertaken on implementation as part of that exercise.

Q202 **Chair:** The thought I would leave you with, Minister, is that since 1832 we have had this sedimentary build-up of electoral law. For the courts and for administrators, for candidates and for voters, cross-referencing between 1832, 1868, 1928, 2022, and so on, can drive a teetotaler to drink. I think there is a recognition that there is a piece of work that needs to be done. We will leave it there and look forward to further thoughts.

I want to touch briefly on electoral staff retention and recruitment. We know that there have been problems. You have referenced something that was not unique to the last general election: the deployment of civil



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servants, principally but not exclusively from HMRC and DWP, to support. We have all been hearing, have we not, about a problem with recruitment? That seems to be, broadly, because Covid was a great reason for people who had been involved in delivering election day to step away; because of the complexity of elections, particularly surrounding voter ID; and fear of harassment and intimidation among polling clerks as a result of issues that you have already discussed. Turning to our first point about guaranteeing resilience, what thoughts do you have about working with the commission and the AEA to try to resolve that issue?

Rushanara Ali: Chair, you raise a very important point about the scale of challenge faced by electoral administrators in delivering the general election, but also other elections. We are conscious of the pressures on them. There are also recruitment challenges that vary across the country, and we want to and will work with the sector, including the Association of Electoral Administrators. I had the opportunity to speak at its conference recently to make sure that we are able to provide appropriate support, working with the Electoral Commission. The responsibility for delivering elections lies with statutorily independent officers, but central Government plays an important role, and we are looking closely at how we can support it.

Q203 **Chair:** Would an integrated set of digital systems—going back to points raised by the commission and the AEA—or indeed a single digital system be helpful to solving the issues at hand?

Rushanara Ali: I will turn to Stuart; it is his favourite topic.

Chair: I know. That is why I feared asking the question.

Stuart Ison: I will get to that in a second. If I may come back to the point about resilience in the system, just to make a distinction for the record, we had 12,000 civil servants who volunteered to help at polling stations ahead of the general election. That is brilliant and I am grateful to them.

Chair: Is that 1,200 or 12,000? I thought I had heard 1,200 in an earlier answer.

Stuart Ison: Twelve thousand. We are talking about how we can harness that in future elections. It is a superb thing that people have done.

What we have also built is something slightly different. You refer to HMRC staff. We have a standing group of HMRC staff who are able to be deployed into back office posts in the run-up to the general election. You will recall that this was a provision that was made available to returning officers in good time before the election in 2024. It is available in the run-up to as well as the five-week period before the election.

On the digital services, to be clear, we are very proud of the digital services that we run. We now have seven, including the electoral



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registration officer portal, which I will get to in a minute. We are proud of how well they operate. They get superb reviews from those who use them and they are operating well. The electoral registration officer portal, which colleagues referred to in previous evidence sessions, did come under some pressure because it was introduced a relatively short period before the May elections. We have been continuing to evolve that system at pace. The reporting that we have had back from returning officers and electoral registration officers after the election is very positive. We have taken on their comments about improvements. We have developed a roadmap to outline how we will further develop that in the coming months. Ultimately, it proved to be successful, and was successfully used during the general election. Indeed, Chair, you saw it in its operation at Reigate and Banstead.

Chair: I did. I remember it well; I inputted some of the data myself. I did not fill out any ballot papers, before anybody makes that claim.

Stuart Ison: I want to be clear that it is being used. It is continuing to evolve, and it has been successfully used by colleagues around the country.

Q204 **John Lamont:** I have a small point to clarify. The 12,000 civil servants who you said volunteered—are they redeployed from their existing civil service position, or are they paid in the same way as other people who work in polling stations?

Stuart Ison: They put themselves up for a day of volunteering. Not all of them were used, Mr Lamont. I do not know how many went on to be. We give returning officers a geographical sense of where they are, and they can use them—“use them” is a terrible way to describe it; they can rely on them as they wish. They would need to take a day’s leave, and they will be paid in the same way as polling station officers. There is an arrangement, and we will have a look at that.

John Lamont: It is not quite volunteering in the way that it initially sounded. They are getting paid to do that and they are taking a day’s leave.

Stuart Ison: I believe so. I would have to check on that. I will confirm that with the commission.

John Lamont: It is important to clarify.

Q205 **Mr Richard Quigley:** Funding of elections has been mentioned regularly by the Electoral Commission and AEA. How will the Government ensure that sufficient funding is made available so that the system does not fail?

Rushanara Ali: You are right, and local government has suffered from funding challenges. This Government have already increased the funding available to local authorities and we will also look closely at what else is needed. We are very conscious, of course, of the pressures and



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challenges that local councils have faced. In the wider agenda, this Government have already taken steps to support local government.

Q206 Mr Richard Quigley: On a connected note but slightly aside, a senior aide to a political party in the UK was jailed in the US for agreeing to launder money for undercover agents posing as drug traffickers. That aide was subject to a search and arrest warrant in relation to accusations that he was illegally financing a political party in Montenegro. Do you have any concerns about that for UK elections?

Rushanara Ali: We have made a commitment in our manifesto to make sure that foreign money has no place in UK politics. It is vital to protect our democracy from actors who seek to interfere in our elections. You give that example, and there are threats and there are risks of interference in our democracy. There is quite a lot of work that has been done in the past and ongoing work, including through the Defending Democracy Taskforce. We have set out in our manifesto that we plan to make changes to address some of the outstanding issues relating to political finance.

Q207 Sam Carling: Just on the area that Mr Quigley has gone into with funding, we all know that foreign money, despite being officially banned by UK electoral law, can still enter our politics through multinational corporations. Minister, you and I both know that the Labour party turned down £2.7 million of overseas donations at the last election, but under the current rules it seems to me that not a lot can be done to stop that happening in parties that are willing to take it. Have the Government done any work to examine how overseas donations affected the 2024 election and how they might affect future elections if the current rules are not changed?

Rushanara Ali: We have committed in our manifesto to taking action on this. You are right that at the moment the rules are not tight enough. It is up to individual parties to do the due diligence, and some parties do that better than others. The “know your donor” approach is important. Some parties are doing that voluntarily. I know that the Labour party does that.

However, there is a case for looking at whether that can be strengthened. There are a number of proposals that are coming through, including from the Electoral Commission, on what we could be doing. We are very open to looking at those proposals as well as others that have come in. I know that you have had submissions and evidence in this session from Transparency International and others. We want to make sure that we get this right. I am also keen that we engage and work with political parties to make sure that we are not missing a trick in ensuring that we protect our democracy from donations that are not legitimate and that can come in, as you say, through loopholes.

Q208 Sam Carling: On that note, you mentioned that at the moment the system relies on the beneficiary to check the source of the donation. I am



reminded of a case at the last election where the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, via an overseas donor, made small payments to all the major political parties, which overall totalled just over £500 as the declarable threshold. They found that the Conservatives, Reform, the Lib Dems, the SNP and the Greens all accepted those donations. It was only the Labour party that identified and returned them. Do you think examples like that back up the suggestion that maybe we need to move away from a system where it is up to the beneficiary to check?

Rushanara Ali: We will look at these issues in the round. You are right that the current system needs improvement, and we need to tackle some of the underlying issues that you point to. We are very much looking at those issues, working with the Electoral Commission and other relevant parties. We need to draw on the expertise of those who have worked at these issues before proceeding to the next stage. However, we are very committed to taking action on this agenda.

I will hand over to Stuart, in case you want to add anything.

Stuart Ison: I have a couple of points, Mr Carling. First, we think there is a huge amount that we can learn from the work done by both the Electoral Commission but also the Committee on Standards in Public Life. They have some good learning that we can draw on as we develop these proposals.

Secondly, this is a complex area of law, and it is one we are looking at very carefully. We want to work with stakeholders, including political parties, as we bring this forward. What we do not want to do is inadvertently take a misstep on this. It is important we get it right. That is why we will be talking to the practitioners very carefully about how this is implemented because clearly it is a very important matter, as the Minister has outlined.

Chair: I am conscious of time. I know the Government are making an important announcement on welfare reform in the not too distant future, which I am sure most colleagues will want to be in for, so I am going to refocus us on time management. I am conscious I have lost my bet with Mr Baker.

Q209 **Luke Taylor:** I will try to be very direct. Earlier in the year there was a lot of media hysteria over a mooted donation to a political party by a foreign billionaire. There was a lot of worry about how that would distort politics.

I have a couple of direct questions. Do you think it is appropriate to consider reducing spending limits in election campaigns to reduce the potential impact and influence of big money donations? You have given a fairly firm answer to Mr Carling about the donation reform, so that was helpful. Do you see there are also major loopholes in spending on social media and broadcast media that currently do not really cover the way that modern electoral campaigns are run? Are you looking to tighten up



how those rules operate as well?

Rushanara Ali: Thank you. First of all, on foreign donations, the law is very clear. It is already pretty clear, notwithstanding the points we discussed earlier, that donations to political parties and other campaigners are illegal, and only those with legitimate interest in UK electoral events can make political donations. It would not be appropriate for me to comment or for the Government to interfere and be perceived to be interfering with specific donations. Any suspected breaches are a matter for the Electoral Commission. Parties, as we discussed, have a responsibility to do the appropriate due diligence and make sure they are working within the legal framework.

In terms of the other point you make, as I said earlier, what is important is that we look at the various proposals that are coming in and can consider carefully what next steps should be taken. At this stage we have not set out proposals to—I think you mentioned the point about—

Luke Taylor: Reducing spending limits.

Rushanara Ali: We do not have proposals to reduce the spending limit.

Q210 **Peter Lamb:** What is the Government's assessment of how well postal voting performed at the general election?

Rushanara Ali: Do you want to come in on that?

Stuart Ison: Yes, I am happy to. Overall, Mr Lamb, I think it performed well. We have seen a significant change in the postal voting landscape, as I think the Committee knows very well. Around 10% of voters voted by post going back 20-odd years and now we are looking at somewhere around 25% of voters using the postal voting system to vote. Overall, the system has changed a huge amount. That said, as I spoke about at the start of the Committee, there were some challenges, including the way in which postal votes for some constituents in Scotland operated.

The most important thing to underline here is that the way in which elections are delivered is an ecosystem. We cannot just point to one particular area of that system and say, "That has failed". We have seen that there are very close links between suppliers, printers, Royal Mail and returning officers, and making sure those elements work in harmony is key. We work closely with Royal Mail and suppliers throughout the years, but we intensify those discussions as we get close to an election to make sure, first, that there is resilience to address any challenges that crop up, but also when there are particular issues that occur—like the ones we saw a week to 10 days before the general election—we are ready to address them on the ground.

Overall, I think the postal voting arrangements worked very well, but there are some challenges—the Electoral Commission has raised them—and there are things that we want to look at in this Parliament to try to improve the way in which postal votes operate.



Q211 **Peter Lamb:** Could you outline what those things are that you are looking at?

Stuart Ison: The strategic review is looking at a range of different issues relating to postal voting, including some of the timing arrangements within that 25-day period. We are still in discussion as to what recommendations we are going to make but, as I said, we will set those out in our policy statement, which will be published, we hope, before the summer recess. We look forward to coming to discuss those with the Committee in due course.

Q212 **Peter Lamb:** Building on that, 16,000 people were affected notionally but anecdotal evidence suggests it might well have been higher than that, to be honest, talking to some of the electoral administrators. With increasingly narrow results at general elections, we are starting to move into an area where this might affect some of the outcomes. Are there any plans to look at alternative delivery mechanisms for postal votes?

Rushanara Ali: You are right, and it is unacceptable that 16,000 people were affected in this way. The Electoral Commission has already, as you know, considered a number of recommendations in its report, including the point that was made about statutory deadlines. We are keen to look at what else can be done to reduce the risk of voters not being able to participate.

There are also considerations around overseas voting that have come up, which we are looking at in order to ensure that overseas voters are not negatively affected, particularly in relation to postal votes.

Q213 **Peter Lamb:** Are you considering any mechanisms other than postal voting to enable people to vote?

Rushanara Ali: At the moment we are looking forward to receiving suggestions and proposals. Some of them are coming in already, or have come in already, which we are considering along the way. As Stuart has pointed out, we look forward to updating you once that strategy statement is published.

Q214 **Peter Lamb:** Could I ask what assessment the Government have made of the reliance on external suppliers in all this?

Stuart Ison: Mr Lamb, it is very much part of the strategic review that we are conducting, the relationship with suppliers. We understand the part that they play in, as I said, the ecosystem or the infrastructure that supports the delivery of elections. We work closely with Royal Mail and the suppliers at all times, as I have set out, and the relationships with suppliers are a key part of the way in which we are conducting the strategic review. As I said, we will come back to the Committee with further information later on in this Parliament.

Q215 **Peter Lamb:** I am not going to ask about future arrangements, then, but just build on the existing arrangements. I should state that I have spent



14 years as a governance committee member at my local authority overseeing this on the ground, so I have some quite strong opinions about the way Government deal with a lot of these things.

We had an election in May. That flagged a number of issues with Royal Mail. We then had a repeat of a number of those issues in July. We have a situation where you have to print 9.5 million postal packs, 48 million poll cards and 50 million ballot papers, and you have to do that on a 25-day working timetable. I acknowledge the comments made around potentially changing some of that, but what was the back-up plan in July if all this fell apart?

Stuart Ison: There is resilience in the system at a local authority level to deal with this, and within Royal Mail. Royal Mail in the past has seen challenges around its staffing and has arrangements to deal with that. That is the first point.

The second is that, as I have talked to the Committee about previously, we have that close working relationship with Royal Mail, the returning officers, local authorities and print suppliers, so we know when there are challenges that are occurring and can address them appropriately. For example, when the issue with the printers in Nottingham occurred, we were aware immediately. We began engagement with Royal Mail, which really pulled out the stops, supplying lorries and staff to support the effective delivery of postal votes at very short notice. I want to thank it for doing that. We have that relationship and working arrangement so that when issues arise we can address them quickly.

There are then also structural arrangements in place—including in Royal Mail, where there are challenges around, for example, staffing—so that they can address them quickly. Of course, our work with Royal Mail does not just stop once the general election has taken place. We have continued those conversations, including to learn the lessons from what took place at the election in July.

Q216 **Luke Taylor:** You mentioned overseas voting, and 50% of the 200,000 overseas voters choose to vote by post. I think in the last election, only 50% of those returned their postal voting packs in time. We have understood the issues with printing and sending those out—simply, the international postal network is not capable of doing that in a lot of places—yet you have ruled out telephone voting and voting at embassies for overseas voters. How are the Government ensuring that overseas registered voters are able to vote successfully in the next general election?

Rushanara Ali: You raise important challenges in relation to overseas voters. It is not straightforward. As you say, the distance from embassies in particular countries means that in some places that might work but in others it will not, depending on the size of a particular country and the dispersal of UK electors in those countries. There is no quick fix. There are no straightforward answers to this. However, we are keen, as part of



the review of electoral registration conduct, to work with the Electoral Commission to look at what else we can do.

That said, there are particular issues in relation to telephone-based voting. We have to make sure that the process is safe and secure, alongside the practicality-related points. While telephone voting might be very efficient and practical, it also needs to be safe and secure. We are keeping an open mind, but we also need to be practical and pragmatic about what is possible and what is not.

Q217 Luke Taylor: Picking up on keeping an open mind, there is a specific point about embassy voting, which we see lots of other countries use very successfully. Around London, we quite regularly see festivals and people having celebrations in the queues at embassies for overseas elections. Why has that specifically been ruled out if you say that the Government are keeping an open mind on systems?

Rushanara Ali: It is partly geographical as well. I do not know if you have been party to some of those discussions or if you want to add anything, Stuart.

Stuart Ison: Thank you, Minister. It is not a straightforward, quick process to put in place. As the Minister said, we keep an open mind. We are very willing to listen to the Electoral Commission and others about some of the proposals they are thinking about, including, as you just pointed out, Mr Taylor, the learning from other countries where this works effectively.

This is not a simple, straightforward process to put in place overnight. It is going to take a lot of time. We will continue to listen and see what proposals come forward, but it is not currently part of our immediate strategic review work or proposals for this Parliament. As I said, we will keep listening.

Chair: One of the tricks I missed for the last general election was asking local authorities to capture how many overseas postal votes arrived after the declaration of the poll. We have a vacuum of data. There is some anecdotal, but from memory I think about half a dozen local authorities captured some information, not uniformly. We do not know, and I just wonder if there is any point, even at this late stage, asking local authorities—it will be a ballpark figure—how many did come back.

The intention was great—increasing the franchise—but the Electoral Commission told us that we could not advise people to vote by proxy, for example, which would have meant that that issue did not materialise. We had to let people come to a decision to utilise the varied options of exercising their vote, but it is much easier to get something from the centre of Paris than it is, for example, the centre of Queensland. We do not have the data and that does tie one hand behind the Government's back, I think, just casting forward on that.

Heaven rejoices when a sinner repenteth. I would urge serious



consideration of the point that Mr Taylor and others have made in this inquiry, thinking about embassies and consulates. I do not necessarily take the argument that it will all take a long time. Embassy staff are pretty flexible on these things.

Q218 Mr Richard Quigley: What assessment have the Government made of the impact that the introduction of voter ID has had on elections?

Rushanara Ali: As you know, a lot of work has gone into voter ID, and the Electoral Commission report sets out some of the broad, overarching figures in terms of people who were able to use voter ID and participate. However, there are particular groups that were less likely to be able to participate or to have the appropriate ID: those in temporary accommodation, for instance, some ethnic minority groups, and so on, and disabled groups. There are particular challenges that are outstanding in relation to the requirement to have voter ID. We recognise that much more work needs to be done to ensure that those who were excluded, in effect, are included.

Mr Richard Quigley: Stuart, did you want to add something to that?

Stuart Ison: The figures suggest, Mr Quigley, that around 0.25% of the electorate did not have a valid piece of ID when they went to vote. Many of them went, got a piece of ID and came back to vote, and that left just 0.8% of the population—around 16,000 people—who did not return. Now, that is a large number of people and I am not complacent about that at all, but that is important context.

What we are doing at the moment is evaluating the way in which it was used during the general election. We are also thinking about extending the franchise to 16 and 17-year-olds and what that means for the use of ID. We will bring forward proposals before summer recess, but we are very conscious of the data and the learning from the Electoral Commission and what it has seen on the ground and the AEA through what it hears from its returning officers. Indeed, a range of other stakeholders have expressed views about the way in which ID has operated on the ground.

Q219 Mr Richard Quigley: You are right that the numbers are quite small, but do you think there is some work that needs to be done around the acceptability of ID and voter ID itself? I think there is a core group of people who are quite fearful of what might be done with ID.

Stuart Ison: We work with the Electoral Commission on a range of communications that it puts out throughout the year but in particular as we get closer to elections, and we will continue that conversation with it. I do recognise that the use of the Voter Authority Certificate could be increased, and that is something we are exploring very actively. Your point is well made, and we will continue to discuss that, in particular with the Electoral Commission, while also reviewing how ID operates across the piece.



Rushanara Ali: The bottom line is that it is not acceptable that 16,000 people were not able to participate because of this issue, and we are determined to do all we can to ensure that lessons are learned and addressed. That is why the Government's review on improving voter ID is important. We will keep an open mind about what else we can do to ensure people are included rather than excluded. They are legitimate voters, and they should not have been excluded.

Q220 **Charlotte Cane:** The voter ID was introduced to tackle electoral fraud. What evidence is there that electoral fraud has been reduced?

Rushanara Ali: First of all, the situation with voter ID has—I do not believe that there is specific evidence around cases. It is slightly a counterfactual because you could argue that having the ID process has meant that if there were electoral fraud issues, that would have helped to prevent it. That said, I am very aware of some of the challenges around electoral fraud in particular areas, which of course led to the previous Government introducing voter ID.

What we are focused on is making sure that in the pursuit of a process that means you have to provide ID, people are not disenfranchised. I mentioned some of the groups that have been in that position. Action needs to be taken—and that is what we are doing—to make sure that we make the necessary improvements so that people are not excluded from participating in elections.

Q221 **Charlotte Cane:** We know that at the last election a minimum of 16,000 people were excluded. The Electoral Commission tells us the figures are significantly higher because there are people who simply did not even try. And yet I think, if I am right in remembering, the number of charges for personation was 34. What are the criteria you are using to judge the impact and effectiveness of voter ID, given that you do not have a clear measure of whether fraud has been reduced? What criteria are you using to judge that impact against the number of people who are being prevented or discouraged from voting?

Rushanara Ali: I have made the point already about the fact that it is not acceptable that legitimate electors were prevented—the 16,000. Potentially, as you say, it could be more.

We are not going to rip up the system. Our focus is on improving the voter ID system so that legitimate voters are not excluded from elections and that they are conducted safely and securely. That is our focus. Obviously, our Chair was the previous Minister overseeing the legislation at the time. The focus needs to be on making sure that those who were excluded are included. They are legitimate electors and that is what we have to focus on.

Stuart Ison: I wonder if I could just add a couple of points. Evaluation of voter ID at the general election is being conducted in the same way as it was for the May 2023 local elections. We have an independent contractor,



IFF Research, which undertakes this evaluation and uses a thorough and very specialist evaluation approach to inform that evaluation.

We have contracted another wave of large public opinion survey work as well, which is being conducted by Ipsos. Again, IFF has conducted this very thorough, mainly qualitative research with electors to provide us with a full picture of what the impacts have been. This will help to shape the way in which we consider the recommendations we make on voter ID, which we are working through at the moment. I just wanted to reassure you that a very thorough evaluation process has taken place as to its impact, including with independent reviews of the way in which it has been conducted.

Q222 Charlotte Cane: You are looking at the impact on voters and whether or not they were able to vote, and it is good to hear that. However, I have not heard anything about the impact on electoral fraud—which was why it was introduced in the first place—and how that is being measured, and I have not heard what your criteria are for judging those two impacts and whether we have the balance right.

Stuart Ison: Personation, as the Minister has outlined, is hard to prove because of the counterfactual point. We do know that when we have surveyed the extent to which voters have confidence in the way in which the voter ID system operates in reducing fraud, that has increased, but it is a very difficult element to prove one way or the other.

All I can say is that we are taking the evaluation work that has been conducted and what we have heard from the Electoral Commission, and in the round we will be making an assessment of the success of voter ID and what changes we might need to make in due course.

Q223 Charlotte Cane: There are no criteria that you have pre-set against which you are going to do these judgments?

Stuart Ison: What I have said is that a very careful piece of evaluation work is being conducted, both by IFF and by Ipsos, and that will help to inform the way in which we assess the success of voter ID and inform future policy proposals in relation to voter ID.

Q224 Chair: Is the removal of voter ID on the table?

Rushanara Ali: No, it is not. What we are focused on is improving the system and making sure that we look at what else we can do in relation to voter ID and getting those legitimate voters who were excluded included.

Q225 Mr Richard Quigley: How do the new accessibility requirements introduced in the Elections Act 2022 operate in practice? Can you take me through what happened with the new accessibility requirements?

Rushanara Ali: In relation to the last election, picking up from post-election and the responsibility I have taken, one of the important groups that the Department engaged with is the accessibility of elections working



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group, which includes disability groups, the Electoral Commission, administrators and Government officials, and the focus is around policy, legislation, guidance and communications. It is important for us to make sure that they provide appropriate input. Disability should never be something that prevents people from taking part in their democratic right and duty.

In terms of assessments, I mentioned, and the Electoral Commission report highlights, some of the barriers that those with disabilities experience. The work that this group does, as well as the review, will pick up on those barriers. We want to take action to ensure that those with disabilities are not prevented from participating in our democracy, and we will take the appropriate action to do that. Did you want to come in on any of these points, Stuart, specifically in relation to pre-election?

Stuart Ison: Yes, I can do, Minister. It is a good question, Mr Quigley. The Elections Act 2022 introduced some new requirements, and I think you have had a conversation with Vijay Rangarajan from the Electoral Commission on this.

What we have done is to work closely with local authorities and returning officers to support them in making new provisions available to those with a disability who want to vote. The satisfaction levels that we have measured are high. The testing that we did through Ipsos broadly came out in the same place as the Electoral Commission assessments—somewhere around the 80% mark for satisfaction—but that leaves quite a lot of room for improvement.

We have a particular group within the Department that meets with stakeholders with an interest in these particular issues relatively regularly. We are going to be picking up on the learning that we got from the voters and from local authorities on how they experienced it and see how we can improve arrangements going into the general election. Forgive me; I should have said from the start that this was another important bit of learning from the general election. We are not complacent at all. There is a lot more that we can do.

I think, though, what we are trying to do is to provide the flexibility for returning officers to deal with a range of different disabilities in their particular local area. I know there have been some calls to be more prescriptive about what should be made available. The view that we have taken, including through close consultation with stakeholders, is that we should provide a flexible level of support to returning officers to support a whole range of different disabilities and make sure that the largest number of people can vote. Clearly, there is more that can be done, so I am sympathetic to this point.

Q226 **Mr Richard Quigley:** Are you happy that you have had sufficient feedback to form an action plan, or is that still ongoing?



Stuart Ison: It is still ongoing, to be clear, but we have had some important feedback from the general election. I would not want you to think that me quoting the figures about satisfaction means that it is all done; absolutely not. We look at the 20% who are not satisfied, in particular, and we want to work to make sure not only that everyone is satisfied, but also that those who chose not to vote because they might have felt impeded by their disability feel that they have the freedom to go and vote in the future. We are very alive to these issues.

Q227 **Chair:** Minister, your detailed and heartfelt opening statement on the abuse, harassment and intimidation of candidates, their party supporters and others has negated quite a lot of the questions that I wanted to ask you about that important issue. It is an issue that unites us all around this table and anybody in the House of Commons and elsewhere who takes these issues seriously. I am not going to ask you very much on that, given the self-sufficiency of your opening remarks, save for two quite specific questions.

The first is in regard to money, and that key question: has the Treasury grasped the scale and disruptive impact that abuse, harassment and intimidation can have? Therefore, the question, I suppose, is: are the Government committed to providing the funding to do whatever it takes to ensure a robust, free, liberal, pluralistic democracy?

Rushanara Ali: Thank you, Chair. The first thing to say is that the Prime Minister has given the Defending Democracy Taskforce a mandate to co-ordinate and drive forward a whole of government response, building on the work that was done in the previous Government, and look at the full range of threats to our democracy. That involves cross-government work.

Secondly, in relation to your point on money, £31 million was committed back in February 2024 for the current financial year to strengthen protective security measures for MPs and local representatives. That includes councillors, police and crime commissioners, mayors and all general election candidates. That is something that is very much recognised as important in terms of protecting our democracy and supporting those who are taking part.

You will be familiar with the Op Bridger network, Op Ford for the local elections, and other supports that come in as part of that package. Because of some of the security issues, there is also Op Regency, which is about providing private security personnel for events, including constituency surgeries. As you know, those programmes have been needed, sadly, because of the tragedies that we have faced. There is a commitment to making sure that support is provided, and these are some of the examples, building on what was done in the previous Government.

Q228 **Chair:** Thank you. Appreciating that these things evolved to meet challenging circumstances, I was struck—outside Operation Bridger—by the different views of constabularies to their quite important role, proactively rather than reactively, to support and protect this thing that



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we call liberal democracy. That is possibly just because this was a very fast-paced and evolving picture. What assurance can you give us, without necessarily going into all the workings, quite properly, of the Defending Democracy Taskforce, that there is a drive to try to secure a more—forgive the pun—uniform approach across all our constabularies, and that from the chief constable down to the special constable there is an understanding that our police service has a vital role to play proactively in defending and respecting democracy?

Rushanara Ali: Spot on, Chair. The Security Minister, Dan Jarvis, and I work very closely together, along with colleagues across Government, through the Defending Democracy Taskforce. This, among a number of issues, has come up. You will be familiar with it in the public domain. It is important that we have that consistency, and that we have confidence that we can expect the support that is required—not just national politicians, but local councillors and other candidates who are standing for elections, who can be the target of harassment, intimidation and worse.

The Security Minister has already written to police partners across the country. We look to work closely with them—the Home Office is in the lead on this—to make sure that good practice is shared. The Speaker's Conference is, of course, key. He and I will be giving evidence in that Committee. This is an agenda that requires constant work. The Parliament side is important, to your point. We have a whole new generation of Members of Parliament who are for the first time elected into our Parliament, so making sure that there is that co-ordinated effort is critical. That is what we are doing. I am in touch with Mr Speaker, of course, on these matters, as well as our other colleagues and representatives from Parliament included in the Defending Democracy Taskforce.

Chair: Thank you. Minister, Mr Ison, thank you very much for your attendance this morning and for taking our questions. There are one or two things on which I think you have committed to write to us further. We look forward to receiving that. This is an iterative, organic suite of issues, and as a Committee we look forward to engaging with your Department, and indeed others, to play that role in scrutinising what comes forward to protect and safeguard both candidates in elections and those who participate as voters. Thank you very much for your time this morning.