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Matt Western MP  
Chair, Joint Committee on the National Security  
Strategy  
House of Commons  
London  
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Dear Matt,

**Response to the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy (JCNSS) on risks and threats to UK democracy**

Congratulations on your appointment as Chair. As a former member of the Committee, I recognise what an important contribution you and your committee members can play in holding the Government to account in matters relating to National Security Strategy.

I am writing in response to the letter of 23 May from your predecessor, the Rt Hon Dame Margaret (now Baroness) Beckett MP, addressed to the then Prime Minister the Rt Hon Rishi Sunak MP. The letter clearly describes the concerns of the then JCNSS regarding threats to the UK's democracy. With the election of a new Government, I am replying as the Security Minister, to set out how the Government is working to tackle the threats the Committee has highlighted.

**The 2024 General Election**

Security in democratic processes is paramount, and the Government has robust systems in place to ensure the integrity of elections. Planning for this is led by the Joint Election Security and Preparedness (JESP) Unit, which sits jointly between Cabinet Office and the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG). As part of their work to prepare for electoral events, JESP set up an election cell ahead of the 2024 General Election which brought together government departments, the intelligence agencies, the devolved governments, and external partners to monitor and respond to any emerging issues. For the local elections in May 2025, proportionate arrangements will be set up to respond to any emerging risks.

I recognise the risks set out in Dame Margaret's letter. As reported by the Electoral Commission, the 2024 General Election ran smoothly, and people were able to cast their votes securely. However, the election was not without incident. In particular, the election saw completely unacceptable harassment and intimidation of candidates, campaigners and electoral administrators, ranging from serious incidents to lower level but persistent harassment or intimidation.

In response, the Home Secretary chaired a meeting of the Defending Democracy Taskforce (DDTF) on 25 July with a particular focus on early lessons identified from the General Election and the harassment and intimidation many experienced. A formal lessons learned process across government is now well under way, led by the JESP Unit, to inform planning and preparation for future electoral events.

## **Foreign interference**

In a year in which almost half the world's population has gone to the polls, interference activities pose a long-term threat to democracy and sovereignty worldwide. Indications suggest there were no major interference incidents which affected the outcome of the UK General Election. However, we continue to very closely monitor any longer-term impacts that sustained interference could have on the UK's democratic institutions and processes and we will not be complacent.

The Government takes threats of interference very seriously, and we continue to work closely with the UK Intelligence Community to combat these issues. One of the key milestones in our response is the introduction of the Foreign Influence Registration Scheme (FIRS). The political influence tier of the scheme will require those being directed by a foreign power to carry out "political influence activities" to register. This will therefore increase transparency of foreign power influence in the UK and deter the use of covert arrangements by foreign powers seeking to influence our democracy. The scheme also contains an enhanced tier which will provide the Government with a greater assurance of the activities carried out at the direction of the foreign powers which pose the greatest risk, therefore helping to tackle a wider range of state threats. The implementation of FIRS remains a government priority and we expect it to go live in summer 2025. We are also engaging our international partners to learn lessons and collaborate on the common challenges we face.

## **Cyber Security**

The DDTF supported work led by the National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC) and Westminster Parliamentary authorities to develop and roll out an enhanced cyber security offer for Parliamentarians to better protect them against cyber-attacks and foreign interference. Since the General Election, the NCSC have further promoted the newly produced Defending Democracy Guidance to Westminster and Devolved Parliaments to secure Members' personal email and web domains to reduce their vulnerabilities. The guidance is available here<sup>1</sup>.

## **Emerging technology and deepfakes**

The Government recognises the challenges that AI-generated content can pose for the information environment and its potential impact on democratic processes. The use of Generative AI during the UK 2024 General Election was not at the scale anticipated. The Alan Turing Institute's Centre for Emerging Technology and Security, have reported they found "*no evidence that AI-enabled disinformation or deepfakes meaningfully impacted the UK or European election result*".<sup>2</sup>

In preparation for the 2024 General Election, teams worked closely across Government to ensure we were ready to respond to threats from AI-enabled election interference. This included the Election Cell which coordinated a wide range of teams across Government to respond to issues, including AI-generated disinformation.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ncsc.gov.uk/collection/defending-democracy/hri-website-email-domain>

<sup>2</sup> <https://cetas.turing.ac.uk/publications/ai-enabled-influence-operations-threat-analysis-2024-uk-and-european-elections>

In addition, the Home Office and the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) launched a 'Deepfake Detection Challenge' in May 2024, to facilitate innovation in deepfake detection.

The Government is working hard to make the internet safer. Doing this effectively requires a broad toolkit – using the Online Safety Act (OSA) to ensure platforms take steps to limit harmful content online. Media literacy is a key tool to build citizens' resilience to misinformation, disinformation and AI-generated deepfakes, by ensuring both children and adults have the knowledge and skills to navigate the online world. Specific guidance on AI and disinformation was shared with candidates before the election.

## **Social Media and Technology Companies**

Deepfakes and other forms of manipulated media are captured by the OSA where they constitute user generated content that is illegal content, or content which is harmful to children. The Government has been clear that social media platforms should be taking action to improve user safety now, rather than wait for the OSA duties to take effect in early 2025. The Government, including DSIT, is working closely with Ofcom to have the regime operational as soon as possible, whilst ensuring the necessary preparations are completed effectively and service providers understand what is expected of them.

DSIT met regularly with the major social media platforms in the run up to and during the election period, to discuss what action they were taking on mis and disinformation and to ensure a robust response from platforms to content that could undermine the election. There is, however, more work to do.

## **Security of Candidates and MPs**

The safety of MPs, candidates and high-risk individuals who can face politically motivated abuse and hatred is a priority for the Government as this abuse is completely unacceptable. Ahead of the Local and General Elections earlier this year, an additional £31 million was allocated over this financial year (FY24/25) to support candidates during the General Election, as well as locally elected representatives. This included the provision by the Home Office of private security operatives available to all candidates for election-related events, and full-time private security packages to candidates whose risk profile merited provision. Security guidance for candidates can be found here<sup>3</sup>.

Over the course of the General Election, the Home Office provided security for over 600 events across the UK.

Following the General Election, the Parliamentary Security Department (PSD) continues to offer several baseline measures to all MPs to ensure their safety and security when they are away from the Parliamentary estate.

Alongside the work of Government on harassment and intimidation, the Speaker has announced that he is to chair a Speaker's Conference in Parliament which will consider the factors influencing the threat levels against candidates and MPs and the effectiveness of the response. It will make recommendations about the arrangements necessary to secure free and fair elections and the appropriate protection of candidates at future parliamentary elections. I have discussed this with the Speaker and have assured him that the Government stands ready to work with the Conference and Parliament to address these issues.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/candidate-security-guidance-collection>

## **Political financing**

Effective regulation and enforcement of the spending and funding rules for campaigners are crucial for maintaining public trust in our electoral systems and combatting the threat of foreign interference in our democracy.

The recent Report on the 2024 UK Parliamentary General Election and the May 2024 elections published by The Electoral Commission highlights the interest in this issue and explores what lessons can be learned for the future.

The Government intends to strengthen the rules around donations to political parties to protect our democracy. MHCLG is developing proposals to give effect to this commitment.

In summary, the risks and issues raised in the former Chair's letter are complex, and the Government is taking a joined-up approach to tackling them: working across party lines, coordinating with international partners, and collaborating with industry; it is a genuinely whole of society approach.

I would be very grateful for the Committee's continued support and engagement on these important issues and would like to again assure you of the priority that the Government attaches to them.

I wish you well in your important role as Chair, and again, I am grateful for the letter.

Yours sincerely,

**Dan Jarvis MBE MP**  
Security Minister