

## **Local Government Information Unit (LGIU) – written evidence (VID0006)**

*Submitted by Dr Gregory Stride, Researcher, Local Government Information Unit (LGIU)*

### **House of Lords Constitution Committee inquiry into voter ID**

#### **About the LGIU**

The LGIU - Local Government Information Unit - is a not-for-profit, charitable and non-partisan membership organisation. We are for local government and anyone with an interest in local democracy and finding local solutions to the challenges that we all face. Our resources, innovative research and connections are relied on by colleagues across the globe.

Our Local Democracy Research Centre, has researched the implementation of voter identification in the May 2023 English local elections. The research was funded by the JRSST-CT, the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust's connected charity. By surveying and interviewing electoral administrators from the ~230 local authorities that held elections in 2023, we have built a picture of how the policy worked 'from the inside' and the experiences of those directly responsible for its implementation.<sup>1</sup>

#### **1. What steps need to be taken to raise awareness of the voter ID requirement and the existence of the Voter Authority Certificate (VAC)?**

Our research of local electoral administration shows that two steps are required:

- 1) Local administrators should lead strong local communications campaigns.
- 2) Funding should be made available from central government for local authorities to enable them to coordinate and run these campaigns.

The evidence we gathered from interviews and a survey of electoral administrators suggest that a strong local communications campaign is essential for ensuring voters are aware of the new requirements and the availability of the Voter Authority Certificate. 85% of electoral administrators who responded to our survey said that voter ID made communicating election rules to the public more difficult, and additional support for local administrators is required to make up for this increased difficulty.

In order to run these new communications campaigns, local electoral administrators suggested they need more funding from central government

---

<sup>1</sup> The survey received 171 responses from 18th May 2023 to 8th June. We have conducted 11 interviews with electoral administrators of varying levels of seniority from local authorities across England which held elections in May 2023. The full report is available here: <https://lgiu.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/The-impact-of-voter-ID-the-views-of-administrators.pdf>

to recognise the additional communications effort required, and this funding needs to be available early in the electoral cycle, as one administrator said about their experience in May 2023:

*'I think the only thing that would have been helpful for us would have been more, well, money, made available as part of the new burdens funding for local communications efforts and campaigns. That was something that wasn't available when the election preparation was going on...And then, well later on there was a special, I suppose you could call it a relaxing of the guidelines as to what you could use funding for. By that point. You're talking about March, April, It's too late to do anything at that point.'*

This funding can be used to facilitate a wide array of communications activities tailored to the needs of local communities. We heard of electoral administrators advertising the changes using innovative methods, such as printing the requirements on pharmacy bags to reach electors picking up prescriptions, and electoral administrators visiting local groups who may have been more affected by the reforms, such as disability groups or LGBT groups. Local electoral administrators also set up specific drop-in areas to help electors who are not computer confident to apply for VACs and for any electors to ask questions.

These bespoke efforts must be locally coordinated, supplementing national campaigns and making use of the expertise of electoral administrators both in the realm of administration and their local knowledge. However, these campaigns are also resource intensive, and should be funded by central government in recognition of their importance and to underline the central government responsibility for the introduction of the identification requirements.

## **2. Are changes required to the application/issuing process for VACs?**

The small number of Voter Authority Certificate applications before the May 2023 local elections (around 90,000 total) masked serious concerns that administrators have about their capacity to deliver VACs if the demand is significantly higher. As one administrator from our survey said:

*"We will need additional resources for a general election as the turnout in our area will double and the requirement for VAC will probably treble."*  
(ID: Survey)

In general the conclusion we have drawn from our research is that the primary driver of complications regarding capacity to manage VAC applications is not the VAC process in and of itself, but the VAC process on top of every other responsibility electoral administrators face in the run-up to an election, an issue that is exacerbated with unscheduled elections.

The major problem with VACs is the additional pressure they cause for electoral administrators. However, there are three other problems specific to the VAC process:

- 1) the potential for duplicate applications - especially across elections;
- 2) the potential surge in applications around the deadline;
- 3) the unknown scale of likely applications at a general election.

The potential for duplicate applications could be tackled by making VACs more permanent (such as by making it a card rather than a sheet of paper) and more useful for other purposes, as with the Electoral Identity Card in Northern Ireland which can be used to prove identity in a variety of circumstances. However, this may not be feasible across the rest of the UK given the additional pressures and costs it would incur for local electoral administrators.

Points 2 and 3 are both related to pressures on the workforce, but could be improved if mechanisms were put in place to spread out VAC applications throughout the year - such as during the annual canvass - or increase local electoral administrators' capacity at the time of an election.

### **3. Whether, and if so how, the forms of acceptable ID should be expanded.**

Electoral administrators in our research gave three major reasons for expanding the list of acceptable documents:

- 1) Enabling wider participation,
- 2) Preventing confusion about the acceptable forms of ID,
- 3) Avoiding perceptions of bias in electoral processes if the list of ID is considered to be highly partial by sections of the population.

As one administrator put it, regarding why it is important to expand and rationalise the list of acceptable identification:

*"The thing that I, we, found on election day, wasn't the fact that people didn't bring ID, It was the fact that they didn't know what ID to bring."*

There were types of ID that were suggested by administrators for these reasons: NHS work cards and firearms licences for example. There were also more radical suggestions, such as introducing a national identity card or issuing VACs to every elector. In general, it was a common suggestion from administrators that the list should be expanded for the reasons above.

### **4. The likely impact of voter ID on the administration of the next general election (e.g. overstretched polling station staff unable to seek help from neighbouring areas) and the impact on local areas' ability to recruit and retain polling staff.**

Electoral administrators in our research raised serious concerns about the impact of voter ID on the next general election for three major reasons: their own capacity to deliver the elections, the staffing of polling stations, and the increased demands of general elections.

### **a. Workload, time and resources**

Our research, which gathered evidence from electoral administrators across the country, shows that workload, time and resources were already significantly stretched before the introduction of compulsory voter ID. It is only through the overtime, goodwill and extra effort of administration teams that elections are managed and people are able to vote. The first, and most serious, of the potential problems we may see caused by the extra burden of administering voter ID at the general elections is that they increase the pressure on electoral administrators to the point where we see unpredictable and unprecedented electoral failures, in spite of the extraordinary efforts of electoral administrators to keep up with increasing pressures over recent years. These administrative breakdowns may be related to the new voter ID requirements, for example if an elections team believes they cannot complete VAC applications in time, or they may be in an unrelated area of election policy due to the knock-on effects of voter ID on administrators' capacity - for example if postal vote applications cannot be completed on time.

### **b. Staffing polling stations**

The second greatest potential issue at the next general election caused by voter ID is polling station staff shortages. 88% of electoral administrators in our survey identified staffing polling stations as a problem and 82% said it had become more difficult as a consequence of the new voter ID rules. This was usually identified as a consequence of the increased responsibilities polling stations staff are expected to take on, such as determining whether electors have the right type of ID and turning them away if not, and recording how many electors are turned away. Electoral administrators also noted how the rates of pay for polling station staff had not increased despite these increased responsibilities.

*"There were people who had done it for many years though and that said outright at the beginning: 'we're not interested in the extra responsibility of this'."*

Additionally, during a local election there are steps electoral administrators can take to make up for the difficulties in recruiting polling station staff. Most commonly, they can contact electoral administrators in an area without elections and ask to borrow their regular polling station staff. In a general election, where every area will have elections, this will not be possible.

### **c. Increased public interest and participation**

The final problem administrators raised that may be an issue at an upcoming general election is that the weaknesses of the voter ID system will result in challenges when coming into contact with the increased participation and public interest in a general election. Many electors who do not yet have experience with voter ID - especially in Wales and

Scotland - will vote for the first time at a general election, meaning that continued additional communications campaigns are required, and that VAC applications are likely to be higher. This will put additional pressures on administrators to continue and expand their communications campaigns, and ensure that their processes can keep up with significantly increased demand.

Equally, electoral administrators raised to us that although there were not widespread disturbances in polling stations at the local elections, this could change at a general election, where turnout and passions are greater. As one administrator put it:

*...parliamentary elections mean an awful lot more to people than local elections, unfortunately. So I think if somebody had been turned away and because that, you know, they didn't have ID with them for a parliamentary election, I think they'd be a lot more angry about it than, you know, the people go 'oh well, it is just a local'."*

As a consequence of this increased risk, there should be consideration of how electoral administrators and local police forces can work together to protect polling station staff as we saw in many places during the 2023 local elections, and how central government can help to facilitate this.

**5. The cumulative impact of changes to the voting system--including voter ID, the process for obtaining a VAC, IT systems, potential greater use of postal voting--on the ability of election staff and suppliers to conduct the next general election.**

Electoral administrators across our research raised serious concerns about their workload and the pace of changes to electoral legislation. Every new change takes time to adapt to, and the changes introduced by the Elections Act - including voter ID, but also online absent vote applications and the extension of the overseas franchise, all have major effects on the work of electoral administrators. After the May 2023 local elections - before the tranche 2 changes - 96% of administrators already believed staff are overworked during elections, and only 25% that elections staff have adequate resources for running an election. These changes will exacerbate the existing capacity issues unless serious efforts are taken to address them.

**6. Whether Elections Act tranche 2 measures (extension of overseas franchise, online absent vote applications) should be delayed to ease pressure.**

The 'Gould principle' establishes that it is best practice for no changes to electoral legislation to happen within six months of an election. However, this does not imply that any changes with more than six months before a scheduled election will necessarily be simple to implement, especially when there are changes to the processes and guidance that continue to happen up until within the six months before polling day.

There are two reasons all upcoming changes should be delayed until after 2024. First, because electoral administration as a sector is under serious pressure as is, as shown in our research, and introducing new pressures at this point increases the risk of failure. Elections are part of the critical infrastructure of UK democracy, and no new pressures should be introduced until the concerns of elections staff about electoral administration are addressed.

Second, because the elections timetable makes it inevitable that a general election will be called in 2024 or very early 2025, and unscheduled elections are already significantly more difficult to organise. 93% of respondents to our survey said that the challenge of organising a snap election is a problem. Under these circumstances, where it is very likely elections staff will have to organise a general election at some point in the next year without much notice, it is the wrong time to be bringing in major changes to electoral processes.

*7 November 2023*