

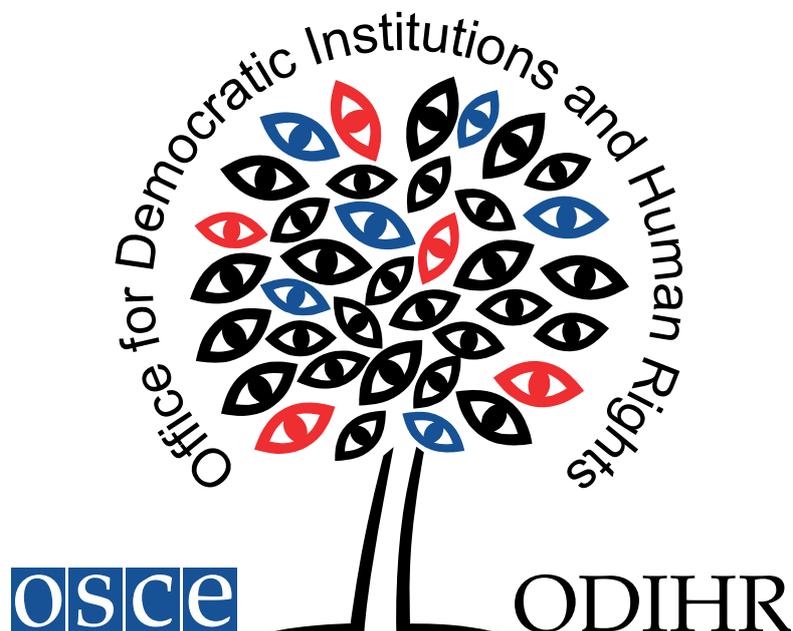


Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights

UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND

GENERAL ELECTION
4 July 2024

ODIHR NEEDS ASSESSMENT MISSION REPORT
28 - 30 May 2024



Warsaw
17 June 2024

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I. INTRODUCTION

In accordance with its mandate and in line with an official invitation to observe the 4 July 2024 general election in the United Kingdom, the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) undertook a Needs Assessment Mission (NAM) from 28 to 30 May. The NAM comprised Vladimir Misev, ODIHR Senior Adviser on New Voting Technologies and Goran Petrov, ODIHR Election Adviser.¹

The purpose of the mission was to assess the pre-election environment and the preparations for the general election. Based on this assessment, the NAM should recommend whether to deploy an ODIHR election-related activity for the forthcoming elections and, if so, what type of activity best meets the identified needs. Meetings were held with officials from state institutions, the election administration, and representatives of political parties, media, and civil society. A list of meetings is annexed to this report.

ODIHR would like to thank the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office for their assistance and cooperation in organising the visit. ODIHR would also like to thank all its interlocutors for taking the time to meet with the NAM and share their views.

II. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On 22 May, the prime minister called the general elections for 4 July 2024, and Parliament was dissolved on 30 May. Most ODIHR NAM interlocutors stated they did not expect the election date until autumn and explained that the sudden call of elections is the consequence of the royal prerogative to dissolve Parliament at any time, exercised at the request of the prime minister. Voters will elect 650 members of the House of Commons in single-member constituencies for five-year terms under a first-past-the-post system.

Over a hundred pieces of electoral legislation govern the general election, and many stakeholders call for a reform of the legislative framework to consolidate and simplify it. The 2022 Elections Act made some significant changes, including on campaigning, campaign finance, voter identification, and government oversight of the Electoral Commission (EC). The amendments were mostly welcomed by the ODIHR NAM interlocutors; however, several noted concerns over the new photo ID requirement for voter identification. Despite recent legal reform, a number of ODIHR recommendations remain unaddressed, including on comprehensive reform and harmonization of the legal framework. For the first time since 2010, the constituency boundaries were reviewed one year before this election and now fall within a 5-per-cent deviation threshold, thus aligning with the national legislation and international good practice.

¹ On 30 May 2024, following the 22 May announcement of the elections by the Prime Minister, the OSCE Delegation in Vienna invited ODIHR to observe the 4 July general election.

General elections are administered by acting Returning Officers (ROs), while in each polling station, the polling process is supervised by a Presiding Officer assisted by clerks. In general, the ODIHR NAM interlocutors expressed confidence in the independence and impartiality of the election administrators. However, some noted that limited resources and problems with staffing may harm the adherence to procedures in some localities. Following the 2022 amendments to the election legislation, in February 2024, the government designated a policy statement containing priorities for the work of the Electoral Commission (EC), an independent body that oversees elections at the national level. The EC and some other election stakeholders believe this instrument might negatively affect the EC's independence. International or domestic observers may follow the management of postal voting, as well as voting and counting at polling stations; the law does not provide for observation of any other election processes.

To be able to vote, eligible British citizens, as well as eligible Irish and Commonwealth citizens residing in the UK, must register in their municipality. Registers are maintained locally, and there are no checks against multiple registrations, which might result in multiple voting and a criminal offence if detected. The 2022 Elections Act obliges voters to present an eligible photo ID in order to vote in general elections. While the government representatives stated that voter identification safeguards the integrity of the process from possible impersonation and have launched public information campaigns and introduced several measures to widen the number of acceptable ID documents, many ODIHR NAM interlocutors remarked that this measure was unnecessary, having no election-day integrity issues to be addressed, but that it would instead result in barriers for certain categories of voters.

Any eligible voter can stand as an independent candidate or on behalf of a registered party. Prospective candidates must submit their nominations by 7 June. The ODIHR NAM interlocutors expressed no concerns about the candidate registration process.

Parties may campaign any time, including on election day, and the official campaign period for candidates started on 4 June. Campaign materials are subject to imprint requirements, and since 2022, that has also extended to online campaigning, including on social networks. Political parties may hold voters' personal information and use it for targeted outreach. Some ODIHR NAM interlocutors noted that disinformation and deceitful practices may negatively impact the voter's informed choice, and some also warned about the threat of foreign interference in the campaign.

Most of the ODIHR NAM interlocutors noted that campaign finance is comprehensively regulated. Parties, candidates and registered third-party campaigners must report their donations and expenditures above certain thresholds. However, some ODIHR NAM interlocutors raised issues, including the reliance on considerable donations from wealthy donors and the lack of clarity in the attribution of expenses between parties and candidates that can bypass candidates' expenditure limits. Political parties and campaigns are funded solely by private sources and there are no limits on donations. Anonymous donations are not allowed, and the contestants should know the true identities of donors, but some interlocutors noted this can be circumvented by some organizations donating bulk sums.

The UK media landscape is diverse and pluralistic. It features a strong tradition of public service broadcasting. Broadcasters are legally required to maintain impartiality in political and election coverage, while newspapers and online media, which are less regulated, are widely considered partisan. The ODIHR NAM interlocutors did not raise concerns about the electoral media environment, the independence of the public broadcasters or the ability of voters to be informed on their electoral choices. Paid political advertising on television and radio is not allowed. Debates among party leaders and candidates are common, and broadcasters can decide their format in line with the law.

Election results can be contested by an unsuccessful candidate or one or more voters before an election court within 21 days of the declared results, but extended timeframes are allowed in case of illegal practices or irregular campaign finances. However, such a petition is a private legal action, which, according to several ODIHR NAM interlocutors, leads to costly, complex and prolonged dispute resolution processes. Breaches of electoral law can also be prosecuted in the criminal courts following police investigations. The 2022 Elections Act introduces a penalty for intimidating candidates, campaigners or elected representatives.

All ODIHR NAM interlocutors expressed a high level of confidence in the electoral process and the ability of the election administration to organize elections professionally and impartially. Even so, all ODIHR NAM interlocutors were open to possible external assessment by international observers, noting that such a review would be beneficial in particular regarding the electoral legislation and recent amendments, the campaign environment and framework, including the use of social networks, and administration of elections, including the implementation of new provisions for voter registration and identification.

Some ODIHR NAM interlocutors highlighted persistent issues related to the lack of clarity and complex legal framework, disinformation and deceitful practices, and the possible negative impact in case of foreign interference in the election process, as well as concerns related to the new obligations for use of photo IDs for voter identification. Therefore, based on the assessments and the concerns expressed by the interlocutors and noted in this report, the ODIHR NAM recommends deploying an Election Assessment Mission) for the 4 July 2024 general election.

III. FINDINGS

A. BACKGROUND

The United Kingdom (UK) is a constitutional monarchy that includes England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland. The King serves as the Head of State, with largely ceremonial powers. The legislative power resides in a bicameral Parliament consisting of a directly elected House of Commons and an indirectly elected House of Lords. Executive power is exercised by the UK government, the devolved governments of Wales and Scotland, and the Northern Ireland Executive. The UK government is headed by the prime minister, traditionally the leader of the party or coalition with the most seats in the House of Commons.

In the 2019 early general election, the Conservative Party secured a landslide victory with 365 out of 650 seats, followed by the Labour Party with 202 seats, the Scottish National Party (SNP) with 48 seats, and the Liberal Democrats with 11 seats.² This election was the last during the reign of Queen Elizabeth II, who passed away in 2022 and was succeeded by her son, King Charles III. The election results gave the government a mandate to negotiate the terms for leaving the European Union by 31 January 2020. In July 2022, Boris Johnson resigned as a Conservative Party leader in relation to accusations of disregarding the COVID-19 lockdown requirements. On 24 October 2022, Rishi Sunak was chosen as party leader and was appointed prime minister the next day.³ Local elections were held

² Smaller parties in the House of Commons include the Democratic Unionist Party with 8 seats, Sinn Féin with 7 seats, Plaid Cymru with 4 seats, the Social Democratic and Labour Party with 2 seats, and the Green Party of England and Wales, and the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland each with 1 seat. Additionally, the Speaker was re-elected, running as an independent.

³ Before that, Mary Elizabeth Truss was elected as a party leader and became the prime minister in September 2022, but resigned after only 50 days.

in England and partially in Wales on 2 May 2024. The Labour Party won most mayorships and council seats, followed by the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives.

The general elections must be held no more than five years apart, but the prime minister can determine the timing without providing a reason for selecting a specific date or calling the election early.⁴ On 22 May, the prime minister called the general elections for 4 July, and Parliament was accordingly dissolved on 30 May. Most ODIHR NAM interlocutors stated they had not expected the elections to take place until the autumn and explained that the sudden call of elections is the consequence of the royal prerogative dissolve parliament at any time, exercised at the request of the prime minister.⁵

As of 2024, 225 women (35 percent) are represented in the House of Commons, the highest number in Parliament's history. There are no legal requirements for promoting gender equality in Parliament, and it is left to the political parties to do so.⁶ Currently, 7 of the 23 cabinet ministers are women.

ODIHR has assessed five elections in the UK since 2003.⁷ Most recently, ODIHR deployed an Election Expert Team for the 8 June 2017 general election. The final report issued in December 2017 contains five recommendations for the authorities to improve the electoral process and bring it closer in line with OSCE commitments.⁸

B. LEGAL FRAMEWORK AND ELECTORAL SYSTEM

Over a hundred pieces of electoral legislation govern the general elections. A number of institutions have called for a reform of the legislative framework and for it to be consolidated and simplified.⁹ The 1983 Representation of the People Act (RPA) serves as the primary piece of legislation along with the 2000 Political Parties, Elections and Referendum Act (PPERA), the 2006 Electoral Administration Act (EAA) and the 2009 Political Parties and Elections Act (PPEA). Secondary legislation includes numerous statutory regulations.

The 2022 Elections Act added some significant changes, including on campaigning, campaign finance, and the government oversight of the Electoral Commission (EC). It also introduced a photo ID requirement for voting, changes to postal and proxy voting, minimum conditions for assisting voters with disabilities and easing the requirements to register to vote abroad. Yet another important change clarified the types of illegal behavior considered voter intimidation and strengthened the

⁴ The 2011 Fixed-term Parliaments Act (FTPA) set in legislation a default fixed election date for general elections; under the FTPA, triggering an early election required the government to either get two-thirds majority support in Parliament vote or pass a law to by-pass the FTPA. In 2022, following the adoption of the Dissolution and Calling of Parliament Act, the government repealed the FTPA, arguing that the FTPA was responsible for the parliamentary deadlock over Brexit in 2019, thus restoring the ability to call for the dissolution of Parliament and calling an election by the monarch on a request of the prime minister.

⁵ On 4 January, Prime Minister Sunak stated that he is “working on the assumption” that the general election will take place in the second half of this year.

⁶ In several prior elections, including in 2019, the Labour Party used all-women shortlists in the candidate selection process in many constituencies, guaranteeing that a woman would be elected if the Labour candidate won. In March 2022, the Labour Party abandoned this practice, citing that this would be an unlawful practice under the 2010 Equality Act, since most Labour MPs in the outgoing Parliament are women (104 out of the 202 MPs).

⁷ See [previous ODIHR reports on the UK](#).

⁸ In paragraph 25 of the [1999 OSCE Istanbul Document](#), OSCE participating States committed themselves “to follow up promptly the ODIHR’s election assessment and recommendations.”

⁹ The UK’s Law Commissions have provided [recommendations for the reform of electoral law](#) that are widely supported by the election administrators. In its [2019 report](#), the House of Commons Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee (PACAC) also highlighted the urgent need for electoral law to be consolidated and simplified. In 2021, the Association of Electoral Administrators [published a report](#) calling for adoption of a single Election Administration Act.

deterrents against intimidation of voters, candidates and campaigners. Some election stakeholders point to the lack of a comprehensive consultation process prior to the adoption of the bill.¹⁰ While most of these changes were welcomed by ODIHR NAM interlocutors, several noted concerns over the implementation of the photo ID requirement and the EC's oversight (see *Election Administration*).

A number of previous ODIHR recommendations remain to be addressed, including consolidating and simplifying relevant legislation, fully bringing the suffrage rights of prisoners in line with international standards, determining the constituencies based on population rather than the number of registered voters, setting up annual donation limits for single donors, lowering the reporting threshold for donations to political parties, the calculation of expenditure limits and vesting the EC with investigative and sanctioning powers for offences relating to candidates' spending and donations.

Elections of the 650 members of the House of Commons are conducted for a five-year term under a first-past-the-post system in single-member constituencies. In March 2020, the government abandoned the plans to reduce the size of the House of Commons to 600 MPs, an idea introduced by the government in 2011, which was supposed to be implemented by November 2020, following the recommendation of the 2018 recommendations of the boundary commissions.¹¹ The candidate who receives the most valid votes in a constituency is elected.

For the first time since 2010, the constituency boundaries were reviewed ahead of this election.¹² As a result of the review, England now has 543 constituencies (an increase of 10 constituency since the last election), Wales 32 (a decrease of 8), Scotland 57 (a decrease of 2) and Northern Ireland 18 (unchanged). ODIHR NAM did not hear any significant concerns on the boundary delimitation process from its interlocutors, although it learned that a few questions and objections were raised about some specific constituencies during the comprehensive consultation process.¹³ This process brought the constituency sizes to within a 5-per-cent deviation threshold, thus aligning them with the national legislation and international good practice and addressing a prior ODIHR recommendation.

C. ELECTION ADMINISTRATION

The general elections are managed by acting Returning Officers (ROs), typically senior managers in local communities.¹⁴ In each polling station, the polling process is supervised by a Presiding Officer assisted by clerks (from one to four as determined by ROs). In general, the ODIHR NAM interlocutors expressed confidence in the independence and impartiality of the election administrators. However, some noted that the limited resources and problems with staffing may have a negative impact on the adherence to procedures in some localities.

At the national level, elections are overseen by the EC, an independent body that regulates party and campaign finance and registers parties and observers. The EC guides and supports ROs and political parties, and candidates on the rules that apply to them. The EC also runs awareness-raising campaigns

¹⁰ See [the December 2021 PACAC report on the Elections Bill](#).

¹¹ In 2011, Parliament passed the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act 2011, by which the 1986 Boundary Commissions under the Parliamentary Constituencies Act was amended to reduce the number of MPs from 650 to 600. In December 2020, Parliament passed the Parliamentary Constituencies Act, changing the figure back to 650.

¹² The [review](#) occurred from 2021-2023, and the recommendations were submitted to the House of Commons for approval in June 2023.

¹³ Four separate boundary commissions, in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, determine the constituency borders.

¹⁴ In England and Wales, the responsibilities are with an ARO; in Northern Ireland, elections are administered by the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland, headed by a Chief Electoral Officer, supported by assistant ROs; in Scotland, the election is administered by RO who is the local government RO.

on voter registration and postal and proxy voting.¹⁵ The ODIHR NAM interlocutors viewed the EC's work mostly positively, but some noted that the detailed guidelines to political parties are sometimes provided late in the process raising uncertainty about adherence to new procedures.

The 2022 amendments introduced the possibility for the government to provide a strategy and policy statement containing priorities for the EC's work.¹⁶ By law, the EC must consider it and report annually on its implementation, and according to the government representatives, the EC's activities should be aligned with the government's electoral legal reform plans. However, the EC representatives maintain that this instrument might undermine the perception of its independence and may lead to political interference in its work.¹⁷ In August 2023, the EC reported that it was a victim of a comprehensive cyberattack and that its systems were compromised from August 2021 until August 2022.¹⁸

Voters can cast their vote in person at a polling station, by post or using a proxy to vote in-person or by post.¹⁹ The 2022 Elections Act allows for online applications and also limits the number proxy votes to two other voters in the country or up to four abroad. Voters can register for postal or postal proxy, and for changes to existing permanent registrations by 19 June and for in-person proxy by 26 June.

Voters abroad can vote through a postal ballot.²⁰ The 2022 Elections Act removes the limit of 15 years of voting rights for citizens living permanently abroad and extends it to any UK citizen abroad. It also changes the need to re-register from once a year to every three years. While in general the ODIHR NAM interlocutors did not raise concerns about proxy or postal voting, some noted that the voters abroad have limited time to receive, complete and return their ballots, and that some might come too late to be counted.

The EC maintains guidelines for election officials on accessible voting.²¹ Since 2022, the ROs are legally required to support voters with disabilities to vote independently, but the law does not foresee detailed measures.²²

The legislation allows individuals and legal entities to be accredited as international or domestic election observers with the right to follow the issuance and receipt of postal ballots, as well as voting and counting procedures in polling stations. The deadline for application with the EC is 15 days before elections. However, the law does not explicitly provide for observation of procedures beyond election day and postal voting, such as voter registration, candidate nomination and registration and other

¹⁵ All information is made available in English and Welsh and partially in numerous other languages, and also in easy-to-read formats.

¹⁶ In February 2024, a [policy statement](#) was designated to the EC by the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities.

¹⁷ See [further information](#) by the Electoral Commission.

¹⁸ The perpetrators [had gained access](#) to its email server and copies of the electoral registers held by the EC. The registers held the names and addresses of voters in the Great Britain registered between 2014 and 2022, the names of those registered abroad during the same period, and the names and addresses of anyone registered in Northern Ireland from 2018 to 2022.

¹⁹ [According to the EC](#), in the 2019 general election, almost 21 per cent of votes counted were submitted through postal ballots.

²⁰ The request must be sent to the electoral services of the local council of the last address registered in the UK. The envelopes should be received by Returning Officers by the time the polling stations close on election day.

²¹ Including videos on [how to improve accessibility](#).

²² The ODIHR NAM was informed about a range of measures in some localities to provide for independent access, including audio devices to read ballots, stencils, lower voting booths, etc.

work of election officials before election day. ODIHR has previously recommended expanding provisions to allow for observation of all stages of the electoral process.

D. VOTER REGISTRATION AND IDENTIFICATION

Citizens of the UK and the Republic of Ireland who are at least 18 by election day and included in a voter list have the right to vote. Commonwealth citizens with indefinite leave to remain in the UK can also register to vote. Commonwealth and Irish citizens may register only if residing in UK. Despite previous ODIHR recommendations, citizens who are convicted and imprisoned cannot vote in UK parliamentary elections, regardless of the severity of the crime, with certain exceptions.²³ Those found guilty within the previous five years of corrupt or illegal practices concerning an election are also disenfranchised.

To be able to vote, voters must apply to register with the Electoral Registration Officers (EROs). Voter lists are managed locally, and there is no central voter register. In recent years, the EC has been advocating for giving EROs access to other sources with citizen records, in order to maintain accurate and complete electoral registers, but this is not yet implemented.²⁴ Voters can register in multiple localities and are free to vote in multiple local elections. However, no checks against multiple registrations are conducted for general elections, which might result in multiple voting that would go undetected. ODIHR NAM interlocutors noted that this is deterred against by being a serious criminal offence and knew of no such examples in previous elections.

By law, the general public may inspect the entire voter register under EROs' supervision. By law, voters have 14 calendar days to appeal the decision to the ERO if removed from the register. The ERO forwards the appeal, accompanied by their statement and relevant documentation, to the county court, which makes a final decision.

The 2022 Elections Act obliges voters to present an eligible photo ID in order to vote in general elections.²⁵ This requirement was applied for the first time in the local elections in England on 4 May 2023 and again in England and partially in Wales on 2 May 2024.²⁶ Those who do not have an acceptable form of photo ID can apply for a Voter Authority Certificate until five days before election day. While the government representatives stated that voter identification safeguards the integrity of the process from possible impersonation, many ODIHR NAM interlocutors remarked that this measure addresses a non-existent problem and may result in barriers for certain categories of voters.

²³ Remanded and unconvicted prisoners, those who are convicted but not yet sentenced, and civil prisoners are permitted to vote in case they are registered to vote.

²⁴ Including the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency, Passport Office, Revenue and Customs, Department for Work and Pensions, Department for Education and the Education and Skills Funding Agency.

²⁵ There are 22 different types of documents legally considered a valid photo ID. The new regulation impacts the polls for the UK Parliament elections in England, Scotland and Wales. Voters in Northern Ireland have been required to show ID when voting since 1985, and photo ID since 2002.

²⁶ Following the 2023 local elections, the EC [reported](#) that overall awareness on the requirement was high, but some voters did not know about it until they arrived to vote.

E. CANDIDATE REGISTRATION

Political parties must register with the EC to run in elections.²⁷ Any eligible voter can stand as an independent candidate or on behalf of a registered party. Candidates must be eligible voters but certain individuals, such as police and armed forces members, civil servants, and judges, are disqualified from standing.²⁸

Prospective candidates must submit their nominations with the ROs starting from the day of publication of the notice of election (latest by 4 June) until 7 June.²⁹ They must submit a GBP 500 deposit (approximately 587 EUR), which is returned if the candidate wins more than 5 per cent of valid votes. The ODIHR NAM interlocutors did not express any concerns about the candidate registration process.

F. ELECTION CAMPAIGN

Parties and prospective candidates can campaign at any point before the election, while the official campaign period starts 25 working days before election day, after the notice of elections. Contestants may use public venues and air campaign broadcasts free of charge and receive discounts on distributing materials via post.³⁰ For transparency, printed election material must contain details (an imprint) showing who is responsible for producing or procuring it, which must be included on all posters, placards and leaflets. Since 2022, imprints have also been required on certain digital material, including campaigners or party social network accounts and sponsored and organic social network posts.³¹

Candidates may not campaign in the vicinity and inside the polling station during election day and are not allowed to publish exit polls before the polls close. Making a false statement about a candidate's character is illegal, and the defamation rules apply also to election materials.³² The ODIHR NAM interlocutors noted that the campaign will concentrate on the economy, environment and health issues, and on immigration. Contestants mostly campaign through door-to-door canvassing and outreach over broadcast media and social networks.

The Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) maintains guidance for using personal data in political campaigning. A political party may have personal information about a specific person and use it to target that person through digital advertising.³³ Some ODIHR NAM interlocutors expressed an opinion that disinformation and deceitful practices may negatively impact the voter's informed choice.³⁴ The 2023 Online Safety Act requires the largest social network platforms to ensure they

²⁷ The EC maintains separate political party registers for Great Britain and for Northern Ireland; political parties can choose to appear only on one register or both.

²⁸ In addition, persons who are subject to a bankruptcy restrictions order in England or Wales, or a debt relief restrictions order, persons who have been adjudged bankrupt in Northern Ireland and persons who have had their estate sequestrated in Scotland are not eligible to stand as candidates.

²⁹ Nominations are accepted between 10 am and 4 pm on working days.

³⁰ Candidates are entitled to one free mailing (by Royal Mail) to voters in the constituency they are contesting.

³¹ In general, all paid adverts must have imprints if political. Organic material must be imprinted if published by or on behalf of a candidate or a political party.

³² The police may investigate allegations of the specific electoral offense of making a false statement. Defamation issues are a matter for the civil courts.

³³ Those processing personal data for political campaigning must demonstrate that the processing complies with the UK GDPR, Data Protection Act and Privacy and Electronic Communications Regulations. Otherwise, the ICO may take legal action against the campaigners.

³⁴ On 23 May 2024, [a news report](#) was published claiming that the main political parties started disseminating campaign materials formatted like tabloids issued by media organizations, rather than clearly marking them as campaign pamphlets.

adhere to their own terms and conditions, for example, on removing content.³⁵ Some ODIHR NAM interlocutors also remarked on the dangers of using campaign materials generated by Artificial Intelligence (AI) engines, as well as deepfakes.³⁶ In April, a group of civil society organizations called on political parties to refrain from producing harmful misleading content using AI and to clearly label AI content and that party staff, members and volunteers are given clear guidelines in this respect.³⁷

Several ODIHR NAM interlocutors warned about the threat of foreign interference in the campaign, including online. In 2023, Parliament passed a National Security Act which, *inter alia*, defines what constitutes foreign interference in elections and defines increased punishment for various types of electoral malfeasance, from 2 to 7 years of imprisonment, in case a perpetrator acted as a foreign power or on behalf of one. Several government agencies informed the ODIHR NAM they co-operate to counter this threat, by analysing publicly available data on emerging disinformation risks, including to the integrity of elections.³⁸

G. CAMPAIGN FINANCE

The political finance system relies on an extensive regulatory framework comprising several laws, including the RPA, the PPERA, the PPEA and the 2014 Transparency of Lobbying, Non-Party Campaigners and Trade Union Administration Act. The 2022 Elections Act requires parties to declare assets or liabilities over GBP 500 and introduces additional transparency requirements for digital campaign advertising. While most of the ODIHR NAM interlocutors noted that campaign finance is comprehensively regulated, some raised concerns, including on the reliance on considerable donations from wealthy donors and lack of clarity in the attribution of expenses between parties and candidates that can bypass candidate expenditure limits.

Political parties and campaigns are funded solely by private sources.³⁹ Direct public funding is provided only to the opposition represented in Parliament for their parliamentary work. Anonymous donations are not allowed, and candidates should know the true identities of donors. However, some ODIHR NAM interlocutors remarked that this could be circumvented by some organizations first accepting contributions and then donating the bulk sum, thus occluding the identity of individual donors. There are no limits on donations.

Party campaign spending is regulated by the EC, while the ROs oversee spending by candidates in each constituency. Following the dissolution of Parliament, the candidates can spend up to GBP 11,390 plus up to 8 and 12 pence per elector in the borough and county constituency, respectively. In the year preceding the election (since 6 July 2023), parties may spend up to GBP 54,010 per constituency.⁴⁰

Parties must report on donations quarterly and during the election campaign every week. For the election campaign, parties have three months to report expenses, or six months if the spend more than GBP 250,000. Candidates must report their spending to ROs within 21 days after the results are

³⁵ The Office of Communications (Ofcom) has enforcement powers, including issuing fines of up to GBP 18 million or 10 per cent of a platform's worldwide revenue (whichever is higher).

³⁶ The Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) and the Home Office have initiated [a program](#) with the participation of the private sector to develop technologies to detect deepfakes, including during the election period.

³⁷ See the [open letter to political parties](#) published by the Civil society organization DEMOS.

³⁸ Including the representatives of the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities.

³⁹ According to [an online source](#), in 2022, the Labour Party had a total income of GBP 47,171,000, followed by the Conservatives' income of GBP 30,682,000.

⁴⁰ This adds up to a maximum GBP 35,106,500 for the whole country.

declared. The third-party campaigners are required to register with the EC if they spend over GBP 10,000 across the UK and need to report their spending if they reach certain thresholds.⁴¹

H. MEDIA

The UK media landscape is diverse and pluralistic. It features a strong tradition of public service broadcasting, led by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), alongside several commercial broadcasters and various print and online media outlets.⁴² Broadcasters are legally required to maintain impartiality in political and election coverage, while newspapers and online media, less regulated, are widely considered partisan. The ODIHR NAM interlocutors did not raise concerns about the electoral media environment, the independence of the public broadcasters or the ability of voters to be informed on their electoral choices.

Broadcast media are regulated by the 2003 Communications Act and 1996 Broadcasting Act, which sets obligations on standards and content. The Office of Communications (Ofcom) oversees broadcasters' compliance and develops statutory requirements in its Broadcasting Code, as required by law.⁴³ The Code mandates accurate and impartial reporting of news and programs, ensuring a balanced presentation of views. During election periods, broadcasters must maintain impartiality and fairness in their coverage of political candidates and issues.⁴⁴

Election contestants participate in numerous broadcasts on television and radio, depending on their political weight as defined by the broadcaster based on the Ofcom guidance.⁴⁵ Paid political advertising on television and radio is not allowed. Debates among party leaders and candidates are common, and broadcasters are free to decide their format in line with the law.

I. ELECTION DISPUTE RESOLUTION

Election results can be contested via an election petition filed by an unsuccessful candidate or one or more voters before an election court. This challenge must be made within 21 days of submitting the results protocol. However, extended timeframes are allowed if the petition involves allegations of corrupt or illegal practices or concerns about election expenses.⁴⁶ However, the election petition must be brought to the court as private legal action, which, according to several election stakeholders, leads to costly, complex and prolonged processes.⁴⁷ It typically takes several weeks for a judgment to be reached by the court, and the decision is final and cannot be further appealed. According to ODIHR NAM interlocutors, in practice, most objections or disputes are solved by the local election authorities and do not reach courts.

⁴¹ The reporting threshold is GBP 10,000 in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, and GBP 20,000 in England.

⁴² The [Royal Charter](#) constitutes the legal basis that sets out the public purposes of the BBC, guarantees its independence and outlines the structure of the broadcaster. An accompanying [Agreement](#) with the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport provides details on the topics outlined in the Charter and covers the BBC's funding and its regulatory duties.

⁴³ See sections 5 and 6 of the Ofcom [Broadcasting Code](#).

⁴⁴ On 23 May, Ofcom published a [note](#) to broadcasters for the upcoming general election that includes a summary of the legal and due impartiality requirements in the pre-election period and a summary of requirements relating to politicians as presenters.

⁴⁵ See the Ofcom's [guidance](#) on evidence of support to determine due impartiality.

⁴⁶ In principle, an election petition can be submitted to request a court-ordered recount if there are suspicions of inaccuracies in a close result that could alter the outcome. It can also seek the annulment of an election on the grounds of alleged irregularities in the entire election process in the constituency.

⁴⁷ An initial fee of GBP 626 to submit the petition and GBP 119 to apply for securities of cost must be paid when submitting it to the Election Petition Office at the Royal Courts of Justice. This office will review the petition to determine the cost of the potential trial, which may be up to GBP 5,000. A hearing is held to determine whether there will be a trial, usually held at the court in the constituency where the result is challenged.

Breaches of electoral law can also be prosecuted in the criminal courts following police investigations. The 2022 Elections Act introduces a penalty for intimidating candidates, campaigners or elected representatives. Perpetrators could be banned from standing for elected office for five years, in addition to punishments already in place before the 2022 amendments, for those guilty of assault, harassment, and the use of threatening language. The 2022 amendments also exclude the ability of the EC to bring prosecutions against party members and campaigners who break the law. According to the EC, to fill any regulatory gap, the "Police and Crown Prosecution Service will need to work with us to take forward appropriate prosecutions."⁴⁸

Complaints against ROs or EROs and their actions or inactions can be addressed directly to county courts, after first raising the issue with the respective officers involved. The EC receives and reviews complaints about its work, typically responding within 20 days. Further appeals can be submitted to the ombudsperson, but the complainant must be channeled through the MP, as the ombudsperson usually reviews only those appeals forwarded in this manner.

IV. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

All ODIHR NAM interlocutors expressed a high level of confidence in the electoral process and the ability of the election administration to organize elections professionally and impartially. Even so, all ODIHR NAM interlocutors were open to possible external assessment by international observers, noting that such a review would be of benefit, in particular, regarding the electoral legislation, the campaign environment and framework, including the use of social networks, and administration of elections, including the implementation of new provisions for voter registration and identification.

Some ODIHR NAM interlocutors highlighted persistent issues related to the lack of clarity and complex legal framework, disinformation and deceitful practices, and the possible negative impact in case of foreign interference in the election process, as well as concerns related to the new obligation for use of photo IDs for voter identification. Therefore, based on the assessments and the concerns expressed by the interlocutors and noted in this report, the ODIHR NAM recommends deploying an Election Assessment Mission (EAM) for the 4 July 2024 general election.

⁴⁸ See [the information provided](#) by the Electoral Commission.

ANNEX: LIST OF MEETINGS

Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO)

Paul Welsh, Head of European Human Rights Institutions, Human Rights Department
Sophie Newman, Elections Policy Lead, Democratic Governance & Media Freedom Department
Charlotte Gildersleve, Deputy Team Lead, European Human Rights Institutions, Human Rights Department

Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities

Paul Docker, Head of Electoral Administration
Laura Cronk, Head Of Joint Election Security and Preparedness Unit (JESP)
James Moore, Head of EUVCR and OAVA policy

Electoral Commission

Craig Westwood, Director of Communications, Policy and Research
Jackie Killeen, Director of Electoral Administration and Guidance
Hannah Brown, Head of Registration, Compliance and Transparency

Office for Communications (OFCOM)

Laura Rhea, Principal, Online Safety
Ciaran Cartmell, Policy Manager, Online Safety
Natalie Rose, Principal, Standards and Audience Protection
Caitlin O'Brien, Senior Standards Executive, Standards and Audience Protection

Information Commissioner's Office (ICO)

Oliver O'Callaghan, Head of Public Affairs
Owen Prendeville, Group Manager, Parliament Affairs
Douglas Burton, Group Manager, International Regulatory Cooperation Directorate
Elsa Hestriana, Policy Officer, International Regulatory Cooperation Directorate

Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT)

Hannah Toms, Security and Counter Disinformation

Boundary Commission for England

Glenn Reed, Senior Review Manager

House of Commons Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee (PACAC)

Philip Larkin, Committee Specialist
Alice Baxter, Constitution Specialist

Institute for Government

Alex Thomas, Programme Director
Ben Paxton, Researcher
Finn Baker, Research Assistant

Equality and Human Rights Commission

Katherine Perks, Head of Policy
Jennifer Cannon, Head, Fostering Good Relations and Health and Social Care Policy
Robert Bancroft, AI Policy and Online Safety

Greater London Authority

Lea Goddard, Acting Deputy Greater London Returning Officer
Alex Chafey, Senior Marketing Manager
Chandni Muller, Coordinator

British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)

Ric Bailey, Editorial Policy

Conservative Party

Alan Mabbutt, Registered Treasurer and Legal Officer
Megan Tucker, Election Law Officer

Liberal Democratic Party

Mike Dixon, Central Executive Officer
Kerry Buist, Head of Compliance

Electoral Reform Society

Darren Hughes, Chief Executive

Democracy Volunteers

John Ault, Director
Nathanael Cullis, researcher

Elect-Her

Hannah Stevens, Chief Executive

International Community⁴⁹

Representatives of diplomatic missions of the Czech Republic, Germany, Portugal, Switzerland and Türkiye.

⁴⁹ The ODIHR NAM extended an invitation to representations of all OSCE participating States resident in the United Kingdom.