



# UK GENERAL ELECTION JULY 2024



## CPA BIMR ELECTION ASSESSMENT MISSION PRELIMINARY STATEMENT

**“Fair and regular elections form the foundation of a democracy. How elections are planned and executed must not only be transparent, but be seen to be so, hence the importance of election observation. Ultimately, the legitimacy and credibility of a government rests upon this. That is why it has been my honour to lead this Election Assessment Mission to the UK.”**

Hon. Dr. Otiende Amollo MP (Kenya)

Head of Mission CPA BIMR Election Observation Mission to the United Kingdom 2024

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

**The CPA BIMR Election Assessment Mission was impressed by the dedication of electoral administrators and thousands of polling staff across the United Kingdom, who delivered a well-run election under tight deadlines and following substantial revisions of electoral law.**

**Observers were deployed to eight constituencies across the UK.** These constituencies provided a broad sample of locations, covering a variety of demographics, regions and voting patterns. They were able to explore the pre-election environment and visited more than 290 polling locations on election day. The election day process was orderly, and the ballot counts were transparent and well-organised.

The election saw a record number of candidates, with more than a fifth running as independents and five political parties nominating candidates across most UK constituencies. The highest ever number of women stood as candidates and emerged winners, even though their share as candidates decreased overall. Conversely, estimated at 60 percent, voter turnout was the lowest in over a generation.

The election administration across all levels delivered a professionally organised and transparent democratic process. Notwithstanding a number of concerns about postal ballot delivery times, **stakeholders across the board expressed a very high level of trust and confidence in the electoral process.**

The **legal framework** for parliamentary elections was revised in 2022, with substantial changes to voting arrangements and new voter photo ID requirements. Many Mission interlocutors focused on how these changes would work in practice and the possible effect on voter participation.

Ahead of these elections, a **review of electoral boundaries** was undertaken by the boundary commissions in the constituent nations, which aligned the constituency sizes with the statutory requirements and international standards on equal suffrage. The boundary commissions earned praise for the impartial and consultative manner of their work.

**Election administration**, which is decentralised, enjoys wide public confidence. The work of the Returning Officers, who played a key role at the constituency level, was positively assessed overall. Polling staff faced unusually short deadlines and a heavy workload associated with several changes in the process, which has reportedly contributed to staffing challenges in some areas.

Already frequent use of **postal voting** in the UK may have been further increased by the holding of this snap election during the summer. The Mission repeatedly heard concerns about delays in delivery of postal ballots to voters and fears that some of the returned ballots may not reach the electoral authorities within the statutory deadline.

Mission interlocutors generally had confidence in the accuracy of **voter registers**. At the same time, the Mission learned that the rates of registration were lower for young voters.

A record **4,379 candidates stood in these elections**, including 923 independents, with five parties nominating candidates in some 90+ percent of the constituencies. While a record number of women ran, their share among the candidates was lower than in the most recent elections in 2019.

According to most interlocutors, and as observed by members of the Mission, **campaigning** appeared more prevalent online than on the street, although candidates reported engaging with voters door-to-door and at many hustings events organised by a variety of actors. Most candidates said they were satisfied with broadcast media’s respect for impartiality, including in organising debates, although some believed smaller parties do not receive their due attention.

While stakeholders' expectations of high levels of **disinformation**, deepfakes and hateful speech did not materialise, **negative and derisive messages**, especially online and disproportionately directed at women and minorities, have left some stakeholders feeling vulnerable. At least one contestant requested police protection at their campaign events.

## INTRODUCTION TO THE MISSION

The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association British Islands and Mediterranean Region (CPA BIMR) conducted an Election Assessment Mission (EAM) to the United Kingdom General Election on 4 July 2024. This is the third time CPA BIMR observed a general election in the UK. The Mission was present in the UK from 29 June until 6 July 2024.

The mission was composed of **29 Commonwealth Parliamentarians, 2 election analysts and 24 members of staff** from the UK branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA UK), the British Group Inter-Parliamentary Union and the UK House of Lords. The Head of Mission was Hon Dr Otiende Amollo MP (Kenya) and the Deputy Head of Mission was Hon Ryan Callus MP (Malta). The election analysts were Stefan Szwed (Poland) and Vasil Vashchanka (Sweden).

The Commonwealth parliamentarians were drawn from the following jurisdictions:

Alderney	Guernsey	Malawi	Saint Kitts & Nevis
Anguilla	Jersey	Malta	Seychelles
Australia	Kenya	Mauritius	Sri Lanka
Grenada	Lesotho	Saint Lucia	Turks & Caicos



The Mission conducted an independent assessment of the United Kingdom General Election against international legal standards, commitments and obligations as well as domestic laws. The Mission focused on the observation of Election Day and meetings with stakeholders in the preceding two days. The Mission therefore gave limited or no assessment of broader issues such as the media and campaign finance.

After two days of training, the CPA BIMR observers were deployed to eight constituencies across the UK. These constituencies provided a broad sample of locations, covering a variety of demographics, regions and voting patterns. Prior to election day, observers met key stakeholders, including election officials, candidates and a wide range of civil society organisations. On election day, the Mission visited over 290 polling locations and the counting centre in these eight constituencies.

**The constituencies visited were Birmingham Ladywood, Brighton Pavilion, Bristol Central, Glasgow East, Ilford South, Liverpool Walton, North Northumberland and North West Cambridgeshire.**

The Mission is independent in its composition, findings and conclusions, adhering to the Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation and Code of Conduct for International Election Observers signed at the United Nations in 2005. It will continue to follow post-election developments and will publish a final report, containing recommendations, within two months of Election Day.

## POLITICAL BACKGROUND

On 22 May the Prime Minister called the general election for 4 July, with Parliament dissolved on 30 May. Many stakeholders expected the elections to be held in the autumn. Since the last general elections in December 2019, the UK has had three prime ministers, and saw the passing of the longest-reigning British monarch, HM Queen Elizabeth II, who was succeeded by her son, HM King Charles III. The UK completed the withdrawal process from the EU in January 2020 and faced the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Public discourse in the runup to the elections was marked by expectations of significant changes on the UK's electoral map, including historic gains for the hitherto opposition party, speculation about close results in some seats and the significance of voters' tactical behaviour.

## LEGAL FRAMEWORK

Parliamentary elections are regulated primarily by the Representation of the People Act (1983) and Political Parties and Elections and Referendums Act (2000), with relevant provisions also in other legislation. While detailed on many aspects of the process, the legal framework has previously been described as fragmented and complex.<sup>1</sup>

Recent amendments to electoral law introduced with the Elections Act (2022) made substantial modifications to voting arrangements, including postal and proxy voting as well as new voter identification requirements, campaigning, and electoral offences, among other changes. The restriction disenfranchising overseas voters who resided outside the UK for more than 15 years

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<sup>1</sup> See Electoral Law: a Joint Final Report, Law Commission of England and Wales (No. 389) and Scottish Law Commission (No. 256), 16 March 2020.

was removed. Sanctions for breach of ballot secrecy and undue influence of voters were further toughened by the Ballot Secrecy Act (2023).

**Mission interlocutors largely welcomed these legislative changes, although many were concerned that the new photo ID requirements could discourage or be a potential obstacle to the participation of some voters.** Overall, the legal reforms of 2022 and 2023 do not appear to reach as far as the Law Commissions previously recommended in their 2020 review of electoral law.

## **ELECTORAL SYSTEM AND BOUNDARY DELIMITATION**

The House of Commons' 650 members are elected in single-mandate constituencies through the "first past the post" system, whereby the candidate who obtains the most votes wins. The Mission noted that more proportional electoral systems have been introduced for some elected offices in the UK and smaller parties included change of the electoral system in their manifestos.

Ahead of these elections, a review of electoral boundaries was undertaken by the boundary commissions in the constituent nations, which aligned the constituency sizes with the statutory requirements and international standards on equal suffrage.<sup>2</sup> **The boundary commissions have conducted the process in an independent, open and consultative manner and were praised by many Mission interlocutors. The resulting constituencies appear to have been broadly accepted by political parties and have not been challenged in courts.** At the same time, some of the election administrators and candidates met by the Mission noted that they had to adapt to challenges posed by new constituency boundaries for electoral preparations and campaigning.

By law, constituency boundaries are drawn based on the numbers of registered voters. The rationale for using these numbers, rather than population figures, is plausible. However, the Mission is also mindful of the fact that elected representatives are called to act in the interests of all constituents, including minors and those not enrolled as voters. This consideration speaks in favour of having regard also for population sizes in constituencies.

## **ELECTION ADMINISTRATION**

The administration of the elections is decentralised, largely as a function of the electoral system, with Returning Officers, who are senior administrators in their respective local government, playing a central role managing the process at the constituency level. **Most interlocutors met by the CPA BIMR EAM spoke very highly of the professionalism of Returning Officers and election officials. The work of the administrators was assessed positively overall, despite unusually tight deadlines and partially related staffing problems, including reports of high turnover rates shortly before Election Day.** Several stakeholders, including election administrators, worried that although training ensured that staff would be versed in new procedures, the speed with which they were implemented and logistical challenges stemming from the postal vote and boundary delimitation could have had an adverse effect on the quality of the overall process.

This high level of public confidence extends to the Electoral Commission (EC), which oversees the elections at the national level, registers political parties that wish to field candidates, regulates

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<sup>2</sup> Since 2020, the law permits no more than 5 per cent deviation from the average constituency size. Article 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) provides for elections to be held by universal and equal suffrage.

aspects of campaign finance and runs voter education campaigns, whilst it does not run the elections. The EC's independence has come under focus in light of 2022 amendments that introduced a provision for the UK Government to designate a Strategy and Policy Statement setting out the EC's priorities.

The legal framework provides for the accreditation of citizen and international observers to specifically follow the processes of the issuance and return of postal ballots, as well as voting and verification and counting procedures, but makes no mention of other parts of the pre-election period. Several observation and assessment efforts were underway, including a 200-strong team of civil society Democracy Volunteers observers and a small team of experts from the OSCE/ODIHR.

Apart from casting the ballot in person at a polling station on election day, voters both in the UK and abroad may take advantage of the proxy and postal vote.

## POSTAL VOTING

Any eligible voter in the UK and abroad may opt for a postal ballot and the number of voters who use this voting method has been steadily growing. A number of Mission interlocutors thought that the holding of the current snap poll during the summer, coinciding with school holidays in some areas, will be a contributing factor to the increase in postal voting.

The Elections Act 2022 introduced online applications for postal voting. Rules on handling postal ballots also changed, with restrictions on political campaigners and on the number of postal ballots that may be handed in in polling stations on election day.<sup>3</sup> **These changes were positively assessed by the Mission's interlocutors, even as some of them pointed out that the risks of undue influence on voters associated with casting ballots in uncontrolled environments outside the polling stations cannot be eliminated entirely.**

**The Mission repeatedly heard concerns about delays in delivery of postal ballots to voters and fears that some of the returned ballots may not reach the electoral authorities within the statutory deadline of 10 pm on election day in order to be included in the ballot count.** The Mission encourages the authorities to collect information on the extent of such problems and to consider measures that would further reduce the risk of effective disenfranchisement due to delays in processing and postal delivery.

## VOTER REGISTRATION

Registers of electors are maintained by local authorities, and the law provides for proactive measures to encourage eligible voters to register and update their data. Mission interlocutors generally had confidence in the accuracy of voter registers. At the same time, the Mission learned that the rates of registration were lower for young voters, which is a concern. In this respect, **the Mission was pleased to hear about various local initiatives which encourage young voters to register, as well as pilots with automatic pre-registration.**

Convicted prisoners serving their sentence are not eligible to vote. Prisoners awaiting trial (remand prisoners) may vote, but face barriers in practice. **Mission observers visited one remand prison**

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<sup>3</sup> Political campaigners are now banned from handling postal votes. Any voter may hand in no more than five postal votes in a polling station, in addition to their own.

**and found no measures in place to inform detainees of their right to vote or enfranchise them.**

## **PARTY AND CANDIDATE REGISTRATION**

The EC registers the political parties that wish to field candidates in parliamentary elections. Candidates can stand as party nominees or independents, and must all submit a GBP 500 deposit, refundable to those who obtain more than 5% of the vote. They must be eligible voters, with restrictions on some professions and those under bankruptcy proceedings.

Of the 4,379 candidates running – the highest number ever in UK elections – 923 stood as independents (some 21 percent), with five parties fielding contestants in close to 90 or more percent of the 650 constituencies.<sup>4</sup>

While more women than ever stood for election in 2024, their share as candidates fell as compared to the last elections in 2019. The outgoing legislature was the first in which women constituted more than a third of the membership. There are no special measures in the law in place to promote women in politics at any level in the UK, although legislative work on quotas is currently underway in the Welsh *Senedd*. Nonetheless in this election a record number of women have been elected to office, with at least 242 winning seats.

Some parties moved to prioritise women candidates, however, none reached parity.<sup>5</sup> **Several CPA BIMR EAM interlocutors claimed that harassment and personal attacks, especially online, are more common against women, thus potentially also discouraging women candidates.** The absence of gender disaggregated data on candidates does not support the formulation of public policy that addresses women’s needs.

## **CAMPAIGN**

Campaigning may take place at any time, but the formal campaign period starts 25 days before election day. Most political parties published their manifestos in June and used them as basis for their campaign messaging. Offline, parties and candidates campaigned door-to-door, leafletting and participating in hustings organised by a wide range of actors. Many used the opportunity to send their flyers to voters through the mail free of charge. There was notably little campaign visibility on the streets in any of the locations visited by members of the CPA BIMR EAM.

While political advertising is not permitted on television and radio, both public and private media aired contestants’ campaign broadcasts free of charge and organised contestant debates in line with the oversight authority Office for Communications (OFCOM) and their own guidance on impartiality. **Several interlocutors representing smaller political parties, including those with representation at different levels of government, expressed dissatisfaction with the level of coverage they received in the media.**

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<sup>4</sup> The Labour Party nominated candidates in 631 constituencies, Conservative and Liberal Democrats in 630 each, Reform UK in 609 and the Greens in 574 constituencies.

<sup>5</sup> According to Elect Her, a CSO that supports women candidates, some 30% of the candidates nominated by political parties were women. Among the parties, Labour nominated the highest number and share overall (46%), followed by Greens (43%), SNP (35%), Conservatives (34%), Liberal Democrats (28%), Plaid Cymru (25%) and Reform UK (16%).

According to several CPA BIMR EAM interlocutors, campaigning has to a significant degree moved online, with contestants relying on social media platforms to advertise and disseminate campaign content. The 2022 amendments extended the imprint requirement to online political advertising and organic content published by or on behalf of a contestant. **Some stakeholders claimed that their earlier concerns about disinformation, the so-called deepfakes and foreign interference in the campaign, had not materialised to the expected degree.** Conversely, a number of interlocutors informed the EAM that instances of negative or derisive speech online, especially directed at women and minorities, had an intimidating effect on some contestants. In at least one case a contestant requested police protection as part of the campaign activities.

## ELECTION DAY: OPENING

**The EAM observed opening in a total of 18 locations,** including polling stations that were located in the same polling centre, in some cases a single enclosed space. They all opened on time at 7am with all staff, materials and relevant display notices in place, and after performing the required verifications and checks. Ballot boxes were shown to be empty and then sealed, as witnessed by CPA BIMR observers in all but four cases. While in three cases unauthorised persons were present, none interfered with the process. All observed polling stations were independently accessible to voters with limited mobility, but some did not have relevant tools in place to aid voters with visual or hearing disabilities in the process of voting. Although one EAM team rated the polling staff's knowledge of procedures and management of opening as bad/poor, **all thought the overall process was very good (12) or good (6).**

## ELECTION DAY: VOTING

**Voting was observed at 263 locations.** Most voting locations were clearly marked (all but 9 cases). Although queues of voters were witnessed in most cases, they generally included only a few voters. Party agents were on site in more than 20 percent (56 in total) of the observed polling stations: most represented the Greens (36 cases) and Labour (28 cases). Observers other than CPA BIMR EAM teams were seen in only three percent of observations.

**Individual procedures were applied correctly in nearly all the polling stations visited by the EAM.** In some 41 percent of the polling stations, voters have been turned away, for the most part because they were not on the register (39 cases) – in several instances because they were non-British citizens unaware of their ineligibility to vote – or because they did not have a photo ID (28). In several locations, voter guidance notices were available in languages other than English or Welsh (in Wales), among others in Polish, Mandarin, Arabic, Sanskrit and Gaelic, but also in pictorials.

In several locations, EAM observers saw the voter registers in an electronic format, with polling staff using tablets to process electors, which also allowed them to partly complete parts of the closing process automatically. At least one team remarked that while this greatly increased efficiency and was welcomed by polling staff, it could in some instances reduce transparency.

**Secrecy of the ballot was upheld in some 83 percent of observations: where violations occurred, this was in the main because of poor layout (18 cases) or voters' poor handling of the ballot (15), e.g. failure to fold it. Cases of 'family voting', i.e. where more than one person entered the voting booth, were witnessed by the EAM in some 35 observations (14 percent).**



Some 92 percent of the observed polling stations were accessible to voters with reduced mobility, and tools to aid voters with hearing or visual impairments were found in a similar share of locations. Assistance to voters who needed it was provided in accordance with procedures in most cases, except in just under 4 percent of observations.

Overall, CPA BIMR observers deemed the administration of the process to be very good or good in 154 and 86 observations respectively (94 percent), and bad in 15 (6 percent). Voters' understanding of the procedures was overwhelmingly very good or good in 155 and 93 cases (98 percent), and bad in 6 (2 percent). The process was transparent or very transparent in all but three cases (1 percent), with **the overall impression of the voting process assessed as very good and good in 157 and 90 cases respectively (over 96 percent), and bad in 10 (less than 4 percent).**

## ELECTION DAY: CLOSING

**The Mission observed closing in 17 polling locations and assessed the process positively in all but 3 of these.** Polling staff were mostly familiar with the closing procedures and did not have issues with the ballot paper account and other forms. Ballot boxes were sealed and kept safe for transportation. The process was carried out swiftly and efficiently. The 3 negative assessments were primarily due to polling staff not following the procedures properly, such as closing the locales before 10 pm (1 case), leaving the ballot box unsealed and out of sight during the closing process (1 case), as well as difficulties with filling the ballot paper account (1 case).

## ELECTION DAY: VERIFICATION AND COUNT

**The process was assessed positively in all 8 verification and count centres visited by the EAM observers. Transparency was ensured for the candidates' agents and the process was well organised.** In the 3 count centres where observers noted that instances of discrepancies in polling station accounts were found by the counting staff, these were followed by re-counts and further addressed in accordance with the prescribed procedures.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

The CPA BIMR Election Assessment Mission wishes to express its gratitude to all those who supported the work of the Mission, including election officials, candidates, and civil society organisations. We are grateful to our observers and analysts for participating.

## CPA BIMR ELECTION OBSERVATION SERVICES

The first objective of the BIMR Strategy is to strengthen parliaments and the skills of their members. As part of this work, CPA BIMR facilitates election observations when invited to do so.

For more information about these services, please contact the CPA BIMR Secretariat at [cpabimr@parliament.uk](mailto:cpabimr@parliament.uk).



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