



Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities

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Rt Hon Sir George Howarth MP
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Thank you for your email on 11 December on behalf of your constituents who raise their concerns regarding the impact of introducing photographic identification for voting. I am responding as the Minister for Local Government.

Whilst we can all rightly be proud of the strong and long-standing democracy we are part of, it is also important that we are alert to any weaknesses in our processes that may undermine that strength.

Photographic Identification for the purposes of voting has been a part of the electoral landscape in Northern Ireland for two decades, with electors and electoral administrators viewing it as a common-sense measure to protect the integrity of their elections. This view is replicated throughout many European countries, including France, Germany and Austria, as well as comparable democracies further afield, such as Canada, all of which require some form of identification to vote.

Before we introduced the new photographic voter identification policy (an out of date and no longer viable form of voter identification relying on another person calling out anyone committing fraud at a polling station had been in place since 1867), there were frequent anecdotal reports of personation in almost every election, including most recently during the 2022 local elections. There was an inexcusable potential for someone to cast another's vote at the polling station. Personation in polling stations was very difficult to identify and prove - by definition, it is a crime of deception. But it's by no means a victimless crime. In 2013, the Electoral Commission found that it is often the most vulnerable who find themselves targeted, so it is right that we took steps to stamp out the potential for it to take place in elections.

Further to this, any registered elector who does not possess any of one of the required forms of photographic identification can apply to their local authority to obtain a Voter Authority Certificate, an accepted form of identification, free of charge. This will ensure that everyone who is eligible to vote will continue to have the opportunity to do so.

I have noted the reports that your constituent has mentioned, from the Electoral Commission and the All-party Parliamentary Group on Democracy and the Constitution. It is essential that we understand how the policy has operated in practice, what has gone well and where there are any areas for improvement in the future.

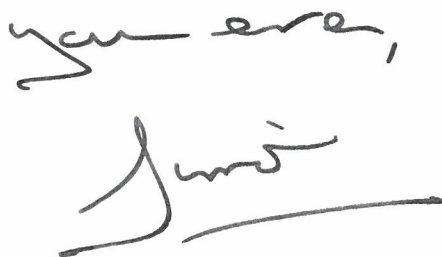
The findings in these reports have – alongside the Government's own research – fed into the Government's report on the impact of photographic voter identification that was published in November 2023: "Evaluation of the Electoral Integrity Programme: Year 1 Report.

We are pleased with the initial rollout of the photographic voter identification policy. Data collected at the May polls showed that 99.75% of electors who attended polling stations were able to vote. Around 0.25% were turned away and did not return later in the day with accepted forms of ID but the exact reasons for this are not clear.

It is the Government's view that the Voter Authority Certificate has a significant role to play in ensuring the accessibility of this policy for electors. Indeed, the Voter Authority Certificate was deliberately created to support electors who may not have access to another form of accepted photographic identification, either temporarily or over the longer term, and to be available free of charge. Evidence in the recent IFF Evaluation of the Electoral Integrity Programme shows that awareness of the Voter Authority Certificate increased from 9% of voting age adults in England in January 2023 to 21% in May 2023, suggesting that the public information campaign raised awareness to some extent, so there is further work to do to increase awareness across all groups, including those without accepted identification.

The Electoral Commission will continue to work to further raise awareness of the need to show an accepted form of photographic identification, including of the availability of the Voter Authority Certificate so that more voters know there is a free document they can obtain to use to vote on polling day. Continuing to improve this awareness by close working between Government, the Electoral Commission, civil society organisations and local authorities to target Voter Authority Certificate communications at those electors who may benefit most is a high priority.

Thank you for writing on this important matter and I hope the above addresses your constituents concerns.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Simon Hoare', with a long horizontal line extending from the end of the signature.

SIMON HOARE MP
Minister for Local Government