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Report on the May 2021 elections in England You are in the Police and Crime  
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Campaigning at the elections Delivering the elections Introduction This report looks  
at how the May 2021 elections in England were run, how voters and campaigners found  
taking part, and what lessons can be learned for the future. On 6 May Police and  
Crime Commissioners (PCCs) took place in England. Most local authorities had local  
government elections and some areas had Combined Authority Mayor and local mayoral  
elections. In London, people could vote for the Mayor of London and London Assembly  
members. Many of these polls had been postponed from 2020. This was one of the most  
complex sets of polls held in recent times, with the additional challenges presented  
by the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic. Even with these challenging circumstances  
people had high levels of satisfaction with the process of registering to vote and  
voting, and were confident that they were well run. Turnout across the different  
elections in May 2021 was similar to comparable elections in previous years,  
suggesting that concerns about Covid-19 did not stop voters from taking part. Changes  
that were put in place by electoral administrators and the Government helped to  
support and reassure voters. People were confident that they could vote safely at the  
elections, and the overwhelming majority were able to vote using their preferred  
method. s adapted their activities in response to public health restrictions and were  
able to communicate with voters face-to-face, online and through printed material.  
Transparency about who is responsible for producing campaign material online remains  
important for voters, and new digital imprint requirements will help voters  
understand who is paying to target them online at elections in future. The experience  
of these polls has again highlighted concerns about the resilience and capacity of  
electoral administration structures in the UK, which are coupled with the challenges  
of delivering elections within an outdated and increasingly complex electoral law  
framework. We will work in partnership with the electoral community, the Government  
and local authorities to develop and deliver proposals to support resilient electoral  
services for the future. Voting at the elections The experience of voters at the May  
2021 elections Most people were confident that the elections were well-run, even  
though they took place in unprecedented and challenging circumstances. People were  
highly satisfied with the process of registering to vote and casting their vote.  
Changes that were put in place helped to support and reassure voters. People were  
confident that they could vote safely at the elections, and the overwhelming majority  
were able to vote using their preferred method. New rules allowed people who were  
required to isolate to appoint a proxy to vote on their behalf as late as 5pm on  
polling day. This positive change helped to provide a safeguard for anyone whose  
circumstances changed close to the polls, and should continue to be available if  
people are required to self-isolate as part of the public health response to  
Covid-19. There was a notable increase in the proportion of ballot papers that were  
rejected at the Mayor of London election because people had voted for too many  
candidates. Good ballot paper design is essential to help voters understand how to  
cast their votes without making errors. Possible alternative design options for  
ballot papers should be tested ahead of future Mayor of London elections. Voting at  
the elections summary This was one of the most complex sets of polls held in recent  
years, with the additional challenges presented by the Covid-19 pandemic. In March  
2020, due to rising concern about the Covid-19 pandemic, the UK Government postponed  
the local elections that had been scheduled for May 2020, until May 2021. This meant

that on 6 May 2021 there were: Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) elections across England (except for London, Greater Manchester and West Yorkshire) Local government elections in most areas of England Combined Authority Mayor elections in some areas Local mayoral elections in some areas Mayor of London and London Assembly elections in London Some voters had multiple elections using different voting systems. In Bristol and Liverpool, for example, there were four different scheduled elections using two different voting systems. In both areas, local elections used the first past the post voting system, and PCC, Local Authority Mayoral and Combined Authority Mayoral elections used the supplementary vote system. A number of authorities also needed to hold by-elections and local referendums on the same day, adding to the complex picture for voters in those areas. During the summer and early autumn of 2020, the Electoral Commission worked with and consulted electoral administrators, political parties and governments across Great Britain to identify a shared set of high-level objectives for delivering successful elections in the current public health environment . These objectives were used to assess and test different options for supporting voters, campaigner and electoral administrators, and to identify and manage significant risks to successful delivery of the elections. We have also used them to inform our research, analysis and reporting on these polls. Returning Officers put in place new procedures in polling stations based on guidance from public health bodies and the Electoral Commission to comply with public health regulations and guidelines and to ensure that voters could be confident that they could vote safely. Voters who didn't want to vote in person at the polling station could also choose to cast their vote by post or appoint a proxy. To make sure everyone knew about the different voting options available to them and to reassure people that voting in person would be a safe experience, we – along with local authorities – took a lead role in communicating these messages before the elections. This covered a range of topics including how to find your polling station, options for casting your vote and how to get help at the polling station. Our voter registration campaign ran from 9 March until the application deadline on 19 April. Our ads directed people to the [gov.uk/register-to-vote](https://www.gov.uk/register-to-vote) service and were promoted across TV, video on demand, radio, digital audio, out-of-home billboards, social media and digital display. In England, there were 852,830 applications to register during our campaign between 9 March and 19 April. A total of 18.3 million people were registered to vote in the local elections and 14.5 million in the county council elections in England. There were 32.1 million people registered for the PCC elections and 6.2 million for the Mayor of London elections. Voters continue to have positive views about how the election was run People had high levels of satisfaction with the process of registering to vote and voting, even with the challenging circumstances of these polls taking place during the Covid-19 pandemic. Our research shows that: 87% of people across England 1 and 88% of people in London were satisfied with the process of registering to vote. This is consistent with levels of satisfaction reported by people after the most recent comparable elections held in 2016 94% of people across England and 92% in London were satisfied with the process of voting. This is an increase from 2016 when satisfaction ranged from 82% at PCC elections to 86% in London more experienced voters are more confident and satisfied with registering to vote and voting than first time voters Three-quarters of people said they were confident that the elections were well-run; however, at least one in 10 were not. Although this is similar to the 2016 PCC elections in England (73%), it is lower than the proportion of people in 2016 who were confident that the local elections (82%) and elections in London (85%) were well-run. When we asked people why

they were not confident that the May 2021 elections were well run there were some differences between voters in England and London, with voters in London more likely to identify concerns about Covid-19 and dislike of the voting system used. Reasons given by voters in England who were not confident elections well-run Reasons given by voters in London who were not confident elections well-run Wasn't enough information about the candidates (29%) Do not think it was safe for people to vote at polling stations because of Covid-19 (27%) [Information] about the elections (19%) Wasn't enough information about the candidates (21%) Candidates didn't canvass/have contact with people (18%). Don't like the voting system (20%) Did not trust that the votes were counted accurately (17%), Wasn't enough information about the elections (20%) Did not think it was safe for people to vote at polling stations because of Covid-19 (16%) Did not think there was enough information about alternatives to voting at a polling station (16%) We also saw that views about whether electoral fraud is a problem, and about the safety of voting, were consistent with other recent elections. Just over a quarter of people across England (28%) see electoral fraud as a problem, rising to 34% in London. This compares to the 26% of people across the UK who saw it as a problem after the 2019 UK general election. Voters continue to have positive views about how the election was run: breakdown The pandemic does not appear to have stopped people from turning out to vote Although the level of turnout at these elections was low, this is consistent with previous elections. In 2021 there was a slight increase in turnout for the local and county council elections compared to the last comparable polls. This suggests that Covid-19 restrictions or concerns did not stop people turning out to vote. Turnout at the PCC elections was also higher than in 2016. However, this is likely to be at least partly due to the combination of different types of elections in 2021. The postponement of some elections from the previous year, meant that more areas in England held local elections alongside their PCC elections compared with 2016. Local election turnout tends to be higher than standalone PCC election turnout. In London, turnout was lower than at the previous Mayoral and Assembly elections in 2016. However, we have no evidence that Covid-19 was a significant factor in that. Turnout in May 2021 compared to most recent comparable election County Council 2017 35.0% 2021 36.6% Local 2017 33.8% 2021 35.6% PCC (England only) 2017 26.0% 2021 33.0% London Mayoral 2017 46.1% 2021 42.9% People were most likely to tell us that they didn't vote because of a lack of information or lacking trust in politicians, rather than because of Covid-19. This further illustrates that the pandemic does not appear to have played a role in whether someone voted or not. England London There was not enough information/media coverage (10%) That they don't trust politicians (11%) Lack of information (10%) Lack of information (10%) That they don't trust politicians (10%) That voting takes too long (10%) That voting takes too long (9%) Forgetting/missing the deadline (8%) Illness (9%) 2 Illness (7%) You should be able to vote over a few days (6%). You should be able to vote over a few days (7%). People were confident that they could vote using their preferred method Although public health restrictions were in place at the time of the elections, people had a choice of how they cast their vote. They could choose to vote in person, by post or by proxy (asking someone to do so on their behalf). Most people who voted were able to use their preferred method: 93% of people who voted across England and 91% of those who voted in London said they were able to use their preferred method of voting first time voters and younger people aged 18 to 34 were less likely to say they were able to use their preferred method 6% of voters across England and 8% in London said that they were not able to vote using their preferred method. Among this group, around a quarter said this was due to reasons

related to Covid-19 (such as being worried about going to the polling stations and having to self-isolate), rising to around a third amongst those who generally prefer to vote in polling stations. Voters in polling stations were confident that they were safe places to vote. Across England and London, a number of different measures were in place to make sure that voting and working at polling stations was as safe as possible during the pandemic. To support and advise on what changes should be made to voting in polling stations, we worked with public health experts across the UK to provide guidance for electoral administrators. We also produced resources for local authorities designed to help: reassure the public that voting in person would be a safe experience, highlight the other ways to vote, for those vulnerable or concerned encourage voters to start thinking about their preferred voting option early. Voters in polling stations were confident that they were safe places to vote: breakdown

Polling stations were set up and managed to minimise public health risks. How safe voters at polling stations felt with the safety provisions in place. Almost all of the people in our research who voted in person said that they felt safe at a polling station with the safety provisions in place:

| Location       | Very safe | Fairly safe | Fairly unsafe | Very unsafe | Don't know |
|----------------|-----------|-------------|---------------|-------------|------------|
| London         | 56%       | 39%         | 3%            | 1%          | 1%         |
| Across England | 64%       | 33%         | 2%            | 0.5%        | 0.23%      |

77% of polling station voters said that they had enough information about safety measures to cast their vote safely across England, first time voters were slightly less likely to feel safe than people who had experience of voting before. Half of voters across England who said they felt unsafe said there was nothing more that could have been done to make a difference. Almost all (99%) polling station voters said that they noticed at least one of the various safety provisions that had been put in place. People were most likely to notice Hand sanitiser provided on exit and entry. People were least likely to notice Cleaning of pencils (where single use pencils were not used). Staff wearing face coverings. Cleaning of booths. A one-way system with floor markings. Polling station staff also felt that polling stations were safe places to work (96% of staff responding to our survey agreed), and that the safety of voters was adequately provided for by the changes introduced (95%). The new safety measures meant that voting took longer for some people. The combination of polls, where voters had more than one ballot paper to complete, may have also contributed to this: just under four in 10 people who regularly vote in polling stations thought that voting took longer than usual as a result of Covid-19 safety provisions. Half thought that despite the measures, voting took them about the same amount of time as usual. Some voters had to queue outside their polling station before they went to vote. Electoral administrators and polling station staff told us that in most instances people were prepared to queue, and understood that it was because of the additional public safety measures that had been put in place: "There were short queues at polling stations all day, staff were more concerned about this than the electors were." "The one in, one out policy in such a small cabin, coupled with three ballot papers all with different criteria which were too complicated for a lot of voters and had to be explained, meant that there were long queues all day. People who didn't want to go to a polling station had options for voting remotely. People who don't want to vote in person at the polling station can apply to cast their vote by post or appoint a proxy. If their situation changes close to an election due to work or disability, people can appoint an emergency proxy up to 5pm on polling day to vote on their behalf. The law was changed ahead of these elections so that anyone who had to self-isolate close to polling day because they had tested positive for Covid-19, or had been in close contact to someone who had tested positive, could also appoint a proxy. Remote voting information. Most people knew what other options they had if they didn't want to vote

in a polling station Most people found it easy to find information about how they could cast their vote either in person at a polling station or remotely by post or proxy. Our research showed that: three-quarters of people said that they found it easy to get information about the different methods of voting that they could choose from similar proportions of people who normally vote in polling stations said they found it easy to get information about different methods of voting (76% for elections across England and 80% for London) around a third of first time postal voters told us they chose to vote by post as they didn't want to go to the polling station because of Covid-19 related safety concerns, or because it was convenient a further 30% of first time postal voters across England and 27% in London said they were prompted by information from their local authority informing them they could register for a postal vote. A fifth across England said they saw similar advertising from us, rising to a quarter in London electoral administrators from over three-quarters of local authorities said that they did some form of campaign encouraging residents to apply to vote by post Most people who didn't want to vote in a polling station found it easy to apply to vote by post or appoint a proxy There was a small increase in the proportion of voters choosing to vote by post at these elections, compared with the most recent comparable polls. Percentage of electorate that chose to vote by post

| Authority          | Year | Percentage |
|--------------------|------|------------|
| County Council     | 2017 | 16%        |
| County Council     | 2021 | 19%        |
| Local              | 2016 | 17%        |
| Local              | 2021 | 21%        |
| PCC (England only) | 2016 | 16%        |
| PCC (England only) | 2021 | 18%        |
| London Mayoral     | 2016 | 15%        |
| London Mayoral     | 2021 | 19%        |

Our public opinion research found that there were many new postal voters at these polls with: just under a third of people who voted by post across England said that it was the first time they had voted by post nearly half of people who voted by post in London said they were first time postal voters Most people who voted by post for the first time found it easy to understand how to apply: almost all of these first time postal voters (92%) said they found it easy to understand what to do to complete and return their postal vote application People applying for a proxy also said they found it easy to understand what to do: nearly three-quarters of people who voted by proxy said it was the first time they had done so almost three-quarters of proxy voters across England said they found it easy to understand how to appoint a proxy, although a quarter said they found it difficult to understand what they had to do to complete the application People who needed to isolate because of Covid-19 could appoint a proxy to vote on their behalf The changes to the provision for emergency proxies meant that anyone who had tested positive for Covid-19 or had to self-isolate could still vote in these elections. Across all the elections more than 2,800 voters were able to appoint a proxy to vote on their behalf using these new rules. There was no increase in the overall level of proxy voting despite the new proxy provisions: for the local elections 0.01% of the electorate appointed an emergency proxy to vote on their behalf (including 2,313 voters at the PCC elections, 1,069 county council election voters, and 1,611 voters at other the local elections) for the London Mayoral election 0.02% of the electorate (1,160) people appointed an emergency proxy this was comparable to the percentage of electors (0.02%, or 8,518 people) in England who appointed an emergency proxy at the 2019 UK general election Administrators recognised the benefits of the changes to emergency proxy rules for voters. This change was not announced until late February 2021, and only came into effect six weeks before polling day on 24 March 2021. Some administrators found it difficult to update their plans to reflect the change in time to promote this option to voters. The extension of the emergency proxy provisions in relation to Covid and the updated application form were issued at a late stage which was problematic for planning. Most people who voted by post were confident they knew how to vote without making a

mistake Almost everyone who voted by post said they knew how to complete and return their postal vote. Our research showed that: more than nine out of ten people said it was easy to complete and return their postal vote, compared to 6% across England and 8% in London saying it was difficult first-time voters, people who had voted by post for the first time and those aged 18-34 were more likely to say it was difficult to understand what was needed to complete and return their postal vote compared to other voters the most common reasons for saying it was difficult across England were not being clear which envelope to return the completed ballot(s) in (39%); not being clear what information to provide (30%); and receiving more ballot papers than expected (29%) Despite more people voting by post for the first time we did not see an increase in the number rejected compared to previous elections. Data from electoral administrators shows: 2% of returned postal votes were rejected at the County Council and London mayoral elections 3% of returned postal votes were rejected for the local and PCC elections The most common reasons for postal vote rejection were where personal identifiers (signature/date of birth) didn't not match, which was similar to the last time each of these elections took place. Rejected postal votes by election County Council 2017 2% 2021 2% Local 2016 4% 2021 3% PCC (England only) 2016 4% 2021 3% London Mayoral 2016 4% 2021 2% % of postal votes rejected because of mismatched personal identifiers County Council 2017 52% 2021 48% Local 2016 50% 2021 46% PCC (England only) 2016 47% 2021 44% London Mayoral 2016 66% 2021 63%

Recommendation 1 Recommendation 1: Retain an emergency proxy option for isolating voters Legislation introduced for these elections to allow emergency proxy votes for anyone who tested positive for Covid-19 or had to self-isolate helped to provide a safeguard for anyone whose circumstances changed close to the polls and ensure that they were not prevented from participating. Although the provision was not widely relied upon in practice, it was nevertheless an important safeguard to make sure that no one lost their ability to vote. We recommend that the Government should ensure this option continues to be available if people are required to self-isolate as part of the public health response to Covid-19. Voters in some areas found it harder to complete their ballot papers Around nine in 10 voters said that it was easy to fill in their ballot paper, but some people said that they found it difficult. People who told us it was difficult said it was due to: unclear instructions the ballot paper being complex/confusing confusion caused by voting in multiple elections too many candidates A quarter of people who had difficulties filling in their ballot paper in areas holding both local government and PCC elections said it was confusing that the elections used different voting systems. A third of people voting in London said that they found the two voting systems confusing. The percentage of rejected ballot papers at those elections using the supplementary vote (SV) electoral system in May 2021 was higher than at those elections using first past the post: 0.8% for the local government elections compared to 2.7% for the PCC and 4.3% for Mayor of London. This is consistent with the experience at previous polls. Voters in some areas found it harder to complete their ballot papers: breakdown Rejection rates for Mayor of London ballot papers were higher The number of rejected ballot papers for the Mayor of London election was notably higher than it had been at previous elections or at other elections held using SV in May 2021: in total, 4.3% of first preference votes were rejected, compared with 1.9% in 2016 most of these were rejected because voters had voted for too many candidates (over 87,000 ballot papers, representing 76.4% of all rejected first preference votes) at the PCC elections which also use SV in England in May 2021 the first preference rejection rate was 2.9 % The most significant difference for the May 2021 Mayor of London election was that a new ballot paper

design was used, compared with previous London elections and other elections using the SV system. There was a record number of 20 candidates for the Mayor of London election. The arrangements for electronic counting meant they were required to be a certain size and format to be able to be scanned correctly. This meant that the length of the paper could not be extended to include all the candidates, so for the first time it was split to present candidates across two columns rather than one continuous list.

**Recommendation 2** Ensure new ballot paper designs are tested before they need to be used by voters. Good ballot paper design is essential to help voters understand how to cast their votes without making errors. User testing with the public can help to identify potential usability problems and improve the design of ballot papers. We recommend that the Greater London Returning Officer should test possible alternative design options for ballot papers for future Mayor of London elections, including two-column designs. We stand ready to provide technical support to this work, drawing on our extensive experience of user testing ballot papers and other voter-facing materials.

**Campaigning at the elections** The experience of campaigning at the May 2021 elections. Changing public health regulations and restrictions during spring 2021 caused uncertainty for campaigners, who had to adapt their plans as official guidance changed before and during the campaign period. s were able to communicate with voters face-to-face, online and through printed material, even though restrictions remained in place during the campaign. However, people in areas with PCC elections found it less easy to get information about the role of the elected office or the candidates or parties standing for election. Transparency about who is responsible for producing campaign material online remains important for voters, and new digital imprint requirements will help voters understand who is paying to target them online at elections in future. Changes to reduce the number of subscribers required for candidates to be nominated for these elections were well-received by many candidates and electoral administrators. The Government should review whether the range of current subscriber requirements are still proportionate for different elected offices.

**overview** There was a record 20 candidates for the Mayor of London election, and 249 candidates stood for election to the London Assembly. This was more than at the last elections in 2016, when there were 12 and 205 candidates respectively. A total of 145 candidates contested the PCC elections in England, less than in 2016 when there were 169 candidates. s communicated with voters about a complex range of elections held in May 2021, including polls that had been postponed from the previous year. They also adapted their activities in response to public health restrictions because of the pandemic. Some candidates and agents get support from local or regional groups of their political party. This year, these local political party associations supported campaigns across a bigger range of elections than usual. This added a further layer of complexity as associations helped manage a wider range of campaign messages, spending limits and rules than they would normally do in one campaign period. All of this meant it was not straightforward for campaigners to plan and deliver their activities at these elections. The changing public health context caused uncertainty for campaigners. Some changes to legislation were made close to the start of the election period but most candidates considered they were well-informed about them. The Government made several changes to the law to support those campaigning in the elections: In December 2020, legislation was changed to make inflation-based increases to local council candidate spending limits. The Government argued that the pandemic could mean more emphasis on postal and digital campaigning and that this added to the case for limits to be increased in March 2021, legislation was changed

to reduce the number of signatures required to nominate candidates, in order to reduce the travel and contact involved in completing nomination forms. Given the changing context of the pandemic, it was understandably more difficult for the Government to ensure changes to legislation were in place at least six months before campaigners or electoral administrators needed to comply with them. Most candidates who responded to our post-election survey said they felt well-informed about legislative changes before these elections. However, some changes were made very close to when they would affect campaigners, and this added to uncertainty and risk for candidates and electoral administrators. The changes to nominations were announced in mid-February and came into effect on 10 and 11 March, which was less than a month before the deadline for nominations. Some prospective candidates had already started using old nomination forms before the change to the rules, which meant their forms were out of date. After the changes took effect, some electoral administrators told us that they found it challenging to quickly update their plans and prepare nomination packs which reflected the new rules. The main issue on the nomination process was the lateness in the change of legislation, but the change was welcome and did speed up the processing." "The main challenge was the change to the number of people could nominate a candidate. This came incredibly late and meant that we couldn't produce the nomination papers as early as we normally would, it meant that we had to change our candidate and agent training fairly late in the day and the guidance came fairly late. The discussions on what legislative changes there should be came too late and hampered the running of the election. Official guidance on campaigning activities changed during the campaign period. People across England were placed under new lockdown restrictions from early January 2021. This meant that campaigners had to adapt their plans for activities to reach voters. They had to comply with general public health restrictions, and the UK Government also published specific guidance on campaigning for elections in England at the end of February: The Government said its guidance meant that up to 8 March, door-to-door campaigning and leafleting by individual campaigners were not allowed under the lockdown regulations, and leafleting was only allowed to be carried out through existing commercial delivery services. From 8 March, the Government changed the lockdown regulations to support door to door campaigning activity by people who were campaigning for a specific electoral outcome. This included anyone who had been asked by a candidate, party or campaign organiser to participate. Hustings and public meetings could only take place remotely. From 29 March six people, or two households, were able to meet outside to plan or deliver campaign activities, but campaigners were told not to enter voters' homes. In April, campaigning was also briefly suspended as a mark of respect following the death of HRH, Duke of Edinburgh. When we conducted in-depth interviews with candidates who stood in the PCC and London elections, the majority of participants said they did not feel well-informed about these changes. While many candidates noted that changes to the restrictions were reasonable and necessary, this added to the complexity and the frustration that they reported. I think it was very difficult to know what was a regulation and what was advice. I don't think they were at all clear. And it didn't help that we were getting, what I certainly perceived as, mixed messages from different parts of the government about what you could and couldn't do [...] In terms of delivering literature. Whether we could put leaflets out with volunteers or whether we had to use paid deliverers or whether we couldn't do anything. That was an absolute mess trying to work out what we were meant to do and what we were not meant to do. Some candidates also expressed concerns about the role of the governing party in deciding what campaign activity should be allowed ahead of



the elections, although others considered that the Government would need to have this role during a pandemic. Our guidance to candidates, parties, and non-party campaigners about the regulated period included advice on the spending and donation rules, as well as the reporting rules, following the postponement of the May 2020 elections due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Our guidance also reflected legislative changes made as a result of Covid-19. We also asked parties and candidates for their feedback to better understand their questions and concerns about how spending could be affected by the pandemic, and updated the support on our website in response to this. s were able to engage with voters while following public health regulations and guidance s used a range of digital, print and in-person campaigning to communicate with voters Despite the initial restrictions on in-person campaign activities in early 2021, voters continued to receive information about candidates and parties at the elections from a range of different sources, and in a variety of formats. The most common ways voters reported seeing information on parties and candidates are shown in the following table: England London on a leaflet or flyer, either from a candidate/political party (40%) or another source (23%). On a leaflet or flyer from a candidate/political party (33%) In newspapers (14%) The household booklet about the London Assembly and Mayor of London elections (25%) On their local council website (13%) Newspapers (24%), News websites (10%) Leaflets or flyers from another source (22%) Social media (10%) on a news website (19%) Word of mouth (10%) Younger age groups and first time voters were more likely than older age groups and repeat voters to have seen information about the elections on social media, and less likely to have seen information on a leaflet or flyer from a candidate/political party or another source. Candidates told us that digital campaigning was particularly important during early 2021, when in-person activities were less manageable and they were unsure how voters would react to door-knocking and face-to-face campaigning. PCC candidates were most likely to have said that they used digital campaigning, where the geographical size of police areas made it impractical to deliver leaflets to every voter. However, other candidates told us that relying on social media to campaign restricted opportunities to get their views across to voters. They felt that social media didn't have the same reach as leaflets and that the audience for posts was often limited to those who were already engaged with local politics or who were their supporters. Some candidates said they were not able to campaign effectively Candidates generally agreed that it was clear what campaigning was and was not allowed in line with public health restrictions, although some candidates did not think it was clear. We also saw differences between PCC and London candidates as to whether they felt able to get their views across to voters. Candidates standing in the London elections were more likely to agree that they could get their views across compared to PCC candidates, and the majority of those who responded to our survey said they were satisfied the booklet was an effective way to communicate with voters. In interviews, some PCC candidates said that: the PCC elections were not well publicised and they struggled to reach all voters in the police area, and this meant that some voters didn't know that the elections were happening there should be a London-style household candidate booklet delivered to all households, as well as the existing choosemypcc voter information website Our research with voters also found that people in areas with PCC elections were less likely than people in London to say that they found it easy to get information about the role of the elected office. Almost six in ten people (57%) said it was easy to get information on the role of a PCC, compared to almost eight in ten of people (77%) who said it was easy to get information on the role of Mayor of London. People in PCC areas were also the least likely to say they found it easy to

get information on the candidates or parties standing. People in London were most likely to say this information was easy to find and that they had enough information to make an informed decision. How many people found it easy to get information and had enough information to make an informed decision Found it easy to find information on the role Found it easy to get information about parties / candidates Had enough information to make an informed decision PCC 57% 59% 49% London Mayor 77% 77% 62% London Assembly n/a 74% 62% Local govt. (excl. mayoral) n/a 72% 52% Local govt. (mayoral) n/a 73% 54% Transparency about who is responsible for producing campaign material online remains important for voters The Government has proposed legislation that would require most campaigners to include information to identify themselves as part of their online campaign material in future. This change has also been recommended in our policy reports and by parliamentary select committees. A new digital imprint requirement will help voters understand who is paying to target them online at elections and referendums in future. Our research after the election confirmed that people continue to value transparency about who is responsible for political campaign activity online at elections with: seven in 10 people across England and in London (70% and 72% respectively) agree that it is important for them to know who has produced the political information they see online. This was consistent with our findings after the 2019 UK Parliamentary General Election six in 10 people across England and in London (62% and 60% respectively) said they would trust digital campaigning material more if they knew who produced it Younger voters appear to be more confident that they can scrutinise the trustworthiness of political information they find online with: six in 10 18-34 year olds across England and London (57% and 59% respectively) agreed that information available online about politics is trustworthy, compared with just under half of 35-54 year-olds (43% and 49%) and around a third of people aged over 55 (37% and 34%) The differences in trust across England and London were also reflected in people's confidence in finding the sources of political information online with: similar proportions of 18-34 year olds (60% and 58% respectively) agreed that they can find out who has produced the political information they see online, compared with 35-54 year-olds (44% and 54%) and people aged over 55 (33% and 29%) Processes for submitting nominations prioritised access and safety Changes to nomination processes to minimise public health risks were welcomed and candidates agreed the process was well-run While completed nomination forms were still required to be submitted by hand, electoral administrators made changes to their processes to minimise risks to candidates, agents and their staff: candidate and agent briefings were often held using video conferencing tools informal checking of nomination forms was more frequently offered using email arrangements for safe hand delivery of nomination forms ensuring social distancing measures were in place These new measures were generally welcomed and feedback we received from candidates was that the nomination processes were well-run. Both candidates and electoral administrators noted in their feedback that many of these practical measures should be retained for future elections, regardless of the public health situation. We devised a system where candidates emailed their nomination form to us for an informal check. This worked really well as they were only allowed to deliver them when they were correct, we will definitely be using this system going forward. However, some candidates thought that further improvements could still be made to make the process more accessible, such as by accepting nomination papers electronically, or by allowing electronic signatures to be used on nomination forms. Candidates and administrators had mixed views about changes to subscriber requirements To minimise travel and contact involved in completing

nomination forms, the Government legislated to significantly reduce the number of subscribers required by candidates to stand in the elections. For example, candidates standing to be Mayor of London needed to collect 66 signatures from registered voters instead of 330, while PCC candidates needed to collect the equivalent of two signatures per local authority in the police area instead of 100 in total. Overall, candidates and their agents said that the reduction in the number of subscribers needed made it easier for them to stand as a candidate. Some candidates in London said they would not have been able to stand in the elections without the reduction: Yes if I had been required to get 100 signatures it would have been a significant challenge under Covid. We faced some challenges with securing nomination signatures in the context of COVID, and whilst it helped to have to get fewer signatures this year it didn't mitigate the difficulties entirely. The process for checking and delivering nomination papers with London Elects was very efficient and well run. Some candidates did however express caution about the precedent the changes may set and keeping the reduced requirement for future elections, because they said that subscribers demonstrate that candidates have a certain level of support before standing: I think it should go back to having more people to be honest, there's a reason why you have a hundred when you've got 1.4 million in your electorate. Electoral administrators told us that the reduction in subscribers helped them process nominations more efficiently, and they also recognised the benefits for campaigners. However, some expressed reservations about the possibility of retaining the new number of subscribers for future elections: The reduction in the number of subscribers certainly helped me in dealing with nominations and also the candidates who were only required to get a reduced number depending on the election. The nominations process was fine, and the reduction in the number of signatories for principal council elections helped us as well as candidates. That said, I would not favour it permanently as the requirement for ten signatures does in my view strike a balance in the sense of demonstrating a (minimal) level of support for candidature.

**Recommendations**

**Recommendation 3: Review subscriber requirements for nominating candidates**

The requirement to collect signatures from subscribers ensures that candidates have some level of local support, and is intended to deter frivolous candidates. The number of subscribers required should be proportionate to the degree of risk relating to different types of elections and elected offices. We recommend that the Government should review whether the range of current subscriber requirements are proportionate for different elected offices, taking into account evidence from this year's polls and conclusions from our Standing for Election review in 2015. Regulators strengthened collaboration during the election period For the May 2021 elections, we worked with regulator partners to run an online public awareness campaign and encourage voters to find more information from a new section of our website . The campaign aimed to encourage people to think more carefully about political campaign adverts they see online, and it provided information about which regulators or other organisations they could contact if they had concerns. Evaluation of the campaign showed that over 7.6 million people saw our adverts on websites and social media platforms. The number of people who clicked through to find more information from the adverts was encouraging, and provides a good foundation for further awareness-raising activity at future elections. A group of representatives from 3 met regularly throughout the election period to share issues. This initiative built on a regulators' forum that we have co-ordinated since 2016. Regular discussions during the campaign period allowed the regulators to develop a greater understanding of their roles in helping to support public confidence in elections. We

will continue to work with other regulators during election periods to strengthen this type of collaboration for future polls. Delivering the elections The experience of electoral administration at the May 2021 elections These polls were well-run, despite the complex range of elections taking place and the significant challenges presented by the pandemic. Returning Officers and electoral administrators faced considerable challenges securing polling station venues, and finding and training staff to work on polling day. Also, although many electoral administrators were satisfied with the support provided by their suppliers, some experienced significant problems. The particular circumstances that led to the development and introduction of legislative changes in February and March 2021 were unprecedented and unavoidable, but the timing of these changes close to the start of the election period created additional challenges and risks for the delivery of the elections. The experience of these polls has again highlighted concerns about the resilience and capacity of electoral administration structures in the UK, which are coupled with the challenges of delivering elections within an outdated and increasingly complex electoral law framework. We will work in partnership with the electoral community, Government and local authorities to develop and deliver proposals to support resilient electoral services for future elections. Delivering the elections introduction Our evidence shows that the May 2021 polls were well-run. Voters and campaigners reported high levels of satisfaction and confidence, and there were only a small number of issues that had an impact on their experience in some areas. Our research shows: 94% of people across England and 92% in London were satisfied with the process of voting three-quarters of people said they were confident that the elections were well-run nine in 10 candidates were confident the elections were well run For Returning Officers and electoral administrators, however, these elections presented unique and difficult challenges, and their considerable effort and commitment enabled the polls to be delivered successfully. The capacity and resilience of electoral administration teams and suppliers are significant risks for future polls The challenging circumstances of these elections highlighted the limited capacity of some local electoral services teams Electoral administrators' ability to plan and deliver their work for these elections was impacted by Covid-19 restrictions in the months leading up to them: 95% said that the Covid-19 restrictions had made their job more difficult, with the same proportion saying that their workload increased because of the Covid-19 restrictions during the elections 63% said that they were concerned for their own health because of Covid-19 Some electoral administrators told us that they weren't able to rely on support from other parts of their local authorities in the way they would normally, and that they had seen a significant impact on the capacity and wellbeing of their teams: Project management was extremely difficult in these circumstances. The usual assistance from others in my council was limited due to them not being in the office or being under similar pressure in their area of the business. Our organisation just did not have the capacity to work in the way we usually do, and more work was left to a stretched elections team." "This election almost failed. Without the extended overtime hours worked by core staff it would have failed. The local authority did not have resources available during a pandemic. Every task took longer and we had to fight all the way to make it happen. Administrators also highlighted the difficulty they had finding suitable venues to use as polling stations. Covid-19 restrictions meant it was harder to contact people to make bookings, and in some venues there were issues with the facilities as they had been shut down for long periods in advance due to lockdowns. Confirming polling station bookings was very difficult as venues had been closed for a year. Many venues were

unsure if opening for an election was legal under lockdown restrictions. Many venues were reluctant to allow us to use social distancing floor and wall signs." "We had to change 40 polling station venues due to Covid, and supply things like water to others – where the premises had been shut and only reopened for our purposes and water supplies were not back on." "We did have issue with polling stations as a result of COVID. We had a number of buildings closed, or staff running sites being furloughed, so unable to make contact to arrange. This resulted overall in 29 new stations being used this year. Complex combinations of polls increased the risk to the successful delivery of the polls in some areas. The elections that were postponed from May 2020 meant that there were complex combinations of polls taking place in some parts of England. In many areas of England PCC elections were held at the same time as elections to County, Borough or District Councils, and parish council elections were also held in some areas. Four different types of elections were held on the same day in Liverpool, Bristol, Cambridge and Hartlepool, including mayoral elections and a Parliamentary by-election. Electoral administrators told us that the scale and extent of combination increased the risks to the successful delivery of the elections: The complexity of the combination of the polls led to errors on ballot papers which would just not occur under usual election conditions. Although these were rectified and did not lead to any greater issues the combination of polls did mean that there was a greater risk of error." "The combination of city and county elections caused the biggest challenge, particularly in relation to postal vote openings and the verification process. We had to design new procedures and systems, which took significant time and while they worked, the human element in implementing them did cause some problems. We were able to resolve them, but it was very labour intensive. In some cases, in delivering the particular combination of polls in May 2021, errors arose which meant that voters didn't receive the service they should be able to expect. For example, one local authority issued postal vote packs without the political party emblems that should have been shown alongside the candidate names on the ballot paper for the local election, an error which has led to them being assessed as not fully meeting the Commission's performance standards. While recognising the pressures faced by Returning Officers and their teams, errors like these directly impact on voters' experience and can affect people's confidence in well-run elections. Finding staff to work on polling day was a key challenge for Returning Officers and electoral administrators. Finding staff to work in polling stations was a challenge for most administrators, although support was provided by the Cabinet Office and other organisations to help address this issue. Many local authorities employed extra staff as 'Covid-19 marshals', to help support social distancing in any queues and to make sure people knew about the restrictions inside polling stations. This meant more staff were needed than usual and our research suggests that a quarter of polling station staff at the May polls had not worked in a polling station before. Additionally: 83% of administrators responding to our survey said that they had difficulties recruiting polling station staff over a quarter of gaps were filled by members of the civil service (29%), while other areas relied on staff from the council, students, the national citizen service and private companies. Staffing was the biggest issue – it was a nightmare. Many of our usual staff simply declined right from the start. This meant finding new staff and having to appoint a couple of POs who had never worked in a polling station before." "Staffing polling stations is always difficult and the older age profile of many of our staff meant that many were not prepared to work this year. Over a third of the staff we eventually used had not done polling duty previously, which was an uncomfortably high

level. Reliance on key suppliers is a critical risk to the delivery of well-run elections. Electoral administrators continue to be dependent on a small marketplace of expert suppliers of electoral management software and specialist election print services. Administrators also faced new challenges identifying reliable suppliers for personal protective equipment. Although many electoral administrators were satisfied with the support provided by their suppliers, others told us that they experienced significant problems: Suppliers had changed their own production techniques because of Covid and there were some issues arising as a result of this. It was also clear that there was overall pressure on the system as a result of the number of complex combination polls across the country." "It was apparent that our print supplier, who had previously had an exemplary record in terms of customer service and accuracy, was under strain and we encountered some quite serious problems which was no doubt caused by the coincidence of the complexity of the polls and the pandemic. We are aware that there were some instances of delays to supplier delivery of materials, with local authorities not receiving the ballot papers they expected and needed on time, and some not being delivered until very close to polling day. As well as introducing additional risk by reducing the time available to deal with any issues with delivered material before the opening of polls, these delays meant that administrators needed to invest significant time and energy in managing these issues at a crucial time in the election timetable, inevitably taking their focus away from other parts of the process. The impact on electors was minimal in that polling stations ultimately had the ballot papers they needed in time on this occasion, but the timing of the despatch of postal vote packs to voters was affected in some areas.

recommendation 4  
Recommendation 4: Build resilience and capacity for electoral administration We have repeatedly highlighted concerns about the resilience and capacity of electoral administration structures in the UK, which are coupled with the challenges of delivering elections within an outdated and increasingly complex electoral law framework. We will work in partnership with the electoral community, the Government and local authorities to develop and deliver proposals to support resilient electoral services for the future. Through the Electoral Advisory and Coordination Board, which includes senior Returning Officers, electoral administration professional bodies and government officials, we will establish a programme of activity to gather evidence about the challenges facing electoral administration teams and identify solutions to address them. Late confirmation of legislation and interventions made it harder for Returning Officers to plan in some areas. On 8 February 2021 the Minister for the Constitution confirmed the Government's formal position that these elections would go ahead in May. The Cabinet Office delivery plan for the elections was published in early February and included £31 million funding to support Returning Officers to secure venues and staffing and run Covid-19 secure elections. It also highlighted the Government's plans to legislate to extend the availability of proxy voting for people who were required to self-isolate and to simplify nomination requirements for candidates at the May polls. In addition to our usual core suite of guidance and resources to support administrators with the delivery of elections, we worked with public health bodies, the UK Government and the electoral community to develop and publish supplementary guidance to support the delivery of Covid-19 safe elections. The guidance was issued on a rolling basis from September 2020 and was informed by both the requirements of administrators and the latest expert advice from public health bodies. It was kept under review throughout the election period, and was updated to reflect the legislative changes to the nominations and proxy voting process as a result of Covid-19. Many electoral administrators said that they found

that uncertainty about the elections made it difficult for them to plan effectively. Just under nine in 10 administrators (88%) who responded to our survey after the elections said that they felt the initial uncertainty about whether the elections would go ahead made it difficult for them to plan. Waiting for legislation to be laid/enacted and then for corresponding guidance/documentation delayed plans and procedures being put in place to deal with those changes. This caused additional stress and uncertainty and added to an already heavy workload. The particular circumstances that led to the development and introduction of changes to electoral law ahead of the May 2021 polls were unprecedented and unavoidable. However, the timing of these changes created additional challenges and risks for the delivery of the elections. It affected when Electoral Commission guidance and resources to support the delivery of the polls, such as amended nomination forms, could be provided, and when electoral administrators could implement them. Issues with the use of schools as polling stations. Communications about the use of schools as polling stations in England caused significant problems for some electoral administrators. Administrators also highlighted significant problems caused by a letter from the Department of Education to Returning Officers and Head Teachers across England on 11 February 2021, asking for schools not to be used as polling stations at the May polls where possible. As a result, some schools went on to change their agreements or withdraw their consent to the use of schools as polling stations. This was just at the point that election teams were finalising polling station locations and printing poll cards, leaving some Returning Officers under pressure to find available and suitable venues at short notice. Administrators told us that this took their focus away from other parts of the process, impacting on their preparations for the polls more generally and further challenging capacity and resilience. The timing and content of the Minister's letter in relation to the use of schools as polling stations was very unhelpful as our polling stations were already booked and we were already working on producing poll cards. We did manage to move away from two schools but this created a lot of extra work for the team who were already under pressure. It would be helpful for such matters to be decided and communicated earlier in future."

"The DFE letter to schools in February was extremely unhelpful and we need clarity and consistency from Government about the use of schools as every year it gets more difficult. It is also frustrating that the process for designating venues in accordance with legislation requiring statutory polling district reviews can be undermined and overruled by government interventions such as these. Election teams updated count processes to support social distancing while maintaining transparency. In providing their feedback on the elections, electoral administrators told us about the challenges they faced in setting up and managing counts: 46% of administrators responding to our survey said they had difficulties recruiting count staff for the May 2021 elections 42% either strongly agreed or agreed that the Covid-19 restrictions made it difficult for candidates and agents to observe at the count. We had to move count venues due to our current venue being used as a Vaccination Centre – that came with challenges to ensure the new venue met all the requirements. We had to operate two count venues to enable social distancing which made the count organisation massively more complicated and added to our workloads. Having to use less count staff in order to facilitate social distancing made the count process take much longer than normal. Given the need to comply with regulations and guidelines about social distancing that were in place in May 2021, Returning Officers and electoral administrators needed to adapt their plans and processes to maintain transparency at count venues. Changes included introducing Perspex screens in front

of count tables, agreeing with agents to limit the number of people attending the count, or providing video feeds of the count and adjudication processes for agents and observers to view away from the count tables. The adjudication of doubtful ballot papers was challenging due to the COVID restrictions. It was difficult to observe social distancing between the Returning Officer and agents whilst still allowing agents to see the ballot papers. Most candidates said they were confident that the elections were well run and content with the efficiency of the count and verification processes. However, some candidates were less satisfied with their ability to observe and scrutinise the count. We became aware of issues at three counts where errors were made which has led us to conclude that the Returning Officers 5 did not fully meet our performance standards: An error was discovered during the count for a directly-elected mayoral election. When counting second preference votes it was discovered that the votes of two candidates with the same surname and first initial had been reported the wrong way round at the end of the first count. This meant one candidate was recorded as having fewer votes than they had actually received and vice versa. The issue was identified prior to the result declaration, and it did not impact the final result. The second error was that the votes for two candidates in one ward were mixed up. This meant one candidate was recorded as receiving more votes than they had actually received and another less. The issue had no impact on the overall result. The third error also involved the mix up of results for two candidates, however in this case the error resulted in the incorrect candidate being declared as the winner. There has been a successful election petition in this case. While recognising the pressures faced by Returning Officers and their teams and the challenging circumstance of the combination of elections and changes to count arrangements due to Covid-19, it is important that voters, candidates and political parties can have confidence in the accuracy of election counting processes and results. Supporting Evidence Supporting Evidence England Public Opinion 2021 Full Tables Local and County Election administrative data May 2021 Police and Crime Commissioners electoral administrative data May 2021 London Mayoral Election Public Opinion Tables May 2021 London Mayoral Electoral Administrative data 1. In this report data presented for England excludes London but covers all other areas in England with PCC, local or mayoral elections ■ Back to content at footnote 1 2. Although 'illness' was given as a reason by 9% of non-voters we cannot be sure what proportion of this related to Covid-19. Illness or medical reasons is also often given as a reason for not voting (6% of non-voters after the 2019 UK general election gave this reason). ■ Back to content at footnote 2 3. The regulator sub-group was attended by the Advertising Standards Authority, Electoral Commission, Equality and Human Rights Commission, Information Commissioner's Office, Ofcom, UK Statistics Authority and Office for Statistics Regulation. ■ Back to content at footnote 3 4. Gosport Council ■ Back to content at footnote 4 5. Durham County Council, South Gloucestershire Council and Oxfordshire County Council ■ Back to content at footnote 5 Related content Report on the May 2021 elections in Wales Read our report about how the 2021 elections in Wales were run Report on the May 2022 local elections in England Read our report on the May 2022 local elections in England Report on the May 2022 elections in Wales Read our report on the May 2022 elections in Wales. Report on the May 2022 Scottish council elections Read our report on the May 2022 Scottish council elections.