

London Borough of Hackney's submission to the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee's inquiry into the Elections Bill

1. Whilst the London Borough of Hackney broadly welcomes proposals in the Elections Bill regarding postal voting and the new offence of handling of a postal ballot by a political campaigner, it is extremely concerned about the impacts of other proposals within the Bill, particularly the provisions on voter identification (voter ID). These proposals risk disenfranchising a significant number of people from being able to vote in local and general elections, including many Hackney residents. To be clear, these are residents that currently have the right to vote, not those without this right and doing so fraudulently.
2. We expect the proposed voter ID regulations to have a particularly negative impact on turnout in Hackney, broadening inequality in voter turnout. This is due to the lower levels of passport and driving license holders in the Borough, the two most common forms of photo ID, aligning with national statistics on certain groups of people being less likely to hold these forms of ID, including Black, Asian and minority ethnic people, young people and the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities.
 - 2.1. As has been reported, 24% of the electorate hold neither a passport or photographic driving license (1). Whilst the exact number of people who hold neither of these ID's is difficult to ascertain for Hackney, we do have estimates for the proportion of residents who do not hold a passport and those who do not hold a driving license.
 - 2.2. As a diverse borough and one with low levels of car ownership, Hackney Council estimates that 47% of households in Hackney have no driving licence holder (2). The percentage of residents without a driving license is likely to be higher as multiple people will be without a driving licence in one household. In addition, according to the 2011 Census, 27.9% of Hackney residents did not hold a UK passport and 6.8% of residents did not hold a passport of any kind.
 - 2.3. It is important to highlight the equality implications these voter ID proposals would have. Hackney is proudly diverse with around 40% of the population coming from Black and minority ethnic groups with the largest group (approximately 20%) being Black or Black British (3). However, Black people are most likely to not hold a full driving licence. Latest figures show that 47% of Black people do not hold a full driving licence in the UK, compared to 39% of Asian ethnicity people and 24% of White people (4).
 - 2.4. Hackney Council is concerned about the impacts of the voter ID proposals on young people in the Borough. Hackney is a relatively young borough with a quarter of its population under 20 and just under 25% of residents aged between 20-29 years (5). Young people (6), and people in London generally (7), are less likely to hold a driving license and as the results from the Electoral Commission's 2019 voter ID pilot found, awareness of the voter ID laws in the pilot local authorities varied significantly between different groups,

with younger voters and those from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds being less likely to know about the requirements.

3. Even when taking into account the broader forms of ID which can be used – concession travel passes, blue badge parking permits, cards from the proof of age standards scheme and local authority issued voter ID cards – these forms of ID are often costly and difficult to obtain. Hackney Council views the voter ID proposals as another barrier to people voting, particularly for people who are less likely to vote due to a number of factors, increasing inequality in the electoral process. It is expected that these proposals would lead to more people being turned away at polling stations for not carrying the correct ID and less people voting due to the added effort and cost of either obtaining an ID or returning to a polling station after being turned away.
 - 3.1. In addition to the groups of people mentioned above, the Council also expects the proposed voter ID laws to have a negative impact on the turnout of the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities, who already experience low voter turnout; voter ID requirements would be yet another barrier to their participation in the electoral process (8).
 - 3.2. Similarly, the Council expects voter ID requirements to have significant negative impacts on people who are homeless in Hackney. According to the Cabinet Office, only 2% of people who are homeless are registered to vote (9) and, as outlined by many homeless charities, people who are homeless face a multitude of difficulties in obtaining and keeping ID documents (10).
 - 3.3. In addition, the cost of obtaining certain forms of ID will primarily affect residents on a lower income.
4. Hackney Council is also concerned about the administration of the voter ID requirements. The Council has received no detail regarding the local authority issued voter ID card, what the costs of this would be, how it would be funded or the officer time required to implement such a policy. There are also concerns surrounding the risk to personal safety involved in enforcing voter ID requirements for polling station staff as well as the practicality of doing so given the size and throughput of polling stations where queues have already become more common in recent years.
5. The Council broadly welcomes the new safeguards being proposed around postal voting and the new offence of handling of a postal ballot by a political campaigner, and the new limit on the number of electors on behalf of whom a person may hand in postal votes to a Returning Officer or at a polling station. We would recommend this figure is kept as low as possible in secondary legislation so as to avoid the harvesting of postal votes by political campaigns. It is also important that the Bill identifies the need to preserve a secret ballot when using postal or proxy voting.
6. Whilst Hackney Council is pleased that the voting rights of EU citizens who qualify for the EU Settlement Scheme will be preserved, noting that about 15% of Hackney residents – 41,500 people – are from EU countries, the Council remains concerned that these people would need to provide additional evidence to prove their eligibility to vote and the voting rights of future EU citizens that enter the UK will be diminished (11).

7. Hackney Council is troubled by the proposed amendments to the Bill which would apply the First Past the Post (FPTP) voting system to the election of council and 'metro' mayors across England, and to Police and Crime Commissioners across England and Wales, replacing the Supplementary Vote (SV) system.
 - 7.1. These changes would result in the electorate having less say and less choice in elections, with electors under FPTP often forced into voting against a candidate they dislike, rather than for someone who represents their views, otherwise they risk 'wasting' their vote. This leads to less political diversity in elected representatives and the inaccurate representation of the electorate. As has been well documented, FPTP often leads to 'minority rule' with significant positions handed to people with less than 50% of the vote, undermining the legitimacy of elected officials. This question of legitimacy and the requirement for a broad-based mandate is especially important where, as in Hackney, there is a directly elected Mayor. The Council believes all Hackney residents should have equal say on who is elected into positions of power; these proposals are a step backwards and seek to abolish an electoral system that has served Hackney and the office of elected Mayor well since 2002. SV has not been found to be either complex or confusing and returning to FPTP would do nothing to secure the stated aims of the Bill: to make elections more 'secure, fair, modern, inclusive and transparent'.

References

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