



House of Commons
Political and Constitutional
Reform Committee

Voter engagement in the UK

Fourth Report of Session 2014–15



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the UK**

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*Report, together with formal minutes relating
to the report*

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The Political and Constitutional Reform Committee

The Political and Constitutional Reform Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to consider political and constitutional reform.

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1 A chance to engage

1. We believe that improving voter engagement is crucial to the long term well-being of democracy in the UK. Unusually, therefore, the following Report is an interim report—a draft—for public consideration, rather than the Committee’s final word on the issue of voter engagement. Appropriately, we publish it in the annual Parliament Week since we wish it to be subject to wider discussion involving all those who care about the UK’s democracy, including all those who submitted evidence to the Committee. All of our draft recommendations are open to possible change following public consultation.

2. As part of this process, we have been in discussion with the independent and impartial Hansard Society, which we understand may be looking at some of the issues considered in this report as part of its regular Audit of Political Engagement. We hope that the Hansard Society’s findings in this area will inform our final judgment about the reforms which can be achieved in practice. We plan to issue a final report before National Voter Registration Day on 5 February 2015, to frame debate on these issues ahead of the 2015 general election. We hope that citizens feel we are being open and inclusive about the improvements which must be made. In that spirit we hope that everyone reading this Report plays their part by engaging and responding to it. We also propose to write to the political parties and their leaders requesting a preliminary response to our interim proposals. It is appropriate that as 2015 dawns the UK’s history on the 800th anniversary of Magna Carta is celebrated by stepping up to meet the enormous challenges that face to the UK in renewing its democracy for the future.

2 Introduction

3. Levels of turnout at UK elections and the percentage of people that are correctly registered to vote has declined substantially in recent decades. Although turnout for the 2010 general election was the highest since 1997, only 65% of registered voters participated, and turnout levels for local authority, European Parliament and Police and Crime Commissioner elections are even worse. At every local council and European Parliament election in the last decade that has not coincided with a general election the turnout has been less than 50%. There are also millions of people missing from the electoral registers—it is estimated that 7.5 million people entitled to vote at an election are not correctly registered to vote, and that there are millions of British citizens living overseas that are not registered to vote at all.¹ These figures indicate a substantial lack of engagement of the public with elections in the UK.

The electorate

4. Eligibility to register to vote and participate in UK elections varies depending on the type of election being held. For general (parliamentary) elections, eligible voters are British or Commonwealth citizens, as well as citizens of the Republic of Ireland, aged 18 and over, who are resident in the UK, as well as British citizens living abroad who were resident in the UK within the last 15 years.² For local and European Parliament elections,³ citizens of other European Union member states aged 18 and over living in the UK are also entitled to vote, but British citizens living abroad are not.⁴

5. In 2013 the number of people registered to vote—the electorate—for general elections was 46,139,900.⁵ This figure is 0.5% lower than in 2012. The Electoral Commission has estimated that the most recent electoral register is only 84.7% complete. This equates to 7.5 million people that are eligible to vote in UK elections not being correctly registered to vote, though the Electoral Commission has stated that this figure does not mean there should be an additional 7.5 million people registered to vote, since many of these people may still have been included on the register but in an inaccurate entry.⁶ The number of people not correctly registered to vote has risen substantially since 2000, when it is estimated there were 3.9 million people not correctly registered to vote. The Electoral

1 Figures for electoral registration referred to throughout this report relate to Great Britain only. The electoral registration system for Northern Ireland operates separately to that for Great Britain.

2 Certain people are excluded from voting. These are: Members of the House of the Lords, convicted persons detained in pursuance of their sentences, and anyone found guilty within the previous five years of corrupt or illegal practices in connection with an election.

3 Local elections include those for local councillors, mayors, and members of the Northern Ireland Assembly, Welsh Assembly and Scottish Parliament.

4 The Government's website, [Voting in the UK](#), details who is eligible to vote for the various UK elections, and the Electoral Commission's website, [About my vote](#), gives details of how to register to vote.

5 [Electoral statistics for UK – 2013](#), Office for National Statistics. For local government elections, the number of registered voters was 47,691,800.

6 [The quality of the 2014 electoral registers in Great Britain](#), Electoral Commission, July 2014

Commission has cited “higher population mobility” as one of the main reasons for the increase.⁷ There are also several million British citizens living overseas—many of whom will be entitled to vote in some UK elections—but only 15,818 overseas voters are currently registered to vote across Great Britain.⁸

Turnout

6. Voter turnout varies substantially depending on the type of election. General elections have by far the highest turnout, while the elections for Police and Crime Commissioners in 2012 had the lowest turnout of any election in recent history. Turnout for recent elections and referendums is detailed in the table below.

Turnout for recent elections and referendums

Type of election (or referendum)	Turnout (as percentage of electorate)
General elections	2001: 59.4% 2005: 61.4% 2010: 65.1%
Local elections	2010: 63.1% (same day as general election) 2011: 42.6% 2012: 32% 2013: 31% 2014: 36%*
European Parliament elections	1999: 24% 2004: 38.5% 2009: 34.5% 2014: 35.6%
Scottish Parliament elections	2003: 51.8% 2007: 49.4% 2011: 50.4%
Welsh Assembly elections	2003: 38.2% 2007: 43.7% 2011: 42.2%
Northern Ireland Assembly elections	2003: 63% 2007: 62.3% 2011: 54.5%
Police and Crime Commissioner elections	2012: 15.1%
Alternative vote referendum	2011: 42%
Scottish independence referendum	2014: 84.6%

* Figure is for turnout for local elections in England. In Northern Ireland, turnout for the 2014 local elections was 51.3%.

7. Although turnout for the 2010 general election was the highest for any general election since 1997, the number of registered voters that did not participate—15,909,857—was still larger than the turnout for any one party. When the number of people eligible to register to vote but not correctly registered to vote, are reckoned in the total, the number of people

7 Q724 [Jenny Watson]

8 Written evidence from the Electoral Commission [[VUK 40](#), [VUK 156](#)]

that did not participate at the most recent general election is larger than the number of votes cast for candidates of the two largest parties, or of both of the Coalition parties.

Our inquiry

8. In the light of declining levels of registration and turnout we launched an inquiry into voter engagement in the UK. We wanted to investigate the reasons for low levels of registration and turnout, and find out what could be done to improve them. The full terms of reference for our inquiry are annexed to this Report.⁹ As part of our deliberations we have heard from think-tanks, campaign groups, academics and organisations representing specific groups, as well as the Electoral Commission, individual Electoral Registration Officers and the Minister for the Constitution. We have also received a large amount of correspondence and written evidence, including a significant volume from members of the public, as well as from community groups, a former Member of Parliament, an independent candidate in the Police and Crime Commissioner elections, and others. Our inquiry was also informed by an informal event at the University of Sheffield, where members of the Committee discussed some of the key questions we have been looking at with members of the public.¹⁰ We are grateful to everyone that contributed to our inquiry, particularly to those for whom this was their first occasion engaging with a Select Committee. A list of all those who gave evidence to the Committee is on pages 103-109.

9. Democracy is working less well than it used to and we need to move swiftly to pre-empt a crisis. The scale of the response must be equal to the task. Millions of people are missing from the UK's electoral registers. Many of those who are registered—and in many cases the majority—choose not to participate at elections, be they for the UK Parliament, local government, or the European Parliament. In a modern democracy, it is unacceptable that millions of people who are eligible to vote are missing from electoral registers. We believe it should be made clearer in law that any person who is eligible to vote in a UK election should be on the electoral register. We also believe that it is desirable in a representative democracy for turnout at elections of all kinds to be higher—and ideally far higher—than has been the case in recent years.

9 Annex 1 – Terms of reference

10 A note of the informal event at the University of Sheffield is printed at Annex 2.

3 Reasons for low voter engagement

11. Low voter participation is a widespread phenomenon and not one unique to the United Kingdom. Voter turnout has been falling in many countries for decades. There is no single reason for the decline in levels of voter engagement, in terms of registration rates and turnout figures, in the UK or elsewhere, but we have received evidence about several factors that are likely to affect people’s inclination to vote and also their likelihood to be registered to vote in the first place. These include:

- Political disengagement and dissatisfaction;
- The value of voting and
- Concerns about where power lies.

We consider each of these issues below.

Political disengagement and dissatisfaction

12. One of the strongest arguments that came through in our evidence was that low levels of turnout at elections, and also to some extent low levels of registration, were a manifestation of a broader sense of political disengagement and dissatisfaction with politics and politicians.¹¹ Dr Ruth Fox, Director of the Hansard Society, told us:

voting levels are a manifestation of the bigger problem of disengagement across the board, linked to a declining sense of the efficacy of politics generally and their role in it, and a sense that the parties are all the same, the politicians are all the same, they are not like us, it does not make any difference.¹²

Similarly, the British Academy stated: “British society has become, for the most part, disengaged with politics. [...] in the case of British voters it is important to understand the scale and depth of their disenchantment.”¹³ Its submission went on: “Most citizens embrace the principle of democracy; the issue is that politics is not delivering against that ideal.”

13. It is important not to take evidence of low levels of participation at elections, or dissatisfaction with current parties or politicians, as an indication that people do not care about politics and political issues. Very few of our witnesses believed the general public was apathetic, and most witnesses took the opposite view—stating that members of the public were interested in issues that affected their lives, but that this did not necessarily lead

11 Q142 [David Babbs], written evidence from Professor Matt Flinders [\[VUK 06\]](#), Electoral Reform Society [\[VUK 17\]](#), Mark Ryan [\[VUK 31\]](#), Andrew Ping [\[VUK 60\]](#), Keith Best [\[VUK 117\]](#)

12 Q84 [Dr Ruth Fox]

13 Written evidence from the British Academy [\[VUK 11\]](#)

people to vote. Ruth Fox told us that members of the public are highly interested in public policy issues,¹⁴ and David Babbs, the Director of 38 Degrees, told us:

you have people who care a lot, are by no kind of ordinary measure of the word apathetic but don't see the point in registering to vote or don't vote. I think you have to recognise that as part of the problem if you are going to get to the right solution.¹⁵

Negative views of politicians and politics

14. Several of our witnesses, and a large number of written submissions—particularly those submitted by members of the public—stated that politicians and political parties were held in poor regard by many. The views set out in the submissions we received included:

- politicians not respecting and not listening to the public;¹⁶
- politicians not being trustworthy and not keeping promises;¹⁷
- MPs just following the party line and whips;¹⁸
- MPs only being willing to engage with the public in a limited way;¹⁹
- the conduct of politicians being off-putting (for example, at Prime Minister's Questions);²⁰
- there are too many career politicians;²¹
- the main parties are too similar or do not appeal to voters,²² and
- politicians are not representative of the public.²³

14 Q84 [Dr Ruth Fox]

15 Q171 [David Babbs]

16 Q157 [David Babbs], written evidence from Gillian Pardesi [\[VUK 04\]](#), Myplace Project [\[VUK 23\]](#), Professor Pete Dorey [\[VUK 45\]](#)

17 Q21 [Professor Sarah Birch], Q377 [Nigel Slack], written evidence from Mr Hugh Eveleigh [\[VUK 01\]](#), 38 Degrees [\[VUK 50\]](#), Andy Tye [\[VUK 84\]](#), Sheffield for Democracy [\[VUK 93\]](#) and [\[VUK 124\]](#), Lodestone [\[VUK 101\]](#), Unlock Democracy Birmingham [\[VUK 143\]](#)

18 Written evidence from Mr Les G Cooper [\[VUK 07\]](#), Gordon J Sheppard [\[VUK 57\]](#), Philip Combes [\[VUK 64\]](#), Paul D Lee [\[VUK 70\]](#), Arthur C James [\[VUK 111\]](#), Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform [\[VUK 152\]](#)

19 Q164 [David Babbs], Paul D Lee [\[VUK 70\]](#)

20 Q184 [Toni Pearce], Professor Pete Dorey [\[VUK 45\]](#), Hansard Society [\[VUK 46\]](#), David H Smith [\[VUK 59\]](#), Andrew Ping [\[VUK 60\]](#), Paul D Lee [\[VUK 70\]](#), Peter Roberts [\[VUK 82\]](#), Andy Tye [\[VUK 84\]](#), STV Action [\[VUK 114\]](#), Keith Best [\[VUK 117\]](#), John E Strafford [\[VUK 134\]](#)

21 Q377 [Nigel Slack]

22 Q378 [Nigel Slack], written evidence from Andrew Jones [\[VUK 10\]](#), Unlock Democracy [\[VUK 18\]](#), Mark Ryan [\[VUK 31\]](#), Professor Pete Dorey [\[VUK 45\]](#), David H Smith [\[VUK 59\]](#), Sheffield for Democracy [\[VUK 93\]](#), Liam Hardy [\[VUK 109\]](#), STV Action [\[VUK 114\]](#), Ken Davies [\[VUK 127\]](#), Michael Meadowcroft [\[VUK 135\]](#), Unlock Democracy Birmingham [\[VUK 143\]](#)

Many similar views—in addition to several other points—were expressed by members of the public when we held an informal discussion on these issues in Sheffield.²⁴ The importance of trust was raised several times, and Sheffield for Democracy told us that this was the crucial reason that people were dissatisfied with current politicians.²⁵ Research undertaken by Professor Sarah Birch, of the University of Glasgow, demonstrated that “people’s propensity to vote is linked to their trust in politicians”.²⁶

15. There are broad negative stereotypes about Parliament and Government—two separate institutions—which go beyond healthy and necessary scepticism and into a cynicism which if unaddressed could undermine the very basis of our representative democracy.

Role for politicians

16. We have been told that politicians and political parties have a central role in improving voter engagement and political engagement more broadly. Several of our witnesses told us that outreach by politicians was very important,²⁷ and there was a need for greater communication and responsiveness between politicians and the public.²⁸ A paper produced by the Electoral Commission also stated that “the key to any significant change lies in the hands of politicians and campaigners”.²⁹ We have received various suggestions for how politicians could better engage with the public—including producing short videos on issues about which they received a large amount of correspondence,³⁰ making better use of e-mail to engage in two-way communications,³¹ and having a monthly live TV programme where the Prime Minister had conversations with members of the public.³² David Babbs, Executive Director of 38 Degrees, told us about some “very positive” experiences that “a relatively small minority” of their members had had with their local MP, and told us: “I think some of those MPs probably have things to teach the rest of you.”³³ We also received evidence that there is much greater scope for politicians to use new and social media to make direct contact with the public, unmediated by the traditional media.³⁴ It is necessary to bear in mind the finite time and resources available to MPs, but the fact that some MPs are being praised shows that better engagement is possible.

23 Q122 [Jessica Garland], Q184 [Toni Pearce], written evidence from Gillian Pardesi [VUK 04], Andrew Jones [VUK 10], Electoral Reform Society [VUK 17], Written evidence from Dr Elin Weston and LLB Advanced Constitutional Law students, King’s College London [VUK 33], Liam Hardy [VUK 109], John E Strafford [VUK 134]

24 Annex 2

25 Written evidence from Sheffield for Democracy [VUK 93 and 124]

26 Q22 [Professor Sarah Birch]

27 Q19 [Glenn Gottfried]

28 Written evidence from Dr K Purdam and R Southern [VUK 62], Thomas G F Gray [VUK 67]

29 Annex 1, written evidence from the Electoral Commission [VUK 156]

30 Written evidence from Philip Combes [VUK 64]

31 Written evidence from Democracy Matters [VUK 112]

32 Written evidence from Tom London [VUK 116]

33 Q142 [David Babbs]

34 Written evidence from Professor Charlie Beckett [VUK 133]

Failure of traditional political mechanisms

17. Several of our witnesses stated that although people were politically interested and active there was limited opportunity for that interest to feed into current political mechanisms. Professor Matt Flinders of the University of Sheffield stated that “the traditional political structures have no way of absorbing or tapping into or understanding that energy”, and people were disaffected with current political institutions.³⁵ Professor Hendrik Wagenaar told us that there “there is a huge amount of informal participation going on” and “there is a much wider repertoire of political engagement out there than just voting”.³⁶ Democratic Audit also noted that “public engagement in politics beyond the ballot box has actually increased; more people see non-electoral participation such as signing a petition or attending a protest as a substitute rather than complementary to voting.”³⁷ Cybersalon.org told us that “young people are very active on single issue campaigns, signing on-line petitions, attending issues-related meet-ups, voting via allocating money on crowdsourcing online platforms to their chosen projects, participating in street protests, and even arranging sit-ins”, but that they did not “engage with traditional politics”.³⁸

Political parties

18. Membership of political parties has fallen drastically in recent decades. There can be no clearer example of declining levels of public engagement with traditional political mechanisms.³⁹ A number of submissions stated that this fall in membership was not just a problem for political parties, but also for wider engagement and participation.⁴⁰

19. We have been told that both the structure of political parties, and the way in which they are funded, should be reformed in such a way as to increase voter engagement. John E Strafford told us that the structure of political parties did not allow for “meaningful participation”, and that there was therefore little incentive to be a member of a political party.⁴¹ He suggested that individual party members should have a greater say over party matters, and that there should also be greater party activity at a regional level.

20. The Electoral Reform Society told us that “Reforming the party funding system is an important step in restoring confidence in the operation of the political system”,⁴² and we have received several suggestions for how party funding could be reformed, although by no means every submission we received stated that there was a need to reform party funding. Several organisations argued that state funding of political parties needed to be

35 Q386 [Professor Matt Flinders]

36 Q390 [Professor Hendrik Wagenaar]

37 Written evidence from Unlock Democracy [VUK 18]

38 Written evidence from Cybersalon.org [VUK 29]

39 Written evidence from Keith Best [VUK 117], John E Strafford [VUK 134], Michael Meadowcroft [VUK 135], Unlock Democracy Birmingham [VUK 143], Dr Nick Anstead and Professor Sonia Livingstone OBE [VUK 149]

40 Written evidence from the Electoral Reform Society [VUK 17], Professor Pete Dorey [VUK 45]

41 Written evidence from John E Strafford [VUK 134]

42 Written evidence from the Electoral Reform Society [VUK 17]

considered.⁴³ Professor Susan Banducci and Associate Professor Daniel Stevens, from the University of Exeter, argued that direct funding to political parties should be increased to enable them to do more campaigning and increase public awareness of elections.⁴⁴ Other evidence we received called for a cap on donations to political parties, potentially with a transitional period.⁴⁵ Dr Nick Anstead and Professor Sonia Livingstone argued that the reliance in the UK on caps on spending, rather than donations, meant that parties relied on a small pool of donors and did not need to draw on ordinary citizens for financial support.⁴⁶ They also argued that this “has the potential to suggest a conflict of interest and undermine public trust in the political process.” They stated that although state funding was one possible solution, this would undermine the relationship between parties and the public, and it would therefore be more desirable to match funds donated by the public, or have a system whereby voters were able to nominate a party to receive their share of state funds. Unlock Democracy also called for a system of donations to parties being matched by the state, to encourage parties not just to mobilise supporters more widely than they do at present.⁴⁷ Tim Knight, a member of the public, told us that spending by parties “could/should be limited to state funding in proportion to popular support at that level.”⁴⁸ Another option to spread ownership of political parties could be to give people the option of making a small tax free donation to the political party of their choice by choosing to on their income tax return, in effect “crowdsourcing” the budget of political parties.

21. Centralisation of political party activity, not least to aid party discipline and the demands of the media and messaging, is a recurrent theme in the decline in the local strength and activity of political parties. The unitary system in the UK, where all roads lead to Whitehall, means that political parties focus more and more on power at the centre and less on effective engagement not only with their membership but also with the public. This “hollowing out” must have a clear adverse impact on how people engage with elections, as well as politics more broadly. Political parties have become leader-centric. We recommend that party leaders consider how party structures could be reformed and localised to better engage with the public. We will write to each party leader and request that they engage with the Committee directly in respect of this recommendation. We look forward to their responses and to taking proposals forward.

22. We have previously called for progress to be made on broadening the base of party funding: this is an area where reform could strengthen local party structures, increase confidence in the independence of political parties and therefore strengthen politics more broadly. Cross-party talks on party funding will be most successful if no pre-conditions are set, but some members of the Committee believe that increased taxpayer

43 Written evidence from the Electoral Reform Society [\[VUK 17\]](#), Andrew Jones [\[VUK 10\]](#), Sheffield for Democracy [\[VUK 93\]](#), Mike Simpson [\[VUK 162\]](#)

44 Written evidence from Professor Susan Banducci and Associate Professor Daniel Stevens, University of Exeter [\[VUK 120\]](#)

45 Written evidence from John E Strafford [\[VUK 134\]](#)

46 Written evidence from Dr Nick Anstead and Professor Sonia Livingstone [\[VUK 149\]](#)

47 Written evidence from Unlock Democracy [\[VUK 18\]](#)

48 Written evidence from Tim Knight [\[VUK 129\]](#)

funding of political parties is not likely to be part of the solution. *We recommend that all-party talks on party funding are resumed urgently with a view to reaching a swift, agreed settlement before the general election.*

Role of the media

23. As part of our inquiry we have considered the role of the media as the main arbiter of the public's perception of MPs, Parliament and Government, and also its role in raising awareness of elections and political engagement more broadly. Several pieces of evidence noted the focus of the media on "conflict" and "the very worst of party politics".⁴⁹ Unlock Democracy considered that although there was "little evidence that the media has any significant negative impact on political participation [...] the constant media focus on scandal and negative stories is unlikely to have any positive effect."⁵⁰ By its nature much of politics, policy making and public consultation is lengthy and unexciting and does not fit easily in to an ever diverse and highly competitive media agenda which has to produce stories 24 hours a day. That said, we also received evidence which highlighted the importance of an independent press in scrutinising politicians.⁵¹ It is also broadly accepted that much of the media has its own political agenda.

24. We asked Ruth Fox of the Hansard Society what role the media played in people's political engagement. She told us that:

we did a study isolating all the drivers we know about political disengagement [...] and it was better for your political citizenship not to read a newspaper than it was to read a tabloid because it feeds that cynical anti-politics approach.⁵²

Birmingham 'Success' Group, a project funded by the European Commission's 'Europe for Citizens' programme, which brings together groups of young people to discuss citizenship, stated: "the national tabloid press is particularly guilty of sensationalising any political issue or event which can be presented as running counter to the 'national interest' and any negative aspect of the private life of politicians".⁵³ Noting that the effect of the media could be different on different audiences, Professor Charlie Beckett stated: "It is safest to say that networked media has definitely made engagement easier for the 'already-interested' and marginally easier for the occasionally active. There may be negative effects for the wider population such as disillusion, dysfunction and lack of delivery."⁵⁴ Stephen Fisher, Associate Professor at the University of Oxford, also noted the complex relationship the media could have with political engagement and participation:

49 Written evidence from Andrew Jones [VUK 10], Electoral Reform Society [VUK 17], Unlock Democracy [VUK 18], Mark Ryan [VUK 31], Birmingham Success Group [VUK 37], Liam Hardy [VUK 109], Democracy Matters [VUK 112]

50 Written evidence from Unlock Democracy [VUK 18]

51 Written evidence from the National Union of Journalists [VUK 137]

52 Q88 [Dr Ruth Fox]

53 Written evidence from the Birmingham 'Success' Group [VUK 37]

54 Written evidence from Professor Charlie Beckett [VUK 133]

While some research shows that the media can enhance participation by informing and motivating people, other studies show that it can also put people off politics and voting. The effects depend on the nature of the source, content and context of the media coverage, and so overall there might be very little net effect on participation.⁵⁵

25. We also received evidence from representatives of the media. The National Union of Journalists stated that the media—and the NUJ represents people from broadcast media, newspapers, news agencies, magazines, books, public relations, communications, online media and photography—had a very important role to play in relation to voter engagement, as it was “the main source of information for most people on political parties and their policies, politicians, party manifestos, opinion polls and political analysis as well as political gossip and scandal.”⁵⁶

26. Unlike other news outlets, the BBC exists to serve the public interest, and one of the public purposes set out in the BBC’s Royal Charter is “sustaining citizenship and civil society”.⁵⁷ In order to fulfil this purpose, the BBC is required to give regard to the “need to promote understanding of the UK political system”.⁵⁸ Both Ric Bailey, the BBC’s Chief Adviser on politics, and Sue English, Head of Political Programmes for the BBC, rejected the idea that the BBC was cynical in its portrayal of politics, but stated that coverage could be sceptical. Sue English told us: “We have to be robust in our questioning. Cynical is something that we absolutely do not want to do and I do not think that the BBC does do that.”⁵⁹ In terms of the broader portrayal of politics by the media, Ric Bailey told us:

I think when it is done properly and when politics is shown in the raw as it were I think people will engage with it and, like Sue, I am not as pessimistic as you are. It may feel here as if it would be more under siege but I think engagement in politics generally is not declining.⁶⁰

27. One of the areas we questioned the BBC on was their approach to Europe. In 2005 a review commissioned by the BBC’s board of governors and an independent panel concluded that “there is a widespread perception that the BBC suffers from certain forms of cultural and unintentional bias” and that “the BBC’s coverage of EU news needs to be improved and to be made more demonstrably impartial”.⁶¹ When we asked the BBC about their coverage on immigration and the European Union Ric Bailey told us:

I think the BBC has already said that there were elements of that story—and I don’t think it was just the BBC and I don’t think it was even just the media,

55 Written evidence from Professor Stephen Fisher [\[VUK 35\]](#)

56 Written evidence from the National Union of Journalists [\[VUK 137\]](#)

57 [Royal Charter for the continuance of the British Broadcasting Corporation](#), Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2006

58 [An Agreement Between Her Majesty’s Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport and the British Broadcasting Corporation](#), Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2006

59 Q439 [Sue English]

60 Q437 [Ric Bailey]

61 [BBC News Coverage of the European Union](#), Independent Panel Report, BBC, January 2005

perhaps Parliament itself—and I think there were elements of that where we were a bit slow to talk about it. I think the BBC takes its responsibility for that as much as anybody else did. As you say, I think that is something, particularly through some of these other different outlets where there is quite a close interaction with the audience and we do pick up these things more quickly through social media than perhaps we used to, where we are more responsive and able to feed back into the general debate; that sort of thing is happening. In general terms, I think we are less likely to miss it now than perhaps we were 10 years ago because we are perhaps better engaged in talking to audiences than we were in the past.⁶²

28. The National Union of Journalists also raised concerns about the power of large newspaper groups, telling us “media plurality is vital for a healthy, functioning democracy” and arguing that there should be a limit on the market share private firms are able to reach.⁶³ The NUJ also stated that the local media “plays an important role in local democracy and again is a vital source of information for voters in local elections”, but that decisions of newspaper groups were undermining this role. Democratic Audit also noted that coverage of local elections in local media could have a positive impact on voter turnout.⁶⁴

29. The televised debates ahead of the 2010 general election were an innovation which we were told had had a positive impact on voter engagement, particularly on young voters. Ric Bailey told us the debates were a big success “both in broadcasting terms but also in audience engagement terms”.⁶⁵ Sue English told us: “I think they were such an important contribution to the electoral process that I would be very disappointed if they did not happen again, and we will work very hard to make sure that they do.”⁶⁶ BBC, ITV, Sky and Channel 4 have now announced plans to hold three debates ahead of the 2015 general election, to include one between the Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition, one also including the Deputy Prime Minister, and one with all three and also the leader of UKIP.⁶⁷ Noting the possible positive impact of media exposure, Professor Susan Banducci and Dr Daniel Stevens recommended allowing more free air time to political parties, as citizens who have been exposed to an election campaign through the media have a higher probability of voting than those who did not see much of the campaign coverage.⁶⁸

30. Glenn Gottfried, Quantitative Research Fellow at the Institute of Public Policy Research, told us that the media could have a better relationship with politicians, telling us that if the dynamic were to change:

62 Q487 [Ric Bailey]

63 Written evidence from the National Union of Journalists [\[VUK 137\]](#)

64 Written evidence from Democratic Audit [\[VUK 20\]](#)

65 Q477 [Ric Bailey]

66 Q460 [Sue English]

67 [Rival parties' anger at TV debate offer to Nigel Farage](#), BBC News, 13 October 2014

68 Written evidence from Professor Susan Banducci and Dr Daniel Stevens [\[VUK 120\]](#)

politicians would be confident enough to answer the questions that people are asked in the media, and the media would be respectful enough not to try to make the politicians look like they had gone off message or said something that was not entirely in keeping with other people in their party, and respect politicians when they are trying to be direct and truthful and answering questions in as honest a way as possible. A bit more respect between politicians and the media probably would go a long way towards reducing the perception that politicians are constantly spinning, which people really appear not to like.⁶⁹

Other evidence argued that the media should provide “more positive news around the importance to get engaged in local or national democracy”.⁷⁰ Damian Lyon Lowes, Chief Executive of polling company Survation, called for “more direct communication” by “Parliament, councils, the Electoral Commission, everybody who is in charge of elections”, bypassing the media.⁷¹ Some media outlets have also specifically taken up the cause of increasing voter engagement, with the Daily Mirror working with Bite the Ballot and others on a campaign to get one million new voters to register to vote.⁷²

31. The media plays an essential role in informing the public about political news, in relation both to elections and politics more broadly. While it should be understood that public education and increasing levels of voter engagement is not necessarily a priority for news media, we note that the BBC does have a clear duty, through its Charter, to sustain citizenship and civil society. Innovations such as televised debates ahead of general elections have proved to be popular as television events but have not resulted in sustainable engagement with the political process. We have also received evidence that relentless and disproportionate focus of the media on negative news stories and “the very worst of party politics” can have a negative impact on how the public perceives politicians and the political system, reinforcing a cynicism that makes people less likely to vote. It is our view that politicians and media outlets could both do more to move the media focus away from denigration and trivialisation and more towards analysis and reporting, with the hope of better engaging the public with issues that concern them to make politics and elections more relevant. This is a sensitive area with strong default positions on all sides but, again, the future of democracy in the UK demands that business as usual is not an option. *We intend to hold a summit with willing participants in the New Year to start a discussion on whether, and how, the media and politics can interact for the greater good of a healthy democracy.*

The value of voting

32. A significant theme in the written evidence submitted by members of the public was that they felt there was no point in voting, or that their vote did not make a difference, particularly when they lived in a safe seat, where the party of the elected representative was

69 Q50 [Glenn Gottfried]

70 Written evidence from Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council [[VUK 49](#)]

71 Q513 [Damian Lyon Lowes]

72 [No vote no voice: Mirror campaign to get 1 million new voters to register](#), Daily Mirror, September 2014

unlikely to change.⁷³ Various witnesses gave their view that the First Past the Post (FPTP) voting system, used for general and local elections, had a negative effect on people's perception of voting, and the value of individual votes,⁷⁴ as well as meaning there was little incentive for political parties to engage with the majority of voters.⁷⁵ That said, others have argued in favour of the First Past the Post voting system, citing the simplicity of the system and the fact that the constituency's representative is the one favoured by more electors than any other.⁷⁶ Will Brett, Head of Media of the Electoral Reform Society, stated:

Lots of voters in safe seats are going to struggle to see the point and if they have lots of other pressures on their time and resources, if they have limited resources, the point of voting is going to be harder to understand. I think that is part of the problem.⁷⁷

Similarly, David Babbs, Executive Director at 38 Degrees, told us:

There are a significant number of 38 Degrees members, a minority but I think a revealing minority, who are very active with 38 Degrees but don't vote and are not registered to vote because they don't see the point. I think this an important point to make because I am sure there are some people who are apathetic, [...] but I don't think fundamentally that is the problem. It is the perception of it being worthwhile or it making a difference.⁷⁸

33. Dr Stephen Barber stated that a "suspicion by the electorate that their vote does not matter perhaps goes to the heart of the structural weaknesses with our Westminster model and first-past-the-post electoral system."⁷⁹ He highlighted research which had found the number of marginal seats—where there is likely to be a change in the party of the member elected—was as few as 85, representing no more than 15% of the present 650 constituencies. He also noted that the FPTP voting system meant that the number of MPs elected for each party bore little relation to the number of votes the parties received at a national level. A further complaint against the FPTP electoral system was that it "severely disadvantages smaller parties with the effect of reducing real voter choice."⁸⁰ That said, Dr

73 Written evidence from 38 Degrees [VUK 50], Ian Sheppard [VUK 51], Michael Yates [VUK 53], David H Smith [VUK 59], Tim Knight [VUK 69], Paul D Lee [VUK 70], Tim Iverson [VUK 79], Peter Roberts [VUK 82], Sheffield for Democracy [VUK 93], Dr David Hill [VUK 99], Anthony Tuffin [VUK 105], Keith Underhill [VUK 113], STV Action [VUK 114], Make Votes Count in West Sussex [VUK 115], Keith Best [VUK 117], David Bernard [VUK 144]

74 Q156 [David Babbs], Q244 [Dr Toby James], Q377 [Nigel Slack], written evidence from Dr Elin Weston and LLB Advanced Constitutional Law students, King's College London [VUK 33], Professor Stephen D Fisher [VUK 35], Professor Ailsa Henderson [VUK 38], Malcolm Morrison [VUK 68], Peter Roberts [VUK 82], David Green [VUK 91], Liam Hardy [VUK 109], Colin Buchanan [VUK 110], Michael Meadowcroft [VUK 135], Charles Harvey [VUK 138], Unlock Democracy Birmingham [VUK 143], Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform [VUK 152]

75 Written evidence from Democracy Matters [VUK 112]

76 For example, [We should stay with the first past the post voting system](#), Grégoire Webber, and [The case for First Past the Post](#), Lord Norton of Louth

77 Q123 [Will Brett]

78 Q171 [David Babbs]

79 Written evidence from Dr Stephen Barber [VUK 12]

80 Written evidence from Dr Elin Weston and LLB Advanced Constitutional Law students, King's College London [VUK 33]

Barber also acknowledged that levels of turnout in marginal seats differed little from levels of turnout in safe seats.

Where power lies

34. Several written submissions referred to the structure of government in the UK and relationships with international bodies as reasons for low voter engagement. A number of these highlighted dissatisfaction with the relationship between the UK and EU as a reason for people not voting.⁸¹ Mr Hugh Eveleigh, for example, told us: “I imagine that many folk feel that the EU has ultimate control and what is the point of bothering as we have no control on what it does.”⁸² Others stated that there was likely to be greater interest in politics and elections at a local level if local government were reinvigorated,⁸³ potentially by more substantial devolution to local government.⁸⁴ On this point, Professor Sarah Birch told us that “if more genuine powers were given to local government”, it would enable local councillors to better mobilise constituents, as they would be able to have less constrained campaign messages.⁸⁵ Nigel Slack, of Sheffield for Democracy, took the view that devolving greater power and finance to local government was “vital to reinvigorating local politics in particular”.⁸⁶ The Local Government Association stated that the “national framework of local democracy needs to be renewed to ensure decisions about local arrangements are made by people who are accountable to local voters.”⁸⁷ Similarly, the 4 Freedoms Party (UK EPP), a pro-EU political party, and the British Committee of the European People’s Party stated that “British local government enjoys insufficient subsidiarity from Westminster” and that this “over-centralisation of power within the UK is increasing voter disengagement”.⁸⁸

35. Overcentralisation of power in Whitehall has had a clear adverse impact on how people engage with and perceive politics and elections for the localities and nations of the UK. Measures that appropriately devolve decision-making and power from Whitehall to a lower level might have been thought to be likely to have a positive impact on engagement with non-Westminster politics and elections, although this failed to happen in respect of elected police and crime commissioners. This sentiment is not just evidenced in Scotland but is also prevalent in England, Wales, Northern Ireland and the localities within. While devolving power to the localities would be an improvement most political parties believe it should not stop there but also go deeper to neighbourhoods and communities, so-called “double devolution”.

81 Written evidence from Mr Hugh Eveleigh [VUK 01], Mr Les G Cooper [VUK 07], Professor Ailsa Henderson [VUK 38], Professor Pete Dorey [VUK 45], Lionel Judd [VUK 136]

82 Written evidence from Mr Hugh Eveleigh [VUK 01]

83 Written evidence from David Green [VUK 91]

84 Written evidence from the Local Government Association [VUK 70] Sheffield for Democracy [VUK 93 and VUK 124], Liam Hardy [VUK 109]

85 Q34 [Professor Sarah Birch]

86 Q377 [Nigel Slack]

87 Written evidence from the Local Government Association [VUK 70]

88 Written evidence from 4 Freedoms Party (UK EPP)/British Committee of the European People’s Party [VUK 146]

36. This Committee has produced a number of reports over the course of the Parliament looking at the relationship between local and central government and urging much greater devolution; we are consulting, through “*A New Magna Carta?*” on several options for a new structure and constitutional framework for the UK, and we are currently undertaking an inquiry looking at how devolution should take place across the United Kingdom. In a time of political volatility, clarity about a future democratic settlement is vital. It is clear that engagement with politics and elections at a local level suffers from overcentralisation, and the rhetorical commitment of all parties needs to find concrete form in substantial changes to the devolution settlement across the UK to reinvigorate local politics. *We recommend that, at a time when manifestos are being written, party leaderships make real, not least in England, the undertakings given to ending overcentralisation and to extending devolution, not least as a means of engaging the electorate much more in deciding their own affairs.*

The views of “non-voters”

37. One of our witnesses, Fran O’Leary, Director of Strategy and Innovation at Lodestone, a communications consultancy, gave evidence to us on the basis of a survey she had commissioned into the attitudes of “non-voters” as compared with voters. The survey was conducted by the polling company Survation, and “non-voters” were defined as “those who did not vote in the 2010 General Election (this includes those who were too young or otherwise ineligible to vote in May 2010).”⁸⁹ Of the respondents to the survey, over half of those who had not voted in the 2010 general election had never voted in a general election.⁹⁰ This included 23% of those aged over 55, who must therefore have missed at least eight consecutive general elections. Specific reasons those who did not vote in the 2010 general election gave for not doing so included:

- “27% said they didn’t believe their vote would make a difference;
- 25% said they thought the parties/candidates were all the same;
- 19% said they were not interested in politics, and
- 18% said they did not have enough information/knowledge to choose.”⁹¹

Accessibility of voting was also highlighted in the survey results. Patrick Brione, Director of Research at Survation, told us:

from our poll when we asked non-voters what their main reason was why they did not vote, as well as the large number that said things like, “I don’t believe my vote will make a difference” and so on, there were 9% that said they were not able to access a polling station or get a postal ballot as their

89 Written evidence from Survation [[VUK 103](#)]

90 Q499 [Patrick Brione]

91 Written evidence from Lodestone [[VUK 101](#)]

main reason. That is a small portion but I think it is still a significant number of people that said they have obstacles in some way⁹²

38. We heard that respondents to the survey who did not vote were “very interested in issues like how their kids are schooled, or making sure that they have access to more housing, concerns about debt—things that Parliament deals with”, but that for some reason this interest was not connecting with the act of voting.⁹³ We also heard that both younger voters and non-voters “did not feel that they had enough information or understanding”.⁹⁴

Conclusion

39. **A number of factors have contributed to low levels of voter engagement in recent years. The evidence we have received indicates that the most significant of these is political disengagement and dissatisfaction with politicians, political parties and UK politics more broadly. Issues such as the perception that voting does not make a difference and dissatisfaction with where power lies in the UK system have also been cited as reasons for low levels of participation at elections. These are all legitimate reasons for people to disengage from the electoral process, and it cannot be said that low turnout levels and registration rates are the result of apathy on the part of the public. Just as the exposure of abuse of parliamentary allowances and the subsequent establishment of the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority has purged the expenses scandal, so an equally serious and perhaps uncomfortable set of reforms are needed to renew democratic participation. In a consumer society, there is a danger that the enormous demands placed on democratic institutions to gratify expectations can lead to short-termism and a lack of substantive engagement. However, the decline in voter engagement is a result of failures by the governing political and administrative elite, and responsibility for initiating the re-engagement of the electorate with existing and future political processes lies with politicians. *We recommend that political parties come forward with a package of measures to renew democratic participation which are based squarely upon those in this Report.***

40. **There is a strong perception that elections themselves are hidebound by process, bureaucracy, rules and restrictions and that the electoral process in the UK needs to be part of rediscovering a sense of excitement and engagement, to celebrate democratic values and to cherish the history of extending the vote to both sexes and all classes. This should not only occur on National Voter Registration Day but be a part of culture and education. It must also be supported by reinvigoration of the UK’s electoral administration, and we propose measures to achieve this in the remainder of this Report. We are conscious that we are placing a heavy burden on the Electoral Commission and Electoral Registration Officers both now and for the future. In this context of constant improvement we also draw attention, for consideration by the**

92 Q509 [Patrick Brione]

93 Q494 [Fran O’Leary]

94 Q495 [Patrick Brione]

public, to the proposal for a standing Commission for Democracy, akin to the Electoral Commission, but as a permanent mechanism for broader democratic reform and renewal which is floated in our report *A new Magna Carta?*, currently out for public consultation.

4 Recent developments

Individual Electoral Registration

41. By far the most significant change that has been made to electoral administration during the course of the 2010 Parliament is the move, in Great Britain, to Individual Electoral Registration (IER), where each eligible elector will need to register to vote individually, as compared to the previous system where one member of a household completed an electoral registration form on behalf of all members of the household. The main rationale for introducing IER was to help to tackle electoral fraud and improve confidence in the electoral register,⁹⁵ although the Electoral Commission has also stated that it is right that “people are able to take individual responsibility for their own vote.”⁹⁶ IER went live in England and Wales on 10 June 2014, and in Scotland on 19 September 2014 (it has been operating in Northern Ireland since 2002). Under the new system, people need to provide identifying information, such as their date of birth and national insurance number, when applying to register, and applications need to be verified before voters are added to the register. We have previously reported on the Government’s White Paper and draft Bill for IER that was published in 2011, and found that there was general agreement in principle that IER was the right move for electoral registration in Great Britain, but raised some concerns about the implementation of IER.⁹⁷ We have since held a number of follow up sessions looking at readiness for the implementation phase.⁹⁸

Requirement to register

42. Electoral registration in the UK is not compulsory, but the Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013 does provide for Electoral Registration Officers to “require [a] person to make an application for registration by a specified date”, and impose a civil penalty on anyone failing to do so.⁹⁹ The Government stated in 2012:

This will provide appropriate encouragement for people to do their civic duty and register to vote. However, it is not our intention to see large numbers of people fined, and so there will be safeguards in place to ensure that EROs are required to take specific steps to encourage an application and only those who refuse repeated invitations can be fined.¹⁰⁰

95 [Individual Electoral Registration](#), Gov.uk

96 [Electoral Registration](#), Electoral Commission

97 Political and Constitutional Reform Committee, Tenth Report of Session 2010–12, [Individual Electoral Registration and Administration](#), HC 1463, November 2011

98 [Readiness for Individual Electoral Registration](#), HC 796, 7 November 2013, and [Individual Electoral Registration – April 2014](#), HC 1188, 10 April 2014

99 Section 5, [Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013](#)

100 [Government introduces legislation for individual electoral registration](#), Cabinet Office, May 2012

It is also an offence under the Representation of the People (England and Wales) Regulations 2001 to fail to comply with a request for information from an ERO.¹⁰¹

43. We believe it is an inseparable part of the UK's social contract that in a democracy every citizen should, as a bare minimum, register to vote. We recommend that the legal requirements to register to vote are clarified, and that this basic civil duty be enforced.

Confirmation process

44. As part of the transition to IER, the names and addresses of electors currently on the electoral register are being matched with records held on the Department for Work and Pensions database. Electoral Registration Officers are also matching electoral register records with local authority databases. Individuals whose records can be matched are automatically “confirmed” on to the new electoral register, while those who are not confirmed will be contacted and told that they need to register individually. Every person currently on the electoral register will be written to by their Electoral Registration Officer stating either that they have been confirmed and need to take no further action, or that they have not been confirmed and need to register individually. We were told by the Electoral Commission in September that around 12 local authorities had delayed the write-out due to IT issues, but that this would not “significantly impact upon the overall programme”.¹⁰²

45. When we spoke to Jenny Watson in September 2014, she gave us some provisional data on the confirmation process, telling us:

The national match rate with the DWP is running at 79% so far and the national match rate following local data matching is running at 86% so far, so you can see that the local data matching is playing an important part. The variation in the match rate across England and Wales with DWP varies from 47% to 87%, so that gives you the scale of the variation across the country. The variation after the local data matching is added in is between 70% and 97%.¹⁰³

Phil Thompson, Research and Evaluation Manager at the Electoral Commission, also stated:

the local data matching does appear to be dealing quite well with groups who we knew would not get matched through DWP, people who are moving around a lot, private renters, young people, that kind of thing. So it does look like local matching with council tax and other data sources is picking up that kind of group of people.¹⁰⁴

101 [Regulation 23](#), The Representation of the People (England and Wales) Regulations 2001

102 Q696 [Jenny Watson and Phil Thompson]

103 Q693 [Jenny Watson]

104 Q693 [Phil Thompson]

46. The Electoral Commission published its report on the confirmation process in England and Wales on 22 October 2014. The key findings were:

- Approximately 36.9 million electoral register entries were matched (corresponding to 87% of the total number of records on the electoral registers sent for matching).
- 5.5 million electors could not be positively matched with the DWP database or through local data matching (LDM) and could therefore not be automatically transferred onto the new IER registers.
- The proportion of electors matched at local authority and ward level varied considerably.
- The match rate for attainers—people aged 16 and 17 who will turn 18 during the period the register is in force—has declined significantly since the test of confirmation. It is down to 52% from 86% in 2013.
- 329 EROs reported undertaking local data matching while 19 did not. Some of these 19 are planning to carry out local data matching work later in the transition period.¹⁰⁵

Jenny Watson told us: “Despite this encouraging progress, there is much work still to be done during the next stage of the transition. EROs now need to focus their efforts on targeting the existing electors whose entries could not be matched, as well as those not currently on the registers at all.”¹⁰⁶

Online registration

47. Under IER, it is now possible to register to vote online at <https://www.gov.uk/register-to-vote>, although it is still possible to register by post using a form. Several witnesses told us that the option to register online could have substantial positive effects for registration rates, particularly for young people. Both Toni Pearce of the NUS and Michael Sani from Bite the Ballot gave a warm welcome to the option to register to vote online, with Toni Pearce saying it “would have a massive impact on the number of young people registered to vote.”¹⁰⁷ Simon Woolley of Operation Black Vote also told us he was “encouraged that the Electoral Commission and the Government will soon have online voter registration.”¹⁰⁸ John Turner, Chief Executive of the AEA, told us “there will be some benefit and improvement in what is largely going to be the digital route into registration now, but it won’t solve all of the problems.”¹⁰⁹ Jenny Watson told us:

The move to individual electoral registration, and in particular the new system of online registration that went live successfully on 10 June, gives us some real opportunities and there is enthusiasm both in the electoral

¹⁰⁵ [Analysis of the confirmation live run in England and Wales](#), Electoral Commission, October 2014

¹⁰⁶ Written evidence from the Electoral Commission [[VUK 164](#)]

¹⁰⁷ Q190 [Toni Pearce], Q214 [Michael Sani]

¹⁰⁸ Q372 [Simon Woolley]

¹⁰⁹ Q267 [John Turner]

community and beyond about how we can explore new ways to engage with voters to get them registered now we have a modern registration system.¹¹⁰

48. When we spoke to Jenny Watson most recently, she told us that “feedback on the online system itself, from those who have used it, has been positive so far, but there is still a huge amount of work to do.”¹¹¹ The Minister told us on 9 September:

Since the launch of IER, the digital service has processed 1.5 million applications. Over 80% of these were made through online registration; over 90% of users have provided feedback saying they are very satisfied.¹¹²

40% of new applications to register to vote were from people under the age of 35.¹¹³ As of 16 October 2014, 1.8 million applications to register to vote had been made online.¹¹⁴

Monitoring of implementation

49. As part of ongoing monitoring of the implementation of IER, the Electoral Commission will be producing several reports throughout the transition phase. These include:

- October 2014—on the confirmation process;¹¹⁵
- February 2015—on the write-out and canvass, and
- June 2015—on the May 2015 elections.

Jenny Watson told us that “At every stage we will also give an assessment on progress against our performance standards.”¹¹⁶ The Commission will not be able to report on the completeness and accuracy of the first electoral register produced under IER until after June 2015.¹¹⁷

Risks of Individual Electoral Registration

50. Although several of our witnesses were positive about the possible impact of IER, we also heard concerns that the new system could have an adverse impact on registration levels and voter turnout,¹¹⁸ and could have a particularly adverse impact on certain groups.

110 Q517 [Jenny Watson]

111 Q692 [Jenny Watson]

112 Q812 [Sam Gyimah MP]

113 Q712 [Jenny Watson]

114 [Analysis of the confirmation live run in England and Wales](#), Electoral Commission, October 2014

115 This report was published on 21 October 2014, and is available on the Electoral Commission’s website.

116 Q692 [Jenny Watson]

117 Q709 [Jenny Watson]

118 Written evidence from Charles Pattie, University of Sheffield, Ron Johnston, University of Bristol, David Cutts, Bath University, and Laura Palfreyman, Peaks College [VUK 19], Democratic Audit [VUK 20], Dr Maria Sobolewska, University of Manchester, and Professor Anthony Heath, Universities of Manchester and Oxford [VUK 30], Smartmatic Limited [VUK 41]

When Northern Ireland moved to individual electoral registration in 2002, the first electoral register produced under the new system had 10% fewer names than the final register produced under the previous system.¹¹⁹ Dr Toby James stated that his research “suggests that [IER] will have a negative effect on voter registration rates” and that “These declines are likely to be especially significant amongst young and mobile populations”.¹²⁰ IER will preclude “block registration” of students in halls of residence, which the NUS stated “could have a very negative impact on electoral participation amongst the student population.”¹²¹ The Electoral Commission’s report on the confirmation process in England and Wales identified one area where the transition to IER has had a disproportionate impact, in relation to registration rates for attainers—people aged 16 and 17 who will turn 18 during the period the register is in force. The Commission’s report stated that the match rate for attainers has “declined significantly since the test of confirmation”, falling from a match rate of 86% in 2013 to 52% during the live run in 2014.

51. The move to Individual Electoral Registration has created both opportunities and challenges. Making it possible to register online is an extremely welcome change, and one that has been taken up by over 1.8 million people already. Moving registration online will make registration more accessible to many people and will also make it much easier for groups working to increase registration rates to run more effective campaigns.

52. Implementation of IER also presents risks. 5.5 million registered voters have not yet been transferred to the new electoral register following data matching. A disproportionate number of these people are from particular groups—private tenants, students and attainers. *We recommend that every effort is made by Electoral Registration Officers to reach all registered voters who have not been automatically transferred to the new register, to give them the opportunity to register under the new system. The Electoral Commission must make it a priority to ensure that this happens and we are asking the Commission to give a progress report to us in the New Year. We understand that the Cabinet Office is considering another canvass in the spring to improve the electoral register before the election. The committee fully endorses this.*

End of transitional arrangements

53. Under provisions of the Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013, if voters have not been added to the new electoral register—either through the confirmation process, or by applying under the new registration system—they will be removed from the register in December 2016.¹²² However, the administration in office after the 2015 election will be able to bring forward the date at which transitional arrangements end to December 2015.¹²³ This would affect who was registered to vote ahead of elections in May 2016 for the

119 [Continuous electoral registration in Northern Ireland](#), Electoral Commission, November 2012

120 Written evidence from Dr Toby James [[VUK 26](#)]

121 Written evidence from the NUS [[VUK 34](#)]

122 [Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013](#), Part 2, Schedule 5, Para 5

123 [Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013](#), Part 7, Schedule 5, Para 28

Scottish Parliament, Welsh Assembly, the Mayor of London, and various local elections. The Electoral Commission will provide advice to the Government in June 2015 on whether it thinks such a decision would be appropriate. Jenny Watson told us that before giving this advice the Commission would look not only at the impact nationally, “but also the variation across the country”.¹²⁴

54. The Commission will not have completed its research on the completeness and accuracy of the new electoral registers before giving this advice, and will therefore not have detailed information about how particular groups would be affected by bringing forward the date on which transitional arrangements end.¹²⁵ Despite that, Phil Thompson, Research and Evaluation Manager at the Electoral Commission, told us:

What we will be able to do is what we did for the assessment of the confirmation process, which is look at the variation across the country in rates of response to the write-out and things like that in relation to known demographic things about different local authorities. We may well be able to see that local authorities that have a large number of private renters are the ones with lower response rates, for example. It won't be quite as definitive as one of our full registration studies but it should tell us if there is a problem.¹²⁶

Jenny Watson stated that: “we are focused on those important elections in May 2016 and we would need to see some compelling evidence that it was appropriate for the transition date to be brought forward”.¹²⁷ When we asked Sam Gyimah MP about the IER programme, he told us:

we are confident that there should be no overall reduction in the completeness of the register. That is the most important issue, that we don't have an overall reduction.¹²⁸

55. Under current arrangements, the next review of Parliamentary constituency boundaries will be undertaken on the basis of the December 2015 electoral registers, meaning that the decision of whether to bring forward the end date for transitional arrangements could have a substantial impact on the level of changes proposed in the next review of constituency boundaries. This is an issue we intend to consider as part of our current inquiry into arrangements for redrawing of parliamentary constituency boundaries.

56. It is essential that, before it advises the Government on whether it is appropriate to bring forward the end date for the transitional arrangements for IER, the Electoral Commission consider not just the “headline” figures of how many people would drop off the register if the end of the transition period were brought forward, but pay particular attention to the differential impact across the country, and different

124 Q698 [Jenny Watson]

125 Q709 [Jenny Watson]

126 Q709 [Phil Thompson]

127 Q733 [Jenny Watson]

128 Q808 [Sam Gyimah MP]

demographic groups. *We will be closely monitoring the Electoral Commission's reports on the progress of the transition to IER, and we recommend that the select committee with oversight of the process in the 2015 Parliament continue this monitoring. We recommend that, with 5.5 million voters not yet confirmed on to the new electoral register, unless the electoral registers are substantially more complete than at present by May 2015, the Government not bring forward the end date for the transitional arrangements for IER.*

57. As well as the direct impact on the quality of the electoral registers, the Government and Parliament will need to consider—as we are currently doing in our inquiry into the rules for redrawing parliamentary constituency boundaries—how any bringing forward of the end of transitional arrangements will affect the next review of parliamentary constituency boundaries.

Additional funding to maximise registration

58. In light of the move to IER, in July 2013 the Government announced that it was making £4.2 million available to help maximise voter registration.¹²⁹ £3.6 million will be distributed to local authorities, and just over £200,000 will be spent on Innovation Fund grants to organisations that try to reach groups that are “most distant from the political process”.¹³⁰ We took evidence about two projects that had been funded by such grants—the Hansard Society's project with Homeless Link,¹³¹ and the “Hear my voice” campaign being run by Mencap—and were told that these would focus on registering particularly hard-to-reach groups.¹³² We also heard some criticism of how the funding had been made available. Michael Sani, Executive Director of Bite the Ballot, told us “the whole process has not been as well thought out as it could have been” and that “it felt as though the Cabinet Office had not thought through the tender with the organisations that were best placed to deliver.”¹³³ Simon Woolley, Director of Operation Black Vote, criticised the level of funding that had been made available, stating:

You will be aware that the Cabinet Office announced a voter registration campaign before Christmas. I think the budget was some £4 million over three months to solve a problem that has been going on for decades.¹³⁴

The Electoral Commission's report on the confirmation stated that the Commission was in discussion with the Cabinet Office about “potential for additional funding being provided to EROs to support them with their work to maximise registration between the publication of the revised registers and the May 2015 polls.”

59. **Even—or especially—in a time of austerity it is vital that funding for elections is protected. While we welcome the £4.2 million the Government has made available to**

129 [New government campaign to get people on the electoral register](#), Gov.uk, 4 July 2013

130 [Funding for new ways to encourage voter registration](#), Gov.uk, 5 February 2014

131 Q101 [Dr Ruth Fox]

132 Q316 [Rob Holland]

133 Q218 [Michael Sani]

134 Q355 [Simon Woolley]

maximise registration during the transition to IER, it is likely that further funding will be necessary to ensure that levels of voter registration are not adversely affected by the implementation of IER. We recommend that in order to safeguard levels of voter participation, the Government commit in its response to us to look favourably on requests for additional funding to be made available to EROs to support their work in maintaining and enhancing the levels of electoral registration, and to other bodies and organisations that have a proven track record of increasing voter registration in the most economical and effective way possible. We also recommend that the Electoral Commission look into service level agreements with agencies, bodies and organisations such as Bite the Ballot and Operation Black Vote who have a proven track record in increasing electoral registration and can do it a fraction of the cost of the Electoral Commission or Government Departments.

Electoral Commission work on electoral fraud

60. The Electoral Commission has issued several reports focusing on electoral fraud in the UK. The foreword to their latest report looking at electoral fraud, published in January 2014, stated:

Electoral fraud is a serious issue. One of the Electoral Commission's priorities is to ensure both that fraud is prevented from happening and that it is swiftly detected in the relatively rare circumstances that it is committed.

Despite some high-profile cases in recent years when fraud has been detected and punished, there is no evidence to suggest that there have been widespread, systematic attempts to undermine or interfere with recent elections through electoral fraud.¹³⁵

When we asked Jenny Watson about the scale of electoral fraud, she told us:

You will know from the report that we said it is relatively rare. There are 16 local authorities out of around 380 that are at greater risk. In those local authorities it is not the whole local authority area. It is usually a few wards and it is much more likely to happen at local government elections.¹³⁶

Despite the very low number of convictions for electoral fraud, Jenny Watson told us:

There certainly is a perception [of electoral fraud], and we look at this after every election, and it is pretty stubborn perception. Around 30% of people believe that fraud is taking place.¹³⁷

135 [Electoral Fraud in the UK](#), Electoral Commission, January 2014

136 Q557 [Jenny Watson]

137 Q555 [Jenny Watson]

Electoral Commission proposals

61. The Electoral Commission’s most recent report on electoral fraud included a number of proposals that it has suggested in order “to tighten our electoral system against fraud.” The proposals are:

- Renewing efforts in targeted areas to ensure that voters can be confident that their vote is safe;
- Preventing campaigners from handling postal votes, and
- Moving to a system where voters are required to produce identification at polling stations.¹³⁸

The report explains the rationale for these measures, stating:

In making our recommendations for change, we have been conscious of the need to strike the right balance between making the system accessible, and making it secure. Getting this right will mean that voters and candidates can participate in elections, but corrupt campaigners cannot win votes through fraud.

62. When asked about the proposals, Jenny Watson told us that, although IER created a “secure registration system”, there was a still “a vulnerability around in-person voting”, which led the Commission to “recommend some kind of ID for polling stations by 2019”.¹³⁹ Several of our witnesses raised concerns with the Electoral Commission’s proposals around requiring photo ID at polling stations. Comments included:

- “We would be very worried that introducing any document check at the polls would have serious adverse effects on turnout.”¹⁴⁰
- “We have some concerns about that [...] because we think it is putting up barriers to voting.”¹⁴¹
- “how do you ensure that everybody has a photo ID so they can turn up to vote and their vote will be counted?”¹⁴²

Dr Maria Sobolewska also told us she believed the proposals would have a particular effect on BME voters.¹⁴³ Jenny Watson did acknowledge the possible adverse impact of requiring ID at polling stations, stating:

138 [Electoral Fraud in the UK](#), Electoral Commission, January 2014

139 Q557 [Jenny Watson]

140 Q73 [Professor Dunleavy]

141 Q130 [Will Brett]

142 Q44 [Glenn Gottfried]

143 Q339 [Dr Maria Sobolewska]

One of the things that we will need to be mindful of is whether that would impose any unnecessary barriers for people. We do need to get the balance right between accessibility and security, and that is one of the things that we will be looking at very carefully as we do this work.¹⁴⁴

63. However, others supported the proposals. John Turner, Chief Executive of the AEA, told us “there is too much of an opportunity for impersonation to take place in certain areas”, and that introducing the requirement would not necessarily have an adverse impact on turnout.¹⁴⁵ Yet some thought it would have little impact. Alasdair Buckle, President of the University of Sheffield Students' Union, doubted it would reduce participation for students, as “Most students will carry some form of identification on them at most times.”¹⁴⁶ When we asked the Minister about these proposals, he told us:

Any measures to change the electoral system obviously have to strike a balance between safeguarding the integrity of the election but also ensuring voters are able to participate in elections. In terms of verifying identity at polling stations that you mentioned, allegations are not widespread and are more likely to be recorded in areas at high risk of electoral fraud, so it is not clear that we need a nationwide ID scheme as a proportionate solution.

[...]

Requiring ID at polling station could disenfranchise legitimate voters who forget to take their ID with them or who are put off going because they do not have appropriate ID.¹⁴⁷

64. Any fraud committed in elections undermines our democratic system and must be dealt with severely. That said, with only three convictions for electoral fraud in 2013— all of candidates and not voters—compared with 7.5 million people not being correctly registered to vote, and almost 16 million not voting in the last general election, it is clear where the biggest issue lies in respect of electoral administration in the UK. It is essential that any changes to electoral registration and voting procedures intended to combat fraud are proportionate to the scale of the problem. The benefits of measures that could create barriers for legitimate voters wishing to participate in elections need to be carefully weighed against the potential risk of voter suppression. Any new measures likely to have a disproportionate negative impact on groups that are already less likely to participate at elections must be assessed with the utmost care.

65. Several of our witnesses raised particular concerns about the Electoral Commission's proposal that voters be required to present photographic ID at polling stations. *We believe that such a requirement cannot be justified at present, and we recommend against its adoption.*

144 Q559 [Jenny Watson]

145 Qq 293, 297 [John Turner]

146 Q409 [Alasdair Buckle]

147 Qs 826-7 [Sam Gyimah MP]

5 Unequal registration and participation

66. Many of our witnesses argued that the biggest issue for voter engagement was not low levels of voter registration and turnout *per se*, but the inequalities that existed in registration and turnout.¹⁴⁸ Professor Sarah Birch told us that turnout inequality was “a significant problem because you have a distinct sector of the electorate whose interests are going unrepresented.”¹⁴⁹ The IPPR stated that unequal turnout mattered because it “reduces the incentives for governments to respond to the interests of non-voters and thus threatens a central claim of democracy which is every citizen’s preference, no matter their status, should count equally.”¹⁵⁰ Glenn Gottfried, Quantitative Research Fellow at the IPPR, told us that inequality of turnout led to a “vicious cycle of engagement and turnout” where the Government looked at those groups that were not turning out to vote and no longer focused on their interests.¹⁵¹

67. Research conducted by the Electoral Commission has identified several demographic groups that are least likely to be registered to vote. These are:

- Students and younger people (under 35);
- People living in the private rented sector;
- Certain Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) groups ;
- British citizens living abroad;
- Commonwealth and EU citizens, and
- Those classified as social grade DE.¹⁵²

Similar trends exist in relation to turnout, with younger people, certain BME groups and people from social grade DE being less likely to vote. We outline below the evidence we have received about voter engagement as it relates to several of these groups.

Young people and students

68. The evidence is unambiguous that young people are less likely to be registered to vote and also less likely to participate at elections than older people. It is estimated that only 44% of people aged 18-24 voted in the 2010 general election, compared with 75% of people

148 Q386 [Professor Matt Flinders], written evidence from Professor Matt Flinders [\[VUK 06\]](#), Unlock Democracy [\[VUK 18\]](#), Dr Maria Sobolewska and Professor Anthony Heath [\[VUK 30\]](#), Professor Stephen D Fisher [\[VUK 35\]](#)

149 Q12 [Professor Sarah Birch]

150 Written evidence from the IPPR [\[VUK 14\]](#)

151 Q2 [Glenn Gottfried]

152 [The quality of the 2014 electoral registers in Great Britain](#), Electoral Commission, July 2014

aged over 55.¹⁵³ The Electoral Commission's report on the 2011 Electoral Register also notes that young people are much less likely to be registered to vote, stating: "The lowest percentage of completeness is recorded by the 17–18 and 19–24 age groups (55% and 56% complete respectively)." For comparison, completeness across all age ranges was 82.3%, and for the 65+ age group the register was 94% complete.¹⁵⁴ The most recent research on the 2014 electoral registers found a similar pattern.¹⁵⁵

69. We have heard time and time again that young people feel disconnected from the political process, and that politicians do not address the issues young people are interested in. The National Union of Students stated: "NUS does not believe that students are apathetic; instead we recognise that young people are often disengaged with the political process."¹⁵⁶ Alasdair Buckle, President of the University of Sheffield Students' Union told us: "The current parties are not really saying much about what they are going to do for young people."¹⁵⁷ When Toni Pearce, President of the NUS, gave evidence to us, she said:

I think there is a combination of reasons [why many young people don't vote]. There is a piece of research, that I am sure you are aware of, that the Electoral Commission did that shows particular reasons why, which is things like disillusionment, the idea that voting does not make any difference to them or the political system does not make any difference to them.¹⁵⁸

However, she told us that she did not think there is anybody who was apathetic; there were just "people who don't feel that the right issues are being talked about and so they don't get involved with them". She also told us that young people could feel alienated from politics and not feel that they as an individual could make much of a difference. The idea that young people felt that none of the major parties addressed their issues or otherwise engaged with young people was reflected in several pieces of written evidence.¹⁵⁹ Stuart Fox, an academic who submitted evidence based on an analysis of the survey conducted by Survation, stated that the key reasons young voters gave for not voting were "a lack of political information, a lack of political efficacy, and a lack of interest".¹⁶⁰

70. Evidence from Dr Elin Weston and LLB Advanced Constitutional Law students at King's College London stated: "Among younger people, the major issue relevant to voter engagement and turnout is not political apathy *per se*, but instead apathy towards the

153 [Report on the administration of the 2010 UK general election](#), Electoral Commission, July 2010

154 [Great Britain's Electoral Registers 2011](#), Electoral Commission, December 2011

155 [The quality of the 2014 electoral registers in Great Britain](#), Electoral Commission, July 2014

156 Written evidence from the NUS [\[VUK 34\]](#)

157 Q399 [Alasdair Buckle]

158 Q184 [Toni Pearce]

159 Written evidence from the Bradford Children in Care Council [\[VUK 02\]](#), Bite the Ballot [\[VUK 65\]](#), Intergenerational Foundation [\[VUK 80\]](#)

160 Written evidence from Stuart Fox [\[VUK 128\]](#)

current, traditional methods of political participation.”¹⁶¹ Evidence from Bite the Ballot highlighted several reasons why young people did not vote, including:

- “they are not made aware of the link between their lives and politics, and many are oblivious to the existing channels of communication that enable them to voice their opinions;
- they are not taught about 'the basics' of politics, and the relationships between the issues they care about and the decision-making processes that determine them;
- politics is unrepresentative, elitist, 'out of touch', untrustworthy and irrelevant to their lives;
- democratic institutions appear to have nothing to offer them and don't care about their concerns and ideas; and
- there is a lack of effective ways to access, communicate and engage with decision-makers.”¹⁶²

Bite the Ballot stated: “There are only two ways in which voter registration and turnout can be improved amongst young people—by ensuring young people are engaged with the democratic process and by making it as easy as possible for young people to be registered to vote and to vote on the day.”¹⁶³ Similar views were expressed by the president of the University of Sheffield Students’ Union and the Bradford Children in Care Council.¹⁶⁴

71. Another trend of particular relevance to the youth vote is the fall in the proportion of people who believed in a “duty to vote”, which has been particularly marked among young people. Democratic Audit stated that “the proportion of the public who believe that everyone has a duty to vote fell from 76% in 1987 to 62% in 2011.”¹⁶⁵ Professor Sarah Birch agreed that there had been a “generational change and a decline in the sense of a duty to vote” and that for this reason young people were less likely than older people to vote.¹⁶⁶ Related to this, Professor Anthony Heath argued that there was a need to consider the long-term impacts of unequal participation at elections:

There is also evidence that whether you register and vote at your first election can have long-term consequences for future participation. If we have a generation of young people who are turned off politics that will live with us for many elections to come. They are not things that can just be immediately

161 Written evidence from Dr Elin Weston and LLB Advanced Constitutional Law students, King’s College London [[VUK 33](#)]

162 Written evidence from Bite the Ballot [[VUK 65](#)]

163 Written evidence from Bite the Ballot [[VUK 65](#)]

164 Q413 [Alasdair Buckle], written evidence from the Bradford Children in Care Council [[VUK 02](#)]

165 Written evidence from Democratic Audit [[VUK 18](#)]

166 Q21 [Professor Sarah Birch]

reversed once people have got into the habit, and that could also apply to minorities.¹⁶⁷

This means that if something is not done to tackle current inequalities in electoral registration and election turnout now, it is likely to be even more difficult to reverse the inequalities in the future.

72. Although there was significant evidence that young people are likely to feel disconnected with politics, Professor Patrick Dunleavy, Co-Director of Democratic Audit, told us that the problem of low rates of registration for young people went deeper, stating:

You can't think of that as being a motivational problem. It is a structural problem. It is down to young people's position in the housing market, the fact that they are moving, the fact that people don't have jobs for life any more. They have portfolio careers where you have to move quite regularly to get jobs if you are a young person. Also, a lot of young people are in the rental sector, which has also much less structural registration.¹⁶⁸

He told us that these problems had been known for a very long time but that “very little that is effective has been done about them.” Richard Eastall, Director of Membership Services at the University of Sheffield Students' Union, expressed similar views, stating “For people who move house quite often, the register is often out of date and students don't understand how and where to register and where they are entitled to vote and that creates problems in itself.”¹⁶⁹

73. We were also told that the low levels of participation by young people appeared to affect how policy was formed by political parties. Professor Sarah Birch told us that the IPPR's research “demonstrates that it is young people whose interests tend to be unrepresented, because they tend to vote with less frequency than older people”.¹⁷⁰ She went on to say:

It is difficult to attribute any particular policy to that type of trend, but that is the type of thing that we think is the consequence of the situation we see where politicians don't have so much incentive to pay attention to the voices of young people because they know they vote with less frequency.¹⁷¹

Similarly, a written submission from the Intergenerational Foundation noted that low turnout amongst younger voters “gives politicians an incentive to target unpopular policies at young people.”¹⁷²

74. Low levels of registration and turnout amongst students and young people are a serious problem now and could get worse. If a generation of young people choose not to

167 Q338 [Professor Anthony Heath]

168 Q55 [Professor Dunleavy]

169 Q400 [Richard Eastall]

170 Q13 [Professor Sarah Birch]

171 Q14 [Professor Sarah Birch]

172 Written evidence from the Intergenerational Foundation [[VUK 80](#)]

vote, and then continue not to participate at elections as they grow older, there will be severe and long-lasting effects for turnout at UK elections, with consequent implications for the health of democracy in the UK. We propose later a series of recommendations, not least on registration and voting, which if implemented will help halt and reverse the disengagement of young people.

Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) groups

75. According to the Electoral Commission, some Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) groups are significantly less likely to be registered to vote compared to those identifying as White British. Completeness of the electoral register for White British people is 85.9%, for Asian people it is 83.7%, but for Black people it is 76%, for people of Mixed ethnicity it is 73.4% and for people whose ethnicity falls into the “Other” category it is 62.9%. A survey by Ipsos Mori of the 2010 general election also found that the turnout rate for white voters was 67%, while for non-white voters it was 51%.¹⁷³ In a survey of BME citizens, when asked why they were not registered to vote, a large number of respondents (28%) gave the reason that they were not eligible, even though, as evidence from Dr Maria Sobolewska and Professor Anthony Heath has stated, “quite a number of these were almost certainly eligible since they were Commonwealth citizens.”¹⁷⁴ One point that was raised several times was that BME groups were not homogenous. Professor Heath told us that there was “diversity within the groups as well as between the groups” and that this meant there could be very different reasons for lack of registration and lack of turnout within and between groups.¹⁷⁵

76. Professor Heath also told us that unequal levels of registration were the crux of the matter in relation to unequal voter engagement of BME residents compared to White British residents, stating

registration is the central barrier for minorities, all the main groups of which appear to have much lower rates of registration. Once registered there are some differences, but they are relatively modest and they are not the major issue.¹⁷⁶

Dr Maria Sobolewska flagged up knowledge of eligibility as one of the factors that could be clearly identified as having an impact on registration rates for BME groups.¹⁷⁷ Lack of English language was another factor, which we were told could be even more of an issue in light of Individual Electoral Registration—where each voter has to register to vote themselves.¹⁷⁸ Professor Heath also told us that “concerns about dissatisfaction, alienation and the feeling that people are excluded”, which are held by BME groups, should not be

173 [How Britain voted in 2010](#), Ipsos Mori, May 2010

174 Written evidence from Dr Maria Sobolewska and Professor Anthony Heath [\[VUK 30\]](#)

175 Q326 [Professor Anthony Heath]

176 Q326 [Professor Anthony Heath]

177 Q333 [Dr Maria Sobolewska]

178 Q333 [Professor Anthony Heath]

ignored as “that could have long-term, wider social consequences.”¹⁷⁹ Professor Heath and Dr Sobolewska stated that research on how to improve registration rates for BME groups in particular was inconclusive, although “more liberal rules (such as registration on the day) increased registration [...] across the board, for all social groups.”

77. When we spoke to Simon Woolley, Director of Operation Black Vote, he told us that he did not believe that there was “a wilful act of seeking to marginalise or alienate BME communities”, but that he did feel there was a “lack of political will” to address the problem of low levels of engagement from BME communities.¹⁸⁰ He said that registering people to vote was “the most difficult job” that Operation Black Vote undertook,¹⁸¹ and told us: “Once they are registered and they believe they can make a difference, then they will go out to vote”, but that first a case had to be made to get them to register. He also highlighted the importance of representative democracy, saying that there “should be nearly 100 black and minority ethnic MPs in this institution; there are 27”, but stated that policy was equally important.¹⁸² In terms of what could be done to better engage BME groups, Simon Woolley told us:

Genuine engagement from the political class is critical for civic engagement. Community empowerment from people like us, education in the schools are all the building blocks that will get us to a better place.¹⁸³

78. Registration rates for certain BME groups are substantially lower than for White British residents, but turnout for people from BME groups once they are registered to vote does not differ significantly from turnout for White British residents who are registered to vote. It is not acceptable that registration rates and turnout levels vary so significantly in relation to ethnicity, although it should also be understood that registration rates and turnout levels vary significantly within both the White British and BME groups, so the question requires more careful consideration than simply comparing these two figures. The relevant recommendations set out in this report should be implemented in full in order to redress the current imbalance.

People with disabilities

79. One of the clearest instances where current electoral administration does not make sufficient provision for universal access to electoral participation is in respect of people with certain disabilities. As part of our inquiry we received evidence from representatives of both Mencap, a charity for people with learning disabilities, and the RNIB, a charity for people with sight loss, and also a joint submission from several charitable organisations for deaf people. This evidence highlighted the specific barriers to registering to vote and participating in elections faced by people with disabilities, and also the low level of

179 Q333 [Professor Anthony Heath]

180 Q373 [Simon Woolley]

181 Q362 [Simon Woolley]

182 Q370 [Simon Woolley]

183 Q366 [Simon Woolley]

participation for some of these groups. Hugh Huddy, Campaigns Officer for the RNIB, told us:

RNIB's interest in voting is really about enabling people with vision impairments living in the UK to lead a fulfilled, independent life where they can participate in democracy and everything else that we do and take for granted.¹⁸⁴

We heard that inaccessibility of voting to people affected by sight loss was something that was raised frequently by people contacting the RNIB.¹⁸⁵ Rob Holland, Public Affairs and Parliamentary Lead for Mencap, detailed the low participation rates at elections for people with learning disabilities—for the 2001 election “only 31% reported that they did vote”.¹⁸⁶ In addition to the practical barriers to participation faced by people with disabilities, Rob Holland also told us that for people with learning disabilities, “There is a cultural exclusion from the democratic process, from politics in the way that Parliament and the Government often communicate to people.”¹⁸⁷ Similarly, Ismail Kaji, Parliamentary Affairs Assistant for Mencap, told us that for people with learning disabilities it was “often very difficult to understand what politicians are saying and what they really mean”.¹⁸⁸

80. John Turner, Chief Executive of the Association for Electoral Administrators, stated that physical access was one of the most serious issues in relation to disabled people participating at elections, stating:

At the last general election, I was out looking at places and there were a number of places I went to where it was exceedingly difficult for somebody in a wheelchair to get physical access to a building to be able to cast a vote.¹⁸⁹

He told us that “Anything that stands in the way of somebody being able to vote should be a matter of attention”, but that the problem had not been resolved and changes were needed to “make it better and to comply with legislation, frankly, in terms of disability access.”

81. Practical changes that were suggested to us to make registering to vote and voting more accessible to people with disabilities centred around the provision of information. Specific recommendations included:

- Making information available in British Sign Language;¹⁹⁰
- Producing information in “easy read” format;¹⁹¹

184 Q303 [Hugh Huddy]

185 Q303 [Hugh Huddy], written evidence from the RNIB [\[VUK 81\]](#)

186 Q303 [Rob Holland]

187 Q303 [Rob Holland]

188 Q304 [Ismail Kaji]

189 Q266 [John Turner]

190 Written evidence from Signature [\[VUK 87\]](#)

191 Written evidence from Mencap [\[VUK 44\]](#)

- Making manifestos available in accessible formats such as large print, audio or braille, and¹⁹²
- Using electoral registration to link someone’s name and address with their preferred reading format.¹⁹³

Patrick McGonagle MBE, Managing Director of the Pakflatt Group, told us about the possibility of introducing tactile voting devices to “enable a blind person to mark a ballot paper independently and in private”.¹⁹⁴ Rob Holland also raised with us the possibility of proposals aimed at making elections more accessible to people with disabilities having wider effects, justifying this by stating that “It is nearly always the case that when you make things more accessible for disabled people, it benefits a much wider group.” He told us:

It is certainly fair to say that being able to request easy-read information or large print information will benefit people whose first language is not English, or perhaps they are illiterate, for example, because it uses pictures and very simple words, so I think it will undoubtedly benefit more people.¹⁹⁵

82. We asked Rt Hon Greg Clark MP, the Minister then responsible for political and constitutional affairs, what consideration had been given to ensuring that registering to vote and participating at elections would be fully accessible to people with disabilities. In response the Government stated: “the Government is committed to ensuring that disabled people are supported to participate in political and public life and that the electoral process is accessible to all electors.” The Government response further stated that:

- People with learning disabilities or mental health conditions should receive information or other forms of support, if requested, to assist them with their application to register or to enable them to find out more about the electoral system.
- Electoral officers are required to make information and documents about the electoral process available to electors in other formats, including Braille and audio format. The Electoral Commission has designed the new paper forms that will be used by all local authorities under IER. These forms have been developed based on advice from experts in graphic design and usable form design. The Commission has also taken into account good practice advice from accessibility experts, including RNIB.
- Local authorities have a statutory responsibility for designating polling places that are, so far as it is practicable, accessible to electors who are disabled. A number of provisions are also in place that are designed to enable blind and partially sighted electors to cast their ballot at polling stations, including tactile voting devices

192 Written evidence from the RNIB [\[VUK 81\]](#)

193 Q324 [Hugh Huddy]

194 Written evidence from by Patrick McGonagle MBE CEng FIET, Managing Director of the Pakflatt Group [\[VUK 97\]](#)

195 Q325 [Rob Holland]

designed to enable blind voters to cast their vote independently, without revealing their voting intentions.¹⁹⁶

83. It is clear there is a particular problem with the accessibility of registration and voting for a large number of people with specific needs resulting from a disability. It is unacceptable that people face barriers registering to vote or participating at elections because of a disability. We have heard several practical suggestions that could make elections more accessible—including making information available in British Sign Language and “easy read” format, large print, audio and braille.

84. We recommend that within three months of the publication of this Report, the Government consult with the Electoral Commission, EROs and disability groups and publish clear and stretching proposals setting out how registration and voting will be made more accessible to people with disabilities. We also recommend that political parties work with disability groups to make manifestos and other election material accessible in formats which people with disabilities find easier to use.

Overseas voters

85. British citizens who have been living abroad for fewer than 15 years, and were previously registered to vote in the UK, are eligible to vote in certain elections in the UK,¹⁹⁷ but very few expatriates are currently registered to vote. Written evidence from the Electoral Commission stated:

There have been two reliable estimates of the number of British nationals living abroad produced in recent years. The Institute for Public Policy Research estimated the total number of British citizens living overseas in 2006 at 5.5 million; a World Bank study put it at 4.7 million in 2011. Yet there were only 19,245 registered overseas electors in December 2012. While it is not possible to determine how many expatriates have been on an electoral register in the last fifteen years, and would therefore be eligible to vote, there is clearly a very big gap between the number eligible and those actually registered.¹⁹⁸

The Electoral Commission updated this information subsequently, stating that the most recent data, from February/March 2014, showed there were 15,818 overseas voters registered across Great Britain.¹⁹⁹ This represents substantially less than 1% of the total number of British citizens living overseas.

86. Jenny Watson told us “it is unacceptable that there are so many people who could be registered who are not”, and that overseas voters are “one of the groups that we target specifically with our campaigns because they are under-registered.”²⁰⁰ The Electoral

196 Written evidence from the Government [[VUK 148](#)]

197 Overseas voters are eligible to vote in general elections and European Parliament elections, but not local elections.

198 Written evidence from the Electoral Commission [[VUK 40](#)]

199 Written evidence from the Electoral Commission [[VUK 156](#)]

200 Q702 [Jenny Watson]

Commission staged an Overseas Voters Registration Day on 26 February 2014,²⁰¹ and stated that it has worked “closely with the Foreign and Commonwealth (FCO) and others with overseas links, including the political parties, to use their networks to raise awareness.” When we spoke to Jenny Watson in September 2014, she told us that they would be running a further campaign ahead of the 2015 general election, and that they had set “a target that is aspirational of 100,000 overseas voters registering to vote.”²⁰² She told us:

We are working with the kind of organisations that support people when they are moving overseas [...] to make it clear to them that they can stay on the electoral register, that this is how they go about doing it and to try to encourage as many of those people to stay on the register and indeed to become registered if they thought they did not stay registered once they have moved overseas. That is quite a focused programme of work and, as I think I said earlier, we do have—it is only part of the solution—an overseas registration day that does enable us to generate some kind of—they are a very disparate group and by their nature they are hard to reach. We are very dependent on consulates and embassies to have a form of contact with them and be able to be gatekeepers in encouraging people to stay registered to vote.²⁰³

One of the areas we discussed with representatives of the BBC was the possibility of putting some information on elections out via BBC World and the World Service, as a way of reaching overseas voters.²⁰⁴

87. Jenny Watson told us that the bar to sending out postal ballot papers more than 11 days before the election had been removed, and that papers could go out around five days earlier than in the past, meaning that overseas voters had more time to cast their votes.²⁰⁵ Andrew Scallan, Director of Electoral Administration, also told us that the Electoral Commission had issued advice “that says priority should be given to overseas electors and to service voters to make sure that [their postal ballot papers] are issued as quickly as possible.”²⁰⁶ Jenny Watson told us that the work of the Electoral Advisory Board, a board chaired by the Electoral Commission which is intended to be a focal point for those involved in the delivery of electoral services, about “how one might look at the role that technology might play in improving the process” could be relevant to the question of overseas voters. She stated:

Of course, one can quite quickly see that if there were one group of voters that might particularly benefit from some kind of difference in the operation

201 [British expatriates - "It's your vote, don't lose it" urges elections watchdog on Overseas Registration Day](#), Electoral Commission, February 2014

202 Q699 [Jenny Watson]

203 Q765 [Jenny Watson]

204 Q460 [Sue English]

205 Q704 [Phil Thompson]

206 Q706 [Andrew Scallan]

of technology, perhaps because they could download their own ballot paper as soon as it was issued because it has a barcode that says it is genuine and they can send it back, that would make the process faster. That work will continue from our perspective after the next general election and we will be bringing forward some suggestions about what changes might take place.²⁰⁷

The International Foundation for Electoral Systems told us that allowing “voters to print their ballots online in PDF form and return by mail” would reduce turnaround time for the voting process, and that e-voting merited further consideration.²⁰⁸ The Association of Electoral Administrators (AEA) also suggested how voting could be made more accessible for overseas voters, stating:

The most straightforward approach would be to introduce the options of on line applications for registration and for absent voting together with the option of e-voting by internet means. Clearly, the necessary safeguards to prevent fraudulent applications and misuse of votes would have to be introduced. A policy decision would need to be made in terms of the current restrictions including length of time abroad and to what elections such rights should apply.²⁰⁹

88. Roger Casale, the Chair of New Europeans, told us that removing the 15-year rule, so that British citizens living abroad were eligible to vote in UK elections no matter how long they had been living abroad, could help increase registration rates of overseas voters.²¹⁰ The New Europeans questioned the justification for having a time limit on eligibility for overseas voters participating in UK elections, stating that British citizens remained connected to the UK, and continued to be affected by decisions taken in Westminster more than 15 years after they moved abroad.²¹¹

89. When we asked the Minister for the Constitution what was being done to reach overseas voters, he agreed that “overseas electors are some of the most under-represented on the electoral register” and told us:

[M]ore needs to be done to make sure they are represented on the electoral register. It is something that since I became the Minister I have asked officials to look into, to see what we can do in terms of the funds we are making available for maximising registration to target some of it at overseas voters.²¹²

90. Although British citizens are only entitled to register to vote for UK elections if they were resident in the UK in the previous 15 years, it is clear that only a very small percentage of those who are likely to be eligible to register to vote are actually on the electoral register. It is not acceptable that such a small proportion of this franchise is

207 Q707 [Jenny Watson]

208 Written evidence from the International Foundation for Electoral Systems [\[VUK 47\]](#)

209 Written evidence from the Association of Electoral Administrators [\[VUK 32\]](#)

210 Q882 [Roger Casale]

211 Written evidence from New Europeans [\[VUK 161\]](#)

212 Q796 [Sam Gyimah MP]

registered to vote, and we welcome the fact the Minister for the Constitution has asked officials to look into this issue. *We expect to see a comprehensive plan from the Government in response to our Report, setting out how it plans to increase registration rates for overseas voters. We recommend that, at a minimum, this includes using UK embassies to promote registration to British citizens living abroad, working with the BBC to put out information through BBC World and the World Service, and making changes to voting to make it more convenient to overseas voters.*

Citizens of Commonwealth countries and other EU member states

91. Commonwealth citizens who are resident in the UK are eligible to vote in all UK elections, and citizens of other EU member states resident in the UK are eligible to vote in local and European Parliament elections. The completeness of the electoral register for Commonwealth citizens is 61.8%, and for European Union citizens the figure is 53.2%. This compares with 86.5% for British citizens.²¹³

92. In addition to low levels of registration amongst Commonwealth and EU citizens, we have also received evidence about specific barriers EU citizens face in participating in European Parliament elections. In order to vote in the European Parliament elections while resident outside their home member state, EU citizens have to sign a declaration form, separate from the electoral registration form, stating that they are not voting in their home member state. New Europeans, an association which promotes the rights of EU citizens, told us that this additional process was “very confusing and has in fact resulted in hundreds of thousands of EU citizens being denied the vote”.²¹⁴ Roger Casale told us that there had been a dramatic decline in the number of non-British EU citizens registered to vote for the European Parliament elections between 2009 and 2014—the figure fell from 1,043,629 registered to vote in the European elections in 2009 to 327,883 registered to vote in the European elections in 2014.²¹⁵ New Europeans stated that they “have evidence of many EU nationals who went to the polling stations on 22 May expecting to be able to vote in both local and European elections, only to be were told they could only vote in local elections.”

93. The Electoral Commission told us that there had been “74 enquiries from citizens of other EU member states complaining that they had gone to their local polling station and found that they were able to vote in their local election but not the European Parliament election.”²¹⁶ The Commission accepted that “it appears that a significant number of citizens of other EU member states resident in the UK who wanted to vote in the UK at the May 2014 European Parliament elections were unable to do so, because they had not successfully completed the necessary application and declaration.” The Electoral Commission also stated that it would “continue to work with the UK Government, EROs and organisations representing citizens of other EU member states in the UK to identify what can be done to simplify the system and remove unnecessary administrative barriers to

213 [The quality of the 2014 electoral registers in Great Britain](#), Electoral Commission, July 2014

214 Written evidence from New Europeans [[VUK 107](#)]

215 Q891 [Roger Casale]

216 Written evidence from the Electoral Commission [[VUK 151](#)]

participation so that this problem does not affect electors at the next European Parliament elections in 2019”, including considering “whether legislation could be changed so that, in future, citizens of other EU member states do not need to complete more than one electoral registration form to be able to vote at European Parliament elections in the UK.”²¹⁷

94. EU and Commonwealth citizens resident in the UK are amongst the most under-represented groups on the electoral register. *We recommend that the Electoral Commission should run a specific campaign aimed at Commonwealth citizens and citizens of other EU member states resident in the UK, focussing on eligibility to participate in elections, and how to register to vote. The Electoral Commission should also bring forward proposals for simplifying the process for EU citizens living in the UK to register to vote at European Parliament elections promptly so that the necessary changes can be made before the next European Parliament elections in 2019.*

Conclusion

95. It is deeply concerning that certain groups of people—including young people, certain Black and Minority Ethnic groups, disabled people, and British citizens living overseas—are far less likely to be registered to vote and turn out at elections than others. Given current inequalities in the completeness of the electoral register, there is a strong case for focusing efforts to increase registration rates on those groups that are currently underrepresented. *We recommend that the Government produce a plan well before May 2015—working with all parties, the Electoral Commission and EROs—for targeting those groups that are least likely to be registered to vote. There is also scope for politicians and political parties to have a continuous dialogue with these groups and convince them of the value of participating in all the elections for which they are eligible.*

217 Written evidence from the Electoral Commission [[VUK 151](#)]

6 Improving levels of electoral registration

96. The evidence we have received on levels of electoral registration was unanimous that the ideal situation is a complete and accurate electoral register. Jenny Watson, Chair of the Electoral Commission, told us:

We would all like to see a more complete register and a more accurate register. There is no question about that.²¹⁸

Similarly, when we took evidence from officials from the Cabinet Office on IER, we were told:

Everyone wants the electoral register to be 100% complete and 100% accurate—and then let the best candidate win.²¹⁹

And John Turner, Chief Executive of the AEA, stated:

clearly we would be in the game of wanting every ERO to get as many people on the register as is legally and humanly possible.²²⁰

Similar sentiments were expressed by Rt Hon Greg Clark MP, Minister of State for Universities, Science and Cities, who told us:

I think we should leave no stone unturned at getting every one of those people who is not there on there. I cannot give you a number for a target, because I think we should be looking for every one of them, but I have always taken the advice of this Committee and its members to keep the scrutiny and indeed the pressure on everyone involved in the electoral registration system to keep their sights high.²²¹

97. We have identified several changes that could not only increase the number of people registered to vote, but also improve the administration of electoral registration more broadly. We have also looked at the roles of Electoral Registration Officers and the Electoral Commission.

98. However, we have been told that improvements to electoral registration are not a ‘silver bullet’ to improve levels of voter engagement. Glenn Gottfried told us that “although the electoral registration question is an important one and we should do all we can to ensure that people are registered, it is still not necessarily going to stop the declining turnout levels.”²²² Dr Toby James shared this view, telling us that improving electoral

218 Q536 [Jenny Watson]

219 Q49 [Mark Sweeny], [Oral evidence on Individual Electoral Registration](#), 10 April 2014

220 Qq 259, 280 [John Turner]

221 Q50 [Rt Hon Greg Clark MP], [The work of the Deputy Prime Minister 2014](#), 9 September 2014

222 Q19 [Glenn Gottfried]

administration “takes us so far but of course, ultimately, it is also about politicians and parties.”²²³ Jenny Watson also told us that in the context of the “disengagement of people with politics in this country, [...] electoral registration officers are having to work harder than ever before simply to keep up”.²²⁴

Electoral Registration Officers

99. Electoral Registration Officers (EROs) are responsible for maintaining the electoral registers for their area, and play a vital role in the electoral registration process. Their legal powers and obligations are set out in the Representation of the People Act 1983.²²⁵ EROs have a key role in the implementation phase of IER, in terms of contacting local electors and completing data matching with local authority data. We have heard from several EROs as part of our inquiry, and a number of them told us how they saw their role. When we spoke to the ERO for Sheffield, he told us:

My responsibility and roles are to get people registered, to inform them, to provide the administration that enables them to be registered and to proactively look for those people who are not there.²²⁶

Dr Dave Smith, ERO for Sunderland, told us:

I think we have a huge role to play [in getting people registered to vote]. From my perspective, while there are general national initiatives that can be taken to effect and improve registration, there are some very local issues that make a big difference to the impact on the number of people registered. [...] At a very local level it matters most to us to get as many people registered as possible. It matters for all sorts of reasons, but obviously principally from a principle of democracy and eligibility.²²⁷

Performance

100. Since 2006 the Electoral Commission has set and monitored performance standards for electoral officers. The Electoral Commission first published standards for EROs in July 2008,²²⁸ and developed a new performance standards framework in light of the changes brought in by IER, which was published in September 2013.²²⁹ Jenny Watson told us that these standards had made performance “more transparent”, stating:

You can see whether EROs are meeting the performance standards or are not, and when they fail them we say so. [...] We are always developing our performance standards and we have tried to make them, certainly for this

223 Q244 [Dr Toby James]

224 Q537 [Jenny Watson]

225 Registration of parliamentary and local government electors, [Representation of the People Act 1983](#)

226 Q415 [John Tomlinson]

227 Q775 [Dr Dave Smith]

228 [Performance standards for Electoral Registration Officers in Great Britain](#), Electoral Commission, July 2008

229 [Performance standards for Electoral Registration Officers](#), Electoral Commission, September 2013

year, much more dependent on outcomes rather than on inputs and that is a change.²³⁰

Dr Toby James also told us he thought the introduction of performance standards had been an “enormously positive development”, stating:

It has meant that EROs have learned and shared good practice from each other. I think the scheme has been very effective through a kind of system of naming and shaming and has brought down the number of EROs who don’t meet the various criteria over time.²³¹

He noted that the current performance standards focused on processes, rather than outputs, such as registration rates. He told us that an alternative approach would be to include outputs in the performance standards, although such an approach was untested.²³²

101. The Electoral Commission has no power to compel EROs to act if they fail to fulfil their duties set out in the Representation of the People Act 1983, but they can recommend that the Secretary of State issue a direction to an ERO.²³³ Jenny Watson told us that the Electoral Commission had not advised the Secretary of State to issue a direction to an ERO in relation to a failure to meet the Commission’s performance standards, but that it was a possible further action would be taken should a local authority failed to conduct house to house enquiries during the current canvass.²³⁴

102. We have heard evidence questioning whether there were sufficient mechanisms in place to deal with EROs who do not fulfil their legal duties or meet the performance standards produced by the Electoral Commission. John Turner, Chief Executive of the AEA, told us that “until you have some means of ensuring that the will of Parliament can be enforced, [special measures] may be the only answer that would work.”²³⁵ Jenny Watson told us that if there was going to be a special measures regime, it would be helpful to identify “the purpose of it” and also “how it would be sustainable in the longer term”.²³⁶ Dr Toby James stated that there “is a case for targeting support for authorities that are continuously not meeting the standards”, and that “MPs could do more [...] to put pressure on local authorities that do not meet the standards”.²³⁷ Paul Lankester, ERO for Stratford-on-Avon, told us:

we are trying very much to improve performance within the sector by the sector and I think there is a role for us to try to get colleagues to act in a way that ensures we get it through changes in behaviour in those registration officers [...]. I would prefer to say give it to us as local government to sort out

230 Q547 [Jenny Watson]

231 Q253 [Dr Toby James]

232 Written evidence from Dr Toby James [[VUK 141](#)]

233 Section 52, [Representation of the People Act 1983](#)

234 Qq 751–2 [Jenny Watson]

235 Q281 [John Turner]

236 Q551 [Jenny Watson]

237 Written evidence from Dr Toby James [[VUK 141](#)]

our colleagues who are not doing that. That is the right way forward and we will certainly try to help and promote good practice in ensuring it is there. But in terms of sanctions, sanctions need to be used very carefully and need to be used in a way that befits the situation.²³⁸

A subsequent written submission from Dr Dave Smith outlined a proposal which the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE)'s Elections and Democracy Board was putting forward to the Electoral Commission and Cabinet Officer for a set of regional pilots to form Electoral Boards, with the intention of promoting greater levels of consistency in the electoral community across each region, and of providing a support forum for EROs.²³⁹

103. In addition to looking at how underperforming EROs could be dealt with, we have also looked at the possibilities for recognising and sharing good practice. Dr Toby James told us that performance standards could be revised on the basis of “excellent work” by certain EROs, and that the Electoral Commission should also “draw ‘best practices’ from the ‘best in the class’ local authorities”, which might allow other local authorities to replicate their success.²⁴⁰ John Turner also highlighted the possibility of having exemplars of best practice for electoral services.²⁴¹ Jenny Watson said that “we think that is a very good idea” to recognise best practice and that the Commission “would be very happy to play any part that is appropriate in running that.”²⁴² She also told us that the Commission was in the process of setting up a new mechanism to share good practice, and that “we could probably do more to share that with MPs and we are thinking about how we might put that in place.” The written evidence from Sam Gyimah MP, the Minister for the Constitution, stated:

Greg Clark and I have given some thought to the proposal for a scheme to recognise good practice by EROs. We believe this may have merit—particularly as a mechanism to promote the sharing of good practice. But I know the Electoral Commission would want to ensure that any scheme complements rather than competes with the important work of the Electoral Commission’s existing performance standards regime. The Government may not be best placed to operate or adjudicate on such a scheme, but there are a range of other potential bodies which could play a useful role. I have asked officials to consider options.²⁴³

104. The Electoral Commission’s performance standards have had a positive impact on the performance of Electoral Registration Officers, and these should be maintained. We recommend that in future targets for registration should be included in performance standards for EROs. The Electoral Commission will need to consider how such output

238 Q780 [Paul Lankester]

239 Written evidence from Dr Dave Smith [VUK 157]

240 Written evidence from Dr Toby James [VUK 141], Q255 [Dr Toby James]

241 Q263 [John Turner]

242 Q548 [Jenny Watson]

243 Written evidence from the Government [VUK 148]

targets should be set, and the steps which would be most effective in securing attainment of such targets should they not initially be achieved. Best practice, as identified by EROs and the Commission, should also be incorporated in the performance standards. We believe that the outcomes on the number and percentage of those registered to vote should also be a key performance indicator for the Electoral Commission.

105. *We recommend that proposals for annually recognising notable successes and best practice in electoral registration be presented in the Government’s response to this Report. We also believe that MPs should be more closely engaged with the monitoring of electoral registration in their constituencies and that the Electoral Commission should provide them with specific data on the outcomes of the number and percentage rates of registration in each ward within their constituency. We recommend that the Government commit to finding parliamentary time for an annual debate in Parliament to allow registration issues to be discussed. This could be held on National Voter Registration Day or on a “Democracy Day”.*

House to house canvassing

106. One of the specific duties of EROs that we have considered is the requirement to conduct house-to-house enquiries, as stipulated by the Electoral Administration Act 2006, and set out in the Electoral Commission’s performance standards.²⁴⁴ The Electoral Administration Act 2006 states that EROs must “must take all steps that are necessary for the purpose of complying with his duty to maintain the registers”, including “making on one or more occasions house to house inquiries”. Both John Turner, Chief Executive of the AEA, and Dr Dave Smith, ERO for Sunderland and lead on the Elections and Democracy Board at the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives, told us about the importance of house-to-house canvassing in relation to electoral registration.²⁴⁵ However, in 2013 there were 22 EROs (6% of all EROs) that did not meet the house-to-house enquiry standard.²⁴⁶ When we questioned Jenny Watson about the failure of these EROs to meet the performance standard relating to house-to-house enquiries, she told us:

There are 22 EROs who have not met the house-to-house standard, so that is 6% of the total. We are confident that their plans for the implementation of IER show that they have plans to meet that. If we find that they aren’t—that could happen at any point—then we will be talking to the Minister. We are already talking to the Cabinet Office. We have a process in place to ask for a direction quickly if we need it. I think had we not seen the transition to IER being funded in the way that it is, you might well have seen directions being asked for at this point. Since it has been funded in the way that it is and we are confident that EROs have the resources to do what needs to be done, we

244 Section 9, [Electoral Administration Act 2006](#), and [Performance standards for Electoral Registration Officers in Great Britain](#), Electoral Commission, July 2008

245 Q261 [John Turner], Q777 [Dr Dave Smith]

246 [Analysis of electoral registration data for Great Britain](#), Electoral Commission, June 2014, written evidence from the Electoral Commission [[VUK 104](#)]

haven't therefore yet sought to ask for a direction, but I would not rule that out at all.²⁴⁷

107. As part of our inquiries, we took evidence from two of the 22 local authorities that had failed to conduct house-to-house enquiries during the 2013 canvass. Mark Williams, Chief Executive and Electoral Registration Officer for East Devon District Council, told us that “over the years we have developed a system whereby through internal data matching, e-mailing and telephoning people who were not on the register, we managed to do the same—if not better—than just sending out people cold calling by door knocking”,²⁴⁸ and Kevin Finan, Chief Executive for Mid Devon District Council, told us that he had “made the judgment that that was not a good use of our money”.²⁴⁹ Mr Williams also told us that “if the objective is to get the voter to vote, you can do it through more amenable ways for the voter, which is dealing with them through the phone and through other means that they find more comfortable than necessarily appearing on the doorstep”.²⁵⁰

108. We have also received written evidence from the Government on this point, which stated:

Greg Clark wrote to all EROs that failed to meet performance standard 3 on the day the report was published. He made clear that Parliament expects EROs to meet these obligations. The law places an important duty on EROs to maintain a complete and accurate electoral register; this responsibility is further clarified under IER. The Cabinet Office has provided additional funding in the current financial year for this work.

EROs were advised that the Cabinet Office and the Electoral Commission will be working closely with them to ensure that they are implementing their public engagement and implementation plans to transition successfully to IER. This will include ensuring that they carry out full house-to-house enquiries as part of their statutory obligations. Greg made it clear that if an authority is identified as not implementing its plans for carrying out house-to-house enquiries Ministers are fully prepared to issue a Secretary of State direction under section 52 of the Representation of the People Act 1983, to ensure the ERO complies with his statutory obligations. This was made clear to all EROs.²⁵¹

When we asked Sam Gyimah MP about this, he informed us:

We expect [EROs] to meet their full obligations and Ministers are fully prepared to issue a formal direction to EROs if necessary to ensure that they comply with their statutory obligation.²⁵²

247 Q549 [Jenny Watson]

248 Q844 [Mark Williams]

249 Q847 [Kevin Finan]

250 Q845 [Mark Williams]

251 Written evidence from the Government [[VUK 148](#)]

252 Q840 [Sam Gyimah MP]

109. Jenny Watson told us in September 2014 that for the 2014/15 canvass, “house-to-house inquiries, whether that is for the purposes of following up with individual electors to remind them to register or to get information about residents in the household who need to be invited to register, are at a very early stage.”²⁵³ She told us that the Electoral Commission would be “monitoring [house-to-house enquiries] on an ongoing basis”, and would inform the Committee if there was a need to take any action outside of their reporting cycle.²⁵⁴

110. Under the Representation of the People Act 1983, as amended, there is a statutory requirement that Electoral Registration Officers conduct house-to-house enquiries as part of the canvass. The Government should communicate this much more strongly to the public and put the legal requirements of EROs on the public record. We welcome the news that every ERO has plans to conduct house-to-house enquiries as part of the 2014/15 canvass, but this legal duty has in some cases not been taken seriously enough until now. Twenty-two EROs failed to fulfil this statutory requirement in the previous canvass, some for a number of successive years. We particularly welcome the explicit statements from Ministers that they are prepared to issue a formal direction to any EROs not complying with their statutory obligations, and we would support the issue of any such direction which had the objective of increasing levels of voter registration. *We recommend that if any ERO repeatedly fails to fulfil their statutory duties in a way which has an adverse effect on the quality of voter registration in their area, the Government should take enforcement action against them. This could include consideration that this function should be taken from the local authority and handed to a neighbouring local authority which has had greater success. We also recommend that the Government set out the circumstances in which it is prepared to seek a prosecution of any electoral official considered to be in breach of an official duty under the provisions of the 1983 Act and bring forward proposals to amend the law if it is not sufficiently clear. We recognise that the Electoral Commission, Government Departments and EROs have allocated more effort, time and money to ensuring a more complete electoral register for the purpose of IER, to prevent the 5.5 million voters who have not yet been confirmed on to the new electoral registers from dropping off the register. We believe that such rigour should have been shown in the past, and should be shown in future, in order to get the 7.5 million who are not correctly registered to vote at present.*

111. We will monitor how the canvass proceeds in the coming months and hope that increased scrutiny of performance standards will lead to improvements in the completeness and accuracy of the next electoral register. We will report again in the New Year on the 2014/15 canvass.

Freedom of Information requests

112. Only public authorities listed in the Freedom of Information Act 2000 are subject to requests for information under that Act. Although both the Electoral Commission and local authorities are included, Electoral Registration Officers and Returning Officers are

253 Q692 [Jenny Watson]

254 Qq 739-50 [Jenny Watson]

separate legal entities and are not covered—though information they have passed to the Electoral Commission or a local authority would be disclosable by those bodies. In March 2010, the then Minister of Justice stated that “In order to come within the scope of the FOI Act, EROs would need to be designated by a section 5 Order under that Act or through an amendment to the primary legislation.”²⁵⁵

113. When we asked John Turner, Chief Executive of the Association of Electoral Administrators, whether EROs should be subject to the provisions of the Freedom of Information Act, he said:

Our policy is quite plain on this. We advise our members to do exactly the latter thing that you have suggested, writing back and pointing out that, “By law we are not obliged to, but in the spirit of transparency and so on, here is the information”. It is basically public and it is publicly funded, so I do not see any reason why not. The simple answer to your question is, yes, I do believe that EROs and returning officers should be on the FOI list.²⁵⁶

Jenny Watson, Chair of the Electoral Commission, took a similar view, stating:

We would say exactly the same thing—that they should respond as if they were subject to the Freedom of Information Act. I confess I don’t really understand why they are not and whether it is a kind of glitch in the legislation, but we just advise them to act as if they were.²⁵⁷

She went on to say that she thought it would “make things clearer” if EROs were brought formally under the FOI Act.²⁵⁸ John Tomlinson, ERO for Sheffield, told us:

I think that when the Freedom of Information Act was passed it was never in Parliament’s intention that EROs and returning officers would be exempt from Freedom of Information, so perhaps that ought to be addressed so they are included in it. From our own personal perspective, the line that we take when we get Freedom of Information is to first of all point out that we are not subject to that but if we can give the information, we will give it. If we can’t give the information, if there is a legal barrier or we just don’t have it, then we explain why.²⁵⁹

114. When we questioned Sam Gyimah MP, he told us he agreed that the exclusion of EROs from the FOI Act “does seem like an anomaly” and that it was something he was happy to look at. He said:

In terms of how we move forward, officials have discussed bringing EROs under FOI with their counterparts in the Ministry of Justice who have responsibility for Freedom of Information. It appears likely that EROs could

255 Hansard, [col 654W](#), 29 March 2010

256 Q276 [John Turner]

257 Q553 [Jenny Watson]

258 Q554 [Jenny Watson]

259 Q429 [John Tomlinson]

be included through an order [...] and it is something that I am going to look into.²⁶⁰

115. It appears to be an oversight that Electoral Registration Officers, and Returning Officers, are not subject to the provisions of the Freedom of Information Act 2000. EROs and ROs clearly exercise functions of a public nature and it is in the public interest for them to be required to respond to requests for information in the same way as other public authorities. The Committee notes that despite evidence from the Electoral Commission that they would advise EROs to respond to FOI requests as though they were subject to the Act, East Devon District Council has been refusing to respond to requests for information under the FOI Act from members of the public in respect of electoral registration activity.²⁶¹ *We recommend that the Government issue a section 5 Order designating EROs and ROs public authorities for the purpose of the Act. In the meantime, the Electoral Commission should make it clear that it is best practice for EROs to respond to requests for information as though they were subject to the Act.*

The Electoral Commission

116. The Electoral Commission was established in 2001 by the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000. The main duties established by the Act include preparing and publishing a report after each major election on the administration of the election, keeping under review, and reporting to the Secretary of State, on matters including the registration of political parties and the regulation of their income and expenditure, and political advertising in the broadcast and other electronic media, and educating the public about the UK's electoral and democratic systems.²⁶² The Commission lists its main roles and responsibilities on its website as:

- supporting well-run elections and referendums in the UK, offering support and guidance to those involved, and ensuring voters know everything they need to know;
- making sure people understand the rules around political party finance, taking action when the rules are broken and publishing information on political finance.
- maintaining and publishing the registers of political parties in Great Britain and Northern Ireland;
- conducting a wide range of research around elections and referendums, electoral registration and party and election finance;
- running campaigns before elections and referendums to make sure people are aware of when and how to register to vote and anything else they need to know, and

260 Q823 [Sam Gyimah MP]

261 [Letter from an Information and Complaints Officer, East Devon District Council, to Mr Tony Green](#), 4 November 2014

262 [Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000](#)

- carrying out policy work across a range of areas to ensure that the rules around all aspects of elections are as clear and simple as possible and that the interests of voters are always put first.²⁶³

117. The Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 included duties relating to “Education about electoral and democratic systems”, which were intended to provide for the Commission to have a role in encouraging voters’ participation in the democratic process.²⁶⁴ However, in 2006 the Committee on Standards in Public Life recommended that “The Electoral Commission should no longer have the wider statutory duty to encourage participation in the democratic process.”²⁶⁵ The rationale for this was that promoting democratic participation was neither within nor supportive of the Commission’s core tasks, and was more properly a responsibility of political parties. The recommendation was supported by both the Government and Opposition, and as a result the Government stated that the Commission’s duties relating to education about electoral and democratic systems could “be interpreted more narrowly to reflect the restricted remit of the Commission.”²⁶⁶

118. We received a significant amount of evidence on the role the Electoral Commission plays in relation to voter engagement. Several witnesses argued that the Commission could be spending more time looking at how to have “a full, healthy democracy” and “the promotion and encouragement of voting itself”.²⁶⁷ On the Electoral Commission’s role, Jenny Watson told us:

Our efforts focus on providing information about registration and how to vote rather than seeking to drive voter turnout or broader civic engagement [...].I would argue, though, that the work we carry out now plays an important role in engagement by ensuring that voters know how they can play their part and in raising registration levels in advance of elections. More broadly, when it comes to the way elections are run, we are already discussing with our Electoral Advisory Board—that is a group of senior returning officers who advise the Commission—a vision for 21st century electoral administration and that work will continue after the next general election.²⁶⁸

263 [Roles and responsibilities](#), Electoral Commission

264 Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000, [Section 13](#) (and [Explanatory notes](#))

265 [Review of The Electoral Commission](#), Committee in Standards in Public Life, January 2007

266 [The Government Response to the Committee on Standards in Public Life’s Eleventh Report: Review of the Electoral Commission](#), Cm 7272, November 2007

267 Q43 [Glenn Gottfried], Q73 [Professor Dunleavy], Q76 [Jessica Garland]

268 Q517 [Jenny Watson]

She also told us:

We think it is important that people can participate if they want to do so and that they are not prohibited from participating by a lack of information or by not being on the electoral register.²⁶⁹

Supporting others

119. The Electoral Commission also told us about the role it plans to play in supporting other organisations that take an interest in encouraging democratic participation. The written evidence from the Electoral Commission stated: “The Commission is [...] committed to supporting all those who have a role to play in changing people’s engagement with politics, and to doing what we can ourselves to increase participation in elections”.²⁷⁰ Jenny Watson told us:

we will continue to take seriously the implications of declining and low turnout at elections or referendums and to increase the work we do to support organisations and individuals best placed to tackle public disengagement. We do that through a range of routes, some of which is working in partnership with others, some of which might be brokering conversations between civic society groups and electoral registration officers, for example.²⁷¹

Expanding on the issue in a subsequent hearing, she said:

One of the things we are doing from now until the general election around IER and also around the general election campaign is working more closely with a range of different partners. For example, it may be that being told by Citizens Advice that it is important you are registered to vote will have more of an impact. We have a range of partners that we are working with. They have the audiences, we have the voter knowledge, and we are putting that together.²⁷²

Maximising registration

120. The Electoral Commission runs regular public awareness campaigns in the run up to elections encouraging people to register to vote. Details of the campaigns run in recent years have been published in the Official Report in response to parliamentary questions,²⁷³ and the Electoral Commission also submitted written evidence to us in relation to the cost-effectiveness of their public awareness work.²⁷⁴ Ahead of the 2015 general election, the

269 Q545 [Jenny Watson]

270 Written evidence from the Electoral Commission [[VUK 40](#)]

271 Q523 [Jenny Watson]

272 Q725 [Jenny Watson]

273 Electoral Register, [Col 390W](#), 17 March 2014

274 Written evidence from the Electoral Commission [[VUK 88](#)]

Electoral Commission has a target of 1 million registrations. This is a substantial increase on targets for their previous registration campaigns.

121. Although one of the activities the Electoral Commission plans to undertake in the coming years is to maximise registration—through public awareness campaigns and the provision of guidance, templates and tools to EROs—one of the “key success measures” of their current corporate plan is that “Accuracy of the electoral registers improves, and completeness of the registers does not deteriorate”.²⁷⁵ Asked whether this was an ambitious target, Jenny Watson told us:

For this stage of the transition in IER, given that we have consistently said the register should be more accurate and should not be less complete after IER, that is the key success measure for the purposes of this transition. I would expect to see this develop as we go through the life of this corporate plan, which effectively takes us through to 2018-19. For this stage I think it is right, but it is not, on its own, the only thing we are doing and you cannot see that in isolation without seeing that we are also focusing on service voters, overseas electors, maximising registration and individual electoral registration.²⁷⁶

When this point was raised with Rt Hon Greg Clark MP, he told us: “I think that one of the aims of the Commission should be to get people who are not registered to be on the register.”²⁷⁷ Rt Hon Nick Clegg MP, Deputy Prime Minister, also told us: “my opinion and all of our opinions is to be ambitious for the fullest scale of registration possible, and clearly every voter who is unregistered, we should be seeking to make efforts to register them.”²⁷⁸

122. The Electoral Commission’s goal should be that every person eligible to be registered to vote is on the electoral register. Given there are an estimated 7.5 million people not correctly registered to vote, and also millions of British citizens living overseas that are not registered to vote, we welcome the news that the Electoral Commission aims to have one million more voters registered ahead of the 2015 general election. This is a substantial increase on previous targets for registration campaigns.

123. It is disappointing to note that one of the Electoral Commission’s key measures of success for the next five years is that “completeness of the registers does not deteriorate”. Since the level of completeness for the electoral registers is not currently satisfactory, we do not consider it to be a success simply for them to deteriorate no further. *We recommend that the Electoral Commission review its success measures in respect of voter registration and set itself much more challenging measures for the completeness of the electoral register.*

275 [Corporate plan 2014-15 to 2018-19](#), Electoral Commission

276 Q721 [Jenny Watson]

277 Q52 [Rt Hon Greg Clark MP], [The work of the Deputy Prime Minister 2014](#), 9 September 2014

278 Q54 [Rt Hon Nick Clegg MP], [The work of the Deputy Prime Minister 2014](#), 9 September 2014

Plans for the future

124. Jenny Watson told us she thought there was a role for the Electoral Commission in “stimulating wider debate” around issues such as making voting more accessible. Following our oral evidence sessions with the Electoral Commission, we received supplementary written evidence outlining some of the areas the Commission and Electoral Advisory Board (EAB) would be looking at in the future. These included two main strands of possible reform:

- Useful changes to electoral administration processes that could improve efficiency and which could be achieved over the short to medium term. Such changes might include “back-office” and “candidate-facing” processes—for example, the nomination process, the use of electoral management software; training for electoral administration staff.
- More strategic, medium to long term, “voter-facing” changes that could form part of a wider debate about voter participation. This could include consideration of different voting methods, including e-voting and advance voting; improving the electoral registration process; and the counting of votes.²⁷⁹

The Commission stated that “The EAB agreed that prioritisation of issues was necessary and the Commission is now in the process of developing a more specific work plan to be finalised by the end of the year, following further discussion.” The Commission noted that that the EAB had expressed the view that “any potential changes should be considered carefully before being implemented and should ideally be based on sound evidence and proper evaluation.”²⁸⁰

Registration campaigns

125. A number of independent organisations run their own campaigns encouraging people to register to vote and participate at elections, often aimed at particular sections of society. Bite the Ballot focuses on young people, for example, and Operation Black Vote works with Black and Minority Ethnic groups. Alex Robertson, Director of Communications for the Electoral Commission, praised the registration campaigns run by other organisations, stating:

I think the work that Bite the Ballot are doing—and not just them but many other organisations working with young people and other groups—is very effective and very innovative. What they are able to do, by focusing on a very specific audience, is build up a relationship with them and understand what is effective for them.²⁸¹

126. One specific organisation we heard a great deal of praise for was Bite the Ballot. Several of our witnesses spoke enthusiastically about the National Voter Registration Day

279 Written evidence from the Electoral Commission [[VUK 156](#)]

280 Written evidence from the Electoral Commission [[VUK 156](#)]

281 Q568 [Alex Robertson]

campaign they ran on 5 February 2014,²⁸² which led to approximately 25,000 young people being added to the electoral register on a budget of £9,000.²⁸³ Representatives of Bite the Ballot told us that the key to their success had been “inspiration” and “the call to action to the individuals”.²⁸⁴ They also said that with online registration National Voter Registration Day in 2015 should be even more successful, as every tweet or promotional video from the campaign could end with a link to the new online registration page.²⁸⁵

127. Several witnesses highlighted the influence social media could have in registration campaigns and in encouraging people to actually vote.²⁸⁶ Fran O’Leary told us that politicians should look to both Facebook and Twitter to engage with younger voters in particular,²⁸⁷ a view shared by Patrick Brione, from Survation, who told us:

the role of Facebook in campaigning should not be underestimated or underused as a tool. Facebook and the family were important to them whereas traditional newspapers less so.²⁸⁸

Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council told us that they have already “developed a greater usage of social media to make sure that people are aware of the importance to register and also get involved in the process.”²⁸⁹

128. Registration campaigns run by independent organisations such as Bite the Ballot, Operation Black Vote and Mencap are extremely important in supplementing the efforts of electoral officials, and can also be highly cost effective. We welcome the Electoral Commission’s stated intention to work closely with such organisations, and call on the Commission and the Government to support all organisations genuinely concerned with increasing the number of people who are registered to vote.

129. We recommend that, while every day should be a voter registration day, in its response to this Report the Government should set out how it plans to support Bite the Ballot’s National Voter Registration Day 2015, on 5 February 2015. The Electoral Commission, electoral officials, and all public sector organisations should put specific plans in place to take advantage of National Voter Registration Day to make a significant difference to the number of people who are registered to vote ahead of the 2015 general election, and future elections.

282 Q47 [Glenn Gottfried], Q138 [Jessica Garland], Q191 [Toni Pearce], Q568 [Jenny Watson], Q619 [Dr Rebecca Rumbul]

283 [National Voter Registration Day](#), Bite the Ballot

284 Q208 [Michael Sani]

285 Q209 [Oliver Sidorczuk]

286 Written evidence from the International Foundation for Electoral Systems [\[VUK 47\]](#), Lodestone [\[VUK 101\]](#), Professor Susan Banducci and Dr Daniel Stevens [\[VUK 120\]](#)

287 Q496 [Fran O’Leary]

288 Q495 [Patrick Brione]

289 Written evidence from Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council [\[VUK 49\]](#)

Changes to electoral registration

130. We have taken evidence on a number of specific proposals that could make registering to vote more accessible, or otherwise increase registration rates. The specific proposals we have considered most closely are:

- Prompting people to register to vote when they access other public services
- Registering students to vote at schools and colleges
- Letting people register to vote closer to the date of an election

We examine each of these proposals below.

Prompting people to register to vote

131. A number of witnesses argued that there was scope to encourage people to register to vote when they access a wide range of public services—such as registering to pay council tax, or applying for a passport.²⁹⁰ Jessica Garland, Research Officer at the Electoral Reform Society, told us that their research had found that “at least 38% of people felt they would be more likely to register with that sort of encouragement”,²⁹¹ and Fran O’Leary told us that “Lodestone recommends that at every point when voters engage with the council they should be invited to register to vote.”²⁹² Jenny Watson, Chair of the Electoral Commission, agreed that prompting people to register to vote could be effective, telling us there was scope “to think about how the technology that supports individual electoral registration could be used to deliver benefits for voters in the longer term through making it easier for them to register to vote and to be prompted more often to register to vote.”²⁹³ She had previously told us:

when individual electoral registration is running in steady state, it might be possible to use [...] transactions with Government in different ways to encourage people to register, and a wider range of records to identify people who are not on the register and invite them to register.²⁹⁴

She did qualify these statements by saying that “it would be very difficult to see transactions with Government being able to make it easier for voters unless there was a better integrated system.” Most recently, she told us “One of the things that we know needs to change in the system is to have a better ability to interact with people who are moving around more frequently than they used to do.”²⁹⁵ A similar view was expressed by Paul Lankester, ERO for Stratford-on-Avon, who told us there needed to be “a continuing emphasis on trying to

290 Written evidence from the Electoral Reform Society [VUK 17], Dr Toby James [VUK 26], Bite the Ballot [VUK 65], Lodestone [VUK 101], Bite the Ballot [VUK 153]

291 Q134 [Jessica Garland]

292 Q491 [Fran O’Leary]

293 Q602 [Jenny Watson]

294 Q586 [Jenny Watson]

295 Q724 [Jenny Watson]

ensure people, when they move into an area, part of their pack in moving in is, ‘Here is about electoral registration’.”²⁹⁶

132. Toni Pearce told us that the NUS were doing lots of work with EROs and local institutions to “try to integrate the process of enrolment at college or university with the process of registering to vote”. Other occasions when people could be prompted to register to vote include:

- When people receive a National Insurance card;
- When people register to pay council tax, and
- When people register with a doctor or dentist.

Private sector companies could also be encouraged to prompt their customers to register to vote, something that would be particularly effective if people could be prompted to register to vote when they register with a utility company, apply for home insurance or become tenants of a property, as this could be effective in reaching people when they are moving home, a point at which people often cease to be correctly registered to vote.

133. We recommend that in its response to our Report the Government make specific proposals about how people could be prompted to register to vote when they access other public services, particularly those services associated with a change in address, such as registering to pay council tax. The Electoral Commission and EROs should also seek to work with private companies who interact with the public so they can, as part of their corporate responsibilities, prompt those people who are currently not registered to vote to register.

Registration at schools and universities

134. In light of the particularly low registration and participation rates amongst students and young people, several witnesses highlighted the possibility of registering people while they were still in school or college.²⁹⁷ Michael Sani, Managing Director of Bite the Ballot, told us:

We think the Northern Ireland initiative of allowing the local authorities to liaise with schools and public bodies to share information and, where necessary, pre-populate forms is fantastic, and it localises this effort of engagement.²⁹⁸

The written evidence from Bite the Ballot elaborated on this proposal.²⁹⁹ Similarly, Eleanor Thompson, Student Voice Manager at the University of Sheffield Students' Union, told us about plans to invite students to indicate if they wished to register to vote when they

296 Q775 [Paul Lankester]

297 Written evidence from the Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform [VUK 152], Bite the Ballot [VUK 153]

298 Q221 [Michael Sani]

299 Written evidence from Bite the Ballot [VUK 65]

enrolled at University.³⁰⁰ When we mentioned this work to Sam Gyimah MP, he told us: “It is a good idea. We are working with the NUS along the same lines as well, but it is a good idea.”³⁰¹ Professor Jonathan Tonge and Dr Andrew Mycock stated that compulsory registration of 16 and 17 year olds in school or college would help address the particular issue of electoral participation for young people, and would also be a cost-effective way of registering young people.³⁰² Another suggestion was that “EROs should investigate using students’ unions, universities and colleges as venues for polling stations as they are already a central hub for the community.”³⁰³

135. Given the low registration rates amongst young people, there is a strong case for making greater efforts to register 16 to 18 year olds at school and in college—particularly as registration now takes place on an individual basis and can be done, easily, on-line, from school. We particularly ask the Secretary of State for Education to promote this to schools and colleges. EROs also should now be working with schools and colleges to register students, and we recommend that the Electoral Commission explicitly include this action in its performance standards for EROs. This could be integrated with broader citizenship education, and include a discussion about how to register to vote when moving to university or away from home. Successful initiatives developed by EROs and Universities—such as those we heard about in Sheffield—should also be replicated across the country.

Registering closer to the election and election-day registration

136. Currently voters must register at least 11 working days before the date of an election. We examined the possibility of letting people register to vote on the day of an election, an idea which received significant support from those addressing it in their written evidence.³⁰⁴ Professor Dunleavy and Richard Berry, of Democratic Audit, told us they thought election-day registration should be introduced,³⁰⁵ and Jessica Garland, of the Electoral Reform Society, told us: “that is the one reform that has been shown to improve equality of voting most.”³⁰⁶ Dr Toby James told us that in some US states up to 17% of voters registered on the day, although he thought in the UK the figure was likely to be “somewhere in the region of three to six percentage points”, saying that this “is still quite a substantial increase”.³⁰⁷ He also noted that with the introduction of IER, election-day registration might be able to be implemented more easily. The Wales Governance Centre argued that allowing registration on the day of the election would in particular facilitate turnout for young people, stating: “Young people are more likely to wait until the last

300 Q407 [Eleanor Thompson]

301 Q833 [Sam Gyimah MP]

302 Written evidence from Professor Jonathan Tonge and Dr Andrew Mycock [VUK 05]

303 Written evidence from the NUS [VUK 34]

304 Q264 [Paul Lankester], written evidence from Dr Elin Weston and LLB Advanced Constitutional Law students, King’s College London [VUK 33], NUS [VUK 34], Birmingham ‘Success’ Group [VUK 37], Smartmatic Limited [VUK 41], Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council [VUK 49], Bite the Ballot [VUK 65], Lynne Armstrong [VUK 106]

305 Q74 [Professor Dunleavy and Richard Berry]

306 Q132 [Jessica Garland]

307 Q242 [Dr Toby James]

minute to vote, and may not even decide to do so until the day in question, and as a result, often find themselves unable to participate.”³⁰⁸

137. On the other hand, John Turner, Chief Executive of the Association of Electoral Administrators, said that, although there was “potentially scope” for letting people register closer to an election than at present, “If you get to the point of registering on the day, you open up a completely different can of worms”, which he set out in written evidence.³⁰⁹ A written submission from Professor RA Watt also highlighted difficulties around election-day registration, referring to both the risk of fraud, as well as the logistical challenges of processing registrations on election day and then checking them.³¹⁰ Dr Toby James, who considered that there was “a very strong case for making election-day registration a long term policy goal”, also noted implementation challenges that would be involved: that the change would “require funding and carefully managed implementation”.³¹¹ Others, including the Local Government Association, also highlighted the challenges that could be presented by election day registration.³¹²

138. There is persuasive evidence that enabling people to register closer to the date of an election, or on an election day itself, would lead to increased registration rates and turnout at elections. We recommend that in its response to this Report, the Government set out proposals for reducing the number of days between the cut-off date for registration and the election day, with a view to implementing them as soon as possible. We also recommend that the Government set out the steps to achieving by 2020 the objective of allowing eligible electors to register and then vote at the Town Hall or equivalent up to and on the day of an election. We acknowledge the need to consider how to accurately verify registrations made on the day, and to provide any additional resources required by local authorities to implement such a system.

The “open register”

139. There are two electoral registers, one an unedited version—used for electoral purposes by political parties and candidates, and also for other limited purposes specified in law—and an edited, “open” register, that is available to anyone who wants to buy a copy. We have previously recommended that the “open register” be abolished, on the basis that personal details gathered for electoral purposes should not be sold to commercial organisations.³¹³ The evidence we have received more recently has provided further support for the abolition of the open register. The Electoral Commission, and a number of the Electoral Registration Officers we heard from, raised with us the dissatisfaction they considered the public felt with the open register. In order for their details not to be included on the open register, individuals must opt out when they register to vote, or

308 Written evidence from the Wales Governance Centre [\[VUK 15\]](#)

309 Qs 298-9 [John Turner], written evidence from the Association of Electoral Administrators [\[VUK 32\]](#)

310 Written evidence from Professor RA Watt [\[VUK 24\]](#)

311 Written evidence from Dr Toby James [\[VUK 26\]](#)

312 Written evidence from the Local Government Association [\[VUK 70\]](#), I Miller [\[VUK 119\]](#), Andy Tye [\[VUK 84\]](#)

313 Political and Constitutional Reform Committee, Tenth Report of Session 2010–12, [Individual Electoral Registration and Administration](#), HC 1463, November 2011

contact their ERO requesting to be removed. Jenny Watson told us that the wording explaining the open register to voters had been made much clearer following the implementation of IER,³¹⁴ and also told us that “during the passage of the legislation [for IER] we said that we thought the open register should be abolished or, if not abolished, that we should move to a system where people were asked to opt in rather than opt out.”³¹⁵ Paul Lankester, ERO for Stratford-on-Avon, told us that the open register “has probably caused the biggest exercise in complaints I have received in my time of 13 years as an electoral registration officer, 3,000 complaints in the last month from the current canvass, and that is fairly universal from my talking to other electoral registration officers. People do not want to be on that sold register.”³¹⁶ Dr Dave Smith, ERO for Sunderland, also highlighted public dissatisfaction with the open register, stating: “I also think that for the first time people are clear what an open register is and the fact that people are on it rather than electing to go on it or come off it. That is what people are objecting to, that they have not had control of the decision in the first place, and that has been at the front of this.”³¹⁷

140. When the Government responded to our earlier recommendation to abolish the open register, it stated that the issue was “currently under consideration in the context of the wider access regime for the electoral registers”, but has since taken no action.³¹⁸ When we heard from the Minister for the Constitution as part of this inquiry, he told us that he too had received complaints about the open register.³¹⁹

141. We have previously recommended that the edited electoral register—now called the “open register”—should be abolished. We reaffirm this call in the light of the clear and significant public dissatisfaction—which has reached the ears of the Minister for the Constitution—with the sale to private companies of data that electors provide to electoral registration officers to enable them to register to vote. We recommend that the Government take immediate action to abolish the open electoral register before new registers are published. We believe that the full electoral register should continue to be available to political parties and candidates, as it is at present.

314 Q696 [Jenny Watson]

315 Q696 [Jenny Watson]

316 Q775 [Paul Lankester]

317 Q788 [Dr Dave Smith]

318 [Government Response to pre-legislative scrutiny and public consultation on Individual Electoral Registration and amendments to Electoral Administration law](#), HM Government, February 2012

319 Q801 [Sam Gyimah MP]

7 Proposals to improve voter turnout

142. We have heard several proposals for how voter turnout could be increased, and we discuss the most persuasive of these below. Changes we have considered include:

- Automatic registration;
- Modernising electoral administration (for example: weekend voting, voting anywhere, online voting);
- Improving the provision of information about elections;
- Non-partisan “get out the vote” campaigns;
- Citizenship education, and
- Electoral reform.

Automatic registration

143. We have previously recommended that “it would be desirable to identify a system whereby those eligible to vote could be automatically registered”,³²⁰ and we have heard some further arguments that this would be desirable. Dr Maria Sobolewska told us: “Automatic enrolment would be the ideal-world scenario in my mind, but that would be a very costly and very big step in terms of reform.”³²¹ Sheffield for Democracy’s written evidence also called for automatic registration, stating that this could be linked to “something like the National Insurance number”.³²² The Government’s response to our suggestion that automatic registration would be desirable was:

The Committee’s proposal for automatic registration would represent a significant shift away from the present system of elector-led application and voluntary registration, to a system of automaticity with an opt out. Such a system would present a number of issues for the electors. As well as the cultural change this would entail, it would also present potential challenges in terms of ensuring the accuracy of the electoral register and its security against fraud, which would require very careful further consideration.³²³

144. We reaffirm our view that voters should ideally be registered to vote automatically. The fact that the latest parliamentary electoral registers were only 85.9% complete and 86% accurate makes a strong case for a system of automatic registration, which could include the use of the National Insurance number. We recommend that in its response to

320 [Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Bill](#), HC 437, Third Report of Session 2010-11, October 2010

321 Q346 [Dr Maria Sobolewska]

322 Written evidence from Sheffield for Democracy [[VUK 93](#)]

323 [Government response to the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee’s Report on the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Bill](#), Cm 7997, March 2011

this Report the Government clearly set out its view on moving to a system of automatic registration. Such a system could operate alongside Individual Electoral Registration.

Modernising electoral administration

145. There are several ways in which current electoral practices could be modernised to make voting more accessible to the electorate, and we have been told that “the more opportunities provided for individuals to vote, the more likely they are to do so”.³²⁴ Phil Thompson, Research and Evaluation Manager at the Electoral Commission, told us of some views the Electoral Commission had received from the public in a recent opinion survey. The results included:

- 70% of people said they would support weekend voting;
- 65% would support advance voting in some other way so voting would be stretched over a number of days, and
- About 63% of people said they would support the introduction of online voting.³²⁵

Between 2000 and 2007 several electoral modernisation pilot schemes were run across the UK, but none have been run since.³²⁶

Weekend or extended voting

146. Traditionally, elections in the UK are held on Thursdays; the last general election not to be held on a Thursday was on Tuesday 27 October 1931. The Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011 provided for future parliamentary general elections to be held on first Thursday in May in the fifth calendar year following the previous general election. Elsewhere in Europe it is common for elections to be held on the weekend—for the recent elections to the European Parliament, the UK was one of only three countries, the others being the Netherlands and Ireland, out of the 28 involved to hold elections on a weekday. Other countries, including the United States of America, Canada, Denmark, the Netherlands and Ireland hold elections on various weekdays. Several witnesses and written submissions stated that moving elections to the weekend could have a positive impact on voter engagement.³²⁷ Professor Patrick Dunleavy, Co-director of Democratic Audit, told us:

I think if you look across Europe the general pattern is that elections that are held on the weekend have a 10% higher turnout than elections that are held on working days. We think that is a pretty easy win. It has costs in terms of

324 Written evidence from Professor Ailsa Henderson [VUK 38]

325 Q578 [Phil Thompson]

326 Written evidence from the Electoral Commission [VUK 40]

327 Written evidence from the Birmingham ‘Success’ Group [VUK 37], Professor Ailsa Henderson [VUK 38], Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council [VUK 49], Charles Harvey [VUK 138], Dr Nick Anstead and Professor Sonia Livingstone OBE [VUK 149]

higher overtime pay or something like that, but if you were interested in increasing turnout, that would be a useful thing.³²⁸

Dr Toby James told us that “There is clear evidence that if you were to change the day of the election it would bring about an increase in turnout.” He cited research which indicated that holding elections on the weekend could increase turnout by between 6.8 and 10%, stating: “You have some variation in terms of what the research is saying there, but universally the evidence is that one positive effect would be, it seems, that more people would vote on a Sunday.”³²⁹

147. However, not everyone was in favour of holding elections at the weekend. John Turner, Chief Executive of the AEA, told us that he thought moving elections to a non-weekday “might encourage a few more people but I think you are talking about a few more people.” He also said that the previous Government had looked at the proposal and rejected it on the basis of cost and premises available.³³⁰ When the previous Government consulted on weekend voting, they found that a majority (53%) of respondents, and particularly those with a role in running elections (80%), favoured keeping elections on a week day.³³¹

148. A related suggestion was that polling stations could be open for several days, possibly including at least one weekend day.³³² The evidence we received stated that this would increase the opportunities people had to participate at an election. One piece of written evidence, from David Green, took a slightly different view, suggesting that elections continue to be held on a weekday, but that the day be made a public holiday—to enable greater participation. It would be easier to plan for having a general election day on a public holiday in light of the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011, which provided for future elections to be held on the first Thursday in May every five years. Mr Green stated that the intention of making election day a bank holiday would be to “make a national day of voting” so that it was “special”.³³³

149. The idea of a “Democracy Day” fits closely with our view that greater esteem and excitement should return to the electoral process. We recommend that the Government explore further proposals for weekend voting, extending voting and designating election days as public holidays. We acknowledge the resource implications of some of these proposals, particularly for rural communities.

328 Q70 [Professor Dunleavy]

329 Q241 [Dr Toby James]

330 Q300 [John Turner]

331 [Election Day: Weekend Voting](#), Ministry of Justice, March 2010

332 Written evidence from Dr Elin Weston and LLB Advanced Constitutional Law students, King’s College London [\[VUK 33\]](#), Professor Ailsa Henderson [\[VUK 38\]](#), I Miller [\[VUK 119\]](#), Dr Nick Anstead and Professor Sonia Livingstone OBE [\[VUK 149\]](#), Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform [\[VUK 152\]](#)

333 Written evidence from David Green [\[VUK 91\]](#)

Voting anywhere

150. Another suggestion we heard was that of allowing voters to cast their vote at any polling station in their local authority,³³⁴ or anywhere in the country.³³⁵ Jessica Garland, Research Officer at the Electoral Reform Society, told us this was “worth thinking about”,³³⁶ and Dr Toby James also said it would “make a difference”, but noted it would require making changes such as having electronic poll books.³³⁷

Online voting

151. We have received a significant amount of evidence in favour of online voting, whereby voters could cast their vote over the internet. Several submissions from members of the public and civic groups supported the idea, or stated that it would have a positive impact on participation.³³⁸ Others raised concerns about the possibility of fraud, and difficulties around guaranteeing secrecy.³³⁹ Phil Thompson, Research and Evaluation Manager at the Electoral Commission, told us that in a recent survey “half of the people who didn’t vote told us they would have been more likely to vote if they had been able to vote online”,³⁴⁰ and the written evidence from Lodestone also indicated that online voting could be particularly effective at engaging those people who do not currently vote, as their survey of non-voters found that “67% of those who didn’t vote in 2010 said that they would be more likely to vote if they could vote online”.³⁴¹

152. The National Union of Students stated that online voting “presents a good opportunity to ensure that democratic processes better reflect the practices that young people and students already utilise”,³⁴² and Toni Pearce, President of the NUS, also told us: “One of the reasons that online voting is so attractive for me is not just about encouraging young people to vote but the issue of access, particularly for disabled people, for being able to vote.”³⁴³ When we took evidence from the University of Sheffield Students’ Union, we heard about how they had moved to a system of online voting for Union elections in 2009. Online and paper voting were run concurrently in 2009 and 2010, but as few votes had been cast by paper in 2010 elections had been exclusively online since 2011. The impact on turnout had been significant, with an increase in the number of people voting of over 50% in the first year elections were run online, and turnout increasing further with each

334 Written evidence from Dr Elin Weston and LLB Advanced Constitutional Law students, King’s College London [\[VUK 33\]](#), Dr Nick Anstead and Professor Sonia Livingstone OBE [\[VUK 149\]](#)

335 Written evidence from Sheffield for Democracy [\[VUK 93\]](#)

336 Q135 [Jessica Garland]

337 Q239 [Dr Toby James]

338 Written evidence from the Bradford Children in Care Council [\[VUK 02\]](#), Andrew Jones [\[VUK 10\]](#), Democratic Audit [\[VUK 20\]](#), Andy Tye [\[VUK 84\]](#), Lynne Armstrong [\[VUK 106\]](#), I Miller [\[VUK 119\]](#), Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform [\[VUK 152\]](#)

339 Written evidence from RA Watt [\[VUK 24\]](#), Policy Exchange [\[VUK 83\]](#)

340 Q578 [Phil Thompson]

341 Written evidence from Lodestone [\[VUK 101\]](#)

342 Written evidence from the NUS [\[VUK 34\]](#)

343 Q195 [Toni Pearce]

subsequent year. When surveyed, 85% of students at the University of Sheffield said they would be more likely to vote in governmental elections if they were able to do so online.³⁴⁴

153. Dr Toby James told us that online voting was something he could give “lukewarm support” to, as “evidence has not shown it bringing about a major increase in turnout yet”. That said, he also told us that “times are changing and it is something we should certainly keep under review”.³⁴⁵ He did give some suggestions for situations which could encourage greater take up of online voting, when he referred to previous pilots in 2003, stating: “what we did see from those pilots was that where you had internet voting in place in consecutive elections, more people began to use it. If you had internet voting open until the close of the poll, at 10 pm, more and more people would use it.”³⁴⁶ We also received written evidence from Rushmoor Borough Council, which was involved in the previous pilots of online voting, outlining the results of the pilots and suggesting some ways in which future pilots could be improved. Their experience was that online voting did not meet their targets for increasing turnout, but was generally received positively by people who used the system.³⁴⁷

154. Concerns we heard about online voting centred on risks of electoral fraud and problems in guaranteeing secrecy of the ballot. Professor RA Watt stated that “new (i.e. digital technologies) are not suitable for introduction into the remote voting (unsupervised, out of polling station) environment” as there would be issues around fraud and the secrecy of the ballot if people were allowed to vote digitally outside of a polling station.³⁴⁸ A written submission from Policy Exchange stated that online voting could trivialise elections, and that it was also “arguably [...] inconsistent with the core principle of the secret ballot.”³⁴⁹

155. In terms of how online voting could be taken forward, Democratic Audit told us:

We think we should definitely have a sustained, serious experiment of using online voting on a larger scale than has been tried before.³⁵⁰

Fran O’Leary told us:

we believe that there should be closer interaction between Government, industry and academics to ensure that any internet voting systems that are developed are safe, secure and economical.³⁵¹

However, it does not appear that the current Government are planning to implement changes such as online voting. When we questioned Sam Gyimah MP about various proposals that might improve voter participation, he told us:

344 Written evidence from the University of Sheffield Students’ Union [\[VUK 86\]](#)

345 Q231 [Dr Toby James]

346 Q239 [Dr Toby James]

347 Written evidence from Rushmoor Borough Council [\[VUK 123\]](#)

348 Written evidence from Professor RA Watt [\[VUK 24\]](#)

349 Written evidence from Policy Exchange [\[VUK 83\]](#)

350 Q70 [Professor Dunleavy]

351 Q491 [Fran O’Leary]

Looking at the options that are there, you have widening the franchise, electronic voting, weekend voting, all of these have been suggested a number of times over the years. In my view there are more downsides than upsides.

[...]

There are some good arguments for them but I think at the moment the downsides outweigh the upsides, but then you would not have talked about online registration 10 years ago so you never know, their time may come.³⁵²

156. Online voting is a proposal for increasing levels of participation that has received strongest support from our witnesses, although support has not been unanimous. Enabling electors to cast their vote online if they choose to do so would make voting significantly more accessible. In light of the move to IER, and the already high take up of postal voting, there is scope for giving online voting further consideration, although this would need to be balanced with concerns about electoral fraud and secrecy of the ballot. We believe that online voting could lead to a substantial increase in the level of participation at UK elections, and we recommend that the Government should come forward with an assessment of the challenges and likely impact on turnout, and run pilots in the next Parliament with a view to all electors having the choice of voting online at the 2020 general election.

Postal voting

157. In Great Britain, anyone can apply to vote by post—separate arrangements apply in Northern Ireland. A number of submissions noted the high levels of participation from people using postal votes,³⁵³ although others raised concerns about security and secrecy.³⁵⁴ In the 2010 general election 5.5 million valid postal votes were received, representing just over 18% of the total number of votes cast.³⁵⁵ The percentage of the electorate issued with a postal vote increased from 4% in 2001 to 15% in 2010. Turnout rates were higher at the general election for people voting by postal ballot, with 83% of people who were sent a postal ballot voting, compared with 63% of those who had to vote at a polling station. 96% of electors who have postal votes in the Tatton Constituency voted at the last general election, the highest proportion in the country.³⁵⁶ Of the 15% of electors who voted in the Police and Crime Commissioners election almost half of these were postal voters.³⁵⁷ Of the 14% of electors who voted in the recent South Yorkshire by election only 3% voted in the polling station and 11% by postal voting.³⁵⁸

352 Qq 837, 839 [Sam Gyimah MP]

353 Written evidence from Professor Andrew Russell [VUK 25], Dr Nick Anstead and Professor Sonia Livingstone [VUK 149]

354 Written evidence from Hugh Eveleigh [VUK 01], Unlock Democracy [VUK 18], Professor RA Watt [VUK 24], Professor Stephen D Fisher [VUK 35], Policy Exchange [VUK 83], David Green [VUK 91], Dr Nick Anstead and Professor Sonia Livingstone [VUK 149]

355 [Report on the administration of the 2010 general election](#), Electoral Commission, July 2010

356 [UK General Election 2010 data](#), Electoral Commission, May 2010

357 [Police and Crime Commissioner elections in England and Wales](#), Electoral Commission, March 2013

358 [Labour win South Yorkshire police commissioner poll](#), BBC News, 31 October 2014

158. As part of the transition to Individual Electoral Registration, voters with existing postal votes who are matched as part of the confirmation process or register individually will keep the postal vote, but otherwise will lose their postal vote entitlement at the conclusion of the 2014 canvass. Any voter that loses their entitlement to a postal vote will still be able to vote in a polling station.³⁵⁹ 93% of postal voters were confirmed on the electoral register following data matching, and so will retain their postal vote entitlement without having to take further action.³⁶⁰

159. The extension of the postal vote has been a success and those who choose to vote by post should be facilitated to do so. The Committee recognises the importance of postal voting in increasing democratic participation and calls upon political parties, Electoral Registration Officers, the Electoral Commission and the Government to make postal voting more accessible. We note with concern that under the transitional arrangements for IER, almost half a million postal voters who were not confirmed automatically will lose their entitlement to a postal vote if they do not register under the new system.

All-postal voting

160. Voting at elections exclusively by postal ballot was piloted in England from 2000 to 2004. The Local Government Association found from the 2000 pilots that postal voting was the only new electoral arrangement to have significant potential for increasing local election turnout,³⁶¹ and the Electoral Commission stated that all-postal voting increased turnout significantly in some places, but that performance differed from area to area.³⁶² The Electoral Commission told us:

Following the largest all-postal voting pilot schemes across four English electoral regions at the 2004 local government and European parliament elections, we noted that turnout had been just over five percentage points higher in those regions with all-postal voting than in regions where postal voting was available on demand in addition to polling stations. We also found, however, strong public support for retaining the ability for people to choose to vote in person at a polling station, and therefore recommended that all-postal voting should not be pursued for use at future UK statutory elections.³⁶³

161. We recommend that further trials of all-postal voting in elections should be held.

Conclusion

162. Given its importance to our democracy we feel that there is a need to revisit electoral administration on the basis of convenience for electors and no other interest.

359 [Individual Electoral Registration guidance: Part 5 – Absent voting](#), Electoral Commission, September 2013

360 [Analysis of the confirmation live run in England and Wales](#), Electoral Commission, October 2014

361 Elections – the 21st Century Model: an evaluation of May 2000 local electoral pilots, Local Government Association

362 Modernising Elections A Strategic Evaluation of the 2002 Pilot Schemes, Electoral Commission, August 2002

363 Written evidence from the Electoral Commission [[VUK 40](#)]

Several changes, which have in the past been of academic interest, including online voting, holding elections on weekends or over several days, having a “Democracy Day” public holiday for voting, letting voters cast their vote anywhere in their constituency and having all-postal votes, are now measures which need to be considered in the context of improving voter participation. There is compelling evidence that some of these changes could have a substantial, positive impact on the levels of voter participation. Particularly if taken together, these changes could demonstrate that “the powers that be” are serious about voter engagement. *We recommend that the Government, working with the Electoral Commission and EROs, bring forward a package of reforms to electoral arrangements to increase accessibility and turnout, and establish a series of pilots early in the next Parliament to test the various proposals that we have considered, with a view to making permanent changes to electoral arrangements by 2020.*

Public awareness and the provision of information

163. We received a great deal of evidence highlighting problems with the provision of information and promotion of public awareness to electors, and calling for improvements to be made. One of the main points Democratic Audit highlighted in their evidence to us was that the “information provided to UK voters is insufficient”.³⁶⁴ Unlock Democracy Birmingham highlighted similar concerns, stating in their written evidence: “many members of the public do not feel they have enough information about the elections to cast their vote effectively”.³⁶⁵ Fran O’Leary, Director of Strategy and Innovation at Lodestone, told us she had been struck by the number of people she had spoken to who “don’t really know how to get on the register”, and that is “not because they are not enthused about the world, it is that they do not know about the system”.³⁶⁶ Jenny Watson, Chair of the Electoral Commission, highlighted lack of awareness as having played a significant role in relation to voter turnout for the Police and Crime Commissioner elections. She told us that 37% of the people that did not vote in those elections gave a reason for not voting that related to a lack of awareness. She also told us that at the local elections in May 2014, only 63% of people felt they had enough information to make an informed choice. She felt there was “enough evidence there to be clear that lack of awareness was a significant factor at the elections”.³⁶⁷

164. Several witnesses and written submissions argued that it should be possible to provide more and better information to voters, particularly in light of new technology.³⁶⁸ Democratic Audit, in particular, have called for better information about elections and candidates, and for past results to be made more accessible.³⁶⁹ Professor Patrick Dunleavy argued that there should be a phone or tablet app that “provides as much information as it

364 Written evidence from Democratic Audit [[VUK 20](#)]

365 Written evidence from Unlock Democracy Birmingham [[VUK 143](#)]

366 Q492 [Fran O’Leary]

367 Q565 [Jenny Watson]

368 Written evidence from Andy Tye [[VUK 84](#)]

369 Q57 [Professor Dunleavy]

can to make participation attractive.”³⁷⁰ The Wales Governance Centre made a similar suggestion, stating: “The development and use of mobile apps by both parties and the institutions of government should be a priority in engaging young people in politics and voting.”³⁷¹ Some other possibilities for improving the provision of information to voters include:

- “Voting advice applications”—online election quizzes which help users find the party that is closest to their political views;³⁷²
- “An online forum to enable members of the public to ask the candidates questions during the lead up to a general election”;³⁷³
- “a weekly email from the local Council” to registered voters, and³⁷⁴
- Better advertising of elections on the day.³⁷⁵

Lodestone asked a sample of those who did not vote in the 2010 general election what would be most likely to persuade them to vote in a UK general election, and over 10% of respondents highlighted factors relating to information, including:

- “16% of people saying receiving a leaflet;
- 12% saying a personal visit from a candidate;
- 12% saying more information as to how and where you can vote;
- 11% saying more information on how to get a postal vote, and
- 6% of people saying receiving an email from a candidate.”³⁷⁶

165. There is demand for an improvement in the level and quality of information available to voters, and scope to improve delivery, particularly through new technology such as apps and social media. New technology could also be used to promote public awareness of elections. Some ideas—such as voting advice applications designed to tell voters which parties most closely represent their views—would need to be taken forward by independent organisations, but others could be pursued by the Government or the Electoral Commission.

166. We recommend that the Government discuss with the Electoral Commission and include in its response to this Report details of arrangements that are currently in place to

370 Q67 [Professor Dunleavy]

371 Written evidence from the Wales Governance Centre [VUK 15]

372 [Voting advice applications promote political engagement and an informed electorate](#), LSE, 20 May 2014, written evidence from Unlock Democracy [VUK 18]

373 Written evidence from Thomas Quinton [VUK 163]

374 Written evidence from Cybersalon.org [VUK 29]

375 Written evidence from J R Attar [VUK 89]

376 Written evidence from Lodestone [VUK 101]

provide information to the public about elections and registering to vote, and bring forward proposals for the effective use of new technology to better inform the public and increase awareness of elections. This could include having a central source of information about election results, and better advertising of elections on the day. The Government and Electoral Commission should also examine the changes which can be made to provide more and better information to voters, and should actively support the work of outside organisations working to similar goals.

167. Both the Government and Parliament, and not least select committees, can be even more innovative about the way they engage with the public, enhancing not superseding our representative democracy. We note that the Speaker’s Commission on Digital Democracy is looking at proposals in these areas.

‘Get out the vote’ campaigns

168. In addition to campaigns encouraging people to register, campaigns encouraging people to vote—both non-partisan campaigns and those run by political parties—can have a positive impact on voter participation. Professor Peter John, of University College London, outlined research that showed that contacting people in person, by telephone, or by mailshot, encouraging them to vote could have positive effects on turnout,³⁷⁷ and that there were also positive effects for turnout in subsequent elections, even when there was no further intervention. A submission from four academics argued that “party campaigning could be an important part of the solution to low turnout in UK elections”, but noted that parties will always focus their campaigning in areas where increased votes are likely to provide an electoral advantage, rather than campaigning equally across the country.³⁷⁸ Professor Susan Banducci told us that “information and visibility enhances people’s sense of engagement in the campaign, and that motivates them to vote.”³⁷⁹

169. One suggestion to come out of our informal Outreach event, on which we subsequently received written evidence, was that there be “some kind of pin-on token, which voters could choose to wear when they have voted”, so as to make voting “feel more social”.³⁸⁰ On a similar point, but in the realm of social media, Dr Rebecca Rumbul from the Wales Governance Centre, told us that “positive, small things, such as putting an “I voted” button on Facebook and having reminders, and seeing that your friends voted, made a significant difference in voter turnout among that younger age group.”³⁸¹

Citizenship education

170. The importance of providing effective citizenship education to young people was a theme highlighted as essential to improving voter engagement in much of the evidence we

377 Written evidence from Professor Peter John [\[VUK 16\]](#)

378 Written evidence submitted by Charles Pattie, Ron Johnston, David Cutts, and Laura Palfreyman [\[VUK 19\]](#)

379 Q644 [Professor Susan Banducci]

380 Written evidence from Michael Andrews [\[VUK 96\]](#)

381 Q633 [Dr Rebecca Rumbul]

received.³⁸² Suggestions for how citizenship education related to voter engagement fell into two main categories:

- That citizenship education should cover the importance of voting, and³⁸³
- That citizenship education should cover the practicalities of registering to vote and participating in elections,³⁸⁴ and also how to engage with politics more broadly.³⁸⁵

Professor Matt Flinders argued that it was only through citizenship education that the broader question of political disengagement could be addressed.³⁸⁶ Toni Pearce, President of the NUS, also highlighted the need to impart understanding of how to vote and the importance of voting to young people, stating:

Citizenship education and just fundamental understanding of how voting works and what it means to vote and what it will be, what the physical act of voting is, doesn't get talked about and that is a real problem.³⁸⁷

Michael Sani, Managing Director of Bite the Ballot, told us that it was important to start early with the process of teaching young people about voting:

You might not see the results of our work for a decade, but what an exciting time when these 14-year-olds hit 24. At 16 they felt empowered to register to vote, and at 18 they were waiting to vote and play an active role, not just once at every election but in between, going through the communication channels to the right people to voice their views and take a stake in their society. It could be wonderful for our country.³⁸⁸

171. Ruth Fox, Director of the Hansard Society, thought that the focus on voting as being “about people participating and what they get out of it” was quite worrying, and “what might be more effective is focusing on the citizen duty element of it instead”.³⁸⁹ The New Citizenship Project, a think tank that focuses on participatory society, also argued that more should be done to actively promote the “Citizen identity” as a way of increasing public engagement with elections.³⁹⁰ One suggestion of how the focus on citizenship could be applied was that a “citizenship ceremony” be held where newly eligible voters were

382 Written evidence from Dr Kaat Smets [\[VUK 21\]](#), Myplace Project [\[VUK 23\]](#), Mark Ryan [\[VUK 31\]](#), Dr Elin Weston and LLB Advanced Constitutional Law students, King's College London [\[VUK 33\]](#), Keith Best [\[VUK 117\]](#), Gary Stewart [\[VUK 118\]](#), Bite the Ballot [\[VUK 153\]](#)

383 Written evidence from the Bradford Children in Care Council [\[VUK 02\]](#)

384 Written evidence from Dr Elin Weston and LLB Advanced Constitutional Law students, King's College London [\[VUK 33\]](#)

385 Written evidence from Democracy Matters [\[VUK 112\]](#)

386 Written evidence from Professor Matt Flinders [\[VUK 06\]](#)

387 Q184 [Toni Pearce]

388 Q222 [Michael Sani]

389 Q83 [Ruth Fox]

390 Written evidence from New Citizenship Project [\[VUK 155\]](#)

presented with a certificate to commemorate their becoming able to participate at elections.³⁹¹

172. Effective citizenship education is an important part of the process of becoming an engaged voter, and should continue to be a part of the national curriculum. We recommend that the Department for Education ensure that schools' citizenship education courses specifically include discussion of the political and governmental structures of the UK and the electoral systems that operate in the UK, and also the practicalities of registering to vote and actually participating at an election. We expect that Department to respond to this report to indicate progress in this area.

Electoral reform

173. Several witnesses and written submissions proposed more substantial reforms to electoral arrangements, or the franchise. Changes to the UK electoral system that were proposed included:

- Compulsory voting (including just for first-time voters);
- Reducing the voting age, and
- Changing the First Past the Post electoral system.³⁹²

Compulsory voting

174. International experience shows that making voting compulsory results in consistently high election turnout. Countries such as Australia and Luxembourg, which have compulsory voting, have had turnout figures of over 90% for recent general elections, significantly higher than turnout for any UK election in decades. A number of our written submissions stated that there was a case for considering compulsory voting,³⁹³ noting that it would have a substantial positive impact on turnout. One argument we heard in favour of compulsory voting was that it was “the only way to ensure that there is no inequality in turnout”.³⁹⁴ Others opposed compulsory voting stating that it would treat the symptom—low turnout—rather than the underlying problem—why people don't vote.³⁹⁵ A written submission from Dr Nick Anstead and Professor Sonia Livingstone also noted that “compulsory voting would be politically very difficult to introduce in a country where it has no precedent.”³⁹⁶

391 Written evidence from David Green [VUK 91]

392 Written evidence from Mark Ryan [VUK 31], Dr Elin Weston and LLB Advanced Constitutional Law students, King's College London [VUK 33], David H Smith [VUK 59], Morgan Dalton [VUK 75]

393 Written evidence from Professor Stephen D Fisher [VUK 35], Birmingham 'Success' Group [VUK 37], Michael Yates [VUK 53], Malcolm Morrison [VUK 68], Liam Hardy [VUK 109], I Miller [VUK 119]

394 Q35 [Glenn Gottfried]

395 Written evidence from Nota UK [VUK 61], STV Action [VUK 114]

396 Written evidence from Dr Nick Anstead and Professor Sonia Livingstone [VUK 149]

175. A specific proposal that was made to us by the IPPR was that voting should be made compulsory for first-time voters. Their proposal was that “young people who are eligible at their first election to vote will be required to go out and vote” so that “they develop this habit and they will do so at subsequent elections.”³⁹⁷ The written evidence submitted by the IPPR stated that this would “go a significant way toward breaking the habit of non-voting that often gets passed from generation to generation, and could have a substantial and lasting impact on turnout.”³⁹⁸ A similar proposal was suggested by Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council—stating that voting should be compulsory for 16-18 year olds.³⁹⁹ Glenn Gottfried told us he believed that making voting compulsory for first time voters “will help alleviate the problem of turnout over time.” However, several witnesses opposed treating first-time voters differently from other people.⁴⁰⁰

176. A number of written submissions recommended that there be an option for “none of the above” on the ballot paper if voting were made compulsory—so that people were not compelled to vote for one of the candidates standing for election—and others supported the option of voting formally for “none of the above” on the ballot paper, whether voting was compulsory or not.⁴⁰¹ A written submission from Nota UK stated that being able to vote for “none of the above” would allow people to actively withhold consent from the parties standing for election.⁴⁰² Being able to vote for none of the above was the most popular choice by 38 Degrees members in their survey of “What would make you more likely to vote in the 2015 General Election?”, picked by over 18,000 of the 84,000 respondents.⁴⁰³

177. International experience demonstrates conclusively that making voting a mandatory civic duty ensures that the vast majority of eligible voters participate in elections. Making voting compulsory is not the sole solution to voter engagement or to political engagement more broadly. Some members of the Committee believe there is now a strong case for including it in a package of measures to meet the threat of disengagement, though provision for those who wish not to take part should be respected by including an abstention provision on the ballot. However, other members believe that voting should not, as a matter of principle, be made compulsory, and that people should be free not to participate at elections if they so choose. We recommend that the Government report to the House setting out how a system of compulsory voting could operate in the UK, including an assessment of international experience, and an assessment of whether voting should only be compulsory for certain types of election. This would mark the start of a public debate. If the 2015 Parliament were to agree, compulsory

397 Q35 [Glenn Gottfried]

398 Written evidence from the IPPR [VUK 14]

399 Written evidence from Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council [VUK 49]

400 Q62 [Professor Dunleavy], Q104 [Hansard Society], Q113 [Jessica Garland], Q204 [Toni Pearce]

401 Q377 [Nigel Slack], written evidence from 38 Degrees [VUK 50], Michael Yates [VUK 53], Nota UK [VUK 61], Malcolm Morrison [VUK 68], I Miller [VUK 119]

402 Written evidence from Nota UK [VUK 61]

403 Written evidence from 38 Degrees [VUK 50]

voting could operate at the following general election. If Parliament did not agree the current system would continue.

178. *We recommend that, in the event that voting in certain elections is made compulsory, an option to vote “none of the above” or to “abstain” should be one of the options set out. These options could also be included even if voting were not compulsory.*

Alternative electoral systems

179. The written evidence from the Electoral Reform Society stated: “The results of UK general elections have become increasingly disproportional in the translation of votes to seats, and produce majorities far in excess of votes received”, and goes on to say that “Without changing the voting system [...] the culture of politics at Westminster is unlikely to change.”⁴⁰⁴ A significant number of submissions called for the implementation of some form of the Single Transferable Vote (STV) system,⁴⁰⁵ where voters rank candidates so that results can more closely reflect the preferences of voters. STV Action, a group dedicated to campaigning for use of the Single Transferable Vote election system (STV) for all public elections in the UK, stated that STV would allow voters to “vote positively for named candidates” and make votes “more positive”.⁴⁰⁶ That said, we noted earlier the benefits that some people have argued the First Past the Post voting system provides. Of those calling for STV, many stated that it should be used initially for local government elections.

180. Other submissions did not favour particular reforms, but recommended there be greater public debate about possible changes to the electoral system.⁴⁰⁷ For example, Dr Stephen Barber stated that an “independent, intelligent, evidenced, public debate about the merits and demerits of alternative systems set in the terms of engagement can only be a positive discussion.”⁴⁰⁸ Unlock Democracy stated that there is “significant evidence that more proportional voting systems are linked with higher turnout (3-7%)”.⁴⁰⁹ A number of other submissions also called for an electoral system that was more proportional than First Past the Post, or noted that such systems were shown to increase turnout.⁴¹⁰ Other electoral systems were also suggested.⁴¹¹

404 Written evidence from Electoral Reform Society [\[VUK 17\]](#)

405 Written evidence from Ian Sheppard [\[VUK 51\]](#), Thomas G F Gray [\[VUK 67\]](#), Malcolm Morrison [\[VUK 68\]](#), Richard Lung [\[VUK 77\]](#), Peter Ivorson [\[VUK 79\]](#), David Green [\[VUK 91\]](#), Dr David Hill [\[VUK 99\]](#), Anthony Tuffin [\[VUK 105\]](#), Canon Michael Hodge [\[VUK 108\]](#), Colin Buchanan [\[VUK 110\]](#), Arthur C James [\[VUK 111\]](#), Keith Underhill [\[VUK 113\]](#), STV Action [\[VUK 114\]](#), Make Votes Count in West Sussex [\[VUK 115\]](#), Keith Best [\[VUK 117\]](#), John E Strafford [\[VUK 134\]](#), Michael Meadowcroft [\[VUK 135\]](#), Brian Wichmann [\[VUK 145\]](#), Dr AEL Davis [\[VUK 147\]](#)

406 Written evidence from STV Action [\[VUK 114\]](#), Make Votes Count in West Sussex [\[VUK 115\]](#)

407 Written evidence from 4 Freedoms Party (UK EPP)/British Committee of the European People’s Party [\[VUK 146\]](#)

408 Written evidence from Dr Stephen Barber [\[VUK 12\]](#)

409 Written evidence from Unlock Democracy [\[VUK 18\]](#)

410 Written evidence from Dr Elin Weston and LLB Advanced Constitutional Law students, King’s College London [\[VUK 33\]](#), Professor Stephen D Fisher [\[VUK 35\]](#), Sheffield for Democracy [\[VUK 93\]](#) and [\[VUK 124\]](#), Lynne Armstrong [\[VUK 106\]](#), John E Strafford [\[VUK 134\]](#), Unlock Democracy Birmingham [\[VUK 143\]](#), David Bernard [\[VUK 144\]](#)

411 Written evidence from Tim Knight [\[VUK 69\]](#) and [\[VUK 131\]](#)

181. Westminster has a settled view on First Past the Post. The more that centralisation gives way to devolution, the more that electors at the level of the nations, regions or localities will wish to exercise choice over their electoral systems. We accept that democratic institutions outside Whitehall, be they Parliaments, Assemblies or institutions in localities, will increasingly be the place where the debate about their own electoral systems should take place and be decided and that this will have a positive impact on engagement and participation.

Reducing the voting age to 16

182. Only people aged 18 and over are eligible to vote in UK elections, although people aged 16 and 17 are able to register to vote if they will turn 18 during the period the register is in force. 16 and 17 year olds were allowed to vote in the UK for the first time in the referendum on Scottish independence, held on 18 September 2014. Turnout for the referendum as a whole was 84.6%, though data on how many 16 and 17 year olds voted at the referendum is not available.

183. Several of our witnesses argued in favour of extending the vote to 16 and 17 year olds. Professor Sarah Birch and Professor Paul Whitely stated that research on extending the franchise to 16 and 17 year olds suggested that it would be likely to increase youth turnout in the short term, and could also increase overall turnout in the medium to long term.⁴¹² We also received a written submission from the Hon Stephen Charles Rodan SHK, Speaker of the House of Keys, Isle of Man, where the franchise was extended to 16 and 17 year olds in 2011. The experience in the Isle of Man was that 35% of eligible 16 and 17 year olds registered to vote, and turnout of the registered voters at the next election was 60.2%—very close to the turnout figure for the electorate as a whole. The rate of registration for this age group had since risen to 60.1%. The Speaker of the House of Keys stated that he remains “firmly of the view that 16-year-olds should be entitled to vote as a matter of principle in any case”, and also notes that many Keys candidates now make reference to young peoples’ issues in their manifestos, and he says it is arguable whether this would have been the case if the voting age had remained 18.⁴¹³

184. A written submission from Harry Barnes, a former MP, also argued in favour of extending the franchise to 16 and 17 year olds on the basis that this would make it much easier to achieve almost 100% registration rates of those people who would become eligible to vote during the period an electoral register was in force, by registering them at school.⁴¹⁴ The Electoral Reform Society took a similar view, stating that “Early registration should be implemented alongside lowering the voting age to 16”, as this would “allow a seamless transition from learning about voting, elections and democracy to putting such knowledge into practice”.⁴¹⁵ Extending the franchise to 16 and 17 year olds was also supported by

412 Written evidence from Professors Sarah Birch and Paul Whitely [VUK 08]

413 Written evidence from Hon Stephen Charles Rodan SHK, Speaker of the House of Keys, Isle of Man [VUK 90]

414 Written evidence from Harry Barnes [VUK 13]

415 Written evidence from the Electoral Reform Society [VUK 17]

Democratic Audit,⁴¹⁶ the NUS,⁴¹⁷ Dr Elin Weston and LLB Advanced Constitutional Law students at King's College London,⁴¹⁸ and the Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform.⁴¹⁹

185. Professor Jonathan Tonge and Dr Andrew Mycock made the point that because voting is habit forming, if the franchise were extended to 16 and 17 year olds, it would be important that they actually exercise their right to vote. To that end, they stated that consideration needed to be given to the broader question of political literacy of young people when considering extending the franchise.⁴²⁰

186. We have received a significant amount of evidence that extending the franchise to 16 and 17 year olds could have a positive impact not just on voter engagement for young people, but also on voter engagement overall in the medium to long term. We as a Committee take no view on whether the franchise should be extended, but recommend that Parliament leads a national discussion on this matter and that a motion on the issue is brought forward in 2015 to allow the House of Commons a free vote on its view, with a view to the introduction of legislation if appropriate.

416 Written evidence from Democratic Audit [[VUK 20](#)]

417 Written evidence from the NUS [[VUK 34](#)]

418 Dr Elin Weston and LLB Advanced Constitutional Law students, King's College London [[VUK 33](#)]

419 Written evidence from the Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform [[VUK 152](#)]

420 Written evidence from Professor Jonathan Tonge and Dr Andrew Mycock [[VUK 05](#)]

8 Conclusion

187. A significant reason for low levels of engagement with elections in the UK is broader dissatisfaction with the UK's political culture. This cannot be resolved by moving elections to the weekend, or making it possible for people to vote on their mobile phone. Many witnesses have argued that, although certain specific proposals will have a positive effect on registration rates and levels of voter turnout, the broader question of voter engagement requires a deeper and more long-term response.⁴²¹ Will Brett, Head of Media at the Electoral Reform Society, told us:

We need a combination of public policy, institutional reform and cultural change, all driven by a relentless focus on what will re-engage the public in politics.⁴²²

Similarly, the Association of Electoral Administrators believed that:

voter turnout is largely a political matter and that logistical or administrative changes are unlikely to have a significant effect on increasing turnout.⁴²³

Unlock Democracy stated:

Low turnout is fundamentally a political, not an administrative problem. If voters do not believe that their vote will make a difference, or that there is a genuine choice, they will continue to shun the ballot box. The remedy for low turnout must be a serious programme of political reform designed to reconnect politics with the electorate.⁴²⁴

Sheffield for Democracy stated that there was no “silver bullet” solution to the current issues around voter engagement and broader political engagement, but that the central issue was one of trust—in the electoral system, in parties and in politicians.⁴²⁵

188. The recent referendum on independence for Scotland, where turnout was 84.6%,⁴²⁶ showed that there is clearly scope for greater levels of participation at the polls. The Electoral Commission noted the significance of the referendum in a written submission to us, which stated: “as we have seen in Scotland, when voters are enthused by an issue or campaign, they retain the capacity to turnout and engage in the electoral process in record numbers.”⁴²⁷ This is a lesson that needs to be applied to other elections if voter engagement is to improve.

421 Written evidence from Professor Matt Flinders [\[VUK 06\]](#)

422 Q107 [Will Brett]

423 Written evidence from the Association of Electoral Administrators [\[VUK 32\]](#)

424 Written evidence from Unlock Democracy [\[VUK 18\]](#)

425 Written evidence from Sheffield for Democracy [\[VUK 93\]](#)

426 [Scottish independence referendum](#), Electoral Management Board for Scotland

427 Written evidence from the Electoral Commission [\[VUK 156\]](#)

189. When we spoke to the Minister for the Constitution about what needed to be done to improve voter engagement, he told us:

In my view, government, politicians, electoral administrators and civil society all have a role to play in engaging people in our democracy. As the Government specifically, I see the responsibility as ensuring that the structures and mechanisms are in place to enable people to participate in the democratic process. We are committed to ensuring that everyone who is eligible to do so has the opportunity to register to vote.⁴²⁸

He went on to say:

There is no one quick fix. If there was we would have implemented this already. That is why our plan to engage voters involves politicians and civil society organisations but also involves organisations like UK Youth and Scotland Youth who have a national reach and can engage young people, not to mention some other innovative organisations like Bite the Ballot who we have been working with. So there is no quick fix to this. You are absolutely right to say that in a democracy as old as ours we should be expecting higher levels of voter engagement and participation, and it is incumbent on all of us to make sure that we help deal with it.⁴²⁹

190. We have outlined a number of proposals that we believe could have a positive effect on voter engagement, in terms of both registration rates and turnout at elections, but there is no single change that will suddenly re-engage the electorate. The problem of low voter engagement is to a large extent a manifestation of broader political disengagement and dissatisfaction with politics in the UK. The recent referendum on independence for Scotland, where 84.5% of the registered electorate turned out, shows that people will vote if they are engaged and believe their vote will contribute to making a difference, but substantial cultural and structural changes are necessary to convince the public that registering to vote and participating at other elections is worthwhile. This work must go hand in hand with renewing the public's faith in the UK's political institutions. This is a task that requires the support of political parties, individual politicians, electoral administrators and the Government. On the broader issues there may also be scope for the establishment of a new forum—such as a Commission for Democracy—specifically to address these issues over the long term.

191. Political parties, individual politicians and the Government must take action to re-engage the electorate. We call on each political party to include plans in its manifesto for the 2015 general election for improving voter engagement—in terms of voter registration and turnout—as well as how they will work to rebuild the trust of the public in politics more broadly. Specific proposals that should be considered for inclusion in party manifestos include:

428 Q793 [Sam Gyimah MP]

429 Q805 [Sam Gyimah MP]

- *The civic and legal duty of all citizens to register to vote*
- *Registering to vote closer up to or on the day of an election*
- *Online voting*
- *Extended or weekend voting, or a public holiday for voting*
- *Compulsory voting*
- *All-postal voting*
- *Extending the franchise to 16 and 17 year olds*

192. With the date of the next, and future elections, set out in the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011, it is possible for the Government and other political parties to consider what plans they wish to make in this area and consult with the Civil Service on them so they are ready for implementation immediately after the general election.

193. Throughout this inquiry we have made a particular effort to take into account the views of the public, and the evidence we have received from individual members of the public. It is now for the public to dictate to the parties what changes they expect to be implemented after the next general election. This should be done throughout the election period and—crucially—at the ballot box.

Conclusions and recommendations

A chance to engage

1. We believe that improving voter engagement is crucial to the long term well-being of democracy in the UK. Unusually, therefore, the following Report is an interim report—a draft—for public consideration, rather than the Committee’s final word on the issue of voter engagement. Appropriately, we publish it in the annual Parliament Week since we wish it to be subject to wider discussion involving all those who care about the UK’s democracy, including all those who submitted evidence to the Committee. All of our draft recommendations are open to possible change following public consultation. (Paragraph 1)
2. As part of this process, we have been in discussion with the independent and impartial Hansard Society, which we understand may be looking at some of the issues considered in this report as part of its regular Audit of Political Engagement. We hope that the Hansard Society’s findings in this area will inform our final judgment about the reforms which can be achieved in practice. We plan to issue a final report before National Voter Registration Day on 5 February 2015, to frame debate on these issues ahead of the 2015 general election. We hope that citizens feel we are being open and inclusive about the improvements which must be made. In that spirit we hope that everyone reading this Report plays their part by engaging and responding to it. We also propose to write to the political parties and their leaders requesting a preliminary response to our interim proposals. It is appropriate that as 2015 dawns the UK’s history on the 800th anniversary of Magna Carta is celebrated by stepping up to meet the enormous challenges that face the UK in renewing its democracy for the future. (Paragraph 2)

Introduction

3. Democracy is working less well than it used to and we need to move swiftly to preempt a crisis. The scale of the response must be equal to the task. Millions of people are missing from the UK’s electoral registers. Many of those who are registered—and in many cases the majority—choose not to participate at elections, be they for the UK Parliament, local government, or the European Parliament. In a modern democracy, it is unacceptable that millions of people who are eligible to vote are missing from electoral registers. We believe it should be made clearer in law that any person who is eligible to vote in a UK election should be on the electoral register. We also believe that it is desirable in a representative democracy for turnout at elections of all kinds to be higher—and ideally far higher—than has been the case in recent years. (Paragraph 9)

Reasons for low voter engagement

4. There are broad negative stereotypes about Parliament and Government—two separate institutions—which go beyond healthy and necessary scepticism and into a cynicism which if unaddressed could undermine the very basis of our representative democracy. (Paragraph 15)

5. Centralisation of political party activity, not least to aid party discipline and the demands of the media and messaging, is a recurrent theme in the decline in the local strength and activity of political parties. The unitary system in the UK, where all roads lead to Whitehall, means that political parties focus more and more on power at the centre and less on effective engagement not only with their membership but also with the public. This “hollowing out” must have a clear adverse impact on how people engage with elections, as well as politics more broadly. Political parties have become leader-centric. *We recommend that party leaders consider how party structures could be reformed and localised to better engage with the public. We will write to each party leader and request that they engage with the Committee directly in respect of this recommendation. We look forward to their responses and to taking proposals forward.* (Paragraph 21)
6. We have previously called for progress to be made on broadening the base of party funding: this is an area where reform could strengthen local party structures, increase confidence in the independence of political parties and therefore strengthen politics more broadly. Cross-party talks on party funding will be most successful if no pre-conditions are set, but some members of the Committee believe that increased taxpayer funding of political parties is not likely to be part of the solution. *We recommend that all-party talks on party funding are resumed urgently with a view to reaching a swift, agreed settlement before the general election.* (Paragraph 22)
7. The media plays an essential role in informing the public about political news, in relation both to elections and politics more broadly. While it should be understood that public education and increasing levels of voter engagement is not necessarily a priority for news media, we note that the BBC does have a clear duty, through its Charter, to sustain citizenship and civil society. Innovations such as televised debates ahead of general elections have proved to be popular as television events but have not resulted in sustainable engagement with the political process. We have also received evidence that relentless and disproportionate focus of the media on negative news stories and “the very worst of party politics” can have a negative impact on how the public perceives politicians and the political system, reinforcing a cynicism that makes people less likely to vote. It is our view that politicians and media outlets could both do more to move the media focus away from denigration and trivialisation and more towards analysis and reporting, with the hope of better engaging the public with issues that concern them to make politics and elections more relevant. This is a sensitive area with strong default positions on all sides but, again, the future of democracy in the UK demands that business as usual is not an option. *We intend to hold a summit with willing participants in the New Year to start a discussion on whether, and how, the media and politics can interact for the greater good of a healthy democracy.* (Paragraph 31)
8. Overcentralisation of power in Whitehall has had a clear adverse impact on how people engage with and perceive politics and elections for the localities and nations of the UK. Measures that appropriately devolve decision-making and power from Whitehall to a lower level might have been thought to be likely to have a positive impact on engagement with non-Westminster politics and elections, although this failed to happen in respect of elected police and crime commissioners. This

sentiment is not just evidenced in Scotland but is also prevalent in England, Wales, Northern Ireland and the localities within. While devolving power to the localities would be an improvement most political parties believe it should not stop there but also go deeper to neighbourhoods and communities, so-called “double devolution”. (Paragraph 35)

9. This Committee has produced a number of reports over the course of the Parliament looking at the relationship between local and central government and urging much greater devolution; we are consulting, through “*A New Magna Carta?*” on several options for a new structure and constitutional framework for the UK, and we are currently undertaking an inquiry looking at how devolution should take place across the United Kingdom. In a time of political volatility, clarity about a future democratic settlement is vital. It is clear that engagement with politics and elections at a local level suffers from overcentralisation, and the rhetorical commitment of all parties needs to find concrete form in substantial changes to the devolution settlement across the UK to reinvigorate local politics. *We recommend that, at a time when manifestos are being written, party leaderships make real, not least in England, the undertakings given to ending overcentralisation and to extending devolution, not least as a means of engaging the electorate much more in deciding their own affairs.* (Paragraph 36)
10. A number of factors have contributed to low levels of voter engagement in recent years. The evidence we have received indicates that the most significant of these is political disengagement and dissatisfaction with politicians, political parties and UK politics more broadly. Issues such as the perception that voting does not make a difference and dissatisfaction with where power lies in the UK system have also been cited as reasons for low levels of participation at elections. These are all legitimate reasons for people to disengage from the electoral process, and it cannot be said that low turnout levels and registration rates are the result of apathy on the part of the public. Just as the exposure of abuse of parliamentary allowances and the subsequent establishment of the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority has purged the expenses scandal, so an equally serious and perhaps uncomfortable set of reforms are needed to renew democratic participation. In a consumer society, there is a danger that the enormous demands placed on democratic institutions to gratify expectations can lead to short-termism and a lack of substantive engagement. However, the decline in voter engagement is a result of failures by the governing political and administrative elite, and responsibility for initiating the re-engagement of the electorate with existing and future political processes lies with politicians. *We recommend that political parties come forward with a package of measures to renew democratic participation which are based squarely upon those in this Report.* (Paragraph 39)
11. There is a strong perception that elections themselves are hidebound by process, bureaucracy, rules and restrictions and that the electoral process in the UK needs to be part of rediscovering a sense of excitement and engagement, to celebrate democratic values and to cherish the history of extending the vote to both sexes and all classes. This should not only occur on National Voter Registration Day but be a part of culture and education. It must also be supported by reinvigoration of the

UK's electoral administration, and we propose measures to achieve this in the remainder of this Report. We are conscious that we are placing a heavy burden on the Electoral Commission and Electoral Registration Officers both now and for the future. In this context of constant improvement we also draw attention, for consideration by the public, to the proposal for a standing Commission for Democracy, akin to the Electoral Commission, but as a permanent mechanism for broader democratic reform and renewal which is floated in our report *A new Magna Carta?*, currently out for public consultation. (Paragraph 40)

Recent developments

12. We believe it is an inseparable part of the UK's social contract that in a democracy every citizen should, as a bare minimum, register to vote. *We recommend that the legal requirements to register to vote are clarified, and that this basic civil duty be enforced.* (Paragraph 43)
13. The move to Individual Electoral Registration has created both opportunities and challenges. Making it possible to register online is an extremely welcome change, and one that has been taken up by over 1.8 million people already. Moving registration online will make registration more accessible to many people and will also make it much easier for groups working to increase registration rates to run more effective campaigns. (Paragraph 51)
14. Implementation of IER also presents risks. 5.5 million registered voters have not yet been transferred to the new electoral register following data matching. A disproportionate number of these people are from particular groups—private tenants, students and attainers. *We recommend that every effort is made by Electoral Registration Officers to reach all registered voters who have not been automatically transferred to the new register, to give them the opportunity to register under the new system. The Electoral Commission must make it a priority to ensure that this happens and we are asking the Commission to give a progress report to us in the New Year. We understand that the Cabinet Office is considering another canvass in the spring to improve the electoral register before the election. The committee fully endorses this.* (Paragraph 52)
15. It is essential that, before it advises the Government on whether it is appropriate to bring forward the end date for the transitional arrangements for IER, the Electoral Commission consider not just the “headline” figures of how many people would drop off the register if the end of the transition period were brought forward, but pay particular attention to the differential impact across the country, and different demographic groups. *We will be closely monitoring the Electoral Commission's reports on the progress of the transition to IER, and we recommend that the select committee with oversight of the process in the 2015 Parliament continue this monitoring. We recommend that, with 5.5 million voters not yet confirmed on to the new electoral register, unless the electoral registers are substantially more complete than at present by May 2015, the Government not bring forward the end date for the transitional arrangements for IER.* (Paragraph 55)

16. As well as the direct impact on the quality of the electoral registers, the Government and Parliament will need to consider—as we are currently doing in our inquiry into the rules for redrawing parliamentary constituency boundaries—how any bringing forward of the end of transitional arrangements will affect the next review of parliamentary constituency boundaries. (Paragraph 57)
17. Even—or especially—in a time of austerity it is vital that funding for elections is protected. While we welcome the £4.2 million the Government has made available to maximise registration during the transition to IER, it is likely that further funding will be necessary to ensure that levels of voter registration are not adversely affected by the implementation of IER. *We recommend that in order to safeguard levels of voter participation, the Government commit in its response to us to look favourably on requests for additional funding to be made available to EROs to support their work in maintaining and enhancing the levels of electoral registration, and to other bodies and organisations that have a proven track record of increasing voter registration in the most economical and effective way possible. We also recommend that the Electoral Commission look into service level agreements with agencies, bodies and organisations such as Bite the Ballot and Operation Black Vote who have a proven track record in increasing electoral registration and can do it a fraction of the cost of the Electoral Commission or Government Departments.* (Paragraph 59)
18. Any fraud committed in elections undermines our democratic system and must be dealt with severely. That said, with only three convictions for electoral fraud in 2013—all of candidates and not voters—compared with 7.5 million people not being correctly registered to vote, and almost 16 million not voting in the last general election, it is clear where the biggest issue lies in respect of electoral administration in the UK. It is essential that any changes to electoral registration and voting procedures intended to combat fraud are proportionate to the scale of the problem. The benefits of measures that could create barriers for legitimate voters wishing to participate in elections need to be carefully weighed against the potential risk of voter suppression. Any new measures likely to have a disproportionate negative impact on groups that are already less likely to participate at elections must be assessed with the utmost care. (Paragraph 64)
19. Several of our witnesses raised particular concerns about the Electoral Commission’s proposal that voters be required to present photographic ID at polling stations. *We believe that such a requirement cannot be justified at present, and we recommend against its adoption.* (Paragraph 65)

Unequal registration and participation

20. Low levels of registration and turnout amongst students and young people are a serious problem now and could get worse. If a generation of young people choose not to vote, and then continue not to participate at elections as they grow older, there will be severe and long-lasting effects for turnout at UK elections, with consequent implications for the health of democracy in the UK. We propose later a series of recommendations, not least on registration and voting, which if implemented will help halt and reverse the disengagement of young people. (Paragraph 74)

21. Registration rates for certain BME groups are substantially lower than for White British residents, but turnout for people from BME groups once they are registered to vote does not differ significantly from turnout for White British residents who are registered to vote. It is not acceptable that registration rates and turnout levels vary so significantly in relation to ethnicity, although it should also be understood that registration rates and turnout levels vary significantly within both the White British and BME groups, so the question requires more careful consideration than simply comparing these two figures. The relevant recommendations set out in this report should be implemented in full in order to redress the current imbalance. (Paragraph 78)
22. It is clear there is a particular problem with the accessibility of registration and voting for a large number of people with specific needs resulting from a disability. It is unacceptable that people face barriers registering to vote or participating at elections because of a disability. We have heard several practical suggestions that could make elections more accessible—including making information available in British Sign Language and “easy read” format, large print, audio and braille. (Paragraph 83)
23. *We recommend that within three months of the publication of this Report, the Government consult with the Electoral Commission, EROs and disability groups and publish clear and stretching proposals setting out how registration and voting will be made more accessible to people with disabilities. We also recommend that political parties work with disability groups to make manifestos and other election material accessible in formats which people with disabilities find easier to use.* (Paragraph 84)
24. Although British citizens are only entitled to register to vote for UK elections if they were resident in the UK in the previous 15 years, it is clear that only a very small percentage of those who are likely to be eligible to register to vote are actually on the electoral register. It is not acceptable that such a small proportion of this franchise is registered to vote, and we welcome the fact the Minister for the Constitution has asked officials to look into this issue. *We expect to see a comprehensive plan from the Government in response to our Report, setting out how it plans to increase registration rates for overseas voters. We recommend that, at a minimum, this include using UK embassies to promote registration to British citizens living abroad, working with the BBC to put out information through BBC World and the World Service, and making changes to voting to make it more convenient to overseas voters.* (Paragraph 90)
25. EU and Commonwealth citizens resident in the UK are amongst the most under-represented groups on the electoral register. *We recommend that the Electoral Commission should run a specific campaign aimed at Commonwealth citizens and citizens of other EU member states resident in the UK, focussing on eligibility to participate in elections, and how to register to vote. The Electoral Commission should also bring forward proposals for simplifying the process for EU citizens living in the UK to register to vote at European Parliament elections promptly so that the necessary changes can be made before the next European Parliament elections in 2019.* (Paragraph 94)
26. It is deeply concerning that certain groups of people—including young people, certain Black and Minority Ethnic groups, disabled people, and British citizens living

overseas—are far less likely to be registered to vote and turn out at elections than others. Given current inequalities in the completeness of the electoral register, there is a strong case for focusing efforts to increase registration rates on those groups that are currently underrepresented. *We recommend that the Government produce a plan well before May 2015—working with all parties, the Electoral Commission and EROs—for targeting those groups that are least likely to be registered to vote. There is also scope for politicians and political parties to have a continuous dialogue with these groups and convince them of the value of participating in all the elections for which they are eligible.* (Paragraph 95)

Improving levels of electoral registration

27. The Electoral Commission’s performance standards have had a positive impact on the performance of Electoral Registration Officers, and these should be maintained. *We recommend that in future targets for registration should be included in performance standards for EROs. The Electoral Commission will need to consider how such output targets should be set, and the steps which would be most effective in securing attainment of such targets should they not initially be achieved. Best practice, as identified by EROs and the Commission, should also be incorporated in the performance standards. We believe that the outcomes on the number and percentage of those registered to vote should also be a key performance indicator for the Electoral Commission.* (Paragraph 104)
28. *We recommend that proposals for annually recognising notable successes and best practice in electoral registration be presented in the Government’s response to this Report. We also believe that MPs should be more closely engaged with the monitoring of electoral registration in their constituencies and that the Electoral Commission should provide them with specific data on the outcomes of the number and percentage rates of registration in each ward within their constituency. We recommend that the Government commit to finding parliamentary time for an annual debate in Parliament to allow registration issues to be discussed. This could be held on National Voter Registration Day or on a “Democracy Day”.* (Paragraph 105)
29. Under the Representation of the People Act 1983, as amended, there is a statutory requirement that Electoral Registration Officers conduct house-to-house enquiries as part of the canvass. The Government should communicate this much more strongly to the public and put the legal requirements of EROs on the public record. We welcome the news that every ERO has plans to conduct house-to-house enquiries as part of the 2014/15 canvass, but this legal duty has in some cases not been taken seriously enough until now. Twenty-two EROs failed to fulfil this statutory requirement in the previous canvass, some for a number of successive years. We particularly welcome the explicit statements from Ministers that they are prepared to issue a formal direction to any EROs not complying with their statutory obligations, and we would support the issue of any such direction which had the objective of increasing levels of voter registration. *We recommend that if any ERO repeatedly fails to fulfil their statutory duties in a way which has an adverse effect on the quality of voter registration in their area, the Government should take enforcement action against them. This could include consideration that this function should be taken from the local authority and handed to a neighbouring local authority which has had*

greater success. We also recommend that the Government set out the circumstances in which it is prepared to seek a prosecution of any electoral official considered to be in breach of an official duty under the provisions of the 1983 Act and bring forward proposals to amend the law if it is not sufficiently clear. We recognise that the Electoral Commission, Government Departments and EROs have allocated more effort, time and money to ensuring a more complete electoral register for the purpose of IER, to prevent the 5.5 million voters who have not yet been confirmed on to the new electoral registers from dropping off the register. We believe that such rigour should have been shown in the past, and should be shown in future, in order to get the 7.5 million who are not correctly registered to vote at present. (Paragraph 110)

30. We will monitor how the canvass proceeds in the coming months and hope that increased scrutiny of performance standards will lead to improvements in the completeness and accuracy of the next electoral register. We will report again in the New Year on the 2014/15 canvass. (Paragraph 111)
31. It appears to be an oversight that Electoral Registration Officers, and Returning Officers, are not subject to the provisions of the Freedom of Information Act 2000. EROs and ROs clearly exercise functions of a public nature and it is in the public interest for them to be required to respond to requests for information in the same way as other public authorities. The Committee notes that despite evidence from the Electoral Commission that they would advise EROs to respond to FOI requests as though they were subject to the Act, East Devon District Council has been refusing to respond to requests for information under the FOI Act from members of the public in respect of electoral registration activity. *We recommend that the Government issue a section 5 Order designating EROs and ROs public authorities for the purpose of the Act. In the meantime, the Electoral Commission should make it clear that it is best practice for EROs to respond to requests for information as though they were subject to the Act.* (Paragraph 115)
32. The Electoral Commission's goal should be that every person eligible to be registered to vote is on the electoral register. Given there are 7.5 million people not correctly registered to vote, and also millions of British citizens living overseas that are not registered to vote, we welcome the news that the Electoral Commission aims to have one million more voters registered ahead of the 2015 general election. This is a substantial increase on previous targets for registration campaigns. (Paragraph 122)
33. It is disappointing to note that one of the Electoral Commission's key measures of success for the next five years is that "completeness of the registers does not deteriorate". Since the level of completeness for the electoral registers is not currently satisfactory, we do not consider it to be a success simply for them to deteriorate no further. *We recommend that the Electoral Commission review its success measures in respect of voter registration and set itself much more challenging measures for the completeness of the electoral register.* (Paragraph 123)
34. Registration campaigns run by independent organisations such as Bite the Ballot, Operation Black Vote and Mencap are extremely important in supplementing the efforts of electoral officials, and can also be highly cost effective. We welcome the Electoral Commission's stated intention to work closely with such organisations, and

call on the Commission and the Government to support all organisations genuinely concerned with increasing the number of people who are registered to vote. (Paragraph 128)

35. *We recommend that, while every day should be a voter registration day, in its response to this Report the Government should set out how it plans to support Bite the Ballot's National Voter Registration Day 2015, on 5 February 2015. The Electoral Commission, electoral officials, and all public sector organisations should put specific plans in place to take advantage of National Voter Registration Day to make a significant difference to the number of people who are registered to vote ahead of the 2015 general election, and future elections.* (Paragraph 129)
36. *We recommend that in its response to our Report the Government make specific proposals about how people could be prompted to register to vote when they access other public services, particularly those services associated with a change in address, such as registering to pay council tax. The Electoral Commission and EROs should also seek to work with private companies who interact with the public so they can, as part of their corporate responsibilities, prompt those people who are currently not registered to vote to register.* (Paragraph 133)
37. *Given the low registration rates amongst young people, there is a strong case for making greater efforts to register 16 to 18 year olds at school and in college—particularly as registration now takes place on an individual basis and can be done, easily, on-line, from school. We particularly ask the Secretary of State for Education to promote this to schools and colleges. EROs also should now be working with schools and colleges to register students, and we recommend that the Electoral Commission explicitly include this action in its performance standards for EROs. This could be integrated with broader citizenship education, and include a discussion about how to register to vote when moving to university or away from home. Successful initiatives developed by EROs and Universities—such as those we heard about in Sheffield—should also be replicated across the country.* (Paragraph 135)
38. *There is persuasive evidence that enabling people to register closer to the date of an election, or on an election day itself, would lead to increased registration rates and turnout at elections. We recommend that in its response to this Report, the Government set out proposals for reducing the number of days between the cut-off date for registration and the election day, with a view to implementing them as soon as possible. We also recommend that the Government set out the steps to achieving by 2020 the objective of allowing eligible electors to register and then vote at the Town Hall or equivalent up to and on the day of an election. We acknowledge the need to consider how to accurately verify registrations made on the day, and to provide any additional resources required by local authorities to implement such a system.* (Paragraph 138)
39. *We have previously recommended that the edited electoral register—now called the “open register”—should be abolished. We reaffirm this call in the light of the clear and significant public dissatisfaction—which has reached the ears of the Minister for the Constitution—with the sale to private companies of data that electors provide to electoral registration officers to enable them to register to vote. We recommend that the*

Government take immediate action to abolish the open electoral register before new registers are published. We believe that the full electoral register should continue to be available to political parties and candidates, as it is at present. (Paragraph 141)

Proposals to improve voter turnout

40. We reaffirm our view that voters should ideally be registered to vote automatically. The fact that the latest parliamentary electoral registers were only 85.9% complete and 86% accurate makes a strong case for a system of automatic registration, which could include the use of the National Insurance number. *We recommend that in its response to this Report the Government clearly set out its view on moving to a system of automatic registration. Such a system could operate alongside Individual Electoral Registration. (Paragraph 144)*
41. The idea of a “Democracy Day” fits closely with our view that greater esteem and excitement should return to the electoral process. *We recommend that the Government explore further proposals for weekend voting, extending voting and designating election days as public holidays. We acknowledge the resource implications of some of these proposals, particularly for rural communities. (Paragraph 149)*
42. Online voting is a proposal for increasing levels of participation that has received strongest support from our witnesses, although support has not been unanimous. Enabling electors to cast their vote online if they choose to do so would make voting significantly more accessible. In light of the move to IER, and the already high take up of postal voting, there is scope for giving online voting further consideration, although this would need to be balanced with concerns about electoral fraud and secrecy of the ballot. *We believe that online voting could lead to a substantial increase in the level of participation at UK elections, and we recommend that the Government should come forward with an assessment of the challenges and likely impact on turnout, and run pilots in the next Parliament with a view to all electors having the choice of voting online at the 2020 general election. (Paragraph 156)*
43. The extension of the postal vote has been a success and those who choose to vote by post should be facilitated to do so. The Committee recognises the importance of postal voting in increasing democratic participation and calls upon political parties, Electoral Registration Officers, the Electoral Commission and the Government to make postal voting more accessible. We note with concern that under the transitional arrangements for IER, almost half a million postal voters who were not confirmed automatically will lose their entitlement to a postal vote if they do not register under the new system. (Paragraph 159)
44. *We recommend that further trials of all-postal voting in elections should be held. (Paragraph 161)*
45. Given its importance to our democracy we feel that there is a need to revisit electoral administration on the basis of convenience for electors and no other interest. Several changes, which have in the past been of academic interest, including online voting, holding elections on weekends or over several days, having a “Democracy Day” public holiday for voting, letting voters cast their vote anywhere in their constituency and having all-postal votes, are now measures which need to be considered in the

context of improving voter participation. There is compelling evidence that some of these changes could have a substantial, positive impact on the levels of voter participation. Particularly if taken together, these changes could demonstrate that “the powers that be” are serious about voter engagement. *We recommend that the Government, working with the Electoral Commission and EROs, bring forward a package of reforms to electoral arrangements to increase accessibility and turnout, and establish a series of pilots early in the next Parliament to test the various proposals that we have considered, with a view to making permanent changes to electoral arrangements by 2020.* (Paragraph 162)

46. There is demand for an improvement in the level and quality of information available to voters, and scope to improve delivery, particularly through new technology such as apps and social media. New technology could also be used to promote public awareness of elections. Some ideas—such as voting advice applications designed to tell voters which parties most closely represent their views—would need to be taken forward by independent organisations, but others could be pursued by the Government or the Electoral Commission. (Paragraph 165)
47. *We recommend that the Government discuss with the Electoral Commission and include in its response to this Report details of arrangements that are currently in place to provide information to the public about elections and registering to vote, and bring forward proposals for the effective use of new technology to better inform the public and increase awareness of elections. This could include having a central source of information about election results, and better advertising of elections on the day. The Government and Electoral Commission should also examine the changes which can be made to provide more and better information to voters, and should actively support the work of outside organisations working to similar goals.* (Paragraph 166)
48. Both the Government and Parliament, and not least select committees, can be even more innovative about the way they engage with the public, enhancing not superseding our representative democracy. We note that the Speaker’s Commission on Digital Democracy is looking at proposals in these areas. (Paragraph 167)
49. Effective citizenship education is an important part of the process of becoming an engaged voter, and should continue to be a part of the national curriculum. *We recommend that the Department for Education ensure that schools’ citizenship education courses specifically include discussion of the political and governmental structures of the UK and the electoral systems that operate in the UK, and also the practicalities of registering to vote and actually participating at an election. We expect that Department to respond to this report to indicate progress in this area.* (Paragraph 172)
50. International experience demonstrates conclusively that making voting a mandatory civic duty ensures that the vast majority of eligible voters participate in elections. Making voting compulsory is not the sole solution to voter engagement or to political engagement more broadly. Some members of the Committee believe there is now a strong case for including it in a package of measures to meet the threat of disengagement, though provision for those who wish not to take part should be respected by including an abstention provision on the ballot. However, other

members believe that voting should not, as a matter of principle, be made compulsory, and that people should be free not to participate at elections if they so choose. *We recommend that the Government report to the House setting out how a system of compulsory voting could operate in the UK, including an assessment of international experience, and an assessment of whether voting should only be compulsory for certain types of election. This would mark the start of a public debate. If the 2015 Parliament were to agree, compulsory voting could operate at the following general election. If Parliament did not agree the current system would continue.* (Paragraph 177)

51. *We recommend that, in the event that voting in certain elections is made compulsory, an option to vote “none of the above” or to “abstain” should be one of the options set out. These options could also be included even if voting were not compulsory.* (Paragraph 178)
52. Westminster has a settled view on First Past the Post. The more that centralisation gives way to devolution, the more that electors at the level of the nations, regions or localities will wish to exercise choice over their electoral systems. We accept that democratic institutions outside Whitehall, be they Parliaments, Assemblies or institutions in localities, will increasingly be the place where the debate about their own electoral systems should take place and be decided and that this will have a positive impact on engagement and participation (Paragraph 181)
53. We have received a significant amount of evidence that extending the franchise to 16 and 17 year olds could have a positive impact not just on voter engagement for young people, but also on voter engagement overall in the medium to long term. *We as a Committee take no view on whether the franchise should be extended, but recommend that Parliament leads a national discussion on this matter and that a motion on the issue is brought forward in 2015 to allow the House of Commons a free vote on its view, with a view to the introduction of legislation if appropriate.* (Paragraph 186)

Conclusion

54. We have outlined a number of proposals that we believe could have a positive effect on voter engagement, in terms of both registration rates and turnout at elections, but there is no single change that will suddenly re-engage the electorate. The problem of low voter engagement is to a large extent a manifestation of broader political disengagement and dissatisfaction with politics in the UK. The recent referendum on independence for Scotland, where 84.5% of the registered electorate turned out, shows that people will vote if they are engaged and believe their vote will contribute to making a difference, but substantial cultural and structural changes are necessary to convince the public that registering to vote and participating at other elections is worthwhile. This work must go hand in hand with renewing the public’s faith in the UK’s political institutions. This is a task that requires the support of political parties, individual politicians, electoral administrators and the Government. On the broader issues there may also be scope for the establishment of a new forum—such as a Commission for Democracy—specifically to address these issues over the long term. (Paragraph 190)

55. *Political parties, individual politicians and the Government must take action to re-engage the electorate. We call on each political party to include plans in its manifesto for the 2015 general election for improving voter engagement—in terms of voter registration and turnout—as well as how they will work to rebuild the trust of the public in politics more broadly. Specific proposals that should be considered for inclusion in party manifestos include:*
- *The civic and legal duty of all citizens to register to vote*
 - *Registering to vote closer up to or on the day of an election*
 - *Online voting*
 - *Extended or weekend voting, or a public holiday for voting*
 - *Compulsory voting*
 - *All-postal voting*
 - *Extending the franchise to 16 and 17 year olds (Paragraph 191)*
56. With the date of the next, and future elections, set out in the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011, it is possible for the Government and other political parties to consider what plans they wish to make in this area and consult with the Civil Service on them so they are ready for implementation immediately after the general election. (Paragraph 192)
57. Throughout this inquiry we have made a particular effort to take into account the views of the public, and the evidence we have received from individual members of the public. It is now for the public to dictate to the parties what changes they expect to be implemented after the next general election. This should be done throughout the election period and—crucially—at the ballot box. (Paragraph 193)

Annex 1: Terms of reference

On 16 January 2014 the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee agreed to inquire into voter engagement in the UK, and called for evidence on the following questions.

Reasons for and impact of low voter engagement

- What are the main factors that have contributed to low voter turnout in recent UK elections?
- What are the main factors that affect voter registration?
- To what extent does the public's perception of MPs, Parliament, the Government and events such as Prime Minister's questions affect voter registration and turnout?
- What role does the media play in this context?
- What socioeconomic factors affect registration and turnout and what, if anything, can we learn from this about how to improve voter registration and turnout?
- What are the costs to society of low voter registration and turnout?

Improving voter turnout

- What are the principal ways in which voter registration and turnout could be improved?
- What lessons can be learnt from other countries where voter registration and turnout is higher?
- To what extent could electoral reform, rebuilding political parties or changes to party funding improve public engagement and voter turnout?
- In what ways could new technologies be used to encourage people to vote?
- What would be the advantages and disadvantages of allowing voters to register on the day of an election?
- How can arrangements for British citizens living abroad to register for and vote in elections in the UK be improved?

Annex 2: Summary of Outreach event at the University of Sheffield, 5 June 2014

On 5 June 2014 the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee held an outreach event at the University of Sheffield. Graham Allen MP, Fabian Hamilton MP, and Mr Andrew Turner MP led discussions on three main questions with attendees. These were:

- Why do you think people don't vote or register to vote?
- How do you think the media impacts on people's perceptions of politics?
- What do you think could be done to get more people engaged in politics and elections?

Members of the public were invited to contribute to discussions on these questions, and also to write their views on several wallsheets. A summary of comments made is included below, with comments posted on wallsheets repeated verbatim.

Why do you think people don't vote or register to vote?

Difficulty of getting real people to get involved with politics and become politicians

People being informed by the media (eg. Daily Mail)

Elitism in political parties

Engaging in politics is a luxury for people with limited time and other responsibilities

Young people don't identify with any of the main parties

First past the post voting system puts people off

All the candidates look and sound the same

Feeling disengaged

No-one represents their views

Nothing they want to vote for

Won't make a difference

Lack of online voting

Candidates and parties are so similar

Politicians aren't representative of wider community

Safe seats—not going to make a difference

Ordinary MPs have no power

Need to discuss postal voting

Voting systems—problems with First Past the Post

Parties attacking other parties

Lots of people not involved in politics at all

Uncertainty about “what” they are actually voting for (disconnect between party and ideology)—both before and after the election

Very few opportunities for people to talk and meet and debate politics without stress

Elections are essentially social activities, but voting feels like an individual activity

Voting is so antiquated, the way it is done. If I can bank from my phone, why can't I vote? Is it because you don't really want young people?

At what level does a very low turn-out render a vote non-legitimate?

A security guard on the door suggests you are afraid of the people you represent

Visibly, you don't represent us. You wear suits, you are all male

Lack of reflection with MPs class and culture

MP's self-preservation

Lack of education and engagement with local people

Citizens disconnected

No feeling of “community”

People feel that decisions made in London don't affect them when they live outside London

Young people feel they are not allowed to “make a difference”

A lack of time to understand the issues—people say they don't vote as they don't understand

Political tribalism is a real problem

Those with “alternative” political views are seen as an enemy of the establishment

Widespread cynicism

Expenses scandal

All the same people—think they know it all

Impact of single issue politics—sense of power without any need for compromise

Existing parties are seen as corrupt

Vote doesn't count—safe seat

They are all the same

There was only one woman from your team. She moved the tables and mopped up spilled coffee. She didn't speak at all

Confusion of where your voice should be directed—ie. Facebook? Twitter? MP? Pub?

Difficult to find information about parties. Do not want to read through hundreds of pages to understand policies

Democracy broken—it is for the next generation to design the replacement system

A view among the young that they are not qualified to contribute to policy making

How do you think the media impacts on people's perceptions of politics?

Media has a massive negative impact—focuses on personalities over issues

Politicians let media drive agenda

Media is corporately owned

Politicians are afraid of changing their mind

Politicians need to be braver and say what they think and work together

Government needs to take responsibility for language and message

Media exists to entertain and not inform

Need a separate voice that is informative

“Scroungers” and “Strivers” does not send a very inclusive message of equally important citizenship

Stop politics dealing in perceptions—and their manipulation, and deal solely with reality

Politicians play into the media's stranglehold. Don't do it—get back to grassroots community organising

The media (Daily Mail) drive agenda and politicians play into it—eg. Who is saying why immigration is a good thing? Politicians need to be brave

The BBC is supposedly neutral and yet they were the reason why UKIP garnered so many votes due to the amount of coverage they gave the party

The media diminish or illuminate political debate by the confrontational way they interview

What do you think could be done to get more people engaged in politics and elections?

Making issues tangible so people feel motivated to get involved

Far better political education at school

Making politicians more representative (eg. gender balance)

Parliament taking responsibility to present debates clearly (can't rely on media)

Making it easier for people from a disadvantaged background to participate

Need to look at wider civic engagement (other forms of participation)

Making voting easier (eg. advertising postal voting)

Considering how to better engage with young people

Electoral reform (proportional representation, making parties chase every vote)

Open primaries

Compulsory voting

Celebrating voting

Making election day a public holiday

Automatic registration of students at universities

Use of social media

"I have voted" stickers

Choice

Political education

Community spaces

Being represented

"None of the above" option at elections

Different voting system (eg. rank the candidates)

Clearer information

Grass roots level education

Parliament needs to encourage debate on issues

Visibility—not just at election time

Give people something to vote for

Focus on grassroots politics

Positive election material (not negative)

Appeal to duty to vote

More public involvement with parties

Local party members to vote on policy

Localisation

Educate people before elections. The leaflet system isn't very useful

Better, more responsive communications

Address economic issues in the North

Engagement with public over policy

More events in regions

Increase representation of BME people and women—needs to go right down to selection of candidates

X-factor style polling of constituents' interests and views

Better use of technology

Online voting

More visibility

Develop think tanks reflective of society

“None of the above” on ballot paper

Knowledge that their vote will (not can) influence something

Let real people be politicians—working/low income people/women not represented—don't have time or money to leaflet but would like to be involved

Other voting options that young people connect with—internet/twitter

When we teach children about politics in time we might get results

More funding for public engagement—primary trips to Westminster? Question Time?

Party members should be deciding policy at conferences, not voting on a pre-decided agenda—would encourage new membership that their voice/vote counts

Citizens should make policies—not just choose between them

Not proportional representation—it distances elected representatives from voter

Proportional representation in the voting system and more consensus politics (eg Denmark, Netherlands)

Challenge social isolation and a culture of individuality

Promote civic engagement

The ability to choose candidates to represent you without joining a party

Rights and responsibilities agenda

Make politics relevant to people's lives by taking politics out into communities

Parliament could take the responsibility for framing “issue” debate in appropriate language/style for particular interest groups

Support National Voter Registration Day

Maybe an opt-out system of voting

Compulsory voting

Online voting—extremely important to increase young people engagement

Empowered civil society through community organisations

Saturday or Sunday voting

A detailed job description for our candidates

Promote and support better community connectivity

Postal vote needs to be publicised

Greater engagement with stay at home parents—through local play groups and daytime or public transport engagement

Formal Minutes

Monday 10 November 2014

Members present:

Mr Graham Allen, in the Chair

Tracey Crouch
Mark Durkan
Paul Flynn

Chris Ruane
Mr Andrew Turner

Draft Report (*Voter engagement in the UK*), proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 193 read and agreed to.

Annexes 1 and 2 agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the Fourth Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chair make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available, in accordance with the provisions of Standing Order No. 134.

[Adjourned till Monday 24 November at 4.15 pm]

Witnesses

The following witnesses gave evidence. Transcripts can be viewed on the Committee's inquiry page at www.parliament.uk/voter-engagement-in-the-uk.

Thursday 27 February 2014

Question number

Professor Sarah Birch, Professor of Comparative Politics, University of Glasgow, and **Glenn Gottfried**, Quantitative Research Fellow, Institute for Public Policy Research, Q1-50

Professor Patrick Dunleavy, Co-Director, Democratic Audit, and **Richard Berry**, Managing Editor, Democratic Audit Q51-80

Thursday 13 March 2014

Dr Ruth Fox, Director, Hansard Society Q81-106

Jessica Garland, Research Officer, Electoral Reform Society, and **Will Brett**, Head of Media, Electoral Reform Society Q107-141

Thursday 20 March 2014

David Babbs, Executive Director, 38 Degrees Q142-180

Toni Pearce, President, National Union of Students Q181-206

Thursday 3 April 2014

Michael Sani, Managing Director, Bite the Ballot, and **Oliver Sidorczuk**, Policy Coordinator, Bite the Ballot Q207-230

Dr Toby S. James, Lecturer in British and Comparative Politics, University of East Anglia Q231-256

Thursday 1 May 2014

John Turner, Chief Executive, Association of Electoral Administrators Q258-302

Rob Holland, Public Affairs and Parliamentary Lead, Mencap, **Ismail Kaji**, Parliamentary Affairs Assistant, Mencap, and **Hugh Huddy**, Campaigns Manager, Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) Q303-325

Thursday 8 May 2014

Dr Maria Sobolewska, University of Manchester, and **Professor Anthony Heath**, Universities of Manchester and Oxford Q236-350

Simon Woolley, Director, Operation Black Vote Q351-376

Thursday 5 June 2014

Nigel Slack, Sheffield for Democracy Q377-385

Professor Matt Flinders, University of Sheffield, and **Professor Hendrik Wagenaar**, University of Sheffield Q386-398

Alasdair Buckle, President, University of Sheffield Students' Union, **Eleanor Thompson**, Student Voice Manager, University of Sheffield Students' Union, and **Richard Eastall**, Director of Membership Services, University of Sheffield Students' Union Q399-414

John Tomlinson, Electoral Services Manager, Sheffield City Council Q415-435

Thursday 19 June 2014

Sue English, Head of Political Programmes, Analysis and Research, BBC, and **Ric Bailey**, Chief Adviser, Politics, BBC Q436-490

Damian Lyons Lowe, Chief Executive, Survation, **Patrick Brione**, Director of Research, Survation and **Fran O'Leary**, Director of Strategy and Innovation, Lodestone Q491-516

Thursday 3 July 2014

Jenny Watson, Chair, Electoral Commission, **Phil Thompson**, Research and Evaluation Manager, Electoral Commission, and **Alex Robertson**, Director of Communications, Electoral Commission Q517-614

Thursday 10 July 2014

Dr Rebecca Rumbul, Wales Governance Centre, Cardiff University Q615-637

Dr Cristina Leston-Bandeira, University of Hull, **Professor Susan Banducci**, University of Exeter, and **Professor Daniel Stevens**, University of Exeter Q638-690

Thursday 4 September 2014

Jenny Watson, Chair, Electoral Commission, **Andrew Scallan**, Director of Electoral Administration, Electoral Commission, and **Phil Thompson**, Research and Evaluation Manager, Electoral Commission Q691-773

Paul Lankester, Electoral Registration Officer for Stratford-upon-Avon, and **Dr David Smith**, Electoral Registration Officer for Sunderland Q774-792

Tuesday 9 September 2014

Sam Gyimah MP, Minister for the Constitution, Cabinet Office Q793-840

Monday 13 October 2014

Mark Williams, Electoral Registration Officer for East Devon District Council
and **Kevin Finan**, Chief Executive, Mid Devon District Council Q841-879

Roger Casale, Chair, New Europeans and **Samia Badani**, New Europeans Q880-892

Published written evidence

The following written evidence was received and can be viewed on the Committee's inquiry web page at www.parliament.uk/voter-engagement-in-the-uk. INQ numbers are generated by the evidence processing system and so may not be complete.

- 1 Hugh Eveleigh ([VUK0001](#))
- 2 Bradford Children in Care Council ([VUK0002](#))
- 3 UK's Changing Union: Our Future ([VUK0003](#))
- 4 Gillian Pardesi ([VUK0004](#))
- 5 Professor Jonathan Tonge and Dr Andrew Mycock ([VUK0005](#))
- 6 Professor Matthew Flinders ([VUK0006](#))
- 7 Mr Les Cooper ([VUK0007](#))
- 8 Professor Sarah Birch and Professor Paul Whitely ([VUK0008](#))
- 9 Dr Cristina Leston-Bandeira ([VUK0009](#))
- 10 Andrew Jones ([VUK0010](#))
- 11 British Academy ([VUK0011](#))
- 12 Dr Stephen Barber ([VUK0012](#))
- 13 Harry Barnes ([VUK0013](#))
- 14 Institute for Public Policy Research ([VUK0014](#))
- 15 Wales Governance Centre ([VUK0015](#))
- 16 Professor Peter John ([VUK0016](#))
- 17 Electoral Reform Society ([VUK0017](#))
- 18 Unlock Democracy ([VUK0018](#))
- 19 Charles Pattie, Ron Johnston, David Cuts and Laura Palfreyman ([VUK0019](#))
- 20 Democratic Audit ([VUK0020](#))
- 21 Dr Kaat Smets, University of London ([VUK0021](#))
- 22 Myplace Project, University Of Manchester ([VUK0023](#))
- 23 Professor R.A. Watt, University of Buckingham ([VUK0024](#))
- 24 Professor Andrew Russell, University of Manchester ([VUK0025](#))
- 25 Dr Toby S. James, University of East Anglia ([VUK0026](#))
- 26 Dr Jenny Lloyd, University of the West of England ([VUK0028](#))
- 27 Cybersalon.org ([VUK0029](#))
- 28 Dr Maria Sobolewska and Professor Anthony Heath ([VUK0030](#))
- 29 Mark Ryan ([VUK0031](#))
- 30 Association of Electoral Administrators ([VUK0032](#))
- 31 Dr Elin Weston and LLB Advanced Constitutional Law students, King's College London ([VUK0033](#))
- 32 National Union Of Students ([VUK0034](#))
- 33 Professor Stephen D. Fisher, Trinity College, Oxford University ([VUK0035](#))
- 34 Mrs Linda Belgrove ([VUK0036](#))
- 35 Birmingham 'Success' Group ([VUK0037](#))
- 36 Professor Ailsa Henderson ([VUK0038](#))
- 37 Electoral Commission ([VUK0040](#))
- 38 Smartmatic Limited ([VUK0041](#))

- 39 Professor Martin J. Smith and Professor David Richards ([VUK0042](#))
- 40 Mencap ([VUK0044](#))
- 41 Professor Pete Dorey, Cardiff University ([VUK0045](#))
- 42 Hansard Society ([VUK0046](#))
- 43 International Foundation For Electoral Systems ([VUK0047](#))
- 44 Electoral Commission ([VUK0048](#))
- 45 Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council ([VUK0049](#))
- 46 38 Degrees ([VUK0050](#))
- 47 Ian Sheppard ([VUK0051](#))
- 48 John East ([VUK0052](#))
- 49 Michael Yates ([VUK0053](#))
- 50 Vicky Moller ([VUK0055](#))
- 51 Gordon J Sheppard ([VUK0057](#))
- 52 David H Smith ([VUK0059](#))
- 53 Andrew Pring ([VUK0060](#))
- 54 Nota UK ([VUK0061](#))
- 55 Dr. K. Purdam and R. Southern ([VUK0062](#))
- 56 Rashid Nix ([VUK0063](#))
- 57 Philip Combes ([VUK0064](#))
- 58 Bite The Ballot ([VUK0065](#))
- 59 Adrian Wait ([VUK0066](#))
- 60 Thomas G F Gray ([VUK0067](#))
- 61 Malcolm Morrison ([VUK0068](#))
- 62 Tim Knight ([VUK0069](#))
- 63 Local Government Association ([VUK0070](#))
- 64 Paul D. Lee ([VUK0071](#))
- 65 John B Dick ([VUK0074](#))
- 66 Morgan Dalton ([VUK0075](#))
- 67 Cynth Spanner ([VUK0076](#))
- 68 Richard Lung ([VUK0077](#))
- 69 Peter G Webb ([VUK0078](#))
- 70 Tim Ivorson ([VUK0079](#))
- 71 The Intergenerational Foundation ([VUK0080](#))
- 72 RNIB ([VUK0081](#))
- 73 Peter Roberts ([VUK0082](#))
- 74 The Policy Exchange ([VUK0083](#))
- 75 Andy Tye ([VUK0084](#))
- 76 University Of Sheffield Students' Union ([VUK0086](#))
- 77 Joint submission from: Action Deafness, Action on Hearing Loss, the British Deaf Association (BDA), the National Deaf Children's Society (NDCS), the National Registers of Communication Professionals Working with Deaf and Deafblind People (NRCPD), the Royal Association for Deaf People (RAD), Sense, Signature and SignHealth ([VUK0087](#))
- 78 Electoral Commission ([VUK0088](#))
- 79 J R Attar ([VUK0089](#))
- 80 The Hon Stephen Charles Rodan SHK, Speaker Of The House Of Keys ([VUK0090](#))

- 81 David Green ([VUK0091](#))
- 82 Professor Hendrik Wagenaar, University Of Sheffield ([VUK0092](#))
- 83 Sheffield For Democracy ([VUK0093](#))
- 84 John Street ([VUK0094](#))
- 85 Philip Hutchinson ([VUK0095](#))
- 86 Michael Andrews ([VUK0096](#))
- 87 Patrick McGonagle ([VUK0097](#))
- 88 John Cartwright ([VUK0098](#))
- 89 Dr David Hill ([VUK0099](#))
- 90 BBC ([VUK0100](#))
- 91 Lodestone ([VUK0101](#))
- 92 Survation ([VUK0103](#))
- 93 Electoral Commission ([VUK0104](#))
- 94 Anthony Tuffin ([VUK0105](#))
- 95 Lynne Armstrong ([VUK0106](#))
- 96 New Europeans ([VUK0107](#))
- 97 Canon Michael Hodge ([VUK0108](#))
- 98 Liam Hardy ([VUK0109](#))
- 99 Colin Buchanan ([VUK0110](#))
- 100 Arthur C James ([VUK0111](#))
- 101 Democracy Matters ([VUK0112](#))
- 102 Keith Underhill ([VUK0113](#))
- 103 STV Action ([VUK0114](#))
- 104 Make Votes Count In West Sussex ([VUK0115](#))
- 105 Tom London ([VUK0116](#))
- 106 Keith Best ([VUK0117](#))
- 107 Gary Stewart ([VUK0118](#))
- 108 I Miller ([VUK0119](#))
- 109 Professor Susan Banducci and Professor Daniel Stevens, University of Exeter ([VUK0120](#))
- 110 Samia Badani ([VUK0121](#))
- 111 Martin Brighton ([VUK0122](#))
- 112 Rushmoor Borough Council ([VUK0123](#))
- 113 Sheffield For Democracy ([VUK0124](#))
- 114 Electoral Commission ([VUK0125](#))
- 115 A member of the public ([VUK0126](#))
- 116 Ken Davies ([VUK0127](#))
- 117 Stuart Fox ([VUK0128](#))
- 118 Tim Knight ([VUK0129](#))
- 119 Tim Knight ([VUK0130](#))
- 120 Tim Knight ([VUK0131](#))
- 121 Professor Charlie Beckett ([VUK0133](#))
- 122 John E Trafford ([VUK0134](#))
- 123 Michael Meadowcroft ([VUK0135](#))
- 124 Lionel Judd ([VUK0136](#))

- 125 National Union Of Journalists ([VUK0137](#))
- 126 Charles Harvey ([VUK0138](#))
- 127 Tim Baynes ([VUK0139](#))
- 128 Stv Action ([VUK0140](#))
- 129 Toby James ([VUK0141](#))
- 130 Unlock Democracy Birmingham ([VUK0143](#))
- 131 David Barnard ([VUK0144](#))
- 132 Brian Wichmann ([VUK0145](#))
- 133 4 Freedoms Party (UK EPP) / British Committee, European People's Party ([VUK0146](#))
- 134 A E L Davis ([VUK0147](#))
- 135 The Government ([VUK0148](#))
- 136 Dr Nick Anstead and Professor Sonia Livingstone ([VUK0149](#))
- 137 Electoral Commission ([VUK0150](#))
- 138 Electoral Commission ([VUK0151](#))
- 139 Labour Campaign For Electoral Reform ([VUK0152](#))
- 140 Bite The Ballot ([VUK0153](#))
- 141 New Citizenship Project ([VUK0155](#))
- 142 Electoral Commission ([VUK0156](#))
- 143 Dr Dave Smith ([VUK0157](#))
- 144 Mark Williams, Chief Executive, East Devon District Council ([VUK0158](#))
- 145 Adair Anderson ([VUK0160](#))
- 146 New Europeans ([VUK0161](#))
- 147 Mike Simpson ([VUK0162](#))
- 148 Thomas Quinton ([VUK0163](#))
- 149 Electoral Commission ([VUK0164](#))

List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament

All publications from the Committee are available on the Committee's website at:

<http://www.parliament.uk/PCRC-publications>

The reference number of the Government's response to each Report is printed in brackets after the HC printing number.

Session 2010–12

First Report	Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Bill	HC 422
Second Report	Fixed-term Parliaments Bill	HC 436 (Cm 7951)
Third Report	Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Bill	HC 437 (Cm 7997)
Fourth Report	Lessons from the process of Government formation after the 2010 General Election	HC 528 (HC 866)
Fifth Report	Voting by convicted prisoners: Summary of evidence	HC 776
Sixth Report	Constitutional implications of the Cabinet Manual	HC 734 (Cm 8213)
Seventh Report	Seminar on the House of Lords: Outcomes	HC 961
Eighth Report	Parliament's role in conflict decisions	HC 923 (HC 1477)
Ninth Report	Parliament's role in conflict decisions: Government Response to the Committee's Eighth Report of Session 2010-12	HC 1477 (HC 1673)
Tenth Report	Individual Electoral Registration and Electoral Administration	HC 1463 (Cm 8177)
Eleventh Report	Rules of Royal Succession	HC 1615 (HC 586)
Twelfth Report	Parliament's role in conflict decisions—further Government Response: Government Response to the Committee's Ninth Report of Session 2010-12	HC 1673
Thirteenth Report	Political party finance	HC 1763

Session 2012–13

First Report	Recall of MPs	HC 373 (HC 646)
Second Report	Introducing a statutory register of lobbyists	HC 153 (HC 593)
Third Report	Prospects for codifying the relationship between central and local government	HC 656(Cm 8623)
Fourth Report	Do we need a constitutional convention for the UK?	HC 371

Session 2013-14

First Report	Ensuring standards in the quality of legislation	HC 85 (HC 611)
Second Report	The impact and effectiveness of ministerial reshuffles	HC 255 (1258)
Third Report	Revisiting Rebuilding the House: the impact of the Wright reforms	HC 82 (HC 910)
Fourth Report	The role and powers of the Prime Minister: the impact of the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011 on	HC 440 (HC 1079)

	Government	
Fifth Report	Pre-appointment hearing: The Chair of the House of Lords Appointments Commission	HC 600
Sixth Report	Introducing a statutory register of lobbyists: Government Response to the Committee's Second Report of Session 2012-13	HC 593
Seventh Report	The Government's lobbying Bill	HC 601 (801)
Eighth Report	Parliament's role in conflict decisions: an update	HC 649
Ninth Report	House of Lords reform: what next?	HC 251 (1079)
Tenth Report	The Government's lobbying Bill: follow up	HC 891
Eleventh Report	Impact of Queen's and Prince's consent on the legislative process	HC 784 (HC 224)
Twelfth Report	Parliament's role in conflict decisions: a way forward	HC 892
Thirteenth Report	Fixed-term Parliaments: the final year of a Parliament	HC 976
Fourteenth Report	Constitutional role of the judiciary if there was a codified constitution	HC 802
Session 2014-15		
First Report	Role and powers of the Prime Minister	HC 351
Second Report	A new Magna Carta?	HC 463
Third Report	Pre-appointment hearing: Registrar of Consultant Lobbyists	HC 223