



# Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee

## Oral evidence: Electoral Registration, HC 841

Monday 6 March 2023

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 6 March 2023.

### [Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Mr Clive Betts (Chair); Bob Blackman; Ian Byrne; Mrs Natalie Elphicke; Ben Everitt; Kate Hollern; Andrew Lewer; Mary Robinson.

Questions 1 - 66

### Witnesses

**I:** Professor Toby James, Professor of Politics and Public Policy and Co-Director of Electoral Integrity, Project, University of East Anglia; and Professor Alistair Clark, Professor of Political Science, Newcastle University.

**II:** Louise Round, Head of Elections and Democracy, Solace; and Barry Quirk CBE, formerly Chief Executive, Kensington and Chelsea London Borough Council.

### Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Professor Toby James and Professor Alistair Clark.

**Chair:** Welcome, everybody, to this afternoon's session of the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee. This afternoon we are going to begin our inquiry into electoral registration, which is an important part of our democracy—people registering on the list so that they can vote at elections.

Before we go to our witnesses—we have two panels this afternoon—I will ask members of the Committee to put on record any interests they may have that may be relevant to this inquiry. I am a vice-president of the Local Government Association.

**Ian Byrne:** I employ a councillor in my office.

**Kate Hollern:** I employ a councillor also.

**Bob Blackman:** I am a vice-president of the Local Government Association and I employ a councillor in my office.

**Mrs Natalie Elphicke:** I am a vice-president of the Local Government



# HOUSE OF COMMONS

Association and I employ a councillor in my office.

**Ben Everitt:** I am a vice-president of the Local Government Association and I employ a councillor in my office.

**Mary Robinson:** I employ a councillor in my office.

Q1 **Chair:** Right, those are our interests that may be relevant to this inquiry.

To our witnesses, you are very welcome. Perhaps you would introduce yourselves, say who you are and the organisation you are currently with.

**Professor James:** I am from the University of East Anglia and am also the co-director of the Electoral Integrity Project.

**Professor Clark:** I am a professor of political science at Newcastle University.

Q2 **Chair:** A general question to both of you to begin with. Will you give us an overview of your thoughts about the registration system as it stands and the biggest challenges facing electoral registration officers, the officers in each local authority who have oversight of and responsibility for the registration process in their areas?

**Professor James:** Thank you to the Committee for the kind invitation to speak with you this afternoon.

This is a much welcome inquiry. We are at a particularly important moment in the devolution of the electoral registration system. Its origins are Victorian and it has been in place for a long time. In the last 20 years or so, we have seen some quite major reforms, which have had mostly positive effects but some side effects as well.

Internationally, the UK system is ranked a B, B+, 58th out of 169 countries, by the Electoral Integrity Project. There are some particular challenges in general, and completeness and accuracy of the electoral register are forever challenges faced by electoral officials. We can look at areas of improving the quality of service to the voter—it is about putting the voter first—but there are some significant challenges facing electoral administrators. We will probably come on to some of those challenges.

We have gone through the process of moving to individual voter registration and online voter registration, which has put significant pressure on local authorities and has sometimes been undertaken at times when there have been significant cuts to resources.

The picture is uneven, and Professor Clark will probably say a bit more about that. There are areas where there is scope for reform. As we shall see, things such as direct enrolment could make a major difference and improve quality for the voter and also remove some pressure from electoral officials.

**Chair:** An intro for you, Professor Clark.



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

**Professor Clark:** As Toby James says, it is worth praising what is achieved by electoral registration officers; I think they achieve a lot with limited resources. The limited resources that electoral registration officers have to achieve their functions is one of the first things that I would like to point the Committee to. Electoral services teams are quite small. They may often have only three or four people for what are very sizeable electorates. That in itself brings a range of pressures, particularly close to an election but also at other points during the electoral cycle, and they deal with almost inevitable pressures during that cycle.

There is the annual canvass, where there are local elections most years and a general election every four or five years, although we have also seen snap elections in 2017 and 2019, and officers are often working to very tight time scales. We know, from the Association of Electoral Administrators and research, that the Electoral Integrity Project has done that in many ways and that it is a workforce under pressure, suffering from fairly high turnover and losing expertise as a result. It achieves a lot but the service could be better resourced.

Q3 **Chair:** Coming on to pressures, one of the obvious ones is the surge in workload. We often hear nothing about electoral registration until just before a general election when we hear about it on the national news, "Isn't it wonderful that this many hundreds of thousands of people have signed up to register today?", compared with the normal trickle at other times.

We will come on to the details of the annual canvass as well but that is another spike. Is this a problem? Would you generally devise a system that built workload spikes of that kind into itself?

**Professor Clark:** I think so. I think the system has some inefficiencies built into it, and one of the difficulties is trying to iron them out. Event-led registration causes inefficiencies and puts considerable pressure on electoral services teams to check applications and get people properly registered in the run-up to elections and there can be very high numbers of applications at those times but also during the canvass.

We will talk about the canvass. I believe the process has changed, but it is still not perfect. There are gaps.

**Chair:** We will come on to the details in a minute; yes.

**Professor James:** For the record, before the 2015 general election, electoral officials had to look at something like half a million voter registration applications that were submitted in one day. We have had a bit of a gap in major electoral events. However, at some point, there will be another big event in the form of a general election and we can expect major pressure on staff again. We want to even out the workload as much as possible. One way of doing that is through having a higher level of completeness and accuracy of the electoral register at other times.

Q4 **Chair:** Has the Elections Act 2022 improved the situation or are there still



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

challenges around that it has worsened or left untouched?

**Professor James:** The Act does not directly address voter registration but some changes that it brought in will have consequences for electoral officials. As researchers, we do not fully know that yet; information is still more anecdotal and electoral officials will have their own perspectives.

One change is the introduction of voter authority certificates. We have not seen very many applications yet—I think there are something like 27,000—but you might expect to see a pattern similar to that of voter registration applications, and they might come in very late, which is an additional pressure. There will be pressure on resources for introducing and managing voter ID at polling stations; extra staff and extra time will be involved.

Other changes are coming in further down the line, from August. Postal votes, for example, must be applied for, or re-applied for every three years. That is more work for electoral officials. Removing the limits to overseas voting also means there will be more applications. Whatever the other pros and cons of particular reforms, they will create additional work for our electoral officials.

**Professor Clark:** I want to pick up on a couple of things. First, a qualification: we are talking about the electoral register, but it is important to recognise that there is no single electoral register in the UK. There are over 360 electoral registers across the UK, and we are talking about different registers for local and parliamentary elections. That is an important qualification.

Toby James has mentioned most of the things about the Elections Act that I think are worth talking about—renewal of postal votes, changes to postal voting, for instance, and there is also an issue about European citizens post-Brexit. Although Toby has mentioned overseas voters, it is a much bigger problem than I think is recognised. About a couple of hundred thousand overseas voters were registered for the 2019 general election and the limit at that point was 15 years.

When you think back 15 years, most stuff was not online; most records were held in hard copy. If you are extending it, you are potentially extending overseas voters' eligibility to millions. Electoral registration officers will have to check their eligibility against what are going to be fairly difficult-to-find resources. For me, the big stand out among the rest is the potential work that the overseas voters' aspect of the Bill might add.

Q5 **Chair:** Has anyone assessed it?

**Professor Clark:** Not that I have seen. I have seen a number attached to it, that potentially upwards of over a couple of million voters might be eligible. Not all of them will register or apply to register, but that seems to me to be something that could create a fairly big workload for electoral registration officers on difficult-to-find material.



Q6 **Kate Hollern:** It must be very difficult to find that information, because people must have been previously registered in an area but will no longer be there so how is it going to be evidenced?

**Professor Clark:** I don't know. That is the simple answer. I don't know if anyone here has done any family history but, if you can imagine the ability to find those kinds of records, you are going back and depending on the quality of local government record-keeping of more than 15 years ago. It may be great. It may be more reasonable than I am thinking but let's just at least be cautious and recognise it as a potential difficulty.

**Kate Hollern:** The estimate is 3 million, isn't it?

Q7 **Bob Blackman:** Let's just clarify because after 15 years you come off. That was the original case. Now it will be in perpetuity.

**Professor Clark:** Exactly.

Q8 **Bob Blackman:** We are saying that if someone claims, saying they are a UK citizen who lived in the UK up until 30 years ago and would like to register to vote now, they can do that under the new legislation.

**Professor Clark:** That is my understanding, yes.

**Chair:** Moving on to other issues: duplications and inaccurate entries in the register.

Q9 **Ian Byrne:** To Toby James first, what is your understanding of the percentage of registration applications annually that are duplications? How are duplications currently dealt with and are they a problem across all local authorities? Do they add to the pressure on officers that Alistair Clark has been talking about?

**Professor James:** I don't have an official number for duplicate applications received. Anecdotally, it was around the 50% mark during the Brexit referendum but that data is not published. Each returning officer would not say how many duplicates they would get.

We did a study of the Brexit referendum, which is a good example of a high-profile, very significant electoral event. During that process, only 2% of local authorities reported duplicates being no problem at all. Of the vast majority, 37% said that they experienced extensive challenges with duplicates. It is an element with two aspects. One is that you have many issues with the completeness of the electoral register—people are not on the electoral register. There is also an element of, "I will register just in case", submitting just in case. People do that although there are methods of checking if you are on the electoral register, such as telephoning or emailing your local registration officer.

Some countries have a system, an "Am I registered?" website, so that by putting in your personal identifier number and your date of birth and name you find out. It will tell you, yes or no. In the UK, you can go down to the local returning officer and check the hard copy in person. However,



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

in practice, the absence of being able to check easily does place a challenge on returning officers and electoral registration officers and, if not removed, it could be reduced by having a website that let people check their registration status.

**Ian Byrne:** Professor Clark, anything to add?

**Professor Clark:** Not much. I have seen an estimate as high as two-thirds of applications in one local authority being duplicates. That may just be an individual case, but it is important to recognise the kinds of numbers of people who are applying during electoral events to begin with.

On the deadline day for the 2019 general election, 659,000 applied to register. During the period from Dissolution through to the close of the registration deadline, just under 4 million applied to register. Of course, not all of those applications would have been duplicates but, if we accept the estimate of about 50%, that is still a lot of extra work that is being created for electoral registration officers to check. The closer it is to the deadline, the more pressure they are under to get it done and done effectively and efficiently.

The way they seem to react to this situation is by taking it upon themselves to work harder to get it all done as properly as possible, but that results in stories about electoral registration officers working through the evenings and to midnight and so on. The stories we have heard are anecdotal but, clearly, that is what some officers are experiencing.

Q10 **Ian Byrne:** Resourcing is key, isn't it?

**Professor Clark:** Yes.

Q11 **Ian Byrne:** The Cabinet Office undertook exploratory work for an online checking tool. We touched on it before. Sticking with you, Alistair, in your view, would this help create a more accurate register and would it provide value for money?

**Professor Clark:** Would it provide value for money? I think that is an open question. The Government did put some figures to it when the House of Lords looked at it back in 2019. I think the decision then was that it would not be value for money.

If you asked electoral registration officers if it would be value for money, I think they would give you a different answer, which is that it would be, that it would take a lot of pressure off at the time of running up to electoral events. In that sense, it probably would be and it would make it easier—we must remember that we are talking about voters here, as well—to check that they are registered because most of these voters just want to do the right thing. They just want to vote without any difficulty and we end up with these inefficiencies.

Q12 **Ian Byrne:** Sticking with the potential online register, Toby James, how



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

would you ensure that the digitally excluded would not miss out? Also, how could fraud be prevented? Do you have any views on that?

**Professor James:** To be clear here, we are talking about a checking tool to see people who are already registered.

As for the digitally excluded, you could say an online register is just another tool, additional to the telephone, and also people can go in and check the register in person. It is just adding another method so it would have all those positive effects.

I am not sure that there is too much of a risk of fraud. Anyone can go and check the registers at the moment. There are not many restrictions on the open register or the edited register. There are risks in who uses the register and for whatever, but they are the same as for other registers. This is a very straightforward tool, which most democracies would look to provide. It is available in Canada, and Ireland introduced it a couple of decades ago. It is standard practice.

Q13 **Ian Byrne:** Would you both be in favour of it?

**Professor James:** Very much so, yes.

**Professor Clark:** Oh, definitely.

Q14 **Ian Byrne:** The Law Commission report in 2020 pointed out there may be inconsistencies in local authorities' decision-making regarding electors having a second residence. This could result in some electors being sent two postal ballot papers and unwittingly voting twice. Are you aware of inconsistencies in how different local authorities determine applications for a second residence? To what extent is this a problem and how does this reflect on the integrity of our system?

**Professor James:** I am not aware of any number of cases where this has happened or whether there is any variation across local authorities. That is simply because it is not possible to know. It is not possible to know because, as Alistair Clark has said, we have multiple electoral registers rather than one central register.

The Committee could look at the advantages and disadvantages of having a single electoral register. It is impossible for a local authority to map and identify whether anyone in the room, for example, is also registered in another local authority area. It is not possible to check. If there was a single electoral record, a single point, it would be possible to check and we would then be able to monitor second residences as a potential problem.

Q15 **Ian Byrne:** Would you be in favour of a single register?

**Professor James:** Yes, I would be.

**Ian Byrne:** Alistair Clark?





**Professor Clark:** I can see that being argued both ways. In some ways, I think, if it was held centrally, a single register could be a kind of honeypot for potential data breaches and things of that sort. There is a degree of security, believe it or not, in having separate registers and a decentralised system.

Equally, you could potentially have it with the Electoral Commission or something of that sort. Many countries—Italy, France, and Germany for instance—hold their electoral registers locally. They hold them at local government level. I don't think there is anything inherently wrong with doing that. I would just worry, given the increasing amount of cyber security issues, that a centralised database might be open to some degree of attack.

Q16 **Ian Byrne:** How can we ensure that we get the data we need to secure the integrity of the system if we stay localised? How do we do it better?

**Professor Clark:** There are various aspects to it. The countries that I have just mentioned all have civil registrars and so on. We don't have that and there is no prospect of that happening any time soon.

Basically, we are looking at dealing with local data matching, some of which is already going on. We are trying, or we should be trying, to look at other government data sources that we might be able to use and link up. The DWP website's data is often mentioned in this connection and electoral registration officers often mention having better access to that data.

It may require changes to data protection law to resolve some of these issues. I believe there are protections around the DWP data that prevent EROs from using them to the extent that they might like. However, I am not sure that we know the extent of the data sources we might be able to use because they are all fairly decentralised and fragmented.

**Chair:** Ben Everitt wants to come in now and move on to his question, if that is all right.

Q17 **Ben Everitt:** This is a very efficient use of time, chaps; thank you.

Yes, I had some questions about an alternative system, noting that some other countries do use data sharing agreements to update their electoral registers from other parts of the public sector. In the UK, the backend of the gov.uk website is pretty good at that so what is stopping it? Why, in the UK, do we not prompt people to register as they register their identities through the Government Gateway or some other official verification site?

**Professor James:** I am happy to kick off on that. Two things: first, uncertainty around data sharing agreements and the political will to put them in place. Secondly, is the strategic ambition to do it? Understandably, previous Governments have focused on other electoral reforms; for instance, voter identification for electoral registration. We





## HOUSE OF COMMONS

have moved to online and individual voter registration. It has just been that the government has been focused elsewhere.

However, this is the big opportunity. I would say two things could happen here. One is the possibility of using other government data sources for direct enrolment. The one I would focus on is direct enrolment for 16 year-olds when they receive their national insurance number. There is a government database that lists them all. It is with the Department for Work and Pensions. Everyone on it written to. They are told of their national insurance number. All that needs to happen is for that information to be transferred to the relevant local returning officers, but they need to be given the legal authority to directly enrol the individuals.

What happens instead is that local authorities spend a lot of resources on tracing people, writing to them, and trying to find innovative ways of getting people involved. It is a waste of time and resources. Young people could just be incorporated into the system and that would save a lot of time and effort. We have estimated that 700,000 citizens would be added to electoral registers each year, directly, just as a result of that arrangement at a time when the number of attainers on the register is dropping like a stone.

You mentioned some other things. You could also very easily add an opt-in box to other government services so that, when people complete a driver's licence application for instance, update that, or apply for a passport, they could tick a box. It could be an opt-in: "Do you want to send this information to your local voter registration officer?"

In our written evidence, we set out how 6.5 million people per year could be prompted to register to vote when they apply for their passports. That might be adding new names or just keeping the register up to date. It is all documented in our written evidence that is available to the Committee for your consideration.

Q18 **Ben Everitt:** You are sort of almost suggesting a lack of ambition?

**Professor James:** It has not been a priority for previous Governments. They have been focused on other things.

Q19 **Ben Everitt:** I will come to Professor Clark in a minute, because I am going to pick up on some of the things you said in previous answers to colleagues. You highlighted things such as cyber security, fraud concerns and data privacy as pretty substantial risks. Before I go to Professor Clark, do you have any comments about those things being potential, Professor James?

**Professor James:** There are always risks with running major public services and we have to be sure to take them seriously.

If we are thinking here about a single electoral register, it is something that other democracies do. Take Canada for example. Essentially, what they do is curate a central electoral register but then extract from it and



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

send to local authorities or areas their respective register at the time of an election, which means that there is not a single honeypot during the immediate electoral period.

All democracies, all countries, have central databases of citizens. On the one hand, you could say we do not have a civil population register in the United Kingdom. We do not have one named as such but we do have a database maintained by the Department for Work and Pensions that contains everyone's national insurance number, date of birth and nationality, all of which is essential information for voter registration, so there are ways of overcoming those potential threats or taking them seriously.

**Ben Everitt:** Indeed, most of us have an NHS number as well. Professor Clark.

**Professor Clark:** I will pick up on two points you made in your question. The first was about the backend of the gov.uk website. I think that is an important point because electoral registration officers do not all use the same software at the backend. There are three or four different types of software that are used by different providers. My understanding is that some electoral registration officers like some of them better than others, and I think this would be something that needed to be thought about in designing any new system.

The second thing was about public services mentioning things such as electoral registration and so on. There is a section in an Act of electoral law that is on the statute book that allows this to happen. It is an Act that is probably not likely to be used any time soon. It is the Referendums (Scotland) Act 2020. Believe it or not, section 25 of that Act did permit public services to give individuals information about electoral registration so there is a potential model there if the Committee wanted to have a look at it.

**Ben Everitt:** Fantastic. Thank you both.

Q20 **Chair:** For clarity, would concerns about a honeypot apply equally if the local register was online?

**Professor Clark:** There have been examples of cyber-attacks on local councils and indeed NHS Trusts so, yes, I think they would. I think the issue would be that, quite simply, if anyone wanted to do something with the electoral register as a whole they would have to go through 368 councils to do so. By definition, that is far harder to do than doing it at one single register. I would take advice from the UK Cyber Security Council on that. I make no claims to be a cyber security expert, but it is a concern that many would have. Indeed, in this age of conspiracy theories, no doubt it is something that someone might raise elsewhere as well.

**Chair:** All right, thanks. Moving on to the annual canvass. Bob?



Q21 **Bob Blackman:** Yes. The Government have published and implemented reforms to the annual canvass. Some would say, “Why do we need an annual canvass at all, given we have rolling registration, there is a requirement to register, and people routinely do register and deregister when they move?” Given the evidence you have been able to collect, have the reforms done the job of reforming the system enough?

**Professor James:** That is a great question. I think that the jury is still a little bit out on this. The Electoral Commission undertakes accuracy and completeness surveys. It is doing that at the moment and my understanding is that it will report later this year, and that will tell us—

Q22 **Bob Blackman:** That will be September this year, I think.

**Professor James:** Yes. That will give us a before and after of the effects that these changes have brought in. Generally speaking, the canvass reforms have been positive. It has used data sources to be more efficient with resources in local authorities. It means that we have been able to automatically reregister people where there are no changes. That is cost-efficient; it saves money and time.

There are some caveats. I think one potential issue is with attainers and young people. If you are automatically writing out to a household because you can see no changes using your data, maybe the opportunity to capture young people who have just come of age is being missed, for example. That is a possibility. Generally speaking, I am very glowing about what I have seen from the reformed canvass.

Your other question was: given this, do we need an annual canvass at all? I think that the trajectory of travel in countries that have had a similar system to the UK has been to move away from annual canvasses and they have removed those. Given that we have this level of accuracy and completeness in the UK, I would be hesitant to remove that stopgap.

Q23 **Bob Blackman:** Given that we have moved to rolling registration, should we just have a rolling canvass?

**Professor James:** In a sense, yes, but the countries that have gone on to remove the annual canvass usually have some form of direct enrolment in place. That has removed the need for an annual canvass even further. For example, if you look at Victoria, Australia, they introduced direct enrolment just for a particular group—for young people as they came of age. That was very effective at getting those names onto the electoral register and engaging them.

Q24 **Bob Blackman:** How did they do that? As you say, normally a form is sent to the home. If there is no change it is signed and sent back, but if anyone is an attainer there is a risk they are missed off the list.

**Professor James:** Yes. They used other data sources to directly add them to the electoral register. They would then write to them to inform them that they have been added to the electoral register and if anything



is incorrect not to worry. They were doing that because the annual canvass was becoming much less effective at capturing the churn of people. I think that is also what has happened in the UK over the course of many years. I think that removing the annual canvass could be fine, but some direct enrolment mechanism would be needed to focus on those groups.

**Bob Blackman:** Professor Clark?

**Professor Clark:** Nothing much to add to that.

Q25 **Bob Blackman:** Both of you have mentioned attainers dropping off the list. What evidence is there that that is happening? In my own local authority when I was elected in 2010, we were getting 1,200-plus people turning 18 during the year. We are now down to less than 200. Is that demographics, or is it the case that attainers are not being registered?

**Professor James:** I think it is the case that attainers are not being registered. I looked at the ONS data and I think there was something like 541,000 attainers in 2009. That has now dropped to 177,000 in 2021. That is a huge drop. One of the reasons for that is the move to individual voter registration. Whereas once upon a time the head of a household would have registered people in the house, a parent would have added their teenage children, potentially everyone has to do it now on an individual basis. I think that is one of the key things that has led to that.

**Professor Clark:** I agree entirely with that. The only thing I would add is that, even if someone gets added during the canvassing process, they still have to go and apply to be registered in the first place. There is a two-step process. It is not like the old household registration system where you get added to the form and you were necessarily registered. The individual still has to go and apply. That then brings in another hurdle for completeness and accuracy, unfortunately.

Q26 **Bob Blackman:** Obviously, different local authorities use different means to capture this. With the age-old thing of literally going door-to-door, do you have any evidence about how people are rewarded for carrying out that work? Are they paid by the hour or by the number of people they collect? Are they targeting particular households? Do you have evidence about that particular element—the last stage, after people have been reminded, told and prompted, of literally going door-to-door and hopefully finding someone in who can say, “Yes, the following people live here”?

**Professor Clark:** No, I don’t have any evidence on that. I don’t know if Toby has. I do know—this is anecdotal from talking to election services teams—that the costs of doing this often do not necessarily reckon with the returns that they get back. This is because you are putting people into areas that may not necessarily be areas that like engaging with people from the state to begin with. You might get a handful of applications, but at what cost? You have had to find someone to do this,



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

you have had to pay them, and so on. I think that there is a sense within the electoral community that this is a cost that does not really pay back in the returns that it is getting.

**Q27 Bob Blackman:** Is there national guidance on that? I am asking a question that I don't know the answer to, which is always dangerous. Is there any national guidance that says, "There is no one on the electoral register at this property and, therefore, local authorities should target these properties to ask who is living there, are they empty and could they be brought back into use"? Particularly when we are looking for housing for people.

**Professor James:** Yes, there is guidance on how the canvass should be undertaken and a requirement for the number of times that a property should be approached. However, as Alistair was saying, there isn't particular research on the effectiveness of individual-level rewards for the canvasser.

I think the story that is coming back internationally is that there are many cases where the annual canvass does not work as it was originally founded to do, which was over 100 years ago. Now you face issues with high-rise flats, gated communities, dog barks and everything else that comes along with having to approach every single house.

Data matching using public data is the way forward. It is much more convenient for the citizen as well, because they can be registered automatically rather than having more people knock on their door or letters coming through their door. It is much easier for them.

**Q28 Chair:** You could not think of a more inefficient system, could you? You work out the groups of the population who are least likely to register— young people, people living in HMOs, private rented property, probably communities where English isn't their first language—and then you write to those people. You write to HMOs where you might get a letter shoved in the entrance and somehow it gets lost, and the people who do not easily read the letter that they get sent. It is totally inefficient, isn't it?

**Professor Clark:** I would not start from where we are, let's put it this way.

**Chair:** We will move on to a very important issue: confidence in our system. Natalie.

**Q29 Mrs Natalie Elphicke:** With that introduction, I would say that we are a group of people around this table with a particular interest in the integrity and confidence in the system. It is encouraging that the Electoral Commission's own survey has shown that 80% of respondents to them were confident that elections were run well in the UK, which apparently is the highest level of confidence since it was measured back in 2012. Does that confidence level reflect your assessment of the general public's confidence in our registration system, or do you think that there is a lack of confidence behind why some people are choosing not to register?



**Professor Clark:** It probably is accurate, but to the extent that people think about this as an issue to begin with. I would have that as a qualification. I think that people sadly only think about the electoral process when things go wrong. That is when they start thinking about it in detail.

In general terms, people are probably fairly happy with it because they have not had to think in any depth about it, beyond when you get to election time and then people suddenly think, "I have to do the right thing. I have to make sure that I am registered". Then you end up with all these duplicate applications and so on. I think that it is probably a fairly accurate representation of what people think about the system at the moment, in terms of confidence at least.

**Professor James:** Yes, elections are well run. I think it is easy to focus on the problems. There are problems that need to be fixed, but I think that it should be noted and said loudly that elections are well run. They are run by independent officials who do their job very well. That is a difficult and important message to get across in a social media era where, if you do have a single instance of a late postal vote or a missing name on an electoral register, it is very easily spread on social media. Maybe that is a good accountability mechanism, but it gives a false sense of how widespread those problems are.

It is good that you have seen those positive steps in the Electoral Commission's survey data. I looked up some of the comparative survey data to compare Great Britain to other countries. According to the World Values Survey, 53.4% of the respondents had confidence in the elections. That is roughly comparable to some other countries. It is lower than Australia, where it is 63.5%, lower than Germany, where it is 71%, but better than the USA, where it is 41%.

There is a serious issue with engagement with the political process. As Alistair was saying, how you ask the question will shape a lot of the answers that are found. It is well run, but there are obviously things we can improve on.

Q30 **Mrs Natalie Elphicke:** Looking at the Electoral Integrity Programme, what is your view about whether those improvements will be successful in increasing confidence or improving the integrity of the electoral registration system? Do you think it will achieve those objectives?

**Professor James:** Are you talking there particularly about the voter ID measures that were introduced?

**Mrs Natalie Elphicke:** Yes.

**Professor James:** Yes. We have both been fortunate enough to give evidence to previous Select Committees and other inquiries, and I think that we have said before that there was no evidence to justify the move to voter identification. The cases are very few and far between.





There is a particular problem with the form of voter identification that is being required in forthcoming elections. It is one thing to say that we need voter ID—and I think that could run well—but I think what is now required in the UK is photographic identification and there are not the safety lanes that you would want to have at elections.

For example, one thing that was discussed during the parliamentary procedures looking at the Elections Act was using a Canadian-style vouching system. If Alistair forgets his voter ID on election day—I am sure he won't—someone with voter ID on the day could sign to say that this is Alistair. You then have an affidavit testifying that he is who he says he is. That kind of mechanism is usually in place in democracies to ensure that everyone is still able to cast their vote but, because they are not, it is very possible that there will be a lot of people who will not be able to vote on election day. That is a very serious problem for participation in democracy.

Q31 **Mrs Natalie Elphicke:** Thank you. That is very clear. Professor Clark, would you like to add to that?

**Professor Clark:** I have nothing much to add to that. I began my comments to you by saying that people only start paying attention when things go wrong, and I think that there is potential for things to go wrong with the introduction of voter identification because almost inevitably there will be variation in how this is done across the country, unfortunately.

Toby has already mentioned social media and how these sorts of things spread, so I hope this will not be the case. I hope that this will go smoothly. I know electoral staff will have done their utmost to make it go smoothly, but almost inevitably with the resourcing that they have, with the training that they are able to do and so on, I think that there is potential for difficulties.

After polling day at the beginning of May, I would look for stories about this for a few days. Whether that goes on to affect confidence I think is an open question, and in what direction is also an open question. It may be that just asking for voter ID does improve people's confidence. Equally, if there are problems in the delivery of that system, that may lead to a dent in confidence in the system overall. I think that we should be concerned about that if that happens.

Q32 **Mrs Natalie Elphicke:** If I can just capture that, there is a question over the form of the photographic identification. Then there is the question of whether it will be applied evenly for people coming to the polling station and having different identity information. Professor James, you have alluded to this already. If I could just draw out a bit: are there other processes in other countries, such as same-day registration and advanced polling? Are these methods that we could look at to improve that position going forward, do you think?





## HOUSE OF COMMONS

**Professor James:** Same-day registration would be a serious challenge to run in UK elections. The advantage would be that somebody who has not registered would be able to cast a vote on election day. In our poll worker surveys, we found that there are people who are not registered that turn up on election day. They want to cast their vote but are not able to.

In a way that would solve that, but there would be a very major downside: usually, where you have this in place, you tend to have big queues because, rather than registering 11 days before the election, people can leave it to election day. That puts another burden on our electoral officials, so I think that the 11-day registration deadline is fair and is the very least that electoral officials need. I think that direct enrolment is the way to combat the potential issue of people not being able to cast their vote.

Extending voting hours is good for citizens as it increases convenience and gives them choice. However, generally speaking, it does not lead to a major increase in voter turnout. It just adds choice. That is not necessarily a bad thing but it isn't the remedy for a higher turnout.

**Mrs Natalie Elphicke:** I think that we have all had those experiences of getting those last few people out of their houses. Professor Clark, did you—

**Professor Clark:** The only thing I would add is that some of the early voting issues were discussed and debated in Scotland during the run-up to the 2021 elections, which were held under covid. They inquired into whether or not extending the voting period to three days in that case would help with social distancing measures. In the end, they chose not to go down that route, but it was a debate that they had. I think that they debated it over a couple of sessions, so that may well be worth a look at.

Again, the issues of resources, staffing and funding would be important to address, and election services teams are under pressure with all of those sorts of things.

You would also need to consider locations where this might be done. Would this be done in schools or local authority buildings? Where might it be done? There are already complaints about elections in schools, for instance. Then you have the question about ballot security afterwards as well. There are some issues to be thought through fairly carefully there. I think that we would probably both be in favour of it in terms of increasing voter choice because, after all, this is what it is all about, making sure that voters can participate. The issues need to be thought through quite carefully with that.

Q33 **Chair:** One technical question on how local authorities deal with individuals who don't return the form: I think that some authorities say, "If you don't return the form, you are off the register". Others say, "We will keep you on for a bit, maybe one year, two years, three years,



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

because not everyone fills the forms in and we will give you a bit of leeway". Have you picked up any great differences in local authorities and whether that makes a difference to their overall registration levels?

**Professor Clark:** Not particularly. As far as I am aware, under the new rules they have to have a couple of pieces of corroborating information. Therefore, it is not just that they have not replied but that they cannot find them in some other data matching that they have done. I think there is a check before taking them off the register. It is not just a case of taking them off.

**Chair:** Thank you both for coming. It has been helpful for the Committee to understand some of the nuances and challenges, of both the current system and what any new system might look like as well. Thank you both very much.

### Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Louise Round and Barry Quirk.

Q34 **Chair:** Welcome to both of you. Could you begin by introducing yourselves and the position that you currently have so we can understand that? Thank you very much.

**Louise Round:** Thank you. My name is Louise Round. I run a south London legal partnership that provides legal services to five London boroughs in the south-west of London. However, for these purposes, I speak for the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives on elections and democracy.

**Barry Quirk:** Good afternoon. My name is Barry Quirk and I was a returning officer from 1994 to last November. I have been a returning officer in 34 elections for three different boroughs and across London as well.

Q35 **Chair:** Thank you both for coming this afternoon. To begin with, we are not looking into the particular details of all aspects of the Elections Act 2022, which has just been passed and is being implemented, but the impact of those measures on resources and capacity of electoral registration officers. Do you think that it has had an impact, and do you think EROs are getting both the technical support and the resources that they need to deal with the extra challenges?

**Louise Round:** It is probably a little early to say because the first set of changes will not come into force until this next set of polls on 4 May. It is beginning to ramp up for those people involved in the election so far, but the first real significant change is voter ID. We are beginning to see applications coming through for voter authority certificates nationally but still a fairly slow drip, I would think. As your previous speaker said, people's attention tends to get focused when they are aware there is an election around the corner, and it is perhaps fair to say that with local



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

elections they may not quite have permeated the public consciousness yet.

I have no doubt that when we get much closer to the elections, the number of applications for voter authority certificates and the sheer amount of training and input that will have to go into upskilling people to deal with the question of voter ID on polling day will be enormous. We will have to see how it goes and then do a quick debrief afterwards to understand what it has meant for people running elections on the ground.

**Q36 Chair:** Do you have any concerns at this stage? You do not have the data information because we have not had an election yet, but have any initial concerns been flagged up?

**Louise Round:** I think that the concerns are the additional burden it is placing on presiding officers in particular. They are going to be the people in the polling stations who will have to decide whether or not someone matches their ID or turn someone away if they do not have the voter ID. That puts an additional pressure on them.

Your previous speakers talked about the difficulty in resourcing elections. Getting someone to come along and spend 15 hours in a draughty polling station is not always easy at the best of times, and when they have this added responsibility I think that will definitely put some more pressure on recruitment.

**Barry Quirk:** From the canvass of opinion that I have done across London on the impact of the new Act, most of the responses have been positive about the administration. I think that it has reduced cost, enabled more technology, enabled voter choice and so on.

The concern at the moment, as discussed earlier by the previous academic colleagues, is about the pending voters, which is those who are on the register but have not applied—at the moment, this stands at about 10% across London, which is a lot of electors; well over half a million—as well as the other concerns that were mentioned.

The point I would make at the outset is that when I began being an elections manager, only 5% of electors voted by post. It is now nearly one in four. The enabling legislation, which was in the year 2000, saw this enormous increase from 2005 onwards in postal votes. The management and administration of postal votes is the confounding thing for voter identification, signatures and so on, as well as the preparation—the amount of work done beforehand. You cannot overestimate the impact of that increase in postal votes.

There is an awful lot of consideration about other factors, but the fact that one in four voters is now voting by post I think is probably the most significant consideration.

**Chair:** Thank you for that. Moving on now to data matching and sharing. Kate.



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q37 **Kate Hollern:** That is an interesting comment about postal votes, because of course you do not need voter ID to apply for a postal vote, do you? You just apply with your NI number and your date of birth.

**Barry Quirk:** Yes, and a signature.

Q38 **Kate Hollern:** Yes, obviously. What do you think the implications would be if electoral registration officers were able to automatically update the register based on data shared by other public services? For example, DWP has your NI, your address, your date of birth, and all sorts.

**Louise Round:** I think, broadly speaking, with certain safeguards, that would be helpful. Again, as your previous speaker said, the fact that you might know someone lives in a property because you receive that information from DWP or through your other data mining in the council—council tax records for instance—that does not enable you as an electoral registration officer to put someone on the register.

All it does is give you the information to write to them and invite them to apply to go on the electoral register. If they don't reply, there are various stages you have to go through, such as reminder letters, a door-knock, and eventually the sanction of a civil penalty. I don't think there is much research about how much that has been levied.

By getting that information, all it is really doing is allowing you to kick off a process. Being able to register someone—if you know they live there—would be a good thing in terms of electoral administration.

Q39 **Kate Hollern:** Yes. Do you think it would ease the burden, because it would be more targeted for local authorities to write to a property where there may be—

**Louise Round:** Again, as your previous speaker said, under the old system, if a household member had told you that a member of their family lived at the house with them, you would put them on the register. You cannot do that anymore, so anything that allows you to enrol somebody, provided you are sure about your information, has to cut down on the amount of administration that people have to carry out.

**Barry Quirk:** I think that it is essential that we move in this direction because of the churn that there is. In London, 25% of people live in private rented. Outside of London it is 17%. We have a very high proportion of the population in private rented accommodation. That is where an awful lot of the churn occurs. It is not wholly there, but to have a complete and accurate register, it is important that we get information on to registers as easily as possible.

The DWP is a very good example. It is patchy across the country about getting information. It is important that it is consistent, but I agree entirely that the issue is about making sure that it is complete and accurate, using all of these data uploading opportunities.



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q40 **Kate Hollern:** Of course, if you live in a property, you are likely to pay council tax. That information could be shared, not only externally from local authority but also internally.

**Louise Round:** We do share and there is provision in the legislation to require the council to make things like its council tax records available to the ERO. I think probably if you asked a member of the public, "You have registered for council tax but we have not put you on the electoral register", they would probably think you are a bit strange to not have done that. However, as I say, at the moment all it does is allow the electoral registration officers to then make inquiries to invite someone to apply to register, so it is arguably an unnecessary step in the process.

Q41 **Kate Hollern:** Do you see not only an improvement in the system, but also any potential cost savings by public service departments talking to each other?

**Louise Round:** Absolutely, yes, by cutting out maybe two or three intermediary steps.

Q42 **Kate Hollern:** Barry, do you think there would be savings?

**Barry Quirk:** I have not implemented many computer systems where there has been savings as a consequence. For me, the issue is that there are different levels of requirements to share information. Probably the most evident is the one on crime and disorder, where it is a requirement on authorities to share information in order to tackle crime. That is perfectly understandable. Whereas, when there is just a permission and it is all down to this institution's GDPR expert and that institution's GDPR expert, there will be different interpretations. I think that it is important that the regulations are absolutely clear on the requirement to share information for the purposes of having a complete and accurate register.

Q43 **Kate Hollern:** If you could write those regulations, which Departments or organisations would you include that could share data for that purpose?

**Barry Quirk:** DWP.

**Kate Hollern:** Just DWP?

**Barry Quirk:** DWP and, oddly, registrars. For example, when people are registering their citizenship, there are very patchy arrangements across London for that.

**Kate Hollern:** Again, that is local authority.

**Barry Quirk:** It is, but it is dealt with under separate arrangements, I think.

**Louise Round:** They are, but registrars are already under obligation to share their information with electoral registration officers. It does not work back the other way, but they are.



Q44 **Kate Hollern:** I suppose the important part there is, if there is a housing benefit or a council tax benefit, you would automatically assume that that same information would be used to check and verify electoral registration, wouldn't you?

**Louise Round:** Yes. In all the councils I have worked with over the years they do share. The point is that it does not allow you to then register. It is just another means of checking the veracity of your information.

Q45 **Kate Hollern:** Louise, you say that you speak to many chief executives. Do you see significant variations between authorities on managing the system itself?

**Louise Round:** It might be fair to say—and they may not thank me for saying it—that probably a lot of chief executives are not wholly aware of what is going on in the electoral registration part of their organisation. Usually the returning officers will, and they will absolutely be on top of the electoral process—you might want to contradict me, Barry—but some of the minutiae of what goes on underneath is probably something that they do not have a lot of day-to-day decision-making over.

Q46 **Kate Hollern:** No, but you would presume there would be feedback because the chief executive—who is normally the returning officer—is the boss of the people who work in democratic services who manage it. You would imagine there would be some discussion on how the process has gone, and what could be done to make it more efficient and easier.

**Louise Round:** Yes, I think so. I don't want to underplay what they do and certainly they would be interested in how the annual canvass return is going and the percentage of return rate, but I suspect many of them do not concern themselves with some of the real detail around how data mining and everything happens.

**Barry Quirk:** If I could also add to that. The comment was made earlier about some of the downsides, perhaps, of going to a fully nationally integrated system. There are differences in the ability of these different software places. I will not go through the three main ones that are used, but there are three ones and the ability to upload information differs.

They all have integrated application programming interfaces with the main so you can connect, but some of the file arrangements are not 100% reliable for every authority, such as CSV files, for example. I have checked this with authorities. There are technical problems in connecting. It is not straightforward.

I do think that there is an issue about whether there is an advantage in having a decentralised approach or one that is more consistent. Certainly, I was the returning officer four times for London as a whole. It was very difficult when there were 32 different authorities all running their own election. It is a separate election, yet I have to aggregate it for the London base. It is difficult when I am looking at if this inconsistency is





## HOUSE OF COMMONS

warranted or not. That is essentially what I was looking at. Should I override this local decision to do it in this particular way?

There is always that tension in running elections in a decentred approach. In essence, we are coming out of a high trust approach to election management in a low trust world.

Q47 **Chair:** To follow up on the data sharing, DWP knows who an individual is. They have with a national insurance number or whatever. With council tax, all you know is the person who pays the council tax, not everybody else in that house. How do local authorities connect the one person they have information about to the fact that other people may be living in a property?

**Louise Round:** They don't necessarily from the council tax records, because they cannot. That is one source of information they might see. They might ask the parking service, who may well have parking permits issued in other members of the house's names, and the births and deaths records. There is no one complete set of data that will tell them everything that they need to know. In fact, when the register is compiled, if it is accurate, in theory it ought to be the data set that is the most complete and most reliable.

**Barry Quirk:** In my experience, electoral service managers are quite innovative in finding ways to identify people, but the essence is that, yes, you are registered on the electoral register but you are registered from a property. What matters is: what is the property reference? What is the gazetteer that is used? As you mentioned earlier, HMOs in particular are a real difficulty because they are not identifiable properties sometimes, so there are a lot of people in the same address, or there could well be a lot of churn in private rented. It is difficult to have a people-based approach, which the electoral register is but it is actually tied to property.

Q48 **Chair:** It may be a traditional house so the registry officers may write. When they write, do they say to people, "We know you live here. If other people live in your property, these are the forms they have to fill in as well"? Does that encouragement go off when the contact is made?

**Louise Round:** Yes. That is effectively what the annual canvass is. You would be right to say, "Why do you not adopt the same approach every time you contact a household?"

Q49 **Kate Hollern:** Could I just add to that? On council tax, if you have a 25% discount, you know it is a single-person property but, if you only have one voter on a register who does not get a discount, surely that is an indication that somebody else lives there.

**Louise Round:** It is and, as Barry said, some electoral registration officers will do that extra bit of detective work and come back and say, "There is no single person discount. Do you know who else lives there?" That will trigger an inquiry, but that is all effectively manual matching. It





## HOUSE OF COMMONS

is looking at one set of records and another set of records and making deductions from it.

**Barry Quirk:** People's lives are very complicated.

**Kate Hollern:** I know.

**Chair:** You mentioned the annual canvass. Moving on. Bob.

Q50 **Bob Blackman:** Obviously, I think you were present for the first evidence session we had here when I was asking about the annual canvass. One of the issues is identifying people who are not on the register. In your experience, how good is it to continue with the annual canvass to try to get those people who are unregistered?

**Louise Round:** I have slightly changed my view since canvass reforms came into force a few years ago. I had thought, "What is the point of doing an annual canvass now that we can have the DWP data matching exercise?" If you look at the stats, there are still a huge number of deletions and additions that happen in the annual canvass period because the rolling registration and the data matching only works when you upload all of your data from the electoral management system into the DWP system. It will not automatically catch anyone who has moved in since.

Q51 **Bob Blackman:** Why not just have a rolling canvass? You are looking at households as I described. You have an empty house or a house where no one appears on the register but it is clearly occupied, so something has to be done and that is where you focus your attention. Why not do that all the way through the year? I know the annual canvass goes on for an extended period, but, given we have rolling registration, why don't you do that as a continuous process?

**Louise Round:** I think many electoral services teams do that. As soon as they have their attention drawn to a house that is empty, they will kick off the process. They know that someone is living there using all of the sources of data that are currently available to them, but that does not give them a write out to every household in the borough who has not been matched, which is what the annual canvass does. Sometimes you do not know what you do not know. It gives you a chance once a year to have a reset. If you look at the figures anecdotally, about as many people come on as come off, but at least, if it does not increase actual raw numbers, the nett numbers, it does improve accuracy.

Q52 **Bob Blackman:** You say you have changed your mind about your view on the annual canvass. Is there a better way of doing this process than our current processes?

**Louise Round:** I would certainly endorse the idea of automatic enrolment along the lines of when someone gets a national insurance number, for instance. I think that until you have that, you will always have to do a proactive search. Whether you do it once a year or twice a



year is probably a matter of judgment. The benefit of doing it in the summer is that, generally speaking, you do not have an election coming up, so there is time for electoral services teams, pushed as they are, to do that concentrated work over the autumn. However, yes, until and unless we get other ways of getting people registered that isn't about them applying—you are finding them and inviting them to apply and they are applying—I don't see there is much option.

**Q53** **Bob Blackman:** Barry, you obviously have a long experience in electoral registration. Have the recent reforms improved things by streamlining the process?

**Barry Quirk:** The short answer is yes, although there are remaining issues about the invitation to register and household forms. People are confused about these, "Why do I have to do this and that?" Once the issue of household notification and individual registration is ironed out, then I think that overall the answer would be yes. There are improvements in costs and in better use of data—we do not have automatic enrolment but we seem to be getting there—and there is greater choice for voters, so I think that the answer would be yes.

Some of the big questions are about: is this right to be done in 368 ways that we have learned or the same thing done by 368 people? It is never going to be done exactly the same, even when there are very highly structured regulations to follow and guidance and so on.

I do think that what has happened in the last few years—and it happened following the referendum in Scotland, which established an election management board for Scotland—is the same being done at the regional level, where regional returning officers are looking at consistency within their region as a step towards ensuring we do not have unwarranted variation in practice. There is just an embellishment because of something that happened 20 years ago. That is often the case—"Why are they doing this here?" "Because this thing happened 20 years ago and everyone was upset about it. No one can remember much about it now, but it means that it is different than the place next door." I have experienced that twice.

**Q54** **Bob Blackman:** You heard the data, that there is a dramatic drop in the number of attainers coming onto the register and, also, that a huge number of people registered literally at the last minute in the last general election. Hearing that data suggests to me what is potentially coming up at the next general election. In local elections, if people are interested in voting they will make sure they are on the register, but in a general election, people say, "I have to make sure I am registered". That potentially represents a huge body of people that may suddenly come onto the register. What would be the issue for returning officers in that particular instance?

**Barry Quirk:** I think it is how you organise the resource that you have. It is not just about the three or four core staff that you have. It is also



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

about how you separate some functions so that you are doing postal votes in one way, you are doing the arrangement and management of the event with another group, all under the aegis of the umbrella of the returning officer.

However, you cannot rely on three to five to seven people, whatever the numbers are, in your core team that know all about registration. When there is a real fight it draws a big crowd and, if you are not prepared for that big crowd— You have to be anticipating a big event and when you have a big event realise that you don't just add another five people to electoral registration, five extra people to the electoral team. You have to think more innovatively about how you organise your whole resources and authority.

**Q55** **Bob Blackman:** One of the problems that I see as a big issue is landlords who are letting HMOs and you will see suddenly 17 names appear on the register. The landlords' names are still there but they don't live there. What are the local authorities, the registration officers, going to do about that particular challenge? Clearly, that is someone who is no longer living at the property, has moved away but they still own the property?

**Louise Round:** There are various powers open to an electoral services manager, a registration officer, to make inquiries and to remove someone following a review if they have reason to believe that they are no longer there. That is when you come down to resources. That takes hours of work and, as Barry said, in small places you might have only two people in the team and even in some of the bigger places you might have only seven. In all reality, that will probably not happen unless someone decides it is a particular issue in that borough.

It is also worth saying that many managers are creative with issues of attainments. They will go to things like student fairs and reach out to schools, some of the lessons they have learned with covid and vaccination hesitancy and all those things where we have to get hyper-local into the local communities. It is about understanding where those issues are in real genuine geographical terms, in this road, in this street, in this house. Again, it takes resources but we have got used to doing that kind of work across councils now with the idea that it is the whole council's responsibility and not just the small team at the centre who might be trying to run an election at the same time.

**Barry Quirk:** In my previous authority, which of course had lots of HMOs in west London, the issue was using other powers that we had— environmental health and other powers—on HMOs, not just using our election powers. We have to think about this in the round: what can we achieve in regularising HMOs, not just for election purposes but basically for the quality of life of the people living there?

**Q56** **Chair:** Coming back to the council tax issue, I appreciate that it does not give you all the individuals who live there in your approach, but people



change homes right throughout the year. When they change homes, a change of a person paying their council tax is probably the biggest single indicator that the household has changed. What is the purpose of going to people yearly? Surely following up every one of those changes straightaway would simply spread the workload over the year, wouldn't it?

**Louise Round:** Most people do, but not everybody will necessarily register with their council tax and not everybody will necessarily have notified the council when they have moved. The purpose of going once a year—you find several thousand people being taken off the register and several thousand people being put on the register, even in the boroughs that are proactive throughout the year. I don't think there are any councils or electoral registration officers that wait until the annual canvass to do this work, but it is a reset.

Q57 **Chair:** Yes, but the council surely ask questions if there is nobody there paying their council tax, don't they, I hope?

**Louise Round:** Yes, they will, but again, do they have the data to know every single property out of which someone has moved in the last month or two months or three months, if you are not doing it annually? It is a counsel of perfection that you should, but that might not always be the case.

**Barry Quirk:** Even in the highest residential churn, it is still not up to 50%. I am looking at a map here about where the residential churn is. Yes, it is significant—25%, 30% in some areas—but you don't organise for the 25%, 30%. You organise for the 65%, 70%, and then you make adjustments for the 25%. You need to do both.

I think there is a benefit in having an annual ritual that makes it present in people's minds, not just at the time of election but the whole issue of being an active citizen, being part of a community, having the opportunity of voting. That is an important thing to keep on the agenda of councils because councils are not just delivering services. They are about community governance in a locality. It is about the act of democracy, so I think reminding people of that is important. It is not just a transactional issue about it all being behind the scenes and we don't have to worry about it.

My other concern is about data self-referencing. If the council tax connects to the electoral register and the electoral register goes back and forth, you end up reinforcing information from one database. An important thing that is being done at the moment is the National Fraud Initiative, looking at council tax information so that authorities can make sure that people are actually there. It is not just that they are referenced as being there by some other system.

**Chair:** Let's move on to event-led registration.

Q58 **Andrew Lewer:** This follows on from some of the questions that Bob



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

asked. Big events, general elections but referenda as well, lead to a surge and in the run-up to the 2019 general election 300,000 people registered in a single day. Is that surge inevitable? What can be done to manage and reduce the burden on the officers dealing with those surges?

**Louise Round:** I don't know if it is inevitable but I think it is highly likely, no matter how good your monthly work or your annual canvasses are and how well rolling registration works, that there will be people who have not registered themselves, for whatever reason. They suddenly wake up and realise that there is an election coming up and they want to be registered. To answer that part of the question, you hope that you will be able to smooth it through the year but there will always be some rush when people suddenly realise that there is an election.

The deadline is 11 days before polling day and it comes at a time when the teams are incredibly stretched. It is a very tight deadline and it is compounded if people want a postal vote; they apply to register but that doesn't necessarily mean they have applied for a postal vote. Then they apply for a postal vote, which takes two or three days to process and then it has to be posted to them and posted back. You end up with potential complaints when people have not received their postal vote in time for the election and all the rest of it. That is compounded even further when people might be overseas.

It is absolutely in the interests of electoral teams to avoid that as much as they can, to invest time and effort throughout the year to make sure that they capture everyone that they can but I think that it will always happen.

**Barry Quirk:** I agree and I think that it may get much worse than this. At the last election, 32 million voted. Therefore, I think that the numbers you are describing—300,000 in a day—will be more than that. It will grow more than that.

The systems that we are talking about here were all put in place before the iPhone was invented and that was 2007. There are few things that are postal nowadays, only if the FCA insists that the provider writes to you, which they do, for insurance or whatever other reason. You don't get much through the post and you don't have to write much back through the post. This ends up being one of the few things that are dealt with through letters and post and you can obviously apply online.

I think that late surges will always occur because of essentially the centralised, nationalised process of the media coverage. It is a parliamentary election but it is conducted in a quasi-presidential way, so it ends up encouraging lots of late applicants and late voters. It has got later and later throughout my career.

Q59 **Andrew Lewer:** Picking up that online reference, the iPhone reference you made, do you think that an online checking tool to help with duplicate applications and updates would help with that?



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

**Barry Quirk:** That was referred to by a previous colleague and I think they are absolutely right. I have looked at the Victorian system—Victoria in Australia—and they have that online tool. It is very useful but there is a law that you have to vote in Australia, so the cultural background to it is very different. The whole thing about attainers is very different as well because of driving and drinking, so the whole issue about 18 becomes very significant.

We used a look-up tool in a couple of London-wide elections for people looking up where they could vote, and there are other things as well. I remember we were doing early voting for two weeks beforehand. There is also organised voting at train stations and supermarkets and so on.

There are lots of things you can do to try to engage, but the most important thing is not to undermine the security, the trust and confidence in the integrity of the election, anything that corrodes confidence in the outcome of an election such as you see in other countries where there is not loser's consent. That is probably the most important issue in an election, where the loser says, "Yes, I have lost". If you can throw mud at the electoral process and say, "This has not been done properly, fairly, there has not been sufficient robust integrity", that is corrosive to democratic politics. It is absolutely crucial that integrity is maintained and sustained.

There will be lots of media to encourage people to vote, lots of things that we can do, but we should not take it too far and undermine the seriousness and integrity of the elections, in my view.

Q60 **Andrew Lewer:** I think in Australia it is legal to turn up to vote rather than to actually vote.

**Barry Quirk:** Yes, that is right.

Q61 **Andrew Lewer:** There are certain membership organisations of all our acquaintance where the requirement to register to vote comes much earlier and you cannot suddenly register to vote just before an election. You have to be registered quite some way out. Is there any merit in that in helping this?

**Louise Round:** That used to be the case before rolling registration. I think it was that the place where you were registered in October for the following May was the only place you could vote in. There is a balance to be struck. I think it ought to be in favour of allowing people to register as late as they can, to enfranchise them, but still with the ability to run a robust election and not overwhelm the system with late registrations. Electoral administrators might welcome a bit longer than 11 days, or they certainly would not want it to be shorter, but I don't think it would be the right thing to push it out to months in advance, particularly because of the churn that Barry has been talking about, particularly in London but elsewhere in the country too.





## HOUSE OF COMMONS

**Barry Quirk:** I don't think there is any mobilisation of bias in electing people for Parliament or public appointments. There would be in, say, private societies or in parties or whatever. There is always some bias in whatever the cut-off date is because then people flood in and they can join and then vote, but that is not the case with citizens, in my view.

**Chair:** Moving on now to under-registered groups.

Q62 **Kate Hollern:** The Government set out strategies to improve engagement with under-represented groups. How successful do you think that has been?

**Louise Round:** I don't necessarily speak for what the Government have done directly. The Electoral Commission has done an awful lot of work and the individual boroughs will have done an awful lot of work too. I think the answer is probably "some and some". In some cases it has worked and in some other cases it may have made a bit of difference but not necessarily quantifiable. That is probably a question for the researchers.

Q63 **Kate Hollern:** The reason I am asking is because the Government said that they spent £27 million. I wondered how successful that has been and what are some examples of promoting outreach support for groups to encourage people to register to vote, particularly in the hard-to-reach groups, ethnic minorities who may struggle with English as their first language, projects like that, projects in colleges. I am curious to find out where the £27 million was spent, whether it has been successful and what else we can do to help these groups.

**Barry Quirk:** From my experience in London, the London authorities have done this quite well. They have improved on it and I think they have used some of those resources. They got better at it during covid as well, and that has improved because of what was known as differential hesitancy rates among different people. It is not the same thing as hesitancy with vaccines. In voting it is a different thing altogether, but I think that the techniques that people use, essentially from public health, have informed all the work that authorities do to make sure that their public sector equality duty is properly thought through. It is not just in the delivery of service but it is having inclusive approaches to voting.

It will be very different in different places. I know that Tower Hamlets did some good work and the authority I was with did very good work, as did Westminster, with particular groups. Authorities need to always keep on top of this because maintaining relevance at a time when the population is changing at a faster rate than we are able to change, bluntly, means that you have to keep on top of this.

I think that it is best probably not to think about groups, because it is easy to groupify people—"All people who are like this have this attitude." No, it is not the case, but it is thinking about trying to include everyone. It is critical that people feel that the election is fair and that their vote





has counted and has been counted. Therefore, it is the inclusion of people, particularly if they are recent migrants into, say, London and they have come from different places with different electoral systems.

We had extremely good discussions in west London about the nature of voting itself, so that people could say, "This is what we did in Iraq, Iran, Lebanon," and learning from that and people saying, "Oh, I see" is really important. People are not just schooled into, "This is how you do it here," but you include their own background, their approach.

**Q64** **Kate Hollern:** It would be good to be able to share some good practice and it might have been helpful if the Government had set some targets on improving registration. I would certainly be interested in examples of good practice. Given the pressures that local authorities face, what percentage of the resources will be used on managing the postal votes, getting registered, everything else, and outreach? They have to balance both, don't they?

**Louise Round:** I think it comes back to Barry's point about: let the core team that know about elections run elections. There are plenty of other people employed by councils who know about community engagement and communications. It is the responsibility of the ERO and the RO to deploy those resources, to allow people to get on with running the election and do the outreach and not just do it when there is an election coming up. All the time our staff are out talking to communities about all sorts of different things, covid and everything else, so why not use them as your workforce, why not use them to talk to people about elections and registration.

I come back to voter identification particularly at the moment. I know that all local authorities are doing that piece of work—which people are less likely to have the right voter ID in the first place and less likely to understand how to apply for the certificate that they will need? They are likely to be some of the same communities that we work with anyway; let's go and talk to them in their place in a language they can understand. We can use the resources the Government put in and we can certainly adapt some of the useful translations that the commission is providing, but it is about people talking to people in their place that will get a change, in my view.

**Q65** **Kate Hollern:** It will be very difficult. If you look at the cuts to local authorities over the last decade, outreach workers have certainly been scaled back right across the patch, I presume. I think it must be very difficult for a returning officer to prioritise between the processes and achieving a representative group.

**Louise Round:** Absolutely. Speaking for returning officers, having been one myself, and the people I represent, they are passionate about what they do. They try to deliver safe elections that allow everyone to vote who is entitled to. When it comes to it, they are having to balance



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

resources but I don't know many who would sacrifice that outcome for other things.

**Barry Quirk:** I agree with that. As a chief executive, I would say that running elections reminds you all the time that we are not just engaging with service users, we are engaging with citizens. No one says, "Let's spend less money on service user engagement," but you use the same sort of tools and techniques. That is why I think—on the point you are making about community engagement—you use the same tools and techniques for engaging a particular service user in social care or engaging people on major planning disputes as you use with citizens. Ultimately, they are citizens.

I am not denying the reduction in resources that local authorities have. It is part of a senior manager's job to try to continue delivering services despite those reductions. However, I think there is a lot of crossover, much more crossover than people think. More people should be using their role as returning officer to engage with that aspect of the role of local government, not just service delivery.

Q66 **Kate Hollern:** Do you think that there is a danger—because there is additional pressure on councils with reduced resources and extra requirements for ID—that there will be groups who by default will be excluded from elections because there is not enough support for outreach work for voter ID? Do you think there is a danger that people will think, "Forget it, it is too much"?

**Louise Round:** I think it is a risk, but it is a risk that we are alive to and that we are doing everything we can to mitigate.

**Chair:** Thank you both very much for coming today and giving us some very good evidence as a basis for starting our inquiry. You have identified a lot of challenge in there but a lot of clear successes in the way that EROs deliver a high quality service, very often with limited resources. Thank you very much for coming this afternoon.