



Constitution Committee

Corrected oral evidence: Voter ID

Wednesday 6 December 2023

11.45 am

Watch the meeting

Members present: Baroness Drake (The Chair); Lord Anderson of Ipswich; Baroness Andrews; Lord Falconer of Thoroton; Baroness Finn; Lord Foulkes of Cumnock; Lord Hope of Craighead; Lord Mancroft; Baroness Suttie; Lord Thomas of Gresford.

Evidence Session No. 5

Heard in Public

Questions 69 - 94

Witnesses

I: Simon Hoare MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State (Minister for Local Government), Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities; Becca Crosier, Deputy Director for Elections, Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities.

USE OF THE TRANSCRIPT

1. This is a corrected transcript of evidence taken in public and webcast on www.parliamentlive.tv.

Examination of witnesses

Simon Hoare and Becca Crosier.

Q69 **The Chair:** Good morning, everyone. This morning, the committee is taking evidence in its inquiry into the voter ID requirement for the participation in elections. We will be hearing this morning from Simon Hoare MP, Minister for Local Government at the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, and Becca Crosier, deputy director for elections at the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. Welcome to you both, and thank you very much for finding the time. We are looking to put our report out before Christmas, so obviously it is very timely that we are able to speak to you. We have lots of questions that we would like to put to you. I know that you have a time constraint.

Simon Hoare: Whether I have lots of answers is a different kettle of fish, but we will try.

The Chair: I hope you have had an indication of our areas of questioning. Before I put the first question, are there any opening remarks that you would like to make, or would you prefer to go straight into the questions?

Simon Hoare: I am in your hands. I am certainly very happy to assist with your questions, yes.

Q70 **The Chair:** Some of our questions get into more of the detail. What lessons did the Government learn from the implementation of the voter ID policy in May this year? Do you have enough time to improve implementation, bearing in mind that, at the very least, elections are less than five months away on 2 May 2024? Do you have enough time, and what did you learn?

Simon Hoare: The answer to your second question is yes, there is enough time. That is predicated on the answer to the first bit of your question about the lessons learned. The general headline lesson that it is worth learning is that, as the adage goes, the proof of the pudding is usually best in the eating, notwithstanding the fact that, probably as a species, we are all pretty reticent about change. We much prefer the status quo and comfort zones that we know.

The horror stories, if you will, or the horror scenarios, that many people who were opposed to these changes were conjuring up and envisaging, did not come to pass. There are a number of people who one can add our thanks to, as a Government and as practising democrats and parliamentarians, in that. Principally, our thanks must go to returning officers, the election staff across the local government picture and those manning the polling stations, as well as the Electoral Commission in all the work that it did before, during and after.

Am I saying that there is no room for improvement? No, I am not, but it is gratifying to know that the area where improvement needs to be made and where focus needs to be re-energised is, in the general picture,

relatively small. Doubtless we can come on to that in subsequent questions.

Q71 **The Chair:** There are two things that we will want to interrogate in more detail, so I do not want to go into too much detail. Although we are looking at voter ID, consistently the evidence that came across was that there is an electoral system under pressure and that there were other changes coming. I do not want you to go into too much detail, because we will ask you what you feel about resources. The Government did not really acknowledge that point, or did not seem to think it was an issue.

Simon Hoare: I am not sure that it is right to characterise it in that way. Councils have been made aware, and not just once but on repeated occasions, and rightly so, of the new burdens fund. We were all alert that any change to a system, particularly one that had been in practice for a considerable period of time, was going to create challenges, burdens and new tests, et cetera, for those who were delivering those elections. The new burdens fund, where councils have sought additional resource, has been very useful as a way of delivering that.

I think it was Mr Farrant, who is the returning officer for the unitary council next to mine in Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole, who said, effectively—I will paraphrase his response to you—that, despite a lot of anxiety that this might have been a rather flimsy structure that could fall over at the gentlest puff of wind, it did not. It proved a refreshing and gratifying robustness.

I will add a caveat, which I appreciate you have not asked for. The turnout at local elections is, by definition, always lower than that which one would expect to see at a general election. We were wise, effectively, to stress-test this new regime at local elections, anticipating a lower turnout. The learning that we have taken as a department, and certainly that we hear anecdotally, is that the scaling up of turnout and the extra demands placed upon our electoral services are match fit, if I can use that phrase.

Q72 **The Chair:** We might push you on that point with some supplementary questions. The other area is that, although at the aggregate level participation rate was not affected significantly by the introduction of voter ID, when one looks at particular demographics it becomes more significant. Of course, that goes to the issue of a core principle being improving engagement. In a sense, it is arguable, at least on first look, that for certain groups, whether it is cumulative to other barriers or a primary driver, voter ID has impacted their ability or disposition to vote.

Simon Hoare: If you look at the figures, 84% of voting-age adults were aware of the voter ID requirement. I am not seeking to make a direct comparison between high street retail and the preciousness of our election system, but any retailer rolling out a new product that, within a few months, was scoring 84% customer recognition and understanding would be seen as a stellar success.

I would add a caution, if I may. I do not want my remarks to be interpreted as “Nothing to see here. Everything in the garden is rosy. Everything is perfect”. I am far more interested in not enforcing the knowledge with those who already have it, but widening the knowledge and expectation among the groups of our fellow citizens where that work needs to be done. In broad terms, that does not lead to the conclusion that that applies to the whole demographic of these three groups, but there are people I would describe thus: the considerably elderly, who are more digitally detached; an element of those who would classify themselves as coming from the ethnic minority heritages; and some, but not all, of the young. None of those demographic groups delivered a statistic at such an alarming rate as to make one wish to step back and have a rethink.

There is work to be done with targeted groups and in a very focused way. Work is in hand in my department. but most particularly with the Electoral Commission. I have my first meeting with the commission next Tuesday, when this is on the agenda. To go back to the second part of your first question. about the scale of the challenge, the time exists in order for us to be able to do the very best possible job we can.

The Chair: In some of the evidence you have had, people compiling the evidence thought that, for some of those groups, it was statistically significant. Also, there is the issue of whether more people in those demographic groups are more likely to participate in the general election.

Simon Hoare: Could I offer up two statistics, conscious of the caveat that there are lies, damned lies and statistics, so all of them should be borne in mind? Of those who presented to vote, 0.7%—that is, 37,000 people—were turned away due to the inadequacy or inappropriateness of the ID that was required; 0.25%, or 14,000, of those turned away did not return.

The Chair: We might pick up on the collection of data on that point, but I will not do it now. We have gone right through the figures.

Q73 **Baroness Andrews:** Good morning, Minister. Good morning, Ms Crosier. We touched on this elliptically in the last exchange. To quote the voluminous evidence from the IFF, one of its statements was, “Evidence was sufficiently consistent and strong to support the conclusion that the claim ‘communication campaign raises electors’ awareness of voter authority certificates’ has not yet been met. VAC awareness remained low in May 2023, even among those without accepted photographic identification”. That is a pretty conclusive statement. I am sure that, in the first instance, you would accept that. How concerned are you about that, before we come on to talk about the practical response that government can make to that set of problems?

Simon Hoare: You are right to point, as a foundation stone, if you will, to the importance that the voter authority certificate plays in this. There is an identifiable cohort who believe that they require, or required, a certificate because their other forms of ID would not be sufficient to the

task in hand. Some were obviously going to be correct about that, but quite a lot were not.

There are two pieces of work that need to be done organically, and they probably do not have an end. These things have to be renewed every year, as people come on to the electoral roll. You cannot say, "Job done", on 31 December of this year. Every year there need to be these information campaigns.

The first is to amplify the very wide range of voter ID that is accepted in order to cast a ballot. Where voters do not possess any of those IDs, voter authority certificates are available. We need to highlight that as much as we can to a whole range of people who we think would qualify for it. This is an estimation, but we anticipate that about 2 million people qualify. However, the data needs to be taken with a slight pinch of salt. That figure of 2 million, or 4% of the electorate, is all people of voting age. That would include people who were foreign nationals and therefore ineligible to vote, or people who may, for example, be Jehovah's Witnesses, who are of voting age but who decide, as a result of religious belief, that they are not going to take part in the democratic process. I would not have a handle today on how many Jehovah's Witnesses we have in England. That 2 million figure is actually of a lower scale when you discount eligibility against practicality.

Baroness Andrews: That is very interesting. What came out of the evidence, and it was pretty consistent, was not only the granularity of these particular groups—disabled people, people in rented accommodation and so on—but, in the broad criteria: those who were less likely to own an accepted form of ID; those for whom political awareness was low, however you define low political awareness—voting patterns or whatever; and those who simply did not have elections in May this year. In your 2 million, would you encompass those three broad groups? Would they be identified, as it were, in that population?

Simon Hoare: Those are the 2 million that we would anticipate; in other words, if everyone applies for a certificate, you would get to about 2 million. It is quite hard to say, with anything other than an informed hunch, that among that number will be a statistically identifiable group of the groups that you have set out in your question. Having done the identification—the what, if you will—we then have to focus, Exocet-like, on the how. How do you address this?

Could I make this point that I am conscious is not in direct answer to Baroness Andrews' question? If I had made an opening remark, this would have been at the absolute heart of it. We have to achieve a system here whereby, whatever an election result is, it is deemed to be robust, reliable and resilient. The one thing I have said, in meetings with Becca and other officials, is that I do not want to see the scenes we saw in Washington of a semi-naked man with buffalo horns. Some people might like to see a semi-naked man with buffalo horns. I have no idea. It does not float my boat.

I want the victor to know that their victory is a proper victory. I want the defeated to know that they lost and lost fairly. That, I would suggest, is an uncontested statement of how we want elections in this country to be. Not every country can claim it as we would like, but that is my absolute determination. The task that we—the commission, the authority, local government, charities, civic society, et cetera—have in hand is to turbocharge conversations, information campaigns, et cetera, about what the IDs actually are and, if one is devoid of those IDs, how you go about securing a voter authority certificate.

Without prejudging what I suspect may be a subsequent question, I have taken advice as to whether we could deploy the contacts that are harvested through DWP, the Passport Office, DVLA, et cetera, as a way of raising awareness. I am also conscious that, if you have a passport, you would not require a certificate. It depends whether it is your old friend or your old enemy, but data protection precludes that. However, there could be banner advertising on the DWP website, full deployment of promotion in GOV.UK, and posters in jobcentres. One could easily foresee information in doctors' surgeries, dentists' waiting rooms and those sorts of places. Anywhere the public go is an appropriate place to provide the messaging, support and information as to how we go about this.

I want to maximise the roll as much as I can. That has always been the Government's intention. There are those who have tried to portray this as some sort of voter suppression or slow step to undermining the traditional ways that our democracy functions. That has always been wrong in its assumption, and the proof of the pudding that we saw in May this year demonstrates that beyond peradventure.

Baroness Andrews: You raised the language of legitimacy. That is very much part of the committee's focus. I am very happy with those responses.

The Chair: Staying with your last point about using every avenue to promote awareness of voter authority certificates, the IFF report found no evidence of targeted campaigns on those who did not have accepted photographic identification. Lord Hope wants to go there in particular.

Q74 **Lord Hope of Craighead:** Can I preface my question by making an assumption? From what you have been saying so far, you are of the view that everything possible should be done to make everybody who is in a position to vote aware, first, of the need for registration, and, secondly, of the possibility of applying for a certificate if they do not have other forms of photographic identification.

Simon Hoare: Yes, without a shadow of a doubt.

Lord Hope of Craighead: It is a given that that is your aim. It would be a misfortune if people were falling through the gap because they were simply not aware. That is why widening the knowledge, as you put it, and making use of the information the Government have is worth considering. I am not clear so far as to what steps you are actually taking, apart from

recognising the possibility. Could you enlarge on the practicalities that you are putting in place or can put in place in time for the May elections?

Simon Hoare: I do not have the full answer for you, so I am very happy to write subsequent to my meeting with the commission next Tuesday. We have to run this in parallel and have a broad understanding that the Electoral Commission, as a body, has a range of responsibilities in this area and has the authority, as an independent operator in the sphere of our electoral world. It plays a very important role, which government can augment and buttress.

There are, as I say, things that government itself can do. When I say government, I mean both central and local. That is information. It can be online. It can be information in council leaflets. One does not usually welcome the arrival of the council tax bill, but you always have the bumpf and information about everything else. I would very much welcome a paragraph or two making very clear what ID is required for an election and how to go about applying for a certificate if you do not have that information. There are a variety of ways.

Some people, I am sure, will hear a message, see a poster or see something online, be told about something by an organisation or group that they belong to locally, which may mean that they hear the message three or four times. It is a message of such importance that repetition does not diminish the importance of it.

It would be a very rash Minister—in fact, it would be a very stupid Minister—who said that everybody who is able to vote and to get on to the electoral register will for any election, because there is always a cadre of people who, for a whole variety of reasons, do not want to go on to the electoral roll and do not want to take part in our electoral system. As you know, we do not have the Australian model of compulsory voting. I have heard arguments in favour of that. We do not have it. It is not an argument that I share, because I think it should be part of the voluntary contract between the governed and the governors.

Lord Hope of Craighead: There were lots of good ideas in that answer, but I am interested in the practicalities. Can you make use of information you have, such as benefits recipients and the other things that you have mentioned so far? Are you able to put something in place in time to reach these people by using the various datasets that you have in your possession, and are you willing to undertake to do that?

Simon Hoare: Is government able? Of course. As we know, government is able to do anything it wishes by majority. Speaking to Baroness Drake's initial question about timing, we are better trying to maximise what we have at the moment.

Going back to the database point, the data protection rules preclude us, rather bizarrely, targeting people to say, "You are in receipt of universal credit, housing benefit or pension credit, et cetera. This is what you need to do to be able to vote", because of the rules that govern GDPR. Were

those rules to be changed, a far more direct approach to marketing, if I can use that phrase, to the elections and to the process of registration and identification could be used.

The current circumstances do not preclude a very prominent part of the communication being on the websites, communications, banners, GOV.UK, et cetera, which is the point that we will be maximising, and I am aware that local authorities will be doing the same. It will be the promotion of what the ID is and, if you do not have that, how you go about applying for a certificate. Certainly, analysis of data suggests that the cohorts that one would be seeking, if one could do direct mail through database share, are the people who, more often than not, will be looking at the DWP website or the local authority website, for example. Principally, I would suggest, that is because they have a closer relationship with the delivery arm of the state, both local and national, than those who do not.

There is no silver bullet. There is no perfect system that we can deploy that guarantees 100%. I hope you as a committee will take away and dwell on the serious, absolute commitment to exploiting all tools to maximise promotion, so that we can demonstrate full engagement in this space in order to ensure that those who wish to vote are able to do so unhindered and unimpeded. Ms Crosier is my guru on these matters.

Lord Hope of Craighead: I absolutely understand the problem of data protection rules. Targeting individuals may be difficult, but broad spreading advertising and so on, spreading information in the broader sense, is what I am thinking of. Can you elaborate on that?

Becca Crosier: The Minister is absolutely right that the main routes we have here are advertising through other government departments—DWP, jobcentres, and networks like that—and through our GOV.UK services. We have also given councils £7.4 million of funding designed to support local awareness-raising, because chief executives, returning officers and their teams will have much more of a sense of the needs in their patch than we will. That is designed to supplement at a local level the great work that the Electoral Commission has done with its national campaigns. I know there is more to do to build on the 84%, but it is an enormous achievement to begin with.

We are keen to support the commission in any way we can to get those messages out there. It is in the lead. It has the statutory responsibility, but we are in constant conversation with it about what we can do to help it, whether that is deploying its messages through our channels or further support. We have recently increased the amount that it is legally allowed to spend on campaigning ahead of a general election year, because it knows that there is a lot to do in that space. We are working with it to remove barriers and use government channels as far as we can, and we have provided this funding to local authorities.

Lord Hope of Craighead: That is very encouraging.

Simon Hoare: As an addendum to my answer, the role of faith groups can be particularly important in ensuring that their faith communities are aware of what needs to be done and how. There is always a tendency to default to the formal and GOV.UK mentality, but there is a whole range and raft of people. Age UK obviously springs to mind as an organisation with a huge reach among the constituent parts that Baroness Andrews and I were discussing just a moment or so ago.

There are a lot of people in that charitable sphere who have a great network of contacts but are also a very trusted source among their user cohort, so it adds a certain augmentation of authenticity to that process if you are involved with an organisation—I will take Age UK as a prime example—and you get something from it to talk about this sort of thing.

Q75 **Baroness Andrews:** I have one very small follow-up apropos of something Ms Crosier said. We had evidence from Graham Farrant that they had managed to look at some of the areas in their borough where there were particular issues and where you had a convergence of all these issues, as you would expect. In the money that you have provided local authorities, can you help in any way to promote universal best practice across the local authorities? If they can do it in Southampton, they could do it in inner London or rural Sussex.

Simon Hoare: You are right. There is a role there for me as Local Government Minister. There is certainly a role for organisations such as the Local Government Association and Solace. As I say, there are constituent parts, whether they are the service shapers, the service providers or the service users. If they hear the message on multiple occasions, they may get a bit bored, but at least they have heard it. For something that is so pivotal to our national life, it is more important that people hear that message about registration and how to do it, whether they hear it three times or 30 times, as long as they do not not hear it.

Becca Crosier: You are absolutely right that there is a lot of scope for sharing good practice across local authorities. We and the Electoral Commission co-chair a meeting of regional returning officers and share good practice on a number of fronts. The department has its own stakeholder governance for the electoral integrity programme set up under the Elections Act; we bring representative local authorities together and they spread messages on our behalf through a change network, essentially, so we disseminate good practice in that way as well. It works on voter ID and a number of other issues.

Q76 **Lord Falconer of Thoroton:** Thank you very much indeed to both our witnesses for coming. I am worried about this aspect of it. I am unclear, Mr Hoare, about the extent to which you accept that there is a problem at the moment. If you do not have photographic ID, you cannot vote at the moment. The only way you can vote is if you get a voter authority certificate. The evidence the Government have produced through the IFF report says that voter authority certificate awareness is low, even among those without accepted photographic identification. I would like to hear from you, Mr Hoare, the level of the problem that you say is there at the

moment, because 4 million people do not have a photographic ID.

Simon Hoare: I am loath to use the term “problem”. I am far keener to use the term “identified challenge”.

Lord Falconer of Thoroton: Unless we know the extent to which you accept there is an issue—using a neutral word—it is quite difficult to know what confidence one can have that the Government are addressing it properly.

Simon Hoare: I am slightly sorry to hear you say that, because in my responses to your colleagues’ earlier questions I was trying to give these key messages. I am pleased but not complacent. I am aware of further work to be done in the specific area you have raised, and I am committed to doing so by the range of options that I set out in answer to earlier questions. I am not saying, “Nothing to see here”. Nor am I saying, “Chicken Licken”—if you remember your childhood stories—“the roof is about to fall on our heads and we’re all going to hell in a hand cart”.

May this year demonstrated to us that 84% of voting-age adults were aware of the new requirements. In the general scheme, I would suggest that 14,000 people not returning with correct identification—to use the phrase of Mr Cowling, a former BBC polling expert—does not suggest that the death of democracy is imminent. We have a very firm and clear commitment, which we are happy to keep your committee up to speed on, with the levers we pull and the buttons we push, to promote the existence of certificates, reamplify and reinforce the range of acceptable photographic and other forms of ID, and continue that process.

To Lord Falconer’s question, I would pray in aid the call to issue plastic rather than paper certificates. Forgive me; I am uncertain whether your committee has made recommendations on this on previous occasions. The issuing of paper, of course, means that the local authority administering the elections can issue a certificate in a far shorter time, closer to polling day, than they would if they were issuing them by non-paper means. I am not saying that that is the “get out of jail free” card. I have been able to rehearse some of the points I made earlier with your colleagues. There is an absolute commitment and determination on the part of the Government not just to work alongside but to motivate partners in this endeavour, to maximise our efforts, in order to minimise the numbers of those who are excluded from voting on polling day. I hope that is helpful to you.

Lord Falconer of Thoroton: Thank you for that answer. I remain anxious that you will not acknowledge the problem that VAC awareness remains low among those who need it to vote.

Simon Hoare: May I make these points to a distinguished former Minister and leading King’s Counsel? As I say, we have to make the best endeavour that we can. I am not suggesting in any way, shape or form that you fall within this cohort of naysayers, but I would suggest that those who were most concerned about this—people were right to have

concerns, because these were significant changes—should remember the dictum of Keynes: when the facts change, opinion changes too.

The facts of fear pre-May 2023 have not come to pass in any way that suggests a manifestation of deliberate suppression or, as Mr Cowling said, that the death of democracy is imminent. There is work to do, time available to do it, and energy and determination to achieve that task in hand, both in government and with partners. I have a managed sense of confidence that we can do it in the timeframe available.

Q77 The Chair: Staying with that point, the Constitution Committee is not very excitable. I do not think we have had the phrase “the death of democracy”. An issue that keeps coming out in all sources of evidence is the indication that voter ID presents a barrier for particular demographic groups. The Government’s solution to that barrier is the voter authority certificate. The IFF evidence is quite clear: “Evidence was sufficiently consistent and strong to support the conclusion that the claim ‘communication campaign raises electors’ awareness of voter authority certificates’ has not yet been met”.

Another 23 million people will become registered voters participating in an election. We are interested in whether you have a target for awareness that you are trying to achieve by, say, May 2024. What hard indication can you give us that you are focused on getting this percentage figure up nearer to the 80s and 90s?

Simon Hoare: My target, which I can tell you I will not meet, is 100%. We will strain every sinew to achieve, if not that target, then as close to that target as possible. Elections are important, and facilitating unfettered opportunity for people who wish to partake in our democratic processes is a solemn and sacred obligation of whoever holds the keys of government at the time. We all have to facilitate that as best we can. I repeat again, and have pleasure in doing so, the absolute and unquestionable commitment and energy of His Majesty’s Government in delivering this.

You are right to talk about the differential in scale. Let me make this clear for comfort: we will in no way be back-peddalling or soft-peddalling on the promotion of what ID is acceptable. That job is iterative and goes on not just in the pending electoral cycle but throughout the calendar year. If we are not back-peddalling on that, I hope to assure the committee of the determination with which we will be turbo-peddalling certificate awareness among those who most need it.

As I set out in previous answers, there are multiple buttons to press, levers to pull and partners to engage with across society in order not just to raise awareness of it, but, in some instances, also to help people to make the application who may not feel very confident doing it. That is another element of the process, and we want to maximise that as well.

Q78 Lord Hope of Craighead: I was trying, particularly through Becca, to find out the steps that you could take to reach these groups without ID. We have a pretty good idea of who they are without going into the

statistics. The question is whether you are using all you can in the discussions with the Electoral Commission to be sure that you are doing everything you can. In your first answers to me, you emphasised your commitment to achieving as much as you can. Everybody understands that some things may fall through, but one tries to avoid that as far as possible. Perhaps, Becca, you could repeat the steps that you are taking to be sure that we can achieve the target that the Minister has very helpfully identified.

Becca Crosier: In government, there are government communication channels. We are working with teams across Whitehall in the various departments to identify the opportunities. As I think I said earlier, we talk pretty constantly to the Electoral Commission about what it would find most helpful in this space. It runs communication campaigns on registering to vote, and now on the voter authority certificate and VID in general, every year. We are there to support it on that, so we have those conversations on a very regular basis.

As we were developing the policy on voter identification, we also spoke to around 70 civil society and charitable organisations representing various different groups. We still have those relationships and have shared them with the Electoral Commissions. It is working with those groups—it did this ahead of May and will be doing more of it this May—to reach particular audiences, many of whom are the groups identified as being at risk of having less access to identification at the moment. I think we have met with Age UK, Minister.

Simon Hoare: Yes, we have.

Becca Crosier: There are meetings with other groups like that, and we also have our own groups in government, such as the Accessibility of Elections Working Group, which brings together disability charities. It does not just deal with voter ID; it deals with the whole voting process. We can use those relationships to make sure that we are giving the right messages in the right way. We will be doing all of that between now and May. I think I am right in saying—Craig may have said this when he gave evidence here—that the commission's campaign is going live again in January. We will start from that point to amplify those messages all the way into May.

Lord Hope of Craighead: I hope you will encourage people to think that getting a voter authority certificate is a relatively simple process. There is some indication from the IFF report that people are put off. They think that this thing is too complicated or too expensive. Obviously photograph ID may be expensive, but the VAC should not be expensive. They should be encouraged to believe that the system should work for them.

Becca Crosier: Yes. The voter authority certificate is free, in fact, so we need to get that into the messaging more clearly.

Simon Hoare: Who does not, as a consumer, get excited by the two words "free" and "simple"? I do not say that flippantly. These are very

important points: the simplicity of application and the free nature of their existence.

I am sure your committee and colleagues have these figures to hand, but in case you do not it may be useful to remind ourselves that there are 22 accepted identification documents. That excludes the certificate. The benefit of doing the paper certificate rather than any other form is that the deadline is 5 pm just six working days ahead of the poll.

Again, speaking back to Baroness Drake's initial questioning about timing, we can and will run these information campaigns. I have asked for advice on a purdah. The efficacy of the third sector is important if what the Government can do is constrained in any way by a purdah. I will not say that six working days before polling is generous, because that is not the right word, but it is a pretty sensible deadline.

Q79 **Baroness Suttie:** You have touched a little already on the funding of awareness campaigns. You have also touched a little already on the new burdens fund, but what funding have you provided for local authorities and the Electoral Commission to meet the costs of implementing the new voter ID policy?

Simon Hoare: In headline terms, the new burdens fund is for local authorities. We thought that was an important intervention to make, conscious of the range and weight of other burdens placed on local councils' shoulders.

Becca Crosier: There are a few routes to funding this one. We have so far disbursed £25 million of new burdens funding to local authorities. That covers the whole of what we have implemented under the Elections Act so far. Just under £14 million of it is for voter ID specifically, so that is their funding at the moment.

There is also a facility for local authorities to make a justification-led bid for additional funding if they can show that the need was greater than the amount we supplied them with. We are working on very new policy. We have had to make a number of assumptions, for example, about demand for voter authority certificates. We wanted a contingency in case we were wrong. Those justification-led bids are also available.

For the Electoral Commission, it is a slightly different picture. It is not funded directly from government. Its funding, as you may well know, comes from Parliament and is voted on by the Speaker's Committee. The funding for implementing the Elections Act was factored into its last budget request and was considered by the committee. Government, of course, sits on that committee, and we always want to be supportive of the commission in getting the funding it needs to implement this properly. So it is a bit more difficult to disaggregate for the commission, but those are the headline figures for local authorities. There is also more funding to come in April for further implementation of the Act.

Baroness Suttie: Clearly, the scale will be significantly larger than it was in the local elections of May this year. Are you anticipating that it will be

renewed and reviewed according to needs?

Becca Crosier: The funding methodology was developed in partnership with local authorities. We shared all the assumptions and the costings with them, and they gave us some incredibly helpful advice on pay rates and how much things cost to deliver. We costed the May polls last year based on likely numbers of applications and the need for additional core staff. The full methodology is set out on GOV.UK, and we can provide links if that is helpful.

We have used the same funding principles but scaled it up for the likely demand in May this year. There will also be full funding in the usual way for a general election, as and when that takes place. That will, as usual, come from the Consolidated Fund, but it will take account of the additional impact of the Elections Act.

Simon Hoare: The 84% of voting-age adults who were aware of the voter ID requirements was not 84% across the country as a whole, but very specifically 84% of the voters in areas that were holding elections this May. That is an important statistic to pause on for a moment, because it suggests to me, hopefully not naively, that the methods and tools deployed in those areas to raise awareness of what was required are capable of hitting the bullseye. From a standing start, 84% of the electorates in those areas knew not just about the need for voter ID, but about what constituted voter ID.

On the presumption that that is a comparable figure that would be rolled out across the whole of the geography where elections are taking place this May much more widely, and to a further general election, again, it should give us confidence but not complacency.

Baroness Suttie: In areas that have not yet had voter ID in elections, such as Scotland, would you anticipate giving additional funding for an awareness campaign?

Becca Crosier: Every local authority, including in Scotland and Wales—not in Northern Ireland, as voter ID is very different there—has received communications funding already. We did that early because of the series of by-elections that have happened, including the one in Scotland. They are all funded.

The Chair: The 84% was a figure from a survey taken after they had had the local elections, so you were building the familiarity there. I was desperately trying to find it in the IFF report. It cautions that a lot of people carry their driving licence around and use that, so be careful not to elide awareness with the fact that you coincidentally had your driving licence. This is not a criticism; it is just about not over-leveraging that 84% when taking into account those two factors.

Simon Hoare: That is certainly true. I would focus my attention on the destination rather than the route. If somebody did not know but happened to have their driving licence with them because they always

carry it, by definition they would always be able to vote because they always carry their driving licence with them.

That figure of 84% is robust and reliable. There is no silver bullet that hits all the targets, but, by a variety of mechanisms, 84% of the electorates in the areas that were having local elections were aware that they needed something and what it was. As I say, that is encouraging. Whether somebody always carries a piece of ID that falls within the qualifying list or does it specifically on that day does not matter. As long as somebody can be handed a ballot paper and legitimately complete it, their vote is counted and the majesty of our democratic process continues uninterrupted.

The Chair: I was not trying to go behind the integrity of the figure. I was just saying that, given what was said by the IFF report itself, when we come to a general election, a lot of people who vote in general elections do not vote in local elections; they are less politically committed and all the stuff that is in there. There is a sensitivity to not being overconfident that that 84% will give you the level of awareness.

Simon Hoare: The level of awareness by the time general election polling day dawns will be enormously high. Set aside for a moment the organisations and groups across civic society that will play a part in this. It is not novel to suggest that party-political campaigning literature will cover, in the form of some communication that lands on somebody's doorstep, "Make sure you are aware and that you bring the right bit of ID with you". If you think of all the useful information that the parties put through letterboxes during those campaigns, my hunch is that most people will know. Even if it just tells people who are unsure to find out what it is at a local council or government website, people will know.

Becca Crosier: Minister, you have just reminded me that I have missed one of the blindingly obvious communication channels. All poll cards are now obliged in law to carry information about voter identification, including the full list of accepted ID. In addition to everything that we and the commission are doing to promote that, voters will have a reminder landing on the doorstep, which hopefully they will take note of and, in many cases, carry to the polling station, whether or not they need to.

Simon Hoare: There we are. I will score that as a win for the Minister, because my official here is on top of everything. If somebody is good at cross-stitch or something and could just tapestry something that I reminded my official about, I will put it in my downstairs loo post haste.

Q80 **Lord Falconer of Thoroton:** I was interested in Becca's answer about the polling card. The polling card will presumably contain a reference to a voter authority certificate. Will it contain information about how to get one?

Becca Crosier: Yes, it does. It has the relevant web links, and I believe it also says, "Contact your ERO if you are struggling".

Simon Hoare: Again, if you just pause there for a moment, consider the literature from all the candidates and political parties, the full deployment of government e-communications on websites—ditto for local government—the involvement of faith groups, the charitable sector specifically but not exclusively involved with cohorts where the drive really needs to be made to maximise this, the polling cards and the election information that comes through the door. I would suggest that all those things mean that most people will be exposed to this level of information. How they respond to it is their concern.

My worry is almost that people think, “Oh God, not that thing again”, because we have told them so many times. It will be important, because new people come on to the register, new people come to the country who will qualify for voting in certain elections, and so on. This is not a one-off thing. This will need to be done year on year to ensure that that message is refreshed and renewed among the latest cohort of people coming on to the roll by dint of being over the age of 18. We will not leave it to mum, dad, granny and grandpa to tell them. We will need to tell them directly.

Q81 **Baroness Andrews:** I want to make sure I understood what Becca was saying about the money that went to local authorities for communication. You talked about £25 million, or was it £7 million for communication?

Secondly, was I right in hearing that it was all weighted according to what the local authorities themselves thought would be deliverable and what they needed to deliver? For 65 local authorities, it is not a lot of money between every local authority, but presumably it was what they needed on their own terms, or did you make a central decision about the amount of money you could afford to give?

Becca Crosier: On your first point, the £25 million is new burdens funding. The £7.4 million for communications is technically not a new burden because we are not requiring local authorities to do it, so that is additional funding. They are two slightly different things in the strange world of government finance, so that is two separate funding streams.

On how the model is built, local authorities helped us with defining the assumptions we were making on how many polling staff they use and how much they pay them. A lot of the funding is focused on how many staff you need to do an activity and how long that activity takes. Some of that was decided in discussion with local authorities; only they know how long it takes to do things. Other things we set centrally, such as the estimation of how many voter authority certificates an authority would likely get, with the population divided by the assumption about how many people needed a certificate.

We have tended to err slightly on the generous side because of the amount of uncertainty. Local authorities in these polls were funded to 2% of the electorate needing a VAC, but, in reality, it turned out to be zero-point-something. As I said before, the justification-led bids are available for people who, in the event, discovered that they had more than we had thought they would. It is a combination.

Baroness Andrews: That is a system that can also be refined on the basis of what you now know. Clearly, you were testing some of those assumptions for the first time, and now you have the evidence to know that you were right in the balance of the way the decision was made or the actual decision in the allocation of funding.

Becca Crosier: Yes. We will continue to refine it as the evidence base builds, but until we have done at least one general election with the system at full stretch, we do not want to cut our cloth too close there.

Simon Hoare: I cannot underscore this enough. This is an iterative, organic process that is reviewed by looking at lessons learned, new strategies implemented, things sharpened or whatever. Maybe there are things that do not need to be done again that were done because the initial assessment was that they were needed. This predates my involvement, because I have been in post three weeks and one day, but it was sensible to trial it at a local election in a smaller geography, with what was anticipated and proved to be a lower turnout, rather than trying to stress-test something like this on general election day.

Lord Mancroft: Could you tell us, Minister, what plans you have to improve the voter authority certificate portal, and how you will ensure that any amendments to the system are well tested and in place in good time for the next set of elections? Also, have you considered how best to support local authorities in processing voter authority certificate applications, particularly in the lead-up to the next general election?

Simon Hoare: I will ask Becca to take your first point. On the latter point, a huge amount of work was done, and continues to be done, in working with the returning officers and, through them, with those who do that unsung valiant work of manning our polling stations, sitting in draughty village halls from 7 am until 10 pm. They need to have confidence in and the knowledge of how this works. That is an organic, iterative process that we continue to finesse and deploy, particularly because there will be new people coming in to man polling stations who have not done it before. We need to make sure that they get it right.

There is nothing worse—we have all had it—than when an official tells you black is white or the other way around. You then have some great argument about what it says here and all the rest of it, and somebody has to back down. We have to make this as seamless as possible, and education and training is the route to that. Certainly, in my understanding, from what the returning officers and council chief executives have said, they are as alive and alert to that as we are.

Becca Crosier: On the portal for processing voter authority certificate applications, that now does more than just that. It also supports the processing of online absent voting applications, which is another element of the Act that we have just implemented, and it will, in time, cover other functions as well.

I mentioned that the functionality is being built out across those things, so we are prioritising the functions that local authorities are telling us will make their lives easier in processing things across the piece, such as bulk processing and scanning in paper forms. All these are in the list of things we are working through at the minute, and those are tested and rolled out using thorough assessment processes. The decisions we make on prioritisation are based on the conversations with local authorities on what they will find most helpful in this space.

We will continue to develop the portal up to late February or early March. The timing will depend slightly on whether there is a general election in May, because the volumes that will go through will be so much higher. At that point, we stop developing our systems because we implement a digital change freeze. We do not want to be doing anything other than essential repairs at that point, because we do not want to disrupt a live service on the run-in to polls. That could be risky for their stability, and we do not want to damage the process. At that point, we have a backlog of things that we will work through that will take us up to that date. We should be enabling much better and faster processing of voter authority certificate applications, alongside the other elements such as online absent voting.

On the point about how we are supporting local authorities, there are a couple of other bits of detail. There is obviously the new burdens funding element, which will pay for additional staff to process applications. We are continuing to talk to authorities about whether they would find any other support helpful in that space, but centralising the printing of the certificates is, in and of itself, designed to take a load off local authorities. We did not want 350-odd authorities having to work out how to do this themselves. We offered them the opportunity: "We will do it for you. You process them. You make all the decisions as the statutorily responsible officers, and we will arrange to have them printed". There are other advantages to that system as well, but it has succeeded in minimising the burdens on them in that respect.

Simon Hoare: Could I also add a statistic? We commissioned some research through Ipsos, which found in May 2023 that 96% of voting-age adults in England owned an accepted form of photographic identification. Even when you scale it up to the whole picture, I am confident that we are dealing with a manageable demand figure.

Just to give this committee comfort, there is a cross-government commitment, through IT resilience and the like, to ensure that all is being done to preserve the integrity of the election process from the obvious hazards that any advanced democracy—I am stepping on to Lord Anderson's territory here—will, regrettably, have to prepare itself for. I apologise for stepping on your territory.

Lord Anderson of Ipswich: No apology needed.

Q82 **The Chair:** The efficiency of the VAC portal and processes was something that the electoral administrators kept stressing to us in their evidence.

They were still concerned that any improvements will not have been stress-tested fully until a local election. Without going into too much detail, are you directly engaging with them to raise their confidence level?

Becca Crosier: Yes, we are engaging with them through our expert panel, which are our regional local authorities that we work very closely with. Many of them were involved in the private beta testing of these services before they went live, and we continue to work very closely with them. We stress-test the systems as far as we physically can before we launch them, and we test after; we do load testing in preparation for elections to make sure that we can cope with volume. There will always be an element of uncertainty when we get into the live environment, there is an election coming and the volume starts to spike, but we put a lot of emphasis on the testing programme, both before and after launch and in the run-up to polling day.

The Chair: In summary, you have recognised their concerns and you are actively engaging to address those.

Becca Crosier: Yes.

Simon Hoare: This is an important point, which I cannot overstress. Nobody in my department is saying, "Everything we thought was going to be perfect is perfect. There is no room for improvement here. There are no modifications. There is nothing else to do". By definition, there will be. We are not running away from that. We are facing into it, working with partners. We all hear in the public sector, "Lessons will be learned", and two years later you say, "What were they and what did you do?" and they say, "We didn't really do anything". Lessons are being learned in real time and have been taken into account. Improvements and changes are being made. Nobody should be shocked or surprised by that, given that this was a new system trialled just a few months ago. It seems to be a sensible way of dealing with these matters.

The Chair: Yes, but this is the first review, and you asked our committee to interrogate the review, so we are trying to do a full job of it.

Simon Hoare: I am feeling interrogated. Do not worry about that. It is not quite to Spanish Inquisition levels, but it is early doors.

The Chair: That is our job and that was a request to us. Hopefully, we are doing it courteously.

Simon Hoare: I am keen to know who made the request.

Becca Crosier: It was Baroness Scott.

Simon Hoare: Baroness Scott. Thank you, Jane.

The Chair: It should not be seen outside its context of moving a contested issue forward, to be fair to the Lady, who is not here. I will defend her in her absence.

Q83 Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: Minister, I cannot help but admire your knowledge of your responsibilities after three weeks and one day in office, and your eloquence in expressing them when you say you want to explore all tools. However—

Simon Hoare: I knew there would be a “however”.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: —I cannot hide my disappointment that all you seem to be saying is that you are not going to change things at all. This is exemplified by the voter authority certificate, where you are sticking to paper and six days in advance. Why can you not do it digitally and move into the 21st century?

Simon Hoare: You can construct a perfectly persuasive argument to say, “Do it digitally”. One can construct a perfectly compelling argument to compel compulsory voting. You can construct a very compelling argument to say that all votes should be taking place online and the need for polling stations done away with altogether. It is how one responds to it.

You do not need me to tell you this. As you laid the flattery on with me, I shall do so with you. You are a seasoned operator in both Houses. To govern is to choose, and we have heard all sorts of representations during the progress of the Bill and during the evolution of the systems that have emerged from that. The settled view of the Government is as expressed in the legislation. If what sits behind your question is a reversal from the requirements of voter ID, and therefore by necessity the obviation of the need for the certificate, that is not the view of the Government.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: I am not suggesting that at all. What I am suggesting is a speeding up of the arrangements by using modern technology. Do you know what that is?

Simon Hoare: I believe it is a mobile telephone.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: Yes, and can you see what is on it? It is my senior railcard, and it has a photograph of me. I obtained that instantly. If you had an arrangement digitally for people to give information, they could do it up to a day before the election, and that would be far more efficient.

Simon Hoare: Could they?

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: Why not?

Simon Hoare: I do not know how many general elections you fought, but I know it is more than I have fought.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: It is too many.

Simon Hoare: I do not think that we, as elected practitioners, fully comprehend the huge amount of work that those who are responsible at the local level for administering the elections do in those days in the run-up to polling. There is the delivery of ballot boxes, the signage, liaison

with the police, ensuring that you have the polling stations staffed and all the rest of it. There has to be a cut-off point.

I would suggest that, even if one was going to do it digitally, there would need to be an element of oversight. There would need to be an element of sign-off. Your colleagues on the committee have rightly questioned me about the burdens on local authorities. That might be overly burdensome in the timeframe available to them.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: Why is it more burdensome than issuing a piece of paper, which presumably has to be sent out?

Simon Hoare: It does, or it can be collected.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: If it is done digitally, it can be done to someone's mobile phone.

Simon Hoare: In theory, yes, but can I suggest, both respectfully and seriously, that there is a huge difference between being the bearer of a senior railcard and the right to vote in a democracy? There is a slight comparison there with apples and oranges. For anybody who is applying to be included in the electoral roll, it is perfectly sensible and proper to make the system as robust and resilient as we think it needs to be, hence the steps that the Government have taken.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: Why is that any different from me showing my driving licence?

Simon Hoare: You will have your driving licence in a card form that has been processed by DVLA, and DVLA has not had the time pressure of a general election taking place in 12 hours and having to whizz around delivering ballot papers and ballot boxes, checking on staff, et cetera. It is one of those issues where the theory and the deliverable practice run headlong into each other, and the theory comes off worse.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: You have rejected any change. You have rejected plastic cards as well. You have just said a driving licence is a plastic card. What about the suggestion of a plastic card instead of a piece of paper that can get lost, torn up, eaten by dogs and so on? If you have a little plastic card instead, at least you can keep that for election after election after election.

Simon Hoare: You can call me old-fashioned. I must tell you that a lot of people do. I still champion the role of paper. I could be wrong in ascribing this, but I think that when Lord Falconer was a Minister involved in constitutional electoral affairs in Sir Tony Blair's Government, serious consideration was given to—

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: ID cards.

Simon Hoare: ID cards and digital online voting. Can these things be done? Yes. Let me reiterate the reason why we have decided to stick with paper certificates. They are quicker to produce, which allows the quite

generous cut-off point of the six days before polling. When one gets married, one is not given a plastic marriage certificate. When somebody dies, the surviving relative is not given a plastic death certificate, so officialdom in its many guises still rests a number of its transactions with the citizen on paper. I do not see it as being eccentric to produce paper voter certificates. You may not like it and you may not agree with it, but it is not eccentric.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: Thank you very much. As I said at the start, you explain your position very eloquently, but it does not disguise the fact that it is a position of government that has rejected any improvements in the arrangements, which is very disappointing.

Simon Hoare: If the system in May had proved not worth the paper it was written on—or digital card that it was printed on—my position and that of the Secretary of State and the Government would be indefensible, and I would share your demands. In fact, I would be implementing what would be described colloquially as root-and-branch reform. Particularly when set against the fact that this was the first time it was trialled—before you cut me off at the legs, I am not suggesting that you are in this cohort—for those who were desperate, praying that the wheels would fall off the bus, I can only sympathise with their disappointment, because it has not. That does not mean that the bus is in the most perfect condition, but it is certainly roadworthy.

Becca Crosier: Could I just add a couple of technical points? On the digital cards, we are still looking at digital as a potential option in future, but right now the Minister is absolutely right. This is the decision we have taken. It may well change in future, but right now we cannot secure them properly. There is a lot of security built into the voter authority certificate, some of it very obvious and some of it much less so. We also cannot guarantee that people will be able to produce them properly in polling stations, because while many polling stations have perfectly adequate wi-fi or phone signal, there are plenty that do not, and it would be a real accessibility issue there.

There are some very practical barriers to digital cards here and now. It is something that I am sure will be kept under review in future, but at the minute it is not very achievable. On the six days, the way the minus six working days is calculated is one day for EROs to process the applications, one day for the printers to print them, and four for Royal Mail to deliver them, just to be on the safe side, because post comes with challenges and there is a lot of post at election time.

If we were to move to a digital system in future, we would be taking out the Royal Mail element of the process, but we would still be giving electoral administrators only one working day to turn the applications around. As the Minister rightly says, that is a big burden to put on them very close to polling day when they are frantically busy. It is not as straightforward as it seems, because you are taking out the wrong bit of the process.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: That is really helpful. Thank you.

Simon Hoare: I am scheduled to see Royal Mail in the coming weeks, because I need to be absolutely assured that their delivery network, which we know has been under strain in certain geographies, in rural areas—although not exclusively in rural areas—is able to deliver on time the things that need to be delivered on time. It plays a very important role in our electoral process, which I am sometimes not even entirely sure is as alert to that as it needs to be.

Lord Mancroft: I am pleased to hear that you are an optimist, Minister.

Q84 **The Chair:** If I have it correctly, with the digital card, the two issues are security and practicality, because you would need internet or mobile signal access for it to work. Those are the two primary arguments.

Simon Hoare: Also, the paper certificates are not just printed out on any old bit of photocopying paper that is to hand. There are both visible and invisible means of checking their veracity.

The Chair: We will not ask you for the detail, for obvious reasons. With the plastic ID, the principal point is that you would not want a VAC certificate to become an ID card by default. If you have a plastic VAC, that takes longer to distribute anyway on top of existing pressures, but, of course, if you did not have a principal objection to it being a default form of ID, you could give a paper one in the first instance and follow up at leisure with a plastic one, could you not?

Simon Hoare: There are a variety of ways to skin this particular cat, yes.

The Chair: The primary reason is that you do not like the risk that it could become a default form of ID.

Simon Hoare: At this juncture and on balance, it is our clear view that there are currently far fewer risks with paper certificates, both in the adjudication of their authenticity and in the speed of their production and delivery. We all know that if technology, IT and others think that there is an opportunity to potentially exploit in the future, some whizzy person somewhere will come up with an answer to that that satisfies the concerns. I hope we would all agree that, given their nature, it is not wrong to have those concerns. They are important concerns to have.

Q85 **Lord Anderson of Ipswich:** You took on board the Electoral Commission's recommendation 2 in the sense that you reviewed the list of accepted ID with the intention of identifying and exploring any further possible additions, but you concluded that no addition would be able to significantly increase coverage, so you did not make or recommend any additions.

I would just like to ask a couple of questions about how you got there, based on your own account of how you got there. If I quote from your response, you said, "The key challenge is the diminishing return of

including additional documents on the list. Research by the Government and the Electoral Commission has shown consistently that the vast majority of the electorate—96%—hold a form of photographic identification that is on the existing list. As such it is likely that a similar percentage of the holders of any potential additional document will already also hold another document that is on the current list ... as such the addition would not be able to significantly increase coverage”.

I do not know if you can help me, but I just do not understand that. It is one thing to say that 96% of the population as a whole has a form of accepted ID, but surely you needed not simply to assume that that figure could be read over to any individual form of ID, but to look individually at those forms. Look at the person with a young person’s railcard or the person with an NHS card. How likely is it that that person will have a driving licence or a passport?

It is a very fundamental question about method. You seem, as the philosophers say, to have been assuming what you are trying to prove, because you are saying that, because 96% applies across the board, a similar percentage applies to the holder of any of the individual documents you are looking at. It does not sound, from your response, as though you did the necessary work. I would love you to tell me I am wrong, but your response certainly does not suggest that you have done it in a very meaningful way.

Simon Hoare: The decision and the response to the suggestion was taken at a time that predates me, so I will leave that to Becca to pick up on the substantive point.

In general, may I just make two brief observations? It is right to have an exhaustible list rather than an inexhaustible list. It aids clarity, and I hope it will be of help to those who are administering the physical operation of the polling station. Let us take the principle first that there has to be an exhaustive list, and if you do not have any of those, to hell with it; you cannot vote. That is why we have the certificate. Whether one possesses one of 21, 61, 81 or 101 types of identification that government could deem to be acceptable, there may be somebody who does not have one of 101 and would still require the certificate.

The voter authority certificate should not be seen in any way as the poor relation in identification, nor in any way to be throwing up any doubt about the legitimacy of that person casting their vote. It is as perfectly legitimate to have a voter authority certificate as it is to have any of the other qualifying means of ID.

Lord Anderson of Ipswich: Mr Hoare, none of that is in any way contentious, at least with me, but my question was a precise question on methodology. I appreciate that it predated your time, but perhaps Ms Crosier could respond to it.

Becca Crosier: It does not predate my time.

Simon Hoare: Becca was not there at the 1832 Reform Act, but I am told she was there shortly thereafter.

Becca Crosier: Yes, pretty much. The formation of the ID list has been a really tricky question. We want something that has a bit of security around it and something that is held fairly widely so that most people have a fighting chance of having one. Also, we are trying to hit the various demographics who may or may not have something that is already on the list, and we are trying not to overwhelm staff in the polling station. This was something that came out in the qualitative feedback. They found the ID list just about manageable but were a bit reluctant for us to do much more on it.

When we did the review of the ID list, we did not have any direct evidence on the holders of items of identification that are on the existing list and on what else they own. We have had a good look round and we cannot find it elsewhere either. It is probably more accurate to say that there is an absence of evidence that these additions would have benefited, rather than that there is positive evidence it does not, if that is not too convoluted a way to say it.

Lord Anderson of Ipswich: You did not look, to take one example, at the holders of young person's railcards and ask yourselves what proportion of them have driving licences, passports and other documents on the existing list.

Becca Crosier: We looked for evidence of that.

Lord Anderson of Ipswich: How did you look?

Becca Crosier: I did not do it personally, but I understand that my team were in touch with the Department for Transport on this. They chatted to the teams that run the railcard services. We have spoken to PASS, which does the hologram cards.

Lord Anderson of Ipswich: Were they chatting, or were they actually doing a survey?

Becca Crosier: They were meeting.

Lord Anderson of Ipswich: It says here that it is likely that a similar percentage—in other words, 96%—of the holders of any potential additional document will have one already that is on the list. I do not see how that assumption is justified in the absence of proper rigorous survey evidence.

Becca Crosier: This is an interesting area for further research in the next iteration of the evaluation. At the minute, we do not have the positive evidence, but we have the inverse of it, as I was trying to explain earlier, possibly in a slightly convoluted way. We cannot find any evidence that those items of ID would move the dial. Therefore, our decision has been not to add them, because of the complication it would add to the list. We have not established a benefit case, but it is an

interesting avenue for further research in the next round of the evaluation, which will take place after the next general election.

Q86 Lord Anderson of Ipswich: I am simply conscious of the time. I am a longwinded lawyer, so you will have to excuse me if I am taking too long.

Can I ask a second methodological question? The Government's response says that it is likely that a similar percentage of the holders of any potential additional document will already also hold another document that is on the current list. If we take the example of the NHS card, let us assume that you had done the survey evidence and found that 96% of people with NHS cards also had driving licences, passports, et cetera. Did you look at the question of people who hold those alternative documents perhaps leaving them at home? If you are popping out to vote on your lunch break, you are more likely to have your NHS card with you than your passport. I am wondering whether the figure of 96% is giving us a lot of false assurance, because it is not looking at that question either.

Becca Crosier: Work passes are a slightly different question. Apart from anything else, there is not just one NHS card. They look different in every trust. My brother is a doctor, and we have some doctors in the team. Work passes are a tricky one, because they are all different and they have no identifying marks. You cannot tell whether they are what they claim to be. They are just a pass. As such, we have decided on security grounds not to add those to the list. It is impossible to verify that they are what people claim them to be. It is impossible for a poll clerk to say, "Is this something I should be accepting?"

Simon Hoare: Can I make two points? As I say, you could have a list as long as your arm. The voter authority certificate fills the gap of absence. I would suggest that you are right to focus on young and newly qualified voters. During the process of getting on the electoral register, the opportunities present themselves to highlight the forms of identification and how you go about applying for a certificate.

I am conscious of two other things. It is not, as a matter of principle, such a bad thing that all of us, when we trot off to vote, realise the seriousness of the event and the privilege of living in a democracy where we do it. Anything that can intensify and raise in the minds of our fellow citizens the very special thing of going into that polling station to decide who is going to run your council or your PCC or be your mayor or your Member of Parliament is a very special part of the contract between the citizen and the state.

Lord Anderson of Ipswich: You are saying that it is desirable for there to be a bit of friction in the system.

Simon Hoare: No, that would be taking my words too far. I was about to say that I and the Government have to have in mind not just the operability of the polling station but the safety and security of the clerks who run them, often in obscure village halls in the middle of nowhere. "I produce this card, because my work gave it to me and I use it to get into

the factory gate”, or the office or whatever it might happen to be. “We cannot have that”. “You took that”, et cetera.

To have a list that is uniform across the piece makes it easier for the voter, because they know what they have to take. It takes away any form of discretion. It also makes it safer for those who are administering. They are hopefully not going to get into a verbal tussle, and we are not going to have somebody saying, “No, you cannot have a ballot paper unless you go home and bring something that is on this list”.

I would be negligent, as Elections Minister, if I did not have at the forefront of my mind, equal to the whole issue of voting access, the safety of the polling clerks as well.

Q87 Lord Anderson of Ipswich: That is very useful. In answer to the second rather precise methodological question that I asked, the answer was that, no, you did not ask how likely it was that a person with, for example, a young person’s railcard would want to use it to vote because they had left their passport at home. In other words, it is not enough to say, “Do they have a passport?” You might have also wanted to know whether they were less likely to have it with them.

Time is short. I had better just ask one further question. It relates to what you have just said, Minister. Indeed, someone you have previously mentioned, your near neighbour in Dorset, Mr Farrant, gave evidence to us and suggested that there might be something to be said for providing returning officers with a degree of discretion in deciding what ID they might accept. It is true that there are lots of hospital trusts, but the evidence he gave—you will know about this much more than I do—was that there were an awful lot of NHS people voting in the constituency he was operating, and they all worked at the same hospital and their ID cards were very similar. He made the case for local discretion on the basis that the point of these rules is not to erect a series of obstacles that need to be surmounted in order to be worthy of casting a vote but, rather, simply to detect and root out fraud.

With that more limited purpose in mind, it would be a good idea to give some discretion to local returning officers. What do you think about that?

Simon Hoare: I certainly heard what Mr Farrant said, and I do not support it. It is not the returning officer; it is the people at the polling station. It is the means of contacting the returning officer. Does the returning officer have to turn up at the polling station? My constituency, for example, is a good 50 minutes to go from east to west. The returning officer will not be in my constituency because his office is in the neighbouring constituency of West Dorset.

It would try the patience of the voter. It would jeopardise the security of polling staff. We are all created equal; so too should be our qualification to vote. I do not see that the deployment of discretion, with all its human frailties, faults and foibles, is the right way to go about it.

Q88 Lord Mancroft: Minister, you have said that you are not supportive of

attestation as an alternative to showing photo ID to vote. Could you elaborate on your reasons for this?

Simon Hoare: I can. Unusually, I will read the words that have been given to me in my briefing, because it is an important issue. Let us start from the first words: "96% of the electorate hold a form of photographic identification"; "The necessity of attestation is a small one. We do not support the use of a form of attestation in polling stations, which can sometimes be known as vouching. We believe it would undermine the aim of the identification policy to prevent impersonation and therefore would not be appropriate"; "We do not believe also that there is a practical way to assure the attestation process in the polling station"—this goes back to the point I made a moment or so ago to Lord Anderson; "It would undermine the integrity of the check and risk adding time and complexity process".

If you think about a highly contested election, just imagine that it is 9.30 pm and there is a queue snaking around the corner. We saw this in Sheffield in one of the elections. It might have been 2010; it might have been 2005. People will get very impatient while somebody is trying to prove something; "In order for the security of an attestation system to be suitably robust, vouching would need to be prepared with a process for confirming the identity of the vouched-for voter after the close of poll. This would be extremely costly, undoubtedly inefficient and could potentially cause, dependent on the numbers, significant delays to the result of the poll being announced, open it up to challenge and further diminish confidence in the electoral system and its results as a whole".

There are considerable downsides to attestation that mean that it is not justified even to trial it, given the small percentage of voters who either do not hold the accepted forms of identification or, through that whole raft of communication, have not been aware of the existence of a voter authority certificate.

The Chair: We will not get through all our questions. If we may, we will write to you on the last one, if that is okay.

Simon Hoare: Yes, of course.

The Chair: I know you have a time constraint too. I will take two questions together. They embrace the issue of strain on the whole electoral system and support for administrators for implementing the tranche 2 measures coming out of the Elections Act 2022.

Q89 Lord Thomas of Gresford: You have referred to the safety of the polling staff and their concerns, which include the fact that they have become gatekeepers and not just facilitators of people voting; in other words, they have to check that the person has one of the 21 forms of identification or a VAC. We have been told that this has led to a fall-off in recruitment of older people in particular. Some people take a training course and then drop out.

What steps are the Government taking to alleviate the strain under which

the electoral sector operates? We fear, or at least I fear, that electoral officers will suddenly be faced with the impossibility of doing all the tasks that are now imposed upon them very close to an election. What comment can you make on that?

Simon Hoare: First, it is an issue that I am aware of and alert to. A number of things play into what is a manifest challenge in recruiting people to man polling stations. That manifested itself before these new requirements came in. There is quite a canon of evidence from returning officers over recent years saying that those who used to volunteer, et cetera, were dropping off for a whole variety of reasons. I am tempted to highlight Covid of itself. A lot of people who used to do things have used Covid as the cut-off point for their civic engagement.

I want to make clear that, by whatever means necessary, polling stations will be fully manned throughout election day at all times in every place where there is a vote taking place. That just has to be done. I am looking forward to conversations with returning officers and others to harvest their ideas as to how best we can do it.

There may be a way to do this. I do not know whether you have ever been in an election count. Very often, it is the younger members of the local authority staff who do the counting, but they have not been doing the work on the day. You may reverse that and have more council staff surged into manning polling stations. People like parish clerks, for example, who are well used to these things, could also provide fertile ground for recruitment.

We are aware of it. I am not hiding behind the fact that I am new to post, but it is a fact. It is something I am alert to. As my thinking evolves on this and as we find solutions to it—there is something to find a solution to—I am happy to write to this committee to keep you up to speed with that.

The overarching principle from which I start is that the integrity of the ballot, the operation of the ballot and the delivery of the ballot in those accepted polling hours will be maintained without interruption.

Q90 **Lord Thomas of Gresford:** As a Welshman, you will appreciate my family motto, “Ar bwy mae’r bai?” or, “Who can we blame?” Where will the responsibility lie if, on election day in May of next year, there is a complete mess-up and the counters or the polling staff are not available?

Simon Hoare: We will know well in advance. People have to apply if they are not on the list. There are processes that the returning officers go through to prove that those people are men and women of upstanding character and good will. I am not using the correct terminology, but you cannot have somebody sitting in a polling station in the quiet hours filling out the ballot papers on behalf of people. There has to be some element of that. If this was two weeks out and suddenly alarm bells were starting to be rung, I would have a greater concern than I do. We are many months out. There is scope to rectify this.

I may come to regret this answer. You ask where the buck stops. It stops with me.

Becca Crosier: It is also important to recognise that we are already doing a lot of work in the background on these issues with the Electoral Commission and the Association of Electoral Administrators.

First and foremost, staffing is the returning officer's responsibility. They have their lists, they work through their lists. The question we consistently ask is, "What can we do to help?" Government should not overreach on elections. That would be constitutionally awful. There are definitely things the Government can do and have done in the past. In 2021, during Covid, we rounded up civil servants who were willing to volunteer at their local authority. The offer is out there if local authorities would like us to do that again. We are continuing to talk to the AEA about it. We are also working with the Electoral Commission on sharing best practice. The Minister is absolutely right: we will keep this under review. As we get closer and closer to polling day, we will get more of a concentrated focus on it.

It has been an issue for years, as the reliable librarians of the world start to retire. There is an interesting question about how they are replaced and how local authorities are managing their resources across the piece as well. What we can do we will do.

Simon Hoare: Maybe our new slogan should be, "What do we want? Reliable librarians. When do we want them? On 2 May".

Becca Crosier: Yes, always.

Lord Thomas of Gresford: There are new responsibilities such as issuing VACs.

Simon Hoare: The VACs would be done by council officers, not by polling staff. Nobody in a polling station will be issuing a certificate. That has to be done—

Lord Thomas of Gresford: I appreciate that has to be done six days before, yes.

Q91 **Lord Hope of Craighead:** Do you recognise that there may be a problem with recruitment? There is some evidence that at the May elections some potential volunteers declined the role because they had concerns about the voter ID policy, how it would be administered and so on, and decided not to continue to provide the service. Do you recognise that this is a possibility? Do you recognise that we are having these problems with recruitment? If so, what are you proposing to do about it?

Simon Hoare: I do. It would not be right to presume that everybody who applies for a role and goes through the training follows through to implement it. Some people might just think, "It is not for me" or, "God, I do not want to sit in a hall for all those hours", et cetera.

I mentioned in a reply to Lady Drake that the proof of the pudding was in the eating. Anecdotally, there was some concern that the atmosphere of the polling station would be a rather tense place. People did not want to be part of that. May demonstrated that that is not the case. I am hopeful that that is the message that we can disseminate.

I am just passed a note by the admirable Becca, which I will read to you. I do not actually know what I am reading to you until you hear it.

The Chair: You have just made it very exciting.

Simon Hoare: It could be her "Dear Santa" letter. I do not know: "Although around 10% of polling staff dropped out between recruitment and polling day, drop-out was mainly attributed to personal circumstances, including the two bank holidays in May, which resulted in many of the usual temporary staff not being available. Only one-fifth of those who dropped out"—that is, 18%—"cited the new measures as a reason for dropping out".

We have work to do, but, as I say, the proof of the pudding will be that the calm, Miss Marple-like atmosphere of a UK polling station can be maintained. If we can disseminate that, both for retention and to encourage recruitment, that would be not unhelpful. I am not sidelining the issue, because there is an issue there.

The Chair: You made reference to Miss Marple. She might have been calm, but she left lots of dead bodies wherever she went.

Simon Hoare: She did. Of course, I hope there would be unanimity in the view that Joan Hickson provided the best manifestation of Miss Marple, Margaret Rutherford was pretty awful, and that their successors were unspeakable.

Q92 **Lord Hope of Craighead:** The effect of the Elections Act 2022 was to introduce a whole lot more things that have to be considered. That increases the administrative burden. What support are you providing to those who are running the system to cope with this additional administrative burden? In particular, what about the electoral administrators in Scotland, Wales and parts of England who did not have experience of the local elections?

Simon Hoare: There is the new burdens fund, which is there and which continues. It has been well used and the benefits of it are tangible.

The other good news is that those who are involved in the delivery and management of elections from the official side talk to each other. They have associations; they share best practice. Those who went through it this May—I pay tribute to them—have been very forthcoming in talking to colleagues who will have to implement it, who did not have elections this May and but will next May, in order to ensure they are hitting the ground running. That is particularly important, given, if history is to be repeated, the probable doubling, on average, of the turnout between an ordinary local election and an ordinary general election, from 33% to 66%.

Q93 Lord Hope of Craighead: I have a few questions to add to that. Does the Electoral Commission play a part in disseminating experience and keeping an eye on the extent to which people understand the system? Secondly, is financial support required? If so, what steps are being taken to provide it?

Simon Hoare: Do you mean financial support to the commission?

Lord Hope of Craighead: I mean to the administrators.

Simon Hoare: It is the new burdens fund. That is their principal recourse to funding. Yes, the commission plays a part, as does—again, I pay tribute to the work they do—the Local Government Association and other local government organisations that are, despite political differences and different geographies, all focused on the delivery of quality and reliable public services. What could be more of a public service than the administering of the ballot on election day? They too are sharing best practice in order to ensure that each parliamentary constituency and each area that is having elections next year is match fit.

Becca Crosier: The other thing we found in May—it is common practice anyway, but it was particularly emphasised this year—was that councils that did not have polls to run would send their staff over the border to a neighbour that did to shadow and to learn lessons. Some ESMs—electoral services managers—stepped in to fill gaps for sickness. Martha, who is from Sutton and who I believe gave evidence to you, was heavily involved in the running of the polls in York. She can bring that really valuable experience back to London. There is a lot of information-sharing via the Electoral Commission and at local level.

Lord Thomas of Gresford: Is “match fit” the Welsh equivalent of “oven ready”, by any chance?

Simon Hoare: There is no Welsh equivalent to “oven ready”.

Q94 The Chair: Minister, you did say that you would be happy to write to us about the measures that you have taking to deal with the stress and strain from the tranche 2 measures. This was quite a significant issue from the evidence we took from the administrators. They are clearly hugely committed to delivering elections. One in particular said that the problem was that, “If we keep telling them that there are problems, they will think we are crying wolf because we always do whatever it takes, but in the end that is not a fair system”.

It would be helpful if, in writing to us, you could do justice to that point by listing the measures you are taking to deal with this. They clearly feel strongly on this point. They care about a functioning democracy too.

Simon Hoare: First, let me give you that undertaking. Secondly, let me put this on the record this afternoon to you and your colleagues. Rest assured—those who have raised this concern should also rest assured and I hope take comfort from this—that we are conscious that we have created new systems and new things to do. We are not ignorant of the new burdens, responsibilities and challenges that this places on those

who will implement them. We are not taking them for granted. We are not trying to pile as many straws on to the camel's back before it breaks, which is why we have the new burdens fund, et cetera.

For a system that had very little change for a considerable period of time now to have quite a lot of change delivered on block is a challenge. Given their professional experience, their commitment to public service and the long track record we have of delivering incontestable ballots in this country, I know that the foundation stones upon which future elections will be delivered are very firm indeed.

The Chair: We all want to protect a functioning democracy. It is a question of what needs to be done in order to ensure that happens. Thank you very much indeed for coming. We got through a lot of questions, but we have one on data that we will send to you. We will certainly digest what you have said. Thank you very much for coming, because we are under a bit of a timetable. There is no point in us coming out with our report after the election.

Simon Hoare: No, I take that point. Thank you for your questions and thank you for having us this afternoon. We are very grateful to you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.