



HOUSE OF LORDS

# Select Committee on the Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013

## Corrected oral evidence: Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013

3 March 2020

3.30 pm

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Members present: Lord Shutt of Greetland (The Chair); Lord Campbell-Savours;  
Lord Dykes; Lord Hayward; Lord Janvrin; Baroness Pidding; Lord Wills.

Evidence Session No. 12

Heard in Public

Questions 127 - 146

### Witness

I: Virginia McVea, Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland.

## Examination of Witness

Virginia McVea.

Q127 **The Chair:** Welcome to this evidence session of the Select Committee on the Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013. You have in front of you a list of interests that have been declared by members of the Committee. The meeting is being broadcast live via the parliamentary website. A transcript of the meeting will be taken and published on the committee website. You will have the opportunity to make corrections to that transcript where necessary. That is the formal bit.

We will make a start. Welcome to you. What has the experience been of Northern Ireland with having Individual Electoral Registration over a longer period than Great Britain? What lessons have been learned?

**Virginia McVea:** Thank you for the welcome. It was definitely the right decision. In thinking about this question, it would have been difficult to imagine our current operation working through a head-of-household system. For example, in Northern Ireland, we essentially have, in the Electoral Office, a full credit profile for electors in Northern Ireland, and it is difficult to imagine a head of a household being able to provide that list of data for all the people who occupy the same building. When you move into the developments around data protection, it is difficult to imagine how they would be privy to all those pieces of data; we have national insurance numbers and dates of birth, and still capture wet signatures in Northern Ireland. With all of that in mind, it is difficult to imagine how the head-of-household system would have worked.

The short answer is that, from our point of view, it has been a success and certainly builds towards perhaps more visionary use of data going forward in the electors' interests.

**The Chair:** There is nobody around the place saying, "Bring back the old system."

**Virginia McVea:** No. It is a fairly brief answer in that regard.

Q128 **Lord Hayward:** You may have, in part, just answered this question by your one-word response. Do you think that the system works well and succeeds in its objectives?

**Virginia McVea:** Yes. In terms of objectives, there were many conversations and reflections in relation to electoral fraud and perception of electoral fraud. As things stand, I do not have any concerns at present in relation to electoral fraud in Northern Ireland, and it is my understanding that that would be the position of the Electoral Commission.

Essentially, it has shown that people are capable of managing their own data and working with the system. We have 1,293,971 voters registered as our electorate, and there is still population growth of about 0.6% in Northern Ireland and we have about 20% under 15. In terms of young people and handling their data, there were concerns in relation to other

people within a household being able to do it, and that has not proven a difficulty.

**Lord Hayward:** May I ask something in association with that? We have been provided with figures in relation to accuracy and completeness of the registers. Generally, in terms of evidence that we have heard about accuracy of registers, the emphasis has been on those multiracial and multi-ethnic cities, where there is a high level of churn in terms of rented accommodation, including private rented accommodation. Northern Ireland has a pretty stable electorate, for the most part, and I was surprised by these levels of accuracy and completeness, given the demographics of most of Northern Ireland.

**Virginia McVea:** Part of that story is about coming near to a use-by date in relation to our canvass, because of the length of the period between one canvass and another, so we can end up in a 10-year situation. You see it coming to end-of-life. That said, with the amount of election activity that there has been, those figures that were collated in December 2018 by the Electoral Commission will have altered.

What you say about social mobility in relation to the rented sector holds true for Northern Ireland. It may not be to the same length but that is the area where we think, particularly coming up to canvass, more work needs to be done. Getting the data from the Housing Executive has been a goal of the office. We are in discussions at the minute, particularly in relation to canvass, because I know it has been working with the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency to try to make sure that group is reached, because it would be an area where there is a concern over the accuracy and completeness.

Q129 **The Chair:** When you spoke about fraud earlier, you said you did not think there was any. Did you mean that there was no fraud anywhere in the electoral system, or just in registration?

**Virginia McVea:** In terms of any systemic issue, given where the conversations had arisen some time ago, before the legislation was brought in in 2002, there is not the same perception currently in Northern Ireland. That is my understanding and from the Electoral Commission as well. That is not to say that there is no fraud at all; occasionally, I will have visits from the PSNI in relation to ID cards and people losing registration and whatnot, but, in terms of systemic indicators of widespread fraud or, even more importantly, the perception of fraud, it would not be the same conversation, as I understand it.

Q130 **Lord Janvrin:** May I follow up on one point? I think this is my ignorance. You did away with an annual canvass in Northern Ireland. Who now decides when the canvass should take place? Are you content that you will, effectively, go for seven years without one, so that continuous registration is running for seven years before you take stock again?

**Virginia McVea:** My answer to that might be more lengthy and possibly less erudite. You do come to an end-of-life. When I listen to my electoral administrator colleagues across the UK, we understand that elections are

perhaps the greatest motivation for people to come on to the register, and there is lots of debate about that.

We will try to match the data in Northern Ireland, in quarters across the year. We get DWP data and then our health authority data, which is referred to as BSO data. When we do not find a match in relation to names or addresses, we will do a mailshot. At the start of this year, we did a mailshot to about 20,000 people, saying, "We think something may have changed. You may have moved house. You may have married and changed your name. We are not finding a match. Can you come back to us?" We had a return of about 3,000, so that process is not very efficient or productive in making those matches. There are lots of possibilities that we might come on to discuss about what can be done with the data that we have to work more effectively.

The difficulty in Northern Ireland is that, after encouraging all these people to go on to the register for the electoral events that we have had, their reward is that I come to them later in the year and say, "We are now in July. Thank you very much. Everybody is going off the register, thank you very much, and you all have to reapply to go on to the register". I do not have the advantage of a knockout date, so I cannot say, "You must do this by such a date". If I have reason to believe that the data is so poor that I cannot stand over it, then those people come off the register in December 2020, but there is a rollover period of two years, during which we continue to chase.

I recently described that to a journalist and he told me that I was hurting his head. I had hoped that he could come up with a soundbite that would enable me to communicate that to the public, because it would hurt your head, and that is very often a good indicator of whether it is an efficient and effective process. Doing that will be problematic for us, not least with coronavirus now coming into the mix.

We think that, with the data that we have, we could chase areas of lower registration throughout a period. We also think that, with the administrative data that the Government have collated, we could work to a by-exception system, in terms of the new legislation that there is, for example, for England, where we say, "We have you as Mr So-and-so at this address. If that is correct, please tick", whereas, as I say, I have to approach the electors in Northern Ireland and say, "Everyone must now reapply". Previously, that caused difficulty as I came into post and we came into the Northern Ireland Assembly elections. It was felt by the parties that around 70,000 electors had, in effect, fallen off the cliff because we had come to that very end date where they could not be rolled over any more. Although it had been brought down and down, it ended up being about 70,000 people. I could well understand for the parties, right on the doorstep of an election, that that was not welcome news, and we would want to avoid that.

**Q131 Baroness Pidding:** What has been the impact of introducing online registration in Northern Ireland, and what challenges has it created?

**Virginia McVea:** It has been very positive. It is notable that, in terms of accessibility, the work that the Cabinet Office team had done was really exceptional by the time we were joining in, so to speak. I am not aware of anyone raising complaints about accessibility. People find it easy to navigate and easy to go on to. By December 2018, 77.9% of those applying to go on the register were doing so online. By the local parliamentary elections at the start of the summer this year, that had risen to 87.2%. For the December period of the parliamentary election, 93.4% of the applications were online. People are finding that they can do it and it is tremendous to have that level of accessibility.

What has come with that is that there are clearly duplicates. During the parliamentary election in December, we had about 85,000 applications to go on the register. For an unplanned election, we had just over 40,000 people; that was all the people who applied to go on the register in the local council elections, which cover the entirety of Northern Ireland. We had all those people apply, and then it was as if, in the last six days of registration, all those people applied again so the numbers were phenomenal. The number of local council applications, sitting at about 49,000 applications, was unprecedented and then it went to 85,000, so there are challenges in processing those applications within the timeframe.

Although the data team within the Electoral Office think that we do not have as many duplicates as they would have in other areas, it is still an issue, because, of those 85,000, if substantial numbers are duplicates, then obviously that is a waste of time at a peak time for processing. A look-up service perhaps poses insurmountable problems, but the inability to look up whether you are already on the register is a challenge and certainly leads to this issue of duplicate applications when resources are stretched to their limit.

Those are some of the observations. The fact is that, even with rurality in Northern Ireland, although there may be issues in some areas in relation to broadband cover, as far as we can tell, with the various smartphones, most people should have access. To counter any concerns in relation to access, we have set up pilot kiosks in some local council offices so that, if people feel they cannot have access at home or by their phone, they can go in and use a little computer in a kiosk to have online registration. The use of those may, to date, be minimal but we have not reviewed it and we are going to test it in other areas.

Q132 **The Chair:** I have one point on this, which may be different from England. With your office functioning through the entirety of Northern Ireland, if someone lives in Belfast and has a holiday home on the north Antrim coast, are they registered twice or once?

**Virginia McVea:** They can choose to be registered twice, and that is one of the interesting things in that last election in relation to students. Not so long ago, we had about 18 people registered in two homes, and they were essentially holiday homes. What we saw at Christmas was students thinking that, instead of using absent votes, which would have been the

case in the past, they could be registered at two addresses. Some of the difficulties are then around proving those addresses if we cannot find a match.

You can be registered in two, and I understand, from evidence given recently in relation to Scotland, that the question then will be how you ensure that on polling day people do not vote twice. The short answer to that seems to be that, at the moment, you cannot. Digitally, there is some opportunity with that in the future, but it is a challenge.

Q133 **Lord Hayward:** May I just seek clarification? You talked about this surge in applications, many of whom had clearly previously registered anyway. I think you said that you could not actually solve that problem. I think you used the word "insurmountable". I am curious about that, because we have had other people say that, if you provided read-only access, it would solve part of the problem, though it would not solve all of it. I just wanted your clarification.

**Virginia McVea:** When I have raised the issue, my understanding is that it is extremely complex, and that perhaps the cost of what would have to be done centrally to create that system would not be possible. That is probably for others to answer. When I use that word, I am essentially passing on a message.

I wonder, in terms of Northern Ireland, whether it is possible to create our own, and that is part of a reflection about strategies moving forward. I recently attended the election in Ireland, and it has a look-up facility for electors. There are questions about completeness and accuracy of registers, but we know that the public like that service. We can try to think about how we could provide it for them in the future. It may not be insurmountable in Northern Ireland; I am simply passing on that my understanding, as it has been communicated to me, is that it is much more complicated to produce centrally than I might appreciate.

Q134 **Lord Janvrin:** What further steps do you think could be taken to improve the electoral registration process and the integrity of the electoral register in Northern Ireland? In other words, can we have some of your ideas? What is on your shopping list?

**Virginia McVea:** The first wish on my shopping list would be for a break in electoral activity. That is not just so that I can put my feet up. We have had eight electoral events in three years in Northern Ireland, and we have had lots of ideas and would love to be able to roll some of those out. I averaged it out, in a "poor me" session, to about 4.5 months per election we had rolled through in those three years.

We have been doing lots of things that I am looking forward to showing your party when you come over to Northern Ireland on the 19th. They come under a heading: if you are a data-capture organisation and it is about processing data, how can you do that in the smartest way? That very often is about what levers you can deploy with other people who have data, to not reinvent the wheel.

Some of that, for example, concerns education. Again, the benefit of being a small region is that we have what is called the C2k network in education. The Department of Education, just before the last election, had agreed to share data so I could have the name, address and school of each pupil in Northern Ireland. I also have a connection, through that C2k network, so that it is possible to email every child in secondary-level education in Northern Ireland, and that is a great boon in trying to look forward strategically at how we put the attainers on the register.

Linked to that, we have worked with the education authority, CCEA, on the curriculum. It has very generously agreed to let us come in to its system, so we have created a suite of materials that will go into the curriculum of Northern Ireland, with a view to having young people going on the register as part of the normal curriculum activity. We will be able to use their mailshots for those aged 16-plus who are preparing to leave school and be part of the wider world, particularly focusing on the credit opportunities and banking opportunities of being on the register. It is the pitch that will work for your audience. That is one example.

The other is with the data held by the Housing Executive, as I have mentioned. The Statistics and Research Agency in Northern Ireland has been very generous with the Electoral Office in relation to its time and pilots and preparation for census. Working with that, we can see how to target areas in relation to rented accommodation. In very broad terms, we think about 20% of the data that we have at this point in its degradation, so to speak, is probably what I would call less reliable data. A lot of that will be focused in that area of rented accommodation. The more we can co-ordinate with other bodies and share administrative data, the more we can highlight areas.

With an app that we have created with the Land and Property Services in Northern Ireland, which I can show you when you are over, each household now can be pinpointed on a map and it is colour co-ordinated to the polling station that those people will go to. That also gives me a much better tool to work with the political parties, so that I can say, "These are the areas and these are the very streets with the lowest levels of registration. I am going to work there but you understanding this data too can be helpful." Local parties on the ground can say, "There is a reason or there is a particular group of people here. You should look to these services to support." It is trying to share as much of that data to analyse as much as we possibly can and distil it into meaningful chunks of information, and then sharing that with groups who can help us reach out.

**Q135 Lord Wills:** I ought to declare my interests as the president of the Wiltshire Association of Local Councils and a member of the advisory board of Transparency International. I just want to ask you a couple of questions. The first is just about this app. Is that widely and publicly available?

**Virginia McVea:** It is. It is a question of publicising it. It is used and I have brought the parties in and I have demonstrated it. Again, if we have

time outside an election, we can do more with that. A member of the public should be able to look up. It can be useful to see where their polling station is but, particularly for the parties and particularly for us, it is easier, for example, when we are doing polling station scheme reviews, which is really where the idea originated. It is easier if you can see on a map where these people are. Once you do that, you also identify the outliers in terms of clerical errors, because you can say, "Why is that yellow dot so very far away from that polling station?" It is a great tool to identify any clerical errors that you have but also for all of these other reasons.

**Lord Wills:** Is it generated by your organisation?

**Virginia McVea:** Yes, it is, working with the Land and Property Services. I cannot remember at this point some of the benefits to them, but it is about trying to find the benefits for each organisation. I was so overwhelmed by the benefits to our organisation, but obviously it is a win-win for all of these types of projects when you can secure a benefit for all those involved.

**Lord Wills:** May I just go one step further? If I said, "Look, I can give you one wish. You can go to any person you like and I guarantee they will do exactly what you want", who would you choose and what would you ask them?

**Virginia McVea:** I would ask HMRC, if I have got this in the right order, to engage directly when giving national insurance numbers to young people, if we do not have an automatic registration system, to say to them at that point, "You should go online and register now". That point of entry would be the most effective.

Q136 **The Chair:** You have referred to this feast of elections that you have had.

**Virginia McVea:** I did not say "feast".

**The Chair:** No, that is my word. I am sorry. What is the next programmed election in Northern Ireland now?

**Virginia McVea:** I almost hesitate to say it but it would be the Assembly elections for 2022. Our canvass activity would be in July this year through to December. In theory, we have a fallow year in 2021.

**Lord Hayward:** Keep touching wood.

**Virginia McVea:** I know—a lot.

**The Chair:** Can you just set out to us what you will be endeavouring to do in this hopefully fallow period, in your terms, in terms of improving the underregistered groups? How does that interact with the individual registration system?

**Virginia McVea:** We have started some processes, and we are fortunate enough to have been able to keep some plates spinning as we move

through that electoral activity. For example, we have started work with a group called Start360; it works with young people who are not in employment or education. We have been doing outreach clinics for it, trying to encourage young people to come and work for us during elections. We recruit 6,000 people and sometimes, for students and young people, that is a draw. Equally, we want to see a spread of our demographic in our polling stations. We have been working with that group and I would like to roll that out further.

Similarly, we have been working with organisations such as Disability Action. Again, we are trying to promote the notion of, "You can come and work for us", and to try to understand from their members any inhibitors that there may be in terms of our recruitment or the way that we work so that they could come and work in polling stations and count centres. Participating in the process itself is something that I am keen to encourage. It is mainly in terms of those drives—the education drive, the rented sector drive and the increasing sharing of that data—as well as following up on canvassing in 2021.

**Q137 Baroness Pidding:** Aside from the changes to the registration system, what other administrative changes should be a priority to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of electoral administration in Northern Ireland and to aid administrators in doing their job?

**Virginia McVea:** On this, if you feel I do not go where you think I ought to, rein me back in. One of the things that I thought that I could highlight to the Committee at this point was electronic management systems. It is a concern to me that, commercially, there are very few providers. With very few providers, as we try to tender for the electronic management systems that will keep all these electoral administrative processes running through elections, it is absolutely vital that we procure the right mandatory requirements and that we are visionary. We need to think about what we could do with data, how we could use data and how that works into a contract, and ensure the support through those contracts.

We have various mergers and buy-outs, and it means that there are very few providers to go to and there is a huge pressure on electoral administrators when they have to contract for those services. If those electronic management systems do not work, are not agile enough, or cannot be developed within reason from the public purse, then there is a huge risk posed to the system. I know this has been discussed recently among electoral administrators, ensuring that they have the service. The intensity of electoral periods, particularly with unplanned elections and those kinds of waves of applications that I have discussed, means that we must have very robust systems, and systems that can be developed and can provide the necessary security.

Improving efficiency very much depends on these electronic management systems and how they look, making sure that we do not simply replicate paper-based systems into a digital system but rather that there is sufficient blue-sky thinking and that the timing of the thinking co-ordinates, so that we can say that for now we need the system to do

this, but we would like it to be able to move with the times and achieve other things, and we certainly want to make sure that the system is robust enough. That is very challenging for electoral administrators to be able to do. You could have a central electronic management system provided by government, but certainly it seems to me that it is about engagement across electoral administrators and sharing of knowledge to ensure that, when they go to the marketplace, they are as well prepared and supported as possible in the public interest, to procure the best kind of service.

I would also again raise the issue of the possibility of look-up and checks, and the issue of duplicates.

**Baroness Pidding:** What is your relationship with the Electoral Commission and the Cabinet Office, and how do you co-ordinate and co-operate on your activities?

**Virginia McVea:** It is one of gratitude very often. Certainly, with a lot of electoral events, the Cabinet Office has been very generous with its time in relation to our office going live with online registration. There was a lot of generosity from the Cabinet Office and sharing of expertise. It shared all its battle scars, which then enabled us perhaps to save ourselves some of the pain. That was extremely generous in relation to the development of our systems.

We meet the Electoral Commission very regularly in Northern Ireland. It is a very open relationship where, again, expertise is shared, and I am very grateful for that. We would engage with it, sharing strategic planning meetings coming up to elections. In relation to the canvass, it would join us and we would move through our planning and it could pass comment and share experience. It has the statutory duty and the budget to follow in re raising public awareness, and that combination is vital. There are a lot of things that the Electoral Office could do with not necessarily a very big spend in relation to developing social media engagement with the public—not necessarily relying on websites but trying to make it accessible and timely.

Certainly, in relation to the canvass, working with the Electoral Commission, we may be able to share data as it emerges, so that they can be more agile in their targeting of advertising during that canvass period. That is a discussion that we are having at the minute. We should be able to take the online registrations and amend the data daily, so that we can see where it comes from. That would enable it to target its campaign and shift that. If that is something it is able to do within its own systems, it would certainly make sense and be much more efficient.

Q138 **Lord Dykes:** Earlier we touched on removing the annual canvass. That was, of course, way back in 2006. How would you sum up the plusses and minuses in the effects of that removal? Do you have second thoughts? Is there a case for the review of the continuous registration system anyway?

**Virginia McVea:** Particularly in recent days, when faced with the challenge of coronavirus and thinking about canvassers and how the system might work, you are pushed more and more to the conversation and reflection on how we can use the data that we have in the smartest possible way. The notion of going door to door, particularly when faced with a challenge within society as to why that might not work, pushes you even more to the thought of, “What else can we do and what is it that the public respond to?”

I understand there has been some research done recently in relation to the census, with major spikes following maildrops, so we have something generic that goes through every single letterbox. There were spikes in reaction to pilots as opposed to what they would have called the numerators going door to door.

We collate so much data within the state that using that in as smart a way as possible to identify the areas where we really need to focus our efforts would be key, and then trying to think about what a focusing of those efforts looks like. For example, I can see from the data that some of the lowest levels of registration are in the two university areas, which we refer to as Coleraine and, in Belfast, Botanic. Once you have used your data to try to identify these areas, the question then is what you do. One of the things that would be great to be able to do is to look at some of the examples in England, where we work directly with the universities at the point of entry for the students. I have been working with the Students’ Union, but a lot of their bodies change at a certain time and the representatives change, so it would be easier to work with the core university administration.

There are so many data capture points already available, and it seems that the way that we engage with people in society is so vastly altered. People do not come to your door anymore in the way that they would have done, to provide coal, lemonade, video rentals or whatever else. The world has changed so considerably, and the data available to us is so vast. It is about what we do with it.

**Lord Dykes:** Can you link those things into the fact that there is a new canvass now scheduled for 2020? The next big event will be 2022. Does that enable you to make the research to prepare more thoroughly all the inputs that you need to make sure that canvass is accurate?

Q139 **The Chair:** Just before we come to that, bearing in mind that you have Queen’s and UU, have they heard of the Sheffield scheme? We have been quite impressed by what is happening at Sheffield with students. Has there been any suggestion that they take up the schemes that they have there?

**Virginia McVea:** I have been going through the secondary level, approaching the third level. What I have only recently become aware of—we may be talking about the same thing but I am perhaps not knowledgeable enough to know—is that, through the ombudsmen scheme in relation to universities, there is a follow-down voluntary sector body

that acts as a go-between in relation to the data. That is my understanding. Is that the same thing?

**The Chair:** I am not certain about that.

**Virginia McVea:** Any scheme whereby there is an arrangement put in place so that universities are working directly is good. It is trickier for us because of national insurance numbers and whatnot. It is slightly easier elsewhere. I have not heard anything yet that would preclude it as an experiment.

**Lord Dykes:** Can you return to the second question I asked?

**Virginia McVea:** I am sorry; would you repeat it for me?

Q140 **Lord Dykes:** You have the new canvass coming along and you have time now, before the next big Assembly events, although you have had far too much, as you say, in recent years. What kind of preparations will you make as extra activity to make sure that canvass is successful?

**Virginia McVea:** The extra activity is trying to use those other levers, for example, to focus on the rented sector. Another example would be that we have the RQIA as an oversight body for health and social care in Northern Ireland. Residential care facilities are registered through them and, under the standards, care home providers are obliged to facilitate the participation in democracy, which is very useful. As a result of that, I have been working with the RQIA, to use it as a conduit point to all of those residential care facilities in relation to canvass and rolling thereafter. Those would be examples in relation to that data.

There are also the schools. I think they get their data in at the start of the autumn. They then have to process it a bit but, as soon as they would make it available to us, we could work with that.

**Lord Dykes:** In the early discussions with them about these things, what have the putative responses been? Have they been encouraging?

**Virginia McVea:** Yes, they have. Given that you are potentially introducing something new or a bit of an increased work, people from the examinations board through to RQIA are very positive, and people have been generous, again, working towards trying to make sure that there is a benefit for them or those who use their services overall.

Q141 **Lord Janvrin:** Can you tell us how the voter ID system functions in Northern Ireland? What are the key challenges as you see them and what lessons might be learned with regard to the UK Government's proposals to introduce mandatory voter ID in Great Britain? In other words, can you give us your advice on that?

**Virginia McVea:** Obviously, things arose in a very different context in Northern Ireland when the conversations around voter ID emerged. There was identification from the 1980s and then that moved into exclusively photographic ID. What I had advised the clerks was that I could share with the Committee some early tallies. Three tallies were

done of three elections early on in Northern Ireland—I think they were from 2003 to 2005—trying to chart those who were turned away from polling stations because they did not have the appropriate ID. It also charts the type of ID that people were presenting, from no ID through to their electric meter card and marriage certificates. All kinds of things were brought in. I can share those tallies, for what it may be worth to the Committee.

It is now generally understood. When I go through the polling station logs that the polling station managers prepare during polling day, there is no message coming through that identification is an issue anymore in Northern Ireland. We have the electoral ID card. People seem readily able, and what you generally find is that people have simply forgotten; very often they will go back to the house, get it and return with it.

I have looked at some old figures. For 2003-04, we had prepared 89,000 electoral ID cards. For 2018-19, that number was just 11,417. That tells the story that we have seen a general drop in the number of ID cards that we have been required to provide for the public. As I said, we are finding increasingly—this is anecdotally, from our staff, rather than from running a formal system—that people are getting cards for credit and banking purposes rather than electoral purposes, though the parties will still make representations that, in areas of social deprivation, young people having passports or driving licences is problematic.

Q142 **Lord Dykes:** The EU passports are not normally permitted in UK parliamentary elections, but do you hope they will continue to be usable in the list of ID items in the Northern Ireland elections?

**Virginia McVea:** I am not entirely sure that that is for me to say, in terms of what the legislation will direct.

Q143 **Lord Hayward:** We have been provided with a list of what is acceptable as ID, and you have just referred specifically to the electoral ID card, although, as you have identified, they are actually used for other purposes, which I can well understand. Do you have an idea, roughly, of the balance of what people use for ID, or is that something that nobody keeps a record of?

**Virginia McVea:** We have not kept a record. As I say, the only tallies that I could find when thinking about what might be useful to you were those from 2003 to 2005, of the people that were turned away. I would say driving licences and passports, and people use the smart passes as well, but it would be a guess. It would possibly at points be too time-consuming on polling day to record.

Prior to your visit, I can engage with a group of polling station inspectors, for example, and take their minds on it. Again, it would hardly be clinical or forensic evidence, but I will take their minds and feed that back to you.

**Lord Hayward:** Associated with that question, is there substantial representation against an ID system, or has everybody learned to live

with it and, in some way or another, they cope with it?

**Virginia McVea:** I would say the latter. I get some representations but mainly on areas of social deprivation, and that can then be, "Electoral Office, there is a greater job for you to do, because you should be proactively going into those areas if you can match." Social deprivation does not always match, in terms of our data, the areas of lowest registration, and that will be my priority. There is certainly a responsibility on us to do further outreach there and do the ID clinics, which can be done relatively easily.

**The Chair:** When an elector goes into a polling station, they are asked their name, or perhaps they are not anymore; perhaps they are asked, "Where is your identity?" It would only be a matter of seconds, but is there much difference in the amount of time it takes for an elector to get a ballot paper?

**Virginia McVea:** I do not think anybody has done a time-and-motion study on it. Yes, it is bound to incur some time cost but it is not noticeable.

Q144 **Lord Janvrin:** I just want to come back to voter ID. Do you have any feel for whether there was any effect on turnout when it was introduced?

**Virginia McVea:** I looked back at previous reports and I understand that there were suggestions, which I can look up for you, about numbers being turned away, but we did not see the turnout figures necessarily going down. I can lift those turnouts and you can look at them comparatively.

Q145 **Lord Campbell-Savours:** Forgive me for coming in late. I was looking forward to your evidence, but I was detained on the Floor. We have some statistics on accuracy and completeness, and I wondered to what extent they varied against the rest of the United Kingdom. For parliamentary elections, in December 2012 it was 78%, and then in December 2018 it was 80%. For local government, it went from 78% to 80%. For completeness, there was 73% to 74% and 71% to 73%. I just wonder what they were for England and Wales.

**Virginia McVea:** I do not know the answer to that. My understanding from the Electoral Commission—on the 19 March we will be able to make sure this is accurate—is that they would see a deterioration matching our gap in canvass as it nears expiry date, which shows up in December 2018. We then had the electoral activity, which has probably falsely lifted the accuracy and completeness, because we should only have had, from 2017 until now, one electoral event—the local council elections—in terms of planned elections. The European election is then another discussion. In theory, the completeness and accuracy probably would have diminished further than it currently has, because we have had all of those applications to go on, which is a question mark in relation to that long period of canvass.

I suspect that there is a difference because of the ongoing nature of that in England. The Electoral Commission has not raised that with me as a particular concern that we are such an outlier. That is as detailed an answer as I can give on that, though not very satisfactory. I undertake to inquire and to return to the Committee on that.

Q146 **The Chair:** Have you any expectations of where, following the canvass, that would lead to in percentage terms?

**Virginia McVea:** I would be very hopeful in relation to the canvass with online registration. It is, again, difficult. The work that has been done in relation to census would lead us to hope that we would get a response of over 50% online. I am hoping for a bit more than that. I hope that, in the period after December, we would have less of a follow-up to do, but it is certainly a long period where we can chase. It would be my hope that it would lift, because I think it has even lifted now from where it was in December 2018.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much indeed for coming along and sharing your views with us, and we look forward to our visit. Thank you very much indeed.

**Virginia McVea:** Likewise, I look forward to welcoming you. Thank you very much.