



# Select Committee on the Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013

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

Tuesday 29 October 2019

3.30 pm

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

Evidence Session No. 5

Heard in Public

Questions 62 - 72

### Witnesses

I: Mr Mark Emson, Electoral Manager, Peterborough City Council; Ms Lindsay Tomlinson, Electoral Services Manager, Allerdale Borough Council.

## Examination of witnesses

Mr Mark Emson and Ms Lindsay Tomlinson.

Q62 **The Chair:** Good afternoon. 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.

As you are now aware, it seemed to us that, bearing in mind the day it is and what seems to be happening in another place, we ought to put to you some of the questions of the day, which are clearly on your mind. No doubt you will track back to whence you came and think, "How could we cope in these circumstances?" There are three issues, two of which are certainly being discussed in the Commons at the moment, and we do not know what will happen about them. We may well find ourselves having to talk about these things tomorrow or another day.

The first is the possibility of 16 year-olds being able to vote in a general election, which may take place in the early days of December. The second is the possibility of EU electors being able to vote in an election in the early days of December. Thirdly, regardless of those two, there are the problems for you of the publication of the electoral register on 1 December, a poll a few days after that, and the issue of poll cards. What happens about late registrations, and all that sort of thing?

Those are three things, and you may say, "Aha, but there's more". Would you like to talk about that? Indeed, if there are more, tell us about them too. Tell us about the things that are going to concern you on the ground, doing the job at the coalface, for a poll in early December.

**Ms Lindsay Tomlinson:** To touch on the register first, when we publish the new register on 1 December, all the elector numbers will change. If we run poll card data tomorrow, potentially, which is as soon as we possibly can once we know the date for an election, those numbers will be different from the register that will be in use in polling stations on whatever date in December the election is. A real issue for polling station staff and electors will be trying to make sure that they have crossed off the right elector when they go into the station.

We were aware of the issue, so to get ready for a potential election we have been keeping up to date with processing all the forms coming in, because we are in the middle of the annual canvass, which is a massive task anyway. That is to make sure, if we possibly can, that we publish our new register at the end of this week and then run the poll card data. Other authorities have a bigger electorate and more complexities than we have, and they may not be in a position to do that.

There is certainly a problem and we are aware of it. If we cannot resolve it, we will have to give additional training to our polling station staff, to

make them aware of the issues, with a note of what to look out for. It may well lead to a lot more calls to our office on election day just to clear up queries about elector numbers and to check that we have the right people. We are very busy on election day and it is a bit of a madhouse, so it will add extra complexity.

**The Chair:** Your first reaction is early publication. Will that happen throughout the land? Is the Association of Electoral Administrators pushing that as a possibility?

**Ms Lindsay Tomlinson:** It certainly recommended that we should try to do that if we can. However, not everyone will be in a position to do that, because of where they are with their canvass. Everyone does their canvass on slightly different timescales. We started very early and have finished the actual door-knocking stage of the canvass, so we could publish early. Others are slightly behind, or have more processing to do, and may not be able to do it at this stage, which is possibly the situation with Mark in Peterborough.

**Mr Mark Emson:** Yes. It is certainly not one size fits all. Every council will be different. Lindsay is in a more fortunate position than I am as regards the number of forms still to be processed. We have to get them all processed for 1 December, and we are working double time to get them processed before the potential call of a general election.

If you add that to the prospect of including additional franchises in the register for this election, there will be a logistical nightmare for officers up and down the country. Even advertising the fact that 16 and 17 year-olds and European electors were able to vote would be a massive task. When Scotland brought it in, there was a lot longer than a few weeks to get the point across. Having to do it in the space of a month would add massive confusion to the whole election.

**Ms Lindsay Tomlinson:** Running a major election like a general election is an absolutely huge task. We do a lot of extra hours; we work very long hours, but we are not able to claim back the cost of the registration aspect of the election, because it has to be borne by the authority and the electoral registration officer. Only the costs of running the election—the polling stations, the staff and all the rest of it—can be claimed back. When we deal with all these different issues, like having to publish the register early, having to work overtime to process forms or trying to get 16 and 17 year-olds registered, we will not be able to claim any of the costs back. The authority will have to bear that cost itself, which seems a bit perverse because you can directly attribute a lot of the registration work that we do as linked to a specific election. We would not be doing it if it was not for the election, so that is a real concern.

**Lord Hayward:** Two particular questions come to mind. On 16 and 17 year-olds, do you even have the information at this stage for registration?

**Ms Lindsay Tomlinson:** They can go on to the register at the age of 16, and we do a lot of work to try to encourage 16 and 17 year-olds to get on to the register, so that they are there, and then as soon as they turn 18 they are allowed to vote. Some will be there, but because we are a district council and not a unitary, we do not have easy access to the data that tells us who the attainers are, so we do not easily have that available to us to try to reach those groups.

**Lord Hayward:** Is it your experience that, let us say, 16 year-olds do not register, because their mind is not yet looking towards 18 as registration, and that there is an increase when people move from 16 to 17? Therefore, there is every possibility that, although you have some information for 16 year-olds, you may not have full information.

**Mr Mark Emson:** It is a very difficult task to encourage people to register at the best of times. One carrot that we tend to dangle is the fact that it could improve your credit score, but there are not that many 16 and 17 year-olds who are fussed about improving their credit score. On that basis alone, we will miss a lot of names off our register of 16 and 17 year-olds.

**Lord Hayward:** You spoke about different positions in each authority. Is there a correlation between local authorities where there is limited churn in the electoral roll and those with massive churn? You have a fairly stable population in Cumbria. If one looked at the electoral rolls of some of the big cities associated with university locations and high rented accommodation, are they the ones that will face bigger problems and are therefore more likely to be behind the timetable at this stage?

**Mr Mark Emson:** Very much so.

**Ms Lindsay Tomlinson:** Having worked in Peterborough before working in Cumbria, I would say, yes, there is certainly more churn there. We have areas and pockets in Cumbria where there is churn, but we have a lot of rural areas, with a lot of second homes and holiday properties, where it is fairly steady and stable.

I agree that churn in large cities will be much more difficult to deal with at this stage, and we are certainly in a more fortunate position at the moment than a lot of our colleagues. It is not great, but it is certainly more fortunate than the position a lot of colleagues in other authorities will be facing.

**Lord Campbell-Savours:** Ms Tomlinson, I think I heard you refer to restricted access to data. Are county authorities required to hand over data to district authorities, or is there no requirement at all?

**Ms Lindsay Tomlinson:** Yes, there is a requirement, but it is often very difficult to get that data.

**Lord Campbell-Savours:** Why? What is the obstruction?

**Ms Lindsay Tomlinson:** It is getting to the right person and trying to explain. If you are dealing with an authority that does not run elections, it may not understand the requirements of the legislation, so it is about trying to explain the urgency and why we need the data. As a county group, we got our hands on attainer data last year, but it took two years to get that data. We have a county group that is quite active, and we try to work with our colleagues at the county council to target the right people there to make sure that, particularly with canvass reform next year, there is understanding of why we need that data. It is difficult, and trying to do it quickly, as we might have to in the next few weeks, is going to be an impossible task.

**The Chair:** Is it just you, by the way, or is it all county districts and their county?

**Ms Lindsay Tomlinson:** I can only speak from our experience. I imagine that it is probably typical of district and county relationships around the country. For a unitary authority, it may not be as difficult.

**Lord Campbell-Savours:** What recommendation would you make about that?

**Ms Lindsay Tomlinson:** I would make it clearer to the counties that they have a duty to supply the data. It needs to be much clearer, with maybe stronger requirements about what they have to do and when they have to do it.

**Mr Mark Emson:** A lot of authorities administer several constituencies, so you have to get data sources from other authorities, not only your own, which again could put a spanner in the works when suddenly changing franchises quickly.

**Lord Janvrin:** If there was an amendment about EU electors, would there be there any particular issues? You have them on the register anyway, presumably, for local elections.

**Ms Lindsay Tomlinson:** I do not think that would be as much of an issue as the 16 and 17 year-olds, because, as you said, they are on the register. It would just be a technical problem of flipping them over to the right franchise and making sure they appeared on the register.

As regards complexity, I think Mark would agree that it will not be as difficult to deal with that. There is always room for error when you are making a big change in such a very tight timescale, but not to the extent that the franchise for 16 and 17 year-olds would cause.

**The Chair:** Are there any other questions on this general area?

Q63 **Lord Campbell-Savours:** Are you really prepared for an election in six weeks? How will you manage? Do you see obstacles and problems?

**Mr Mark Emson:** Are we prepared? No, but we know what processes need to be done, and we will work all hours to get them done. A

December election really is a step into the unknown for us. We are already looking at road gritters. If we have snowfall, we need to make sure that every polling station is open. That is not so bad for me in a more urban area, but for Lindsay it could prove a bit more of a task.

There will be extra lighting; daylight hours are fewer in December, so that may require having lighting generators outside certain polling stations, particularly mobile units. Christmas parties are taking place in village halls and nativities in schools, as well as Christmas parties in hotels, so there will be much reduction in availability of the usual polling stations. People will be forced to hire mobile units and position them wherever they can, which will be a massive expense.

**Lord Campbell-Savours:** And Ms Tomlinson?

**Ms Lindsay Tomlinson:** As you know, Cumbria is a large rural area. We have polling stations half way up mountains, where they have no wi-fi, telephone connection or mobile phone signal, so trying to get in touch with those stations will be a nightmare. If the ballot boxes do not arrive back, we will have to send people out to find them and they may need police escorts for some of those stations.

**Lord Campbell-Savours:** But that would apply to an election at any time, would it not? Why particularly now?

**Ms Lindsay Tomlinson:** Because of the bad weather. You will remember the floods we had back in 2015, when a lot of Cumbria was shut down and roads were shut for months. It just takes a bit of bad weather and you are stuck somewhere like Buttermere or Thirlmere and you cannot get the box back.

Our staff often do not live in the area where the polling station is, so getting staff to the station on time to open up at 7 am, if there is bad weather, will be a challenge. Because we are a district authority, we do not have easy access to gritters, so we will have to have an understanding with the county council that they do that work for us, to keep the roads gritted to make sure that we can get staff out to polling stations and ballot boxes back to our count. Our latest box comes in at about 11.15, from Bowness-on-Solway; it is a long drive.

We are prepared as much as we can be at this stage. We have known for a while that there is potentially an election coming, so we have done what we can, but until we know a date there is not too much we can do. We have been in touch with all polling stations, and a lot of them have said that whatever date it is they will make themselves available, but we have stations in schools that are used for pantomimes and Christmas plays, so we anticipate that there may be some problems. Quite often, we cannot send electors to a different station, because it is too far to travel, and there is no transport in the rural areas. We may find that a lot of our staff are on holiday, because it is the lead-up to Christmas, so we may struggle from that perspective.

I have worries about overseas electors. With a short timescale for an election, the Christmas post will have an impact on the time for postal votes coming back. We have tried to contact all our overseas electors and said that, if they can get a proxy vote in place, they should please do so, because there is a potential issue with getting their postal vote back in time. We have electors in Thailand, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. The timescale is tight, and at Christmas it will be even more of a challenge to get those packs back, but we are trying to get that done. We are doing all that work behind the scenes, trying to prepare. Our printers are going to be under pressure. Only a certain number of specialised printers can do election printing, so the pressure on them to deliver a quicker poll is going to be immense as well.

**Lord Janvrin:** I want to be clear about where the costs fall. Extra work will be involved on the electoral register for a 12 December election, or whatever date, and you will have to find the resources, but for the extra lighting and hiring different halls, et cetera, can you re-charge? Can you explain how the costs fall?

**Mr Mark Emson:** We are still awaiting confirmation from the Cabinet Office as to whether extra funding will be made available for things such as lighting and heating, so we are in the unknown on that one; we really do not know. It would be remiss of us not to plan for it now, whether we have to pay for it or not. It is people's safety at the end of the day.

**Baroness Pidding:** With a December poll, do you anticipate a considerable increase in requests for postal votes?

**Ms Lindsay Tomlinson:** We were talking about that before the session started. Yes, I think we will get an increase in postal vote applications. Again, resource is required to process them and get them in place, which we cannot claim back; we have to absorb that cost and have people on overtime dealing with that.

Postal votes are expensive; there is the cost of printing them, posting them out and then posting them back. It is an expensive task. Even if all the electors who go to a polling station decide to have a postal vote, we still have to run the polling station. We cannot shut down a polling station. It increases the cost, and we still have to fund the station and the staff who man the station. I think there will be an increase in postal votes, but it does not solve the problem for us of those polling stations.

**The Chair:** One thing has occurred to me. As someone who has been to many counts, and so forth, I have noticed in my local authority that several people who retired years ago are still involved in operating counts. Indeed, they come in on behalf of an authority to a polling station very early in the morning to see that all is well and then they come in during the day. Such people could be of tremendous use—perhaps they are used—between now and polling day. What is the position for staffing up? Are you able to use those people, or not?

**Ms Lindsay Tomlinson:** When appointing people to work in polling stations as polling station inspectors and at the count, we rely a lot on ex-staff who have left us and retired, because they have the expertise and often the time to do it. We use an awful lot of ex-staff during elections, and for postal vote opening sessions as well. We are potentially going to need extra polling station inspectors because of our issues with remote stations, so we may call on more people to help us during that time. We have to bring in temporary staff to help us in the lead-up to a big election, because we just do not have time to answer the phones, deal with all the queries and do all the planning needed. Yes, definitely, we will be looking to people with experience and expertise to come back to help us, and a lot of them are willing to do that.

**Lord Campbell-Savours:** Is it the same in Peterborough?

**Mr Mark Emson:** Yes, absolutely. We will beg, borrow and steal to get whoever we can.

**The Chair:** I contested the February 1974 election, which was certainly still in the winter. There was the further complication of the three-day week, but that seemed to run away quickly. There is now the threat of a potential postal strike. How would you cope with that, do you think?

**Ms Lindsay Tomlinson:** Pass.

**The Chair:** It might run away, just like the three-day week did, of course, but who knows?

**Ms Lindsay Tomlinson:** I do not know how we could cope with that. We will have to have contingencies, but I do not know what those contingencies will look like. People can hand their postal pack in to our offices, so maybe we will have to have collection hubs around the borough, where people can physically take them, to drop them off, and then we will bring them in from those places. That does not solve the problem for people living abroad, or people on holiday, so that will be an issue. We will have to try to encourage them to change their vote to a proxy, but there is a deadline for doing that. There are tight deadlines, and everything is done to a deadline. I dread to think how we would manage that process.

**The Chair:** Right. I think we will return to our earlier plans.

Q64 **Lord Lexden:** Do you regard the introduction of individual registration in a positive and favourable light? Secondly, how does the new system compare with the old?

**Mr Mark Emson:** I think Lindsay and I have very contrasting views. Before IER was introduced, because of potential electoral fraud in my authority, the electoral registration officer always felt the need to do what we call a blank canvass. Every form had no pre-printed name whatsoever, and we had to input everything manually from the form every year.

For me, the introduction of IER, whereby forms go out with pre-printed names on for people who registered the previous year, was a godsend, and saved a massive amount of work. The previous method of registration was outdated, and now people can complete their forms online and via the phone, and it makes it a lot better.

My only gripe with the system is the two-stage process, and the fact that there is still the household form and anyone added to that will still need to register individually. We have found that that can cause uncertainty; people think they are registered when, in fact, they are not.

**Ms Lindsay Tomlinson:** I worked in Peterborough, and I went through the agony of having to do that blank canvass every year, so I completely understand how that is an improvement for Peterborough.

From our perspective, as an area that did not have an issue with elector fraud, the two-stage process has brought additional complexity for people. A lot of people still do not understand the two-stage process; we are a few years down the line and we are still trying to get that message across to potential electors. We pick up a lot of calls, complaints, emails and phone calls from people who do not understand why we have to chase them. They ask why, when they have sent back their canvass form, we are chasing them for the ITR form; it gets people quite angry. We have evidence from polling stations that people turn up on election day thinking that, because they filled in the canvass form with their name on it, it means they are registered, and they are not. That still happens, particularly in certain areas.

The thing that works is the online application process. That works very well, and we are very happy with it. There is more that could be done with it, but it is certainly a positive coming from the change.

**Mr Mark Emson:** It is more secure as well, obviously. Now we have to match whatever records we are given to the Department for Work and Pensions, which adds an extra layer of security that certainly was not in the previous system. That is to be encouraged.

**Lord Hayward:** You touched on the question of online application, as previous witnesses have, and the capacity for people to view online to check whether they are registered. I am thinking of this particularly in relation to 16 and 17 year-olds and Europeans in these circumstances. As a general thing, would you welcome the capacity to view online so that you do not have to administer people who make multiple inquiries?

**Ms Lindsay Tomlinson:** Yes, definitely. We would certainly support that. We get a lot of duplicates and queries, and if we could direct people to the online checking process it would be a lot better for us and reduce the admin burden that we have to face. It always comes at a busy time, when an election has been called, and that is when we least have the resources to deal with it. If that process was available, we would welcome it, definitely.

**Lord Hayward:** And on late registration, would you welcome moving the date slightly further back, away from the election, for the same reason?

**Ms Lindsay Tomlinson:** Always. Any extension to the timetable would be welcomed, because we are working on a tight timescale.

**Lord Hayward:** Can I say, Mr Chairman, that two witnesses who have a will-do mentality is enormously impressive. I am struck by that, and I am sorry that I have to leave early, but I am impressed in the circumstances.

Q65 **Lord Dykes:** I, too, certainly endorse the will-do attitude, and we are grateful for it, I am sure. IER may seem a marginal change to outsiders, but it is quite substantial for habits and routines and what people are used to. Has the introduction of IER had any impact, positive or negative, on your efforts to identify and reach underregistered groups?

**Ms Lindsay Tomlinson:** The harder to reach groups are probably even harder to reach through the IER process, because it adds more complexity, and we may be dealing with people who cannot understand it or do not want to engage with it. If we cannot get them engaged with a simple, one-stage process, we are not going to get them engaged with a more complex, two-stage process.

We do a lot of work with nursing homes, where for obvious reasons there is turnover. We do not have a student population, which is something to be thankful for. We try to work with young people to get them enthused and engaged, but it is difficult. As I say, the hard to reach groups are harder to reach because of the complexity of the process.

**Mr Mark Emson:** The only contrast is that young people registering, and students in particular, probably embrace the online method more. We often attend citizenship ceremonies, so we know when someone has British nationality, and we can say to them, "You can register online right here and right now". That is certainly very good for us.

We work with the Cabinet Office as part of their national democracy weeks to encourage young people to register. Of course, they can go on to the register at 16, but they cannot vote until they are 18. We attend freshers' days in colleges to get the message across that you are able to register from the age of 16.

**Baroness Mallalieu:** I heard yesterday on the radio a very good little piece, just slotted in, with somebody saying, "This is how you do it online. Here's the address and this is the date by which you have to do it". Is there any programme for putting that out on the media, particularly to areas where young people are likely to be listening?

**Ms Lindsay Tomlinson:** The Electoral Commission does a lot of work in the lead-up to an election. It produces media packs for us to use and has its own campaigns, which we tap into. I am sure that will be kicking off soon.

We work closely with our communications teams, so we get regular messages sent out. We put messages on Facebook and Twitter to try to attract younger people who perhaps use those methods of communication. We try to get them where we can. There will definitely be a massive communications strategy; as soon as an election is announced, the commission will do a lot on that.

**Lord Dykes:** Have you been struggling with the need to reach what we call hard to reach groups and working with other local authorities to try to overcome those problems? There is the old habit of the head of household saying, "Just leave it to me". A lot of people in some of the ethnic groups might find that was more of a suasion for them than in other elector groups.

**Mr Mark Emson:** Yes, in actually registering, and that is why the Government are looking to reform the canvass. It is still a household form and it will be completed by only one individual. That has not changed; it is the only aspect that has not changed.

**Lord Dykes:** That is encouraging, in a way.

**Mr Mark Emson:** I think so. It is an encouragement, because people have very little to do. With the reform next year, they will have even less to do, if it goes ahead. I believe the Government are saying that they are going to send literally just a letter and, if the details have not changed, you do not have to do anything, which I think is the right way to go. It will certainly help us with the processing aspect.

**Ms Lindsay Tomlinson:** We do not have the kind of diversity in our area that Mark has in Peterborough. We have a lot of houses in multiple occupation, and it can be difficult to get people from those groups. With canvass reform, there will be what is being called the route 3 process, which will be a different route for some of those properties. We encourage and welcome that, because it will make things a bit easier.

It is sometimes difficult to get the forms back from people, and a lot of people are suspicious; they do not want to fill in forms or give us their details, and they are reluctant to register. We have the same argument with the same people year after year, and probably we are never going to reach those people, but we still have to go through the process. It is a burden and a problem, but I think canvass reform will address a lot of the issues that we deal with currently.

**Lord Dykes:** Is there a notable percentage or incidence of recognisable groups when you talk about that? Are there particular groups where it is more of a problem?

**Ms Lindsay Tomlinson:** For us, it is more the area. We have pockets in different areas. Keswick, Cockermouth and some of the rural areas are perhaps easier to reach than some of the more industrial urban areas. We have Workington and Maryport in our area, and it is harder to reach some people sometimes in those areas than it is in other areas. It is an

authority of two parts, and we see different elector or voter behaviour in different areas of the authority. There are different challenges throughout the authority.

**Mr Mark Emson:** It comes back to the churn, does it not? There is a much higher churn in my authority than in Lindsay's, and if people know that they are not going to be staying for a particularly long time, they are not going to complete the form.

**Ms Lindsay Tomlinson:** Rented properties are difficult, because people are often there short term, and it can be difficult to reach them. If we can identify the landlord, it can be easier to try to get a response through that channel; but it takes time, and it is a burden to do that.

Q66 **Lord Campbell-Savours:** There are half a million electors in the county of Cumbria. Have you ever heard of fraud in our county?

**Ms Lindsay Tomlinson:** No, not elector fraud.

**Lord Campbell-Savours:** Thank you. Secondly, do you think that ID at polling stations would be helpful? I will ask you separately in a minute, Mr Emson.

**Ms Lindsay Tomlinson:** No, not for us. We do not see elector fraud in polling stations, and we are not aware of any instances of it.

**Lord Campbell-Savours:** Thank you. That is all we need.

Mr Emson, could you tell us about the problem in Peterborough, and what you are able to do about it? Do you have the resources to deal with it? We have read a number of reports about the problems you have.

**Mr Mark Emson:** Yes, as I am sure you are aware there was an incident at elections in 2004, when three individuals were convicted of interfering with postal votes. As a result, Peterborough City Council, working alongside Cambridgeshire police, developed robust counterfraud mechanisms, which include wearing gloves while opening postal votes, looking at patterns in handwriting on votes that have been rejected and having a police presence on the streets when postal votes are being delivered. We also station officers at a number of our urban polling stations to prevent any forms of personation or intimidation.

Unfortunately, all that comes at a cost. To go back to that nugget again, as it currently stands, we are unable to claim those costs back from central government. If we are to continue to produce elections that the public have confidence in, we need funding for counterfraud initiatives, particularly the inclusion of police officers throughout the election period.

We try to provide fair elections for all, which everyone is confident are fair and transparent. But even with all the measures we put into place, you are never going to eradicate the threat of fraud, as long as you have postal votes on demand. As soon as that pack goes through the letterbox, we cannot do anything about it; there is nothing to say that

someone is not coerced by the head of the household or a landlord to say that they should vote in a particular way. We work with the police, and they investigate any such allegations, but people are unwilling to sign statements to that effect. As long as postal votes on demand continue, that shadow will always loom over elections.

**Lord Campbell-Savours:** We understand that 18 authorities have been identified as in a similar position to yours. Do you not think there is an argument for having a two-tier system in the way the administration of elections works? It might well be two different budget structures and two different responsibilities placed on the two different authorities. Ms Tomlinson's peaceful Cumbria appears very different from the rather active Peterborough. Is there not an argument for a difference in their treatment?

**Mr Mark Emson:** Quite possibly. Since the introduction of social media, things have got worse for us from the administrative side of things. We had a parliamentary by-election in June, and immediately afterwards there were a lot of spurious claims on social media of things that clearly did not happen. Because all eyes in the country were on us for that one election, we were getting queries and complaints from up and down the country about things that clearly did not happen. There were half a dozen reports of fraud at that by-election, investigated by the police, none of which came to anything.

For the Electoral Commission's guide for authorities that are perhaps more susceptible to voter fraud, I would welcome what you suggest. A two-tier funding programme would give additional support to those authorities.

**Lord Campbell-Savours:** Can I give you an example? You have CCTV cameras in polling stations in Peterborough, have you not?

**Mr Mark Emson:** Correct.

**Lord Campbell-Savours:** They do not have them in Allerdale, in Cumbria.

**Mr Mark Emson:** No.

**Lord Campbell-Savours:** There is already a differential. All I am saying is that it could be more formalised.

**Mr Mark Emson:** Absolutely. These are things we cannot claim for, but we need them in place to show our electors that everything is being done above board and that fraud is not taking place.

**Lord Campbell-Savours:** I have another quick question for Ms Tomlinson. There is another form of fraud, is there not, where there are second homes? There are lots of second homes in Cumbria and people voting twice. What do you think we can do about that?

**Ms Lindsay Tomlinson:** I do not know whether there is an easy answer. We have a lot of second homes, and people are entitled to register at both places; they can take part in local elections in both places, as students can with a university address and a home address. Until there is some kind of national checking system, it will be impossible to determine whether anyone has voted twice. There have been instances in previous elections where students have gone on social media and boasted about having voted twice. Other than people saying that they have done it, it will be impossible to detect, with the way the system currently works.

**The Chair:** I have just one point on fraud, Mr Emson. You described the issue of postal votes and putting CCTV in polling stations, but is there any element of fraud in registration?

**Mr Mark Emson:** Not to our knowledge. Because of the introduction of IER, every individual is checked against the Department for Work and Pensions database. If they do not come back as what we call a green match, with the DWP saying that everything is okay, we ask for further evidence from that individual, such as a passport or further documentation, to prove they are who they say they are. Apart from the fraud perspective, which I alluded to earlier, IER has been absolutely brilliant in Peterborough. It has eradicated the registration side of fraud; it is the postal vote side we have no idea about.

**Lord Hayward:** On that subject, in relation to the by-election and the upcoming election, is there anything you are going to do differently, having learned from what was, no question, a bruising experience from social media and parties, et cetera?

That is the first half of the question. Secondly, looking long term, would it be better if there were restrictions on the number of postal votes that any individual could hand in? If so, do you have thoughts on what those limits would be?

**Mr Mark Emson:** There is not a great deal we would do differently. We had the nation's media watching us all day long, and we were commended for the most part on how well run the election was. There were some aspects that came out of an independent review, which I am sure you saw, about potential family voting. That concerned us to begin with, but when we got further into the matter it was not in the urban areas, as people might suspect; it was in rural areas, with older couples asking each other who they should vote for, which is not the kind of fraudulent activity alluded to in the report. That is one thing we are going to tackle in much more depth, through training and on signage at the polling station that your vote is yours alone and should not be discussed out loud.

The other thing that came out of the report was about photography in polling stations. It is a terrible blight for us, because everyone in the country walks around with a camera in their pocket these days. It is not illegal to take a photograph of your ballot paper, but it is illegal to share what you put on it before the close of poll. That puts us in a very difficult

situation. We will reiterate the point in our training sessions for our polling station staff. We are looking to employ extra staff in the more urban wards to help to police it and we will have extra signage to say that you must not take a photograph of your ballot paper.

**Lord Hayward:** What about the question of handing in postal votes and the numbers that might be restricted, or otherwise?

**Mr Mark Emson:** It is a great idea. We always have a briefing for candidates and agents before our polls, and explain to them that none of their representatives should handle postal votes at all; they should come directly to the returning officer. If something was put into legislation such that you were allowed to hand in only, say, two postal packs at one time at the polling station, I would welcome that.

**The Chair:** You had a recall petition in Peterborough, did you not?

**Mr Mark Emson:** We did.

**The Chair:** Did that raise any problems at all? Was there any element of fraud or anything to do with that? Was it a straightforward kettle of fish, or not?

**Mr Mark Emson:** It caused many problems, given the fact that no one had done one in the country before. The biggest task was getting our heads around the legislation, which, as you know, is quite new. In running the process of a continuous poll for six weeks, it became about finding venues; you can have up to 10 venues for a recall petition, and they have to be open Monday to Friday for six whole weeks. The testing part was trying to find venues to use and getting the whole process done. We come back to timetables not being long enough; the timetable for a recall petition is only 10 days, so that was very testing.

There was no sign of fraud. The only thing I would say is that, for Peterborough, it seemed like an exercise in futility, because we reached our 10% threshold on day 2 but we had to carry on running the polls for another 28 days.

**Lord Hayward:** That is interesting.

**The Chair:** It is a good point to make.

Q67 **Baroness Pidding:** I think you have both already answered this question. We have heard that the Government do not adequately compensate councils for the cost of electoral registration and administration. Would you agree that that is the case? If the Government were to provide greater compensation, would you do things differently?

**Ms Lindsay Tomlinson:** I do not think we could do things differently. We do everything to the best of our ability, and we do what needs to be done; whether we have to absorb the cost ourselves is just part of it. What we might do, I suppose, if it was adequately compensated, is bring in extra temporary staff to help us, but those people need to have

experience, because we are dealing with a complex area. Perhaps we could get more staff to help us with the massive task of getting people registered and doing the postal vote and proxy applications before the tight deadlines, but, as to how we do it, I think we do everything as it should be done.

On the question of whether we would do things differently, knowing that things have gone wrong, it is difficult to make changes when there is a really tight timescale in a snap election. If you knew that things had not worked, you would need time to plan how you would do them differently; in a tight timescale such as we face in the next few weeks, it is very difficult to plan to do things differently. For registration, we will carry on doing what we have been doing and put the time and hours into doing that. If we could get money for extra staff, that would be helpful, but, as I said, there is the issue of training people and having them available to call on.

Q68 **Lord Janvrin:** If you had an "Am I registered?" look-up facility, would that reduce your costs?

**Ms Lindsay Tomlinson:** It would, yes, because we get a lot of duplicates, and that needs someone on the team to work through them. You have to get a certain way through the process of dealing with an application before you realise that it is a duplicate, so you waste time on dealing with that. We get a fair few, and it takes team resource to deal with them. An online facility would be very welcome, and I think it would reduce our costs.

**Mr Mark Emson:** That will increase dramatically with the deadline for the forthcoming general election.

**Lord Janvrin:** The duplicates?

**Mr Mark Emson:** Yes, there will be a great number of people who decide that they need to register themselves several times.

**Ms Lindsay Tomlinson:** The problem is that the issue of duplicates comes at a time when we are least able to deal with it, because we are so busy with the massive task of organising the election. The separate issue of dealing with the duplicate registrations takes time away from other tasks.

Q69 **Baroness Mallalieu:** In your very different authorities, what do you reckon it is costing in finance and resources to bring in the individual registration system, and ongoing?

**Ms Lindsay Tomlinson:** I had a look at how much we had spent on IER. It is sometimes difficult to unpick the different parts of the process, but we try to keep everything coded differently so that we can work it out. As you probably know, we get funding for IER, and we can apply for top-up funding; it is a justification-led bidding process. We try to keep on top of it, but it can be difficult.

During a canvass round, which is August to December, I estimate that we probably spend about £8,000 on having forms printed and posted, and we use our printer to do that because it is cheaper and more efficient to do it that way. Then there is the ongoing ITR process throughout the year and the staff resource for dealing with it. We are probably not far short of £20,000 each year, just in a small authority like ours, to deal with the additional ITR burden.

**Mr Mark Emson:** It is dramatically different for Peterborough. On current estimates for the 2019 canvass, I think we will have a shortfall of between £90,000 and £100,000.

**Baroness Mallalieu:** What, if any, are your concerns about the cost implications of the proposals to introduce voter ID?

**Ms Lindsay Tomlinson:** It is a worry, because we hear that electors who do not have ID to hand will be provided with elector ID through the local authority. Who is going to do that task? Are we going to be funded to provide that service? Are we going to be given the equipment to provide those ID cards? The burden is likely to come when we are very busy already running a major election, so our team resources will be stretched to the limit anyway, and we are potentially going to have to bring in additional people to provide that service.

Electoral ID in stations may push more people towards having a postal vote, so you may be trying to deal with fraud in one area but opening up the potential for it elsewhere. As we heard from Mark, with postal voter fraud, it is difficult to have control of the postal pack once it has gone through the letterbox. You may be forcing more people down the postal vote route, when for genuine reasons they do not have ID. I know anecdotally, from trying to get ID from people who cannot get on to the register through the DWP matching service, that a lot of people in our area do not have a passport or a driving licence; they are the kind of people we are going to have to provide ID for.

As regards hard to reach groups, we have had instances at by-elections in some urban areas when the turnout at polling stations was 2%. That was bumped up by the postal vote turnout, but it was still 2% in the stations. Voter ID will have a considerable impact on those areas. There is certainly real concern about cost and how it will be funded from our resource.

**Mr Mark Emson:** It depends on whether there will be national voter ID, or whether it will be individual to that authority, especially bearing in mind that it is still legal to register at numerous properties and holiday homes, and when students are away. Would they need two separate forms of ID, depending on where they were going to cast their vote?

On the implications, we did a light form of voter ID last year and requested all our proxy voters to show photographic ID at the polling station. We obviously implemented a process whereby we could produce a bespoke voter ID for them; it was just a letter with their photograph on

it. Strangely enough, no one needed it; they had photo ID that was adequate already.

As Lindsay said, when it comes to registering individuals, a great number cannot produce a passport or a driving licence. I can see an added burden at already busy times, right before an election, with people saying that they do not have ID, or saying on polling day itself, "I've been to my polling station and they've told me I need ID. I need it now". That will be a considerable cost, not only monetary but in our resources, which we cannot spare on that day.

**Lord Campbell-Savours:** That brings me directly to my next question. One-word answers would be very helpful. Do you think a national identity card would be helpful? Could we have a reply from each of you?

**Ms Lindsay Tomlinson:** Do you mean a national identity card provided by someone other than the authority?

**Lord Campbell-Savours:** Yes, it would be a national identity card.

**Ms Lindsay Tomlinson:** In that case, yes.

**Mr Mark Emson:** Yes, it would be helpful.

**Lord Campbell-Savours:** Thank you.

Q70 **Baroness Suttie:** I would like to turn to the annual canvass. You have both touched on it already, but could you say a bit more about the key problems and what changes you would like to see the Government consider as part of their reforms?

**Mr Mark Emson:** As I mentioned earlier, the current proposals are certainly, from an administrative point of view, going in the right direction. If nothing has changed, why do we need to hear about it? We could be sending out a letter confirming those we have registered there and, if nothing has changed, we do nothing. They have estimated for most authorities around the country that that should cater for about 70% of the authority's electorate. If that is true, it takes a massive burden in the current canvass away from us. Obviously, only time will tell how true that is, and it will vary, of course, across authorities.

I honestly think it is the way forward, and I am looking forward to it being implemented. Whether that will still be the case next year, with the chance of an election being called, time will tell.

**Ms Lindsay Tomlinson:** I agree. I would welcome canvass reform, which will certainly help us. In a rural authority, it is very costly to carry out the door-knocking stage. We have to send out a few forms and then send people out physically to knock on doors to get the completed forms. In a rural area, it can be very costly in mileage for staff doing that; you might send them 30 miles and they come back with one form.

It is certainly more cost effective in urban areas, but we have an awful lot of properties in the rural heart of the area. With a lot of our properties,

we try to do a lot of data matching, with the limited access to data within our authority. We try to identify empty properties, second homes and holiday lets to knock them out of the process, so that we do not have to canvass them.

Canvass reform would be very welcome. My concern, which I raised earlier, is that if we are trying to access data from other authorities, and from the county council, we need some strengthening of their requirements to provide that, because we cannot do a proper full data match locally before we carry out the canvass. We will need some strengthening of the requirements to provide data, but certainly I think the reform is to be welcomed.

**Q71 Lord Janvrin:** To go back to the Act, apart from IER, there were a number of administrative changes in the later sections. Which administrative changes brought in by the Act have had the biggest impact on your ability to deliver elections? Are there other measures that you think might further improve electoral administration?

**Ms Lindsay Tomlinson:** We are very pleased about extending the parliamentary timetable from 17 to 25 days. I still think it is not long enough, but it is certainly better than the 17 days we used to have to try to deal with. That has only been a benefit.

The online list of electors is something we could have done with as part of the change, so I would welcome that.

**Lord Janvrin:** That is the look-up facility.

**Ms Lindsay Tomlinson:** Yes.

We need to do something about overseas electors. It is a real difficulty, particularly the proposal, which I know has been circulated for a while, to remove the 15-year limit. It is a big administrative burden to check the eligibility of overseas electors—that they are within 15 years and have been registered previously. We physically have to go through old copies of the registers from 14 or 15 years ago to check, and the annual renewal of their overseas registration is another task we have to do.

There is the issue of getting their postal votes back. At the moment, we have overseas electors who are in-station voters. There should be something to stop that being possible and making it easier for them to get their votes cast. Whether that is by insisting on proxies or something else, I do not know.

It needs to be addressed, because it is a huge burden and a huge issue and, quite rightly, people get very angry. We try to explain the timetables and the situation but, ultimately, they blame us if they do not get their postal vote back in time, and that can be very demoralising. It takes a lot of our time to deal with those complaints and issues.

**Mr Mark Emson:** On the pluses, there is the ability for the returning officer to make minor amendments to nomination papers. You would be

amazed at how many candidates do not know how to spell the word "independent", or have even put the wrong date. We have to put word for word something that has been written, which then goes on to the ballot paper, and the change could save some candidates from massive embarrassment, so I welcome that. It will stop the phone calls when the nominations are published.

To go back to what Lindsay said about the timetable, it is great that it was extended, but it is still not enough. The current deadline for the delivery of nomination papers is 19 days before the poll. That is too short when you consider that we have to liaise with a handful of specialist printers across the country, which gives us sometimes a matter of hours to proofread ballot papers. They are important documents that need to be considered carefully, and we are under ridiculous timescales to get them to our printers so that we can get everything sent out, especially for overseas electors and postal votes in general. We would like an extension to the timetable.

**Lord Lexden:** You say it should be more than 25 days. How much longer?

**Mr Mark Emson:** However long you can give us.

**Ms Lindsay Tomlinson:** I would extend it by five days. That will give us a bit of comfort. As Mark said, proofing ballot papers is an important job. The parliamentary election is one thing, but for local elections we had 36 elections to run in May, and I had a team of people proofing papers. I was online at 2 o'clock in the morning, proofing them, because you have to do it to such a tight timescale. Pulling everything back, even by five days, would really help us in that task.

Q72 **The Chair:** The other side of that coin, of course, is whether the public would put up with another five days' campaigning.

Our job, as a post-legislative scrutiny committee, is to ask whether the Bill is fit for purpose. Is there any one thing you want to spit back to us and say, "If there's one thing that could come out of your report, it would be X"?

**Ms Lindsay Tomlinson:** I have a shopping list of things we could do with, to be honest, but the funding is a real worry and concern, so it would be making sure that we are properly funded for the task we have to carry out.

**Mr Mark Emson:** I am going to be greedy and say two things: the timetable and looking at postal votes on demand.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much indeed for giving us the benefit of your experience. We wish you well in the few weeks ahead, and beyond of course.