



Political and Constitutional Reform Committee

Oral evidence: [Voter engagement in the UK](#), HC 1059

Thursday 1 May 2014

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 1 May 2014.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [Association of Electoral Administrators](#)
- [Mencap](#)
- [RNIB](#)

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Members present: Mr Graham Allen (Chair); Mr Jeremy Browne; Tracey Crouch; Mark Durkan; Paul Flynn; David Morris; Chris Ruane; Mr Andrew Turner

Questions 258 - 325

Witness: **John Turner**, Chief Executive, Association of Electoral Administrators, gave evidence.

Q258 Chair: It is good to see you again, John. Was there anything you wanted to say to start us off or shall we dive straight into questions?

John Turner: I think I have been enough times before without having to go through the introductions again, so I am happy to go straight into it.

Chair: The beauty of it is, John, you stay permanent but the members of the Committee evolve, so no doubt there will be new colleagues to ask you some of the same old questions.

Q259 David Morris: Good morning, John. Could you start by telling us exactly who the Association of Electoral Administrators represent and what role your members play in both registering voters and administering elections?

John Turner: Our members are the people who do it at the coalface. They are not the statutory officers, returning officers or electoral registration officers. They are the people employed by the statutory officers to actually do it. That is why I am by myself today, because the rest of them are busy getting ready for 22 May and particularly with postal votes. We have been in existence for about 25 years. During that time we have had almost a triumvirate with Government and the

Electoral Commission and we are there to try to advise and ask for changes to practice or law where we think it would benefit the voter or the elector. Ever since the Scottish thing back 10 years or more, a great principle of ours is that the voter should be put at the heart of everything that is done in terms of electoral administration.

Q260 David Morris: The Electoral Commission's recent estimate is that around 6 million people are missing from the UK's electoral registers. What is your view on why so many people are missing from these registers?

John Turner: I think it is a variety of different things. Probably the whole question of whether people are engaged with politics springs to the fore, because the number seems to be increasing. Equally, almost flippantly, I could say that 10 years ago it was much easier because to get a mobile phone, you needed to be on the electoral register because of the credit checks that were done. Now that everybody has about three mobile phones that principle does not apply. The benefits of people being on the electoral register seem to be lost on an awful lot of people. The difficulty is that also we live in a time when demographics mean that people seem to move around a lot more, particularly younger people, so keeping track of those people has not been simple or easy.

I think until we can somehow get people to understand the benefit that they would derive from being able to cast their opinion at whatever election it is, we are going to have this deficit. With the best will in the world, it is the old horse and water syndrome and we certainly are facing difficulties with that. It depends on where you are in the country but probably 10% to 15% are just not interested, end of. There are other reasons as well, which we will not go into, of people who do not want to be found.

Q261 Chris Ruane: Disengagement is obviously a source of low registration. Demographics, social and geographical mobility is another factor. Can any blame be put on EROs? I have the statistics in front of me of seats like Ceredigion in Wales where only 77% of the electoral registration forms were returned. There are 90 EROs who have not done door-to-door knocking since it was introduced, and it is a legal requirement, so 90 broke the law. Can any blame be apportioned to EROs?

John Turner: It would be of the highest folly if I were to say no, because clearly the disparities that you are highlighting point to the fact that different EROs achieve different results in different parts of the country, even when you are looking at local authorities that are basically of the same shape and size. It is my belief that there are techniques that can be used that can improve those figures. Certainly the point about door knocking is a single one. In my previous life, I was the ERO at Norwich and we found that even in our worst return areas, by putting actual effort into sending people to knock on doors you could move the figures from high 70s to middle 90s.

Q262 Chris Ruane: While stressing the negative, which is Ceredigion with 77%, can I also stress the positive, which is also a Welsh local authority, Conwy with 100%. If it can be done in the top of Wales in Conwy with 100%, it can be done in Ceredigion with 77%. The Vale of Glamorgan in Wales, 200 miles south, only has 89% registration rates and yet has refused three times to go out on the knocker, like it is supposed to do by law, and knock those doors. We can say disengagement, mobile phones, we can say demographics, but I think some of the issues do come back to poor performing EROs.

John Turner: I am certainly not here to try to defend EROs who do not follow all the steps they can take. I don't always agree with the Electoral Commission but they issue very sensible guidance, elicit good practice, and it is pretty clear, because of the sort of disparities you are talking

about, that not every ERO is following them. The question I would then pose is how is it that so many of them are not picked up through the performance standards regime that the EC runs.

Q263 Chris Ruane: They are judged by inputs—“Did you do this?” tick, “Did you do that?”—and not by outputs. How many people were on the register last year? How many people on the register this year? Is your trend upwards or downwards? That is one of the key issues. I am pleased that you have been open and honest about the contribution of EROs.

John Turner: I can’t be anything else.

Chris Ruane: What can be done to fix that?

John Turner: I think we need to take one step back, get into a regime that is more about results, and then concentrate the efforts on the areas where clearly the results are wanting, the sort of list that you have before you. It is resource intensive to go door knocking, there is no doubt about that, and it can be difficult. There are parts of this fine city where you would not necessarily want to send a single person to a particular place door knocking, but there are techniques that the better authorities have used to overcome all of those sorts of problems. So I think it is learning from good practice and then applying all of these principles, particularly the ones where people have done well.

If I might say so, I think we have missed a bit of a trick here. If we go back to the previous Parliament, you will recall the previous Government had this thing called the Beacon Council scheme. I got involved in that the one time they did electoral services and the lessons we learnt—we only picked three. There were only three that we could say were exemplars. I think, and I have been talking to the EC preliminarily about this, that something similar to that, where you assess those who wish to be assessed and then use them as best practice—

Chris Ruane: You are coming on to question 8, which is my question that I will expand on.

Chair: We will let you save yourself for that, Chris, but we have talked about highlighting the good practice as well as the bad. I think we need to take this very seriously and perhaps in our next private session talk about whether we need to draft something to the Secretary of State or to the Electoral Commission, or both, in respect of those people who do not fulfil their statutory duty. Perhaps we can lighten it a little bit by underlining again, as we have, that we would like to be involved in congratulating those people who are doing a good job. We don’t want to be seen as just one-sided here, having a go at the people who need a bit of encouragement, but we want to praise and highlight the positive. That may well go back, John, to your Beacon Council thing, which I think was very helpful.

Q264 Mr Turner: Could you tell me whether people must register who are from Zimbabwe or Cameroon or Somalia?

John Turner: You are testing my knowledge of Commonwealth countries now. Any Commonwealth citizen who is resident in the UK and is entitled to be resident in the UK can register and because of the requirement on completing of forms—and we are in this transient position between the current system and IER—is required to respond to any inquiry made by the electoral registration officer. Citizens of Commonwealth countries should be registered.

Q265 Mr Turner: Are Zimbabwe or Cameroon or Somalia part of the Commonwealth?

John Turner: You are now testing my knowledge. If you wanted me to give you an answer, I believe Zimbabwe are still in and not suspended, because the only country I can recall that is suspended is Fiji. Cameroon is definitely a member of the Commonwealth, although some people would question why. Somalia I think not, but please don't hang me if I have got that one wrong.

Q266 David Morris: We are hearing from Mencap and the RNIB later this morning about barriers to registration and voting faced by people with disabilities. Are electoral administrators sufficiently aware of the possible accessibility needs that voters may face when registering to vote or participating in elections?

John Turner: I think they are and it presents some quite interesting challenges. If you go back to basics almost, I think the worst example of it is not perhaps what you have mentioned so much as physical access. You will all know from your political lives that not all polling stations are of the modern idiom, shall we say. At the last general election, I was out looking at places and there were a number of places I went to where it was exceedingly difficult for somebody in a wheelchair to get physical access to a building to be able to cast a vote. You end up with situations where we advise that the mountain and the Mohammed thing should apply, so if the person can't get in, you go outside and you somehow manage to ensure that a secret vote is cast outside. On a day like this that might be a little tricky.

The one thing that we have been trying to persuade on is a more flexible approach to granting access to people who have these difficulties, people who have learning difficulties and people who have partially or totally lost their sight for whatever reason. Anything that stands in the way of somebody being able to vote should be a matter of attention. The trouble is that we are still coping with a Victorian system and to some degree we are coping with Victorian premises and so on. Until we move away from that and find better and more sensible ways to do things, I think this problem is going to still be there. It is better than it was but it is by no means perfect. We do need some changes to make it better and to comply with legislation, frankly, in terms of disability access.

Q267 Tracey Crouch: Good morning, John. I want to turn briefly to individual electoral registration. Your response to the Government consultation on IER highlighted the need to better understand how it would impact certain groups and you specifically raised the black and minority ethnic communities and young people. Do you believe that any progress has been made on this?

John Turner: I think things are better than our response of two years ago and clearly, dealing with the various groups that you have mentioned, there will be some benefit and improvement in what is largely going to be the digital route into registration now, but it won't solve all of the problems. I think we will have a legacy of issues that relate to particularly the people who are the most mobile, those in private sector rented accommodation and certain BME groups. It is not all BME groups by a very long chalk, if you look at returns from certain areas of the country, but there has been a real tradition of low registration rates in some places that might well be to do with the fact that some of those people don't speak English, so trying to register is quite a difficult thing because they can't even read the form. It is better than it was. I think the jury is out on whether the changes that are being made will have sufficient impact to ensure that we maintain registration levels at those that currently apply. If you asked me the question again next September, I would have a better view on that. There is still lots to be done.

Q268 Tracey Crouch: What in particular do you think the Government should do, or EROs or even your own members, to ensure that IER does not adversely impact registration? We don't want to wait until next September.

John Turner: We don't, but the reason I say next September is that of course we will know what the results of the confirmation live run have been and therefore what the deficit is in terms of the numbers that we need to engage at what I see as the critical time in the electoral cycle. We don't want to go into a general election with a register that is in a worse condition than it was for the last one. That is for sure. I deliberately picked September because it then gives us six months to put a lot of the effort, the sort of thing that Mr Ruane was talking about, into practice between September and next March.

Q269 Tracey Crouch: So it is about implementation. There is nothing more that needs to be done other than—

John Turner: I think all the pillars are in place. What we will not know is how many people will automatically be transported from the existing register to that and therefore how many have not. That is more critical to me because they are the people that we will then have to do more work on in terms of the canvass. What I would like to see, what I have said to the Government, is the first three months of next year will provide us with probably a once in a lifetime opportunity to do some work around that. That is going to need some resourcing. As I answered to Mr Ruane, it is largely about door knocking. There is not a simple way to do it.

Q270 Tracey Crouch: Do you have some sense about the timeframes involved with rolling out IER? All the commencement orders and everything have been passed now so it is—

John Turner: It is as good as it could have been if you were intent on implementing IER before the general election.

Q271 Chris Ruane: You said that next year we will have a once in a lifetime chance of having a look at these registration rates, a three-month period when we have the live run. We have already had the dry run and of the 385 EROs in the UK, only 133 of them participated in the local government data matching. We had the national data matching and on average it was 80%. That was then handed over to local government EROs and they were asked to consult their local government databases and only 133 out of 380 informed the Electoral Commission that they had done that. We have had one opportunity in the dry run and the vast majority of EROs have not implemented their part of the agreement.

John Turner: I don't think it is quite as straightforward as that, and this is a case for me to make a plea to you. The real problem is that in two-tier local government areas the district councils that run electoral registration do not have access to the records held by the upper tier, the county councils. There is a statutory instrument I think that is about to be tabled.

Chris Ruane: Yesterday morning at 9.00am. I was there.

John Turner: Excellent. That is a critical part of this because the two biggest set of records that the authorities—which will be largely the numbers you are talking about—within the unitary areas have access to, social services and education, contain the most valuable information to allow you to do this data matching. So I believe that once that power is there, and I agree with you, provided it is used, then that will be a great benefit to using data already held within local government to supplement the information you have.

Q272 Chris Ruane: Given that this is the greatest change in our constitution, parliamentary democracy, according to the Government, since 1832, do you think the Government should have planned for that? Do you think that SI that I attended yesterday morning at 9.00am should have been considered perhaps last year on a Tuesday at 9.00am so that those local government databases could have been matched?

John Turner: I believe that they are probably 10 years too late. There is no reason why this could not have happened 10 years ago. Why didn't we do it at the last local government reorganisation in 1974?

Q273 Chair: Is there anything we should be doing now rather than in 10 years' time, saying we wish we had done it then?

John Turner: Getting this SI in place as quickly as possible, and certainly by June, would be a major step towards what I am talking about, that once in a lifetime opportunity over the next nine months to get it in place.

Q274 Tracey Crouch: I have one final question on the IER. When we took evidence from the Cabinet Office last month, they told us that they have been presenting the new online registration system at AEA branch meetings and indeed at your recent conference. How do you think the system works and do you think it is an improvement on the current system?

John Turner: It has been an iterative process. To be fair to the Cabinet Office and the team working on this, they have done a marvellous job in getting out into the country and talking to all our members. I have been at one or two of those sessions and certainly improvements have been made as a result of that. I think the product that is now there is a good one. Time will tell whether the public think it is, but it is simple to use. You don't need too much information to be able to get online and use it. I sincerely hope that it will be particularly attractive to those people who would otherwise not be engaged.

Q275 Tracey Crouch: Do you see that there may well be problems because there are people who do not have access to the online community and that this in turn could mean that people become less engaged or disfranchised?

John Turner: There is no reason why they should in one sense because the conventional route will still be there, and there are a lot of safeguards built in at the end. If you really do not have all the things you need, there are exception processes that can get you there and on the register. The position should be much better than it currently is because of this extra channel.

Q276 Chris Ruane: EROs are not currently subject to freedom of information requests because they are not listed as public bodies in the FOI Act. I have some practical examples here. I wrote to the underperforming local authority EROs that did not do the door knocking, priority 3, and this is the answer that came back from Kate Symington, Information and Complaints Officer, East Devon District Council, "The electoral registration officer, returning officer or any other person appointed under the Act are not subject to the provisions of the Freedom of Information Act". They were not prepared to supply me with the information. That was the same from Robert Landon, Head of Democratic Services—or should I say undemocratic services—at Tameside, and there is a further one. There were three authorities that came back to and said, "We are not subject to the FOI. Don't be asking us these questions". Is that right? We were talking about Beacon practice. Can I also stress that

about 50-odd did and some of them said, “We are not subject to the FOI but we will supply it”? If we are looking for best practice among EROs, what action should be taken against those EROs?

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

Q277 Chris Ruane: So that would be a sensible recommendation for this Committee to make.

John Turner: I see no reason why not to. I think when the Act was put in it was just a blip. The distinction between a local authority and a statutory officer was not taken into account and I think if anybody had taken it into account they would have been on the list.

Q278 Chris Ruane: Coming back to the point I mentioned before, I think there are something like 12 or 13 local databases that unitary authorities or two-tier authorities can access. You quite rightly mentioned the two biggies, social services and education. In my authority area of Denbighshire they even consulted fixed penalty notice databases. They went to every database they could find and they used it. Are there any databases within lower tier authorities that they could have used to do the data-matching exercises that other authorities did?

John Turner: I don’t know about every database held by every local authority, but it seems to me, and certainly going on my past experience when I was doing the job, that you would use any information you could damn well get your hands on as a starting point. It does not necessarily mean you can add them to the register, because you have to do some further verification, but you certainly have a starting point that then assists in contact and assists in the door-knocking process. I see no reason why all of these databases should not be used, particularly given that computerised information systems can do much of that job for you.

Q279 Chris Ruane: If you believe the lower tier and upper tier authorities should have been doing it, why did only 133 out of 380 actually do the data matching, or inform the Electoral Commission? They may have done it but they may not have informed the Electoral Commission that they have done it.

John Turner: I really don’t know.

Q280 Chris Ruane: Do you think there is an attitude among some EROs that even if it is legal, even if priority 3 is written in law, because there is no invigilation or no sanctions against those EROs they think they can just get away with it, “We will be published as poor performer one year, two years.” Some of these authorities have not done it for four years on the trot. East Hertfordshire did not do priority 3 for four years, West Devon, Vale of Glamorgan three times, West Somerset three times, Mid Devon three times and East Hampshire. Is there a devil-may-care attitude among some EROs, who say, “If we get to 90% that will do us. It doesn’t matter if there are 7,000 or 8,000 left off the register”?

John Turner: I can’t get inside individual EROs’ heads, obviously, so I have no idea of whatever reason it is. All I would say is that, being completely selfish about this and just speaking about

electoral administration, clearly we would be in the game of wanting every ERO to get as many people on the register as is legally and humanly possible. That is our stance.

Q281 Chris Ruane: You want that, John, we want that, the Cabinet Minister wants it, the Electoral Commission wants it, everybody wants it, but over the years it has not materialised. Over the years we have ended up with an extra 6 million people not on the register and EROs breaking the law and nothing happening to them. Do you think there should be a sanction? If you have a good performing ERO next door to a poor performing one, should that function be transferred to the good performing ERO? Should the Electoral Commission be able to step in and say, “If you can’t do it properly, we’ll do it properly for you and we’ll charge you”? Should it be given to the private sector, Experian, who already know the names and addresses of those people missing off the register? Does there need to be a stick to beat poor performing EROs with?

John Turner: I am recollecting a previous conversation I had downstairs in this place with a former Minister and we were discussing this point 10 years ago. You can probably guess who the Minister is now. We went quite a long way towards talking about special measures. Ultimately, if you want my honest and bare answer to it, I think until you have some means of ensuring that the will of Parliament can be enforced, that may be the only answer that would work.

Chris Ruane: I thank you for that. As head of the EROs, that is quite a brave thing to say.

John Turner: I am not head of EROs remember. They are up there.

Chris Ruane: Sorry. That is a brave thing to say either way and perhaps that is a recommendation that we can look at, Chair. We urge the Government or the Electoral Commission. The Electoral Commission say they don’t have the powers—

John Turner: Which they haven’t, that is true.

Chris Ruane: —which they don’t have. They can’t fine, they can’t sanction. They can only point out that EROs have not performed. So perhaps that is something we should look at, Chair.

Chair: Certainly. Andrew, you had a comment on that one?

Q282 Mr Turner: Are we speaking of a criminal offence or a civil offence?

John Turner: Which?

Mr Turner: The failure to do what Chris Ruane has asked should be done.

John Turner: There is a section in the Representation of the People Act 1983 that makes it a breach of official duty for a registration officer not to do that and follow the law.

Q283 Mr Turner: Does that mean a police officer would be handling that or a civil matter?

John Turner: No, it is a criminal matter, a criminal offence. It carries a penalty. I can’t recollect what it is offhand, but it is definitely a criminal offence. What I should also tell you is that I have been doing this for some long time now and I have never known anybody to be prosecuted for it.

Q284 Mr Turner: I am just wondering whether it would help if it were drawn to the attention of the local police officer.

John Turner: We go down an interesting route here. Things have happened where there have been investigations by the police—the police are only the investigating body in this sense—and it always ends up at the door of the Crown Prosecution Service and we get into matters where we start talking about public interest and decisions to prosecute. That would take us another five hours I fear, Chair, so—

Q285 Chris Ruane: Is it in the public interest to have 6 million people and the poorest people in the country off the electoral register? Is it in the public interest or not?

John Turner: That is a different question from the public interest to prosecute, but what I am saying is, in answer to your question, there is already on the statute book an offence of breach of official duty. It is certainly not within my bailiwick to decide how that should be enforced but it is there. It sits there.

Q286 Chris Ruane: As well as highlighting the negative, which I have sought to do with parliamentary questions, we ought to be stressing the positive. One issue we have been considering is how best practice can be shared among EROs and electoral administrators and also what scope there is for recognising high performing individuals. Does the AEA currently have a role in this regard? Do you think that this Committee or the all-party group on voter registration or the Departments or the Electoral Commission or all of us together could recognise the best performing EROs, pat them on the back, give them a trophy and share their best practice among the others? What role does your organisation have in that and what role could we, as parliamentarians, have in that?

John Turner: That is why I mentioned the Beacon Council scheme. I am not suggesting it did not have its faults, because it clearly did, if only the bureaucracy of it. But what it enabled us to do was to have a hard look across the whole country and then basically pick—as I say, only three passed the test, which perhaps is a legacy in its own right. I have started preliminarily to talk to the EC about, if there is not a will within Government to do it. If the EC and AEA working together are able to start something like that again, and the detail can be worked out, that basically does what you are asking for. It was not just the process; it was what happened afterwards. The three authorities that got Beacon Council status for electoral services had done some really innovative work. They had very good returns on registration rates, they had done some excellent stuff in piloting elections, a really good record on the disability thing, a good record on door knocking, and they got the award. Then we could say, “Look, here is some best practice that you can take.” Swindon was one. If it works in Swindon it can work just about anywhere. So, “Take that good practice and use it.”

Q287 Chris Ruane: Taking it to a larger scale, one of the best performing areas now is Northern Ireland. It has its own chief electoral registration officer. They can experiment and the experimental work that they have done in schools has led registration rates to go from 25% among attainers to 65%, the best in the UK. Is there a case for chief electoral registration officers for Wales, Scotland and England, so that you could have four laboratories for best practice?

John Turner: I think that is probably a step too far. If you were going to spend the sort of money you would need to set up that sort of organisation, I think it would be better spent in the local areas doing the sorts of things you were talking about but with the other thing we more latterly talked about, a means of enforcing it. If you use any type of local authority service where things have got so bad that the Government decides to send in commissioners, or whatever the term is, that is what

you actually end up with. Using the whole rotten apple barrel thing, you don't need it in some places. You need to concentrate that effort where it is required.

Q288 Mr Browne: Good morning, Mr Turner. I have a rapid fire round on a range of slightly different issues. I wanted to start with one that Mr Ruane touched upon, maybe inadvertently, which is do you think this whole process would be better off being privatised and getting rid of electoral registration officers altogether? The reason I make the point is because I often hear the observation made that Tesco, for example, know every single thing about my life, what type of breakfast cereal I like to eat and what type of wine I might like to drink. Even the local pizza delivery people seem to be very sharp on knowing where everybody lives within their catchment area, and yet the electoral registration officers seem to find it all incredibly difficult. Would it be easier to give it to some people who know what to do?

John Turner: As a matter of philosophy, the answer to that is no. I don't think that necessarily whatever Tesco or anybody else does is translatable into what we are about here, largely because the people who want to buy wine or cereals do it because they want it. They want a product at the end of it. I think what we have to do is persuade people that it is almost a citizen's duty to—

Mr Browne: I will come to that, but you have a philosophical opposition to it being—

John Turner: Yes, because I have seen what can happen when things are put in the private sector and it goes badly wrong.

Q289 Mr Browne: Even if it could be demonstrated in a pilot study that a private company got a higher registration level than some of the local authority examples? You could take one of those that Chris just mentioned where the rates are pretty low and subject the electoral registration officer to a bit of healthy competition and see in that pilot area whether we could get a better outcome with a private sector company. If there was a better outcome in the pilot study, you would still be hostile to it?

John Turner: No, I wouldn't. If it could be demonstrated that that system could be applied equally across the country, good, bad and indifferent, and produced the same results—

Mr Browne: Maybe it just could apply if they fell below a certain threshold.

John Turner: No. I think what years in the public sector have taught me is that often you can privatise something and it works well for about a year. Then it starts to drop away. By that time you have dismantled the public sector offering, to get back to it costs an absolute arm and a leg.

Q290 Mr Browne: What about an alternative public sector? What if any authority fell below 90%, then an authority with a record of, say, over 95% could have their electoral registration officer sent in to sort it out?

John Turner: That goes a bit towards the answer I was trying to make to Mr Ruane that I think that is quite possible because we are looking at shared services. In particular, if you go back to this exemplar product, you could say, "What we are going to do is ask ABC to go into XYZ and sort this out".

Q291 Mr Browne: It could be an automatic trigger that if you are below a certain level then you are deemed not to be capable of performing the job properly.

John Turner: Why not?

Q292 Mr Browne: Separate subject: do you think the process is sufficiently simple? People always say the process should be made simpler for people, but when you said you can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink, are you implying that we should reluctantly conclude that however idiot-proof you make it, there will always be some idiots or, to put it maybe less indelicately, there will be people who don't wish to register? Some people, for example, live in two locations and they regard one of them as their primary residence and they feel a sort of civic affinity with that area and the other one they just think of as a place where they occasionally stay the night in a flat. They probably get lots of electoral registration forms through the door of the flat where they live and they choose consciously not to register there because they don't feel a civic attachment to that area, but they would come up on the figures as a non-registered person and would count against the ERO.

Then there might be other people—we all meet them—who it does not matter how much you try to explain to them that politics is so interesting and relevant and important to their lives, they are absolutely indifferent to what you say and it would not matter if you attached a £20 note to the back of the form, they still would not open the envelope. The point I am making is that in the constant quest to make things easier, is there a point where you just run into this, and where is that point?

John Turner: It will differ from area to area. Anecdotally, but there is some evidence to support this, if you wanted to at a stroke change something then do away with the single person discount for council tax. The biggest incentive for not putting the second person's name on the electoral registration form is that you will lose your 25% discount if you do. I remember going back several years, Ipswich had a massive study of that and the electoral register changed dramatically because, if you compared what social security were finding out about people's living habits and so on, there were far more people living in particular places than the register indicated. Why? Because there was a financial incentive not to register.

Q293 Mr Browne: A separate subject again. Young people I speak to, insomuch as they take an interest in this issue, first-time voters, are nearly always, in my experience, surprised that they don't have to demonstrate who they are when they go to cast their vote. They are familiar with doing that with almost every other service that they access. Particularly in areas with transient populations, with electoral voting cards floating around multiple-occupied properties, do you think that people should have to demonstrate who they are to some degree with some sort of form of identification before they cast their vote?

John Turner: Yes, I do, basically because there is too much of an opportunity for impersonation to take place in certain areas and the problem is that we are working with a system that is based on trust. We are also working in a system that is based on what were local arrangements where everybody knew everybody else. That is not the case any more. The only way I can see to sensibly take this forward and avoid the fraud issue but to ensure that people legitimately get their vote—because remember if I turn up before you at your polling station and say I am you and they believe that, I will get your vote and I will walk out. You turn up five minutes later and they will say, "Very sorry, you have already voted. Here you can have a pink piece of paper as the ballot paper". What they may or may not tell you is it will not be counted, and that to me is absolutely outrageous by any definition, particularly when you look at the international—

Q294 Mr Browne: What happens in those circumstances?

John Turner: What I am talking about is a tendered vote. That is all you will get. If I have voted in your place, I get your vote and I put it in the ballot paper. You turn up, you are given a pink version of the ballot paper.

Q295 Mr Browne: I thought what you could have said is that somebody turns up to vote without ID and they get the pink one and it is only counted if—

John Turner: No, I am not going into the future. I am going into what happens now, and that cannot be right.

Mr Browne: There is not much more to expand on, you have already made your point, but I only observe as a person who stands in elections myself, when people say, “I can’t find my polling card” you can say airily to them, “It doesn’t matter, just show up”. They say, “What form of ID do I need?” and you say, “You don’t need any. You just go along and say who you are”. People are typically, in my experience, surprised that it is that lacking in fraud proofness. Good. Let’s see if there is something we can do about it.

Q296 Mark Durkan: This is more an observation than a question. In Northern Ireland we do have photo identification as a requirement for voting. As a result of that, we have an electoral ID card that was introduced particularly to facilitate people who did not have access to things like driving licences, passports and all the rest of it. Chris earlier referred to the success in Northern Ireland of the schools-focused registration campaign. One of the reasons for that success is the electoral ID card because young people see the benefit of having an ID card that is portable, useable and they don’t have to have a driving licence, don’t have to have a passport, which is costly, and also it is a more neutral form of ID in our context, as well as being more easily carried than a passport or whatever. I know there are different views on the recommendations and proposals on the benefits of photo ID, but it seems to me when people talk about the situation in Northern Ireland and the issue of photo ID, that is a point that is sometimes missed.

John Turner: I agree wholeheartedly. I think the Ireland model is a model that is replicated throughout the world, generally speaking now, and has proved to get rid of the fraud problem on the one hand and, strangely enough, to increase take-up, for the reasons you make, and also increase turnout.

Q297 Mr Browne: One might think that the more fraud proof you make the system, and therefore the harder you make it for people to vote, the more you will have an adverse effect on turnout, but you think it is perfectly possible to make fraud resilience stronger and not to have a downside?

John Turner: Yes, I think it is.

Q298 Mr Browne: I have a few more. Again, it may slightly surprise people that in an age where you can access services very quickly and register online for things that there is a deadline for registration that is several weeks before polling day. Is there scope for reducing that period or even, the most radical modernisation of the service, that you could register on the day if you realised that you are not registered but you are caught up in the excitement of the moment when you realise it is polling day?

John Turner: It is currently minus 12 working days, so it is not several weeks. I think there is potentially scope. The real problem is that we still have a system in this country based on pre-2000, that anybody applying to be on the register is subject to public scrutiny. There is a five-day cooling-off period where anybody can look at it. I am so advanced in years now that I can remember the old claims and objections system that the political parties used to actually scrutinise who was applying to go on the register, but that was in the days when political parties had professional fulltime agents who were very good at that job and those days have just about gone. So the problem you have to balance is the scrutiny process against the facilitation of people being able to register late. I think there is some scope for looking at whether you could do it closer than 12 days. If you get to the point of registering on the day, you open up a completely different can of worms, which I think I set out in the evidence I submitted.

Q299 Mr Browne: Your hunch might be that there is the scope to make it fewer than 12 days, but registration on the day comes up with extra downsides that we ought to be wary of.

John Turner: It comes with all sorts of extras. Most countries that allow that then have a cooling-off period for those votes to be checked and for the scrutiny process to take place. Given that Parliament has said they wanted results out by 2.00am after a general election, saying to you people, "Sorry, we are not going to be telling you whether you are elected or not for three weeks", à la the American system, I think might find a bit of resistance across the road there, frankly.

Q300 Mr Browne: We struggle to do it by 2.00am, partly because the results keep being uncomfortably close so they have to check them carefully.

My last question relates to what I think of as slightly faddy ideas to increase turnout but other people might think they are innovative, interesting ideas. I would be interested in your views on them. One end of the scale seems to be a perfectly practical consideration and just because I am a bit of a traditionalist I ought not to resist it on that basis, which is whether we have weekend voting rather than Thursdays. The other end of the scale, which I think is a little bit more superficial but you may disagree, is things like voting in supermarkets or places where people might find themselves more regularly than community centres or wherever voting takes place now. Do those sorts of changes, in your view, have the potential for increasing voter engagement and turnout or are they a superficial analysis of why people don't turn out? My analysis of this, but you may disagree, is that the reason people don't turn out for elections is not necessarily because the polling station is not in a supermarket but I may be wrong. What are your thoughts?

John Turner: I think the two things you mentioned are slightly different. The last Government spent quite a long time looking at weekend voting and didn't implement it. That is largely around two things: one about cost, it would put the cost up, and the other is about the premises availability. Particularly as more and more community buildings disappear, we are more reliant on religious buildings and at the weekend necessarily they are not available. So there is some practical stuff about it. It could well be that if you are making it on a non-workday that might encourage a few more people but I think you are talking about a few more people.

The minute you go into having things in supermarkets, in train stations, whatever, you are into completely different and more alarming technical areas. For instance, I got on a train this morning in a place that is not within the constituency in which I live, so it would be of no use to me. If you had put the polling station at the end of my journey in Liverpool Street, you would have needed ballot papers for 600 constituencies. It just is not going to work, that is the truth of it. So I think that unless we change the whole election system and put it online, then those sort of things are really at the gimmicky end of what encourage a few more voters.

Chair: Chris, I think you have some questions rather than comments.

Q301 Chris Ruane: It is just on what Jeremy said before about the role of the private sector, and in particular, Experian, because it was Experian that told me there were 6 million people missing off the register. The Electoral Commission said, no, there were not and then conducted the research and said, yes, there are 6 million. I would not agree with total privatisation of electoral administration, but do you believe that there could be a greater role for co-operation between the private sector, who have this information, and the Electoral Commission and individual authorities?

John Turner: Undoubtedly, yes, is the simple straight answer.

Q302 Chris Ruane: Just to put a counterbalance to what my two colleagues have said about voter ID, in America voter ID is being used in Republican states as deliberate voter suppression because it particularly adversely affects working class and poorer electors. Have you made any assessment of the political impact or the social economic impact of putting further barriers to people voting, bearing in mind this is before IER has been properly embedded?

John Turner: I think that last point is the critical one. Once IER is there and it is largely then digitally held, that makes life much easier. I would not go for the American model for the reasons that you have hinted at, but the Northern Ireland model, which cuts across both the political and the cultural spectrum, has worked. It has clearly worked without any great—

Chris Ruane: That was because there was massive electoral fraud there. They have only had one case of electoral registration fraud prosecution since 2008.

Chair: Chris, let the witness answer.

John Turner: I think there is a great deal of merit. Northern Ireland is much closer to home. It has it for all sorts of historical reasons but it works, so if it works and works so well, it would certainly be worth trying in GB, even on a pilot basis.

Chair: John, thank you very much. That was very really helpful and stimulating evidence and you have given us food for thought about recommendations and proposals. As always, it is a great pleasure to see you.

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: **Rob Holland**, Public Affairs and Parliamentary Lead, Mencap, **Ismail Kaji**, Parliamentary Affairs Assistant, Mencap, and **Hugh Huddy**, Campaigns Manager, RNIB, gave evidence.

Q303 Chair: Welcome everyone. I know Ismail is going to give a little statement shortly. To start us off, I would ask Andrew to ask a couple of questions.

Mr Turner: I am going to start by asking Hugh Huddy to tell us briefly who Mencap, and in your case the RNIB, represent and the interest your organisation has in voter engagement?

Hugh Huddy: I will speak for RNIB first, because I work for RNIB. We represent 2 million people in the UK with uncorrectable sight loss that will affect their ability to read the letters and print documents that come through our doors and also information presented on screen through

electronic devices. Out of that 2 million, around 400,000 are registered blind or partially sighted and those registers are held by local authorities. People who are partially sighted or blind will have sight that significantly impairs their ability to read print or computer screens.

RNIB's interest in voting is really about enabling people with vision impairments living in the UK to lead a fulfilled, independent life where they can participate in democracy and everything else that we do and take for granted. The inaccessibility of voting is something that we constantly hear about through our member forums and calls coming into our helplines. Really it has gone on for as long as RNIB has probably existed, but I have worked there for over 10 years and it is just one of these things that comes in all the time, particularly around elections and most likely after an election when people feel cross about it or that they have not been able to vote, but there is not much we can do about it once the election has passed and that tends to be the pattern. It tends to be after the election when we get the major calls and complaints coming in.

But I would say that for the majority of people, voting is just a small part of the daily difficulties they face in trying to get work and trying to do everything else they need to do in life. It is not one of these issues that can escalate to being a massive campaign for RNIB because it is just one of many issues.

As for Mencap, I am not best qualified to represent Mencap. Maybe that should be Rob, if you don't mind.

Rob Holland: I am Rob from Royal Mencap Society. First of all, thank you for inviting us to give evidence at this session.

Royal Mencap Society is a national organisation, working with advocating and supporting people with a learning disability across the country, together with Mencap Cymru and Mencap in Northern Ireland. We campaign together with people with a learning disability for change but we also provide services to over 7,000 people across the country in terms of social care to support them to live as independently as possible, housing, as well as support and training about moving into employment, as well as leisure and advice and guidance through our helplines. What we want to see is that people with a learning disability, of which there are 1.4 million in the country, are valued equally, listened to and included in society.

Of course, voting and participation in the democratic process is a huge part of that and what we do know is that the majority of people with a learning disability are not registered to vote and do not vote. Looking back at the data from 2001, which is the data we have—we don't have data from the last two general elections—only 31% reported that they did vote and there are differences within that group as well. Of those with a mild learning disability, 42% reported that they did vote; those with a significant learning disability, 27%; those with profound and multiple learning disabilities, only 4%. First of all, there is an issue around more data. The barriers, which I am sure we will discuss as we go on, are multiple. There is a cultural exclusion from the democratic process, from politics in the way that Parliament and the Government often communicate to people. There are also practicalities, which Ismail will talk about, in terms of the process of registering to vote and then casting a ballot.

This obviously has led us to do a huge amount of work in the area. We ran "Get my vote" in the lead-up to the 2010 general election, which was about supporting and empowering people to register and vote. In the lead-up to May next year, we will be running "Hear my voice". An important facet of that is supporting people to register to vote and we have secured some money from the Cabinet Office to do that. We have a target to register 7,000 people to vote but we hope that our support, guidance and all the rest of it will reach upwards of 30,000. That is very much our interest in the subject and why we were keen to give evidence.

Q304 Mr Turner: Thank you much. I understand Ismail Kaji has prepared some points on the barriers people with learning difficulties face. Would you like to present these?

Ismail Kaji: Yes, thank you. My name is Ismail Kaji. I am a parliamentary affairs assistant and spokesperson for Mencap. We support people with a learning disability to live independently and campaign to make things better. A learning disability is a developmental disability that affects the brain. It is something you are born with and have for life. It means you might have difficulties with everyday life, such as household tasks, socialising or managing money. Some people with a learning disability might take longer to learn. They may need support to develop new skills and understand complex information. There are 1.4 million people with a learning disability in the country. Many are not fully included in society and many do not vote.

Voting is an important part of my life and important to me. It is important that Parliament hear our voice and what we have to say on the issues that affect us. Unfortunately, many people with a learning disability don't see the point in registering to vote. They don't think voting will affect their lives or make any difference. This is bad because many decisions made by Government and in Parliament have a huge impact on them. These might be cuts to benefits or social care or changes to schools and hospitals. I believe everyone involved in the voting system needs to make more of an effort to help people with a learning disability understand why voting is important and what a difference it can make.

The second issue is the voter registration form. When I received the form in the post it was very hard to understand. It was very complicated and I couldn't fill it in. There was a number to call on the form. I called it but it was only an answering machine to register. I couldn't speak to anyone to ask questions. I had to bring the form into work so that my colleagues could support me to fill in the form. This is not fair and made me feel excluded. I think easy-read voting forms and information would help people with a learning disability to be included. I would be able to fill in the form and understand things by myself.

Politics also needs to be more accessible so people with a learning disability can engage with it more. It is often very difficult to understand what politicians are saying and what they really mean. They can speak very quickly and use complicated language and jargon. When I am face to face with an MP it is often easier and they might speak in a more accessible way, but when they are on the TV or giving speeches it is much more difficult. I can understand why many people switch off.

MPs and the parties should communicate more using easy-read information. Easy-read is when images, large print and easy language are used. I also believe that the manifestos for the general election in 2015 should be in easy-read. We have written to the political parties asking them to do this and they have all agreed. The parties should also say what they would do for people with a learning disability if they won the election. This will help people decide who they want to vote for. The parties should also listen to what people with a learning disability have to say and understand the issues that affect us. MPs and candidates should meet with local people with a learning disability and listen to what they have to say. This is why the Mencap campaign is called, "Hear my voice". It is all about I believe that together we can make a positive change. Thank you for listening.

Chair: Ismail, thank you very much for that. We do appreciate your contribution. Andrew, were there any further questions to follow up?

Q305 Mr Turner: A third question for either representative of Mencap: you said 4% of people who have severe learning difficulties are registered. Did you say registered or voted?

Rob Holland: 4% reported that they had voted.

Mr Turner: What is it that prevents them from voting?

Rob Holland: I think there are multiple barriers and they are significant particularly for those with profound and multiple learning disabilities. Ismail has talked about the kind of cultural exclusion that people with a learning disability might face and the way that perhaps political parties, Parliament and others communicate to people with a learning disability is inaccessible. Therefore, they might not be very engaged in what political parties and Government might be saying. They might feel quite distant, despite the fact they are likely to use social care and health benefits more than other people. So, more accessible information would go some way to ending that cultural exclusion.

For people with profound and multiple learning disabilities there are further barriers. They are, for example, more likely to have significant health needs, perhaps mobility issues, which touches a point that the previous panellist was making about physical access. So there is that, for example. The data that we had from 2001 showed, for example, that those most likely to vote were living independently. They might have a job; they might be in a more affluent area. They are unlikely to be in a care home setting where getting a group of people to the polling station has transport needs and all the rest of it.

So I think there are many more barriers for people with profound and multiple disabilities, but there is an attitudinal one as well for those with perhaps quite profound learning disabilities that might come from those who are working with them, supporting them, perhaps in some cases family members, who simply believe that they would not be able to make an informed decision about who to vote for. Those would need to be tackled as well. There are multiple barriers.

Q306 Mr Turner: That is where I was hoping you would go. How do you persuade people who cannot persuade themselves and in many cases don't themselves have access to the background and the knowledge and so on? What is it that we can do to make it more acceptable, if you like, so that we—you and us—would know it was a genuine participation rather than just a tick in a box without necessarily knowing what that means?

Rob Holland: One of the reasons that a lot of people with a learning disability don't vote is that they don't see what the parties would do for them and so they feel quite disengaged. As Ismail was saying, if parties were to say what they would do for disabled people and people with a learning disability, those working with those people on the much more profound end of the scale would be able to communicate that more to them so that they would be able to make more of an informed decision. As Ismail was saying, things like easy-read manifestos using simpler words, pictures and so on would help, but there will also need to be work with family and support workers who are working with those on the profound end of the scale. For example, the work we are doing through the Cabinet Office-funded project will be online training, workshops and guidance for support workers, carers, family members and so on to support that person to make a decision. For those with profound and multiple learning disabilities—the previous panellist mentioned access to the polling stations—postal voting and online voting may be an opportunity for them to do that as well.

Q307 Chair: Hugh, this is Graham Allen. Did you have a further comment to add to Mr Turner's question?

Hugh Huddy: With visual impairment, the issue is about the provision of information in a format that can be read. The majority of people complaining to us about being disengaged and unable to vote come initially because the information coming through the door is, by default, in print, even

though local authorities keep the register of who is visually impaired in their areas. We have not come across any evidence of electoral officers using that information to make sure that people do get the information, even with a note in the document saying, "If you cannot read this ring this number" in braille and large print. That sort of thing would make a big difference. It is this print by default that creates a lockout effect where people don't even know that anything has come through their door. Many people don't have people to read to them or they try to manage the post themselves, and it is exactly that sort of person who misses out.

If you are registered and someone does tell you that there is a vote coming up or you have picked it up in the news, you don't get to the polling station knowing which candidates you should be thinking about. That happens to me. I have not read anything so I literally walk with my white stick to the polling station, which is behind where my children's nursery is so I do know physically where it is. But I go completely unaware of the names of the candidates and just thinking, "I think I know which way I want to vote so I'll just have to try to solve that problem when I get into the polling station". This is typical for anybody who has not been able to prepare themselves by reading anything. It is because of the fact that even if you ring the election office, as I have done in the past, to say, "Can you send me this information in an accessible format?", I have never actually had it. I don't know what goes wrong. It seems that each time a vote comes round no database or record is kept that you can't read print and you need an alternate format. The onus always seems to be on the voter to chase up their ability to vote and know when to do it by. Remember, if you can't read the deadlines, you don't know when the deadlines are anyway.

Once you get into the polling station, I have had a number of difficulties, with voting officers being very helpful once they seem to click that you are visually impaired, but that is a very offputting process. You can be standing with people milling around you in a room that is echoey, often a school or a church, with very little acoustic information to go on and you don't really know how to find someone to help. You don't know who is a member of the public and who is an officer. Once you have found your way to the desk you hope someone can help, and then the fun and games start because only 25% of voting stations have braille tactile templates when there should be 100%. It means three out of every four voting stations you go to won't even have the physical template to put over the paper ballot in order to feel with your fingers where to put your mark. We are also losing the numbers off these templates, which is going to be very serious. If you can imagine just a plastic template under your fingers with a series of little holes down one side, that is it. You have to count down. You have not even read the ballot paper.

The reality is that you are voting with a piece of plastic with some holes in it and you are hoping to remember which candidate you want, not having ever read about them because you have not had the information in an accessible format. The voting officer has just read them to you on the spot in an echoey room and you are trying to count up which box down this piece of plastic is the one you need to put your mark against. It really puts people off bothering with this because it is so awkward and doesn't give you a feeling that you are exercising your right to vote. It feels more like a sight test. You are being asked to jump through so many hoops.

Q308 Tracey Crouch: Hugh, it is Tracey here. Does it mean that it is incredibly difficult when there are multiple votes involved, for example with European elections or if we were ever to go down the route of some form of PR system? At the moment the first past the post, single vote at perhaps general election or local election is one thing, but when there are multiple votes involved that makes it even more difficult, given the lack of template structure.

Hugh Huddy: That is right. This current system is a workaround, let's face it. The tactile template is a way of trying to get a print ballot paper partially accessible to someone who can't read it and of course the more holes you strike through that plastic template, the harder it gets to feel them. We

all know when we are voting that the voting booth is very narrow. It is difficult for the voting officer to get in there with you and it has a highly polished surface. I know it probably looks nice polished but the paper slips around and you can't fix the template on it. So every time it slightly shifts the officer has to realign the plastic template over the top again. When there are five candidates it is just about doable. I do it and it is just about okay, but often there are transferable votes, there are two columns. It is incredibly difficult and I think this approach is just unsustainable really. Fresh thinking needs to be applied to enable visually impaired people to interact properly with this process rather than just having to survive on workarounds.

Chair: Andrew, have you finished your questioning? I will move on to Paul Flynn.

Q309 Paul Flynn: Mr Huddy, I have read the submissions that have come in from your organisation and they have been very illuminating. Having been involved in elections as a candidate since 1972, I must say I have never seen one of these tactile templates. I note that they were used in 68% of polling booths in 2005 but only 25% in 2010. You have described the difficulties and the fact that they are not really satisfactory. Do you have an explanation of why the reduction in their use has been so severe, only one in four polling stations having them at all, although they are a statutory requirement? If they are not doing the job, what is the alternative?

Hugh Huddy: To take the first question first, it is not clear why these tactile templates are going off the cliff edge, seemingly. We have been told in informal conversations that it is because there is a general sense that it is not at the forefront of the thinking in the planning into the polling station. It is one of these things that gets forgotten, but I can't say why it is being more forgotten now than it was before. We don't have any evidence, apart from people saying, "Maybe it is because not very many people come and use these templates, so what is the point of them?" We just know that blind and partially sighted people ringing us want and need these templates.

The second part of the question is a very important one about the usability of these templates. In a general election it is much easier because there are fewer candidates so it is easier to use them. I think perhaps people do find these, as I do, extremely awkward to use and that probably does contribute to people not bothering to vote. You can't be sure that you have voted for the right person, so you don't get that good feel factor that you have cast your vote, you know for sure you have and that is the end of the process. You end up with this uncertainty of, "Did I or didn't I? I'm not sure" and you are left in your mind with all of the awkward experience of just trying to make the thing work. So what needs to be done is I think fresh thinking but, most importantly, the problem starts earlier than the template.

Visually impaired people are used to putting up with a lot of difficulties in life. It is just an inevitable part of not being able to see. But many of these things are unnecessary and not knowing that there is even a vote taking place or where to go or who the candidates are because the information coming through your door is inaccessible is where it all really starts. Once you get to the polling station, you have done pretty well to know there is a vote on, where the polling station is and feel your way to get there, but once you are in the polling station the tactile template is just one of the awkward things. I think people would want a better system than this. We do and we think it is extremely practical to do it. There are developments in other countries with sign-based voting and some electronic systems, which obviously people can look into.

Q310 Paul Flynn: Could you give us an example of somewhere else where they have made these improvements? One of the difficulties here is that we are used to spending relatively small amounts on elections, on what we spend in parties for instance, compared with the United States. We all have a vested interest in making sure that as many people as possible take part in the vote,

representably possible. Is there an example you can quote from another country where they have been successful in increasing the number of people who have voted?

Hugh Huddy: The information that we have from Vision Australia, who are our colleagues there, is that the phone-based system is more effective than having to get to a polling station. But I think in Britain the system we have, if you ring an electoral registration office and say, “I am visually impaired. Can you make sure that there is a mark against my name on the register and you always send me information in braille or large print or email it to me so I can read it on my computer?” doesn’t work. If just that could be fixed I am sure—as other departments do send accessible information to me. My bank does, my utility company does. It just seems to be local authorities that don’t.

Q311 Paul Flynn: If the provision of the tactile template is not being done, even though it is a statutory requirement, by three quarters of the registration officers now, isn’t there a case for making a greater fuss about this and that if there are to be improvements, to make sure that they are carried out by all the registration officers?

Hugh Huddy: I think so if blind and partially sighted and people with uncorrectable sight loss are going to be at the heart of the process, but it does not look like they are at the moment. It looks like only one in four polling stations are putting them at the heart of the process, not four in four. I think that needs to be looked at immediately and there needs to be an action plan in electoral registration offices to make sure these things are done and can be ticked off and checked. It just seems that perhaps they are being forgotten or the issue of visual impairment is one that they don’t get many complaints about. We get some but elections, as I say, for people living with disabilities is just one of many things and it is not a daily struggle. It is a struggle every few years and so it is not something naturally that our switchboards get jammed with. They are trying to get benefits and trying to get rehab. Voting is quite low down on their list, but it is no less important.

Q312 Paul Flynn: Thank you very much. In the evidence that you put in, Mr Holland, there is a reference to outreach initiatives, including one by the Speaker in this House. Perhaps you would like to tell us about that. How successful are they? What can we, as Members of Parliament, do to contact people with learning difficulties?

Rob Holland: Thank you for giving me the opportunity to talk about this because I think what the Speaker has done, together with the Parliamentary Outreach Service, has been really great. What they have actively done is to get out and engage with people with a learning disability to talk to them about the democratic process, about voting and what their votes mean. I think that is really important. They have produced a DVD with people with a learning disability talking about the democratic process. They have produced a training package and have been touring that around the country, not only directly to people with a learning disability and those that work with them and support them but they are also doing train the trainer things so that can go further. The Speaker has been great in championing that. We worked with him to do a takeover of Leeds City Council chamber. We had over 150 people with a learning disability in the chamber for a meeting, chaired by the Speaker, talking about and engaging in the process.

There is a lot to learn there. I think those opportunities that candidates might take to get out into their constituencies and talk to Mencap groups or other groups of people with a learning disability and those who work with them will start to try to tackle that kind of exclusion and make the process much more meaningful. I hope certainly what we are doing as well, through the Cabinet Office money, will be able to share that great practice. I would hope that the Cabinet Office and others would support us in sharing that good practice so it can be taken further.

Q313 Paul Flynn: I think most parties have target mail to contact specific groups, pensioners and so on, others with common interest in various subjects. Do you think it would be helpful if your organisation could inform parties of those who are likely to welcome a simplified approach in the literature that is sent out or other details? It is a problem with all MPs. We speak a special language that nobody else understands, we are far too complex and the general criticism is absolutely right, we should simplify things. But I think if it was simplified to the extent that might be necessary it would not be acceptable to the general voter. There might be some resentment there and, in order to make it as a practical proposition, it would be useful if the candidates had some idea of who is likely to benefit from a special leaflet or information that is put out in a form that is simplified. Is that possible?

Rob Holland: Yes. Just to pick up on the other point in terms of how parties might communicate and absolutely I accept that to do everything in easy-read is going to be difficult, it is great that the manifestos are going to be in easy-read. That is really good news. I think also communicating in easy-read what the parties would do for people with a learning disability would be very important so that it is much less abstract when they are making their decision.

Q314 Paul Flynn: Have you held hustings at all? I have never been invited to one. I have been invited to one for certain groups. It could be of great benefit in communicating with people with learning difficulties and it is also a great advantage in that the future MPs are likely to concentrate on a particular subject in preparation for the hustings. Is this something that you would plan to do?

Rob Holland: It is something we are planning to do as part of the “Hear my voice” campaign in the lead-up to the general election. We will be working with our affiliated local groups to hold husting events across the country and invite the candidates, give them the information but also support people with a learning disability to engage in those events as well. We certainly will be doing that, yes.

Paul Flynn: We are very grateful to you. Thank you very much.

Q315 Mark Durkan: I want to ask a number of questions that will touch on your work in respect of both encouraging people to register to vote and then the separate issue of supporting people in actually casting their vote. First of all, on the work to encourage people to register, what activities do both Mencap and RNIB undertake in that regard? What do you find works? Also, what is the sort of feedback that you get from your members when you are trying to provide that encouragement? Hugh, do you want to go first?

Hugh Huddy: One thing that we do at RNIB is focus our efforts on trying to make sure that people who ring us to say, “I want to vote and I am trying to vote” get connected with an ERO so that the ERO can provide them with the accessible formats. We have not run campaigns like Mencap, for example, to encourage people to vote and it is mainly because, as I said before, for the majority of people calling us—voting is one of these things where we know the process is extremely inaccessible, from the people we talk to about it, but we just assume that there are very low levels of interest in fixing that problem. To us, blind and partially sighted people and people newly diagnosed with sight loss feel that there are much more serious things in their life to deal with than voting and yet we do get calls. They are low level but they are persistent from people who are trying to vote but can’t, and I think that is the tip of iceberg. Our concern is that we can’t work out how people can vote secretly based on the current system, so we can only assume that they are not voting or they are not voting secretly. They are having to rely on other people to do it for them when that is unnecessary, or should be unnecessary.

Rob Holland: As I have mentioned, to support people to register to vote, in the lead-up to the next general election, we have an aim to support 7,000 people to register but we hope that our materials will reach a much wider audience. We are running a series of workshops for people who work with people with a learning disability in our services, in our local groups, as well as people with a learning disability themselves. That will be very much about why it is important to vote as well as the process and how they might go about actually casting their vote. There is the work that we are doing, and the work that other charities, such as Dimensions who are also working with Parliamentary Outreach, People First and United Response, are doing on this as well.

I think we have to accept that even collectively we are going to make a dent in that huge number that don't register—hopefully—but more needs to be done. There are things like the Electoral Commission, for example, in 2009 produced a guide to voting for people with a learning disability. It was a good guide but very much focused on the importance of voting and not the actual process of registering. I think a refresh of that guidance that could be cascaded out to local authorities, other agencies and wider would be helpful. That is not only refreshing it in terms of the actual registration process, which it does not really cover, it just refers people to a local authority, but also a guidance will need to cover the individual electoral registration as we move to that. As we move to the new system, there is a risk that people with a learning disability don't know there is going to be a new system and that it is not accessible in terms of how they register under the new system.

Q316 Mark Durkan: Further to that, Rob, Mencap have received Cabinet Office funding. Just explain how that project is operating and what its scope is.

Rob Holland: The project in its entirety is a £4.2 million pot of money that is to reach people who are disengaged from the voting process. For that, we have received I think £58,000 and that is very much about empowering and supporting people with a learning disability to vote. There are other organisations that receive money for other groups. We can provide information for the Committee. We received the money about a little over a month ago, so we can certainly provide more information going forward with some more detail on the project as we plan it.

Q317 Mark Durkan: Again, Rob, are you working with local branches across the country in doing that? We have had one or two doors opened during these sessions, so I should be asking them.

Rob Holland: Yes, certainly. We have affiliated local groups throughout the country. Some of them are quite small and some of them are large charities in their own right. The plan is to work closely with them. Obviously they have the contacts with people with a learning disability themselves so we would be working with them in order to host training sessions, supply them with the right materials, get case studies and all the rest of it.

Q318 Mark Durkan: So far we have been asking you in respect of what your organisations can do to encourage people to register and participate. Who do you think should be taking the lead on ensuring that people with learning disabilities or with sight loss or any other disability have the necessary support and easy facility to register and then also to vote? We keep asking you the questions and each of you have made a number of observations about some of the difficulties. Who do you blame for the difficulties? Who do you think should be solving those difficulties as opposed to us asking you about them? Hugh, do you want to go first?

Hugh Huddy: I think I would initially blame the fact that you are all sighted. How are you going to understand when you are sitting in an election office and you are busy, you have lots of things to do, that there are probably perhaps up to 10,000 or 15,000 people in your region who are registered visually impaired? If there is not something to remind you to check that, I completely understand why for the average member of the public who is working in this voting process it will not be foremost in your mind. But you ought to be helped to make it foremost in your mind because otherwise they will not be reached.

The Electoral Commission have produced useful guidance and we have been involved in consultations with the Electoral Commission before. We have had a very useful exchange of information and the tactile templates came out of that many years ago, so really good steps can be made. But I think one of the big difficulties that they face in the Electoral Commission is one that they should solve themselves and that is if you do not have a minimum font size, if you allow font sizes to drop because you don't want paper sizes to get too big or things get too expensive, then you are going to have to accept that the smaller you make the font, the fewer people out of that 2 million in the UK with uncorrectable sight loss will be able to read it. That is just a fact. It is physics. They won't be able to read it. They need to have measures in place for dealing with that but we are concerned and we remain concerned that those measures are not there and that font sizes just routinely drop and that other priorities take over. There does not seem to be any way that we can win that, but if blind and partially sighted people are going to be involved in the process, that has to be resolved and I think the Electoral Commission have a role to take the lead on solving that problem.

Also, local authority level is where the registers of visual impairment are held and it is also where the registers for voting are held. Matching the data up probably should have been done years ago. The data are there, probably sitting in the same building, on the same computer system. There may be rules that create challenges in sharing that sort of information but there are probably ways and ways if you want to do it, and that would enable election officers to know and to mark which letters are going to a household where you know the person will not be able to read it and you can create an adjustment to that.

I think they are the two things that the Electoral Commission has a very clear role in: making sure that it is foremost in officials' minds and listing quick action steps to make sure they know exactly what to do. Then at local authority level, it is about making sure that data are being used smartly and intelligently to engage people. In our case we would say that it is sending people stuff they can't read and hoping that someone will read it to them or just hoping they will somehow read it when they are blind or partially sighted. We can't carry on with that sort of default thinking and expect to have good engagement with people and an accessible system if that behaviour is so prevalent.

Rob Holland: There are different organisations and agencies that need to do different things, but I think tackling the fact that voting remains abstract for a lot of people with a learning disability is critical. That is in terms of what parties offer people, what their proposals are for people with a learning disability and communicating that in an accessible way so they can make an informed choice, which they can't do at the moment.

I think charities have a role to play. We have a role to play in communicating to our constituents why it is important to vote and supporting them to do that. The Cabinet Office can support us in that by continuing to fund projects such as this but also helping us share good practice. The Cabinet Office also has a role in how the different Government departments put out consultations, policy proposals and things like that. If those can be communicated in a more accessible way, people with a learning disability will feel more part of the process and that their vote counts.

I think the Electoral Commission has a role in terms of refreshing its guidance in the lead up to the next election and also providing easy to read and understand information as we move into individual electoral registration where I think there is a risk that fewer people with a learning disability may register to vote. There is a combination of actions across those different organisations and agencies.

Q319 Mark Durkan: On the issue of actually voting, issues have already been mentioned in respect of the situation in polling stations and the accessibility in relation to particular polling stations, the particular setting and the confines of polling booths and so on. Obviously, as a way around that, there is the facility of postal votes or proxy votes for people who can't physically access polling stations. There have been issues where people have applied for postal votes because they didn't feel comfortable voting in a polling station but, because they have written that their condition for applying is Down's Syndrome, they have then been denied the postal vote and, in turn, denied the vote on the grounds that the officers make the judgment that it is only for physical incapacity and not for any other reason. How do Mencap address that narrow interpretation of the conditions for getting a postal or proxy vote if that is the more comfortable form for somebody voting?

Rob Holland: That is a good question and I am glad you asked it. For us, it is about choice. Hugh has talked about his experience at the polling station but the experiences of many people with a learning disability at the polling station is quite negative and so the opportunity of a postal or proxy vote should be the people's choice. It is certainly Mencap's view that they should have that choice.

Q320 Mark Durkan: But currently, because of the way the law is interpreted and applied, it is denied to people. As an aside, I have had experience in the past where officers have told me that there is a question mark as to whether people should have even been on the register, never mind as to whether or not they should be able to go for a postal vote on that basis. That raises elderly, infirmity and dementia issues that come in on a different side of that same attitude by officers as they interpret the law as it stands, which maybe raises further questions for us. In terms of actual changes, Hugh, if you had a day in power and could make changes and take practical steps or if you could translate something that you know is going on in another country or whatever as a way to solve it, what would it be? What would be the measures, and then the same to Rob?

Hugh Huddy: I think leading up to the upcoming election it would be that each election registration office tests its process end to end, so it adds in visual impairment. The banks are being expected to stress test and so should these voting processes. They should test it with people at every step from something arriving at a door and simulate what they are going to do. What is lined up for them to do action-wise in the office? One simple test would be to look at the registration figures in your local area. They are stored. They are national data and you can access them. It is on the RNIB's website if you just look for "prevalence of sight loss". Any ERO can find the registration figures for their area. Compare that against how many alternate formats you sent out. It will probably be 0.001% or something like that. It is not just way short; it is virtually non-existent. I think that should be the first test you make: have we sent out the number of formats that we probably should have done?

The second thing is test end to end from registration. I tried to register from my phone on the bus coming in yesterday, just to test this out, and I got to the registration page on the Electoral Commission, using the talking facility on my smartphone. I could read it, it is accessible with a speech interface as well as a visual one, but once I got to register I saw, "Print this off and sign it and post back". Okay, how do I do that then? There are multiple what I would call paper lockouts in the registration process, whether you are registering to vote or trying to get a postal vote. There are multiple processes. These are the things that should be end-to-end tested so the procedure has

no pitfalls for visually impaired people. That can be done. It is something they could do probably in an hour or two at their desk, but we are not sure that has ever been done. So that is the thing I would do today, to implement straightaway just a simple test.

The second thing is that in the longer term fresh thinking needs to be applied, learning from other countries like Australia, which is adding choice, as Rob was saying. I want to go and vote at the polling station. I don't know, I am just funny like that. I would like to go and vote properly; that is how I see it. Also, it gives me a sense of being part of the community. It is a very important sense if you are visually impaired and many people live feeling very isolated. It is a way of being physically present in the community and if officers in these voting stations never ever see someone with a white stick, they could be forgiven for thinking that there are not very many of us around, when in actual fact, there are nearly 400,000 registered in the UK who are likely to be carrying white sticks. There are a lot of us around, but we are probably not there because it is just so awkward.

So I think that phone voting, electronic voting, all of those measures are important to look at and key really to look at. I have a smartphone in my pocket now. If there was a system for voting, I could do it now, while sitting here probably, but there isn't one. I can access my bank online; I can move money around; I can pay bills. Why can't I vote online? Now I am sure that is a question, but the point I am making is that the banks have made paying a bill online accessible for blind people. If new systems of voting are to come about, they should offer new opportunities for making voting quicker, easier and more accessible for everyone. Blind and partially sighted people can benefit from smartphones. Apple and Google phones, for example, have built-in text to speech. You can just buy it off the shelf, switch the speech on and be using it, reading text messages even though you cannot see the screen at all. You can even use your finger on a touch screen and feel your way around and as you move your fingertip around the screen, it reads out the text underneath your finger. That is where we are at in terms of the facilitating technologies for getting over visual impairment problems these days, but it is not represented in many aspects of public life yet.

There are great opportunities there. People know where you live if you are visually impaired and they can send you accessible formats, so providing databases really just has to be the norm and it needs to be implemented now, as soon as possible.

Q321 Mark Durkan: Before I ask Rob and Ismail what they would do, I assume those are exactly the sort of things that you have been saying to the Cabinet Office about individual electoral registration and other things. Do you think they are receptive?

Hugh Huddy: I was asked to present at an away day of the Electoral Commission last year, and I gave a presentation that went down very well. So, yes, receptive. I think they were very interested in what we were saying and we were very pleased about that. But at RNIB we do not know what has happened. We are not part of the inner circle so we don't know what is being planned and what is actually happening. Months and sometimes years can go past before you ever find out what is being done. There is an engagement issue about keeping us better informed about the thinking and the challenges that they are facing so that they can let us in to help us solve those problems rather than just think, "They are too difficult. We can't solve them".

Q322 Mark Durkan: There probably are lots of companies out there—I certainly know there are some of my constituents—who think they have the answers to some of these things. Rob and Ismail, if there was something that you could absolutely do in charge on this, what would it be?

Rob Holland: Ismail, what would you do?

Ismail Kaji: My personal view would be easy-read information, accessible information like picture images, simple words that anybody can understand. Also, if there was a phone line that you could call instead of an answer machine, talking to someone to guide you, and maybe also an accessible information line as well so people with disabilities can go through that line and then speak in a way that people with any disability can understand. How I see it as well is that we are one society and I would say it is everyone's responsibility to choose easy-read and see that all disabilities have the right to vote.

Rob Holland: In addition to making the process more accessible, as Ismail was saying—having someone at the end of the phone, having easy-read information together with the registration form and things like that—it is about making what the parties and candidates say real for people with a learning disability so they can make an informed choice about that. It is about parties communicating in an accessible way what they would do for people with a learning disability and getting out there and engaging with them. Not only are people with a learning disability becoming more engaged, but the candidates themselves are understanding their constituents more.

At Mencap, what we would love the parties to see is that there are 1.4 million people with a learning disability and about 6 million in total who either have a learning disability or are related to someone with a learning disability or work with them. There is a huge number out there, but the parties are not engaging fully with that group.

Q323 Mark Durkan: Finally, Rob, are there any particular concerns you would have about the operation of individual electoral registration in respect of people with learning disabilities and are there any specific asks you would have about how that would be operated?

Rob Holland: Yes. I think there is a concern as we move to the new system that, first of all, a lot of people with learning disabilities don't know that we are moving to a new system. They have not necessarily been given accessible information to let them know that we are moving to a new system and, try as we might, we won't be able to reach all of them. Whereas in the past the head of the household may well have registered a son or daughter with a learning disability to vote and perhaps supported them to do that, now the onus is on the individual. I think it is how the Commission and others get this information out to people with a learning disability and families and people who work with them so that they can get registered. Then, of course, if it moves online they are going to need information about how they go about doing that in an accessible way. There are risks associated with that.

Q324 Mark Durkan: Hugh, do you have anything additional to add? I think you covered some of the points anyway in what you were saying earlier.

Hugh Huddy: At RNIB we see individual voter registration as a unique opportunity to enable someone's name and address to be attached to their preferred reading format. Someone will be able to nominate what format they need and we have no doubt, from communication with the Electoral Reform Commission so far, that the idea of being able to say what format you need should be a simple thing to build into the process. But the difficulty still stems from that if something arrives at my door, or that of anyone else who cannot read ordinary print, with my name on it, the clock starts ticking endlessly to the point when will someone else pick that up for me? It is not me who will be involved in that process. I will be unaware it is there and waiting for someone to open that for me and tell me what is in it.

At RNIB, we think we can reach about one in three people registered blind and partially sighted in the UK and we are very happy to put information out in our member magazines and other

information and journals to let people know about this process. But there will be two in three who we will not be able to reach, and solving that problem comes down again to the information on registration that is possessed at the local authority level. They do know. They keep what used to be called BDAs, the blind registration forms, now CVI, the Certificate of Visual Impairment. It is kept at the local authority: the person's name, when they were registered, whether they are registered blind or partially sighted, or now it is called visually impaired or severely visually impaired. So they possess this information already and I think they are going to have to use that information to try to make sure that letters arriving at people's doors with their names on it at the very least have a large print or "Ring this number and you will be able to speak to someone about accessibility" or, in braille, a number to allow you to ring. That is one example of the least step where you could be given a chance of being able to get yourself engaged in this process. From then on, it ought to be better than the system we have at the moment.

I had to ask my wife the other day, "Am I registered to vote for the elections coming up?" and she said, "Oh yes, sorry, I forgot to tell you. In January something came through the door so I just sent it back". I didn't even know about this. That is a good thing in a way, but it just shows how little I know about my own affairs and this is not unusual. Maybe this happens to people who are not visually impaired as well, but particularly with visually impaired people. It just shows that I am disfranchised by default and not in control of this information. I could have missed the deadline. If she had have said, "You haven't had anything" then what would I have done? There is a 6 May deadline, I think, for registration and I have got this thing saying, "Print this form out and send it back" and it is 1 May already.

It just shows the barriers are many and numerous. For individual voter registration, as soon as I can get my hands on a number and ring someone I will say, "Put electronic or audio down as my format and please from now on send me everything in audio". I think that is the most significant thing that can be done to start the process of making voting something that you can do in secret if you are visually impaired, just like anyone else.

Q325 Chris Ruane: To all the panel really but, Hugh, you said that visually impaired people can't read because they are blind. There are a number of people in the country who can't read. They can see but they can't read because they are illiterate. I think Rob and Ismail have said the numbers of people who have learning disabilities is 1.5 million and I think the number of functionally illiterate people is 15%. It is about 6 million voters. Do you think from the evidence that you have given here today about simplification, standardisation, bearing in mind who that communication is going to, that some of the lessons that you have given us and insights that you have given could be taken out to that 6 million people who are functionally illiterate?

Rob Holland: I think that is a good point. It is nearly always the case that when you make things more accessible for disabled people, it benefits a much wider group. It is certainly fair to say that being able to request easy-read information or large print information will benefit people whose first language is not English, or perhaps they are illiterate, for example, because it uses pictures and very simple words, so I think it will undoubtedly benefit more people. But also, as Ismail was saying, the importance of being able to ring up someone as well and have them talk through the process I think will benefit a much wider group and not just people with a learning disability or those with a visual impairment. Hugh, do you want to—

Hugh Huddy: Ringing in my ears is the Treasury and, "How much is this all going to cost?" At RNIB, my role is to try to find ways around this so that we can present proposals that are thought through, realistic and can be delivered. Regarding people who have reading difficulties or what could be called print reading impairments that are not related to a learning difficulty or visual impairment, there is overlap, but when it comes to providing information in braille, large print,

audio formats or accessible through well designed digital platforms, which include email, from my point of view it is a secondary issue. I think it probably would benefit the process but I wouldn't want to say that we have invested a great deal of integrated design time in thinking about that. But what Rob says stands to reason, that when you make text larger, for some reason it helps everybody read it. It is just a fact. Otherwise, why is bold and larger text used to emphasise words? It is a simple fact of the eye that people are more likely to read things when it is in slightly larger text. Publishers know this and use that technique. I think larger text is one good example where it might make people have to write more efficiently in fewer words, but fewer words probably improves engagement.

Chair: Hugh, that is incredibly helpful. Thank you, colleagues. Thank you to our witnesses, Hugh, Ismail and Rob, this morning. I found that an education and I thank members for their attendance this morning. If there are additional things you want to tell us, do not hesitate to let us know. We are open for business and further evidence as we speak. Thank you all for your attendance.