



Political and Constitutional Reform Committee

Oral evidence: [Voter engagement in the UK](#), HC 232

Thursday 5 June 2014

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 5 June 2014.

The Committee met at Sheffield University

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [Sheffield for Democracy](#)
- [Professor Hendrik Wagenaar](#)
- [Professor Matt Flinders](#)
- [University of Sheffield Students' Union](#)

This meeting was not televised or recorded

Members present: Mr Graham Allen (Chair); Fabian Hamilton; Mr Andrew Turner

Questions 377 - 435

Witness: **Nigel Slack**, Sheffield for Democracy, gave evidence.

Q377 Chair: Good day everyone. It is really nice to see you. Thank you for coming in and it is tremendous that we have friends here from members of the public. When we have our sessions in Westminster, it tends only to be hardy, grizzled professors, rather like Professor Flinders over there. They have been round the tracks and two or three of them sit at the back taking notes. So it is lovely to have, if I can say, genuine members of the public here today. I have to say, by the way, that it is a formal evidence-taking session so I cannot take contributions from the floor. Even if you are bursting to contradict the witness or one of the questioners, I am afraid I can't let you in at the moment. That chance was this morning and also you can send us an email about how you think we have done this, how we can improve. It is the first time my Select Committee has left the hallowed halls of Westminster, to come out of the Westminster bubble, so we want to get it right and get it right for next time. I have to say I don't think we got it entirely right this morning, particularly the Chair talking way too much and I will try to do better next time.

However, rather than prove that I can talk too much, I am going to move straight on to our first witness who is Nigel. Hello and welcome to the Select Committee. I want to kick off with a quick question to get you warmed up. What do you think we can do about voter participation and what are the reasons, in your view, for low registration and what do you think we can do about it?

Nigel Slack: Thank you very much. I would like to thank the Committee for the opportunity to take part in the opening session. Sheffield for Democracy campaigns for democracy at both local and national level, to improve representative democracy and to encourage the participation of the public more. We cover issues from influencing matters in local politics through to the effects of the Localism Bill and hopefully contribute to the national conversation with respect to democracy and public engagement in the democratic process.

We have made several proposals concerning the improvement of engagement at the ballot box, which essentially is what we are talking about here with voter engagement. Some of our main concerns are reflected by the fact that people have lost trust in the democratic process. That is really at the heart of why people no longer vote. Their lack of trust falls into several areas but essentially it is a lack of trust in the system that does not reflect their opinion or their vote. Mainly that is a problem with the first past the post system and the fact that large swings are generally required to change heartland seats to be more responsive to the actual share of vote that individual parties or individual candidates get. It is to do with the party system itself. They have lost trust in the party system.

These days there are far too many of what might be considered careerist politicians—and I can include the leaders of all the top four parties in this—who have been either to public or private schools, have been to Oxbridge, have had jobs in the City or directly in politics and it could be argued have never actually had a real job in the real world. That careerist element gives the perception that they are party animals. They are not any longer representing the members of the public who have voted for them but they are representing their party to the public, and that is causing dissatisfaction and distrust. The most significant problem in terms of distrust and the lack of trust is unfortunately the actions of many of the individual MPs. The expenses row caused a huge drop in trust and a huge change in people's attitudes to MPs. The belief is now very prevalent that MPs are in it for themselves, either as a career or to line their own pockets or to represent the interests that they work for, because so many MPs have positions on boards or second jobs for various different organisations outside of Westminster, arguably in the real world, arguably in some cases not in the real world because they tend to be at very high levels, usually memberships of boards.

Unfortunately there is also a perception that politicians cannot be trusted to tell the truth. There is, as we know, that old saw of lies, damn lies and statistics. While in our evidence we have attempted to avoid naming names with respect to particularly untrustworthy situations, I think one does come to mind that needs to be highlighted and that is the fact that the DWP have been essentially hauled up on 35 occasions since the current incumbent came into office in 2010 for misusing statistics. That is plainly unacceptable to the public, as they have made very clear and as is also becoming very clear by the number of fact-check organisations that are springing up to now look at every single piece of statistics that comes out of Government or Opposition, to look at what they say and whether they are using the information they receive effectively and properly, never mind effectively.

Finally, I think there is a problem over the way that voting takes place. It is a much more minor problem in that people are not particularly put off by the necessity to register, they are not particularly put off by the necessity to vote at a ballot box. That is a relatively minor element of what puts them off. It is the panoply of problems within Government itself and within the House of Parliament that seems to put them off. There are things that can be done at that level that would improve matters and we have commented on that in our evidence.

But to cover those four areas in terms of what we would suggest, what we might propose, one of the most significant changes we would like to see is the actual system of elections moving to proportional representation. It is very clearly a fairer system where every vote is valued. When you

put that together with a set of candidates who are open, honest and prepared to stand by what they say rather than just toe the party line, you will have a much more effective, representative Government. We believe there needs to be a means of registering a legitimate protest vote so that rather than having to choose some extremist party or some far left or far right party that people do not necessarily agree with but think will put a rocket up the status quo, people are able to vote for “none of the above”. That is the sort of thing that gives people a reason to vote without their having to vote for any of the people who they believe do not represent their views, because that is the current situation. With fewer than 40% voting in local government on a regular basis, that suggests over 60% do not believe the people in power represent their views.

We heartily believe and always have in Sheffield for Democracy that the implementation of the PCRC recommendations from last year with respect to rebalancing the power between central and local government, both in terms of power and finance, is vital to reinvigorating local politics in particular. Local politics is in a dreadful situation at the moment because people do not see a vote for their local party in a local council having much effect at all on what they get from that council. Councils are much more bound by diktats coming down from the centre, where they are the most centrally organised local governments in the world, and by extra cash, if it is available, being doled out with so many corollaries and ring-fencing and jumping through hoops that they do not believe the council can do anything with it apart from operate within the very specific remit for which they got that money.

Austerity has added to that problem. It has gutted local finance. Sheffield is now down something like £80 million, which has a significant impact not only on periphery services, things that the council would like to do, but on things that they are required to do by law. There was a big change in the way that people voted in the 2014 election locally because there has been an enormous hoo-ha over the changes to the library system. While the council is required by statute to provide a comprehensive system of libraries that gives full coverage across the city, their ability to do that is now so restricted that they have had to make major changes and some libraries will now be run by volunteers. Many people do not like, do not believe that is an effective way of using the money, and they are rebelling against that by voting for another party.

Chair: Nigel, I wonder if I could bring in another member to ask a question.

Nigel Slack: Sure.

Q378 Fabian Hamilton: Nigel, before I go on to my question, you talked about Sheffield’s budget. I can tell you that by 2016, Leeds City Council’s will be 55% of what it was in 2010, so that just emphasises your point.

Let me ask you about this: you at Sheffield for Democracy are involved in engaging with local people on a variety of different issues. Which areas of interest do you find that public are most involved in, most want to discuss?

Nigel Slack: I think inevitably that most of the comment that you get at meetings and in general conversation when we are talking to the public is about expenses, lack of trust and the fact that the main parties are so similar that people really struggle to decide whether there is any worth in voting for any of the main parties. There has been this drift towards the centre. We all remember the inevitable comments of the election broadcasts last year of, “We agree with Nick”. Everybody will probably be taking a completely different approach in next year’s election broadcasts and they will all be agreeing with Nigel, unfortunately not this one but Mr Farage because he is now, following the latest local election and European election results, likely to be more in charge of the conversation when it comes to the election than any of the main parties because he is now the person that they all need to beat.

Q379 Fabian Hamilton: Let me interrupt you and ask you if any Member of Parliament from any party stood up and said, “I think immigration is a really good thing, this country doesn’t have enough immigrants”, would we get any airtime or coverage? Wouldn’t we just be dismissed as vote losers? What would Sheffield for Democracy say?

Nigel Slack: Sheffield for Democracy would be quite happy for anybody to stand up and say that. Sheffield in particular is a city of—I can’t remember the phrase they use now but is very welcoming to asylum seekers and immigrants. We have a particular reputation for the warmth of our welcome and for the fact that in the large majority of cases the people that come here are contributing to the Sheffield scene. There are problems; there are always problems. It is about the way that people change culture as they move into new countries. It does not happen overnight. That causes tensions and problems. When people are commenting on immigration, we never talk about expats, British people living abroad in vast numbers in other parts of the world and particularly in other European countries. It is arguable that a large part of the Spanish property bubble was caused by UK residents moving out there for retirement, the ones that could afford it at least. So I think the conversation needs to be looked at in a balanced way. Just to say, “Immigration is great and we want as many people as possible”, yes, you would be on a vote loser, but it is to say that immigration is not the cause of the problem. The cause of the problem is changing Europe to be able to provide for those people within their own countries or to allow people from all countries to move to jobs not necessarily just to move.

Q380 Fabian Hamilton: If any politician from any mainstream party was able to say, “Actually, I’ve got a different view to Nigel Farage. This is what we want to say”, do you think more people would be likely to vote in the subsequent election? In other words, if they were not all kowtowing to Farage next year, as you think that the main party leaders and leaderships and the media will, will that encourage people to vote?

Nigel Slack: I think a broader range of views will encourage people to get out there because they will start to recognise the difference between the parties. If different parties have different views and express them clearly, without jargon, using plain English and stick to what they say rather than changing it the first time they get a bad poll result or the first time any focus group says, “We don’t like that”, I believe it will encourage more people to vote. In Sheffield, and throughout the country, there was a big swing in terms of the green vote, which I suppose was the alternative to the UKIP vote, in the last local and EU elections, but the lack of coverage for the green policies, for the green politicians who were out there and for their successes in the actual voting itself was incredibly noticeable. Everybody was on the UKIP bandwagon, including the media.

Q381 Mr Turner: Can I ask you what is Sheffield for Democracy?

Nigel Slack: It is a community group. We are basically a—

Mr Turner: That is an answer. A community group composed representatively or a few local people?

Nigel Slack: It is not representative in the sense that we invite people from sections of the group.

Q382 Mr Turner: Thank you very much. Could you tell me why you think it is bad to support UKIP but good to support the greens?

Nigel Slack: I didn't say that, to be fair.

Mr Turner: No, I know. I am just asking.

Nigel Slack: I think it is down to people to make their own decision. Sheffield for Democracy does not advocate any individual party and we would not advocate any particular policy, save for the things that we think are positive in terms of democracy in general. We are not here to create a drive for a particular party or a drive for a particular direction.

Q383 Mr Turner: There has quite obviously recently been support for UKIP whereas 10 years ago no one would really have dared speak what they believed. Would you agree?

Nigel Slack: I don't know that they wouldn't speak what they believed. I think you had parties who perhaps said it in a little more extremist fashion, because we did have BNP in the European Parliament last time round.

Q384 Mr Turner: Are you saying it is more damaging now than it was under those percentages then who supported BNP?

Nigel Slack: I have not looked in the detail at how good the percentages were for BNP. I believe that UKIP has tapped in, I suppose, to a general disquiet that has largely been generated through both media and party political comment concerning the numbers of migrants into this country and the damage that they are doing. I have not seen in any great splash or fanfare in the press any serious analysis of the types of people coming in, the jobs that they are getting, how many of them are actually claiming benefits or using the NHS for tourism purposes. There is a lot of flash in the pan comment that is designed to generate coverage and create an atmosphere that parties believe that they can exploit for their own benefit at the next election.

Q385 Mr Turner: Are you suggesting that the Labour Party and the Conservative Party rather than UKIP are going to push the things that UKIP believe in that the Conservatives and the Labour Party don't?

Nigel Slack: I think there is the potential that because of the volume of UKIP vote and the share of UKIP vote that they will look at how they can use some of the UKIP language or some of the UKIP policies in a more Conservative-friendly, Labour-friendly, Lib Dem-friendly approach.

Chair: Nigel, thank you so much. Just for your benefit but more for the public's benefit, this is not all you have had to say. You have put in some more written evidence and you will no doubt follow up from this conversation. The questions are to give you a bit of airtime as it were, rather than to have a full view of a very complex area. Nigel, thank you so much for your time.

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: **Professor Matt Flinders**, University of Sheffield, and **Professor Hendrik Wagenaar**, University of Sheffield, gave evidence.

Q386 Chair: I am going to ask the next couple of witnesses to come in. Professor Flinders and Hendrik Wagenaar, please. I will let you start us off, Andrew, on the first one, just to get Matt and Hendrik talking.

Mr Turner: Professor Flinders and Professor Wagenaar, you are both coming at this forum from slightly different angles. Could you please briefly tell me what aspects of voter engagement you are interested in?

Professor Flinders: I am interested in more traditional institutional means of representation. I am interested in particularly the rise of a political inequality within the electoral turnout. In a sense, it is not just an issue at the moment of low voting figures. It is about a gap between certain sections of society within the figures of people who do vote. I am also interested in what I would call the nexus. There is a lot of political activity and engagement out there in communities, in society more broadly. There is a lot of energy. As we have seen this morning, the public do not hate politics. What they crave is a safe space in which they can discuss and learn about politics. I think what is interesting at the moment is that we do have this groundswell of interest and activity and engagement that is really quite frightening. I can turn up to a rugby club on a wet Thursday night and 200 people will turn up in a small mining town in South Yorkshire. People are really interested, but the traditional political structures have no way of absorbing or tapping into or understanding that energy. So what I am interested in is the nexus or the connection between the energy and the political life that is out there and why it is not feeding through in more conventional ways.

Q387 Mr Turner: Would you say it is something to do with the lack of political parties in responding to what people believe in; people believe it is useless contacting us because we, the people here, are not representing the people out there in their constituencies? Is that what you believe?

Professor Flinders: I think what is interesting, and if you look at the data it is very clear, is that anti-politics and attacking politicians has become incredibly fashionable. It has always been fashionable but I think now we have moved to a different level. So if you ask the public at a broad level what they think of politicians, you will not be able to publish in your transcripts today the sort of responses you will get. If you ask them what do they think of their local politician, his or her MP or councillor, overwhelmingly they will be positive because when constituents meet their local politicians, even if they do not get what they want, they are generally very impressed that somebody is fulfilling this role. There are issues around Parliament and political parties but I think it is more basic than that. It is about one of the key themes that came out from this morning's discussion; it is about political understanding. It is about the fact that if you look at the data and the reports of organisations like the Hansard Society or the Committee on Standards in Public Life, the basic level of knowledge among the public about what an MP does or what is the difference between Parliament and Government they haven't got a clue, and that is the real problem. Once the public have a basic political literacy, they are able to engage and understand, they usually have quite a positive experience.

Q388 Mr Turner: In my constituency I have held a meeting of anyone who wants to come in and talk to me, and I am sure others do the same, and I got the sort of support in that as we got this morning here, proportionally. I am interested in why it is that people like their local politicians but do not like this person whom they have never seen and never had any interaction with but whom they have chosen to have a view of from pictures.

Professor Flinders: You are absolutely right, there is a disconnect between local councillors and how they are generally held and national politicians. I don't know if I dare say this but I think there is a slight emphasis here on national politicians, MPs, and I know that the vast majority of them spend an increasing amount of time on constituency work. I think that national politicians still work within a very narrow definition of political engagement and what it means. I think MPs might be

very well encouraged, instead of holding public meetings where members of the public can turn up, to think more creatively about how you can go and meet the public more broadly.

I will give you a very good example. Recently there was a public engagement opportunity that was held in a local town hall, not in Sheffield. As soon as you say “town hall” to vast sections of the public they switch off. It is scary; it is a world beyond them; they don’t understand it. As soon as you even use certain language like “manifesto”—we are talking about real people—they just don’t understand what these terms mean and it is alien to them. Even the way that you and I dress, as soon as you turn up in your suits and ties with your entourage it is then very difficult.

It is very much easier for me as a politics professor—and I am very lucky to enjoy the fact that people see me as independent and I don’t ever want to be a politician—to go into communities and talk freely about politics and say some pretty tough stuff to members of the public about their responsibilities and not just those of the politicians. It is much easier for me to do that than it is for MPs. But overall, and I will say this, one of my ambitions with the Crick Centre is to cultivate a belief among a much wider range of people that they can enter politics.

Q389 Fabian Hamilton: Do you wear a suit when you go in there?

Professor Flinders: I don’t know if this will go into the hallowed annals of *Hansard* but I did have a big discussion with my wife last night in bed about what I might wear today because I did not want to wear a suit. That encapsulates one of the key problems. I know there is this terrible problem that if you all turned up today with baseball caps turned backwards you would get in the media, but I do think dress, language, approach, structure of this room matters. We have a self-selecting audience people here who are genuinely already interested in politics. At the moment I am working on a project that looks at the relationship between art and politics and using participatory arts to re-engage people from disadvantaged parts of South Yorkshire. Suddenly when you think about language, theatre, music, you are into terrain that immediately grabs the imagination of young people who have not been to university, who didn’t even finish school but suddenly you can allow them, give them a means to build their confidence to ask those questions and maybe for the first time in their lives think, “Maybe I could do something different”.

Q390 Fabian Hamilton: All I would say is I don’t think you would have wanted me to turn up in my cycling lycra today but that was the alternative.

Chair: That is very true. None of us would.

Fabian Hamilton: Absolutely, but there is a compromise I guess. Professor Wagenaar, I know we have not addressed you yet. Could you tell us about your submission, which I think broadly addresses the idea of greater civic participation? Do you think that public participation outside of voting, of which there is quite a lot and Professor Flinders has mentioned some of it, means that people actually are not apathetic, it is just they don’t see voting as the most effective means of participating in community life or within the democratic system itself?

Professor Wagenaar: I think you are perfectly right there. I am going to start my little brief with an observation that there is a huge amount of informal participation going on. I will give you just one example that I am looking into in more detail at the moment, which is civic enterprises. These are ordinary people who come together, usually in co-operatives, which is an interesting forum in itself, and they produce social goods. If you look at what they are producing, it is again a very interesting not co-incidental thing. It is sustainable energy, sustainable food and often care for the elderly and for the chronically ill. That is from my own observations in the Netherlands but this is happening in most countries in Europe including the UK, if we look at care, there is a reason for

that. Most Governments under austerity conditions are retreating from care. In this country there is a crisis in care for the elderly, I have read. In my country the Government has basically given up on it. A lot of that care is contracted out to big international care companies who the moment they can't turn a profit also withdraw from that field. Ordinary people identify with that because we all have elderly parents and at some point you are facing an issue.

I think this is some of the impetus—and I basically agree with Professor Flinders here—for ordinary people to engage with politics in a completely different way, so there is a much wider repertoire of political engagement out there than just voting. For many people that is a much more interesting repertoire of engaging than voting.

Q391 Fabian Hamilton: If Parliament encouraged the public to participate more in Parliament itself, in parliamentary activities, whether in Sheffield or Leeds or London, and of course Government itself was able to spread government outside London and get more participation at local level, would that encourage people to vote or would it be the same people?

Professor Wagenaar: I find it a hard question to answer, to be honest. In my own research where I have been talking to many people who are engaged in unofficial forms of participation, they were not necessarily interested in voting. What you did see in all of these cases is they had a much better understanding of how the political system works. If that translates into, “I want to participate in the official, institutional forms of democracy” that is another story altogether. As one of these grizzled professors who were mentioned, I think the big challenge we are facing is not so much how to integrate people into the official electoral system but the reverse issue of how professional politicians, particularly at the national level, can be integrated into these more unofficial forms of participation.

Q392 Fabian Hamilton: Perhaps you could both answer this: in a mass society, how do we know what sort of system, policies and ideas people want to put into operation and what their priorities are in the government without democratic participation, without voting itself? I accept that democracy is more than just voting but if people don't vote then how do the people who are elected know what the public want?

Professor Wagenaar: One way to go about it is—again this is based on observations and I talk a lot from experience in the Netherlands because that is where a lot of my experience is, much more than here—that local democracies are much more vibrant than the national democracy. Although we have proportional representation, we have exactly the same problem of disaffection, low voter turnout, a swing to extremist parties on the right and the left as we have here. We had it much earlier than you have had with the Wilders party almost 10 years ago. What we see in local democracies is that politicians do manage to connect with people and again that does not always translate into more voting, although we do see a pretty high turnout at the local level, but that translates into voting for local parties and not the national parties at the local level. That is an interesting phenomenon in itself. Those connections are basically the way we all connect; politicians going out into communities, talking to people, listening to people and not imposing their own agendas on these people. That is very important. The agenda certainly of national politics but often of local politics is very inward looking and does not always connect with the everyday issues that people are dealing with.

Professor Flinders: Can I just jump in there? Going to the national level, if we are completely honest here, parliamentary politics could almost not have been designed to better put people off politics. If you look at the level of parliamentary reform, it is glacial and unless we move to more fundamental approaches we are going to be struggling. You can tinker with the edges but in the

mainframe there is a real big problem. I don't think we need to deal with this UKIP phenomenon because it relates exactly to the issues you are interested in with electoral representation. The idea that came up this morning about having a ballot paper where you could vote for "none of the above" I think is absolutely critical. At the moment we have a "none of the above" party and it is called UKIP and that is what UKIP is hoovering up. The people who are voting for UKIP in huge numbers are not voting for UKIP, they are voting out of frustration with the political system more broadly.

Q393 Fabian Hamilton: UKIP voters might be very offended by that.

Professor Flinders: Yes, they might well be, but my point here is that if the broader public felt that they had more of a broad range of representation that they could actually connect with, UKIP would not be doing as well as it is. It is a frustration vote that is connecting—earthing—a broad frustration among the public about politics.

Q394 Mr Turner: Wouldn't you have felt in 1964 that the Liberals were—not extreme, clearly, because they are in the middle—saying, "We want anyone's vote for whatever reason"?

Professor Flinders: But what is very interesting here—it is fascinating for a grizzled old professor who is interested in these issues—is that at the moment what we have is a populist party that is soaking up popular support by giving easy answers to complex questions and the main parties—

Mr Turner: Like the Liberals.

Professor Wagenaar: But we are in the 21st century now, this is a problem for today and the future, the problem is—

Q395 Mr Turner: Sorry, wasn't it an issue in 1964 for the Liberals?

Professor Flinders: It may have been an issue then but I think UKIP is a slightly different beast in the contemporary climate of anti-politics and a perception of complete and utter pessimism. I think it is a real big problem that politics has become to be seen by lots of people as jaded, negative and dirty. Somehow we need to replace this politics of pessimism with a politics of optimism, and that is what came out from the people this morning in the focus group.

Q396 Fabian Hamilton: You both emphasise the importance of the local and, Professor Flinders, you talk about Members of Parliament perhaps being not as connected to their communities as local councillors are, and that is fairly obvious. A local councillor generally represents a quarter or a sixth of a parliamentary constituency and there are three of them and not just one, so they are bound to be more connected. They also don't have to travel to London every week.

Professor Wagenaar: I would like to place a footnote here because a lot of these issues are experienced at the local level but they are not necessarily local issues. For example, the people working within a lot of these civic enterprises that deal with sustainable energy have a very clear idea that this is not a local issue but a national or even a global issue.

Q397 Fabian Hamilton: But my question is have either of you looked at the relationship between an individual national politician's popularity and their connection to local government, whether they have had experience of local government or not? That might tell you quite a lot.

Professor Flinders: It used to be that local government was a professional training ground for potential MPs. The data are very clear on that: many fewer new MPs have had a grounding in election at local level.

Professor Wagenaar: That is the same in the Netherlands.

Professor Flinders: So this professionalisation of politics is a key issue. Often MPs say to me, "What are the answers? Give me some ideas. You study this". I would be quite radical. I think what we need to do is create more opportunities in politics to allow more people in. I would limit terms for MPs to only two or three terms and then they have to leave Parliament and create more space for more people.

Q398 Chair: Again, I apologise for the fact that we don't have a great deal of time. Matt and Hendrik you have put in evidence. You have had a moment, at least, to talk openly to us and hopefully again you will have further thoughts and digest and send us even more evidence.

I am just going to throw out a thought. It seems that the more we talk to people and the more people understand about what Parliament, for example, does there is a general public perception that MPs are venal and corrupt and that is the received wisdom, but then when people interact with someone at a political level they say, "Yes, they are pretty hardworking and they do their best regardless of party". Do we deal with the reality and say we have to try to convince people that we are actually doing a decent job or do we deal with the perception and almost admit that we are all those terrible things that the newspapers and others tell people that we are and deal with that and leave the reality behind? There is a bit of a conundrum as to where the energy should go to persuade people.

Professor Wagenaar: Is there time for a short answer?

Chair: Just a quick one, if you don't mind, Hendrik.

Professor Wagenaar: We talk a lot about representation, but I think if we talk about representation we should be thinking about representing issues. For example, it struck me enormously that in the early 2000s when there was a big political national debate about the lack of integration of ethnic minorities, particularly Muslim minorities, in the communities, that in those very communities people were totally dismissive of that debate. They said, "What are they talking about? We live with these people. What is this integration debate?" and they were irritated. I can list a lot more of those issues where there is a big disconnect that people do not feel that in Parliament MPs represent their issues and I think if we can get a conversation going on that level we already have made a lot of progress. That is my parting thought.

Professor Flinders: Very quickly, I think that if politicians were smart they would try to turn this whole issue upside down and inside out. There is a great public appetite out there at the moment for brave politicians who say it like it is and what they are going to do. If you look at what is undoubtedly fuelling Nigel Farage's popularity it is that, whether you like him or not, he says things very clearly and he talks about issues that most politicians are scared to talk about. You can't take that away from him. There is the Boris factor in London. Boris is teflon politician because he says what he thinks and often gets in trouble but the public like the fact that he says what he thinks. This is why I want to get a new generation of much broader representation of people into politics. We have too many politicians who are not willing to stand up and say what they think.

Chair: Thank you very much, Matt and Hendrik.

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: **Alasdair Buckle**, President, University of Sheffield Students' Union, **Eleanor Thompson**, Student Voice Manager, University of Sheffield Students' Union, and **Richard Eastall**, Director of Membership Services, University of Sheffield Students' Union, gave evidence.

Q399 Chair: Hello. How are you, Alasdair, Eleanor and Richard? Welcome. I just want to kick you off with one question to get you talking, so to speak. The issue of low levels of interest and participation by young people has been mentioned a lot, not just this afternoon but particularly in the fantastic session we had this morning. Why do you think it is that young people are less likely to register to vote and then to turn out on the day than old people?

Alasdair Buckle: A lot of the work we have done is looking specifically at students, so that has taken a lot of our attention. With students there is the issue of being registered both at home and at university, potentially, and quite often not being aware of how that works and whether they do have to go home to vote or whether they do have to vote at university. I guess there are also the time commitments of being a student. Often examination time falls around election time in May, which can often cause an issue. There are definitely some more fundamental issues. We are going to be talking to you about electronic voting as well, which is a fantastic mechanism to get young people engaged in voting, but I think there are much more fundamental issues to do with engagement in politics from young people.

The current parties are not really saying much about what they are going to do for young people. A couple of them are not really saying much at all at the moment. To use an analogy, I am a planning student and when housing issues come up, the people who are most engaged with those issues are people who are settled in an area, own a house and do not want new houses built round the corner from them, and parties are responding to them and not to the young people who will need the houses. Although the coalition have said that they are going to build a lot of houses and plan to, there is still a lot of response to local issues that means that those houses are not being built. I guess that is just a very specific example of the wider problem.

Q400 Chair: I could take you up on that but I had better not otherwise we could digress quite greatly. Given my party is saying we have to have so many hundred thousand extra houses and I represent a constituency that is virtually all houses, I just wonder what relevance there is sometimes to squeeze in even more houses rather than look at skills, jobs, leisure and so on. But that way lies madness if I pursue everything that excites me, as I did this morning. Do Eleanor or Richard want to add to that starting question?

Eleanor Thompson: Yes, just to expand on what you were saying about low engagement. We did some research for this inquiry and 24% of our students told us that they don't vote in British elections, so that is local, general or European elections. If you take that everyone is at university, they are an educated and not apathetic audience, I think a quarter of these young people choosing not to vote is an interesting percentage. What I would also say is that we put in a question alongside that question about whether they voted in the SU elections and there was very little difference in the engagement in SU elections between those who had voted in British elections and those who

don't vote in British elections, which I think shows that people do care but maybe there is something wrong with the Westminster system that is leaving people detached.

Richard Eastall: One thing I would add from a process point of view in terms of electoral registration is the system does not work well for transient populations. Given that young people and students are quite transient and move house quite often and their register is often out of date, often they are not registered or they don't know whether or not they are registered. I think the practical issue of moving house does not lend itself to registration. For people who move house quite often, the register is often out of date and students don't understand how and where to register and where they are entitled to vote and that creates problems in itself.

Q401 Mr Turner: I am not sure if this is true; perhaps one of you can tell me. In my constituency there are no universities. Are people more likely to vote if they are not going off to university than if they are going off to university where we have got this mess of people who are registered in different places and so on?

Alasdair Buckle: Do students vote in lower quantities than people of the same age who did not go to university?

Mr Turner: Yes.

Richard Eastall: I don't have the data on that. I know that participation is lower among young people more generally as a sector of the population. I do not know how it divides between students and non-students.

Eleanor Thompson: I think it is very difficult for us to say that because we only have access to students, so that is the audience that we work with. I would suggest that it is more difficult for students to vote because of the confusion over the registration for voting but I would also say that they may be more likely to want to vote. There are a lot of students who might be studying politics, that kind of thing, and that will encourage them to vote. So they get extra reminders to vote as well.

Q402 Mr Turner: What would the result be of allowing voting at 16 rather than 18?

Alasdair Buckle: Our students are almost all, with the exception of a very small number, over 18, so again it is not something that we have done research into. I would imagine that it would make people aware from a much younger age of the importance of voting and that would be while they were at sixth form or college. So potentially it might ingrain a better culture of wanting to vote, but in terms of evidence I don't think we have anything that could give you that information.

Q403 Fabian Hamilton: Can I ask you about online voting? Do you think it would be sensible for parliamentarians to look at the possibility of online voting for local, general and European Parliament elections? The problem, of course, is that when that possibility is being discussed the first question that comes up is fraud, and yet we have online banking that is generally pretty secure. What is your view on this, if you have one?

Alasdair Buckle: I think absolutely it would increase engagement particularly with younger generations. We have a lot of statistics here that back that up in terms of 18% of our students who say that they didn't vote because they thought it was too much trouble to get to a polling station, which is a sad fact but a fact none the less. I would imagine online voting would potentially catch some of those students.

Eleanor Thompson: Our research found that 85% of those who said that they don't vote currently would be more likely to vote if they could vote online.

Richard Eastall: Our experience has been that prior to online voting at Sheffield, turnout generally was 4,000 to 5,000 students voted each year. Since we have had online voting it has gone up to about 8,000 or 9,000, so it has roughly doubled with online voting, and there has been a similar trend at other students' unions. Generally speaking, where online voting has been introduced turnout has increased.

Q404 Mr Turner: To what proportion?

Richard Eastall: It has gone up to about 36% of the student population.

Alasdair Buckle: On the fraud question, we have never had an issue with electoral fraud. The Oxford Students' Union a couple of weeks ago had an issue with paper ballot fraud in an election, so if you are going on students' unions and their levels of fraud dependent on their voting systems, seemingly paper is more likely to cause issues.

Q405 Fabian Hamilton: That is very helpful. Do you think that there are any other changes apart from online voting that would encourage young people to vote at national elections and local elections?

Alasdair Buckle: Simplifying the electoral registration system. You still have to print off a form, fill it out and post it in. I don't know if that is the case everywhere but certainly in Sheffield that is the case and that seems like a very antiquated system to people who generally don't post letters much.

Q406 Fabian Hamilton: So online registration would be helpful as well?

Alasdair Buckle: Yes, absolutely.

Eleanor Thompson: And perhaps on the day registration as well. In some of the responses, people seemed confused that you even had to register to vote.

Q407 Fabian Hamilton: I think the University of Sheffield was involved in a pilot scheme to integrate voter registration with enrolment. Do you think that is a good thing or is the fact that students are transient a problem?

Eleanor Thompson: It is a little different from how you describe. It is happening this year and what they will be doing is instead of acting as any sort of register for the council, when students register or reregister on to their course they will give them the option of passing their information on to the council through the university. So if the student says, "Yes, I would like to be added to the electoral roll", their information and contact details and national insurance number will be passed to the city council who will then need to contact them and the student will then need to confirm again that they want to be registered.

Alasdair Buckle: Again, this has all come in in response to individual electoral registration. Previously our students, when they arrived in their halls, would automatically be registered, so this is not necessarily something that is going to increase turnout. It is to negate the impact of IER.

Q408 Fabian Hamilton: Do you think that when people go to vote they should have to present some form of identity card, driving licence, student card or whatever it may be?

Alasdair Buckle: I guess it negates the possibility of electoral fraud.

Q409 Fabian Hamilton: Would it reduce participation?

Alasdair Buckle: In terms of participation? Well, I doubt it. Most students will carry some form of identification on them at most times, a driving licence or something like that, so I can't see that that would cause a major issue.

Richard Eastall: It does seem slightly bizarre that one of the main objections people raise to online voting is the possibility of fraud but the current system is completely open to fraud. It does not require any proof of identity at all.

Q410 Fabian Hamilton: Yes, and you mentioned the Oxford experience. Eleanor, is there anything that you want to add?

Eleanor Thompson: No, just to agree with my colleagues. You can go into a polling station and you see people's names listed in front of you. You could pick one off the list if you wanted to. You mentioned banks before. When I use my online banking system, if I transfer money to somewhere else, they send me an automatic phone call to confirm, so it might be there will be some sort of system like that, as long as it were done properly. It was definitely raised as a concern among students that they very much agreed with online voting but that hacking fears would need to be allayed and so it would need to be a very secure system.

Q411 Chair: This morning I was very impressed by the number of people who referred to the history, and it is almost like a sense of civic duty because people fought damned hard to get the vote over the years. I often quote the three young men, aged 20, 19 and 21, who were hanged on the steps of the Shire Hall in Nottingham—I am sure we are no more barbaric than anybody else—in 1831 after they had burnt Nottingham Castle down on the news of the Reform Act not being passed, and they plucked these guys out of the crowd. It is our own sort of version of trying to win the vote in South Africa or anywhere else or suffrage for women more recently. Do you feel we should be teaching people a little bit more about the history and how important we have all felt it is to exercise that franchise and have made incredible sacrifices? People seem casually to cast it aside now and say, "I can't be bothered".

Alasdair Buckle: The history is very important. People should learn a lot about the history but you can't forget that for us the present is important. At the last general election students in Sheffield who lived in Nick Clegg's area went on bulk and voted for the Lib Dems because he was promising them that he would not increase tuition fees, and then within five minutes—and that will affect students. So although the vote was very important to our parents' generation, even more important to our grandparents generation because the people that they voted in went and spoke for them and did what they wanted them to do, we now have generations that have various parties to choose from, none of whom you are really sure are going to go what you want them to do when they get into post and that will create issues. I guess there is also an issue of social mobility and the fact that people don't tend to necessarily vote for who their parents voted for in the same way that maybe would have happened with the generation before. So maybe people are less loyal to a particular party just because that is what they were brought up with.

Eleanor Thompson: Just linking on to what Ali said, you are brought up in a society where the customer is always right. With broadband providers, for example, you look at the best deals, you go online and compare the market and you choose who is going to give you the best offer. If you chose one and then they decided to charge you double what they promised, you could go to the Office of Fair Trading and complain about it and you would get an apology from whoever it was who had let you down. I think we don't have the same mechanism for politicians and that is quite frustrating. It is quite disillusioning. Some of the students have said comments like—I noted one down this morning—"I feel we deserve better than the best of a bad bunch". I think politicians need to prove to students and the electorate that they will keep their promises.

Q412 Mr Turner: Quite apart from the fact that 20 years ago, and even more 40 years ago, we did not read as much or we could not read as much so we were not in a position to compare in every detail what politicians were held to account for, whereas now they are held more to account, would you say we are more likely to ignore our promises now than we did 20 or 40 years ago?

Alasdair Buckle: Tuition fees was not something at the bottom of the manifesto. That was the headline.

Mr Turner: I tend to agree with you about a certain party. I was talking about Conservatives and Labour.

Alasdair Buckle: Yes, I guess there is much more of an ability now to go and fine-toothcomb through a party's manifesto online and see what politicians have been saying on certain subject for the past five or 10 years. What politicians are saying, what they are saying they will do is far better recorded now, but people would have still picked up on what people were saying in the past and would have still held them to account.

Eleanor Thompson: Maybe we have a bigger voice to complain now. We have social media. If we don't agree with what politicians are doing, we can say so and maybe in the past there was not that opportunity.

Q413 Chair: Is it possible for it ever to be cool to vote for a political party? Aren't they a bunch of rascals and frankly you need to be a little bit of a fool to vote for any of them?

Alasdair Buckle: I wouldn't say that we just vote purely on what is cool. I get your point in that political parties seem very disengaged from young people but that is because they are, in my opinion. I can assure you that if a party came along that was focusing on young people, had some very broad policies and had young politicians in there and promoted diversity and things like that, young people would engage far more with the system if that party was in place or if one of the current parties adapted themselves to do that.

Q414 Fabian Hamilton: I don't want to leave Richard out but, Alasdair and Eleanor, as the younger two of the panel—sorry, Richard—can I just ask you what is the one thing that you think most young people would want from a political party if they were to engage with that party? You said that there is no party that really talks to young people. Well, okay, what is it that people want?

Alasdair Buckle: Certainly if you are talking about students, they want graduate jobs and they want some jobs created that they can move into. I think there is a real issue in that most of those are centred in London and graduates can't afford to live in London for many years and only if they are in a very well paid job, so that is creating quite a big issue as well. Lots of that comes back to house

building and things like that. There are some really key issues for students and young people that we don't feel at the moment are being adequately addressed.

Eleanor Thompson: As a staff member, I don't know if it is fair for me to speak for young people.

Alasdair Buckle: You can.

Eleanor Thompson: Okay, thanks Ali. I suppose we see our parents and they worked hard, bought houses, got jobs, did the right thing, to use their phrase at the last election. We do the same and if the tuition fees are £9,000 a year, realistically if you go into teaching, a well-paid job, you might never pay that off and it is frightening. So if a party were to work with young people, I think the best thing to do would be to consult and ask us on a more regular basis and an ongoing basis exactly what we want. You asked earlier when Matt Flinders was on stage about engaging, how you could get in touch with your constituents and understand what people want. I think it is about reading your mail and understanding what people are asking for, paying attention to protests. These are the ways that young people are engaging in politics these days.

Chair: Great. Thank you very much indeed, Eleanor, Alasdair and Richard. Thank you for your evidence and don't forget after this session, go and have another discussion, please talk to your friends and work colleagues and fellow students, and if you want to put more evidence in, we would be absolutely delighted to hear from you. Thank you so much.

Examination of Witness

Witness: **John Tomlinson**, Electoral Services Manager, Sheffield City Council, gave evidence.

Q415 Chair: John Tomlinson, come and join us. How are you?

John Tomlinson: I am all right, thank you.

Chair: Thank you very much for joining us today. You are going to round off for us what has been an incredible day. We had a fantastic session this morning. It was quick fire. There was so much going on and we all ran a little group and learnt a lot, and we learnt a lot about how to do that better as well. I keep saying that and the more of this engagement that we do outside of the Westminster bubble I think the better we will get at doing it.

It is lovely to see you. John, I am going to kick you off with a fairly general question just to get you warmed up, as it were. Tell us how your role and your duties interact with what is our central preoccupation, which is how can we get more people to engage readily, freely voluntarily and happily with the political process?

John Tomlinson: I am Electoral Services Manager at Sheffield. I am also currently the Electoral Registration Officer. My responsibility and roles are to get people registered, to inform them, to provide the administration that enables them to be registered and to proactively look for those people who are not there. Clearly that role has a bearing on voter engagement and there is a lot that we can do to help working with other people to get that up. There are some areas that affect voter engagement that we can't be involved in. Clearly independence from the political party debate needs to remain, so we can't get involved in that, but there are lots of areas that I think we could usefully be involved in.

Q416 Chair: In your own experience and in your own city, what have you done, what have you found most helpful in terms of trying to register some of the—we talk about people writing in “none of the above”. It seems the most popular party is the “Don’t Register Party”. I think there are about 6 million members of that at the moment. How have you been able to try to draw some of those people into registration and therefore enable them to vote?

John Tomlinson: The students are one community that have previously not registered a lot. Up to this year we have been registering people, working with the universities and getting lists from them. Their past system enabled us to register a lot of people and enabled them to register. IER is on its way and that would have disappeared and so we have worked together—we have already heard about the system that Sheffield University will be employing this year and Sheffield Hallam University will be employing it from next year to enable us to continue getting registration. There are other communities out there as well that are difficult to reach and unfortunately for us there is no one solution fits all. It is about understanding communities, engaging with the communities and trying to find out. We had particular success with the Slovak Roma community this year. One canvasser managed to get a connection with that community where we had not had it before and we got a lot more people in that community registered because of that. So it is making that connection. We have the same problem that in a sense politicians do. Our job for us to be successful is making that connection.

Q417 Chair: John, I am not trying to flatter you but you are well known within your own community of electoral registration officers as being one of the most active, proactive and imaginative. Therefore, there is a lot of others, if I may say so, who just take it very formally, just go by the letter. How do we get your profession to appear and actually be much more proactive, as somebody said this morning, in making the act of voting exciting and a celebration and a real joy of civic duty as well? How do we get that message over and how do we get the rest of your colleagues and professional colleagues to share your own obvious enthusiasm for doing this job?

John Tomlinson: I can’t talk for my own community. I know in Yorkshire, with the people that I meet with often, there are lots of things going on there. The student thing was a particular problem that made my name better known than that of others perhaps, but there is lots of work going on there. People are trying to find solutions, but quite often the solutions we find have little results and therefore don’t get flagged up. Last year we got a 94% return. If I managed to get a 99% return next year, that would get flagged up. If it was a 95% return, it wouldn’t get flagged up. There would be no, “What are you doing?” As a professional, my view is that I have not got to be distracted by whether we are flagged up or not, but just to work on and on and on at attacking those questions. There are millions of people not registered but the numbers are not that important to me. It is the fact that anybody is not registered; it is the same issue. Whether it is millions or one, I have the same issue because my aim should always be that 100% of people are registered.

Chair: Maybe it is a bit like MPs, that electoral registration officers are a bad bunch but everyone I have ever met has been really good and trying to do their damndest to get people registered, but I had better not go there.

Q418 Mr Turner: Of those you speak to, let’s put it, are you speaking for those who are alive or eligible? You have got people from other countries who are not entitled to vote. What happens when one of them comes to you and says, “I want to vote”?

John Tomlinson: It is about explaining to them why they are not eligible to vote and the systems that we have in place. So we spend as much time with that inquiry as we would with somebody

who was not, so that people understand. Partly it is a resource issue for me. If I can get the message across that they are not eligible, I am not going to get registration forms in from people who are not eligible. It is a problem every year. I have the parties telling me that, "We're under-registered". We have been out and we have got loads of registration forms in, and 50% of those that come in tend to be from people who are not eligible.

Mr Turner: 50%?

John Tomlinson: In the areas where that happens, yes, and that takes up my time. It takes time to process those forms. So, having that understanding about the franchise and who is eligible or not is very important for me to get out because then I cannot use resources.

Q419 Mr Turner: Does someone in my constituency who comes from Zimbabwe have a vote or not?

John Tomlinson: It would depend on their right to remain in the country. Commonwealth, perhaps, but do they have a right to remain in the country? My instruction to my team and what we do all the time is that there are different countries of eligibility. We never assume we know. We always check because it might change. A country may have moved out of the Commonwealth at any time and we need to keep on to that, so we never assume.

Q420 Mr Turner: Right, okay. Would you say that the challenges around electoral registration are pretty well known by EROs?

John Tomlinson: I think the challenges in the area in which an ERO works should be and probably are known by that ERO. The challenges I face would be different from the challenges of a neighbouring area such as north-east Derbyshire. I am largely urban, they are largely rural, and there are different challenges in making the registrations. I know the challenges I face. They would face different challenges and would need different solutions.

Q421 Mr Turner: With the solutions, we are not talking about legal problems. We are talking about how easy it is to get to houses.

John Tomlinson: Demographics, geography, yes, they all play their part in getting registration. For instance, in Sheffield one of the problems we have is an increasingly movable population and we send out over 1,000 registration forms to people each month, 80% of those to people who are registered in Sheffield but have moved. Keeping the register complete and accurate throughout the year is a challenge for us. In Sheffield there is a growing number of properties where to get to somebody's front door you have to go through a locked door first and that makes it increasingly difficult with canvassing. We get round it by working with the landlords to try to get access to those buildings. One landlord once said, "No, you press the buzzer, you go in, and you come out again and you press the buzzer". It is a lot of work for us to do.

Another issue that is increasingly coming to us is that people are very aware of their data and giving their data to somebody, a canvasser on the door, is a big issue now for them and the security of that data and quite often people won't do it. If they were convinced of the value of registration, I think we may well get past those things. One thing would be that the initial forms that went out would be returned a lot quicker, we would get a lot more back, we could put more resources into the canvassing we had to do if, when canvassers go and knock on the door, people are convinced of the value of it, that we are helping them, not interrogating them and trying to take something from them.

Q422 Mr Turner: What is the legal position if somebody refuses to give you information that is necessary for you to register?

John Tomlinson: We can prosecute.

Q423 Mr Turner: How often do you do so?

John Tomlinson: We have not chosen to prosecute in Sheffield while I have been working here, which is 30-odd years.

Q424 Mr Turner: Do you think it is necessary to do so?

John Tomlinson: The reason why we have not prosecuted so far is that it takes a lot of resources for that one person. By the time we went through the prosecution system—and we know other councils where they have done it—the reports come out in March, April and that is when they get prosecuted and that is when it is in the news. We do the canvass in September, October and it is a forgotten issue. What I have heard from councils that have done that is that they have not seen a significant increase in registration afterwards. That might change. With the new law allowing us to issue penalty notices that time delay goes away. There is an issue with the new legislation for us in terms of resources. We can issue a penalty notice but we don't keep the resources. It costs us money, resources, to issue a penalty notice and there is a balance we need to get there about whether the value we will get in registration is worth the resources or whether we are better using it in other areas.

Q425 Mr Turner: If I said, "I know you have done a murder but I am not going to prosecute because it costs a lot of money", what is the difference?

John Tomlinson: If somebody murdered and we prosecuted them and penalised them for murder, if the solution was if we don't prosecute them, we would reduce murders by 50% what would you do, and that is the question we face. Yes, people are not legally compliant but what is the benefit in prosecuting for us? It is not the same thing as a murder but there is that—my whole aim is to get as many people registered as possible, aiming for that 100%. Will prosecutions help or not? That is the issue really, or would I be better be spending those resources in another way and getting a greater increase in registration?

Q426 Fabian Hamilton: There is no representative organisation for electoral registration officers, John, comparable, for example, to the Association of Electoral Administrators. Do you think that is a gap or do you think that the Electoral Commission effectively fulfils that role?

John Tomlinson: I don't think the Electoral Commission can effectively fulfil that role because part of their role is to monitor performance and I don't see how they can represent EROs and monitor at the same time. But I don't think there is necessarily a gap because AEA and SOLACE together probably provide enough avenues for representation without adding another body. So I don't personally see a benefit in an extra body.

Q427 Chair: In terms of best practice, I am sure you guys talk to each other but wouldn't it be useful to have that forum that Fabian suggested to help? John, I keep saying this to you—I hope I

get paid afterwards—but if we could learn from you and there was a forum or there was a website or whatever, wouldn't that be quite helpful?

John Tomlinson: The forum in terms of electoral administration already happens within the AEA. That sharing of best practice does already happen.

Q428 Fabian Hamilton: So the needs are being fulfilled. You don't need another body.

John Tomlinson: I don't see the benefits currently.

Q429 Fabian Hamilton: You are not currently subject to Freedom of Information requests. How do you respond to a request for information and do you think you should be subject to Freedom of Information requests?

John Tomlinson: I think that when the Freedom of Information Act was passed it was never in Parliament's intention that EROs and returning officers would be exempt from Freedom of Information, so perhaps that ought to be addressed so they are included in it. From our own personal perspective, the line that we take when we get Freedom of Information is to first of all point out that we are not subject to that but if we can give the information, we will give it. If we can't give the information, if there is a legal barrier or we just don't have it, then we explain why.

Q430 Fabian Hamilton: It probably makes it a bit simpler for you because nobody can appeal against that because you are not subject to the Freedom of Information Act. It is your discretion.

John Tomlinson: Yes.

Fabian Hamilton: We on this Committee understand that you have been working closely with the university to incorporate registering to vote with the enrolment process, something I asked our previous witnesses about. How has that worked and do you see it becoming common practice in the future in other universities?

John Tomlinson: It came about because we have 40,000 students in the city in the two universities and up to now I have been able to get lists off the universities and use that for registration. Individual electoral registration was coming along and stopping that and also the requirements of sending a first reminder, a second reminder and then door knocking every inquiry that I send out to people faced me with a large amount of resources, because canvassing students is not easy. They are not necessarily, because of university time, in at a certain time and also in multiple houses of occupation, when canvassers go, they will not necessarily know all the information of their fellow residents' registration.

I am actually a registered student with York St John and I register each year for my course. It occurred to me that a lot of the information I put in is the information that I need for registration, so I approached the universities about the possibility of adding electoral registration on to their enrolment to their courses each year. I have been fortunate in that both universities have been very supportive of that and we have worked together. The process will be that the student will sit down to do a registration for their course. In their mind is registration. That is the great advantage of doing it this way. So they sit down and they finish off all the information they have for course registration and then they go on to electoral registration. They are informed that from now on the information will be passed to the ERO for use for electoral registration. They are asked whether they want to register in Sheffield, because they have that freedom. If they are registered at their

home city they don't have to register in Sheffield. One of my problems in terms of registration is I can't tell how many people I have.

Any information they give me, including that information that they don't want to register, can then be useful for me. If they don't want to register, I don't have to chase up those forms I have sent out to them, but if they say, "I don't want to register" there is a page that explains, "Well, perhaps you ought to go and check that you are registered at your home address", because that may not be the case, and how to follow up if they want to change their minds. For people who do want to register, we will collect the extra information that is not collected by the university, their national insurance number, nationality perhaps, and then that will be passed to me and we will register people. There will be information sent out but we will register people that way.

Q431 Fabian Hamilton: How do you share your work in this field with other electoral registration officers?

John Tomlinson: During the IER process there has been a university forum so we have been talking to each other, and I know at the first meeting of that I said my suggestion and other EROs took that up. I know Manchester has been looking at introducing it and some other people, so that will go ahead. After this year, I will be in a much better position to say, "Well, here are the difficulties as well as the advantages. Here are the costs and everything else". I am confident that if it works well at an affordable price then the majority of university cities will be taking it up.

Q432 Fabian Hamilton: John, as you know, the Cabinet Office has made £4.2 million available to maximise voter registration. I think most of that has gone to local authorities. Do you feel that you now have the resources necessary to maximise the number of voters registered in Sheffield or do you need more?

John Tomlinson: Any resources you will give me I will use.

Fabian Hamilton: So there is never enough?

John Tomlinson: I can use positively anything you give me. I think the money that has come is reasonable. I think they are reasonable amounts for us to be using, particularly in these times of austerity when they can't just throw money at it. The way that it has been given out has given us a chance to look at the problems we particularly face and the advantages we might have. So we will be having a road show in Meadowhall where people can register with people with iPads and stuff. Not only Sheffield but the rest of South Yorkshire will benefit from that, and we will look at other areas where we can invest money effectively. It gives us a chance to get into those under-registered groups that only add less than 1% on to my registrations but there is money there for me to begin to target and help them understand that registration process.

Q433 Fabian Hamilton: Have you any idea at this stage how individual electoral registration is going to affect registration levels here in Sheffield?

John Tomlinson: In terms of the figures, no. The Northern Ireland example gives us an indication that we will see a drop in registration. The advantage we have over Northern Ireland is that we have seen the outcome in Northern Ireland. EROs are well aware of the potential drop and have been working to move towards mitigating against that risk. So I think there will be a drop. I am not 100% sure what that percentage will be yet. As soon as we have gone through the IER transitional canvass this autumn, we will be targeting, as we always have, where the gaps are, so we will be

trying to get those filled. By the general election in May I would be aiming to get it at least up to the current registration but over and above.

Q434 Fabian Hamilton: Let me ask you finally whether there is any further guidance you need from the Cabinet Office or from the Electoral Commission?

John Tomlinson: The one thing about IER that has really pleased me and my colleagues in other cities is the amount that they have worked with us and talked to us and understood the issues that we face and have sought to bring about solutions that are workable. So currently I don't think there is anything more to come because what we have is very good and has been better than—some changes in the past have not had that effect quite so much and we have just been left with an Act that is almost unworkable, but it has not been that way this time so it has been a positive experience for us to work with.

Fabian Hamilton: That is very encouraging. Thank you.

Q435 Chair: John, thank you so much. Is there anything left to say, anything that you want to get on the record? Obviously we would love to hear from you anyway afterwards by email if you have any further thoughts.

John Tomlinson: I think the one thing I would say about voter engagement is if there was an easier solution, we would have found it. I think it needs a cultural change and it needs all agencies, so the people that have given evidence, politicians, administrators, everybody to attack the culture that has grown up about thinking it is not worth anything. That does mean, as well as the history of politics, of democracy, perhaps there is a way of highlighting how not being engaged, even though you have democracy, can allow people you may not want to govern you in easier, of which we may get examples from other states.

Chair: John, thank you so much for your time. You are our last witness today. Thank you so much indeed.