



Political and Constitutional Reform Committee

Oral evidence: [Voter engagement in the UK](#), HC 232 Thursday 4 September 2014

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 4 September 2014.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- Electoral Commission: follow up on 3 July oral evidence
- Electoral Commission: further follow up on 3 July oral evidence
- Electoral Commission: Response to New Europeans written evidence

Watch the meeting

Members present: Mr Graham Allen (Chair); Mr Christopher Chope; Mark Durkan; Fabian Hamilton; Robert Neill; Chris Ruane; Mr Andrew Turner

Questions 691 – 792

Witnesses: **Jenny Watson**, Chair, Electoral Commission, **Andrew Scallan**, Director of Electoral Administration, Electoral Commission, and **Phil Thompson**, Research and Evaluation Manager, Electoral Commission, gave evidence.

Q691 Chair: Good morning, Jenny, Andrew, Phil. Welcome. It is nice to see you again. You are getting air miles. I think you have been our most regular attendees. Jenny, did you want to kick off with an opening statement or go straight to questions?

Jenny Watson: I did actually, if that is all right, Mr Chairman.

Q692 Chair: Colleagues can ask whatever questions they like but this is part of our general inquiry about voter engagement, which is very important to us and obviously the timing of our report will be important too because it will be ahead of a general election and there will be a lot of discussion about how we engage more people. It is quite a long inquiry for us but a very important one and we feel the Electoral Commission is an ally in trying to make sure that we can get as much engagement and participation as possible. Jenny, welcome and please make your statement.

Jenny Watson: Thank you. We are grateful for the opportunity to come and, as you have noted, to speak to you again particularly so soon after the last session. I wanted to make some remarks about two different aspects that you might want to talk to us about today.

The first is the move to individual electoral registration. That only began on 10 June in England and Wales, so we are just 12 weeks in. It does not begin in Scotland until after the independence referendum, so we are at the very early stages of the implementation process. So far the early signs are that this first phase of implementation has been reasonably positive, both in terms of the confirmation process itself and the operation of the online registration facility, which has now been used by over a million people. The feedback on the online system itself, from those who have used it, has been positive so far, but there is still a huge amount of work to do. As I said, Scotland has not even started the confirmation process. The write-out is still ongoing in England and Wales and will carry on for a little while longer. Our house-to-house inquiries, whether that is for the purposes of following up with individual electors to remind them to register or to get information about residents in the household who need to be invited to register, are at a very early stage.

I say that because we usually come before you with a lot of accurate data and a great deal of hard evidence and today, in relation to individual electoral registration, we find ourselves in a rather different position. We have only a partial snapshot, so I hope that you will not think any of our answers to be obfuscation. We may simply not be in a position to give you, with the degree of robustness that we would like, the answer to your questions. To reassure you that we will be able to, there are three important points where we will report on progress towards implementation: this October on the confirmation process, next February on the write-out and the canvass, and in June following the election. That obviously will happen slightly later for the first two in relation to Scotland. At every stage we will also give an assessment on progress against our performance standards.

Separately, before recess we sent to you our latest research on the completeness and accuracy of the electoral registers. We were working on those reports up until the last minute, but I hope it was helpful for members to see them before the House rose and gave you time to read them before this session with us. As we set out when we published those reports, they contain one piece of good news. It does appear that the decline in the registers that had taken place over the past decade has stabilised over the past couple of years, but that does not mean that we are complacent. The research also shows that the number of people not correctly registered at their current address was at the upper end of our original estimates, and that is around 7.5 million people. That concerns us and should concern anyone who cares about the health of our democracy. I certainly know it concerns your Committee. As we set out clearly in the press release when we published those reports, they show that nobody should underestimate the scale of the challenge in ensuring the registers become more complete. I cannot overstate the importance that we ourselves place on rising to that challenge and ensuring that others do the same. We are happy to take any questions that you have.

Q693 Robert Neill: The first thing I was going to ask you was for an assessment of how IER had gone so far, Jenny. I suspect you have broadly covered that, unless there is anything else your colleagues wanted to add to that assessment.

Jenny Watson: If it is helpful, we can give you some—and I underline this—provisional data that we have had returned from the confirmation process so far for England and Wales, and I do stress it provisional.

Robert Neill: Yes, please.

Jenny Watson: The national match rate with the DWP is running at 79% so far and the national match rate following local data matching is running at 86% so far, so you can see that the local data matching is playing an important part. The variation in the match rate across England and Wales with DWP varies from 47% to 87%, so that gives you the scale of the variation across the country.

The variation after the local data matching is added in is between 70% and 97%. Phil, I don't know if there is anything else you want to add about specifics.

Phil Thompson: As you said, the local data matching does appear to be dealing quite well with groups who we knew would not get matched through DWP, people who are moving around a lot, private renters, young people, that kind of thing. So it does look like local matching with council tax and other data sources is picking up that kind of group of people.

Q694 Robert Neill: It certainly struck me in my constituency, when you sent me through what you had for me, that the two with the least good match—they were all pretty good—were those with the largest amount of private sector rented accommodation, which did not surprise me. Are you able to extrapolate from that how many people have actually been confirmed on to the new register so far?

Jenny Watson: No. I have pushed my colleagues very hard on that and we are not at a stage where we have data that we think are robust enough to share with you, but I can tell you that we will be able to say that for England and Wales in October and we will be able to say that in relation to Scotland in November.

Q695 Robert Neill: Thanks, that is helpful. You gave us two assessments of readiness for the transition before, if you remember, and you mentioned some areas of concern. In particular there was a reference to the IT systems and also contingency arrangements that you took the view had to be addressed. Did you find that they were adequately addressed before the transition began?

Jenny Watson: That is a good question. Let me divide it into three parts and we can take each of those. The first would be about the Government IT infrastructure where we had raised some concerns before live running. It is now running live and it is working smoothly. Having said that, we have also pushed and asked some questions—and you may want to do the same when the Minister appears before you—around particularly its operation in the run-up to the general election next year where the two areas we were interested in were capacity and downtime. Those have been answered to our satisfaction, but again you may want to ask some questions.

I think there are two other areas of preparedness and where we have seen things as we go through the process. One of those would be around IT locally and the other would be an interesting one around the open register, so we are happy to go on and elaborate on those if that would be helpful.

Q696 Robert Neill: What were the particular areas of concern there?

Jenny Watson: Around the local IT—and I will ask Andrew to say more about this—this is a new system and it is being operated by individuals. I think if we were to ask every local authority, “Has your IT run completely smoothly through the whole process?” probably everybody would say, “We had a bit of getting to do with the new system” or “we had a blip here or there”. Having said that, from those local authorities where we have had data we know that around 57 of them have had problems with their IT. In many cases, those have been—I don't want to underestimate them—blips, sometimes significant blips, but they have been ironed out through a great deal of commitment from staff in local authorities. There are around 12 local authorities where the problems with their suppliers and the software have meant that the write-out has been delayed. Andrew, do you want to say a little bit more about that?

Andrew Scallan: There has been delay but it has not been so significant to significantly impact upon the overall programme. So, while there have been some delays—and as Jenny said there are a

dozen authorities—the delays have not had a significant impact. At the moment there is nothing that causes us concern that EROs will not be able to carry out all the functions.

Jenny Watson: I do want to give the Committee a clear picture. The one other area where we are aware that there have been software issues is in Wales where some suppliers have not been able to provide their clients with fully bilingual software, so of course that has been a difficulty in terms of getting the forms right. Again, many people have found ways to work around that. Do you want me to say something about the open register now?

Robert Neill: You might as well, yes,

Jenny Watson: For those of us who have been used to calling it the edited register, we have a new piece of terminology to learn, and you are aware that the open register is the new name for the edited register. The wording that describes the open register is now very much clearer. I think it is fair to say that that has made voters aware of the fact that it exists and that in some cases their details have been added to it unless they ask to come off, and frankly they don't like that. You will be aware that during the passage of the legislation we said that we thought the open register should be abolished or, if not abolished, that we should move to a system where people were asked to opt in rather than opt out. I should also say that we have amended the wording of the letter that we provided to EROs to make the explanation of the open register and what people needed to do clearer. Andrew, I don't know if you want to add anything to that.

Andrew Scallan: As Jenny said, I think the important thing is that there has been a lot more public attention around the existence of the open register and the fact that you have to opt out. In some respects that is not surprising, given the fact that so many people have now had personalised letters that explain what the current situation is. I might just add that one of the other things that we have noticed is that the issues that we have received complaints about have been around the open register and not about the change in the registration system itself. So, while there have been some issues, we have not had anything from members of the public in any numbers that say, "We don't think we should be required to give a national insurance number". As Jenny also said, we are at the very early stages of the process and there will be a lot more engagement with people around that detail later.

Jenny Watson: That is an interesting and, I think, reassuring first finding. I mentioned the open register specifically, Mr Chairman, because it may be relevant to the work that you are doing on engagement. If people feel that their data is in some way being passed on to others, that may make them less likely to want to provide it for the purposes of registering to vote.

Q697 Robert Neill: Talking about engagement with the public, when you gave evidence before you told us it was very important that EROs sent out letters to voters in July to coincide with the public awareness campaign that you are doing. We have seen a briefing note from the ERO at Nottingham and the information that they gave was that in Nottingham the letters could not be sent out in July because there was a problem with the electoral management software and in fact they will not get sent out until September. Is that a one-off or is that more common? What do you think the impact of not achieving that will be?

Andrew Scallan: There are a handful of authorities who had to significantly delay their write-out as a result of the software issues. I know Nottingham has changed their software supplier in this process and I think they are hoping to issue it by the end of the week. So I think it is not very many authorities; some of them are very large authorities. The view from our communications colleagues is that that should not have a significant impact. There is something about knowledge retention, about the overall message that we put out in our public awareness campaign, but also the nature of this engagement with people is a very personal one. People have been warned to expect a letter and

what people will now get is a letter, albeit slightly later than originally planned. As I said earlier on, I think there is nothing in that delay that should stop the whole process going through.

Jenny Watson: As I think I said earlier, we know at the moment there are 12 of those local authorities, five of whom have one single supplier, where that problem has arisen.

Q698 Mr Turner: You said that if at any point you believe the risks of bringing forward the final transition are too great you will say so. Are you saying so? When will you be saying so?

Jenny Watson: As I said, we will be reporting on the confirmation process in October, on the results of the write-out and the canvass in February, and then in June after the election, which would be our advice to an incoming Minister, on whether or not we consider it safe to bring forward that transition. So our final advice would be given in June next year but you, and indeed anybody who is interested, will have an opportunity to see our thinking develop on that as we publish the previous reports. I am trying to remember if I have said this to this Committee before; I think I may have done. If you look at this whole process, the legislation says that the transition point is at the end of 2016 and there are important elections right across the country in May 2016: the Scottish Parliament, Welsh Assembly, all police and crime commissioner elections that cover the whole of England and Wales, including large cities, the elections in London for a mayor and assembly. I know Mr Durkan will forgive me if I exempt the Northern Ireland elections for the purposes of IER, but of course they are also happening. Our concern will be whether there would be substantial numbers of electors who would lose their ability to stay on the register ahead of those elections. We will not only be looking at the number nationally but also the variation across the country. I think you have already seen from the first answer I have given that there is variation across the country and that will be as important to us as the single number.

Q699 Mr Turner: The group that I have become aware of is those who live overseas. How will these changes affect people who are registered overseas?

Jenny Watson: There are two parts to that. We will be running a campaign ahead of the next general election that will build on the campaign that we ran ahead of the European elections to register overseas voters and there the changes will be extremely positive. The first point is that overseas electors will be able to register online, much easier for them, and they will no longer need another citizen to attest their application. So I think we should find that there will be many more overseas electors registering. We know from the campaign that we ran this year ahead of the European elections that we had around 80,000 people clicking through to see what they had to do to register but only 7,000 forms downloaded. I suspect the difference there is simply because it wasn't very easy to do. If you make it easier to do then I hope we will see substantial numbers of overseas electors registering. We have set ourselves a target that is aspirational of 100,000 overseas voters registering to vote.

Q700 Mr Turner: I thought I read somewhere that there is 5.5 million people overseas entitled to register.

Jenny Watson: Do you want to say something about that data?

Phil Thompson: There have been a couple of estimates about how many overseas British citizens there are, and I think one was 5.5 million and one was 6 million or 6.5 million. Within both of those figures, I think that is the global figure of British citizens living overseas. With the 15-year rule, the number who are eligible to register will be smaller than that global number but, having

said that, it will still be much larger than the number who are currently registered, which is around 15,000 on the registers at the moment.

Q701 Mr Turner: What is the figure that you estimate may be those who are entitled to register but have not registered?

Phil Thompson: We don't have an estimate for that, simply because it is very difficult or impossible to work out who is overseas, who has been overseas for 15 years who is still eligible therefore to register to vote. The estimates for the global number of overseas British citizens come from the IPPR and I think the World Bank estimates but they don't take any account of the 15-year eligibility rule.

Jenny Watson: I think we said when we came to the Committee before recess that it is simply a very large difference between the number—

Q702 Mr Turner: Surely it is unacceptable that we should have a huge number of people who live overseas who are entitled to vote but you are doing nothing about them?

Jenny Watson: No. The first part of your question I agree with: it is unacceptable that there are so many people who could be registered who are not. In that sense, they are one of the groups that we target specifically with our campaigns because they are under-registered. As I was trying to explain, and would be happy to share the information with you, we ran a specific campaign ahead of the European elections. Of course, in the European elections, citizens living in other EU member states would be entitled to vote in those countries rather than voting here and some of them may have done so. We are running that campaign again; we have learnt from it; we are working closely with the Foreign Office. I do think that having the availability of online registration will make a real difference. So we are aware of the discrepancy and it is because of that gap that we are focusing very hard on that group of people. We have an overseas voter registration day. We work with all the political parties, because they will have arms of their parties that are dedicated to reaching their voters overseas, and we work with a number of other interest organisations and campaigning organisations that reach British citizens overseas.

Q703 Mr Turner: Okay, I used the wrong words. It is not that you are not trying, it is that you are only trying to get to 15,000 people of 5 million or 4 million or 3 million, but still—

Jenny Watson: I am sorry, we have set a target for this campaign that we will run next year of getting 100,000 people registered.

Mr Turner: Yes, but what are we doing with the other 2.9 million, say?

Jenny Watson: I hope that we will reach far more of them than that but we may not, and we have to start with what we can do and hope that that snowballs. As Phil said, not all of those people will be able to register because they have to be within the 15 years.

Mr Turner: I am sorry, I said 2.9 million as a guess of those within the 15 years. It is 5 million, we have heard it is 5.5 million, of those altogether, including those beyond—

Jenny Watson: Indeed, that is right.

Q704 Mr Turner: The other thing I am concerned about is the likelihood of your receiving a ballot paper. I don't know how much time it will take now to get a ballot paper to Spain and then back from Spain to the UK. I imagine not as much as it would if you were in Malawi or Mali. What are the chances of your getting a ballot paper in sufficient time to fill it in and send it back?

Jenny Watson: That is one of the reasons why we wanted to see the election timetable changed to allow for the earlier distribution of postal votes. Andrew, do you want to say a little bit about that?

Andrew Scallan: That has now happened, the legislative change that came into force for the last elections, which means that postal votes can now be issued a lot earlier than previously and that will increase the opportunity. There is the potential that there will be another five days in the mailing time in the timetable. As soon as nominations are closed, very quickly after that the returning officers can issue postal ballot papers. There used to be a block on issuing them until 11 days before the election. That has now gone, so they can be issued very quickly after nominations have closed, subject to getting them printed, produced and despatched.

Q705 Mr Turner: Is that five days earlier or is it more than five days earlier?

Andrew Scallan: It can be more. It will probably work out at about five days earlier. It will never be an instant process that as soon as nominations close ballot papers can be issued. They have to be printed, collated and all of the mechanics that need to be gone through, but there is a longer period now.

Q706 Mr Turner: Is there a requirement for EROs to get these ballot papers out by as early as can be or is it just up to them how early they decide to send the ballot papers out?

Andrew Scallan: It is up to them; as soon as practicable, which means it is up to them. We give advice that says priority should be given to overseas electors and to service voters to make sure that they are issued as quickly as possible.

Q707 Mr Turner: What do you expect the differences to be between those earliest and those latest?

Andrew Scallan: What happens is that there is a standing list of postal voters that will include overseas electors. The main bulk of voters could be issued very quickly after the close of nominations. There is then a cut-off point for getting an application in to be a postal voter, which is 11 days before the election. There are usually two tranches of issue. What we have said is that even in the first tranche, if you can prioritise your production process—it may only save a day—you should prioritise overseas electors and service voters. People are dealing with very large numbers and quantities so there are some production processes that take time. What we have said is that within the early tranche priority should be given to overseas electors and service voters and then the rest, most of which will stay within the UK. Then there will be a second tranche that will be all applications that came in up to 11 days before the election.

Jenny Watson: I think your question is a very good one, Mr Turner, because it does refer back to some of the work we have been doing with our electoral advisory board, which is a group of senior returning officers who advise us in terms of thinking about how one might look at the role that technology might play in improving the process. Of course, one can quite quickly see that if there were one group of voters that might particularly benefit from some kind of difference in the operation of technology, perhaps because they could download their own ballot paper as soon as it

was issued because it has a barcode that says it is genuine and they can send it back, that would make the process faster. That work will continue from our perspective after the next general election and we will be bringing forward some suggestions about what changes might take place.

Q708 Mr Turner: Are those legislative requirements or are those administrative requirements?

Jenny Watson: It would be both. It would require legislation and it would also require changes in administrative processes and operations. I think in today's world it is a good example of the kind of questions that we get asked by overseas voters at election time. They can easily find our e-mail address, they can e-mail, they can ask us why they can't get a ballot paper sooner, but actually nobody is able to send them a ballot paper in a different way other than as Andrew has just described, so there is mismatch there.

Q709 Chair: On a similar point really, the black and ethnic minority communities and private tenants and young people are particularly groups that we are looking at to try to ensure their greater participation. Do you think if they are affected that that might affect your view in terms of the transition being extended or remaining at December 2016?

Jenny Watson: I think that comes to a point that we may have made before about when we will do our next study on the completeness and accuracy of the new register, which we would not be able to do until the publication of the new individual register. We would not have the detail of the nuance to be able to say what is happening with those particular groups at the time we make that advice, but what we will have is the variation across the country and that is the thing to which we will be paying very close attention. I don't know if there is anything else you might want to say about that now

Phil Thompson: I think it is useful to say that we will not be doing the full completeness and accuracy study that is the type of research that has given rates of registration for those types of groups in the past. What we will be able to do is what we did for the assessment of the confirmation process, which is look at the variation across the country in rates of response to the write-out and things like that in relation to known demographic things about different local authorities. We may well be able to see that local authorities that have a large number of private renters are the ones with lower response rates, for example. It won't be quite as definitive as one of our full registration studies but it should tell us if there is a problem.

Q710 Chair: As Bob mentioned earlier, if you know the demography you can break it down to smaller units and you can see, and Bob mentioned private renters, council tenants, owner-occupiers. In a constituency like mine, for example, it is nearly all council tenants and we can define quite clearly where people have bought and where people have then sold on to private rented. So it can be broken down further, can't it?

Jenny Watson: Yes, and I am sorry, I should have said that what we will do when we publish our report on progress on confirmation is to make that confirmation live-run data available in the way that we have until now, which is on a ward basis, and provide that to MPs so that you are able to see how that impacts on your constituencies. We are working on an interactive tool, a kind of geographic map, that would allow search by constituency a local authority area. We hope that that will also be a different and perhaps more useful way of presenting some of that information.

Q711 Chair: Is this all in-house stuff that you do? I am sorry to be parochial but just down the road from my constituency is Experian who obviously can do a lot of very sophisticated analysis on demography. Is that a capability you have or you might want to buy in?

Jenny Watson: The data that we are publishing will specifically be the confirmation live-run data and that is to give that transparency. I think we have talked to the Committee before about the methodology that we think is robust for the purposes of calculating completeness and accuracy of the electoral register, whereas Experian's data are based on something rather different. Do you want to add to that?

Phil Thompson: On the specific point about demography and that assessment, we did that for the dry run of the confirmation process and that was all stuff that we had done in-house using census data that are publicly available and available down to very small areas, as you said. Our intention at the moment is to repeat that assessment for the live-run data. We think we can tell the full story based in-house.

Jenny Watson: It is worth me reiterating that the legislation is clear about when the transition point is set out in law and we are focusing on those elections in May 2016, which are important elections right across the country. If, because of the degree of local variation that we see, there is a risk that there would be differential experiences as a result of IER, that would not be a compelling reason for us to bring forward the date of the transition. I do think it is right that we have asked the EROs to prepare as if the transition were to be brought forward because that minimises the risk, but I would not want the Committee to confuse that with the facts that we will be looking at when we make that assessment.

Q712 Chair: I am sure we all felt that young people were not participating as much as they should do, and there is some evidence around that. I do not know what colleagues feel, but it certainly struck me that that is a very strong theme that has emerged from the oral evidence that we have been taking. Somehow we have to crack this problem of young people feeling alienated from the system.

Jenny Watson: I am sure that is right. I have read the evidence with a great deal of interest. I have been following your proceedings. There is one piece of data that I did not give you in answer to Mr Neill's first question, which is what we know about the operation of the digital process, the online registration. That has so far, as of I think yesterday, had just shy of 1.4 million applications. Certainly, as of the middle of August, around 40% of those who were using that service were aged under 35. If that continues then we can hopefully see that that method of getting people to be able to register to vote is perhaps one that suits younger people better. If there are those of you who have not yet been to investigate the Government digital service performance dashboard on voter registration, it is excellent and I would advise you to do so because it gives you age breakdowns of applications to register to vote on a daily basis.

Q713 Chair: We are going to move on to completeness of electoral registers. Just to tee that up for you, on 22 July you did publish your report on the completeness and accuracy of the 2014 electoral registers. Would you like to give a brief summation of the most important points from that document?

Jenny Watson: Yes. I suspect the number that will be most memorable to everybody, including to us, is that around 7.5 million are not correctly registered at their current address. That is the upper range of our previous estimate—we had previously said at least 6 million people—and that is a figure of 85% completeness and 86% accuracy. There is a nuance below that. Do you want to add to that?

Phil Thompson: The other patterns of under-registration by different demographic groups that we looked at in this report was largely the same as what we found in previous reports. There was nothing that was substantially different in terms of the patterns. One thing that we found this time that we have not found before was an actual significant difference in levels of registration by social grade. The social grade group D-E recorded a significantly lower level of registration than other social grade groups, which is not something we have seen in previous studies.

Q714 Chair: That is 7.5 million out of how many? What is that as a raw number and as a percentage?

Phil Thompson: The 7.5 million is based on 85% of what we estimate to be the 17-plus eligible population in Great Britain. That is around 50 million, high 49-point million. 7.5 million is 15% of that estimate.

Q715 Chair: There are 15% of people who are entitled to register who are not registering?

Jenny Watson: Not correctly registered at their current address. That may sound like an incredibly bureaucratic answer, but it is important because they could be registered at a previous address.

Q716 Chris Ruane: What date was your report of 22 July on the completeness of the registers printed?

Jenny Watson: Printed? When was it uploaded online? It would have been that day.

Q717 Chris Ruane: Was it printed at all? Did you have printed copies, hard copies?

Jenny Watson: No, we do not produce hard copies.

Q718 Chris Ruane: Did you plan for that to be released on that specific date or was it later than that? Was it earlier than that? Were your timetables moved around?

Jenny Watson: If the thrust behind your question is could we have published it earlier than the last day of the session, which I suspect it might be, it would have been nice if we could have done. We were also publishing our statutory report on elections. I am afraid the thing that delayed it in this

particular case was that we had a critical member of staff who was ill for the best part of a week. The last exchange that I had with the team on it was on the Sunday evening, I think, before publication and it was not yet finished. It was being worked on right up until the last minute. We published it as soon as we could in the circumstances and I would argue that we moved heaven and earth to get it out before Parliament rose.

Q719 Chris Ruane: You said it would have been nice if we could have received it before then. I think it was crucial that we had it before then so that we could have had proper parliamentary scrutiny of this important document. The fact that you published it hours before Parliament went into recess for seven weeks' holidays I think was a big mistake and maybe you were thinking it was a good day to bury bad news.

Jenny Watson: I entirely disagree with you. I would very much have preferred that we did not have somebody who was out of the office for a week off sick and that was a critical person. I can assure you that none of my staff are malingerers and, given a report of that importance, if they could have been there doing the job they would have been doing the job. We published it as soon as it was finished. I consider this Committee to be a very important part of the parliamentary scrutiny process and you are here having an opportunity to ask us questions. It seems to me the alternative would have been to delay it until this week and I think that would have been a far worse thing. As it is, you have all had it. You have had the time to look at it, to become acquainted with it and you can ask us some good penetrating questions about it.

I must also say, Mr Ruane, that I do not think it will date. I suspect that the figure of 7.5 million is one that we will be talking about and I hope everybody who is interested in voter engagement will be talking about. The data that it contains are driving our public awareness campaign for the next general election. It will also provide data for EROs to use as they go about doing their work to get people engaged. Therefore, I think publishing it as early as we could was the right thing to do.

Chris Ruane: The headline figures: in 2010 it was 6 million, by 2014 it had gone to 7.5 million, and the Electoral Commission's response is to welcome this. It has stabilised. I think this is indicative of the importance that the Electoral Commission places on the issue of registration, to welcome the news that it has increased from 6 million to 7.5 million, or even, using your duff figures from 2010, 7.5 million to 7.5 million—to welcome that. Can I put that in perspective? With 75,000 voters per seat, that is the equivalent of 100 extra parliamentary seats, and that news is welcomed by yourself as head of the Electoral Commission. This is an absolutely disgrace.

Jenny Watson: I think you were coming into the room when I was making my opening remarks, so you may not have heard me say that what is good news in that report—and I hope all of the Committee will welcome it too—is the fact that the decline that had been happening over the previous decade has stabilised. That is good news.

Chris Ruane: You have had tens of millions of pounds of public money to carry out this function of a complete register and you have failed to do it. You have failed to do it while we are

having the biggest political and constitutional changes in 130 years, with the equivalent of 100 parliamentary seats missing from the UK democracy, and you welcome it.

Jenny Watson: I just explained to you that what we welcomed was that the decline over the previous decade had stabilised. We can talk a little bit about what we think caused that decline, but I think that is good news. What we also made very clear was that that figure meant that there is a lot of work to be done. That figure is consistent with the range that we previously set out. Phil, would you like to try to explain the point about the range and the actual figure?

Phil Thompson: The focus of our previous report, which was published in 2011, was the April 2011 registers. Within that report, we also published an estimate that looked back to the December registers in 2010 and that was done because all the previous reports that had been published based on census data used those post-canvass registers. That was an attempt to provide a comparable figure that you could look back at, but that was not the main thing we were doing in that report and, as such, the estimate we produced for 2010 was a range and it was an estimate. We said those registers were likely to be between 85% and 87% complete. Taking the 87%, that meant there were at least 6 million people not registered. Since then, not in the completeness and accuracy report we published but in the other report we published based on the census data, we have been able to look again at the December 2010 registers in more detail and that research has told us that the completeness of those registers was nearer the bottom end of that estimate; so not 6 million but 7.5 million.

Chris Ruane: When I first told the Electoral Commission that it was 6 million in 2009—and I got this data from Experian—first of all you rubbished Experian's figures. The figure that we have all been quoting, the Electoral Commission, this Committee and everybody else, is 6 million. That is the figure we have been quoting since 2010. Then on the day you release this new information that shows it has gone from 6 million to 7.5 million you say, "No, it was not 6 million. It was 7.5 million. Let us rejoice. It is still 7.5 million".

Jenny Watson: Mr Ruane, I am sorry about this.

Chris Ruane: I think this manipulation of figures by the Electoral Commission is absolutely despicable and it shows the priority that the Electoral Commission has given over the past four years.

Jenny Watson: We are not manipulating figures and it is extremely important to put that on the record.

Chris Ruane: You are 25% out.

Jenny Watson: Phil has just tried to explain to you very clearly, and I think he has done it, the range that we previously set out, which would have meant at least 6 million. We now know from the census data, which we would not have had access to previously because it is once every 10 years, that it was at the upper end of our range; that is 7.5 million. That is consistent with what we put out before. The 6 million figure has become used as a shorthand. We have explained to this Committee before why we do not agree with the data that Experian has suggested, because we do

not consider the methodology that they use to be accurate for the purposes of collating the electoral register. I am very happy for us to try to explain that to the Committee again, Mr Chairman, if you would find that useful, but I think it is on the record.

I would like the opportunity, because it might be helpful to the Committee, perhaps to look at the reasons why we think that it is proving more difficult.

Chris Ruane: Can I finish my questions first?

Jenny Watson: Of course.

Q720 Chris Ruane: I think that will be addressed later. I was here at the beginning when you gave an overview. You said, “Nobody should underestimate the size of the problem and we are rising to the challenge of having a complete register”. Can I refer you to your document here, *Corporate Plan 2014-15 to 2018-19*, and your key success measures for completeness, “Over the next five years the key aim of the Electoral Commission is that completeness does not deteriorate”. That is your aim. It is 7.5 million now; it was 7.5 million in 2010. By 2015, if we try hard, if we put millions of pounds of public money into that, we will not have a deteriorating register. We will still have 7.5 million people missing. Is this an ambitious target on behalf of the Electoral Commission?

Jenny Watson: I have that part of the corporate plan in front of me as well, so perhaps let me give some context. We have a section on challenges, priorities and plans. The key activity for that period includes the individual electoral registration programme, maximising registration, focusing on overseas electors and focusing on service electors.

Q721 Chris Ruane: That is fine. That is all there. That will be questioned afterwards. Just this one focus is completeness does not deteriorate.

Jenny Watson: Mr Ruane, I am just about to turn to that.

Chris Ruane: Right, thanks.

Jenny Watson: It is important, because the key activity that we will be carrying out is set out very clearly on page 12 of that corporate plan. In our discussions with the Speaker’s Committee that, as you know, agrees our corporate plan, we have had ongoing discussions with them about the need to have very clear, focused and measurable data against which performance can be measured. For this stage of the transition in IER, given that we have consistently said the register should be more accurate and should not be less complete after IER, that is the key success measure for the purposes of this transition. I would expect to see this develop as we go through the life of this corporate plan, which effectively takes us through to 2018-19. For this stage I think it is right, but it is not, on its own, the only thing we are doing and you cannot see that in isolation without seeing that we are also focusing on service voters, overseas electors, maximising registration and individual electoral registration.

Q722 Chris Ruane: That is fine, but the issue that I have been pursuing for 13 years now is the issue of the completeness of this register. I do not think that “completeness does not deteriorate” is an ambitious plan for an organisation that is having tens of millions of pounds of public money. It is the key democratic issue of today and you have failed in the past with it; operating to a document like this, you will be failing in the future. Can I move on? At every election—

Chair: If you are not asking a question then the witness is at least entitled to make comment like you have.

Jenny Watson: Might I respond to statements as well as questions, Mr Chairman?

Chair: Yes.

Jenny Watson: I do not accept that we have failed. Over many years we have had performance standards in place that, with the work that registration officers have put in, have raised the performance of registration officers across the country. We have run public awareness campaigns that enable thousands of people to register to vote. One of the things we may do is submit some additional evidence on Scotland, because we have been running a voter registration campaign in Scotland. To use that as an example, we have seen 100,000 voter registration forms downloaded in Scotland and 64,000 of our voter registration guides downloaded in Scotland. That is a good example of somewhere where we have succeeded. I do not accept that we have failed. This is a partnership. Getting more voters on to the electoral register cannot only be the responsibility of the Electoral Commission. We take it seriously and we play our part, but it also depends on a whole range of other organisations. We all want to see the register become more complete and more accurate and we are all working very hard to get it there.

Q723 Chris Ruane: Coming to your public awareness campaign, each election the Electoral Commission is given millions of pounds to try to get additional unregistered people on to the register. You set yourselves targets: the European elections in 2009, the target was 50,000; the general election in 2010, 142,000; 2011, 75,000; 2012, 75,000. Take the general election in 2010: of the 7.5 million who were off the register, your target was to get 1.8% of them back on the register in that campaign. Is that a sufficiently robust target or does it again show the Electoral Commission’s lack of ambition, lack of drive, lack of focus on getting people on the register just before an election? Is 1.8% ambitious enough?

Jenny Watson: Probably the best way to respond to that question is to follow up and write to the Committee with some information about the targets that we are setting for our current general election.

Chris Ruane: I want to deal with the past mistakes.

Jenny Watson: Well, I do not accept it is a past mistake.

Chris Ruane: Is 1.8% good enough?

Jenny Watson: I think we have talked to the Committee before about the difficulty of measuring our campaigns, because we do not have an exact correlation between the amounts of forms that are downloaded in response to our campaigns. What we now have is a great deal more information,

particularly with the online system, about the kinds of ways in which people are responding to our campaigns. I am very happy to write to the Committee with the targets we are setting for the future. Those are more stretching. It is right that they should be. It may well be that we come back to you in the future and say, “We set this target”, as I have just said to Mr Turner about overseas voters, “and we have not met it”, but I would rather that we had an aspirational target and we were working hard to reach it.

Q724 Chair: Is it possible to say you could have more stretching targets and achieve those targets if you had other support, whether it is resources or proper assistance from the other organisations you mentioned? Would you like to consider framing how we could move forward and have yet more people registered on the register? These things are very important and they do influence not merely how people vote and their right to vote. They influence things like boundary commissions, which are of great interest to Members of Parliament, and they influence our whole democratic structure. I have no doubt you want more people registered and I have no doubt everyone around this table wishes that, but in order to have yet more stretching targets, as you referred to, would you take that thought away and come back with, “If only other people would do the following or if only we had the following resources we could achieve way more than we are at the moment”?

Jenny Watson: One of the reasons I was saying, in answer to Mr Ruane, that I would like the opportunity to talk about what might be behind this is that one of the things we have seen, and we discuss this in the report, is much higher population mobility. One of the things that we know needs to change in the system is to have a better ability to interact with people who are moving around more frequently than they used to do, and I think we have had some discussions with this Committee about how the system might change in the future. For example, if you had more interaction with other government or public services perhaps you are being more readily prompted to register to vote. It is a very easy thing to say. It requires a lot more thinking and legal change to do.

The other single largest factor that we talk about in the report is the declining trend in political engagement. We all wish it were not so. We wish it were not so just as much as you wish it were not so, but it is having an impact. One of the things that is very interesting to me, and it is one of the reasons I say we might write to you about Scotland after the referendum, is that what we have seen in Scotland is a very different approach to an issue that is clearly of significance. People feel engaged; they can see the importance of it. They can see that their vote will make a difference and they are engaged in the process. They are signing up to register to vote. They are responding to our campaigns and I think it is fair to say that the electoral register in Scotland after the referendum will probably be the most complete it has ever been and that includes a large number of young people. Andrew may want to give data on the numbers of young people. The lesson I take from that is that we cannot separate what we can do from the general feeling about politics and politicians.

Q725 Chair: Although we see you regularly in your more conventional role with the Committee, this inquiry is about voter engagement. Therefore, you are just one of a large number of people and institutions we are talking to you, for you to pitch a vision supported, in a sense, by specifics and a shopping list and lessons from Scotland and elsewhere and, instead of being the people who get the brickbats because the register is not what it should be, you could be the people saying,

“This register could be way better if you, Committee, consider pulling into the public domain ideas around the following things, which are not necessarily always down to the Commission”. I am trying to lure you into a field where hopefully, on voter engagement, we share a common view, which is that the more people who are engaged in our process the healthier our democracy is. Do you think you could take that away and—

Jenny Watson: I certainly think we could write to you with some of the learning and the outcomes from Scotland. I think we might also want to think about some of those system changes and perhaps we can respond to you on that. Where I do think there is something else to say is about the way we work with other partners. It may simply be that hearing from the Electoral Commission, which is an organisation you may not ever have heard of, that it is important for you to register to vote may not have a lot of resonance. One of the things we are doing from now until the general election around IER and also around the general election campaign is working more closely with a range of different partners. For example, it may be that being told by Citizens Advice that it is important you are registered to vote will have more of an impact. We have a range of partners that we are working with. They have the audiences, we have the voter knowledge, and we are putting that together.

Q726 Chair: I am encouraging you and your organisation to take this opportunity under the ambit of a broader question, which is about voter engagement rather than some of the specifics we normally see you about, because there is a general election coming up. There will be a refreshed new Government of some description in place after the general election. To have that sheet of paper as part of our evidence will help us also put to that new Government how, in future years, we can do this general election better and do other engagement better. I am offering you that opportunity. I hope you can seize that.

Jenny Watson: What we will do is write to you with some of the thinking that we have shared with our electoral advisory board, because that might be in the best direction.

Chair: That is good.

Q727 Mark Durkan: I hope your observations on Scotland do not mean that what we have to do is contrive an exciting referendum as the best way of creating a context for significant registration. Without wishing to set aside any of the concerns, the 7.5 million as opposed to the 6 million is to do with inaccuracy rather than non-registration. It is incorrect registration rather than complete absence of registration. Is that right? It is including non-registration?

Phil Thompson: Yes. The 7.5 million may well be people who are not on any register, but it will certainly include people who are on a register but simply at an old address and are not on the register at their new or current address.

Q728 Mark Durkan: Has the revision in that overall figure knocked, in any way, the confidence around assumptions about the impact of individual electoral registration? Has it changed any of the working assumptions or confidences in that regard?

Jenny Watson: No. There is one thing about individual electoral registration that, as Andrew said, we are already seeing. It sounds self-evident. The communication is individual and people are more aware as individuals about what that means for them. There is one side of the debate that says that individual connection is a very strong personal motivator for people to register to vote and, once they have done that individually, they also know it is their responsibility to register should they move or should something change.

One of the other things that may help with IER is that electoral registration officers will receive different kinds of data. For example, if I move house and I register somewhere else, the electoral registration officer in the authority that I have moved from will get information that I have left that property. They can then send out a form to the new occupants of that property to get up-to-date information about who lives there. Of course, it is making the register more accurate but it is also making it arguably more complete. Having said that, you know the Northern Ireland experience and we would expect to see inaccurate entries coming off the register as a result of IER.

Q729 Mark Durkan: Yes, but in the Northern Ireland experience we also had a fall-off in registration for a period, a significant fall-off in registration.

Jenny Watson: Yes. There are a number of parts of the process that have been designed not to replicate that experience, deliberately with the Northern Ireland experience in our minds. One of the things that we have been pushing very hard is let us learn from the experience of Northern Ireland and design the process differently. The household canvass is a good example. Do you want to expand on that?

Andrew Scallan: I think it is important to remember that the process we are going through now is confirmation. Taking your point about looking at figures, what has happened this year is very similar to what happened during the dry run last year. There have been no major surprises around that, which is the point Jenny made earlier. Now the process will carry on of pursuing people at the addresses that the electoral registration officers know about. We know the electoral registration officers have very good address databases, so that process will carry on in writing and by knocking on doors.

Q730 Mark Durkan: Of course, address databases and house-to-house is something that cannot be done with overseas potential voters. If we find ourselves in the future talking around the notion of this stabilised figure of 7.5 million—say it carries through even after individual electoral registration—in those circumstances would the component of non-registration not therefore be higher as opposed to the inaccurate registration? Have you looked at what possible margins of difference there would be serious causes for concern at that point?

Jenny Watson: I think 7.5 million not correctly registered at their current address is cause for concern and I have made that clear on many occasions. We focus very hard on trying to get those people registered. Do you want to try to address that?

Phil Thompson: I think Jenny said earlier on that we are going to carry out another one of our full completeness and accuracy studies on the registers once the transition to IER ends. One thing that

might find is that the accuracy of the registers has gone up. The last one found the accuracy of the registers to be 86%. If that study finds that the accuracy of the registers has gone up to over 90%, 92% or 93%, then we would know that there are fewer redundant entries on the register. If the level of completeness looked like it had stayed the same then, yes, we would know that there was a larger group of people who simply were not registered anywhere, so that study will let us look at the balance between completeness and accuracy at that stage.

Having said that, before we get to that stage in terms of all the data we will collect from EROs, we will know or we will be able to make some assessment of how the accuracy of the register is changing. We will not be able to put a figure on it, but we will have information like the number of additions and deletions from registers as we go through the process, which will help us and give us some sense of how that is progressing.

Q731 Mark Durkan: But then looking beyond all of that, have you any projected models on the potential impact of IER in terms of the potential distribution of seats as under the current law is intended under the boundaries legislation? If IER in England and Wales does have the effect of reducing registration, that in turn would have the effect then of giving England and Wales fewer seats under the Sainte-Laguë formula that Parliament has legislated for, that out of the 600 that the law says are currently to be allocated in the next boundary distribution, but of course before the 600 seats are allocated, they are allocated to the four boundary commissions, so what difference it would make to the distribution of the 600. Have you looked at any models about if there is under-registration in England and Wales, what kind of range of differences there would make a difference to the number of seats England would get, and then relatively what Northern Ireland and Scotland would get, if Scotland is still to be counted in that situation?

Jenny Watson: We have not. What we would tend to do is to present all the data and information that we have and to make clear what the impact of that would be, and that would also include, for example, the data that we will be publishing from now through to next summer, looking at the impact of local variation. We have not engaged in a discussion about boundaries. That would be for the boundary commissions.

Q732 Mark Durkan: Yes, but it is not just about boundaries. This is not just the issue of local variation, because I think some people think, “If there is under-registration in certain parts of England that is not a problem. That is really a boon in certain areas of England where there is not”. But of course if there is significant under-registration, then England at large will lose whatever it says its due share of seats are to be allocated out of that 600, because that is the way the law works in terms of how the seats are to be distributed through the different boundary information.

Jenny Watson: I see the point you are making. I suppose I would respond that that discussion of boundaries and how they are composed would be for this place to discuss and we have been informed that—

Q733 Mark Durkan: Yes, but the law that you work under at the minute and we work under, says that the boundaries are to be set on the basis of the 2015 register, which will be on the basis of

individual electoral registration, so that is the boundaries for the next Parliament. That is under the law at the moment.

Jenny Watson: No, because the cut-off point for the transition to the new register is the end of 2016 in law. I think I was answering Mr Turner's question earlier: what we will be looking at is to give advice on whether that should be brought forward, given that the current Government has stated it wishes to bring it forward, but in law, that is not the transition point. So, as I was trying to suggest earlier, we are focused on those important elections in May 2016 and we would need to see some compelling evidence that it was appropriate for it to be brought forward, and you will see the direction of our thinking as we publish. It may be as we go through that that we can think about what references we might make to boundaries, but that has not historically been something that we have done, and I am not sure I think it is the role of the Electoral Commission to do that.

Q734 Mark Durkan: It would be a significant factor in bringing forward the transition.

Jenny Watson: Clearly it is already being discussed and we are all aiming for September 2014, so I note the significance of it.

Q735 Chris Ruane: Coming back to the targets that the Electoral Commission set itself for registration in each campaign: in 2009 the target was 50,000 people to be registered by the campaign; you did 137,000, three times as much. In the general election, 142,000; you did 460,000, three times as much as you had sought. In 2011, twice as much; in 2012, twice as much. Is the Electoral Commission deliberately giving itself low targets that it can dramatically overshoot and out-perform its targets to make itself look good? Why weren't the targets altered after each campaign to reflect the more rigorous testing targets? Is it again indicative of the lack of priority that the Electoral Commission has given to registration?

Jenny Watson: No, and I have already said that we will write to you with the targets that we have set for the forthcoming general election with how much we are spending.

Q736 Chris Ruane: Yes, that is fine for the future, but going back to these, why did you give yourself such low targets?

Jenny Watson: The targets are set by the team on the basis of the previous experience, the particular election at the time and the type of reaction that they think there might be to those campaigns. For each of those years that you have set out, there will obviously be different electoral events, so you might expect in 2010, which was the year of the last UK parliamentary general election, that there would be a great deal of interest. You might not perhaps—I do not mean to denigrate anybody working in local government—expect quite the same level of excitement about a year in which there are only local government elections, so we will also take that into effect and we will take into the effect the types of the country in that those elections are taking place and they will set a target accordingly.

I have said to you that I will write with the general election targets, because they are more stretching, and I do not disagree that stretching targets are a good thing, and I think you will see that we are setting more stretching targets now.

Q737 Chris Ruane: Okay, but you have just said there now, “We set our targets in light of the previous targets” so in 2009, you overshot by 300%, so when you set your targets for 2010, were they taken into account? In 2010, you overshot by 300%, so when you set for 2011, were they taken into account?

Jenny Watson: Why don’t I write to you with a complete answer?

Chris Ruane: Why can’t you answer that question?

Jenny Watson: Because I do not have that data in front of me.

Chris Ruane: Well, here they are.

Jenny Watson: Yes, but what I do not have in front of me, Mr Ruane, is what lies behind that, and my team will have done work that explains how they get to that. I answered your question much more fully: it will take into account the previous targets and the achievement, but it will also take into account the type of election it is and where in the country it is taking place and the type of campaign that we are running, for example is it a mass media campaign, is it a digital-only campaign. I do not have in front of me at the moment that detail for all of those different election campaigns. I am sorry, I was not aware that that was what you wanted.

Q738 Chris Ruane: Can you give the Committee an indication of the type of target it is going to be? Is it going to be as low as 1.8%, which it was in the last general election? We have had extra funding for registration; we have had online registration introduced; we have had IER introduced. The whole issue of registration has been up in the air now far more than it has ever been in the past, so the target you are going to set, is it going to be in the order of 1.8% or 20% or 30%?

Jenny Watson: I am afraid I do not have the target with me, but my colleague has a better memory than me and he suggests—

Chris Ruane: We are nine months away from an election and you do not have the target.

Chair: Chris, please ask the question and allow the witness to answer.

Jenny Watson: Thank you, Mr Chairman. I think the target that we are setting is 1 million registrations, and we will be able to tell that those are registrations because they will be driven online in the main, but I would prefer to write to you with that data, if that is acceptable to the Committee, because I do not want to mislead you by giving you an incorrect answer¹.

¹ The Electoral Commission subsequently confirmed that its target is for 1 million people to be added to electoral registers during the period of its main public awareness campaign, ahead of the General Election.

Chair: I think that would be helpful, yes.

Jenny Watson: Thank you.

Chair: Chris, any further questions?

Q739 Chris Ruane: Just finally, you mentioned Northern Ireland, Mark has mentioned Northern Ireland, and I think Andrew mentioned something about the door-to-door canvass, the full canvass that was undertaken between 2012 and 2013 in Northern Ireland, because registration rates, completeness rates had dropped to 71%. A concerted, focused effort on door to door canvassing took it back up to 88% in one year, so we know the effect of full canvasses, where they can have a positive effect. Why does the Electoral Commission tolerate up to 55 local authorities breaking the law and not doing this door-to-door canvassing in the run-up to the general election?

Jenny Watson: We know the canvass is important. That is why we argued for IER to be carried out in a way that keeps a door-to-door process, that is why we recommended the action that was taken in Northern Ireland. That was as a result of the research that you did. Andrew, do you want to say something about the house to house?

Andrew Scallan: The evidence we have received from electoral registration officers for the rest of this year is that they will be undertaking house-to-house inquiries, in accordance with the law.

Chris Ruane: They will?

Andrew Scallan: They will.

Chris Ruane: But they have not for the past six years?

Andrew Scallan: Some of them have not, no. They have said they will for this year and we have been very clear that we will be monitoring their performance and we will be working with them to support them, to make sure that they are carrying out their duties.

Q740 Chris Ruane: When will you be monitoring them: at the end of the process, during the process? If they are failing, at that point that you notice that they are failing will you inform the local MP? Will you inform this constitutional Committee? We would not want to end up before the next election with an extra 1 million or 2 million or even 4 million or 5 million people missing off the electoral register because you have tolerated law-breaking.

Jenny Watson: Again, I mentioned earlier on that when we publish in October-November, in February and March for Scotland, and then again in June, we will at each stage give an assessment of progress against our performance standards. In some cases, that may be a very early indication of progress, but I am very happy to confirm that if we find the need to do anything out of that reporting cycle, we will write to the Committee and let you know what we have done.

Q741 Chris Ruane: The door-to-door canvassing starts around this time of year, September-October. When will you be writing out to those 383 EROs saying, “Have you started your door-to-door canvassing?” and when will you report to this Committee?

Jenny Watson: We are reporting—

Chris Ruane: Dates.

Jenny Watson: I am trying to answer your question, Mr Ruane. We will publish progress in February, when we will give an assessment of the write-out and the canvass process. That will be a month later for Scotland, because Scotland does not start the confirmation process until after the independence referendum. At that point, we will publish everything. Should we find the need, for example, to ask the Secretary of State to issue a direction in relation to a house-to-house canvass outside of that process, we are happy to write to the Committee and tell you that we have done.

Q742 Chris Ruane: So February you are going to check on them?

Jenny Watson: No.

Q743 Chris Ruane: Can it be done in September and October and November?

Jenny Watson: You have just asked me when we would publish and I said we would publish the response to that in February. The process of monitoring is ongoing all of the time.

Q744 Chris Ruane: Can I ask if you can check as early as possible, two or three times over the next month or so when that door-to-door canvassing should be taking place; that you send an e-mail, pressing the button to 383 EROs and ask them are they doing it, because I would like to intervene in September and October and November, when they should be doing it, not at the end of the process.

Jenny Watson: We would welcome that. I think we have previously said we welcome all MPs talking to their electoral registration officers and asking them what their plans are.

Q745 Chair: But is there a continuous interaction with EROs of the sort that Mr Ruane is asking?

Jenny Watson: Yes, there absolutely is.

Andrew Scallan: That exactly is what happens, both from the Electoral Commission and from the Cabinet Office, who are monitoring the performance of the introduction of IER as well.

Q746 Chris Ruane: When will you report, interim report taking the pulse, especially those 55 who have been breaking the law?

Jenny Watson: I feel as if I am a broken record. We are going to report in October; we are going to report in February; we are going to report in June. In October, we will be reporting on the progress of confirmation. If there is anything that we have to say about house-to-house at that point, we can say it. We will be reporting in February. That is the point where I would expect us to have something robust to say about the canvass and about the effectiveness of the write-out, and at that point the Committee will get that information. If we are concerned—

Q747 Chris Ruane: At that point, it will be too late.

Jenny Watson: Why would it be too late?

Chris Ruane: Because of the canvassing that should have been done, that should have been monitored, perhaps on a weekly basis, for those 55 who have been breaking the law.

Jenny Watson: We have just explained to you that we are monitoring on an ongoing basis.

Q748 Chris Ruane: You will send that information to this Committee?

Jenny Watson: I do not think we can send you a weekly update of—

Q749 Chair: You mentioned October, Jenny. Is October a good time to report?

Jenny Watson: October is the time that we will be reporting on the confirmation process. If we have anything of concern around house-to-house inquiries, we can put that in. I said earlier we would give an early indication of progress against performance standards.

Chair: That would be very helpful.

Jenny Watson: That will be an early indication, but I would not want to give the impression that there will be a weekly report to this Committee.

Chair: No, I do not think even Mr Ruane is asking that.

Chris Ruane: Not at all.

Chair: But if you could let us know about the outcome of your monitoring in October, give us an indication, maybe a one-line report saying, “Things seem to be on track” but there may be some things you want to bring our attention.

Chris Ruane: A final question.

Q750 Chair: Excuse me, is that generally acceptable to you, Andrew?

Andrew Scallan: I think the only thing I would add is something Jenny mentioned earlier, that if—and this is exceptional reporting—we discovered an ERO, after we published our report in October, was not carrying out their functions, as Jenny said, we would then consider asking the Secretary of State to issue a directive, and at that time we would let the Committee know that that action has been taken. I think it would be by exception. If, through our constant monitoring, we felt someone was not performing their function, we would make a recommendation to the Secretary of State and we would advise the Committee.

Jenny Watson: But I would certainly expect our report in October, which in any case will give an indication of progress against performance standards, to do exactly what you just outlined, Mr Chairman. There is no discrepancy there.

Q751 Chris Ruane: If the EROs continue to break the law, if they continue to break their solemn promise to you and the department and they do not do it, the action that you will take will be to write to the Minister and that is it?

Jenny Watson: I think we have said that today, and I think we have previously said, that should we be concerned at any point—and it may not only be about house-to-house inquiries—that something is not being done that should be done in relation to the transition to IER, one of the options that we have available is to seek the Secretary of State to make a direction. I think it would have to be quite a high hurdle for that. In relation to house-to-house inquiries, I could well see that we might be asking for a direction from the Secretary of State. That of course has the force of law, and it would be exceptional for a local authority, in my mind, not to follow that.

Q752 Chris Ruane: How many times have you used that power over the past six years relative to asking the Secretary of State to intervene? Have you used it for local authorities that have broken the law for five years on the trot?

Jenny Watson: We have previously had the discussion with the Committee about how we bring people into compliance with our performance standards.

Chris Ruane: Have you used it?

Jenny Watson: No, we have not.

Chris Ruane: You have not?

Jenny Watson: We have made—

Q753 Chris Ruane: You find someone has broken the law five times and you have not used that power?

Jenny Watson: We have made clear to the Committee before that at the beginning of the process of the transition to IER, we had around a quarter of local authorities who were not on track and we have brought them into compliance by working with them in a different way. It is not the only way. There is peer support that can be useful to people in helping them understand, it may be a capacity issue, there is a range of different options, but we have made very clear that this is now an option that we are considering and we will write to you with that.

Q754 Mr Chope: I have a series of questions under the heading “Reaching unregistered voters”, which is in a sense a contradiction in terms because if people are not registered, they cannot vote. Can I ask you to start off with how many adults resident in the United Kingdom do you think are not entitled to be on the parliamentary register?

Phil Thompson: On the parliamentary register? People who are EU citizens, for example, would not be eligible to be on the parliamentary register. We know, I believe from census information, that there are around 1.2 million EU citizens who are eligible to register, and the difference between the total number of people who are on the local government register, for example, and the parliamentary register is about that size. What we do not have is an easy estimate of the total eligible population because of the way some of the information is gathered through the census, which would be the main way we would find it out. They ask questions about people’s national identity, they do have questions about what passport you hold, but then there are issues about dual citizenship, which is quite difficult to untangle. What we have is an estimate of the size of the eligible population largely based on age, which is around, I think I said earlier on, 50 million for Great Britain.

Q755 Mr Chope: So that eligible population does not include people who are ineligible?

Phil Thompson: That 50 million figure will include some people who are ineligible due to nationality.

Q756 Mr Chope: Why is it going to include those people? Mr Ruane is exercised about the percentage of people and obviously if you start off with a figure of, say, 50 million, and of that 50 million some of them are legally not entitled to even be registered, then why are you including those among people who you regard as potentially registrable?

Phil Thompson: I think there are probably two things within that. The 7.5 million people is based on the local government electorate, so that is everyone who would be entitled to be on the local government register, so EU citizens in addition to—

Q757 Mr Chope: So that includes the 1.2 million EU people who could not vote that would be on that register?

Phil Thompson: Yes, because that is the larger number, that is the thing that we tend to base that on. On the difficulty of reaching an ineligible population figure, I think we have previously taken the view that while we could attempt to tinker with the number, the age-based number of 17-plus, there would be difficulties with it around properly interpreting what it is the census is telling you around people's answers to national identity questions. That would give a false sense of accuracy, I suppose, to try to do that and say we have reached an eligible population figure, and that it was better to use that global 17-plus figure, acknowledge there will be people included in that who may not be eligible because of nationality issues, and accept therefore that the estimates like 7.5 million, which we always say is an approximate estimate, because it is a percentage based on the completeness figure that we have applied to a rough estimate of people who are eligible. So we always talk about approximately 7.5 million, another reason why we previously have talked about at least 6 million, because it is not a decimal point level.

Q758 Mr Chope: Going back to that base figure of 50 million, is that 50 million adults resident in this country? Is that what you are saying or are there more than that?

Phil Thompson: That is the figure, I believe, in mid-2013, people who are aged 17-plus who are resident in Great Britain, so excluding Northern Ireland.

Q759 Mr Chope: We know that there are a large number of people resident in our country who are not British citizens and are not European Union citizens and are not entitled to vote and are therefore not entitled to go on the register. Before this Committee comes out with a report about non-participation in voting, we want to be able to be clear as to those people who are not entitled to participate because the law does not allow them to vote and therefore they are not allowed to be registered.

Phil Thompson: Absolutely, and at a Great Britain level I do not think that those people would alter the general story or the approximate headline figure. That is one of the reasons why what we do not do is report in a detailed way at a local authority level based on population estimates. If you look at, for example, an authority like Kensington and Chelsea and you put the size of the register against the size of the population, it looks horrendous because in that particular area there are a lot of people who would not be eligible to be on the register. In other areas, that is less of the case, and at a Great Britain level, I think while the number is not completely insignificant, they do not alter that headline.

Q760 Mr Chope: But we must be talking about 5 million-plus people who are adults in this country who are not British citizens, not entitled to vote, would you think?

Phil Thompson: I think anyone who is a Commonwealth citizen will be able to register; anyone who is from the 28 EU nations will be able to register; anyone who has dual nationality, so they may be American, they would be able to register. I do not have a figure in my head for the percent or the number of people who are from ineligible nationalities.

Q761 Mr Chope: But surely this is a starting point for this whole discussion. We have to get the basic data from which we are operating clear. You are suggesting that you have 50 million people eligible to vote and you are working from that position, but it is quite clear that of those 50 million, there may be 5 million, there may be 4 million. We know that there are 1.2 million who are only entitled to vote at a local election because they are EU citizens. But we know that every year recent figures show net migration coming into this country going up into 250,000, which represents something like 450,000 people coming in from abroad and 200,000 people leaving. If we are getting another 450,000 people coming in from abroad every year, that is quite a lot of people, and how many of those do you estimate are entitled to be registered on the electoral register?

Phil Thompson: I think it would probably be helpful if we maybe wrote to you and set out what some of the numbers are, because I think the number of people who are resident who would not be eligible is much smaller than the number of people who are coming into the country or who are not British citizens, so I think it would be helpful if we said that in the figures.

Q762 Mr Chope: It would be very helpful. If you have those figures, could you let us have them?

Phil Thompson: Yes. They are census-derived estimates, so we can—

Q763 Mr Chope: As an aside, there is talk about not having another census. That would be a disaster because you would not be able to have even the information you have.

Phil Thompson: What we do not know at the moment is what we would be able to do with the type of census that is being proposed, so it is an online survey, supplemented by greater interrogation of other administrative data, so health records and things like that. The ONS has done a lot of work around estimating to what extent that would provide the same types of results as a house-to-house census and that is not something we particularly comment on, but what we do not know in terms of their detailed plans is whether what comes out at the end of that would let us replicate the type of study based on the census that we have just done and that we did 10 years ago. We do not know that and that is something we need to have more detailed conversations with the ONS as we get nearer to the—

Jenny Watson: I think I am right in saying we have put that point of view across, because it is an important part of the data that we rely on to do what we do, and we have made those views known as part of the consultation process. But we would be happy to write both to you, Mr Chair, and to the Committee, to set out that data in more detail, if that would be helpful.

Q764 Mr Chope: You can get data, you can find out roughly how many Somalis there are and how many Eritreans there are in the United Kingdom, neither of which group would be eligible to go on the register unless they had been here for a very long time and had British citizenship. It must be possible to get figures rather better than the 50 million for the starting point.

Phil Thompson: It would be possible to reach a figure for the number of people who in response to the census have said that they considered their national identity to be, for example, Somalian. I

think there may well be people within that group who would answer that question saying they were Somalian but they do have British citizenship. We do not know what the number of those would be, which again is one of the reasons we have not attempted what I think would be sort of tinkering with the headline number and giving a false sense of our robustness.

Q765 Mr Chope: Can I ask for you to look at it from the other angle as well? If there are about 200,000, 250,000 people, mainly British citizens, mainly people entitled to vote leaving each year, then over a five-year period that is well over 1 million. So since the last general election, it may well be that more than 1 million people who were entitled to vote in the last general election have moved abroad. What are you doing to try to track those people? You are saying at the moment that the latest figures you have of all registered overseas electors is only 19,000, and yet at least 1 million may have gone abroad within the last five years.

Jenny Watson: That comes back to some of the answers I was giving to Mr Turner earlier on about the work that we do to try to engage with people who are British citizens living overseas. Many of those people will be registered at the point that they move, because they will be leaving an address here and they are registered. We are working with the kind of organisations that support people when they are moving overseas, the kind of companies that send people overseas, property removal firms, that kind of organisation and the people that provide advice to British citizens who are moving overseas, to make it clear to them that they can stay on the electoral register, that this is how they go about doing it and to try to encourage as many of those people to stay on the register and indeed to become registered if they thought they did not stay registered once they have moved overseas. That is quite a focused programme of work and, as I think I said earlier, we do have—it is only part of the solution—an overseas registration day that does enable us to generate some kind of—they are a very disparate group and by their nature they are hard to reach. We are very dependent on consulates and embassies to have a form of contact with them and be able to be gatekeepers in encouraging people to stay registered to vote.

Q766 Mr Chope: But when we get individual electoral registration and somebody decides to go abroad, they will give the electoral registration officer the address to which they are going, will they, so that the electoral registration officer will know that they are now resident abroad, but would be able to continue to vote in the UK based upon their existing registration?

Andrew Scallan: It is not as seamlessly as that. Registration in Great Britain is fixed in the way that people are going through the change now. To register as an overseas elector, it is a different registration process because it has a different entitlement. It is not an entitlement to vote at every election, for example, so they do need to go through the overseas elector process, which is a separate process. But if someone tells the electoral registration officer they are moving, then the electoral registration officer will be in a good position to explain to them how to go about registering as an overseas elector and, as Jenny said, that facility is now available online.

Q767 Mr Chope: But that seems to be far less proactive, because what we are saying is under the new system, if you move, then the registration officer will inform the registration officer for

the area to which you move, but the registration officer is not going to take a similar responsibility if that person says, “I am moving to Paris”.

Andrew Scallan: No. The point I thought I had said was that if someone tells their electoral registration officer they have moved, then the electoral registration officer will explain what the process will need to be to register. It is about an individual registering and it is about that registration has to be done as an overseas elector because of their voting entitlement, which is different from the parliamentary franchise, for example.

Jenny Watson: It might not even be the case, of course, that people contact an electoral registration officer when they move, whether they are moving overseas or whether they are moving within this country, and greater population mobility is one of the very real challenges that these EROs are working much harder to get to the same level of the register as we have in the past.

Q768 Mr Chope: But this group—and I am glad you are prioritising overseas British citizens entitled to vote but not registered—those people, perhaps as few as one in 100 are registered and therefore able to vote. That is a very large gap in our system. Do you have more accurate figures than the 19,245 registered on December 2012? Has that gone up a lot since then?

Phil Thompson: No, I think it has gone down.

Q769 Mr Chope: It has gone down?

Phil Thompson: I think it was 15,000 on the most recent registers that were published in February and March of this year.

Andrew Scallan: There will be a spike, I think, because of the nature of the elections at which overseas electors can take part, so part of the reason why our campaign is geared towards next year is the fact that they will be entitled to vote at those elections.

Jenny Watson: I am trying to think of the last election: the referendum possibly, and then the general election that is forthcoming. Of course, it is also true, Mr Chope, that some of those people who are moving abroad may be thinking that they are making a new life in a different country and they no longer want to be involved in having a say in elections.

Q770 Mr Chope: Absolutely, but you have given us your latest evidence, which includes in the evidence the figure of 19,245, but it seems that you have more up-to-date figures that are less compelling, less persuasive, as far as we are concerned.

Phil Thompson: I am not sure which evidence it is, but if it is the evidence we originally submitted to the Committee at the start of the inquiry, it may well have been before the publication of the most recent registers. At the time, that may have been the most recent data on overseas electors, because we only have that annually when each set of registers is published.

Jenny Watson: I should stress that it is not only that they have the ability to register online. It is also that the process for registering as an overseas voter in respect of having to have another person to attest your application is no longer there, so that is another hurdle that British citizens overseas will not have to leap over.

Q771 Mr Chope: I am looking at the UK 40, which was your written evidence, and I do not know whether that was your original or your supplementary. It is your original, I think.

Phil Thompson: I think that will have been submitted before.

Jenny Watson: Yes.

Mr Chope: That is your original evidence, and that contains the figure of 19,245. Would it be possible for us to have the latest up-to-date figures?

Jenny Watson: That will have been submitted at the beginning of the inquiry. We will include that in the letter that we send with the remainder of the data.

Q772 Chair: Thanks, Chris. Jenny, very quickly from me: obviously when we are entering an electoral period, things are incredibly sensitive. Are you aware that campaigners can be concerned that when things are reported to you they are often inflated therefore as, “The Electoral Commission are investigating” or, “The Electoral Commission says this, that and the other” and, like all of us, your name can be taken in vain? Would you please ensure that any responses about possible investigations are always, as much as you can, framed so that they cannot be misquoted? There are a number of cases where people have used your words, not necessarily your personal words but those of spokespeople for the Commission.

Jenny Watson: I think it might be reassuring if we wrote to the Committee as well to set out the process that we use for when we do and do not comment on applications that have made to us, but I am afraid I do not feel that we are entirely responsible for those who find it very helpful to add to the end of the day press release, “And I have reported it to the Electoral Commission”, which seems always to be a good way of getting some coverage.

Chair: It is.

Jenny Watson: I am afraid that is as it goes these days.

Chair: Thanks very much, Jenny.

Mr Chope: Can I ask just one quick question?

Chair: Very, very quickly, Chris.

Q773 Mr Chope: It arises from my visit, which you very kindly facilitated, to the Tower Hamlets by-election, and one of the concerns that was expressed then was that one of the candidates in that by-election—who had been nominated only a few days after that same candidate had stood in a

different ward in the main elections in May—had a different name and a different address and he was standing in this by-election. I asked the returning officer about this and he said that because the name on the nomination paper and the address on the nomination paper matched, and matched with the registration on the electoral registration form, he could do nothing about it, although obviously this has caused a lot of consternation, because you have somebody who is standing as Mr X—

Chair: I am going to ask Jenny if she will write to us about that, because I have two electoral registration officers who have waited very patiently, who may themselves be able to answer this very question, so Jenny will be pleased—

Jenny Watson: I am going to refrain from commenting on it.

Chair: Yes, good. Please refrain from commenting.

Mr Chope: But not in relation to the by-election.

Chair: Thanks, Jenny. Thank you very much.

Jenny Watson: I have been told to shut up.

Chair: Drop us a line. Phil, Andrew, thank you for coming.

We overran considerably there, colleagues, and I do not wish to be disrespectful to our electoral registration officers, who have travelled a long way to join us this morning.

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: **Paul Lankester**, Electoral Registration Officer for Stratford-upon-Avon, and **Dr David Smith**, Electoral Registration Officer for Sunderland, gave evidence.

Q774 Chair: Paul and Dave, please come and join us. I am particularly keen to squeeze in the questions. Do forgive us for what was a very interesting session that overran there. I am so sorry. Is there anything you would like to say to start us off or do you want to jump straight to questions?

Dr Smith: I am happy to take questions.

Paul Lankester: I think it is better for your time if you pose the questions you wish.

Q775 Fabian Hamilton: Good morning, gentlemen. We have just heard from the Electoral Commission about the approximately 7.5 million people that are not correctly registered to vote and I wondered what role you think electoral registration officers have in bringing that number down.

Dr Smith: I think we have a huge role to play. From my perspective, while there are general national initiatives that can be taken to effect and improve registration, there are some very local issues that make a big difference to the impact on the number of people registered. Obviously very different mobility patterns, different demographics, different housing conditions all influence,

student numbers as well obviously influence the number of people that are registered, and the particular initiatives you take in that context make a big difference between the levels of registration. At a very local level it matters most to us to get as many people registered as possible. It matters for all sorts of reasons, but obviously principally from a principle of democracy and eligibility.

Paul Lankester: I agree with Dave. I think it is absolutely essential that we play a role in promoting. It is a service, elections are a service, and too often they have been run as administration exercises for administrators. What we have now though is something that I like to call a 21st century electoral registration system, but we still have an 18th century voting system, electoral system, and it is trying to match those up. One of the things about a better electoral registration system may well be that apparently voter turnout will go down, because if you get better at that and people still do not vote, then you will have an impact on percentage figures.

But I think it is all about a continuing emphasis on trying to ensure people, when they move into an area, part of their pack in moving in is, “Here is about electoral registration”. I think there is a difficulty over the two registers, the one for sale, and that has probably caused the biggest exercise in complaints I have received in my time of 13 years as an electoral registration officer, 3,000 complaints in the last month from the current canvass, and that is fairly universal from my talking to other electoral registration officers. People do not want to be on that sold register.

Q776 Fabian Hamilton: Yes, that is very interesting, isn't it? Of course, there could be a contradiction here. There could be an increase in the numbers of voting but a decline in the percentage of those registered to vote.

Paul Lankester: That is right, yes.

Q777 Fabian Hamilton: That would be a slight contradiction, but anyway, could you tell us what are the main challenges you face in producing an electoral register that includes everyone in your area who is eligible to vote? How would you characterise the response to those challenges across the country? Do you think that everyone involved, electoral registration officers, the Electoral Commission, the Government, in fact is doing enough to ensure that everyone who is eligible to vote is registered to vote? Obviously you have heard our discussion earlier and my colleagues talking about this as well.

Paul Lankester: I will start, because I think the issue for me is very different from Dave, who is in an urban area. I am in a rural area. I have properties that are half a mile to a mile apart, so you can imagine the logistics of visiting each property through gates and everything else. It is quite different than when you are in an urban area where you can quickly get around to deal with services, but we deal with other services in that same way.

The IER is a big step forward with the ability now to register on the internet and by phone and that has helped significantly in terms of overcoming some of the obstacles I had. In some ways, we used to look at it as a value for money exercise. We do visit every property, that is part of the requirement, but before we would have said that to spend—in a time of austerity—£7,500 per 1%

increase, as we were getting, because we went from 95% to 97%, about that sort of level, in terms of going from not to every property to every property. I think the issue is that people think that the process we have is restrictive to them. If we could have electronic registration right up to the day of the election, because some people do not even think about elections until the last possible minute—we are embedded in it, we are in a political environment, so we know when things are happening and how they are happening. Some people do not really realise until it hits them and sometimes the registration date has passed. That is when people get caught out, when they are going overseas on holidays, because they did not want to do a postal vote and this sort of thing.

But for me, the other bit is around students; that is a real difficulty. The transient nature of students is such that when it was one person registering for all of them, they would be on two registers. We did surveys of people who do not vote, and it is something like, “Why haven’t you voted?” “I was a student and I voted where I was at at university” even though they are on our register as well. We have this sort of dimension that I think that when you move to the electronic registration and complete it there, you can start to take out some of the double issues and that will help.

The last bit that I would say is that some of the forms still get assumed to be junk mail and we do not have an easy way of overcoming that when you move to the paper side; people do not realise what it is. I regret to say that some of my residents see something that is from the council, therefore they put it in the bin and then wonder why they do not know what is going on. That is the nature of some of our community.

Dr Smith: From my perspective, we currently have 97% of our eligible voters registered and I do not believe there is a single sort of action that we take that achieves that. I also think there are things we have not yet thought of that would further close that gap. I do think it is about a series of actions that have a cumulative effect over time to improve your registration. It is simply hard yards, a lot of it, which is why I have always supported the Electoral Commission’s view about canvassing. I think that door-knocking is as important as the write-outs, and in Sunderland we have taken an additional step of we also write out in February to try to encourage those who are not quite over the line and registered to do so, in the hope that if we do it close enough to the election it is on their minds.

I think actions like that and others that we are learning from other authorities who have ideas that we do not have, if they are relevant and pertinent to our communities, to improve our registration, then that is what we should do. I think there is never a day you should feel you have this taped, because everything in your community continues to change and evolve, and therefore there are new challenges and new opportunities to influence people’s willingness to register and to make it easy and available to them.

Paul Lankester: I think probably one thing I would add is about now the importance of social media, particularly for the young, and that is something we have to get a lot better at and get into people’s psyche on that.

Q778 Fabian Hamilton: You have also seen, I take it, Mr Lankester, what Sheffield University are doing on registrations, which seems like a good way forward.

Paul Lankester: Yes.

Q779 Mr Chope: You say 97% of the eligible people are registered, and congratulations to both of you for a fantastic performance, but how do you know that is the figure of 97%? Is that 97% of all the adults in your area, or might it be higher because some people who are foreign nationals and not entitled to be on the register have declined to put themselves on the register?

Dr Smith: Yes. Of course we can never be entirely satisfied that it is an accurate representation because the numbers do change and we are at the mercy of that, as anyone else. I think we have a view about the number of eligible voters that we are aware of and we go on checking the accuracy of that, and obviously we have been doing that again through the IER process and we will go on trying to ensure that we are as accurate as possible.

In a sense, from my point of view, the number is less important, the percentage is less important of those who are registered than an understanding of those who are not, so understanding that broadly what sort of number we are trying to deal with to get across the line who are not currently and where they may be, both in terms of geographical place and the type of people they are determines the best actions we can take to encourage those particular demographic groups to register. I think that is the key for me, so the key is to take a scalpel to this and understand who is not registered, understand why they are not and then focus your solutions on achieving those increases and go on measuring it to show that it is having an impact, obviously that we are using other resources effectively to improve the registration number, and if initiatives do not work, stop them and try something else.

Paul Lankester: I think we have looked at a couple of things, and we found that some people do not know that they can vote, because we try to target those where we feel there is a problem, and that is especially Commonwealth citizens, because obviously they can vote within the local elections and they do not realise, and trying to get that together is quite an important exercise. Tenants sometimes do not realise, and certainly if they are new to the private tenanted market or voting sector, they think the landlord is going to register for them. So I think with the move for more responsibility for the individual, we will get better and better. We base it on the demographics information we have and with the knowledge that we have in terms of those who might not be eligible to vote in terms of that and base that percentage on those figures, so the 97% is as accurate as we think it is.

I suppose to some degree, there are two elements. Why are we getting people to register to vote? What is the purpose of it? Is the purpose to get people to vote or to register to vote? Certainly if I take another hat, my hat as a returning officer, I want to get people to vote, because that is their inalienable right, not enough people do that and that creates a demographic deficit. I have a mixed view about going for 100% in terms of that, because is 100% achievable in terms of value for money and why are we doing it? That is a slight question, but that is for others to make that decision and we will implement the legislation in terms of that.

Q780 Mr Chope: Some of my colleagues think that there should be sanctions against electoral registration officers for not meeting targets and so on. Rather than going down that road, do you think there is anything to be said for having sanctions against the individuals who do not register?

Paul Lankester: There are sanctions against those who do not register. I think we would have to use the Private Prosecutions Code in terms of what we did, and is it worth it in terms of the public interest of doing something for that? If I take it back though, you mentioned about the sanctions for the electoral registration officers that are not there. I think in local government, we are trying very much to improve performance within the sector by the sector and I think there is a role for us to try to get colleagues to act in a way that ensures we get it through changes in behaviour in those registration officers, to be quite honest, rather than a person just doing it for the sake of doing it, because people's minds tend to go to how do they get around the systems to seem to be doing it and still not doing it. I would prefer to say give it to us as local government to sort out our colleagues who are not doing that. That is the right way forward and we will certainly try to help and promote good practice in ensuring it is there. But in terms of sanctions, sanctions need to be used very carefully and need to be used in a way that befits the situation, and it still goes back to my question why do we want people to register to vote?

Q781 Mr Chope: Are you aware of any EROs who use sanctions against individuals who do not register?

Dr Smith: I know of occasions when it has been done, but it has been extremely rarely. I think there is a great deal of reticence among EROs to pursue that, in the sense of Paul's point: to what end? It might mean that they register, and you arguably could say that they are even less likely to use the opportunity of having registered to vote if you set those sort of negative cultures around the reasons to register and to use your democratic vote. I think we are very cautious of it.

We certainly know from the experiences of staff who canvass—and I am sure MPs are more than aware of the sort of reactions you get on the doorstep—and we spend a lot of time with our canvassers training them about the messages to try to get across to persuade people about the positive benefits of being registered and obviously exercising their democratic right. It does not always work, as you will be well aware, but trying to set the right culture around this is important because it is not just the message that that individual receives, it is what they then communicate to their neighbours, their colleagues, their friends and families, and if we give them a very negative message, it obviously has a rolling impact, I think.

Paul Lankester: I think we would use the carrot and stick approach in terms of that. You do try to persuade and then when you do say, "You are running the risk now, if you do not register, then you could be liable to prosecution" and that is normally enough; normally enough, but not always.

Mr Chope: Thanks so much, and once again, congratulations on what you have achieved.

Paul Lankester: Thank you.

Q782 Fabian Hamilton: I just wondered what changes would enable you to improve voter registration in the areas you are responsible for. In other words, is it just a question of funding—we have already referred to this at the cost of 1% at £7,500 just in your area—and would better funding lead to higher registration rates, do you think?

Paul Lankester: Funding will always help, but it is not the panacea for all ills. I think in terms of that, I have a community that we do not normally get under 40% voting at any election, the police and crime commissioner election being the exception on that one, and we all know about that. In terms of most people do want to vote, they want to exercise that and we will get 70%-odd at a general election minimum, even more if there is some sort of local issue that is abounding at the time, but I have to say that I think it is more about giving more choice to citizens to be able to register and to see the benefits of registering.

To some degree it is, “Can we register once?” We have this Tell Us Once initiative, but we need to be very careful about how far we use that in terms of that. If people have registered to pay council tax, for instance, and people know they are there, residents sometimes assume they are automatically then registered to vote because that is all part of that. I would have said that if we started a change that when a conveyance is done, part of that conveyancing thing is perhaps a registration to vote, as a start that might be quite a good, slow-release burner that takes things up in time, but we have to make it as easy as possible for people. People claim they do not have time—I may have used that expression myself from time to time—and I think the more we make it easy and the more we give different choice for how you access this service then the better it will be in the long run. We have been trying an initiative with our contact centre and with our front of house staff that when someone comes in, we ask them have they registered to vote at the same time, and it is that sort of thing, “Do you want to do it now while you are here? We are at the screen, put this in, get that done” and that is quite helpful. I think perhaps not necessarily more money; it is working smarter might be a better way.

Q783 Fabian Hamilton: These are now ubiquitous. An electoral registration app, for example, is that something that is feasible, given the security requirements and making sure there is no fraudulent registration?

Dr Smith: I think the opportunities around technology are very feasible. I think we have to overcome challenges and ensure security and so on, but if we truly want to drive this further, and we should want to try to drive it further, but we should also have regard to the fact that there are laws of diminishing return on just doing the same things over and over again. I think doing things in new ways, there are some very fundamental questions for all of us when we are trying to do things, “What is in it for me? How easy is it for me to do it and what is the downside of me doing it?” If you can answer those—

Q784 Fabian Hamilton: So it is motivation?

Paul Lankester: Yes, absolutely.

Fabian Hamilton: It is motivation to register as well as technological ability to do so easily and quickly?

Dr Smith: Yes.

Paul Lankester: Yes.

Dr Smith: If you can combine those things together, then you improve your opportunity at best cost.

Q785 Fabian Hamilton: The Electoral Registration and Administration Act of 2013 made provision for electoral registration officers to issue a civil penalty to people who do not respond to requests for information. Do you expect to make use of this power and how common is it that people refuse to register?

Paul Lankester: There are a few individuals. We have some individuals; there is a certain sector of the community who believe that they have to accede to abide by the law. We have the same on council tax as well. We have some wonderful little cases there where they claim that they have to positively agree to the law before they will assess it, so we have some individuals like that and we could show you some lovely correspondence on those sorts of things.

There is some that cannot do. We have to think about the “cannot do” as well, because with the forms themselves, we do have a problem with people. I think there is more dementia in society, also with still some people with the inability to read, the basic skills. They have to be helped to get through and we are quite willing to provide that help, but there are also people who will not do because they do not believe that conformity to the national laws is for them.

Q786 Fabian Hamilton: So it is the same as people who overtake you in a 40 mile an hour speed limit on dual carriageway because the law does not apply to them, it applies to us?

Paul Lankester: Absolutely, yes.

Fabian Hamilton: So you get quite a lot of that with the electoral registration?

Paul Lankester: I get a small percentage of that, rather than anything else, and I am going to be very interested to see what the impact is for next year, having had these letters. I have had, as I say, over 3,000 e-mails or letters about the notification that you are on the register, saying that they do not want to be on the open register and the saleable register, and some of them are very vitriolic in, “What are you doing, Mr Lankester, in trying to sell our information? We think it is wrong. This is for voting, isn’t it, not for selling to companies?” We have persuaded in the past that if you want credit, one of the key factors why you would go on the electoral register is because the credit companies do their checks and look at that.

Q787 Fabian Hamilton: Does that alter their perception? Do they say, “Oh, I see. Right, okay, that is fine”?

Paul Lankester: Yes, we have had a number that had no intention of voting—and we had that in some of our customer surveys—it is only to ensure that they can obtain the credit they need.

Q788 Fabian Hamilton: No, I am thinking of the hostility about you selling the register. Does that change when you say, “If you want credit or if you want to do almost anything, you have to be on the register”?

Paul Lankester: I think it is two things. The credit agencies might buy it, but they do not sell it on. We have companies who buy it from us for less than 50 pence a record and sell it on for £10 a record. That is something that needs to be grappled with, and I suppose in terms of the people impacted, it is 3,000 out of an electoral roll of about 85,000, 86,000, but it is only of that 83% who matched, who had the records matching. It was quite significant.

Dr Smith: I also think that for the first time people are clear what an open register is and the fact that people are on it rather than electing to go on it or come off it. That is what people are objecting to, that they have not had control of the decision in the first place, and that has been at the front of this.

Q789 Fabian Hamilton: Have either of you ever issued civil penalties to people who refuse to register?

Chris Ruane: When did they start?

Chair: Chris, be fair, be fair. Come on.

Paul Lankester: I have not to date. We have managed to persuade the few people that we have down to responding, because it is trying to get through the gates of some of these properties; you cannot get through. It is that sort of side there, and second homes as well. That is the other bit that it comes up.

Q790 Fabian Hamilton: David, have you had that? Have you issued any penalties?

Dr Smith: No, I have not.

Q791 Fabian Hamilton: The Electoral Administration Act 2006 stated, and I quote, “A local electoral officer must take such steps as he thinks appropriate to encourage the participation by electors in the electoral process in the area for which he acts”. What do you think that means in practice?

Chair: We will have to be very brief on this, I am sorry.

Paul Lankester: I think that is a number of different things in terms of promotion, of getting into schools. We try to get into schools and get people engaged as part of what was the national curriculum in terms of the civic side, but then quite often we find that 18 year-olds lose it by the time they get there, so we are doing something different, we are trying something new on that. We will go out and actively promote the campaigns the Electoral Commission do, work with the Electoral Commission to try to ensure that people are able to see the importance of voting, but what we will also do is at every opportunity when we do get people coming to us and saying that they do not like things, particularly locally, "Have you voted? Make your vote count". That is what we try to do, but it is a non-stop message.

Q792 Chair: Paul, David, I again apologise to you, we overran and compressed your time, and I know you have both travelled a fair distance to see us, so no disrespect intended whatsoever.

Paul Lankester: Chairman, if there is any other information you wish, just do come back to us.

Chair: That was my next point, Paul. I know members are itching to ask further questions and if we may, if we can write to you, we would like to pick those questions up in writing and we would appreciate your responses.

Paul Lankester: Yes, we can do a consolidated response.

Chair: Why not? Thank you so much and congratulations on your excellent work. It really is inspirational. Thank you so much.

