



Political and Constitutional Reform Committee

Oral evidence: [Voter engagement in the UK](#), HC 232 Monday 13 October 2014

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 13 October 2014.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [Mark Williams, ERO, East Devon District Council](#)
- [New Europeans](#)
- [Samia Badini](#)

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Members present: Mr Graham Allen (Chair); Mr Christopher Chope; Tracey Crouch; Paul Flynn; Chris Ruane; Mr Andrew Turner

Questions 841 – 892

Witnesses: **Mark Williams**, Electoral Registration Officer for East Devon District Council and **Kevin Finan**, Chief Executive, Mid Devon District Council, gave evidence.

Q841 Chair: Kevin and Mark, welcome. Did you want to say anything to start us off? Anything you want to get on the record to start it off?

Mark Williams: No. I did submit a briefing note to give you some thoughts but as I understand it the convention is to answer questions.

Chair: Yes, it can be or if there is something you would like to set the scene with it is up to you.

Mark Williams: In terms of setting the scene then, yes, if it is helpful. I think—not just for myself but for most EROs—we are in a new situation now with individual elector registration and the key thing is to make a big success of that.

Kevin Finan: I think the other thing to say is that, for a small district rural area, it is not very practical to send people down farm tracks looking for remote properties during October and November. There is a risk to them and it is expensive in terms of their time, and we in Mid Devon have taken the view that that has not been a good use of our limited resources. We did carry out door-to-door canvassing in 2009 and 2010, where we achieved 94% and 96% respectively in terms of a return. But we found, when we used those resources to do more internal checks and telephone

checks, we managed to achieve 94%, 97% and 95% in the following three years. It was a much more effective way of using our resources.

Q842 Paul Flynn: I welcome the suggestion that the convention in this place is to answer questions. It would be a daring, pioneering innovation if you did that, but we live in permanent hope. As you know, we have been looking at this matter in some detail for some months now. Could you tell us what your particular priorities are relating to registration and the main challenges you face?

Kevin Finan: In Mid Devon, our priorities are looking at the elderly population and young electors, trying to find ways to ensure that they are registered. Challenges are things like lots of second homes, residential homes for the elderly, low levels of internet access in some areas, voter disengagement—that is a common theme—and the sparsely populated rural areas. That makes visits expensive, as I mentioned earlier.

Mark Williams: In East Devon, it is reasonably similar. I think the percentage of retired and elderly people is higher in East Devon than it is in Mid Devon, so that is a factor in terms of the number of empty homes we have. At any time we might have in the region of 2% to 2.5% of empty homes. A lot of that is to do with people who have gone into care, have gone into a nursing home or died, and the properties are with the executors awaiting sale. That is an issue. That apart, it is similar to Mid Devon.

In terms of the terminology, with under-represented groups, the main one is social renters and private renters, particularly in the two main towns of Exmouth and Honiton. In terms of a new challenge in East Devon, we have a new community being built, which is called Cranbrook. That is scheduled initially to be 3,500 homes of which I think 750 to 800 have now been built and are occupied, but it could go up to as many as 7,500 homes. That is a new dynamic for East Devon. The demographic profile of that town is massively different to the other towns in East Devon, so a much younger profile of people. Initially of course the development of the town has got away because of a lot of advanced funding from the Government through the HCA, so a lot of that has been social housing. It is people either from East Devon or Exeter in the main occupying that social housing, and that is an issue to make sure that we get similar rates there as we get elsewhere within the district.

Q843 Paul Flynn: To improve registration, is it a matter of additional funding or are there major changes that we need to make? I was rather surprised to hear you say that it was the elderly and people in rural areas who are thought generally to vote in larger numbers than people in urban areas or young people, but that is your experience, is it?

Mark Williams: It varies across the district. We have seven towns, soon to be eight towns. I think you can rely on a reasonable turnout at any election. You can see from the last general election the national average was 65.1% while East Devon was 72.9%, so you can always count on a reasonable turnout. A lot of that is to do with the more aged who I suppose still see it as their civic duty to vote. With regard to the youngsters—particularly looking ahead to IER—things like online registration are a real bonus to us. We can already say, from the work that we have been doing and preparing for the new register in December, that the take up of online registration has been good, particularly among the young but also interestingly among the elderly. Our eldest so far is 94.

Kevin Finan: I think you heard from two previous EROs, David Smith and Paul Lancaster, about the dangers of trying to get to 100%—the law of diminishing returns. If people generally move every seven years that means you always have 15% of the population moving every year, so it is always going to almost an impossibility to get 100%. I think those two were achieving 97%. We had 97% in 2012 and 95% in 2013 but with the election coming, up I think we will easily get to 97% in Mid Devon.

Q844 Paul Flynn: The Electoral Commission identified Mid Devon and East Devon as two of the 22 areas that did not conduct house-to-house inquiries during the last canvass. This is one of the Commission's performance standards for Electoral Registration Officers and it is also a statutory requirement. Are you in breach of your statutory duties?

Kevin Finan: I do not believe so. The statute requires the ERO to make arrangements as he thinks appropriate. In my mind it is not appropriate under those performance standards, given the circumstances in Mid Devon.

Mark Williams: From my perspective, over the years we have developed a system whereby through internal data matching, e-mailing and telephoning people who were not on the register, we managed to do the same—if not better—than just sending out people cold calling by door knocking.

Q845 Paul Flynn: I think you have repeated the view you expressed to the BBC. You said that you did not feel house-to-house canvassing was an effective use of resources with local government being cut. Other areas would take a different point of view and say that that built up the difficult-to-get-to and the reluctant to register on the list. But that is your firm view and you believe your experience justifies it?

Kevin Finan: I have spent the summer talking with all my business managers about how we will face the next £1 million worth of cuts next year, identifying which service is being cut, which jobs are going, which posts, which people are losing their jobs. Against that background, it seems very difficult to substantiate spending taxpayers' money on sending people down to remote areas to chase people up who have not responded to two or three notifications previously. Those are the judgments I have made prior to the current year where we are now required to do that canvass.

Mark Williams: Could I just add that I see it slightly differently? I am satisfied that, through looking at the matter afresh, if the objective is to get the voter to vote, you can do it through more amenable ways for the voter, which is dealing with them through the phone and through other means that they find more comfortable than necessarily appearing on the doorstep when it is dark outside or when they have other things that they want to do. That has been the experience. For me, I have achieved a good rate in terms of electoral registration without those issues. I can go into the history of it if you want me to, but I have achieved a good registration rate without those issues such that, if I am getting the 95% that I was for the most recent one and I know I have 3% or so of second homes and 2% or so of empty properties—I know there is a little bit of crossover among those numbers—then you are almost there or thereabouts if you accept that 100% is unrealistic.

Q846 Chris Ruane: It is my understanding that it is the law, that an ERO has to call on the houses of non-responders. Have you taken legal advice on this or have you just consulted with your officers?

Kevin Finan: I have just consulted with my officers.

Q847 Chris Ruane: If you are breaking the law—

Kevin Finan: Have been.

Chris Ruane: If you have been breaking the law, how will you explain that to your officers? Did you make your officers aware that this is the law?

Kevin Finan: I made the judgment that that was not a good use of our money and we made that as a budget saving in 2011. We stopped doing door-to-door inquiries.

Q848 Chris Ruane: Other authorities around the country have to obey the law and go and knock down windy lanes in November, but your ERO does not have to do that?

Kevin Finan: As ERO, I decided that that was not a good use of taxpayers' money to spend it on that. We found that—

Q849 Chris Ruane: So you as ERO decided to break the law?

Kevin Finan: We found when we were doing these canvasses, we were going to the same refuseniks every time. It was not resulting in many forms coming back completed and it was not a good use of public money. The law has changed for the IER where we have to do door-to-door canvassing.

Q850 Chris Ruane: No, it was in 2009 that it stated that you had to do it then. You have repeatedly broken the law.

Kevin Finan: I believe it says that it is as the ERO sees as appropriate. It does not say it is a requirement.

Q851 Chris Ruane: I believe that it said it is law and I think we need to look at that.

Kevin Finan: Can I just quote to you Sir Bob Kerslake and Eric Pickles who both exhort local authorities to proceed until apprehended, in terms of how they face these difficult budget decisions?

Q852 Chris Ruane: Mark Williams, your press release of 11 July stated that you would be appointing 10 temporary canvassers to start the work on 4 August to knock on the doors of non-responders, but the adverts for the canvassers were not placed until early September, a month after it was supposed to start. Why was this?

Mark Williams: In its broadest sense, the canvass includes all the work we do in sending out the initial forms, sending out the reminder form, sending out the subsequent reminder form. I am not aware of many EROs who will send out people door knocking while they are still going through that process.

Q853 Chris Ruane: Do you have a full team of canvassers?

Mark Williams: Yes.

Q854 Chris Ruane: How much are you paying them?

Mark Williams: I am now paying them £8 an hour.

Chris Ruane: What were you paying them before?

Mark Williams: The living wage, £7.65 an hour.

Q855 Chris Ruane: So you moved it upwards and you have a full team. Are they out on the knocker as we speak?

Mark Williams: No, they are going to start on 28 October.

Q856 Chris Ruane: Who is your line manager?

Mark Williams: My line manager?

Chris Ruane: Yes.

Mark Williams: I do not have a line manager. I have a chief executive.

Chris Ruane: Who guards the guards? You are the guardian of democracy in your—

Mark Williams: My councillors do that.

Chris Ruane: So your scrutiny committee scrutinise you?

Mark Williams: Not hitherto.

Chris Ruane: Why not?

Mark Williams: It is their choice, isn't it? It is the choice of the scrutiny committee as to what they want to investigate.

Q857 Chris Ruane: Are there concerns within your locality about your performance?

Mark Williams: Not hitherto, no.

Q858 Chris Ruane: Have you been contacted by anybody in your locality about your performance?

Mark Williams: Not until I saw the correspondence that you have received. I had never seen that correspondence until Wednesday of last week.

Chris Ruane: Nobody has ever brought you up about your performance?

Mark Williams: A gentleman appeared at our most recent council meeting to express some views. Yes, a gentleman appeared at the recent council meeting to express some views.

Q859 Chris Ruane: How many electors did you knock off the register because they failed to fulfil the two-year rule for signing the electoral register?

Mark Williams: I know that there is a blog and press releases circulated talking about up to 6,000.

Chris Ruane: How many do you think there are?

Mark Williams: There are two points that I would like to make with regard to that. I was looking at this Cabinet Office summary report that came out last month, in terms of maximising electoral registration. It was interesting, in terms of the 24 authorities—of which I wasn't one—that were involved in the pilot project. These were pilot projects to try to increase registration and turnout. One third reported a decrease in electors because that was to do with reflected improvements and accuracy ahead of IER. So that you are clear about the process that I followed, my understanding of what I was expected to do, in terms of preparing for IER, was to submit the cleanest possible register to the DWP so that it could do data matching and then get a return back of greens. Those greens would then be automatically passported on to—

Chris Ruane: How many did you knock off?

Mark Williams: In my opinion, I haven't knocked anyone off.

Chris Ruane: How many were there one year and not there the following year?

Mark Williams: None in my opinion. If you would like me to explain why, it is because this year I have been effectively running two registers. I have run the register for IER, which is in development and I have also had my old register that I have used for comparison purposes, particularly with the European election. For example, at the European election if an elector presented themselves to vote and they were not on the developmental register as I call it, the

presiding officer would phone up and say, "That's okay, they are on my old register. We will do a clerical error and they can go back on."

Q860 Chris Ruane: You are the ERO for East Devon, is that right? **Mark Williams:** Yes.

Chris Ruane: The ERO for East Devon is also the Chief Executive for both East Devon District Council and South Somerset District Council.

Mark Williams: Yes.

Q861 Chris Ruane: For South Somerset District Council, the registration forms returned via doorstep canvassers in 2011 were 12,507, in 2012 11,576 and in 2013 12,020. Can you give me East Devon's number of registration forms returned via doorstep canvassers for each of those years? If you cannot I can.

Mark Williams: There were none.

Chris Ruane: None for 2011?

Mark Williams: Yes.

Chris Ruane: What about 2012?

Mark Williams: None.

Chris Ruane: And 2013?

Mark Williams: None.

Q862 Chris Ruane: Are you proud of that?

Mark Williams: Yes, I am proud of my register because I am satisfied that my register is as accurate as it possibly can be without the need to have done door-to-door canvassing.

Q863 Chris Ruane: The doorsteps not canvassed in South Somerset: in 2012 there were zero doorsteps not canvassed for non-return of registration forms; in 2013, zero. Can you tell me the number of doorsteps not canvassed in your area of East Devon? The number of doorsteps not canvassed in 2012 and 2013?

Mark Williams: If you are talking about people turning up on the doorstep, the answer is zero.

Q864 Chris Ruane: There were 3,316 doorsteps not canvassed in East Devon in 2012 and 3,231 not canvassed in 2013. That is doorsteps of people who did not respond but nobody knocked on the door. Can I say that I think you are breaking the law and you are one of few authorities that have repeatedly and brazenly broken the law? What do you have to say to that?

Mark Williams: What I will say to you is that if the purpose of the system is to make sure that people can vote, I do not have complaints about not being able to vote in East Devon.

Q865 Chris Ruane: So you and Mr Finan are prepared to rest on 94% to 95% registration rates? To be fair to you, 84% is the national figure, so that is above that, but you have stable communities. If you are prepared to rest on your laurels for 94% then that means as a nation we must accept 3 million people missing off the register. Are you prepared for 3 million out of 45 million voters to be missing off the register?

Mark Williams: It is an academic question, isn't it?

Q866 Chris Ruane: It is a question of democracy. What price democracy? You and Mr Finan are saying that you cannot afford it. It is the wrong priority in times of cuts.

Mark Williams: No, excuse me, I have not said that we cannot afford it.

Chris Ruane: No, Mr Finan said that in times of cuts this should be relegated. It is not very important. It should be relegated. Do you share those opinions?

Mark Williams: I have not said that. You are misquoting me if that is what—

Chris Ruane: No, I am quoting Mr Finan. Do you share those opinions that £40,000—on a £200 million budget or whatever you have—is too much to spend on doorstep canvassing to fulfil your legal obligation to maximise the register?

Mark Williams: No. I am telling you that through approaching the matter afresh and trying to get to the purpose of what we are trying to do, which is to get the voters through the polling station or otherwise a postal vote, I can deliver to you the same rates and higher turnouts than you get elsewhere in the country.

Q867 Mr Chope: Can I ask you about people from East Devon who are British citizens who have moved abroad and are still entitled to vote, East Devon being the last place where they were registered? How many such people are there on your register?

Mark Williams: I am sorry, I do not have that number to hand.

Q868 Mr Chope: Do you think that you have a very high proportion of people who are eligible who are on the register?

Mark Williams: Two of my children are because they live in Australia, but that is just by the bye. I would not say it is a high proportion. Certainly anecdotally, when I do the postal vote opening, there are an interesting number of stamps that come through from around the world in terms of postal votes that have been returned, and I know that some of the national political parties have had campaigns to pick up overseas electors over the years. We get a few—certainly France, Australia, Spain.

Q869 Mr Chope: But you are not proactive at all in trying to encourage people to register from overseas?

Mark Williams: I would not pretend we were proactive.

Q870 Mr Chope: I think the message that comes through in your written evidence is that you believe in goal setting rather than prescriptive regulation and that, in terms of the goal of trying to get the maximum number of people registered, you have found the better way of achieving that goal is doing it in the way you have been doing it rather than going down the highly prescriptive route, which might result in a lot of wasted resource. That seems to sum up your approach. Is that fair and appropriate?

Mark Williams: In essence hitherto. I think that is the point I want to make.

Q871 Mr Chope: Why is it that your arguments about the benefits of goal setting regulation, rather than prescriptive regulation, have failed to find favour with the powers that be?

Mark Williams: In my short briefing note, I made the analogy about my experiences dealing with the Audit Commission back in the day when we had comprehensive performance assessment and comprehensive area assessment dealing with the benefits inspectorate, in terms of how they wanted my teams to be organised. All I can say to you is that every time we ignored their strictures we

came up with better performance than they were prescribing for us. I know the Electoral Commission do not necessarily see it in terms of a subsidiarity or respecting a local way that works. I accept that at the national level they have to do it in terms of, “This is a template.” All I am saying to you is that sometimes you need to look beyond the strictures of what the national overseer is saying and say, “Actually, if it is working locally there should be some flexibility within the system to say, ‘Okay’” but we still have to argue. I have no problems of being overseen by the Electoral Commission but there are alternative ways.

Q872 Chris Ruane: There is nobody else overseeing you. This is a question to both of you. The Government has made it clear that Ministers are prepared to issue a formal direction to any ERO that does not meet the requirement to complete house-to-house inquiries. How would you respond to such a direction? A Minister is going to write to you saying, “You are not doing your job, do it.” How are you going to respond to that?

Mark Williams: I would do it and I am doing it this year.

Chris Ruane: How do you feel about that?

Mark Williams: I think we are in a whole new ballgame with IER. I am not being funny about it but for me with IER it is the law of unforeseen consequences. I am going to do it, because I honestly do not know what the impact is going to be at the end of the day. The analogy I work with is my own family: if it is mum and dad and two, three or four adult children, when I was the head of household it was very easy. I filled it out and I sent it back in. Now I have to chase my kids principally to complete the forms.

Q873 Chris Ruane: With respect, it is not very easy because there are 7.5 million who do not do that process currently on the household registration, from certain backgrounds: black and Asian and ethnic voters, young people, people living on council estates or socially registered landlords and the private rented sector, which are the main groups affected in this 7.5 million. It is not easy and I think it is the attitude that it is easy that has resulted in 7.5 million people missing off the register.

Mark Williams: I am not here to account for every ERO within England or within the United Kingdom.

Chris Ruane: No, just your own.

Mark Williams: What I am saying to you is that, for example, in East Devon we are a council that has kept our housing stock. Since 2005-06, from data matching with our housing department, we pick up most—if not all—of the social renters without having to door knock, because we are doing it through data matching and then doing telephone calling and the like.

Q874 Chris Ruane: How many data matches did you use? As a local authority, how many sets of data are available to you and how many did you cross-reference in local data matching?

Mark Williams: My understanding is we do council tax, we do housing benefit, we do housing register, our own housing list—the people who are our tenants.

Q875 Chris Ruane: Which ones did you not use?

Mark Williams: Off the top of my head I don’t know.

Kevin Finan: That is the main source of data, those various datasets.

Q876 Chair: How do you think the Electoral Commission’s performance standards are affecting your work and could they be improved? Now is your chance.

Mark Williams: Is that a fair question? We work well with our local regional office of the Electoral Commission because they understand the situations that apply locally. I think a more purposive approach could be adopted by the Electoral Commission saying, “If you are achieving the ends then perhaps some of the bureaucracy need not necessarily follow.”

Kevin Finan: I think Mark alluded to some of the issues in his briefing note, but you have had a suggestion around people being required to bring a photograph ID to the polling booths. Well, that can only put people off. We have staff and ex-staff that man these polling booths. They are very expensive but it is the way we do it in this country at the moment. These people have been doing it for years. They know everyone in their community. It is a social event for them as much as an election process. If a farmer is getting off his tractor to call in to vote on his way between fields and we are saying, “Where is your ID?” knowing he is their neighbour, it will just make us look a laughing stock. That is an example of the sledgehammer to crack a nut process.

Q877 Chair: What is your general view about the IER process? You mentioned Mark alluded to the fact that it may be more difficult in your own circumstances, for example, but do you think it will have a derogatory effect on the numbers on the register?

Kevin Finan: Without a doubt I think the numbers will decline, but I think if this is the gateway to electronic voting and if we have electronic voting by 2020 then we will have succeeded. But if we don’t, then I think we will have failed.

Mark Williams: My view is somewhat simpler than that. I do not understand why it is not a duty to vote. I think it would help me in terms of my job that, in the same way it is a duty to register, it is a duty to vote. I accept that that is not the way of the world but certainly, when I look at some other countries, if you want to achieve a higher turnout rate then that is one of the things that works. If we go back to door-to-door canvassing, it has always been one of the weaker elements of the argument to get people to register when you say, “You will be able to get a credit card if you are on the electoral register” as opposed to saying, “Well, you have to register”. People say, “But I don’t want to vote”, but you have to register. It is one of those circular arguments.

Kevin Finan: In terms of compulsion, it would help us if that civil penalty resulted in income to the council. If we are going to alienate our electorate and put the effort and the cost into that process, then at least we should get the fine.

Q878 Chair: Taking you beyond your responsibilities, but we have you as witnesses so I will take the liberty of asking you this. We are looking at the general question of voter engagement. Just from your own life experience, what are the things that you think might be really helpful for this Select Committee to look at so that this next election—whoever wins it—will produce a serious increase in voter engagement at the following election?

Mark Williams: It is a good point because I do understand the importance of voting. Don’t get me wrong. Also, if you take a wider view of what it means to engage in politics, you can then see voting as an aspect of that engagement, whether it is through purchasing choices, whether it is through the organisations you join, or some perhaps who do lobbying. There is all that type of thing. I think there is an ability to express a wider engagement in the political world than necessarily just voting. Again, just reflecting on an interesting debate I had with a town and parish council once when I was doing a road show to try to drum up enthusiasm to get them to stand for election, the accusation was levelled at me, “Why are you not getting more people to vote?” I said, “I can run the smoothest, slickest election that is possible but if you are not inspiring people as candidates to actually vote there is not a lot I can do in that respect.” So I think there is an issue around trust, engagement and the willingness for the public to see that they are voting about something that matters.

I suppose you then look at the turnout for the Scottish referendum, don't you? It was a high turnout. Interestingly, it wasn't 100% because it was a massive question. It was a very high turnout and one we had not seen before. You got the feeling—outside looking in—that that question mattered to the people who were being asked to vote on that day. I think that is the issue, isn't it? The general election is the first order election within this country. People think it matters so they do come out. I realise that it has been declining over the years but, nevertheless, they do come out. I would hazard a guess but I think the turnout would be higher this time around. I think it is a more interesting proposition for the electorate. Certainly, if things proceed the way that they are at the moment it is going to be an interesting proposition for the electorate so I can foresee a higher turnout.

My job as RO—in whatever capacity as RO—is to make it as smooth and as convenient as possible and not put anything in the way, so that whoever turns out on the day they can vote. Whatever I have to do, in terms of clerical error procedures, the power to do anything to remedy a breach of regulation, I do that because you want to respect the fact that people have made the effort to turn out and vote.

Q879 Chair: Kevin, last word?

Kevin Finan: I think it is about why would people bother to vote. As Mark mentioned, you have seen that in Scotland and the PCC elections. In my own council, I have seen two examples of elector frustration, their frustration in raising issues over which the council has no control, because the Government has put them in a position over planning issues and dealing with standards issues that we as a council were completely impotent to have an impact on. For me, that raises the whole issue around devolution. If it is more important for people to have a vote on local elections, it would be because we have more accountability for local functions, but now so much of what we do is controlled by the Government, why bother?

Chair: I think you are probably pressing the buttons of most members of the Committee when you allude to that, and we are working on that one as well. Kevin, Mark, thank you so much for coming in today. Thank you for giving us your time and we will consider your comments very carefully as we complete our report. Thank you for your time today.

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: **Roger Casale**, Chair, New Europeans and **Samia Badani**, New Europeans, gave evidence.

Q880 Chair: You are coming before former colleagues in front of the Committee, Roger. I don't know whether you are going to relish this or whether it may traumatise you, taking you back to the time when you were a fellow Member in this House, but welcome. Roger, and, Samia, welcome.

Roger Casale: Thank you very much indeed. It is good to be back, yes.

Chair: Good to see you. Roger and Samia, did you want to say anything to start us off or do you want to jump straight into the questions?

Roger Casale: Perhaps just to explain who we are and what we do. We are a civil society organisation that exists to represent and promote the interests of people who move, live and work in other EU member states. For example, we estimate that there are about 2.2 million British citizens who live outside the UK but in the European Union, and probably slightly more non-British EU citizens from other member states of the EU who live in the UK. If you put those together it is about 4.5 million. If the British electorate is about 46 million it is a very sizeable pool of potential votes, and yet we feel that they are very under-represented. Part of the reason for that is that they are not registering to vote, particularly the British citizens who live in other EU states. So we are set up to research that, to promote registration and participation; political participation

through voting but also social and economic participation and active citizenship. But the emphasis is very much on exercising their right to vote, because we believe that if people have the right to vote then it is better if they exercise that right in order to be better represented. As I say, our work is both with non-British EU citizens who live in the UK and also very much with British citizens who live in other EU states.

Q881 Chair: Samia, did you want to add anything?

Samia Badani: I think Roger said it for me. I just want to thank you for the opportunity to be here and to assist you. I think one of our main objectives is to increase voter participation and actually voting. We want to see communities taking part in British political life.

Q882 Mr Chope: Thank you for what you just said because the written evidence very much concentrates on the issue of non-British EU citizens being able to vote in the UK. Yet you say that there are 1.6 million European citizens on our electoral register, which is probably quite a high percentage of the, say, 2.5 million of those who could be eligible to vote. Whereas the other way round, the number of British citizens living elsewhere in the EU—and Roger put an estimate of 2.2 million—we know that there are fewer than 17,000 such citizens across the whole of the world who are registered to vote in the United Kingdom to participate in a general election. So I am sure you would accept that, on the basis of those figures, the much bigger problem is trying to find and encourage those British citizens living elsewhere in Europe to participate in our British democracy and take part in a general election here because they do not have the right to vote in a general election in the country where they are resident. Would you accept that that is the bigger problem?

Roger Casale: It is a mirror image of the problem that we emphasised in our evidence, but we are just as passionate about the huge problem—and it is a huge problem—of enfranchising the British citizens who live in the EU. We were with the Electoral Commission last week and I believe that the number currently registered is actually 15,848. That is a drop from 19,101 last year. It is slightly up from December 2008 but it is a tiny number compared to the estimated 2.2 million who are abroad. We have been approached by the British Conservative Association in France, Robin Baker and Chris Chantrey, who we work very closely with, along with Graham Richards from Votes for British Expats Abroad, Conservatives Abroad, Liberal International and Labour International.

We know that a number of Members of Parliament here—including yourself, but also Geoffrey Clifton-Brown, the Member for the Cotswolds, and others—have been very active in particular in challenging the 15-year rule, which we support. We are pleased to see that the Conservative Party have made a pledge to remove the 15-year rule and we think that will be helpful, because why would you get yourself on the electoral register if you were only going to be pushed off it a few years later? We would certainly urge the other political parties to follow suit. We think that will help.

This is very much a focus of our work. We are working with the Electoral Commission to see how we can help to increase that number. We know that efforts were made before the European elections to get British voters to vote over here. There is some disappointment all round I think in terms of how effective it was, and we stand ready to help and we believe that we can help to push that number much higher than was achieved in the elections. So we are absolutely listening to this because for us it is about participation, it is about engagement and we need the contribution, we need the voices of British people who live abroad to be heard. Also I have to say, increasingly, there are a number of issues that are decided here that directly affect them, to do with pensions, to do with healthcare, and they need to be represented. That is why it is so important to get them to register to vote.

Q883 Mr Chope: Thank you very much. We are both on the same page on this. I am asking about this because your written evidence does deal with the other side of the issue so, rather than ask

you to repeat your written evidence, I would be grateful if you could spell out what specifically you think can and should be done to increase the participation of British citizens currently resident in the rest of Europe.

Roger Casale: We have been through very closely with the Electoral Commission the steps that they took before the European parliamentary elections. I have to say they worked very hard and they did a lot of very sensible things and I think they achieved quite a lot, so I would not criticise them for what they did. Trying to do it all from London is a little bit like sending a Morse code signal from Beachy Head to France on a foggy night. I think where we can help is actually getting under the skin of communities in the European member states themselves, connecting with the British diaspora who are there. Not least because, of course, British people do read things like the *Algarve Daily* where you can read regularly about New Europeans I am pleased to say. Of course they are also tuned into the media, the television, radio, and press in the nations where they live.

For example, I will be in Bulgaria in a few weeks' time visiting parliament and I will be interviewed on television to talk about the work that we are doing here to enfranchise the Bulgarian community. There are 25,000 British nationals who live in Bulgaria and I am sure a lot of them watch Bulgarian television and so they will get the message, so I think that is important. With respect, I also think that what you are doing, as Members of Parliament, is very, very important. I can remember from my time as a Member of Parliament people would come to me and they would say, "We did not vote for you but we think you are representing us very well". I am sure everyone on this Committee has had that experience. But of course if somebody has not voted at all, if they have not paid the ticket to our democracy, then that connection is much harder to make. So whether your expat constituents have voted for you or not, the fact that they have participated in the election will mean that they will feel that you can represent them and that their voice can be heard. I think once their voice starts to get heard, once they hear you representing them in Parliament, raising their concerns about the fact that, for example, they cannot open a bank account unless they have a UK address, that the tax rules are changing in relation to pensions, that it is more difficult for them to move their pensions overseas, that will encourage them to register and to participate more because they will have a representative.

Finally, I would make the point about the importance of civil society. The first thing I would do if we were asked—as we hope we will be through the work we are doing with the Electoral Commission to raise the participation of British expats abroad—is I would go to talk to Age Concern in Spain. Age Concern have opened an office in Spain because they have a very large number of British widows who are there who are perhaps in difficult circumstances, who need to access social care, healthcare, have pension issues. I will talk to civil society organisations and say to them, "Yes, Age Concern have opened an office there exactly for this reason. I will talk to them and ask them to carry the message about how important it is also for people to register to vote." So we have to get at it from both ends. We can send the message out from London but that will only get so far. We need to get at it from the other end as well. I see Members of Parliament have a central role to play because in the end the biggest reason for somebody to vote, whoever they vote for, is that by participating they feel that that person can subsequently represent them. If you can show that that is what you are doing by taking up their issues—and I know, Mr Chope, that that is something that you have done—that would be very helpful. We are very happy to interview you, to put you on our website, to put stuff out through social media across Europe so that people understand, and I know Greg Clark the Minister has done that as well.

This is the way to make people realise that, yes, it does make sense for them to go to the trouble to do it. We need to make it easier for them too but in the end the incentive is a really powerful thing. Mr Chope, you are the incentive because you can demonstrate that you will represent them, whether they vote for you or not. So long as they participate, you will speak up for them in Parliament and raise their concerns. I think if we get that message across it will help to go a long way to redress this pathetic level—I am sorry to use that word but it is—15,848 compared to 2.2 million. There are 5 million worldwide, so there is plenty of work to be done.

Q884 Mr Turner: You have just referred to what I was going to ask you, namely about those people who are not in the EU. Why do you limit yourself the EU?

Roger Casale: We don't, but there is only so much one organisation can do. We have a partner organisation called European Citizens Abroad who are based in the United States. They are reaching out to British citizens and citizens of other member states around the world internationally. There is a huge European and British diaspora around the world and we think it is a much underutilised resource. They are people who are very often very enterprising, through whom one can also make all sorts of other connections that are valuable to the UK. But our focus has been very much on these two groups of people so far: the British citizens, the 2.2 million we estimate it to be in other European member states, and the other side of that, the 2.3 million European citizens who are here. But absolutely, the same applies to British citizens around the world. We need to reach out to them.

I have Italian blood. I am quarter Italian and the Italians do this very, very well. When I was a Member of Parliament, I was invited back to Italy to speak in the Italian Chamber of Deputies, because they were reaching out to members of parliament with Italian origins in parliaments around the world, as a way of soft power, as well as cultural diplomacy, but this is another issue. I think that there is a tremendous resource if we show that we want to connect and engage with that resource. The central way of doing that is by enfranchising, registering and making people participate in elections. I think there is everything to be gained.

Q885 Mr Turner: So there is New Europeans, which I take it is European, covering the EU and others. Who are the others?

Roger Casale: In the British case we estimate there are 2.2 million British citizens who live in other EU member states and then 2.8 million who are in the United States and Australia.

Q886 Mr Turner: Is there a body like yours that—

Roger Casale: There is an organisation called European Citizens Abroad, which is based in the United States, who we work with. There is another organisation run out of Denmark called Europeans Throughout the World. It is nothing to do with the European Union as such. We are simply talking about the fact that citizens of other member states of the European Union live here, are building their lives here, sending their children to school here, building their businesses here and we want to engage with them. We want them to participate fully. As far as European elections are concerned, they can either vote here or they can vote in their own member states, but it is about participation and engagement. Many British people prefer to exercise their civil rights and their political rights here. That is fine, so we want to encourage that too. What we don't want are people to not have a voice, not be able to participate.

Q887 Mr Turner: I am still not absolutely clear. Who covers the countries that are not part of Europe, by which I mean the EU.

Roger Casale: Who covers that?

Mr Turner: Yes.

Roger Casale: I don't know. The way that we try to cover it is through partnership with other organisations, simply because there is only so much work we can take on. The two organisations that we work with: one is called European Citizens Abroad and the other is called Europeans Throughout the World. We also work with Conservatives Abroad, Liberal International, Labour International and they have an international reach. That is a global reach.

Q888 Mr Turner: Are you publicly or privately funded or a combination or what?

Roger Casale: We are run by volunteers and we are funded through private donations. You can find the form on our website and we would be very grateful for any help with that. We also have programmes that are grant funded, so we have to bid in order to do that work. The kind of work that we are talking about here, in terms of registering people to vote, is very resource intensive but we believe that we give very, very good value for money.

Q889 Paul Flynn: You are very generous in your praise of Comrade Christopher. Are other parties doing the same? Are there prominent people in the Labour and Lib Dem parties?

Roger Casale: In respect of the British expat vote or in respect of European citizens here? I think in respect of the British expat vote, we would like to see the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats follow the Conservative Party down the road of seeking to abolish the 15-year rule.

On enfranchising European citizens living in the UK, there I would almost put a curse on all the houses in a sense. I think none of the parties are really doing enough to promote this participation. The Labour Party does do things. It has Labour Friends of Italy as Labour friends, which is good but I think there is much, much more that could be done and I would urge all the parties to do it. Because, Chairman, with respect, they are missing a trick. There will be regional elections in 2016 for the Welsh Assembly and for London. In fact, all over Britain and the EU, citizens will all have the vote in this. So I think it makes sense for all political parties to reach out and engage because there is potentially a large political payoff for doing so. We stand ready to work with any party and all parties and none to encourage that engagement. What we want to see is political parties reaching out to this constituency, engaging with them, encouraging them to register and to participate and try to win their vote. Traditionally this is something that has perhaps been done at European elections, but what has happened is that we had a European election in 2009 and a census in 2010, and it wasn't until the 2010 census that we really picked up how large this number was of EU citizens, non-British EU citizens who live in the UK. So the 2014 European election was the first opportunity to go and actively seek their vote, which is why we ran our voter registration campaign so strongly. I think there is another opportunity in 2016 with the regional elections, and I would like to see all political parties stepping up to the plate a bit more and doing a bit better and the biggest gainers will be the ones who do that best.

Q890 Paul Flynn: There are large concentrations in many constituencies of particularly people from Eastern Europe, of Czechs in certain areas, Slovaks, and the Poles, who do not have any deeply rooted loyalty to any particular parties. Can you think of any examples when this proved to be beneficial? I recall one campaign where one of the candidates, a former MP, was a speaker of an Eastern European language and as it happened he did not win the seat, but he did calculate that it would bring him in a couple of thousand votes; other factors were involved. In order to encourage this approach to get more people involved, are there any examples you can quote of having a group of people from another country that was larger than the normal majority in seats where they have actually affected the result?

Roger Casale: In Southampton, which is a city of about 200,000 electors, the Polish adult population there is more than 20,000, so if you can mobilise the Polish vote in one direction that is 10% of the electorate. In Lincoln at the local elections in 2014 there were a number of Polish candidates who stood as Polish candidates and they did not get on terribly well. I think what I would say to you is that our research has shown, because we do surveys with the help of, for example, the Polish Federation of Great Britain or the Italian equivalent organisation, where we ask people about their voting intentions. We get a similar sort of spread to what you would think of in the rest of the population. In fact, we even found some Polish people who were going to vote for UKIP. So I think Polish people, French people and German people living in the UK are not from Mars or Venus. They are just from around the corner. They look and feel and speak just like us. They watch British television. They read UK papers. They also read the Polish papers. So we have

done a lot of work. We have a team of translators translating our message into Polish and pushing it out through Polish papers. But in terms of where they are going to vote, well, your guess is as good as mine. It is the same as the British person who lives next door. Some of them will vote Conservative. Some of them will vote Labour. Just because they are Polish, they are not all going to vote one way, and I think that is a very important point to grasp.

Paul Flynn: I am grateful to you. Thank you.

Q891 Chair: Roger, in your written evidence you talked a lot about the problems of non-British EU citizens, essentially around the 2014 European parliamentary elections. What do you think is necessary if we are not to repeat that problem in 2019?

Roger Casale: Thank you, Chairman, because that gives me an opportunity to also bring my colleague, Samia, in. But just to set the scene for that very quickly, we were talking about the British citizens living in other EU member states where the number has gone last year to this year from 19,000 to 15,000. I am afraid to say it is on a completely different scale with the European citizens who are living and voting in the UK, because what has happened there is that we had 1,043,629 registered to vote in the European elections in the 2009 elections. But we have now discovered through our research that only 327,883—that is a fall of 815,746—were eligible to vote in the 2014 election. So there has been a catastrophic decline despite our best efforts early on this year to run our voter registration campaign, and other organisations were doing the same. There has been a catastrophic decline in the eligibility of EU citizens in this country to vote, and that is why we have been looking into this. We are very keen to push that number back up again. In order to do that we need to understand exactly what went wrong. Perhaps that is the opportunity to ask Samia to tell us a little bit about our “Vote Denied” report.

Samia Badani: As Roger said, about 80% of non-British EU nationals were not registered to vote in the European elections in 2014. So what we did was that in parallel we ran an online survey to try to understand the experience of voters, and we found different sorts of scenarios that could explain why we had the gap. I think it became clear to us that voters who were successful in 2009 were not aware that there was any additional administrative requirement. Some of them thought that they were automatically registered, so that may be the beginning of an explanation. But what we are really worried about is the trend we have seen of people who actually complied with the administrative requirement who turned up at the polling stations and were told that they were not registered.

So, for the majority of our respondents the system was far too confusing. Yes, there was a lot of publicity around the European elections and I think there was no tailored information for EU nationals, so they thought—rightly or wrongly—that they were successfully registered when they received their polling cards and it was not until polling day that they realised there was an additional form that they should have completed. Needless to say, what we gathered from our respondents was that the election was of importance to them. I think as European nationals choosing your MEP you would like to know what your MEP stands for, so they were more motivated to go and vote I think.

One person told us that the only reason they went to the polling station was not to vote for the local elections but for the European elections, and they could not vote. So we believe that we should have a simpler registration process. I do not think we can have a cumbersome system that excludes potential voters. I think people were denied a voting opportunity. I want to make the point that there is a difference between that and people actually going to vote. Being registered and being given an opportunity I think that is the main focus first. I think it is another debate to try to understand whether people would actually go and vote. I think being robbed of the opportunity was quite a concern for us.

Q892 Chair: Is this something you are taking up with the Electoral Commission and the Electoral Registration Office?

Roger Casale: Thank you, Chair. Yes, the Electoral Commission have said in their statutory report on the European elections that it was unacceptable—they used the word “unacceptable”—that so many non-British EU citizens who wanted to vote were unable to vote. With New Europeans, they are setting up a working group which will meet in early November to look at, yes, the causes. So we will look very closely at the research that Samia has done that we have presented to the Committee. If we may, Chairman, we will send a full version of our published report but also, crucially, the steps that we believe need to happen in order to push that number back up again from just over 300,000 back to where it was in 2009. What has happened is that, at a time when politicians in Europe have been talking about the importance of engaging with European citizens, and at a time when the number of EU citizens in the UK has gone up very strongly, the number who are actually registered to participate in the European elections has fallen off a cliff. We urgently need to redress that. The Electoral Commission will set up a group with New Europeans, with the Electoral Registration Officers and with other representatives to look at a project that will consider the changes in legislation. As Samia has said, we believe there needs to be a one step registration process for EU citizens, rather than the current two step process where the voter has to fill in the registration form but also a declaration to say that they will only vote in Britain, as opposed to voting in their home member state. The key thing is going to be the awareness campaign, the consultation that we will help them with through our relationships with community groups and through our programme of events around the country to drive that message through the communities themselves, so that we can push that number back up again.

Chair: Roger, Samia, thank you very much for coming today and thank you very much for your evidence. You are our last witnesses in this inquiry so you may be even more influential than you think.

Roger Casale: Thank you very much, Chairman.

Chair: Thank you very much. It has been a great pleasure to see you again, Roger.