



Political and Constitutional Reform Committee

Oral evidence: [Individual Electoral Registration 2015](#), HC 1024

Monday 2 March 2015

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 2 March 2015.

[Watch the meeting](#)

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

Questions 1 – 56

Examination of Witnesses

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

Q1 Chair: Jenny, would you like to start off with anything or shall we jump straight into questions?

Jenny Watson: If it is all right, I would just like to put what we are about to say into some context.

Chair: Yes, please do.

Jenny Watson: As you will know from the report, we have set out what the data looks like from the 1 December registers. That shows that there has been approximately a 2% decrease in the size of the England and Wales electorate, compared to that following the final household canvass before the introduction of IER. That equates to just over 900,000 fewer entries on the registers, but there are some significant local variations within that. Once again it is the most mobile population, so those who have moved home or students, and attainments, those young people who are eligible to be on the register, who are most likely to be absent. We think that is likely to be the impact of the lack of a full canvass in 2014 and that situation is unique to that year.

I want to stress for the Committee that that data from 1 December is a snapshot and it has already been overtaken by voter registration activity, whether that is through EROs, through our own public awareness activity, by NUS, through Bite the Ballot's National Voter Registration Day or by our partners. We are committed to doing everything we can to get all those eligible to be registered on to the register. We know that activity is working because we have seen around 2 million applications to register since 1 December, although of course some of those may be duplicates.

In particular, I want to draw the Committee's attention to the fact that, since January, Electoral Registration Officers have been sending a letter to every property in their area. That is the household notification letter. That process allows them to conduct a complete audit of their register to encourage new registrations and to remove any that are out of date. We believe that the absence of a letter, such as that, to every household during the autumn contributed to the problems that we identify in our report. This will, therefore, go a long way to addressing them and that is why it has been in our guidance for EROs since December 2013.

We have raised some IT issues with this Committee in the past, and I thought it might be helpful just to recap on those before we get into your questions. The online system of registration is working well. That has very high satisfaction ratings. The previous software issues locally, which caused some delay for example to the write-out, have been fixed. There is a new IT issue that relates only to the production of data to allow us to monitor the progress against the transition and to assess the state of the registers. We are confident that we have enough data to allow us to reach the conclusions that we have in this report on the 1 December register. We have also been clear that, unless there is urgent action by the Cabinet Office and by software suppliers to address this problem, it is highly unlikely that we could recommend in the summer, under any circumstances, that it would be safe to bring forward the end of the transition to IER, as the current Government has indicated it would like to do. You would expect me to say that we are continuing to work with the Cabinet Office and software suppliers to provide any help we can in addressing the issue.

Finally, before we take your questions, I anticipate this might be the last time that we appear before you during the life of this Parliament and I want to take the chance to put on record our thanks for your Committee's interest in our work and the wider health of our democracy. It has been a very important point of accountability for us. It has not always been easy, nor should it always be easy, but we have always valued your questions and we look forward to answering any that you have today, but I just did want to take that opportunity to thank you for that.

Chair: Thank you, Jenny.

Q2 Tracey Crouch: Thank you, Jenny for giving me heart palpitations by reminding me how close we are to the general election. I was going to ask you about the report that you published last week. You have set out quite clearly some of the detail around that, for example, the fact that 920,000 fewer voters are registered. Could you explain a little bit more about what happened and why that might be? Secondly, you also mention local variations and I am keen to explore a bit more about what you mean by that.

Jenny Watson: Yes, broadly speaking, the lack of a canvass has meant that additions and deletions to the register have not been captured in the way that they would previously have been, and I reiterate that that is a unique situation for 2014.

Phil, do you want to say a little bit more about what underpins that data?

Phil Thompson: Yes. As we said in the report, we think the overall decline is largely attributable to that lack of household canvass activity and then the variation is largely to do with how that affects different areas in different ways. As Jenny said, areas that have a more mobile and maybe a younger population, and particularly students, are more affected by the fact that there has not been that full canvass. So you see areas, which have those particular characteristics, showing larger drops in their electorate than some other areas where they have shown either very little change or in some areas where the electorate has gone up.

Q3 Tracey Crouch: Are you naming and shaming the best and the worst?

Jenny Watson: It is not so much a question of the best and the worst, if you do not mind me taking issue with that a little bit. What we have been trying to do more is to explain what underlies the change that we have seen. Certainly in the report we have set out very clearly those local authorities where, for example, because we know there are a high proportion of students, their register has been affected, and we have certainly set out those authorities that have the greatest decrease in numbers. We can read that into the record if you like but I could probably simply refer you to the relevant pages of the report. What would you prefer me to do?

Chair: I think we are fine unless Tracey wants a particular statistic.

Q4 Tracey Crouch: No, I am just interested. I mean obviously if you drill down, while I recognise that there will be local authorities with populations that do change—such as the student population as you said—there will be others that don't. So I wonder whether you are seeing any significant progress in some areas, or whether they are not progressing as much as they should despite the fact that they have a pretty stable population.

Jenny Watson: We have certainly set out in the report, for example, the authorities with the largest percentage increase and decrease and the largest absolute decrease. We are also monitoring what is happening now in relation to the household notification letter that I mentioned in my opening remarks, because that complete audit in areas with a mobile population gives the opportunity for people who have not found their way on to the register yet to be captured by responding to that letter, and where there are people who were previously at that address who have moved on, again, they can be taken off as a result of that letter.

We know from what has been happening in some of the particular local authority areas that that is making a difference. For example, in relation to the household notification letter specifically, I can tell you that in Mr Flynn's and Mr Ruane's local authority that process of audit has meant that the decrease in the registers, which had been seen by 1 December, has been overturned by the household notification letter and the audit process. I would expect that to be the case throughout the country but we do not yet have the data that will show us that. Do you want to say when we will have that?

Phil Thompson: We should have that to inform the report that we are planning on publishing following the general election in June.

Q5 Tracey Crouch: I am right in thinking, though, that the report that you published last week is based on figures for local electors and not parliamentary electors because different people are eligible for local and parliamentary elections and clearly for the major parliamentary event coming up in a few weeks time, being the general election. So are the findings set out in your report illustrative of changes to the electoral register for the 2015 general election as well as the local elections?

Phil Thompson: Yes. We reported on the local electorate as the widest franchise and we also knew that the Office for National Statistics would be publishing their annual electoral statistics, which they did last Thursday, which would be on both the local government and the parliamentary electorate. Certainly the figures they have published show a similar decline in percentage terms in both registers, so we have no reason to think that any of the trends we have set out in our report would be different between the two registers.

Q6 Tracey Crouch: So you took the decision to base your latest analysis on local elections, rather than parliamentary elections, in order to have the widest franchise?

Phil Thompson: Yes.

Q7 Tracey Crouch: Your report identifies the lack of comprehensive household canvass activity in 2014 as the likely cause of the decrease in the number of registered electors. To what extent do you think this was foreseeable once the Government had decided upon arrangements for the 2014 canvass?

Jenny Watson: As I said in my opening remarks, the reason that we had had this kind of household activity in our guidance from 2013 is that we had thought that there would be a need for something to fill that gap. Andrew I think can take us through the kind of follow up that there has been to the invitations to register and to the Household Enquiry Forms, because it is important for people to realise that there has been house-to-house activity. I would say that the decision not to have a full canvass in 2014 was taken in the light of the confirmation process. That of course has transferred 40 million people on to the new registers without those 40 million people having to do anything themselves. It seems to us there is a definite benefit there and the fact that you had follow up for parts of the process was a safeguard, and the fact that we had put some kind of household communication in our guidance was also a safeguard. So I think those safeguards are working but it is clearly happening after the 1 December registers and for that reason they are a snapshot as of that time. Do you want to say a little bit more about the house to house, Andrew?

Andrew Scallan: Yes. While there was not a comprehensive canvass last year, Household Enquiry Forms were sent to any properties that the Electoral Registration Officer chose to send them to or that were previously empty. That had an impact. I cannot remember what the proportion is but it will have had a very similar impact as the old form that was sent, and the Electoral Registration Officer was required to carry out certain actions in relation to those households. Some forms were sent but, as we have already said, the vast majority of electors were transferred across and were notified of that through a confirmation letter.

Q8 Mr Chope: You referred earlier to the household notification exercise being done in January. Has that affected every single authority or are there some that have not done anything about it?

Jenny Watson: No. Every local authority in England and Wales, bearing in mind this report is only on England and Wales. Our report on Scotland will come later. Every authority in England and Wales is carrying out either the household notification letter exercise or, I think in two cases, something that is having the same outcome as the household notification letter exercise. We can say a little bit more about that if you would like.

Q9 Mr Chope: Obviously you are inviting us to ask that question: which two local authorities and what extra are they doing?

Andrew Scallan: South Beds and Ryedale, who are writing, at the same time as the poll cards are issued, with a postcard explaining to electors that, “You have received poll cards for people who are included on the electoral register. If there is anyone living at the address who did not receive a poll card they should register online or contact the elections office”. So the impact is the same, which is notifying people of people who were on the register and asking them to take action if anyone isn’t.

Jenny Watson: I think it would be remiss of me not to at this point—if I might, Mr Chope, in answer to your question—welcome the Government’s funding for all of this activity. Many EROs would have been doing it in any case but that funding has definitely helped and I would like to put on record the fact that we welcome that.

Q10 Mr Chope: Does that mean that there will not be any necessity for the Secretary of State to be asked to issue a direction in relation to this?

Jenny Watson: Yes, that is right. If we had felt that there was any need for that we would have moved on that front but there isn't so we haven't.

Q11 Mr Chope: When will you next be reporting on the performance of EROs? It seems that this is not going to be until after the election. You are not going to do an interim report based on this household notification exercise?

Andrew Scallan: We report on the position in Scotland in April, because they are working to a slightly different timetable, and then we will report in June on the outcome of these figures, which will be reflected in the electorate for the May elections.

Q12 Mr Chope: Then you are satisfied, as we are at the moment, that every Electoral Registration Officer is fulfilling their statutory duties?

Jenny Watson: Yes.

Q13 Mr Chope: When I was down in Tower Hamlets one of the concerns expressed was that some of the candidates had more than one name and more than one address, and the Returning Officer said that that was something that would be sorted out when we got on to individual electoral registration. Can you be sure now, following this exercise, that it will not be possible for somebody to be a candidate in a local election under a different name and a different address from the name and address that that candidate had a few weeks earlier?

Andrew Scallan: The purpose of IER is to make sure that people are registered, either because they had been confirmed or because they had given particular identifiers that make them distinguishable from other people. I cannot give you a cast-iron guarantee as to the permutations of activity that people might undertake to arrive at the situation that you described. It is entirely possible for people to be registered in more than one place, because they are entitled to be depending on their personal circumstances. So it would need to be about the facts of any particular case, and whatever the particular details were, before I could give you an answer about whether that was an appropriate thing or not.

Q14 Mr Chope: But under the law it is not possible for somebody to be registered under different names in different places, is it?

Andrew Scallan: There is nothing to stop someone having more than one name and using more than one name, and that happens a lot with married women, for example. It is entirely possible that that same person would be entitled to be registered in more than one place.

Q15 Mr Chope: So that is still a big loophole under our system because when we are comparing data with one Electoral Registration Officer and another, it is based upon the assumption that everybody is using one name rather than a whole lot of different names?

Andrew Scallan: It is based on an assumption but, nevertheless, it is entirely possible for someone to qualify to be registered in more than one place and there is no requirement on someone to use the same name consistently.

Jenny Watson: All I was going to add to that is if you have gone through the online registration process it will ask you for information as to: do you use another name? Have you used another name? That is the kind of information that would prompt one ERO to talk to another, possibly, if there was a person registered at two different addresses but, as Andrew said, that might be completely lawful depending on the facts of the case.

Q16 Mr Chope: Are you continuing to take a special interest on what is happening in Tower Hamlets?

Jenny Watson: In the run up to the election we have 17 particular local authorities where we are asking far more of those electoral staff because of the history of allegations or pattern of campaigning behaviour in those local authority areas, and Tower Hamlets is one of those areas. Do you want to say anymore about that?

Andrew Scallan: Yes. I attend the planning meetings for Tower Hamlets, so we are very actively involved in monitoring the preparations.

Q17 Chair: Jenny, you reminded us it is your last appearance. Can I remind you of your first appearance before us that—

Jenny Watson: Oh dear, do you really want to?

Chair: No, I am not going to quote anything at you but we were all rather concerned about the queuing that occurred and about some of the people being locked out of polling stations and the rest of it. It would be remiss of me not to flag up that, obviously, because we are keen that we do as much as possible to ensure that that does not happen again at future elections.

Jenny Watson: Indeed, I am grateful for the support of members of this Committee, current and previous, who enabled us to make sure that there is a safety valve now in law, so that if you are in a queue at 10 o'clock—although I would advise you to get to the polling station earlier than that if you can—you will be able to vote. That was in place for the elections in May last year and I think it has been in place indeed in Scotland since 2012. It has been tested and we know that as a safety valve it works. It is no substitute for good planning and I do not know any returning officers who would treat it as a substitute for good planning but, as a safety valve, it does now exist.

Chair: Thank you.

Q18 Chris Ruane: Your report on the December 2014 electoral registers states that “data issues” meant that you were unable at this time to undertake a detailed analysis of progress with the transition to IER. What are these issues, the data issues?

Phil Thompson: I think the main issues we face fall into two camps. We attempted to collect quite complicated data from all 348 EROs across England and Wales and we ended up either with data that was missing—just completely missing—or data that was not reliable or looked like it was not correct. That is data generated by each of those EROs’ electoral management software systems that they use to hold the register and to manage it. So we are very much not saying that any of the errors we have encountered are to do with things that electoral services’ staff have or have not done. It is issues with the reporting function from each of those systems.

Q19 Chris Ruane: On 4 September I put down a parliamentary question to the Electoral Commission, to ask the Commission which local authorities had contacted the Commission concerning the capabilities of their computer systems to deal with individual electoral registration. I knew there were concerns back in September. The Electoral Commission said, “While electoral management software is one of the areas routinely covered in the course of these discussions and correspondence, contact from EROs and their staff on EMS supplier issues is managed by the Cabinet Office. This reflects the joint working agreement in place between the Commission and the Cabinet Office relating to the provision of guidance and support to EROs and their staff throughout the period of the transition”. So I was concerned in September about this lack of ability for computer to speak to computer or computer to speak to department. Were you concerned then and what actions did you take back in September?

Jenny Watson: I seem to remember that we gave evidence to this Committee in September in the short session, and one of the things we said then was that we were aware—and indeed we reported at that time—that there were software issues that delayed the write-out to people who had not been confirmed through the confirmation process. That was the point that we were discussing in September. It was the actual ability of the local software systems to get people on to the register. As I said in my opening remarks, that issue has been fixed.

The issue that we are now encountering or encountered in relation to the December registers, is not that same issue. If I can give an example of the kind of data that we have not had. There should be an ability to press a button and get an automatic report generated that would tell us, for example, how many electors in each local authority area would be lost to the register if the transition arrangements were not in place. That is correct. That is the kind of data that we do not have, which means that we cannot give the perspective on the transition at a local level that we would have wanted to give. It is not affecting in any way the service that voters receive. It is affecting our ability to give you a completely up to date picture on the transition; not on the state of the registers on 1 December but around the transition. It is for that reason that we have said that for those software systems, unless the suppliers and the Cabinet Office can get that right—and you would expect them as they are now to be working with us differently to do that—we would not be able, under any circumstances, to recommend bringing the date of the transition forward because we would not have the data quality to be able to do that. But it is very important to distinguish that from the service that is available to voters, which we certainly thought was what your PQ was about.

Q20 Chris Ruane: What type of data quality are you looking at? Are you looking at geographical differences, social and economic differences or what type?

Phil Thompson: The data we are attempting to collect was designed to basically let us look at the whole process of IER and how it was working, so from people who were trying to register who were confirmed, people who needed to go through what is known as the exceptions process for IERs; if you cannot provide your National Insurance number you have another route, so how was that process working? It is quite a lot of data and that is why we designed it as an automated function, so that there was very little effort required locally for people to compile this data.

As Jenny said, one of the most important pieces of information is how many people who are currently on the register would be removed at the end of the transition period, so that was included in the data request. I think we only have reportable data from 158 EROs across the country. That is just less than half. We think that has probably given a reasonable picture of what the current situation is. What it doesn't let us say is what the variation is so that we know what the variation is between the 158 people who have reported to us. Some people have virtually no electors on their register who are being retained under those transitional arrangements, and there are other areas where it is a fifth. That is obviously very important but what we do not know is, for those who could not report to us in December, what their level of retention is on the register. So that is something we are currently working with the Cabinet Office and the EMS suppliers to make sure that we have for our June report.

Q21 Chris Ruane: What assessment have you made of the percentage of Muslim women who will be dropped off the register? I believe that there are issues with National Insurance numbers: they do not have them to hand or they do not have them at all. What assessment have you made?

Phil Thompson: The data that we collect will not allow us to look at detailed demographics like that, just because that information is not held on the register itself. We can look at quite broad demographics around areas that have a high student population or others that have a high proportion of young people but, in terms of being very specific about a specific group of people, that information is just not held on the register so it is not possible to do that kind of national analysis.

Jenny Watson: What we would have hoped to get, Mr Ruane, and have not been able to get, is an idea of what those people who could not provide a National Insurance number were able to provide, how they went through that process and how their application was eventually resolved. That is the data that we do not have. Such data is not only important in itself, but as we have consistently said to the Committee, in terms of giving advice to a future Government about the date of the transition, that data is important in showing the degree of variation throughout the country in terms of the impact on electors being removed and the withdrawal of the transition arrangements. That is absolutely key for us because that is our underpinning principle through which to assess that decision.

Q22 Chris Ruane: We have odd geographical disparities around the country with 100% here and 80% or 90% there, so you would say, “You cannot go ahead because this would put some areas of the country at a disadvantage”?

Jenny Watson: At the moment what we are saying is, unless there is a significant improvement in the quality of the data that we have, it is highly unlikely that in the summer we would recommend, under any circumstances, that you could bring forward the date of the transition.

To take that a step further, and assume in an optimistic way that we were able to get the data and that we could therefore do that analysis, we would have our focus on the elections in May 2016, a significant batch of elections. They are taking place right throughout Great Britain. Our question would be: would there be electors who would be disadvantaged by not being able to vote in those elections by the ending of the transitional arrangements? How would that look—not at a headline national figure, although we will report that—across the country? What would that level of variation be like? If you can easily see that, for example, in every large urban area there are a significant number of electors who would lose their vote in those circumstances, then that is one of the things that would prompt us to say it would not be safe to go forward. But until we get that data we do not know that that will be the picture.

Q23 Chris Ruane: Why was the Committee not told about these problems as soon as they became apparent?

Jenny Watson: The data issue?

Chris Ruane: Yes.

Jenny Watson: We started to find out about it at the point at which people started to report the data from us or, in some cases, not report the data from us—

Chris Ruane: When was that?

Phil Thompson: That was very shortly after the publication of the December register, so the first week of December when reports started to come back in.

Q24 Chris Ruane: So the first week of December you were concerned and why wasn’t that relayed to our constitutional committee?

Jenny Watson: There is a first point, which is that obviously in that situation what my staff would want to do is go back to those teams and ask questions to see if we could understand the data to see if we could help and see if there was anything we could do. There would have been time taken to do that before we reached a conclusion that there was nothing that could be done about the quality of the data, and we reported that publicly when we published the report.

Q25 Chris Ruane: Can you describe what contact you have had with the Cabinet Office, and what their response has been to your concerns? Are they putting strategies in place to get over these issues?

Jenny Watson: They are already working with us very differently for the next round of data. Do you want to say a little bit about that?

Phil Thompson: Yes. We have a clear understanding with the Cabinet Office about how we will work with the next round of data that we are collecting for the May polls, so we will have a much clearer process with them about testing these data reports well before we try to collect them. So that means identifying any problems and having time to fix the problems so that when we come to request them from EROs essentially it is a kind of “right first time” approach.

Q26 Chris Ruane: Could you give us a percentage chance of your not making this recommendation at the current point in time? Is it that there is so little information out there or it is so inconclusive that we are 100% likely to say no at this point in time? What are your guiding principles? What kind of information will you need to get before you can make a recommendation?

Jenny Watson: Tempting though it would be to give you a starting price, I am going to avoid it and refer to what we said here. Without reliable data about electoral registration in June 2015, it is highly unlikely that the Commission would be able to recommend, in any circumstances, that the end of the transition to IER should be brought forward to December 2015. I do not know what the chances will be of getting that data right. I am encouraged by the fact that the Cabinet Office is now working with us differently, but we have to wait to see when we get that next round of data what that looks like.

Q27 Chris Ruane: Obviously you have a lot of work on your plate. You have 8.5 million people still missing off the register now or it may have slightly decreased since December. You have an election to run. You have a promise of getting 1 million extra people back on the register. Before then you have all of these hitches to sort out. What priority will you be giving to all of the bread and butter functions of the Electoral Commission and this request by the Government, so that they can make a political decision in June of this year on whether to drop these missing millions off the register? Which one gets it? Is it exactly the same priority or are you allocating resources and personnel to prioritise the political aim of the Government to drop these people off by June?

Jenny Watson: Let me answer your question in a slightly different way. I said in my opening statement that we are committed to doing everything we can to get the people who are not registered on to the register. We have over 50 partners that we are working with to do that. Our public awareness work—online advertising—is now live. We have a campaign targeting students that will be going live shortly. We have a campaign targeting attainers that will be going live, and we have our main TV advertising campaign, so all of that work is a priority. I answer it that way because you ask: what is the priority? That is a priority now because we have a lot of work to do—all of us, including EROs—in the run up to 20 April and the voter registration deadline. Of course there is a priority now being given to our role in overseeing the election, and Returning Officers and Electoral Registration Officers will be working hard on that, including right up to the last minute on those last minute applications to register to vote.

We have made it very clear—and it is an established part of our work programme—that we will be reporting shortly after the election to a new Government. It has been part of our work programme for a long time, to give that advice on whether that transition should be brought forward. There is nothing changed in our work programme around that. That has been there as part of the transition to IER. It is as established as our first completeness and accuracy study on the register after the transition.

Q28 Chris Ruane: You listed a whole range of partners that are helping people to get back on the register. Are those the ones that have just dropped off, the 1 million that have just dropped off now, the 2 million to 2.5 million that may drop off in June or is it the 7.5 million people that are already off the register?

Jenny Watson: I think we have probably explained to the Committee before that our public awareness work is informed by what we know about those people who are less likely to be on the register at their current address.

Chris Ruane: The 7.5 million?

Jenny Watson: The 7.5 million. What we know about the decrease in the electorate from the snapshot from the 1 December registers, that 2% headline decrease, is that that is largely attributable to the lack of a household canvass. I have already said that we know that the household notification letter, along with the other work that EROs are doing, is what is most likely to enable those people to be added to the register. So there is a whole range of activity going on with a whole range of organisations, including us, including other organisations, like the NUS, Operation Black Vote and Bite the Ballot, whose National Voter Registration Day we were happy to support this year. We were very pleased with our activity around that and indeed that initiative. We have an overseas voter registration campaign that has a 100,000 target.

So there are a lot of voter registration activities going on, and of course what we want to do is target those who are least likely to be registered and, specifically, students and attainers. We can go into a little bit more detail about that if the Committee would find it helpful.

Q29 Chris Ruane: Again, percentage-wise, what is your aim? Is it to target these 7.5 million people here? Is that a priority? Or is it the 1 million that have dropped off? Which is it?

Jenny Watson: I am clearly not explaining myself very well. In a minute I will give somebody else a go but I will try one more time. Our original campaign and the boosters that we put in place are to target home movers, students and attainers and others who are less likely to be registered to vote who, as we have consistently said to the Committee, make up most of the 7.5 million people who are less likely to be registered to vote. It is also the case from our snapshot of the 1 December registers that we have been able to see that there have been decreases in attainers on the register and in students on the register, those who want to register at their term time address. So we have boosted the subsets of the campaign activity that will target that. For example, Facebook is very popular with students and young people and we have some very targeted activity on Facebook. Facebook have added a life event, "registered to vote", so that you can now share that you have registered to vote with your friends and hopefully encourage them to do so. We have targeted advertising for students through their mobile phones, where they will get a text message that sends them to the Government site where they can register to vote from their mobile phone. There is a range of other activity that we are talking to NUS about, which will be coming down the track in March. So our priority is the people who are less likely to be registered to vote.

Q30 Chris Ruane: But you will still be happy with 7.5 million people missing off the register in 2019, which is in your long-term plan?

Jenny Watson: Of course not. We have made it absolutely clear on more than one occasion that we all want the register to be as complete as possible. Indeed, the corporate plan that we are discussing this week with the Speaker's Committee has a different target, which I hope you think would be a more stretching target.

Chris Ruane: What is that?

Jenny Watson: That is that everybody who is entitled to be registered to vote is confident that they know what to do to get themselves registered.

Q31 Chris Ruane: As far as numbers are concerned, in your 2019 plan you said that you would give yourself a big tick if there were 7.5 million still missing off the register in 2019. There were 7.5 million in 2010. There were 7.5 million last July and you would get a tick in 2019 for your assessment if there were 7.5 million. Is it still going to be 7.5 million?

Jenny Watson: I have just told you what our corporate plan that is being discussed with the Speaker's Committee sets, so I cannot—

Chris Ruane: So it goes down from 7.5 million to what?

Jenny Watson: —be much clearer than that.

Chris Ruane: A number?

Jenny Watson: Our target is that everybody who is entitled to register to vote, who wants to register to vote, is confident they know what they need to do to get registered.

Q32 Chris Ruane: Okay. So what number is that? It was 7.5 million. What number is it now?

Jenny Watson: I have just given you the answer.

Chris Ruane: Do you have a number? Because that is quite fuzzy if in 2019 you are going to say, “Yes, we did try to get everybody on. We really did a good job”. So, 7.5 million, at least you have been bold enough to put it in writing to say that it is 7.5 million last year, 7.5 million in five years' time. What is the new number if you are revising it?

Jenny Watson: We are doing a completeness and accuracy assessment on the first register after IER. That will tell us what that number will be. I personally think that the target that we have set ourselves is more stretching than those that we have had in the past. You would prefer to see us put a number on it. That is now what we have chosen to do. We will discuss that with the Speaker's Committee.

Q33 Chris Ruane: Sorry, no, you prefer to put a number on it because you put a number on it. You said “By 2019 there will be 7.5 million. If there are 7.5 million people still missing off the register we will have done a good job”. You have now said that you are going to change that. But it is words that you are changing, it is not actual numbers. Is it that you cannot give the Committee a number of people that you expect to be off the register in 2019? You had it before. You are revising it now but you cannot give us a figure.

Chair: Let the witness answer if she wishes.

Jenny Watson: I do not recognise that characterisation of what was in our previous corporate plan, I must say.

Q34 Chris Ruane: It is there. It is on the right-hand page, page 13 I think.

Jenny Watson: I think what we previously said—which I seem to remember we debated in the past—was that we thought that completeness should not deteriorate.

Chris Ruane: That is it, yes, 7.5 million, so completeness.

Jenny Watson: I think what we are saying now is that we have set ourselves a different and I think a more stretching target.

Q35 Chris Ruane: We have spoken about the decision Ministers will make early in the next Parliament as to whether to bring forward the end of the transition period. You have said that if at any point you believe the risks of bringing forward the final transition to December 2015 are too great you will say so. Is there an occasion to say that now?

Jenny Watson: No. What I have already said is that without more accurate data it is highly unlikely that in the summer we would recommend, under any circumstances, that it is safe to bring forward the transition, but we need the data to be able to assess that.

Q36 Paul Flynn: You stated in your recent report from 268 Electoral Registration Officers that there were nearly 135,000 fewer people registered for postal votes than there were for the European elections last year. Knowing that there is a relatively low poll for the European elections and the increasing importance of postal votes, isn't this alarming? People will not be able to vote in the coming election when many of them might well have the impression that once they have registered for postal votes they are on it for life.

Jenny Watson: Indeed. I will ask Andrew to say something about that. It is perhaps worth putting it on the record that when the confirmation process happened we know that 93% of postal voters were matched through the confirmation process, but, Andrew, do you want to say a little bit more about what is being done?

Andrew Scallan: Yes. That figure relates to people who were postal voters previously who were not able to be confirmed through that confirmation process. What happened to those people is that they will each have received three letters from the Electoral Registration Officer about the status of their registration, together with a personal visit, and after 1 December they will each have received a letter explaining what has happened as a result of their not being registered under IER. I think it is important to remember there is nothing to stop those people voting in person at a polling station, but if they now choose to vote by post they will need to register under IER.

Q37 Paul Flynn: Do you think people are aware of this? We are all very much conscious of how people have turned in large numbers to postal votes and expect to do it possibly in the general election in the same style.

Andrew Scallan: That is why the legislation required Electoral Registration Officers to write to people explaining what their situation is. They will have received a letter from the Electoral Registration Officer explaining to them that they need to register. Those people will also get a poll card, which has different wording to it than electors who have been registered under IER, explaining again to them that they will need to reregister if they want to do it by post.

Q38 Paul Flynn: You were kind enough to say that the number of registrations in Mr Chris Ruane's constituency and mine had increased. How much is this due to canvassing and how much is to do with the stellar qualities of the sitting MPs?

Jenny Watson: I believe that is called leading the witness, Mr Flynn. It has been encouraging to see some of the early results from the household notification letter. So, for example, certainly across the Newport area as a whole your Electoral Registration Officer's team have suggested that they think it has overturned the decrease in the register from that snapshot of 1 December registers, through sending out that household notification letter and that comprehensive audit. So I think that is positive and that shows the benefit of that particular initiative.

Q39 Paul Flynn: Thank you very much. The Government announced last week, on the same day your report was published, that it was "providing an additional £20 million to local authorities in

2015 to 2016” in relation to the transition to IER. This is on top of the £14 million of additional funding that has been made available for the last two years. Do you think this is sufficient to enable the EROs to undertake what steps are necessary during the transition? I mean, will it happen?

Andrew Scallan: The Cabinet Office have worked very closely with each ERO in great detail about their requirements for IER, and there have been some very detailed costings around the cost of paper, the cost of envelopes, the different sized forms, and I think I have said to the Committee before we have not heard any ERO saying that they have not had sufficient funds to carry out their functions. Since the announcement I have not had anyone refer anything to me that suggests they do not have sufficient funds.

Paul Flynn: It is a relatively small amount spread across the nations.

Andrew Scallan: The actual registration function is a small part of every local authority’s function. It represents a very small percentage of the spend but at the moment we have not had any suggestion that it is not sufficient.

Q40 Paul Flynn: You have been calling for individual electoral registration since 2003. With the transition going as it is at the moment, would you say this is a policy that has been implemented up to the expectations that you had?

Jenny Watson: I think there have been some very good lessons learnt and we have discussed those with the Committee before, so making sure that we do keep in steady state the annual canvass. The confirmation process was a good one and that certainly did make life easier for a lot of people. If you do not mind I will reserve my judgment on the success of the implementation of the whole thing until we report in the summer because, particularly given the data issues where we have not had the data, I think there may be things we would want to look at in the transition where I simply could not give you an accurate picture. I certainly think the sort of activity that we have discussed today, which is around the household notification letter and the work that has been done since 1 December, has been very positive and is having an impact. I mean 2 million applications to register since 1 December is not a small number and the majority of those are online. Of course what we do not know is the number of those that might be duplicates.

Q41 Paul Flynn: Finally, is it possible that you will be recommending reverting back to the previous system?

Jenny Watson: Of household registration?

Paul Flynn: Yes.

Jenny Watson: Given that we have been calling for IER since 2003, no, to give you a straight answer, but I think what we might do—

Paul Flynn: Even if it is not working?

Jenny Watson: The reason I am reserving judgment is because I want us to be able to have the data to give you an accurate assessment of what future work might be needed to make it work and, in the absence of that data—you will forgive me—I do not want to be led in that.

Q42 Chair: Jenny, did you read our report on voter engagement?

Jenny Watson: I certainly did.

Q43 Chair: What did you think of it?

Jenny Watson: I thought you had given it very considered thought and taken an impressive range of evidence and come up with a package of proposals. We are reading it and taking it very

seriously, and thinking particularly about some aspects of how we keep voting relevant in future for our longer term work after the election. I am also conscious of the Speaker's Commission on Digital Democracy, which has also made a number of recommendations, and I think we have said to the Committee before that after the election we expect to do quite a substantial piece of work potentially on modernisation of the way we run our electoral process, and I think we would want to take a number of your recommendations forward.

Q44 Chair: Just skipping quickly through some of the issues we raised on things like registration up to and including Election Day, mandatory voting extension to 16 to 17 year-olds, an ability to abstain on the ballot paper, any quick run through on that?

Jenny Watson: In terms of our prioritisation I think registration and the developments that you might have around registration are likely to be a priority, because we know we are going to be having a transition to individual electoral registration in steady state. That might also be looking at things like: how could you use wider engagement with Government or public services either to prompt you to register or use that data to ask you to be added to the register? Could we get to a point where certain data could be deemed as a trusted? Therefore, if an ERO receives that data, they would, rather than ask you if you want to be registered, write to you and say, "I am going to add you unless you tell me that there is a reason why I should not do so". Those are the kinds of things I think that are in our priority order.

As you know, some of the issues around the franchise we consider are matters for Parliament, so we will comment on the practicalities but not engage on the point itself.

Q45 Mark Durkan: The Electoral Commission has brought forward two assessments of the readiness for the transition to IER. You have highlighted some areas of concern, and I am not going to go over all of those, but among them were IT systems and contingency arrangements. We are now at a time when the deadline for registration for the general election is imminent. In that context, are your concerns on the capacity of the online registration system abated or exacerbated?

Jenny Watson: The ability to register online and the online system itself has worked well and it has very high user satisfaction ratings. I think that National Voter Registration Day was a good test for it. I think there were 155,000 applications to register online and a further 10,000 in paper on National Voter Registration Day. That is a pretty good test and the system there worked very well.

Q46 Mark Durkan: There is also the question about who should have responsibility for managing the various aspects of electoral registration, and particularly the new digital service, which may raise questions about the whole ownership of IER once the transition is complete. Do you think that we may have a cue for taking a broader look at responsibilities for electoral registration and administration?

Jenny Watson: Are you thinking about removing it from local authorities or were you just thinking about what happens to the digital side of things? Sorry, I am not clear on the question.

Mark Durkan: Well, the latter first of all but the question is: does it lead us to even questioning then the former?

Andrew Scallan: In terms of the future management of the system that we currently have, it is very important that its ownership is very clear, that the right agencies are involved and that there is the ability for cross-government working, that the future of the position we have reached to date is maintained and, also, that there is a body that is capable of sustaining any machinery if the Government changes so that it stands together as a whole, so that there is a proper integration of policy and the mechanical aspects of the registration system.

Jenny Watson: In relation to the digital side of things itself, we are confident that the right people are in the room to make that decision. As Andrew says, where it rests in Government does need to survive any machinery if Government changes. It matters to get that right within Government because if we want to think about how we might use the digital system to modernise the system still further—I mean not only to extend it to Northern Ireland, which would be a good starting point, but to think about extending it more broadly—are there other public services that we interact with, whether that is registering for a passport, a driving licence, a pension or whatever, which could prompt you to register to vote? That needs really sustained focus from right across Government to get that right. So having that ownership in the right part of Government is absolutely critical for that to happen.

Q47 Mark Durkan: You have mentioned the Northern Ireland position. Obviously many of us would like to see the digital system extended to Northern Ireland, but also we come from a situation where we are accustomed to these matters not lying with local authorities but being a dedicated system in its own right and I think there may be occasion to look more widely at some of these issues.

This Committee's recent reports on voter engagement have made a number of recommendations around improving arrangements and allowing for modernisation around electoral registration. You have said in your recent report that you will "continue to explore options for further improving the electoral registration process across the UK". In answer to previous questions you touched on a number of points. What are the main changes you think could most enhance levels of electoral registration?

Jenny Watson: I do think that one of the things we are going to need to look at pretty soon is the level of quasi-automaticity—that is a horrible term—that you have in the system. So, rather than perhaps in the future relying on people to apply themselves, if an ERO gets trusted data, and they can tell that somebody is who they say they are and that they have moved address, they could write to that person and say, "I am going to add you to the register unless you tell me"—for example, nationality—"that there is a reason why you should not be". That is a significant plus. I think a wider range of triggers across interaction with a wider range of services would also help.

I should say as a point of clarification, I was not looking for the opportunity to say that I thought this was a service that should be removed from local authorities. In fact we have seen very clearly that local authorities' knowledge of their local area and their population has been absolutely critical in the transition to IER, because they have been able to go out and do that work. I do know, though, that there are local authorities that are coming together to share their learning around that and to think about how they work on registration in the future in a differently structured arrangement. I would expect to see that grow in terms of the resilience of the service as we go into the life of the next Parliament.

Q48 Mark Durkan: In previous evidence this Committee heard from groups such as the RNIB and Mencap about particular concerns in respect of IER, namely that some people could be more adversely affected than others, not least those with sight issues or learning disabilities. Earlier you said that you are encouraging that every effort is made to make sure that people who need to register know. Is there any particular effort that you are encouraging in respect of those who might need particular support, who may not be in a position either to pick up on all of the communication that is going on out there, or people who might need support to go through the business of registration itself?

Jenny Watson: Mencap is a very good example because they are one of our partners. We have produced an easy read guide to the individual electoral registration form, which can be used. There is also a pack that Mencap have produced together with us, which they are able to give to people who are supporting people with learning difficulties to help them understand how to register and the voting process itself. We are going to be doing a fact sheet—again in partnership with them—

that people with learning difficulties can take, if they want to, to the polling station to enable them to understand what they are entitled to expect when they get there. That is just one example. We are also talking to a range of other disability organisations.

Andrew Scallan: We would be very happy to supply the Committee with a list of the partners that we are working with, so you can see the cross-section that we are partnering with.

Jenny Watson: For example, a range of accessibility of issues, tactile devices in polling stations, support when it is needed to be able to register. There is a wide range of things.

Mark Durkan: Yes, but specifically on the issue of registration.

Jenny Watson: Yes, again, the Mencap—

Q49 Mark Durkan: I am not setting aside any of those issues. They are hugely important but it is just on the registration question itself, because those are questions that have been raised directly with us and, up until now, they had not been addressed here today.

Jenny Watson: Indeed. I think the online application process is again helpful in terms of helping people go through that registration process, because different software can interact with it in different ways, but we would be happy to send you a bit more detail about the work that we are doing if that would be helpful.

Mark Durkan: Yes. Okay.

Chair: I am sure it will be of great concern to you, Jenny, if the Committee does not reconvene for some reason after the general election, that you will miss your interaction with Mr Ruane, so I think it is only fair to give him the last couple of questions to you—

Chris Ruane: Thank you, Chair.

Chair: —and it will give you your last word. I will make sure you get the last word, Jenny. How about that?

Jenny Watson: Thank you, Mr Chairman.

Q50 Chris Ruane: Question 16 concerns the unregistered voters, particularly those from groups who are under-represented on the electoral registers. Before the introduction of IER I think the groups I would have said were likely to go off are attainders and students. Why wasn't every single ERO in the country instructed to go into every single sixth form in the country, as they do in Northern Ireland, to register those attainders? Why did the Electoral Commission not recommend that block registration continue in halls of residence to ensure that those young students were carried over? In essence, did the Electoral Commission flag up these specific groups before the introduction of IER to give specific strategies to register them and, in the light of what has happened, what is it going to do in retrospect?

Jenny Watson: A two-part question. I will try to take it in that order. We have always been clear—and I think we have been clear with the Committee—that there are some groups of people who are less likely to be registered. Indeed, some of those that you have mentioned, students and younger people but also people who have moved house, and also people from some ethnic minority communities are less likely to be on the register, and our advice to Electoral Registration Officers, and indeed our monitoring of their performance, has been as we have explained to the Committee before that they need to have local activity in place that addresses the needs of their local population.

Do you want to say a bit more about this, Andrew?

Andrew Scallan: We have covered exactly the groups that Jenny has referred to, and I would remind the Committee that there was a thing called “the confirmation dry run” in 2013, which essentially set the scene for what would happen last year, when the confirmation live run happened. What we said was, “Take the learning in each local authority area from the confirmation dry run and think about what it tells you in your area, ward by ward, polling district by polling district, and do an analysis from your own local knowledge that only Electoral Registration Officers can have in detail”. That information from the confirmation dry run was then transferred across into their local engagement strategies following the live run in 2014. All of that included activity aimed specifically at all the groups that traditionally have been under-registered.

Jenny Watson: So indeed many EROs and their teams will have been going into schools and colleges, and indeed many other places where they know there will be young people, to do exactly that, to register them. You asked what we are doing now. As I explained previously, our public awareness campaign was in any case specifically designed to target those who were less likely to be registered to vote. We know who they are. We have discussed that with you in the past as a Committee.

Since seeing the data on the 1 December registers we have boosted the two parts of our campaign that address students and attainers. For attainers—some of you may have seen the news coverage of that today—the message there is, “Use your age wisely. You are now entitled to be registered to vote. Here is how you can do it and you can do it online”, pushing those young people to an online route because we know they welcome it. For students, it is a specific issue about, “If you are going to be in your term time address on 7 May you need to register there as well”, and again pushing them to show how they can do that. That is where our online advertising has already been live since National Voter Registration Day. Our activity with Facebook, for example, was the single largest driver to the digital site on National Voter Registration Day. That drove around 40% of the applications to register to vote, and as for Facebook, where you have millions of people seeing something in their newsfeed through Facebook, through our partnership work, saying, “Register”, we know that is something that many, many young people will use. So we are doing everything we can with that kind of activity to target precisely those groups.

Q51 Chris Ruane: The list of groups that you have funded, the NUS, British Youth Council, Citizens Advice, Citizens UK, Homeless Link, Mencap, Operation Black Vote and UKYouth, are all excellent organisations but none of them has the track record of Bite the Ballot, who can register young voters for 25 pence per elector. Why, oh why have the Electoral Commission not drawn up a service level agreement with Bite the Ballot to get into those schools and get those young people registered?

Jenny Watson: Unless I misheard you, I think that you suggested that we are funding those organisations. We are not funding those organisations.

Chris Ruane: You are co-operating with them.

Jenny Watson: They are our partners. There is a wide range of them—over 50—and they are people who have been interested in promoting voter registration among the people that they work with. The reason that is important is because people who may well have heard of Citizens Advice may never have heard of the Electoral Commission and would not think of us as being the first point of call. We need to use those trusted brands.

In fact, when it became clear that extra money might be available from Government, we did suggest to Government that there were organisations that they could specifically fund directly. From memory those were: NUS, who already have a large programme of activity and are one of our partners; Operation Black Vote, again who are a partner and have a very large bus that some of

you may have seen going around towns and cities and Bite the Ballot. In the end I think that Government did not fund Bite the Ballot directly, but we did suggest that.

Q52 Chris Ruane: My apologies, the Cabinet Office funded all of those but they have not funded Bite the Ballot, the single most successful organisation in recruiting young people. The Electoral Commission and the Cabinet Office have not taken advantage of their specific skills in getting young people registered.

Jenny Watson: I must say, Mr Ruane, I do not think I agree with that. I think National Voter Registration Day is a great initiative. We were happy to support it. We got EROs to support it in huge numbers. Many of them sent out their household notification letters to get the benefit of National Voter Registration Day and we worked with our partners to promote it and support it. The more of us that get behind it the better it is. Bite the Ballot are doing work with a number of local authorities, I would say largely as a result of our having said to those EROs, “You need to think about how you are going to target young people”. But it must be for local authorities to make that decision on how they contract with Bite the Ballot.

Q53 Chris Ruane: In its response to our report, the Government said the Commission would be responding separately to the Committee’s request for a progress report on the scope for service level arrangements with external organisations. When I checked with Bite the Ballot this afternoon no such service level agreement has been given to them.

Jenny Watson: No, of course not. You are absolutely right, it hasn’t. We had planned our campaign activity. That was already in place and we are not funding any of the organisations that we are working with as partners. We collaborate with them because we recognise we have expertise and the big plus that we can bring to the table is: we are able to have those links with Electoral Registration Officers to make their work much more effective. We will certainly be learning lessons from the work that we have done now and we will want to consider the Committee’s report as we go forward and develop our partnership working for future elections. I think, given the timing of the Committee’s report, it would have been impossible for us to do anything else as we had made our plans for the election some way ahead.

Q54 Chris Ruane: Over the past month in February you launched a registration campaign focused on overseas voters. Last year you told us that you had set “a target that is aspirational of 100,000 overseas voters registering to vote”. How did you do?

Jenny Watson: We have not reached the end of it yet because it is through until 20 April, which is the cut off date, so 100,000 for overseas voters and 1 million for the domestic campaign. I can tell you—

Chris Ruane: How many have you done so far?

Jenny Watson: —on Overseas Voter Registration Day we had 4,000 applications. We have had great support from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office through embassies, and we know already that the number of overseas voters is now 10,000 more than it was for the snapshot of 1 December than it would have been the previous year. There is a lot of our campaign to go. We are working on that right up to the deadline. There is online advertising, search terms and there is display advertising. There is a lot of work with embassies and consulates and a lot of social media, and I have no doubt that the simplified process of going through the online site will be a great attraction to many overseas voters.

Q55 Chair: Any last words, Jenny?

Jenny Watson: No. I mean we are all doing—us, EROs and partners—everything we can to make sure that we get as many people who are eligible on to the register. I think doing it now, with a general election in prospect, makes it very real for people and that is one of the things that I hope will make that activity more successful. Again, I do not think there is anything we would have wanted to say that we haven't and thank you again for your interest.

Q56 Chair: Another final broad question around what is called the “Lobbying” Bill. It is beginning to settle now as an Act. Have you had any interactions with people about how effective that is or any difficulties with it that you would like to bring to our attention?

Jenny Watson: We have people phoning us for advice, obviously, as you would expect. I think we now have around 52 organisations registered with us. I think that is probably less than we might have anticipated when we spoke to you during the passage of the Bill, which I think largely reflects the amendments to the Bill. We have already made contact with the secretariat for the review. The Government has asked Lord Hodgson to look at the legislation and I am expecting to meet him soon to discuss the parameters of his review. So we will make sure that we cover that in our post-election reporting.

Chair: Jenny, we have been very certain and demanding in our questions and you have been feisty and clear in your replies, but I take that on both sides as being a level of commitment and passion that we all have to make sure that as many people as possible are on the register and can vote in our democracy. Finally, thank you for all your work and thanks to your colleagues for the attendances they have put in over the five-year period of this Select Committee.

Jenny Watson: Thank you.

Chair: Thank you so much.