



House of Commons
Constitutional Affairs and
ODPM: Housing, Planning,
Local Government and
Regions Committees

Electoral Registration

Volume III
Oral and Supplementary Written evidence

*Ordered by The House of Commons
to be printed 16 March 2005*

HC 243-III
Published on 4 April 2005
by authority of the House of Commons
London: The Stationery Office Limited
£13.00

The Constitutional Affairs and the ODPM: Housing, Planning, Local Government and Regions Committees

The Constitutional Affairs Committee (previously the Committee on the Lord Chancellor's Department) and the ODPM: Housing, Planning, Local Government and the Regions Committee are appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration, and policy of the Department for Constitutional Affairs and the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and any associated public bodies.

Current membership

CONSTITUTIONAL AFFAIRS: Rt Hon Alan Beith MP (*Liberal Democrat, Berwick-upon-Tweed*) §, Peter Bottomley MP (*Conservative, Worthing West*), Mr James Clappison MP (*Conservative, Hertsmere*), Ross Cranston MP (*Labour, Dudley North*), Mrs Ann Cryer MP (*Labour, Keighley*), Mr Jim Cunningham MP (*Labour, Coventry South*), Mr Hilton Dawson MP (*Labour, Lancaster and Wyre*), Andrew Rosindell MP (*Conservative, Romford*), Mr Clive Soley MP (*Labour, Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush*), Keith Vaz MP (*Labour, Leicester East*), Dr Alan Whitehead MP (*Labour, Southampton Test*).

ODPM: Andrew Bennett MP (*Labour, Denton and Reddish*) §, Sir Paul Beresford MP (*Conservative, Mole Valley*), Mr Clive Betts MP (*Labour, Sheffield Attercliffe*), Mr Graham Brady MP (*Conservative, Altrincham & Sale West*), Mr David Clelland MP (*Labour, Tyne Bridge*), Mr John Cummings MP (*Labour, Easington*), Chris Mole MP (*Labour, Ipswich*), Mr Bill O' Brien MP (*Labour, Normanton*), Mr Richard Page (*Conservative, South West Hertfordshire*), Christine Russell MP (*Labour, City of Chester*), Mr Adrian Sanders (*Liberal Democrat, Torbay*).

§ Chairman of a participating Committee.

Powers

The Committees are departmental select committees, the powers of which are set out in House of Commons Standing Orders, principally in SO No 152. The powers of the Committees to work together and agree joint reports are set out in Standing Order No. 137A. These Standing Orders are available on the Internet via www.parliament.uk.

Publications

All publications of the Committees (including press notices) are available on the internet at www.parliament.uk and can be found by going to the webpage of either of the two participating Committees.

Committee staff

The staff who currently work for the Committees on the joint inquiry into Electoral Registration are:

CONSTITUTIONAL AFFAIRS: Roger Phillips (Clerk), Dr John Gearson (Second Clerk), Richard Poureshagh (Committee Assistant), Alexander Horne (Legal Specialist), Julie Storey (Secretary), Tes Stranger (Senior Office Clerk) and Adèle Brown (Committee Media Officer).

ODPM: Lynn Gardner (Joint Committee Clerk), Jessica Mulley (Joint Committee Clerk), Charlotte Littleboy (Second Clerk), Ben Kochan (Committee Specialist), Ian Hook (Committee Assistant), Ian Blair (Chief Office Clerk) and Emma Carey (Secretary).

Contacts

CONSTITUTIONAL AFFAIRS: Correspondence should be addressed to the Clerk of the Constitutional Affairs Committee, House of Commons, 7 Millbank, London SW1P 3JA. The telephone number for general enquiries is 020 7219 8196 and the email address is conaffcom@parliament.uk

Media enquiries can be addressed to Adèle Brown, Committee Media Officer, House of Commons, 7 Millbank, London SW1P 3JA. Telephone number 020 7219 0724 / 07711 155 722 and email address brownac@parliament.uk

ODPM: All correspondence should be addressed to the Clerk of the ODPM: Housing, Planning, Local Government and the Regions Committee, House of Commons, 7 Millbank, London SW1P 3JA. The telephone number for general enquiries is 020 7219 1353; the Committee's email address is odpmcom@parliament.uk

Witnesses

Tuesday 25 January 2005

Page

Mr Sam Younger , Chairman and Ms Pamela Gordon , Commissioner, Electoral Commission	Ev 1
Mr Francis Aldhouse , Deputy Information Commissioner and Mr Jonathan Bamford , Assistant Commissioner, Information Commissioner	Ev 10
Mr David Simpson , Head of Compliance and Data Protection, Conservative Party	Ev 16
Mr Peter Watt , Head of the Constitutional and Legal Unit, Labour Party	Ev 16
Mr Mark Pack , Internet and Communications Officer, Liberal Democrats	Ev 16

Tuesday 1 February 2005

Mr Nicholas Russell , Campaigns Officer, Royal National Institute of the Blind (RNIB)	Ev 25
Mr Simon Wooley , National Co-ordinator, Operation Black Vote	Ev 25
Mr Jules Mason , Head of Citizenship and Development, British Youth Council	Ev 25
Mr David Sinclair , Social Inclusion Manager, Help the Aged	Ev 25
Mr Malcolm Dumper , Executive Director, Association of Electoral Administrators (AEA)	Ev 31
Mr Michael Lithgow , Scottish Assessors' Association	Ev 31
Mr David Monks , Chief Executive of Huntingdonshire District Council and Chairman of SOLACE Electoral Matters Panel	Ev 31

Monday 7 February 2005

Mr Nick Raynsford , a Member of the House, Minister for Local and Regional Government and Fire, and Mr Paul Rowsell , Divisional Manager, Democracy and Local Government, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister	Ev 42
Mr Christopher Leslie , a Member of the House, Parliamentary Under-Secretary, Department for Constitutional Affairs	Ev 42

List of supplementary written evidence

Memoranda VOT 01 to VOT 36 were published as *Electoral Registration: Written Evidence*, HC 243-II, Session 2004-05

Labour Party (VOT 37)	Ev 57
Liberal Democrats (VOT 38)	Ev 58
Graham Allen MP (VOT 39)	Ev 59
British Youth Council (BYC) (VOT 40)	Ev 61
SOLACE (Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers)(VOT 41)	Ev 65
Help the Aged (VOT 42)	Ev 67
Operation Black Vote (OBV) (VOT 43)	Ev 69
Ministry of Defence (MoD) (VOT 44)	Ev 70
Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) (VOT 45)	Ev 73
Audit Commission (VOT 46)	Ev 74
Supplementary Memorandum by the Department for Constitutional Affairs and the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (VOT 01(a))	Ev 77
Supplementary Memorandum by the Electoral Commission (VOT 02(a))	Ev 79
Supplementary Memorandum by the Department for Constitutional Affairs and the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (VOT 01(b))	Ev 80
Supplementary Memorandum by the Electoral Commission (VOT 02(b))	Ev 82

Oral evidence

Taken before the Constitutional Affairs Committee and the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister: Housing, Planning, Local Government and the Regions Committee

on Tuesday 25 January 2005

Members present:

Andrew Bennett, in the Chair

Mr A J Beith
Sir Paul Beresford
Mr Clive Betts
Peter Bottomley
Mr David Clelland

Mrs Ann Cryer
Chris Mole
Mr Bill O'Brien
Mr Adrian Sanders
Dr Alan Whitehead

Witnesses: **Mr Sam Younger**, Chairman and **Ms Pamela Gordon**, Commissioner, Electoral Commission, examined.

Q1 Chairman: May I welcome you all to the first session of the joint committee, that is the ODPM and the Constitutional Affairs Select Committees, joint inquiry into electoral registration? May I just point out to you that the written evidence that we have received has been published this morning and is available from the Stationery Office at the cost of £13, but probably of more interest to most of you will be that you can actually look at it on the web, at a minimal cost I suppose of connection. May I welcome the two of you and ask you to identify yourselves for the record, please?

Mr Younger: Sam Younger, Chairman of the Electoral Commission.

Ms Gordon: Pamela Gordon, Electoral Commissioner.

Q2 Chairman: Do you want to say anything by way of introduction, or are you happy for us to go straight to questions?

Mr Younger: Happy, Chairman, for you to go straight to questions.

Q3 Mr Beith: In your written evidence, you refer both to the overriding principle that a right as fundamental as voting should only be secured by personal initiative, then, to a series of practical reasons which you say favour individual registration. If the practical reasons were shown not to stand up, indeed if it were shown for example that it would not be likely to increase participation and might have the opposite effect, would the reason of principle be an overriding one and would you stick to your view that it is a principle that people should register themselves?

Mr Younger: We do have to be very careful on this. Clearly, we have looked at it in terms of the principle and all the practical benefits that we think would flow from it. We have to be aware of the one area of experience that there has already been in this, in Northern Ireland, moving from household to individual registration. Clearly, there are some practical difficulties there. It seems to us we need to work through those, to see whether they can be

overcome, so that you do not have essentially the opposite effect of that intended. The principle has to be the right one. If there were overriding reasons, then I think we would need to look at it again; it is something we need to be pragmatic about.

Q4 Mr Beith: Do you have any evidence that the current system is thought by people to be confusing or, conversely, that it is a trusted system that people are quite comfortable with?

Mr Younger: There is no evidence that people are uncomfortable with it. There is evidence that people have been able to use it and use it perfectly comfortably for very many years. What we were looking at was a case for change based on up-to-date issues of data protection rights and so on, but also, more practically, how we could improve both the security of postal voting in the first instance and then the ability of the registration system to support further developments in voting over time.

Q5 Mr Beith: How far was your interest driven by all-postal voting, with a piloting of it, or indeed using it more generally? There clearly are arguments relating to all-postal voting which strengthen the case for individual registration. If we do not go down the road of all-posting voting, does the case for individual registration weaken?

Mr Younger: The original review we did of registration was not based on all-posting voting, it was one of the reviews which came out of our report on the 2001 general election and was based on the fact that there had been postal voting on demand. Clearly the practical implications, and if the reasons are there to go for individual registration in terms of postal voting on demand, are even stronger in scale if you have all-postal voting. The principle of individual registration and the extra security in postal voting are applicable and whatever the future in terms of all-posting voting, the fact is that with postal voting on demand we are already up at what was 8.1% of the electorate registered as postal voters in the elections last June and that must be a figure which is rising and it is a very significant number in

25 January 2005 Mr Sam Younger and Ms Pamela Gordon

any event. In our view, the argument there in general terms is there, whether or not there is all-postal voting.

Q6 Peter Bottomley: Can you remind us? In the United States I think they have generally individual registration. What is the proportion of potentially eligible voters who are registered?

Mr Younger: I do not have figures for the United States.

Q7 Peter Bottomley: Until I am contradicted, I put it to you that it is pretty low compared with us. Should not the overriding principle be that all potentially eligible voters should be registered and that there also ought then to be the principle that the individual voters can check that they are registered or get themselves off a register if there is inappropriate registration?

Mr Younger: That has to be the principle, yes.

Q8 Peter Bottomley: Both?

Mr Younger: Yes. Everybody who is eligible to be on the register should be on the register. The issue is how you best get to that and get to it in a way that also helps the security and the future of the voting system.

Q9 Chairman: If someone does not intend to vote, perhaps for religious reasons, is there a logic for them to be on the register?

Mr Younger: Of course in response to a request for information it is an offence not to provide that information or to provide false information. The number of prosecutions there are for failure to return information for the register is very, very small. In this case, in terms of voting, we have always had the principle up to now that voting is voluntary, but, up to now, there is an obligation to provide information that is requested for the register. So in theory it is actually an obligation to provide that information.

Q10 Peter Bottomley: And it is used for jury lists as well.

Mr Younger: Yes.

Q11 Chris Mole: You touched on the Northern Ireland experience. In your memorandum you seem rather reluctant to accept the significance in the fall in registration in Northern Ireland and you state in paragraph 4.10 "... the experience of introducing individual registration to Northern Ireland might suggest an initial impact of a drop in registration rates". How much do you feel the decline in the numbers on the electoral register in Northern Ireland since the introduction is due to a drop in registration rates, as opposed to other causes such as eradication of duplicate entries? Do you forecast that the drop will continue or that registration rates will return to previous levels?

Mr Younger: It is something we have to take very seriously. Clearly, there would have been an expectation when the register was cleaned in Northern Ireland in the context of the 2002 Electoral

Fraud Act, that there would be a drop-off which would partly be the greater accuracy of that register, but that the increased requirements in terms of individuals putting their signature, having their date of birth, their national insurance number and so on would lead to an extra drop-off. The jury is still out on exactly where the proportion of those reasons is, but we do have to take it seriously and in the context of looking at the potential applicability to Great Britain, we do need to take that on board. I note what the Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee said in their report that they did not think at this stage that that exact system should be rolled out to Great Britain and I think there is some force in that. However, the conditions are not exactly the same in Northern Ireland and in a sense, what we are currently discussing with government is how we can modernise that system of registration whilst taking into account the lessons that there certainly are from Northern Ireland and the analysis of those lessons is continuing.

Q12 Chris Mole: So what general lessons do you think we can learn from the Northern Ireland experience before introducing a similar system in Great Britain?

Mr Younger: One of the things in Great Britain relates to this issue of the carryover. It seems to me, though we have not pinned this down finally, that if one is to introduce it in Britain, because the reasons why we are introducing it are not exactly the same in Northern Ireland—that is a sort of once-off, where you are off the register if you do not fill in the individual registration form on day one—that may well not be right but something that is graded and gradual as you introduce a new system has to be something which is well worth exploring and it is important to explore that. There is also the question by comparison with Northern Ireland of the sort of identifiers. One of the issues in Northern Ireland was having to find the National Insurance number. Our view currently is that we would not need necessarily to do that in the rest of the UK. I would say that we have to be very careful. I very much recognise the fears that there are and I note very much that the government's response to our earlier recommendations on individual registration, which of course, in what was being responded to, pre-dated the experience in Northern Ireland, said that they were sympathetic to the principles of individual registration, but concerned about practical implementation. I think it is very, very fair point.

Q13 Chris Mole: Was that an approval of the rollover process that I thought I detected there? I think the experience suggests that it is, as ever, the hard-to-reach groups which are the most likely to fall off the register. The Committee would be interested in hearing what strategies you have put in place to address that in Northern Ireland specifically. Did I hear you say you would welcome rollover coming back?

Mr Younger: Interestingly, in the context of Northern Ireland, we had some scepticism about rollover in the initial system in Northern Ireland,

25 January 2005 Mr Sam Younger and Ms Pamela Gordon

because the great thrust of the Fraud Act was to tidy up and clean up the register and it would have been in conflict with that purpose. Looking at the register in GB, I think we would say that you do need to find some kind of rollover and link that to the question—

Q14 Chairman: Explain “rollover”.

Mr Younger: This is not having a register which, as it were, starts from ground zero every year. In other words, people stay on it and only have to re-register periodically. In Northern Ireland, up to now, since 2002, if you do not re-register every single year, you are off the new register.

Q15 Chairman: So are talking about rollover for a year, two years or for ever?

Mr Younger: I do not have an absolutely fixed position, because these are the practicalities which we are getting into discussing now. I should have thought, in the context of GB, certainly not for ever. You need to have a way of cleaning up the register so that when people who, as it were, have not bothered to take themselves off because they have moved, gone away, whatever, you can do that.

Q16 Peter Bottomley: Died?

Mr Younger: Possibly. On the other hand, I think you need to have a period of grace. There is another reason, not just the fear of people dropping off the register, but also, and this relates to the promotion of getting people on the register, you have the issue that if you do take people off the register less frequently, in other words, you do not do the absolutely full 100% annual canvass, some of the resources that we currently use for what is effectively repeat business of not very high value could be diverted a little bit more into trying to reach harder-to-reach groups. You could focus maybe more on those, which is a slightly separate issue. The effort of going to, taking the example of Northern Ireland, a full personal annual canvass when a very high percentage are people who are staying in the same place, is where the use of that resource is not necessarily of great value by comparison with the other ways those resources could be used.

Q17 Dr Whitehead: You mentioned a moment ago the recommendation that National Insurance numbers would not be necessary as far as individual registration in concerned in Great Britain. Why do you think that would not be necessary? In Northern Ireland various photo identity cards have been required and you make no mention of that as a possible individual identifier in Great Britain. Could you comment on that?

Mr Younger: Yes, certainly. When we looked at the registration process and made our recommendations for GB, which we did in the early part of the 2003, we were not particularly looking at the model of Northern Ireland, we were looking at what would, in the context of the GB register, be useful and valuable security and other identifiers. We felt that the addition of a date of birth and a voter signature was quite sufficient for the purposes

that we were after. That is the reason that we did not wish to do that in Northern Ireland. I am sorry, the second part of your question was . . . ?

Q18 Dr Whitehead: The question of photo identity cards of various kinds. Four options were suggested in Northern Ireland.

Mr Younger: Again, we were looking at the development of the registration requirements as a matter of remote voting and in a sense the voter identity card is not a requirement of the registration process, it is a requirement of going and voting in a polling station, if you do not have other designated photo identification in Northern Ireland. It does raise an issue that we have not looked at yet very hard, and perhaps we should, which is, in the context of polling stations, what sort of identification should be required, because the tradition in this country is not to require any identification. There is no doubt that in the context of Northern Ireland, the photo identification has been something which has, in the Northern Ireland context, improved credibility to some extent in terms of those going in to vote in polling stations being who they say they are.

Ms Gordon: May I add something to that? We have also suggested that voters would be given a unique registration number for voting purposes. That obviously, looking to the future, would be an extra check and a vital check for any electronic voting, in the same way that the signature would provide for a cross-check based on a sample basis for postal voting. They are both security measures that we are suggesting. We have not thought it necessary to add the photographic evidence to those; not at this stage anyway.

Q19 Dr Whitehead: If you were in future to undertake individual registration by telephone or internet, you would not at that stage have a unique registration number. How would you deal with the security and possible fraud implications as far as that was concerned?

Ms Gordon: If it were introduced before there was individual registration? This is why we have seen the two things as needing to go together, because, for any form of electronic or remote voting, one is going to need to have identifiers which will be absolutely secure within whatever system is available. How one would do that outside individual registration becomes much more complicated, much less easy to see.

Q20 Dr Whitehead: The individual identifiers would arise after the registration process had taken place presumably and the question of possible fraud and identity theft would arise at the point of individual registration I assume.

Ms Gordon: A fraud in registering, yes.

Q21 Sir Paul Beresford: Presumably some of the potential identifications, such as the National Insurance number would not work for the individuals who come from Commonwealth countries and have a reciprocal right to vote.

25 January 2005 Mr Sam Younger and Ms Pamela Gordon

Mr Younger: I guess that is right. What we have done up to now is thought in terms of the principle and what we are trying to achieve by it. In the practical implementation we put forward some thoughts, but are in discussion with government and others as to exactly what those should be in order to make sure we get a system that works within the context of those who are eligible to be on the register and to vote in this country.

Q22 Dr Whitehead: You mentioned the possibility in your evidence of the fact that, as far as household registration is concerned, it is possible obviously for the head of household filling the form in, either by accident or design, to omit household members or indeed add other household members. What evidence do you have of what level of inaccuracy there is and do you consider that with individual registration that particular issue of deliberate or accidental inaccuracy would be resolved?

Mr Younger: We have anecdotal evidence rather than exhaustively researched evidence that there are some levels of inaccuracy in the register. I do not think our evidence would suggest that the vast majority of these are other than mistakes, whether it is somebody putting on somebody who is not the right age, whether it is somebody who is of a nationality that does not have the right to vote. People getting forms through the door may return them because they are good citizens and if they are sent an official form they return it duly signed. The chances are, we would suggest, that if you do have individual registration, and each individual has to identify himself and make a signature, you are in the end going to get a more accurate register. The question is, and I think this is one of the key issues, whether it would be a more complete register. There, there would be an awful lot of work to be done to make sure, which is exactly the issue at the heart of this, that, if you do move to a different system of registration, you maintain the maximum number of those entitled to vote on that register.

Q23 Chairman: The dog getting a polling card or the three-year-old getting a polling card appears to be fairly rare, so that it is a story for the local paper, is it not? If it were commonplace, it would not be a story.

Ms Gordon: I am glad to say that it is fairly rare, but I also have to say that it derives from the dog or whoever being entered onto the return.

Q24 Chairman: It is normal that the returning officer is blamed for it, whereas it should really be the householder.

Ms Gordon: Yes.

Q25 Mr O'Brien: May I press you on the implementation of the individual registration? In your written evidence, you have advised that a possible staged approach might include reducing the frequency of annual canvass. What plans have you developed for a phased approach to the

implementation of individual registration? Over what period of time do you envisage this being introduced?

Mr Younger: As we mentioned before, we have not really pinned this down. There is a recognition, particularly looking at the experience of Northern Ireland and perhaps one would even have reached this conclusion without the experience of Northern Ireland, that a significant change to the system is one that you need to be very careful about, if you are not going to lose people off the register. Certainly much of the discussion of those who have been sceptical has been a very genuine worry, particularly parents who say "I fill in the form for my household and I put my 20-year-old and my 19-year-old on it as well as my wife and myself and I am afraid that if I did not do it, they would not get on". We have to deal with that, because that is very real. Making a staged approach, so that, whatever register we have at the time we move to individual registration, we do not, as it were, dump it overnight, but have a period of maybe two, maybe three years where you do not push people off the register who were on it before individual registration, has to be allied with a good deal more work on targeted campaigns to get people to be on the register. We have done a fair amount on this and it is interesting to note, and it is buried there somewhere in the evidence, that some of the areas which are the most successful are when you can really target, such as using the Royal Mail redirection service to target people who have moved house. Over the last six or eight months, that has brought 50,000-odd new registrations which we can source to that because of the means that we use to make the registration. There, we need to be a lot more sophisticated and in part, if one did move over time away from putting whatever resource is available overwhelmingly in a repeat annual canvass every year, but were more targeted about it with a full canvass less frequently than every year, perhaps every two, maybe every three, then one could have a real impact on that.

Q26 Adrian Sanders: The principle here is about the largest number of people being on a register. Now people move, and you give the example of using the redirection service, but when people move, even if they move out of area or within area, they are still on the register so they still have a vote, it is just the inconvenience of having to return or fix up a postal vote. Under the system of individual registration, they presumably would not still have that vote if they moved and did not then register in their new address.

Mr Younger: In theory that is possible and indeed may happen. That is part of the reason to think in terms of the carryover: that you pick up people who are moving house, you try to get them onto the register in the new place and take them off in the old. I think there are cases when somebody is known to have moved out of an area, where electoral registration officers (EROs), after a time, may take people off the register anyway. The problem is not non-existent now, but we have to be careful with individual registration. There, in a sense, the issue is

25 January 2005 Mr Sam Younger and Ms Pamela Gordon

not necessarily any different under individual registration. That depends on the length of the carryover; even now when people move house, they stay on the register until the period of carryover is finished.

Q27 Adrian Sanders: Some of the more transient groups are the people who do not have secure housing or are the very hard to reach groups at the moment.

Mr Younger: Yes, indeed. I think it is the case, depending on what the rules would be, that if they are once on the register in the first place, they are no less likely to remain on the register under individual registration than they are under household. The question is, once somebody is on the register, over what period you take them off if they have not re-registered. This in a sense is part of the experience of Northern Ireland that is worried about losing people you should not be losing if you force them off the register if they do not re-register that immediate following year and looking at doing that over a longer period, which is what the government has expressed the intention of doing now.

Q28 Mr O'Brien: In the transition period to which we referred, how would you approach the question of accuracy and coverage of the register? How would you address the problems which could develop from people having different views as to how they should register, like a parent registering or pressing their children to register? Do you envisage any other problems and how would you deal with them?

Mr Younger: In moving from any system that has been there for many years to any sort of new system, you have to recognise that there will be problems and there certainly will be and there will certainly be people who might have been registered by a parent or other member of the family who will not immediately be registered. That is a matter above all of (a) the staged process but (b) the targeting of campaigns to encourage people to get on the register. That is what the key to it is and in saying all of that, I certainly would not want to minimise some of the problems that there might be. The pluses of individual registration are real and are worth achieving, but we need to make sure we are pragmatic enough to look at making sure that we do that—

Q29 Mr O'Brien: What problems have you witnessed with the Northern Ireland procedure?

Mr Younger: The problems with the Northern Ireland procedure have been that there have been quite significant numbers of people lost off the register, not just in year one, but then some more, a more modest number, in year two. There the problem has been traced first, which we would not run into if we applied this system within the rest of Great Britain, to knocking people off the register if they have not re-registered after year one. Also there are people who do not want to go through giving their details endlessly to authority of one kind or another. There are various reasons people might not give their details: whether because they are transient,

whether because they have a reluctance to put into any official form, a National Insurance number, or a date of birth or whatever it is, whether in the context of Northern Ireland with rolling registration you are actually being asked to go to a hearing, which is not something that happens—

Q30 Mr O'Brien: So you are still dealing with some of the problems in Northern Ireland are you?

Mr Younger: We have an interest in it. Clearly the responsibility for registration in Northern Ireland rests with the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland. We support that office in terms of publicity and registration campaigns to get people to understand the requirements and to register.

Q31 Mr O'Brien: In your report of 2003, *The Electoral Registration Process*, you recommended the retention of annual canvass as an interim measure. What should replace it and on what timescale?

Mr Younger: When we did that report, one possibility we did have in mind was to say perhaps we did not need the annual canvass, perhaps it should be every two years, every three years, we had not defined a particular amount of time, and use the resource, say, as I have mentioned before, to target registration campaigns at harder-to-reach groups. In fact it was in discussions and feedback from the political parties that there was an anxiety at that stage about moving away from the annual canvass and we felt that we had not sufficiently thought through how that might be done to recommend dispensing with the annual canvass just like that. Increasingly, and looking at the experience of Northern Ireland, there is a good case for re-orienting the kind of resources that you use and actually only doing a full canvass on a less regular basis than every year and using that resource to target your—

Q32 Chairman: Why do you have to do it less frequently than every year? Is there not a logic in not doing it at all and simply concentrating all the effort on the people who move? I have lived in the same house for 25 years and have filled in the form for 24 of them, as a pretty pointless exercise, have I not?

Ms Gordon: In our report we did indicate that there could well be an argument for some flexibility on a local basis. The average movement, as I understand it, of households last year was 13% across the whole of the country and that varies enormously between people like the Chairman who have stayed for a long time in one house and inner city areas where there is considerable movement. I think individual registration officers would wish to take a very different approach, depending on their local circumstances. There are also very particular circumstances about the considerable areas where there are large numbers of students, where obviously there is already a big problem of registration which, if anything, is being compounded, we understand again from anecdotal evidence, because of wardens of halls of residence and so on being unhappy about having to register students individually on a

25 January 2005 Mr Sam Younger and Ms Pamela Gordon

composite return because of human rights issues. So there are already in the current system a number of problems which will need to be addressed which could be addressed through the proposals that we are making.

Q33 Mr Beith: You are looking at this from the standpoint of getting people onto the register, but what is there, as an alternative to the national canvass, for stopping people being on the register who should not be on the register? We were reminded us in a memorandum of evidence that a national newspaper registered somebody called Mr Gus Troobev, which is an anagram for bogus voter, in 31 constituencies; his name actually appeared on the electoral register in 31 constituencies, even though he was an entirely bogus character. What alternative is there to the annual canvass to vet these things?

Mr Younger: There are two or three possibilities. One, if you once moved to a system where there are more individual identifiers, you are less likely to have those kind of bogus registrations; less, but it is not out of the question. Secondly, we have also made a proposition in that earlier report which said there should be a right for and indeed an obligation on electoral registration officers themselves to challenge and follow up registrations which they think might be bogus. It is not there at the moment, it is on receipt of an objection from somewhere else that they act and I think there is a case for a much more proactive role for registration officers on the register. The third element is probably the answer to the question of whether you need an annual canvass at all. A periodic canvass, that is a full canvass, that tries to make sure you update, clean up the register, is something that there should be. I very much also take the Chairman's point that there is a very high percentage of those in the annual canvass which is simply a repeat of exactly the same details that were given a year before.

Q34 Mr O'Brien: Do you think a targeted audit procedure would be better, replacing the existing system?

Mr Younger: My sense would be that any auditing system would probably include a periodic complete audit. The issue would be what period would be the right one: whether it would be two years, three years, whether it might be once in every electoral cycle which is likely to be every four to five years. I think that would be part of it. I think the other is the targeting, particularly at making sure that those under-registered groups are on. One point I think we need to be careful of there, one of the reasons historically why individual local authorities have been reluctant to get involved in a great deal of targeted canvassing for people on the register, is a fear of getting pulled into what could become political issues in terms of where that targeting is and how you carry it out. One needs to recognise that. Given the position local authorities can be in, in terms of understanding the people in their patch, there is a case in a coherent and thought-through way to have more targeted registration campaigning.

Q35 Mr O'Brien: The current electoral register is based on addresses grouped in parliamentary constituencies. What would be the basis for the register formed from individual registrations?

Mr Younger: Initially, though obviously if the system were to be changed then there is a chance to review everything, I would not necessarily think there was any reason to change the unit of account; there is no need for that. One of the enablers of individual registration, particularly once you have individual identifiers and particularly, which we have not mentioned yet, once you have a register which is electronically maintained to common standards and which can be interrogated, is that you have a possibility then of people, for example, being able to vote outside of a particular polling station, because you have a linked-up system. That is actually a little bit further down the road, but I do not think there is an immediate reason why moving from one basis of registration to another would change the geographical unit on which you would need to base a register.

Q36 Mr O'Brien: Finally, may I just press you on the constituency size and combination? This is an issue that you and I discussed a few months ago. Would it be possible under individual registration to base constituency sizes on the combination of census and electoral registration figures, rather than electoral figures alone? Taking the census into consideration.

Mr Younger: I would need notice to answer that question at all coherently. As I understand it, the basis on which parliamentary constituency boundaries are done is set out in legislation and there is obviously a case after a cycle of looking at the legislation. Perhaps one other thing—

Q37 Chairman: Wait a minute; come on. This is fairly fundamental to this inquiry, is it not? There is a bit of panic from some members of parliament, that if you went to individual registration and you got under-representation, you could end up with a constituency which allegedly had 70,000 people on the register, but in practice there were 80,000 adults. Your case work might well go up considerably and over a period of time it would skew the political representation in here, would it not, because there is a fair chance that the under-representation might be people who in the end will vote for one particular political party. Surely you ought to have some view as to whether, if you went for individual registration, we would need to look at a different way of measuring the size of constituencies, perhaps combining registration and census figures; not that they have got it right particularly recently.

Mr Younger: It is a very legitimate point, but it is not one that I have a particular answer to, because the parliamentary process is separate. Clearly there is a link, as the register is developed, to make sure that we finish up with constituencies which are on the fairest possible basis.

Q38 Mr O'Brien: This was one of the points I raised with you when we were looking at constituency changes. There is evidence to show that in many

25 January 2005 Mr Sam Younger and Ms Pamela Gordon

constituencies, taking into consideration the 2003 register of electors, it has identified that those figures for the electorate are 10% below the census figures for people over 18. Now surely that is the kind of evidence that we should be looking at to make sure that the constituency boundaries are based on a more fair and open system than just on the electoral system. Do you not agree?

Mr Younger: You make a strong point. It is not something we have looked at in the context of this and of course we do not have any responsibilities in the areas of parliamentary boundaries; that is something very much to look to for the future and it is not directly linked to individual versus household registration. In a sense it may be that if it were the case that the scale of under-registration of people who should be on the register would be significant if you moved to individual registration, then we have in practical terms to look at whether we have it right and whether that is the right system to go to. That said, I think there clearly is an issue of making sure that we have parliamentary constituency boundaries which are fair and coherent. But that is for the future.

Q39 Mr Clelland: What about the poor old electoral registration officers in all of this? Have you done any research into what assistance they might require in order to ensure best coverage of the register? Do you have any recommendations on levels of reminders and checking of returns?

Ms Gordon: We would want to work through the details of any proposal that was agreed by government, very much involving the electoral registration officers. They have given us a lot of observations so far, because obviously it is their practical experience that we are depending on. We are on record as regarding the registration service historically as having been a Cinderella service of local government and they do need greater resources to carry forward some of these additional burdens that are being laid on them with individual registration, as there have been with other developments in elections. So there would be a resource implication, but it would be largely a transitional one, as would be the case in introducing any new system. The other dimension of this, which we would regard as important from the local authority point of view, from the returning officer's responsibility, would be to carry out wider local public awareness campaigns alongside what the Commission does at a national level. That is particularly relevant where there are local circumstances and particularly hard-to-reach groups in a locality. This, again, is an issue we have drawn attention to because not all returning officers or registration officers are comfortable with the idea of mounting such campaigns. We should like greater clarity as to their ability to do this.

Q40 Mr Clelland: These are the promotional campaigns you talked about in your report *The Electoral Registration Process*.

Ms Gordon: Yes.

Q41 Mr Clelland: So you see a role for the electoral registration officers in running these promotional campaigns.

Ms Gordon: Yes.

Q42 Mr Clelland: You feel they are perhaps not comfortable with this. How are going to convince them that this is a good idea?

Ms Gordon: Many of them are comfortable; many of them do a great deal and that is very welcome and no doubt has a considerable effect. Others, for a variety of reasons, feel it is outside their role and they really need some certainty that it is seen by government, to clarify the legislation as part of their role, that they are entitled to do this and that they should be able to do it, irrespective of any political views that there might be among the members of their council.

Q43 Mr Clelland: Do you think there might be scope for introducing some sort of incentives, either sticks or carrots, for the individual to register?

Ms Gordon: This is a difficult one because many people will say that traditionally it is a citizen's duty to do what is required and obviously that has some strength. On the other hand, there have been experiments to encourage people to meet the requirements laid on them and it is an area worth looking at further as we work through the practicalities.

Q44 Mr Clelland: You talk about resources. If or when we move from the present system to a system of individual registration, how much is this all going to cost and who is going to pay for it?

Mr Younger: The general background to this is that we have been on record for some time saying that electoral registration services generally have been under-funded in very many areas; that is the general background. In terms of individual registration, there would be an initial transitional cost as there would be in any of these things, but in an ongoing sense, one of the things of looking at the mix of factors you would have, perhaps not having an annual canvass in the same way that we have had historically would release resources within even the current pot to enable more targeted registration campaigns. That is not to say that we would not, as I suspect many others would, say there would be value in putting more resources than are currently there into the process of making sure those who should be on the electoral register are. I do recognise that there are elements of our system which are a system which is becoming increasingly sophisticated and which do require more resources. You see, for example, not thinking for the moment about all-postal voting, that the rise of postal voting does mean that there are more resource pressures on registration officers. In the context of individual registration, if you had an individual signature, that is not only important at the point of registration but, in postal voting terms, it gives you something against which you can check the incoming postal vote. Well that needs somebody to do it, so there are resource

25 January 2005 Mr Sam Younger and Ms Pamela Gordon

implications there as well. I do think that is part and parcel of making sure we have a system which is fit for the kind of democracy we are in the future.

Q45 Mrs Cryer: Should we move to individual registration, what sort of impact do you think this would have on hard-to-reach groups, such as young people, which Ms Gordon has already touched on, as far as students are concerned and ethnic minority groups? May I just suggest to you that my constituency of Keighley is in the Bradford district and 50% of the fairly large Bangladeshi and Pakistani community do not speak any English and very many of that group are illiterate in their mother tongue, so I think we are probably back to promoting registration.

Mr Younger: In a sense the picture you paint is precisely the reason why, we would entirely respect those views which say we have to be very careful with moving to individual registration in terms of not losing people who should be on the register and are not. Part of the problem you describe was something which was there with household registration as well. I can only say that the answer must lie in being much more targeted and much more determined in the campaign to get people onto the register. I would not want to predict how that would go, but I do think one of the important things is that if we are going to move from one system of registration to another, we should not be doing it without an adequate resource to make sure it can be done properly.

Q46 Peter Bottomley: I think the group of people who are the least represented as potential voters absent from registration are British citizens living abroad. I put it to you that it may be that 97% of the potentially eligible voters, say in Majorca, are not registered. Who do you think has responsibility, under the present system, of getting them registered and who do you think would have the responsibility under a future system of having them registered?

Mr Younger: First of all, the small number of overseas voters registered is something that is pretty clearly the case. The latest figures we have show a very, very small number of a population of potential overseas voters, of which we are not quite sure, because there are estimates of up to 13 million British people living abroad, how many actually have the right to vote, how many of them are under age and so on; anyway, the number of them registered is very small. Clearly, in terms of registering to vote, the first responsibility under the present system and under any future system will be with the voter him or herself to get on the register. Organisations like mine, just as a local authority, have a role in encouraging people to get on the register; that is both a matter of advertising that they have the right to be on the register and making it as easy as possible for them to get on the register. In the case of overseas voters, interestingly, it is an issue that did not get raised by anybody in the context of the 2001 general election. It has been raised since, it is something we have looked at, we have developed materials, developed our own website to make it easier for people, doing targeted advertising

alongside our registration campaigns in the UK. It is a very real issue. Of course voters around the world outside Britain are even more difficult to get at in any coherent sense than voters in Britain.

Q47 Peter Bottomley: So you are not satisfied with the present situation.

Mr Younger: No, I do not think one can be satisfied with a large number of people who have the right to be registered to vote and a very small proportion of them are actually registered from the evidence we have.

Q48 Peter Bottomley: Chairman, is this not the one example of where there is individual registration opportunity, there is no householder registration? Does it not show that there is potentially a very grave danger in moving to individual registration?

Mr Younger: I would not see the two as necessarily connected. I suspect the dynamics of people in terms of registration when they move abroad are very different from the dynamics when they are at home. I have not done any research into it, but I do not think you could make a direct read-across.

Q49 Mrs Cryer: Should we move to individual registration, what sort of recommendations would you be making to registration officers regarding disabled people, getting those people on the register and, also, those people who are in long-term hospital care or residential care?

Ms Gordon: May I answer the last part first? We actually think there would be advantages for people in residential care, as indeed in student accommodation, in having individual registration, not least because it would answer a concern which is sometimes expressed that there is an opportunity for fraud there for people; it applies at the voting stage as well, but it applies at registration, as to how the registration is done. We would see advantages there in registering people individually. Sorry, please remind of the first part of your question.

Q50 Mrs Cryer: The first part was about individual registration for disabled people, the disabled people who may be blind or whatever but who live at home.

Ms Gordon: We would see individual registration, especially when combined with a national electronic register, as offering more opportunities for people with a variety of disabilities to register in different ways. At the moment, there is only the paper-based method. There would be an opportunity with a different system for people to use electronic means or to develop the telephone system, which at the moment is only operated by a few authorities and then only if there is no change in the registration. Once one has got some individual identifiers as a security check, people would be able to use the telephone as well. We see it as offering great advantage for people with disabilities.

25 January 2005 Mr Sam Younger and Ms Pamela Gordon

Mr Younger: The other element with individual registration is that if we were to move to individual registration or a system where there is a common format for registration right across the country, it would make it easier to provide the ability to register in different formats. Probably in terms of people with all sorts of issues with registering conventionally, whatever they are, one of the big opportunities would be when we can move down the road of electronics, whether by voice, sight, whatever, when different languages, for example, would be much easier to handle.

Q51 Mrs Cryer: What are the terms of reference of your current research into existing non-registration? Can you give us an interim report on its findings? How do you expect the results to inform your strategies on encouraging registration under a system of individual registration?

Mr Younger: We have a significant project under way at the moment in terms of understanding the causes of under-registration. There have been bits and pieces coming out of all sorts of bit of research, including research in Northern Ireland, though the conditions there are slightly different from much of the rest of GB. Certainly the point of doing that is precisely to inform any future strategy, not just that we might have, to encourage registration but also the local authorities might have. We have made some suggestions for things our local authorities might do in the past, but we are looking to this research, which I think I am right in saying we should be completing some time in the course of this year, really to inform the future. Whether under individual registration or, to be honest, even if it were the existing system, a lot of the same considerations would apply.

Q52 Chairman: When is that likely to be in the public domain then?

Mr Younger: I would rather, if I may, come back to the Committee to state that; I am not wholly sure.

Q53 Mrs Cryer: In the Bradford district, we seem to have the anomaly of an ever-shrinking register. Every time we have a new register, it is smaller and smaller; I wonder where it is going to end. I just wondered whether you already have an idea about addressing that by positive action by electoral registration officers.

Mr Younger: Yes, as a general proposition, but we would need to look a bit further at the precise tools that might be used. Again, part of what we are doing is looking also at practice in individual local authorities and particularly in the context of the analysis that is currently under way of, for example, the December 2004 register and looking at where there have been decreases and where there might have been increases. We do not have the figures yet, but there will be some local authorities in which there will be increases. Part of it will be looking at those and wondering whether there is something those authorities are doing that others could be copying. Generally speaking, in electoral

administration over the years we have not been very good at learning from experience elsewhere. It is an opportunity provided by the creation of the Commission as a central body, as a sort of clearing house, to try to get where the good experience and good practice is and help it get elsewhere.

Q54 Mr Betts: You may or may not be aware that some members of the ODPM Select Committee visited Australia recently, amongst other places. One of the things we went to look at was electoral registration. When we were there, the Electoral Commission looked rather bemused and said "Do you mean you actually chase up people on a yearly basis, send them forms and then canvass them even when they have not moved house?" which comes back to the Chairman's point on this. "We spend all our resources chasing up the people we know have moved and where there has been a change in their situation". The reason they can do that is that there are several bodies, the postal authorities, the utility companies, the driving licence authorities, who are all obliged to tell the Electoral Commission when someone moves their address. Do you think that is the sort of approach we should adopt in this country?

Mr Younger: There are two parts to it. One is the discussion we have already had about the degree to which an annual canvass is the right thing to do or not. In terms of the more targeted stuff, certainly the early experience we have had is that there is real value in targeted campaigning, whether it is of home movers through postal redirection, whether it is mortgage companies. We have been looking at that and there is a role there, both for us as an organisation and for local authorities and this is precisely the kind of thing that we need to join up much better than it has been joined up in the past, whatever system of registration we are with.

Q55 Mr Betts: And if we need changes to data protection legislation to achieve that, would you support that?

Ms Gordon: This is clearly one of the inhibitions at the moment and people raise this. They assume when they move house and they are signed up for council tax, that the information will go directly across to the registration officer. Of course that does not happen largely and there is some confusion about what is permitted under data protection and what is not. Some of this could be addressed, if it were made clear. Clearly it would have to be demonstrated to the individual that by signing up for one thing, they were signing up for another, but there ought to be ways of doing this and that would, no doubt, be helpful.

Q56 Mr Betts: Taking things a stage further, and it goes back to this point where I think you are right that individuals, when they sign up information to one bit of the system, assume that other bits get it and they do not know why they are being asked for it several times, if we move to a comprehensive system of national identity cards, should that

25 January 2005 Mr Sam Younger and Ms Pamela Gordon

information be automatically transferable? Do we not effectively have electoral registration lists there for us?

Mr Younger: The conclusion must be, were you to have compulsory national identity cards, that they could provide a basis for an electoral register. It is not something we have looked into with any great—

Q57 Mr Betts: Is it something you think people would like to look into, given the way that that legislation is going, so we do not end up with a complete duplication and people again getting rather fed up because they are going to give two lots of information for different purposes, when they could actually have given the same information in through one channel?

Mr Younger: I would not want to pour a lot of our own resource into anticipating what parliament is going to do. If it looked as though there were going to be national identity cards, clearly we would have to look at the impact that would have in terms of electoral registration and it would be real.

Q58 Mr Betts: I was just going to ask about the CORE project and whether you thought that actually was going to deliver and what sort of timescale you thought it was going to deliver on? I understand we are waiting for a strategy paper from government on this, but I think you essentially said that until that is working, individual registration would be very difficult.

Mr Younger: The CORE project is a vital first stage towards individual registration. It is also vital in terms of the needs right now, the needs not just of the Commission, but also critically of the political parties to be able to undertake their obligations under current legislation, in terms of the declaration of donations, in terms of being able to assure themselves that donors are on the electoral register.

Q59 Chairman: It is needed now but it is very much pending, is that it?

Mr Younger: Yes, that is an accurate summary.

Chairman: On that note may I thank you very much indeed for your evidence. Thank you. Can we have the next set of witnesses, please?

Witnesses: Mr Francis Aldhouse, Deputy Information Commissioner and Mr Jonathan Bamford, Assistant Commissioner, Information Commissioner, examined.

Q60 Chairman: May I welcome you to the second session this afternoon? May I ask you to identify yourselves for the record?

Mr Aldhouse: Chairman, I am Francis Aldhouse. I am one of the two Deputy Information Commissioners and I have with me, Jonathan Bamford, one of the Assistant Commissioners who specialises in some of this work.

Q61 Chairman: Do you want to say anything by way of introduction, or are you happy for us to go straight to questions?

Mr Aldhouse: May I just say something very briefly by way of introduction? The first is to thank you and the two committees for the opportunity to give evidence and the second is to extend to you the apologies of the Commissioner for being unable to be present himself. When the invitation to give evidence came to us, the Commissioner was already committed to give evidence yesterday to the Education and Skills Committee and he felt that he could not properly do justice to your work by cramming the two together so he asked me if I would undertake the duty. I hope that I am able to help you adequately.

Q62 Mr O'Brien: As you know, we are looking at individual registration. Do you believe that making individuals responsible for their own electoral registration is the right principle?

Mr Aldhouse: In principle we are strong supporters of individual registration, from a data protection point of view. The idea is that if you are collecting information about individuals, you should, whenever possible, try to obtain it from that individual; you are obtaining it from a more reliable

source. We do recognise—and I listened to the previous evidence from the Electoral Commission—that there are other issues to be taken into account. I can try to help you about how to weigh the data protection issues; I do not say that they should prevail.

Q63 Mr O'Brien: Moving away from the household submission for registration to individual registration, does this raise any particular problems for data protection? Would you require any additional safeguards for individual registration over the household registration?

Mr Aldhouse: That is why I said that this is a complex matter where you have to weigh things. Yes, one of the issues would be what sort of identification was required when somebody registered. At the moment, I suppose the assurance an electoral registration officer has is that a household is a reasonably fixed entity based on a location and, by other means, you can usually identify who the senior person is who says he or she is the householder. There is a difficulty if an individual gets in touch with the electoral registration officer by whatever future means are contemplated and what assurances will be required that this is a genuine individual entitled to be on the register. That still needs to be thought through to safeguard as much as anything the democratic process, rather than the specific individual. Accurate identification is a data protection need.

Q64 Mr O'Brien: Could I just press you on a matter which was submitted in your written evidence, paragraph 14? When you referred to the move from the household to the individual registration, and I

25 January 2005 Mr Francis Aldhouse and Mr Jonathan Bamford

quote, you said “This would in effect constitute a compulsion for individuals to provide information about themselves, and therefore to appear on the electoral register, with the likely effect that the information would be more accurate. The benefits of the most complete electoral registration in a democratic society carry great weight. Parliament might wish to count these benefits more highly than the loss of individual freedom caused by compulsion”. Are you referring to compulsory registration there?

Mr Aldhouse: We are assuming that registration would be compulsory, just as, in a sense, it is at the moment in that householders are bound by law to make a return. We are assuming that there would be a similar duty on individuals. Looked at from a purely narrow data protection point of view, requiring individuals to give information about themselves is an important issue which has to be thought about. It might well be that the democratic process is so important that it should be done in this case. That is why we put it the way that we did in the paper.

Q65 Mr O’Brien: But it is not an offence now if the head of the household, or whoever completes the forms, does not provide all the information. Are you saying that it should be an offence if all the information being sought by the electoral registration officer is not provided?

Mr Aldhouse: We have not constructed a specific offence. It is of course a duty on the householder to make a return when canvassed and we had assumed that, by analogy, such a duty would fall on the individual. Of course it would have slightly different consequences, but if our assumption were correct, then it would in effect mean that the individual was bound to make an accurate return about him or herself and one should weigh whether that is the right course to adopt. We suggest to you that you might think that it is right, even though it is a strong form of individual compulsion.

Q66 Mr Clelland: The Commissioner is apparently a fan of on-line and telephone registration under certain circumstances. Should a paper-based system ever become solely electronic? Could you say something to the Committee about the advantages and disadvantages of each, in data protection terms?

Mr Aldhouse: The reason why we are supporters of electronic and new technology ways of collecting information, I suppose goes back to the origins of data protections in that they were safeguards for individuals in a new technology world and we certainly do not believe that data protection is a reason why you should not adopt new technology ways of achieving these old processes. Indeed, if the safeguards are adequate, it should make it possible to adopt these new means. That, as it were, is a philosophical standpoint that yes, in the way that you put it, we are a fan of these new methods. The

problems in this context of the new methods will be as much as anything to do with the fact that we are talking about individual rather than household returns and issues about the identification of the individual. I suspect that that will prove to be the most difficult issue. How do you identify individuals at a distance through electronic communication means? Some of this is dependent on other issues. If we were to go the route in this country of identity cards with chips on them, then one could contemplate a technology which would provide on-line identification. There are other ways of providing on-line authentication: the sort of systems which have been adopted by the Inland Revenue, for example.

Q67 Mr Clelland: I am sorry for interrupting you, but we understand all the possibilities of technology. What we are concerned about from your point of view is the data protection implications involved in this.

Mr Aldhouse: The data protection implications are that you should identify people as well as you can. It is important that you identify people well, partly to protect their identities and partly to avoid identity theft. That is probably the principal implication in this case. The other important element I am reluctant to claim as a data protection issue is the accuracy of the register. You would probably want to see that as a democratic issue rather than specifically a data protection issue.

Q68 Mr Clelland: For instance, what security safeguards and what checking procedures could be used in order to allow telephone registration?

Mr Aldhouse: We have not set about constructing a way of implementing a system. We could point to systems used by other people, such as, for example, those who run telephone banking. I was talking about the sort of system used by the Inland Revenue, where you have user identification and passwords. Whether these are appropriate in the particular context, particularly bearing in mind the issues I know the Committees are anxious about of disadvantaged groups, might be debatable. One could construct security measures. We have not actually set out to do that yet.

Q69 Mr Clelland: So despite the fact that the Commissioner and the Commission have made it clear that they are in favour of on-line and telephone registration, you do not seem to have looked very deeply into what the security implications of that might be.

Mr Aldhouse: We are, in principle, in favour. We do not think that the security issues as such are distinguishable from the identification issues. They are issues which are the subject of fairly extensive debate at the moment in technical IT circles. We would not see it as our job to construct a system.

25 January 2005 Mr Francis Aldhouse and Mr Jonathan Bamford

Q70 Mr Clelland: What about people who are unable to register unaided and need to give information to a third party in order to register individually? What are the implications of that in data protection terms?

Mr Aldhouse: We see that as perfectly legitimate. In principle there is no data protection problem about using anyone as an agent to help you. You could construct scenarios in which the information was abused by the person to whom it was given to help, but I cannot say that we are greatly anxious about that. This is an issue which arises in many circumstances and it is perfectly acceptable from a data protection point of view to ask somebody to help you.

Q71 Adrian Sanders: In your evidence you support anonymous registration, comparing it to telephone subscribers choosing to opt out of the phonebook. Is there not a problem there in balancing your requirements for public scrutiny of the register with the rights of individuals who do not wish to have their records recorded?

Mr Aldhouse: On reflection, I wish we had perhaps not used that example. I think we made it clear in our evidence, at least in the conclusion, that we do not believe that full anonymisation is possible, nor indeed proper. At the end of the day, you, the individual, have somehow or other got to demonstrate to the electoral registration officer that you are entitled to vote and be on the register. We believe that there are several classes of people who have a very good claim to protect their address. You can think of those who are perhaps the subject of a witness protection programme or battered wives or others who are trying to hide their address entirely legitimately. We really quite strongly believe that there is an argument for seeking to protect them by what would be pseudonymous registration. They would register under some code or something like that, but some means of keeping off the publicly available register the name linked to the address of these people who do have a good claim for protection. That has consequences, because once you create a group like that, that information of itself has a value, has importance and needs to be protected. In the light of our experience, we know that there are investigators out there who would be trying to obtain the information.

Q72 Adrian Sanders: Are there any other types other than the ones you have described for trying to enhance the privacy of people other than setting up a category of people which could eventually be identified? Is the reality actually not that there is no answer to this question?

Mr Aldhouse: There is not a cut-and-dried answer. It is a case where you have to weigh considerations. I can try to help the Committee, as I do not think it is for the Information Commissioner to force a view on you. We do think that the categories I mentioned look as though they are very good candidates. You

might well take the view that those who just do not wish to be on the public register, just as they do not wish to be in the telephone directory, are at the weaker end of the case. It depends how the register is used. This comes to a general position of the Commissioner that the electoral register exists to assist the electoral process and our democratic processes. It should be used for that purpose and only for other purposes where strictly necessary and justifiably so.

Q73 Adrian Sanders: If that is the case, if your view is that the electoral register is there for electoral purposes first and foremost, then surely people who do not engage in the electoral process, Jehovah's Witnesses for example, have a complete right not to be upon the electoral register.

Mr Aldhouse: That might be so. We would not want to express a view on that, because it is not particularly a data protection issue. I could well see how that position could be maintained and we would certainly not see anything objectionable about it in data protection terms. You might well see it as assisting some other issues, but I do not think the Commissioner has a data protection viewpoint on that particular matter.

Q74 Adrian Sanders: We have a restricted register at the moment and under freedom of information legislation, the public do not have access to it. Should the freedom of information legislation be amended to allow the public the right to look at the restricted electoral register?

Mr Aldhouse: Freedom of information legislation of course is another balanced piece of legislation with a general principle and a number of exceptions. There are some very good reasons why the restricted information is kept restricted. I would not want to argue to you today that those restrictions should be abandoned.

Q75 Chairman: Is it really kept restricted? As I understand it, any political party has a right to see the full list, do they not? So presumably, if you decide to stand as an independent in an election, you have the right to see the full list.

Mr Aldhouse: Chairman, you are doing two things: you are taxing my knowledge of electoral law beyond its capacity and strength and, secondly, you have raised one of the inherent difficulties. Yes, a lot of the practices about access to the electoral register can be worked round and of course there is some anxiety given the position we have taken, which I expressed earlier.

Q76 Mr Clelland: Without going into any of the complexities of the electoral law, do you have any difficulties in principle, if there is going to be a requirement on electors to give personal information such as their date of birth, their National Insurance number, addresses and signatures in order to be registered? What safeguards should exist in order to protect the rights of individual in those circumstances?

25 January 2005 Mr Francis Aldhouse and Mr Jonathan Bamford

Mr Aldhouse: These safeguards that I am going to mention are based on classic data protection approaches. The first safeguard is why you want the information, what the purpose is and it is to construct an electoral register. You have a narrow purpose and that enables you to minimise the amount of information you need to construct the register. You do not obtain information because it might come in handy or because it might be convenient for some other secondary distant user of the register. The sort of information which you are talking about is potential information to help identify the individual more accurately; that might be necessary. Is it necessary to keep it on the register itself? That is another issue: it does not necessarily have to be there. I think that that would be the way we would go about suggesting safeguards, that is: narrowness of purpose, minimisation of the information and minimising the information that appears on the public register and, as a sort of corollary of that, adequate security safeguards and access rules about obtaining the remaining information.

Q77 Sir Paul Beresford: Evidence from one interested group in this particular area says that there is an opportunity for scope for additional information to be stored on that database. In other words, rather than just going for the minimum required information, they look for somewhat more. Have you any thoughts on that?

Mr Aldhouse: Wrong in principle from a data protection point of view.

Q78 Mr Clelland: If a requirement were introduced for pin numbers, signatures or photo cards, what would be the key issues that would have to be considered?

Mr Aldhouse: I am sorry, but I think I end up repeating myself because it does not necessarily matter what specific information it is. The question you would have to ask is: given the limited purpose and trying to make the purpose as narrow as possible, do we really need this information? It might be that you take a balanced view about what is necessary, what is proportionate in order to identify the individuals. You suggested a pin number system, perhaps a new system like that would be necessary. In that case, I think we would be saying: how is this information going to be stored, is there a risk of it becoming available so it permits another form of identity theft and it permits people to quote this number and people will tend to assume that the person quoting the number is indeed the person to whom it refers, as has happened with pin number systems abroad? However, it is very difficult to construct a system or a set of rules in isolation from a specific proposal for a system.

Q79 Chairman: I cannot remember my pin number from one week to the next when I use it for my credit card. How would someone really be able to remember their pin number if they only voted once a year?

Mr Aldhouse: Chairman, I am not trying to urge upon you a pin number system. I was merely trying to respond to the suggestion that this might be one way of doing things. The issue does arise about the practicalities of that and if you did have a pin number system, is that in order to assist the voting process when someone has actually got onto the register, or how would it actually relate to identifying the individuals in order for them to get onto the register? For that, you need to look at other information. Here at the moment we are faced with a difficulty, a certain circularity. One of the principal elements in identifying individuals at the moment is the electoral register. I do not think either we in the Information Commissioner's office or others have yet properly addressed how we are going to avoid that circularity.

Q80 Mr Clelland: That is very interesting. For an organisation which, at the outset you said, seemed fairly keen on the idea of new technology and new ways of doing things, you do not seem to have thought through very clearly what the implications of all this are in security terms.

Mr Aldhouse: I think I said that we are committed, as a general approach, to try to encourage and use the new technologies. It is extremely difficult for us to propound a specific set of security controls in the absence of a specifically designed system. We would be extremely reluctant to propound the system. We can comment on the sorts of considerations that people might bear in mind and the security ones are not actually very different from the points that I was making about identification of the individual and how you would seek to protect the information.

Q81 Mr Betts: In some countries such as Australia, they use other data sources, the postal authorities, the registration of deaths, the licensing authorities and utility companies, to provide the Electoral Commission with information about people's change of address so the Commission can then follow them up, hopefully to update and keep accurate the register. In your opinion, would it be proper to use any other data sources like these or National Insurance or council tax information to keep our registers up to date. If it would not, would you be prepared to support any changes of legislation to allow that to be the case? Whether you would or would not support change of legislation, what safeguards would you be looking at, if that were the way parliament chose to go?

Mr Aldhouse: This is an issue which, some time ago, the Cabinet Office looked at and more recently, the Department for Constitutional Affairs have been looking at, that is the question of data sharing between government departments for different purposes. We certainly do not say on data protection grounds that information should never be shared. We do start from the point of view that in order to protect individuals, you should collect information for a specific purpose and confine it to

25 January 2005 Mr Francis Aldhouse and Mr Jonathan Bamford

that purpose, but there are sometimes very good important public policy reasons for overriding that principle. This might be one of them. That access to information should be made available in order to ensure a good and accurate electoral roll, we would not want to dispute. There is an issue about whether other government departments and organisations have the statutory powers to provide that information. It might well be that legislation is necessary. If it is necessary, we would want to see it as narrow and specific legislation authorising the transfer of the information for a specific and identifiable and justifiable public purpose. We certainly do not say that this is objectionable in principle and should be ruled out; absolutely not.

Q82 Mr Betts: If everyone knew, when they were filling in a council tax form, that that information could also be used for electoral registration purposes and the law had been changed to allow that, and that was narrowly drawn, you then would feel that that was something that would be reasonable to do.

Mr Aldhouse: May I put it the other way? I should like to say that it is certainly something the Information Commissioner would not object to. I put it that way because I do not actually think it is for the Information Commissioner to promote the particular way of doing it, as someone who would want to perhaps comment on data protection safeguards, but the proposal that you are putting forward is a perfectly reasonable proposal and not one the Information Commissioner would want to object to. It is not really for our office to be promoting one way of doing electoral registration.

Q83 Mr Betts: May I just take it on to another related issue? Obviously national identity cards must be exercising your thoughts to a degree. If we had a comprehensive system brought in where effectively there was a list of all citizens in the country with details of them, would it then to your mind be appropriate if that information were collected at the same time for electoral registration purposes? One of the things the public often objects to is having to provide the same information for two purposes, when they assume government ought to be doing a little bit of sharing in a common-sense way.

Mr Aldhouse: Two points of principle. Sometimes it is a very good idea to collect what seems to be very similar information separately, partly because individuals might, for entirely legitimate reasons, want to use a different name or a different address and we have come across examples of that in the past. In this particular case, and I have not attempted to think through all the implications of this, that problem might not arise and you might well want to say that the list of people on the national identity register is to all intents and purposes the list of those entitled to vote in elections. I could see the strength of that argument.

Mr Bamford: Could I just add something to that answer? One of the problems with the national identity registration scheme which is proposed will be enrolling people and understanding on what basis they are there. I think it would be very clear that the actual people who are entitled to a national identity registration number and a card would not actually be entitled to vote in some instances. So you would be involved in adding an extra level of difficulty to the enrolment process, of then actually determining the eligibility for certain services at the point of enrolment.

Q84 Mr Betts: So that is a matter of practical objection, rather than a principle objection.

Mr Bamford: It would be a significant practical problem for the Home Office to try to achieve that objective at the same time as enrolling people.

Q85 Mr Betts: More immediately, the government is, and we are waiting for a strategy paper very soon I understand, trying to get the CORE project under way for a national database of electoral registers which would be formed by the information collected by electoral registration officers at local level. Again, have you been in discussion with government about that? Have you thought about the necessary safeguards or are you generally relaxed about that?

Mr Aldhouse: We have not been consulted on it.

Q86 Mr Betts: Do you know about it?

Mr Aldhouse: We know about it.

Q87 Mr Betts: You have not been consulted. Would you have expected to be consulted about it before the project actually is implemented?

Mr Aldhouse: We should have thought that this was a project which had data protection implications and we normally expect government departments to consult us when they have such a proposal.

Q88 Chairman: Very tactful, but you are a bit unhappy, is that right?

Mr Aldhouse: I should prefer it if the Commissioner had been consulted.

Q89 Dr Whitehead: In paragraph 29 of your memorandum to the Committee, you raise some concerns about the targeting of voter profiles by political parties as a result of use of the marked register. You suggest that by the use of a number of other techniques, which gather different amounts of information, very accurate profiles can be produced. You expressed concern that that is not in your view, an appropriate use of the marked register. On the other hand, the existence of the marked register as a public document historically, to ensure that a check against impersonation for example can be undertaken, seems to be a rather

25 January 2005 Mr Francis Aldhouse and Mr Jonathan Bamford

important element of the process. How would you reconcile those two positions and particularly meet your concerns about profiling whilst allowing people to inspect the marked register as far as potential fraud is concerned?

Mr Aldhouse: By a purely expedient practical process, I am afraid; the sort of process which was adopted with the poll tax arrangements. Yes, there is a need and a pressing public policy reason to inspect the register and allow it to be inspected. That should be permitted, but that is not the same as providing copies of it. Inspection must be permitted. We do not believe that copies should be made available.

Q90 Chairman: Should not be made available to whom?

Mr Aldhouse: Complete copies should not be published, although a member of the public, and in this respect probably political parties would be exercising the greatest interest, should be able to inspect marked copies of the register in order to ensure against impersonation and any other electoral fraud.

Q91 Dr Whitehead: A sort of chained bible method.

Mr Aldhouse: That is our practical expedient.

Q92 Adrian Sanders: What would there be to stop somebody going in with a copy register and simply copying onto their register what they see on the marked register? There is no offence.

Mr Aldhouse: You could put together rules about the ways in which people should inspect the register. If somebody is really determined, I suppose there is nothing to stop somebody going to inspect a marked-up register, copying out five items every day and going back and doing it again. The experience in other areas is that people will understand the principle and respect the principle which is being demonstrated.

Q93 Adrian Sanders: On what do you base that?

Mr Aldhouse: Our experience of the community charge and council tax.

Mr Bamford: May I say, without being expert on the subject, that my understanding with the existing full register and the edited register, is that you potentially have the same situation as well. Somebody could go in and inspect the full register, which everybody can, but they had actually brought a copy of the edited register with them and therefore could annotate it with the extra details. My understanding is that at the moment electoral registration officers do not allow that to take place.

Q94 Adrian Sanders: There is not much point to doing that if there is no endgame. However, there is clearly an endgame, an interest in using a marked

register in terms of parties targeting their message at those voters who are most likely to vote, who would be the ones recorded as having voted in the past. It is actually a very valuable document for any political organisation which contests elections.

Mr Aldhouse: I think I used the community charge example before, where some rules like this were constructed. In that sense the document was extremely valuable to direct marketers and others and the practical inconvenience of copying out by hand small quantities at a time conveyed the message that this was not acceptable. Yes, it is possible that someone would attach such importance to it that this would not be a successful expedient: at the moment that is the expedient we would recommend.

Q95 Dr Whitehead: Does the same principle not apply to the concern that the credit reference agencies have access to a full copy of the register and indeed they quite often use that access for a purpose which does not relate to elections but relates to some other purpose entirely?

Mr Aldhouse: That is absolutely right. The Commissioner's position in principle was and still is that the electoral register exists to aid the conduct of elections. That is why, for 15 years now—to put it in the rather strong words of the first Data Protection Registrar—he could not see why anybody should be under a statutory duty to report their changes of address to direct marketers. The credit reference agencies advanced a strong argument that for the avoidance of fraud and similar reasons they should be able to have access to the electoral register in order to assist the identification of individuals. This is one of those issues where you have a competing public interest which the government and the courts indeed accepted should override the narrow data protection view. I do not dispute that. Our starting point was that there is a narrow purpose for the electoral register.

Q96 Chairman: As I understand it, the mobile phone companies are actually improving registration amongst youngsters because you cannot now easily buy a mobile phone on one of these arrangements where you get the phone free and pay for our charges unless you can prove your address. I understand the mobile phone companies, via the credit rating people, are checking whether you are on the electoral register. If you are on the electoral register you can get mobile phones. So there is a certain incentive, is there not, for young people to get on the electoral register.

Mr Aldhouse: I suppose unintended consequences can sometimes be good as well as bad.

Chairman: On that note, may I thank you very much for your evidence?

Witnesses: **Mr David Simpson**, Head of Compliance and Data Protection, Conservative Party, **Mr Peter Watt**, Head of the Constitutional and Legal Unit, Labour Party and **Mr Mark Pack**, Internet and Communications Officer, Liberal Democrats, examined.

Q97 Chairman: May I welcome you to the final session this afternoon? Would you identify yourselves for the record and then if anyone wants to say anything briefly by way of introduction, we shall be happy to hear it?

Mr Pack: I am Mark Pack from the Liberal Democrats.

Mr Simpson: David Simpson from the Conservative Party.

Mr Watt: Peter Watt from the Labour Party.

Q98 Chairman: Does anyone want to say anything by way of introduction or are you happy for us to go straight to questions?

Mr Simpson: I am perfectly happy to go straight to questions.

Mr Pack: Yes; straight to questions.

Mr Watt: Yes.

Q99 Mr Beith: I am not sure whether I should declare an interest, because, like all other members of this Committee, I am a member of one of the parties represented by one of you. You are all representatives of political parties interested in organising elections competently and beneficially, so presumably any views you have on this subject are really more dictated by how you organise elections than by some grand principle of whether it is better for us to be collectively registered in households or individually registered as individuals. What advantage do you see for yourselves in it?

Mr Pack: The main potential advantage of individual registration from our perspective is the extra security it can provide for postal voting. Regardless of the issue around possible all-postal voting or postal voting on demand or widespread electronic voting, even under the current set-up an increasing proportion of votes is cast by post. I think that there is a general view that the current security arrangements are far from ideal and that individual registration provides the possibility of gathering extra information about individuals. There are obviously some questions about whether signatures, dates of birth, other identifiers and so on, can be used to validate that a postal vote is really cast by the person it says it should be cast by. It would be fair to say that is a fairly important point of principle to say that there needs to be a reasonable way of being assured that votes are being cast by those who are entitled to cast them.

Mr Simpson: We would certainly go along with all of that argument. There are distinct advantages in individuals knowing that they are committing themselves, whereas the householder will merely tick a box which says X, Y and Z still live here. Thank you very much. Sign it off and away it goes and X, Y and Z may never even be consulted about it. It does not have to be the case. It is right that there is individual responsibility which is extremely important in this exercise. We would certainly support the Northern Ireland system if we were asked how to deal with this. The way forward there, with the use of the National Insurance number—I

will not go into the other identifier which is used in Northern Ireland necessarily—seems to me to be the appropriate way forward.

Mr Watt: The other issue of principle is that we want as many people as possible to be taking part in the electoral process. I think we would all agree that we would want to move forward to multi-channel-enabled elections where people have choices as to how they cast their votes. The practical reality is that the only way that is going to happen is that we do have individual voter registration, where people can vote at more places than just that one polling station at a single point in their constituency.

Q100 Mr Beith: As a matter of practice how much do your parties use the published electoral register or the marked register as a means of establishing whether some fraud has taken place; not for other purposes mentioned earlier but for establishing whether some kind of fraud has taken place or electoral malpractice?

Mr Simpson: I would say only at a time when the result of an election in a particular ward or constituency is challenged.

Q101 Mr Beith: You would be challenging it.

Mr Simpson: Yes, of course. We would challenge the result in a particular case, if it were maybe a result like the Halesowen case a year or so ago where the returning officer was actually taken to the election court on the balance of probability of whether or not people had received postal vote application forms. It was a key decision which I believe involved the Labour Party in quite some cost.

Mr Watt: I could not possibly comment on the cost, but we certainly had some interest. That was an interesting case in that the issue there was whether or not the fact that someone did not receive their postal vote, for reasons to do with the Post Office or whatever, was actually a valid reason to contest the outcome of the election. It was an important point of principle. I would agree with David in a sense when it comes to fraud, but what we would use the electoral register for would be as a check, to make sure that people are being registered to vote. It becomes quite clear, as you are getting to know your patch and pounding the streets, as I am sure colleagues do regularly, that there are certain parts of your constituency where rates of registration are very low. If you knock at a house and no-one in the house is on the register and it happens door after door and you realise that there is a particular problem, then you would want to take some remedial action.

Mr Pack: The other issue in respect of fraud is that the existence of the electoral register, the publication of the marked register and so on are not just useful in terms of when a particular allegation comes up being able to see whether it looks like there is some evidence to make it worth pursuing, but also that it helps prevent fraud in that certain types of fraud are a lot easier to spot because we have a public electoral register and because we have a marked register

25 January 2005 Mr David Simpson, Mr Peter Watt and Mr Mark Pack

which can be inspected. If either or both of those did not apply, it is quite plausible that there would be all sorts of fraud taking place which do not happen at the moment because they would then become much easier.

Q102 Mr Beith: Do you have concerns about the potential reduced size of the register from individual registration, except in so far as that is because of the deletion of fraudulent or mistaken entries?

Mr Watt: We certainly do. I would say that was our main concern. Whilst we are wholly in favour, as a matter of principle, of individual voter registration, we have real concerns about the speed with which it would be introduced. The Electoral Commission have made some reassuring noises in terms of their recommendations for phasing in individual voter registration, but if you look at Northern Ireland as an example where that clearly would have a big impact, there are certain groups which would be particularly badly affected. Young people and students come to mind. If we were just to go from household registration to individual registration we would have real concerns.

Q103 Chairman: The problem in Northern Ireland was not necessarily the first register, it was the continuing process. In a sense it could be done quickly, as long as some way was found to make sure that particularly young people and other groups actually registered.

Mr Simpson: It would be impossible to run things side by side. You have to have a cut-off point and if it were determined by parliament that we should go to individual registration from a particular date, then that is what would happen. I do not see how you can have a dual system.

Mr Pack: It is also the case that whilst we share the concerns about what would be the initial impact on the registration rate, when you separate out two other parts of that issue, one of which is the impact that actually has on turnout in an election and therefore to what extent the people who do not register initially are the people who are not going to vote and therefore although there is still an impact of having reduced registration rates, it may not be as significant, but, also, in general in this country we are very poor at providing people with opportunities to register. If you compare, for example, the circumstance in Australia with Britain, in Australia there is much more integration, much more joined-up government—in the modern jargon—than there is in Britain. Our view would very much be that if we go down the route of individual registration, one way of dealing with the issue about a possible drop in registration rates is to look also at making it easier for people to register and it being tied up with the other sorts of things people do in terms of telling the Royal Mail when they move, giving information to DVLA and similar activities.

Q104 Peter Bottomley: In one area we have made the change already for service voters. In the past people in the armed services could register and would not have to change and they could always go on voting.

We have now moved to individual registration. It is quite clear that the evidence is that registration has dropped very significantly. There you have a monopoly employer, who knows where the people are and registration has gone down and down, has it not?

Mr Watt: I would agree and we are concerned. There are some merits in the household system in that we would not throw out the baby with the bath water here. It is not beyond the wit of us to come up with a system which maintains the advantages of the household registration whilst actually having individual voter registration; perhaps a household registration form which requires individual voters to sign, particularly if voters begin to have their own voter identification number or whatever that becomes known as. I do not want to bring in any disagreement when there is clearly agreement between the three of us so far, but a note of disagreement with Mark. Whilst I do not think the issue first of all would be that just because voters did not register, there would not necessarily be a drop in turnout. I do not think that is the issue because if people are on the register then we can communicate with them. If we are communicating with them, it might not mean they vote in this election, but the fact that they have been communicated with over a series of elections may well be a factor which leads them to decide to vote at some point in the future. I certainly would not want to give the impression that we would be unconcerned just because they did not vote when they were not on the register.

Mr Simpson: The thing with the service voting is that it is different in the sense that you have always had one person in the household consistently, every year, having to do a registration. It was considered that if you joined the service of your country and you registered to vote once, that stayed with you for life. It is that principle which has been changed by the 2000 Act and that has caused the real problem and the reduction in the number of service people voting or inclined to vote.

*The Committee suspended from 4 pm to 4.10 pm
for a division in the House*

Q105 Mr Betts: May I pick up three points, one made by each of you, and see whether there might be some agreement on the way forward with individual registration? Peter Watt was saying that there might be a possibility of having household forms which the head of the household received but then individuals signed them in their own capacity. Presumably that could be backed up by individual forms as well for anybody who wanted one. Mark Pack was making the point earlier about the use of other information, driving licence, council tax or whatever, as a means of getting information about individuals and where they lived and the appropriateness of using that. David Simpson was making the point that we used to have a situation where service personnel, once they were registered in a particular place, stayed on the register. There is that continuity principle: if someone is registered at an address, whether or not

25 January 2005 Mr David Simpson, Mr Peter Watt and Mr Mark Pack

they stay there they remain registered. Are they three points about which there might be common agreement?

Mr Simpson: On the service vote issue I rather think that a squaddy in Basra has more things on his mind than getting a vote back home. It seems to me that once people had signed up for the services they had the right to remain.

Q106 Mr Betts: I was really asking you about the continuity principle and whether it was a general one which could be applied across to everybody.

Mr Simpson: I believe that there has to be an annual registration.

Q107 Chairman: Why? Why does there have to be an annual registration?

Mr Simpson: Historically that has been the case. Though we do not have to follow history necessarily it has stood us in good stead thus far in creating electoral rolls. One of the problems sometimes is that local authorities, bless them, do not always follow up and do the removals from registers as quickly as they might and that leads to excess numbers on an electoral roll. If you are then looking at the problem like Northern Ireland, where about 120,000 people came off the roll the first year they went to individual registration, an awful lot of that could have been natural wastage; let us put it that way. They still think that annual registration is necessary in order to maintain an interest and maintain an accurate list for a particular local area.

Mr Watt: In terms of annual registration, what we would say is that again it is the baby and the bath water argument. There are some disadvantages to annual registration which, for example, the Electoral Commissioner identified in that it does not necessarily target under-represented groups particularly well for instance. On the other hand, what it does do is put the onus on local authorities to make an effort once a year in order to make sure their register is accurate. There are some very good examples around the country of authorities which have made the most of the annual registration. Again, what we would support would be a combination of maintaining the annual register, together with more targeted and focused work where local authorities are sharing best practice of what works in terms of increasing the registration of under-represented groups so you would get the advantages of both. I think that is where we would want to end up on this.

Mr Pack: It also adds an important safeguard in terms of both new properties appearing and old properties going. One of the problems all councils face is that electoral registration is not a great vote winner and therefore when it comes to allocating resources they are often relatively short of money. Having an annual process ensures that at least once a year there is a thorough check of the validity of the data. Whilst councils vary somewhat in how quickly they respond, for example, either to properties being demolished or new properties being built, we have at the moment the guarantee that once a year any issues

like that are sorted out and we have a guarantee that once a year a whole range of other issues will be sorted out.

Q108 Mr Betts: When some of us were recently in Australia and talked to the Electoral Commission there, they just looked in amazement at us when we described our system and said "Why do you bother sending out forms every year to people who have not changed their address, have not changed their circumstances and, if people do not send them back, chasing them up with an actual physical canvass?". What they do there is actually require other organisations, the utility companies, the postal authorities, the driving licence authorities, to inform the Electoral Commission when there have been changes of address. The Commission's job then is to chase those people whose circumstances have changed. They say that therefore they focus their efforts on the people whose registration position is going to be changed.

Mr Simpson: So all the power is with the Commission out there and not with the local people and the local authorities.

Q109 Mr Betts: Yes; either the national commission or the state commission. Whether it is or not, that is the requirement and they chase the people whose circumstances have changed. They claim that their register is 98% to 99% accurate, which is a lot more accurate than ours is.

Mr Watt: I would agree with that. I do not have any problems with that in the sense of the advantage of data sharing. I heard some of your conversation with previous witnesses and I think that there is a lot to be gained from data sharing with utility companies, even within local authorities. There is also a practical consideration which gives us concern in terms of the more targeted rolling approach and that is that there is the danger of political bias, or at least the allegation and perception of political bias in terms of where is being targeted for registration. Certainly in some of the proposals which have come forward from the Electoral Commission, we can imagine scenarios in which, even if it were not true, there would be the perception that particular areas were being targeted for voter registration for party political purposes. The advantage at the moment is that we have an annual registration and we know for practical purposes what that means for us practically. It works, so I think it is better to stay where we are and add on the benefits of the sorts of things you are talking about, than to get rid of the system and start again.

Peter Bottomley: Is it not true, picking up what Sir Paul Beresford said, that if electoral registration officers use the 192.com and Experian type of information, that should be able to throw up households where they thought something had changed and they could check, on an exception basis? Is it not also true that the Andrew Bennett issue, that so long as local authorities say you can just ring up and report that there has been no change, you actually cut out half the expense of organising it? Would it not be a good idea also if

25 January 2005 Mr David Simpson, Mr Peter Watt and Mr Mark Pack

even this place could actually agree with the Treasury that to call both the Treasury and Number One Parliament Street parliamentary building Number One Parliament Street is absurd?

Chairman: I cannot get smiles on the record very easily.

Q110 Mr Betts: In terms of the cut-off date for allowing people to register before an election, do we not have to get that far closer particularly to general election dates? We all know people who suddenly realise that they are not registered and who become very disgruntled and disaffected and cannot understand why, as there are still weeks to go to polling day something cannot be done. In many states in the United States, for example, you can literally register on the day. I know they do not have an electoral registration system we would want to copy in every respect, but would there not be something to be said for trying to get the data a lot closer to polling day and how close do you think we can get?

Mr Pack: Our view would certainly be that we would agree there is an almost, one is tempted to say, very English eccentricity that the point at which most members of the public are aware that there is an election on and maybe they have not sorted out their electoral registration, the deadlines have been and gone. It is difficult to see, if one were to sit down to invent a system, that one would come up with that system of having a deadline before most people notice there may be an issue. That said, the electoral register is used for a range of purposes, including, for example for Westminster elections and the provision of the Freepost election address leaflet, if candidates decide they wish to use an addressed leaflet they pull that information from the electoral register. In terms of it being an important tool for candidates campaigning. There is a trade-off between having a deadline which is closer to polling day, which is more convenient for the public and having a deadline which is further away from polling day, which is more convenient for those who make use of the electoral register.

Q111 Chairman: Come on. If a political party has 10 extra names, it is not that difficult to do an extra set of labels, is it?

Mr Pack: Absolutely. The question is whether you get the 10 extra names two hours before the polls close or you get them with a little bit more notice. There is a trade-off. Certainly our view would be that the current date is not the optimal one for trading off those different factors. The other issue it does tie into is exactly what happens with the rest of the registration process. The question is: at that deadline date, whenever the date happens to be, are you getting 10 extra names or are you getting 5,000 extra names, which are two very different scenarios?

Q112 Sir Paul Beresford: If the cut-off date were very, very close to the election, particularly where you have small numbers of votes which would

conclude the election in particular wards, do you not feel you would run the possibility of a transitional movement of individuals?

Mr Watt: Yes, there is that risk and that is the balance. In a sense you have hit the nail on the head. For practical purposes we would support the registration up to close of nominations; that would seem to us to be sufficiently far away from polling day. Even with that, it does not completely mitigate the situation you are describing. As with all these things, they have to be balanced against the fact that there are individuals—take a parliamentary by-election—who suddenly become aware of the fact that there is this rather important event taking place in their constituency and at that point they realise they cannot actually take part. Those two things have to be balanced.

Mr Simpson: I would go along with Peter here. Sir Paul may be referring back to the Swampy factor in Newbury some years ago. There is a danger of small groups of people believing that they should have a disproportionate ability to influence a result.

Q113 Mr Betts: Are you talking about the Liberal Democrats?

Mr Simpson: I am not talking about the Liberal Democrats at all; would I dare? I am merely talking about the fact there are groups of individuals, who may not be party political, who may have a view on the outcome of that particular result in that particular constituency. I do think it is quite right that we should have a date which is a bit further out than that.

Q114 Mr Betts: May I raise one other issue and that is that if we go to individual registration there clearly are some arrangements now, which operate in nursing homes and halls of residence for students, where there is a bit of a centralised attempt to register everyone? How do you see that being affected by moving towards individual registration? How can we practically develop systems to make sure people do get registered?

Mr Watt: I would say that for all practical purposes we would prefer a system where there was a maintaining of household registration whilst introducing individual registration. In the situations you describe, for practical purposes, the warden or whoever it was would receive a list of those people who were previously registered and it would be incumbent upon them to ensure those individuals signed, marked the form, whatever it was. You do not then lose people off the register while at the same time you maintain the individual voter registration.

Q115 Chairman: It would be a nightmare, would it not, for the principal of the hall of residence? You would have 95% of the students having signed and you would be waiting for that one who had disappeared somewhere. It would be somewhat onerous.

Mr Watt: Yes, if you took it to the Nth degree in that sense it would be a nightmare. There must be a practical way through this in terms of halls of residence which could be worked through.

25 January 2005 Mr David Simpson, Mr Peter Watt and Mr Mark Pack

Q116 Mr Clelland: It says here that the Labour Party favours the introduction of a national register and that the Conservatives are firmly against any moves to centralise electoral registration services. Perhaps Peter Watt could tell us what the advantages of a centralised register would be and David Simpson could tell us what the disadvantages would be. Perhaps Mark Pack could give us a third way.

Mr Watt: The advantages of a national register in campaigning, or for individual voters, is that we can then move towards a multi-channel-enabled election which I know the government are in favour of, so that people are not tied to voting in one polling station which is somewhere near where they are actually registered to vote, but they could in theory vote anywhere in their constituency or even outside the constituency. Obviously once you have a national register, those sorts of things become possible in the way that, for practical purposes, they are not possible at the moment. There are also some very practical advantages for political parties. At the moment the cost of managing 600-odd different registers, which are given to us in different formats, and turning those into a campaigning tool, a process which all major political parties have to go through, is extremely high and over a year the costs seem to increase disproportionately. There are both advantages for voters, but also advantages for political parties as well.

Q117 Mr Clelland: So the individual voter would have a unique number or identifier which would be allocated to them and their constituency. They could vote anywhere in the country but that vote would be allocated to that particular constituency.

Mr Watt: Yes.

Q118 Sir Paul Beresford: Would that increase the chance of impersonation?

Mr Watt: Security is always a concern with these things. It has to be balanced against making it easier for people to vote. Impersonation can take place now. People could just walk into a polling station, if they wanted to. The requirements for security versus the ease with which people can vote have to be balanced. Take myself, if I had a unique voting number and I went to a polling station and was told I had already cast my vote somewhere else, then that would clearly be cause for concern and there would be an audit trail, because it would be obvious where my vote had been cast.

Q119 Sir Paul Beresford: One of the advantages of having it quite narrow is that there is a chance you will meet the neighbour, but if the head of the household wanted to vote a particular way for the whole of his household and they were all away on holiday, he could go round a selection of polling booths voting for himself, his son—not his wife, but you get the point.

Mr Watt: I do not believe that we would invent a system which was absolutely 100% secure whilst at the same time making it as easy as possible for voters to cast their vote and that is the balance. The Electoral Commission will certainly have a really

vital role, once we have a national register, in terms of auditing some of these. Spot checking, random checking of voters who voted and those sorts of functions are ways which will not only increase the security of the ballot, but will also be seen to increase the security of the ballot.

Mr Simpson: We believe, frankly, that local is best and local people vote for local communities, they vote in their local communities and their registration should be kept within their local communities. On the other hand, obviously there has to be a national database and we are fully signed up to the creation of a national register, but by keeping it local and bringing it together through a system. We are all looking forward to the day when the money comes forward from government and we get the CORE project properly under way; we hope that will be not very far away, because we all believe, without exception amongst the larger parties, that that is the right way forward to create a national database. It is how you get there. As far as we are concerned, we should say: keeping things local, making sure people have an interest in their local community and that registration remains local is the best way forward.

Mr Pack: In some ways the differences of view are slightly a matter of semantics. There is quite broad agreement amongst political parties and hopefully Peter and David will not immediately contradict what I have to say in terms of believing that there is an important role for the local knowledge and expertise which councils and their electoral services staff have, particularly about where the flat over the shop is, where you get to it, round by the steps, round the back on a different street, and so on. Whatever electoral registration model we have, having that degree of local knowledge and expertise is important. Secondly, I think there is a broad degree of consensus that there is a deep level of frustration at the huge variation in data standards and quality of data on the register. On the one hand local expertise is important, but on the other hand much more uniformity of data standards should go hand in hand with that. What you are left with then in terms of scope for disagreement is relatively minor in my view in terms of whether people have a unique national electoral registration number or whether we use some other number which is in existence for other purposes and doubles up for that. If we have that, do we allow people a much wider degree of discretion as to which polling station they vote in or not? To be honest, both of those are in a sense options. In terms of the immediate future, in my view they might be less pressing than getting a good set of national data standards implemented, enforced and followed.

Q120 Mr Clelland: So if we do have this centrally held data, what restrictions do you think should be put on its use?

Mr Watt: The same restrictions that are put on the local registers. Political parties have access to the electoral registers for campaigning purposes and that would continue. All other who have access would have restrictions put upon them. That would also mean you have the two registers for those who

25 January 2005 Mr David Simpson, Mr Peter Watt and Mr Mark Pack

decide to opt out of the commercially available register. I do actually agree with David that although there would be a national register in that sense, there would in reality be a combination of locally produced registers, which would be produced to a common data standard. I do not think that in actual fact there would be much change.

Q121 Chairman: So we have a situation at the moment in which there are about 10 different computer programmes which different local authorities use to compile the electoral register and you would envisage that they all move to one and then you would have one national list which was completed on the basis of locally collected information.

Mr Simpson: That is exactly how I perceive it.

Q122 Chairman: If you are going to go to being able to vote anywhere in the country, you are going to have to have the identifiers. You do not accept that a signature would be suitable for an identifier because that would be electronically difficult to verify, so you are talking about some other identifier. Would the fact that you have to produce a piece of information when you want to vote actually make it harder for people to vote and therefore less likely that they would vote?

Mr Watt: In a sense we are thinking outside the box here. When we talk about the advantages in terms of being able to vote in places other than your constituency, the reality is that that does not exist at the moment. As the national register develops, these sort of things will be explored. You can imagine a situation where, for instance, if I decided to vote at my normal polling station, or perhaps within my ward or my constituency, then my signature or whatever would be enough, whereas if I were going to be voting outside my constituency somewhere else, then I might be required to produce a second form of identification. Those things would not be particularly difficult and it would be easy for the electorate to understand: I am either voting close to home or I am not.

Q123 Chairman: If I wanted to vote from somewhere where I was not normally resident, I would have to have the identifier with me. What do you recommend as an identifier?

Mr Simpson: I would go back probably to the National Insurance number as being the most simple, straightforward identifier. Everybody over the age of 16 has one.

Q124 Chairman: Can you tell me your National Insurance number?

Mr Simpson: Yes, I can.

Q125 Chairman: That was a bad question from me. I should have asked myself, because I certainly cannot come out with my National Insurance number and I suspect a lot of my electorate would not be able to come out, off the top of their heads, with their National Insurance number.

Mr Pack: As someone who can also remember their National Insurance number—we are an elite club here—the reason we have quite deliberately not expressed a view on the appropriate additional identifiers is because they tie in very closely with other issues such as the question of ID cards; the obvious one which comes to mind. In many ways what is appropriate as an extra identifier to be able to register follows on from the decisions and questions which lie outside the narrow remit of electoral registration.

Q126 Chairman: If you were going to have identifiers, that would be a piece of information which would have to be entered at the point at which you registered. Is that right? You would have to provide your National Insurance number.

Mr Simpson: Yes.

Mr Watt: It would certainly be a number you take with you and that would be the point. If you moved addresses, that would be a unique identifier which you would take with you.

Q127 Mr Beith: That is the number they give you when you supply the information, is it not?

Mr Watt: It would depend what that was: whether it would be a unique electoral number or whether it would be a piece of information which you already had.

Q128 Chairman: If it were a unique electoral number, you would probably have to remember it from 12 months to 12 months, would you not? You would not use it that frequently.

Mr Watt: If a number were required—as I said a minute ago we are looking forward to a system which does not exist and trying to identify whether or not, for instance, I would be required to carry forward my unique electoral number—it could be that the unique electoral number is something which is used by the electoral registration departments of local authorities to identify individuals, whereas I am required to provide perhaps my name, address and a form of identification, something else, so I do not need to remember that number myself. I would say as well that one frustration we all have about this is that it is frustrating that we are sitting here talking about a system which does not exist in terms of the common data standards. It does seem to all of us slightly difficult to understand why it is that we, sitting here today, do not even have common data standards between the Electoral Commission and local authorities in order to be able to make some progress on the national register.

Q129 Mr Beith: May I just clarify one point? Is there not a slight danger that you assume that possession of a unique electoral number demonstrates that you are qualified to vote in an election, which may not be the case. You may have supplied information that you are who you say you are, but you may be disqualified by virtue of being a citizen of a country which does not have voting rights in this country; you may be disqualified from voting in parliamentary elections because you are a peer or

25 January 2005 Mr David Simpson, Mr Peter Watt and Mr Mark Pack

whatever it may be. The mere possession of a number still has to be recognised as not sufficient proof that you are qualified to vote in that election.

Mr Pack: There are two different sorts of electoral fraud in this respect. One is effectively fictitious people being placed on the electoral register and votes then being cast on their behalf, or people who should not, for other reasons, be on the electoral register. Certainly outside of Northern Ireland, that is a relatively minor concern compared with the other group, which is where votes are being cast on behalf of somebody who is legitimately able to vote, but not actually being cast by them. If you take the scenario of, say, a postman deciding to steal some postal ballot papers because they are in a distinctive envelope and they decide to walk off with them, what are they able to do? How can they cast them? At the moment, if it is a traditional election with a witness statement, okay, they have to forge some signatures, but the signatures never get checked. There is no record to check the signatures against even if one wished to, so it is quite difficult to make use of the current security arrangements to ensure that those postal votes were really cast by the people who should have done so. If there were some other identifier, take the National Insurance number just as an example, how is that postman or somebody else who steals the envelopes, going to know what the National Insurance numbers are of those people? It would add a significant protection; not perfect, but a significant extra protection.

Q130 Chairman: May I take you on to the question of the anonymous registration for people of various categories who should not be on a public list? Do you see problems with that and would the problems get worse if you had individual registration?

Mr Watt: Clearly there are categories of people whose identity should be protected. One can think of those who are victims of domestic violence, people recommended by the police or social service departments. Clearly those people should not be on registers available publicly or to political parties even and we should not have any problems with that at all.

Q131 Mr Betts: You talked earlier about the issue of certain groups being significantly under-represented on the register and whether it was right to target-cavass. Are there any views on that between the three of you? Surely in some polling districts—and I got some information out from my own constituency two or three years ago and saw this—after a couple of reminders through the post more than 80% of the forms have come back, in others probably 60% or less. Is it not reasonable for electoral registration officers to target, at least in the first instance, those areas where few forms have been returned?

Mr Watt: We would say yes; yes, it is. I do not think we would have any problems with that at all, in fact we would strongly support targeted initiatives. The Electoral Commission have done some interesting work in terms of putting together some thoughts about the minimum standards which might be

required, the best performance or performance standards which could be set for under-represented groups which local authorities will be expected to achieve. That would also remove any concerns about political bias, about particular groups being targeted in particular areas, if they were nationally agreed by a body like the Electoral Commission.

Mr Simpson: I do not think that is an unreasonable approach. This brings us back quite clearly to the advantage as well of maintaining local registration, which is particularly important. Local knowledge is an important thing in order to determine and increase the number of people who actually do register.

Q132 Mr Betts: Could we come onto the issue of compulsory registration? If we go to individual registration, should it be compulsory? What penalties should there be for failing to register? Apart from mobile phones, what incentives could there be for encouraging people to register?

Mr Simpson: Technically there is compulsion there already, is there not, in the sense that everybody is supposed to register and there is a penalty—I think it is £1,000—if you do not? It seems to me that no local authority rushes to enforce that particular penalty. I personally do not see any need nor would have any desire to see any further compulsion.

Q133 Mr Betts: There is no compulsion now, is there?

Mr Simpson: There is in the sense that it is there, it is in the Act, but that is as far as it goes: whether anybody actually takes that any further, it is in the Act that you can be fined for not completing. That does not make you vote, it means you are actually registered to vote.

Q134 Chairman: Do you have any idea how many were fined last year?

Mr Simpson: I do not think anybody was fined. I should be very surprised if anybody had been.

Mr Watt: Technically the issue of compulsion will need to be looked at if we move to individual voter registration. At the moment the law only refers to the householder to whom the form is sent. Clearly that needs to be looked at. We should be in favour of maintaining a sanction, but it would come down to local returning officers as to whether or not it was used. I should expect on balance that most of them would not, because they would prefer to spend their time and money, rather than prosecuting individuals, doing the targeted things we were talking about a moment ago, which would have the effect of increasing the number of people registered, which at the end of the day is what we are all interested in doing.

Q135 Mr Betts: We talked earlier about the possibility of improving data sharing to try to get more information into the electoral registration process. When we were talking about identifiers, the issue of identity cards came up. When we have a comprehensive national identity card system, there must be a match between the people who should

25 January 2005 Mr David Simpson, Mr Peter Watt and Mr Mark Pack

have one of those and the people who should be registered for electoral purposes in a way. Has any thought been given to bringing those two processes together or using the information from the national identity card system to improve the accuracy of voter registration massively?

Mr Watt: The problem at the moment is that there is a problem agreeing common data standards between local authorities. What is absolutely clear is that at the point we have a comprehensive identity card system in place, when that comes in, one of the advantages of that would be identity in terms of voting and it may well help us get round the issues we were talking about a moment ago, about voting in different constituencies and how to prove your identity. I would just express our common frustration again that we are actually struggling at the moment to agree common data standards between local authorities for the national electoral register.

Q136 Mr Beith: Is it not the case that the citizens of the Irish Republic would require an identity card, but would not be qualified to vote?

Mr Pack: There are several groups of people where there would be that issue. The other question is maybe more a matter of if rather than when, in terms of when there is that comprehensive national identity card system. Even if one takes the position that one will definitely happen and everything will work, on the most optimistic timescale we are still likely looking at several general elections before the ID scheme is fully in place, national, mandatory and so on. It is reasonable to say actually that it is worth basing what happens to the electoral registration system on something which provides a good workable system on general elections in the interim. Obviously 10, 15, 20 years down the line, all sorts of other things may change anyway.

Q137 Mr Betts: Back to the here and now then. You have all been expressing frustration with what you all agree are these common data systems between various local authorities and agreed on a national basis as well. Who is dragging their feet? Who should pull their finger out now and get on with it?

Mr Simpson: The government might say the Electoral Commission. The Electoral Commission would probably say the government.

Q138 Chairman: Who would you say?

Mr Simpson: I would personally say the government quite frankly. That is not party political, it is simply the fact that the original idea came through the IdEA and through the Electoral Commission four years ago, following the introduction of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act. We all need to have a national database for that alone, never mind voting.

Q139 Chairman: It does not appear that the three of you are in a sense disagreeing, or shall I say squabbling. It is not your input into it; it is government input which is slowing things down.

Mr Simpson: Yes.

Mr Pack: It is. Our frustration would be that there have been various projects and various consultations over the last few years on which all the main parties have given very similar views and we keep on each year, or each few months, being asked for our views again and giving the same views again and the process does not seem to move forward. The one slight caveat I would add is that at the moment there is clearly a degree of disagreement between the government and the Electoral Commission as to what the stumbling block is. The law requires the Electoral Commission to have a key role in producing the data standards and there is a question about whether the Electoral Commission will really do that as quickly as we wish. Certainly over the overall bigger picture the government has not been moving with any real speed on the issue.

Mr Watt: The government is absolutely committed to the national register, is pushing ahead and the funds are there. What there does absolutely appear to be is an inter-departmental quagmire at an official level and that is why I think we are getting stuck and not being able to agree something very basic. We would all agree politically that we want this to happen; we just do not seem able to agree the data standards.

Q140 Mrs Cryer: How well do you feel the new regulations on making the register publicly available are working? Is there evidence that electors are being excluded or included in the "for sale" register as a result of decisions made on their behalf but without their knowledge by the householder who completes the current registration form?

Mr Pack: Our experience, because we use the full electoral register for our purposes, is that we do not really encounter those sorts of issues directly. In terms of talking to returning officers about getting copies of the register and how the system is working, in general I would say that my impression is that there are no significant problems there, with the important caveat that it is not an area we deal with directly because we deal with the full register.

Q141 Mrs Cryer: You have no knowledge of people being included or excluded by a householder against their will.

Mr Pack: I could not name anybody off the top of my head where that would be the case.

Q142 Mrs Cryer: None of you?

Mr Simpson: No, no direct knowledge.

Mr Pack: No.

Q143 Mrs Cryer: Mr Simpson and Mr Watt, in your written submission you mention that the availability of the marked register can help in detecting fraud. Mr Pack mentioned it in his verbal submission this afternoon. How does that work? How can we detect fraud from a marked register?

Mr Watt: This was the Information Commissioner's evidence before and obviously we have had a lot of conversation with the Electoral Commissioner about this. I think there is a misunderstanding about

25 January 2005 Mr David Simpson, Mr Peter Watt and Mr Mark Pack

what political parties use the marked registers for. What we use the marked registers for is (a) to make sure we do not speak to people who have already voted on polling day, but (b) to make sure we are targeting our messages because we have limited resources and limited time. A by-product of that is that if we knock on somebody's door and as far as we are concerned they did vote in an election and in fact they did not, then if that happens frequently it is obvious that people have been voting for people who did not know they were voting, if you see what I mean. It is a very useful by-product and not one which should be given up lightly. This is why we should argue very strongly that the marked register should remain available to political parties.

Mr Simpson: This is why we were all particularly keen on making sure it was available to parties in those regions in the European elections last year, where the all-postal experiment was taking place.

Q144 Mr Beith: The Liberal Democrats' evidence suggested some kind of additional information which could usefully be included on the register, such as, something which has always seemed to me rather odd, the returning officer deciding whether you are known as Euphemia A Smith, a name you have hated since childhood, or E Ann Smith, but also information which is necessary to be able to communicate with electors using the Royal Mail, because the Royal Mail set conditions like postcodes, which are not on the register. The first of these can be done voluntarily. Do you think an obligation should be placed on the compilers of the register to include postcodes?

Mr Simpson: Frankly, yes.

Mr Pack: Yes.

Mr Watt: Yes.

Mr Simpson: I also think salutation is desperately important.

Mr Pack: The salutation may seem like a slightly esoteric issue, but in practice, if I were to add up the number of complaints from members of the public which I have had to deal with in the last year to do with use of marked registers or tellers at polling stations or questions about the full versus opt-out electoral register or the fact we are using the register at all, they are all completely dwarfed by the total

number of complaints from people about us getting their names wrong or getting their titles wrong. In terms of practical day-to-day use of the electoral register, it is actually by far the most important issue compared with a lot of other issues which often take up a lot of time on investigations such as this. On the issue of postcodes, certainly, yes. The other issue I would add, as we said in our written submission, is that there is this inconsistency particularly for military service voters in what the Royal Mail requires for Freepost addresses to be delivered to them and the information provided on the electoral register. It would be sensible to remedy that.

Mr Beith: There is an impressive enthusiastic agreement along the table.

Q145 Peter Bottomley: As I understand it from the evidence we have heard, in some places, take Northern Ireland pre-change, one voter in four was not eligible to be registered and they had 126% registration. In some parts of the rest of the United Kingdom you may have one voter in six not registered, which is down to about 82%. Do you think we should be aiming for a perfect system where nothing can go wrong, or do you think we ought to aim over the next five to 10 years to achieve a significant reduction in the wrongly registered and the non-registered and also make some progress towards helping people to vote if they find it difficult? Should we go for perfection or should we go for significant steps to make the situation better?

Mr Watt: Personally I think we should be going for significant steps to make it better. I come back to what I was saying earlier about the Electoral Commission's role here. I think the Electoral Commission, as an independent body observing these things, is in a perfect position to set common standards for what it thinks should be acceptable levels of registration, voter participation; it can target each sector of society and pick up issues, that certain groups have suddenly gone from being well registered to not very well registered. The Electoral Commission seems to me to be in a perfect position to be doing that and it absolutely should be.

Chairman: On that note, may I thank you all very much for your evidence and thank the Committee for their attendance.

Tuesday 1 February 2005

Members present:

Mr A J Beith, in the Chair

Andrew Bennett
 Sir Paul Beresford
 Mr Clive Betts
 Peter Bottomley
 Mr David Clelland
 Ross Cranston

Mr John Cummings
 Chris Mole
 Christine Russell
 Mr Clive Soley
 Dr Alan Whitehead

Witnesses: **Mr Nicholas Russell**, Campaigns Officer, Royal National Institute of the Blind, **Mr Simon Wooley**, National Co-ordinator, Operation Black Vote, **Mr Jules Mason**, Head of Citizenship and Development, British Youth Council and **Mr David Sinclair**, Social Inclusion Manager, Help the Aged, examined.

Q146 Chairman: May I apologise for the fact we were called away, and apologise in advance in case we are called away again later. We are very glad to have before us a group of witnesses who can speak about some of the groups who tend not to register or have not been adequately registered: Mr Russell, from the Royal National Institute of the Blind; Mr Wooley, the National Co-ordinator from Operation Black Vote; Mr Mason, from the British Youth Council and Mr Sinclair from Help the Aged. We are very glad to have you with us. Can you tell us, in the groups you represent, what assessment you have made of the sort of proportion who are not currently registered to vote? Do you have any figures on that or just a general idea?

Mr Sinclair: Certainly in terms of the older population we know that generally about 70% of the older population vote as compared to around 30% in the last election of younger people, with opinion polls suggesting the figure for the younger population would fall further at the next election. In terms of registration alone, it appears as though that does not appear to be particularly, at this stage, a problem, for the majority of older people vote. It may be for a minority, and that is really where our concerns are.

Mr Russell: In terms of blind and partially sighted people the introduction of individual registration would potentially make this a much worse problem, but evidence from the Electoral Commission, where they have looked at the situation in Northern Ireland, which already has individual registration has shown that it has had an adverse effect on the registration of this group of people.

Mr Mason: Most young people are encouraged or engaged about the whole process, not just on voting, so both on voting and registration it is not something we can fiddle about—you have to be on the register to vote.

Mr Wooley: With our community there is a large, significant proportion that are not registered to vote; generally speaking it is about 24%, which is pretty significant when you bear in mind that in the white population it is between 7% and 8%. That variation differs when you are looking at the different minority communities; it is particularly bad amongst Caribbeans, and, again, particularly amongst the

Bangladeshis, Pakistanis and Africans. I think what is critically important to understanding this, with the research that we did with Warwick University, is that their non-registration had little to do with apathy or laziness; it was more a conscious opt-out of a system that they thought was failing them. Our work began on voter registration because we knew that if we were to positively engage in the democratic process we needed to be registered to vote, so we have been doing this since 1996, in some areas to great effect. However, I am glad today and over the weeks ahead we are having this debate because I think it is crucial to bring in marginalised groups to civic society.

Q147 Chairman: Are you sure there are not both categories? That is, people who have made a conscious decision not to register and others who, because they are in sections of society which have more mobile and less settled accommodation, simply slip through the system as others do?

Mr Wooley: Our research said that was a conscious opt-out; people talk politics in the barbers and amongst friends, and then when you put the question: “Why don’t you do something about it?” the answer is always: “What’s the point? We have got very few black MPs, they never listen to us; it is a white institution.” What our role has been, really, is to turn that negativity around to actually say that until we engage they will not listen. We need to force politicians to be more accountable to us.

Q148 Andrew Bennett: If there was some enforcement of registration, possibly a fine, do you think people would pay rather than register or would they actually conform because there was a fine that was enforced?

Mr Wooley: That question has been put to us and, I am sure, some of the other people on the panel, but I think it is missing the point. I think we have to make the case and show people that their voices can be heard so that they engage in politics. There is no point dragging them kicking and screaming to register to vote if they do not then vote. I think a deeper kind of work needs to go on to engage marginalised groups.

1 February 2005 Mr Nicholas Russell, Mr Simon Wooley, Mr Jules Mason and Mr David Sinclair

Q149 Andrew Bennett: Are people not likely to be motivated in the last few days of an election campaign? Is that not one of the difficulties? By the time they are motivated it is too late to register.

Mr Wooley: I think that would be so to a small minority, but I think a larger groups needs to be made the case.

Mr Mason: Rather than forcing people it needs to be about an informed and educated choice, and about two-thirds of voting people in 2001 who did not vote actually participated in some form of political activity, whether it is talking to or meeting an elected representative, writing a letter about a concern or attending a demonstration. So for a number of people they are engaged in politics or political activity in a wider sense but not necessarily in our political process of electing people to Westminster. How we get to that point is actually about seeing an end-product; about whether “If I cast my vote what happened? Who got in? What was the decision?” Especially for young people, being told you have to do something would actually make them not want to do it; you have to show them the benefit of their involvement rather than dragging them, and if you do not do it you are in trouble. Then people will not engage in that sort of process.

Q150 Christine Russell: Last Friday I went to watch the proceedings when the young members were selected for the Youth Parliament in Cheshire, and there was huge enthusiasm in the hall. What more do you think schools and colleges can do to encourage youngsters to get engaged with the political process?

Mr Mason: I think issues like school councils and mock elections are a good way for young people themselves at an early age to engage and see the role that they can play as decision-makers. That is one of the things, as an organisation, we applaud.

Q151 Christine Russell: Have you got any good examples that you can give us?

Mr Mason: In Plymouth they have a city-wide school council where young people from all the schools get elected (two from each area) and then sit on a city-wide youth council. In Leighton Buzzard they have a town-wide youth forum which has representatives from the schools as well as local youth groups and it is open to individual people. Both models are good to introduce young people to the political process.

Mr Wooley: I would go even further because we have just introduced a citizenship programme for schools, but we do not begin with the democratic institutions because it is often dry and it turns young people off. Yet you can talk about power and the dynamics of power within areas that young people are interested in, such as the dynamics of the power within music—who gets paid, who gets used—or within fashion and with cultural identity. Once you put these areas of discussion before children you see them waxing lyrical about things they are passionate about. What we argue with Operation Black Vote is get them talking about the dynamics of power in subjects they are interested in and it is no longer a quantum leap to talk about the dynamics of power within the

institutions that affect their lives. What we try to do is make power and politics real for young people to grasp. We have rolled it out and 100 schools have taken our booklets and videos, but you do have to think inventively about how you engage people.

Q152 Chris Mole: Can I just ask if there is any indication that the reintroduction of the citizenship agenda to schools is changing attitudes or creating opportunities for encouraging registration and interest?

Mr Mason: I would say it is good for teachers, I would not necessarily say it is a good thing for young people who actually get those lessons. Again, it is about subjects they are interested in. Just after the last General Election we were involved with some other organisations in a project called “Y Vote/Y Not?”¹ One of the key messages young people were saying there was that politics does need to feed into their everyday life, so their media, their TV, their sports programmes or whatever, but it has to be done in a way which does not patronise them but actually engages with them on things they are concerned about. Having it just as a form of education, again, says “This is something I have to do”, and this all relates back to the aspect about will they register if they are forced or fined if they do not? So you need a balance, and it is about choice.

Q153 Peter Bottomley: We have tended to look at the question of whether it should be individual registration or the householder registering the people in their home. Rather than just asking which you think would be helpful—and let us assume that those with particular difficulties can have those difficulties overcome either exceptionally or within the general system—do you think it makes sense to maintain the householder having the responsibility to make sure people know where they can vote and have individual registration nationally? So you can answer the question separately: are you on the eligible to vote and registered? Are you able to know where your vote should be cast or be counted? Will you be able to vote in some separate place if you happen to be away? Do you have views on any of those three elements?

Mr Sinclair: I guess, from Help the Aged’s perspective, the one area where it becomes significant is in relation to care homes where there are about 570,000 individuals in about 30,000 care homes in the UK. The way it works, at the moment, I am told, is that, essentially, the form would come in, the care home manager would fill it in with all the names and either tick the box all the way down saying “postal vote” or arrange for a transfer out. In terms of our general preferences, that seems to work but we also, in terms of actual empowerment and actually individuals receiving the information themselves, to a certain extent, with the individual approach generally, there do not seem to be any barriers. Some individuals may, of course, need assistance with filling in the form, but some disabled people may need assistance in terms of voting

¹ For more information about Y Vote/Y Not? visit www.ycp.info/yvotereview/

1 February 2005 Mr Nicholas Russell, Mr Simon Wooley, Mr Jules Mason and Mr David Sinclair

anyway. In terms of the two separate routes, maybe that would get over some of the difficulties, but in general, particularly in the care home issue, we do not particularly have strong objections to it being moved to an individual basis.

Mr Russell: Individual registration is potentially advantageous for two reasons: one that it will facilitate the foundation model and move away from the all-postal voting that we opposed—and we thank the ODPM Committee for helping us to highlight those problems. Secondly, it could register individual access needs and, hopefully, make sure that all the material, in terms of polling cards and things, comes in acceptable formats.

Q154 Peter Bottomley: So you could have a tick in the box saying “special arrangements”?

Mr Russell: A tick in the box or you could actually fill in what those are. Hopefully, you would get your future registration material in your preferred format, otherwise we have a situation where many blind and partially sighted people, who are older people living on their own, rely on someone to read their post, perhaps, once a week, and we have a real danger of people not being registered at all.

Q155 Chairman: Missing deadlines?

Mr Russell: Missing deadlines. We were talking about penalties and things before, but if people cannot read it penalties either way are not going to make much of a difference.

Mr Wooley: We have found problems with the householder because we would often go to local authorities and say, “There is a significant black and minority ethnic community in your local authority and we would like to have a programme to register them to vote”, and the Electoral Registrar would say to me “Actually, we are fine; we are near to 97–98% voter registration, so there is no programme needed here.” We just knew that that could not be so, but if one person had registered to vote in that house of 10 it would be seen as 100%. We were shackled to do anything because the local authority would not put any money to any initiatives with that system.

Mr Mason: From our point of view, household registration would not necessarily take account of the many stages in life that young people go through in terms of where they are actually located, and also the fact that not every young person, even if they are living with their parents or guardians, necessarily live in what is termed “a house”—say, gypsies or travellers where they move to a different caravan site and very regularly move around the country. So I do not think having a dual system of household and individual would actually circumvent that issue. Also, in terms of household registration for older young people—say 18 to early-20s—who have left home and have entered higher education but still would be on their own, where-they-recently-came-from, household list as well, they could actually incur difficulties. I know there has been lots of work done by National Union of Students to encourage students to register to vote because a lot of students already have the idea that it is where they have come

from rather than the city or town where they have come to universities, and they do not need to do anything about the process.

Q156 Christine Russell: Can I ask you whether you have any evidence about the fact that often parents are reluctant to register their, perhaps, more itinerant offspring who may go off to college and then come back for a while and then move out and flat-share with someone, and that that reluctance is sometimes based on the erroneous belief that if they put their child down on the voters’ register they could then lost their single person’s discount for the Council Tax if they are a lone parent?

Mr Mason: I used to be involved in the National Union of Students, and that was one of the big issues during my time on the National Executive that we did encounter, because a lot of students were very aware of that—“Just being on the list, will that mean I am going to get charged the community tax?” So there are a lot of hidden issues which need to be unravelled when you go down the household registration list, especially for young people regardless of whether they are living at home as a dependent or they have moved to, say, to a Foyer² and whether or not the manager of that Foyer would feel empowered to register all those young people, and the fact that they are there to get help and assistance to move into the work place and accommodation of their own.

Q157 Mr Betts: Just following the point you made earlier about the issue of having a different model of voting and not having all-postal votes, which the Committee had picked up on, and also your comment about ticking a box if you want special assistance, could there not be an extension to say that every registration form could easily have a box that can simply be ticked if you want a postal vote or not, and not that you have to fill another form in? That could actually be part of the process. Is that something you have considered?

Mr Russell: I think we would have no objection to that. Our objection to the all-postal system was that there was no choice in how you voted and for disabled people with different impairments if you have different systems you are more likely to make the voting process accessible.

Mr Sinclair: We would welcome a single form. Many people get annoyed about the fact that they have to fill in lots and lots of forms and the databases do not match up and then, due to certain regulations, you are not allowed to share the information on the database with another. Actually having one tick on one form would make absolute sense. In terms of the second point, I think we would be extremely concerned if whatever method of registration was chosen there was not some form of exceptions service. The real disaster, as it were, with the East Midlands pilots, in terms of accessibility, in terms of having to fold the paper up in complex ways and in terms of having exceptions service departments which were 40 miles away from where

² For more information on the work of the Foyer Federation visit www.foyer.net

1 February 2005 Mr Nicholas Russell, Mr Simon Wooley, Mr Jules Mason and Mr David Sinclair

people lived and involved three bus journeys—the point is whichever route you go down there has to be an exceptions service for the population who cannot deal with that, and the tick-box is one way to identify it. Of course, another issue which we may come on to is the issue of technology, and exactly the same occurs. We have got less than 20% of older people who have ever used the Internet, and less than 25% of over-75s have mobile phones. The ONS stats are not changing; there is not a cohort effect. It is often seen that over time, as the generations go through, things will change and we will have more people online, for example. Actually, it is 1 or 2% a year, so you are talking about many years before change happens. The main point is whatever you go for, if you go down the technology route you have got to have an alternative.

Q158 Mr Cummings: Experience in Northern Ireland tends to suggest that the already “hard to engage” groups (and I am including disabled within these particular groups) are most likely to fall off the individual register. What do you believe could be done to perhaps mitigate this effect?

Mr Russell: Firstly, make sure all your forms are produced within RNIB Clear Print Guidelines. You can also do a lot in terms of advertising campaigns, particularly using things like talking newspapers and local radio, so that people realise they should be registering even if they have not been able to see the form. Again, as we have been referring to, there is more than one way of doing it. For an increasing number of visually impaired people, though far from all, an accessible website is one way of doing it. Indeed, the Electoral Commission website already has a basic template for registration on their website, and we have given a link to the accessibility guidelines for websites that need to be followed to make sure those websites are accessible. However, as my colleague has said, not everyone is on the Internet so a telephone voter registration system would also help. There is the whole issue, which we need to be very careful of, of balancing the need to make it a secure process and prevent fraud, and these huge, long pin numbers that are impossible to remember. It seems to be suggested in the voting pilots that the longer the number the better, but the RNIB are happy, as we have already done with the banks, to advise on accessible pins. If they can be avoided, all the better. How about your address and your date of birth? That should be fairly simple and straightforward to remember, for example.

Mr Sinclair: In terms of the most socially excluded, they are probably not registered under the household system either. Clearly, we have got a fairly small proportion of the population who are outside of all contact with government and they are not registered under the current systems, so becoming all individual would not make that much of a difference to those. A lot of Help the Aged’s work in terms of social exclusion is about how you identify the most isolated individuals. The Government is trying to do it, for example, with its campaigns on the take-up of the Pensions Credit and Council Tax Credit. Clearly, the Government would

quite like to have much higher levels of success in identifying these people, but I do not think they are currently registered anyway.

Mr Mason: I would also encourage partnership working with the voluntary sector who work with the “hard to reach” and socially excluded sectors of society. For example, last year the Electoral Commission ran a roadshow called The Box, which visited a number of universities and college campuses up and down the country. There were a number of interactive games which included a large Perspex box where somebody had to go in and then other people outside had to decide what activity they were doing. They also used it as a mechanism to speak to young people about the voting process and actually signed people there on the spot to get them on the electoral register. A lot of it is about going to these groups rather than always expecting them to come to you. If they do not know about the process they are not going to know where to go. Organisations that focus on trying to improve life in society for hard to reach and socially excluded groups have a better mechanism of reaching out to those people, and by working in partnership with those people I think you are going to increase the percentage of those groups in society who do get on the electoral register.

Mr Wooley: I would echo that, particularly for black and minority ethnic communities. Local authorities or the Electoral Commission in general say: “Register to vote, it is a good idea. Have your say.” To the cynic and to the frustrated it does not mean a lot; you really have to engage in a long-term process to make the case for civic engagement. Local authorities are bound not to talk political, even if it is a small group, and so is the Electoral Commission, so engaging with NGOs and grass roots organisations is probably the key route to engage with the “hard to reach”.

Q159 Mr Cummings: Do you believe more effort should be made to employ local canvassers belonging to the same community as the electors they are helping to register?

Mr Wooley: I do think that would be a good idea. It is a bit like Big Brother coming round your house; a lot of people do not answer the door, they think you may want their Council Tax or something else. However, if you see someone who looks like you and speaks your language, I think you might have a better opportunity of them answering the door.

Mr Russell: Inasmuch as it would be good if we could have a large number of visually impaired people being electoral registration canvassers. Probably the reason the registration process would still make it impossible is because of the problem I have alluded to already about people not realising for a week that they have got a vote. Just, basically, keeping the canvasser system going is absolutely essential, even if you got your sight. As someone who has worked in electoral registration canvassing, I know how easy it is to have missed your voter registration form, if you cannot see it. You have got almost no chance if no one is going round and trying to make sure you fill it out and help you do it.

1 February 2005 Mr Nicholas Russell, Mr Simon Wooley, Mr Jules Mason and Mr David Sinclair

Q160 Mr Cummings: What arrangements might need to be made for those individuals unable to complete the registration form personally? I am thinking now of people who are part of institutions which may register corporately—those being university halls of residence, care/nursing homes, etc.

Mr Sinclair: Certainly in terms of older people and care homes there are currently informal ways in which care centre managers or staff help individuals voting. Equally, a similar sort of thing can happen in terms of registration. In terms of the older population as a whole, it is hard to generalise because we have 10-12 million people over the age of 60, we have got an increasing number of older people living over the age of 85 who have very diverse needs, and the challenge in terms of delivering service to some of those, particularly perhaps the 750,000 people who currently suffer from Alzheimer's—

Q161 Mr Cummings: What arrangements would you specifically make for those groups?

Mr Sinclair: It would have to vary on individual needs. It would have to be, I assume, as well as drop-in centres perhaps similar to—

Q162 Chairman: They would be among the exceptions that you referred to earlier?

Mr Sinclair: We would have to have, essentially, an exceptions service which would be delivering a service in a variety of different ways. I suppose our concern, generally, around this is that you would end up looking at Gershon and the efficiency review and saying: "Clearly it is cheaper to do it for 95% of the population. Let us throw everything into this way because it is a cheaper way of doing it", and then not providing an adequate exceptions service which you do not promote very well. So it is not just a case of having an exceptions service; in terms of what we have seen recently in terms of direct payments in post offices, the Government has a big exceptions service but it has not been promoting it particularly well. If you have an exceptions service you have to promote it.

Mr Russell: We share the views on the issue of a public exceptions scheme. In terms of allowing someone else to fill in the form with them and then being able to just make a mark rather than, perhaps, their full signature, the same applies, I think, to care home managers. I think both care home managers and registration canvassers need to be trained in the issue so that they are aware of how to assist to make sure that people do get their right to vote.

Q163 Dr Whitehead: This is a question for Mr Sinclair, particularly. In your evidence you suggested that some particular groups, particularly older people, may have concerns about the publication of the full register, particularly in terms of, for example, estranged family members, people in debt, and so on. What do you think about the current regulations on making the full register publicly available?

Mr Sinclair: I think that there is a need for safeguards and to protect the most vulnerable for whom it may well be that publication does act as a disincentive, in some cases, to registration in the case of, for example, estranged wives who have left their husband and do not want to be found, and in the case of individuals who have genuine reasons for not wanting to be identified, but there are some barriers there. We did some work a couple of years ago with Keele University about looking at socially deprived areas, and there were issues around certain ethnic minority communities—older minority communities—who do not want to be identified.

Q164 Chairman: Do you think the present system is sufficient or are you arguing for something stronger—that is, the present system under which there is a public register on which some names are not included but all the names appear on the register which goes to the parties and candidates before an election?

Mr Sinclair: I think, as long as the confidentiality remains. Of course, there is the issue I spoke about, which is the barrier. The barrier is often that the individual is worried about having their name on the register and would not necessarily know whether or not it was going to be made available, particularly when there is a tick box saying: "Do you want marketing information?" It does not inspire confidence that the information is being protected. Of course, if you did not understand electoral registration you would not necessarily understand that if you do not want that sort of communication you do not have to have it. Clearly, registration has experience from the Poll Tax and other issues, which is an issue which does create barriers in some small cases to individuals wanting to vote than actual political or social or individual reasons why you would not want to register.

Q165 Dr Whitehead: Do you think that the provision for anonymous inclusion on the full register is important, and how widespread might you want to see that?

Mr Sinclair: I suppose, to a certain extent, the issue, as I say, is whether or not it is acting as a barrier. I am talking from personal experience and from our limited research, but there is probably strong case to actually doing some research to look at whether or not there is any evidence in which people decide not to register because they are afraid that the implication of doing so is that it is not confidential and individuals, whether they be the state or other individuals, contact them. In terms of older people I have not seen that research, but certainly there is an issue there.

Q166 Dr Whitehead: Do you think there is a particular issue in terms of the head of the household registering, in terms of the extent to which that person may or may not find out whether other people they are registering actually want to be included in the published register?

1 February 2005 Mr Nicholas Russell, Mr Simon Wooley, Mr Jules Mason and Mr David Sinclair

Mr Sinclair: Certainly, again, our research with Keele University did highlight some issues there, and there are certain ethnic minority communities—Somali women and other groups—where decisions are made by heads of households, and not necessarily other members of the household know—or choose to know. It may be, actually, that the decision is made by the head of the household with consent. Clearly, there is an issue, but the way it works at the moment is that somebody is making that decision and, typically, they are the head of the household.

Q167 Mr Clelland: Nicholas Russell mentioned before the question of telephone registration and possible problems. Is the availability of electronic and/or telephone registration something that acts as an advantage to other groups, or are there particular access problems involved?

Mr Mason: The “Y Vote/Y Not?” initiative found that young people wanted technology to be used to inform them about the process but not necessarily the way that they cast their vote or, equally, would be able to register.

Q168 Mr Clelland: I am talking about registering rather than voting.

Mr Mason: There is registering—whether they want to do it by text messaging or linked to a popular youth website, or something as a reminder appeals, but not actually placing themselves on the electoral register by this method.

Q169 Mr Clelland: Why is that?

Mr Mason: Most young people, whilst they like information technology and the advantages that they bring, want to be able fully to engage and find out and discuss, rather than getting a text message and replying to this. So a reminder or a prompt to go and look here or go to search a place to find out, to register to vote, yes, but to reply to ensure you are on the electoral register, no.

Mr Wooley: Again, I suppose, I echo what Jules is saying but it misses the point. We can tweak the system however much we like, but unless we are making the political case people will not register to vote or vote.

Q170 Mr Clelland: So you are saying it is not a question of how easy it is?

Mr Wooley: It helps. It is tweaking it and it will not hurt, but we miss a crucial point if we tweak it any which way without making the case; without engaging communities; without demonstrating that their participation will have an effect on this place and other institutions of governance. While I welcome where we are discussing household or individual, rolling registration, voting by text or voting by IT—let us not miss the point. The biggest point why most marginalised groups are not engaging is because they do not feel they can have an effect on these institutions.

Q171 Mr Clelland: What about individual identifiers? Do you support the idea of having individual identifiers for electors?

Mr Wooley: For example?

Q172 Mr Clelland: Individual identifiers—pin numbers, or National Insurance Numbers or some other way of identifying each individual elector.

Mr Wooley: I think it would help.

Q173 Mr Clelland: Would it cause any particular problems?

Mr Sinclair: I think we would have some concerns based on some research which is about to be published by UCL which suggests, in terms of pin numbers, for example, that even with relatively low levels of dementia you are likely to struggle with pin numbers, and you are talking about 750,000 to one million people. Of course, that creates challenges in relation to Chip and Pin, but there are clearly some issues there.

Mr Clelland: Can you think of any individual identifiers that would not be a problem?

Q174 Andrew Bennett: A signature?

Mr Sinclair: The signature, of course, is the alternative to chip and pin, which again is not being very widely promoted. If you cannot deal with the new chip and pin the signature is an alternative, but, again, it suffers from the problem that even when you want to move everyone on to chip and pin there is a lot of incentive on the industry to promote the alternative, and what incentive will there be for government to promote exceptional services or alternative services. That would be the worry.

Mr Russell: Mencap have highlighted the problems as well which people with learning difficulties have. Really, I would maintain that something simple like your date of birth which people will remember and is reasonably secure might be a good start, but if we do, for God’s sake make it as short as possible.

The Committee suspended from 3.08 pm to 3.18 pm for a division in the House

Chairman: Our apologies to the witnesses; we have a real difficulty this afternoon and we anticipate some further votes. Therefore, I will need to bring this part of the evidence to a close no later than 3.30, which means we will have to have some very sharp questions and answers. We have a few remaining items we want to cover.

Q175 Mr Clelland: Following the question we had on individual identifiers, could I just ask you simply which would be the simplest individual identifier for the group that you represent? If we are going to have individual registration we need to have some way of identifying each voter. What would be the simplest way of doing it in terms of your group?

Mr Russell: We are suggesting, as I said, date of birth.

1 February 2005 Mr Nicholas Russell, Mr Simon Wooley, Mr Jules Mason and Mr David Sinclair

Q176 Chairman: Would National Insurance numbers be a problem when you have got women in ethnic minority communities who have not got a number?

Mr Wooley: That might be a problem, yes.

Q177 Mr Clelland: Signature? Help us out here.

Mr Wooley: Signature and date of birth.

Q178 Chris Mole: I think we have touched quite a lot on the black and minority ethnic issues but I wonder if there are any issues that you might tell the Committee about that would cause difficulties for voters for whom English is not their first language?

Mr Wooley: Most local authorities are pretty good and have their voter registration forms in different languages. One of the problems is you get a form through and it looks cumbersome and it looks like something that you do not want to deal with. We have a voter registration form online on our website which is very, very simple and it does not frighten people away from it.

Q179 Peter Bottomley: Is it acceptable to Electoral Registration Officers?

Mr Wooley: Yes, it is. You only need basic information but often local authorities make it very busy. The other point I wanted to pick up on was what David was talking about, tweaking the system. I remember, through a quirk in the system, that you could not get a mobile phone unless you were registered to vote, and of course there are a lot of young black men and women, and other youths, that would register to vote to get mobile phones.

Q180 Chairman: That is the best incentive we have heard of so far.

Mr Wooley: The best incentive to register to vote. But that did not translate into voting. That is the point that I am making.

Q181 Christine Russell: Are you aware of the Australian system whereby schools are actually given a bounty by the Australian electoral commission if they enrol their students? Are you aware of that? Would it work here?

Mr Wooley: I am aware of it. I thought that registering to vote was compulsory in Australia.

Q182 Christine Russell: I think it is, but in order that they pick up good habits at an early age, a school that encourages its students to enrol actually receives some prize or awards or some financial inducement from the electoral commission. Would it work for young people here?

Mr Mason: It depends on what the money would be spent on by the school. Different young people have different perceptions of how good their school is, especially if there is a statemented child and the level of support they may get differs compared to an un-statemented child in their experience. They might have a view of the school as a whole, regardless of its academic results at the end of the year. It is another gimmick, really.

Chairman: We have managed to cover the remaining issues. We are very grateful to you for your help and, indeed, for the written submissions that you gave us. If you would like to make way for those who have to administer the system, they are our next group of witnesses. Thank you very much indeed.

Witnesses: **Mr Malcolm Dumper**, Executive Director, Association of Electoral Administrators (AEA), **Mr Michael Lithgow**, Scottish Assessors' Association and **Mr David Monks**, Chief Executive of Huntingdonshire District Council and Chairman of SOLACE Electoral Matters Panel, examined.

Q183 Chairman: Mr Dumper, from the Association of Electoral Administrators, Mr Lithgow from the Scottish Assessors' Association, Mr Monks from SOLACE, the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers, and indeed Huntingdonshire District Council as well. We are very glad to see you. We know that you have to struggle to operate the system to tight deadlines usually, because nearly all of us will have been dealt with by your counterparts at some time or another in our electoral existence. All three of you have indicated some of the problems about individual registration with differing degrees of force. How do you set the practical against the principle? Are you concerned with the principle or are you just concerned that there are practical difficulties with it?

Mr Dumper: I think both. We are faced, at the moment, with a slightly peculiar situation where we do have individual registration through rolling registration, which has been in place for three years.

Q184 Chairman: Individual registration?

Mr Dumper: Effectively it is in with rolling registration at the moment, which is the monthly updated register, but we are caught mainly on the

practical implications of the annual audit and the difficulties in conducting that. I think it is fair to say that most registration officers would mention that canvassing at the annual audit stage is becoming more and more difficult. A very interesting point is made by one of the previous speakers about annual returns and targets being at 95% but you cannot really be sure that there is accuracy within that 95%. We are relying on individual householders to complete the registration details. As has been mentioned, they are not wholly certain that the information they are providing on the annual registration form can be correct as regards to opt-out, nationality, jury service or whether the person wants a postal vote. So there is a lot of information that is required but that is really only being provided by one person. If you think about engagement and actually getting people involved in the process from the grass roots stages, which is registration, only about 40% of eligible electors are actually involved in completing the data the first time. So it automatically leads to people feeling not part of the process and, ultimately, therefore, might lead to them not voting.

1 February 2005 Mr Malcolm Dumper, Mr Michael Lithgow and Mr David Monks

Mr Monks: I think if you were starting with a blank piece of paper and not from where we are now I think you would go for a system of individual registration, but I think it ill behoves chief executives to talk to politicians about principles. I find myself in my job as a humble public servant. I think there are, as we have identified in the evidence and as I think you have heard already, a number of very practical problems with moving to a system of individual registration: possibly declining numbers on the register and delays in getting forms back. I think, inevitably, it will mean a greater burden on those administering the register in local government, and greater cost. What I tried to do at the start of the evidence was look at the big picture. Fine, if central government says to local authorities and guys like me who are PROs “We want to do it this way”, fine, we will do it that way. All I would say is that that will take a lot of planning, preparation, proper resources, proper training and quite a while. Please be aware of the pitfalls. So, in principle, yes, if it came on a blank piece of paper but there are all sorts of practical consequences. If I may draw a parallel, many of you know local governments and have local government backgrounds, and it is a bit like saying: “What do you think of the structure of local government?” We have a structure that is a product of history, we have a system of electoral registration that has its roots in history and it has developed to today. We try to make the best of it in local government. Probably one of its greatest strengths is that we know how to get it to work, and broadly speaking—broadly speaking—it is reasonably accurate. I would say: “Do not chuck all those ideas out”; in principle we can get anything to work for you, given enough time.

Q185 Chairman: Have any of your organisations made any estimates of the costs, not just the introductory costs of extra training and so forth but the recurring costs of individual registration as opposed to household registration?

Mr Dumper: I think that would be difficult to quantify without exploring what avenues of individual registration we were going to take. There are elements of geography, etc, different groups that we are targeting to get registration levels increased, so until we know the blueprint of what individual registration would actually entail I do not think it would be possible to actually apply costs to that. From my perspective, and leading on from what David has said, I think most members of the association would support individual registration because I think that would, at least, see the eventual advent of an accurate register. I think we are carrying a lot of inaccurate data on the register, not least for the reasons I gave earlier about the householder completing the individual information on behalf of others, but also issues like carrying forward names where we carry names forward for a one- or two-year period which inflates the electorate and gives an artificial turnout figure.

Q186 Chairman: Can we stop at those specific points? I wonder if you have an overall assessment.

Mr Lithgow: I think immediately we can see that we would have to double the number of forms that go out, so you can see that there is an immediate doubling of the cost in terms of stationery and that kind of thing. Also, it would mean that our systems would have to be developed to accommodate the changes. Like the other two, can I just say that in Scotland we will make any system work. If the decision is taken that we have individual registration, then in principle we have no position on that, but there are pitfalls.

Q187 Andrew Bennett: Could you keep the cost down if you only chased up the people who moved as opposed to the people who stayed in the same address and, therefore, there is no real reason for them to register each year?

Mr Dumper: Clearly, yes, that would keep down the costs. I think it would be a case of linking into other council records to ensure that where there is movement you could pick up those people who have not chosen to re-register by change of address, but that tends to happen in some ways now with the ability to access Council Tax records, for example, by registration officers because it prompts you to pick up people who may have moved and encourage them to fill in the form. To get an accurate register you need some form of audit. I am not so sure, if we moved to individual registration, whether an annual audit would be necessary, but maybe one pitched—dare I say, if we had fixed term parliaments—the year before the Parliamentary election then that would be the occasion to conduct an all-out audit to ensure the accuracy of that register.

Mr Monks: I suppose, to try and answer the last question a little more laterally, if we were to look at doing something like this—and, yes, of course, costs are very, very important in local authorities now—a way forward might be something along the lines of linking it with the way we administer benefits as housing authorities. I do not want to go on at great length about that but the way we administer housing benefits, for example, in local government is, in my view, particularly dumb. We have lots of people rolling into our offices and we ask them to produce bank statements and identification and, inevitably, a lot of these people bring the wrong piece of paper at the wrong time, and it takes us an awfully long time to do that. So authorities like mine, and we are now part of a pilot project (there are about three or four of us doing this) are employing staff (we already do this) to go out and see people in their homes, often elderly people or, perhaps, people who find our bureaucracy threatening or too challenging—and I can understand that—

Q188 Chairman: Even in Huntingdonshire?

Mr Monks: I could not possibly answer that! I have to face the leader this week. If you have to face a 34-page questionnaire and fill it in for benefits, that is a very complex document, so if you can send someone out and talk them through it, then at the same time you could say: “By the way, do you want to tackle this electoral registration system as well?” It is a bit of joined-up thinking we need to do internally, and

1 February 2005 Mr Malcolm Dumper, Mr Michael Lithgow and Mr David Monks

it is that sort of change of mindset we need to do. That is not impossible but there are difficulties with the legislation, and how we keep our records (I am sure someone will say “Data Protection Act” after a while—that is the sort of thing we bump into), but if we did that sort of thinking I think that would help. I think that is the answer rather than what I call aggressive canvassing, and a lot of local authorities do that.

Q189 Peter Bottomley: You have told us we already have individual registration for people who have moved during the year. We know that a single person household is, in effect, an individual registration anyway, so that presumably leaves just the majority to cope with. Assuming we were to move on to individual registration, how much notice do you think you would need for the change and does it all have to be done in one go or can it be done on a rolling basis?

Mr Dumper: It could, potentially, be done on an incremental basis but I think it would be better to pitch it in two years’ time, for example, so we would have enough time to fully explore the avenues that we need to take and get a proper scheme and an awareness programme developed. Incrementally, yes, but I think that may lead to confusion amongst the electorate as to which type of registration they should be going through.

Mr Lithgow: I would agree with those points as well.

Q190 Peter Bottomley: Coming on to the practicalities of how an individual register could be compiled and maintained, clearly one of the easy ways to do it would be to say: “You can register to vote at 16, so if you come off Child Benefit you can then go on the register.” Do you accept the idea of trying to make sure someone knows they are eligible to vote and then you can deal with the question of in which local authority or constituency they can cast their vote? While you are thinking about that, assuming each person’s vote is equal, it is a terrible shame that a lot of eligible overseas voters are not registered.

Mr Dumper: I am not sure—are you suggesting through a national registration scheme?

Q191 Peter Bottomley: There is eligibility to vote in any combination of elections, whether you are an EU citizen postal voter—there are variations. Are you eligible to vote at all, and then the question is: is there a local area in which your vote should be counted, and the third question is, should you only be able to vote in that local area or by postal vote by proxy, or can you vote somewhere else and have the vote transferred electronically or in some other way?

Mr Dumper: I think, if I understand it, if you are saying that registration will be through a variety of methods, as you outlined, should the vote be contained within the normal residential area of the constituent’s ward, then, yes, that would be the case. That leads on to whether you have got the benefits of a national register and the flexibility of that, and that does involve or allow the opportunity of remote voting from anywhere.

Q192 Mr Clelland: Mr Dumper mentioned this question of the difficulty of the annual canvass and the possibility of having some sort of audit. Are you suggesting that once you have had the canvass you have got to make the register and it should be updated by periodic order, not necessarily annually?

Mr Dumper: I think if individual registration and rolling registration was working perfectly, I do not see the need (I have to say, this is a personal view) for an annual audit. Annual audits, as I mentioned earlier, are becoming very difficult to conduct. I am not sure that we are getting anywhere near the accuracy levels that we should. As we mentioned in our evidence, local authority funding is under severe pressure; there are different practices applied to annual audits by registration officers, mainly because of the difficulty of the areas they are canvassing. Generally, I think, from the social perspective, not a lot of people like opening their doors at 6, 7 o’clock in the evening because we conduct the canvass at the wrong time of the year, when the darker evenings are coming in, which makes it extremely difficult and people are reluctant to respond to a knock on the door or, indeed, a telephone call at that time of the evening. If individual registration was robust and secure, the electorate were aware of it and knew exactly what they should be doing, I do not see the need for an annual audit; a three-yearly or four-yearly annual audit would be sufficient.

Q193 Mr Clelland: Once you have compiled your national register should it be possible for registration officers to fill those gaps when they learn that people in a particular household have not registered and automatically include them?

Mr Dumper: Obviously, that is a fundamental component of individual registration; the RO has the power to obtain information from any other council source—or, indeed, any other government source—that may have information about electors in that particular residence.

Q194 Mr Clelland: What should the deadline for registration be for any particular election?

Mr Dumper: I certainly think it is too far off at the moment. To close down an electoral register on 16 March when an election is going to happen the first week in May is not going to be helpful to the electorate.

Mr Monks: I think it could be a lot tighter. I have seen evidence and talked to people in the political parties who are worried that people register in marginal constituencies very near polling day because the opinion polls are showing—well, you know where the marginal seats are now. So you have to be able to guard against that sort of worry as well. You have, as an electoral registration officer, to be sure this is a *bona fide* registration; somebody actually lives in the area with specific local connections, or something like that.

Q195 Mr Clelland: So closer than it is now but not too close?

Mr Monks: Definitely.

1 February 2005 Mr Malcolm Dumper, Mr Michael Lithgow and Mr David Monks

Q196 Mr Clelland: Of course, the problem with a General Election is that you will not necessarily know until very near the election.

Mr Monks: That is correct.

Mr Dumper: I certainly think you could bring it into the month prior to the election, but nomination day is the key. You need to have regard to the day of nomination when registration should have a cut-off date.

Q197 Chris Mole: Mr Monks described the problem where people might have a concern with late registration and, essentially, fraudulent was the implication. Would it not be possible to have a system, as I believe they do in Australia, of provisional registration that you can verify after the event?

Mr Monks: I think something like that would be worth looking at. I think in Canada—you must excuse my lack of knowledge of the other systems—you can actually register on the day of the election, or the day before. It strikes me if this can be achieved in other areas we need to look at that. Can I make just a general point on that, because I do think this is important? What we do have a habit of doing in this country, which I find not terribly helpful, is we get an idea of a system like that then we graft it, rather skilfully, on to our existing, Victorian legislation which goes back to 1870-odd (and, in my view, is quite incongruous with the 21st Century) and we come out with a result which, I am afraid, leaves some of us in court. It is all very well for a lawyer, that is good for lawyers, but I think if we are going to have a new system (and I did say this at the end of my evidence) let us go at it *de novo* rather than try and graft something on. I do think there is merit in what Mr Mole says.

Q198 Mr Soley: This follows on from that. A number of us in this House, from time to time, go to see other elections in other countries to see if they are fairly and properly done under common rules (?) of the United Nations and the EU. What would happen if an operation like that was done here? Would we have any serious criticisms at the result?

Mr Dumper: I would say no. Yet, I myself—

Mr Soley: No or yes?

Q199 Chairman: In relation to registration.

Mr Dumper: I am quite intrigued by the way that overseas organisations arrange registrations and, indeed, their voting processes in such a short period of time. I have visited countries such as Mozambique and South Africa when they had their elections several years ago, and to implement in a period of six months what they did, total registration, remote voting, was applauded. However, as David mentioned, at the moment we are stuck with this very age-old but trusted system, and I think we should recognise that. People do have real trust in our system on voting, despite the recent issues on postal votes, and for that reason I think it should not completely be taken apart; we need to look at the processes, revisit them and modernise them.

Q200 Mr Soley: So it is about the old system and new grafts that makes you worry that we might have some criticism on the issue of registration security?

Mr Dumper: That is fair. I do not know if Members have read the foundation model proposals by the Electoral Commission, but a number of issues they have there would impact. Clearly, the platform would be good, robust registration to enable them to roll out the proposals they have, which are similar to those employed overseas.

Q201 Mr Betts: Security and personal identification: SOLACE suggest using National Insurance numbers whilst the SAA favour a unique registration electoral number. Why the difference?

Mr Monks: Certainly, from our point of view, most people have a National Insurance number in this country; I accept that not everybody does.

Q202 Mr Betts: There are a lot more National Insurance numbers than people.

Mr Monks: There we are. I thought that was something reasonably easily identifiable and reasonably easily accepted in our society. I accept that not everybody has one, I think that is as good a place as any to start. I think whatever system you come up with, whether it is as the previous witnesses suggested birthdays or signatures, National Insurance numbers, there have to be problems with them all. I just thought out of the lot of them the National Insurance number was the most easily accessible.

Mr Lithgow: I think my point was that if we could firmly establish someone's identity at the outset—whenever the outset is—and allocate them an electoral number at that stage which they could keep for life, then the National Insurance number, date of birth, signature, whatever it is, would be a component of us establishing that person's identity at the outset.

Chairman: How would that work for people who are registered in more than one place? Sorry, I am going to have suspend the sitting for 10 minutes.

The Committee suspended from 3.41 pm to 3.51 pm for a division in the House

Q203 Chairman: I asked you a question, and you have had plenty of time to think about the answer.

Mr Lithgow: Yes. If an elector was registered in two constituencies with the same electoral number then in an electronic system it would be the way certainly to check that they had not voted twice. At the moment, under the current system, there is no offence in being registered twice but there is in voting twice. It could have a practical advantage.

Andrew Bennett: Not at local elections.

Q204 Chairman: Voting twice in the same election?

Mr Lithgow: Yes.

Q205 Chris Mole: Presumably a national identity register would be very helpful to you?

1 February 2005 Mr Malcolm Dumper, Mr Michael Lithgow and Mr David Monks

Mr Monks: It would, except that what you have to consider, if it went to a national register, we have still got all these problems to tackle about accuracy, getting people engaged, and inevitably in our society—we have heard these concerns from other speakers—there are some people who are determined not to go on the register. As I said earlier on, levels of accuracy of our register are good though I accept in certain city areas, like in inner London, they are not so good, but you have to tackle those problems and then not say “The national register is the answer”, because it is not. A national register would be useful.

Q206 Chris Mole: A national identity register would be helpful for the purpose?

Mr Monks: Absolutely. I think we had a question before about trying to link records of child benefit. My understanding of those sorts of records, like tax records, they are done on a national basis and you can pay your tax via a tax office at the other end of the country. Those records, those boundaries are not contiguous with our local authority records and our constituency canvas. There are problems with mismatch there. It is a case of trying to think of some of those issues.

Q207 Mr Clelland: In an answer to a question I put to Mr Dumper earlier, he said it would be quite legitimate for an electoral registration officer to add people on to the list once they discovered they had not registered. What would happen then in terms of the identifier, particularly if it was a signature?

Mr Dumper: I think it is a question of what information we had to request to validate that data. If you are going to obtain that data from council tax records, for example, then the applicant presumably would make some sort of declaration on his council tax so you compare that to registration. The difficulty you would have then is with other members in that household. I think what it would be, it would be a precursor to the ERO following up the information with somebody who had moved address and then making an independent inquiry to that new address.

Q208 Mr Clelland: What happens if someone refuses? If there was an identifier which had to be provided by the elector, what would happen if they refused to provide that?

Mr Dumper: I presume that would be accounted for in legislation. If you do not provide the information to enable you to register, the proper identifier, (a) you would not register and (b) you would be considered for prosecution, if the legislation provided for that.

Q209 Sir Paul Beresford: Should you have to go on the register? If some people really do not want to go on the register, why should they?

Mr Monks: Indeed.

Mr Dumper: There is a compulsion at the moment to provide information for the ERO if he requests it, that is the backbone of the current annual audit system. Why people do not go on the register is for

a variety of reasons but the ERO will seek to obtain a 100% accurate register by the conclusion of the annual audit.

Q210 Sir Paul Beresford: The question is why should they have to?

Mr Lithgow: My view of that is if the system is voluntary then people should not have to. One solution may be, however, that they have to fill in the form, they have to provide the information but they could be given the option on the form to opt out, you make an opt out of registration provision.

Q211 Sir Paul Beresford: We have a Government that is collecting huge amounts of centrally accumulated data, you mentioned benefit forms, many of these forms have questions way beyond those which are required and it smacks of an authoritarian police state in the making. Why should we have to provide any information at all if we do not want to vote?

Mr Monks: I think we must plead the humble servant carrying out the work of Parliament. The Act says we have to get people to fill these forms in. I have never pursued in my career, over 20-odd years as electoral registration officer, a prosecution against anyone doing it because I do not think it is worthwhile. Our experience, and the experience of others through the courts is that inevitably we tend, in perhaps some hapless way, to pick on someone who is 82 years of age who has got a good excuse for not filling it in because they have been in hospital or something like that. I think it brings the whole system into disrespect. I think there is a very strong civil liberties' view there, if I may use that as a label—excuse me for doing that—which would place those that administer the system in a difficult position. Are you expecting us to administer the system and to make a value judgment? No, I think you have to tell us to register all these people because they have to register and then, once you start saying to us “Unless they have a good excuse, unless they were on holiday or unless they have some—I will use the word—conscientious objection to it”, it puts us in a judgment situation as to how to run it.

Q212 Mr Betts: We are moving towards a national identity card scheme. Would it not be sensible to use that as a basis for electoral registers? It is not absolutely the same people but 90% certainly would be on it.

Mr Dumper: I think undoubtedly you would secure a far more accurate register if there was some condition of getting an ID card that your name was included on the national register. Without a doubt that would be a major benefit to the process.

Q213 Mr Betts: In the interim, we have talked about data sharing and there are different models of that in different countries. I understand in Canada, you tick a box if you do not mind the information is provided for another purpose or is used for electoral registration. In Australia, many of the bodies—the utility companies, the postal authorities, driving licence authorities—have by law, as I understand it,

1 February 2005 Mr Malcolm Dumper, Mr Michael Lithgow and Mr David Monks

to provide electoral registration officers or the Electoral Commission with information that someone has moved address. It is up to the Commission to chase them up to get the information for electoral registration purposes. Is that something you would like to see in this country?

Mr Lithgow: Certainly it would assist in creating an accurate register if we were to be able to access that sort of information.

Mr Monks: I think mechanically these are very, very attractive ideas. I think you have to place them in the context of our society. Someone was saying earlier on, people are very sensitive about the information they give out and how it is used against them. I do not think it is a simple answer to say "Because you are an ERO then you have some sort of semi-divine status and can have access to all these records". I think a number of people in our society would feel very uncomfortable. I think the fundamental on the ground is a point for central government to have some more joined-up thinking on how it does these things. Do not have a set of people over here working on identity cards, do not have a set of people over here working on hospital forms or electoral registration system and another set of people over here who have some other records, we need more joined-up thinking centrally. We are exhorted to do this in local government—I will leave it your judgment as to our levels of success at that—but if we had a bit more thought about that at central government it would be useful.

Q214 Andrew Bennett: Is everyone not signed up to CORE? There is supposed to be this scheme which you are all feeding into.

Mr Dumper: Yes. We are working actively towards that. I think without doubt that will be a major bonus, also, to registration, as long as the registration is left at the local level, which it will be within the current thinking of CORE, but the move then to a national register, for other reasons, may bring other issues which need to be considered. I would just like to expand on the point that was raised about information being given, and David's comments. We made mention in our submission, the Association's submission, about the over-bureaucratic information flow in local government. We need to widen the access to registration. At the moment, looking at individual registration and looking at the annual audit, they are the only two mechanisms of register at the moment. Now somebody new to the area—take Southampton, where I live—comes in and wishes to register for their council tax. I do not think there is any reason why they should not have the ability, through that registration process, to sign up for electoral registration, to get their library card, to get their leisure pass, to get whatever else the local authority can provide. Although I would share David's view about there needs to be joined-up thinking at central level, I think we should have the ability to widen the access to the registration process at local government also.

Q215 Mr Betts: It is like with the Australian model, what they were saying was "But why on earth do you bother chasing people up if they live in the same house?", registration is going to be the same and their details are the same year on year. What the system there allows to happen is because other authorities notify the Electoral Commission if people move, the Electoral Commission can then concentrate all its efforts on following up to make sure they have the registration details of those people who have moved. They claim that gets them a 98–99% accuracy.

Mr Dumper: I would wholly support that.

Q216 Christine Russell: I am trying to fathom out quite what my question is. I was going to ask the question about the disadvantaged groups, people with disabilities, and I was reading through your submissions and I cannot find the exact piece which I wanted to ask you about. But, you made some comments about the difficulties posed by groups who find it difficult, either because they are unable to write, unable to see or whatever, perhaps you could enlighten us on that. Maybe, by then, I will find the reference.

Mr Dumper: I intend to do that. I think it is essential that we are able to get to disadvantaged groups and those who will not ordinarily respond to the annual registration form. There are a variety of ways of tackling this and because registration and the annual audit are left to the discretion of the ERO at the moment then registration officers can do their own thing. If I could use the methods that we employ in Southampton, we use specialist organisations to contact disadvantaged persons to register through their care worker or through family members who are known to them and we use people with language skills in areas where there is high publicity so they can get a better understanding of what the council is trying to get from them. I think it is essential that we do use the skills which other organisations have to ensure that everybody has an opportunity to register.

Q217 Christine Russell: In reality, how much checking is there of the forms or the lists that your officers get which are completed by bursars or care officers or whatever? Do you bother or do you just say "Oh, well, those halls of residence, there may be 2,000 people—a substantial part of the register", do you just accept them all?

Mr Dumper: I think it is fair to say, and my colleagues may have another view, that the information is taken on face value.

Mr Monks: It is.

Mr Dumper: The person who provides it is making a declaration that the information is correct and the ERO will ordinarily accept it unless he is alerted to some issue regarding the authenticity of the information. Very little of the information that comes in on the annual report is checked. The accuracy of it will be in transferring that information into the register but the provision of the information, the information provided by the householder is totally at face value.

1 February 2005 Mr Malcolm Dumper, Mr Michael Lithgow and Mr David Monks

Q218 Christine Russell: So a change to individual registration would mean you would have, therefore, to send individual canvassers in to every elderly person's home or every hall of residence?

Mr Dumper: Yes. That needs a great deal of thought because, as Mike mentioned earlier, the logistical implications of conducting individual registration at annual audit time is immense, without a doubt, because, at the moment, you are dealing with a one person in the household, in houses of multi-occupation, 20 students occupying a large Victorian house, you are going to have a problem getting that information. That is why I mentioned earlier you need to widen the access to registration rather than concentrating on a once a year in your face audit which people now, I think, are not that turned on to. The comment was made earlier "They don't vote, why should they register?" and we need to address that in the round rather than focusing on one period during the year.

Q219 Christine Russell: Do you think any responsibility should be put on the institution or the organisation to assist you to do it?

Mr Dumper: The way the regulations are framed at the moment, that responsibility is with the person who has the information we are seeking. They are empowered to supply us with that information but it is the accuracy of that information which concerns us, whether we are getting the right information. The key issue with halls of residence, for example, is we are not too sure whether we have the status of the elector right with regard to their nationality. The new electoral form asks for their nationality as you have various status for voting, but when they are supplying to you a list with 750 people on, giving the nationality of each individual, faced with "Do we register these people with full voting rights?", it is a very difficult situation, particularly when you have to hit a deadline for publication on 1 December. We made a point in our submission that maybe thought ought to be given, particularly to those people who reside in this country for many years, pay the council tax for many years, may be part of the community. Why should they not be given full voting rights, why do we restrict people's voting rights because they are not a British subject if they have been part of the community for 20-plus years?

Q220 Chairman: Do you think the forms make it clear enough at present that people have to state a relevant fact like their nationality or the restricted nature of their voting entitlement?

Mr Monks: No, I think all the forms we use could be improved to follow up on that latter point, particularly those not used to the sort of world in which we live. I do not think the forms are terribly user friendly. I think they have a very Victorian side to them. I still think an idea would be to have more, let us say, personal contact, in other words see an individual, if we can do that, that benefit example I was talking to you about, rather than just sending out lots of forms. Without doubt, we can do better on the presentation of the forms.

Q221 Dr Whitehead: This question may not apply to the near heaven of Southampton but what do you see electoral registration officers being able to do proactively to encourage registration? Do you think they have a particular role in that sphere? Are there perhaps changes to statute which could be engineered in order to enhance and assist that role?

Mr Monks: Perhaps I should start on that one and go on to Southampton later on. That is quite a tricky issue. As an electoral registration officer, if you like, my role is like a returning officer separate from being a chief executive. If you ask the elected members of the authorities I served as chief executive, they would just still see me as one individual. Therefore, if you were to have a campaign of that nature, inevitably I think you would come across some political objection. I do not think there is any point being coy about it. Some people have said "You are deliberately trying to get more people on the register" or "you are deliberately working harder on a certain group because we know that group supports a particular candidate or a particular policy for that particular party". So there are some dangers to it. I think you have probably seen the submission from the Electoral Commission where they are suggesting a specific duty put upon us personally to have a more proactive role, to use your word. I think there are some downsides to that as well as some upsides to do it, without offending any political party. If you work in an authority where your chief executive in my view has been extremely difficult because as a chief executive, inevitably, if you work in a political environment some people are going to dislike what you do because you are identified as a majority group, that is a fact of life, that is how we work. I would hate to see the role become politicised in that way so we do need a lot of careful thought about that. I confess, Chairman, I have no easy answer to it. I am not sure whether simply putting another duty upon us is the answer. I would prefer a broader approach of greater education, more awareness, more publicity campaigns, that sort of stuff, perhaps run from outside the authority, perhaps this is a role for the Electoral Commission rather than identifying the one particular individual who is targeting a certain group or targeting a certain area to increase the registration. I am sorry if that appears an evasive answer.

Mr Lithgow: I think I would broadly support the comments which have been made by David. The other dimension that I would add, however, is that the degree of proactivity equals greater cost. At the moment we are not funded for that. The question of how proactive to be I think becomes an issue as well. I agree with David that I would not personally like to feel that I was being opened up to accusations of political bias as an electoral registration officer.

Q222 Dr Whitehead: Presumably—your answer, Mr Monks, perhaps anticipates my question—if we did introduce individual registration then I imagine it would be necessary to accompany that with considerable educational and information campaigns and so on to explain the difference.

1 February 2005 Mr Malcolm Dumper, Mr Michael Lithgow and Mr David Monks

Mr Monks: Indeed.

Q223 Dr Whitehead: Where would those campaigns be run? Would it be a difficulty for perhaps the reasons you have mentioned to run those campaigns at a local level and should it be perhaps at national level that they are run?

Mr Monks: Certainly I would envisage a start at national level. Local authorities are all different. I have worked for five and they were all different. I think without doubt local authorities would have varying levels of interest in that and also varying levels of resources to put into it. To be fair, either you have to have national campaigns or some sort of model that local authorities have to work off. I dread to say we have more performance outputs and more people inspecting what we do but we are learning to live with that far better now. We have some sort of criteria that we have got to go through. I think the defence would say we have done this work, we have gone into schools, we have tried to look at these records and we have tried to put these adverts out. We are not aiming at any particular group, we are aiming nationally. Either we have it nationally or a model, something like that. Again, on behalf of the chief executives, we work in a political environment and, on behalf of my colleagues, I would say we get used to criticism as well. We go into it with a good heart and an open mind and the usual broad shoulders and we believe we are doing the right thing to get the numbers up.

Mr Dumper: If I could just add something. I think the independence of the ERO, as with the returning officer, has always been respected, I think that should remain. I think without doubt if we move towards individual registration there is a significant role for the Electoral Commission to co-ordinate that, but the conduct of the individual registration can be, and has to remain, at local level for local circumstances, geographical knowledge et cetera. I do think there is a significant role for the Commission and I think, also, there is consideration which should be given very seriously to central funding because undoubtedly what we need to do—and this is the ideal opportunity to do it—is to have a consistent standards approach to registration so that registration is conducted in the same way across the whole of the country.

Q224 Dr Whitehead: Thinking about moving to individual registration again, in terms of the encouragement one might give people to both understand and participate in individual registration, would your minds be slightly changed in terms of your views on sanctions or do you think exactly the same arguments apply?

Mr Monks: I think if the sanctions are pursued through the courts the same arguments would apply unless perhaps—and I did put this in the evidence—we think in a different way. Okay, have some sanctions but say if you go on the register you get £20 off your council tax next year or something like that. It is a bit of a cynical idea, you can get up to £25 or

£30 as a bonus when you go and vote after registering. Let us try a bit of carrot as well as a bit of stick.

Q225 Chairman: General council tax would go up as a consequence though, would it not?

Mr Monks: I am sure it would be generously funded by some charity.

Q226 Dr Whitehead: You could have a mystery prize for every 100 at registration?

Mr Monks: Yes. People have tried this sort of stuff. I think certain authorities have tried to give out prizes if you are the hundredth person to register or the thousandth person to register. One local borough was giving out hairdryers, not a topic in which I am usually interested—for my own reasons—that sort of thing. It sounds a bit low level and rather mundane but if it works, that is great, let us go for it. I do not think we have to be too proud or too clever on this. I think a bit of sanctioning and a bit of carrot.

Q227 Andrew Bennett: If money draws, would not the logic be to make sure the returning officer has got there on the basis of the turn-out at elections and local councils got their council tax worked out on the basis of the electoral registration numbers rather than the Census number? The Census numbers appear to be wrong in a lot of places, so there would be a huge incentive for local authorities to get the registration 100% if they were getting the money on that basis.

Mr Dumper: If the first part of your question referred to elections, it is not the returning officer who should be concentrating that much on the turn-out. Effectively it is the conduct of the election that the returning officer is appointed to oversee.

Q228 Andrew Bennett: A lot of them run campaigns.

Mr Dumper: They do and I am isolating returning officers from that. I do not think we can lose sight of the fact there needs to be a joint approach to try and increase turn-out at elections and also registration. I think local politicians and administrators have a joint role to play in that.

Q229 Mr Clelland: Why is it so important to retain local control over the compilation and updating of the register? If I am moving house from one part of the country to the other, would it not be simpler to have one central registration point like the DVLA or one website you can go into rather than having to traipse down to the town hall? Is that not simpler?

Mr Dumper: I think it is a question of balance and there are arguments for and against. I think the benefit of this being conducted at local level is because of local knowledge and identity with their local authority. I think the benefits of the national register will come because it will enable, centrally, the hub to cleanse the local registers when people do move. As long as the arrangement is right whereby when a person moves the information is immediately

1 February 2005 Mr Malcolm Dumper, Mr Michael Lithgow and Mr David Monks

fed into the hub to remove that person from the previous address then you are going to continue to cleanse the register and retain it at a local level.

Mr Monks: If I can just come back to that one. I think if we were starting again *de novo*, a blank sheet of paper, I would go with that suggestion.

Q230 Mr Clelland: That is what you want, is it not?

Mr Monks: That would be great if we had a system like the man on the street corner, but we are not starting from there, are we? There are people in the area that I have worked who have that affinity with the local area and they believe it is part of local citizenship. They are filling a form in which is going back to their local authority. In some of the older groups of people I meet, they still think like that. In Huntingdonshire, local councillors often go out and canvass when the forms go out to say "Have you filled that form in? Are you on the register?" because they have that local connection with the community and they know someone new has moved into the house. They know if someone has come back from university and is living with their mum and dad for a few years. I think if you went to the national system you would lose that and I think in a way that would be a shame because that is the voluntary aspect of all this, the community involvement which I see from my members, and it would be a pity to give it up.

Q231 Mr Clelland: There is a centralising measure in vogue. You mentioned earlier the CORE project.

Mr Dumper: Sure.

Q232 Mr Clelland: How is that going and what would be the advantage of that to members of your associations?

Mr Dumper: It is early stages in the project at the moment. I am on the project group of CORE. I think the benefits of CORE will do just as I outlined in response to your earlier question. It will enable us to cleanse the register. There are still issues about access to CORE: who will be given access; what the data will be used for. I think that is a key area which needs to be considered and thought through very, very carefully, so that for people supplying information through the local electoral registration officer, notification is given on the national database as to exactly what that information is going to be used for and people will have access rights to that.

Q233 Mr Clelland: If we are going to have that central register of information which is compiled from information held locally, presumably that means localities are going to have to have common databases and common software. Are you promoting that?

Mr Dumper: That is what the project is addressing at the moment.

Mr Monks: Not necessarily common software but software which talks to each other.

Q234 Mr Clelland: That is compatible?

Mr Monks: Yes. You can get it in about four or five systems but the idea is that you have a common communication system. There are some authorities

who have developed their own software, most have bought it from standard suppliers. You just need them to be able to talk to each other.

Q235 Chairman: Is there a SOLACE brand software?

Mr Monks: No, I am thinking about it. I see a commercial opportunity!

Q236 Mr Betts: You are saying because there is local knowledge you have got to be in charge of things locally on the ground in an area. A few minutes ago you were asked about targeting which is, I understand, your area and maybe spotting where forms are being returned as opposed to where they are not being returned. Presumably you want to know about that because you are worried about being accused of political bias?

Mr Dumper: I did not give that answer to that particular question. I think the answer—

Q237 Mr Betts: You disagree?

Mr Monks: We do disagree.

Mr Dumper: I think the two things are separate. Local knowledge is important because you have the local knowledge of the area you are administering. I think the point was made earlier that people identify with the local authority and expect them to undertake that sort of local authority service, and I think it adds to the fact that they feel part of that local authority area. If you move to a central database where everybody files in their annual forms to an address in London, Edinburgh or wherever, then I think they would start to lose identity with their local authority.

Q238 Mr Betts: That is fine. In your area you suddenly find you have part of your area which you are administering where half of the people are returning their forms and in another part 90% are returning them. Surely it would not be unreasonable for you to target in any future canvassing the areas where fewer forms have come back?

Mr Dumper: We do that.

Q239 Mr Betts: Fine. That is targeting.

Mr Dumper: We target on the strength that we want to get 100% accuracy, we want 100% response, that is what we target. I think the answer to the previous question is that if we are going to have a common approach to individual registration, in my view, and I think this is shared by David, it should be led by the Electoral Commission.

Q240 Mr Betts: Just following that up, if you can see from looking at your local knowledge and information combined it is very obvious that forms are not being returned from families with an Asian name because maybe there is an issue of language there, would it not be reasonable to go and target them?

Mr Dumper: Yes, we would. There is a difference here in interpretation of what the Electoral Commission would be doing in fronting up the individual registration.

1 February 2005 Mr Malcolm Dumper, Mr Michael Lithgow and Mr David Monks

Q241 Mr Betts: You, as the local officer?

Mr Dumper: Yes. We would still see ourselves undertaking the local canvass, the annual audit, no matter who was targeting.

Q242 Mr Betts: And targeting?

Mr Dumper: Target the people who do not respond, that is our job, that is an electoral registration officer's job, to get the information from all those people who are entitled to register.

Mr Lithgow: The previous question was to do with proactivity. I think naturally in our processes we would follow up non-returns of canvass forms, that happens automatically across the board. In that sense, we are targeting everybody regardless of their background or whatever. Proactivity is a different issue, I think that is the point.

Q243 Chris Mole: How well do you think the regulations are working on making the open register publicly available? Have you any evidence that people who have been registered by the head of household are concerned that either they have been included or excluded from the full register for the purpose of the open register?

Mr Dumper: Certainly the only evidence that we have is when our staff are conducting the annual audit. You get reaction on a doorstep that certain individuals are not going to give the information because we will use it for other purposes. I think the introduction of the edited version was pretty much a sop to solve the Robertson case. Its worth is nil, I would think. I do not know of any registration officers who get any enquiries for purchasing or anyone who will want to look at the edited register, people are only interested in the full register. To assess the impact of negativity regarding that is very difficult but it is out there. People are now more aware, certainly by the introduction of the opt-out provision, that the register is now being used for other purposes. I think that has had a negative impact but I would not like to put a figure on it.

Q244 Chris Mole: The Assessors' Association raise concern on the lack of restriction about what information we got by hand from the full register, and I suppose essentially that is the point that Mr Dumper just made about the pointlessness of the edited register. What solutions do you propose there might be—some more drastic than others perhaps—to address this question of taking unlimited handwritten notes from the full register?

Mr Lithgow: I think in practice it is a theoretical problem. I think in practice it is very unlikely that someone is going to sit for days on end trawling through the registers taking handwritten notes. It is possibly more of a theoretical problem than an actual problem.

Q245 Chris Mole: I suspect political parties would be concerned if they did not have access to the marked register or do you see that as a separate set of issues?

Mr Dumper: Yes.

Q246 Chris Mole: What is your suggestion, that the marked register should only be available if the Sheriff/Lord Chancellor has been petitioned to give access to it?

Mr Dumper: It is a separate issue but the law is very loose on the provision of the marked register to such a degree that it undoes the legislation attached to the provision of the full register. As the law stands currently anybody can come in after the day of an election and purchase a copy of the marked register, effectively anybody, therefore, can buy a copy of the full register.

Q247 Chairman: Anybody?

Mr Dumper: It does not need to be a political party.

Q248 Chairman: Not even a political candidate or party?

Mr Dumper: No.

Q249 Chairman: That seems to be a loophole.

Mr Dumper: It is. You will see in our evidence, which supports the Electoral Commission's view, that the electoral register should be used only for electoral purposes. Only recently—this mainly is the opt-out provisions—was there any indication that the information contained in the electoral register was going to be used for other purposes, and that is wrong. I do not think there is enough information on the form as it stands currently that outlines that the information is provided and used for other purposes.

Q250 Chairman: Do you think in any way the electoral abuse of the register, that process of registration, is damaged by the fact that companies make use of the open register to identify where people live? Some credit agencies have the full register for that and others use it as a simple locator of people to confirm their addresses. Is that damaging in any way to the main use of the register?

Mr Monks: I do not know if damaging is the right word, Chairman. I think, and the Society agrees with Malcolm and the AEA, that it should be used for electoral and government policy purposes only, for example jury service or something like that.

Q251 Chairman: I want a straight answer to my question: whether you think that or not, does it do any damage to the proper use of the register for electoral purposes that it is used in these other ways?

Mr Dumper: In my view it does but it is difficult to quantify. There is a negative impact by some electors to providing information when they are aware that the information they have provided is going to be used for other matters.

Q252 Chairman: Even though they have ticked the box—

Mr Dumper: Yes. People are becoming aware now, of course, that the full copy is available to all credit reference agencies which are trading and registered as such. It is available to them.

1 February 2005 Mr Malcolm Dumper, Mr Michael Lithgow and Mr David Monks

Q253 Chairman: Something else that was said to us was that it would be better if the register showed people's preferred names so they did not constantly annoy people saying "I have never been called Euphemus since childhood. I hate the name. It is my other name that I use." If people indicate appropriately, the register should show the name as they prefer to be known.

Mr Monks: Yes. They fill the form in and they are put on the register, if they have always been called "Jack" and their name is "Euphemus" or "Ebenezer" or something and they put down "Jack", we do not send people out to say "Well, we would really like you to be called something else".

Q254 Chairman: If they write all their names down, their full name, is there a tendency to print the first one with initials?

Mr Monks: Yes, because there is a limit on the technology and how many characters it can have. That does cause problems later on for the credit reference agencies. I dread to tell you this story but when I worked in the Midlands the Lord Lieutenant had a very, very full name indeed which we could not get on the register and then when he went to change his bank account or get a bank loan, let us say they did not think he was a bona fide person. I had this rather difficult conversation with the Lord Lieutenant. Yes, I am not lying, Chairman. It is career directing, let us put it like that!

Q255 Chairman: With much thanks for your assistance, this is perhaps your last chance to say is there anything else you want to flag up in the complexities which you have all referred to which ought to have some urgent attention, those things which make it difficult to do the 21st Century job of local registration?

Mr Monks: May I make two points which I repeat at the risk of boring you to death. One is the regulations we have been talking about this afternoon are horribly complicated, even for people like loyal chief executives like me who sit and read them, they are horribly complicated, very inaccessible and in my humble submission need sorting out if we are going to have some reforms. Secondly, I think it is fine to say we must do better at registration, I believe in local government we must do better at everything, however let us try and put that alongside the demands made upon us by central government, the Gershon Review, to try and knock 2½% off our running costs for the next three years. I am sorry on those two ideas, I do not want to be contradictory, we can do better but the point we have not addressed this afternoon is that registration is a labour intensive process, it involves people working on forms and it does cost money.

Q256 Chairman: Knocking on doors.

Mr Monks: To take 2½% out of some budget is not going to be easy to move to the sort of things we are talking about today. I am afraid it is a traditional local government argument of we must have the resources to carry out this work.

Q257 Chairman: Any other takers?

Mr Dumper: I would support that and we would very much support the modernisation agenda. I think it is crucial at times to talk and engage with those people who are at the sharp end and this is one of the difficulties we have had with legislation that has been passed in the last five years without any real thought to the practical implications of rolling out that legislation and getting the job done. The Association would welcome the opportunity of being involved in any further dialogue or any other working parties which have been set up to explore the agenda on individual registration.

Mr Lithgow: I think probably my last plea would be for funding for any changes which come along.

Chairman: Thank you very much indeed.

Monday 7 February 2005

Members present:

Andrew Bennett, in the Chair

Mr A J Beith
Peter Bottomley
Mr David Clelland
Mrs Ann Cryer
Mr John Cummings

Chris Mole
Mr Richard Page
Mr Adrian Sanders
Dr Alan Whitehead

Witnesses: **Mr Nick Raynsford**, a Member of the House, Minister for Local and Regional Government and Fire, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, **Mr Christopher Leslie**, a Member of the House, Parliamentary Under-Secretary, Department for Constitutional Affairs, and **Mr Paul Rowsell**, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, examined.

Q258 Chairman: Can I welcome you to the third evidence session on electoral registration and ask you to identify yourselves for the record?

Mr Leslie: Chris Leslie, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Department for Constitutional Affairs.

Mr Raynsford: Nick Raynsford, Minister of State at ODPM. I am joined by Paul Rowsell, who is an official within the ODPM.

Q259 Chairman: Do you want to say anything by way of introduction or are you happy for us to go straight to questions?

Mr Leslie: Fire away.

Q260 Mr Sanders: Do you accept the principle of individual voter registration?

Mr Leslie: Perhaps it would be useful to help the Committee so you know the responsibilities between the two Departments.

Q261 Chairman: You have sent us a note but it arrived this morning when it was promised before Christmas.

Mr Leslie: Better late than never.

Q262 Chairman: If you could briefly put it on the record, we would be happy.

Mr Leslie: In essence, we have concurrent responsibility for election legislation and policy, quite naturally on the ODPM side focusing more on local implementation and, on the Department for Constitutional Affairs side, looking at generic policy issues, referendum policy, political parties, legislation and so forth. Of course, we work jointly on most of these issues with a series of programme boards and project boards on which our Departments and other departments are represented.

Q263 Chairman: On the question of the principle, presumably you are agreed?

Mr Leslie: Collective responsibility at all times. On the question of individual registration, we sympathise very much with the principles behind the concept of individual registration because we see that there are potential benefits that it can bring, but we remain concerned that it needs to be a simple,

clear process of registration if that is to come forward, not least because there have been a number of lessons learned from other parts of the country where this has been implemented that I think we need to take on board. We are sympathetic towards it but we need to work it up and wait for the Electoral Commission recommendations on their foundation model to come forward in particular to help inform us of the particular concerns they have about individual registration.

Q264 Mr Sanders: What does the government see as the particular benefits of individual voter registration?

Mr Leslie: In particular in a similar way as the Electoral Commission have set out, there is the potential obviously for greater security and accuracy in the register, security in that an individual registration process could facilitate the provision of individual identifiers on the register which could in turn help make remote voting and innovative voting methods more feasible. There are benefits in that respect. Also, in general accuracy terms, individual registration is much more likely to better reflect the returns that each individual makes to the register. There are in principle some good benefits there. Those have to be weighed against any potential disadvantages or consequences of a shift from the existing process of household registration. We do not want to see a system that is unduly burdensome for the elector. In relation to the complications of filling in forms and the hurdles, we do not want to place too many of these before people in getting onto the register in the first place. We need to work to find a good balance that can achieve those benefits that I set out whilst simultaneously not deterring people from appearing on that register.

Mr Raynsford: I agree.

Q265 Mr Sanders: Given that the technology is probably there for a large percentage of the population to engage in different methods of voting, how long do you think it would take to introduce individual registration to Great Britain in order to take advantage of that?

Mr Leslie: We need to settle on the principles of individual registration first.

7 February 2005 Mr Nick Raynsford MP, Mr Christopher Leslie MP and Mr Paul Rowsell

Q266 Chairman: I thought you had settled on the principles.

Mr Leslie: We need to settle on the principles of the mechanism that we use for individual registration before we can predict how long it would take to roll that out. For example, if we have a system of individual registration that requires pin numbers or specific passwords, something like that, that is obviously of a different character to a form of individual registration that perhaps rests on the signature or a date of birth as the individual identifier. There is a whole series of different forms in which individual registration can take place. That is why I simply say, until we settle on the mechanism that we feel is best to form a good, successful process for individual registration, I do not think at this stage we can say how long it will take. That is why we do not say at present that we are intending to roll anything out. We want to settle the principles of those mechanics first.

Mr Raynsford: There are different factors to take into account in terms of security between different types of voting. For postal voting, for example, the signature is likely to be one of the most effective aids to prevent and uncover attempts at fraud.

Q267 Mr Beith: We have just discovered that the electoral registration officer cannot compare the signature on the original postal vote application with the signature on the form which accompanies the ballot paper.

Mr Raynsford: I am not talking about the current arrangements. I am talking about arrangements that could be put into place to guarantee security at a future date. The signature is likely to be probably the most effective for a variety of reasons. In the case of electronic voting, a signature is much less likely to be useful. The benefit of electronic voting is the ability to vote anywhere in the country and for that either a pin number or an individual identifier—whether a national insurance number or other—is likely to be more effective. There are some quite complex issues that need to be thought through about what is the right approach and, against that, the very obvious point that we do not want to create too many requirements for collecting data in order to meet all these possible requirements. There is a balance there and that is why I very much agree with what Chris is saying. We need to think the issues through very carefully indeed before reaching decisions.

Q268 Peter Bottomley: There is always a balance. If the present household registration has, for the sake of discussion, 5% inaccuracy and if individual registration led to 100% accuracy with only about 80% of people registered, would that be an improvement in accuracy or a decrease?

Mr Leslie: My maths off the top of my head are not quite as good as yours, I suspect. There are differences in how we best achieve accuracy of a register.

Q269 Peter Bottomley: Accuracy is one issue. Completeness is another and usability maybe is a third. Do you have any sense of trade-off or balance between accuracy and completeness?

Mr Leslie: This is part of the worry we have if we were to simply roll out instantly individual registration without taking into account the potential effect on deterring people from signing up because of the extra bureaucracy potentially involved in getting absolutely every single individual to register, rather than having the head of the household do that on their behalf. We have seen in recent years a slight but still significant fall in the numbers of people appearing on the register and the reasons for that are not entirely clear. Some say that it is the process of moving towards more rigorous annual canvass arrangements whereby individuals have fallen off and perhaps it is a reflection of the fact that the register has become more accurate and is not duplicating names across a wider geographical area. Then there is that trade-off. Perhaps it is because people feel it is a more onerous task to complete a form absolutely every single year. We always have that balance to strike. That is where we need to be informed by research into what deters people from signing up to a register and also questions to do with whether people feel less inclined to sign up to a register if there is a series of hurdles before them, forms and so forth.

Mr Raynsford: In my view, obviously we have to take account of both these issues but I think there is a greater risk of reduced numbers of people registering for a variety of reasons than there is of increased inaccuracy in the register. From your previous sessions, I think you have already formed a view that the number of stories of people registered who should not be on the register or animals registered by mistake, while they are often quoted, are probably numerically quite small. In the course of one of your sessions, one of your Members made the point that this is probably the reason why, whenever such incidents occur, they are widely reported because they are exceptional. Against that, we know very clearly that there are real problems in terms of under-representation in certain sections of the population, estimated at very high figures in some groups. We have seen the evidence in Northern Ireland where there does appear to be worrying evidence of a fall-off in registration.

Q270 Peter Bottomley: As an illustration, the armed services registration has moved from in effect household and continuing to individual registration, admittedly sometimes at a distance. Can one learn from that that special measures would need to be taken to avoid a drop in the completeness of the register by a move to individual registration?

Mr Leslie: That has been the reason why we have expressed sympathy but not yet completely signed up to a firm proposal for individual registration. In principle, we can see the benefits but we do have concerns about the effect on numbers. I know there have been some issues raised about service personnel

7 February 2005 Mr Nick Raynsford MP, Mr Christopher Leslie MP and Mr Paul Rowsell

and so forth and the Ministry of Defence have their own process. They have issued their own statement to the Committee about this.

Q271 Chairman: Not very dynamic.

Mr Leslie: It was a Ministry of Defence statement.

Q272 Chairman: I cannot get your smile on the record.

Mr Leslie: I think they recognise that there is always a need for proactivity, for making sure they advertise not just the process of registration but the fact that elections and by-elections take place. They need to make sure that they engage service personnel. I think they are trying to do that through the Defence Council bulletin they have been issuing about this to make sure that there is widespread buy in by all posts, wherever they happen to be, into both the registration and the election process. We need to make sure we have as complete a register as possible and as accurate a register as possible. The two, I hope, are not mutually exclusive.

Mr Raynsford: With service personnel, there is a real question which we do not know the answer to at the moment as to how many have chosen to register themselves at their home address or individually and so are on the register but will not appear in the return coming from the services.

Q273 Peter Bottomley: Try a sample survey.

Mr Raynsford: One of the benefits of the move towards greater national integration of registers which we are working on will be to make it possible for cross checks to be carried out so that we are in a better position to identify, not just through sample surveys but through a comprehensive look at that whole issue.

Q274 Mr Cummings: The government does not believe it would be appropriate to introduce the system in place in Northern Ireland to the rest of the United Kingdom. Did you learn any lessons at all from the Northern Ireland experience which perhaps could be applied elsewhere?

Mr Leslie: One of the reasons we want to take steps towards individual registration very carefully has been because of the experience in Northern Ireland where, quite naturally, in order to help combat worries about fraud and improve accuracy, they have moved towards a system of individual registration but they also, because of the particular nature of that system, saw the register going from 1.19 million people to about 1.07 million people, which is obviously a drop. It is a moot point whether that is rooting out fraudulent or inaccurate entries but there is a sense that probably that also perhaps went to the extent that some people found it too bothersome to go on the register because of that form of individual registration. The Minister of State at the Northern Ireland Office instituted a couple of changes. One was to have an additional year carry forward so that if you did not fill in a form on an annual basis you did not automatically come off the register. There was a one year carry-over put in so that people could stay on it a bit longer. I think

that was a good move on their part. They have also used the resources freed up from the move away from that annual canvass to target efforts intensively on under-registered parts of the community, people who did not normally perhaps actively register.

Q275 Mr Cummings: Are you using the Northern Ireland experiment to perfect the electoral registration system in the rest of the United Kingdom?

Mr Leslie: I would not call the Northern Ireland experience necessarily an experiment. I think it was their own system of registration with their own rules and conducted in their own way, perfectly legitimately. It is reasonable for us to learn lessons from their experience, since they were ahead of us on individual registration in that respect. I think it was the Northern Ireland select committee who made recommendations to ministers that we should be conscious of the experience that they have gone through in Northern Ireland and be cognisant of that in the way we develop policy for the rest of the country.

Q276 Chairman: If we were looking at an emerging democracy, would we be happy with the idea that in one part of that emerging democracy they had one form of electoral registration and in another part of it a different form?

Mr Leslie: We have a Constitution in this country where we have a devolved settlement between the different jurisdictions and nations that we have. That means that, from time to time, we have a different approach in different areas. It is the nature of our Constitution. We have a very good, robust system of registration in each of these jurisdictions, each of which manages to ensure that we have the best registration levels of anywhere in the world. We have a lot to be proud of in the work that the electoral registration officers do to keep up those registers.

Mr Raynsford: It would be perverse, would it not, to ignore the evidence that has come from Northern Ireland which moved towards a system of individual registration first, and where there have been clear benefits on the one side but also disadvantages which are now being highlighted? It is quite right that those should be expressed but we should learn from them and in due course I have no doubt that in Northern Ireland too they will learn from the experience, both in Northern Ireland and here in the rest of the United Kingdom.

Q277 Peter Bottomley: What do you think the Organisation for Cooperation and Security in Europe would think of a governing party that was about keeping one part of that country to be members of its own party?

Mr Leslie: That was a question for you, Chairman.

Q278 Mr Cummings: Would you tell the Committee when you intend to publish your electoral modernisation strategy and will this include the

7 February 2005 Mr Nick Raynsford MP, Mr Christopher Leslie MP and Mr Paul Rowsell

consultation on the Electoral Commission's proposals, including those for individual registration?

Mr Leslie: We are working on a number of different pieces of reform that will mean that in time we intend to publish an electoral modernisation strategy. I do not have a date to give to the Committee on that at present.

Q279 Chairman: A year?

Mr Leslie: In due course we will publish. In many ways, our responses in recent months to the voting for change recommendations from the Electoral Commission and their more recent report, *Delivering Democracy*, set out broadly the government's approach on electoral modernisation. It is widely known that we care very much to increase participation both in and between elections.

Q280 Mr Cummings: Will you be including the consultation on the Electoral Commission's proposals?

Mr Leslie: We intend to wait to see what the foundation model recommendations are from the Electoral Commission. Once they recommend their approach on that, we can respond to it.

Q281 Mr Cummings: When do you expect to receive those?

Mr Leslie: Whenever the Electoral Commission publish them. I think they said some time in the spring.

Q282 Mr Cummings: The ball is firmly in the Electoral Commission's court?

Mr Leslie: In terms of their policy intention, which was to publish their own recommendations on the foundation model, we wait to see what that is. Only then can we respond to it. It would be a little perverse if we were to respond to the general idea of the foundation model until we saw the details of that. I think that is a perfectly reasonable approach.

Q283 Mr Cummings: Do you accept the Electoral Commission's view that individual registration is a prerequisite for any future roll-out of remote voting methods?

Mr Leslie: We had this debate in response to the Electoral Commission's report, *Delivering Democracy*, where we agreed that we needed to work on improved security for remote voting but we did not agree with the Commission's view that there should be no more all-postal voting. We do not have any plans in the immediate future, certainly for the coming general election, for all-postal voting, but we do not rule it out in other future local elections. In that respect, no, we do not agree entirely with the Electoral Commission. There are other avenues for local applications to come forward.

Mr Raynsford: In his evidence to you I think Sam Younger did make it quite clear that since they have made their initial recommendation they have become increasingly conscious of the practical difficulties and they have looked at the experience in Northern Ireland. My understanding is that the

Electoral Commission, while rightly focusing on the benefits of individual registration, now recognise that an approach towards it has to be handled in a way that avoids the kind of downsides that we were talking about earlier.

Q284 Mr Cummings: What other changes to the registration system to ensure the security of remote voting are you prepared to consider?

Mr Leslie: Any recommendations that the Electoral Commission come forward with of course we are prepared to consider. That is why we want to find a pathway through, for instance, on individual registration but we cannot just look at those aspects in isolation from other questions about the comprehensive nature of the register and so forth. It is a balance to be struck. We look at the powers, for instance, that the electoral registration officers have. There will be Commission-made recommendations on that. We know that the electoral registration officers, for instance, have powers to ensure that the proper information is given by individuals, to ensure that there is an offence for giving false information. Those sorts of things help support the validity and veracity of the register. We are happy to look at any further recommendations on that.

Q285 Mr Cummings: When do you think you will be ready to act on the result of your consideration of these issues?

Mr Leslie: A lot of these matters require legislative change. As we set out in our response to *Voting for Change*, we intend to legislate when parliamentary time allows. That is not entirely in my gift but I intend to keep pressing and working on the shape of future legislation.

Q286 Mr Cummings: Do you agree that one possibility, short of wholesale change, is the retention of a single household form but with the additional requirement that all of those eligible in the household should sign it?

Mr Leslie: It would be one form of individual registration.

Q287 Mr Cummings: Would you be sympathetic to that?

Mr Leslie: We would be sympathetic to looking at that. On the other hand, there are potential criticisms over that. For instance, if everybody were required to sign a form, how big would that form physically have to be? What would happen if the individual were not at home during the period in which the form had to be returned? Would that mean that that individual was somehow then not able to go on the register? There are questions that need to be overcome. In principle, I can see the simplicity of a signature basis on the household form. It may well be one of the easier forms of individual registration but there are disadvantages that have to be overcome in that.

Mr Raynsford: There are wider issues as well as to whether one really does wish to continue with a system based on annual registration or whether there might be merit—I think in his evidence to you

7 February 2005 Mr Nick Raynsford MP, Mr Christopher Leslie MP and Mr Paul Rowsell

Sam Younger did hint about this—in moving towards a framework where there would be more focus on targeting those who are thought to be less likely to register.

Q288 Chris Mole: We are just coming to that.

Mr Raynsford: I will not anticipate your discussion. All these considerations do have to be taken into account when you are thinking about what is the most appropriate way forward.

Q289 Chris Mole: Assume we do go towards individual registration. Do you think we should move away from the annual canvass and have a registration that can be amended when people's circumstances change? What do you think the impact on the accuracy of the register might be if we were to do that?

Mr Leslie: We have had a change in recent years, certainly in England and Wales, where we have moved to a system of a one year carry-over so that, if somebody fills in the form one October, they can stay on that register not just until the following year but for a further year at the discretion of the electoral registration officer, on the basis that it would be perhaps too onerous and too stringent to take persons off straight away, after one year. As I said earlier, that was the experience in Northern Ireland. They moved towards a system like that in order to facilitate a little more flexibility in their own process of individual registration. We need to consider all these things. Again, it comes down to that balance. How much of an obstacle is it for the wider general public to be required to fill in a form on an annual basis but, on the other hand, are we going to lose accuracy if we do not require at least one form to be filled in over a particularly short interval like that. I hope some of the research we are doing both via the Electoral Commission conducting their own and the voting insight study we are doing in my Department will help inform the sort of factors that cause people to avoid going on the electoral register.

Q290 Chris Mole: Good, modern, e-government orientated services should make life easier for the citizen. What scope do you think there is for data sharing with those responsible for compiling the electoral register and other central databases, maybe the driving licence, income tax, post office redirections etc? Are there any changes in law that you think are required to allow this to happen? I think the Committee was quite impressed with what happens in Australia. It seems to be fairly automatic and people seem to understand what is going on.

Mr Leslie: We know there are a lot of requirements on the general public to give information to different government departments for different purposes. There is, I think, scope to make things simpler for the public at large, whilst respecting the basics of data protection principles and so forth. The chief secretary to the Treasury is leading a project called the Citizen Information Project under the aegis of the Registrar General and the Office of National Statistics. Their implementation programme is due to be published some time later on in the spring.

They were looking in particular at whether there is better scope for data sharing across all government departments, to look at economies of scale, efficiency issues, to look at making it better for the public to access public services in general. We need to make sure we keep an eye on that project and plug into it.

Q291 Chris Mole: Are there any changes required to the law or would an ID Bill being passed on Thursday make life a whole lot easier for you?

Mr Leslie: I know that part of the Citizen Information Project has looked at that particular Bill's requirement to establish a national identity register which would be one of the fundamental components of ID cards, and whether that can be a basis for that Citizen Information Project. That is slightly separate from electoral law. Whilst the original proposal is not for a compulsory ID card, that national identity register might be a useful tool for electoral registration officers to access, to check and verify information. That is something that we would certainly consider looking at but, not least because the legislation does not propose compulsory ID cards, I do not think we could tie somebody's entitlement to vote to that national identity register because not everybody who is entitled to vote will be required or even asked to carry an ID card. For instance, British citizens resident abroad. I can think of other groups as well. I do not think there is instant overlap there.

Q292 Chris Mole: You have estimated that the cost will be 23 million to introduce individual registration with a further six million every year thereafter. Can you tell us what the main components of those costs would be and what sort of assumptions you have made about what the individual registration process would look like in reaching those figures?

Mr Leslie: I cannot go into massive detail off the top of my head but my understanding is that the existing cost of the household registration process is around 51 million. I am presuming that the calculation therefore looks at the extra administration costs of moving from one form per household to one form per individual, the extra data entry requirements that would come from logging the returns to that process and the extra IT infrastructure as well. I can send the Committee a more detailed note if I have more information about how we reached those figures.

Mr Raynsford: Consultants have been employed to look at this particular issue and it is very much the basis of their evidence that suggests there will be this additional cost of 23 million, taking the current figure of around 51 million up to 74 million, and annual costs would be 57 million which would be some six million higher than the current levels. Obviously, as part of the later consultation which we will be undertaking, we will want to test further the validity of those figures and see whether there is scope for economy in some areas.

Chairman: On data sharing, is it not logical for the registrar of births, marriages and deaths to notify the returning officer of deaths? As I understand it

7 February 2005 Mr Nick Raynsford MP, Mr Christopher Leslie MP and Mr Paul Rowsell

certainly in Greater Manchester they do as far as their own local authorities are concerned but they do not if people die somewhere else. Would it not be pretty simple to pass on that information? It does cause considerable upset when you get a letter through the door suggesting that you might want to vote for a particular political party if that individual has died some months earlier.

Q293 Peter Bottomley: It is even worse if they do vote.

Mr Leslie: Hopefully they are not doing that, but the changes that were made in regulations in the last few years did allow electoral registration officers to get information more readily from local registrars of births and deaths and also from other local authority sources just to verify and cross check the register. I understand the point that you make and I think it does require a certain level of proactivity from both the registration officer and the registrar general at that local level to make sure that they are passing information on a routine and regular basis between them. Perhaps this is something that eventually the on-line registration issue might well be able to pick up on as part of the development of that programme, because we want to make sure that if there is local data available it can feed into an accurate register.

Q294 Peter Bottomley: Is it lawful for an electoral registration officer to delete a voter when they are advised by a responsible authority that they are dead?

Mr Leslie: I think so, yes.

Q295 Mr Clelland: You have already indicated that your Departments are looking at the various forms of individual identifier that might be used. Could you perhaps say something about the advantages and disadvantages of the different types of identifier that you have looked at? Are you coming to a short list?

Mr Leslie: They could be quite numerous. It could be a random, key password, a pin number, something that people are more likely to recall, date of birth or a signature. A lot of the considerations about which would be best need to go in part about how the individual could easily recall that. As Members of the Committee will know, if you have to remember your pin number for your Visa or credit card, they can be varied and changing and not always easily recalled, but most people tend to remember their date of birth, for instance. On the other hand, there are considerations about how easily these extra individual identifiers could be stored in the database held by the registration officers, what level of information would be on the register and so forth and how they would keep that separate.

Q296 Mr Clelland: Do all these ifs and buts mean it is still very much all under examination?

Mr Leslie: Very much so.

Q297 Mr Clelland: The Electoral Commission have suggested that a unique registration number for each elector might be one way forward.

Mr Leslie: We already have a sort of unique reference number in terms of the polling district number and the electoral roll number, which is not something that most electors would know off the top of their head. That would probably be for the purpose of ease of administration. For instance, if there was electronic voting, the verification process between the receipt of e-mail traffic and confirmation and the individual sending that information. You might require some sort of match up of individual identification numbers and that sort of thing.

Q298 Mr Clelland: Nick Raynsford mentioned the signature being used and I think he said that would be the most effective.

Mr Raynsford: In respect of postal voting. If we think back, when the Electoral Commission first started making their recommendations, it was also at a time when they were recommending a roll out of all posting voting as the norm in local government elections. Things have changed. There have been concerns expressed about the safety of all postal voting. They are now working on a different model. They are also giving greater attention to the use of electronic voting opportunities where the signature will not in general be a helpful check because one of the benefits of electronic voting is people being able to vote remotely, where there would be no necessary means of using the signature as a check.

Q299 Mr Clelland: The question is whether that would be of use across the board, depending on what kind of voting system we have.

Mr Raynsford: The point I was trying to make is that there are particular types of security system that will be easier to use in respect of certain types of voting. One of the tasks we have is to find the best way forward without producing an unnecessary proliferation of different forms of security.

Q300 Mr Clelland: The question of pin numbers and electoral voting cards could place additional burdens on the elector in terms of having to remember the numbers and find the cards and all that sort of stuff?

Mr Raynsford: Absolutely.

Q301 Mr Clelland: Have you considered all of these issues?

Mr Leslie: We are considering them. You are talking to us in the middle of a policy formulation process and of course we wait with interest to see the Committee's recommendations on your own preferences on these things. We want to keep an open mind on those questions.

Q302 Dr Whitehead: You have mentioned that the register is slowly subsiding and is harder to collect. On the other hand, we have had the rolling registration and the declaration of local connection. Do you have an estimate of the extent to which that

7 February 2005 Mr Nick Raynsford MP, Mr Christopher Leslie MP and Mr Paul Rowsell

has reversed the trend? Do we have a steep drop in registration with a fillip produced by rolling registration and local connection?

Mr Leslie: I do not have the precise figures. I imagine it would be interesting to see whether it has had a significant upward effect on rolling registration. It has probably helped but it is really difficult to know without a major piece of in-depth research, talking to individuals about why they did not register or perhaps why they did, what was the motivating factor behind that. Was it that they could add their name at a mid-point in the year and so forth? If I do have any figures on the numbers of persons adding their names through rolling registration, perhaps I can send those to the Committee.

Mr Raynsford: The Electoral Commission are quite mindful of the Northern Ireland experience in this area where, after the original register based on single registration was established, the register augmented during the subsequent year as a result of rolling registration, but at the next annual canvass fell back significantly to a level below that which applied the previous year. The implication of that is that if we do not get the system for capturing those people who are disappearing from the register right the rolling register benefits, which clearly are significant, will not compensate for the effect that you have identified.

Q303 Dr Whitehead: Do you have any evidence or information on the extent to which the declaration of connection has facilitated registration at the expense of the accuracy of the register?

Mr Leslie: My anecdotal experience is that there has not been a massive uplift in the numbers on the register as a result of the local connection, the ability for an individual perhaps who is homeless or not rooted to a particular community to identify that local connection. We needed to make that change in order to allow people who were perhaps excluded because they did not have a fixed abode from getting on the register and that was an important change to make. I do not think it has been a massive volume of people added on to the register from that.

Q304 Dr Whitehead: You also mentioned that it would be a good idea to get the result of research, for example, on why people do not vote or people are hard to place on the register. Your Department is conducting research on this and the Electoral Commission is also doing so but with a slightly different angle, I believe. Do you have any indication of the early results of that research? What do they show?

Mr Leslie: There are two different strands. There is a qualitative piece of research trying to get into the minds of individuals who perhaps do not register actively. What puts them off from registering? That is due to be completed some time around April. Also, there is a more quantitative piece of research to look at numbers and shifts in terms of volumes of persons who have registered historically and who do not register now. That is still in progress. It is good that we are doing that as a Department because we really need to be informed in policy making terms

about how we can make a difference to encourage and enthuse people to get on the register if at all possible and the extent to which apathy comes into play, the extent to which the hurdles and barriers put people off entirely. Which factor is biggest and which is smallest?

Q305 Chairman: Do you have any idea what proportion of the people who are not registered know they are not registered?

Mr Leslie: No. We tend to find these things out when we come round to election periods, when we hear stories of people going to polling stations thinking that they have a voting opportunity and finding that they are not on the register. We have a good coverage of the register. Most people are registered. I cannot remember the precise percentage but we have a robust register. It is fairly rare that people find themselves turning up to vote and cannot but it does happen from time to time because, for whatever reason, they did not become registered.

Mr Raynsford: My understanding is that some 30% of the population are quite clear that they rarely, if ever, turn out to vote. Nine per cent were found not to be registered. The most serious finding from the study that I have had reported to me is that there is evidence of a lack of interest and understanding among particularly young people of the need to register and the very clear inference that large numbers of them are registered because they are registered as part of a household registration. If that ceased, they would almost certainly disappear off the register.

Q306 Dr Whitehead: Are you looking in this research at the relationship between registration on a year by year trajectory or are you looking, for example, at the relationship of registration against census? If you were to look at registration against census, if you have not done that, you might find in a number of places that the registration against census appears to be very lacking indeed.

Mr Leslie: We have had a number of adjournment debates in Westminster Hall and elsewhere about this very problem, particularly in certain constituencies where Members of Parliament have pointed out the comparison between the numbers reported on the census versus the number on the register. Certainly it is something that I want the research we are doing to consider. There are different sections about the requirement to fill in a census form versus the requirement to fill in an electoral registration form. To what extent do we need to change those in order to encourage persons to go on that register more actively? Those are the sorts of questions we need to address in the research.

Q307 Mr Sanders: I thought Nick Raynsford had perhaps put the strongest case against individual voter registration in that, under the existing system, people get registered by the householder. Under the individual system, the onus is on them. We know from benefit take-up, where people have to fill in a form and make the approach to take up the benefit, that there is a high percentage of people who do not

7 February 2005 Mr Nick Raynsford MP, Mr Christopher Leslie MP and Mr Paul Rowsell

do that. What is the aim here? Is it to increase the number of people who are entitled to vote or is it to increase the accuracy of the register? By what criteria do you determine where the balance is?

Mr Raynsford: Numerically, it would seem to me that there is a greater risk of non-registration than of error. Nevertheless, our aim must be to ensure that we do both to the best possible effect. While I certainly see the risk of moving towards individual registration and express the concern particularly in terms of young voters not being registered, I am equally very conscious of the importance of safeguards. That is particularly important when you talk of young people who are probably more likely to use electronic means of voting as and when those become more available. It is in their interests to do so. The one piece of good news is that a growing awareness that presence on the electoral register is likely to be important to secure your mobile phone is likely to be a factor that may motivate more young people to ensure that they are on the register.

Q308 Peter Bottomley: If we take two of the four groups least likely to be on a complete register—I do not want to concentrate for the moment on service personnel or their families and I do not want to concentrate on those who are overseas—young people and people who have a black or minority ethnic background, what other departments have your Departments talked to about trying to have effective initiatives that can lead to a more complete register in the first place and then to a more complete turn-out after that?

Mr Leslie: We have a number of programme boards and project boards that involve other government departments. For example, the individual registration project board involves not just DCA and ODPM but also the Northern Ireland Office on the working group, the Scotland Office and others, who are looking at different experiences in different areas of the country but also that links into the wider question about the information data sharing issue that we talked about earlier on, the Citizen Information Project, work that the Treasury have oversight of. All those things feed into the extent to which we can capture and hopefully enthuse those groups less inclined to normally engage with the political process, younger people and minority ethnic people, into that registration process. We want to talk to other government departments about that.

Q309 Peter Bottomley: Unless a young person, whether or not black or minority ethnic, has a household of their own, is the problem when they leave home or lose contact with home in terms of registration or do you think registration for those in multi-person households is pretty good and then it comes to a question of turn out rather than ability to vote because you are registered?

Mr Leslie: It comes back to the question Nick was answering earlier on about whether a head of household responsible for returning a form is likely to add the names of teenage children. We need young people to go on the register even before they

are entitled to vote in order to make sure that they can vote from their age of majority onwards. Typically, that is done by the head of the householder, I imagine, rather than the young person themselves. We need to capture that good part of the existing household registration and try and find a way of retaining that propensity to get those young people on the register if we were to move towards some other form of individual registration.

Q310 Peter Bottomley: If we are talking about people aged 17½ to 21 who may be away from home and may or may not maintain a home link, which department would help most? Would it be the Department for Education and Skills?

Mr Leslie: It depends on how we can contact young people. Universities, for instance, have their own process for making available registration information to students. The declaration of local connection was put in the rules in order to make it clear that people could add their names to the register even if they were away for long periods studying. We have tried to accommodate that in the rules as they have evolved.

Q311 Peter Bottomley: If we take people who are least likely to be in college or full time education and who are away from their household of origin, there are informal and formal local groups who may be able to encourage them to register. Should they be funded by national or local government, through the Electoral Commission or in some independent way? For example, would your Departments fund Operation Black Vote or the British Youth Council directly for this sort of work?

Mr Leslie: I think a lot of that work has been done via the Electoral Commission who tend to have had the lead on innovative registration policy development. We obviously have to be conscious that there is a finite pot of money for these activities though of course we will look with an open mind at any applications or proposals that the Electoral Commission come forward with. I think the Commission intended to have the resource for engaging that sort of organisation in registration.

Mr Raynsford: There is quite a good reason why the Electoral Commission should be in the lead on this because I think the evidence was put to you by the political party representatives that there can always be a suspicion, if you have targeted campaigns focusing on one particular section of the community, that this may be motivated by a perception, whether right or wrong, that that particular group may be more likely to vote for one party or another. If it is promoted by a local authority or government, there is always that suspicion.

Q312 Chairman: I do not think it was the political parties who put that forward. I think it was one of the electoral returning officers who was giving us the evidence who had that fear. Would it not be logical to make it quite clear to local authorities in terms of

7 February 2005 Mr Nick Raynsford MP, Mr Christopher Leslie MP and Mr Paul Rowsell

the grants that you give them so generously that the number of people on the electoral register was one of the key components in getting the money?

Mr Raynsford: This is a very interesting idea. It goes right to the heart of issues that we have debated frequently in front of your half of this Committee, if I may say so, in previous discussions about the balance between ring fenced as against general grant to local government. I know there are many electoral administrators who would love the funding that is included within the EPCS block notion to support electoral registration to be ring fenced, to enable them to insist on having their share of the budget. However, that runs very strongly counter to the principle of a degree of financial freedom for local government which I know the ODPM Committee has strongly supported in the past and we have been seeking to follow as a policy objective.

Q313 Peter Bottomley: For clarity, neither Minister knows of a line in their own budgets that would allow funding other than through the Electoral Commission. Is that correct?

Mr Raynsford: Correct.

Mr Leslie: I will have to check. I think our preference is for the Electoral Commission—

Q314 Peter Bottomley: I asked whether you knew of a budget line within your own Department for the promotion of registration, other than through the Electoral Commission.

Mr Leslie: I think it is through the Electoral Commission.

Q315 Peter Bottomley: Can I clear up one detail which comes in the Electoral Commission's evidence to us, paragraph 5.20? There is at least a doubt as to whether electoral registration officers can spend money to promote registration in terms of campaigning, not just going out and saying, "Here are the forms. Please can we canvass for you?" If there is any doubt, do you think it is your responsibility to promote legislation to make sure that there is no doubt?

Mr Leslie: Yes. We want electoral registration officers to be proactive, to gather information, to encourage people to participate and go on the register. I certainly do not know of any electoral registration officers who have reported to me in my Department that they feel there is a legislative obstacle preventing them doing that. I would be interested to know if the Committee has had that so far. Obviously, electoral registration officers are limited in terms of the budgets they have at their disposal. Notwithstanding that, most EROs do a pretty good job in promoting the availability of registration within the constraints that are upon them.

Q316 Peter Bottomley: It may be that on reading the answer the Minister will see he has answered a question that was not put and has not answered the question which was put. If the Electoral Commission has put to a government that they would like to see the law clarified and if the

government has not yet responded in a positive way, could they reflect on it and possibly let both committees know what their possibly revised answer might be, please?

Mr Leslie: Yes.

Q317 Mr Clelland: The purpose of such promotional work is for the sake of the accuracy and completeness of the register. At the moment, there is an obligation on the household to return the forms, although we have heard it is on very rare occasions that anyone is prosecuted for not returning the forms. Therefore, we have a less than accurate and complete register. If we move to a situation where we have individual registration, should that be compulsory? If so, what would be the appropriate penalties for failure to register?

Mr Leslie: We have a system at present where electoral registration officers have the power to prosecute for failing to comply with a request for information from that electoral registration officer, with a fine of up to £1,000 if found guilty of that. Prosecutions are relatively rare but nevertheless there is that requirement to comply with the request. Therefore, in some ways, you could almost describe this as a compulsory system as it is, but there is not a compulsory requirement if one moves house, for example, to instantly use a rolling register capability to update one's entry on the new register about where you are moving house to. There is a balance to be struck in terms of how strict the enforcement of that desire to comply with the request from the registration officer is. The balance is that, if an electoral registration officer spent all his or her time prosecuting individuals for non-registration, very soon that resources of that registration officer would be used up so there would not be much left available to promote proactive registration amongst the wider population. Quite naturally, they take a balanced approach.

Q318 Mr Clelland: I am not quite sure whether you are saying that it should be compulsory in a situation where we have individual registration, as it is now, or would the same penalties apply?

Mr Leslie: The balance that is struck at present is a good one in that there is an onus on an individual to cooperate with the electoral registration officer when that request comes to that individual for information, that individual being told that there is a penalty of up to £1,000 for failure to comply with that request reasonably. In effect, we have a fairly compulsory system as it is.

Q319 Mr Clelland: That is the stick. What about the carrots? Should there be incentives for people to register? We have heard about the mobile phone one. Apparently some local authorities will issue parking permits and link that with automatic registering.

Mr Leslie: I have not heard of the last one but I know that the use of the register by credit reference agencies in order to verify addresses, names of applicants for mortgages, loans, mobile telephone applications and so forth is probably one of the

7 February 2005 Mr Nick Raynsford MP, Mr Christopher Leslie MP and Mr Paul Rowsell

bigger incentives for people to go on the register. I had a constituent last week who had a new job, a teenager, who was not on the register but wanted to receive the pay cheque through the bank account process and could not open a bank account unless they were on the register. They were keen to find out as soon as possible how to get on the electoral register. It was not necessarily because of any forthcoming general election. It was more a financial imperative, but nevertheless it was an imperative that motivates people to go on the register.

Q320 Mr Clelland: Do you think it would be a good idea, rather than relying on the casual incentives that might be there, to introduce some sort of incentive?

Mr Leslie: Incentives tend to cost sums of money. I have heard people reporting their preference: should we have a voucher system to reward people for going on the register? We do not have limitless resources to go in that direction necessarily. What we could do though is explain more and advertise more the fact that there are benefits to being on the register, not least through the credit reference aspects.

Q321 Mr Clelland: People are allowed to abstain from voting. Should they be allowed to abstain from registering?

Mr Leslie: Abstention from voting is a choice that people have for whatever reason, sometimes religious and sometimes they just do not like the choice before them. I feel that the requirement for all individuals to cooperate with an electoral registration officer is universal and applies to everyone. Therefore, there should be a requirement to go on the register. Whether everybody complies with that—sadly, they do not—that is the requirement in law and that is the one that needs to be upheld.

Mr Raynsford: Can I strongly support that and say it is important that that is accompanied by safeguards for those people who believe their personal security may be put at risk, which is why the whole issue of anonymous registration is important. Also, that there should be very careful consideration as we move through with the Citizen Information Project that Chris was talking about earlier about the whole data protection implications but, subject to those issues, it seems to me absolutely right that there should be a comprehensive register.

Q322 Mr Clelland: They should be obliged to register but they could ask to be left off the published register?

Mr Leslie: We have had a process since 2002 where we have got two registers in parallel, an edited register and a full register. I think that has helped calm some people's minds as to whether that is in the public domain, but you might come on to that later.

Q323 Peter Bottomley: Potential jury service is linked to the Electoral Register as well, I think. With some exceptions, everyone up to the age of 16 and beyond to 18 is known to Government through Child Benefit. There is then a potential gap if they leave education at 16 up to the age of 17-plus when

they are eligible for registration as a provisional voter. Is there some argument for saying let us try to get people who are both on Child Benefit up to 16 and those who are dropping off at 16 to transfer one way or another to a provisional registration so that it becomes seamless, so instead of potentially dropping people you keep going with them?

Mr Leslie: There is an argument for it. I think that the Citizen Information Project, looking at this data sharing issue, in other words between the Department for Work and Pensions, who hold that sort of information, and other departments—our department—and the local authorities as well, maybe could use that information, but ultimately I think it will be for the electoral registration officers to look at a range of sources of data available to them and determine whether that can help them form an accurate register. Those EROs have to be in the lead on how they use data. I think we are still investigating the potential for that and we await that report later on in the spring.

Q324 Mr Sanders: There are very few prosecutions by returning officers taking people to court for non-compliance with the existing rule. What if the onus was actually on the person who loses their right to vote to have some form of sanction against the person who did not fill in the form? I do not believe there is anything in law at the moment that says the student who is kept off the register by the landlord who then is unable to vote, there is no comeback on the landlord from the person who is actually directly affected. Has that been investigated?

Mr Leslie: Not in a formal sense. I can see the point you make about the power for the individual perhaps who feels thwarted when they thought they had been registered and it turned out that they had not been. I think that might be a little bit convoluted. I suspect it is probably better to encourage all individuals to check for themselves whether they are on the register and to be aware that the rolling registration process allows them to go to an Electoral Registration Office, get the form, and apply, and we should make it easier to apply. I think that is the preferable policy development route rather than necessarily getting into litigation territory between individuals and other individuals.

Q325 Mr Sanders: In your memorandum you indicate that you have been involved in groups representing people with disabilities and others unable to complete forms in considering changes to the registration system. What changes to the registration form have you considered as a result of those discussions? Who should be eligible to assist disabled people and those unable to complete forms with the registration process?

Mr Leslie: I think this is a very important area of policy development and, again, I would welcome the Committee's views if there are any particular ideas that come forward from the evidence you hear. Certainly as we review the annual canvass form, which is a Statutory Instrument that we go through whenever there has to be changes, we look at questions about the font size on the form for persons

7 February 2005 Mr Nick Raynsford MP, Mr Christopher Leslie MP and Mr Paul Rowsell

with visual impairment and we look at the complexity of the form and whether there are ways in which we can pare down over-burdensome information requirements on that. We should look at ways of encouraging electoral registration officers to go out on request, perhaps in response to a telephone call, to help an individual in their home complete the registration form, as in a similar way as during the all-postal voting process we had returning officers go out to people's homes, helping them fill in those ballot papers with that secure assistance from the returning officer. Those are all steps that we need to develop further.

Q326 Mr Sanders: What about electronic and telephone registration? When can we expect to see the results of your discussions on that?

Mr Leslie: I think a lot of those more mechanical improvements depend on the IT available, depend on whether we have a single telephone line for the whole country or one for each local authority area, much of that leads into the online registration project experience. There is no desire to see that not happen but it has got to work. We have got to make sure if it is happening it has got to function properly.

Mr Raynsford: Can I just add that a significant number of local authorities are already providing the facility and, indeed, encouraging people to confirm no change in the previous registration either by telephone or online. Obviously, that is going to save costs and—

Q327 Mr Sanders: Offering free draws on the Pools.

Mr Raynsford:—does provide a facility which is particularly useful for some disabled people.

Q328 Mr Sanders: The Government's report on *Voting for Change* accepted in principle that the last date for registration should be moved. When will you act to implement the change in the last date for registration before an election?

Mr Leslie: I think much of that depends on statutory change. I am not sure whether—

Q329 Mr Sanders: Surely that only requires a Statutory Instrument?

Mr Leslie: I am not sure whether it does require a Statutory Instrument.

Q330 Chairman: Would it not be a good idea to find out? It is one of the fairly crucial questions.

Mr Leslie: We have looked at these questions before when, for instance,—

Q331 Chairman: It looks as though there might be some help coming from the other end of the table.

Mr Leslie: Maybe there is but let me finish my point first. We looked at this when we combined the local and European election dates last June and this was a question that we investigated then. Right now I cannot recall whether it is secondary or primary legislation that requires a change. If there is any inspiration I am happy for it to strike at any moment.

Mr Rowsell: I fear the inspiration at this end of the table is the same on this topic. This is something we will do a note for the Committee on.

Q332 Chairman: Thank you very much. Is it not a bit illogical if you go to the local council offices and tell them that you have just moved in, that you are happy to pay your council tax, the council tax department can tell the electoral registration officer that you have moved in but then the electoral registration officer has to send you a form? Would it not be logical simply for people to be able to go to the council and say, "We have moved into this address, please sign us up for all the appropriate things"?

Mr Raynsford: This is precisely one of the issues that needs to be looked at in this wider context of how we do use data sharing in a way that helps to reduce the bureaucracy involved and facilitate registration while at the same time respecting the data protection issues that need to be taken account of.

Q333 Chairman: Any idea when that might happen?

Mr Raynsford: This is very much a part of the ongoing discussion.

Q334 Chairman: This is just commonsense.

Mr Raynsford: It is but there are very important data protection issues involved in this that cannot be ignored. I know that the Deputy Information Commissioner expressed some criticism in the course of appearing before you about not having been consulted at the early stage of the CORE programme, which I will be very happy to explain in due course if we get to that. Can I say that it is absolutely our intention to consult with the Information Commissioner as we develop the second stage of CORE which is very much to do with access to information at a national level and a number of those issues will come up again in relation to the Citizen Information Project that Chris and I have already referred to.

Q335 Chairman: Does it need legislation?

Mr Raynsford: I think it almost certainly will need legislation, yes.

Q336 Chairman: Just to pass on the piece of information?

Mr Raynsford: To clarify that there is a right and an entitlement, if not an obligation, to do so without the risk of possibly infringing data protection.

Q337 Mr Beith: What surely is not is automatically handing out an electoral registration form whenever somebody notifies the council they have moved in for whatever purpose?

Mr Raynsford: There are issues where good administration undoubtedly could assist and good practice, such as the one you have suggested, would undoubtedly make things easier and quicker, but there is a different matter to do with the sharing of information between bodies where that information

7 February 2005 Mr Nick Raynsford MP, Mr Christopher Leslie MP and Mr Paul Rowsell

has been obtained for a reason other than the one that it is being used for, and that is where data protection comes in.

Q338 Peter Bottomley: Data protection does not come into a council official saying "Would you like to have one of these because you are probably entitled to register to vote."

Mr Raynsford: I think data protection could come in where a council official in one department was passing information on a systematic basis to a council official in another department for reasons other than those related to the purpose for which the information was obtained.

Chairman: As I understand it, it is even more bureaucratic because they pass the information but as a result of receiving the information they have to send out a separate form rather than being able to simply put the person on the register.

Q339 Chris Mole: You seem to be very good this afternoon at anticipating my questions, Minister. I was going to ask you what progress you are making with the CORE project and when do you expect the database to be up and running?

Mr Raynsford: Contrary to the views expressed to you by some previous witnesses, we are making reasonably good progress. Can I preface that by saying that initially there was a real difficulty because the precursor of CORE, the Laser project, fell foul of the litigation, the *Robertson* judgment, which completely undercut all the assumptions about how that project was going to be financed through some benefit from the sale of data on the registers. Subsequently, the project had to be reconstituted as CORE. We launched CORE a year ago and subsequently we have carried out a fairly detailed consultation on the arrangements necessary to put in place the systems to ensure consistent gathering of information by local authority registration officers. We are now moving towards the second phase of the project which will be concerned with data standards. It is our intention that there should be completion of that phase in time for the canvass which will be conducted this year, as any year, in the late summer and early autumn, so that we will have a basis for a single national compatible register drawn from all the individual local registers by early in 2006. That is the earliest feasible timescale for achieving this. When we launched CORE we did consult on the possibility of trying to meet the 2005 register and the overwhelming advice we got back from the electoral registration officers was that was simply not feasible within the time available. This is not us dragging our feet, as some people have implied, it is the result of trying to do this in a proper and systematic way.

Q340 Chris Mole: Does the specification for that data gathering and data standards include the provision for the introduction of individual registration and other modernisation projects, such as e-registration and e-voting?

Mr Raynsford: These could all flow from and, indeed, would benefit considerably from the availability of a single national online register but, as I have said, where we have got to so far is establishing a common language. There is now the election mark-up language which is used by the project. We are discussing with the Electoral Commission the process by which we will move towards a definition of the standards that will apply, that is the second stage. They have a statutory role in relation to standards. We cannot act without a recommendation from them on that, so their involvement is absolutely critical. They do have other pressures on their time at the moment which have perhaps acted as a slight inhibitor. Once those two phases are complete then we will have a system in place that will allow a lot of the benefits we were talking about earlier in this evidence session, about remote voting, to be conducted with a far greater degree of security and confidence than otherwise would be possible.

Q341 Mr Page: I am very pleased to hear that the CORE project is going to schedule. Is it over budget in its costings?

Mr Raynsford: No. My understanding is that the budget is exactly the same as was envisaged for the Laser project, which was some £12 million in total, and certainly we have not exceeded that as yet.

Mr Rowsell: We are well within budget. So far we have paid about £400,000 for the suppliers to update their software systems to the standard language, EML.

Q342 Mr Page: The milestones are being reached in the scheduled time?

Mr Raynsford: We have already completed the first consultation and have reached the agreement across local government and with the suppliers of software for putting in place a system which will allow consistency in all authorities. The next stage, which is the definition of the standards, involves consultation which must be conducted in time to enable those standards to apply for this year's canvass if we are to meet that timetable. That does require the Electoral Commission to make a recommendation by no later than July, which was why I referred to their particular role in this.

Q343 Mr Page: This was launched in January of last year?

Mr Raynsford: Yes.

Q344 Mr Page: And you are saying that CORE is so far up to speed and up to time?

Mr Raynsford: I am saying it was understood as far as the first consultation as a result of the response from consultees that we could not meet the timetable for the 2004 canvass which would have allowed introduction in 2005, that simply was not feasible. We did consult as to whether it would be feasible or not, the reply of the consultees was that it was not possible. As it has to be done at the time of the compilation of the register each year that meant

7 February 2005 Mr Nick Raynsford MP, Mr Christopher Leslie MP and Mr Paul Rowsell

inevitably that the earliest possible subsequent date would be for the 2006 register based on the 2005 canvass, which is now our objective.

Q345 Mr Page: I asked my question because I come from the Public Accounts Committee where we see Government projects on IT littered with failures, successes are rare, so it is nice to see a project that appears to be in budget and on time.

Mr Raynsford: It is early days yet. I do not want to whet your appetite.

Mr Page: My last point, and I may be pinching your question here, is I read that the Information Commissioner was not consulted on the CORE project. Did he offer his services and were they rebuffed or was he just not brought in?

Q346 Chairman: He did not know about it.

Mr Raynsford: The first stage of the consultation was entirely about the technical issues to do with the software systems and the language. We have every intention of consulting the Information Commission on the second stage, which is about access to information, where the issues to do with data protection arise. I can only apologise if the Information Commissioner felt that he should have been consulted about the issues to do with the technical introduction of a system to allow consistency between authorities but I do not see any particular data protection issues involved in that. It is the second stage where those apply and we will certainly consult the Information Commissioner.

Q347 Chris Mole: Can I go back to the issue of costs. It has been put to us by one of the large credit checking companies that you can almost buy this database off the shelf essentially from some of the existing reference agencies' databases. Would you have any objection to doing something like that rather than building your own with all of the risks associated with it?

Mr Raynsford: Yes, we would. We do not believe it is right that something as fundamental to our democracy as a national register of electors should be privately owned.

Q348 Chris Mole: You might own it yourself but you acquire it from somebody else.

Mr Raynsford: The present system involves the compilation of a register which is a publicly prepared register which is then made available for certain defined purposes to other potential users. Some have access to the full register, and that is restricted to a limited number of potential recipients, the wider public has access to the whole register but that is an edited version.

Q349 Chris Mole: So basically it is to maintain public confidence?

Mr Raynsford: To maintain the integrity of the system and to ensure that it is, and will always be, publicly available in the service of democracy.

Q350 Mr Beith: The OSCE guidelines actually state that "the examiner should carefully review the legal framework and be satisfied that it does not allow for collection, use or dissemination of personal data or information in any manner for any purpose other than the exercise of suffrage rights", but we have sold a pass on that one, have we not?

Mr Raynsford: This was an issue that we addressed four years ago when there were very serious issues raised by the *Robertson* case. The conclusion that we reached, and I think it was the right one, certainly it has survived a couple of subsequent challenges in the courts, was that there should be access for matters of national security, for matters of action to prevent money laundering and criminal activity and for credit reference purposes, which have an obvious association with that previous issue. Otherwise the register is not available more widely. That posed a very interesting dilemma for us, as we have discovered. You are probably not aware of this, but I have just recently become aware of it, that local authorities do not have access to it in order to run their own referendums; an issue which we have identified as a problem so we will be taking action to rectify it. That is a measure of just how carefully the complete register is protected at the moment.

Q351 Mr Beith: Anyone who is a candidate has access to it if he is to have a right to communicate with every elector.

Mr Raynsford: For obvious reasons.

Q352 Mr Beith: Have you got any evidence of whether potential electors are deterred from registering because of data protection concerns, particularly the concern that some people write to us about, that they are unhappy that their name has fallen into the hands of some commercial organisation because they are on the register, either on the public register or on the restricted register?

Mr Raynsford: There is absolutely no doubt there are worries of that nature and it is important that the restrictions that do apply currently are publicised as well as can be done, but inevitably there will be a suspicion when people receive junk mail that that junk mail has arrived because the sender of the mail has bought a copy of the electoral register.

Q353 Mr Beith: What are you including in your consultation package about changes in access to the register? You are supposed to be producing a limited package of proposed changes on particular issues, is that something you are still working on?

Mr Leslie: One of the issues Nick raised earlier was this question about the scope for anonymous registration or for limited data to be divulged through the edited register. The fact that there are undoubtedly some people who feel that they are more vulnerable by virtue of the fact that their name appears on a public register, albeit recently in a supervised form, inspected in person, rather than on the edited register now, there is a principle at stake of having a full register that can be inspected by political parties, for instance, to ensure that it is accurate, to ensure that it does not miss people off by

7 February 2005 Mr Nick Raynsford MP, Mr Christopher Leslie MP and Mr Paul Rowsell

mistake, for instance, and that has been a principle since electoral registration began in the 19th Century. Also, we have to recognise that it is possible to have a form of anonymous registration, although very tightly controlled because we do not want it to become like an ex-directory system where you get literally half the population going ex-directory, we want it still to be a full and comprehensive register for those authorised agencies to verify that it is a full and comprehensive register.

Q354 Dr Whitehead: We have heard mention of the security of the full register and the need to ensure that the edited register and the full register are differentiated, but is it not really the case that the full register is not really very confidential? For example, you could stand as the You have Won a Cruise, Claim by Tomorrow Party and you would then have access to the full register. You can go in to see the returning officer the day after the election and get a copy of the full marked register. That seems to rather drive a coach and horses through the alleged confidentiality of the full register.

Mr Leslie: There are two distinct points there. Obviously the Electoral Commission control who can be registered as a legitimate political party, although I accept there are circumstances where individuals could become a political party if they really wanted to go through that process for their own commercial motivation, in theory that is a possibility, but there is a form of control on that by the Electoral Commission.

Q355 Mr Beith: Can you just clarify that. As far as I know the Electoral Commission have no control over who can register a party so long as they comply with the financial and other legal obligations placed on political parties. They cannot decide that something does not look like a suitable political party to them.

Mr Leslie: Except that those are still controls and they are part of the legislation.

Q356 Mr Beith: You can fill in the proper returns and do all the things you are supposed to.

Mr Leslie: There are people, indeed, who form all sorts of bizarre and weird political parties, as we know.

Mr Raynsford: Here is the tension between, in a democratic society, allowing anyone who wants to stand as a candidate and to have an ability to communicate with anyone who is in a position to elect them. If you are guaranteeing that right, which seems to me fairly fundamental in a democracy, then the safeguards against access to information inevitably are compromised to that extent.

Q357 Dr Whitehead: Are there safeguards that one could put in perhaps in terms of the uses to which political parties and/or credit reference agencies might actually legally and reasonably put the information to which they are party?

Mr Leslie: You would have to be careful not to jeopardise the right of persons to stand as candidates. In doing so, those sorts of controls may

deter persons and parties coming forward being informed and standing for election, so we have got to strike that balance. There was a second point that you raised.

Q358 Dr Whitehead: The marked register.

Mr Leslie: The marked register availability, and I am conscious that that has been raised before, there is a lacuna in the arrangements here which I think we do need to look at in a legislative context.

Q359 Chairman: You need to look at, but do you not need to do something about it? It is crazy, is it not, to have the provision that you can be left off the original register for various reasons, your name does not appear on it, and yet when it comes to the register of who has been to vote your name appears on it?

Mr Leslie: So far the marked register has only been made available to authorised persons by my Department. We have not had that release of those marked registers to persons who would not be listed in those criteria where they could get the full register anyway. If we have a legislative opportunity that arises, certainly we would want to look at whether we could take the opportunity to address that particular lacuna.

Q360 Dr Whitehead: You appear to be saying that you are fairly confident, in fact, that in reality the potential issue of the marked register has not been taken up. Presumably as a result of the wide publicity that this Committee will receive that may now change.

Mr Leslie: I hope it does not. Our policy so far has been to give it to those persons authorised to see the full register.

Mr Raynsford: It is not the case that people who are authorised to see it have then got complete freedom to use that information for any purpose that they want, there are tight restrictions on the use of that data too. It is a lacuna, unquestionably, but less of one than is perhaps implied sometimes.

Q361 Chris Mole: Those of us on the Select Committee who went to talk to the Electoral Commission in Australia were impressed with its robustness and independence and everything. Do you think our Electoral Commission is fulfilling its function of keeping everything under review that it is charged to do?

Mr Leslie: Yes. The Electoral Commission does its job well. It does not always agree with Government and Government does not always agree with the Electoral Commission, but they make their recommendations independent of the Executive, they account to Parliament directly, and certainly I feel as though we get a good service from the Electoral Commission. Certainly Nick has a different experience of some of the local government aspects.

Mr Raynsford: Could I just add that, along with Alan Beith, I am a member of the Speaker's Committee which does oversee the Electoral Commission and I think one would inevitably say

7 February 2005 Mr Nick Raynsford MP, Mr Christopher Leslie MP and Mr Paul Rowsell

that as an organisation that has been in existence for a relatively short period of time it has been on a steep learning curve and has made very considerable progress in many areas. There are other areas where we probably see scope for continued and further improvements.

Q362 Chairman: It has not passed all its exams?

Mr Raynsford: I do not think I should say anything more than that at this stage.

Q363 Chris Mole: Just now you said that Government is not always going to agree with everything the Commission says. Do you see their recommendations more as academic studies rather than practical blueprints?

Mr Leslie: Sometimes they are very detailed blueprints and policy suggestions but, ultimately, because of the nature of our constitution, Government makes decisions and is held to account in Parliament for those decisions. That is the nature of our democracy. If we were to abrogate our responsibility to make decisions then you could potentially argue that it was reducing democratic accountability for those decisions and that is why I think it is right that the Electoral Commission advises and Government decides and is accountable in Parliament for those decisions.

Q364 Chris Mole: So you are not looking to change the composition, perhaps put more practitioners on there or shift its focus slightly?

Mr Leslie: Certainly I think that the Speaker's Commission will look at a number of different issues and they have got their own investigation into some of these questions. I think we should keep flexible the evolution of the Electoral Commission. It does very good work at present and we want to make sure that it remains a relevant, modern organisation able to give the best advice and to get the best information from those it works with in partnership.

Mr Raynsford: Let me just add one point here. There is an obvious tension between a desire to ensure that the body can act in a robust and independent way as against a position where there is no political input from people who are practitioners with an understanding of the political process into the work of the organisation. It may well be that in wishing to ensure the principle of independence is upheld, and therefore there was no possibility of anyone with a practical involvement in politics over the previous 10 years serving as a Commissioner, that the balance may be drawn a little too tightly against an understanding of day-to-day practical issues. Certainly from my discussions with Sam Younger, I

think the Commission itself would welcome possible changes, not necessarily to the composition of the Commission itself but to the working arrangements to ensure that there can be a more practical engagement with those people who are experienced in the political operation.

Q365 Chairman: Does that need legislation?

Mr Raynsford: If it was a change to the actual composition of the Commission it would. If it was an administrative arrangement whereby the Commission had contact with a body of senior practitioners from all parties who could advise it then that can be done without the need for legislation.

Q366 Chris Mole: They seem to be calling for more powers in *Voting for Change*, their report on the electoral modernisation programme, things like setting data standards for electronic databases, managing individual registration. Do you think a centralised electoral body in the UK is the right way to go in due course?

Mr Leslie: Our response to *Voting for Change* is on the record and is in detail and I would not propose to run through our response to each of their recommendations. There may well be circumstances where simply by virtue that they are an organisation capable of undertaking certain functions, for instance the administration of referendums we know passed to their responsibility in that administrative sense, and there might be tasks they can take on in a more hands-on way. It would be imprudent of us not to recognise that as an organisation they may be capable of doing that but I think the balance of responsibilities is pretty fair as a split between the Electoral Commission and Government at present.

Mr Raynsford: Let me add one specific illustration. We were talking earlier about the CORE project and the second phase of that project which will be looking at the framework for national access to the register. That could be achieved by one of a number of options, of which the two most likely appear to be either a search engine operated from one central location or the register itself being held by one particular body. It seems difficult to imagine a body other than the Electoral Commission which will be correctly in place to fulfil either of those functions. Yes, there is an obvious logic to the Electoral Commission playing a central role as we develop a number of these projects, that would not necessarily be at all out of keeping with the current definition of its responsibilities.

Chairman: On that note, can I thank you very much for your evidence. Thank you.

Written evidence

Memorandum by the Labour Party (VOT 37)

The following comments were first submitted to the Electoral Commission's consultation paper on Electoral Registration that culminated in their report in May 2003 "The electoral register process".

The submission is the product of consultations principally among the party's professional staff but also with our legal advisors with specific expertise in this area.

1. FUNDAMENTALS

1.1 Real reform and progress in modernising electoral registration depends upon a functioning national register. Until that is achieved then major changes to the process may be premature and indeed may prove to be incompatible with whatever form that national register takes.

1.2 We therefore believe that there are two levels to any modernisation of the process. Firstly an incremental review to address particular problems with the existing system and secondly a more fundamental review of the basis of registration in the context of the enhanced technical possibilities arising from a national computerised register.

1.3 Thus a shift to individual registration should be considered as part of a longer-term reform given the huge upheaval and potential administrative difficulties and costs that would be involved in the transitional process.

1.4 In particular we are concerned that any shift to individual registration would lead to an immediate fall in registration levels with young voters in particular likely to drop off. Therefore while in the long-term we have no principled objection to such a shift it should be phased in and integrated fully into a national electoral register.

1.5 We do though believe that the "household" system could be strengthened. For example there could be stronger sanction on householders to return the form and to ensure the information is accurate.

1.6 We are concerned that any shift to individual registration will lead to an immediate fall in registration levels with young voters in particular likely to drop off. While in the long-term we have no principled objection to such a shift, we believe it would require wholly new and robust processes and safeguards.

1.7 We do not believe there should be a general requirement of additional proof of identification to be registered, but as part of a shift to a national register we would assume that a system would be developed whereby an individual elector required a unique portable electoral number similar to a National Insurance number. Clearly there may be scope for additional information to be stored on that database (contingent with data protection) some of which it may be appropriate to make available publicly and indeed include on the register.

2. MANAGING THE REGISTER

2.1 We believe that a national body, the Electoral Commission or a committee under its auspices—should be charged with responsibility for maintaining a national electoral register.

2.2 We do believe that local authorities should remain responsible for compiling that register and for its accuracy in their own area, given their access to alternative data sources, their local knowledge and experience and their status as the principal user of the data. The Commission however should be responsible for the technical specifications of the register and they should be mandatory on local authorities, given that national registration is partly necessitated by the exigencies of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act.

2.3 We would welcome the further development of telephone and on-line registration, provided that it was secure against potential fraud.

3. CREATING THE REGISTER

3.1 We believe the annual canvass will continue to be necessary, at least until there are comprehensive changes to the process associated with individual registration as described above.

3.2 Indeed we believe that the Electoral Commission should lay down and monitor basic standards of canvass to which local authorities must adhere if they are to have discharged their responsibilities, alongside sanctions to ensure compliance.

3.3 We believe that pure "daily" rolling registration while superficially desirable may be impractical.

3.4 We would be cautious about removing the right of appeal against registration as a safeguard against potential fraud. While we believe this is a marginal problem, in some areas it may be significant and we do not believe the marginal administrative benefits of removing it would outweigh the potential dangers.

3.5 We believe that close of nominations should be the very latest cut-off date for registration for a particular election—other than possibly in the case of a clear and demonstrable administrative error. It is an important principle that the electorate for a particular election should be essentially known and fixed for the period of the formal legal campaign.

4. SECURITY ISSUES

4.1 We believe that in principle registration should be compulsory whether in terms of the duty on the householder under the current system or on the individual under a reformed system.

4.2 We believe that anonymous registration should be available for those with a fear for their personal security. However we believe that it is important for the democratic process that the register should be open to scrutiny for those who have legitimate electoral and other purposes.

Therefore we believe that such registration should be very much the exception and may require certification by an appropriate public authority eg police, social services or a bona fide charity eg women's refuge.

5. UNDER REGISTRATION

5.1 We believe that data sharing should be made more systematic particularly within different parts of local authorities and with other public establishments such as schools both for accuracy and verification.

5.2 We do support the introduction of a formal performance monitoring system on registration rates, alongside the stipulations on standards of canvass described above—for example at least two calls on each non-responding property at different times of the day. Moreover would support more consistent standards on carry-over of names from non-responding households which we believe is a major source of under-registration.

6. MARKED REGISTER

6.1 We believe in principle that marked register information should be made available as a matter of course both for absent voters and for those who have attended polling stations. It acts as a valuable assistance to detecting administrative problems, fraud and to effective campaigning. We see no issues of data protection over and above the rights already available to candidates and agents.

Memorandum by the Liberal Democrats (VOT 38)

PRINCIPLE OF INDIVIDUAL REGISTRATION

1. The Liberal Democrats favour the introduction of individual electoral registration as it provides a convenient means to gather one or more personal identifiers or security checks from individual electors.

2. Individual registration would need to be accompanied by certain, tightly controlled, rules for someone to fill in a form on behalf of someone else—for example someone who, through physical disability, is not able to write.

ELECTORAL FRAUD AND INDIVIDUAL REGISTRATION

3. We believe that the security needs of postal voting require such information to be gathered and used in future elections.

4. We believe that the choice of such identifiers should include a consideration of how they will be checked in practice when postal votes are used and the resourcing implications for those responsible for conducting such checks.

5. We believe that discussion over the choice of such identifiers should carefully separate out the two distinct, albeit related, security issues of identity fraud and identity theft. Whilst the question of wholly false entries on the electoral register is a possible prelude to electoral fraud, in practice outside of Northern Ireland this is rarely the cause of fraud accusations. Rather, accusations are much more commonly about the misuse of postal votes issued in the name of someone who is legitimately on the electoral register.

INFORMATION GATHERED ON THE ELECTORAL REGISTER

6. We believe that electoral registration should as a matter of course request people's preferred titles and also means of address (eg legal name: William Gladstone, preferred name: Mr W Gladstone or Willie Gladstone).

7. This would enable those making use of the electoral register to significantly reduce the number of complaints from people about them being misaddressed in direct mail and similar.

8. We also believe that the inclusion of postcodes should be made mandatory. This is of particular importance for candidates wishing to exercise their legal right to a free mailing in Westminster elections (and some other elections). The Royal Mail, not unreasonably, expects any such addressed items to include postcodes. By failing to provide postcodes some councils are in effect undermining this legal right.

9. We also believe that the current inconsistency between the content of the electoral register and the Royal Mail rules should be resolved as regards various military voters. For example, the Royal Mail requires the name, rank or rating and service number to be provided for delivery of election addresses to absent voters at naval shore establishments but, other than name, this information is not provided on the electoral register—or by any other means—to candidates.

ACCESS TO THE REGISTER

10. Whilst recognising that many electoral services departments provide a high quality service on a limited budget, we believe that far too many frequently fail to meet, in a timely fashion, their legal requirements for provision of the electoral register. We believe that these rules should be tightened.

11. Although it does not impact on political parties and their campaigning, we are very sympathetic to the concerns of councils who encounter legal restrictions on using the full electoral register for activities such as consulting residents on their plans. We believe careful consideration should be given to getting permission for such data sharing when the electoral register is compiled, quite separate from any permission for use of the register for commercial purposes.

12. We also note the similar problem with elections such as those to SRB Boards. They have excluded those who have opted-out of the edited register unless they make a specific request to be included in the vote. It is difficult to see why this should be considered a satisfactory approach to conducting such elections.

TIMING OF ELECTORAL REGISTRATION

13. One final consideration for any changes to the registration scheme is the timescale for being added to the register. Other countries even allow registration on polling day. Although we believe this would be too susceptible to fraud, we do believe that the current lead times for getting added to the register are too long. For example, to vote in an election on 5 May requires an application to join the register to go in by 13 March. In practice, many members of the public only become aware of a particular election date much closer to polling day.

Memoranda by Graham Allen MP (VOT 39)

People should be allowed to register to vote up to and including Election Day.

In Nottingham the last day to have an application in to be listed on the register for a 5 May election would be 11 March. This is nearly two months before the election. It must be noted that in a highly mobile society such as the UK, people moving around most likely will not have voting on their mind as the first issue to take care of when they move. Since people get more interested in elections as they approach, it meets the needs of voters to allow registration very close to the day of the election, and ideally the day of the election.

One should not think that allowing people to register the day of the election will cause chaos due massive numbers of registrations and lack of adequate staff, one must bear in mind that it isn't actually an attractive option for a voter to do (as a result of the time it takes to register on an election day when one is already taking time out of their day to go and vote) and is usually only done in rare circumstances. I remember meeting a returning officer on Presidential Election Day where people registered at the Town Hall on the day with suitable l/d, then voted at one ballot box in another part of the Town Hall, no problem!

This is a vital step for democracy, namely because turnout has fallen in all Western democracies where voting isn't compulsory, and the UK is no exception. With turnout falling, voting should be as easily accomplished and allowed as is logically possible. Allowing people to register up until the day of the election is a service to voters who clearly are showing an interest in democracy and should not be turned away based on a technicality.

If one looks at the example of the US, one sees that the 25 states that cut-off voter registration for the US General Election the earliest still allow registration on or up to 2 or 4 October, only four weeks before the election. This is clearly more flexible than the two months in our case. Most other states in the US permit registration until two weeks before the election, the most common deadline being 18 October. Six states, (Idaho, Maine, Wisconsin, Wyoming, New Hampshire, and Minnesota) allow voters to register on the day of the election. As a whole, these states are known to be the most progressive electorally and amidst such close Presidential elections in 2000 and 2004 more state legislatures appear to be pushing for longer registration periods.

Appendix One

VOTER REGISTRATION: DEADLINE FOR REGISTERING TO VOTE IN THE 2004 GENERAL ELECTION OF 2 NOVEMBER 2004. (BY STATE ALPHABETICALLY)

Alabama General Election 22 October 2004
Alaska General Election 3 October 2004
Arizona General Election 4 October 2004
Arkansas General Election 3 October 2004
California General Election 18 October 2004
Colorado General Election 4 October 2004
Connecticut General Election 19 October 2004
Delaware General Election N/A
District of Columbia General Election 4 October 2004
Florida General Election 4 October 2004
Georgia General Election 4 October 2004
Hawaii General Election 4 October 2004
Idaho General Election 9 October 2004; Election Day Registration available.
Illinois General Election 5 October 2004* legislation pending to allow registration longer
Indiana General Election 4 October 2004
Iowa General Election 23 October 2004
Kansas General Election 18 October 2004
Kentucky General Election 4 October 2004
Louisiana General Election 4 October 2004
Maine General Election 23 October 2004 (by mail); Election Day registration available.
Maryland General Election 12 October 2004
Massachusetts General Election 13 October 2004
Michigan General Election 4 October 2004
Minnesota General Election 2 November 2004; Election Day registration available
Mississippi General Election 3 October 2004
Missouri General Election 6 October 2004
Montana General Election 4 October 2004
Nebraska General Election 15 October 2004 (by mail); 22 October 2004 (in person)
Nevada General Election 12 October 2004
New Hampshire General Election 23 October 2004; Election Day registration available
New Jersey General Election 4 October 2004
New Mexico General Election 5 October 2004
New York General Election 8 October 2004
North Carolina General Election 8 October 2004
North Dakota General Election No Voter Registration
Ohio General Election 4 October 2004
Oklahoma General Election 8 October 2004
Oregon General Election 12 October 2004
Pennsylvania General Election 4 October 2004

Rhode Island General Election 2 October 2004
 South Carolina General Election 2 October 2004
 South Dakota General Election 18 October 2004
 Tennessee General Election 3 October 2004
 Texas General Election 4 October 2004
 Utah General Election 13 October 2004 (by mail)
 Vermont General Election 25 October 2004
 Virginia General Election 4 October 2004
 Washington General Election 2 October 2004 (by mail); 18 October 2004 (in person)
 West Virginia General Election 13 October 2004
 Wisconsin General Election 23 October 2004 (by mail); 2 November 2004 (in person); Election Day registration available
 Wyoming—General Election 23 October 2004 (by mail); 2 November 2004 (in person); Election Day registration available.

Memorandum by the British Youth Council (BYC) (VOT 40)

INTRODUCTION TO THE BRITISH YOUTH COUNCIL

1. The British Youth Council (BYC) is the national youth council in the UK and is an umbrella body for youth organisations. Its membership ranges from local youth councils to large youth organisations such as the Scouts, the National Union of Students and youth wings of trade unions.
2. BYC seeks to promote the active citizenship of young people, helping them to develop the skills and abilities to participate fully within decision-making organisations, the communities in which they live and society as a whole.
3. BYC aims to:
 4. Provide a voice for young people;
 5. Promote equality for young people;
 6. Help young people be more involved in decisions that affect their lives;
 7. Advance young people's participation in society and civic life;
8. BYC is run by young people for young people. Young people shape our work at all levels through consultations and involvement in pieces of work. They can also become involved as members of our board of 11 annually elected trustees or through our other committees.

BYC'S HISTORY OF INVOLVEMENT IN CITIZENSHIP AND DEMOCRACY

9. BYC has a history of work in the field of youth citizenship. We played an active role in the Y Vote?/ Y Not initiative and have produced a number of publications in this area:
 - Young People Influencing Decisions: BYC's Lobbying Guide, 2003;
 - Youth Update, Young People and the 2001 Election, 2002;
 - Youth Agenda, Involvement in Decision-Making, 1998.
10. We regularly provide oral and written evidence to parliamentary committees and commissions on young people's active involvement in the democratic process. Over the past few years, we have submitted evidence to the following commissions, consultations and inquiries:
 - Electoral Commission's consultation on the Voting and Candidacy Age, 2004;
 - Putman Commission on Parliament in the Public Eye, 2004;
 - Local Government Information Unit (LGIU) Commission on the Local Government White Paper, 2002.
11. As part of our wider work on democracy, BYC chairs the Youth Voting Network, which is supported by the Electoral Commission. We also provide the secretariat, along with YMCA England and NCVYS (National Council for Voluntary Youth Services) to the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Youth Affairs. In 2002, the APPG produced Making Parliament Real for Young People, a guide for MPs on how to organise successful tours of Parliament for young people.

JOINT INQUIRY—ISSUES OF INTEREST TO BYC

12. BYC welcomes this joint inquiry and the opportunity to respond. BYC believes that young people, as empowered citizens, can make an enormous contribution to our society. A key tenet to young people's empowerment is their ability to participate in the political process by casting their vote, which requires young people to place themselves on the electoral register.

13. BYC's submission is focussed on a number of the areas stated in the request for written evidence. As the national youth council for young people under 25 in the UK, our submission is concerned with young people's ability to join the electoral register and the accompanying issues.

14. BYC believes that young people have not yet taken their rightful place in the political sphere. By this it is meant that young people do not presently play the role that they should in government, political debate, and other decision-making, either at local, national, or international levels. BYC believes that by ensuring that the process of electoral registration is transparent, accessible and plainly explained to young people, that they will be empowered to register and express their say in who they want to represent them within the UK's political system, ie voting in elections.

15. This submission will therefore focus on:

- Advantages of individual registration compared with the existing system of household registration;
- Strategies for encouraging, in particular among young voters, and tackling resistance to registration; and examination of the advantages and disadvantages of compulsory registration;
- Advantages or disadvantages of electronic rather than paper-based registration systems;
- Availability and confidentiality of the register; and
- Basis for individual registration eg address-based or on personal criteria such as NI number or birth date.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

16. BYC believes that the existing system of electoral registration dismisses citizens as individuals, but treats them as a homogenous group. Rather than a system based on residence, BYC believe that a person-centred system, that is flexible and meets the individual needs of citizens represents the creation of a responsive system.

17. Young people, especially, currently feel alienated from most aspects of the political process; this includes registration as well as voting. We need a sea change in emphasis, by moving towards a system that entices all citizens, not just young people, through a variety of methods, to engage in the process.

18. A move towards a person-centred system will require a re-evaluation of the way citizens are able to access information and services that inform and educate them about the registration process. To achieve best results and reach as many citizens as possible, in methods appropriate to each citizen, the state has to enter into sustained, effective partnerships with the voluntary and private sectors. Voluntary youth organisations, such as BYC, have a pivotal role to play in advising and influencing the creation of accessible methods for young people to be informed about the process. A key tenet of this accessibility is the need for a secure system, as that will increase people's confidence in this new approach.

19. All systems need a cornerstone that lays the foundations. The use of a universal product, provided by the state, is the only degree of compulsory that BYC believe should be part of the system. The use of the NI number is the only universal product provided by the state to all citizens of voting age. This makes it our preferred cornerstone to a person-centred system, and would reignite the debate around votes at 16, which BYC support, as that is the age that citizens receive their NI number.

20. Choice not enforcement is paramount to this system. Only through the creation of a system that recognises citizens' individuality and their diverse needs, will increase numbers of citizens, who are empowered and enticed, place themselves on the electoral register.

MOVING TOWARDS A PERSON-CENTRED SYSTEM

21. Young people are citizens and as such deserve the right to be able to influence decisions that affect and concern them. Within our democratic process, the most powerful method is by voting in elections, for which citizens need to be on the electoral register.

22. Many decisions for young people, including those of voting age, are made for them rather than by them, the mechanisms employed by the state to ensure all its citizens of voting age are on the electoral register should enable personal, individual choice. This is the fundamental premise of voting, hence the process for being on the register to enable you to vote, must also be a personal choice.

23. The existing system of household registration discriminates young people and their ability to register, as well as sending another message from society that they are not equal and are less worthy than adults. Something, which BYC believes is wrong and unjustified.

24. Household registration is an extreme barrier to those in society who do not have a permanent residence or regularly move from one part of the country, at some times, especially in the case of children and teenagers, without their consultation due to their parent or guardian's work or their family being gypsies/travellers.

25. BYC supports the move away from a collective, household registration system towards a system that is based on and recognises each citizen as an individual. Our democratic process, and the need to subscribe to participate, should not be defined by where you live; yet our current system is based on such a premise. We see this as a move towards the creation of a person-centred (individual) system, one that does not discriminate against citizens on the basis of the lack of permanent residence, but enshrines and celebrates every citizen's democratic right to be placed on the electoral register.

26. The creation of a person-centred system would help re-engage, what has become a disengaged and disillusioned generation, ie young people, with the formal democratic process. It will serve as a way to educate and inform citizens, regardless of their age, residence or any other factor, about our democratic process and the vital importance of their participation. We cannot seek to create stronger communities, if the systems that facilitate the selection of leaders to implement such changes deny or deter many from participating.

27. A person-centred, individual, registration system must be flexible and robust, to cope with the changing circumstances that every citizen, of voting age, encounters during their life. Such a system will end the uncertainty that many citizens, especially first-time voters, ie young people, feel about electoral registration, as the basis for registration will be closely tied to other measures that the state employs to record its citizens' movements (see *The cornerstone to a new approach*).

ENTICING AND ENGAGING YOUNG PEOPLE

28. Any strategies used to encourage citizens to join the electoral register must not just ensure that more citizens are able to vote but that they do vote. Such strategies must entice and engage with citizens, rather than alienate or confuse them.

29. Work must be done that reaches out to citizens, meeting them at their point of need whether that be educating them about the system and explaining the process, or informing them of the deadline for registering to ensure that they are able to vote at the next election.

30. Strategies must not be static and staid, but responsive to citizens needs. This is both on the basis of treating each citizen as an individual, as well as recognising that certain sections of society have similar concerns that need addressing. Whether that is language, for those whose first language is not English, or misconceptions about ancillary uses of the electoral register, or their unfamiliarity with the registration process.

31. Whilst BYC acknowledges the state's role in the process, we know through our history of working with young people, that young people are sceptical and at times untrustworthy of the government.

32. It is not just young people who are sceptical of the state. By creating and sustaining partnerships between the state, voluntary and private sector, this scepticism can be overcome. The partnership, due to the breadth and diversity of organisations involved, can effectively deploy a range of appropriate and targeted methods to encourage citizens to place themselves on the register.

33. Work around young people's involvement in the democratic process achieves its best results, when it is done in partnership with voluntary youth organisations and the state. The state can provide baseline support and a general framework (see *The cornerstone to a new approach*), with voluntary and private organisations providing the dynamism. This dynamism is translated to activities on the ground that young people themselves lead, resulting in their peers engaging in the process.

34. Under this approach, the voluntary and private sectors can devise appropriate messages, activities and resources that entice those within the sector to engage in the process of electoral registration.

35. In relation to engaging young people, BYC would urge against the sole use of youth work. Youth work has its many benefits, especially in reaching out to marginalised young people, its main aim as defined in Section 3 of the Youth Work Act 2001 is

36. "A planned programme of education designed for the purpose of aiding and enhancing the personal and social development of young persons through their voluntary participation."

37. Youth work's is not young people's civic development and engagement. This is the focus of many voluntary youth organisations, especially young people-led organisations such as the British Youth Council who exist to provide a voice for young people to assist their greater involvement in civic life.

38. BYC believes that youth work can play a pivotal role in educating young people about the electoral process, especially those young people who are socially excluded. Equally the state can use compulsory education as another tenet of educating young people about the process.

39. In addition to schools, further and higher education institutions also have a role to play in providing information about the process and how young people can participate (see *An accessible and secure register*).

40. Voluntary youth organisations, such as BYC, can use their vast and diverse networks of young people and youth organisations to organise various activities such as workshops, peer consultation, exploit information technology communication, or the youth sector media, and are best placed to effectively engage young people with a person-centred system.

41. The private sector, in partnership with the state, can utilise mainstream media to promote the electoral register. It is also well placed to entice the endorsement of well-known individuals by different sections of society, as way to engage citizens' participation.

42. Whilst BYC is committed to working with others to increase young people's participation in the process, and allay any misconceptions they may have, we believe that the overriding premise for young people's involvement, as previously stated, should be on personal choice.

43. It is this focus of choice, which underpins BYC's opposition to a compulsory registration process. Whilst advocating the use of a citizen's NI number, we believe that it is a citizens' right to choose whether they wish to be on the electoral register, and if they choose to be it is also their choice to vote. Compulsory registration would be a precursor to compulsory voting.

44. State enforcement is not the way to attract and engage citizens to participate. Most citizens hate being told what to do, but are more receptive to suggestive prompts rather than dictates.

AN ACCESSIBLE, SECURE REGISTER

45. BYC believe that regardless of whether the system is paper-based or electronic, it should be accessible and secure, to ensure confidence in the system and that their details will not be easily accessed by third parties.

46. Issues of accessibility do not just relate to security, but also the means by which citizens are able to obtain information about the electoral register and registration process. Citizens' portals, both physical and electronic, should be available in various locations to enable citizens to readily access such information. This resonates with our belief that the process should meet citizens individuals needs, and be flexible whilst robust.

47. BYC has already mentioned the need for partnership working between the state, private and voluntary sectors. Institutions within each sector should be outlets of information about the process, thus ensuring that whilst standard, uniform information is provided, each partner is able to utilise their expertise to appropriately tailor the information to the needs of different sections of society.

48. Our belief of choice also influences the need for the registration system to be available in numerous formats. It is not a case of either a paper-based or electronic system but the use of both systems. A person-centred system is one based on choice of the means by which a citizen is able to place him or herself on the register.

THE CORNERSTONE TO A NEW APPROACH

49. The foundation or cornerstone to this new approach—a person-centred (individual) system, is the mechanism(s) used by the state to record its citizens' movements. In Moving towards a person-centred system, we have already stated our opposition to a household system and believe that an address-based system works on the same premise and thus carries the same disadvantages and barriers to citizen's ability to be placed on the electoral register.

50. BYC has already argued for a flexible registration system, it thereby follows that the cornerstone to this new approach should also be flexible. In light of this, we favour the use of the National Insurance (NI) number as the foundation to a person-centred system.

51. This adequately reflects our stated desire of the system to be based on the individual, reflect their changing circumstances through life, as well as possessing real currency to citizens.

52. Using the NI number would reignite the debate around the voting age, something that BYC would welcome as we are committed to campaigning for the lowering to voting age to 16, the age at which citizens receive their NI number.

53. BYC favours the use of the NI number as every citizen aged 16 and over, is provided with one. A citizens' date of birth, as suggested as one possible basis in the joint inquiry's terms of reference, is not unique as many citizens not only share the same birthday but birth date, whilst every citizen has their own, individual NI number.

54. BYC would not wish to see the use of identity or entitlement cards as the cornerstone to a new registration system. As an organisation, we are opposed to the introduction of such a card. This opposition is matched by the majority of young people who responded to our submission to the Home Office's consultation on Entitlement Cards and Identity Fraud.

55. Other state issued documents such as passports and driving licences are inadequate cornerstones, are not universal amongst citizens of voting age. Whilst BYC has previously stated our opposition to enforcement (Enticing and engaging young people), we believe that encouragement and education rather than enforcement should be employed to attract citizens to register.

56. The state's key role in laying the cornerstone is the provision of a universal product to all citizens of voting age. The use of the NI number, as the cornerstone to this new approach, fulfils that criterion.

Memorandum by SOLACE (Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers) (VOT 41)

SOLACE (Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers) is the representative body for senior strategic managers working in the public sector. The Society promotes public sector management excellence and provides professional developments for its members who come from all areas of the public sector. Whilst the vast majority of its members work in local government it also has members operating in senior positions in health authorities and central government. SOLACE spans all of the United Kingdom, having membership in Northern Ireland, Wales, Scotland and England.

Members are drawn from a variety of professional backgrounds and are:

- local authority Chief Executives (the bulk of whom are Returning Officers/Electoral Registration Officers)
- senior executives of local authorities (or other related organisations)
- members of related international organisations
- past service members

SOLACE is uniquely placed as a professional organisation to take an overview of all public sector issues, especially those in local government and not simply electoral issues. In particular, the Society is interested in all new management/leadership developments to improve service to the public and responding to numerous central government initiatives.

The Society organises its work into a number of programme areas and one of these is Electoral Matters. A panel of experienced practitioners meets regularly to discuss and comment upon current issues and problems; this panel is chaired by David Monks, Chief Executive of Huntingdonshire District Council, who has been a Returning Officer/Electoral Registration Officer for more than 20 years.

Although SOLACE would accept the view of the Electoral Commission that registration is the lynchpin of the electoral system it does not have a high profile in the culture of local government administration. Essentially, it is work carried out at a moderately low level in the organisation and does not attract attention like many of our front line services such as education, social services, housing, highways, planning, etc. That is not to say it is unimportant—it is, but if it is to be substantially reformed it must compete for attention (and hence resources) in an essentially political arena alongside the other “headline/sexxy issues”.

This significant consideration is amplified well in a paragraph from the Electoral Commission Report on Local Election in Wales 2004 (remember that registration staff and election staff are synonymous).

Paragraph 7.16

It is important to recall that the administrators who manage the day-to-day election planning are generally not senior management staff. Returning Officers are Chief Executives or other senior officers with many other responsibilities and priorities. In Wales, as in England, few Returning Officers would describe themselves as ‘hands-on’ (although there are those who are) and, understandably given their broader responsibilities, tend to be involved in key decisions only. Electoral administrators, on the other hand, are obliged to spend their time administering complex processes aimed at meeting legal requirements and deadlines, rather than considering broader strategy and wider issues beyond delivering an election.

Thus electoral registration is conducted more as a routine annual process, rather than a strategic service in local authorities. To change this attitude will require a massive cultural shift—not just new legislation.

All concerned with the electoral process wish to both maximise registration and make such a procedure as available and accessible as possible. The current system is not perfect but it is well understood by those that administer it and, broadly speaking, produces reasonably accurate results (there are some notable exceptions, particularly in urbanised areas). Thus, at the outset, if changes are to be made then they must be addressed with clear objectives in mind (that are measurable) with easily discernable benefits to the consumer. There must also be proper consultation on these proposals with adequate resourcing and training for those charged with operating any new system. It must be fairly said that the record of central government in producing new legislation for election work falls woefully short when measured against these standards.

Moreover, rather like the act of “turning out to vote” registration for the general public has little attraction. It is done out of routine and duty and is seen by many in the 18-24 age range as being connected to their credit worthiness, opening a bank account, obtaining a loan rather than an active step to participate in the democratic process of this country; politics are not attractive (this is all evidenced by research from companies like MORI and quoted in Electoral Commission reports, for instance). Thus, if there were a move

to have individual registration by, say, all within a household signing the form there would, inevitably, be a significant decline in names on the register. Again, there would be increased delays in the return of the form and a need for special provision for those with physical and language disabilities, etc. Compared with the attractions of the Lottery, reality television and voting out participants in ‘Big Brother’ this is not an issue that is likely to grab the public’s attention; legislative tinkering with details is not the answer. The real issues centre on awareness and education, involving a change in attitude in our society, which is rarely achieved quickly after any new enactment.

Turning now to the detailed points listed in the invitation to submit evidence and amplifying the themes outlined above:

- (a) Advantages of individual registration compared with the existing system of household registration.

There are some apparent superficial advantages in having individual registration rather than the current system. Thus, the Returning Officer could, in theory, check postal vote application forms and declarations of identity documents against original signatures; however, it must be appreciated that this would be a huge burden of work in an already ridiculously tight timescale. Frankly, it is an unrealistic aim.

Individual registration would be more expensive to operate, cause delays (as explained above) and would probably reduce the size of the register.

- (b) Strategies for encouraging registration, in particular among young voters, and tackling resistance to registration; and examination of the advantages and disadvantages of compulsory registration.

There is always a case to be made for more citizenship education in schools and colleges. Other more radical strategies have been discussed—eg a refund of, say, £10 or £20 on Council Tax for either registering and/or voting in elections. This is controversial though does have some instant appeal.

The same arguments concerning compulsory registration also apply to compulsory voting. It only really works if there is a determination to enforce it and, really, some desire amongst the vast majority of people in this country to agree to such compulsion. There will always be some resistance and it is the aspiration of some people to appear as martyrs, particularly if enforcement takes place through the courts.

- (c) Issues of geographic and ethnic variations in levels of voter registration.

These issues arise in certain areas of the country and the answer is adding extra resources by having specialised staff undertaking registration (canvassing) and greater levels of publicity and education.

- (d) Advantages or disadvantages of electronic rather than paper-based registration systems.

There is a strong case to be made out for electronic registration. Some authorities use a telephoned based system at the moment to update the register. Why cannot some people apply on line to be registered? As ever, there is resistance because of worries about fraud and secrecy. The banking industry proves that it is possible to take a view on this (risk assessment) and conduct such work reasonably satisfactorily.

- (e) Difficulties for the disabled and others unable to complete forms.

Again, the answer is for special provision to be made for those with disabilities (of whatever form) to have assistance in undertaking the registration procedure. Levels of this are available from most authorities.

- (f) Availability and confidentiality of the register.

SOLACE believes that the basic presumption and starting point should be that the register should only be used for proper election and public service reasons. It is widely sold to credit agencies for a very small sum of money and, like many other areas of public life, this is effectively subsidising a very profitable industry. A possible increased source of revenue for Electoral Registration Officers to undertake greater work could be charging those companies a higher sum of money.

In the past when ideas have been put forward to limit the access of these companies to the register there has been considerable pressure brought upon government from them to stop such moves. The issue of anonymous registration for certain groups of people (those under threat of violence from a former partner, for example) is one that is dealt with in various ways at many authorities. It really should be clearly legislated upon and have a single solution throughout the country.

- (g) Basis for individual registration, eg address-based or on personal criteria such as NI number or birth date.

National Insurance numbers would appear to be a most attractive solution. It is understood that most people have an NI number, though it is not blanket coverage.

Our society is very mobile and this is always a problem with an address-based system.

(h) The desirability of a national electoral register.

A national electoral register would be desirable and such schemes as the Co-ordinated Online Register of Elections (CORE) are moving towards this goal. However, the system will only work if all the other problems that this Inquiry is addressing are tackled and existing local registers can be made as accurate as possible.

There should be some system of allowing people to vote at a polling station other than the traditional local one near their home. Thus, if they commute to London they should be able to vote there or, better still, via their laptop/blackberry on the train as they go to work.

(i) Means on ensuring the security of the register: PIN numbers, electoral voting cards, signatures.

The current system has very high levels of integrity and trust which, however, have been challenged recently with various scare stories about postal voting. It would be disastrous to lose that overall public confidence in the system and very strong scrutiny measures must be built in to any revised system, together with the resolution to prosecute those who are determined to carry out fraudulent acts.

SOME CONCLUDING THOUGHTS . . .

- (i) The current regulations governing electoral registration are horribly complex and convoluted—even for experienced lawyer Electoral Registration Officers! If changes are to be made then any new regulations should be simpler and more accessible.
- (ii) There must be some ‘joined-up’ thinking here. Central Government, via the Gershon review, is putting pressure on local authorities to become more efficient, seeking savings of 2.5% per annum on our budgets. If extended registration duties are to be placed upon us then there must be proper and adequate resources to accompany the new burdens.

Memorandum by Help the Aged (VOT 42)

OLDER PEOPLE

In 2002, there were 9.5 million people aged 65 and over in the UK. The number of older people in our population has increased over the past few decades, and is projected to continue to grow in the future. During the 50 years 1971 to 2021, the number of people in the UK aged 65 and over is expected to have increased nearly 70%, from 7.3 million to 12.2 million.

The section of the older population which has increased most rapidly, both in actual size and in relation to the total population, is that of people over 75. The proportion of people in this age-group is projected to increase from 4.5% in 1971 to 9% in 2021.

A growing section of our older population is very elderly. For example, the proportion of people in the UK aged 85 and over increased from 0.7% in 1961 to 1.9% in 2002. The number of people aged 90 and over in Great Britain has tripled since 1971; in 2002 there were 380,000 people in this age group, representing 4% of the population aged 65 and over. By 2021 there are expected to be 601,000 people aged 90 and over. (Social Trends 34, 2004)

PROBLEMS OLDER PEOPLE FACE WHEN VOTING

There are a number of features of the voting process which may have served to disenfranchise vulnerable older voters in the recent all postal trials. Similar issues may be relevant in terms of electoral registration.

- The ballot paper itself—the sample ballot paper from the recent pilot in the East Midlands region, provided to Help the Aged, failed to meet basic accessibility standards in terms of its layout and font size. In particular older people with visual impairments and failing eyesight would have struggled to read the instructions on how to vote and information on where to get help if they were struggling.
- The folding rules—the ballot paper from East Midlands came with strict instructions that the paper should be folded in a particular way, explaining that papers folded incorrectly would be deemed invalid. This system was insensitive to the needs of older people with joint and movement problems who may have difficulties in carrying out precise procedures such as folding. Furthermore, given the small size of the font explaining the rules, it is possible that other physically able older people may have had their ballots rejected due to being unable to read the folding instructions.
- The need for a counter-signatory—it is an unfortunate fact of life that there are a large number of older people living alone who are very isolated. The need for a counter-signatory on postal ballots, may have presented particular challenges for these groups.

- The lack of access to help—it is clear that the current requirements for the provision of assistance and delivery points for postal voters are not sufficient to meet the needs of older people. We are aware that, for example, in the Derbyshire Dales District Council area only one assistance and delivery point was made available, and that, for some vulnerable older voters in that area, getting to the point would have meant travelling 40 miles and taking up to four different buses. Whilst we do not know the extent to which these points were used during the election, it's clear that given the excessive distances involved, and the potential for older people to be unaware of their existence (especially given the small font size used to give ballot information) it's highly likely that many older people would have been unable to contemplate even attempting to access them in the first place.

Help for vulnerable voters must be a key priority and must be well signposted and easily accessible within the community.

HOUSEHOLD VERSUS INDIVIDUAL REGISTRATION

In 2001, two new provisions to the Representation of the People Act 2000 came into force which made it easier for homeless people to register to vote. Until then, the need for an address at which to register has been a major barrier to registration. However, under s6 of the new Act, a homeless person can make a declaration of local connection to enable them to register to vote. The section sets out a prescribed format for the declaration, which must include amongst the standard requirements, a required address which is the address of, or which is nearest to, a place in the UK where he [sic] commonly spends a substantial part of his time (whether during the day or at night). The Act also introduced a “rolling register” which means that electoral registers will be updated monthly rather than annually.

Whilst the registration rules for homeless individuals have been made easier, a move towards individual registration could assist those older people who move frequently or have no fixed abode. Changes could also benefit people who live in houses of multiple occupation. There are estimated to be 10,000 older people homeless and with priority needs.

More research is needed into the impact of moving registration from household to individuals in relation to the 30,000 care homes, which provide accommodation for 577,000 people in the UK.

DIFFICULTIES WITH COMPLETING FORMS

There is a need for a variety of tools to help vulnerable individuals register (including home visits and alternative formats). JRF research on meeting the needs of Chinese older people recommended courses to teach older people to fill in application forms. JRF also published, in 2003, “Older people’s views on information, advice and advocacy” which also highlighted the problems some older people have completing forms.

AVAILABILITY AND CONFIDENTIALITY OF THE REGISTER

Confidence in the confidentiality of the Electoral Register is vital if the most vulnerable individuals are to be encouraged to register to vote. Where there are fears that the Register is not confidential, those estranged from their families, or those who have been persecuted either at home or abroad may be reluctant to register.

TECHNOLOGY AND OLDER PEOPLE—ELECTRONIC REGISTRATION

Only 18% of older people ever use the internet and only 24% of over 75s own a mobile phone. If government develops systems of electronic registration, there must be an alternative exceptions service for those who cannot access the technology. If electronic registration moves forward, websites must meet the highest accessibility standards.

Government will soon be making an announcement on digital TV switchover. Help the Aged believes that Government could play a key part in reducing the digital divide by providing and encouraging industry to provide, set top boxes which give internet access into the homes of older and vulnerable people.

PIN NUMBERS/SIGNATURES/VOTING CARDS

New research by UCL highlights the problems which older people have with pin numbers. The research reveals that even mild levels of cognitive impairment affects the ability to use a pin number and pin machine. The research implies that the majority of people with dementia would have problems using a Pin system. The Alzheimer’s society estimates that 775,000 people in the UK have dementia.

EXCEPTIONS

Any changes to electoral registration would need to be backed up by an exceptions service for those who could not cope with the new arrangements.

MORE RESEARCH

Any changes should be backed up by research and should be well planned. The failure of the postal voting trials was partly down to bad planning and partly due to a lack of research. More research is needed into the older person's experience of electoral registration, voting and voting systems. It is clear that proposals such as electronic registration could pose particular challenge for this generally technologically excluded group.

BASIS FOR INDIVIDUAL REGISTRATION

Many BME women will not have an NI number, particularly Bangladeshi, Pakistani, and Romany. Providing a birth date can also be difficult for some refugee communities. Obtaining other documents such as birth certificates can be difficult for some minority and refugee communities.

STRATEGIES FOR ENCOURAGING REGISTRATION

There remains a need for better information and access to information available for ethnic groups, particularly non-English speaking. There is a need to stress to minority communities, the benefits of voting.

Strategies for encouraging registration could include: advertising in ethnic press; advertising on ethnic radio; and advertising at convenient places eg faith centres, day centres, community centres.

Memorandum by Operation Black Vote (OBV) (VOT 43)

Operation Black Vote began in July 1996 as a collaboration between two organisations: Charter88 (which campaigns for democratic reform) and the 1990 Trust, the only national Black generic policy research and networking organisation, which uses information technology as a primary means of communication.

MISSION STATEMENT

Operation Black Vote is the first initiative to focus exclusively on the Black democratic deficit in the UK. We believe that without a strong political voice for African, Asian, Caribbean and other ethnic minorities, the ideal of equality of opportunity—regardless of race and colour—will remain an ideal.

We recognise that building a future Britain in which African, Asian, Caribbean communities have a voice is a long-term project. There is an entrenched cynicism about politics within the Black community, especially among young people, which cannot be addressed easily, or overnight.

In addition, overcoming stereotypical attitudes and institutionalised racism within the dominant cultural and political establishment will require a new willingness to communicate and co-operate from both Black and White.

Our comprehensive programme includes political education, participation and representation; our goal is for a fair, just and inclusive democracy, one that allows our creativity, energy and talent to fulfil its potential and enhance British society.

VOTER REGISTRATION

Registering to vote is a fundamental part of civic engagement. Without it one cannot take part in any election. Because voter registration levels for BME communities, particularly amongst Africans, Caribbeans, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis, OBV have consistently engaged in voter registration campaigns.

OBV has sought to make the political case to encourage people to register to vote: Tackling racism, ensuring MP's are more accountable to BME concerns, having greater control over their lives. Financing our voter registration projects has proven very difficult in recent years particularly since the introduction of the Electoral Commission. Before the Electoral Commission responsibility for campaigns was with the individual local authorities. Our experience with them was patchy but nevertheless there were some that would finance programs in their borough.

But after the Electoral Commission took over their campaigns have generally been generic, or to the young and very occasionally ads that have appeared directly in the Black press. We have financed the first almost online Voter registration form which is filled in on line printed and sent to us by free post, we then send it direct to the appropriate local authority. During the local and Mayoral elections OBV registered to vote over 500 people. We hope to do the same programme for the forthcoming general election.

PROBLEMS WITH REGISTERING TO VOTE

It is impossible to ascertain correct figures from local authorities about voter registration because the present system calculates 100% voter registration if one person registers from that household. We would contact local authorities about raising their levels of registration only to be told that their levels were 95%–98%.

Our experience has shown that the electoral offices were not keen to challenge their own figures because they didn't want to show a drop in registration.

Individual registration forms would go a long way to demonstrate truer levels of registration and allow local authorities and the Electoral Commission to target low take up areas.

It is also vitally important that the Government recognise that if local authorities and the Electoral Commission do not target BME groups then they should support those that will.

Memorandum by the Ministry of Defence (MoD) (VOT 44)

ELECTORAL REGISTRATION BY SERVICE PERSONNEL

In their letter of 20 December about the joint inquiry into Electoral Registration, Alan Beith and Andrew Bennett asked that we send you written evidence on the subject of registration by Service personnel.

The Committees' terms of reference are broad, and many of the issues they intend to examine are outside our Defence interest. However, as Mr Caplin said in his reply to Andrew Tyrie's adjournment debate in the Westminster Hall on 8 December, we are committed to working with the Electoral Commission on encouraging awareness among the Service community of their options to register to vote.

The attached memorandum sets out the active steps we are taking to achieve this and will, we hope, reassure the Committees that we are fully seized of the issue.

1. The Ministry of Defence is committed to make every effort to assist Service personnel to participate in the electoral process.

2. Revised guidance to the Service community providing full information and practical help on how to register and explaining the various voting options available is due to be published in late January 2005 as a Defence Council Instruction (DCI). This will coincide with the Electoral Commission's national publicity campaign on electoral registration. A copy of the revised DCI, which was drafted with assistance from the Commission, is attached for information.

3. In addition, a number of measures are being taken to improve awareness amongst the Service community of the options they have to register to vote. These are:

- (a) *Joint strategy for Information*. The Commission has developed a strategy, based on discussions with the MOD on how it will work with us in the future to ensure the dissemination of information about voting to Service personnel.
- (b) *Forms and leaflets*. The Commission is producing a specific (generic) form for Service voters which will outline the registration options available to members of the Armed Forces. The Service voter form will be clearly signposted on the Commission's website. The Commission is also producing a leaflet giving information to Service voters and details of how (and where) to register and where to seek further advice. MOD will publicise and assist with distribution.
- (c) *British Forces Broadcasting Service (BFBS)*. BFBS covers the areas (by radio and television) with the greatest concentration of Service personnel overseas and on operations (Germany/Cyprus/Gibraltar/Falkland Islands/Balkans/Middle East), as well as other areas. The Commission did some work with the BFBS during the 2004 annual canvass, and will build on this to coincide with the January 2005 campaign.
- (d) *MOD In-house publications and websites*. Articles will be offered to the editors of in-house publications (eg *Soldier Magazine*, *Navy News* and *RAF News*, as well as the three Service Families magazines).
- (e) *New recruits*. All new recruits should be given advice on options to register to vote on joining the Armed Forces. The initial training organisations will be provided with Service voter leaflets for distribution to each recruit.

JSDCI 01/05 ELECTORAL REGISTRATION—MEMBERS OF THE ARMED FORCES AND THEIR SPOUSES

INTRODUCTION

1. This DCI supersedes and updates DCI Gen 11/03. It explains the arrangements for electoral registration and voting for members of the Armed Forces and their spouses, which have been in place since the Representation of the People Act 2000 (as amended) came into effect on 16 February 2001.

2. Registers of electors for Parliamentary, European Parliament and Local Government elections are prepared annually and are updated on a monthly basis, although individuals are able to register anytime during the year. Only persons whose names appear on the register are eligible to vote in an election that occurs during the period of that register.

ELIGIBLE PERSONNEL

3. In order to register, personnel must meet the following criteria:

- (a) Be over 16 years of age (although an individual cannot actually vote until his or her 18th birthday).
- (b) Be a United Kingdom or Commonwealth citizen, or a citizen of the Irish Republic or of another European Union member state. However, citizens of European Union member states other than the United Kingdom or Irish Republic are only eligible to vote in Local Government elections and European Parliamentary elections.

REGISTRATION OPTIONS

4. All Service personnel and their spouses have the option to register as Service Voters by completing a yearly service declaration form, which should be returned to the relevant local council electoral registration office. When registering this way, the Service Voter's qualifying address is the address in the UK they would be living at if they were not in the Services. The advantage of this option is that their registration remains constant even if they are moved from one location to another.

5. Since 2001, Service personnel and their spouses have also had the alternative option to register in the same way as civilian electors. If they are living at a permanent address in the UK, either at a private or other qualifying address, Service Families Accommodation or Single Living Accommodation, a Service person and/or spouse can choose to register as a conventional voter.

6. For those service personnel and their spouses who are posted abroad and who do not wish to register as Service Voters, there is the option of registering as Overseas Electors. This is a facility available to all British Citizens who currently live abroad, but have been registered as electors in Britain within the last 15 years. The disadvantage of this option is that Overseas Electors can only vote in UK Parliamentary and European Parliamentary elections, they do not qualify to vote in British local elections.

RENEWAL OF REGISTRATION

7. All households in the United Kingdom receive an annual form from the local council Electoral Registration Officer during September/October for confirmation and updating of the following year's register of electors. Those registered, as Service Voters or Overseas Electors will also receive an annual renewal notification from the Electoral Registration Officer with whom they are registered.

ROLLING REGISTRATION

8. In addition to the annual canvas, provision is made for a system of rolling electoral registration. This allows individuals to register at any time of year when they either move properties within the same electoral registration area, or to another electoral registration area within the United Kingdom.

PRIVACY OF INFORMATION

9. There are two versions of the electoral register, the full register and the edited register. By law, only certain people and organisations can have copies of the full register and they can only use it for specific purposes. These include electoral purposes, the prevention and detection of crime and checking identity when you have applied for credit. However, Electoral Registration Officers also provide an edited version of the electoral register available for sale or commercial use by anyone, who may then use it for any purpose. Those wishing to have their name left off the edited version must mark the appropriate box on the registration application form.

ABSENT VOTING

10. Service personnel and their spouses who are overseas or away from their UK residence during an election may elect to vote either by post or proxy. Those who are disabled, a remand prisoner, or a mental patient can also vote by post or proxy. As postal ballot papers may not be distributed until one week before the election, those overseas, if they choose to vote by post, should bear in mind that they may not receive and return their ballot papers in time. In these circumstances, they may consider it best to elect to appoint a proxy rather than vote by post.

VOTING BY PROXY

11. The generally acceptable grounds for voting by proxy are as follows:

- (a) Physical incapacity or blindness.
- (b) Occupation, service, employment or attendance on a course.
- (c) Where voting in person would require a journey by sea or air (ie holiday or posted abroad).

However, registered Service Voters, overseas voters, mental patients and remand prisoners do not need to meet the above requirements as their particular circumstances automatically entitle them to vote by proxy.

12. Proxy voters are not required to live in the same area as the person who appointed them is registered, and can apply to cast their proxy vote by post.

EUROPEAN UNION—CITIZENS

13. Citizens of countries in the European Community may register and vote at both local government and European Parliamentary elections, but not British Parliamentary elections.

UNIT PROCEDURES

14. All ships, units and stations are to give personnel and their dependants (especially when overseas) every reasonable assistance to register as voters. All new entrants to the Armed Forces are to be made aware of the procedures and options for registering as voters. Registration forms are available from Electoral Registration Officers, although units may wish to establish their own stocks. A list of Electoral Registration Officers is to be held by all units.

ELECTION PROCEDURES

15. The following procedures are to be adopted:

- (a) Parliamentary By Elections. On receipt by the Services of notification that a by-election is pending, a signal will be dispatched to all home commands giving the name of the constituency and address of the Electoral Registration Officer. COs should then ensure that Form F/Vote/36 (Notice of Pending By-Election) is completed and posted in a prominent position on notice boards.
- (b) General Elections. The procedures as above will apply, except that Form F/Vote/51 (Notice of General Election) is to be posted on notice boards.
- (c) Local Government Elections. Local government elections in England, Scotland and Wales are normally held on the first Thursday in May (there is no set date for Northern Ireland). No notification is made. Personnel may vote using their preferred voting option.
- (d) European Parliamentary Elections. The same procedures as for local government elections apply.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

16. Electoral Registration Officers are able to provide additional information including specific details for registration within their area. Lists of Electoral Registration Officers can be found on the Internet as follows:

- (a) England, Wales and Northern Ireland—www.dca.gov.uk/elections/officeraddress.
- (b) Scotland—www.scotland.gov.uk/voting.

There are also links to the Electoral Commission's websites giving information about electoral registration, elections and voting which can be found on:

The Electoral Commission—www.electoralcommission.org.uk and www.aboutmyvote.co.uk.

Memorandum by COSLA (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities) (VOT 45)

SUMMARY

1. COSLA believes the proposed individual register is a vital part of the continuing electoral modernisation programme proposed by the Electoral Commission, itself crucial in maintaining a healthy active democracy. Individual registration should help ensure an accurate, up to date listing of those who are eligible to vote. An electronic version of the list uniquely identifying individuals entitled to vote is essential to multi-channel, multi-venue voting which could include e-counting and e-voting. If it can be in place before the STV run local elections it could be a valuable resource to returning officers, opening up the possibility of some e-voting.

2. COSLA supports the principle of an individual register. But, in doing so we have concerns that the as far as is practical, advantages of the current system should be transferred to the new arrangements, and that a series of other issues be addressed at the same time. The additional resources required to implement and maintain an individual register will need to be met through additional funding from central government.

STRENGTHS OF THE CURRENT SYSTEM

3. COSLA acknowledges the human rights and data protection issues that arise from having the household head make a return on behalf of others as part of their individual right to vote. It is also obvious that the term “head of household” seems antiquated and it is presumptuous to name one person for this role given the diverse household/family arrangements that now exist. However, there are some strengths to the way in which the current arrangements work. These should be acknowledged and as far as possible planned for in individual registration:

- The household registration system lowers the threshold for engagement. With the paperwork completed by a member of the household “impulse voting” is possible for those who might otherwise have chosen not to register individually or neglected or for other reasons not been able to do so. Without this form of support there is a reasonable chance that the new arrangements will disenfranchise some even if they are not consciously opting out. The most affected are likely to be potential first time voters.
- The current arrangements help meet the needs of those who have either literacy difficulties in English or visual impairments, within the supportive environment of other household members.

Through the electoral canvass return by households valuable information is provided in a simple and effective way to EROs about who should be on the register. We would ask that some element of this process continues, alongside the individual right to register. This could help ensure that the EROs work is as well targeted as possible. If not, there would be advantages if EROs are given access to other databases, such as service users of schools and colleges, registered social landlords etc. It might also be useful if some of the latter were given a duty to provide such information to EROs so that as comprehensive a list of individuals can be compiled in a given area as possible. Lastly, it might be useful to reach agreements with organisations such as estate agents and removal companies, through their trade associations, to promote awareness around registration.

4. The marked register is important to those who campaign in elections. The new system should ensure that it is available to registered political parties to help influence their work and to identify areas with low turnout. This is likely to be of particular interest in areas where STV is being run, as it will create greater pressure on individual parties to increase their vote.

EDUCATION AND AWARENESS

5. There is already considerable planned activity for the lead up to the next local government election in Scotland. This is because of:

- the perceived need for a broader representation amongst elected members;
- the change to the STV system; and
- concerns over the drop in voting rates (49.5% at the last combined election).

Additional work on individual registration will add to the “busy-ness” at the time. Awareness campaigns on the 2007 elections will need to be coordinated across the major stakeholders, with good practice and common materials being shared, wherever possible.

6. Adding voter registration to civic education will contribute to the already developing agenda rolling out in schools. While schools are undoubtedly a good place for this activity, short term campaigning in this environment is unlikely to have an adequate impact on what will be a long-term requirement of all voters. For the majority of pupils a significant time will pass between them leaving school and being able to use their vote. Awareness campaigning around registration needs to take place over a number of years, be broadly focussed but peaking in the build up to elections.

A RISE AND FALL IN TURNOUT

7. It is acknowledged that the continual drop in the percentage voter turnout is disheartening and probably feeds the adverse press reportage which in turn contributes to further voter disaffection. But, a statistical increased rate of participation caused by tightening up the register is not without its downside. It could hide a real decline in those voting as a proportion of the total eligible population. The aggressive “dead-wooding” inherent in individual registration would remove many entitled to vote but suspicious of the registration process. This would disenfranchise those only partially engaged in the political processes and, reduce the transparency of the proportions who effectively choose not to vote, or are not persuaded to do so by the political parties. This could result in a higher “democratic deficit”, with reduced effective accountability and lower participation rates overall. There may be merit in making individual registration compulsory, but its effectiveness would be difficult to predict.

8. COSLA suggests placing a broad duty on EROs to promote full registration as a means of addressing the under registration of particular groups (including some ethnic minority communities and younger people). This would protect EROs from any allegations of acting in a “political” way. In practical terms the duty should require them to concentrate their activity on geographical areas with the lowest proportions of registration. Additional funding should be made available so that those wards or post code areas in the lowest quartile in their local authority area are targeted in an repeated and very localised way, probably resulting in EROs going from door to door. Similarly, additional funding should be made available by the Scottish Parliament and the UK Parliament, to support similar campaigning for those in the lowest quartile of their respective areas.

FUNDING

9. Costs of providing individual registration are likely to be considerably higher than the current household system. Local government needs to be fully funded. While the level of administration costs are going to be linked directly to the larger number of records needing to be managed, provision also needs to be made for follow-up, assistance, general awareness raising and local campaigning to increase the proportion of those eligible to vote on the register.

Memorandum by The Audit Commission (VOT 46)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. The Audit Commission welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the work of the joint inquiry. As requested, this short note sets out how the Commission takes account in its work of how local authorities fulfil their duties with respect to electoral registration.

2. The Local Government Act 1999 gave responsibility to the Audit Commission for inspecting local authority services. Our approach to inspection has evolved and developed since that date. Early inspections were carried out in response to local authorities’ own reviews of their services. Too often these focused on narrowly defined service areas—such as inspections of electoral registration services—when the biggest improvements in performance are to be gained by focusing scarce resources in a more strategic way.

3. The Commission’s subsequent commitment to Strategic Regulation requires us to maximise our impact on improving public services through constructive challenge and by spreading excellent practice, and to minimise the burden of regulation by being proportionate to risk and need.

4. In local government, we achieve this commitment to Strategic Regulation in part through our Comprehensive Performance Assessments (CPAs) of local authorities. CPA pulls together in a single framework the existing information on council performance that is held by councils, government departments, auditors and inspectors. It builds in a “corporate assessment” of councils’ ability to improve. CPA identifies the strengths and capabilities of the council, as well as where more support is needed.

5. CPA combines judgements about current performance and about the council’s ability to improve to form an overall assessment of each council, placing them in one of five categories: excellent, good, fair, weak or poor. These categories and the underlying scores are publicly reported by the Audit Commission, and are used as the basis for improvement planning and for targeting audit and inspection resources where they can make most impact.

6. CPA has been a significant lever for reducing the burden of regulation on councils. In 2002–03 the Commission carried out more than 400 inspections in single tier and county councils for CPA. We anticipate that our activity will reduce further. For example, by 2006–07, the volume of inspections needed for CPA, including the corporate assessments planned for that year, should fall by 68% from the 2002–03 level.

7. As a result of this more strategic approach, electoral registration is not a specific area of focus within CPA, either in the service assessments or in the corporate assessment. However, for every council, the Commission carries out a locally-based assessment of key risks, and develops a combined audit and

inspection plan which focuses on those risks. If significant issues relating to electoral registration were to be identified at the local level, these could be picked up and addressed within the audit and inspection plan. The Commission is not aware of any authority where this is currently the case.

8. Finally, the Commission's auditors are responsible for certifying money claimed by local authorities for the costs of electoral registration and elections. Grant claim certification focuses on identifying whether the money is being correctly claimed to cover costs incurred.

INTRODUCTION

9. This note describes how the Audit Commission originally approached the inspection of electoral registration services when it first took on its best value inspection responsibilities in 1999. The note then explains the current approach, which takes a more risk-based and strategic approach to regulation. The note finally sets out other ways in which the Commission currently takes account of local authorities' electoral registration responsibilities in its work.

EARLY INSPECTIONS OF ELECTORAL REGISTRATION SERVICES

10. Best value is a performance framework for local government, introduced by the Local Government Act 1999. It requires local authorities to deliver services to clear standards by the most economic, efficient and effective means available. Councils are expected to achieve continuous improvement in all their services.

11. Under the legislation and accompanying guidance, every council was expected to carry out a "best value review" of each of its services—including electoral registration services—every five years.

12. The same legislation gave powers to the Audit Commission to inspect councils' compliance with the duty to achieve continuous improvement. For the first year of best value, the Commission fulfilled this responsibility by applying broadly the same level of inspection and audit to all councils. This "one size fits all" approach was an appropriate ambition in the first year to set a baseline, and involved carrying out an inspection following each best value review in every council. Examples of early inspections of electoral registration services included:

- Ryedale District Council Electoral Services, February 2002;
- Royal Borough Kingston upon Thames Electoral Services, May 2002.¹

13. However, councils collectively carried out an over-ambitious programme of 4,500 best value reviews in the first year of best value. Early experience showed that too many of these reviews were focused on very narrow service areas, and that the biggest improvements in performance were to be gained by focusing scarce resources on reviews that covered a number of services, or focused on particular groups of users. A review of electoral registration services alone—and a subsequent inspection—is almost certainly too narrowly focused to result in benefits to the public that will outweigh the costs of the exercise.

14. Once the scale of these review programmes became clear, demands for the Commission to inspect all best value reviews were impractical. The Commission therefore carried out a major review of its approach to audit and inspection, which was published in 2001 as *Changing Gear: best value annual statement 2001*. The principles of that review have since been developed further, and have been extended to all of our work through our commitment to Strategic Regulation and to Comprehensive Performance Assessment.

STRATEGIC REGULATION

15. Strategic Regulation aims to maximise our impact on improving public services both through constructive challenge and by spreading excellent practice. On the other hand it seeks to minimise the burden of regulation by being proportionate to risk and need.

16. Strategic Regulation is based on four key principles. Firstly, it goes beyond merely providing assurance that taxpayers' money is not being misused and looks for ways of actually driving up standards in public sector organisations.

17. Secondly, it focuses on the needs of all those who use public services. The real success test for any public body is whether people have been well served and preferably, over the course of time, better served.

18. Thirdly, it concentrates scarce regulatory resources where they are most needed. We want to leave the excellent performers relatively alone so that we can focus our attention on those with a greater need to raise their game.

19. Finally, Strategic Regulation ensures that regulators themselves work much more closely together to avoid any unnecessary duplication of effort and that those being regulated see a significant part of regulation as being a productive tool for improvement.

¹ Reports summarising these inspections are available on the Audit Commission's website at www.audit-commission.gov.uk

20. Strategic Regulation, therefore, challenges the Commission to do more by scrutinising our own activities and costs, and reducing the burden of regulation on audited and inspected bodies by stopping or reshaping activities where costs outweigh benefits.

21. These principles are embodied in our Comprehensive Performance Assessment of local authorities. Comprehensive Performance Assessment

22. Following the publication of *Changing Gear*, the Audit Commission developed a new performance management framework for local government in England, Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA). The first CPAs were carried out in single tier and county councils in 2002, and were repeated in 2003 and 2004. All 238 district councils have also been assessed, concluding in December 2004. The Commission is currently consulting on proposals for a new approach to CPA from 2005.

23. CPA pulled together for the first time in a single framework the existing information on council performance that was held by councils, government departments, auditors and inspectors. It also built in a “corporate assessment” of councils’ ability to improve. CPA identifies the strengths and capabilities of the council, as well as where more support is needed.

24. The CPA framework measures the effectiveness of the whole council in terms of the way that it provides services and works in partnership. Its focus is on the leadership, systems and culture that lead to improved services, as well as on the current performance of those services.

THE ELEMENTS OF CPA

25. CPA draws on a wide range of evidence to produce assessments of “current performance” on key services (education, social care, housing, libraries and leisure, environmental services and benefits). Much of this evidence is already in the public domain, but it was brought together in one place for the first time in CPA. This evidence includes inspection judgements from the Commission and other inspectorates, auditor judgements, performance indicators and Government assessments of councils’ plans. These service assessments are combined to provide an overall assessment of the council’s current performance on services.

26. CPA also includes a judgement about the council’s ability to improve services for local people and deliver positive change for their communities. This judgement was based partly on a “self-assessment”, which required councils to answer four simple but challenging questions about their own performance:

- what is the council trying to achieve?
- how has the council set about delivering its priorities?
- what has the council achieved to date?
- in the light of what the council has learnt, what does it plan to do next?

27. The self-assessment was followed up by an external “corporate assessment”, carried out by a small team, which included an auditor and inspector as well as officers and councillors from “peer” councils. The outcome of the corporate assessment was a high-level report on the council’s strengths and weaknesses, and a judgement about its ability to improve.

28. The judgements about current performance and about the council’s ability to improve are combined to form an overall assessment of each council, placing them in one of five categories: excellent, good, fair, weak or poor. These categories and the underlying scores were publicly reported by the Audit Commission, and have been used the basis for improvement planning and for targeting audit and inspection resources where they can make most impact.

HOW THE AUDIT COMMISSION CURRENTLY TAKES ACCOUNT OF COUNCILS’ DUTIES RELATING TO ELECTORAL REGISTRATION

29. CPA has seen a significant shift away from the inspection of individual services—such as electoral registration—and towards a more strategic approach. In 2002–03 the Commission carried out more than 400 inspections in single tier and county councils for CPA. We anticipate that our activity will reduce further. For example, by 2006–07, the volume of inspections needed for CPA, including the corporate assessments planned for that year, should fall by 68% from the 2002–03 level.

30. Electoral registration is not a specific area of focus within CPA, either in the service assessments or in the corporate assessment. However, for every council, the Commission carries out a locally-based assessment of key risks, and develops a combined audit and inspection plan which focuses on those risks. If significant issues relating to electoral registration were to be identified at the local level, these would be picked up and addressed within the audit and inspection plan. The Commission is not aware of any authority where this is currently the case.

31. Finally, the Commission’s auditors are responsible for certifying money claimed by local authorities for the costs of electoral registration and elections. Grant claim certification focuses on identifying whether the money is being correctly claimed to cover costs incurred.

Supplementary Memorandum by the Department for Constitutional Affairs and the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (VOT 01(a))

1. This note responds to requests for information from the Committees on the issues of the split of responsibilities between the Department for Constitutional Affairs and the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister; the cost of individual registration; and the Citizen Information Project, on which information has been provided by the Registrar General for England and Wales.

DCA AND ODPM'S DEPARTMENTAL RESPONSIBILITIES

2. The Department for Constitutional Affairs and the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister have concurrent responsibility for the legislation and policy on elections. Since the ODPM takes responsibility for local government issues, it focuses on local government election issues, whilst the Department for Constitutional Affairs has responsibility for Parliamentary and European Parliamentary elections, as well as all issues connected with elections that affect the whole of the United Kingdom. Thus DCA are responsible for overall policy for registration and lead on individual registration, whilst ODPM take the lead on initiatives such as the Co-ordinated Online Register of Electors (CORE) which relates to locally based and maintained registers. Obviously there is read-across between the two and any need for legislation at a national level to support CORE will be taken forward jointly.

3. The Project Board for the Individual Registration Project and associated work (such as anonymous registration) is made up of officials from DCA, ODPM, Northern Ireland Office and the Electoral Commission. These bodies are also represented on a Working Group, along with representatives from the Scottish Office, Association of Electoral Administrators, Scottish Assessors Association, Electoral Office for Northern Ireland, and two electoral administrators with a specific particular interest in the topic.

4. The all-postal pilots in June 2004 are a good example of the joint-working process—DCA led the development of policy and legislation with input from ODPM colleagues. Both DCA and ODPM lawyers contributed to the drafting of the legislation, and a jointly-chaired Project Board (which also included an Electoral Commission official and other stakeholder representatives) oversaw the implementation of the legislation.

5. Other examples of DCA and ODPM working together with stakeholders include:

- An over-arching Programme Board (which also includes members from devolved administrations and territorial offices, local Government and the Electoral Commission) which oversees the strategic element of our work;
- Building on the learning from the European Parliamentary and Local Elections Pilots in June and ODPM's experience in conducting pilot schemes at local elections to take forward the modernisation strategy;
- The development of proposals for electronic registers (CORE Project);
- Accreditation of e-voting suppliers and wider e-voting initiatives;
- Referendums legislation—DCA has responsibility for the generic legislation for referendums under the Political Parties, Elections and Referendum Act 2000 whilst ODPM is responsible for regional assembly referendums both in the Regional Assemblies (Preparations) Act 2003 and the secondary legislation that underpinned the referendum in the North East on 4 November last year;
- Considering the Electoral Commission's proposals for electoral reform in its Voting for Change and Delivering Democracy? reports—the Government's responses to which were published in December 2004.

6. Whether DCA or ODPM takes the lead, officials from both Departments are involved and ministers kept informed of progress.

7. DCA and ODPM also work closely with a wide range of other Government Departments in relation to the development of electoral policy, including registration. These include the Office for National Statistics on the Citizen Information Project, and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office on the enfranchisement of Gibraltar and referendum issues.

COST ASSESSMENT OF INDIVIDUAL REGISTRATION

8. Our initial assessment—based on the Commission's recommendation—was that administration of individual registration could cost an additional £23 million in the first year and an additional £6 million every year thereafter. Any such additional costs would have to be covered by central government under the new burdens principle.

9. The costs incorporated within this estimate include:

- updating computer systems;
- providing additional training;

- increased printing and distribution costs;
- increased data collection and processing costs.

10. The current estimate does not include promotional activity, the cost of which is likely to be substantial. It also does not factor in savings from a possible move away from the current system of an annual canvass. More detailed costing work will be completed prior to any decision to move forward with individual registration.

CITIZEN INFORMATION PROJECT (NOTE PROVIDED BY LEN COOK, REGISTRAR GENERAL FOR ENGLAND AND WALES)

Vision

The vision of CIP is to provide a shared national infrastructure of basic personal data, so as to facilitate major economies, efficiencies and service improvements in the public sector.

This is to support:

- the Efficiency Review agenda, especially to improve back office services;
- departments in achieving their PSA targets and in designing further improvements to public services, including more personalized services;
- the rollout of the e-government delivery programme, which is about improved customer service, including increasing the provision and take-up of transactional services; and
- improved policy analysis, research and National Statistics.

Background

The underlying ideas about what is known as the Citizen Information Project originated from the possibility of efficiency gain across public sector services that could be generated by having an accurate database of contact information on people, which all public services could access.

A feasibility study was announced in July 2002. It was undertaken by the General Register Office (E&W) with close involvement from the Treasury between October 2002 and June 2003. The study concluded that a population register was technically, legally and organisationally possible.

The feasibility study reported to PSX(e) chaired by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury who recommended to the Prime Minister and cabinet colleagues that the project move forward to Project Definition. The Chief Secretary and the Registrar General (E&W) announced the Project Definition stage on 6 January 2004.

CIP Project Definition—1st stage

The first phase of project definition was used to test the validity of the assumptions made in the feasibility study. The project team considered alternative options in the light of the ongoing development of the Identity cards programme and explored synergies between the proposed population register and the National Identity Register (NIR) which will be established to record basic identity information should Parliament agree the Identity Cards Bill which completed its Committee Stage in the House of Commons on 27 January 2005.

The feasibility study had set out in broad terms the potential benefits that might be derived from a national population register. The first six months of this stage identified some fundamental features of such a system and identified a number of alternative options for delivering benefits from a register.

The outcome of this work was that whilst the CIP team had identified a population register would generate efficiency benefits across government many of these benefits could also be realised by the National Identity register. It was assessed that building both the NIR and a separate population register was not cost effective.

The Chief Secretary announced the acceptance of this recommendation by the government on the 28 October 2004.

The objective of CIP project definition—2nd stage

It is planned to complete the project definition stage and to report to the Chief Secretary in spring 2005, in line with the agreed timetable. It is expected that this will cover:

- ways of achieving the long term vision that the National Identity Register should be used to meet the CIP vision for improving the efficiency of public services and providing a better basis for analysis, research and National Statistics; and
- shorter term, cost effective proposals for making better use of contact information held on existing registers or covered in other developments, in ways that lead towards the long term vision.

How does CIP link to Voter Registration

In line with the CIP Vision it is important that departmental thinking around new or improved databases is “joined up”. Therefore although there is no direct relationship between CIP and Voter Registration, the Office of the Registrar General for England and Wales fully supports the Home Office Memorandum which indicates a willingness to examine how the ID Cards scheme can offer benefits to a future Voter Registration scheme. This work will include exploring the feasibility of linking the National Identity Register to electronic voter databases as there may be valuable benefits to be derived by such a link.

Supplementary Memorandum by The Electoral Commission (VOT 02(a))

INTRODUCTION TO COMMISSION RESEARCH

The Commission has a research programme to ensure that our policy recommendations and public awareness activity is evidence-based. Our public opinion research has collected several measures of public awareness of the registration process and attitudes towards it. Several of our research reports including *Voter engagement among young people* and *Voter engagement among black and minority ethnic communities*, have considered registration issues among these groups.

CURRENT RESEARCH INTO UNDER-REGISTRATION

We have recently commissioned ONS to undertake a research project to develop our understanding of the extent and nature of non-registration in Britain, together with an assessment of the operation and impact of rolling registration. This project will utilise statistical analysis comparing electoral registers with Census records (taking into account electoral eligibility), and will be supplemented by public opinion research, case studies of a selection of local authorities, and consultation with electoral administrators to understand administrative practice.

WHAT THE COMMISSION IS DOING

This project has three key elements:

1. Firstly, the Commission is currently retaining ONS to conduct a “register check” using 2001 Census data in order to produce accurate estimates for the proportion of those eligible that are actually registered to vote, as well as estimates for registration rates among key sub-groups.
2. Secondly, the Commission is conducting desk research and case studies in-house. This includes selecting local authorities (against a range of different variables) for in-depth interviews with electoral registration staff in order to explore, among other things, reasons for non-registration and the impact of rolling registration on registration rates.
3. Thirdly, the Commission has procured qualitative and quantitative public opinion work, to further measure and explore public attitudes and behaviour in relation to registration. These aspects will feed into a final report, written in-house, drawing together the research findings from all three elements of this project.

THE ONS REGISTER “CHECK”

This is perhaps the most important element of this project because this will allow the Commission to produce an accurate measure of the proportion of the people eligible that are actually registered to vote in Great Britain, as well as an accurate breakdown of registration rates among subgroups.

To produce estimates such as this it is necessary to compare population data with electoral registers from the same period. The last time a study such as this was undertaken was in 1993 by ONS’s predecessor, the Office of Population Censuses and Surveys (OPCS).

WHY ONS?

They are custodians of 2001 census data for England and Wales, the best population data available. For this reason, this project relies on ONS’s involvement.

WHAT WILL IT INVOLVE?

ONS are using data from the Census and Labour Force Survey (LFS) relating to 10,000 individuals, and matching their details with electoral registers from 2001 to produce estimates for the proportion of the population registered. The benefit of using a joint Census and LFS sample is that the LFS collects data relating to individual’s eligibility to be registered, whereas the Census does not (for example nationality and student’s residency).

WHAT ABOUT SCOTLAND?

Although ONS holds census data for England and Wales, the General Register Office in Scotland holds the Scottish Census data. ONS are currently seeking permission to use Scottish data. This relies on ONS reassuring the GRO in Scotland that this data will be treated confidentially and that the project warrants the transfer of this data. At this time, it cannot be confirmed that this project will include Scotland.

OUTPUTS

The main output from this project will be an integrated report, akin to that produced by the Commission in Northern Ireland, bringing together the following elements:

- statistics on registration rates in England, Wales (and possibly Scotland);
- in-depth studies of electoral practice and local factors effecting registration rates;
- public attitudes and awareness and reasons for non-registration.

The findings of this project will also inform Commission's future work, including policy reviews, campaigns, New Initiatives Fund (NIF) and outreach, add to the wider evidence base on the extent of non-registration, including among sub-groups and act as a benchmark against which to compare future analyses of registration.

OTHER COMMISSION RESEARCH

The Commission conducted research in Northern Ireland in 2003 to review the impact of the Electoral Fraud Act and the new registration arrangements. The research involved statistical desk research and public opinion research. It concluded that:

- In respect of the last household-based register, the registration rate of 95.5% was likely to have been an over-estimate of the actual number of eligible persons registered to vote (although it was not possible to quantify the factors that inflated the register).
- The first register produced under individual registration (December 2002) included 86% of the 18+ population. This is largely explained by the fact that the "carry forward" facility (the mechanism used under the old household system to allow names to be carried forward for one year when a registration form was not returned) no longer applies.

Certain groups—such as young people and students and those living in areas of high deprivation—were less likely to be registered and encountered specific problems with the new registration process.

Our *Making an impact* research report published in 2002 identifies and assesses the impact of the different communication methods employed by local authorities to publicise electoral issues. The report focuses on the period 1997–2002 and covers communication activities relating to a range of electoral "mechanics" including the annual canvass and rolling registration. The research draws upon the findings of a questionnaire sent to all UK local authorities, together with interviews with electoral registration officers, focus group work, consultation meetings and an analysis of communication materials.

Supplementary memorandum by the Department for Constitutional Affairs and the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (VOT 01(b))

When Nick Raynsford and I gave evidence to the Committees on the subject of Voter Registration, I offered to provide additional information on some areas and to clarify certain points. In supplying this note I have also taken the opportunity to provide further additional information which I hope the Committees find useful.

MOVING THE CLOSING DATE FOR REGISTRATION

The Committees noted the Government's intention to move the closing date for voter registration to the close of nominations. We believe that this is in the interest of engaging the maximum number of people in the electoral process. The Committees asked whether this change would require primary or secondary legislation. As the present registration provisions are contained within the Representation of the People Act 1983, I can confirm that any alteration will require primary legislation, to be brought forward when legislative time allows.

IMPACT OF ROLLING REGISTRATION

The Committees questioned whether figures are available on the number of people who register by way of rolling registration. The Government considers that rolling registration has a positive impact on registration levels and helps to offset any shortfall in registered electors that may occur at the time of the annual canvass. There are, however, no available figures on the actual number of rolling registration applications. The Electoral Commission is currently undertaking a research project on voter registration, which will include an assessment of the impact of rolling registration and is expected to produce figures on the numbers of persons that register under this method. The Commission's final report is expected to be published in the Summer 2005.

The Committees also asked if information was available about the number of applications to register by way of a declaration of local connection. Information on the number of such applications is not collected centrally, though it is thought that the number of these applications is very small.

FUNDING THE PROMOTION OF VOTER REGISTRATION

The Committees asked if there was a line in the budgets of ODPM/DCA that would allow funding of promotion and support of electoral registration, other than through the Electoral Commission. I can confirm that there are no such lines. As the Committees will be aware, the Electoral Commission has taken over from the Government responsibility at a central level for promoting electoral registration and the funding of promotional activity.

PROMOTION OF VOTER REGISTRATION

The Committees drew attention to concerns expressed by the Electoral Commission about promotion of registration by Electoral Registration Officers, and in particular its recommendation that the Government should clarify the legal position of Returning Officers in relation to funding publicity to encourage participation. The Commission has recommended that any outstanding uncertainty should be removed through explicit legislative provision. In our response to *Voting for Change*, the Government explained that we are keen to encourage participation in democratic processes and are working with the Electoral Commission to establish best practice and identify new areas for action. We do not currently believe legislation is the best way forward in this area, but will consider other mechanisms to encourage participation.

ACCESS TO ELECTORAL REGISTERS

The Committees asked for details of the planned changes to the regulations that govern access to and supply of electoral registers. A limited package of changes is being developed. They will address particular issues that have arisen following the introduction of the Representation of the People (England and Wales) (Amendment) Regulations 2002. For example, it is proposed to clarify that certain agencies and organisations, such as the Security Service, Environment Agency and Financial Services Authority may be supplied with the full register for specified purposes, and to provide for the storage of old electoral registers in public libraries and local authority archives offices. It is intended to consult on the proposed changes later this year.

INDIVIDUAL REGISTRATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND

I stated during the course of the Committees' proceedings that the carry-forward in Northern Ireland has been reinstated, meaning people are able to remain on the register for one year after they last registered to vote. To clarify, this is in fact not currently the case, but the Electoral Registration (Northern Ireland) Bill is presently in Parliament with the aim of achieving this as soon as possible.

The intention in the long-term is to abolish the annual canvass, replacing it with an audit on a more infrequent basis, freeing up time and resources in order to target under registered groups rather than those who register every year and do not move properties. This will take longer term planning, however, and so in order to alleviate the immediate pressure on the comprehensiveness of the register in Northern Ireland, the changes to the carry-forward are due to be made. The Bill was introduced into the House of Lords on 9 February and will have its second reading on 21 February. If passed, the legislation will have retrospective effect and will reinstate electors who dropped off the register at the 2004 canvass after having registered in 2003.

Christopher Leslie

Supplementary memorandum by the Electoral Commission (VOT 02(b))

REGISTRATION RESEARCH

1. Further to the note we recently sent to you following Sam Younger's oral evidence to the Committee, I am writing with some further information about the likely timetable for the public opinion research component of the Commission's current project on non-registration.

2. As our earlier note explained, the public opinion research includes quantitative (survey) and qualitative (focus group) components. It is being conducted on our behalf by MORI. Although some "topline" results are now emerging from the survey, they are in raw format and still need a good deal more analysis and interpretation before we can use them in a meaningful way. We expect to see a first draft report on the findings from MORI around the end of February; we shall need to conduct some quality review work on it, but I hope to be able to send it to you shortly afterwards.

3. We do not expect to receive ONS's report on their work comparing population and registration data, and looking at the possible extent of under-registration in Britain in 2001, until April, I am afraid.

