ORAL EVIDENCE

TAKEN BEFORE THE

SPEAKER'S COMMISSION ON DIGITAL DEMOCRACY

WEDNESDAY 3 SEPTEMBER 2014

WITH WITNESSES: NATASCHA ENGEL MP, PROFESSOR BOB WATT, KATIE
GHOSE and ANDREW COLVER

Questions 99 - 122

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Oral Evidence

Taken before the Speaker's Commission on Digital Democracy

on Wednesday 3 September 2014

Commission Members present:

John Bercow MP, Speaker (Chair)
Robert Halfon MP
Meg Hillier MP
Paul Kane
Helen Milner

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: **Natascha Engel MP, Professor bob Watt,** University of Buckingham, **Katie Ghose**, Chef Executive, Electoral Reform Society, and **Andrew Colver**, Head of Democratic Services, Rushmoor Borough Council, gave evidence.

In the absence of Mr Speaker, Robert Halfon was called to the Chair.

Q99 Chair: Thank you to everyone who has come along. I am chairing the sitting before the Speaker comes, which should be fairly soon. My name is Robert Halfon. I am one of the Commissioners, and I have Paul Kane and Helen Milner beside me. We have a number of witnesses, including Professor bob Watt, Katie Ghose from the Electoral Reform Society, and Natascha Engel, the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee. Bob, would you like to give your evidence?

Professor Watt: I interpret digital voting to be the use of digital technology, particularly in public elections, and especially elections to the legislature. These are covered, of course, by article 3 of the first protocol to the European convention on human rights. It seems to me that there is no explicit prima facie bar to using digital voting technology because the European Court of Human Rights, in the case of Mathieu-Mohin, made it clear that there was a wide margin of appreciation in voting methods. We know that in London assembly and mayoral elections, we use electronic counting methods. Sometimes, unfortunately, they do break down.

The gist of my argument is that although there is no prima facie bar, the idea of having remote digital voting by means of the internet or any other digital device is contrary to—if not the plain words, certainly the spirit—of article 3 of the first protocol. My argument is as follows. Yes, digital technology works, but a number of principles are necessary for a democratic election procedure. Today I want to focus on just two of those. There are others, but I think these are the most important.

There is a doorkeeper principle that requires that those people who want to vote are positively identified as eligible voters and can vote in accordance with the correct procedure and, secondly, there is a secrecy principle. Both those principles are important. In English law we saw the secrecy principle first brought forward in the Ballot Act 1872, which was a groundbreaking piece of legislation at the time.

First, I want to speak about the doorkeeper principle, which is translated into positive law as the crime of personation. When somebody personates, they vote, usually for a second or successive time, as somebody else. After 1872 and prior to 2000, there were very few recorded examples of the crime of people voting more than once. We have to go back into history to find some of them. There was the Finsbury, Central Division case, and then a big gap until 1998, when we saw a serious attempt at group personation. However, after 2000, with the introduction of remote, by which I mean postal, voting on demand, in accordance with the recommendations of the Howarth committee—the statutory provisions are in my PowerPoint presentation—we saw an explosion of personation. It happened most notably in the Aston and Bordesley Green wards of Birmingham—Commissioner Mawrey, the election commissioner, said it would "shame a banana republic"—in Slough and in Woking, and there is a report by the Electoral Commission that points out some cases in 2012. I should also say that at present there are allegations in Tower Hamlets, but they are before the courts so I cannot comment further.

I suggest that the evidence—I could go into this in some detail, but I will keep it short—shows that in polling station voting, personation is relatively difficult and easy to control, because if the same person appears in front of the presiding officer more than once and there are people around, they can very quickly say, "Oi! They have done it before." The presiding officer is armed with a set of statutory questions and can direct arrest if somebody is personating.

My proposal, which is borne out by the evidence, is that in remote voting, personating is relatively easy and is difficult to control. That was certainly borne out in Aston, and I recommend to the Commissioners that they look at the reports. My concern is that remote digital voting will be even more difficult to control because of personation.

Three types of personation are possible in remote digital voting. First, there is the putting of false people on to the electoral roll, which is known as "roll stuffing". It is said that that will be eliminated by part 1 of the Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013, but that remains to be seen. If it were not an offence, I might be tempted to put other members of my family who used to live in our house on to the roll just to see whether that would creep through, and I might invent some lodgers—I don't know. My point is that it has not been tried.

Vote stealing—taking somebody else's vote by pretending to be that person—should be eliminated by improved cyber-security and through the prosecution of offenders. I am sure that representatives of the industry will say that their cyber-security measures are robust. I can't challenge that, but one wonders about phishing, money stealing and, of course, the latest exhibition of photographs on the internet when one thinks about how secure electronic means are.

The real problem, however, seems to me to be vote borrowing or selling, where people conspire to give or sell their votes to other people. We have seen some evidence of that in the Scottish referendum campaign. Some people have said, "I don't give a flying monkey's"— whatever that might mean—"so you can have my vote for a pound and fivepence." If people agree do to these kinds of things, I do not see that there is any realistic way of stopping it. If everybody is happy, why should anybody try to disrupt that deal that they have been happy to do? That is my first point.

My second point relates to the secrecy principle. We have know about this for a long time—since at least 1872, and there were campaigns to ensure that voting was kept secret before that. I have set out three measures in my PowerPoint presentation, and my concern is that there are two threats to the secrecy of the vote. One comes from the state, in that for some reason or other—forgive me; I cannot see what it is—some people, particularly civil

libertarians, are very exercised about this and think that the state might have an interest in how they vote. As far as I know, members of the Socialist Workers party, the Communist party, the BNP or any other group do not make any secret of their political affiliation and their views. If the security services want to see them, they know where to go.

Although some people think that the state has a concern, I am most concerned about instances involving citizens—horizontal interference with secrecy, as it is sometimes known. Why? We know that, before 1872, employers often dismissed those few employees who had the vote but did not vote as told. Landlords were known for evicting tenants. Ministers of religion denied the sacrament to people who did not vote the right way. There have been more recent instances of political and religious groups putting pressure on people to vote or not to vote in other ways.

I am particularly concerned that when voting takes place in the home, or in a student union computer lab, for example—it may do, because nobody has said that you have to vote remotely in any particular place—and pressure can be put upon people to vote in a particular way. That could be family pressure, and I am talking not about intimidation, but friendly family pressure, which can be the most important of all. I had experience of that when I was a district council candidate and there was a disagreement between a husband and wife about whether to vote for their son. One said, "I am going to," and the other said, "Not on your life." There can be peer pressure if someone is voting in a group on a mobile phone or a tablet. There is also intimidation, and I am afraid that I have seen examples of intimidation in computer labs in two universities when students have felt intimidated to vote in a particular way.

Most importantly is the issue of vote selling. If people agree to sell their votes—one to another—outside a polling station, it is very easy for those things to take place. The problem is that if somebody agrees to sell their vote and then goes to a polling station, the vote buyer has no guarantee that the person has voted in the way that they said they would. You could give me a tenner to go to a polling station to vote for candidate x, and I may gratefully accept your tenner, despite the fact that is an offence, and go and vote for someone else. That is my problem—*[Interruption.]*

Chair: I am sorry, but I have to go and vote—not on the internet.

In the absence of the Chair, Helen Milner was called to the Chair.

Professor Watt: Away from polling station voting, secrecy of course applies, but I really wonder how that can be enforced. Is digital voting any more susceptible to bribery—treating and the giving of presents to secure a vote or undue influence—than paper postal voting? I fear it is, because it is much more immediate. One can hide one's postal voting ballot paper away until people are out of the room, or mark it in secret and sneak it into the post. When it is immediate, it is difficult. I know that my colleague, Andy, is going to say, "Well, you can have a system of only the last vote counts," but I doubt that, because it is perfectly easy to take somebody's phone or tablet away from them.

I fear I may have gone over time, but thank you very much.

Chair: Thank you very much.

I see that Mr Speaker has just arrived, so my stint in the Chair has been very brief.

Mr Speaker took the Chair.

Helen Milner: Professor Watt has just finished giving his evidence.

Chair: From the University of Buckingham, my home university. Bob with a small "b".

Professor Watt: We can have that argument outside.

Chair: No, no. Thank you very much indeed for your evidence, which I will have the opportunity to study later. We can now take questions.

Q100 Paul Kane: One of the roles of the Commission is to try to engage with the voters. We recognise that, unfortunately, there will be bad actors, but we also have to balance that with trying to get people to engage in the process. What would your recommendations be for trying to have an open, inclusive process that facilitates voting and engagement if you are not going to move down the path of electronic voting?

Professor Watt: I would want to see more polling stations. One argument that is put forward for remote digital voting is that it facilitates voting for those living with disabilities. That can be attacked, as it has been in Sweden, by ensuring that polling officials go out to see people and take votes. I have no objection to polling stations being opened in unconventional places, provided that people are available there to take the votes.

While I am sometimes cast as an opponent of digital voting, that is in fact quite incorrect. I am in favour of digital voting, but not remote digital voting. Perhaps there could be a machine that was properly supervised to allow people to vote in a number of hitherto unconventional places—supermarkets, libraries, shopping centres or whatever—provided that secrecy could be maintained and people could go into those places by themselves without pressure being put on them. The secrecy and the supervision are the important things. I accept that that is not cheap, but democracy is not cheap.

Q101 Paul Kane: Just a small follow-up. Let us imagine, hypothetically, that one has voting booths in supermarkets. The probability that you have a higher number of people participating in the voting process is something that only time will tell. The way the world seems to be increasingly moving is that people watch television and have the immediate satisfaction of being able to cast a vote for their favourite act. They want immediate gratification of the voting process.

If one does not move down the digital approach, we must bear in mind that there are inherently bad guys out there. I was unaware of the point about vote selling that you raised. I see that as a real problem because it is not easily controllable. Are there technologies that you are aware of that would facilitate a larger number of polling stations in supermarkets, for example?

Professor Watt: No, but I do not think I am the best person to inquire of; people from the industry may be able to help you there. Straying outside my own field—I am wary of that—I think it is a matter of politics and political culture. I think those things are going to be the real answers to both engagement and getting rid of the bad guys, because some countries—Norway, for example—do not have these particular problems. Here, we have a heterogeneous political culture, and if you look at the cases I have brought before you, you can see that unfortunately people from particular political cultures are more inclined to corrupt the electoral system. Commissioner Richard Mawrey, who is the judge in all these cases, makes this point in a very respectable and restrained way.

The issue is whether we can do something about political culture. My own view is that what is needed is a properly funded sociological study of disruptive technologies to see what we can do for the future. I am not wholly what one might call a first protocol, article 3 purist;

I think that things will have to change. However, I don't think we live at the moment in a political culture in which those things can change. You asked a question about engagement. If people see votes being corrupted and people being returned to power who should not be, that is going to put a lot of people off voting. That is my concern, so we need more sociology on disruptive technologies, and perhaps in 20 years' time we will be having a very different sort of debate. I know that is too long for some of my colleagues to wait, but I fear that that is the problem.

Q102 Helen Milner: May I ask for a point of clarification? You said that you thought digital remote voting would be more fraught with problems than postal voting, and I was not quite clear on your reasoning.

Professor Watt: That is, as your colleague pointed out, because of the immediacy of it. I am concerned that people will have a sudden rush and do it on the spot in a group. Being able to go away somewhere quiet and have even a few seconds of reflection may get them to record the vote in the way they wish to record the vote. I say "record the vote"; if I was being honest, I would use the words "exercise their power of governance", because I do not think democracy is just about putting a cross on a bit of paper or pressing a button; I think it is exercising one's power of governance. One can see this in the 1948 Italian general election. The Italian Communist party tried very hard to corrupt it and, in particular, the Catholic Church made it very clear that going to a polling station was, in some ways, similar to going to confession, because it was secret.

Q103 Helen Milner: That is helpful. I do not want to go down that road any further, because I think we might get negative about postal voting. I really like your idea about more polling stations and digital voting that is not necessarily home-based—for example, visits to disabled people at home with a tablet by an official person who is properly, rigorously controlled. One thing that has come through to me is the point about having to go to the right polling station. Digital voting allows you to be travelling, away for work, or visiting a sick relative; you can go to a variety of locations. However, I am slightly worried about secrecy—your point about the student computer lab, if you have a voting station at your university. How could you see to it that that secrecy was deployed appropriately?

Professor Watt: I do not think it could be, in those circumstances. I would want to have more polling stations—supervised polling stations, and they have to be supervised by public officials. I accept that some libertarians do not share my concern, and do not think like this, but in this country I do not think that the state interferes with people's votes. We have sufficient civil society and a sufficient civil service—I use "civil service" in the broadest sense—to ensure that those things are okay, but where these things take place in an informal environment, I do not think that that can be accepted.

Q104 Chair: Are there other questions to Professor Watt? If you would identify yourself for the record, that would be helpful.

David Melville: My name is David Melville. I am the general counsel for Smartmatic, and you have our machine there. I have two questions for bob—he and I know each other very well, I am pleased to say.

The first relates to the concern around vote selling. There is a genuine concern there, and one accepts that, but if we take the Estonia example of remote voting, they deal with the problem of vote selling very easily. First, they provide the capacity to vote right up to the date of the election, and it makes it very hard for you to sell your vote when you know that right

up to the moment of the election, with a pre-vote period of something like two weeks, you can change that vote. Secondly, the system provides for the capacity for the vote that has been delivered remotely to be overtaken by you turning up at the polling station, so it is the polling station vote that actually then finally gets registered.

There is a concern about vote selling, but frankly, the idea that hundreds or thousands of tablets would have to be somehow purloined and retained in order to preserve the secrecy of that vote is, I think, a bit excessive, bob.

My second point—perhaps this is a question—relates to the idea that, for voters with disabilities in particular, somehow the solution offered by technology is to send people to the disabled person's home, so that they can vote on a tablet. I am sorry, but frankly every disabled voter that I have spoken to wants to be treated in the way that I am treated when I vote. They do not want to be treated in any particularly different way, and they want a system that allows them to vote independently.

Chair: Forgive me Professor Watt, but before you answer, let me say that after this we will move on to Natascha. Thank you for joining us, Natascha—you will be our next witness. Professor Watt.

Professor Watt: You buy the last vote. Yes, you can vote freely, perhaps two or three times, since only the last vote counts in the Estonian system and in some of the systems that you operate. Then, at 5 to closing time—it's a sort of 6 o'clock swill—you go up to the person with your £10 note and you say, "Right, I will buy your last vote." That can be done.

As to the issue of disabled voters, yes, I think that disabled voters should be treated exactly equally with all other voters. Since I happen to think that we all ought to be voting in polling stations or quasi-polling stations, the real shame of this country is that we do not make proper provision for people living with disabilities anyway. As voting is an exercise of their right as a citizen, all polling places must be fully accessible to people with disabilities, because I would not like to see people with disabilities excluded by having to vote at home, or us all having to vote at home. With respect, that sounds rather like the system that Paul Robeson was raging against in one of his songs, when he said that he didn't want to vote in some special place, as some had put forward for black people. He said, "You see me down at the courthouse, because I will be voting right down there." Disabled people should be voting in the same place as all the rest of us, in a properly secure and supervised place with proper facilities.

Q105 Chair: Professor Watt, thank you very much indeed, both for your initial evidence and for responding to questions. It is very much appreciated by members of the Digital Democracy Commission and, I hope, by people who are attending and contributing, by one means or t'other, to our work.

We welcome Natascha Engel, who will be our next witness. She is well known to parliamentary colleagues, but I do not want to be inward-looking. There may be people here who do not know Natascha personally or do not know her well. I should just point out that she is the Labour Member of Parliament for North East Derbyshire and has been since 2005. She has a long-standing interest in youth policy, welfare rights and constitutional and political reform, the latter being of particular significance so far as the deliberations of this Commission are concerned.

In the previous Parliament, Natascha served on the Reform of the House of Commons Select Committee, the so-called Wright Committee, which ushered in a series of reforms to the operation of this place, which have been, it is fair to say, widely welcomed. She was selected at the start of this Parliament as the first Chair of the Backbench Business

Committee—one of the reforms spawned by the Wright Committee. She is well known for her commitment to and passion for this place. Natascha, your willingness to take part is very much appreciated. Let us hear your evidence. I am sure you will be willing to take a few questions.

Natascha Engel: In fact, it would be great if I could be led by your questions, rather than giving you too much evidence. I will keep it very brief. My understanding is that you were after views on doing House of Commons voting electronically.

Chair: Forgive me, I should have said—this is about electronic voting as a whole. If you wish to focus your remarks on the concept of electronic voting within the House, which I think I was led to believe you had particular views on, that is great. If you want to offer a view about the merits or demerits of online or electronic voting at elections by the electorate, you are welcome to do so. We are interested to hear your views across the broad campus of issues.

Natascha Engel: I will touch on everything, and then you can guide me in the direction of what it is that you are more interested in.

As Mr Speaker said, we do not want to be inward-looking by just discussing electronic voting in the House, although that is a subject that keeps raging and pops up from time to time. Some Members feel very strongly that we waste a huge amount of time walking through the Lobby. It is very archaic. It takes 15 to 20 minutes a vote. On the other hand, there are also issues about it being the only time that you really get to see people. If you had electronic voting or a way of remotely voting, there is a real fear that this place would become empty and cease to have any life, because Members would be in their constituencies and press a button at the relevant time without listening to or participating in the debate. They would not be forced to hear Members' views and, should it ever happen, change their mind. There are pros and cons, and we can discuss those if you want.

Electronic voting for elections is a really big issue, which we have looked at for a long time, certainly at constituency level. We had a period where fewer and fewer people were voting, and we were looking at how we can make it easier for people to cast a ballot. There were ideas about having monitors at supermarkets so that, on a given day in a certain period of time, people could vote while they were shopping. There were also ideas about opening polling stations on a Sunday, like they do in most European countries, rather than on a Thursday, which is a working day. Going to full postal ballots was also suggested, which would increase the voter turnout but often for the wrong reasons. People looked at lots of different things, including using digital technology to give people greater choice in voting. But we always come back to this issue: when people feel that there is something to vote about, they turn out. When people really care about what is going on, you try and stop them—they queue around the corner to get into the polling station. It is down to us to make politics not just more interesting but more relevant by talking about the things that people want us to talk about, even if we find those things unpalatable, and by giving people a proper choice when they get to the ballot box. Those things are more important but, given how much technology has advanced, we should start looking at how we use digital technology to the advantage of democracy and how we allow it to support what we want to do, so I welcome the setting up of this Commission. Your area of inquiry is going to be really exciting, because it is changing all the time.

The only other thing is security, which I am sure everyone has considered. You alluded to the security of individual votes so that we are not in the business of buying and selling votes, or hacking into accounts and all the rest of it. That is absolutely paramount. Until now, the system has been that an individual goes to a polling station and their name is marked off

with a ruler and a pen. They are given an individually numbered ballot paper that is then put into a sealed ballot box. That system is very secure, and it works, but can we do better?

I will now take questions in case I ramble off in a direction that is of no interest to anyone.

Chair: Natascha, thank you very much indeed.

Q106 Paul Kane: With regard to voting in the House, I would, like you, be outward-looking, but I would welcome your insight. You touched on it with regard to the arcane system of basically going through the right door. Do you envisage a day in the not-too-distant future when that will be electronic and you will use your respective passes to cast your vote? One could then ascertain, first, that you have voted and, secondly, how you voted, whether that was in person or remotely. I see a benefit. I am with you that this place may become empty, but basically I would like to know when you are in the Chamber and what your contributions were. I would like more transparency. If, as an elected representative, the information that you have is not relevant or up to date, I, as a learned individual interested in a particular area, could then furnish you with more information. Do you see a day in the not-too-distant future when Members of Parliament will be using electronic voting for business in the House?

Natascha Engel: At the moment, no. I don't see that happening, because this is not just one thing that gets changed; it is part of a greater process of change. We are about to do a big move out of this place. It depends on where we go and what we come back to. There are questions about how we do things and what the outcome is as a result of that, which is very important. We have a very archaic, conflictive system. It is unlike the European-style horseshoes where everybody has their individual seat and they can vote electronically because everything is identified. It is completely different. On the one hand, it is really exciting. It is a real bear pit. We are really tested, and we have to be able to think on our feet and we have to take real hostility. In that sense, it is very different. There are advantages and disadvantages in that, but if we went to electronic voting, we would not only be introducing a system of electronic voting; we would have to change the whole way that we do things.

Q107 Paul Kane: I do not disagree. I think there is certainly room for that, but it is more a point of accountability and the elected representative. I just had the privilege of sitting in, because I had a few minutes; I went to the House a few minutes ago and the place was empty. I would like to know where my elected representative is, because we just heard the bell, there, and everyone scurried off. They were not in the room to hear the debate, to actually know which door to go through with regard to which vote.

Natascha Engel: Can I turn that round, because I have this conversation quite a lot? Actually I have 72,000 constituents and they each of them have a quite different idea of what they think an MP is and what an MP ought to be. All of them want to know exactly what I am doing all the time, even if they are not that interested in it. They would much rather know than not know.

I spend, and I think a lot of Members spend, a lot of time trying to communicate with constituents about what it is they are doing at any given point; unless you put a GPS signal on us and track where we are it is not possible, because you would be spending a lot of time just communicating what you are doing, rather than doing it. You run from one meeting to another. I am not in the Chamber now because I am here talking to you, and I think that is a perfectly legitimate activity for an MP to be doing, but it means that my constituents, if they turn on the Parliament channel, cannot see me in there.

The other thing is that we all have interests, and I have particular interests which most of the time reflect what the interests of my constituents are; it is an ex-mining, semi-rural, very poor, elderly constituency. There are lots of people on benefits, so my interests are in welfare, but they are also in youth policy, which is a personal issue of mine. I do take a great interest in infant class sizes, but I do not take an interest in everything, because I cannot—I would be sitting in the Chamber all the time, just listening to debates.

There is a school of thought—there are MPs who believe—that that should be our only job. Any casework that comes in, they send it off to councillors or social services, or whatever. They do not deal with any casework at all, because they say, "I am a parliamentarian. I am a legislator. I am here; I have been sent here by the people to make and change laws." For most constituents, they do not want that. They want to have somebody who is their champion locally, who writes things about potholes. All I am saying is that the job is so wide that, actually, it is about each individual MP making those decisions about what they prioritise.

You can, though, as you know—you know how to access these things, especially now with the Parliament website and everything else—access that information about how somebody has voted and whether they were there. If they were not there, they have not voted. You can't vote in any way remotely. You can't give your vote to somebody else; so if you are not there you have not voted, and it is marked off, in exactly the same way it is in a polling station. That is published almost immediately. It is in *Hansard* almost immediately after the vote has happened. But I am guilty—not often, and I always know what I am voting on—of not knowing the exact detail of everything I am voting on, because otherwise that is all I would be doing.

Q108 Paul Kane: Just a very small point; we had the privilege very early on in this process of meeting a number of the tellers in the Division Lobbies, and I asked the inappropriate question "How often do you get it wrong? How often do you fail to identify the person accurately?" They said, "A few times," but I think using your card would help. It would help the tellers. It would streamline the process and it would give an instant result; but I do hear you.

I am also interested in looking outward. Do you share the view that the professor raised earlier, that electronic voting is fraught with difficulty? In my opinion it would be great if we had a mechanism whereby we could engage more and have greater transparency in the voting process, to get more people engaged.

Natascha Engel: I am really worried about that, yes. Look at postal voting. Anything that is short of an individual presenting themselves with their face, being recognised by somebody and having their name marked off, is less safe. That is the safest way of registering a vote. Technology is inevitable, but if you look at all the fuss that happened with the NHS and putting everything on to the digital spine, there were always problems. Everybody was worried about the security of it. What if somebody hacked into those personal medical pieces of information? But the advantages are also massive. It means that you can check people in and out of beds and you know where free beds are.

You were talking about disabilities; people with mental health problems cannot really access services at the weekend, and they might have an event at the weekend and then they go to the doctor on Monday and nobody knows anything about it. That is all solved by having all the information digitally, because it is 24 hours, seven days a week. There are definite advantages, but it is about agreeing—this is the key—that if we widen out and open access to digital technology more, we agree to take those risks. It is really about piloting it really well,

making sure that we are aware of all the problems that surround it and then taking a decision on whether that is a risk we want to take.

Q109 Chair: Natasha, you are very clear as to what some of the risks and challenges are of online voting at elections, and you have explained that with crystal clarity. Just to go back to the question, if I may, of the possibility of electronic voting here, which some people might think is inward-looking but which is quite fundamental to the way in which we operate, do we stick with the status quo or do we change? I absolutely understand your point that if people were voting electronically from outwith the Palace of Westminster, this place could become an empty barn in two minutes, and so you would not want that.

I also understand and respect the point that we have got some rather beautiful architecture and we are rather happy with our Chamber, and although there may be people occasionally who suggest a reconfiguration of the Chamber, I do not think that that is a particularly popular cause. I think that most parliamentarians are very happy with the layout of the Chamber, and there is no great momentum behind any call for change. In other words, we are not a newly created Parliament in which can be installed desks and electronic mechanisms, so it would obviously be done differently here. If there were a possibility of voting electronically in the way that Paul has suggested by Members within the House using a swipe card or some other process—well, ladies and gentlemen, I will tell you candidly, as I have said several times before, that I am in favour. That is only my view, but I would be in favour of doing that because I think the advantages in terms of avoiding wasted time are considerable. Are you broadly in favour of that, or broadly against it?

Natascha Engel: I am broadly against it, but I am not unpersuadable. One of the really interesting things is that before this, I looked at what research there was in the House about electronic voting in the House, and there is very little. We have not really looked at it. People have looked at it and just rejected it. That was a long time ago, and as far as technology is concerned we are in a different place and it is progressing so rapidly.

I really love the opportunity to meet colleagues when we vote. This is going to sound really bonkers, but before I came here I was quite obsessively organised and I had to be at certain places at certain times, and when I arrived here, I kept thinking, "I must tell so-and-so such-and-such," and I would write it down and probably forget it, but I would always bump into the person I needed to see to tell them the piece of information. I know it sounds mad, but just walking around, you find everybody and everything, you get the information to the right places and you find the information that you need. It is sort of organic. I know that does not sound very efficient or very organised, and certainly as far as you are concerned in terms of accountability, transparency and all of that, it lacks all of that. But voting is the one time where you know you can grab someone. I know for certain that at exactly 4 o'clock, there will be certain colleagues in that Lobby, and I go there early in order to get them. If I want people on the other side, I go in very early and I wait at the other end for them to come out. It is very informal, but it really works. Most business is much better done face to face and eye to eye. It takes 15 to 20 minutes every time we vote, but you have that added advantage. If we voted electronically, we would do more and more in our rooms and would come to the Chamber less.

Q110 Paul Kane: Sorry to interrupt, but you could physically go to the Chamber and physically vote; it is to speed the process up.

Natascha Engel: Oh, I see.

Paul Kane: Rather than sitting in your room and voting. You are not the first—numerous MPs to whom we have spoken have said exactly that. They like the opportunity to buttonhole whoever it is that they are after. The idea is to try to streamline the process in the House by using today's technology.

Natascha Engel: I would definitely look at it.

Q111 Chair: Thank you. Do other colleagues have questions to Natascha?

Areeq Chowdhury: Hi, I am Areeq and I am from an organisation called WebRoots Democracy, which was recently set up to campaign for online voting, in particular looking at the impacts that it can have on young people. I noticed that you said that you are interested in youth policy. Risks and security issues have been discussed, but do you think that declining turnout, leading to Governments with less legitimacy being elected, is a bigger risk than fraud? Do you think that we should accept the risk in the same way that we accept the risks of all other technological advances, such as replacing horses with cars, which have many increased risks that we accept because cars are more efficient and easier and improve everyone's lives? Could the same apply to online voting?

Natascha Engel: I think those are really important questions, but I will return to something I said earlier, which is that I do not think that the reason why young people are not voting is that they do not have the technology; young people are not voting because we are not making politics very interesting to them. If you look at the people who vote, older people are more likely to vote, so it is a chicken and egg situation. A lot of what we do here concerns older people. We spend an awful lot of time discussing pensions and little time discussing things that are closer to our hearts, such as votes at 16, which we spend no time talking about. It is chicken and egg. If we started talking about things that really matter to young people and went out and engaged with young people more—I wish we could find a way for all MPs to go to all schools all the time, which is one way in which young people do get engaged—that is what would do it.

In terms of the risk, young people are perfectly happy to go to a polling station, but I am sure that they would be much, much happier with electronic voting. If that really were a factor—I would love to try it out—and if we could say that a certain area will have electronic voting for a certain election, we could see whether young people's turnout is significantly increased and whether we definitely need to do it.

Areeq Chowdhury: Do you not think there has been a cultural shift in the way that young people live their lives? For example, young people won't be going to banks to get money out; they will be doing things through apps and on their phones. I do not think that it is the case that young people are not interested, because I think that all young people are interested in all the issues that people talk about, such as employment, jobs, housing and all the issues that politicians talk about. Young people see a big gap between politics and how they live their lives. They see Parliament as completely different from how they live their lives, and I only think that it will continue to go down that road. Something I say a lot is that we should imagine the world that someone born today will be living in in 80 years' time. It will be completely different. To argue that they would go to a polling station is ludicrous, because they will not do it for anything else. In eight years, we have gone from no Wikipedia, Facebook or Twitter to everyone relying on them. In another 18 years, it could be completely different. We could be using Google Glass or having a completely different debate.

Natascha Engel: I think that's right, but as I said before, we need to assess the risks and see whether it works. If it does work, we should definitely do it.

Q112 Chair: Thank you. We had probably better move on because we are slightly behind, although that is no crisis at all. Natascha, thank you very much indeed for your initial evidence and for responding fully to questions. It is appreciated. It is all part of the evidence base, and I think people would want to say thank you very much indeed.

Next, we have Katie Ghose, who has been waiting patiently and attending to our proceedings. She is the Chief Executive of the Electoral Reform Society and her work is well known to me. She has been in that post since 2010 and is a campaigner and barrister with a background in human rights law and immigration. She served as a commissioner on the Independent Asylum Commission, where she helped to conduct a very large-scale independent review of the UK asylum system, which led to the Government's commitment to get rid of the detention of children in immigration detention centres, which I think has been widely welcomed. She has worked as a lobbyist and campaigner for a variety of third sector organisations, including Age UK and Citizens Advice, and she spent five years as the director of the British Institute of Human Rights.

She has lectured, given seminars, conducted courses and campaigned on public affairs issues very widely, including for a range of charities and public bodies, as well as in her legal capacity. Her first book, "Beyond the Courtroom: A Lawyer's Guide to Campaigning", was published by Legal Action Group in 2005. You might also be interested to know that she is on the board of FairVote, the United States organisation campaigning for electoral reform. So she comes supremely qualified to give us the benefit of her views on electronic voting, whether in Parliament, at elections, or both.

Katie Ghose: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker.

We have already got into a fascinating discussion about political culture and modernisation. When we are discussing digital tools of any type, or electronic voting, I always feel that we must look at the wider context in which those things sit. I would make three points. First, we now have a yawning gap between people and party politics, of which turnout is just one measure. Secondly, individual voter registration is being introduced; there is a massive change in registration, with online registration currently being rolled out and national insurance cards now being a criterion. That must be looked at. Thirdly—we have begun to discuss this—what is the political culture we want and what are the tools that help us to get there? How does electronic voting help with that, or not?

I did not catch the name of the gentleman from WebRoots.

Areeq Chowdhury: It is Areeq.

Katie Ghose: Thank you. You really hit the nail on the head for me. People need to feel that voting is worth while, otherwise they will not do it. When they do, as we are seeing in Scotland, there is an enormously high turnout predicted, because people feel that the stakes are so high that they are going to go and vote. Some time ago in Scotland, I sat in on a discussion group of established non-voters—people who never vote in public elections—and when asked whether they were going to vote in the referendum the answer from every single one of them was yes. That just shows what can make the difference. We also need to modernise the tools, the opportunities and the access. In other words, we have to do both: it has to be worth while, but we can also make a bit of a difference by modernising the tools. We have to look at electronic voting in that context.

The Electoral Reform Society has not recently done any research of its own, but I thought I would just share with you very briefly some pilot studies from elsewhere in the world. In England in 2003 there were some local pilots, which were an attempt to tackle the woefully low turnout in local elections, but they did not really make any difference to turnout. That is what is found time and again from research in using electronic voting in public elections.

There were some interesting trials in Norway in 2011 and 2013, but they were not pursued because of security concerns. I know that you have already taken evidence about Estonia, so I need not go into that, but it is really interesting and still being used. There is a feature that enables you to change your vote right up until the last minute, which has been acknowledged by many as quite a good thing. There have been pilots in Switzerland, and also in some Canadian municipalities in 2010. There was some success, but also some bugs in the system—one municipality had to extend its poll by another day.

There were pilots in Finland some years ago that were broadly successful, although a portion of voters found that their votes were not registered. The Indian state of Gujarat is currently experimenting with internet voting. So there is a little bit of evidence out there, and I am sure that participants here would have examples and case studies to share as well. It is worth looking at that picture.

Some of the benefits are obvious, in terms of it being cheaper. It has already been mentioned that some disabled people with certain disabilities may welcome it as an additional opportunity, but we have to be very cautious not to make generalisations about that.

There are real, significant disadvantages as well. Security issues and hacking have been mentioned. Secrecy is the obvious one. The main problem, looking at the evidence, is that it has not been established to significantly increase turnout, unlike postal voting, which has been established to significantly increase turnout. If we are trying to at least stem the current tide, which is the downward trend of engagement—we are trying to do something to bring it up—I am not sure that this has been proven to be the answer.

The Electoral Reform Society's policy for some time—although it is not something we have looked at recently—is to oppose the wholesale, blanket adoption of electronic voting for elections, but to say we should absolutely be looking at pilots and experiments. The Electoral Commission recently gave quite a broad range of examples, whether it's the ability to register on the same day, using any polling station in your constituency, advanced voting, or, even more radical options such as e-voting—we plan to look at a variety of options. It was good to see that openness to looking at different parts of it. As I say, the evidence on turnout has not been good.

One of the things we need to think about is what it is we are trying to do. There are so many examples with social media, Facebook and "I've voted, have you?", on how you trigger people. The real question is, just by introducing another means of voting, is that really the way to get more people to engage? There are much bigger issues here than just introducing another means of voting. That is a very live issue. In a nutshell, that is where we are with public elections.

The House of Commons seems much more obvious. We have national political bodies in Wales and Scotland that are using electronic voting; it can be done in the Chamber. All these things can be overcome. I hear what is being said; that was a fascinating point about political culture and how, when you try to introduce modernisations, you could damage quite a positive part of the culture. On the other hand, a lot of people would say, "Can't you find other forums and ways to be having those conversations?" None the less, I take that on board. That is what we are talking about: the political culture of an organisation and how it can be much more engaging. You might introduce something and it might have the effect you didn't want, but I would have thought it would be pretty obvious. There are some good examples out there—the European Parliament as well.

An interesting cultural thing is the independent-minded nature of MPs. For a lot of the public there is a move towards wanting MPs to be more independent-minded and follow the party line less. There is a strong public perception that perhaps politics has become quite professionalised. There is some evidence, where it is a bit less public and you have electronic

voting, that people are perhaps a little less susceptible to the Whips and are more able to feel, "I can be independent-minded." That is a fascinating feature of electronic voting in political institutions, and perhaps something that can be considered. I am sure people would have strong views on either side.

That is a brief summary, but I hope it is helpful. We are passionate about bringing our politics into the 21st century. We are always for thinking about what the modernisations are and what things could make an improvement, but that does not mean we would look at something like electronic voting in isolation and say, "Let's go for that", just because it is a modernisation. We want to look at the evidence. If we were having a wider discussion about other digital means of inclusion, there is some fascinating evidence out there. There are all kinds of things that could and should be done. Again, ending where you started, this stuff has to match where people are at. That means not just people now, but what my six-year-old is going to be like when she comes into the political world. That is the lens through which we should look at this.

Chair: Katie, thank you very much indeed, for both the overview and your detailed treatment of some of the issues, which have been extremely helpful. Do colleagues have questions for Katie?

Q113 Helen Milner: Obviously this session is about electronic voting, but I want to ask you about the political culture and modernisation point you made. If, actually, the real issue is engagement and participation—the Commissioners have been out on the road meeting people, and I have met a lot of people who have never voted or are not going to vote any more, so this is a real issue that we need to address—how do you think that digitising parts of what already happens, or introducing new things, could help with that engagement and participation?

Katie Ghose: Broadly, it can help if it makes something more relevant and more local, because all of us feel more connected if it is something that is actually affecting us in an immediate way. That might be something that is physically on my street, or it might be immediate because I really care about it. It could be a global issue that I am passionate about, or it could be the state of my street, which is actually what a lot of people feel most strongly about. If digitisation can bring that alive, whether through a visual or something on my phone—at the moment, it is all mobile phone apps and all that kind of world. If you are making something come alive and feel relevant, and it is something that somebody could actually have their view heard on, and feel that they are heard, which is another big thing now—people just feel, "I'm not listened to and politicians aren't listening to me"—I think that is where digitisation can make a difference, really.

Jonathan Elmer: My name is Jonathan Elmer. I am a director of an organisation called Democratise. We have constructed a website called *Digital Democracy* and it addresses, I think, some of the key issues that you have just been talking about: one of the principal reasons for lack of engagement is that people feel that their voice does not really make a difference. But they are voting for a representative, by and large, so our system tries to inject a level of participative democracy into this approach. People can identify an issue that they think is important in their community, and essentially pin it to a map, and then ask other people in their geographic community to say whether they support or oppose it. This is not something that attempts to replace in any way the formal structures of democracy that exist; it complements them. That means that the concerns in relation to legitimacy and duplication are not so high, because the system is all about enabling local elected representatives to get a feel for what people are saying is the key issue in their community. It is spatially interrogable as well, so the system will tell MPs how many people have voted for or against something in

their specific constituency, and it gives them much more relevant and meaningful data. It enables MPs actually to work alongside people.

I feel that is the way forward, because people can say that they are bothered about a trivial matter, such as an accident black spot or too much dog dirt on a street. If people feel they can make a difference on those sorts of local issues, I think the next step, if they feel they get that positive feedback, is for them perhaps to try to take on something much more significant.

Katie Ghose: Yes, I think you have kind of identified the future, in a way, which is a more participative and more deliberative democracy, with citizens and politicians trying to thrash things out together. We saw an example of that in Ireland recently, with the Irish constitutional convention. We certainly support more of that. As you say, it is not replacing some of the formal representative stuff; it is very much alongside it, and digital means are vital to that.

Although I do not have time to go into them now, there are lots of examples that I am happy to provide to the Commission of all kinds of citizens' assemblies that have had a physical presence and also a rich online set of engagement tools. There are lots of good examples out there. We could go away from voting and say that voting is one political act, and that if you really wanted a vibrant democracy in which everybody had their say—every hour of the day, or every day of the week—you would be able to use digital in all sorts of exciting ways to achieve that.

Q114 Meg Hillier: Just two quick questions. First, you ran through a list of countries that are experimenting with people e-voting. Is there anywhere that you think is the pinnacle? Has the Electoral Reform Society done any analysis of those models, because I know that they are very small scale?

Secondly, going more internal, you talked about advantages to the political culture of changing to voting digitally. You talked about independence of MPs, so I wondered what your evidence was for that and what advantages you thought there might be to weigh against some of the disadvantages that Natasha highlighted, were we to start voting electronically.

Katie Ghose: No, we haven't got any more detailed analysis on the case studies, although others here might do. I don't have it to hand, but I know there has been some research into where e-voting is used in legislatures, and I think there is something there about behaviour in terms of people feeling more independent-minded. Perhaps that is something we could find for you.

Q115 Meg Hillier: Can I just wind back a little on that, because e-voting can mean lots of things? It can mean sitting in a seat with all the people around you and voting, it can mean walking through a lobby and voting, or it can be sitting remotely—in one country, you can vote remotely, but only in certain situations, such as if you are on maternity leave or have had a major operation. Mostly you have to be on site, but being on site in an office, as Natascha said, is different from being on site with a physical presence. I don't know whether you are making a distinction between types of e-voting.

Katie Ghose: Yes, I would absolutely make a distinction, and I am more familiar with the kind of on-site, at-desk ones that we have in other domestic legislatures.

Natascha Engel: I've got a slight bee in my bonnet about some forms of electronic engagement. My Committee deals with e-petitions—when they reach 100,000 signatures, they come to the Backbench Business Committee to be allocated time for debate. Sometimes it feels like a person signs an e-petition, which is quite an easy act, and then feels, "I've done

my bit," and that's it. It's not passive-aggressive, but it's not really engagement. It feels like engagement, because they have done something, and sometimes when we talk about digital engagement we are using technology to engage people better, but I don't think we are very good at defining what we mean by "engagement".

I love having proper e-mail correspondence with people and saying, "If you do that, the consequences are this," and then they go, "Oh my goodness." That is proper engagement, but sometimes it can feel like, "You are my MP. We pay for you. You do as I say." That is the other side of the coin that you were talking about, which then makes a lot of elected representatives go and hide, rather than—

Jonathan Elmer: There's a very simple solution to that—turn it on its head. The way our system works is that you may well get lots of people sending you an e-mail about a specific issue that is identified in a community, but if you could send one response that was automatically cascaded to all the people who have expressed a concern about that issue, you would end up saving yourself a lot of time, and you would effectively communicate and engage in a meaningful discussion with all those people at the same time.

Katie Ghose: What is interesting is reflecting on whether the era of the sacks of postcards was qualitatively any different from the kind of "clicktivism" age that we are in. However, I have a lot of sympathy for what you say and I think that, for any of us who campaign, when we think about our members and supporters, often there is a sort of journey that they go on. So they might do something that is relatively low cost and simple to them, but then you might hope that over time there might be an opportunity for them to have quite a rich discussion with an elected representative.

This is quite a complicated area, really. I just think we need to be a little careful not to confuse where something just happens to be digital and saying, "It's because it's digital," when it might be just as frustrating if it was a physical thing. Goodness, I mean campaigning is changing all the time and digital technologies are changing all the time, so I suppose it is how we get that sort of happy balance so that we can get a more vibrant, engaged democracy using those tools in the best way.

Q116 Chair: Katie, thank you.

I think we should now proceed to our last witness. Before asking him to give his evidence, I must say has been supremely patient and very attentive to our proceedings, so I think we are already grateful to Andrew Colver, because he has turned up not just for his own session, but for the entirety.

Andrew Colver OBE is head of democratic services at Rushmoor borough council. He has over 20 years' experience in running elections, during which period he has made contributions to the electoral modernisation programme by running internet voting pilot schemes in 2003 and 2007, and an early-voting pilot in 2006 using an e-enabled electoral register. Interestingly, he also implemented a UK-wide scheme in 2010 and 2011 to facilitate voting for military personnel serving in Afghanistan, so he knows a lot about voting and, no surprises, that's why we asked him to give evidence.

Andrew, we would be interested to hear what you have to say.

Andrew Colver: Good afternoon; thank you for the invitation. Just one thing: 2010 is the only election I have been involved with when I have had to deal with an ash cloud, but we got through it in the end.

My evidence is drawn from our experience at Rushmoor running a number of pilots. My particular focus will be on looking at things more from the perspective of electors and my role in the administration of elections. By way of background, we had a huge dip in turnout in our

public elections right after the 1997 general election—we were well below 30%. Driven by our elected councillors, we set up our own little group commission to look at improving engagement with electors.

I think it was always recognised at the time that it was a two-pronged attack: looking at the systems we deliver; and also, from electors' perspective, how they engaged. As an anecdote, one of the queries that we get time after time from electors in the run-up to elections is, "I don't know enough about the candidates in front of me." That would not have been a thing in the past. I hardly ever see any banners, posters or anything in my area now; 20 years ago, they were on every street corner and in lots and lots of houses. I think that is definitely an issue.

We also felt, however, that we needed to look at the electoral system. I am a believer in forms of e-enabled elections. We established a number of principles. One thing that I like to do in my working life is always to try to look at things from the customer's perspective. For electors, it is saying, "What is the way to have a voting system that suits me?" We felt that we needed to look at choices for electors and to try to emulate existing systems as far as possible, while also, in our particular case—you mentioned military voters—assisting hard-to-reach groups. In my area, we have 8,000 military personnel and their dependants, so that is a huge issue for us in terms of engagement. Yes, there is very much an issue around the registration process, but in terms of voting, it is very difficult to get them involved.

I must say that throughout the work, I have had considerable support from elected members from all parts of the political spectrum, but we felt that we needed to give something to electors that was above and beyond what they do now. We looked at e-enabled elections within polling stations but, to a degree, from an elector's point of view, you still need to go to the polling station. One thing that I often find with electors is that they say that accessibility is a real issue. One of the most common queries I got in the run-up to the 2010 general election was people saying, "It's the mobile society. I'm not going to be around on election day; I get called away immediately on business both home and abroad. I want to vote, but I can't vote." To me, that has been an important issue.

In terms of the pilots we ran, in 2003 and 2007, we ran remote pilots for internet voting. This worked on the principle that people had to apply to do it, in a similar way to the postal vote, but they were then given a week to cast their vote over the internet. It was really interesting. For the first one, in 2003, the registration process took place online, and 3,300 people registered to vote online, 85% of whom voted. There was really strong support—over 90%—for the channel.

In 2007, it was slightly different. We got a much higher rate of registration: 6,700 people registered, out of a total electorate of about 60,000, About 3,900 people voted out of that 6,700. Interestingly, with the second one, people applied to register using a piece of paper, so they had to sign it and put their credentials down. We had 600 calls to our helpline, most of which were, "I've forgotten my password. Can you tell me what it is?" It was quite an interesting issue. One point that I would make is that if you are going to go down the digital route, you either go down it or you don't—don't mix it with the paper route, because that is a recipe for failure and waste.

The results on the face of it—Katie's point was right—show that there was not a huge impact on turnout, but you need to unpick some of those results in a little more detail. In both cases, between 15% and 20% of the total votes cast were done over the internet. There was also some evidence from our survey work that some electors voted who would not normally vote. There was also a wide spectrum of electors from the online surveys, so it was not just from a particular part of the population: 18-year-olds were voting; and one person over 100 voted over the internet. That just shows that it penetrated to a wide spectrum of people.

The other key point in moving a programme forward is that each of these things were one-offs. One of the things that I frequently heard afterwards was that people were confused about that. The year after people said, "Will I be able to vote in that way again?" They couldn't do that. Any programme moving forward has to be planned over probably five or 10 years to move to a slightly different system. Awareness raising was really important as well. We took that on board because penetration was quite difficult. For internet voting we produced postcards reading "Ready, Aim, Vote"—that was just for the military— "iVote", "Voting just got easier" and things like that.

I recognise that modernising elections through technology will not be a panacea, but it would be of real assistance to a proportion of the electorate. Our current evidence would suggest that there is increasing interest in this. I would refer to three things. We do some ongoing survey work in Rushmoor polling stations and each year the number of people who show an interest in wanting to vote on the internet increases. This tends to be among people who religiously go to polling stations to vote, so if there is an interest there, I would reckon that there would be interest within the wider community as well. Secondly, individual elector registration has been mentioned. We are well over a million requests for registration over the internet, which shows that people are much keener to use the internet than they would have been in times past. In my local authority, as in others, online engagement in all sorts of services is much greater now than it was.

The pilot that we did in 2006 was quite interesting for me. We allowed early voting over the weekend before the Thursday of the election. Basically, it was ballot on demand: you turn up and you can vote. We did this thing called "Shop 'n' Vote". People were talking earlier about voting in supermarkets, but our elected members did not want to use supermarkets because the supermarket you use might affect how you vote, so we did it in shopping malls over a weekend in our main shopping centre. There were two things about that. The take-up was not great at all, but the vast majority of people who used it said, "I would not have bothered to vote otherwise. I just happened to be here. You were here, I came in and I voted." In that respect, there is something there.

That system used an online register, so basically, wherever they turned up, we were able to tick that person off. It was run by public officials. Also, the politicians were there as tellers as well, so there was an additional element of scrutiny in the process. That is something that I think, were it to be done over a period of time, we could begin to see a few benefits from. Just look at the history of things like internet banking: lots and lots of people do it now but, if you go back five years, they didn't. You then begin to get a good database.

I recognise that there is a huge issue around security. I would say that one of the things we cannot really get round is the issue of coercion. That, for me, is a bit of a problem. I think the move towards biometrics and other types of recognition start to take us forward, but clearly there are issues and challenges that we still need to meet. I am not going to sit here and say, "We should be doing e-voting from tomorrow," but I do believe that we need a plan over a period of about 10 years to move the agenda forward.

I have been working on elections for well over 20 years and have seen engagement fall quite markedly, not just in election processes. Not as many people now turn out at our council meetings. We get a lot more stuff online now, but that direct engagement is not there. If you asked me whether I would do it again, I think I would, but within a planned environment.

I don't think I need to add any more, but I would say, in terms of the pressures you describe, Rushmoor is in north-east Hampshire. We have a fairly mobile society and lots of communities in and out. We have areas of deprivation, but we have some affluent areas as well. It's a small part of the country; it's not Birmingham or the south-west. It might work for us, but it might not work everywhere else.

In the absence of Mr Speaker, Helen Milner was called to the Chair.

Chair: Thank you, Andrew. I want to add that we did get a copy of your paper before the meeting. Are there any questions?

Q117 Meg Hillier: I was particularly interested in your point about a one-off not working, based on your 20 years' experience. You talk about a 10-year plan, but how many times do you think we would need to do this? Internet banking is an interesting analogy, and it is true in one sense, but you don't vote as often as you might pop online to move money out of your bank account. Do you have a guesstimate of how long it would take to embed that in the British public?

Andrew Colver: I think it would take four to five years. One thing we do now that does have an impact is that we religiously send out an e-mail to those electors for whom we have an e-mail address one to two days before the election. The feedback we get on our website is, "I'm really glad you sent me an e-mail because I would have forgotten to vote." That might not matter in a general election, but I think it has an impact in a local election.

Q118 Paul Kane: We learned earlier that fraud is potentially rife in this area. How do you go about mitigating fraud?

Andrew Colver: It's difficult; there is no panacea. I will come back to the question, but one of the concerns I have with elections is the postal vote system, which bob mentioned earlier. I have issues with the postal vote system on two grounds: first, you have no control over it, and there are worries around it even in my sort of area; and, secondly, a lot of mistakes are made as well. We have to reject a number of ballots because they are filled in inaccurately. I, as an administrator, look at it sometimes and think, "Blimey. This is a bit complicated"—that's me, and I should know what I'm doing. That is one of the issues with postal votes.

On fraud, can I just check exactly what form of fraud are you thinking about?

Q119 Paul Kane: How you reduce electronic voting fraud by identifying the legitimate person online, as they might pretend to be someone else.

Andrew Colver: The work we have done so far has been very much around the self-generated. If you are the person you say you are, you can generate passwords and we will send out stuff to individuals. I am not sure how robust that is, and if we're going to do it, I think we need to start moving to something that is more about biometrics—whether it is eyes, touch or some other form that means we are much more sure that the person casting that vote is the one on the register.

Q120 Paul Kane: That would effectively be like the passport. We are all familiar now with the little chip in the passport and standing in front of the camera, and then bingo, we're there. I suppose, in theory, that the camera on a PC or laptop could use that same technology, but that does not necessarily mean the citizen is going to become more engaged. They might not do anything.

Can I ask a slightly different question? We have had a number of these sessions, taking evidence from multiple people. One of the issues that came up previously was about trying to make the political process more relevant to citizens, and one idea was having debating

chambers online—not necessarily with MPs, but with individuals who had a learned opinion on a particular topic. They would form a forum—whether it was a yes or a no forum—to exchange ideas among themselves. Then we could, effectively, have an online vote among those people who were interested, who would be almost a sample of the real world, although more engaged. Have you as a council done anything to try to have a microcosm—you mentioned that your council area is a microcosm of the UK, GB or whatever—with online forums to get debates going?

Andrew Colver: The short answer to your question is no. One comment I would make, which does not really relate to the online forum, is that this is very much driven by the issue. I have two examples of that. First, in the area where I work is a place called Farnborough airport. It changed from a military airport to a civilian airport. There was lots of input on that from the local community; it was a really high-profile issue.

One thing we did try was a voluntary referendum, which we held about 15 or 20 years ago, to change the name of the borough. We held a referendum on the same day as an election. I have to say that I thought it would generate quite a lot of interest, but it didn't—we had exactly the same turnout as we did at the election. Most of the people voted, but most also thought it was a waste of time. I suppose the point I am making is that I cannot answer your question, but my evidence would be that this is very much issue-driven.

Q121 Chair: Bob, did you have a quick question?

Professor Watt: Yes. You said you didn't have any idea of one type of fraud rate—the personation rate. Do you have any idea of the coercion rate?

Andrew Colver: No, I haven't, but I recognise that that is a risk.

Q122 Chair: Any more questions from the floor?

Steve Schneider: I am Steve Schneider, from the University of Surrey. Following on from that question about fraud, do you have any indication—on the technical side, rather than just from the individual voter's side—of whether there is any fraud in terms of attacking or hacking the system?

Andrew Colver: I don't have the evidence, but I know there were a number of attacks on the system both times we tried remote internet voting. There were also attempts to deny the service, but I can't quantify that in any way.

Steve Schneider: Okay, but they were successfully countered.

Andrew Colver: Yes.

Chair: Thank you very much. Are there any more questions? I am not trying to close things down—although I am, obviously. We will now move on to the digital marketplace session.