Introduction

1. The Electoral Commission welcomes the opportunity to submit written evidence to the Committee’s inquiry into voter engagement in the UK. As well as setting out the work of the Commission in this area, we have also tried to summarise some of the evidence that we are aware of that the Committee may find helpful to explore in more detail and have provided this in an annex.

2. This evidence sets out the Commission’s role both in general terms and how that relates to work on participation and turnout. It then summarises the relevant information and data that the Commission has collated through its work. Finally, we note what we consider to be important next steps in helping to address the subject of voter engagement.

The Commission’s approach to voter participation

3. Declining turnout is a serious cause for concern for anyone who cares about the health of our democracy. It is also important when considering levels of turnout in the UK to understand what is happening in other countries. In the last 15-20 years, similar democracies have all seen declines in turnout at their General elections.

4. We recognise that the reasons for declining turnout are complex and not easily solved. People’s identification with political parties and their policies, attitudes towards politicians and the closeness of the contest at a specific election — and a range of other factors, some of which may not be directly related to politics itself - are all likely to have a significant impact on turnout. The Commission is therefore committed to supporting all those who have a role to play in changing people’s engagement with politics, and to doing what we can ourselves to increase participate in elections.

5. The Commission’s enacting legislation (The Political Parties, Elections and Referendums (PPERA) Act 2000) gave us the powers to, “carry out programmes of education or information to promote public awareness of the democratic process” and to “make grants to other persons or bodies for the purpose of enabling them to carry out such programmes”. Until 2007 the Commission delivered both its own programmes to increase voter turnout and engagement and funded a range of voluntary and other providers to deliver such work, with a particular focus on encouraging under-engaged groups to vote. Since 2007 the Commission’s work has focussed on increasing voter registration, providing information to help people vote and improving the regulation necessary to foster public confidence in political parties and their funding.

6. This shift in focus was in line with the conclusions of the Committee on Standards in Public Life (CSPL)’s report in 2007, which said that pursuing the aims of increasing voter turnout and democratic participation was not the most effective use of our limited resources. The Speaker’s Committee supported this change, and both the Government and Opposition at the time said that they agreed with this shift.

7. As a result, since 2007 the Commission has run public awareness campaigns ahead of major polls to increase:

   - the number of eligible people registered to vote (we target those groups we know from our research are less likely to be registered); and
   - awareness and understanding of how to vote (we will only run campaigns if we think there is a need for them e.g. a new set of elections or voting system people are not familiar with).
8. Seven years on from the establishment of a consensus about the Commission’s role forged in the light of the CSPL report, we continue to welcome opportunities such as those presented through this inquiry, to ensure that the Commission reflects Parliament’s current consensus about its most appropriate role and focus for the future.

9. Meanwhile, as part of the Commission’s Corporate Plan that we recently submitted to the Speaker’s Committee we said that over the next 5 years we will continue to take seriously the implications of declining/low turnout and increase the work that we do to support organisations and individuals best placed to tackle public disengagement.

10. This work includes producing high quality user tested marketing resources on our aboutmyvote.co.uk website which can be downloaded free of charge by anyone who wishes to. We actively encourage groups interested in democratic engagement to use these resources, including political parties, and are in the process of strengthening a wide range of partnerships across the public, private and civic society sectors with organisations including the NUS, Bite the Ballot, and Citizens UK to support the introduction of Individual Electoral Registration (IER) this summer. A new set of resources designed specifically for IER, and extensively user tested, are now on the Commission’s website.

11. The introduction of IER represents the biggest change to registration in Great Britain since the introduction of the universal franchise. IER provides a tremendous opportunity to increase every voter’s personal sense of ownership of their right to vote, introduces online registration for the first time and closes down opportunities for false identities to join the register. However, we are very aware of the risks inherent in such a significant undertaking and are therefore delivering a considerable programme of work with a range of local and national partners to help ensure that IER is introduced successfully.

12. The Commission is planning a major public awareness campaign to coincide with the introduction of IER targeted at those most likely not to be automatically transferred to the new system and groups we know aren’t registered already. We will also be carefully reviewing the success of our own campaign, and the initiatives others have been undertaking to encourage registration, before finalising our public awareness plans for the 2015 UK General Election. We are keen to learn from and share what most effectively engages the public so that existing good practice is spread as widely as possible.

13. The Commission sets performance standards for Electoral Registration Officers (EROs) and Returning Officers (ROs), and provides them with guidance and resources to support their local public engagement. We have provided EROs with extensive support ahead of the introduction of IER, and in the next month we will publish a review of ERO’s performance against our standards. Our analysis of this review has been encouraging so far. The standards seek to ensure that all EROs have an effective public engagement strategy in place that reflects their particular local demographics and ensures as many people as possible are registered under the new system.

14. In addition, as well as tracking some high level indicators of voter engagement and confidence in the voting system on an annual basis, we also help to ensure that useful work continues to be carried out by academics and other organisations through letters of support for funding and other in-kind assistance.

15. The Committee will no doubt receive a wide range of information and data through submissions to this inquiry. We have therefore limited the rest of this submission to focus on recent evidence gathered through the Commission’s own research, and reviews of aspect of how elections are run, including our evaluation of electoral modernisation pilots from the 2000s.
Our work and existing evidence

Registration

16. Motivation to register and motivation to vote are clearly linked. As a result any consideration of levels of turnout should take place in the context of what is known about levels of registration.

17. Since 2004 the Commission has taken the lead on research into the electoral registers and our findings on levels of registration illustrate a similar pattern to that of turnout.

18. The number of entries on the registers is higher than ever, with approximately 47.8 million entries on Great Britain’s registers in December 2012. Despite this, our research indicates that registration levels have not kept pace with a rising population. As the chart illustrates, the parliamentary registers increased in size by 6% between 1991 and 2012 while, in the same period, the estimated 16+ population has increased by around 12%.

19. Our previous research suggests that the completeness of the registers was at its highest in the 1950s and 1960s when the registers were found to be 96% complete at the end of the canvass period.\(^1\)

20. Completeness was declining by the early 1980s\(^2\), but post-canvass registration levels are likely to have stabilised at around 91-93% during the 1990s. Despite a shortage of research during the period 1998-2004, there were grounds to suggest that registration levels fell again in this period. The Commission had previously speculated that completeness might have stabilised since 2006 but not have recovered the losses of the preceding years. Our most recent research for Great Britain supported this assessment – it found the post-canvass registration level for December 2010 to be approximately 85-87%.

21. Some of the factors influencing registration levels are not directly related to engagement; for example people who move home more frequently are less likely to be registered at a given point in time. However, lower turnout among young age groups is a pattern also seen in levels of registration. All of our research has found significantly lower levels of registration among the young. For example, in April 2011 we estimate that 55-56% of 17–24 year olds were registered at their current address. In contrast, 94% of the 65+ age group were found to be registered.
22. This pattern is also borne out in Northern Ireland where (because electors provide their date of birth when registering) it is possible to calculate the age profile of the registered electorate. At the conclusion of the most recent canvass in December 2013, 75% of people aged 29 or under are estimated to have been registered but approximately 98% of those aged 50 or over were on the register.

23. In our public opinion surveys we ask whether the respondent is registered and, if not, why not. Commonly people will say they are not registered for circumstantial reasons (e.g. ‘I have just moved house or haven’t got round to it’), more than for attitudinal reasons (e.g. I don’t want to or I couldn’t be bothered). However it is likely that these answers are affected by a strong research effect - people being asked about their attitude to something (registering to vote) that is clearly considered a ‘good’ thing to do or have done).

24. This balance of response is mirrored in responses to questions on turnout. In our survey after the 2010 general election when we asked those who said they did not vote, why not, around a third cited circumstantial reasons (e.g. ‘I was too busy’). We also discovered that a sizeable number of respondents to that survey gave a reason more related to disinterest in politics or the perceived lack of importance of elections.

25. High quality research into the registers in order to identify the groups that are less likely to be registered, and to identify any potential barriers to registration remains a priority for us. This is particularly important given the forthcoming shift from household to individual electoral registration (IER). Our programme of research includes a study to be published in July 2014 into the accuracy and completeness of the final registers to be compiled under household registration and a follow up study on the first registers under full IER. The latter will be published in July 2016 or 2017, depending on the end date for IER transition.

**Overseas electors**

26. The Committee has expressed a specific interest in overseas electors and it is clear that many British citizens living in other countries who are eligible to register to vote are not registered. There have been two reliable estimates of the number of British nationals living abroad produced in recent years. The Institute for Public Policy Research estimated the total number of British citizens living overseas in 2006 at 5.5 million; a World Bank study put it at 4.7 million in 2011. Yet there were only 19,245 registered overseas electors in December 2012. While it is not possible to determine how many expatriates have been on an electoral register in the last fifteen years, and would therefore be eligible to vote, there is clearly a very big gap between the number eligible and those actually registered.

27. The Commission has launched a registration campaign aimed at overseas electors, who will be able to vote for the first time since 2011, ahead of the European Elections in May. Our campaign involves a significant online element, which allows quite precise targeting of expatriates and people expressing an interest in UK politics, as well as radio adverts on stations we know are listened to by this often dispersed and difficult to locate community. We have also been working closely with the Foreign and Commonwealth (FCO) and others with overseas links, including the political parties, to use their networks to raise awareness. The target for the number overseas voter registration forms downloaded as a result of the campaign is more than three times the equivalent campaign in 2009.

28. The Commission is also pleased that two initiatives we proposed to make it easier for overseas voters to cast their ballot will soon take effect. First, the Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2012 extended the electoral timetable from 17 to 25 working days, this enabling more time for the despatch and return of postal votes from overseas. Further, IER will simplify the process for those registering to vote overseas since applicants will no longer be required to have their applications attested by another British citizen. Once the transition to IER
begins, overseas electors will also, along with the domestic electorate, be able to register to vote online and this will hopefully result in an increase in the number registered.

Voter awareness

29. The Commission raised concerns following the Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) elections in November 2012 at which only 15.1% of the electorate turned out to vote.

30. In our analysis of the PCC polls we were clear that low public awareness was an important contributing factor to what was a historically low turnout. We believe that the low level of public awareness about the elections, particularly about the candidates, was compounded by the decision not to issue every household with an information booklet in advance of the elections.

31. When we asked, in a survey why people had not voted in the PCC elections, 37% of respondents cited a lack of awareness. In contrast, only 7% of respondents gave a similar reason in our survey following the May 2012 local elections. We also asked respondents to say if they agreed or disagree with the statement “I had enough information on candidates to be able to make an informed decision” – 70% disagreed.

32. Levels of public awareness of candidates and parties is clearly not the only issue in declining turnout but the PCC elections provided a stark example of what can happen if insufficient information is provided to the public. We identified the absence of a candidate information booklet as a particular problem and we are disappointed that the Government failed to take the opportunity to address this issue when they responded to our report on these elections.

33. There is also some evidence that an election experience like that of the PCC polls, with very low levels of engagement, can have a negative impact beyond the poll itself. Results from the Commission’s annual December public opinion survey found that the percentage of respondents who were satisfied with the way elections are run fell from 72% in December 2011 to 61% in December 2012, just a month after the PCC elections.

The role of the electoral administration system

34. Our regular research with the public indicates that, in general, the system for running elections in Great Britain is well regarded and there is limited evidence of significant levels of dissatisfaction.

35. In December 2013, 72% of respondents to our survey said they were satisfied with the process of voting at elections in the UK – 7% were dissatisfied. The Commission has asked this question since 2003 and these levels have remained quite consistent with the percentage satisfied ranging from 64-77%.

36. We also ask those who say they are dissatisfied why they are dissatisfied. Responses indicate that dissatisfaction often relates to non-administrative issues such as a dislike of the voting system (29% of respondents gave this as a reason) or a general dissatisfaction with / dislike of politics and politicians (27%). Reasons relating to the ease and convenience were given by 14% of respondents.

37. The system for postal voting scores highly in terms of satisfaction and ease of use – particularly among the specific survey respondents who do vote by post. Following the nationwide referendum on the parliamentary voting system in May 2011, 98% of postal voters we surveyed said they were satisfied with the system.

38. It is difficult to reach a definitive view on the impact on turnout of the availability of postal voting. However, in responses to our surveys many people do indicate that they would not have
voted without the option of voting by post. For example, following the English and Welsh local elections in 2008 nearly six in ten (58%) of those that voted by post (or 7% of all people) said that the availability of postal voting encouraged them to vote.

39. It is also the case that turnout among postal voters is consistently higher than turnout among polling station voters and that postal votes make up a significant proportion of votes cast at elections. At the last UK Parliamentary General Election a fifth of the total votes cast were postal votes while at the recent Police and Crime Commissioner Elections they constituted 49% of votes cast.

40. While it is important that the processes used to administer elections remain effective and straightforward, there is no current evidence that declines in turnout are directly related to administrative barriers to voting. However, we do think the time is now right to consider what changes to the broad system of electoral administration would be beneficial in the coming years – particularly in light of the forthcoming change to IER and the potential benefits that new technology affords.

Electoral modernisation pilot schemes

41. During the period between 2000 and 2007, a number of pilot schemes were set up by the Government to explore changes to the way votes were cast and counted at local government elections. One of the explicit aims of these pilot schemes was to test whether any of the changes could help to increase turnout. The Commission was responsible for evaluating the pilot schemes from 2002 onwards, and we published both individual evaluations and overarching conclusions for the schemes which took place between 2002 and 2007.

42. Pilot schemes which were intended to test the impact on turnout included:

- All-postal voting (postal votes sent to all registered electors)
- Different voting hours and locations, including advance voting
- Multi-channel voting including remote internet, phone and SMS text message channels in addition to polling station and postal voting

43. Following the largest all-postal voting pilot schemes across four English electoral regions at the 2004 local government and European parliament elections, we noted that turnout had been just over five percentage points higher in those regions with all-postal voting than in regions where postal voting was available on demand in addition to polling stations. We also found, however, strong public support for retaining the ability for people to choose to vote in person at a polling station, and therefore recommended that all-postal voting should not be pursued for use at future UK statutory elections.

44. Our 2007 evaluation of advance voting pilot schemes highlighted feedback from elections staff and other local stakeholders, together with evidence from local survey research, which suggested that the majority (74%) of users of advance voting would have voted even without the facility. Turnout across the areas with advance voting pilot schemes was broadly consistent with the last comparable elections in those areas. In addition, repeat piloting of advance voting did not necessarily lead to higher levels of usage, which remained low. We concluded that it was unlikely that the advance voting pilot schemes had anything more than a very limited effect on turnout, although it was likely that it did provide greater convenience for some voters.

45. The multi-channel voting pilot schemes were both costly and technically complex to set up and manage, and our 2007 evaluation concluded that while remote electronic voting improved convenience for many of the voters who used it, overall the pilot schemes had a minimal impact on turnout. Total take-up of the e-voting channels ranged from 3.4% to 17.7% of votes cast and the majority of those voting electronically indicated that they were likely to have voted in any
case by another method. So, although local survey research suggested that 25–30% of those who had used electronic voting said that they would not have voted if it had not been available, this represents a relatively small number of voters overall.  

46. There have been no pilot schemes since 2007. Given the decline in new evidence and lessons being learned from each year of pilots and the lack of a coherent approach to determining what should be piloted and when, we recommended that no further schemes should be conducted without a clear and more comprehensive strategy from the Government for developing and implementing electoral modernisation.

47. After calling upon the current, and previous, government to conduct a comprehensive electoral modernisation strategy for many years, such an initiative is now both practical and timely. This strategy could draw upon the important ongoing work of the Law Commissions in reviewing election law, but also build upon the introduction of IER.

48. The demographic and technological context for engagement and participation in elections is also rapidly changing – with lower registration levels and turnout among younger electors, and greater expectation that public services can be accessed online. The Commission recognises that those who administer elections have a responsibility to contribute to debates about how to ensure the UK’s electoral processes remain relevant to today’s electorate. Through our Electoral Advisory Board of senior Returning Officers from across the UK we are reviewing opportunities to modernise electoral processes, and we are committed to working with the UK Government and others, including initiatives such as the Speaker’s Commission on Digital Democracy, to develop policy and legislation that delivers elections fit for the 21st century.

28 February 2014

Endnotes

The Commission’s definition of ‘completeness’ is that ‘every person who is entitled to have an entry in an electoral register is registered’.


7 The Electoral Commission called for a review of electoral law in response to the Law Commission of England and Wales’ consultation on its Eleventh Programme of Law Reform. Proposals for updating and simplifying electoral law will be published in the autumn by the three UK Law Commissions.