Select Committee on Citizenship and Civic Engagement

Uncorrected oral evidence: Disabled People and Older People

Wednesday 1 November 2017
11.35 am

Watch the meeting

Members present: Lord Hodgson of Astley Abbotts (The Chairman); Baroness Barker; Lord Blunkett; Baroness Eaton; Lord Harries of Pentregarth; Baroness Lister of Burtersett; Baroness Newlove; Baroness Redfern; Lord Rowe-Beddoe; Lord Verjee.

Evidence Session No. 10 Heard in Public Questions 88 - 95

Witnesses

I: Philip Connolly, Policy and Development Manager, Disability Rights UK; Fazilet Hadi, Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Advocacy, RNIB; Angela Kitching, Head of External Affairs, Age UK; Dan Jones, Director of Innovation and Change, Centre for Ageing Better.

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Examination of witnesses

Philip Connolly, Fazilet Hadi, Angela Kitching, Dan Jones

Q88 **The Chairman:** Thank you all very much for coming along. I know, Ms Hadi, that you are visually impaired and would like the Members of the Committee to introduce themselves briefly.

**Fazilet Hadi:** That would be helpful, thank you.

**The Chairman:** If I may, I will do that in a second. Perhaps I can begin with the normal opening words which are read on to the record. A list of the interests of Members relevant to the inquiry has been sent to you and is available. This session is open to the public and is being recorded for BBC Parliament. A verbatim transcript will be taken of the evidence and will be put on the Committee’s website. A few days after this session, you will be sent a copy of the transcript to check it for accuracy, and it would be most helpful if you could advise us of any corrections as quickly as possible. If, after this evidence session, you wish to clarify or amplify any points made during your evidence, or have additional points you would like to make, you are welcome to submit supplementary evidence to us. Could I ask you to introduce yourselves, starting with Ms Kitching, and then we will get the Members of the Committee to introduce themselves?

**Angela Kitching:** I am Angela Kitching. I am the head of external affairs for Age UK, the older people’s charity.

**Philip Connolly:** My name is Philip Connolly. I am the policy and development manager for Disability Rights UK. I am a disabled person and chair of my own residents’ association, so I have been civically engaged myself for a very long time.

**Dan Jones:** I am Dan Jones. I am the director for innovation and change at the Centre for Ageing Better, the foundation for a better life for everyone.

**Fazilet Hadi:** I am Fazilet Hadi. I am the deputy chief executive of the Royal National Institute of Blind People.

**The Chairman:** Thank you very much. Perhaps we could now go round the Members.

**Baroness Barker:** Hello. I am Baroness Barker. I am a Liberal Democrat Member of the House of Lords.

**Baroness Newlove:** Hello. I am Baroness Newlove. I am a Conservative Peer and Victims’ Commissioner for England.

**Baroness Redfern:** I am Baroness Redfern, a Conservative Peer.

**Baroness Lister of Burtersett:** I am Baroness Lister of Burtersett, a Labour Peer.

**Lord Harries of Pentregarth:** Richard Harries, an independent Cross-
The Chairman: Robin Hodgson, the Chairman.

Lord Blunkett: Next to me is Professor Matt Flinders, just in case you feel in the atmosphere that there is somebody between us, as there is. I am David Blunkett and I am a Labour Peer.

Lord Rowe-Beddoe: David Rowe-Beddoe, an independent Cross-Bench Peer.

Lord Verjee: Rumi Verjee, a Liberal Democrat Peer.

Baroness Eaton: Margaret Eaton, a Conservative Peer.

The Chairman: That is the dramatis personae on our side of the table. Can we begin with a general opening question: how would you describe the current state of civic engagement among older people and disabled people? Ms Kitching, would you like to start?

Angela Kitching: It would not be a surprise to you, I am sure, as very civically engaged people yourselves, that the vast majority of older people are civically active, vote, volunteer, are engaged in their communities. Some 41% of people aged between 65 and 74 volunteer and 32% of people aged 75 and over volunteer, which is on at least an annual basis, if not above that. However, within that, you have to remember that we are talking about a 30-year-plus age span and those who are furthest away from formal volunteering roles or civic engagement are those who are in poorer health who tend to be the oldest old and people who are in lower socioeconomic groups, so I do not think you should take all the people as a bloc and presume civic engagement is all fine and dandy among them. That is to give you a broad picture.

Philip Connolly: My own impression from looking at the data is that disabled people are civically engaged, where around two in every five are volunteering, but there is a democracy deficit and engagement deficit when you look at the data. The trend over the last four or five years has been a gap of between 3% and 8% in the engagement of disabled and non-disabled people. I spoke to the Electoral Commission to look at the voting figures and they told me that, as at December 2015, the only time they had data, three-quarters of people with mental health conditions were registered to vote and nine out of 10 people with disabilities, but this was against a general population of 96% registered to vote. I would characterise it as there is a strong base to build on, but we could look to, expect and hope for more.

Dan Jones: I would echo what Angela said, that there is a consistent pattern of volunteering, civic engagement and participation across that age range. There is very little evidence of an age-related decline until people are probably into their 80s, which is almost certainly related to health and a wider reduction in engagement activity. We see a pattern though where health conditions, income, education and ethnicity, all of
which we know map on to lower levels of participation earlier in life, those differences are exacerbated in later life.

**Fazilet Hadi:** I would echo those who have spoken before me to say that it is a story of two halves. Disabled people have a very impressive track record of civic contribution; I can think of the struggles in the 1980s and 1990s to get the first Disability Discrimination Act and of blind people marching to try to get equality in terms of disability living allowance. Every day, people campaign for better services, better streets, better transport, but there are enormous barriers to that participation for some, accessibility and attitudinal barriers, which can be overcome, I would agree, but they would need thought and intent.

In terms of political activity, the picture is bleaker. There is not much debate around disabled people in political life or in public office. I can think of the debates we have had around gender and race and we need that debate around disability. I am afraid to end on the fact that blind and partially sighted people still struggle to vote independently and in secret, which, given the week of democracy coming up next year, is not acceptable.

**The Chairman:** Is there, in your view, any difference between different parts of the country? The points you have made, are they universal geographically or is social capital more scarce in different parts of the country?

**Angela Kitching:** I can answer so far as formal and informal volunteering opportunities are concerned. Formal volunteering opportunities are more structured and available in places where there are higher socioeconomic groups, so there is the kind of regional pattern that you might expect from that. If you look at informal volunteering in terms of reaching out beyond your own family into wider networks and communities, you will pick up people of all backgrounds, ages and socioeconomic groups, so there is less of a clear pattern about who is engaged. In terms of voting patterns, it maps purely on the socioeconomic basis.

**The Chairman:** Mr Connolly, do you want to come in on that?

**Philip Connolly:** Yes. Disability has been mapped; the University of Sheffield did the mapping exercise. We know that there are higher prevalence rates of disability in former industrial areas of the country, in the north and in seaside and coastal towns, which is thought to be associated with retirement patterns. Whether these map across to the levels of social capital, I do not know, but that clearly could be done.

**Fazilet Hadi:** There are other areas we could look at apart from geography, such as access to digital where a variation would have a big influence. Only one in 10 blind people are in employment. For working age disabled people, if you struggle to contribute in the way you are expected to in being in work when you are of working age, there will be particular issues for you. There are other dimensions but, for me,
geography is not the biggest, except maybe in rural areas where getting from A to B is a big struggle for disabled and older people.

**Baroness Redfern:** My question was on rural transport. Obviously, there is a disadvantage for people wanting to volunteer because of not very good rural transport.

**Dan Jones:** We have begun a programme of work looking at patterns of social capital among older people in disadvantaged communities, which will include work in north Yorkshire, in Skipton and Scarborough, areas which are disadvantaged and have pockets of quite deep rurality on the edge of the Dales. We have a hypothesis that we will find out different things about the social capital and transport in those rural areas compared with inner-city areas, where we are also doing work.

**Baroness Barker:** Do you think that older people have different ideas about citizenship from younger generations? Is there a generational difference? Does being disabled change a person’s conception of what citizenship means?

**Philip Connolly:** On disability, there are other factors in the debate around citizenship. Citizenship tends to be framed around a discussion between rights and responsibilities. For disabled people, there are other factors, which I would characterise as self-determination or agency, participation and contribution. To understand disabled people’s experiences of civic engagement, you need to understand their experiences of these three issues.

There is certainly an issue that old and disabled people are increasingly having their care provided in institutional settings, so old and disabled people are being removed from our communities and located in residential and care homes rather than having the opportunity or the right to have care in their own homes where they can be civically engaged or feel part of the community. This is a very disturbing trend and a fallout from what is happening in the cuts in social care.

**Fazilet Hadi:** It is quite a challenging question. People who have grown up being blind or partially sighted have more of a sense of rights and their disability being part of their identity and their wanting society to acknowledge that, accept it and to include us. For older people who then become disabled much later in their lives, it is hard to compare because it is apples and pears. If you are in your 60s or 70s and have lived as sighted all your life and then you lose your sight, I do not think you have that same idea about rights, but I may be generalising wildly because I am sure there are some older people who are very hot on rights.

**Dan Jones:** The overlap between a long-term condition or disability and age is quite important in this because of this issue of slow-onset conditions and issues which become impairing to the point that they are a long-term condition or a disability, but which people have not grown up with and, therefore, tend not to self-identify, so you do not find people coming forward in the same way seeking adaptations or claiming their
rights as you do for younger people who self-identify as disabled. I suspect that there is, therefore, an issue that we do not see in the UK, an older people’s movement, in the way that we do in the States, which again is to do with how people identify themselves. I suspect what you find is that the most important thing for how most people identify themselves is in the ways that they have always identified themselves and, therefore, age itself is not a driver of attitudes towards citizenship or participation, but those are driven by your life experience, education, employment history and all those other things about you.

**Angela Kitching:** I take entirely what Dan says. I would like to remind the Committee that there are 280 self-organising older people’s forums in the UK, which we are aware of, so there are people organising around the principle of age who are very active in their local community and wish to address issues relating to ageing and there are some people who use that as a lever to engage with civic society. That said, 12% of people aged over 65 feel entirely disengaged with the society around them and feel that it is rushing past them at a great pace, they are unable to engage with it and it is no longer interested in their interests. It is this pattern of deep distance from society and some very sizeable numbers of active participants, and it is a tricky question to answer because of that.

**Lord Blunkett:** Is that partly about isolation generally or is it about people being isolated and lonely?

**Angela Kitching:** Yes. Around a million people would say that they are chronically lonely, using the English longitudinal study on ageing, so the older people within that study. Around a million people would say that they want a lot more social connection with the people around them or their society, and lack it, which is how it is measured in that study.

**Baroness Redfern:** This follows on from those comments: what do you think we can do about raising awareness to get more elderly people involved?

**Angela Kitching:** The willingness to volunteer is certainly there. There have been some significant positive moves, such as the removing of age barriers to certain roles in volunteering. Organisations which had cut-off ages previously are slowly understanding that they can adapt those roles and there are other ways of valuing older volunteers, so there is some positive movement there. We can work, particularly with colleagues in the disability sector, to think about how else we can adapt roles. For example, Age UK has a telephone-based befriending scheme that allows older people to befriend other older people and younger professionals to befriend older people. It is quite a defined contribution and they are able to make that contribution from anywhere, so it works quite well as a way of providing that kind of support. In terms of volunteering opportunities, I would say to go for flexibility and rethinking the way that volunteering can be done.

In terms of civic engagement, there is a question about how much particularly CCGs and local authorities are prepared to recognise the
value of self-organised forums and groups of people. I know that the Centre for Ageing Better is doing some great work in Leeds off the back of the World Health Organization’s age-friendly cities initiative to say, “How can we work with forums and engage them in changing our community to make it work better for older people?”

Baroness Redfern: So more information, say, from local authorities would help that?

Angela Kitching: Yes, and basic support, such as printing materials, not always relying on an online way of communicating, providing some free space to allow people to meet and self-organise and thinking about using the principles of the public sector equality duty properly when making decisions that affect older people.

Baroness Redfern: My question has been answered on barriers to older people taking part in volunteering. Do you think the main issues are connectivity in rural areas, income and a lack of awareness?

Angela Kitching: The over-reliance on digitisation is a significant issue which has been brought up for other issues too. If you advertise and communicate everything relating to volunteering digitally, you will miss a significant proportion, not all by any means but a significant proportion of people who do not operate in that way. There need to be volunteer managers in place who think carefully about how roles can be adapted and have honest conversations about the point of retirement from a role and moving on to another phase of volunteering, that those conversations are handled well and there is not a solid cut-off to say, “You’ve hit this age. We therefore don’t believe you can do this role”.

Baroness Redfern: So town and parish councils could be part of that activity?

Angela Kitching: Absolutely.

Lord Blunkett: Back in 2009-10, the House of Commons Speaker’s Commission recommended, and the Government then installed, a small fund for enabling people with disabilities of whatever kind to engage in the formal business of getting elected either to local or central government. I want to fit that into the broader question of government programmes which are funded where disabled people, on all the evidence we have been supplied with so far, are doing very badly in terms of either knowing about them or engaging with them, including the initiative for the National Citizen Service, of which I am a trustee, so I am part of this problem. How do we communicate and get that across and what barriers do you think exist? It is a fairly broad question, but if we are pumping money into things, small or large, and disabled people are finding themselves excluded from them, we are excluding a very substantial part of our community.

Philip Connolly: The Equalities and Human Rights Commission did a report, Disabled in Britain, which drew attention, in a chapter on participation and civic engagement, to some of the omissions that go on
at the moment. For example, Section 106 of the Equality Act 2010, requiring political parties to publish their diversity data, has never been implemented. There are lots of ways in which the political parties operate which produce, in a sense, and perhaps it is an unconscious bias, more a monoculture and do not reflect their community. There are very few disabled MPs who are knowingly disabled. There is an issue about how Parliament looks to disabled people, whether they feel it reflects them and how they are supported to stand for office. The fund which you spoke about, Lord Blunkett, I understand, was abolished about two or three years ago. It is a great shame that there is no support, with reasonable adjustments, to stand for public office.

**Fazilet Hadi:** Because I am employed, I receive money from Access to Work, which is probably one of the most amazing government schemes in supporting disabled people to play their part in society through the workforce. Thought should be given to what similar fund there should be to support people to volunteer and contribute, because volunteering now has become a path to employment for many and it is inequitable that disabled people who need some support to deliver work, whether it is a technology change or a support worker, are denied that because that stops them getting into the labour market.

More broadly than that, on Philip’s point about the Equality Act, things would be very different if the Equality Act were actually implemented, never mind the section Philip was referring to. What about equality in terms of reasonable adjustments that volunteer schemes could make? We heard earlier that, as disabled people, we do not always hear about the opportunities, we are not always given the support to get to the opportunities in terms of transport and, for some of us, the information that we need is not made accessible. All these things are doable with the commitment to do them.

**The Chairman:** I cut you off short on barriers to volunteering in my anxiety to make sure that we were keeping up with the clock. Is there anything further you want to add on that earlier question which Baroness Redfern asked?

**Dan Jones:** There are points about the adjustments to the way in which roles are organised, the kinds of things that people do and how they are supported to fulfil their roles, which cuts across volunteering, paid employment and civic engagement. Although we talk a lot about information, and certainly for some groups access to information is an issue, we know that in terms of volunteering—and I suspect this is true, although I do not think it is as well researched, in terms of civic engagement—most people find out about these things through people they know. Formal public information is a very small part of the issue of raising awareness, but if the people you know are people like you and the people you see in the organisation are people like you, that tends to create quite monocultural things within politics, volunteering and many workplaces. There are some cultural barriers around being more
deliberate about inclusion as well as the very practical structural barriers which Fazilet has talked about in terms of adaptation.

**Fazilet Hadi:** I asked our volunteer team before I came here about how many volunteers we had who had disabilities, and the figure for people with sight loss was 21% and it is a slightly bigger percentage if you add on other disabled people. The things that we do are obvious: we adjust roles, look at flexibility, whether people can contribute through doing telephone roles, et cetera. We have a technology bank of equipment that we can give people for access to technology. We will buy special chairs, if they need them, for their desks. It is a mixture of being flexible about the role and putting some practical things in place and doing what you do with any person, reviewing and supporting. It is not rocket science, but it needs intent.

**Baroness Newlove:** What positive examples are there of government initiatives or third sector organisations which have succeeded in helping older and disabled people to volunteer?

**Fazilet Hadi:** I gave you my answer to the last question, so I will not repeat that. We do have some good voluntary sector examples of disabled and older people volunteering and we need to think about how we spread that practice.

**Baroness Newlove:** Perhaps I can put it in another way. Was there a good practice but, unfortunately, because of austerity and other issues, it has not been carried forward, so it is a bit of a mixed picture? Does that help?

**Dan Jones:** I looked at this question and, as an evidence-based organisation where the evidence on how good some of these things are is not that strong, it is slightly awkward for us to back a particular horse. I would say two things. Older people in general do volunteer a lot, and they volunteer with a formal volunteering role in organisations, so quite a lot of volunteer-involving work reaches older people. It does not reach older people from black and minority ethnic groups, older people with long-term health conditions or poorer older people, so I would sort of push that question to ask: what are the initiatives that have helped people who are excluded from volunteering to volunteer?

The other thing that to some extent we know or appears in the data is that those differentials are much less sharp if you ask people about neighbourliness, helping their community and being part of things that are happening where they live. I suspect one of the big gaps is how the formal voluntary and public sector can be better at supporting those kinds of self-generated, organic, community-driven activities which we know everybody participates in and everybody derives value from.

**Philip Connolly:** I would like to mention two international examples which are relevant here. In Japan, they have a system called “fureai kippu”. In Japan, there is an enormous issue with the ageing population. If you are a woman born today in Japan, you have a one in two chance of
living to 100. Many people live a long way from their relatives. With fureai kippu, you can do an hour’s shopping for an elderly couple who might live in your neighbourhood and earn a credit which you can redeem against somebody doing the same service for your parents, particularly in circumstances where you live a long way from your parents. It is a brilliant example of what is possible in volunteering and helps both your own and other people’s parents to be able to live in their own communities.

Similarly, another example comes from the United States, where, because they have massive problems of urban sprawl, in many of the suburbs of the cities there is almost no public transport. They have schemes whereby you can offer lifts to people to be able to carry out their activities of daily living and you can earn a credit which you can redeem when you are forced to give up your car because of your own age, disability or long-term health condition and you can get credits back for lifts for yourself in your own retirement.

These are examples of what should or could be possible in the UK, but I do not think anybody is doing this in the UK. There are huge possibilities, but not very much happening. I do not know if that is because of the seed capital, the infrastructure or training, I am not sure what the issues are, but there is huge scope for this kind of thing.

Angela Kitching: I would mention two initiatives, one urban and one rural. To be specific, the East Sussex Seniors Alliance works extremely closely with the health bodies and local government in East Sussex around Lewes to work on an initiative which started off with “How do we celebrate Older People’s Day?”, and has turned into a much wider “How do we work on issues that are based around ageing?”, using Older People’s Day as the annual lever to get everybody together and, off the back of it, provide printed materials and opportunities to come together and have fun. Belly dancing has been mentioned and other such classes which have come out of these types of initiatives. I am not saying they are wonderful and world-changing, but it is a good rural example of where, with a little bit of convening power from the local authority, they have managed to bring in all sorts of different groups to work on ageing issues.

Lord Blunkett: We do not have time this morning to deal with this, but does this not bring in the issue of co-delivery, where we are getting people engaged in the delivery of services in two ways?

Angela Kitching: Yes. My other urban example speaks more to that, which is around the Age-Friendly Communities initiatives which you will find in Bristol, Manchester, Leeds, Coventry and various other areas of the country where, working across different local authority boundaries and different sectoral boundaries, people have united around identifying a number of issues in their area which they wish to address together. Again, it is that place-based element which brings people in and trying to work, with everybody’s tags of where they come from removed, to address those issues.
Dan Jones: Thank you. As the secretariat for the UK network of Age-Friendly Communities, I am pleased to hear that praise by someone else. It is a good example of a principle of involving older people from the start in how places are shaped and using the particular role of local government to convene it. Fureai kippu is a good example in relation to Baroness Newlove’s question, in that what has made it work is that the state, the Japanese Government, guarantee the vouchers, and therefore you trust that. Indeed, the lift that you give to your elderly neighbour, or the shopping that you do, will be cashable in 20 years when you want it, because it is essentially money, a state-backed time voucher. With the time voucher/time credit schemes which exist in the UK, because they are voluntary, people often do not trust them—“How can I be sure that I will be able to cash that in when I need it?” It is quite a good example in relation to the question of what the state might do, and the state plays a very active role in fureai kippu.

The Chairman: Ms Hadi, do you have anything to add?

Fazilet Hadi: No. I am fascinated by the example, but I do not have anything to add to this particular question.

Q93 Lord Rowe-Beddoe: Do you think that older and disabled people feel that they are involved in how they are governed?

Angela Kitching: In terms of disengagement from an older person’s point of view, as I said, 12% of people feel cut off from society and 16% often feel ignored or invisible, so there is a significant proportion, although it is obviously nowhere near a majority, who feel they are not well engaged with society. On the question of whether that relates to loneliness or the increasing time that you spend in the home—and once you are over 80, 90% of the time is spent in the home—if you are looking on a population level, there are some significant barriers to get over. It is not an uncomplicated question because, clearly, older people are still the largest proportion of people who vote, albeit if you look at the turnout data from the last election there was a significant reduction in older people’s voting activity. In general, if you look at trends over time, older people engage civically, yet still feel invisible and ignored to a certain extent.

Lord Rowe-Beddoe: We have received a lot of written evidence which would indicate that people do not feel they are involved, and there was that 1990s mantra, “Nothing about us without us”. Would you like to comment as to where we are today?

Philip Connolly: The issue is not so much that there is not a lot of consultation, as there certainly is, but the problem is that the loop does not get closed and people cannot see the effects of being involved in the consultation. For example, at the moment London is currently facing planning applications for 400 high-rise dwellings. My own neighbourhood experienced a planning application, and we are a tiny neighbourhood of south-east London of only 74 houses surrounded by industrial estates. We learnt that the planning department had four meetings with the
planning applicants before they had any consultation with the community, so we were left wondering, "What is the weight of our involvement compared to the developers?" At the moment, although that planning application has been deferred because we managed to change the supplementary planning guidance, they will undoubtedly come back, and have the resources to take their appeal to the Mayor’s office and, ultimately, the Planning Inspectorate in Bristol. The issue is what is the weight of the various contributions that you can make, what is the weight of your involvement in consultation, do you see the effects of your influence in the consultation, do you ever get any acknowledgement or credit back for what you have done, said, researched or been involved in, and the answer largely is no. You may have been involved in one consultation but feel that you have had a bad experience from it.

**Lord Blunkett:** We will have to think about that at the end of this, will we not, Chairman?

**Fazilet Hadi:** The other layer of “nothing about us” is around how many disabled people hold public office and are MPs. There are 13 million disabled people in this country, so surely there should be over 100 MPs. It is not debated, and I do not think there are over 100 MPs with disabilities. It feels sometimes, as disabled people, that we are on the outside looking in. There are notable exceptions to that obviously, but it feels like that sometimes.

On Philip’s point about consultations, given that the Disability Discrimination Act has been around since 1995, in particular, the fact that government departments produce excessively long consultations, not always available in the right formats and with short timescales to respond, does not make you feel that good or that your view will be taken into account. There are some very good consultations, but there are some very poor ones, and as Philip says, I am sure the loop is never properly closed unless a disabled person has the energy to read an excessively long response to all the consultations. It is about us being on the outside and sometimes not being paid the courtesy of consultations designed to get our input, but designed in Civil Service speak and jargon, which is probably quite off-putting to many people.

**Baroness Barker:** A number of people in this room might remember that, about 10 to 15 years ago, there was a programme, Better Government for Older People, which had considerable funding and a high degree of political support. What, if anything, has been the legacy and the learning of that, which was in its day quite a big programme?

**Angela Kitching:** The funding that the Department for Work and Pensions provided to the English regional forums on ageing was finally withdrawn last year or the year before. For a long time, they were able to provide a structural support to a regional set of forums, so nine different forums. It is done differently and there is still significant support for such structures. In Wales, the office of the Older People’s Commissioner in Wales provides support and via some of the elected mayoralties, London and others. I am not saying that there are no levels of formal support for
that type of engagement, but they are much less prevalent than a number of years ago. I would say, anecdotally, that the use of the Equality Act to engage people at an early stage in changes to services that affect them is very poor.

**Dan Jones:** I think that is right. It strikes me that many of those points around consultations, where decisions are made, and information management, are general citizenship points, certainly in relation to older people. Therefore, people who are excluded more broadly from citizenship on the grounds of language, education, status or employment history, health, will continue to be excluded in older age. As Angela said, the rates in voting and rates of participation remain quite high later in life. Consultations, in a context where many public bodies feel that their space for manoeuvre is limited, become quite a difficult political process because organisations are consulting, because there is a duty on them to consult, but, in fact, they feel very constrained in the decision that they will make.

Certainly, in the work which we have done in Leeds with older people around transport, people have said, “We’ve been consulted to death. We’ve been asked hundreds of times about transport, we have said the same thing and nobody’s done anything”. If you go to talk to civic bodies in Leeds and west Yorkshire, they will say, “We are operating under very hard constraints and some of the things that have been asked for are not things which are either in our gift or things that we can afford”, but that dialogue is one that is not common practice in consultation, which is much more, “Oh, tell us what you think” and, in fact, we are unable to make the decision in any way that the consultation might suggest, and now we are sitting here slightly embarrassed about that.

**Baroness Newlove:** It is quite refreshing to hear that about consultations, which is, outside of this Committee, what I say about victims—that they are consulted to death. We’ve been asked hundreds of times about transport, we have said the same thing and nobody’s done anything”. If you go to talk to civic bodies in Leeds and west Yorkshire, they will say, “We are operating under very hard constraints and some of the things that have been asked for are not things which are either in our gift or things that we can afford”, but that dialogue is one that is not common practice in consultation, which is much more, “Oh, tell us what you think” and, in fact, we are unable to make the decision in any way that the consultation might suggest, and now we are sitting here slightly embarrassed about that.

**Baroness Lister of Burtersett:** I am not sure if it was Philip or Dan who talked about the democratic deficit earlier, which, in a sense, is partly what we were just talking about. What do you think are the main barriers that older and disabled people face in taking part in the democratic process? I do not mean simply voting, although voting is part of it, and we have heard a bit about elected office, but in the wider, as it is sometimes called, “informal” politics.

**Philip Connolly:** I subscribe to the model of the economics philosopher, Charles Eisenstein. He said that there are four types of change, the first of which is charity, where you do things for people; the second is empowerment, where you help people to do things for themselves; the third is institutional change, which obviously the Peers in the room are engaged with; and the fourth and most important change that we can
deliver is the narrative change—what is the story of our lives that constrains us or liberates us?

Hillsborough provides a fascinating example of this. For a long time, the dominant story was that these fans had turned up late for the football match, they did not have tickets, they forced their way in, they contributed to their own deaths and hindered the relief effort. Then, when the inquest came out, a different story emerged: the fans had tickets, they arrived early for the match, they were not drunk or had drugs in their systems, they were directed into the pens by the police, they did not contribute to their own deaths and they supported the aid efforts to help their fellow supporters. The story changed and now it is the police who are facing prosecutions, not the fans.

One thing we can be doing is telling a story that is helpful to the civic engagement of older and disabled people. The stories which are out there at the moment, such as the resilience strategies of local government, for example, are not helpful where older and disabled people are seen as vulnerable and needing help and there is not a story about them being actors and active and engaged in providing their own help or help to their fellow disabled or older people or, indeed, even younger and non-disabled members of their community. There is not a dominant story out there, which is where we can make the greatest change of all.

Angela Kitching: Building on that narrative point, going beyond the practicalities of getting to vote and the challenges of judging mental capacity in care home settings, which are the technicalities of supporting people to exercise their democratic rights, there are two points of narrative which older people feed back to us quite regularly that they find very difficult at the moment. One is of newspaper commentary and debates around intergenerational fairness polarising people as though there were blocs of younger people and blocs of older people who were on the cusp of engaging in battle with one another, which is utter rot and not the experience of anybody who lives within a family. That is a significant barrier to people feeling able to engage in civic conversation about the rights, duties and responsibilities of people in the public space. We do what we can to try to chip away at that with as much evidence as we can, because the evidence points in a different direction.

The second is, more broadly, a civic engagement point, which is that the influence of the Lobbying Act on organisations, such as Age UK and the federation of 150 Age UKs around the country, and on our ability to allow people to engage civically in electoral processes, is quite significant. For example, at the last election, when the political debate turned to social care, it became extremely difficult for organisations, such as ours, which constantly talk about social care, to offer reasonable opportunities for older people’s voices to come out and be reflected in their local communities on this issue because of the restrictions that are placed around charities’ ability to provide a platform for that debate. That question of narrative and the point at which you want older people to engage in a narrative about their lives is vital to looking at how much you
are interested in what they have to say about their experiences of the life around them.

**Fazilet Hadi:** I would like to say something about the practicalities of voting and link that to belonging. A few weeks ago, when the £10 note came out I was really pleased. It sounds silly, but I like the little tactile dots. That is because it felt like people like me were part of the society; we are going to be here, so why can I not tell a £10 note? I give that example because there are things about belonging which are linked to the voting process. When people go out to vote for local or central government, most people take it absolutely as their God-given right to do that, but it does not feel like that if you are blind or partially sighted; it is not an accessible process, the materials do not come to you in an accessible form. If you want to do a postal vote, you do not necessarily get things in Braille or large print and, if you want go to a polling station, the template does not quite work and the staff have not been trained. Our report, *Turned Out 2017*, shows that only one in four blind and partially sighted people could cast their vote secretly. These things make you question, 22 years after the Disability Discrimination Act, “Do I belong and why can’t I vote?”

As one little shred of light, I must praise the Cabinet Office and the Minister for the Constitution on the new certificate of visual impairment so that, when people lose their sight, their ophthalmologist gives them a certificate if they have gone past a certain threshold. That certificate will go to local government and can now be used by electoral services to make sure that people get what they need in the format they need it. That has to be implemented, but it is a step in the right direction. If people cannot vote easily, that is not the right psychology for being a citizen.

**Dan Jones:** I would echo the points about narrative and the practicalities of engaging. Particularly picking up on the question about the broader set of democratic engagement and citizenship, there are three spaces which we need to be mindful of which are becoming increasingly difficult for people of all generations to use collectively and collaboratively in ways that generate that kind of democratic engagement. Physical space is becoming increasingly segregated in terms of age and has always been quite segregated in terms of disability. The online spaces are very clearly segregated in terms of age. We know that with straightforward civic services, such as getting your bins collected or paying your council tax, two-thirds of people in their 50s have used those services online, but fewer than half of people over 75 have. As those services and spaces move to digital by default, there is a large group of people being excluded from them by default.

That is equally true probably of some of the activist spaces online because if, increasingly, many people’s expression of debate, democracy, engagement and activism is online and 49% of people over 65 have never used the internet, you are clearly creating an age-segregated
space, which makes the kind of informal engagement that enables that
democratic discussion to happen very difficult.

The third space, which connects to online, is news media. We see a very
clear increasing age differential in terms of how people access news and
information, with older people still tending to be more likely to access
information through radio and print and younger people decreasingly
likely to access information. If people are having entirely different
conversations about public matters, it makes it extraordinarily difficult for
anyone to be having joined-up democratic engagement.

Baroness Lister of Burtersett: That is very interesting. I have an
observation and a follow-up question. I am struck by the extent to which
disabled people are using social media online as active citizens. When the
Welfare Reform Bill went through this House, we had a lot of lobbying
from disabled people who were making very good use of social media as
active citizens. A number of you have mentioned in passing questions
around socioeconomic disadvantage and income. Could you say a little
about how you see that that, and poverty in particular, can create a
barrier, be it to civic or more political engagement?

Philip Connolly: The Joseph Rowntree Trust brought out a report on
poverty last year, and the headline for us, as advocates for disabled
people, was that a half of all households in poverty had a disabled person
living in them. The socioeconomic issues play out in the fact that disabled
people are the biggest demographic group that is not internet connected
and with proportionally fewer digital skills. As I say, the digital by default
process tends to be marginalising more and more people. We are seeing
it also play out, of course, in the benefits system with more and more
people being impoverished and becoming destitute with the cuts in
benefits or cuts in entitlement to benefits. This is making it harder for
people to become civically engaged because, as I say, it is the connection
to the internet and travel costs to get to meetings. It is the engagement
with your fellow human beings that tends to get cut back on and people
are increasingly spending more time indoors and less time in the
company of other people, either online or otherwise. For disabled people
this is quite disastrous because a lot of disabilities play out in the
information deficit anyway. If you are blind, you can potentially be losing
three-quarters of the information that comes into your mind and you
have a problem if you have a hearing impairment or a cognitive disability.
An information deficit is a real manifestation for a lot of people with
disabilities, so the poverty issues are quite detrimental to civic
engagement.

Fazilet Hadi: We did a survey a couple of years ago on 1,200 blind and
partially sighted adults from 18 to 100. I would endorse everything Philip
says, but I was quite shocked at the level of disadvantage among
working age disabled people. That is not to say that all the older people
with sight loss are living the life of Riley, but the working age disabled
people had had cuts to benefits, cuts to social care and were not in
employment, so it felt—and somebody asked about austerity earlier—like
that group of disabled people were at the sharp end. There used to be demonstrations around being the hardest hit, and it felt like that group was very hard hit. That is an age when probably you do want to get out there and get involved. The Government have an aspiration to close the disability employment gap, and we will see in December whether their plan to do so matches the aspiration, but if you are not in work, your social care is not as much as it needs to be and your benefits have been cut, this is a very bleak story.

**The Chairman:** You were asked about two conversations; that is to say, between people who were disabled and not disabled. Is there a division between age, where well-known technophobes like me will eventually die out, and my successors will be technically competent, whether they are disabled or not, and the conversations will come back together again once everyone is technically competent and familiar?

**Dan Jones:** There is clearly a cohort of people who did not have in their education or their working life any real engagement with digital online, computers and ICT and, for that group of people, it is particularly difficult for them to see the value of going online later in life. That is probably a cohort and it is certainly larger now than it will be in 20 or 30 years. Having said that, there will remain people who have not had very positive employment histories and who have not, through their education or employment, had particularly active engagement with ICT. We know that particularly people in lower socioeconomic groups are quite likely to stop using the internet on retirement, so even if they have used it at work, they withdraw from it, so they lapse. I expect that those educational and socioeconomic barriers will continue and there will still be a group of people. Although there are some very positive moves around disability, and my colleagues can speak to those better than I can, my sense is that there is still quite a big disability access gap which will continue to be the case.

The other thing which the techno-utopians tend not to mention is that it keeps getting harder, more complicated and there keep being new things, however savvy you are now. It seems to me that the potential game-changer in that is voice. If you get to a point where whatever device it is interacts with you when you speak to it, that will genuinely change the way in which we understand these things.

**Lord Blunkett:** I hope it will be in my lifetime.

**Dan Jones:** Until that happens, I do not think we will see that gap close as sharply as some people hope.

**Fazilet Hadi:** I completely agree with that. The technology keeps changing, so whatever you were used to will be out of date and the minute you leave the workplace, as Dan says, you will not be keeping up to date with the latest. Even if you have used technology all your life, if you then lose your sight, you would have to interact with that technology in a very different way. If you lose your hearing, your sight or your dexterity with your fingers, it changes the way you can interact with
technology, so I do not think there will be a time when that gap is completely closed.

**Lord Verjee:** As a follow-up to Lord Hodgson’s question, it seems to me we are on a journey to a much deeper and more difficult problem when finally we get older people who are tech savvy, as they will reach a different problem in terms of isolation through technology. Are we studying that or looking at it? Young people today have much more isolation through the use of technology than through human interaction, it would seem.

**Dan Jones:** Certainly the data on isolation and loneliness is interesting in that, broadly speaking, it appears that around 10% of people in any age group report quite high levels of loneliness and isolation and there is not an age gradient. In fact, there is a sharp increase in the teens and early 20s and an increase at 75 and 80 up, so there are two age spikes, but they are not necessarily where you would expect.

There has been some research, which is quite limited and tends to be with US college students, who seem to be the people who are easiest to research in these things, which pretty clearly shows that online friends do not have the kinds of benefits that actual friends have, so they do not make you happier, make you feel better about yourself, provide support for you or give you a genuine sense of enhancing your social connections. To the extent that we move to a world where that is the way in which many people express friendship, it is not necessarily a world where we will see the kinds of benefits of friendship that we see now.

**Q95 Lord Harries of Pentregarth:** Building on your very positive example a few minutes ago, Ms Hadi, from the Government, what are the positive examples of the Government, political parties and other bodies including older and disabled people in the democratic process?

**Fazilet Hadi:** I struggled on this, but I came up with one example. For some years now, at the annual UK Labour Party conference, they have had a transcription service on-site. I do not go to the party conferences myself, but they produce information on the day, resolutions, et cetera, and, if people need stuff in Braille, large print or in electronic formats, they have that facility of the transcription service. They also have a group of volunteers, or they may be paid, called “enablers” who will assist disabled delegates around very complicated conference venues. That is the only example I could think of, but any big political event should have both those things.

**Angela Kitching:** A good example would be when there was a move to individual voter registration and greater attention was given to how people who lack capacity, or have varying levels of capacity, are treated by the current electoral system. All of a sudden, we were contacted quite extensively by electoral returning officers, who were concerned about ensuring proper registration for older people in care homes or who were previously in group house settings where managers had been responsible for registration, that proper attention be given to how capacity should be
judged and the training that was available to local staff. There are some examples and it usually comes about when there is a change.

The other one is that the regional devolved governments seem to be taking citizen engagement from older people on a place base much more seriously than local authorities have done for a period of time, but that is very patchy and there are places where it works extremely well, and places where local authorities have felt that was the first cut to be made.

**Philip Connolly:** An example I would like to mention is not from the Government, but it is called the “Digital Eagles” by Barclays Bank, helping older people to become upskilled in digital skills from younger people with digital skills. That is an example of where to go, a direction of travel, with connecting, mentoring schemes and schemes which I would describe as connecting the people who aspire to the people who can inspire, and that is a good example. I do not know how well it is working, but that is one I would commend.

**Dan Jones:** To pick up on Angela’s point, the Older People’s Commissioner in Wales is a strong example of an institution of government seeking to put the rights of older people at the heart of its deliberation.

**The Chairman:** We have overrun, but you have given us a lot of very interesting and, indeed, moving insights, so thank you very much indeed. We will bear it all in mind as we start to wrestle this into some proper framework and order. Thank you very much.

**Philip Connolly:** Thank you for the invitation.