**Smartmatic – written evidence (CCE0232)**

**Introduction**

This document is a response to Question 4 in the Call for Evidence document, with particular focus on the impact of changes to the voting and voter registration process.

Smartmatic is the global leader in the provision of election technology. Smartmatic is a multinational company headquartered in London that designs, engineers and deploys technological solutions aimed at helping central, regional and local governments to fulfil their commitments to their citizens to deliver safe, secure and transparent elections and to increase accessibility for all voters.

Smartmatic regularly contribute to international research and think tanks exploring the benefits of automation in elections. An increasing number of governments are introducing tools that allow citizens to vote electronically (in polling stations or other physical locations) and remotely, via the internet. Why? Because technology based elections increase election integrity and improve security and transparency whilst making voting more accessible. More people can vote, in an easier and more convenient way, increasing the mandate of elected representatives and bringing individuals closer to those who are responsible for delivering the services upon which they rely in their everyday lives. Election technology is also able to drive down the costs of elections - at a time where local authorities are seeing less budget year on year and election administration teams are being asked to deliver more for less.

This submission provides further information on the use of electoral modernisation technology to encourage participation and improve accessibility for all voters.

**Why do we need technology in 21st century elections?**

Governments, who are committed to delivering fraud-free, open, transparent and fair elections, must continue to ensure that the procedures and practices that govern them are balanced with accessible processes that encourage engagement and participation from all voters, including those in hard-to-reach groups.
This is a challenge now being met by an increasing number of governments worldwide by the introduction of technology to the voting process. This includes two key channels of technology deployment:

- Remote on-line voting - casting a vote using the internet from an unsupervised voting location; and
- Electronic voting - using technology in a polling station or polling locations to facilitate the casting and recording of the vote, often with a retained verifiable paper audit trail.

However, in reality technology is now being used to improve almost every stage of the electoral cycle (see Figure 1 below); from the administration of the electoral register through the auditing of political parties expenses, right through to the manner in which those voters are authenticated at polling stations and how they subsequently cast and record their vote.

Voting technology improves all the variables by which an election can be measured including accuracy, transparency, security, accessibility and cost. Technology allows local authorities to:

- Increase the speed of all processes (voting, verification, counting, result publication, etc.);
- Improve the accuracy of election counts by eliminating human error (intentional or involuntary);
- Eliminate subjectivity in the adjudication process

Well-designed election technology also creates mechanisms to allow voters themselves to audit election results and offers unprecedented levels of transparency which are absent from traditional paper based voting processes.
Participation

In the UK, there has been a dramatic and ongoing decline in participation of elections over the last 20 years, with the exception of a small number of electoral events, such as the Scotland Independence and the EU Referendum, which saw participation levels that buck this downward trend.

Whilst the 2017 General Election saw an increase in turnout of 2.6% from the 2015 polls, overall General Election turnout has fallen by 13% percentage points in the last century. Of the 46.9 million eligible voters in 2017, only 32.2 million voted.

Of the UK’s 19k elected officials, over 95% are elected on a less than 50% turnout. Average turnout in the local elections is 36% and average turnout in PCC elections drops to a sorrowful 15%.

In addition to poor turnouts, closer analysis of those voters participating in UK elections shows a concerning growing inequality in participation, with very low turnouts amounts certain voting groups. Unequal turnout matter because it reduces the incentives for government to respond to the interests of non-voters and threatens the central claim of democracy which is that every citizen’s preference or vote is of equal value.
Youth turnout did increase in the 2017 general election, increasing from 43% to 54%. However this still means that 46% of young voters play no part in electing our government. Of the estimated two million blind or visually impaired voters, it is estimated that less than 30% vote.

The Electoral Commission have confirmed that the electoral register if under represented in a number of key areas which include:
- Students and younger people (under 35);
- People living in the private rented sector;
- Certain Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) groups;
- British citizens living abroad;
- Commonwealth and EU citizens

Despite various costly government promotional drives, of estimated 5 million British citizens living overseas, only a tiny fraction of 300 thousand are registered to vote. Of those registered, a significantly small percentage actually vote.

**Challenges**

There are many varied reasons for participatory decline. Yet technology that is being deployed today, by many governments around the world, seeks to meet some of the participation and accessibility challenges.

- More than ever before, voters travel temporarily or relocate permanently. Citizens are travelling greater distances to work, working longer hours and having to balance an increasing number of personal and professional responsibilities, such that the challenge of voting at a particular location on a particular day is ever growing. Yet the electoral administration processes that support them, for both registration and voting, are routed in the 19th century.

- Voters now demand and receive an ever-increasing availability of online services both for government and commercial transactions. The digital service for voter registration, whilst successful, has raised voters expectations. Voters assume that online registration leads to online voting, and the realisation that this is where the digital interaction stops, and that their only voting option is a purely paper process, is leading to voter dissatisfaction. 82% (41 million) adults in the UK access the internet every day. In 2016, 70% of adults accessed the internet on-the-go, from mobile devices. 89% of households in the UK have internet access. Whilst we bank, date, submit our taxes, renew our TV and driving licences and apply for passport updates online, we cannot vote online. The proliferation of internet enabled personal devices mean that voters from all backgrounds are more connected that they have ever been. The internet, smartphones and social media have dramatically increased citizen engagement. These tools have given everyone a level playing field to express their opinions.
Elections are becoming increasingly complex and more frequent. Historically, the UK electoral system was dominated by first past the post elections. The UK now sees regular use of Supplementary Voting for Directly Elected Mayors and Police and Crime Commissioners, STV in Scotland and Northern Ireland, and Closed Party List systems for the GLA. In the Greater London Authority elections, there are 5.4 million voters, with three ballot papers, and three different voting systems. Ballot papers and supporting materials are only provided in English. Over 2.9 million Londoners were not born in the UK, over 1.4 million Londoners only speak English as a second language, and London has over 20 commonly spoken languages. At the last GLA elections, just under half a million votes were rejected and whilst some of these may have been intended, the vast majority undoubtedly have been through voter confusion and unintended mistakes. With an average turnout of less than 50%, this means that for future elections rejected ballot papers could exceed the winning margins.

It is increasingly likely that we will see changes to the voting methods available in the devolved regions of Scotland and Wales in the coming years, with both the Scottish and Welsh Governments expressing a desire to reform elections in their regions to increase democratic participation and accessibility. These are regions that, geographically, are more isolated from the current paper-based system with Highland and Island authorities. This could result in a two-tier system where alternative voting methods are available to voters for local and regional electoral contests, but with those same voters being required to revert to paper-based systems for national elections and polls.

Voters with disabilities face a significant challenge when trying to exercise their democratic right to vote. Whilst wheelchair access to polling stations had improved in recent years, there are still a large number of voters with disabilities who are unable to visit polling stations and are required to use a proxy vote or, if visually impaired, a plastic template that provides extremely limited assistance. Not only is this undermining voter privacy but it also directly contravenes the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Person with Disabilities that the UK has signed and ratified. The RNIB 2017 Turned Out Report highlights how the current voting system is failing to ensure the rights of all voters to vote independently and in secret, with only 1 in 4 of those blind or partially sighted members surveyed saying that the current system is fit for purpose. Voters with visual impairments are quite rightly asking government to consider how they access voting in a way that allows them to vote unaided.

Technology Solutions

Online Voting
Online voting provides a far greater opportunity for voters to participate in the election process by offering a more convenient, yet secure, channel for voting and potentially, an extended voting period – a methodology used in Estonia. Online voting can be particularly effective in driving up the levels of participation in traditionally underrepresented groups such as military voters, overseas voters and voters with disabilities.

Online voting can offer the perfect platform to bring the ballot to the voter in a more accessible and secure way than other remote voting methods. Online voting provides a secure platform for voters with disabilities to cast their vote from home without having to attempt to visit a polling station, or rely on other trusted companions or assistants to vote in proxy or assist them during their in-person voting. Online voting integrates seamlessly with accessibility tools such as braille keypads, sip and puff tubes and screen readers (e.g. JAWS) to ensure that blind/low vision voters and voters with motor/physical disabilities are afforded the same democratic rights as able bodied voters.

Cases in the USA, Estonia and Australia have all seen increases in participation. In the New South Wales State Election in 2011, online voting was made available for voters with disabilities and those who lived a defined distance from a polling station. The post-election report summarised that “usage of iVote greatly exceeded expectations by threefold, with almost 50,000 electors using it. We estimate that access to iVote enfranchised around 30,000 electors who were unlikely to vote had iVote not been available”.

One of the most underrepresented voting groups is young voters. Research has shown that online voting could boost youth voter turnout to 70% in a general election. Tech savvy Post-Millennials and Generation Z voters have grown up knowing nothing but an internet enabled life-style. Their social lives and increasingly their education, work and professional lives are conducted online. The decision in Scotland for 16 and 17 year olds to be enfranchised saw over 109,000 voters added to the electoral register and of this amount, over 75% voted. Yet it seems unlikely that this level of turnout can be maintained for other election events, where the need to visit a polling station or complete a complex postal voting pack will provide sufficient relevance to these voters and the way in which they engage in all other aspects of their lives.

Whilst a permanent online voting option could see a significant impact on the engagement of young voters, in Estonia, far from creating a digital divide between young and old, the take up of online voting has actually been age, sex and politically neutral, with all voter profiles choosing to cast their vote in this way.

**Electronic Voting**

Despite paper and pencil being the way in which voters in the UK have been casting their votes in secret ballots since 1872, many mistakes are still made by voters. This is increased in elections where there are combined polls or more complex voting systems such as supplementary voting, where voters cast a 1st and 2nd choice, or the single transferable voting method, where voters rank candidates in the order of preference.
eVoting technology can be used to assist the voter, in the privacy of the voting booth, to correctly cast their vote in different election types, minimising inadvertent marking errors and flagging if voters have over / under voted. It is also possible to swap instructions easily from one language set to another, to ensure that eligible voters, of all backgrounds and needs are met. The friendliness of user interfaces – to which we are now accustomed via our phones and computers – can make voting more accessible. Large screens and large fonts can be used to assist those with limited sight. In automated elections voters from all age groups consistently report that it is easier to vote electronically than with pen and paper. In addition, it has been widely demonstrated that it facilitates voting for those with lower literacy levels, because they can simply touch a screen that shows the logo, face or colour of the political party that they wish to vote for.

eVoting technology, such as touch-screens, provides significantly higher levels of accessibility and usability for voters with disabilities, than traditional paper methods. eVoting technology can be integrated with audio voting, sip and puff technology for navigating around the ballot paper, and touch/braille pads.

Other Electoral Modernisation Technologies and Process Changes

In addition to online voting and eVoting in polling stations, there are many other technologies and process changes that are being used specifically to increase participation and improve accessibility to the democratic process of both electoral registration and voting. Some examples include:

- Voting on additional days polling days – facilitated with early online voting
- Voting in any polling station/mobile polling stations – facilitated with centralised electoral registers and poll-book technology, for the electronic marking of the register
- Mobile Device Identity Authentication – allowing voters to use their mobile phones to assure Electoral Registration Officers of their identify rather than the complex, costly and time consuming process of sending, receiving and processing paper based copies of identification documents.

Estonian Elections – Additional Information

The Estonian internet voting solution is the longest standing, most technologically advanced, and highly trusted internet voting solution in existence. It has been used to support binding government elections since 2005, and to date has delivered eight nationwide elections. Such is the level of public trust in the system that during the last two elections held, 31% of the participating voters chose to cast their vote online.

Estonia is one of the most connected countries in the world and is ranked 15th in the UN e-Government Readiness Index (EDGI). Over time the Estonian Government have developed a citizen-orientated culture, and the physical and digital infrastructure to make best use of it. As an example, more than 90% of Estonians declare their taxes online.
There are a number of key principals upon which the Estonian i-Voting system is based. These are:

- i-Voting is optional – voters may also cast their ballot by post, or in person at a polling station
- Multiple voting – voters may cast their vote as many times as they like, and only the last vote to be cast will be included in the count.
- Paper dominance – voters may choose, after voting online, to visit a polling station and vote on paper. This process will nullify their digital vote and only the paper vote will be included in the count.

To follow is a link to a video showing a short introduction to the Estonian i-Voting process https://www.facebook.com/SmartmaticTechnology/videos/vb.397107633694904/814290911976572/?type=2&theater