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Last updated: 18 July 2019 Overview Date: 24 October 2018 Time: 9:30am to 2pm

Location: Boothroyd Room, 3 Bunhill Row, London Date of next scheduled meeting: 5

December Who was at the meeting Who was at the meeting John Holmes (JEH), Chair Sue

Bruce (SB) Anna Carragher (AC) Sarah Chambers (SC) Elan Closs Stephens (ECS) Alasdair

Morgan (AM) Rob Vincent (RV) Claire Bassett (CB) Ailsa Irvine (AI) Bob Posner (BP)

Craig Westwood (CW) Kieran Rix (KR) Nancy Bruseker (NB) Tom Hawthorn (TH) Phil

Thompson (PT) Petra Crees (PC) Marie Chadwick (MC) – RNIB Peter Stanyon (PS) – AEA

Paul Woodrow (PW) – London Ambulance Service Apologies and introductions None. The

future of voting – what we know AI introduced the discussion, contextualising it with

the 2016 strategic review. She noted that while a great deal of work had been, and

continued to be, done on registration, it was now time to start looking in more

detail at options for reforming the voting process and improving its accessibility.

2.2 PT provided a brief summary of the research done to date including that public

opinion about the voting process was generally positive. 2.3 KK introduced research

on the barriers disabled people and other vulnerable groups could face in relation to

voting. This outlined the problems they faced prior to the election, when voting by

post and on the day itself in the polling station. 2.4 PT spoke about voter

perceptions about changing the voting process, noting that there was no strong demand

for online or advance voting (including weekends). He did highlight that some 18-24

year olds who said they did not vote also said they were more likely to do so if they

were able to do so online. Moreover, the prospect of advanced and weekend voting led

to more 25-34 year olds reporting that they would be more likely to vote. of

elections MC talked about the needs and issues around voting for partially sighted

and blind people. She offered quantitative and qualitative data, which had fed into

the Cabinet Office Call for Evidence on the accessibility of elections. The headline

messages were that registration had improved in recent years, but there were still

many issues which persisted. Visually impaired voters still found the voting

experience frustrating. Tools that should help were inadequate or inadequately

deployed, for example the tactile voting device (TVD) or the accessibility kit for

postal voting. She noted that the blind and partially sighted people RNIB had

surveyed were very interested in changes to the voting system that would make it

easier for them to vote independently and secretly. These included adaptations to

forms, polling cards and telephone or online voting. She also suggested that

performance standards would be a good way for the Commission to intervene positively

with specific accessibility measures. Meanwhile the numbers of voters with visual

impairments were increasing as the general population continued to age. A discussion

followed, with JEH noting that more data was needed to establish numbers of visually

impaired people who were deterred from voting. It was noted that the TVD was an

unhelpful tool but the current legislation was too restrictive to allow for much

innovation. Commissioners also noted that the demographic shift and an aging

population meant that the number of people with sight loss was increasing. PS

presented his organisation's perspective on accessibility of elections, also noting

that the changes in registration had made major improvements to their work. He did

highlight that further improvements were possible, such as links between electoral

services and data on voters who were registered disabled. Currently voters had to let

EROs and ROs know about their needs proactively, rather than EROs and ROs being able to plan based on data given to them. He commented that, while the situation had improved a great deal in many ways, and training was now good, there were still pockets of bad practice, and sometimes staff were too nervous to use their initiative. He also noted that the inability to challenge an election result unless someone had been wrongly elected made it difficult to address access issues that might have prevented someone from voting. Other challenges included the reduction in available accessible buildings – particularly schools – as polling stations. Legislation existed to require the use of rooms in schools but it was difficult to enforce. He summarised the issue as being about balancing accessibility, security and resources. JEH asked how enthusiastic electoral administrators were for innovation in the voting process. PS responded that there was support for some additional forms of absentee voting, to provide more options for both those with accessibility issues and other constituents, such as overseas and service voters. ECS suggested that issues related to accessibility failures could be captured in the performance standards assessments in the Commission's post-election reports. PS discussed areas which had had major process failures, such as Plymouth and Newcastle-under-Lyme, noting that performance had subsequently improved dramatically. He suggested that scrutiny of 'near misses' would be preferable to waiting until a major problem had arisen. SC noted that there were resourcing implications for reforming accessibility, and that more data was needed to underpin the justifications for it. JEH suggested that it might be possible to use other organisations' surveys, adding additional questions to collect data on accessibility. TH replied that KK and PT would have to consider this proposition, though there was an issue on how it might work given it required self-presenting on disability and could cause problems of categorisation. RP noted that the Cabinet Office Group might be able to take forward this work. A further discussion followed on propositions put forward by Commissioners, many of which CB noted had already been put forward in the Commission's Report, such as allowing someone to choose which polling stations to vote in, mobile polling stations, and linkages with social services. AI noted that a holistic approach was easier to achieve when the local council's Chief Executive was also the RO. ECS suggested that a piece of work on the long term trends on aging population and resourcing might be helpful. A discussion followed on thinking about accessibility more globally. CB noted that if the process were improved in relation to disability access, then it would also more likely be better for all. JEH noted the critical step of reforming registration first to open up options for voting reforms in the future. Providing services that meet the needs of all users PW provided an overview of the previous three years in the London Ambulance Service, describing its transformation from an organisation in crisis to one that was functioning well. The change was fundamental, as the service moved from one focused on response standards to one that looked more widely at clinical outcomes for the people it transported. They had made fundamental changes in the integration with other parts of the NHS and emergency services, building relationships within the organisation, and getting direct feedback from patients and staff at their board. He described a useful tool for transforming their service being the 'Whose shoes?' method for looking at stakeholder perspectives for important issues. JEH asked about the use of technology in the service, and PW explained that they were still largely paper-based, though they were now increasingly using iPads. They were also developing online accessibility, video consultation, and the use of wearables to monitor the health of vulnerable patients. In the last case, this would permit them to intervene before the point of a health crisis. AC asked about resourcing and the blocks to

improvement. PW explained that they had had no additional investment. It had rather been a question of addressing challenges around board leadership, the culture of the organisation and the previous 'command and control' style leadership among senior staff. ECS raised the issue of board oversight, and how this was a common concern for all boards. PW outlined how they had added board sub-committees to deal with detail, and were encouraging a new culture of reporting issues, increasing scrutiny. RV commented that the Commission often felt constrained by the limits of electoral law and the need for legislation and commended PW and the ambulance service for their accomplishments despite similar constraints. PW summarised their position as one of working with partners and bringing forward evidence to build the case for reform. The future of voting AI introduced the discussion with a reminder that electoral registration reform was fundamental to unlocking other changes to elections, work in relation to which was ongoing. She also highlighted ongoing work around guidance, working with accessibility partners and the of Elections Working Group. KK summarised the historic pilot schemes in the UK, covering innovations on how, when and where to vote. The overarching conclusions had been that electronic voting should be considered within a wider modernisation framework, that postal voting should be an option but not used as the only way to vote, and that advance voting did not appear to appreciably add to overall turnout figures. She also noted that these pilots had been conducted from 2000 to 2007 and that technology had appreciably moved on. We should therefore be wary of drawing too many conclusions from them for current policy. AC noted that as well as technological possibilities, political issues had also moved on. KK noted that, in the absence of more recent pilots in the UK context, other countries' experiences with reforms to electoral practices could serve as examples. She gave as an example the gradual increase in take-up of advance voting in Canada. CB noted that there were implications for campaigning of advance voting, potentially changing the nature of the debate, which would require careful handling. ECS noted that this was already the case with postal voting. TH invited the board to focus on the opportunities for change, including those relating to the forthcoming legislation in Wales and Scotland. He suggested considering where attention should be focused for the next two years and then again for the subsequent four years. He asked the board to consider what aspects of electoral process reform should be explored further, and if there were particular aspects of reform the board wanted to progress more quickly than others. JEH asked the board to consider the long-term strategy, particularly as registration reform had to come first for many possible changes. He also noted that more research might be helpful in building the case for reforms. CB noted that preparation had to include being ready to take advantage of opportunities, and not just acting reactively. RV asked about the possibility of encouraging local authorities to be bold in their pilot proposals. AI explained that local authorities could propose anything but that their bid had to be approved by Cabinet Office. AC asked for further information about the Law Commissions' review. RP explained that the report recommendation for primary legislation was not currently on the Government's agenda. CB pointed out that there was some current political appetite for reform of campaign regulations and it might be possible to use current interest in that area to advance the wider cause. AC suggested that there could be closer working with the new Centre for Data Ethics and Innovation. CB concurred, citing their developments in how data collected across government was used. SC noted that an electronic option was necessary in the long term, while noting there were short-term problems with security and resourcing. She reiterated the earlier point on offline electronic solutions as a potential means of speeding up processes, starting for

example with help for the visually impaired. She also noted that more data was necessary to identify groups who were being disadvantaged in election processes. Pilots could be conducted accordingly, for example on overseas voters, service voters, and even rural voters. RV highlighted that a properly online register would be very important in this longer-term context. AM suggested that amendments to current practices to improve voting conditions for those with disabilities could be made contingent on fixing the register, helping to build support for registration reforms. A discussion followed on electronic voting, with a distinction being drawn between electronic voting in polling stations and online voting. While the appetite for online voting was tempered by concerns about security, the direction of travel was recognised as being towards electronic and connected voting solutions in the longer term, for both accessibility and longer-term resource savings. CB added a note of caution about looking in detail for longer term solutions using current technology such as block chain, as technology development was still fast moving. RP noted that it was important to make sure the law that underpinned any new developments was robust. Advantage could perhaps be taken of the legislative changes planned in Scotland and Wales to start to move towards consolidation and simplification. Other countries had made big changes to their voting systems but not without fixing the legislation underpinning it. SB noted that Scotland has the appetite for the legislative change, and the ability to move quickly when the situation calls for it.

5.15 A discussion followed about the lack of appetite for legislative changes in Westminster, noting that for some issues such as voter ID the general public seemed further advanced in their thinking than legislators. Change could be a long time coming but then move very quickly once the need for change was properly established. JEH invited Commissioners to consider other measures that were not specifically tied to a digital solution. Other locations for voting were discussed, most notably the use of mobile polling stations. AI noted that the challenge for the Commission would be to define what problems we were trying to solve. What we were trying to achieve with any reforms needed to be clear as some options could add a burden on to ROs and we would not want to do so without being confident that the changes were actually improving the voting process for electors. ECS noted that working with other services, such as mobile libraries, could allow both innovation and cost savings. AI invited Commissioners to consider what success would look like. CB noted that the Commission needed to balance the cost-accessibility-security triangle too. RV suggested a voting and counting steering group to complement the voter registration steering group. CB cautioned against spreading Commission resources too thin. AC noted that an easy win in relation to accessibility specifically was to add to our performance standards. RP noted that international research could provide a good basis for the Commission's own work. TH noted that it was important to consider upcoming demographic changes, and stressed the importance of being able to visualise the 18 year olds of the future. SC noted that both ends of demographic change needed considering, young and old. JEH noted that he had been struck by the emphasis in the discussion on the desirability of moving towards change based on new technology, though everyone was also well aware of the security and cost constraints. He remarked that overall the system was not broken but that a lack of changes would over time threaten the confidence of voters. ECS enquired as to the possibilities of partnership working with universities. PT noted that King's College brought together tech experts with policy experts to work together on solutions. ECS called for pure social science research partnerships, to share resources and knowledge. A further discussion followed on working with universities, concluding with TH noting that it

was important to understand what gave people confidence now, to avoid undermining it with newer developments. AI agreed to take away the ideas from the discussion and identify the principles against which any reforms could be tested. This would help to inform the scoping of a future innovation and development project on modernising the voting process, which would be taken forward from the second half of 2019/20.