

# Registering to vote

Insights from Local Authorities and Civil Society Groups on registering people from ethnic minorities

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## Summary

The Constitution Group Analysis Team within Cabinet Office designed a qualitative research project to explore barriers to registering to vote. We conducted 16 semi-structured interviews with staff members from different Local Authorities and Civil Society Groups to explore what barriers to registration to vote they think exist for people from ethnic minorities. We also explored what, if any, experiences they had in promoting registration amongst these groups. This research project should be seen as an initial step in building knowledge in the area. Interviewing representatives from these groups enabled us to collect insights from people with experience of working with a range of people and groups.

The main findings showed that those interviewed felt barriers to registration were not specific to a particular ethnic minority, but rather affected multiple ethnic groups (including White people). These barriers were considered to involve a number of intersectional factors including, but not limited to, age, gender, ethnicity, economic, social, tenure, religion, and language proficiency. Recognising these barriers as cross-cutting helped to move past the umbrella 'Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME)' / 'Black and Minority Ethnic (BME)' terms, which were felt to cloud important differences between different ethnic minorities. Findings suggest the potential for identifying solutions that provide wider benefits for multiple under registered groups.

Some Local Authorities and Civil Society Groups provided examples of initiatives and steps they had taken to reduce barriers to registration. Solutions that worked well included using social media, engaging people directly on particular issues, working with community members/ figures who were established and trusted, and creating opportunities for discussion between the citizen and local/central government.

Participants also discussed the roles that Cabinet Office, Civil Society Groups, and Local Authorities might play, and participants also discussed how each could use their existing knowledge and capabilities to support democratic engagement efforts.

This research is a useful contribution to the understanding of barriers to registration affecting people from a range of ethnic minorities. Insights from this project will support the broader Cabinet Office commitments towards democratic engagement. Given the qualitative nature of the study, the findings presented here are reflective of those who took part in the project, and are not intended to be representative of all people who may share similar characteristics.

## Introduction

In 2017 the Government published the Democratic Engagement Plan (Cabinet Office, 2017), setting out a five year programme of democratic engagement and voter registration activity. As part of this programme, the Government committed to explore the barriers to registration for people from ethnic minority groups.

People from different ethnic minority groups are under-registered to vote as compared to people from White backgrounds. The most recent data on registration completeness shows that people self-reporting as Asian (80%), Black (76%), Mixed (77%), and 'Other' (73%) are much less likely to be correctly registered than those self-defining as White (85%) (Electoral Commission, 2016).

Attitudes towards registration, voting, and politics (Sood, Hollings and Chowdhury, 2012), knowledge of the process and eligibility criteria (Heath and Khan, 2012), and English language proficiency (Heath and Khan, 2012; Sood et al., 2012) are some of the potential barriers mentioned in existing literature that may explain this under-registration. However, it is important to note that there are several limitations in existing research. Most of the existing research on barriers faced by people from ethnic minority groups was conducted before the implementation of Individual Electoral Registration (IER), and may therefore provide insight on barriers that relate to the old electoral registration system. Under the old system the head of the household was responsible for adding new members to the register, as opposed to the new IER system which places responsibility on the individual. In addition, due to the small sample sizes used in a lot of studies, there is also very little insight on the potential variations that exist between different ethnic minority groups.

This small-scale exploratory project aimed to address some of these gaps, and collect a range of in-depth evidence and information on current efforts and experiences in registering people from ethnic minorities. The main research objectives of this study were:

- 1) To gather in-depth insights and examples on the specific characteristics that make people from *some ethnic minority groups* less likely to register in *some areas*.
- 2) Identify which of these characteristics are cross-cutting amongst people from *different ethnic minority groups* and areas.
- 3) Explore the experiences of electoral administrators and civil society groups when promoting democratic engagement within these groups.
- 4) To gather examples of any current practices being adopted by electoral administrators and civil society groups when working with these groups, and their perceived effectiveness.

This information will help inform strategies to support efforts in registering people from ethnic minorities, and narrowing the ethnicity gap in the electoral registers. Insights will support the broader Cabinet Office commitments towards democratic engagement (Cabinet Office, 2019).

## Methodology

The aim of this study was to explore attitudes and experiences of individuals working at a local level, as opposed to providing a generalised national perspective. The views expressed are reflective of those who took part in the project, and are not intended to be representative of all

people who may share similar characteristics. We were interested in exploring participants' own experiences of registering people from ethnic minority groups, and the methodology supported this aim.

Trained social researchers from our team conducted a total of 16 semi-structured interviews, each lasting around 40 to 60 minutes. Interviews were either conducted over the telephone or face-to-face, depending on participant's preference. During a semi-structured interview, interviewers follow a structured topic guide, but they also prompt spontaneously during interview depending on what participants say.

Using a convenience sample we spoke to seven staff members from different Local Authorities (LAs), and nine representatives of civil society groups (CSGs). For the full list of organisations and LAs that donated their time and took part in the study see Table 1.

Electoral administrators were invited to volunteer for the research via an email invitation (Association of Electoral Administrators (AEA) newsletter) and by advertising the study during the AEA conference (January 2019).

CSGs with an interest in registration and democratic engagement were invited by email or telephone invitation. These were selected based on existing contact and via targeted efforts to recruit organisations representing a range of different ethnic minorities. Specific efforts were taken in order to ensure that we could obtain at least some information about most/all of the main ethnic minority groups within the UK (ONS, 2011).

Informed consent to take part in the project was obtained from all participants. Taking part was completely voluntary and participants were assured that they could change their mind at any time, and did not have to answer any questions they did not wish to.

**Table 1: List of participating Local Authorities and Civil Society Groups**

Local Authorities	Civil Society Groups
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Aldershot</li> <li>● Camden</li> <li>● Lancaster</li> <li>● Lewisham</li> <li>● Sandwell</li> <li>● Southwark</li> <li>● Sunderland</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Chinese in Wales</li> <li>● Black South West Network</li> <li>● Brap</li> <li>● Hindu Council UK</li> <li>● Operation Black Vote</li> <li>● Patchwork Foundation</li> <li>● QED Foundation</li> <li>● Race Council Cymru</li> <li>● The Traveller Movement</li> </ul>

Interviews were audio recorded using a dictaphone to ensure that the information gathered was interpreted accurately. Data were analysed using a thematic analysis approach, where themes and patterns across multiple interviews (or other qualitative data sources) are identified in order to describe a specific phenomenon, and answer specific research questions. Quality Assurance checks were carried out to ensure information and insights presented were grounded in the data collected.

The nature of qualitative methods implies that this research should be seen as exploratory, and it should not be seen as providing recommendations for future policy solutions or design. Given the self-selecting sample, the findings should not be taken as representative of all those who either work within registration and democratic engagement for LAs or CSGs. Moreover, the approach does not provide information on the extent to which the barriers identified affect different individuals

or groups, and indeed this research question would be better answered by a different methodological approach. Insights provided by participants do not reflect current government policy - rather they reflect the views of those who took part in the qualitative interviews alone.

## Results

The following section reports the main findings from the 16 qualitative interviews, and is organised in the following way:

- Context - overarching contextual features important to note when discussing this topic
- Barriers to registration - explored through cross cutting themes and brought to life with specific examples
- Interventions to address these barriers - exploring what worked well, and what can be learnt from those that did not work
- Capability and future roles

## Context

Participants interviewed from each LA had different roles, responsibilities, and job titles. Some worked directly in the delivery of electoral services and registration, with objectives such as managing the annual canvass, ensuring the register was kept up to date, and running elections. Others worked within the broader remit of citizen engagement, including areas such as increasing public participation in consultations and relationship building (e.g. between citizens and the LAs). Some roles were a combination of the above, and focussed on engagement around registration and working with those 'furthest away from the ballot box'.

Participants working for LAs had different levels of experience and different team sizes. Participants felt they had a lot of existing knowledge about the people that lived within the area from using any available data sources and also from directly interacting with citizens. For example, one LA participant noted that in their experience the importance of 'being on the ground' to understand the people they were trying to engage. Similarly, another LA participant noted that in their view because they did not rely on Royal Mail deliveries, those working for the LA were more likely to go out and meet citizens directly when delivering communications from their LA. Overall, increasing democratic engagement (and therefore registration) was an overarching aim.

Participants working for CSGs also had varying roles and responsibilities. Some reported working towards objectives directly related to registration and democratic engagement amongst citizens from ethnic minorities. Whilst others reported having a broader remit that went beyond registration and voter engagement. Some organisations represented the views of people from specific ethnic minority groups living within a specific geographical area, while others reported having a broader national remit represented multiple ethnic minority groups.

In general, barriers to voter registration were not discussed in isolation of wider elections and voting issues. When discussing registration participants also spoke about citizens voting - the two elements were not seen as separate.

Goals for both participants working for CSGs and LAs, as expected, focussed on specific short-term goals in relation to the services they provide and broader long-term initiatives. Recognising that each LA had their own local issues and challenges was important. The main challenges participants reported for achieving their objectives are summarised in Table 2 below.

**Table 2: Challenges to meeting objectives mentioned by participants**

Local Authority challenges	Civil Society Group challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Churn of staff and residents in the area</li> <li>● Hearing from everyone to ensure initiatives have universal benefit across groups in society</li> <li>● Ensuring a joined up approach and long term impact</li> <li>● Ensuring high registration and canvass when there are no elections</li> <li>● Legislative changes</li> <li>● Data being outdated or not relevant</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Capacity and resources</li> <li>● Not reaching those who are least engaged</li> <li>● Implications of political/legislative change</li> <li>● Providing long term change and impact in addressing inequality</li> </ul>

## Barriers to registration

Participants working for CSGs and LAs suggested a number of potential barriers to registration. Whilst specific examples of barriers faced by particular groups were mentioned, participants noted that in their view commonalities that reinforced the view that most barriers to registration were cross-cutting and affected multiple ethnic minority groups. Moreover, many of the barriers mentioned could also affect the majority group i.e. British White people.

Participants noted that in their experience these barriers, or factors, do not exist in isolation and often interact with each other. These factors include, but not limited to: age, gender, ethnicity, economic and social status, tenure, religion, and language.

*“It is the intersectionality of identity we have to be ready to deal with. I don't think it is as simple as saying there is (something) inherently present in people who identify as BME as the reason they don't register.” (CSG participant)*

Using data was one way of recognising these intersections. Participants working for LAs who were using data to inform their work had in the past cross-checked data to show where gaps in the register could potentially lie. However, data sources were often outdated or missing for particular groups or demographics (e.g. students).

Moreover, it was important to recognise barriers as cross-cutting, for CSGs, as it helped move past the unhelpful ‘BAME’/‘BME’ umbrella terms. Exploring the intersections furthered the understanding of the distinctions between barriers to registration, and barriers to voting once a person was registered. For LAs it also made it easier to identify solutions that would have universal benefits.

As mentioned a number of themes or factors were discussed in connection to reasons why people were not registered and should not be taken in isolation. These themes are explored below.

### Age and generational differences

Participants felt generational differences between people from certain ethnic minority backgrounds impacted their likelihood of registering to vote. Those who were older and therefore more likely to be first generation immigrants often faced language issues. One CSG participant noted that in their view older people from a Bangladeshi background were likely to have English as a second language and tended to rely on their children to translate registration documents. Another CSG participant noted that in their view 2nd and 3rd generation individuals did not have these language barriers and were more likely to feel integrated, and therefore felt would be more likely to be registered.



Similarly, age appeared to have an impact on likelihood to engage with the wider democratic process. For example, a CSG participant noted in their experience those who are older and those from Asian and African descent, including the Windrush generation, had never voted. In contrast those under 18, regardless of ethnicity, were looking forward to voting once eligible.

Participants spoke of differences between citizens from particular groups within a community that were more settled, having lived here for longer, and groups that were newer to the UK, and therefore felt less settled. Citizens from these newer particular groups within a community were perceived as more likely to view democratic engagement as very low priority, being preoccupied instead with the practicalities of establishing their life in a new country.

## **Housing**

Both LA and CSG participants identified a number of cross-cutting characteristics revolving around housing; those living in a multiple tenancy occupancy (MTO), frequent or transient movers, and those living in lower income areas could be less likely to be registered or wanting to be registered.

Moving frequently increased confusion towards the registration process. Transient or frequent movers were defined in different ways, including moving within the LA, moving across LAs, or sometimes moving across different countries (Commonwealth citizens in Higher Education). This added to the difficulty participants working for LAs voiced in keeping the register up to date. Frequent movers were less likely to be aware they needed to re-register when they had moved into a property.

Living in a private rental property or sub-letting also created access issues. For example, one LA participant thought that landlords of private rented properties, who could either live in the property or elsewhere, would sort the post received at the property themselves. This, they felt, would increase the risk of private renters not receiving letters or leaflets as the landlord might not pass these on or think they were junk mail. Students were also identified as being less likely to receive letters or communications sent out and could be less likely to know who they live with when responding to Household Notification Letters (HNLs). In this example, universities were encouraged to share more data with LAs to reduce confusion and make better use of resources during canvass.

In another example, a CSG participant noted that in their experience a minority group of people within the Gypsy and Traveller community they worked with did not have a permanent address, and therefore could face similar issues as those living on barges or other mobile properties in accessing registration services. Those who did live in permanent housing were likely to live in lower income areas, urban, or socially deprived areas. This in turn was linked to an increased likelihood to be politically disengaged. This increased propensity to be disengaged - noted across other ethnic minorities across interviews.

## **Economic Social Disparity**

Participants noted that in their experience those who were not registered are more likely to feel economically and socially excluded and isolated, both on a local level, but also in general from wider society.

*“Rather than ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) it is economic exclusion which plays a big factor. If you are economically included you will recognise the importance of updating your details when you move due to credit rating” (CSG participant)*

As with other intersections that made someone less likely to be registered, being economically excluded was not seen as exclusive to ethnic minorities. For example, it was noted those from a White working class background could also belong to this group.

## **Faith and religious spaces**

During the interviews, whilst ethnicity and religion were often spoken about in combination, it is clear they were two distinct factors impacting on likelihood to be registered. For example, one participant noted that in their view being part of a faith organisation could influence attitudes towards society, and in turn the likelihood to be democratically engaged.

Religious spaces, such as mosques, were noted as an important space where people could interact with other members of their community, and potentially be approached within the context of democratic engagement. However, one CSG participant noted that in their view some would not necessarily run services for women, as such reducing their likelihood to be exposed to these discussions outside of their household.

Religious spaces were discussed in connection with other factors such as age:

*“Older people are easier to engage as they (are) physically present at the temple, they want to register, but do not know how to register. Young people know how to register, but do not engage with the community through the temple” (CSG participant)*

Faith was also a factor to consider when discussing barriers given that the annual canvass usually fell within the wedding season. Participants reflected that this increased the chances of people being elsewhere and therefore not accounted for during canvass. Or similarly, this could lead to having people staying in a household who could be canvassed, but who reside permanently elsewhere.

However, one CSG participant noted that in their experience religious groups could be reluctant to engage with voter registration as they would be required, as charities, to be non-partisan and non-political. They felt this could lead to religious groups objecting to their involvement in matters related to voter registration and harnessing spaces such as mosques or churches, limiting potential opportunities for democratic engagement activities amongst certain groups.

## **Disengagement/ non participation/ and lack of representation**

Disengagement from the political process was identified by participants as a root barrier to registration. Some participants went further and noted this had further consequences for voting habits. Having negative views towards a council or lack of interest in helping the council diminishes people's interest in voting. In addition, a lack of representation of ethnic minorities in local and national politics, reduced, for some eligible electors, any consideration towards voting and registration. One CSG participant noted, for example, that some Caribbean people felt sceptical of the system due to feeling unaccounted for and underrepresented for years, despite being politically conservative. Another noted that immigrants felt different levels of citizenship and awareness of what was going on politically in the UK and in their country of origin, and therefore had a varying degree of civic duty. Overall there was a general sense that their voice had not been heard and therefore would not rationalise registering and voting.

*“For a lot of people, not registering to vote can be a form of protest” (CSG participant)*

*“Why would I engage in a system that doesn't work for me?” (CSG participant)*

Participants highlighted that there could be groups of people from the same ethnic minority groups living in the same LA displaying different levels of engagement. For example, within a Sikh community there were different groups who emigrated from different countries and who have different perspectives on integration, registration and democratic participation.

## **Language**

Participants felt that citizens who had English as a second language were less likely to be registered. Language barriers heightened the general sense that some people from particular ethnic minority groups could not comprehend the benefits of voting, nor how to access the

services. For example, a LA participant noted that in their view the engagement gap widened as candidates did not speak their language and communications were not translated correctly, if at all. Linked to this, paper forms and materials were likely to be ignored or completed incorrectly due to low English literacy skills. These language barriers were seen to cut across ethnic minority groups such as:

- people from the Roma community, and from the Irish traveller community (who would speak English proficiently, but would have low written literacy levels);
- the Chinese people (who have been flagged as potentially taking longer to become proficient in English due to the substantial differences between the two languages); and
- generally older individuals (first generation who did not learn English as a first language), and 'newer' immigrants.

Participants thought, amongst those not fluent in English, there was a general lack of understanding of the specific terminology used in the registration process, as well as a generally lower understanding of the other services they needed to engage with.

*"There needs more investment in getting language interpreters and training on IT and literacy skills to allow people to register to vote online" (CSG participant)*

### **Knowledge of democratic processes**

Participants noted that a lack of knowledge in the democratic process and wider political landscape prevented registration. This was linked to other barriers, including disengagement and language. For one LA participant in a year where there was no national or local election it was difficult to increase knowledge of the registration process. Participants working for LAs felt that those who were not registered did not know enough about the registration process, the details they needed to register such as their National Insurance number (raised in particular amongst younger groups), how it allowed them to get their voices heard, and that they thought the registration process was more difficult than it actually was.

*"It's probably (...) not knowing enough about the registration process and how easy it can be, maybe people think it takes longer than it actually does" (LA participant)*

Overall, lack of knowledge exacerbated confusion. When exploring what was driving this, a specific LA identified a lack of integration with the wider community affecting people from Nepali and Polish backgrounds in their area. Another CSG participant noted that in their experience, immigrants from mainland China specifically faced long term barriers given they had to understand a democratic system substantially different to the one that had experienced before. In general, participants also mentioned how people struggle to see how voting in national elections translates into changes in their local area.

Those interviewed highlighted that some citizens would get confused about which elections they were eligible to vote in. This in particular was noted amongst Commonwealth and European citizens.

Moreover, participants mentioned that citizens could also become confused with the different forms they receive over the course of an election cycle (e.g. Household Enquiry Forms and Invitations to Register forms), which could look similar to someone not familiar to them, and meant that some individuals remained unsure if they needed to complete both. Working through this took up a lot of staff time, who could also be unaware of particular unregistered 'groups' in their area.

## Online-registration details and record matching

More specifically issues around language were highlighted for the online registration services. Some people from Muslim, Sikh, Spanish and Portuguese backgrounds and who were eligible to register were more likely to fail the verification stage due to having multiple surnames and/or special characters (e.g. hyphens), but being used to recording different versions of their surnames for different services. This meant their details would not match the current details held on the DWP database and hence they failed the data match step. In these particular examples, this would trigger an evidence letter being sent to the individual, asking them for additional information to enable them to be registered, which would sometimes not be understood given the existing language barriers. This call to action could be ignored as the person would also assume they had filled the online form in correctly given they used a version of their name they go by routinely.

More generally, there was a sense that online methods for registration were a barrier themselves due to lack of technology knowledge for some people.

## Solutions

The following section explores participants' experience of, and potential solutions to, tackling the barriers that have been outlined in the sub-headings above.

### What worked well

When participants discussed the solutions or interventions they had implemented, some common themes that were perceived as working well emerged. What worked well will be discussed generally in this section, but it was important to note in their view that participants working for CSGs and LAs noted that what could work for one group, might not work for another in the same way.

**Social media campaigns** were seen as a cost effective way to reach a particularly younger audience of voters. Emphasis was placed on the social media being engaging to its audience by employing eye catching branding or short videos rather than bland information pieces. It was noted that in a climate of decreasing funding, social media communications were likely to be a fruitful option for both CSGs and LAs to promote registration. Whilst being more expensive and time consuming, face-to-face engagement for older generations who might not use social media channels was also identified as vitally important.

**Engaging people directly through particular issues** relevant to them was considered a valuable technique for securing the attention of particular groups. For example, the coverage of the Windrush generation was suggested as an issue that could potentially galvanise a particular community to register to vote. It was suggested that material used to encourage registration could hinge on particular issues of interest to make voting feel relevant to under registered groups generally.

*"If you find an issue that a group cares about, it makes it slightly easier to secure that buy-in" (CSG participant)*

Often, voter registration drives were seen to be more effective when the **source of the engagement was a community figure or organisation that was trusted amongst the specific community**. This was often where participants working for LAs and CSGs saw their greatest synergy, with CSGs being in a better and more trusted position to deliver voter registration messages the LAs might want to communicate. If the LAs had access to trusted advocates for a community within their organisation then this could be done by the LA themselves, though this was often not the case.

*"I think they (CSGs) should play the lead role, in that you're not going to do this without the community trusting the organisation or person who's delivering it" (CSG participant)*

CSGs reported that a **two-way discussion that involved the target under-registered group and local/central government representatives** was a valuable way to ensure the under registered group felt heard. Suggested initiatives included running workshops/insight sessions with local MPs or councillors or the under-registered group themselves drafting a manifesto that could then be responded to by MPs for example. This discussion was seen as a general democratic engagement activity rather than a specific register to vote drive. It was noted that spaces where engagement activities occur should be accessible to as many people as possible and reflect the topics being discussed. For example, one CSG noted that women might not be able to enter mosques all the time so is there opportunity to run the engagement activities in other spaces too.

### What did not work well

When discussing what did not work well in encouraging voter registration, the timing of engagement was raised regularly. Participants noted that in their view citizens often felt **engagement in the run-up to a specific vote did not feel genuine**, resulting in group members feeling that they were just being used for their vote. There was a place for canvassing close to elections but doing so without any engagement outside of these times was not perceived as effective or genuinely democratically inclusive. This behaviour also had the potential to drive non-registration as a political standpoint, as particular groups within a community felt they were only engaged around election time and are not involved otherwise. This was particularly likely amongst groups with a mistrust or scepticism surrounding central government.

*“I just don’t appreciate it when people are asking people to register to vote just because there’s an election coming up” (CSG participant)*

Participants working for LAs reported that **not having access to data on ethnic minority voter registrations and lack of resources at certain pinch points** within the year prevented them from achieving democratic engagement goals. Participants reported that, in the run up to elections, outreach officers were often drawn into the operations of running elections rather than fulfilling their role as outreach officers. This was posed as a capacity issue with the suggested solution of having further funding to employ more staff.

Finally, leafleting was raised as a common method of promoting voter registration. Whilst common, concerns were raised that **leafleting might not be effective** as they are easy to ignore and might not be particularly engaging.

### Examples of specific interventions

A number of specific methods for engaging ethnic minority groups who might be under registered were suggested by participants working for CSGs and LAs. The listing below details methods both already used and suggested during the research:

- Building relationships to overcome barriers

Emphasis was placed on building relationships with ethnic minority groups in a holistic way, not simply in the run-up to elections. Specific suggestions included LAs working with CSGs to gain traction within a community, and communicating their registration efforts through them. A two-way dialogue between the under-registered group and local/central government was seen as advantageous. Emphasis should be placed on building trust between the government and ethnic minority groups that might not yet exist.

*“It’s a two-way process, you need MPs, local elections, councillors engaging the communities” (CSG participant)*

- Identifying effective gatekeepers to groups

Effective gatekeepers to groups should be identified within CSGs as they are trusted sources of information and points of engagement for people from ethnic minorities. It was raised that these individuals within the CSG sector may be more capable of reaching out

and connecting with groups within a community than LAs and should therefore be utilised as a conduit for information. People from minority groups are less likely to listen to an authority figure that they did not trust or understand, as such the source of encouragement to for registration was crucial, and CSG leaders are trusted and accepted members of the group.

- Direct “on the spot” registration drives

Direct registration drives aim to register people on the spot, at the point of being engaged with voter registration. Examples of this included a bus that was driven around the country with tablets where people could register to vote there and then, and with engaging material on why they should vote. Others included asking people to use their own devices to register at community meetings or events. Registration drives should also target their efforts to forums where people who might not present in other forums in the community might present, such as coffee mornings at local schools.

For one LA hosting voter registration surgeries within the target community during the canvass and ahead of the registration deadline provide valuable returns. In that community, members could check there and then if they were registered and update their details accordingly. In this case the LA worked with a CSG - showcasing the impact of collaboration when providing solutions.

- Democratic education

Participants working for CSGs mentioned that an important challenge facing under registered groups was lack of understanding or appreciation of the democratic process. A specific solution to this was posed as democratic education. This featured as both an aspiration and something some participants were already actively engaged in. Suggestions were made that this democratic education should support a broader narrative of civil inclusion starting from a young age that would result in the development of democratic engagement in the community.

*“By the time minority teenagers come up to voting age, many are deeply cynical” (CSG participant)*

Education was also seen as a valuable way to increase motivation to vote, as knowing the value of voting would be a motivator to register. This point was raised specifically for individuals who had emigrated from a country where democracy was not prevalent and could be used to combat both knowledge barriers and lack of interest in voting. The potential for LAs to collaborate with CSGs, schools, and colleges to address the lack of understanding and aid peer-to-peer learning was raised by one LA as an important solution to encourage.

- Election material accessibility and translation<sup>1</sup>

Translation of election material into languages other than English was employed by both CSGs and LAs in order to engage those with English as a second language. This was seen as a relatively standard intervention by most, but some caveats were raised. In order to be effective, the translation must be accurate and accessible. Examples were given of poor translations being very difficult to understand for native speakers of that language - it is not as simple as using an online translator to translate word for word. Furthermore, written material might be inaccessible to particular groups of people where English was spoken proficiently, but they lacked high literacy rates (as was the case in some traveller communities). These groups were likely to respond better to face-to-face interventions.

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<sup>1</sup> Translating official material does not reflect current government recommendations. Participants from both LAs and CSGs, however, discussed this topic and as such main findings are reported.

- Using media outlets strategically

The use of social media to engage voters, particularly younger voters, was raised as a cost effective way to engage ethnic minorities. Younger voters had been particularly engaged by videos in the past on popular online video sites. Beyond the popular UK media channels it was raised that country or region specific social media platforms also exist, and they may not have been considered for engagement efforts. These platforms could be used to specifically target people from some ethnic minority groups (e.g. WeChat for Chinese communities was mentioned as an example). Beyond social media, it was raised that ethnic media (TV or radio, particularly mentioned as being popular with Asian groups) could be used to reach more people.

Tailoring the use of more mainstream messaging services to suite the intended audience was also perceived to be effective. One LA participants used WhatsApp, YouTube, and Facebook Messenger to share messages about Voter Registration deadlines and Canvass returns with new migrant communities, and those who had English as a second language.

- Voter registration tracking

An important point raised on voter registration drives were the challenges in tracking of outcomes and impacts of work undertaken by CSGs or LAs. When activity to encourage voter registration occurred, whether that be through face-to-face engagement, social media campaigns or TV advertising, there was no way of assessing the direct impact of that particular intervention on the size of the electoral register. A potential solution that was suggested was to provide tracking or referral codes that could be inputted at the point of voter registration by the citizen, and that would help in identifying whether they had been encouraged to vote by a particular campaign or communication.

*“The hard part for us on that actually is when we’ve done it on social media is (that) we know how many people have clicked through, but not how many people registered” (CSG participant)*

- Registration application for smartphones/tablets and other channels

An intervention that was found by a LA participant to be ineffective at encouraging voter registration was a voter registration app for smartphones/tablets. The app reminded individuals to register to vote, but it was, disappointingly, not effective at encouraging voter registration. The LA that trialled the app believed that the reason for this was that the app only did one thing, remind people to register, and it was therefore considered relatively unimportant and potentially a waste of valuable storage space on the user's device and was therefore deleted.

- Student registration

One LA participant reported that a particular university known to them had set up a registration enrolment system that used the data gathered from students during their registration for University. This system was seen as very effective and presented an interesting case study of providing synergy between existing systems to facilitate voter registration processes. They noted that once the information was gathered from the students to register them in their University course, consent was sought to use this same information for voter registration purposes. As nationality was already collected, this system was able to identify which elections Commonwealth or EU students were eligible to vote in, and register them only for elections they were able to vote in.

- Universal automatic enrolment was also raised by *one* LA participant as a potential solution to maximise voter registration. However, it was caveated with an understanding that this would be a politically noticeable and salient policy measure if ever introduced in the future.

## Capability and forward look

Suggestions on interventions to increase voter registration centred on the roles of key stakeholders in the process of voter registration. Participants were asked for suggestions on the roles and responsibilities they saw Cabinet Office, CSGs and LAs going forwards. A summary of these suggestions are given in the sub-headings below.

### Cabinet Office

Cabinet Office, and the government generally, was viewed as vital in coordinating and sharing best practice to increase voter registration amongst ethnic minority groups. This role could be fulfilled by sharing best practice guidance gathered from research such as the research detailed in this report as well as from experience working with various councils. Cabinet Office was also cited as a valuable resource to connect LAs, CSGs, and other key stakeholders to discuss voter registration issues and draw as many relevant stakeholders as possible into the effort.

The provision of dedicated training and workshops by Cabinet Office was also raised as a suggestion. This training should be aimed at upskilling LA outreach officers or community leaders to better equip them to support voter registration.

Funding was identified as under the remit of Cabinet Office. Participants working for CSGs and LAs mostly considered themselves underfunded, and they believed efforts in these areas would require a funding commitment from Cabinet Office.

### Civil Society Groups

Participants working for CSGs reported a range of roles they saw themselves performing, with some viewing themselves as not being involved in voter registration at all, to some envisaging themselves as taking a lead role in voter registration efforts. Participants working for CSGs saw themselves as valuable conduits for information. They felt that their status as trusted community advocates could enable them to provide voter registration information for people from ethnic minorities. They also raised that they would have access to people who might not present in other aspects of civic life and were thus hard to reach by LAs. Participants working for CSGs could also flag to LAs where they identify low levels of voter registration, in order for the LA to target its efforts more effectively.

### Local Authorities

LAs deemed themselves responsible for maintaining and updating the electoral register within their local area, and were therefore clearly responsible for voter registration efforts. Participants working for CSGs believed that LAs should engage with them more to work together on voter registration. Local councillors were also cited as valuable representatives for local government to reach out to people from ethnic minority groups that might be disengaged.

## Conclusions

This research has explored the varying and complex barriers citizens from ethnic minority groups may face in registering to vote, and it is a valuable contribution to the existing knowledge in the area. Participants offered their views and experiences of how these barriers operate, and what seems to work best to address those.

While findings reflect the views of those who participated in the interviews only and cannot be used to generalise the wider population, the in-depth information collected and reported could be used to inform the democratic engagement debate.



The main findings are summarised as follows:

- Participants working for LAs had a range of experience and resources. Having spoken to multiple LAs there appeared little consistency in role, responsibilities, or titles when exploring democratic engagement and registration.
- Participants working for CSGs also had varying roles and responsibilities. Some related specifically to registration (and democratic engagement), whilst others had a broader remit. Some represented a specific ethnic minority or social group, whilst others supported and raised the concerns of multiple ethnic minorities.
- Challenges for both LAs and CSGs in achieving their objectives were generally around resourcing, reacting to change, and providing long term change in citizens' sentiment towards voter registration.
- Current barriers to registration were explored, and many were found to interact with a number of factors, and not just with ethnicity. Moreover, many barriers were found to affect multiple ethnic groups.
- The barriers highlighted in this research were related to: age and generational differences, housing, economic and social disparity, faith and religious spaces, apathy and lack of representation, language skills, knowledge, and specifically within the online registration process.
- Solutions, again, were identified as being applicable across different groups, despite having only being trialled to a specific group in a specific area only. Solutions that worked included effective use of social media, engaging people directly on particular issues, working with community members/ figures who were established and trusted, and creating opportunities for discussion between the citizen and local/central government.
- Solutions that were perceived to not be as effective, either in terms of increasing registration and ensuring a legacy of democratic engagement, were those that occurred in the run up to an election only, thus feeling disingenuous to the people approached. Lack of data, specifically related to ethnic minorities, compounded the inability for solutions to be better designed or delivered. Generic leafleting was also not considered effective.
- The future role of Cabinet Office was considered, as was the role LAs and CSG could take forward. Cabinet Office was thought to be best placed to deliver oversight and share best practice. Cabinet Office was also encouraged to introduce and help foster networking across those working within LAs and CSGs.

## Glossary

Table 3: List of terms of reference

Term	Definition
AEA	Association of Electoral Administrators
BAME	Black Asian and Minority Ethnic
BME	Black and Minority Ethnic
CSG	Civil Society Group
ESOL	English for Speakers of Other Languages
IER	Individual Electoral Registration
LA	Local Authority
MTO	Multiple tenancy occupancy

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