

Speech: Making science work, together: how can we build the best possible future for science, research and innovation in the UK?

Thank you for inviting me here to Culham today. On a chilly day, it's a pleasure to visit what Ian Chapman tells me is hottest place in the solar system! And this isn't the only superlative that Culham can claim. The Joint European Torus is one of the most impressive international scientific facilities not just in the UK, but perhaps in the world. It symbolises the application of world-leading research and engineering to tackle one of the world's greatest challenges: the challenge of clean energy. At the same time, it's providing the skills our country needs for the future, training both the next generation of nuclear researchers and apprentices for businesses across Oxfordshire and beyond. What could be a better place to give my first speech on science, research and innovation?

I feel very fortunate to be Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation. Several of my predecessors have said they felt it was the best job in government. It has a special significance for me because I began my career as a historian: I profoundly believe in the importance of research. I recognise the joy, and the occasional frustrations, of the pursuit of knowledge. And I deeply respect the passion that drives people to dedicate their lives to it.

Science, research and innovation represent this country's best hope for the future. From an economic point of view, scientific developments underpin prosperity and growth and help create rewarding, high-wage jobs in every part of the UK. From a societal point of view, they offer ways to tackle the grand challenges of the future. And crucially, they are valuable in their own right. Pushing the boundaries of knowledge, seeking to understand the universe, the human race, our past and our future – these are all things we should be proud to invest in.

I'm proud of Britain's world-leading scientific and technological heritage. And of our wider strengths: the invaluable work done in the arts, humanities and social sciences; the ground-breaking interdisciplinary research that goes on in our universities; and the R&D done outside academia – in businesses, independent research institutes, charities and public labs.

Today, here at Culham, I will be visiting a remarkable firm called Reaction Engines that is designing a new type of engine called SABRE, which could revolutionise air and space travel and make it possible to fly from the UK to Australia in just four and a half hours. The development of the engine, which has had £60 million in backing from the UK Space Agency and £50 million from the private sector, is a clear example of the UK being at the forefront of technological and scientific discovery, and exemplifies the aims of the

government's modern Industrial Strategy.

There is no better backdrop to talk about my priorities and ambitions for science, research and innovation in the UK, and how we can work together to make it a reality.

Priorities

I believe there are two overarching priorities for UK science and research in the year to come.

The first is the most urgent: ensuring, as the UK leaves the European Union, we have the right relationship with European research programmes and with the wider world of science and research.

The second may be less urgent, but it is no less important. How we chart a path to an economy that invests more in science, research and innovation, and puts R&D at the heart of our economy.

This second goal may seem to some to be a distraction from the issue of Brexit. But it is crucial to the future not only of science and research in the UK, but to our wider destiny as a country. And we would be unwise to put it off.

The decisions we take now, ahead of the Spending Review later in the year, will be crucial to our ability to invest more in R&D, and to crowd in investment from business and from overseas.

Today I'd like to talk about these two priorities in turn.

Brexit and the future of UK research

First, the urgent question that is on so many of our minds: the question of the UK's place in the global research community as we prepare to leave the EU.

My thinking on this is guided by an old conservative principle: the idea of Chesterton's Fence. It was 90 years ago that GK Chesterton came up with this warning to political reformers: never tear down a fence, he said, until you understand why it was there and what its purpose was. This is especially pertinent today as we inch towards Brexit.

With this in mind, I've been grateful to the researchers, universities and National Academies who have taken the time to speak to me and my officials about this, as well as to the participants in the High Level Group on Brexit set up by my Ministerial predecessors.

The message I've had is clear: participation in EU framework programmes is vital to UK researchers and innovative firms for a host of reasons.

The money is one: through our EU membership, the UK gains £1 billion of R&D funding each year. The fact we are so successful is a measure of our

excellence. But I know it is not just about the money: Horizon 2020 connects our labs, universities and businesses to researchers across Europe. I also recognise the importance of the prestige of ERC grants or the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions.

I acknowledge the importance to Britain's labs and universities of researchers and staff from overseas, including from the EU. Indeed, I want to express my gratitude to the tens of thousands of researchers, whether from elsewhere in Europe or the wider world, who have chosen to make the UK their home, and bring their talents to work here.

Leaving the EU with a deal remains our top priority and the PM has been clear that we want to have the option to associate to future EU programmes including Horizon Europe and the Euratom Research and Training Programme. But we are also preparing in the event of no-deal. The government's underwrite guarantee will cover the payment of awards for all competitive bids to EU funding programmes submitted before Brexit. We've taken steps to ensure that this will work as smoothly as possible if it needs to, notably with the UKRI grant registration portal that was set up in September and which already has 5,000 registrations. I urge all researchers working on EU-funded projects to make sure their project is signed up.

I've heard loud and clear the message that leaving the EU presents unique challenges to science, research and innovation in the UK. So, I ask you and your fellow researchers and innovators to work with me to deliver a Brexit that works for your sector, and to help design the UK's post-Brexit relationship with the EU that builds on our scientific strengths and ingenuity.

At the same time, we continue to strengthen our relationships with researchers across the world. As I announced earlier this week, we are investing more than ever in partnerships with both the leading science and innovation nations and with the developing world. Joint projects which bring together the best with the best enable us to further our ambitions under the modern Industrial Strategy and to tackle the global challenges which affect the poorest and threaten the future prosperity and security of us all. To support such joint ventures, we will build upon our global strategic partnerships at government level, for example with the US, Canada, Israel and China – the latter of which I intend to visit in the coming months to progress our Joint Science, Technology and Innovation Strategy.

Making 2.4% target a reality

My other priority for the coming year is how we ensure a bright future for R&D in the UK. In particular, how we deliver the commitment this government has made to increase the amount the UK invests in R&D to 2.4% of GDP by 2027, and 3% in the longer term.

Measuring R&D in percentages of GDP is perhaps not the most vivid way to capture the wonders of science, the power of technology, or the ingenuity of innovation. But the change it will make will be truly transformational. 2.4% of GDP may sound like a dry statistic: but if we can realise it, it will

represent national renewal. Increasing our R&D investment to 2.4% is equivalent to around 3 new GlaxoSmithKlein and 4 new Rolls-Royces and 5 new Unilevers. This will help keep the UK's economy competitive, and create good, meaningful jobs and prosperity across the country.

It will also help us make great strides to tackle the big societal challenges facing Britain and the world at large.

But reaching the 2.4% target must not be an end in itself. It is the opening of a new chapter for UK R&D and the cornerstone to building a great future based on the collective strength of science, engineering, technology, the arts, humanities and social sciences.

Just this week, we have seen an extraordinary project announced by the University of Strathclyde with the potential to help patients suffering from osteoporosis. Experts will use technology originally used to help measure the collisions of black holes in space to vibrate stem cells in people's bones to turn them into new bone. This is an example of government funded, interdisciplinary research having real world benefits to help people living, longer, healthier lives.

On Tuesday, we also announced 28 new international research projects, backed by £279 million of government funding. Many of these projects are led by experts in UK universities and tackle global challenges, from reducing the impact of oceans pollution, to controlling the spread of infectious diseases.

The work of the UK Atomic Energy Authority here at Culham is a great example of what we want to achieve. World class science, tackling a big global challenge, deeply embedded in the real world and in its community. I'm especially glad that the government has committed to double down on our ambition when it comes to nuclear fusion, committing £20 million to begin development of a new UK based Nuclear Fusion reactor, STEP the Spherical Tokamak for Energy Production, paving the way to practical, energy-producing fusion power.

The UK already leads the world in innovative, compact fusion devices; the Duke of Cambridge turned on the UK's upgraded fusion test reactor, the Mega-Amp Spherical Tokamak, just last October. The work of UKAEA here at Culham will help make British fusion power a reality – this kind of national endeavour is a great example of the vision we need to pursue to deliver the 2.4% R&D target.

In the coming months, we will be developing and publishing our roadmap on how to reach the goal of investing 2.4% of GDP in R&D. We have already shown that we are serious: the £7 billion of additional funding we have announced in recent years represents the biggest increase in public R,D&I funding for four decades.

I want us to go even further. Making the 2.4% target a reality will be a top priority for me in the coming year, as we manage our departure from the EU and agree the terms of the Spending Review that will dictate public investment over the coming years.

A few principles will guide my thinking here.

The first is the right public investment. While it is too early to pre-judge the results of the Spending Review, analysis by both my own officials and by others, including the National Academies, shows that meeting 2.4% of GDP will require significant increases in public investments in R&D across the UK.

OECD statistics show that the UK's mix of public to private R&D is relatively strong: for every pound of public R&D we fund, the private sector funds around £2.60. This compares favourably with many other rich countries: it is slightly more than Germany and Finland, and quite a bit more than Canada, France or the Netherlands, but somewhat behind that in the USA or Switzerland.

An important takeaway from this is that even if the ratio of private to public contribution were to increase to that of the US or Switzerland, but public investment kept at the same level as a proportion of GDP, we would still be some way from meeting the 2.4% target. This means that to meet the target, an increase in public investment will almost certainly be required. This is the case I will be making to the Treasury, and I'd call on everyone who cares about the health of research and innovation in the UK to work with me to do so.

Yet, it is also clear from the statistics that the public sector cannot meet the target on its own. Innovation and R&D happen in an ecosystem, where government, academia, businesses, and other institutions all have complementary roles to play.

We will only meet the target if businesses and charities also increase their investment in innovation. That's why we have been working and will continue to work with businesses to identify what policies will help them commit to investing in R&D across the UK in the decade to come. This is also why we have developed new funding streams to back important and impactful work, including the Industrial Strategy Challenge Fund and the Strategic Priorities Fund, which support research with the potential to transform the economy and the world.

The willingness to invest in innovation will also be determined by the quality of our institutions, the relationships between them and the way we approach the culture that underpins them.

For example, how we can ensure greater access to research careers. How we can ensure the UK's research community leads the world on research integrity. How we will make sure we adopt digital technologies to do better research. How we will assess and manage research effectively. And how we can build the right links between the worlds of research and practice, and between science and industry.

In this respect, the establishment of UK Research and Innovation, planned and launched by two of my predecessors, will be vital.

UKRI are in a position to use analysis and the wealth of data they possess to

work with researchers, businesses and policy makers to understand where our research and innovation strengths are, how our interventions are enabling the growth of high-tech businesses, and how we are delivering against our four Grand Challenges.

UKRI also has the potential to tackle the cross-cutting issues that will determine the health of the UK research and innovation system in the years to come.

One of these is research integrity. If we are relying on research to boost our economy and tackle societal challenges, we need to know the system is working. Research that is not replicable or that fails to meet ethical standards is not just bad in itself: it is a waste of resources that could have contributed to the common good.

Similarly, we need to ask ourselves whether we are making the most of our talent. Recent economic research has documented the phenomenon of “Lost Einsteins” – people who could have been researchers or inventors but who seem, by reason of background, to have missed out on the opportunity. We also hear accounts of those driven out of promising research careers by harassment or bullying. These issues matter both for their own sake – as they are the kind of “burning injustices” this government has set out to tackle – and because tackling them will make for better science and research, from which society at large will benefit.

Finally, UKRI should work toward making sure the benefits of research and innovation are felt widely across the country and across society. This is partly a matter of involving the public effectively in the processes by which decisions about science and research are made. In an age when technologies from AI to robotics are raising big social questions, public engagement is important both from an ethical point of view and from a democratic one.

It also has a bearing on where UKRI makes investments. Historically, public research funding has been concentrated in particular places, notably the Golden Triangle between Oxford, Cambridge and London. It is right that we fund excellence and support successful clusters. But we need to make sure we recognise the potential of other areas and the case for investing in them. That’s why we recently launched the first round of the Strength In Places Fund, to back excellence broadly across the UK.

Another necessary complement to a strategic UKRI is the diversity of funding at the institutional level, including the charitable sector. With this in mind, I recognise the great value of Quality Related (QR) funding, and the role it plays in both building research capability across the disciplines and in providing additional sources of intelligence in our funding system.

I will be working closely with UKRI to make the most of their potential – and aiming to make sure they become recognised as one of the world’s great funders of research and innovation, and a lynchpin in a successful knowledge ecosystem.

So, I’d like to finish with an appeal to anyone dedicated to the pursuit of

knowledge.

We have the opportunity to make a step-change to the world of science, research and innovation in the UK – with more investment, better training, and a renewed focus on changing the world. To do that, we need to work together, both to make the case for investment, and to make sure that investment has the greatest possible effect. The next few months may be a time of political uncertainty. But if we work together, the best days for research and innovation in the UK could well be ahead of us.

Speech: Lead Commissioner Sara Khan on the work of the Commission

Thank you Fiyaz for inviting me to speak on this important issue.

I also want to thank you for all that you do in challenging extremism, often at great expense to yourself.

I know how hard you work. Your commitment is nothing short of inspirational.

I also know how difficult it has been for you – the threats, abuse and hatred you receive from all sides.

Thank you for all that you do.

It is exactly one year today since my appointment as Lead Commissioner.

I didn't realise at the time that 24 January is also national compliment day.

I wasn't the only one.

The Home Office had barely made the announcement when the calls came for me to resign.

Racist and misogynistic abuse was unleashed on social media, including sadly from my fellow Muslims. Disinformation and outright lies circulated in the press.

Fiyaz asks if we're winning the battle against extremism.

I'm still here one year later – and I'll go on to talk about the work I have done and am about to do.

I want to begin by saying above all what gives me the strength is the courage I see all around me.

I want to tell you about an event I attended last week.

Golders Green Mosque was planning to host an exhibition about the 71 Albanian Muslims who had protected Jews during the Holocaust.

It's a wonderful, yet little known story of bravery and courage.

Sadly, a small yet loud group of Jews and Muslims did not want the exhibition to go ahead.

The Mosque came under intense pressure and the exhibition was cancelled.

To many of us, it felt as if those who wanted to burn bridges and build walls had won.

However, a small handful of activists were determined to not give in.

So, they put on the exhibition, called Love Thy Neighbour, at Eton Road Mosque in Redbridge last week.

Despite attempts to intimidate the mosque, the event was a massive success.

I want to share with you the words of the Chairman, Mr Bashir Chaudhry, a grandfather, who like my dad came to this country in the early 1960s – he said:

This exhibition opened my eyes to how Jews and Muslims worked together in that difficult time. For the last couple of weeks, I've had emails and calls saying I shouldn't be hosting this event in a Muslim centre. I said to them 'no YOU are wrong'.

I doubt Mr Chaudhry would ever describe himself either as a counter extremist or as fighting the battle against extremism.

But his civility, dignity and refusal to give in, in the face of intimidation is what countering extremism looks like.

And if that wasn't enough to qualify him as a hero, he also managed to arrange the best curry spread I've had for a long time.

I want to share what I've learnt in the last 12 months about extremism and the many people, like Mr Chaudhry, bravely pushing back.

I launched the independent Commission on Countering Extremism last March.

My priority was to engage widely.

I've sat down with nearly 500 people from across the country; both with critics and supporters alike.

From teachers to youth workers, academics to government officials, police to campaigners and tech companies to faith leaders.

I've visited 14 towns and cities across England and Wales – hearing first-

hand the impact that extremism is having on individuals, communities and wider society.

Yesterday I was in Cleveland in the North East, speaking to the police, the council and civil society groups who shared what extremism looks like in their area. They are worried about growing Far Right extremism.

I've also carried out polling of people's views on extremism.

We've conducted a review of academic literature on extremism.

We've been examining the latest data on hate crime, Prevent referrals to Channel, social media trends and other indicators.

I want to share with you four messages coming out of my early work.

The first is that there is widespread concern about growing extremism, intimidation and intolerance in our country.

Our polling showed that 73% of Britons are worried about rising levels of extremism.

In every area I've visited, examples of extremism and hostility were shared.

The harms of extremism go wider than terrorism.

Academic research points to the breakdown of community cohesion and reduced trust in our institutions, social exclusion and isolation.

But there is also the harm to individuals – the suppression of people's human rights, the denial of one's humanity and freedom.

Youth workers have warned extremists are seeking to recruit young people not only through social media but in communities.

Charities have told me how repeated far right marches have left refugees too scared to leave their homes. These are people who've fled war torn countries because they were affected by extremism – only to be targeted by extremists of a different kind here.

Practitioners and Muslim groups have described to me how Far Right extremists are exploiting local tensions to evoke anti-Muslim hatred or conspiratorial anti-establishment sentiment.

I have heard how Islamist extremists claimed that the terror attack at Finsbury Park and even the fire at Grenfell Tower was an example of the West conducting its war against Islam and Muslims.

I've met people in faith communities, such as the Sikh community, who have been labelled a traitor because they are standing up to the religious fundamentalists in their own community.

These examples are just some of the warning signs I have seen.

But my second message is that we don't know the full scale of extremism in our country or the harms it is having.

When the Commission carried out its review of current academic literature, we were struck by not what we know about extremism, but in fact, the many things we don't know about extremism.

How much of a problem is extremism in schools and in other regulated settings?

What is the size and influence of extremist groups?

What drives extremism in our country – whether at an individual, societal or institutional level?

How is extremism mainstreamed and normalised in our society? What positive role can media play?

What are the evolving tactics of extremists? We have seen they are increasingly becoming professionalised and are intellectualising extremism.

How they are exploiting social media to spread disinformation and conspiracy theories, mainstreaming and normalising their propaganda in wider society?

We need to understand what the most effective ways are to counter extremism.

What may work in one part of the country, may not necessarily work in another.

What may be effective in countering one form of extremism, may not have the same effect in countering another form of extremism.

What does countering extremism look like online?

We're at Twitter. Social media companies have stepped up their work to take down illegal terrorist material.

But what about the kind of content that concerns us all?

The kind of legal far right extremist content which radicalised Darren Osborne? Or the kind of legal extremist content that people like Anjem Choudary produced which helped radicalise hundreds if not thousands of people?

We are still grappling with how to deal with legal extremist content that is online.

We are seeking to answer some of these questions as part of our study into extremism in England and Wales.

The third message is about the good work being delivered by those countering extremism.

I've met so many inspiring and compassionate individuals who are challenging

hatred and championing equality, human rights and our fundamental freedoms.

Organisations – who despite the lack of funding are still pushing back against extremist groups in their area.

Young people who are passionate in advocating for diversity.

Councillors who are prepared to put their principles before political fall-out.

Faith leaders who are not afraid to challenge the extremists within their own community.

There are so many unsung heroes who care about our country, our communities and our democracy and are not prepared to stand by while extremists are actively propagating hatred and conspiracy theories.

That gives me hope and optimism.

Never under-estimate the power of an individual or a small group to bring about effective change.

In the North East I heard from one man who told me he had managed to stop a Free Tommy rally from being organised because he had convinced his mates – what Tommy Robinson really stood for. The effort and impact of just that one individual cannot be over-estimated.

My fourth message is that if a movement of people standing up to extremism and hatred is to thrive, we must address the fact that public debate itself is toxic, angry and polarised.

Too many people experience abuse, threats and intimidation across our country simply for standing up for what they believe in or for carrying out their daily business.

This toxic climate has become part of daily life for not just MPs like Anna Soubry but also for academics, activists and anyone who simply wants to share their opinion.

This is creating a chilling effect on freedom of expression and it is having an impact on our democracy.

This lack of civility in our country creates a climate favourable to extremists.

We all need to, as the Archbishop of Canterbury recently stated, learn to disagree well.

I believe that has to start with politicians from across the political divide. They need to set the highest of standards.

These are some of the challenges facing us in countering extremism today.

I believe we need a movement against hatred and extremism – a diverse

coalition of all those committed to championing our fundamental freedoms.

I want to give more people the confidence to speak out.

I want to give those on the frontline the confidence to navigate these complex issues – and policy makers the confidence to back them.

I want to give academics the confidence to dig into the issue of extremism without fear.

There is more that can be done to support – both financially and emotionally – organisations who are trying to push back.

Too many operate on a shoestring. That too was my experience when I used to run Inspire, a small counter extremism NGO. We never knew if we would exist by the end of the financial year, because we struggled for funding.

I want to give funders the confidence to back vital counter extremism work.

How do we do this?

My focus is to bring together a wide range of data and evidence – so we can have a civilised debate and make the case for this work.

That includes evidence from our public consultation – the first one ever on extremism.

I can reveal that we've already had more than 1500 submissions from across the country.

Thank you to everyone who has shared their experiences and views.

We want to hear from as many people as possible.

This is a unique opportunity to have your say on extremism and what we should do about it. I would really encourage you to respond to our call for evidence which ends on the 31st January.

But that's not all we are doing.

We are giving academics the chance to bid to write papers on extremism.

We have requested information from Government departments and regulators so that we can analyse data on indicators of extremism.

To understand the harms extremism is having in our country, we are organising workshops, visits and testimonies.

We have also begun work on a nationally representative survey on extremism.

I look forward to sharing our findings with you later this year.

I want to end by stressing that how we work is as important as what we work on.

Our work will be transparent, impartial and evidence-driven.

Extremists want to shut down debate – we have to let it flourish.

That is why we have to listen to differing views.

That is why we cannot shy away from difficult discussions.

We have to ask, in the current political climate, if extremists will exploit Brexit.

We met with experts and those on the ground earlier this month to start this very discussion.

We have to accept that there are many people who worry about the definition of extremism – that it may capture genuine protest or simply minority or unfavourable views that fall out of the mainstream.

That is why in our consultation we are asking if the government's definition is helpful – and if not what it should be.

Finally, my Commission is underpinned by human rights principles and a belief in equality.

As a long-standing counter-extremism campaigner and as someone who studied human rights, I recognise that states sometimes use the banner of "extremism" to silence legitimate dissenting voices.

I am very alive to this which is why the Commission has embedded the principles of human rights and equality in our work.

But what isn't often acknowledged enough is how extremists threatens the human rights of many – women, minority groups and others.

And make no mistake: if there is one thing extremists of all backgrounds and persuasions have in common – it is a fundamental opposition to the very notion of human rights and equality.

In conclusion: there is no doubt there are serious challenges facing us in our struggle against extremism.

These challenges are significant and grave.

In an era of polarisation and division, the rise of populism across the world, the influence of social media in spreading disinformation and fake news – we have our work cut out in pushing back against extremists who thrive in precisely such an environment.

But there is hope.

There are many of us who are committed to diversity, equality and mutual respect pushing back against those who are contributing to extremism.

All of us can and must play our part. It is on all of us to defend the

liberties, diversity and freedom that our country represents: the human rights that have been the bedrock of our democracy for centuries. Extremists seek to undermine our values, our society and our country. It is down to all of us to stand up and defend those values and our democracy.

Thank you.

[News story: Switzerland and UK to sign post-Brexit Insurance deal](#)

The insurance sectors of the UK and Switzerland are set to continue trading freely with one another after the UK has left the EU, thanks to an agreement signed today (25 January) at Davos by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Phillip Hammond, and President of the Swiss Confederation and Head of the Federal Department of Finance, Ueli Maurer.

The new arrangement will replicate the effects of the existing EU agreement with Switzerland, and is part of the UK's continued efforts to cement closer relationships with some of the world's most important financial markets as it prepares for a future outside of the EU.

The agreement will come into force when the current EU-Swiss Direct Insurance Agreement ceases to apply to the UK.

The signing of the agreement is part of a series of meetings the Chancellor is having with leaders at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland.

Despite its relatively small population, Switzerland is one of the world's most significant financial centres. In 2016, Swiss investment in the UK's financial services sector was over £11 billion, making the country one of the world's largest investors in UK finance – second only to the USA.

The UK-Swiss Direct Insurance Agreement, like the Direct Insurance Agreement with the EU, allows firms to branch into each other's jurisdiction with greater ease thanks to the mutual recognition of each other's Insurance regulations. It will therefore ensure continuity for UK and Swiss insurers to access each other's markets both now and in the future, consistent with the terms of the original EU-Swiss Direct Insurance Agreement.

Further information

In December last year HM Treasury agreed the terms of the US-UK Covered Agreement with the US Department of the Treasury and the Office of the US Trade Representative. The arrangement will provide continuity of the effects of the existing EU agreement with the US, once the UK leaves the EU.

Speech: Chloe Smith speech at SOLACE

Thank you very much indeed for asking me to be here today, it's an absolute pleasure to come back and see many of you and Louise thank you for the invitation.

It's very good to see a number of familiar faces in the room, but also I understand some new members, so I hope you all had a very good conference morning.

There is a lot that we do together, and first of all I would like to thank Dave Smith all of his work in the last year, and to welcome Louise to the role for Elections and Democratic Renewal. It's a role where I really hope we will be able to achieve together.

As the past few years have clearly demonstrated, facilitating and sustaining a flourishing democracy is a very important thing – it is essential that we all understand the weight behind all of our democratic decisions and that everyone has their say.

We all recognise our shared responsibility to inspire participation and tackle democratic exclusion among under-registered groups.

When I was here twelve months ago, I set out the approach the government is taking to these issues following the publication of our 'Every Voice Matters' Democratic Engagement Plan.

It was the first time government had announced a comprehensive strategy for addressing exclusion in our democratic system.

Today, we are publishing a ['One Year On' update](#), so I want to tell you what we have achieved, but also what we hope to do, to respect, protect and promote our democracy.

Because there is still so much more to do.

As I look at what's possible in the coming years, I know that we cannot achieve our aims alone.

Meeting the challenges that our democracy faces, and reaching the many different groups that we all must serve, requires us to work collaboratively with a range of experts across the public, private and third sector.

So today I have come here to ask you all for your continued commitment to helping citizens have confidence in our historic, strong and successful electoral system.

It is you who hold local knowledge and relationships. I really thank you for the tremendous work of your elections teams supporting their Electoral

Registration Officers and Returning Officers.

You do that hard work and I would love for that gratitude to be passed on to the teams behind you.

Local authorities – you and your teams – are the frontline of our democracy.

Our approach to democracy has to be one based on respect – underpinned by the principle of fairness, of course.

We believe everyone in this country should have confidence that their vote matters, that they are making a difference, and that their voice is being heard.

Votes of course should not carry any more weight for one than for another.

That is why the government is committed to making our democratic system fairer by supporting the independent and impartial reviews from the Boundary Commissions, which will deliver equal representation for voters across the UK at the next scheduled general election.

Channeling a culture of respect and inclusion should be a priority for anyone involved in the democratic sphere at this critical time.

For if we, at the forefront of the democratic agenda, do not promote a culture of respect – how can we expect those we serve to follow it?

As a Member of Parliament, I have been lucky enough to travel to places like Myanmar and countries in East Africa where they are only just beginning their journeys to full democracy.

As last year's Suffrage Centenary reminded us, the UK's democracy has come a long way.

But 100 years on since some women won the right to vote and 90 years since women received equal voting rights in this country, there is a lot more still to achieve.

I am playing my part in this journey by working to ensure that everyone understands and respects the need for debate that is robust and healthy.

At a time of rising levels of intimidation in public life, it's important we work to prevent this worrying trend from stopping talented people going into public service.

I think our politics will be the poorer if talented people do not get involved, whether as candidates or campaigners, or indeed in local authorities, because they see the unacceptable abuse hurled at those who do volunteer for public life.

That is why last year we launched a consultation on [Protecting the Political Debate](#) which sought views on new measures to tackle this growing trend. We are analysing the evidence that we received back from that consultation and I

look forward to publishing our response and next steps early this year.

Respect for our democracy is also rooted in the public having confidence that our processes and systems are secure – that elections will always take place on a level playing field. And so I take my responsibility to protect our democracy very seriously indeed.

We have taken action across a range of areas.

Part of the consultation I just touched on also looked at the requirement for digital campaigning material to include the details of who has produced it and paid for it.

We believe voters should be able to see which organisation or individual is targeting them, and thus be informed and empowered.

Protecting our democratic processes also means recognising the importance of cyber security – a point the newly appointed Government Chief Security Officer has made in a letter to the President of SOLACE this week.

My colleagues in the Government Security Group will also be providing much advice through the Local Government Association's weekly bulletin – which I hope you'll be able to see in the coming weeks.

All of us have an important role to play then, in protecting the operation of our elections from those who seek to undermine them.

For example, electoral fraud is not a victimless crime.

We must work together to stamp this problem out.

We can do so through a solution so simple it is already used by people everyday – and I'm referring to showing ID at the polling station. We do of course already use ID in many, many walks of life and showing ID to prove who you say you are before you vote is a common sense approach to tackling voter fraud.

Indeed, voters in Northern Ireland have been required to show a form of ID since 1985 without adverse effect on turnout or participation.

So, last May local authorities held Voter ID pilots in five local elections. Both our own evaluation and that of the independent Electoral Commission showed that the trials were a success. The overwhelming majority of people were able to cast their vote without any problems.

It is a real credit to the local authorities involved that their awareness-raising campaigns were effective in making voters aware of the change. So it's a big thank you to those Chief Executives and Returning Officers who helped deliver those five pilots last year. And thank you to those who have agreed to hold pilots again or for the first time.

I am delighted by the collaborative, supportive work between each pilot authority and my staff to ensure the success of the 2019 pilots. Doing so

will no doubt benefit you by improving your preparedness for national roll-out. It will also help us prepare for that moment because the more pilots and subsequent data we have to analyse and learn from, the better the final proposal for Voter ID will be. So I would urge everyone here to think about following in their footsteps by volunteering to pilot in future.

I do think this work is absolutely essential to be able to look those arriving at polling stations in the eye and tell them: 'your vote is yours and yours alone'. But we have to get it right, which is why I am also currently holding meetings with representative groups from a broad range of charities and civil society organisations.

My conversations with the Equality and Human Rights Commission, Stonewall, Shelter, Operation Black Vote and Age UK – to give some examples – will ensure that we fully understand the impact of voter ID and the needs of all voters in our country.

That positive engagement with groups which reflect our diverse society reflects our broader approach towards driving up participation. As well as respecting our democracy and protecting it, we must also promote it. We have made excellent progress in this area.

Reforms to our electoral registration system now completed have resulted in record levels of people registering to vote. Nevertheless, this year's Hansard Society Audit of Political Engagement showed that just a third of people believe they can affect political change by getting involved. So we must always be reminding ourselves that our democracy is only ever as strong as the people who are part of it. That's why I've made it my ambition to make the next general election more accessible.

As things stand, for example, there are just over one million people with a learning disability who are of voting age in the UK. I'm very concerned that less than a third of those are exercising their democratic right to vote – and I've been determined to do what I can to change this.

Last year we launched a [call for evidence on access to elections](#) and have since worked out a number of steps to improve the voting experience of disabled people.

We are making polling stations more accessible – physically speaking.

We are improving the accessibility of the Register to Vote website – including by introducing an 'Easy Read' guide on the homepage of the service to enable people with learning difficulties to apply online without so much trouble.

And we have updated the Certificate of Visual Impairment so that local authorities are better able to help those with sight loss register to vote and then vote at elections.

I would also say that disabled people are also not sufficiently represented in public office.

To help address this, in December 2018, government also launched the interim EnAble Fund for Elected Office. This is a £250,000 commitment to support disabled candidates – primarily for the forthcoming local elections in May. It will help cover disability-related expenses people might face when seeking elected office.

I really hope this money will encourage more disabled people to become candidates and enrich our public life as a result.

As a further example of opening up elections, we have changed the law, allowing anonymous voter registration to help protect survivors of domestic violence and others.

As you will know, we want to help make legislation match more closely to the way people need to make those requests.

Another group facing unnecessary obstacles to participating in our democracy are those UK nationals who live overseas – our expats.

We think that no matter how far you have travelled, participation in our democracy is still a fundamental part of being British.

This is why in Parliament we are supporting the Overseas Electors Bill, which will end the current 15-year time limit on British expats voting in UK Parliamentary elections, delivering on votes for life, and why we are pursuing bilateral arrangements with EU Member States – to secure the voting rights for UK nationals living in the EU and vice versa.

It is right that both sides of this are considered together – that is both UK citizens living abroad and EU citizens living in the UK.

It is right in this time of change that we provide certainty to EU citizens living here where we can – many of course who are citizens who play an active role in our society and our democracy.

So I can therefore confirm that EU citizens currently living in the UK will retain their voting and candidacy rights in the next local elections in May.

I have been working closely with my colleagues in other departments, and earlier this week we announced an agreement with Spain that will allow UK nationals living in Spain, and Spanish nationals in the UK, to continue to vote and stand in local elections.

This agreement is the first of its kind and it secures the democratic rights of over 300,000 UK nationals living in Spain – the country with the biggest population of British expats living in the EU.

One final area of progress I want to highlight is our proposed reform of the annual canvass, which will make the process easier for citizens, and for your teams.

It will deliver the most accurate electoral register to date, while saving £27 million a year.

I know that the current canvass process is seen by EROs and others as too paper-based, too prescriptive, and too complex.

I am aiming to modernise it, allowing for a data-led approach and giving EROs more flexibility over their use of communications channels – and to target your precious resources where it is most needed to the properties where household change has occurred.

My team will shortly be communicating plans for Local Authorities to start preparing to use their own data and to test the data match step in early 2020.

I encourage you to support your electoral services teams in accessing and using local data, whether it is local authority owned or third party, where they are keen to do so. Including local data in the data match test will provide important information on the accuracy and usefulness of those data sets. This will be highly beneficial when it comes to the full roll-out of canvass reform.

I hope to legislate to allow for the reformed canvass to be implemented in 2020.

We make these changes as part of our broader commitment towards promoting a more inclusive democracy.

The [Democratic Engagement Plan](#) that I was able to speech about last year, charted a course towards that goal by identifying and tackling barriers that prevent some people – particularly those in under-registered groups – from participating in our democracy.

The [update we will be publishing later today](#) sets out the government's future approach to democratic engagement – it outlines the role the government plays as a legislator, funder, convenor for registration activity and in promoting good practice.

I ask you – as leaders – to consider the significant role you can continue to play in sustaining a flourishing democracy, by encouraging improvement and building capability within your own organisations.

Good practice is at the heart of building capability.

I was pleased to begin to discuss this with Louise yesterday, and I am looking forward to continuing to work together to identify and promote good practice so that it becomes embedded in all of our teams.

Today's publication makes clear how government intends to convene the various parts of the electoral community to make best use of our evidence, skills, knowledge, and our resources.

I see that the Cabinet Office role includes supporting others' capability to lead and ultimately to act independently, to encourage people to register, to participate and to vote.

For instance, the Cabinet Office published details of what works on student registration; a brokering role that the government undertook as part of implementing the Higher Education and Research Act 2017.

The government will share more examples this year where we are best placed – for example we are leading on research on how to remove registration barriers for people who are homeless or move frequently. I really look forward to sharing the results of this.

But there is much to learn and benefit from at a local level. So let's do this together.

As part of this, I am pleased to launch the [Atlas of Democratic Variation](#) – a collection of maps which, for the first time in this format, displays the geographical data variations on electoral registration – and data relevant to that.

The project was a collaboration between government and the Office for National Statistics.

I hope that it allows EROs, you and your colleagues, the wider electoral community, democracy organisations and others to:

- examine the variations in the data, and
- seek to identify any trends or relationships between registration activity and population demographics, and use it to inform and support the development of your democratic engagement strategies

In other words, to get more people involved.

I don't see it as being used to evaluate EROs performance nor the quality of the registers, we encourage stakeholders and interested parties to examine the maps included in the Atlas, to reflect on how they can support their democratic efforts.

This publication also highlights our commitment to ensuring everyone can make their voice heard free from abuse, making voting easier and more accessible for vulnerable and under-registered groups, and introducing measures to protect electors' votes.

Government has a unique role to play in respecting, protecting and promoting our democracy.

I understand that in order for you to accommodate the very diverse needs of voters in your communities, there are certain things that only government can progress on your behalf.

Government naturally has a large impact in facilitating funding and promoting good practice.

We are working with counterparts in Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government to ensure that funding for delivery of elections at both local and national level is effective.

Also, only government, with the Parliament and the Devolved Administrations, can change the law. And I do hope to make the most important changes to keep our body of electoral law up to date and effective – even if I can't do all the change that some call for.

But such things form only part of the equation and together we are greater than the sum of our parts.

It is essential to me that government creates an environment in which democracy can thrive: one which enables our democratic partners – such as yourselves here today – to put your unique knowledge, skills and resource, to work for your voters.

My message to you today is that I am committed to working with all of you to respect, protect and promote our democracy.

I look forward to doing that and I thank you for having me today.

[Press release: Environment Secretary proposes tougher labelling laws for allergy sufferers](#)

Proposals to overhaul allergen labelling laws and give consumers clearer information on the food they buy have been unveiled by Environment Secretary Michael Gove.

Subject to a consultation launched today, food outlets selling pre-packaged food directly for sale could be required to follow new rules designed to give the UK's two million food allergy sufferers greater confidence in the safety of their food.

Under current rules, food prepared on the premise in which it is sold is not required to display allergen information on the package – but the proposed rules could go as far as seeing full ingredients labelling required by law.

The moves follow the tragic death of Natasha Ednan-Laperouse, the teenager who died after suffering an allergic reaction to a Pret a Manger baguette.

Environment Secretary Michael Gove said:

Natasha's parents have suffered a terrible loss, and I want to pay tribute to Nadim and Tanya for their inspirational work to deliver Natasha's law.

We want to ensure that labels are clearer and that the rules for

businesses are more consistent – so that allergy sufferers in this country can have confidence in the safety of their food.

Many businesses are already bringing changes on board independently, and in the meantime they should continue doing all they can to give consumers the information they need.

The proposed reforms cover labelling requirements for foods that are packed on the same premises from which they are sold – such as a packaged sandwich or salad made by staff earlier in the day and placed on a shelf for purchase.

Currently, these foods are not required to carry labels, and information on allergens can be given in person by the food business if asked by the consumer.

Food businesses and allergy sufferers are being invited to have their say on four options put forward to improve the way allergy information is provided for these foods, including:

- mandating full ingredient list labelling
- mandating allergen-only labelling on food packaging
- mandating ‘ask the staff’ labels on all products, with supporting information for consumers available in writing
- promoting best practice around communicating allergen information to consumers

Food Standards Agency Chairman Heather Hancock said:

It’s essential for those of us with a food allergy or intolerance to know that we can trust the food we eat. Accurate and reliable labelling is vital, and this consultation is firmly aimed at improving the confidence we have in it.

In recent years choice, trust and availability has really improved for people with food allergy. We want those improvements to continue, so it’s important that we hear from everyone affected, as part of this consultation. We’re determined to keep on making life better for you.

CEO of [Allergy UK](#), Carla Jones, said:

We welcome this announcement and the commitment shown by the Environment Secretary on this issue. At Allergy UK we believe that whilst those living with allergies must be vigilant on their own behalf, the broader food industry needs to do more than just the bare minimum when it comes to catering for the allergic community. We encourage all those living with allergies to engage with this consultation to ensure their views on this important issue are heard.

The Environment Secretary and Food Minister David Rutley [met allergen groups](#) and retailers late last year to discuss the proposed options around allergen labelling laws.

The Environment Secretary has also met the parents of Natasha Ednan-Laperouse to discuss their campaign for a change in food labelling laws.

A number of food businesses have already begun to implement changes to their provision of allergen information and the [Food Standards Agency](#) will continue to provide food businesses with guidance on allergens. In September the FSA launched Easy to Ask, a campaign to empower young people to ask food businesses about allergens when eating out so they can make safe food choices.

The consultation can be responded to on Defra's [gov.uk page](#).