

# Speech: Minister calls for evidence to improve the accessibility of elections

Thank you, Mark, for inviting me to today's meeting of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Learning Disability. As the Minister responsible for elections, it is very important to me that everyone who is eligible to vote is able to do so.

To play their part in choosing the person whom they believe will best represent their interests, whether as their Member of Parliament or local mayor or councillor or head of their police force. A thriving democracy depends upon the participation of all eligible electors.

To meet this important aim I have visited every region and nation of Great Britain to learn about the barriers that prevent certain groups in society including people who have a disability from participating in the democratic process. I want to find out how these identified barriers can be best overcome.

I have been very impressed by the enthusiasm for voting and level of understanding of its importance that has been told to me, including when I met with organisations who represent the interests of people who have a learning disability. These have included Mencap and, last month when I visited Brighton, Speak Out.

As a direct result of this wide engagement I have been able to push changes to improve the accessibility of elections.

At my request the Department of Health has recently made changes to the Certificate of Visual Impairment so it can now be used by local authorities to support blind and partially sighted people to vote at elections, once their consent has been provided.

The government is also making the process easier for disabled people to register to vote by undertaking an accessibility audit of the website, so the process for online registration is as user friendly as possible. This will include considering providing a facility to request that election materials are available in alternative formats from local authority electoral service teams.

I want to go further to strengthen our democracy and to ensure future elections are even more accessible to disabled people, and this is why today I have launched a Call for Evidence.

The Call for Evidence is asking for people to provide information that will:

- enhance the government's understanding of the experiences of disabled people in registering to vote and casting their vote.
- help identify if current mechanisms to support disabled people to participate in the democratic process are sufficient; and

- identify examples of good practice provided by Electoral Service Teams to disabled people at elections.

In partnership with the members of the Cabinet Office Accessibility Working Group which includes Mencap, the Association of Electoral Administrators and the Electoral Commission the Government will review the evidence we receive and produce a report of key findings and recommendations.

I would warmly welcome responses from all here today to this Call to Evidence – which is available in alternative formats including Easy Read – as part of the process to help ensure that every disabled person is able to have that equal chance, that equal right, to participate in our democracy, and to have their say.

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## [Speech: Sarah Newton speech at mental health and policing conference](#)

Thank you for inviting me to join you today.

First of all, I would like to pay tribute to Mr Herbert, I can't believe I'm the only person in the room that thought that was an incredibly powerful and moving account, which starkly brings home the devastating consequences for both the person in a mental health crisis, their loved ones and the professionals working in that environment, when systems just don't get it right and work as we all would wish.

And also to our keynote speaker, His Royal Highness, Prince William. Both himself, and his brother, have been highly influential in breaking taboos by speaking out about mental health and I think their willingness to talk openly about mental health issues is illustrative of a wider trend in society to tackle misplaced stigmas; helping individuals to seek help; and galvanising all of our commitment to improving responses to all those people suffering mental ill health.

I also commend the organisers of this event, for their hard work in putting all this together, enabling us to reflect on recent developments and some successes, but clearly as we heard so well this morning, there remains many challenges I know we would all want to face honestly, openly with vigour and work together to take on.

Now every day I know there are many, many police officers who refuse to turn their backs on those in need. I have seen this for myself out on the beat with officers in my own constituency. They work professionally and humanely to help individuals to the best of their ability – often going well beyond what might reasonably be expected of traditional police

Sometimes police will have to be involved in incidents involving mental ill health. Mental health conditions, often in combination with other issues such as substance misuse, can cause people to act irrationally and out of character, and it is very difficult for the police in that situation to identify what is going on and that at the root of that behaviour that person is actually very unwell. And it is very difficult for police officers to know what to do for the best in such circumstances both to protect the individual and the community.

It is not necessary to be an expert in this field to be aware of the very high, and increasing, demand for mental health services of all types. Members of this audience will know only too well, that the police can be asked to deal with a wide variety of cases involving people who are unwell and in distress.

We have taken a number of steps to better equip the police and criminal justice system in this regard – we've heard this morning of improvements to the Liaison and Diversion schemes for example. But the pressures on front line officers to make quick judgements and act appropriately cannot be overestimated.

As the Prime Minister has repeatedly said – we are clear that the police should not be expected to act in the stead of health professionals. They cannot be expected to do that satisfactorily – and it takes them away from their primary function of tackling crime. Nor can it be in the best interests of the people affected, who need quick access to professional mental health assistance.

There clearly remains much more to do to get this balance right. However, recent years have seen huge progress in the way in which we respond to those in crisis. In many cases the police have acted as a catalyst for changes that have occurred. And at local level they are often at the vanguard in driving innovation and solutions to local issues.

We've seen for example, seen dramatic reductions in the use of police cells as places of safety in the last few years, and a commensurate rise in the use of health based places and this has largely been achieved through determined, joint working at local level between the police and health partners. According to the 2015/16 police figures on the use of section 136, a handful of police areas have already managed to eliminate entirely, or almost so, reliance on police cells as places of safety and we expect further encouraging progress when the 2016/17 figures are published later this autumn.

To help maintain this, the government has already provided some £15 million of funding to 88 projects in local areas to invest in increasing the numbers of suitable places of safety. We have committed a further £15m to continue this work, and to explore innovative local ideas for maximising the provision of suitable safe places, working with a range of partners, including community and voluntary groups.

Changes to mental health legislation in the Policing and Crime Act – which we

expect to come into effect before the end of the year – are also designed to further improve our response to those in crisis. They offer local areas greater flexibility to adapt and cater to local needs, while reinforcing good practice. The goal is simply to ensure the most appropriate course of action in each case, and to achieve better outcomes for those in crisis as a result.

As we have heard today, amongst the more significant changes are the banning of the use of police cells as places of safety for those under 18 years of age, and there will be severe restrictions on their use in the case of adults.

We are also reducing the periods for which people may be detained pending a mental health assessment. And we are making more explicit the freedom of local areas to work creatively and in collaboration with a range of partners to develop networks of suitable places of safety – including outside traditional health settings.

We have heard of some great examples today of innovation and all local areas will need to take a careful look at their local provision, in the light of the new legislation, to ensure that it is good enough. They may also need to refresh their local joint working practices to reflect the need to act more quickly and collaboratively to provide the most appropriate help for people in crisis.

In the meantime, we do not count this as a ‘job done’. The government has made a clear commitment to continuing to improve mental health services – including but not limited to:

- investing a billion pounds in mental health services by 2020 to improve mental health support in the community; in Accident and Emergency Departments, and in crisis provision and treatment options both for adults and children
- implementing the recommendations of the Mental Health Taskforce review and its five year forward look
- and, will be reviewing the Mental Health Act as committed to in the Queen’s speech

As we all know, legislation alone is not the answer to the complex series of challenges posed by mental ill health. Nor can these be dealt with by any single organisation. In addition to personal health and well-being issues, mental ill health can affect matters as diverse as employment, having a decent home, education and family life. It can also increase an individual’s vulnerability to crime, illness, and social isolation.

Providing effective interventions and support in that context can be challenging, and they demand a partnership approach.

Effective multi-agency working is therefore vitally important in seeking to identify and iron out problem issues. Meaningful change is achieved by committed and dedicated leaders at local level being willing to grapple with the challenges, and work collaboratively to overcome them. I have said before that 'leaders' are not just the people in charge, not just the people at the top of organisations. Anyone in an organisation can be a systems' leader and effect change from within, and often in my experience this comes from those closer to the front line.

Now the Crisis Care Concordat has been mentioned several times this morning, and it has proved to be a really strong way of driving better change and led to far better working between the police and mental health professionals. I can assure you that it remains an important body. We will continue with this work, which is looking at what works locally as well as sharing practice, but also looking at what more we need to do at a national level.

To conclude, I would like to assure you that I and the government will continue to do all that we can to ensure that you are properly supported in this vital area of work. And that we will move to a future where the response to those with mental health issues are delivered by the right agency at the right time.

In the meantime, I would like to extend my most sincere appreciation and gratitude for all that you do. Whether responding to individual cases; challenging the status quo; or driving innovation and change – you are consistently setting the highest standards of public service and I thank you.

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## [Press release: Intimidation of Parliamentary candidates: evidence sessions](#)

The Committee is currently gathering evidence and views as part of its review on the intimidation of Parliamentary candidates.

The Committee has issued a [call for evidence](#) and invites contributions from anyone with an interest in these issues by 8 September 2017.

In addition, the Committee will be holding oral evidence sessions in the Macmillan Room in Portcullis House, Westminster on Thursday 14th September 2017.

### **Session 1 – Police and Security 14:40 – 15:30**

Note: This session will not be open to the public given the nature of

material to be discussed.

Witnesses:

- Crown Prosecution Service
- Director of Security, Houses of Parliament
- The National Police Chiefs' Council
- Deputy Speaker and Chairman of Ways and Means, House of Commons

## **Session 2 – Political Parties 15:30 – 16:30**

This session is open to the public and the media. A transcript will be made available on our [website](#).

Witnesses:

- Rt Hon Sir Patrick McLoughlin MP: Chair, Conservative Party
- Cat Smith MP: Shadow Minister (Cabinet Office) (Voter Engagement and Youth Affairs), Labour Party
- Baroness Brinton: President, Liberal Democrat Party

The Committee will also be holding a roundtable with invited contributors on 12th September, a summary of which will be posted on the Committee's website after the event.

[Find out more](#) or [submit evidence to this review](#).

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## **[Press release: Minister for Asia condemns DPRK nuclear test](#)**

Following North Korea's sixth nuclear test on 3 September, Minister for Asia & the Pacific Mark Field summoned the DPRK Ambassador to the Foreign & Commonwealth Office.

Following the meeting, Minister Field said:

I summoned the North Korean Ambassador to the Foreign Office to make clear the UK's condemnation of the DPRK's nuclear test on 3 September.

North Korea's reckless actions have created a deeply dangerous and unstable situation. The UK will work with our partners and allies to tackle this threat.

I urge the regime to end its illegal pursuit of nuclear and ballistic missiles and return to dialogue with the international

community.

## Further information

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# [Press release: UK leads the world in new agreement to tackle global warming](#)

The UK has today become one of the first nations to commit to a landmark agreement to reduce emissions from appliances such as air conditioning units and refrigerators that will play a major role in preventing global warming.

The Kigali amendment to the UN Montreal Protocol commits nations to reducing hydrofluorocarbon greenhouse gases (HFCs) by 85% between 2019 and 2036.

Harmful global greenhouse gases could be prevented by rising up to 11% by 2050, thanks to a pioneering move by the UK to cut down on harmful emissions from appliances such as air conditioning units and refrigerators. The United Kingdom will be one of the first countries to approve a landmark UN agreement which commits to reducing HFCs by 85% between 2019 and 2036.

The Montreal Protocol, the international treaty which this agreement sits under, is already one of the most successful treaties ever agreed, having successfully phased out 98% of ozone depleting substances – including chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) and hydrochlorofluorocarbons. As a result, the ozone layer is showing the first signs of recovery.

The Kigali amendment to the Montreal Protocol, which the UK today began the process of ratifying, goes even further and extends targets to HFCs. Although HFCs do not harm the ozone layer, they have a global warming potential thousands of times greater than carbon dioxide. Consequently this deal is likely to avoid close to 0.5 degrees Celsius of global warming by the end of this century, making it the most significant step yet in achieving the Paris climate agreement goal of keeping temperatures well below two degrees.

Environment Secretary Michael Gove said:

Adopting this ambitious target will mark the UK as a world leader in tackling climate change. Not only will this deal reduce global carbon emissions by the equivalent of around 70 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide by 2050 – the same as 600 coal fired power stations would produce during that time – it will also help to protect our health, our agriculture and the wider environment.

The UK, along with the rest of the EU, has already begun to phase down HFCs

in accordance with EU law which requires a cut of 79% in HFCs placed on the EU market between 2015 and 2030.

The Montreal Protocol will result in an additional UK reduction of equivalent to around 44 million tonnes of carbon dioxide beyond what would be achieved under the EU Regulation alone. The value of that carbon saving is estimated at around £1.56 billion and the cost at around £390 million, representing a net benefit to the UK of £1.17 billion.

### **Notes to editors:**

- For further information please contact Defra press office on 020 8225 7510 or out of hours on 0345 051 8486.
- As part of global efforts to tackle climate change, countries agreed at the Montreal Protocol meeting in Kigali, Rwanda in October 2016 to phase down the production and use of HFCs. Developed countries agreed to an 85% phase-down between 2019 and 2036; most developing countries agreed to 80% between 2024 and 2045; and ten developing countries (India, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, The United Arab Emirates, Iran and Iraq) agreed to 85% between 2028 and 2047.