



**EVIDENCE TO SELECT COMMITTEE ON  
DEMOCRACY AND DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES**

**Submission from the National Pensioners Convention**

**September 2019**

Clerk to the Select Committee on Democracy and Digital Technologies  
Committee Office  
House of Lords  
London  
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16 September 2019

Dear Clerk to the Committee

## **NPC EVIDENCE TO SELECT COMMITTEE ON DEMOCRACY AND DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES**

### **Introduction**

The National Pensioners' Convention (NPC) is Britain's biggest independent organisation of older people, representing around one thousand local, regional, and national pensioner groups with a total of 1 million members. We wish to submit views to the Democracy and Digital Select Committee's Call for Evidence.

The NPC is run by and for pensioners and campaigns for improvements to the income, health and welfare of both today's and tomorrow's pensioners and this response is based on the views and experiences of our members as expressed through discussion by our specialist Digital Working Party.

We note that the Committee wishes to consider the effects of technology on political debates more broadly, and the wider public's engagement with and participation in political discourse in the digital age.

### **The Digital Landscape**

We have looked closely at the questions on which the Committee has invited evidence, but feel that there is a significant omission in considering the issues under scrutiny by not considering the issue of exclusion from participation in online political discourse from non-internet users, particularly amongst elderly people.

A recent report from the Office of National Statistics "Exploring the UK's Digital Divide" stated that in 2018 there were still 5.3 million adults in the UK described as internet non-users, representing 10% of the adult UK population. Our particular focus is on the digital divide affecting older people and we note from the same report that adults over the age of 65 have consistently been the largest proportion of adult non-users, and over half of adult internet non-users were over the age of 75 years. This confirms that a significant number of adults are excluded from political debate on the internet and other digital platforms such as social media.

Previous research has confirmed that elderly people are more likely to vote in local and general elections and therefore clearly want to engage in the democratic

process. However, as the political debate is increasingly conducted online elderly people with no access to the internet become excluded from the commentary and debate taking place in the digital world. A further barrier for many elderly people in engaging online is the cost of access to a personal computer or digital tablet, and the on-going costs of a broadband internet service.

An additional problem is that with the rapid decline of printed newspapers, particularly local newspapers, it is much more difficult for elderly people to gain information and commentary that would be relevant to engaging with the political process either locally or nationally.

## **Consultation**

**We have confined our responses to those areas we have identified as being most important to, and having most impact, on older people.**

**Question 1** (*“How has digital technology changed the way that democracy works in the UK and has this been a net positive or negative effect?”*).

It is our view that digital technology has had a net negative effect on the way democracy works in the UK.

**Question 3** (*“What role should every stage of education play in helping to create a healthy, active, digitally literate democracy?”*).

We feel that media/data literacy should be part of the National Curriculum. From primary school to university, continuing professional education and Adult Education/Life-Long Learning courses should enable children and adults to learn new digital skills; to receive advice and guidance on ‘staying safe’ online; and to discern, distinguish and guard against ‘false news’.

**Question 10** (*“What might be the best way of reducing the effects of misinformation on social media platforms?”*).

We suggest designating internet companies as publishers would bring them within the remit of contempt of court legislation and existing media law. We agree with the Cairncross review’s recommendation for a ‘News Quality Obligation’: online platforms would be under an obligation or “regulatory supervision” requiring them to improve how users understand the origin of a news article and the trustworthiness of its source. We support the NUJ’s call for a levy on Facebook and Google to fund public-interest journalism.

**Question 12** (*“How could the Government better support the positive work of civil society organisations using technology to facilitate engagement with democratic processes?”*).

We support calls for more funding for digital literacy projects, and wider awareness of locally provided services to help get more older people online on computers and phones, and to provide access and free use of computers in communities. Over a third of 65-74 year olds are not using the internet (Ofcom report, 25 April 2018). One specific area requiring improvement is much faster broadband speeds across the whole of the United Kingdom. The failure to tackle poor quality broadband services in rural areas currently acts as a disincentive for people living in those locations to deploy digital technologies as a means of democratic engagement and participation.

It is also important that existing non-digital methods of citizen engagement and enrolment must be allowed to continue, particularly for older persons residing in non-private facilities such as care homes. The right to vote in person at polling stations and by postal vote must continue to be safeguarded for the indefinite future to cater for all those who choose to deploy non-digital forms of political engagement.

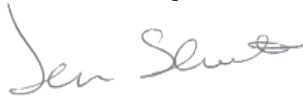
## **Conclusion**

Whilst we accept that the Committee's Inquiry is focussed on the impact of digital technologies on the democratic public discourse, we do feel that the Committee should also look into the issue of how elderly people can access information that is currently online and be able to fully participate in the democratic process.

Technology can help tackle many issues, but at the same time technology and its use should be a choice and people should have access to the same information through all means, whether digital or print. As technologies continue to advance and because of the fast-moving nature of technology, it is important that those who either choose not to or are unable to make use of new technologies are not excluded from society and that access via alternative non-digital means are always made easily available and accessible.

We have attempted to give brief responses to some of the questions posed by the Committee and would be happy to provide further evidence on the digital divide that excludes many elderly people from engaging in the online public discourse.

Yours sincerely



**Jan Shortt**  
**General Secretary**

## **References**

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