

RED

DEMOCRACY

What constituents think of MPs

Spring 2006

Contents

1. Process
2. Participants
3. Headline findings
4. Themes
5. System opportunities
6. Appendices

Process

- We met with 7 people in their homes (2 couples, 3 singles)
- Interviewed 3 constituents about their MP's surgery
- Interviewed 4 MPs, 1 London Assembly member, 1 surgery assistant, 1 Councillor & members of Local Council
- Co-design workshop with 7 x 18-20 year-olds in Brixton
- Conducted two voxpops sessions in Sunderland and Surrey
- Delivered probe-packs to two streets in London (12 returns)

Process: contextual interviews

- 90 minute, 1 on 1 sessions in the participants homes
- We collected qualitative data about their personal, local and national concerns, and their knowledge and experience of their local MP. Questions included:
 - General questions about participants
 - Questions about local issues affecting them
 - Questions about personal issues affecting them
 - About their knowledge of their local MP, and what experience they have of them
 - Their knowledge of what their MP does locally and in Westminster
 - Views on voting and canvassing
 - Mapping exercises to understand relationships and attitudes

Process: voxpops

Chose two locations

- Sunderland city centre high street
 - Chris Mullins, Labour MP
 - High level of unemployment (worklessness)
- Guildford city centre high street
 - Ann Milton, Conservative MP
 - Prosperous 'middle England'

Process: voxpops



“Which one of these is your MP?”

Process: MP interviews

- We met with MPs, Councillors and their support staff in their offices or surgeries
- We collected qualitative data about their role, their interaction with constituents and the environments they work in. Questions included:
 - What is the role of an MP?
 - What do they do?
 - What barriers exist?
 - When are they successful?
 - What do they think is innovative in this area?

Process: probe packs



Process: probe packs

- Probe packs were distributed to two streets in London
- The packs contained:
 - Questionnaire
 - Emotional sticker activities
 - Conceptual matrices
 - Service rating sheet
 - Disposable camera
- They were designed to collect data about:
 - General demographic
 - Engagement with local MP
 - Interests in personal, local, national and global issues

Contents

1. Process
2. Participants
3. Headline findings
4. Themes
5. System opportunities
6. Appendices

Participants: in-depth interviews

We talked to these people

Sharon & Glen

Stuart & Sarah

Jackie

Bronwen

Jane

Participants: in-depth interviews

Why we talked to them

- People with low political engagement and others actively engaged in the political process
- Different ages, locations, and constituencies
- Different socio-economic status

Participants: in-depth interviews

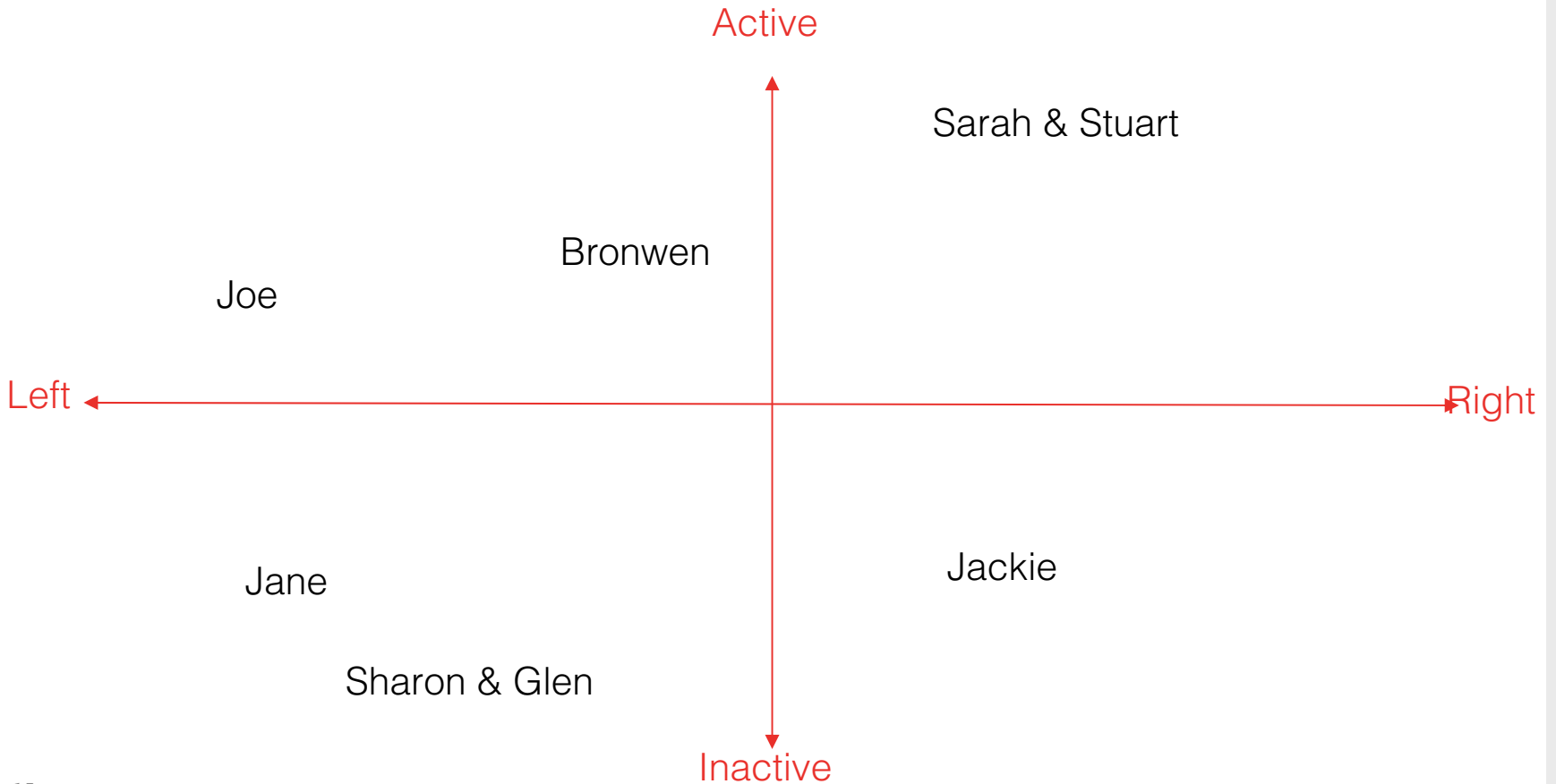
More about the people we talked to

- | | |
|----------------|--|
| Sharon & Glen | - Long-term IB, middle-aged, Labour, North East, Labour MP |
| Stuart & Sarah | - Politically active, early 30s, Conservative, central London, Labour MP |
| Jackie | - Retired pensioner, Conservative, Suburban, Tory MP |
| Bronwen | - Craft worker pensioner, Lib-Dem, Rural, Tory MP |
| Jane | - Single Mum & part-time worker, middle-aged, Shire town, Tory MP |

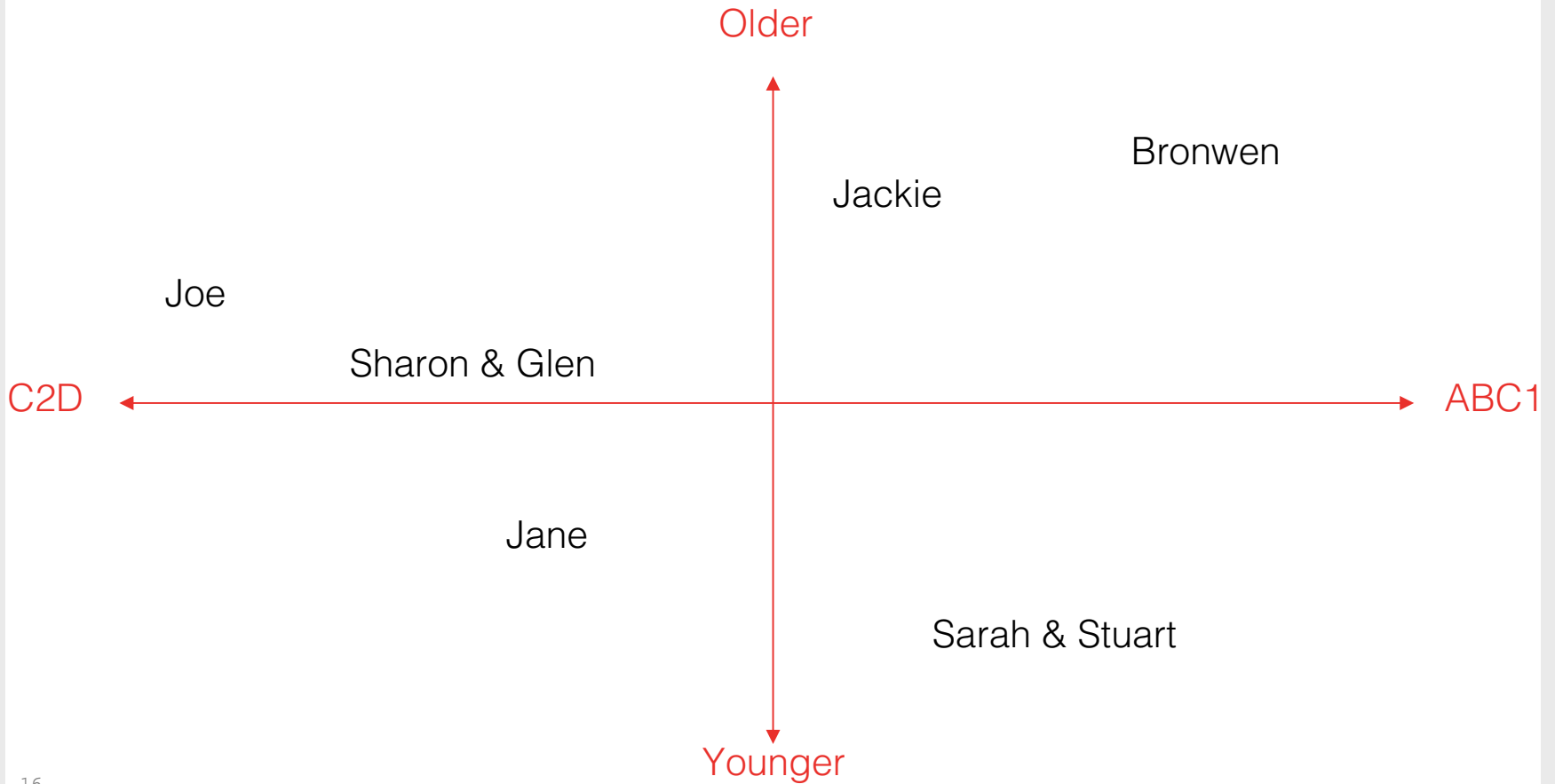
Participants: leanings



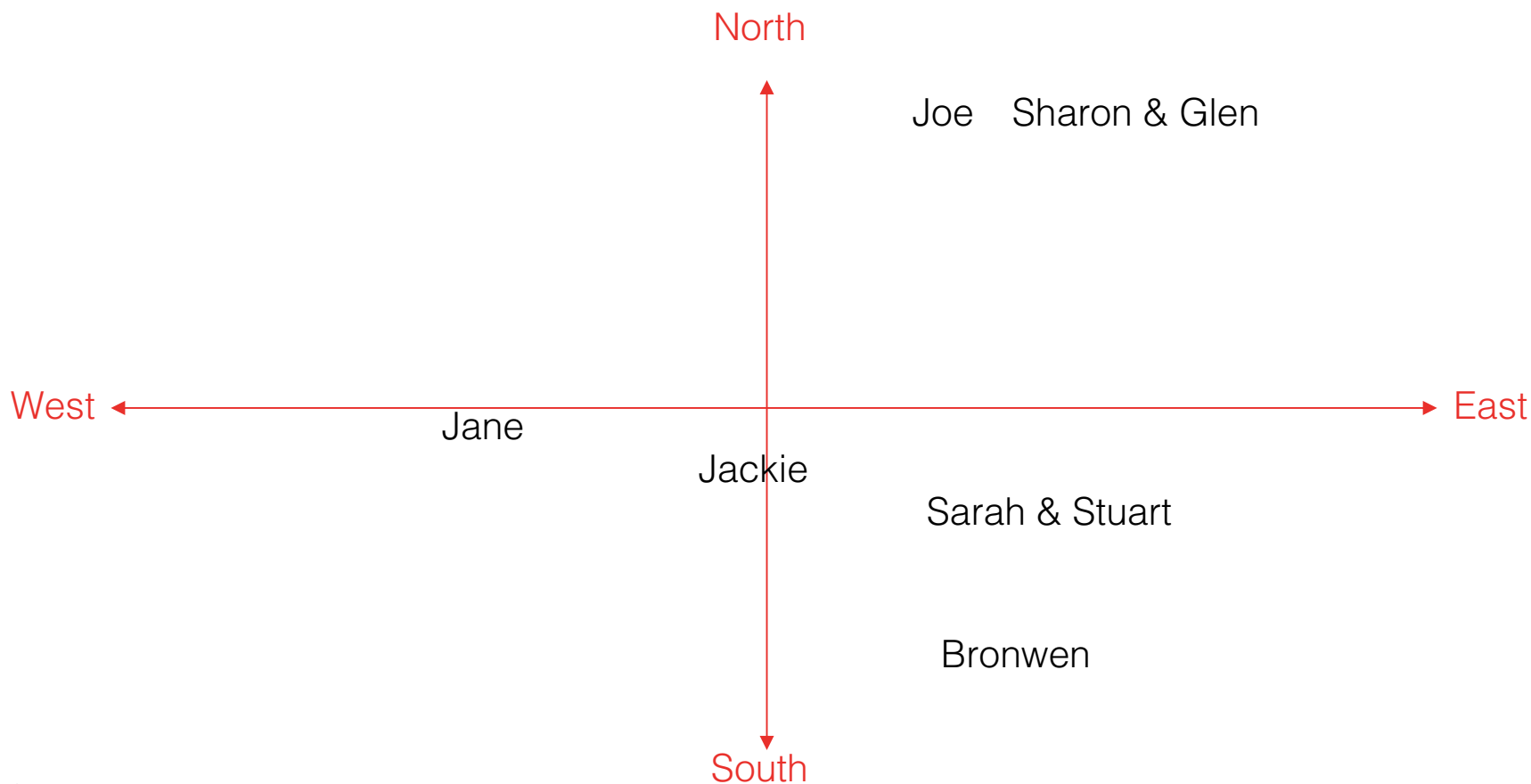
Participants: involvement



Participants: demographics



Participants: location



Sharon and Glen, Sunderland



Sharon and Glen, Sunderland

“MPs are untouchable. That’s the way society is.”

“Everyone’s mobile except the people you need, there’s always a Sky van though”

“He has to wear too many hats, he can’t help you.”

“The only thing they wear out on their suit is the backside.”

About Glen and Sharon

- Glen and Sharon live in central Sunderland
- Both are on long-term Incapacity Benefit but want to return to work
- Glen is cynical about his local MP Chris Mullins, he doesn’t understand what he does
- Glen has never tried to contact his MP, he wouldn’t know how to or if it would make any difference
- They find it hard to believe that MPs can really fulfill their job description
- They have a lot of respect for their neighboring MP Pat Smith who grew up in Sunderland and still lives there
- Both have had poor experiences with local public services
- The MP is part of Glen’s model of local government services that includes local council, citizens advice, & Job Centres
- Sharon and Glen have thought of becoming ‘Specials’ so that they can directly participate in managing community problems

Sharon and Glen, Sunderland



They're up there and we're down here

Sharon and Glen, Sunderland



Sharon and Glen, Sunderland



Jackie, Rickmansworth



Jackie, Rickmansworth

“The parties come round at election time. I’m glad to see that they’re out canvassing. I don’t want to talk to them though”

“Environmental issues, it’s got to be more than David Gauke (local MP), what chance do you have of changing issues like this?”

“The house of commons, I’m not that interested.”

“The police changed the way they dealt with people in custody [...] I’m not sure whether my letter made a difference.”

“To get things done you need to work through the layers.”

About Jackie

- Jackie, 70, lives in Rickmansworth with her husband Robin
- Both are retired and physically active, playing golf and tennis
- She is also active in the community, organising tennis matches and volunteering for a local cancer charity as a trained councilor
- Jackie describes herself as unknowledgeable about politics, however, after her son had experienced unfair treatment from the police she wrote letters to her MP, the local police asking for a change in the way they deal with people in custody
- After writing to her local MP and Police, there was a positive change in the police process. Jackie was unsure whether the letters influenced the change
- she feels that individuals (and individual MPs) do not have enough impact when they act alone
- However, Jackie recognises that local pressure groups can be effective

Jackie, Rickmansworth



Jane & Mason, Witney



During the interview David Cameron, Janes local MP appeared on the TV because Jane was watching the budget debate

Jane & Mason, Witney

“MPs should be someone you can go to for everything, but they’re untouchable. [Getting through to them] would be a bit like battering your head against a brick wall”

“[In David Cameron’s constituency] there should be a Labour MP because they’re in government.”

About Jane

- Jane is a single mum living in Witney, Oxfordshire
- She works a few days a week in an admin job, the rest of the week she cares full-time for her son Mason
- She moved to Witney after splitting-up with her long-term partner
- Jane knows that her local MP is David Cameron, she understands that his role in his party makes him busier than most MPs
- Jane describes how David Cameron “gave a talk” when he first became MP for Witney, however she decided not go along because it wasn’t ‘for her’
- She would see David Cameron if she really needed to, however, because she has a good relationship with the people in the local council, so she feels that there is no need to
- Jane was helped by the local council to part-buy her home in Witney
- The Local council offices are near the shops on the high street. This means Jane often drops by to have a chat with the people who work there

Jane & Mason, Witney



Stuart, Vauxhall



At the end of the interviews participants completed exercises

Stuart, Vauxhall

“We [Vauxhall Conservative Association] congratulated Kate Hoey on becoming chairman the Countryside Alliance.”

“You need to connect with people on the level that affects them.”

“[Kate Hoey] is one of the finest that the Labour party has, she’s an independent thinker [...] if I could tell her one thing, it would be to join the Conservative party.”

About Stuart

- Stuart lives in central London
- He’s is a Musical Director, local voice coach and Chairman of Vauxhall Conservatives Association
- He’s politically active on both a local and constituency level (he canvasses once or twice a week)
- Stuart thinks that a complication of politics is because it needs to work on a number of different levels
- However, even for him there are grey areas of responsibility (Sure Start etc) that are confusing
- He feels that some bodies which affect local issues are unaccountable (e.g. TfL)

Sarah, Vauxhall



Sarah, Vauxhall

“I’m not political but my husband is.”

“I stood as a ‘paper candidate’ [i.e. not expecting to win] for the Conservatives in the local elections”

“Hoey’s fantastic, not typical Labour.”

“Active voting gives you the right to have your say.”

“Voting here is a waste of time.”

“I don’t think I can influence change on my own, but as a group yes [...] went on a Countryside Alliance march.”

About Sarah

- Sarah lives in central London (married to Stuart)
- She’s a full time mum and self-employed caterer
- Regards herself as not particularly political but very locally involved (runs the local Mother & Toddler group, part of the Resident’s Association etc)
- Proactive about local issues (parking, developments etc) but not about national (except fox hunting)
- Stood as a ‘paper candidate’ for the Conservative Party in the local elections
- Her experience of her constituency MP is much more positive than the local council
- Feels that she can approach and find the right people when she needs to

Bronwen, Chichester



Bronwen, Chichester

“Local politics are far more corrupt than national.”

“Whatever I say disappears into the ether.”

“I didn’t vote for him, how does he represent me?”

“I was impressed when the Liberal Democrats came down my lane.” (canvassing)

About Bronwen

- Bronwen lives in rural Sussex
- A pensioner and also a textile craft worker
- Historically she has been very active in local issues, though without any particular political affiliation
- Has a very jaundiced view of what can be achieved in local and national politics
- She was so impressed that one party bothered to make the effort to canvass her (in a very rural location) that it confirmed her decision to vote for them
- Had two positive experiences with her MP. Mp helped her with her mother-in law’s gas bills, and getting the right oxygen cylinders for her husband’s hospital treatment
- Recognizes that the parish council and the parish council magazine are useful at distributing information, but that they fail to “galvanise people” locally

Surgeries



Surgery of Emily Thornberry MP, Labour - Islington.

Josephine, Kate Hoey's surgery Vauxhall

“She has been so helpful, I just wanted to thank her.”

About Josephine

- Josephine is an asylum seeker from the Congo
- She is under threat of deportation
- She is worried about persecution and torture if she goes back
- Her MP has helped her navigate her way through the system
- She feels the access to, and performance of, her MP is very good
- She heard about the role of the MP through another Congolese friend who had been through the same process previously

(Josephine doesn't speak english - Kate Hoey usually has one or her staff translate)

Elsa, Emily Thornberry's surgery Islington



Elsa, Emily Thornberry's surgery Islington

“Mention Mrs Topping, they will know me!”

“[At her MP's surgery] I thought this was going to be a meeting, I thought she was going to meet with me personally.”

About Elsa

- Elsa is 86 and lives in a housing estate in Islington
- She started the first tenants association 33 years ago
- Elsa was on first name terms with her last MP, Chris Smith, and his assistant Stephen
- She was impressed when John Phillips, a local Councilor visited her. She fed him sandwiches and showed him the problems on her estate.
- She thinks that she managed to get through to John Phillips because his PA was elderly; “We spoke the same language”
- She has never met her new MP and is frustrated by MP's lack of engagement (Elsa misunderstood the letter from her MP and thought it was an invitation to a personal meeting - but was disappointed to find out it was actually an invitation to a surgery - so she left without speaking to anyone)
- Elsa gets frustrated by the constant change in staff at her local council; “It's very complicated, you get to know someone [in the local council], then they change the people and then they're gone.”

Joe (right), Sunderland



Joe, Sunderland

“Before meeting Chris I didn’t understand what an MP was.”

“I expected to be turned away because I was homeless.”

Expected Chris to be too busy to see me.”

“I was apprehensive, thought he might be on the side of the Police.”

“He [Chris Mullins, local MP] is very compassionate [...] it wasn’t what I expected.”

“Got a letter from him yesterday.”

“I’d like to go back and talk to him about how the laws about domestic violence are weighed in women’s favor.”

About Joe

- Joe lives in Sunderland
- Often he can be found chatting with his friends at the entrance to Sunderland’s metro station
- His addictions and mental health issues lead to him becoming homeless
- Joe’s situation triggered him to visit his local MP Chris Mullins to seek help
- Joe turned to his MP after being unfairly treated by the police
- He had seen Chris Mullin’s surgeries advertised in the Sunderland Echo and decided to go along
- Joe received a letter from Chris Mullins yesterday “asking me how I was doing”

Professionals

- David Cameron MP - Conservative, Witney
- Simon Hughes MP - Liberal Democrat, Bermondsey
- Kate Hoey MP - Labour, Vauxhall
- Bridget Prentice MP - Labour, Lewisham East
- Frances - Assistant to Emily Thornberry MP - Labour Islington
- Damian Hockney AM - One London Group, London Assembly
- Mark Ingleby Cllr - Grove Park ward (Lab)
- Chris Patterson, Communication officer, Lewisham Council

Kate Hoey Labour MP, Vauxhall

(Josephine, Stuart & Sarah's MP)



Kate Hoey MP
Member of Parliament for Vauxhall
Has No Website!

If you are looking for Kate Hoey's website, I'm afraid you're out of luck because she doesn't currently have one.

This website has been setup for Kate by some of her constituents (*using their own time and money*) because they think websites and blogs are an important way for MPs to stay in touch with their constituents - MP's get to tell us what they're up to, and we find out more about what is being done in our name.

If you would like to encourage Kate to take up this website please contact her using the contact details listed on the right of this page, or [get in touch with us](#) to see how you can get involved.

Until Kate [takes up the offer of this website](#) (or sets up her own), we will do our best to monitor of what she's been up to on your behalf. This website is part of the [Political Weblog Project](#).

Swimming Pools

Council Swimming pools seem very much on Kate's radar at the moment:

Recent Posts

- Swimming Pools
- Religious Hatred
- British Firms in the Occupied Territories
- Post Office Demo
- Kate Hoey's Members Interests 2005
- ID Card Rebellion
- National Treasure?
- Raising The Bar
- Parliament Roundup 1
- More Zimbabwe

Parliament

Read what Kate's been saying

Kate Hoey Labour MP, Vauxhall

“What on earth is the Design Council doing talking to MPs?”

“My constituents have no problem engaging with me.”

Note: interview took place in a surgery slot

- Kate Hoey is a very independent minded MP with a strong media profile and personal vote
- Kate regularly gets 50 people to each of her surgeries, 100 letters and 150 emails each day
- Constituents had an average of 6 minutes with her
- Kate Hoey usually works with translators to interact with her constituents
- Mostly deals with Home Office issues at her surgeries (like Josephine’s)
- She feels that the demands of engagement for inner city constituencies (with deprived areas) are very different to rural or even suburban ones
- The type and content of her constituent’s engagement with her is greatly dictated by its demographic

David Cameron, Conservative MP, Witney (Jane & Mason's MP)

David Cameron

Member of Parliament for Witney

Home
About your M.P.
Local Information
Surgery Details
Articles
Press Releases
In Parliament
Outside Parliament

Conservative members have decided to jump a generation and elect 39 year old David Cameron to succeed Michael Howard as new Leader of the Party.

You elected me and sent me to the House of Commons to speak and vote for the people of West Oxfordshire.

It has been a busy year in Parliament and the constituency, but working for people and representing our area is a privilege.

Your MP is only as good as the information he or she receives, so please USE me by writing to me at the House of Commons or e-mailing me at:

camerond@parliament.uk

If there are any questions or issues that you would like me to raise, or things that you would like me to do or see in the constituency, please let me know.

Contact Me

View the Constituency Map

Browse the Photo Gallery

West Oxfordshire Internet Links

WOCA Witneytory.co.uk

Latest news:
[David Cameron's Constituency Engagements 17.03.2006](#)
[Click here for details...](#)

David Cameron

David Cameron, Conservative MP, Witney

Note: response via email
Cameron

from Caroline - Assistant to David

“[surgeries] are treated by David as private and sacrosanct”

- Q. What do you see as the main benefit to constituents and to MPs of surgeries? Face to face meetings with individual constituents enable MPs to hear about their worries/problems first hand and for the constituents to raise these personally with their MP.
- Q. What are the main issues that constituents contact you about? Housing problems. Health and social care treatments. Fear of Crime. Traffic issues.
- Q. If constituents don't engage with you, why do you think that is? Advice surgeries are not the only way of getting a problem across to an MP. E-mails, letters and phone conversations have always seemed to be much preferred. That said the surgeries are always popular.
- Q. Do you think the way that MPs engage with constituents could be innovated? If so how? Greater use of website/email. I hold advice surgeries at different times of the day and in different locations throughout the constituency. This has to be beneficial as it gives people more of an opportunity to see me if they wish.
- Q. Is anyone being innovative in this area? If so what are they doing? I report to my electorate through a regular newsletter delivered by Royal Mail to every household in my constituency.
- Q. If you could improve one thing - what would it be? I would get the Government to sort out the Child Support Agency which is repeatedly causing hardship to many constituents

Simon Hughes, Liberal Democrat MP, North Southwark & Bermondsey



The screenshot shows the website for Simon Hughes, MP for North Southwark & Bermondsey and Liberal Democrat Party President. The page features a navigation menu on the left with links to Articles, Contact Me, In Parliament, Press Releases, Simon's Profile, and Speeches. The main header includes a search bar and a navigation bar with links to Home Page, Photo Galleries, Liberal Democrats, Southwark LibDems, and Other Links. The main content area displays a welcome message and a list of priorities for the constituency, including housing, health, education, crime reduction, and safety.

Articles
Contact Me
In Parliament
Press Releases
Simon's Profile
Speeches

Simon Hughes
MP for North Southwark & Bermondsey
and Liberal Democrat Party President

Home Page Photo Galleries Liberal Democrats Southwark LibDems Other Links

search


Recent Additions

- ▲ [Aldridge Decision Highlights](#)
[Need For Further Funding](#)
[Reforms](#)
- ▲ Question: Secure Station Scheme
- ▲ Question: Legislative and

Welcome from Simon Hughes, MP for North Southwark and Bermondsey, Liberal Democrat Shadow Secretary of State for Constitutional Affairs & Shadow Attorney General and Party President.

My priorities for North Southwark and Bermondsey this year remain:

- to make sure that our housing, our health service and education are further improved,
- crime is reduced and safety increased,



Simon Hughes, Liberal Democrat MP, North Southwark & Bermondsey

“My yellow taxi helps.”

Note: response via email

- Constituencies local to Westminster mean you can reach them easily during the week even when Parliament is sitting. The disadvantage is that constituents assume that you are always available. Also everybody in my constituency, if they are able bodied, can reach my front door without very much difficulty. A local constituency also spares you of the hassle and fatigue of regular long distance travel
- I walk, cycle, drive [*in his yellow taxi*], use the bus, use the tube and use the train.
- Every day is different. It also depends whether Parliament is sitting or not. Monday afternoons until Thursday evening when Parliament is sitting are more often based in Westminster. The rest of the week and during the recess my more regular base is my constituency and constituency office.
- Constituents either phone, or e-mail, or write, or come to surgery, or stop me at events or in the street, or put a note through my door.
- It is always easier if constituents contact me in writing because then I have a record of exactly what they want. Replies in writing are best for the same reason.
- The most frequent requests for help are in relation to housing - about 40%, Home Office matters (asylum, immigration, nationality, police and prisons) - about 40%, benefits, pensions and other financial matters - about 10%, and health, education and social services - about 10%.
- Many issues come to me which are more logically for local councillors, the Mayor of London, or occasionally MEPs. I am, however, very happy to act as the first port of call.

Simon Hughes, Liberal Democrat MP, North Southwark & Bermondsey

continued...

- People who have just moved into the constituency or into the country probably engage least. There may also be just one or two who have such strong political views of another type that they wouldn't want to use the services of an MP of a party which they don't support- but I hope this is not the case.
- My responsibilities to my constituent are to try to respond when they need me, to be around on a regular basis and to be in touch with the issues that matter to us in our communities locally. Constituents don't have any responsibilities to an MP - but I hope they understand the pressure which we can quite often be under.
- There is training and support for Liberal Democrat MPs through what is called the incumbency project. I was elected long before this started and although best practice and new ideas are always welcome, modestly I would hope that, although I may need support, I need training less.
- The biggest frustration is always the perpetual sense that we can never quite catch up and get on top of the demands made on us. Even with four full time paid colleagues and others on an intern or part time or voluntary basis, we struggle to meet the demands.
- I live amongst them, feel very close to them and went into representative politics as a result of the issues and the people in this community. [since 1977]
- {*About wanting increased engagement*} I am not sure I could handle much more engagement - though my energy for responding happily does not appear to have diminished over the years.
- The two newest innovations [engagement] are e-mail and text messaging. We haven't quite got into the second yet.

Bridget Prentice MP, Labour, Lewisham East



Bridget Prentice MP, Labour, Lewisham East

“I wish I had an extra day at the weekend to do my shopping!”

“I’m on duty all the time”

“The bench opening [a local park event] is a good time to see constituents.”

“I live in the centre of the constituency, near Sainsburys - I always meet people there”

About Bridget

- Mostly sees constituents who have problems with the Home Office and who want to know their status, or housing issues such as overcrowding
- Bridget describes her role as dealing with the 3 C’s; constituency, commons and complaining
- Lives in the centre of her constituency
- It’s good to live locally because you can quickly pick-up on the mood of things, and people like to see you around
- It can be difficult living locally because you’re on duty all the time. People chat to you on Sunday when you’re at Sainsburys wearing your baggy clothes
- She finds her workload very full and would like more time

Damian Hockney, AM, One London



Damian Hockney, AM, One London

“The more you strip away power, the less you’ll engage people.”

“When you centralise power [...] frankly people give up wanting to show interest.”

“Not many people come to debates [...] people don’t know how to attend debates”

“Accoutrements of power and office are a problem, they just get in the way.”

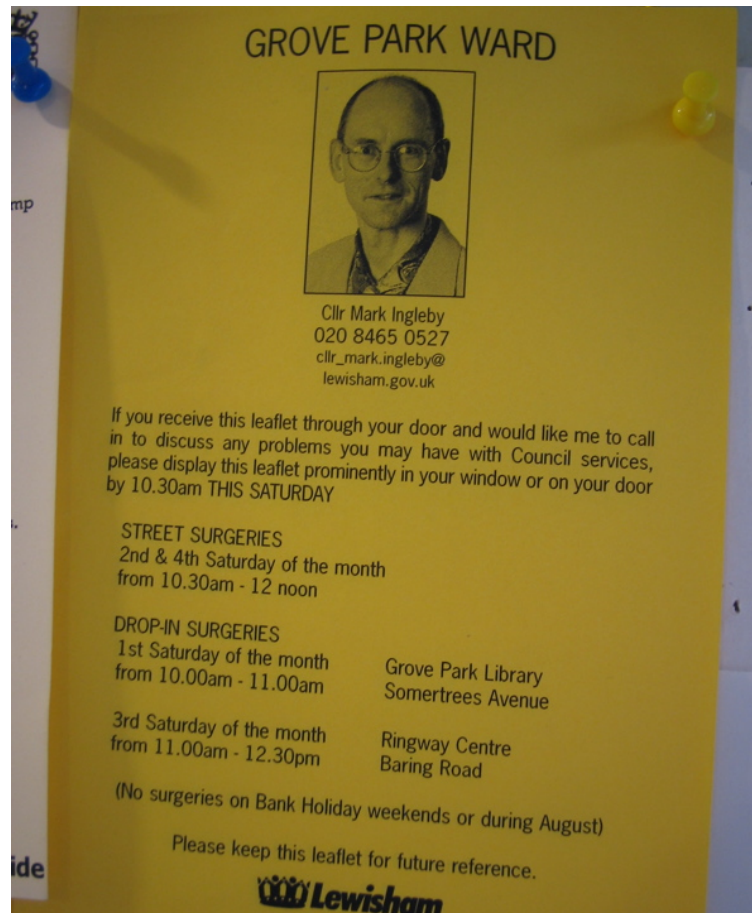
“People don’t understand who is responsible - it’s not easy.”

“The role just ends up what you want it to be [...] sometimes we’re just glorified traffic police”

About Damian Hockney

- Damian is a non-constituency London Assembly member for the One London Group
- He recognises that no one knows what the London Assembly is or does
- He feels that this is inextricably bound up with its powers
- He is worried that engagement is often driven by media
- Complexity is a major problem
- Letting people get close to real power (money) will make them more involved
- Increasing centralisation distances people from power and disengages them
- Frustration with government is a worry if the economy gets bad
- Damien believes it is wrong that prospective MPs who campaign on an issue, such as mobile masts, cannot continue campaigning on that issue after they are elected

Cllr Mark Ingleby, Grove Park ward, Lewisham E

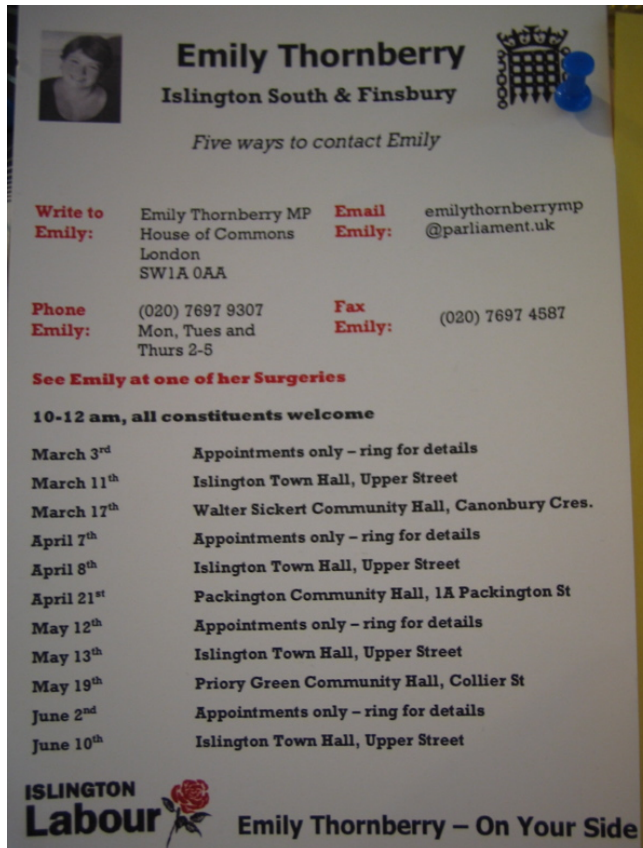


Cllr Mark Ingleby, Grove Park ward, Lewisham E

“I’m the 7th emergency service”

- Part-time music teacher, part-time councilor
- Bridges council and MP, will often direct constituents to the right person
- Has a case load and intervenes on behalf of constituents to resolve issues
- Scrutinises mayor
- Holds ‘street surgeries’
- Learns about local issues from “tip-offs” from sources such as housing managers
- Doesn’t always brand his posters/flyers with Labour logo, so that he doesn’t have to comply with party line, and so that he doesn’t put people off

Frances, surgery assistant to Emily Thornberry, MP for Islington



Emily Thornberry
Islington South & Finsbury


Five ways to contact Emily

Write to Emily:	Emily Thornberry MP House of Commons London SW1A 0AA	Email Emily:	emilythornberrymp @parliament.uk
Phone Emily:	(020) 7697 9307 Mon, Tues and Thurs 2-5	Fax Emily:	(020) 7697 4587

See Emily at one of her Surgeries

10-12 am, all constituents welcome

March 3 rd	Appointments only – ring for details
March 11 th	Islington Town Hall, Upper Street
March 17 th	Walter Sickert Community Hall, Canonbury Cres.
April 7 th	Appointments only – ring for details
April 8 th	Islington Town Hall, Upper Street
April 21 st	Packington Community Hall, 1A Packington St
May 12 th	Appointments only – ring for details
May 13 th	Islington Town Hall, Upper Street
May 19 th	Priory Green Community Hall, Collier St
June 2 nd	Appointments only – ring for details
June 10 th	Islington Town Hall, Upper Street

ISLINGTON Labour  **Emily Thornberry – On Your Side**

Frances, surgery assistant to Emily Thornberry, MP for Islington

“50% of the people have a general idea of the MPs role, 50% don't, a few know exactly.”

“We don't see as many young people as we used to”

“Surgeries are only one form of engagement, there are school visits, events like the 7/7 memorial service.”

“No one is going to come to a surgery to say that they disagree with the Iraq war.”

“The benefit of seeing someone face-to-face is a better understanding of the problem.”

“Coming to a surgery is not necessarily the best way to resolve an issue.”

“There's a danger of getting the same old people turning up. That's why we vary our venues.”

“Part of the job should be encouraging people to see that *they* have the power.”

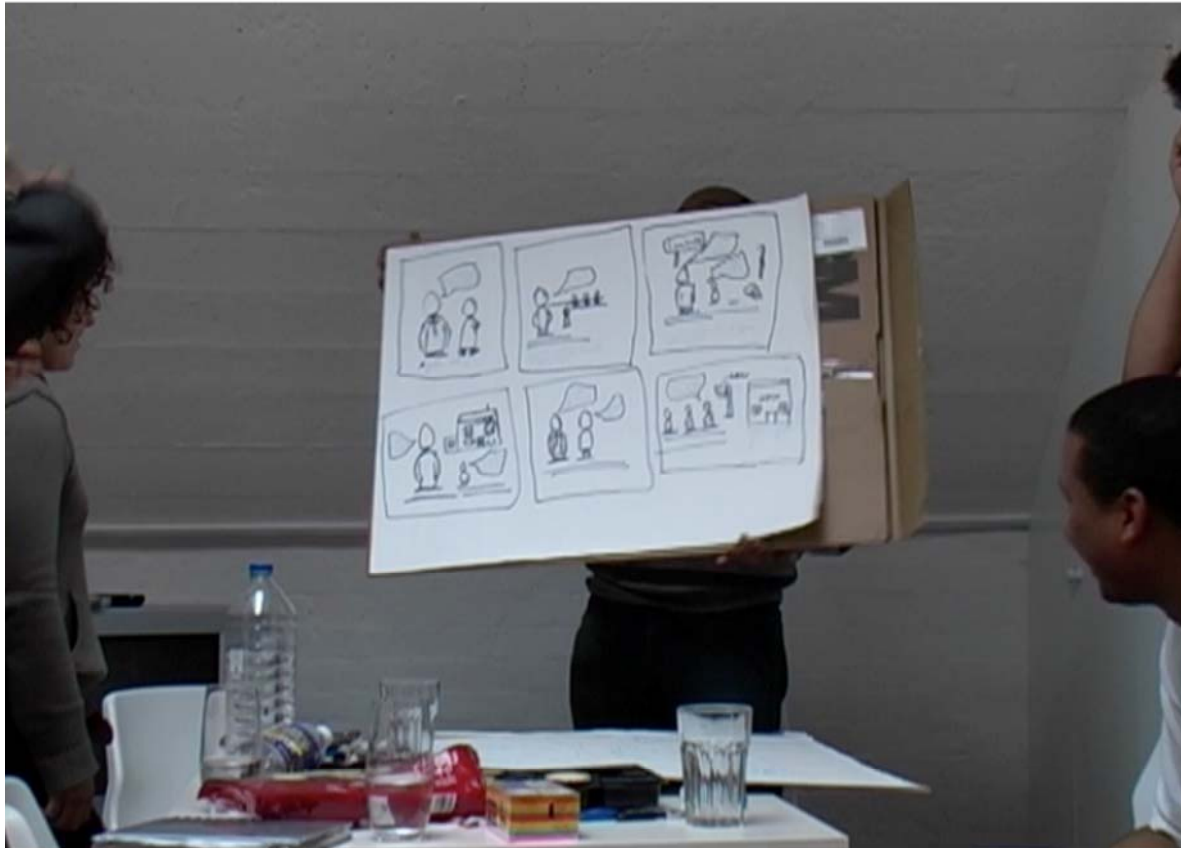
“I would question why all MPs receive the same resources regardless of constituency.”

“Difficult to share best practice because there's no infrastructure to do that.”

About Frances

- Frances is an assistant to Emily Thornberry MP for Islington
- She thinks that surgeries are all about delivery issues rather than policy issues
- Whether something is Local or National politics depends on how you define the issue
- Her preference would be for people to send a letter to their MP first and then follow up with a phone call, as this makes it easier to get up to speed with and keep tabs on their case

Co-design workshop



Live magazine team



Live magazine team

- 18 to 22 years
- Writers, photographers, artworkers, editors and a youth worker
- Quarterly Live magazine covers youth issues including drug abuse, gang culture, crime, teenage prostitution, fashion, celebrity and music
- Engaged with social issues at a local level
- Tabloid awareness of national and global policy and issues
- Low awareness of their local MP and their role
- Cynical about MP engagement for publicity purposes
- Only see their MP at voting time
- They think that most of what MPs talk about is irrelevant to them
- MPs address them as children
- MPs are boring, they acknowledge that MPs have to be boring to fit in with their colleagues
- MPs will never be able to fit in - and shouldn't try

Live magazine team continued...

The Live team think it will be better if...

- There was a 'give and take' relationship between MPs and their constituents
- MPs got 'real', hung-out at JD sports, and were less scared to engage with their constituents
- MPs worked proactively to raise awareness of the issues they could help solve
- MPs acted more like 'bent cops'. Put their ears to the ground but still wore a suit a didn't introduce themselves as MPs
- MPs used market research with the same sophistication as youth brands
- MPs taught 'life skills' lessons at school
- MPs have assistants/informers who know the area and meet with the MP once a week. These assistants would be recruited from a diversity of backgrounds that represent the local demographic



Day in the life of the "MP 2 be!"

Day in the life of the MP's assistant



The MP's assistant (youth)

Contents

1. Process
2. Participants
3. **Headline findings**
4. Themes
5. System opportunities
6. Appendices

Headline findings

- People are political - everyone has an issue they care about
- People do get involved when it concerns them
- They generally respect and know their MPs more than we expected
- They are mostly very realistic (rather than cynical) about what MPs can and can't do
- There is general confusion about the division between local and national political roles
- MPs are not seen as the problem so much as the system that surrounds them

But...

- MPs are seen as “untouchable” by some constituents
- Several participants said because MPs are at the top of layered and complex hierarchies, this prevents greater engagement
- Constituents don’t always believe that their MP represents them, or will support them because they may not have voted for them
- People see that acting in groups can be more beneficial than as individuals
- MPs are products of the world they have to inhabit. This can alienate them from their constituents

Contents

1. Process
2. Participants
3. Headline findings
4. Themes
5. System opportunities
6. Appendices

Themes

4 themes emerged from this research:

1. Complexity and confusion
2. Disconnection
3. Perception vs Experience
4. Representation

Themes: complexity and confusion

- The MP ‘proposition’ isn’t clear
 - The contextual research and the voxpops show that most participants can recognise their MPs photograph and/or know their name. However, participants struggled to describe the role of their MP, understand what they do, and grasp the value that MPs provide.
 - Low-key and local constituency activities are overshadowed by more visible acts such as televised Westminster. These add confusion because they may become the main channel for encountering a local MP

“I don’t know exactly what they do.” - Jackie

“They only ever debate in that room” - Live team

“The only thing they wear out on their suits is the backside” - Glen

“There’s always a sky van, everyone’s mobile except the people you need.” - Glen and Sharon

Themes: complexity and confusion

- Constituents are confused about the role of different representatives
 - The responsibilities of the MP are not clearly differentiated from that of the council and other providers of local services. ‘The council’ is the predominant point of call for finding your MP
 - Participants in this study had mixed experiences with local services (Glen and Sharon had struggled with the local Job Centre, whereas Jane had positive experience of interacting with her local council). For some participants, past experiences of public services informed their view of the local MP

“If I wanted to find them I’d go to the council.” - Glen

“If you want to complain about parking on the pavement - that’s TfL.” - Stuart

“There are so many different layers [...] nobody in the public understands who’s responsible - because they don’t [...] they just tend to shoot an arrow in the air and see where it lands.” - Damian Hockney

“Many issues come to me which are more logically for local councillors, the Mayor of London, or occasionally MEPs. I am, however, very happy to act as the first port of call” - Simon Hughes

Themes: disconnection

- Power disconnection
 - Individuals feel that the political system disconnects/alienates them from their MPs. This means that they believe they are far from influencing policy or change
 - Some constituents do not feel that MPs have significant power - nor do some MPs

“The more you strip away power the less you’ll engage people” - Damian Hockney

“It’s not worth voting here.” - Sarah

“They’re up there and we’re down here.” - Glen

“When you centralise power...and people don’t get anywhere...frankly people give up” - Damian Hockney

Themes: disconnection

- Cultural disconnection
 - MPs need to be educated, knowledgeable and articulate. This sets them apart from many of their less well-educated constituents.
 - But it also makes them more accessible to the political classes

“They’ve come from a different world [...] they’ve got degrees.” - Glen

“They can’t fit in and shouldn’t try” - Live team

“MPs have too many hats to wear.” - Glen

“They have to be boring to fit in” - Live team

“You can’t force people to take part...if [they think] they’re better off outside the system - especially young people - they’re not stupid” - Damian Hockney

“We [Vauxhall Conservative Association] congratulated Kate Hoey on becoming chairman the CLA.” - Stuart

Question: How can busy MPs better connect with the constituents who aren't like them?

Themes: disconnection

- Feedback from MPs
 - Inconsistent feedback to constituents, some good, some non-existent
 - However, all participants were unsure whether their engagement had been effective

“Whatever I say just disappears into the ether.” - Bronwen

“After writing the letters the police changed the process, I’m not sure if my letters contributed?” - Jackie

“Whether anything happened about it I don’t know”

- Question: What if people got feedback - would they feel that they have had influence? Why not name and trace policy changes after people like Sarah’s law in the UK and Jessica’s law in the US (the FedEx of political influence)

Themes: disconnection

- DIY. The research shows that some constituents believe pressure groups or direct action have more influence than a vote
 - Acting via an MP is not always seen as the best way to have influence
 - Often, participants described how issue based pressure groups or direct action are a preferential option (because the outcomes are visible, immediate and more controllable)

“An individual can’t make a difference, not on their own” - Jackie

“MPs acting on their own don’t have much influence.” - Jackie

“We thought about becoming Specials.” - Glen and Sharon

“...over the next 20 years fewer and fewer people are going to get involved in local politics, and they will all do direct action...”

- Question: Could MPs better support issue based politics?

Themes: perception vs. experience

- People who have engaged with their MP describe it as a positive experience
 - Most participants who had contacted their MP by letters or by attending a surgery were surprised by the manner, efficiency and effectiveness of MPs
 - However, the research shows that many constituents initially have low expectations of their MP. This means that their expectations are often (and easily) exceeded

“He was very compassionate...he wrote a letter to the head of housing to find me somewhere to live...he sent me a letter yesterday to see how I’m doing.” - Joe

“I just wanted to thank her.” - Josephine

“I got quite a good comeback from him [the previous MP]...he was alert to the issue”. - Bronwen

“It wasn’t what I expected.” - Joe

“I was very impressed” [that she was actually canvassed] - Bronwen

- Question: How could this experience be more widely communicated?

Themes: perception vs. experience

- However, people who have no direct experience of engaging with their MP have low expectations
 - They have low expectations of what MPs can achieve, their accessibility and responsiveness
 - They have little trust in the power of MPs or belief in the ability of MPs to do an effective job
 - Some participants who had not met their MP expressed extreme surprise that it is possible to meet your MP face to face

“MPs are a bit untouchable, trying to get through to them would be like battering your head against a wall.” - Jane

“Writing to an MP is a waste of time, the letter would get ‘lost’.” - Glen

“I was surprised by his openness and helpfulness, I expected them to turn me away because I was homeless [...] I expected Chris [Mullins MP] to be too busy to see me.” - Joe

“The only part of their suit they wear out is the backside” - Glen

Themes: representation

- Because of their politics, constituents don't always feel represented by their MPs
 - Several participants described situations where their MPs interests, or the interests of their party would prevent their MP from listening and acting on their needs if they conflicted
 - This meant several participants believed that it would be pointless to meet with their MP to discuss issues that were more relevant for other parties
 - Several participants described the need for 'party representatives' (employing the 'also-ran' candidates from other parties)

“How can he represent me? I didn't vote for him.” - Bronwen

“...who would I go to?...would it be a Labour rep? Because Labour are in government.” - Jane

Themes: representation

- Constituents have respect for MPs who have a good connection to their constituency
 - The research shows that people appreciate MPs and parties making an effort to connect with them
 - There is a desire for MPs to ‘get real’ (Live magazine team), live amongst and understand their constituents. There is respect and reward for those who do

“Pat Smith [neighbouring MP] lives in Silksworth, you see her on the bus” - Glen and Sharon

“I was very impressed...which really made me warm to them...I thought if you’ve bothered to make it up my drive.” - Bronwen

“It’s good to see them out there [canvassing] as long as they don’t speak to me.” - Jackie

“They should get ‘real’ [...] hang out at JD sports and talk to the people.” - Live team ▪

Themes: representation

- Despite the good experience of helping at times of crisis, the public are sometimes critical of other methods of ‘engagement’ used by MPs
 - People are cynical of MPs that they only see during canvassing. While some MPs relish the opportunity to ‘open a bench’ (Bridget Prentice MP) constituents often interpret this endorsement opportunity as a PR stunt

“You only see them when they want your vote.” - Live team

Question: Are there other ways to connect with and understand constituents?

Themes: representation

- There is a desire for MPs to ‘get real’, live with and understand their constituents. There is respect and reward for those who do
 - Constituents have respect for MPs who have a good connection to their constituency
 - The research shows that people appreciate MPs and parties making an effort to connect with them
 - There is a desire for MPs to ‘get real’ (Live magazine team), live amongst and understand their constituents. There is respect and reward for those who do

“Pat Smith [neighbouring MP] lives in Silksworth, you see her on the bus” - Glen and Sharon

“I was very impressed [with the Lib Dem canvassers] ...which really made me warm to them...I thought if you’ve bothered to make it up my drive.” - Bronwen

“It’s good to see them out there [canvassing] as long as they don’t speak to me.” - Jackie

“They should get ‘real’ [...] hang out at JD sports and talk to the people.” - Live team

System opportunities

- Personality rather than system
 - The effectiveness of an MP appears to be based on their own personality rather than supporting systems

“The role ends up being what you want it to be” - Damian

“It’s all about relationships” - Damian

Kate Hoey and Chris Mullins quotes

System opportunities

- Personal Innovation rather than system innovation
 - The effectiveness of MPs appears to be based on their own personality rather than systems

“The role ends up what you want it to be.”- Damien Hockney, AM

- There was a low awareness from MPs of innovation amongst peers, and although some parties appear to provide training for new MPs, there was no sense of ongoing development

“There is training and support for Liberal Democrat MPs through what is called the incumbency project. I was elected long before this started and although best practice and new ideas are always welcome, modestly I would hope that, although I may need support, I need training less.” - Simon Hughes MP (via email)

“It’s difficult to share best practice because there’s no infrastructure to do that” - Frances, assistant to Emily Thornberry MP

Question: What if there were systems to share best practice?

System opportunities

- MPs described how most constituents come to their surgeries with similar issues
 - MPs listed asylum and immigration, housing issues (such as overcrowding) and benefit issues amongst the key problems that constituents regularly raise at their surgeries

“The most frequent requests for help are in relation to housing - about 40%, Home Office matters (asylum, immigration, nationality, police and prisons) - about 40%, benefits, pensions and other financial matters - about 10%, and health, education and social services - about 10%.” - Simon Huges MP (via email)

“Housing problems. Health and social care treatments. Fear of Crime. Traffic issues.” - David Cameron MP (via email)

System opportunities

- A large amount of surgery appears to be similar issues
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“Housing problems. Health and social care treatments. Fear of Crime. Traffic issues.” - David Cameron MP (via email)

Question: Is there a way to achieve economy of scale?

System opportunities

- Engaging with diversity

- Constituents and MPs acknowledged that there is poor engagement with young people
- Younger constituents complained that they felt patronised and exploited by politicians
- The group of young constituents who took part in this research believe MPs do not know how to speak to people like them
- The majority of people attending surgeries are not young

“18 to 20 year-olds engage less with MPs, under 18’s, *a lot less.*” - Frances, assistant to Emily Thornberry MP

“They don’t want to speak to us, they speak to us like children [...] they should go and teach a lesson in school, they should teach a life skills lesson.” - Live team

“I telephoned to speak to John Phillips [local councillor], I got through to his elderly PA. She gave me an appointment because we spoke the same language.” -Elsa (86)

System opportunities

- Need different measures of success
 - When asked could engagement be better, MPs talked about engagement in terms of letters received and surgery throughput
 - However, no one talked about measures that looked at the 'disease' rather than the 'symptom'

“I am not sure I could handle much more engagement - though my energy for responding happily does not appear to have diminished over the years.” - Simon Hughes MP (via email)

“My constituents don't have problem engaging with me.” - Kate Hoey MP

Question: What if MPs measured success through crises prevented rather than crisis solved? *Maybe MPs are too busy?*

System opportunities

- Democracy has low expectations of the public
 - The public are expected to complain, protest, moan and only engage when there is a crisis.

“Constituents don’t have any responsibilities to an MP - but I hope they understand the pressure which we can quite often be under.” - Simon Hughes MP (via email)

“I always describe my job as dealing with three Cs; constituency, commons and complaining.” - Bridget Prentice MP

Question: If a degree of responsibility were put on constituents, would they feel more engaged with politics?

System opportunities

- MPs have a unique perspective on policy delivery failure
 - MPs hear first-hand the personal experiences of public services failing to meet the needs of individuals
- MPs are often the 'last resort'.
 - They are called upon during crisis and when existing routes have been exhausted
- However, there is an opportunity for MPs to work proactively to identify opportunities to prevent crisis and solve problems
 - *MPs work re-actively rather than pro-actively to meet the needs of their constituents. Time constraints are a contributing factor to this work*
 - Prevention rather than cure

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Appendix: what politics is like

QuickTime™ and a
TIFF (Uncompressed) decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

Participants were asked to choose images and
words that described what politics was like

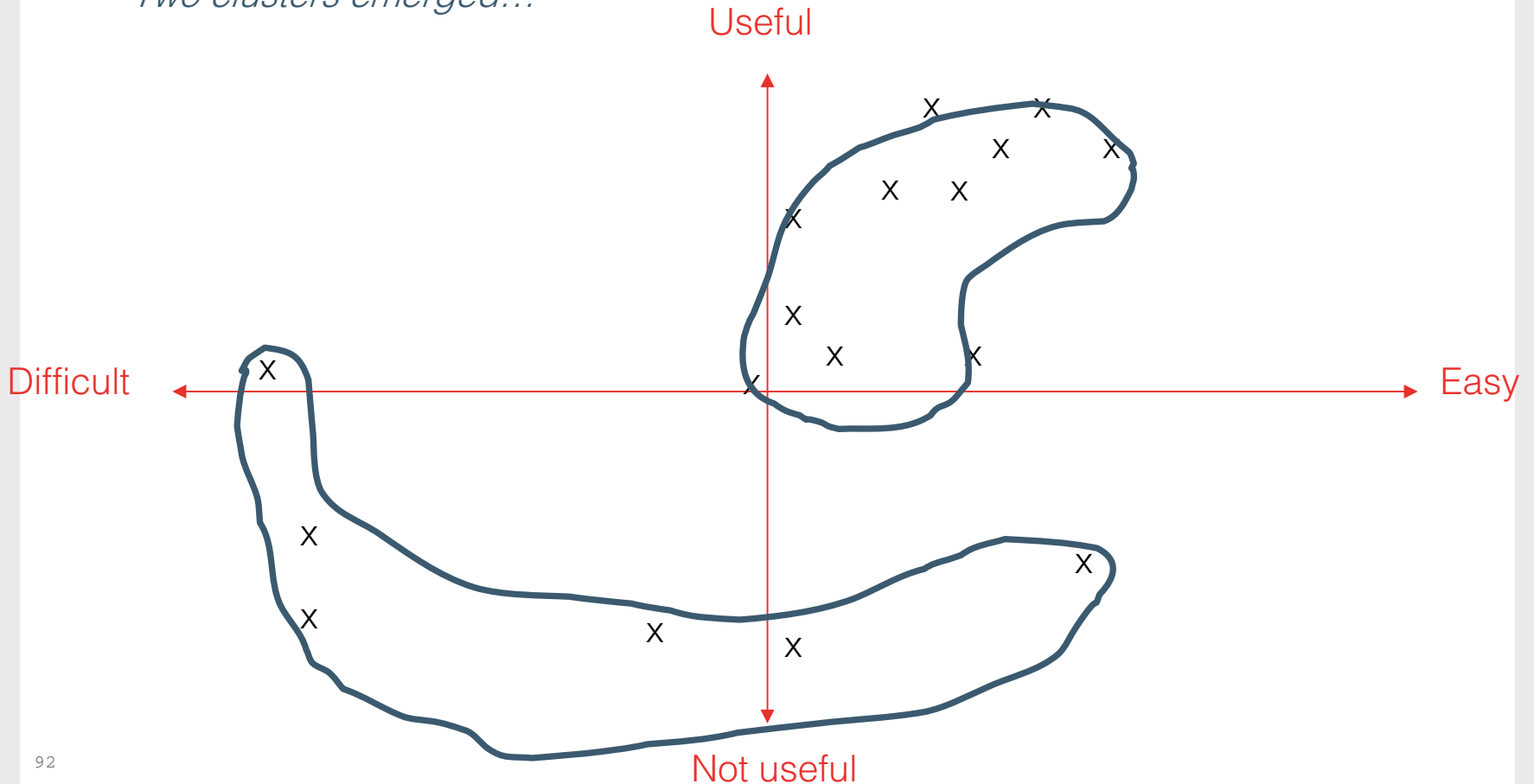
Appendix: what politics is not like

QuickTime™ and a
TIFF (LZW) decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

...and what politics was NOT like

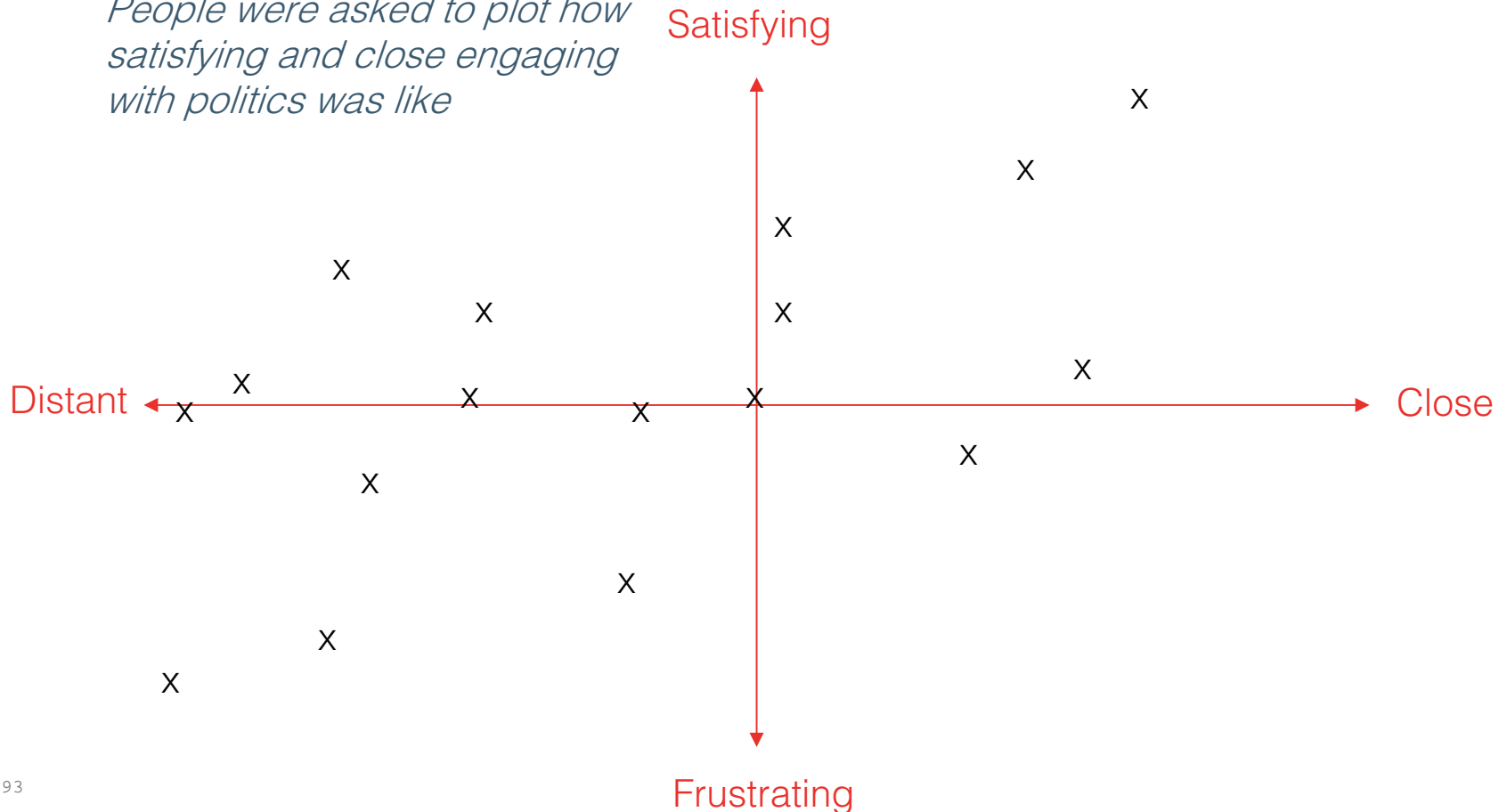
Appendix: usefulness & ease

Two clusters emerged...



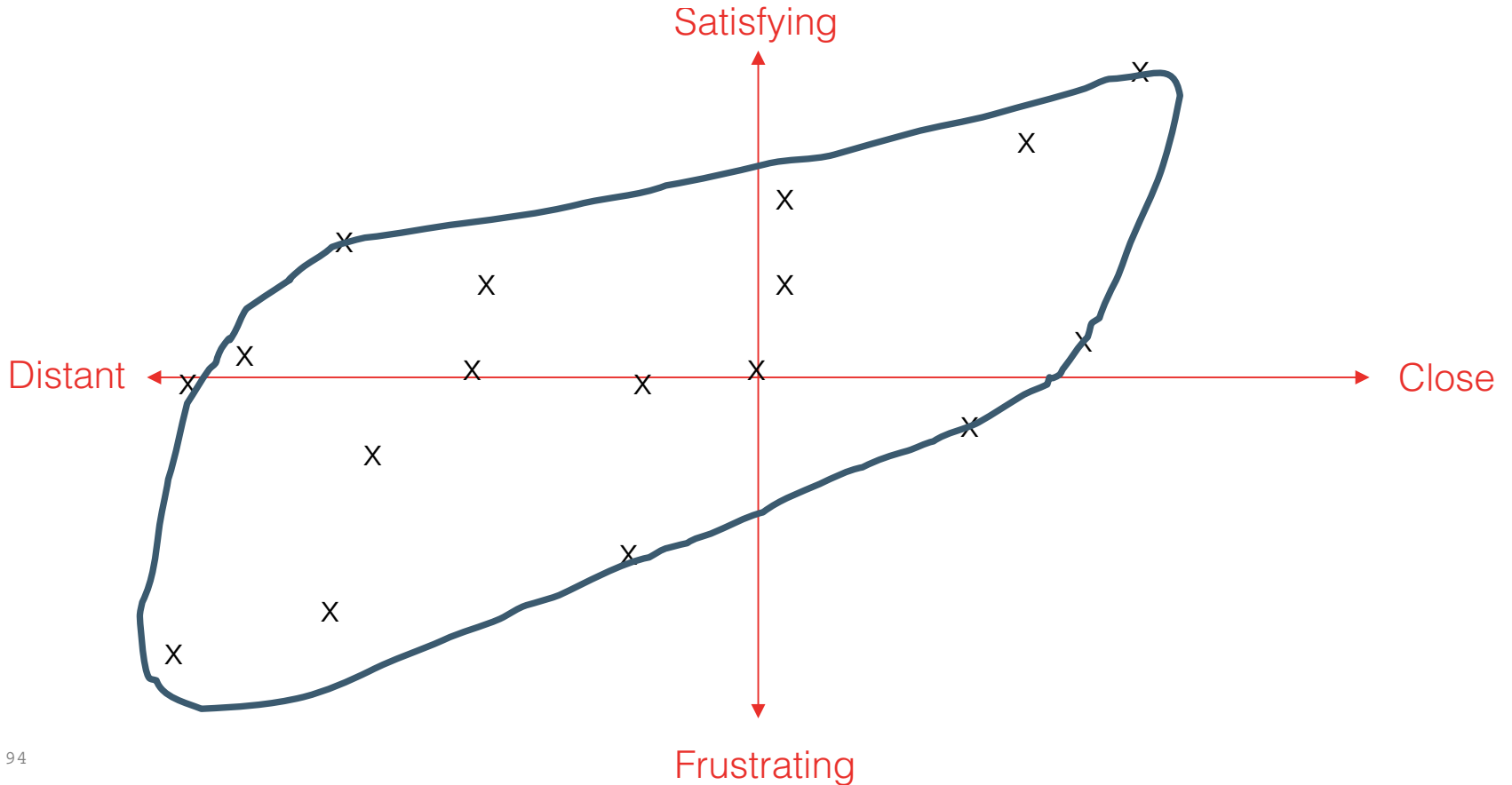
Appendix: satisfaction & proximity

People were asked to plot how satisfying and close engaging with politics was like



Appendix: satisfaction & proximity

A more unified pattern emerged...





SU Rating

SU Index

6.3
10

*SU rating includes results gathered during contextual interviews and collected from completed probe packs

SU Rating

SU Index

6.0
10

*SU rating includes results gathered during contextual interviews only

SU Rating

Proposition

66%

Experience

64%

Usability

55%

Accessibility

59%

*SU rating includes results gathered during contextual interviews and collected from completed probe packs

SU Rating

Proposition

59%

Experience

64%

Usability

60%

Accessibility

57%

*SU rating includes results gathered during contextual interviews only

SU Rating: Distribution

Proposition	20%	80%
Experience	24%	92%
Usability	10%	90%
Accessibility	16%	76%

This table shows the distribution of the results collected during contextual interviews only

SU Rating: Perception v Experience

Proposition	32%	72%
Experience	40%	77%
Usability	28%	76%
Accessibility	32%	70%

This table shows the split (using results collected during contextual interviews) between those who had experience of engagement and those who did not

Top 10 usability issues

Proposition

1. The MP 'proposition' isn't clear. Constituents may have a confused model of the MP role and 'offer' and how this is different from other 'official' representatives
2. The MP proposition isn't communicated well. Constituents need clearer information about what their MP does and how their role fits local government
3. Because MPs need to have a split-role (between constituency and Westminster) misunderstanding is created between local and national responsibilities

Top 10 usability issues

Experience

1. The language and look of politics often appears impenetrable and not relevant for 'normal' people
2. Even though the experience of contacting MPs is generally good, this is poorly communicated, so people's expectations remain low

Top 10 usability issues

Usability

1. There is often a lack of feedback when constituents interact with their MP
2. One single local MP creates representation and availability issues for constituents
3. It isn't always possible to deal with MPs in an appropriate manner and time

Top 10 usability issues

Accessibility

1. There is no clear or consistent way to find information/contact information for local MPs. This means constituents often end-up looking for their MP in local council offices
2. Constituents are not sure where the right place to go is and who the right person is (party politics and personality confuses people)

Top 10 service innovative ideas

1. **MP Reps** Non-elected representatives from other main parties, including neutral reps to represent constituents
2. **Mobile MPs** Help MPs be more mobile and come to the constituents
3. **Specials** Enable constituents to become directly involved by assisting the MP and their team
4. **Default information** All MPs to have consistent and clear website, forms (for surgery type issues) etc with standard information (e.g. Surgery times)
5. **0800 MP** Give all MPs a very accessible contact number
6. **Constituency workshops** Local workshops to uncover the best ideas and involve constituents
7. **'Town hall' meetings** American style local debates and votes on local issues
8. **Best practice sharing** Create the infrastructure and systems to enable MPs to share information about successes *and* failures
9. **Traceability** Create a means for constituents to sponsor and track their input
10. **Future scenarios** Provoke constituents to become engaged by generating imagined futures without their input

If you're interested in hearing more about what the constituents think and the practical ideas emerging from this project visit:

www.designcouncil.org.uk/RED/democracy

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