

Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission

Oral evidence: Local Government Boundary Commission for England and Electoral Commission: Main Estimates 2023-24

Wednesday 15 March 2023

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Members present: Sir Lindsay Hoyle (Chair); Mr Clive Betts; Rachel Hopkins; Craig Mackinlay; Lee Rowley; Cat Smith; Owen Thompson; Mr William Wragg.

Questions 1-51

Witnesses

[I](#): Professor Colin Mellors OBE, Chair, Local Government Boundary Commission for England, Jolyon Jackson CBE, Chief Executive, Local Government Boundary Commission for England and Lynn Ingram, Director of Corporate Services, Local Government Boundary Commission for England.

[II](#): John Pullinger CB, Chair of the Electoral Commission, Shaun McNally, Chief executive, Electoral Commission and Kieran Rix, Director of Finance & Corporate Services, Electoral Commission.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Colin Mellors, Jolyon Jackson and Lynn Ingram.

Q1 Chair: Welcome to this meeting of the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission, on the matter of the main estimates for 2023-24 of the Electoral Commission and the Local Government Boundary Commission for England. We will first hear from the Boundary Commission. Will our witnesses introduce themselves for the record, please?

Lynn Ingram: I am Lynn Ingram, the director of corporate services for LGBCE.

Jolyon Jackson: I am Jolyon Jackson, the chief executive.

Colin Mellors: I am Colin Mellors, and I chair the Local Government Boundary Commission.

Q2 Chair: Would you briefly summarise your estimate? Who wants to take that one on? Lynn—over to you.

Lynn Ingram: We are here to ask for £2,693,000 to continue our work during 2023-24. It is a net increase over this year of £166,000. I want to draw attention to four elements of that. We have included 4% pay and price increases based on actual and assumed costs. We have included a £10,000 adjustment to our dilapidation provision on our Government property accommodation; we will exit this accommodation in September '24. This year you approved £70,000 for a new website, which is due to go live next week. We have done that, so we would like to revert to our normal capital running rate of £50,000 a year. We have included a £101,000 element—4% of our normal running costs—to be held as a risk and resilience budget. The provision will be ringfenced, and is intended to avoid us having to approach the Committee for small supplementary estimates in the case of unexpected events such as changes in interest rates and so on. That is all I want to say; thank you.

Chair: Excellent. We might as well get under way. Let us start with you, Clive.

Q3 Mr Betts: In the estimate, there is £70,000 for development of your website. Will this make a difference to the potential users of the site?

Jolyon Jackson: Yes. We got our last website in 2010 and we have been upgrading it since, but technology has changed significantly in the last 13 years. The website gets about 250,000 hits a year and we get about 8,000 submissions through it. We have done two things: we have looked at how people want to communicate to us, and at the language and how we want to communicate with them. Rather than take our old website forward, we have done a complete redesign aimed at ease of communications both ways.

Q4 Mr Betts: Has that led to an increase in use of the website?



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Jolyon Jackson: It starts next week, so fingers crossed! We believe it will.

- Q5 **Mr Betts:** Value for money will in the end be judged by those who use it or who stop using it because they don't like it. How will you monitor that?

Jolyon Jackson: First, on value for money, we are actually making a saving on our current website of about £20,000 a year. Secondly, we have quite a refined customer satisfaction system, whereby we ask anyone who uses the website their opinion of what we do and how we do it.

- Q6 **Mr Betts:** Right. Will you then do comparisons between their responses?

Jolyon Jackson: Yes, we will do that annually.

- Q7 **Mr Betts:** Will it be possible to make any changes depending on the reaction you get from your customers?

Jolyon Jackson: Yes. The advantage is, because of flexibilities, we will be able to make changes ourselves, rather than going to an expensive provider that charges a lot for them.

Mr Betts: Perhaps when we get to next year, Mr Speaker, it would be helpful to have an update on that response from customers—on how they have responded to the money that has been spent.

Chair: You don't expect it to collapse when you go live because you have so many hits, then?

Jolyon Jackson: Thank you very much for your confidence, Mr Speaker!

Chair: I mean you will be so popular—this could be like live tickets!

- Q8 **Mr Wragg:** Good afternoon to our witnesses. Would you talk me through your current office requirements, and how they might have changed in recent years?

Jolyon Jackson: It is something everyone is struggling with at the moment. We move out in September. At the moment, we have a conference room and seating for, I think, 26; there are 23 of us. But we're a lift-and-shift organisation; everything is in the cloud. All we need is plug-ins, fibre and our laptops, and we're away. But we do need to come together occasionally. We have worked out where we need to be together and what we want to do together, and where we don't need to be together and the procedures for people working away. So we're going to continue with hybrid working.

We are taking a business case to the commission board, which they haven't seen yet; we're just thinking through our ideas. But there will probably be about 12 desks, half what we currently have, so there will be a saving there. We need enough space so that all the staff and all the commissioners can meet together—that will either be in the same place or, if necessary, a hired place, which will still be cheaper—so that we can do everything we do now. What is quite interesting is that when we have discussed it with the staff, some comments have been, "Well, our office is



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quite quiet anyway,” because actually, what they like doing is putting a wet towel round their head and drawing boundaries, because that’s what we do! So we will take a business case to the board, who will then make a decision.

Q9 Mr Wragg: What is the cost at the moment?

Lynn Ingram: At the moment, we spend, for both accommodation and the service charges associated with that, about £300,000 a year, so on a budget of just over £2 million, that is quite significant. We are looking to save around half of that.

Q10 Mr Wragg: Is it privately owned premises?

Jolyon Jackson: No, we’re in a GPA building.

Q11 Mr Wragg: Would you consider that the route forward?

Jolyon Jackson: We will look at all the options, if I may not commit myself at this stage.

Colin Mellors: Just as a general point, Mr Speaker, what we are doing throughout all the things we are looking at at the moment—the last two or three years have changed fundamentally how everybody has been working. In going to whatever the new normal is going to be, we are looking at things through three prisms: what makes sense for our staff—this is not necessarily in order—what makes sense for the people we work with, and what is most efficient and effective. We have learned a great deal from what has happened over the past two or three years. Many things—like the website, where we are going to be for our office accommodation and, not least, how we communicate with communities—have been fundamentally changed by that experience and, frankly, improved very often by it.

Q12 Cat Smith: I want to turn to the work of the organisation and the reviews that you do. The commission has a target of starting 25 reviews a year. Could you tell the Committee why the target is the number of reviews started and not the number of reviews completed, and how many reviews you have completed this year?

Colin Mellors: I will need to check back on that one; you might have that, Jolyon. We do 25 reviews a year, which was an increase from what our predecessors did, prior to 2010. There are 330 authorities in the country as a whole, and three drivers of when we do a review. First, the legislation requires us to do periodic reviews—“from time to time”. We think, for good governance, that should be between three and four full electoral cycles—that is, between 12 and 16 years. If we do them too frequently, it distracts local authorities and probably is unnecessary. If we leave it too long, the arrangements could well have been degraded. Twenty-five is a manageable number, which we can do very well. It gives us a little bit of flex for doing those periodic reviews, but also what we call intervention reviews, which are when there have been significant developments and there is a large amount of electoral inequality—we go in and do those earlier. Also, we do reviews on request. Surprisingly, people



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knock on our door and ask for a review, either because they want to change their own systems of internal governance or their electoral cycle or because they are subject to restructuring.

All those things drive it, and that is why 25 is the starting point. The reason why we record that rather than the exit point is simply that the exit point is a bit volatile. Each review will last probably about 15 to 18 months. It varies a little bit and it varied even more during the pandemic. It is easier to use that as our benchmark, rather than our exit numbers. If you look at the numbers in our report, we had a particularly large output last year because there was a pent-up number. At any one time we have probably got between 45 and 50 on the desk undergoing reviews.

Q13 Cat Smith: How many were completed?

Jolyon Jackson: Thirty-six were completed last year, because quite a lot were pushed to the right because of covid. Local authorities had slightly more important things going on.

Colin Mellors: It won't be 36 this year. My answer was long to give Jolyon the chance to check the number. I do not want to give you the wrong number.

Q14 Cat Smith: Do you have an estimate of how many will be completed in the next period?

Jolyon Jackson: I am sorry, but I have not looked at that.

Colin Mellors: We can confirm, but I think it is about 25 or 26.

Jolyon Jackson: It is normally 25-ish, but if you have a period of further consultation, if the local authority wants to delay for any reason or if something else happens and we delay it, it pushes the finishes to the right—that is why we count the starts.

Q15 Rachel Hopkins: For transparency, I should declare that I am a former employee of the LGBCE and the EC, and familiar with some colleagues in the room. To talk macro on electoral reviews, you aim to review every 12 to 16 years, but 24% of local authorities—80 out of 333— have not been reviewed in the last 16 years, and 47 are not on the review programme. Why is that?

Colin Mellors: The latest numbers we saw were that there are 39 that have not been reviewed since 2012. There are some that are due to be reviewed. Each and every one of them will be in the programme within the next couple of years and will be out of it shortly afterwards. We have a five-year rolling programme that is very helpful to us, because it gives a steady flow of business, which is also helpful to local authorities; they know when we are coming their way, so they have got time to plan.

When we do our review programme, we sometimes have to prioritise those that have got tight deadlines. It is often those where there are electoral imbalances that have occurred, or those that are undergoing restructuring in some form. It tends to be the larger metropolitan districts,



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which, because of their size, are unlikely to trigger a review because of electoral inequality.

We flex it around to ensure we get a reasonable balance. But we do not want to say no—we won't say no—to anybody who is requesting a review, either directly or through DLUHC. We keep in touch with them, and it is a very iterative process. Jolyon and I spend a lot of time at the beginning to talk to every leader and chief exec, because that sets the tone for the whole review. The phrase I try to remember to use, is that we want to do the review with them, not to them. Frankly, we need their confidence and engagement if we are going to do a decent review. Passively going along with it will not do anybody any good. So those engagements are really important.

- Q16 **Rachel Hopkins:** You probably answered my next question, which was of those 39 or 47, are they predominantly metropolitan boroughs, or is there another pattern?

Colin Mellors: There is a mix now. A year ago, they were. We are working through the mets in blocks. I know the London authorities are not mets, but we did the London authorities as a block, we then did the west-midlands as a block and the north-west as a block—the Greater Manchester ones—and we are doing the north-east at the moment. It is quite helpful when there is proximity and some degree of sharing between them. But they are a mix now.

- Q17 **Chair:** To follow up on that, it is great that the mets get the big tick. But what about districts and unitaries? There are districts and unitaries. The north-west is only taking in, in reality, Greater Manchester, but there is also Cheshire, Lancashire and Cumbria—what happens to them?

Colin Mellors: We do those exactly the same. The status of the authority makes no difference to where they are in the process.

- Q18 **Chair:** What I am saying is, if I have followed rightly, that all your reviews seem to concentrate on mets, so when do you move out to—

Colin Mellors: It is probably the opposite. The mets have probably not seen us as frequently, because they have not triggered an electoral review. Because of their sheer size, they are unlikely to move above the intervention criteria.

- Q19 **Chair:** So unitaries would have been caught up in that?

Jolyon Jackson: Absolutely.

Colin Mellors: They all get equal attention.

Chair: That is what I wanted to hear; that is wonderful.

- Q20 **Owen Thompson:** In terms of customer satisfaction, it is encouraging that 75% is very positive. I just wonder what you might be looking to do to improve that further in the review process, following any feedback you might already have had.



Colin Mellors: That is a really helpful question. I nearly interrupted at the end of Mr Betts's question, because it ties in with the website and how we will check whether it is working or not. As I said, we really are absolutely dependent on the good will, the co-operation and the confidence in our independence and impartiality of local authorities. We spend a lot of time at the outset trying to ensure we have that.

Satisfaction surveys are always difficult in our business—and in your business, as well—because we cannot please everybody all the time. We are going to disappoint people, which is why, in a sense, I am more concerned that, rather than the 75% overall satisfaction, for our professionalism we get over 80%. That is what matters to me, because inevitably the responses are going to be coloured by, "Did we give people what they preferred and wanted, or did we upset them?" I am afraid it is human nature that you are more likely to contact people if you are dissatisfied, than if you are happy with things.

These are in response to about a 10% reply, so 10% of all submissions send in a subsequent satisfaction questionnaire. But it is not just about headline visible quantitative data. Every year, we have a dedicated session to look at all the feedback we have had from our reviews. We elicit it contemporaneously, particularly from local authority chief execs and similar. We have a session to look at all those things and we try to learn from them. It has been very influential on our website. One of the biggest observations we get is, "Please, can you be clear and simple with the language you use?" It is to make our language accessible. It has been one of the real positives of doing things down the line during the pandemic. We have had to explain things very, very clearly, so that people understand and engage.

Q21 **Owen Thompson:** As a follow-up, within the 25% are there particular themes or clusters of issues that contribute to the negative?

Colin Mellors: I am afraid so. Most of them are about the outcome rather than about the process, as you might expect.

Jolyon Jackson: Occasionally we get something which picks up on something we could have done better. For us, the comments are more important than the statistics.

Colin Mellors: But we have a self-interest in making sure we work closely with people and, frankly, that we give confidence to you, Mr Speaker, and to the Minister and his Department. While we are separate from the Department, that relationship is critical for us and I hope we are trusted.

Q22 **Cat Smith:** Just a quick follow-up question with regard to the new website going live next week. There are a lot of ongoing reviews and many of them are currently open to consultation. I just happened to come across the one for Rossendale, which is currently consulting. Where councils are currently having a consultation that is open to the public, have you given them any extra information and support about the transition? When we switch from one IT system to another, sometimes



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there can be a bit of a teething problem.

Jolyon Jackson: I think the consultation is closed before the website goes live. You are probably about to look at me and say, "No, it doesn't" but the answer is that the team has looked at that, yes.

Q23 **Cat Smith:** At the minute, it says that you are consulting on proposals for Rossendale between 7 March and 15 May.

Jolyon Jackson: I told you that you would tell me that! But the answer is yes, because one of the biggest concerns is having a break instead of a seamless move from one to the other.

Colin Mellors: The commissioners have been interrogated quite extensively on that very question. The one thing they do not want to do is switch something off.

Jolyon Jackson: What is happening is that they are putting in submissions on the current website. When the new website goes live, they will put in submissions on the new website. So, they will not really see any difference.

Colin Mellors: As an observation, one of the key objectives is to make the website interesting, accessible and meaningful to people, because people will only engage with politics when they think it matters and they can make a difference. We have tried to achieve that. One of the side issues Mr Betts might be interested in is that we think it will make us more resilient, because it will help us to make sure everything that comes in is recorded, double-checked, redacted and such like. It is improving our internal mechanisms, even though it is being externally driven in terms of its needs.

Chair: Okay, we are all happy. That concludes the evidence with the Boundary Commission. Thanks for joining us today. May I also take this opportunity to express our thanks to Jolyon and Lynn, who will be leaving the commission this year? Jolyon and Lynn will have served at the commission for nearly 20 years between them. We're grateful for your dedication and hard work, and we wish you well in the future. Thanks for what you've done and thanks for serving us so well.

We now move on to our next guests.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: John Pullinger, Shaun McNally and Kieran Rix.

Q24 **Chair:** Welcome to our next guests from the Electoral Commission. Could you introduce yourselves for the record?

John Pullinger: I am John Pullinger. I'm the chair of the commission.

Shaun McNally: I'm Shaun McNally, and I'm the chief executive of the Electoral Commission.

Kieran Rix: I'm Kieran Rix. I'm the director of finance and corporate services.

Q25 **Chair:** Welcome. Before we begin the questioning, could you briefly summarise your estimate, please?

Shaun McNally: Yes, certainly. In our core expenditure, we remain on course to remain within the commitment that we gave when we agreed the corporate plan, and that is to keep spending on regulatory activities, support for electoral administrators and overheads flat in real terms over the period of the plan.

However, within that we do see an increase in the overall core expenditure. Principally, that is being driven by three factors. The first is moving our digital and IT systems into the cloud, which results in our having to reclassify expenditure from capital into resource; the second is inflation, in relation to utilities and the cost of energy; and there is also pay inflation, where we have accounted for a 4% increase in-year in terms of salaries.

Overall, when you look at this in terms of the RDEL, that represents a 3% increase, not including depreciation and discounting the funding that has been agreed by the Senedd and the Scottish Parliament.

Chair: Excellent. Thank you for that. Let us kick off with William.

Q26 **Mr Wragg:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. For background, I believe that the commission is forecasting an underspend of £0.2 million in its RDEL budget and by £1 million in its CDEL budget, as I understand it, and this is driven by the decision to stop work on the Political Finance Online system, which, if I were wearing my other Committee hat, I might ask questions specifically about. However, as this session is just about the estimate, I wonder if Mr Rix could enlighten me. Where do you expect to land, as it were, in relation to this year's main estimate? And does this include the write-off for the Political Finance Online tool?

Kieran Rix: Yes, it does. Since we wrote to you with those figures, we've had another month so we've had another look at that forecast. I think it might be slightly higher; it might be £300,000, rather than £200,000. But that will depend on the exact timing of some of the activity—campaigns activity—around the year-end. It's very sensitive at this time of year to small shifts in activity. That number does include the write-off of the political finance system and some of the running costs of starting the discovery for the replacement.

Q27 **Mr Wragg:** I wonder, Mr Speaker, whether any member of the panel wishes to explain the overall status of the Political Finance Online tool and what might be developing there.

Shaun McNally: I am more than happy to do that. In learning lessons from the way it was approached before, we are taking our time to do proper discovery work in relation to Political Finance Online and the replacement thereof.



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What we know is that a lot of the work that was done in relation to the development through the various phases of the programme that was stopped is that a lot of the work on business processes remains intact. That just has to be reviewed, in light of the Elections Act changes, and that is being done.

In accordance with the commitment that was given to this Committee, there will be proper stakeholder engagement, but there needs to be recognition that we have paused right in the centre of that period, so that work will continue.

We are looking to work with, and identify, a delivery partner to ensure that we maximise the opportunities of using off-shelf solutions and then come with a strategic outline business case, so that we can identify what the costs are and the time for delivery in it, so that we have that level of oversight.

As a Committee, you can be confident and hold us to account on delivery in relation to the key stages.

- Q28 **Owen Thompson:** In terms of your core expenditure—and I know that Shaun has touched on this a bit to start with—Kieran, could you maybe give us a bit more on the basis for the 9% uplift in the core expenditure?

Kieran Rix: Sure. Nine per cent. is about £1.3 million. That is about £500,000 of pay for next year based on 4%, as Shaun said. Then there is about £400,000 for other inflation, which we think will be unavoidable. We do not just up everything by the inflation rate; we look at where we think we are going to incur inflation and we allow for that only. Then there is about £400,000 for other increases, mainly the switch of IT from capital to current but there are some other things in there, such as an increase in the L&D budget and that sort of thing.

- Q29 **Owen Thompson:** What would you say, at the moment, will be the largest area of spend that is exposed to inflationary pressures?

Kieran Rix: The biggest one, as a block, would be pay inflation, of course. That is about 50% of our budget. Other than that, we see that there are risks around the communications budget but that is actually quite manageable in some ways. We have contracts in place—the media buy-in and that sort of thing could be exposed.

Energy is the other area where we have experienced big increases this year. The move to the cloud means that we are no longer running our servers and we have put new energy-efficient lighting into our main office. That seems to be having a good effect in mitigating—probably better than we expected—the inflation impacts on energy. We might see that mitigate a bit, but we will have to see what happens to the rates.

- Q30 **Owen Thompson:** What are the objectives of the IT strategy for '22-24?

Shaun McNally: There are rather technical objectives. I am going to try to explain it in a way that makes sense to me.



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Prior to moving into the cloud, we were operating on ageing infrastructure and on servers that were unable to be as resilient as when we moved work into the cloud. The first focus is on ensuring that we are absolutely confident about cyber-security and that we have resilience across the system.

Moving on, we have moved into the cloud and are able to avail ourselves of the full suite of Office 365 measures. That presents an opportunity for us to look at some of the bespoke case-management systems that we have been using internally and to move those across on to a platform that is more consistent with what we would say are off-the-shelf products that are capable of being agile, refreshed and automated where they can. For the staff, there is a real benefit.

In addition, this now gives us an opportunity to look at the internal internet. It is something that staff across the organisation have been saying to me: "Actually, you could make this better for us." That will address many of the issues that they raise and also the resilience of the network in being able to access applications remotely. There will be a proper focus on development.

If I was to be really kind, I would say that this is the first stage of that. It is enabling works to enable us to build on in future years, but it is important to address those and do those in a systematic and thought-through way.

Q31 Owen Thompson: There is clearly a lot of work going on. Could you tell us how much it is going to cost to deliver this?

Shaun McNally: On cost and budget, in resource we have about £1.1 million set aside for next year, in addition to which there is the £600,000 within capital; we will have to look at the classification of that. There will be a cost too for discovery of Political Finance Online, but until we have the strategic outline business case, we will not be able to be clear about the overall cost. In fact, it would be foolhardy in the extreme to do that. What I can say is that this gives us the opportunity to look at efficiencies. By using Office 365 tools, you can use what is readily available rather than looking at the bespoke.

Q32 Owen Thompson: Do you have a timescale or an idea of when you will have that detail?

Shaun McNally: It is just a question of a couple of weeks away.

Q33 Owen Thompson: Finally, there are clearly a lot of issues around IT and a lot of work going into that. From next year, what could we do to ensure that is set out separately within the estimate so that we can have full transparency?

Shaun McNally: Transparency will come from the strategic outline business case, which will be clear about how the costs are being attributed. I would welcome that scrutiny by the Committee; in fact, I would expect it.



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Kieran Rix: We are constrained about what we can do on the face of the estimate, but we can always give you the information nearer the time.

John Pullinger: To add one very quick thing, from a board point of view, what Shaun, Kieran and the team have already done makes us much more confident from a risk-management perspective. This has been a consistent concern for us, but the move to the cloud has already given some resilience. We are very positive about the direction we are taking, for all the reasons that Shaun has outlined.

- Q34 **Rachel Hopkins:** Probing a little more on the write-off of the PFO, I have heard what you are saying about the new discovery phase, but is there anything you can take from that initial work on the PFO in terms of the design or not, if you are moving things online? How much is absolutely written off? Are there any bits that you can take over and use, if you are moving from bespoke to Office 365 and the like?

Shaun McNally: Approximately 50% of the overall cost goes on staff and staff resource, but the work on the business processes hasn't been wasted. All of that is there and capable of being utilised. It puts us in a much better position at the point when we are moving to the discovery phase. Also, a lot of the stakeholder engagement and feedback that took place during that period continues to be very relevant.

- Q35 **Rachel Hopkins:** Will we see that reflected in the business case you talk about?

Shaun McNally: The strategic outline business case will be clear about the commitment, the cost and the timeframe, in terms of delivery.

- Q36 **Rachel Hopkins:** Going forward, will it reflect on what you seem to be saying about some of the benefits of having done the process mapping? Will that be reflected in the business case, so that people will be able to scrutinise that better?

Shaun McNally: Yes.

- Q37 **Cat Smith:** Moving from IT to event expenditure, I can see you have £5 million earmarked for expenditure. How would you go about assessing value for money, Mr McNally?

Shaun McNally: There is a really robust process in terms of assessing value for money. It starts with market engagement in the procurement phase, to test the market and look at best in class and best value. There is then a process of looking at the three costed options, and we get scrutiny from the board. Once a campaign is running, you have data and click-throughs in real time, and you have information from surveys.

To use the example of the campaign that has been running since 9 January on voter ID, the mid-point survey shows an increase in overall awareness from 22% to 63%. We are able to track through that. We have been counting the number of click-throughs. Of course, some of the media and advertising has been run on YouTube, and you can track the number



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of click-throughs in relation to that. So there is a robust process to scrutinise and track how effective the campaigns are.

- Q38 **Cat Smith:** I am interested that you talked then about the implications of the Elections Act when I was talking specifically about events. In terms of the budgeting process, would there be any merit in separating out these expenditures?

Shaun McNally: We separate out events and the Elections Act, so there is anything specifically related to the Elections Act, but events will be driven by electoral events. The "Got 5?" media campaign is one such example. Those campaigns will transcend, so it will be preparation before the election and after it. That will cut across financial years. I am happy to split out and show how the cost is attributed, with the caveat that Kieran just mentioned that we are actually required to meet a certain standard in submitting the main estimate.

Cat Smith: I think my colleague might have some more questions on this.

- Q39 **Mr Betts:** Cat leads nicely into what I am going to follow up on. You have an increase of £0.8 million in the budget to deal with implementation of the Elections Act. Is that the total expenditure on implementation, or is it simply an increase to which other money will be added?

Kieran Rix: That is an increase. Next year we have a lot of new provisions that start to come in around things like overseas, digital and proxy voters. These sorts of projects need quite a lot of communications themselves on top of the communications we are doing around voter ID, which will continue. Reaching out to those newly affected groups will come on top, and that is why we see an increase in communications spend for the Elections Act next year.

- Q40 **Mr Betts:** Is that mainly at the first half of the year around the initial elections?

Shaun McNally: There is expenditure that will run through the Elections Act on the various items in terms of voter ID, but there are other provisions coming in next year that will impact the commission: online and absent voters and arrangements for proxy, EU franchise and overseas voters. That has the potential to require us to amend somewhere in the region of 500 forms. That is a cost to the commission in terms of resource and people. What we would see as we move through the various provisions, and move from effectively a programmatic approach to implementation into BAU, is a reduction in future years in terms of the Elections Act.

- Q41 **Mr Betts:** So there are one-off costs around changing your forms, but back to the issue of voter ID and awareness, you assume that that awareness campaign is going to continue in future years.

Shaun McNally: We would have to because, in terms of the elections in May, not everywhere across the UK and across England is going to be involved, so we will continue to have to promote it in the same way that



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we promote registration through the “Got 5?” campaign in the run-up to elections.

- Q42 **Mr Betts:** If there was a general election in the next financial year, would you need extra money for an awareness campaign? That is bearing in mind that a lot of people will not tune into campaigns if they think they are not going to vote at the local election, but might consider voting at the national elections.

Shaun McNally: Part of the campaign we are currently running is actually using national media and national platforms, because that gives you the reach. What we would have to do, because we do not and have not included any allowance in the main estimate for a potential UK general election during that period, is come back and revisit that in a fully costed way.

- Q43 **Mr Betts:** So you accept, even though you have advertised in the national papers, national media and on social media, that people will ignore things until they think they might be going to vote?

Shaun McNally: Yes.

- Q44 **Mr Betts:** Moving on to effectiveness, you mentioned in your previous answer about the improved effectiveness of awareness of the voter ID arrangements. How are you going to measure that in terms of the practical impacts?

Shaun McNally: On the elections, there are a range of measures that we will have to take into account to look at the overall effectiveness. It will inevitably be determined by the number of people who exercise their right to vote. There will be data collected in the polling stations for people who have turned up, been turned away and subsequently come back because they haven’t had voter ID. We will seek to publish information early as an indicator, but we will have to utilise the information that we get as a result of our work on post-poll reporting. We will use the public opinion surveys that we undertake to see and establish whether people have decided not to attend because they haven’t got ID, or whether they have turned up, walked away and not gone back.

- Q45 **Mr Betts:** You will be looking at the differences in different parts of the country. Will you also be trying to look at the differences in different parts of the electorate? Thinking back to the NAO report about your work on voter registration, that drew attention particularly to young people and the need to connect better with them. That is one of the concerns.

Shaun McNally: One of the strengths of this campaign is that the team—credit to them for their incredible work—have developed 150 resources that can be used by partners, returning officers and civil society groups. They have been actively reaching out and working with them to understand the needs of the demographics that are, by their nature, hard to reach.

One of the resources that was developed was a leaflet that local authorities could use. Some of them have put them in with the council tax



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update. That has generated a significant increase in the number of calls into the commission. Generally, at this time in a campaign, we would have expected about 150 calls per day. We have been experiencing 500 per day during the course of this week, which shows that the message is landing.

It is not just the message coming from the commission, but the work of political parties, campaigners, civil society groups and returning officers. We have the material there. To some extent, I am agnostic to the fact, as long as the people who have ID—the vast majority do—remember to take it, and the people who have already applied for a postal vote know that they don't need ID because the checks and balances are in place. More importantly, the people who do not have a usable form of ID need to know they are able to apply for a voter authority certificate and therefore exercise their right to vote.

John Pullinger: To answer your question, it is going to take us a bit of time, but we want to get a fully rounded picture of what is happening. We are going to get detailed data in polling stations, but we can expect some people to realise, as soon as they get close to the polling station, that they haven't got ID and go away. The public opinion survey that Shaun mentioned will give us a representative sample of people that will be able to tell us whether young people, or other demographics, are particularly likely to have missed out because of that. That will give us some detail that specifically answers your question.

We also want to draw on surveys of campaigners and candidates, because they will be very aware of and observing what is happening in and around polling stations, and they will give us a good picture of what they are seeing. Also, we can expect there to be a lot of observers out and about. We will accredit observers so we can get feedback from them.

We will try to get information as early as possible, but from your point of view, we hope you will give us time to synthesise all of that and get a properly rounded picture, so we all—the Government as well as us—will have a common evidence base to see how well it has gone and what can be learned from what has happened in May 2023. For future elections, that will help us to understand precisely what has happened to individual groups of voters up and down the country.

- Q46 **Mr Betts:** Looking at the differences between different local authorities, a number of authorities, including Sheffield, are going to look at the council doing some local work. We learned during covid that local authorities, with their reach into hard-to-reach communities, are probably best placed to do that. I wonder whether you will be looking in hindsight at what has been done well in those authorities to then spread it out across the country.

Shaun McNally: I would refer back to the fact that those resources have been developed for people to draw down and utilise.

- Q47 **Mr Betts:** It would be helpful to have that feedback in due course. Finally, you have some contracts out to do some of this work. Are they flexible,



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so if you find that some contracts are not really delivering—as you say, this is an ongoing process for you—will you be able to renew them, or change them and go to other contractors?

Shaun McNally: We have contracted for the period that we have contracted. The normal rules apply in terms of monitoring and looking at and observing overall performance, so the answer to that is yes.

Q48 **Craig Mackinlay:** I am struggling to know, all in all, how on earth you need to spend £16 million on the Elections Act over the next five years. I am struggling with that a bit because the Elections Act was not that complex.

The big thing we have been talking about is, of course, the voter ID bit. I see from the notes that we have managed to get awareness up from 22% to something like 63%. It is always difficult. There is a saying in advertising, isn't there—"Only 5% works, but you don't really know which 5%"? I don't suppose the awareness of the public is because they were watching the debate in the House of Commons, as much as it was fascinating; other things have come into play. I see the political parties are putting out tweets and that type of thing saying, "Don't forget: you have to have ID". I have seen billboards and bits and pieces.

I would have thought that the most powerful bit of advertising, which is virtually free, will be on the polling cards when local authorities send them out. If the relevant people want to vote, they will look at their polling card and do something about it. Will there be sufficient time, in your view, between the receipt of a polling card—which can be very varied between authorities, because there is no hard and fast time when polling cards go out—and the local authority providing the voter authority certificate if people are not in possession of a passport, driving licence or any other forms of ID? Is there sufficient time, in your view, for an authority to turn that around?

John Pullinger: Shaun might want to add to this, but I went to the Association of Electoral Administrators conference recently, and the Minister was there as well. They know they have a job of work to do to process all these applications in a timely way, so that voters get the authority certificate, but they are worried that everyone will do it at the last minute. We all do that: the experience of our campaigns on registration is that people do it at the last minute.

A key focus of our campaign is to try to spread that out. We are seeing the numbers of applications upticking, and we want to encourage that to go further so that we minimise the challenge that electoral administrators will have. It will be a cost challenge for them if they suddenly have to staff up and process thousands of applications in the last couple of days. A lot of what we are trying to do is to smooth out that tendency. You are right: the polling card is the immediate and personal call to action, which we will all get as we run up to the elections. Hopefully that will trigger things, but the more we can do that in advance, the easier it will be to manage. Do you want to add anything, Shaun?



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Shaun McNally: Certainly, returning officers have been very clear about wanting anything that can be done to smooth the numbers and the take-up, rather than having a surge that they will have to resource up, recruit, train and supervise staff for. They are concerned about that. The approach we have taken is absolutely the right one to raise and continue to raise overall awareness.

We know that the cut-off date for applying for a voter authority certificate is 25 April. Human nature being what it is, people will leave things until the last minute, and that has implications for returning officers. They want us to do what we can to help them to smooth that curve.

- Q49 **Chair:** Could I come back in? I do not disagree too often with Clive; I agree about young voters and them turning out to vote, but I have a slightly different view. I think that older people, who have established the fact that they just turn up to the polling station and vote, are the ones who are probably used to not taking their identification. The fact is, once you have taken that trouble to go once, and you are then told you do not have your identification, you will go back and not return—it has been a problem to come out of the home and get all the way there. It is something they have always done—cast your vote—and then, “No, you can’t cast it—you do not have your ID.” They are the ones who I am bothered about not returning.

I think that young people who are going to vote for the first time are going to get it right. They are probably a bit more energetic; they will say, “I’ll just nip home and come back—I’ll nip in the car.” Older people might not have that ability. Both of us could be right, or both of us could be wrong, but how do we ensure that we target across the board? Will each polling station gather information about how many people turned up without ID?

Shaun McNally: Yes.

John Pullinger: You are absolutely right. One of the most significant groups we have identified as being at risk are the over-85s. Not only are they creatures of habit, but they do not necessarily have a passport, a driving licence or a bus pass, because they are not mobile. A lot of our campaign is targeting them, and we have worked with organisations that particularly interact with older people—care homes and others like that—so that we can focus on helping them work out how best to ensure that older people can exercise their right to vote, and have the right ID with them when they do so.

- Q50 **Chair:** So are you working more closely with pensioner groups, Age Concern and all those different organisations that would reach those people and make sure that we get that supported?

John Pullinger: Yes.

- Q51 **Rachel Hopkins:** I have a question about the recording at polling stations of people who might turn up without ID and whether they come back. Will you also request that returning officers record where there has been an issue with ID? There might be a discrepancy—it might be a very old



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passport—and there is a decision to be made about whether it is them. I also say that because of an issue that I have raised many times in areas like mine: women may be asked to remove a niqab or a hijab, and then there is a bit of an issue. Will all those be recorded, so that we can reflect on what has happened and hopefully be more positive going forward?

Shaun McNally: This is where a lot of the cost is driven, because it has required an emphasis on the guidance that has been produced to returning officers and also in the polling station handbook. I know that provision is being made to say that, if somebody has to identify themselves by removing the hijab, they have to do that in a way that protects their decency. All that is set out in the guidance, and I know that returning officers are working towards it. From my perspective, what is usable ID is prescribed, and if somebody is rejected for having the wrong ID, I would expect that to be recorded.

Chair: That is great. Thank you very much for coming and giving up your time. That concludes the public session. The Committee will now deliberate in private.