

Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission

Oral evidence: Local Government Boundary Commission for England and Electoral Commission: Main Estimates 2024-25

Wednesday 6 March 2024

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Members present: Sir Lindsay Hoyle (Chair); Mr Clive Betts; Simon Hoare; Rachel Hopkins.

Questions 1 - 47

Witnesses

I: Professor Colin Mellors OBE, Chair, Local Government Boundary Commission for England; Ailsa Irvine, Chief Executive, Local Government Boundary Commission for England; Kathryn Trower, Director of Corporate Services, Local Government Boundary Commission for England.

II: John Pullinger CB, Chair, Electoral Commission; Rob Vincent CBE, Interim Chief Executive, Electoral Commission; Vijay Rangarajan CMG, Chief Executive, Electoral Commission; David Moran, Interim Finance Director, Electoral Commission.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Professor Colin Mellors OBE, Ailsa Irvine and Kathryn Trower.

Chair: Welcome to this meeting of the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission. We are here today to consider the main estimates for 2024-25 for the Local Government Boundary Commission for England and the Electoral Commission. We will hear first from the boundary commission. Would our witnesses introduce themselves for the record?

Ailsa Irvine: I am Ailsa Irvine, chief executive of the Local Government Boundary Commission for England.

Kathryn Trower: I am Kathryn Trower, interim director of corporate services.

Professor Colin Mellors: I am Colin Mellors. I chair the commission.

Q1 **Chair:** Welcome; and welcome to the new role, Ailsa. What are your first impressions about the boundary reviews—can I just tempt you a little?

Ailsa Irvine: I have been really excited to be here and very grateful for the very warm welcome that I have had from the team—both the staff and the commissioners. It is very clear to me that we have a team who are absolutely committed to what they do and really care about delivering high-quality reviews and delivering good electoral equality. My initial impression is that we have the people and processes that we need in order to be able to continue to deliver our review programme effectively. What I want to do is to work with the team to interrogate that fully, to make sure that we really are being as efficient as we can be and to see whether there is anything more that we can do to further drive the pace and robustness of what we do. Effectively, what I am seeing is an organisation that works well. I am keen just to fit in and see what we can do to make it even better.

Q2 **Chair:** Thank you for that. Colin, can you give us a quick run-through of the LGBCE's performance in the last year and the planning assumptions used for the 2024 budget?

Professor Colin Mellors: Yes indeed, Mr Speaker. May I start by saying thank you to you and to your fellow members of the Committee for this annual invitation to come and talk to you about our work, explain what we do and receive your advice?

It is very much as I say in the letter that accompanied the submission of our estimates. We have met all our requirements—the things that we planned to do during the year in terms of review—and we completed the 26 reviews we said we would, affecting about 6 million electors in total. All of them were done on time for their implementation at the desired election. We have stuck within our budget, but my colleagues will explain a little more about that. For what it is worth, we have also met all our—well, our three KPIs. As you will see in our annual report when we publish



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it in the summer, the data shown in our management information statistics are also quite encouraging.

That is our core business. That's the day job, as it were. In addition to those things, we have agreed six related alterations. These are minor-ish things, but they matter to people on the ground and they take us quite a bit of time. This is where we realign our ward or division boundaries so that they are aligned with changes in local boundaries, such as in relation to parishes and town councils. That does matter to them, so we do that.

We have also done during the year our first principal area boundary review for a while. That is about the abutting of the area—I think it's around the Oughtibridge and Stocksbridge area, between Sheffield and Barnsley, to accommodate a new housing development, which is split in half by the current boundary. Both local authorities were keen on that happening. We have completed that work and I think—the Minister will know better than I do—that order is going to be laid by DLUHC at some point in the coming future.

Those are review things. We have also taken the opportunity to refresh our website—I am sure that Mr Betts will be asking some more questions about that in a minute. We have a new mapping tool, which has a strange name: Esri suite. That allows us to do real-time mapping, so that if we are looking at a place, we can draw in the new boundaries and it automatically tells us what the numerical implications of that are. It will also hopefully reduce the incidence of errors due to transcription. We also continue our people strategy.

The penultimate thing is that we signed a memorandum last summer with the parliamentary Boundary Commission for England and Mr Justice Lane. I thought there were opportunities for doing things together, respecting our different statuses and different legislation, particularly because where we are a continuing body, its reviews are episodic. I thought there were opportunities to keep it involved in something during that fallow period, but more importantly to help it gear up when the next parliamentary review comes around.

Finally, and not least, we have made some new appointments, as you have observed already, Mr Speaker. We are delighted to have welcomed—I wrote down what you said, Ailsa—a new chief exec. We have a new interim director of corporate services, and we are about to search for a new one. We have a new communications manager, and I have welcomed a new commissioner. So all in all, it has been fairly busy.

Going forward, we are going to continue to do the same mix of reviews, periodic intervention and request reviews. In particular, with a fresh pair of eyes, we will use the lessons of what worked well during the pandemic—some things did work very well during the pandemic—and the opportunity of a move to new premises to look at all of our processes and review our ways of working, footprint and resources. We will also focus on a particular challenge for us, which is making sure that it is easy for local people, local organisations and local authorities to engage with our



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process. Frankly, we could not do without their co-operation, and we want to spend a lot of time this year seeing how we can make it even better. The consequences of that are in our numbers.

- Q3 **Chair:** Excellent. I am very intrigued by the fact that you have realigned a village to make sure it makes sense. In Buckshaw Village—in Chorley and south Ribble—if you go down the street, one door is in one, and you go another three doors and it moves back again. The village is split all over by a stream running through the middle. What you have managed to achieve in Sheffield is a great example, and I hope you will give further consideration to sorting out those boundaries, which would help me and my neighbour.

Having allowed for my self-interest, can I ask you about the small increase in resource DEL requested in your estimate? How can you keep within the budget envelope for 2025 without the need for a supplementary estimate?

Kathryn Trower: Yes, we think we could keep within the budget if it is awarded in full in the main estimate. We have the assumptions that we put in, which we laid out in the memorandum that went with it—so, 4% inflation across our non-pay areas and 5% in relation to staff. We have looked at our establishment. We have full establishment, so we do not have much room in relation to vacancies, and the premises costs will remain static because we will hopefully use the savings in the second half of the year to cover the cost of moving. We have, of course, put in the new revised rate for the employer pension contribution.

It is a very small budget, as you can see. It is £2.78 million, and 1% of that is only £27,000. I think that is important to remember. We have a risk and resilience budget line of 4%, which is £106,000, and that forms a crucial part of our overall budget. We do have a few unknowns, which is why that budget is quite important. At the moment, we are still working with the GPA on getting a fixed exit date and on what the final costs of clearance and moving will be, so we still have some quite significant unknowns that we are reliant on.

- Q4 **Chair:** Excellent—thank you for that. Your capital budget reduced to £50,000 after the development of your new website. Is this reduced amount still predominantly for IT costs, as per 2023-24? What is the risk of the additional capital needs because of the move to new accommodation?

Kathryn Trower: I think that is my question as well. The £50,000 is to cover two key areas. We obviously need to ensure that our technology remains fit for purpose; that is absolutely key and crucial to us. We want to make some investment in our SharePoint platform so we make sure it remains secure and organised and we can share the information across the organisation. We would like to do some further enhancements to our website and then the remainder is linked to our premises moves, so we will need to put in some IT infrastructure costs and some fixtures and fittings.



Q5 Mr Betts: Moving on to staffing, how have you got to your assumptions about the staff you are going to need for the next year? Are you absolutely certain that you have a figure that is robust and there is nothing coming down the line that could possibly derail it and cause you to come back for more money for more staff?

Ailsa Irvine: In terms of where we are with our headcount, we have once again budgeted for 21.5 FTE, which is consistent with what we had for last year. I am confident that we can deliver the review programme that we have scheduled for the next financial year within that envelope. However, as part of the work that I am doing to look at the review process end to end to try and identify if there is anything that we would want to do differently, it may be that in future financial years we want to look again at whether that is the right level of headcount. It is certainly enough for us to get through the work programme for the next year.

Q6 Mr Betts: Right. Can we move on to that review process? Apparently, the number of authorities that have not been reviewed for a long period of time—in 14 years—has reduced and you are going to get that down to 10 authorities. That is the intention. Why are there still 10 authorities? Is there a problem with them?

Professor Colin Mellors: That is one of the most difficult questions to answer. Our reviews operate over a number of years, but also we mix them up between periodic, intervention and request reviews. I think I was asked this question or a very similar one last year. At that stage, we thought there were 39 periodic reviews. We have reclassified one of them so there were 40 that had not been reviewed for 14 years. There has been a significant number because our predecessor body reviewed all authorities within a fairly chunky period of time. We have moved—I think it is much more sensible for reasons I will explain—to a rolling programme, starting at 25 a year. The output varies a little bit, but nothing gets lost in the machine, although some take a little bit longer than others.

We have 40 at the moment, which have not been reviewed since our creation in 2010. Fifteen of those were started during the year just about to end, a further 17 will be started during the next year and the final eight—I think that adds up to 40—will be started in '25-'26. They are all now on our programme. Clearly, in a few years' time some new ones will come back in that were done in 2010, so it is a continuing programme, but they will all be there and will all be done in that appropriate time.

When we set up our review programme—it is really quite important and I was going say this in one of the answers to your previous question, Mr Betts, about whether we can cope—we have a five-year rolling programme with years 1, 2 and 3 being pretty certain and years 4 and 5 being more flexible. That means that we are able to accommodate things when something comes along, particularly where there has been restructuring. We were asked by the Department to bring Thurrock forward a little bit because it was going to be in a couple of years' time. We have been able to do that, so we have that flex to be able to make sure of that.



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The one thing we do not want to do is say no to a review that has been occasioned either by the local authority or by the Department, where it is felt a review would play a part in supporting them to address some of the challenge, whether in terms of governance, the size of the council, the electoral cycle and so on. We worked very closely with the Minister's civil servants on the four new unitaries, previously in Cumbria, North Yorkshire and—let me get this right—Somerset to give them temporary or interim arrangements so they could get started. We are now going to do them properly in time for their implementation in '27. That is how we are going to get through them.

We have tended to prioritise intervention reviews because the impact of having unequal electorates is felt immediately. With some of the ones we are doing periodically the numbers stack up, but we need to test whether they are still the right ones. So those, and request reviews; we tend to prioritise those. However, they are all now on our programme. They will all go off. It will be easier in future because it is a rolling programme for all of them, so there should be a steady stream. Frankly—a final sentence, you will be relieved to hear—it makes it much more sensible and efficient for us, I think, to have this steady rhythm, rather than it being episodic, as it was for predecessor bodies. It is also better for the local authorities because they know we are coming their way and they know when we are likely to be coming, so they can plan accordingly.

Q7 Mr Betts: Something that often confuses the electorate, as well as elected representatives, is the disjuncture between the work you do and the work done by the parliamentary Boundary Commission, which often leads to ward boundaries and constituency boundaries being completely different from each other, with wards having to split to get constituencies to the right size. When authorities have very large local authority wards, that makes the job of the parliamentary Boundary Commission harder. Do you give any thought to that when looking at your future programme?

Professor Colin Mellors: In essence, we use parishes as the building blocks for our warding/divisions, and the parliamentary Boundary Commission uses ours as the building blocks for theirs. There are some challenges. First, of course, the key driver for parliamentary constituencies is the number, with a variance of 5% either way, so there is not much wiggle room. They also work on a backdated register, so they are looking at an electoral roll that is already three or four years out of date by the time of the next election.

The legislation is wisely constructed, but sometimes a bit difficult to estimate. We look forward, so we are required to look at what the electorate is going to be like five years after we finish our review. That means, therefore, guessing—well, not guessing, but working closely with the local authorities to see where developments are likely to come about, what size they are and how they are going to be phased. Those things will be affected by the nature of the economy, the cost of mortgages and the attitudes of construction companies, which need to sell off one phase before they can do the next one. In an ideal world, you would close it



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down and start afresh. We can make it work, and we are cognisant of these things, as I think the parliamentary one is.

In your part of the world, Mr Betts, I think there are two among the suggestions for Yorkshire that cross not only local authority boundaries but combined authority boundaries. It is about balancing the numbers. In local government, we have four-year terms of office; parliamentary terms of office are up to five years. We have three criteria that we satisfy. If you look at any grouping of local authorities, whether it is the London boroughs, the districts, the met districts or the counties, there is probably a threefold difference in the ratio of electors to councillors. We do not think that is a bad thing, because we take the view that all 300-odd local authorities are unique entities, and we work closely with them to make sure we satisfy what the legislation says, alongside making sure that they have the most effective governance arrangements for their own authority. That seems healthy to me, but it is sometimes a little difficult to explain and interpret.

- Q8 **Mr Betts:** I think what you are saying is that not merely are the timings of the two reviews separate, but the criteria on which they are undertaken are different.

Professor Colin Mellors: Yes.

- Q9 **Mr Betts:** Is it chance, then, if they happen to coincide with each other?

Professor Colin Mellors: No, we look very carefully at coterminosity. We do look very carefully at it, but we can't always achieve it between the counties and the component districts, and certainly not with the parliamentary ones. It is like many things in our constitution: it works—we make it work in some way or another. It is not the neatest of patterns, but it has very good intellectual bases behind it. We try our best.

- Q10 **Simon Hoare:** Thank you for your estimates and so on, Professor Mellors. Can I take you back to a couple of points that you covered a moment ago? When you assisted us when we went unitary in my county of Dorset, there were significant benefits when we had a local boundary review. There were all new wards created, as we did not just overlay the county council, and therefore no sitting councillor thought they had first dibs on the seat—nobody had grandfather rights, for want of a better phrase. From your experience, when councils are reorganised, go unitary or whatever, is there tangible merit in helping that new authority bed in by starting from scratch with their ward boundaries?

Professor Colin Mellors: Thank you very much for your comments on Dorset. When we did Bournemouth, we did Poole and Christchurch at the same time.

Simon Hoare: We did.

Professor Colin Mellors: I agree with you; I share the view that having completely new boundaries gets rid of old affiliations because it is a new authority, not a merged authority. The two Suffolks, for example, are not



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merged authorities; they are a new authority, so if there is a degree of fluidity in those boundaries it can help.

Forgive me—please press me if I am missing the point. Yes, I think there are benefits for them. The Centre for Governance and Scrutiny did some work for us on what made a good review. We have lots of meetings with local authorities at the outset to prepare them. The phrase we always try to use is that we want to do reviews with them, not to them. We are a statutory body, we have consistent criteria, but we are applying them to very different settings, so we work very closely with them.

The Centre for Governance and Scrutiny review said that there are two characteristics that bring out the best in reviews. The first is where there is buy-in from the local authority leadership, both the chief exec and the political leadership, so they are not grudging about it; they are engaging with it. We are here to ensure our bit in helping bring about free and fair elections. We want them to gain some benefit from their efforts—to get that buy-in.

A second characteristic is if local authorities are clear what they want out of it—because we do want them to get benefits out of it in terms of governance, reconnecting with local communities and democracy. I cannot claim that we are going to resolve all your work for you, with all the challenges that local authorities have, but we like to think that we are working with your colleagues in the Department, and particularly in local authorities. We want them to get value from the work that we are doing, as well as being able to satisfy the remit that Parliament has given us.

- Q11 **Simon Hoare:** May I take the opportunity to put on the record my thanks as the Minister, and on behalf of officials, for the work that you do? Turning back to the estimates, were there to be a rash, or a rush, of local authorities changing their administrative architecture, do you have the capacity to work alongside them at pace on local government boundary reviews?

Professor Colin Mellors: We will do our best. There is some degree of flexing; it depends on the scale of the rush, or the rash, of restructuring. But the one thing I do not ever want to do is put ourselves in the position where we have to say no to people who want something to happen. I am sorry: that has occasionally pushed the PERs back a little bit, but we think we can overcome that. If it were on a huge scale, then we would look to you. If I may put in a little wish here, it makes it easier if we are able to confirm the numbers in advance of any reorganisation, which we did in Dorset but did not manage to do in Buckinghamshire and Northamptonshire—and the order had slightly different wording, as I recall, which had some implications.

We had a nice mid-wave approach in North Yorkshire, which has worked very well: we got a feel for the size. You constructed some boundaries, with our advice—because we can't do it and you can't draw new boundaries—using existing local authority wards and even parishes to get something that is workable at roughly the same size as we anticipate they



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will emerge. We would appreciate anything that makes sure that they are consistent in that, if I may make that plea, and that gives us that opportunity. Perhaps we can have a discussion if this is likely to emerge.

Certainly, if there were a massive explosion, we would be knocking on the door. We hope our budget has been constructed to enable us to overcome that, but certainly I can give you our assurance that we do not want to turn away people who genuinely would find our work helpful.

Simon Hoare: I don't want Dorset to outdo Chorley in its parochial examples—

Chair: It couldn't.

Q12 **Simon Hoare:** It could have a go! In chapter 2 of the corporate plan, on page 5 of 11, you state, "We aim to...Make sure that within an authority, each councillor represents a similar number of electors."

I can think of two housing proposals, one of which is still at the planning stage and one of which is being built out, where, by a small-c conservative estimate, the quantum, when development is finalised, would greatly exceed the number of residents within each ward. What is the trigger in those circumstances in order to ensure a relatively fair and equitable burden of work between councillors and the number of residents they have to serve?

When you embark upon a boundary review, it cannot be done in isolation, clearly. It has knock-on effects on other wards. It changes loyalties and affiliations. It may very well tip and change the likely political outcome at an election because of new pieces coming in and so on. Do you find that councils come to you—Dorset will not be alone in this—and say, "We need you to have a look," or is it the precautionary principle of letting sleeping dogs lie?

Professor Colin Mellors: We look at the data every year to see what has happened in terms of change.

Simon Hoare: In terms of new housing developments?

Professor Colin Mellors: Yes. We look at the electoral roll each year to see where variances are. We have triggers for doing what we call an intervention—I wish we could think of a better word, because "intervention in local government" makes it sound a bit more severe than the intervention that we do. That means that we do an early review because there is inequality.

Our definition of "unsatisfactory inequality" is that either 30% of wards have a variance of more than 10% from the norm for that one local authority, or a single ward has a variance of more than 30%. The latter is occasionally a bit of a challenge in places like Sheffield: university cities, where the level of student registrations, which are usually very compressed in one or two wards, can have an impact.



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We keep an eye on that, and if it goes over the trigger point we contact the local authority and ask, "Is this likely to self-correct in any way?" If it doesn't self-correct, they are clearly on our radar, and we would discuss with them when we will come in and do a review. In doing a review, we do not just adjust the area where the development has taken place; all the lines, bar the external parameters, come back into play.

- Q13 **Simon Hoare:** Thank you. I have just one supplementary on that—you must forgive my ignorance on this. In order not to throw the baby out with the bathwater—and not just the baby, but all the toys they have been playing with in the bath—what powers, if any, do you have to say, "Look, this is a one-member ward and the population has gone up. We should make this a two-member or three-member ward"? Does that fall within your powers? If not, should it?

Professor Colin Mellors: I don't think so, because we would want to look at the totality of the area; we would not just do an adjustment to a particular bit. It is unusual that the only trigger of change is at one particular development. It would be at a place where we would want to look across the totality. In doing that, we remove all of them.

We have three drivers under statute that we have to look at. One is the numbers: we have to make sure there is equality. Secondly, there is something called community identity: we want the boundaries to reflect people's beliefs and communities. Those are either behavioural communities, patterns of living, or—I am conscious that you will have heard this many years back, Rachel—effective and convenient local government, where the boundaries make sense. We would want to look across the totality of those, and we balance that.

In terms of the numbers, there is an added thing. I don't know whether you can have four dimensions—I know you can have three.

Simon Hoare: We will be lenient. You can have as many as you like.

Professor Colin Mellors: The fourth one is that if it is an authority that elects by thirds, the legislation gives us a fourth criterion, which is the desirability that everybody should have elections by thirds, and therefore they should all be three-member wards. We quite like it when they don't do that, because frankly in some places a single member is the right solution, and in others having two or three is the right solution.

- Q14 **Chair:** On that point you are absolutely right, but if you have a small community with a single-member ward, that is ruled out if you want elections every year. That therefore distorts the pattern, so you have to go to three-member wards in order to keep elections annually. On that basis, you put communities together that might not otherwise have been together in order to meet the numbers and the requirement for balance.

Professor Colin Mellors: You are extraordinarily perceptive, Mr Speaker. We get as many, if not more, submissions from people saying, "We don't want to be associated with that community," rather than, "Please don't

separate us from that community.” I will allow you to draw your own conclusions about why that might be the case.

- Q15 **Chair:** We have quite rightly done the Dorset one, but let us finish on the Chorley one. The strange thing about Buckshaw Village is that it is in two constituencies, two parishes and two complete districts, and has a stream that runs everywhere. If you are trying to balance things out, that would be my challenge for you.

Ailsa Irvine: I was just going to add a further bit of reassurance. When we take on a new review and work with the local authority, we work with them at the outset to look at what the forecast electorate will be five years after the review ends. We will take that into account and work with them to understand where the local plan says that there is going to be a development. We try to anticipate whether there are likely to be large developments, so that that can be worked in, worked through and reflected in the review. Hopefully, that mitigates the need for development coming: it should not be unforeseen. We should be able to pick that up so that discrepancies do not arise.

Chair: Thank you. Professor Mellors?

Professor Colin Mellors: I am a Sheffield lad like Clive Betts, so thank you for allowing a Sheffield lad to join in this discussion.

Mr Betts: I can tell you which boundaries I want next time.

Chair: Clive, you got what you wanted. Thank you very much.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: John Pullinger CB, Rob Vincent CBE, Vijay Rangarajan CMG and David Moran.

Chair: May I welcome our guests from the Electoral Commission? Vijay, it is good to see you again, wearing your new hat—welcome on board. John, will you introduce your team for the record?

John Pullinger: I am John Pullinger, chair of the Electoral Commission. On my right are Vijay Rangarajan, who started in the role of chief executive on Monday this week, and Rob Vincent, the outgoing interim chief executive. We agreed to have the two of them together for this week only; Rob will be leaving at the end of the week. On my left is David Moran, our interim finance director.

Chair: Thank you—and thank you, Rob, for what you have done to keep the ship going. Rachel, can I hand over to you?

- Q16 **Rachel Hopkins:** Vijay, welcome to your new role. It is week one and you are in front of us already. I am interested in your first impressions of the commission and what you see as the key challenges, particularly in this general election year.



Vijay Ranganathan: Thank you all, and thank you, Mr Speaker, for the invitation to be here. It is day three, so these are tentative first impressions. The first, as I have met a lot of staff and members of the commission, is what a dedicated and expert bunch they are, who know their stuff. They have a very heavy year ahead. There is a sense of, "Can we get through 2024 and deliver the local elections—all the elections in May—and then on to a parliamentary general election?" I will be meeting all members of staff and visiting Belfast, Edinburgh and Cardiff in the next month to take stock.

Some of the internal challenges appear in the estimates in front of you. We have capability challenges on things like finance and procurement. A huge amount of good work has been done on that. High on my list of issues is building on the work that Rob, David and many others have done to improve the capabilities.

Externally, my first impression is that some of the themes that I encountered when working in this area from 2009 to 2012 are very similar. We need to improve voter registration, which is still a challenge in some areas. Some of the complexity of administration and law is significant, along with the combination of polls. A lot of these issues are similar, but some are now different by an order of magnitude: online and physical threats to candidates are completely different from what I saw in the past. We are obviously taking that very seriously.

It has been a pleasure for the teams to work with the Minister and his teams on, for example, the changes to the regulations on security expenditure and how we count it. We will do what we can there, and we are ramping up work on that.

Finally, there are some very big new challenges that we are trying to grapple with, as everyone is—generative AI, deepfakes, cyber-attacks. The world keeps on moving. Part of the role that I will have working for the commission board and with many in the commission is about how we keep going with this ever-changing set of threats. We will learn a lot of lessons in May and we will try to learn lessons from the many other elections around the world. Our closest allies and partners particularly will be threatened in the same way. We will try to keep up to speed with what is a rapidly changing picture of threat and opportunity.

Chair: Rachel, can I bring in the Minister on that point?

Simon Hoare: Welcome. I think we are meeting soon.

Vijay Ranganathan: We are: next week.

Q17 **Simon Hoare:** I look forward to it. I am going to almost tee up one of the things that I want to talk to you about.

You have mentioned the threat from AI, deepfakes and the like. In the mind of the electorate, who are often very suspicious of those of us who are mere elected earthlings, there is the tendency to make the Mandy Rice-Davies defence, "Well, they would say that, wouldn't they?", in



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response to a deepfake or that sort of thing. How can the commission carve out a role as the authoritative voice of comfort for the electorate—the voice to assert that something is or is not a deepfake? I ask because I am struggling to find or to think of another body—I don't think one exists quite yet—that has the capability to fulfil that rather important function.

Vijay Rangarajan: The first thing to say is that from what I have seen so far, we do not have the capability or the technical expertise to check on what is or is not a deepfake. Interestingly, some of the team have been talking to social media companies about whether they do. In some cases they may have it, and obviously the legislation will put a lot of burden on them initially. In other cases, other parts of Government will be able to see what is possible. I am not sure we are going to be the only part of the solution, but we will work very closely with others, particularly for the voices needed to give voters trust that an election is being well run.

Clearly, some of this may also be picked up in post-poll analysis and reporting, and we will certainly play our role in that, but this is moving so quickly. We will also look at lessons from around the world—the Irish elections, the European parliamentary elections and obviously the American election—and see how they are coping with it, what the limits are of what is technically possible, and what it is helpful to say to sustain voter trust in the run-up to an election.

Chair: To slightly answer that question, I have had a meeting in the past couple of days about security and how we deal with the influence of foreign actors. I could speak with the Minister in private afterwards, to give some reassurance. You are absolutely right: it is a question of how we go against and around that to ensure that it does not take place, and of how we call it out. That is important. We will speak afterwards in private.

Q18 **Rachel Hopkins:** Back to the estimates. John, I will come to you first. Can you give us a quick opening run-through of the main estimate for 2024-25 and the planning assumptions that were used?

John Pullinger: Certainly, and I will pick up on the themes that Vijay has already illustrated. The overall estimate is this: we believe that we need an extra £15 million in the estimate in order to deliver what is required of us in the coming year. The vast majority of that increase is focused on the general election, on supporting voters and on making sure that they can get registered and can cast their vote. In particular, it is about making sure that they understand the requirements around voter ID and how to make sure they have got it, but it is also about how they can combat fraud and a whole variety of other issues that will concern voters in this election and how we can support them in doing that.

Secondly, the focus is on how we can support parties and campaigners, including non-party campaigners. Vijay has identified some of the threats around online and personal abuse, intimidation or whatever. We will play our part, along with the police and others, in dealing with that. Also, very



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prosaically, in our role as a financial regulator we make sure that people understand the rules about where money can come from and that how it has been spent in line with the limits is properly and transparently accounted for.

Finally, and very actively at the moment—this will continue—we are supporting electoral administrators to understand what their legal obligations are, and we are supporting them with the practical activities that they need to accomplish to achieve that. I pay tribute to the Minister and his colleagues: there is very active joint working between the Government and the Electoral Commission on very practical issues like the post. How will Royal Mail actually be confident that it can be delivered? There is a lot of detailed work going on and a lot of good joint work between Government officials and commission officials.

The biggest chunk is for that. In relation to the next section, it is not just about the general election this year; we have some big elections already slated for May. Some of them are in areas where there has not been voter ID before—in particular, in London and Wales—so we are helping ensure electors in those places can vote with confidence and all of them can vote and no one is disenfranchised.

We also need to be ready for unexpected elections. You will recall from the discussions we had with you about our supplementary estimates that we had not anticipated the number of by-elections coming our way. We have made an allowance, so that in case there are by-elections we can just get on with it without getting into financial difficulties as a result.

Most of the money relates to elections. The rest of it is in two roughly equal chunks. The first is about capability—Vijay has already named the two areas where, despite amazingly effective work by our teams, we have concluded that we need to have more. The first is IT and cyber generally. We got a lot of support from the National Cyber Security Centre and others last year after a cyber-attack to help us to understand what we need to do to protect ourselves. However, that is part of a much wider IT infrastructure change to enable us to support parties and others that work with us so that we can do our work.

The second one, which has also already been mentioned, is our capability in finance to ensure that we can provide good estimates to you reliably each time. We also had some very good interchange with the National Audit Office over our accounts last year, which has given us some really good detail on how we can improve things. The final section of the estimate is other contingencies. Here, I think we have picked up closely from the conversation that we last had with you as a Committee to put in a contingency for pay so that, if we do not have need, we do not need to draw it down.

We have similarly put in contingencies for inflation and other unknown unknowns. There is a reasonable set of assumptions that we put in there; we may get into those as we go along. It is about ensuring that we have contingencies that are transparently out there and will not be drawn down



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if we do not need them. However, if we do need them, we will be able to get on and spend that money, with your blessing, and account to you at the end of the year about how we have done that.

- Q19 **Rachel Hopkins:** The Secretary of State has now designated the strategy and policy statement in respect of the Electoral Commission. How has that featured in the budget planning? Do you expect its introduction to impact on your budgeting, finances and costs for 2024-25?

John Pullinger: First of all, the Minister and I have corresponded. The key point that has been helpful to the commission board is the emphasis that they placed on the fact that the strategy and policy statement does not compromise the independence of the commission's actions. On that basis, there is not a budgetary consequence for the commission of the SPS, so in making our decisions we will pay regard to the strategy and policy statement, alongside all the other considerations that we need to take into account. That is what we do and plan for already. The short answer to your question is that there is no impact. However, in making that comment, I acknowledge the active work that we have had with the Minister to ensure that we really understand what the Government's intention is here and respect it.

- Q20 **Rachel Hopkins:** To start to drill down a bit more into the budget for the coming year, the overall estimate for RDEL 2024-25 is 48% higher than the final budget for last year, in 2023-24. You mentioned the general election earlier, but can you go into a bit more detail about how much of the increase can be attributed to the general election this year?

John Pullinger: I will point to Rob in a minute, but the 48% is the £15 million I spoke about. Some £10 million of that relates directly to elections, and the other £5 million is reasonably evenly split between these capability increases and £2.5 million for contingencies of various kinds. I do not know if you want Rob to drill down further into that.

Rachel Hopkins: Any other comments to add to that, Rob?

Rob Vincent: You might want to unpick any part of that in more detail, but there is nothing to add at that level to the summary.

- Q21 **Rachel Hopkins:** Fine. Given the conversations we have had about the supplementary estimates and so on, how confident are you that the commission can work within that budget for 2024-25, with contingencies included?

Rob Vincent: I can set off on that. Three of us at least were in the meeting with you about the supplementary estimate, and you had some very clear advice for us on that. The first thing I should say is that we are determined to live within our main estimate for the year ahead. The messages we took away were that we needed to strengthen the process by which we drew up our main estimate. The chair has already referred to the way in which we strengthened our financial analysis and consolidation team—that is under David, and he may want to say more about that. That



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is in place, with some of it funded from the supplementary estimate and all of it funded within the main estimate for the year ahead.

The chair has already referred to a more substantial set of contingencies in the main estimate this time around. That was a very direct message from you. My interpretation of it was, "It's better to put in a contingency, and not have to call it down than to find yourself having to come back for a supplementary estimate at the end of the year." We heard that very clearly; you were very courteous in expressing it, but it was a fairly emphatic message, which we took away.

You will find, actually, if we go through the detail of the main estimate, that there are contingencies for most of the substantial areas of expenditure—certainly for the communications around the general election process, for the cyber provision, for likely pay provision, and for possible further costs of our next corporate strategy—which will not come into place until the following year, but we may begin to take an impact from that before we get to 2025-26; and then we put in a general contingency of 1.25%.

We will not draw down that money if we do not need to have it. We can never give a 100% guarantee, but with the care that has gone into building the main estimate in the first place, plus those contingencies, we are pretty determined that we will not have to come back to you for a supplementary estimate.

The other message that we took away was that if we find ourselves facing circumstances where those provisions are not adequate, and we think that we may have to come back to ask you for money, we should do so when we recognise that they are arising, and not just come back at the end of the year and ask you for sort of forgiveness and provision. We should come to you earlier and discuss the implications of what might be arising. At the moment, we do not anticipate that, but we also took that message away with us, and it is now deep within us.

Q22 Mr Betts: Coming on to staffing, how did you arrive at the figure for the 5% pay increase? Did you consult the Treasury or any other bodies?

David Moran: First of all, the 5% was arrived at independently of any dialogue with Treasury. Treasury does not normally give any indicators, and I am aware that correspondence has suggested likewise—that Treasury would not be sharing or supporting a particular increase at this time when that is prior to negotiations.

As to how the 5% was derived, it was derived from three things. First, we were looking at wider understanding of market expectations, in terms of employer expectations. We particularly honed in on the Incomes Data Research—the IDR work—that showed that 48% of medium-to-large employers were expecting an increase of between 4% and 4.99%, and that a further 24% were expecting an increase of 5% or more. Based on that information, we felt that 5% did not seem unreasonable.



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The second area is the cost of living; the CPI has come out at 4% for both December and January. Then the final one is the awareness of the staff association demands, and, in particular, awareness that they include a cost of living rise and refer to pay restoration for prior years where there was a disparity between the cost of living and the awards given.

So, those three things combined were the key drivers behind arriving at what I think is a reasonable provision, and it is a provision of 5%. Whatever happens, though, we will, as always, align ourselves with consideration of the civil service settlement before any decisions are taken.

Q23 **Mr Betts:** So it is not an offer at this stage to staff?

David Moran: Absolutely not, no.

Q24 **Mr Betts:** Right, but the staff know about the 5%?

David Moran: They know about it being a provision.

Q25 **Mr Betts:** Okay. It will be interesting to see how they respond to that in negotiations.

Moving on, in terms of staff numbers, how have you worked out how many staff you need? As we have discussed, it is always possible to come back for a supplementary estimate if the financial resources are insufficient, but it is often difficult to get supplementary staff in at short notice.

I will also ask about two big issues and how you have dealt with them. The first is the issue of voter ID, which will now become an issue for the general election, when it has only been an issue for some local elections so far. The commission specifically asked the Government to consider additional forms of voter ID to be put into use. You did not specify what, because you said that that wasn't your job, but you asked for more, and the Government said that they couldn't find any more. Do you think that you might have to work more on advertising, promoting and engaging with the public on this issue before a general election?

John Pullinger: I will come back on that, first of all. You will recall the meeting that we had this time last year, and the engagement we had with Minister Rowley at the time to really make sure that we got the publicity budget that would fit with the facts on the ground and the sorts of ID that were going to be used. We came up with a number that we thought would be the best value-for-money proposition that would get the message out to voters about what they needed to bring and how they would get a voter authority certificate if they were unable to bring ID. In a sense, that situation is unchanged this year, so our budget estimates that we bring before you are based on the experience we had from that campaign. On many levels, that was one of the most successful campaigns we have run, in that it drove up voter understanding of the need to bring ID from 22% at the outset of the campaign to 91%. We have been able to learn from that who we did not reach and how we can reach them. We have



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highlighted some communities, in particular disabled communities of various kinds.

This year, we looked first at what has happened to that level of awareness since, and it has stayed pretty high. It is 86% at the moment, and we, the Minister and his colleagues are looking carefully at that to work out what we can do to drive that up further. In places like London, for example, it was always quite high because London sees national media, even though it did not have to do voter ID. On other areas, we are looking particularly at Scotland because for the vast majority of Scotland, the general election will be the first time. We are continually tracking that, and the budget provision here is designed to ensure that we have the right campaign, with enough money attached to it, to drive those recognition rates up as high as we possibly can, and certainly at least as high as we had last year.

- Q26 **Mr Betts:** One of the recognition rates that was not very high was the recognition that you could go and get a voter certificate from a local authority.

John Pullinger: It wasn't, and we must work on that. I was very pleased with my own local authority this week to come through the door and see a piece of paper that had the list of IDs you could bring, and a QR code if you wanted to find out more, and specifically a QR code that linked directly to the Government's website, so that people could get on to it. Basically, we have looked at all those stats and are really trying to work out where the gaps are for which people. You are absolutely right: recognition of the voter authority certificate was at about 57%, which is a lot lower than the general recognition of 92%.

- Q27 **Mr Betts:** The people who do not recognise it may be the ones who need them as well.

John Pullinger: Of course. The numbers there were not actually different, but it only really mattered for the ones who did not. But the basic point to your question is that we need to get to those people to ensure that they know what to do and can do it.

- Q28 **Mr Betts:** What is your target rate for actually making people aware of that availability?

John Pullinger: We have said that one person being turned away is one too many, so we will be going the extra mile to ensure that people are not turned away. We are measuring those stats, and we will be very disappointed about any fall-off from that. In real life, we know the limits of campaigns. As I have said, we got into the 90s last time, which we were very pleased with. We doubt whether we can get much better than that. As for other work we can do, the key is working with organisations that know their communities, so local authorities in particular, but also charities and organisations that work with those communities. Disability charities are a particular case in point.

- Q29 **Mr Betts:** One of the biggest challenges that you identify repeatedly is late delivery by Government of regulations to implement policy. We are



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now potentially two months away from a general election, and there is still a lot of secondary legislation outstanding from previous electoral legislation—the last Act. It is a good principle that you should not legislate within six months of an election. We are not going to meet that intention, are we?

John Pullinger: No, we are not. We would say that we should have a situation where everything is sorted out, lined up, agreed and in place six months in advance, for it then to be introduced. We will not have that this time. There is still work going on, particularly in relation to postal votes and overseas voters. We are working with the Government, and the Minister's colleagues are clearly very dedicated to solving some of the issues that we face. We had a meeting last week—in fact, I will invite Rob to say something of the local authority administrators. All I can say is that we have not met the six-month target, but we are absolutely determined to work with the local authority community and the Government to ensure that each local authority is ready and will be able to process the votes and ensure that everyone's vote gets counted.

Rob Vincent: To add to that, we have a regular quarterly meeting with the Minister's civil service colleagues ourselves, and we have representatives of those living the elections at a local level—attending officers and EROs. As we go in towards May, we actually have those weekly, so we are intensifying discussions with them. From the discussions that we have had, people are quite wary of the additional processes that are to be in place for the first time in May. There will be particular pressure, of course, if the general election happened to be on the same day as the local elections, which remains at least a theoretical possibility. It is not just about understanding the implications of the new regulations. On the whole, that is there, and colleagues at local level are attentive to that. The timing and the detail are certainly not ideal, but I think they have understood that well. Some of the systems required to make that work, including some of the national IT systems, are still being developed. Mechanisms for managing that are there. I have been asked several times since that meeting how confident we can be of the local elections, and I read from colleagues running them at a local level that there is determination, as ever, to make them work. Going back to your initial point, the timing of clarity and the timing of the systems being in place is not ideal, but we will make it work.

Q30 **Mr Betts:** In the May elections, let's say there is a general election as well. Can you cope with changes on overseas voters and postal voters? Do you have all the staff to do that, and will it all work smoothly and seamlessly?

John Pullinger: It will be hard work. Vijay has already alluded to the dedication of our staff, and I think I speak for local authority staff, from the ones I have met, in saying that we will do whatever it takes to make it work between us and the Minister's staff also. It will be hard work because of this. In terms of this particular estimate, we have put an estimate in here that we have designed to enable us to deliver our part of the deal.



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Rob Vincent: I think some of the highest pressures will be at local level. We are confident that we will be able to manage it within our estimate, but some of the biggest pressures will be for local teams.

- Q31 **Chair:** Presumably, depending on when the election is—the later it is, obviously the more it will be bedded in—local authorities will have more time to deliver on the overseas and all the other expectations. I want to go back to something you said, John. An envelope quite rightly dropped through your letterbox saying, “These are the forms of identification”, and your local authority did a great job in doing that. You welcomed the receipt of that envelope informing you of what you need to vote. Surely, I hope, that has gone through every letterbox, and it is not just some local authorities taking this seriously and not others?

John Pullinger: It is timely for this meeting that I received it. We have direct communications from the Electoral Commission, and I have seen our ad on TV, billboards and I saw it on the tube coming in the other day. I am feeling that the message is getting out there. That particular one is just one I saw.

- Q32 **Chair:** That is not quite what I said—that is a very good political answer. I will try again. The local authority that you live in sent you a nice envelope saying, “By the way, when the election is called, local elections are coming. It is not just about your general election—far from it. These are the forms of identification. This is what you need to do,” and so on. Are local authorities universally doing that, or is yours just more aware of what needs to be done?

John Pullinger: We do not have a complete collection of all of them, because different local authorities are doing it at slightly different times. We have a template that they are generally using.

- Q33 **Chair:** Just so I have got it right, the answer is no?

Rob Vincent: It is a universal expectation and we are keeping in contact with local authorities.

- Q34 **Chair:** That is what I am worried about. Hopefully, you may be able to push local authorities and say, “Look, I have just recognised that this has been good for me to open this envelope. Can we get other local authorities to follow?” It is good if there is a universal approach, rather than a salt and pepper pot approach, to delivering it. I think a universal approach is much better, and that would be very helpful. Secondly, you said that one voter being turned away is one too many, which I totally agree with. What percentage are you working on as your expectation in the election? Not how many are bad, but how many you are expecting percentage-wise?

John Pullinger: The things we are actively tracking are the numbers related to Mr Betts’ earlier question. We are running a campaign at the moment, so we are seeking to get that campaign to people. We got to 92% last year and we want to get to at least that this year. We doubt whether we can get much higher. So my answer to your question is: 92%, and a little bit more if we can.



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Q35 **Chair:** So you are saying that 92% will vote all right, and 8% will not. I am asking what percentage will fail to turn up with the right ID, or not be allowed to vote. You must have built in a percentage band.

John Pullinger: There are two significant numbers from the May elections last year that we will be seeking to improve on this time. First, 0.25% of people turned up at a polling station, wished to vote, and did not end up voting. That is 0.25% too many, so that is a target to be beaten.

Chair: That is what I wanted to hear. You are hoping to get below that.

John Pullinger: There is another number, which is just as important. That 0.25% is only those who got as far as the polling station. There are a lot of concerns. When I talked to Mr Betts' Committee a few weeks ago, the issue of greeters, and the fact that many people in many areas are not getting as far as the desk, so do not get counted in those numbers, were raised. We need to know about them, too. We find out about that by doing a nationally representative poll of all voters after the election. We ask them, without any prompts: "Did you vote?"; "Did you not vote?"; "If you did not vote, why didn't you vote?" The number we have been homing in on that influenced my responses to Mr Betts was the 4% of people who, unprompted, said that the voter ID requirement was the reason they did not vote last time.

We really want to get that number down, particularly given that it was rather skewed. It was 9% for people who declared themselves to be disabled. We were really worried about that, and we really want to make sure that we target our efforts and those of local authorities, charities and others to support those people. If they have difficulties, whatever they are, let's work out what they are. Blind and partially sighted people have particular difficulties. People with learning difficulties are another group we really need to work towards. We really want to drive that number down.

Q36 **Chair:** Presumably we will get the information for the greeters. We did not establish that last time. Presumably local authorities will gather evidence to say that it has been successful and the numbers are coming down.

John Pullinger: We have the template of the data we will collect that will give us equivalent numbers, so we will get that 0.25% and the data on the greeters. Not all local authorities will use them, so we will be able to look at the difference between what happened in local authorities that used them and those that did not. We will have all that data. Last year, we published the whole lot pretty quickly after the election so that people could have this conversation in a well-informed way.

Q37 **Chair:** That is not quite what I was asking. We know people are greeting and saying, "No, you can't vote, because you don't have that." Surely that information will be gathered to make sure of the accuracy of what we are saying? You are trying to find it in other ways, when actually, we have somebody who is saying, "No, that doesn't work—please go away." They may come back; they may not. If we are not gathering that information, why not, and what are we doing to ensure that greeters are



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passing that information into the centre? We are all on one side—we all want success on this. We want people to vote. But the only way we can establish that is by having the right information with which to deliver the objective.

John Pullinger: It is, yes. The answer to that specific question—I observed this, and I am sure you did as well—is that the situation in each polling station is different.

Chair: That's the problem.

John Pullinger: You can count what happens at the desk consistently. You can count a sample of the population consistently. Anything in between will be very unstable. Someone going to the polling station might meet their mate on the corner, who says, "Have you got ID?", and then turn around and go away. A greeter can be something the local authority put in place officially. It could be a teller or the presiding officer who happens to meet someone at the door. We have all seen these things. To have a data collection process around one element of that would not give us consistent results. What does give us some ability to judge what is going on is to get the data on what happened at the desk where there was a teller and where there was not a teller, so that you can start to think about what the picture is. That is what we will try to build. It is not a precise answer to your question because it is not a straightforward situation.

Q38 **Chair:** I believe that the law of the land should be universally applied by police. I would expect and hope for my electoral returning officers to establish the same rules that apply right across so there are no inconsistencies. It is a dream and a vision; I hope you will share it at some point.

Simon Hoare: Am I part of your dream and vision, Mr Speaker?

Chair: Always.

Q39 **Simon Hoare:** May I ask you to clarify, John? You have just used the word "teller" there. You are not talking about those of us who sometimes stand outside polling stations wearing rosettes and taking polling numbers, are you?

John Pullinger: I was, actually. They are someone you might encounter on your way.

Q40 **Simon Hoare:** I want to strenuously urge—or urge strenuously, rather than split my infinitive—that that is a huge onus to place and is capable of being abused by having people who are there as party activists. You could see somebody with a sticker that says, "I am going to vote whatever." It is two minutes to the close of poll, it is a tight seat and the teller goes, "Oh no, sorry, you are not entitled to vote; you had better dash home", and they would lose the chance to vote. I do not think party political operatives should be involved with that.



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John Pullinger: I agree. I am sorry; if I mis-spoke, I apologise. I was not suggesting that at all. I was just suggesting that in the vicinity of a polling station, there are lots of people who are interacting with voters in different ways who may end up—

Simon Hoare: I would much prefer to see guidance to say that they should not be asking about that.

Mr Betts: I am sorry for cutting across. If someone is there representing their party and they know that someone who is going to vote has to have ID, it is just an informal conversation, saying, "Do you have your ID with you? We know you need it."

Q41 **Simon Hoare:** Ah, no. That may be allowable, but I do not think it is the job of tellers to say, "That is not the right ID; go back and get another one". That is up to others.

I have two specific questions. People will turn up to a polling station who are not registered to vote or are entitled to vote in some elections and not in others. So the most pertinent figure that we should all be focused upon is not those who were turned away per se, although it is an admirable ambition to see that number reduced to as low as possible through the information campaign, but for those who are eligible and entitled to vote, that they are able to do so, even if it means they have to go away and come back. It is actually the number of people who do not come back, which I know is quite an odd way to look at it, but that is actually the key thing. Those who are eligible to vote and just give up on the process: that is probably the actual figure we should be looking at.

I did have a question just on the estimates, which takes me back to Mr Vincent. You did not envisage having to come back and ask for more cash and if you did, it would not be retrospectively; it would be in real time. Can you assure us that the internal financial management regimes that you have are fleet of foot enough to make sure that they may be trying to put out a small ember rather than a massive conflagration?

Rob Vincent: I may want to bring David in, who manages that part of the organisation, but that has been something that we have invested in quite significantly since we brought the main estimate to you last year. We have a much stronger finance team and we have better information flows around finance, so we are fleet of foot, to use your phrase, and we are more across.

Simon Hoare: That is all I need to hear. Thank you, Mr Vincent.

Q42 **Rachel Hopkins:** May I just clarify something? Going back to the point about people turning up at polling stations who might not have the correct or any ID, what level of information are electoral registration officers or returning officers required to record? We talk about the information we gathered and we know that there are this many. Are there any requirements for them to record people who turned up who did not have ID and were turned away?

John Pullinger: Yes.



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- Q43 **Rachel Hopkins:** And are there any other mechanisms for recording whether they subsequently return, which I think is the point the Minister was making?

John Pullinger: Yes.

- Q44 **Rachel Hopkins:** It is the periphery—if they are not at the actual desk—that is the grey area?

John Pullinger: Precisely, yes. Since you asked that question, to reassure the Minister, we are talking about eligible voters here. To help Mr Speaker, there is a very precise approach to collecting this data, consistent across the country, which every returning officer is required to follow. We work on that schedule with the Minister and his team so that it is consistent and can be operated across the country.

- Q45 **Rachel Hopkins:** Has the outturn of previous elections been publicly available?

John Pullinger: Yes.

- Q46 **Rachel Hopkins:** Great. Moving on, may I probe a bit further on the cyber-security costs, which have increased by £1 million year on year? The breakdown of the increase this year is 57% higher than the main estimate for last year. Is it about being compliant with a certain security standard? Could you explain a bit more about that?

Rob Vincent: May I come in on that? You will remember that we had a cyber-attack some time ago. The costs have now become part of our overall investment in our IT systems and our data management. As the Chair mentioned, we have taken the advice of the national cyber-security committee on how we should tighten up our processes. That was some time ago. Since then, we have had some very specialist advice on precisely what that means, which has led to the £1 million you have drawn attention to.

Over half of that £1 million is the cost of placing our data and systems on the cloud behind some very high security arrangements. In a sense, it is a combination of cyber-security expenditure and advancement of our systems and our data management. Other elements are about improving our firewalls and employing an external agency to monitor consistently, 24 hours a day, whether we are under any sort of attack so that we can respond immediately if that occurs.

There is also some investment in our handheld bits of kit, multi-factor identification and that sort of process. We have also made arrangements for all our data to be held in two reserve places to make sure we can stay in business if we have another cyber-attack. We have always had secondary data provision, but it has been within our own systems. Now we have a separate external one so that we have a double level of security, which has cost us some more money.



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That is the £1 million. As ever, there is a contingency in there as well. There is £200,000 against the possibility that further advice we get will cause yet further expenditure in that area.

- Q47 **Rachel Hopkins:** I have a final question. The forecast for the general election cost is just over £9 million. We have touched on what that will be used for, particularly around staffing. Do you have any further breakdown of that, or an assessment of the risk for any unforeseeable costs? We have talked a lot about contingency, but what is the potential impact on the general election whenever it is called?

Rob Vincent: Actually, the vast majority of the £9 million is not for our own staff. Nearly all of it—about £7.5 million—is for the contracts that we let to agencies for public information campaigns of various sorts. The campaign for registration is already under way in preparation for whenever the general election occurs, and for some other electoral events during the year. Just over £4 million is for voter ID-related communications and information sharing, and about £3 million is for registration.

This is a regular process for us, and we have a strong approach to making sure we get value for money. We tend to go for two or three potential contractors off the nationally approved list. We also review and analyse the impact of what goes on; we have been over some of those figures already. It is a particularly high level of expenditure because of the number of events in the year, the scale of the general election and the implications of the Elections Act, but the actual process is fairly well rehearsed for us.

An element is for our own staff. We take on temporary external contract staff to manage our end of the process during the year. An element goes to digital activity, a lot of which is around advice to campaigners and local administrators. About £0.5 million is for our staff. The remainder is for the handbooks that we provide for every local administration, and part of it is for their translation into Welsh. The vast majority is for contracted communication strategies.

Chair: Thank you very much for coming, everybody. John, it was good to see you, as ever. I put on the record the Committee's appreciation to Rob Vincent for his eight years' service as a commissioner and latterly as interim chief executive. We understand that your term is also finishing as a commissioner. We wish you well and thank you for all the support that you have given.