

# Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission

Oral evidence: Local Government Boundary Commission for England and Electoral Commission: Main Estimates for 2025-26 and five-year corporate plans for 2025-26 to 2029-30.

Wednesday 19 March 2025

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Members present: Mr Speaker (Chair); Rushanara Ali; Florence Eshalomi; Stephen Gethins; Simon Hoare; Lisa Smart; Sir Jeremy Wright.

Questions 1-35

## Witnesses

**I:** Professor Colin Mellors OBE, Chair, Local Government Boundary Commission for England; and Ailsa Irvine, Chief Executive, Local Government Boundary Commission for England.

**II:** John Pullinger CB, Chair, Electoral Commission; Vijay Rangarajan, Chief Executive, Electoral Commission; and Chris Pleass, Corporate Director, Electoral Commission.



## Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Professor Colin Mellors OBE and Ailsa Irvine.

**Chair:** Welcome to this meeting of the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission. We are here today to consider the new five-year plan's main estimates for the Local Government Boundary Commission for England and the Electoral Commission. We will hear first from the Local Government Boundary Commission for England. Could our witnesses introduce themselves for the record, please?

**Professor Mellors:** I am Colin Mellors, and I chair the Local Government Boundary Commission for England.

**Ailsa Irvine:** I am Ailsa Irvine, and I am the chief executive.

Q1 **Chair:** Colin, would you like to briefly outline your new five-year corporate plan?

**Professor Mellors:** Yes, indeed. First, thank you for this opportunity to come and talk to you about our five-year plan. It is always a very useful occasion for us, and we have appreciated each opportunity to come and explain to you what we are doing.

The year just finishing has been a fairly successful year for us. We have completed 24 reviews and seven related alterations. We have had about 3,900 submissions, and our recommendations will affect about 7.6 million electors. So it has been fairly busy. All of our reviews were completed on time, to budget and—we hope—with good quality, and with signs of high customer satisfaction. We have also made some other changes and improvements to our engagement and mapping.

Looking forward, we will set out in our corporate plan the three main strands that we want to work on over the coming period, and those will not be very surprising to you. The first is about the quality of our reviews: how we do them and how we can make them even better and more rigorous. The second is about how we can engage more people in the work that we do, which is increasingly a challenge and is something that I suspect you may want to ask about. Thirdly, we want to make the best and most efficient and effective use of our resources.

Clearly a key feature of this coming period, which we have not experienced in this way before, is the consequences of the "English Devolution" White Paper. We are still working very hard with the Minister's Department and others to try to understand what that is likely to mean for us, but we want to make sure that we are there and able to support that wherever possible, and we are committed to doing so. Obviously, that piece of work has influenced our budget—our estimates—this year, about which I am sure you will want to ask more.

**Chair:** Excellent.



**Q2 Sir Jeremy Wright:** On exactly that note, as you say, probably the most eye-catching figure in your note on the estimate is the 32% increase that you have asked for largely because of the consequences of the White Paper. You will appreciate that we have asked for the Government's view on all this, and their response says there is "limited supporting information in what these requirements will be or how the funding uplift reflects these requirements". If they do not know, how do you know in order to make an assessment of how much extra it might cost you?

**Professor Mellors:** It is a very good question. May we answer it in two parts? I want to say a little bit about the context, then Ailsa can explain about the numbers, as it were. Clearly, what is happening, or could happen, is going to have a major impact on our work and the local government landscape—the largest for a generation, or probably more than one generation—and we want to be absolutely ready and able to support those local authorities and the Government's aspirations in bringing that about.

There is a lot of uncertainty, but it is clear that it will have an impact upon our work. It has already done so, for example, in that 40 of the reviews that are currently in the organisation are live reviews, and we have paused those, in line with what good practice has been elsewhere. We have paused them at a careful position at the end of each stage so that, if reorganisation did not happen, we have not wasted that work and they have not wasted their time. But it would not be good use of their time to carry on with that. That has impacted on our programme. The others will carry on; where it is an authority that is unlikely to be affected, we will simply carry on. We are looking to bring forward other reviews where that is possible and to do other kinds of work. However, we are unsure precisely what will be required of us. The Government clearly wish to move at pace in their work, and we must not be the people who slow them down in any way in the things that we do.

We are talking very frequently and very closely with MHCLG and the local authority organisations and groupings, and we are drawing upon the work that we have done. We have had three much smaller tranches of reorganisation in recent times: in 2017-19 in Dorset, which we talked about before; in 2019-2021 in Northamptonshire and Buckinghamshire; and in 2021-23 in North Yorkshire, Somerset and what was the former Cumbria. We have drawn on all that experience.

One thing we imagine that we will help with is the interim arrangements to make sure that authorities can get started. In an ideal world, we would like to do a review before they start, rather than disturbing them afterwards. That is not going to be possible, I suspect, in almost every case. Therefore, over those three tranches, we have developed ways of working with MHCLG and the authorities affected to give them some useful interim arrangements, so that it would not be too disturbing and distracting for us to then come along and do a proper review later on.

We need to be equipped to do whatever work is asked of us, and it may be that the Minister even approaches us and asks us to do some bigger work



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

under section 4 of the 2007 Act, which is where we would be looking at the external boundaries of local authorities. You look a bit sceptical, Mr Speaker, and it may well be that we do that later on, so there might be retro-engineering later on to get those sorted out.

All those things are what we want to be in a position to do as and when asked, and to do so swiftly and to a high quality. By any definition, there is going to be a lot of work there somewhere, because there are 21 areas being reviewed, or 21 counties. Even if they each have only one local authority, that will still give us 21. It is unlikely that everyone is going to be a whole unitary, so there will be a significant number and at a fair speed. We want to put ourselves in that position, and of course Ailsa and her colleagues have been thinking through how we can do that.

**Ailsa Irvine:** Yes. As Colin said, when we do not know the exact scope or scale of what we will be asked to do, we can only draw from previous experience. We have looked to try to make provision that will enable us to bring in any additional capacity or expertise as and when required, so that we can respond positively and quickly to any requests made of us. What we do not want is to be any barrier to being able to take forward any changes.

In terms of coming up with the figure that we have estimated, we have looked at our small organisation of 23 people. Our ability to move people around and to work flexibly is limited, so if we are going to take on any additional activity, we will need to take on additional people to support us in delivering it. The funding that we have estimated here is based on the cost of bringing in an additional review team to make sure that we can manage any activity coming out of this, alongside our existing core functions. It is also to give us some space to buy in expertise that we do not have in-house, such as legal advice.

Q3 **Sir Jeremy Wright:** Thank you. Colin has described a little of the prioritisation that may change, based on what you are expecting to happen next. I have two related questions about how this will have a knock-on effect on the rest of your business. The first is: how do you conduct periodic reviews more generally? Again, I take the point that you might choose to advance some and de-escalate some others, but is there any other effect on periodic reviews that you want to tell us about? The second question is more broadly on your performance metrics: what effect are you expecting this to have, either if you get another half a million quid or if you do not?

**Ailsa Irvine:** In terms of the impact on the ability to do periodic reviews, we are comfortable that, with the way in which we now manage our programme, we are in a battle rhythm where we can review all authorities from time to time, within every three to four electoral cycles. We do not now have the tail, which we had previously, where some authorities had not been reviewed for a long time. We are comfortable that we can continue to manage that with the flexible rolling programme that we have, and that we can manage to still accommodate the periodic reviews alongside other activity. We may need to look at the pacing of things, and



one of the activities that we have outlined and want to complete in the new corporate plan period is to look at the review process to see if we can do it any more quickly, without losing robustness or quality. Again, that will help us in how we manage the throughput as we go through it.

As for performance metrics, in setting the new corporate plan, we have identified new metrics that we want to look at. We still want to look at the number of reviews that we start, and we expect that that may not hit 25 this year, because we may do other activity, as opposed to what we have done in the past, when it has been solely review business. A lot of our metrics, however, are focused on the quality of what we do and how we work, so we are looking at levels of positive feedback about the review process—levels of confidence or engagement—and that will apply to whatever activity we do, whether in relation to new authorities or to existing authorities being reviewed.

**Q4 Florence Eshalomi:** Good afternoon. You are increasing day-to-day spending and have a provision of 5% for pay awards for '25-26. That seems significantly higher, according to the Treasury. I wanted a bit more background and clarity on how you reached that 5% figure.

**Ailsa Irvine:** It is a provision at this stage. It is not making any assumptions about what award we may make. Five per cent. of our staffing budget in this context is £58,000. We wanted to make sure that we were able to accommodate once the civil service pay guidance comes into effect. We will, of course, have regard to that, as we are required to, and make an award within that, but for now, in the absence of it, when we created the main supply estimate we simply rolled over the provision that we included last year, the £58,000.

**Q5 Florence Eshalomi:** Your provisional uplift request shows that, year on year, you spend less. Instead of asking for that increase of 5%, is there any area where you might be able to absorb it from the additional costs that you have already had and from your reserves?

**Ailsa Irvine:** In the current financial year, we are forecasting to come in much closer to budget than we have in previous years. We are forecasting to come in within 1% of our agreed budget, excluding the risk and resilience budget, which we have not needed to spend. As an organisation, we spend two thirds of our budget on staffing—we have a low turnover rate, so we do not have an awful lot of room for manoeuvre there—and another 15% on premises, where we have already delivered a significant saving in the past financial year. Actually, we are getting into territory where, while we obviously continue to try to find efficiencies and deliver value for money, finding any other savings is likely to result in us having to stop doing some of the areas of activity that we have outlined in the plan.

**Q6 Florence Eshalomi:** You are saying you will come much closer to your overall budget this year, but further on in your corporate plan, you increase staffing costs again for '27-28 onwards.



**Ailsa Irvine:** At that stage, the increase from '27-28 onwards on the staffing cost is purely building in provision for a cost-of-living increase annually. There is no anticipated further growth to the establishment from '27-28 onwards at this stage.

Q7 **Florence Eshalomi:** What modelling would you do for the staff pay awards for that year? What would you base it on? Obviously, you would look at inflation and CPI.

**Ailsa Irvine:** We have put that provision at a flat level across the corporate plan period for our medium-term financial planning. When we come back with the estimate for that year, in due course, we will be able to take into account the live circumstances at that point.

Q8 **Lisa Smart:** The report states that your customer satisfaction rates went down from 77% to 71%. It also mentions that the response rates went down. What do you understand from this data? What is it telling you? Is there a difference in the satisfaction rates from people who have had a different experience—did people feel differently about reorganisation from the time-to-time reviews? What have you done differently as a response to the satisfaction data that you had?

**Professor Mellors:** Customer satisfaction is critical to every organisation. It is particularly challenging for public services, because often we ask questions such as, "Were you happy with the experience?", "Did we listen to you?", "Did we treat you well?", or, "Were our materials good?", but they are probably answering more, "Did you like the outcome?" That is quite difficult. It would be difficult to ask about the customer satisfaction of people in the dock with judges; it would depend on the verdict, I suspect. But it is something we listen to and take seriously.

On the statistics, the figures for '23-24 were a bit lower, in the low 70s, but they are generally in the mid to high 70s. For what it is worth, it was 71.5% that year. For the year just about to end it will be 79.2%, which I think is the highest we have had for about five years.

I am more concerned, in a way, about what the data tell us and how we get people to actually respond to us. That is the biggest challenge, because, by definition, I suspect that the lower the response rate, the more likely it is that the robust comments will be those who were unhappy rather than those who were happy, because we tend to say when we do not like something rather more than when we do like something. That is a particular challenge for us when we do reviews. We ask people to tell us what they like about our draft recs, because if they do not, one or two people might say, "We do not like it," and we might reverse the decision, which was probably the better decision had we pursued it.

We are doing a lot of work this coming year on how we can maximise customer satisfaction and engagement in general terms. By coincidence, about two weeks ago we hosted the inter-commission meeting of all the nation's commissions, local and national, in the UK, and this was really our biggest focus of conversation; we were looking at what we can do all together to maximise those things. This is essentially about helping with



understanding, making it easier it for people to access what we are doing, and so on.

Alongside the numbers, I think we probably learn more from what we do when we collect formative information from local authorities during the review—qualitative information, which tries to dig beneath the surface and say, “What is it that is working okay? What is not working well?” The lessons are not surprising; from the public it is about, “Can you make it easier for us to know what’s going on? Can you make it easier for us to engage with the material? Can we help make the mapping look simpler?”, and so on. From the officers and officials, it is about, “Can you help us engage and brief the councillors more than is the case at the moment?”

We commissioned some work from the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny a couple of years ago, and one of the big lessons from that is: what gets them involved in a review is that if the council leadership, executive and non-executive, say this is something worth doing, others will buy into it. If they are disinterested at the top, it tends to permeate what goes on further down. It is about helping them with that; about greater certainty about dates, not delaying; and about giving them plenty of time at the end of the review to put the new arrangements in place.

One of the things we focus on, because it comes out of the feedback we had from this source, is early and continuing engagement. We keep touchstones with the authority and ask, “How’s it going?”—little things. Ailsa and I spend a lot of time at the very beginning engaging with the leadership, the party group leaderships and the full council to get that buy-in and engagement, so they feel as though they own it. We always use the phrase—I think we deliver on it—that we do reviews with them and not to them. But there is a lot more still to be done.

**Q9 Simon Hoare:** You no longer list staff turnover as a top risk. Why was it removed as a risk even when it was rising?

**Ailsa Irvine:** It was removed as a risk in August 2023, and that was after a period at the beginning of that financial year where there had, as I understand it, been a high number of vacancies. It was removed as a risk because they have made significant progress towards filling those vacancies, and there was confidence at that stage, around the work in place to recruit and induct people, that the risk to the organisation of losing skilled people was being minimised.

It is also important to note that we traditionally have typically low levels of turnover, and since that midpoint in 2023-24, turnover has fallen dramatically. In fact, in this current financial year, we have only had one leaver, and that was someone at the end of a fixed-term contract. We are not complacent about that, but we are finding that the investment that we are making in our people and in making the LGBC a great place to work is helping to stabilise that turnover.

**Professor Mellors:** I suspect quite a few organisations had that turnover in that year. People stayed in where they were during the pandemic and



immediately afterwards, and I think they suddenly went. It has dropped now—as I say, just one fixed-term one—and we are really pleased with the results of our staff survey, which showed that we always outperform that of the civil service as a whole, and similar smaller bodies, because we offer good conditions of work. Hopefully—fingers crossed—that will stay, but people will leave at some point because it is a small, flat organisation and you want people to develop and move on in their careers.

**Q10 Simon Hoare:** I would be, therefore, right to characterise the organisation like so. As you referenced, Professor Mellors, with the local government devolution White Paper, you will have significant, concentrated demands on your skills and time. Do you have confidence about the stability of the organisation to meet those demands, and to not only meet political aspirations but deal with customer satisfaction? Is that an accurate characterisation?

**Professor Mellors:** I think, Sir, you have just applied for a job in our comms department. That is brilliant—absolutely spot on.

**Simon Hoare:** That is very good. We will of course discuss terms afterwards, but I am sure we can come to some sort of arrangement.

**Professor Mellors:** Perhaps you will have a view about the 5% allowance for pay rises.

**Simon Hoare:** Excellent. You have yourself a deal.

**Professor Mellors:** It has been the most difficult year to set a budget and an estimate, because we do not want to let anybody down. I am not going to say that we love giving money back, but if you look at our record, we have been very prudent with it. We take that very seriously and we operate in that kind of atmosphere. But we do want to be able to do what is asked of us.

It is clearly a difficult period and it will impact us significantly. Many things will come to us very late. We will have to be nimble and fleet of foot, and it is likely to be a lumpy programme for a period of time. We will find a way of keeping it going, and we are absolutely committed to working with whoever, but we need to keep our ear close to the ground at the minute and be credible so that we can find out what is happening.

**Q11 Simon Hoare:** Can I ask about one element of the proposed capital expenditure, which I think was forecast to be a significant increase for 2026-27? That is the development of the website. Most organisations have a fairly mature and sophisticated website, with the web being a factor of communication life over the last several years. In layman's terms, what is all that about?

**Ailsa Irvine:** We have a website that I do not think enables us to make full use of the mapping capability and the technologies that we have developed to engage people effectively in our work. We have been running a website survey over the past year to get feedback from users on how they find our websites. We have had quite a bit of feedback about people's





## HOUSE OF COMMONS

ability to find the information that they are looking for, and we are making sure that they understand how to access the things that are relevant to the review in their area.

Although we are in a position to do some things with our current website, with limited resources, to try to improve that user experience, we believe it would be better to make a more fundamental investment in our website to align it more closely with our mapping capability, and to improve the experience and better enable people to provide submissions and engage in the review process. We are looking to do work over the course of this year to develop the specification for what the website would need to deliver, to then go through a tendering process so that we could commit to the spend in 2026-27.

**Q12 Simon Hoare:** That is understandable and laudable. We heard reference in an earlier question to the anticipated increase in demand on your services, and therefore public engagement. Within that website development, what risk, if any, have you calculated and tried to factor out as best as possible? You could either increase user frustration with a website under construction at a time of high demand; or, worse, deliver an innovative IT-driven solution, which sounds fantastic on paper, but crashes the first time it has an interaction with the public, leading to an increased sense of frustration and lack of engagement. The objective and the aspiration seem clear, but is the meshing and the meeting of the timeframes actually optimised?

**Ailsa Irvine:** Yes. I think we are confident that we can manage that in the process. Any switchover to a new website would be carefully timed. We would make sure that there was adequate testing, and we would not be doing that at a critical point in any process. We would work to get user input from the outset, so we would make sure that if there was anything innovative, it actually worked with ordinary members of the public rather than just seeming like a nice idea.

Hopefully, we will develop the brief for the website around the same time as we start to get greater clarity on some of the timings and expectations for the work around the White Paper. We will make sure that the two projects align. We can do a lot of the build work in the background, which would not impact negatively on the user experience. We would not switch over until we were confident that it could deliver.

**Professor Mellors:** If it is any reassurance, we did do this a few years back. A lot of it is about how you set up the thing, and being clear about what you are trying to achieve from it. IT should be the servant and not the master of this.

**Q13 Simon Hoare:** That is where the theory and the practice usually collide. Those answers are encouraging, but can I check one thing? I am sure this is the case, but we would fail in our duty if we did not put it on the record. Were you to be in the midst of a consultation on a proposal, and during that time there was the switchover from the old to the new, can you guarantee that any consultation responses made on the old, outgoing



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

system would not be lost, and that the technologies could talk to each other? There is nothing more frustrating than getting halfway up the game of snakes and ladders, only to find yourself back at No. 1 again.

**Ailsa Irvine:** That will be an absolute cast-iron requirement of the work that we commission. We will absolutely make sure that we do not lose anything between two stools.

**Simon Hoare:** With massive penalties applied if it fails.

**Professor Mellors:** Ailsa was not here when we did it before, but it did work very well for exactly the reasons that you just said. We were very clear that there had to be an overlap. We were very clear that the one system had to work before the other one was switched off. We would also, if necessary, reschedule that switchover if we were partway through some important work, for example, in connection with the reorganisation. I did not say anything when you were asking about performance measures, but the performance measures that matter for us will be the same whether we are doing devolution work, electoral review work or helping to support the White Paper. They are about doing things properly, on time and to quality, and other things will need to fit in around that.

Q14 **Simon Hoare:** Colin, you very sweetly mentioned Dorset. You can always get an interlocutor onside when you mention their home county, so thank you for doing that.

**Professor Mellors:** Lancashire is an excellent county as well.

**Chair:** It is the supreme county.

**Simon Hoare:** I have heard the rumour, but I believe it has never been pressed to a Division. I think it is probably best to leave it there.

**Chair:** It is a much bigger county. My grandparents came from Dorset, so I do have an interest.

**Simon Hoare:** There we are—I knew we got on!

I wanted to ask you, Professor Mellors, about the route to achieving the ward boundaries of new authorities. You referenced those experiences in Cumbria, Cornwall, Wiltshire, Shropshire, and Dorset. My take—you and I have discussed this—is that creating a new council and entirely new ward boundaries eases some of those local political tensions, since nobody has first dibs on the ward because they have incumbency because it effectively mirrors the old county division, or whatever it may happen to be. My understanding is that Government are open to rational persuasion on the best approach. Can you assure us that you will, drawing on that canon of evidence and experience that you have collated, impress upon Ministers that this is the best way? I am not suggesting it is the only way, but from my analysis, it does seem to be the best way of approaching it to iron out political wrinkles and crinkles locally.

**Professor Mellors:** I hope I have understood that—please come back at me if I have not. We emphasise when we are doing our work that if it is a



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

new authority, it is a new authority. It is not a merging of some existing authorities; it is not just tweaking. Even when we do a normal review, we take all the lines off the map, bar the external ones. Because the external boundaries will not change—unless you are in east Yorkshire, where there is about four metres of erosion each year—all the internal ones start afresh, ab initio, even though they may well come back, as they were sensible then and they are still sensible now.

In terms of the new authorities, you will not have time and I will not bore you with the details. But with each of those three phases of reorganisation in the past, we have helped with them in slightly different ways. We ourselves cannot do a review until it legally exists. Prior to that, we are giving help, advice and support. This time, the Government have helpfully agreed that they want to use our guidance on deciding a council size—the number of councillors from the outset.

**Simon Hoare:** I think it is about 500,000, Jim McMahon was saying yesterday.

**Professor Mellors:** No—the number of councillors, not the population or the electorate. We have a difference there, because that figure, which the Government are quoting, is about population; we work on electors. But they are broadly similar.

No, this is the number of councillors. In earlier reorganisations, what they did—because nobody but us can draw boundaries and we cannot draw them unless we are doing an electoral review, so we use existing ones. When they did Buckinghamshire, for example, they gave each of the Buckinghamshire divisions three councillors per existing division, which created 157; I think it was initially 157. It was very difficult to right-size that subsequently.

What we did with the latest tranche in Yorkshire and Cumbria was that we got MHCLG and the council—the new council—to come up with a meaningful number up front, which is what they did, and we are sticking with that. They have agreed now that they are sticking with that, roughly. In the latest invitation to bid for a reorganisation, each new authority has been asked to suggest an appropriate number. We are not involved in that, but they are using our guidance. So it is set up with the right size, and we then create boundaries using—

**Simon Hoare:** And you create the boundaries, not the Government?

**Professor Mellors:** No, we do not create the boundaries. Initially, the boundaries will be created by the order, using existing divisions in some form, whether county divisions—

**Simon Hoare:** The border of the council is set by the order, but the ward boundaries would be set by the work of the commission.

**Professor Mellors:** The answer is that I really do not know, because in Dorset we did it ourselves—we started a review. In Buckinghamshire, nobody did it—an existing one was used.



This was not our decision, but what happened in Yorkshire and Cumbria is that they used an amalgam of parish, county and district boundaries to come up with something that would give them the right size of council. We are now in the process of going along and doing a proper electoral review and amending those things, so they become meaningful. But it means you are not having to change radically the size of the council, and it means that you are not having to change your governance, because the governance structure within the council has been roughly based on the correct number. So we go to it afresh from that point.

I hope I was clear there that it is not our decision initially. I do not know how Government intend to do it.

**Q15 Florence Eshalomi:** To clarify, your guidance is based on the number of electors.

**Professor Mellors:** Yes. When we are talking about the size of a council, that is the number of electors. When we are talking about the number of councillors—the guidance we have given is about the number of councillors that would exist in a given authority. We have told them how we approach that question when we are doing a proper review. Sorry, it is a bit complicated. I do apologise.

**Q16 Chair:** To pick up on that—because I am very interested about what might be coming down into Lancashire at some point—presumably because you have got county divisions, you have already set all of Lancashire, except for Blackpool and Blackburn, and you have already got a geographical area they can fit into. Working on that basis, two councillors will give you—putting three districts together—an authority of roughly 60 councillors. Would that be too many, in your view?

**Professor Mellors:** Mr Speaker, I would not actually ask that question because, again, we start with a piece of blank paper. When we do a normal electoral review—

**Chair:** It would save the review having to take place.

**Professor Mellors:** We ask them how many councillors seem to be appropriate on the basis that you need elected members to provide strategic leadership, and you need elected members to provide internal governance and scrutiny and, increasingly, externality, because local authorities are more and more about place-shaping, rather than delivering services, and then for representation.

**Q17 Chair:** All right. I will try a different way. Have you got a minimum number and a maximum number for, say, a population of 400,000?

**Professor Mellors:** We do not, Mr Speaker, because there is no formula as such, because each authority will be different. It depends on its topography, its numbers, its economic challenges—

**Chair:** If you are working on an electorate of—

**Professor Mellors:** We would be reluctant to agree a council of below 30, because we think that is sub-optimal, and we would be very reluctant to



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

have a council above three figures—probably above 90 or 95—because it becomes too difficult to run and manage.

**Chair:** It has given me an indication of what people should be looking for as reorganisation approaches.

Q18 **Simon Hoare:** I appreciate that it is multi-layered and complex, but I want to get this clear in my mind. When the appropriate request has been made, is it the independent, party politically neutral commission that devises the ward or division—whatever one is going to call it—boundaries?

**Professor Mellors:** That is absolutely and completely true. In an ideal world, we would prefer to do that before an authority came into being, but to do that would mean delaying the current reorganisation, which people are keen to get going. We will offer whatever support we can to help MHCLG in making its order and the local authorities in putting forward their proposals to come up with something that makes sense from the outset. We will then do a completely independent review later on.

Q19 **Simon Hoare:** The reason why I ask is because I think there was an element of opaqueness in some WPQs recently, and a reading of the answers might have led the reader to the conclusion that ward boundaries could be set either by the commission or directly by the Department. That latter option I do not think is an option and would be fundamentally undesirable, because they need to have the imprimatur of that independent commission which looks at it on the experience and the numerics, rather than because those are the only criteria that they have at play.

**Professor Mellors:** This is a decision for others. It is obviously not for us. We would certainly like it if there was the opportunity to do reviews wherever possible before something starts, but that does not seem sensible or feasible with the desired timetable. We managed to do something a little bit quicker in Dorset and Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole. We did some preparatory work, but then we took over and immediately the order went through. The third way, which is what we did in Yorkshire—the most recent one—was simply to help whoever was doing it. The proposal comes from the authority. The decision is made by Government—ultimately by Parliament—using existing boundaries, whether they are districts, wards or county divisions, parishes or parish council wards.

Q20 **Lisa Smart:** You mention that different approaches have been taken in different councils in some of the recent work that you have been doing, but that ultimately this is the decision of Government or Parliament. How are you feeding in the lessons that you have learned—as in, “This process worked better; this one did not”—to make sure that the Government are not having to start with a blank piece of paper and learn lessons you have already learned?

**Professor Mellors:** Ailsa might want to pick this up. In a sense, there is nobody to feed into at the moment, because we are still in that period of



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

trying to understand how the process is going to operate. We will simply try and make our knowledge and expertise available.

We were talking about this yesterday. When it is appropriate to do so, we will almost certainly have workshops with anybody who wants to come along and listen, and we will explain how a review works. But we cannot ourselves do anything until an order has been approved, and an order has to have a map attached to it.

**Ailsa Irvine:** We are having regular dialogue with MHCLG officials, and we are making sure that they understand the wealth of knowledge and experience that we have and know that they have access to that in making their decisions.

**Chair:** That is great. That concludes our evidence with the Local Government Boundary Commission for England. Thank you for joining us today. We will now move to the Electoral Commission.

**Professor Mellors:** Thank you very much, Mr Speaker.

### Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: John Pullinger CB, Vijay Rangarajan and Chris Pleass.

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

**Vijay Rangarajan:** I am Vijay Rangarajan, chief executive of the Electoral Commission.

**John Pullinger:** I am John Pullinger, chair of the Electoral Commission.

**Chris Pleass:** I am Chris Pleass, the finance and corporate director of the commission.

Q21 **Chair:** John, would you like to start by briefly outlining your new five-year corporate plan and main estimate for 2025-26?

**John Pullinger:** Yes, of course. This corporate plan has been the product of an intense period of listening and engagement with our stakeholders. We have engaged with political parties, electoral administrators, other regulators and interested organisations. We have engaged particularly with the Government through the defending democracy taskforce and the Minister and her colleagues in the Department.

We have also had the opportunity to engage with Committees of this House—the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee with Mr Hoare and the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee with Ms Eshalomi—and, of course, lots of individual Members too, including each of you.

We felt that this plan, as the product of that, has the support of the community that we are here to serve. We have put parallel documents to



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

the Senedd and the Scottish Parliament, since we report to them too. They have seen and approved the parallel documents.

The plan has two core elements. The first is to make sure that we do a good job in our basic function of overseeing elections and regulating political finance—making sure that we deliver for voters, parties, campaigners, candidates and electoral administrators the support and guidance that they need, each and every time an election takes place. The extra thing in this plan is the recognition that our electoral system is part of the UK's critical national infrastructure and needs investment if it is to thrive into the future.

We see five areas of investment as being really important. The first is to invest in support for voters, particularly young voters and voters with disabilities. We need investment to modernise the system, which is increasingly out of date and out of touch with the way that people want elections to be run in 2025 and beyond.

We need investment to deal with the various threats that are accumulating: mis and disinformation, concerns about foreign interference and—dear to your heart, Mr Speaker—the increasing levels of abuse, intimidation and threats that candidates and administrators face when going about their work and being involved in elections. We also need investment to get an evidence base to make sure that any decisions that this House makes on the future of the electoral system are well founded in evidence. Finally, we want to complete the work we started in the previous Parliament, with your support, to strengthen the commission itself.

What is the cost? The cost is in our main estimate. I dare say we will get into questioning on that. We have reached the number we have through intense scrutiny by Chris and his team of every one of the budget lines in the commission to make sure that we are asking only for what we need to deliver the plan. We have looked at these investment projects and phased them over several years so that we are spreading the cost.

For the strengthening commission projects, we have prioritised those that will either deliver efficiency savings and save money or reduce financial risk. Those are investments in cyber-security, IT, finance, procurement, project management—the kinds of skills that will help us to be more confident in delivery and more confident in delivery at lowest cost. I commend it to you, Mr Speaker.

**Chair:** Excellent.

**Q22 Simon Hoare:** Because I am a decent chap, and out of the goodness of my heart, I gave you 9 million quid—not my own money, I hasten to add—for costs related to the general election of last year. What percentage of it did you spend?

**Vijay Rangarajan:** We had a slight underspend, if I remember right. I think you actually gave us £22.1 million.

**Simon Hoare:** I was even more generous than I had realised. Gosh—the



largesse of Hoare knows no bounds. Excellent!

**Vijay Rangarajan:** Even more generous. That was the sum budget. We spent just under that. We can send you the exact amount, but we did not go over budget. That was the UK parliamentary general election costs last year.

Q23 **Simon Hoare:** As there was an underspend, the question has to be: why is there not a corresponding decrease in this year's main estimate for 2025-26?

**Vijay Rangarajan:** There is a significant one. Last year was £22.1 million. This year the event costs—that covers all the elections this year—will be £11.5 million. That is about an £11 million decrease in the costs. The £11 million will cover media buying for this May's local elections, which we have just heard about, and campaign production costs for the two large elections coming up in 2026 in Scotland and Wales.

Overall, our core costs have remained broadly static. We are spending about £1 million more on IT security. As John has said, that is to complete the cyber-security work that we needed to do after the attacks in the last few years. Where we have increased is £5.4 million for the delivery in this year of the corporate plan projects. We may want to go into a bit more detail on that, but that balance—going down about £11 million in event costs and up about £5.4 million in corporate costs—is the offset.

Q24 **Simon Hoare:** You predict my next question, which was about the £5.4 million. That is quite a significant increase in budget to deliver year 1 of the corporate plan. What is driving that additional resource request?

**Vijay Rangarajan:** As John set out, the main drivers have been the views of parties, voters and candidates as to what we need to do. Maybe it is helpful if I set out the main drivers for the actual costs, so what we are spending the money on. They are all things that we hope are going to actively benefit the users of the democratic system and participants.

First, which will be about £534,000 in this next financial year for the main estimate, is work with partners, charities and NGOs on stepping up democratic education. Some of you—Mr Speaker in particular—kindly came to our Welcome to Your Vote week last week here in Parliament. There is a huge appetite, as we have seen in the public research that we have put out, for young people to hear more. It is acute, with potentially the franchise changing to include voters at 16. This is an area we think we need to accelerate this year, because it is only about three years until some of those young people will be voting. We need to start the process.

The second big area of spend, about £400,000, will be on how we campaign on registration and voter ID. We would like to modernise that. Particularly given that the registration system may be evolving, we are going to have inform people on how they can register and what kinds of assisted or potentially automatic registration might work.





## HOUSE OF COMMONS

The third is back to Political Finance Online. We have restructured the programme completely—I am very happy to explain how later—and it is both a capital and running cost. We have already done the first tranche in this financial year, about £96,000, to safeguard all the political parties' data that we hold, taking it out of a bespoke server, putting it into the cloud and modernising the underlying systems.

There are two other, slightly smaller, projects. There is policy work on the areas of threat, which John has alluded to, particularly supporting the Speaker's Conference on abuse and intimidation, the work with Ofcom, the Departments and the Defending Democracy Taskforce on mis and disinformation in particular. There is also a slight stepping up of our international work, working with some of our partner commissions to learn the lessons of what threats they are coming under, and hopefully trying to avoid them.

The final project that costs a bit is Democracy Club, who have done a wonderful job in running the polling station finder. We had 24 million voters access that in the last year. It is used by the BBC and by social media. Democracy Club no longer want to continue doing this. They want to move into other areas but we think it is so important, such a crucial part, that we would like to take it in-house, modernise it and keep it going. That includes adding things like accessibility information. The cost of that, this financial year, is about £360,000.

**Q25 Simon Hoare:** Thank you. You have referenced a number of the key drivers and pressures that make the defence of democracy ever more important. In essence, for policymakers and cheque signers it is almost pushing on an open door given the seriousness and level of the issues you have raised. That can often lead to a reduction in the appetite for striving for value for money, greater efficiency and cutting out waste. Notwithstanding the pressures of the tasks at hand, what assurances can you give us that this other side of the coin is at the forefront of your minds and being delivered upon?

**Vijay Ranganathan:** I can give you an assurance that it is. Let me give you two brief examples. One of them is Political Finance Online. From the previous version of the project, we are now able to use really much more modern technology to try to deliver it, so we are hoping to do so at a significantly lower cost. Partly we are looking to use some of the tools we already have. We are off to see the head of the Government Digital Service in a couple of weeks, because we think there are some huge synergies with where the Government is going in online service provision. We do not want to duplicate any of that, so we would like to really work with them.

The second is that we have taken quite a hard look at modernising the public campaigns we do. I mentioned modernising the campaigns we do on voter ID. We are going to step back and not run bespoke voter ID campaigns before by-elections any more. We do not run registration campaigns. We did initially because this was new. We think voter ID awareness is now high enough.



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

We will still run the big voter ID campaigns before the May election, but we do not need to do so before every by-election. That will save us about £50,000 a time. Where we can, we will indeed step back and cut some of the activity. Where we can more efficient, we will definitely be so. I hope that some of these things will also provide a better service for the same money and so be better value for money.

**Simon Hoare:** If you have not had sight of the Minister's evidence to PACAC yesterday morning, I recommend it. I am afraid the question I wanted to ask has, Mr Speaker, temporarily gone out of my head.

**Chair:** Do not worry. I will bring in Stephen while you think about it.

- Q26 **Stephen Gethins:** I want to pick up on the points about the devolved Administrations. Obviously, they are in a different electoral cycle. The last time their elections were fought was during a pandemic, so it has been a decade since we had a run-of-the-mill election.

Are you able to look at issues such as cyber-security and others that have evolved quite dramatically since 2021? Are you confident that the resources are there to deal with those challenges that have emerged since the last set of elections? Secondly, I am delighted that you are keeping "Find your polling station", because I know they keep changing them. I find it valuable, I have to say.

**John Pullinger:** As far as elections for the Scottish Parliament and the Senedd are concerned, we have factored in everything we know now to make sure the costs we have put in cover the emerging cyber environment, as well as the other challenges that have accumulated.

As you say, the environment is very different from the last elections. We have had that discussion separately with the Scottish Parliament corporate body. There is a significant interest, but they are paying for it. That is not part of what you are viewing today, but we would certainly be happy to talk to you afterwards about that. We have done what we can to learn the lessons from across the UK and apply them in Wales and Scotland for the 2026 round of elections.

- Q27 **Simon Hoare:** I have remembered my question—sorry, I was having a moment. You referenced data, which was the topic we were discussing yesterday morning. The Cabinet Office is very keen to drive forward a much better understanding between Government Departments about the availability and desirability of sharing Government-held data between Departments.

You will both recall some problems we had when we were quite keen to try to target those who would be most obviously found unsafe—for example, the DWP databases—and could not do so because there was a preciousness about data. Are you engaged, as a way of trying to reduce costs and reinvent the wheel, with Cabinet Office on ensuring that, as a commission, you are able to promote electoral registration and other democratic matters through DWP, DVLA, Passport Office, HMRC, and so on?



**John Pullinger:** This is the background that both Vijay and I have come from, in terms of data and joining it up. Vijay might want to add something on this, but we have had detailed discussions with DVLA and a variety of other Government Departments to look at the data they hold, its relevance to what we do, and certainly the ability to join it up, working with the Minister and other colleagues across Government. There is an opportunity there, which we are certainly ready and keen to seize.

Q28 **Simon Hoare:** Do you see that as a mechanism of potentially, if not reducing costs then not increasing them? You are not having to reinvent the wheel through consultation and wider engagement, because the data is there.

**John Pullinger:** Yes. I am confident that it will reduce costs. I have seen it done in other areas. If you get it right, it does. Obviously, if you do not get it right, you create even more problems, but I am confident that it can work. I think that between us, we will make it work.

**Vijay Rangarajan:** I will give one example where the costs are not necessarily just to us. In Northern Ireland, as you will know, Mr Hoare, the system is a little different, but it does enable voters to check whether they are on the register.

David Marshall has pointed out that there were a significant number of checks of that register. We know from our data that before the election, about half of the registration applications were duplicate. People were already on the register. That meant that electoral registration officers had to do an awful lot of work to de-duplicate about half a million electoral registrations, and there was also the voters' own time in having to fill out yet another set of forms. The more we can help modernise basic things like that, such as using the data checks, the better.

Q29 **Florence Eshalomi:** I want to touch base on your comment, Vijay, about not doing a big campaign on voter ID before by-elections. The general election last year was the lowest for turnout in recent years. We generally know that for by-elections, turnout is even lower. Around 16,000 were disenfranchised last year because of voter ID. In essence, should we not be saying that for a single citizen to lose their right to vote because of voter ID is one too many? Would that not send alarm bells to the Electoral Commission?

**Vijay Rangarajan:** It did, and it is not an easy decision. It is a significant amount of money before every by-election. We have found that the period before a by-election is just too short, and we found very little impact from our own campaigning.

We evaluate the campaigning quite strictly, and we do not think that it increased awareness beyond what it would have been before. We would prefer to focus that money where we think it is having more bang for its buck—for example, on this May, when we are going to have a voter ID campaign, and then keep it going. We need to maintain the awareness of voter ID for exactly the reasons you give.



**John Pullinger:** One voter turned away is one too many—absolutely.

**Florence Eshalomi:** You mentioned Scotland and Wales; do not forget that there are all-out elections in London in '26 as well.

Q30 **Lisa Smart:** The Mets have three in every four years, as I am sure you are also aware. My question for you is about some of the recommendations from previous audits. We had a very useful report from the NAO, which talks about four of the recommendations that were rolled forward; three of them are still awaiting confirmation. Please tell us more about what these recommendations are and how far along you are in completing them.

**Chris Pleass:** I should start by saying that the commission actually considers that we have met those recommendations and that they can be closed. We have discussed that with the National Audit Office, and it will test it as part of its year-end audit and formally confirm their closure. I think we are in a strong position.

To summarise them briefly, two of the recommendations relate to the provision of evidence supporting key accounting adjustments and judgments. One relates to the timing and quality of the draft accounts production and the review of those accounts, and the final two concern governance around and preparedness for a previous finance system—fairly standard audit recommendations. As I say, we believe we have met them. The NAO will confirm that. Of course, you have seen the NAO's financial overview, which highlights the significant work that the commission has carried out to respond to audit recommendations in general, and the majority are now closed.

Q31 **Sir Jeremy Wright:** I want to ask a bit about the corporate plan and specifically the five priorities that you have set out. I suspect that the answer to this might have to come to us in a bit more detail in writing, but if you can say something in outline at this stage, that would be helpful. I am interested in how you as a commission intend to measure success against those priorities, and how we as a Committee can hold you to account for meeting them. For example, at the end of a first year, what would you expect to be able to say to us in terms of progress on those priorities?

**John Pullinger:** I will start, and Vijay might want to add. There is quite a lot of detail in the corporate plan about the metrics that we will judge ourselves by. For the basic performance standards, we have set percentages—often they are very high, stretching percentages, to make sure we are delivering for our major stakeholders. For the corporate plan projects, what we will do and be held to account for is a series of year-by-year milestones that will set out how far along the road we are with delivery of the project and how much have we spent against our initial plan. You will be able to judge whether we are on track.

The final thing in the plan, which I want to take this opportunity to point out, is that we have put in a lot of what we are calling system indicators. We will not be happy unless we shift the dial on, for example, young



people's levels of registration or on public confidence in the political finance regime, which is very low. We cannot do that alone, but we are keeping our eye on the prize: what is going to make a difference for confidence in our system and the running of our system.

You will see all three of those together: basic performance standards, a series of milestones and performance against targets year by year, and whether we are making a difference on some of the key, intractable areas that have dogged us for a long time. We will do our utmost to work with whoever we can to make sure we improve over the five-year period.

**Q32 Sir Jeremy Wright:** Do you have in mind a measurable statistical improvement? If you take young people's registration as a good example, do you have in your own minds what sorts of improvements you want to see?

**John Pullinger:** Yes, and I think it is in the plan, isn't it? Let me make sure I get the right numbers. Point me in the right direction—Vijay, you have it.

**Vijay Rangarajan:** We have put a number of these five-year aspirations and the data for 2024 and 2025 into annex B of the corporate plan. At the moment, in some cases, they are quite good; satisfaction with the system of registering to vote currently sits at 86% and we would love to get up to about 90%. That is good, and as John said, in some other areas it is not good. We are down at 47% for satisfaction with how democracy works in the UK, and we would like to see really significant increase in that, though clearly that is not entirely in our hands.

Turnout at scheduled elections is again something to keep an eye on. As you all know, it has been steadily falling over time, and we do think some of these projects ought to help greater participation in general. Confidence that elections are well run is quite high, but we think it could go higher.

The one which, as John said, is very low at the moment, is agreement that spending and funding political parties and campaigning organisations is open and transparent. That currently sits at 15%, which is about as low as a public opinion poll gets. We have set ourselves a very challenging target, an aspiration over five years of trying to raise that with the Government's help, given their commitments, to try to increase people's trust in the political finance system.

There is a whole series there, and we will report on all of those and the two sets of indicators every year in the annual report and accounts. I am very happy to share the data we have between those reports.

**Q33 Sir Jeremy Wright:** Thank you. Obviously, what we are interested in is whether you think there will be a constant upward progression, or whether there will be spikes and troughs in that progress. I assume you have attempted to set a five-year aspiration to allow for both of those possibilities.

**John Pullinger:** Yes.

**Vijay Rangarajan:** Yes. None of this will ever be a smooth evolution, I am afraid.

Q34 **Florence Eshalomi:** In your plan, you mentioned the possibility of looking at a potential extension or alteration request to your lease. At what stage would you then come back on that to comply with standard IFRS compliance rules?

**Vijay Rangarajan:** As you know, we have offices in Cardiff, Edinburgh and Belfast. The one that this concerns is the office in London, where we are about to have the pleasure of some building works going on in the shared building we are in. We may need to change the lease after that. We are in the beginnings of discussion with the landlord, and this is just a line in the memorandum to flag the possibility that we may need to come back for funding.

We are very confident now that this will not happen in this coming financial year, so we will not be asking for any form of supplementary. It is just a flag, given how complex the implementation of IFRS 16 has been, that in the next financial year, if we change the lease, we will need to come back for a capital bid in our main estimate.

Q35 **Florence Eshalomi:** So you would potentially come back. Do you not think any additional costs could be mitigated through system budgets?

**Vijay Rangarajan:** We do not, because you take the entire cost over the entire lease, however many years or decades it is, and you accrue that whole cost in capital in the very first year of the lease. The cost of the entire lease, say 10 or 15 years, is vastly bigger than any capital budget we have in any given year.

**Chair:** That concludes our evidence. Thank you for joining us today.