

Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission

Oral evidence: Local Government Boundary Commission for England and Electoral Commission: Main Estimates for 2026-27

Wednesday 11 March 2026

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Members present: Sir Lindsay Hoyle (Chair); Samantha Dixon; Stephen Gethins; Simon Hoare; Rachel Hopkins; Lisa Smart; Sir Jeremy Wright.

Questions 1-44

Witnesses

I: Ailsa Irvine, Chief Executive, Local Government Boundary Commission for England, and Beverley Smith, Chair, Local Government Boundary Commission for England.

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

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Beverley Smith and Ailsa Irvine.

Q1 Chair: Welcome to this meeting of the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission. We are here today to consider the 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. A warm welcome to Beverley, who has recently taken up her position as chair of the commission. Thank you for that. Can our witnesses introduce themselves?

Beverley Smith: I am Beverley Smith, and I am the chair of the commission.

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

Q2 Chair: Excellent. Beverley, would you like to start by briefly setting out your first impressions of the commission? We will then open up to questions on the main estimate.

Beverley Smith: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Can I first say thank you for the opportunity I have been given to take up the role of chair? It has been an exciting start to the year.

My early reflections are that I have joined a well-run, professional organisation that really values its independence and has a strong sense of direction. That comes from the corporate plan, which was agreed just last year. In terms of the current work, we are obviously delivering against those corporate plan objectives, but there has been a real focus, in terms of the commission's statutory role, on the reviews that we can do—those that are appropriate and not tied up with local government reorganisation. We are also making a positive contribution to the local government reorganisation consultations, through both councillor numbers and the interim electoral arrangements.

We have a window of opportunity. Our real focus is to drive improvements that will put us in the best possible position for what the commission will look like in the future with the changing programme. This year, our focus is on enhancing our technology and processes to really drive some efficiencies through the review process itself, strengthening communications and engagement to improve public understanding and awareness of what we do, reducing some of those barriers to participation, and ensuring that communities are well informed and can take part. That obviously contributes to the wider aim around democratic health. Thirdly, our focus is on continuing the commitment to ensure that we operate efficiently and provide value for money. It has been a really good start. I have been here for only two months, but I am really enjoying it. I feel really positive about the future.



Q3 Sir Jeremy Wright: We will try not to ruin all that now. Thank you very much.

Can we start with the main estimate? Your main estimate proposal suggests a 19% increase on last year's resource DEL budget, but you will be aware that the Treasury also noted for us a 14% underspend at the supplementary estimate. Can you tell us something about your confidence in forecasting, because from an external perspective it looks as though you have, in the past, overestimated what you will be spending? Why are you not doing so this time?

Ailsa Irvine: We find ourselves in a very different position from when we brought the main estimate to you last year, at a point when we didn't have clarity on the shape and timings of local government reorganisation or what it would mean for us, hence the challenges we faced with the budgeting and forecasting for this year and the supplementary estimate that you mentioned. We now have a much greater degree of certainty and understanding of what is expected of us over the coming year in relation to local government reorganisation, and that has enabled us to have a much clearer and stronger understanding of what the year ahead will look like.

The main supply estimate we have developed this year has come broadly in line with what we expected in the corporate plan—in fact, slightly beneath that, but still significantly higher than last year. That increase on last year is driven primarily by some planned investment. Rather than being around core growth, it is around two specific areas of planned investment, which gives us certainty that we know we are going to spend it. It is around investing in our digital infrastructure.

We have carried out a digital maturity assessment and developed a digital strategy, so we have a targeted series of investment that will help us to become more efficient and effective with the use of technology. We also have significant investment in communications and engagement. This year, we have carried out some focus group research to help us to understand people's understanding of local democracy and how our key messages and consultations work. That has identified a number of areas for us to focus on as improvements for this year.

We have clear plans in place to spend the money. We know what we are doing this year, and we have a greater degree of certainty than we had previously. We have robust project plans and governance in place to make sure that we keep to spend. Also, not being complacent, we have taken steps to try to further enhance how we manage our budget throughout the year. We have introduced enhanced monthly reporting to make sure we keep that close monitoring, so that if any issues were to arise during the year, we can be very confident that we would be able to identify and address them.

Q4 Sir Jeremy Wright: Can I dig a little deeper on the digital strategy, which you specifically mentioned? There are two line items that it might be worth exploring. One is the £0.4 million uplift you are requesting for digital and



technology activities. The other, even more specific, is the rise in capital expenditure to redevelop the website. You will be aware of the glittering record of delivery in public sector IT projects. Can you tell us your level of confidence in delivering those projects on time and on budget?

Ailsa Irvine: I will start with the first of those, in relation to the £0.4 million uplift for digital and technology projects. Effectively, the spend falls into three main areas: cyber-security, digital skills and enhancement of systems. On cyber-security, the investment will enable us to embed and sustain the improvements we have already made this year, making sure that we can keep pace with the ever-changing cyber landscape and maintain the security of our systems. That is embedded in the day-to-day way we deliver our IT work. There is confidence that we will be able to deliver on that front.

In relation to digital skills, we are currently in the process of carrying out our digital skills assessment. The detailed findings from that will inform a targeted training programme for our staff and commissioners to make sure that we are delivering our technology most effectively. The third angle is about making sure that we are maximising the use of the systems that we already have, making sure that we are leveraging the interoperability between systems—including by making sure that our finance, HR and review systems all speak to each other—helping to limit the time for data processing, and supporting our decision making. As part of that, we are also looking at how we can build on lessons from the AI pilots that we are currently undertaking to safely carry out some routine tasks and free up our staff time and capacity. We have a detailed digital plan that accompanies our strategy, and we are establishing an internal digital oversight committee that will help us to make sure that we deliver that package of activity.

One thing I should have said in relation to digital skills is that we realise that, as well as training up our own people—we are a small organisation of 22 people—there will be times when we need to bring in expert resource, which is also provided for in the budget. One area where we will be looking to do that is in helping to shape the specification and procurement of the new website project.

Where we are at the moment on the new website project is that this year we have been very much focusing on identifying the user needs to make sure we build something that delivers what it needs to deliver. We have completed a year-long website survey, which has given us a rich vein of feedback on the challenges people find with our current website in the accessibility of information, using it on mobile devices, and the accessibility of PDFs. There is a rich vein there that helps us to understand what we need to build.

It is also being shaped by the focus group research we have carried out, helping us to understand people's basic information needs and the fact that we need to tailor it for different audiences. All this information is being used to feed into the specification for the website, which we are now in the process of developing.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

We are preparing the tender documentation, and we are on track to go out to market in the early part of the next financial year. We have done some soft market testing already, and that has given us assurances that the timescales and the ambition we have set are realistic and deliverable, but we will obviously manage the project closely. One of the things we are making sure of is that user testing is right at its heart to make sure that we do not go live with something that does not work and that, fundamentally, what we deliver is going to help people to engage with reviews and with our work.

Q5 Sir Jeremy Wright: Once the new website is up and running, does that extend to measuring public engagement and understanding how well people are using the new product?

Ailsa Irvine: Yes, absolutely. Evaluation is going to be built into the project from the outset, so that we can understand and continue to evolve. We do not see this project as being a one and done; it is about making sure we build a system that can continue to evolve and meet user needs as technology changes.

Q6 Sir Jeremy Wright: Beverley, do you have anything to add?

Beverley Smith: No. I think we are fairly confident that we have the right plans in place to make sure we can deliver on time and to a specification that is going to make a difference to people and their engagement with us.

Q7 Lisa Smart: I will move on to local government reorganisation, an area where there is more clarity than there was when you came to talk to us last year. How is the organisation ensuring that you are learning from previous reorganisations? How do you plan to respond to future changes, such as the change in the franchise to include 16 and 17-year-olds? How are you looking at that?

Ailsa Irvine: When we have been carrying out our role in local government reorganisation, we have been able to draw on our experience of previous rounds, including the most recent rounds in North Yorkshire, Cumbria and Somerset. While we are not able to carry out full reviews of local authorities until they exist, we have been able to share our expertise, experience and learning with MHCLG and local authorities themselves. We have been providing guidance and support, drawing on those lessons, to help guide people as they develop their submissions, and now as they seek to develop their interim electoral arrangements for their first set of elections.

Sorry, can you remind me of the second part of the question?

Lisa Smart: It was about 16 and 17-year-olds voting.

Ailsa Irvine: In some respects, that has less of a direct impact on our work. One area it will impact is the electoral forecasts on which we base the wards. Some of the initial analysis we have done has suggested that it is less likely to trigger intervention reviews and cause significant electoral equality challenges, because it is more likely to be spread across wards and different local authority areas.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Obviously, we also continue to monitor the situation around the potential for automatic voter registration, which, in itself, may have more of an impact on those forecasts. We continue to keep our eyes on that as it progresses, because it is something that could trigger the need for some intervention reviews to address electoral inequality. Fundamentally, it is something on which we would want to work with local authorities, so that when we are carrying out reviews, once any franchise changes have come in, the electoral forecasts they provide to us are as robust as possible.

Lisa Smart: That is probably one for us to pick up next year, when you come and see us.

Q8 **Chair:** Can I just come in on that? Obviously, we have been through a situation where there were not going to be elections, but we now have elections in Lancashire. However, it has still not been decided how Lancashire will be broken up, and the expectation is that it will be into four—let's assume that it will be four. Who will do the planning and how will we get the wards in place for an election next year, if you have not put in place a budget in which to drop all this because it is happening in different areas? I have not seen in your financial projection how you will allocate time, effort and wards. If you do the simple thing of using county divisions, dividing into districts does not quite fit because, within that, you have two unitaries that have arrived at their council wards through a completely different format. Even so, you cannot have differentials in voters for the same representation. There has to be some equality in electorate per ward.

Ailsa Irvine: Essentially, the approach being followed for local government reorganisation, as was followed in North Yorkshire, Cumbria and Somerset, is that there is not a formal role for the commission at this stage in the process. Because we can only review authorities once they are formally established, and because there will not be the time between the authority being established and its initial elections for us to carry out a review, the Government have included the interim electoral arrangements in the structural changes order. It is developed by local authorities and then brought forward in the Government order. Our role is to come in once the authority has been established and has come into effect—so after the elections and after vesting day—to do a review. We do not have a power or formal role at this stage in the process.

Beverley Smith: We are trying to support that local authority, by providing guidance and advice, to find a pragmatic way through to get past that first election point. It is such a short period of time, so while we are without a role, it is just about trying to help and support them to get through that. On our capacity and capability to do that, we have the capacity to be flexible and agile, and to be able to respond, as we can at the minute.

Chair: You will have to be agile, as you will have months in which to prepare it. You are still not getting around the equality in trying to bring a unitary into a county, and the question of whether you should work on the district's representation or the county's representation. How do you ensure



HOUSE OF COMMONS

that the value is equal in the new authorities? The two do not match. It is like playing dominoes, where somebody has a set of six and somebody else is playing with a set of nine: they do not really come together. Just think about that.

- Q9 **Simon Hoare:** I do not know if it is of help to anybody around the table, but were those local authorities—Lancashire or elsewhere—to ask for your advice, I would press upon you the useful way in which we addressed this in Dorset, when we were creating a new council by merging a series of district councils and a county council. I accept that it was not a unitary, but in that case, neither authority ever thought it was the top dog. The ward boundaries were new, and none of them reflected or followed the predecessor ward boundaries.

The Local Government Boundary Commission was obviously involved in providing the boundaries, based on its thinking on numbers, to ensure relative parity in voters per ward. That was the basis on which the shadow authority was elected. It commanded universal local support, and there were no gripes. It still seems a very good way of driving that forward.

Ailsa Irvine: In an ideal world, we would be in a position to have time to do a review, in time to make sure we were setting the electoral arrangements. Given the timetable and the process being followed for local government reorganisation, it is simply not feasible for us to carry out that work in that time. As I understand it, a slightly different approach was adopted in Dorset than has been adopted subsequently.

We are trying to impress upon local authorities how they can use their existing boundaries, not necessarily to lift entire divisions or wards, but to think about the combination they can use to get as close to electoral equality as they can, and to respect the key principles that we would if we had responsibility for setting those boundaries.

- Q10 **Simon Hoare:** I understand the time pressures, but it presupposes that nobody will advertently or inadvertently try to gerrymander. Once these things are set, they are set. I urge some conversations going back to Ministers, one of whom is in the room, to say that if they get it wrong, the new local authority will not command universal support from the get-go. It will start on the back foot if, say, the county divisions trump the borough wards, or whatever. It is not something that can be sacrificed just because of a timetable. If that were the case, I would say that the timetable is artificial, wrong and entirely likely to be self-defeating, because it is always going to be the upper-tier authority that has the whip hand in these matters—always.

Ailsa Irvine: Ultimately, the timetable for the process will be a decision for MHCLG, Government and Parliament. That is outside of our control. We can only work within the process that we are set.

- Q11 **Simon Hoare:** I appreciate entirely that it is outwith your control. However, from your collective experience of having delivered local government reorganisation elsewhere, do you have any reflections on the points that I raised—either to say, yes, there is a point, or no, you are

talking out of the top of your hat?

Ailsa Irvine: It is quite a difficult one for both of us to answer. I could take it back and continue the conversation with the team. We were not directly involved in the previous rounds of local government reorganisation. We have been having conversations with MHCLG and the authorities to share some of the learning that we have. We have always set out that in an ideal world, we would carry out that review. We have raised that point throughout the process.

Beverley Smith: We are where we are in terms of the timescale. We do not have a statutory role in that time from the new authority being in place to their first election. In that gap we are trying to give as much guidance and support as we can in terms of the local authority achieving equity across the board. We are doing as much as we can within the limits we have because we do not have a statutory role in that period. After that, we then can go in and do a full and proper review. Hopefully that bit in the middle provides some comfort in terms of our support and guidance around equity, councillor numbers and so on—which they would want to consider.

Simon Hoare: That approach is not without reputational risk.

Beverley Smith: It is for the local authority to work within those processes and with our guidance and support along the way, but we are not responsible.

Q12 **Chair:** Which local authority?

Beverley Smith: It would be the new local authority.

Chair: We have got two at the moment.

Beverley Smith: It is the new local authority that would need to put together the interim electoral arrangements before the first election. We can help and support that with guidance, but we have no statutory role in that timeframe.

Chair: I know that you are not in charge, but surely you must write and express concern? The concern is that it is a complete shambles. Parties cannot select because they do not know what they are fighting on. The fact is, they do not know how they are going to work it. The district and parliamentary boundaries were updated, but the county boundaries were never touched and are completely out of sync with everybody. The default position that I would expect to be established would be that you would follow the county. That is not in sync with either parliamentary or district which have upgraded their own boundaries, but which do not fit with the county. They do not marry together.

On top of that, you have got two unitaries that have been stuck into the middle of it that are completely different. My worry is that an express train is coming and we can see the buffers, but nobody is going to slow the train down. When we hit the buffers, the shadow authority will be there.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Then you are saying to us, "Oh, we will now do it." That completely changes the makeup of what the local authority may have been, because they are completely different boundaries. I might not be in charge, but I want to express my real concern. Hopefully, the people who draw up the boundaries might be willing to express some concern to make the Government wake up to the problem that is been created.

- Q13 Lisa Smart:** On the corporate plan, you are forecasting a reduction in expenditure from 2027-28 onwards. That reflects the expectation that costs associated with the devolution White Paper would no longer be required. Is that assumption still valid?

Ailsa Irvine: The short answer is yes—it broadly still stands. When we brought the five-year financial plan to you in the corporate plan, the first two years were showing quite significant increases because of the specific provision that we had included as allowance for local government reorganisation. It also included some specific investment in relation to our website and communications—some of the specific pieces I talked about earlier on.

When we get into 2027-28, we think that we will still be broadly in the right space that will allow us to continue to invest in our people and systems, but without the significant set-piece investments we have planned for this financial year. That said, we are a small organisation, and a significant proportion of our budget is tied up in our people and in accommodation. There is a risk that we find that it is not sufficient to sustain our investment, that we identify new work, or are asked to do new work that we have not anticipated, but we would start from the position of trying to manage it within that envelope.

The greater challenge for us will be at the back end of the corporate plan, particularly when we get to 2029-30, when we are carrying out the reviews of all the newly established local authorities. We will have a peak of activity at that point, and at the moment it is quite difficult to quantify what that will look like, but that peak may have an impact on our resourcing in due course. At the moment, through the investments we are making in our processes, and in trying to increase our use of digital and our resilience, we are trying to make sure that we are as well placed as we can be for that peak, so that we can limit any additional resource need.

- Q14 Lisa Smart:** Is there any remaining uncertainty that is making that planning at the back end harder than it needs to be?

Ailsa Irvine: We anticipate that, by the summer, if the timetable that has been put forward for local government reorganisation continues to be followed, and we see decisions on the shape and scale of new local authorities, that will help us to understand how many local authorities there will be and when their next elections are, which will enable us to start to do a bit more of the detailed programming. We are starting to do some thinking now in the scenario modelling, but if we get that certainty, which we expect from the timetable that has been put forward, that will help us understand that a bit better.

Chair: That concludes our evidence from the Local Government Boundary Commission. Thank you for joining us today.

Examination of Witnesses

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

Q15 **Chair:** Welcome to our guests from the Electoral Commission. Can you introduce yourselves for the record?

John Pullinger: Good afternoon. I am John Pullinger, and I am chair of the Electoral Commission.

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

Chris Pleass: I am Chris Pleass, the corporate services director at the commission.

Q16 **Chair:** John, would you like to start by briefly outlining your main estimate?

John Pullinger: The estimate represents the cost association with the second year of the corporate plan, which this Committee approved last year. It represents the culmination of a lot of listening and engagement with political parties, electoral administrators, parliamentarians generally and each member of this Committee.

The shortest way to describe it is that it is a recognition that our electoral system is part of critical national infrastructure. We need to invest in it much more heavily, given the kinds of threats that are facing us, and we need to modernise it and think about its fitness for the future.

Last year was very much a set-up year. We were doing a lot of recruitment into new roles, and planning and preparing the way for what this year's budget will begin to deliver. On top of that, we have the work we are doing with the Minister and her colleagues on the Representation of the People Bill, which is now before the House. Immediately in front of us is a set of elections on 7 May in various constituencies up and down the country. We want to make sure that we do our part in making sure that they run as smoothly as possible. That is the primary element to it, and Vijay or Chris can give more details if they wish.

Chair: Is there anything to be added, or shall we go straight into the questions?

Vijay Rangarajan: I just want to add that we have made some significant progress on some of the bigger projects, which were eating money in the corporate plan. The ones I would single out are political finance online, which we may come back to, and the education work that is now live in a number of schools, where the materials are being tested out, but a good chunk of materials are still being produced, and the idea is

to get those around many schools in the course of the next academic year. The voter information project is now up and running. We are redoing the guidance for parties and volunteers, and we are redoing the website for the public. A lot of that needs updating.

- Q17 **Stephen Gethins:** I will come to the local elections in just a moment, but on the main estimate, the commission's budget has risen significantly compared to its pre-election baseline as a result of the five-year corporate plan. How is the increased expenditure ensuring measurable value for money for the public, and what steps are you taking to demonstrate it?

John Pullinger: I will break it down into three elements. The first part of value for money is to do things that are valuable. I think the projects that Vijay outlined were the ones we thought would add most value for voters, support political parties to play their role and help electoral administrators to run elections as smoothly as possible. When we submit our annual report to you later in the year, you will see in concrete terms the value we are adding in each of those projects, and we have got key performance indicators attached to all of them.

The second aspect of value for money is making sure you only spend money when you need to and really bearing down on costs. I might invite Chris to say something about that in a minute. The first element of that is not spending money when we do not need to. We have returned money through the supplementary estimate this year, and that will be our policy in the future. If we get through the year and realise we do not need the money, we will return it. Obviously, we are confident that our current estimate is what we need, but if we do not need it, we will not spend it.

The second element of that, of course, is being efficient in what we do, and I think there are a number of things that Chris's team has put forward in the last year that we will be able to carry forward that will demonstrate efficiency.

The final bit of value for money is having the processes that make sure that you deliver on the promise month by month. We have made significant investment in our financial and procurement capability, so that we are getting contracts that add value for money, and we are monitoring spending across the commission on a daily basis. If you would like, Chris can certainly give you a little more detail.

- Q18 **Stephen Gethins:** Yes, please. That would be helpful.

Chris Pleass: We have previously spoken about some of the things that we have done to drive value for money in the organisation. I think an example I have used previously is accommodating the Boundary Commission in our London office. That saves us money, but it is also a really efficient use of public office space as well. As part of that, we have refitted the office, and that has led to about a 50% reduction in our power costs.

I will now turn to more recent value-for-money steps we have taken. We previously had a large number of IT contracts. We have consolidated them



HOUSE OF COMMONS

now and bundled them together. As a result of that, we are driving savings of about £100,000 per annum. That is quite significant for us. We have also been able to use new technology in the organisation. Some people have joined the organisation with relevant skills, and we have been able to build a corporate performance system in house; that has saved us about £150,000 as opposed to going to the market. We have numerous other examples.

Q19 Stephen Gethins: I want to ask about local elections, especially those for which there has been relatively short notice. We all know how tricky elections are even with lengthier notices. Your main estimates note that you are urgently assessing the financial implications of the reinstatement of the May 2026 local elections. Based on your current analysis, will the commission be able to deliver that additional electoral activity within the current budget allocation?

John Pullinger: The answer is yes, but it would be helpful for Vijay to give you a bit more detail.

Vijay Rangarajan: The answer is yes. This morning, we have just authorised another £231,000 of expenditure, and that is going to be spent in the areas—particularly Suffolk and Norfolk, East and West Sussex, and Chorley—where the elections are now reinstated. That is within our current budget, so we are not asking for any more money, but we have to make sure that there is an equality of experience across the country for everyone who is having that election. The electoral services team, our own staff, the AEA and others have done a great job in getting things back on track, so I am pretty confident that this will all work and that we will absorb it within the current budget.

The sort of thing which gets a little more complicated is buying advertising spend at slightly shorter notice and booking halls at slightly shorter notice. That is where quite a lot of the work is going. We are going to run three main campaigns, as before. The usual registration campaign will run in all areas where there are elections. A voter ID campaign to bring your voter ID will run in England, but not in Scotland or Wales. Our electoral security campaign, “Your vote is yours alone”, will run in all areas where there are elections.

Q20 Stephen Gethins: I will ask one additional question before Mr Speaker comes in on your reference to Chorley. I have every sympathy for party managers, returning officers and the Electoral Commission trying to organise something. You have highlighted some areas. You will be getting halls, local government premises and even some other public and private spaces on a much more last-minute basis that you might have. Do you foresee any financial difficulties with that?

Vijay Rangarajan: We do not yet have a complete picture from local councils and returning officers, who are booking quite a lot of that. We are doing the communications side. At the moment, thanks to a lot of hard work by them, it is looking okay as far as we can see. There is a real strain on some candidates who were not expecting to have to stand, and on



HOUSE OF COMMONS

parties that have had to distinctly accelerate their candidate selection procedures.

Stephen Gethins: I do not have a dog in this fight, but I should have said that candidates, parties, local authorities and you also have my absolute sympathy for pulling this together.

Q21 **Sir Jeremy Wright:** I have a quick question about your communications with the public. Some people—at least those who were paying attention—thought they were not having elections and are now being told that they are. Does that change the nature of your communications with the public about the fact that there are elections at all? If so, how?

Vijay Ranganarajan: In the areas where the elections are reinstated, we are trying to make sure that everyone understands that the elections are going ahead. That is the additional spend. The £231,000 I mentioned is to make sure that we are reaching everyone. We are trying to do so on a lot of different channels this year. Normal social media reaches some people, but not others. This year, for example, we are going to advertise on screens inside supermarkets, which is a very good way of reaching some people, and doing in-game advertising, which is a completely different demographic—

Q22 **Sir Jeremy Wright:** “Unexpected vote in the bagging area”—that sort of thing? Got it.

Vijay Ranganarajan: We can put that up! We are also going to be on TikTok for the first time. We are going to advertise quite heavily. We are trying a lot of new techniques to make sure that we reach where voters are.

Q23 **Chair:** I am quite intrigued about advertising outside the supermarket. The supermarket people go to might be in an area that does not have elections. That will confuse everybody. I am surrounded by Bolton, Wigan and Blackburn, which do not have elections, but people go to supermarkets there to shop. If you put adverts there, I think you will confuse more people than you will enlighten. That is my first point.

If you really want to get to everybody, should you not send a letter to every individual household so we know we are not missing anybody? What dispensation will there be for people who thought there were no elections, may have booked holidays and might come back to find their postal vote there? We have this ridiculous situation where you have to put it in the postbox. We had a debate today that shows that your mail does not get to the town hall in time. The fact is that you used to be able to push it through the letterbox of the town hall, where all the votes are counted. You will not allow that. We will lose votes because of the intransigence that you have set up even though you have reinstated the elections.

I think having the elections was the right thing to do, so I am not arguing about that, but I am really bothered because all the advertising said that the elections had been cancelled and newspapers told everybody. How do we get people to realise that they are back on? Putting some advert up in the supermarket does not wash with me. If a letter is dropped through



HOUSE OF COMMONS

everybody's door, I know that everybody has been contacted, rather than this hit-and-miss. When did any one of you last look at a screen going into the supermarket? I don't. Come on—let's be realistic. If you are serious, let's be serious about getting people engaged. Why not drop a letter through every door?

Vijay Rangarajan: Polling cards will be dropped through every door. That absolutely will be a mail drop. We have just been working with Royal Mail to make sure that those reach every person, because Royal Mail has to stand up a big operation in the areas where elections have been reinstated. We think you are absolutely right about some of the issues with postal votes. Thanks to the Minister and her team, the Representation of the People Bill will fix some of the problems that we saw at the 2024 general election.

- Q24 **Chair:** You still haven't really answered the big question: why can you not send a letter explaining the reinstatement—not a polling card, because people might say, "Oh, they've delivered that by mistake" and some people do not get the polling card in big rural areas such as mine. Why can't you send a letter explaining that the elections had been cancelled, but are now reinstated? You can put in the letter, "If you are not registered, please register" and put some of the facts in it to make the election work. Let's not waste our time on the supermarket; let's get through to the people who are going to vote and get out an explanation. For those people who are not on the register, we can put in the letter, "This is how you do it, and if you have booked your holidays, you can get a postal vote."

Vijay Rangarajan: We can go and look at whether a letter would be good value for money. At the moment, the way that our—

- Q25 **Chair:** It is better than a supermarket in the wrong place.

Vijay Rangarajan: The supermarket is one. Social media and our TV advertising are others, and the usual billboards and—

- Q26 **Chair:** You spend all that on TV adverts, but I am sure it is cheaper to send a letter. Just out of interest, most regional TV in our area does not have elections—it is a very small area. Surely it is better to send letters.

Vijay Rangarajan: In our experience so far, we are mostly focusing on local radio, as a way to—

Chair: Let's switch it back: ITV Granada, for example, or BBC "Look North"—in Manchester there are no elections.

Lisa Smart: The mets have elections this year.

- Q27 **Chair:** The mets have, but they weren't cancelled. Elections were cancelled: the whole of Liverpool didn't have elections and neither did the whole of Manchester, Cheshire or Cumbria—and only some districts in Lancashire did. For that value of cost, and if the BBC don't put your adverts on, surely on that basis you can write to the individuals—the small number concerned—and explain why and how their vote still matters. You



do not put that on TV.

Vijay Rangarajan: I am very happy to take that away and find out a cost and whether we can write to people, and judge whether we would reach additional people by doing that. We are trying to make sure that everyone has a chance of seeing material that makes it clear that the elections are going ahead in their area, because that is fundamental. We will definitely go and look at whether an additional letter will help.

Chair: I think more people will see something dropping through their letterbox than all the other alternatives. I have great concerns about these elections. I want them to happen, because democracy matters, and I want to make sure that we have a way to make sure that people are informed after getting so much information that the elections weren't happening.

Simon Hoare: Just to make the obvious point, the greatest means of generating awareness is, by definition, something landing on the doormat. I am not convinced that it requires a huge amount of analysis to work that out. The elections were postponed and then reinstated, not by your organisation's choice. It strikes me as being a perfectly legitimate ask to central Government to say, "This was a situation created by your initial decision and then the decision changed." This is something that HMG needs to do with the imprimatur of the commission to make sure that it is seen as an official, dispassionate document. I can understand the reticence of the commission wishing to spend money on direct mail, but I agree with you, Mr Speaker, that it is a better use of money than TikTok, TV adverts and radio and all the rest of it. I see the point about who should write the check to pay for it, and I think it should be His Majesty's Government.

Chair: The proof of the pudding is that every electoral party drops an election address through the letterbox. If they have it wrong, why do they all still do it?

Q28 **Lisa Smart:** Just to supplement your point, Mr Speaker, I entirely agree that it is important that voters know that they have a vote and that they are expected to use it. We should spend some time ensuring that they are communicated with properly, particularly when there has been change and a lack of certainty. In addition to your point about the importance of a piece of paper going through letterboxes, different demographic groups get their news and information in different ways, so it is right that you are looking at social media.

I also think that there are some organisations who particularly communicate with young people, whether it is My Life My say or Shout Out UK. They did an awful lot of work with voter registration in the last election and learnt a lot about how best to communicate with young people in a way that encouraged and empowered them to use their vote. I encourage you to use the learning of other organisations who are doing similar sorts of communication to supplement the very good point you made, Mr Speaker.

Vijay Rangarajan: We are working very closely with those organisations—with Shout Out UK—and with some of the disability



HOUSE OF COMMONS

charities as well. Our partnerships work with some of the organisations to reach voters who are otherwise harder to reach. You cannot reach them through supermarkets or social media. We need a number of different ways to reach all voters. We will go away and talk to local authorities—who, I think, have a little additional money from the Government for the reinstated elections—to see if there is a way of doing that. I also think it is a good idea to write to everyone.

Chair: In fairness, I think Sam just gave you an offer: cut a cheque off the Government. They have created the problem—get them to pay for the solution. Dead easy. Sam, you do not look cheerful on that. Don't worry.

Samantha Dixon: I think Vijay's right. I think that additional funding is coming from the Government to the affected local authority.

Chair: My point is that I have a big rural constituency. I believe those people need to be get the message.

Samantha Dixon: As Vijay said, they will each receive their polling card as usual.

Chair: But without the information about if you are aware or how you register if not. This is a great opportunity to get more people to vote. I thought that was what we are all about. If the mistake had not been made on cancelling the elections, we would not be having the debate.

Samantha Dixon: Would you like me to write to you about that, Mr Speaker?

Chair: I think the Committee would be better.

Q29 **Simon Hoare:** Turning to the Political Finance Online programme, can you set out the revised cost requirements for that programme and explain whether the changes reflect a change of scope and/or a recalibration of the project's strategic direction?

Chris Pleass: I am happy to talk about the finances and Vijay might want to talk about the project more generally. We initiated the project, Political Finance Online, at the beginning of this year following approval of the plan and the estimate by the Committee. Our resource costs for this year are expected to be to budget—about £400,000. Our budget for 2026-27, which is included in the estimate, is about £1 million split roughly between capital and resource spend. We are still expecting the total project cost to be in the order of £1.7 million, which is what we included in the corporate plan. However, we are still assessing the implications of the elections Bill and annual licensing. Authentication and training costs will certainly increase, and we need to understand whether we can absorb those. Our view is that we probably can, but they will certainly be somewhat higher than we had anticipated.

John Pullinger: I think it would be worth you unpacking—

Q30 **Simon Hoare:** Just on that, you have the elections Bill in scope, as it



were? There is obviously the important piece of work that Matthew Rycroft is doing, and it would be eccentric to suggest that that process will end up with the commission not having to do more.

Vijay Rangarajan: To answer your question, the original scope of Political Finance Online was to help political parties do their work and publish their material. That is all going to continue, and we are still aiming, as planned, for a go-live date in summer 2027. That is on track. If Parliament approves it, the Bill will add candidate finance into the scope of what the Commission does. As Chris has said, I think we would then need to basically expand the scope of what the system does. We will try and do so in stages so that we do not delay the essential work of PFO. We can then work on the candidate regime itself. Obviously, the Rycroft review will also come into the Bill in some form, so we will need to take that into consideration. It might change it, but we are very keen—partly given the history of PFO—not to jeopardise the core delivery of the system for political parties. That is because we have now done a lot of work with the parties on all of their accounting systems, the data transfers and how this will simplify their lives. They are very keen to get a much better Political Finance Online system in place by next summer.

Q31 **Simon Hoare:** So it is “watch this space”. You must be able to slightly envisage additional responsibilities, or enhanced responsibilities, likely to be passed to you. Is your assessment that there is headroom to absorb, or would that require a revision?

John Pullinger: There are a whole range of elements in the Representation of the People Bill that will add responsibilities and costs to us. The Government have published an impact assessment. We have been working with them to make sure that everybody who is going to face extra costs knows what they are and that therefore we can plan accordingly. We have not included those in this Budget.

As Chris said, because of the timing of the Bill it is very unlikely that those extra costs will be significant in this financial year that we are talking about. If they are, we will of course assess them and come back to the Committee. As far as Political Finance Online is concerned, as Vijay said, we have a core project that is designed to support political parties to fulfil their current duties, but it is designed to be modular so that if we get an extra element—for example for the candidate spending regime—we will be able to bolt that on and it will fit within the system, so we will be able to assess the costs and it will not get in the way of the core delivery. I think that we are reasonably confident that the design is robust, whatever comes out after Royal Assent of the Bill.

Q32 **Simon Hoare:** Moving from political finance to bricks and mortar, the main estimate indicates that a supplementary estimate may be required in relation to capital upgrades at the Bunhill Row office, given uncertainty around the lease position. What discussions have taken place with the landlord to date? In the context of that uncertainty, how are you ensuring that any proposed capital investment represents both prudent and necessary expenditure that is of benefit to your operation and not to the



capital asset of the landlord?

Vijay Rangarajan: I will start and Chris will want to add more. Our lease in Bunhill Row runs until 2030. Until late 2027, our lease will remain unaltered, so we are now thinking of discussions with the landlord on the future lease, lease extensions and the usual rent negotiations. As you know, the way that accounting under IFRS 16 works is that we would have to declare, as capital, the entire future cost of that lease in the year in which we take it on. That would trigger the possible supplementary estimate. This is really about trying to work out where our future lease in Bunhill Row would be. We do not intend to take on any additional offices in London or to grow in London, mostly because London is very expensive. We get very good people there, but it is very expensive so our primary growth will be among people scattered around the whole country—a lot of them working from home—and of course in Belfast, Cardiff and Edinburgh.

Chris Pleass: Should a lease extension become available, we would carry out a value for money assessment similar to the approach that we took for Edinburgh. We would look at local market rates, and would use an external specialist adviser to help us to assess value for money. As Vijay said, we have been overtly targeting growth in the organisation outside of London because it is expensive. We have seen a significant growth in the number of home workers, and in the devolved offices. For home workers the accommodation cost is nil; in devolved offices the accommodation cost is much lower than London. We are trying to drive value by, where we need to grow, growing outside of London.

Q33 **Simon Hoare:** Given that the end of the existing lease is within sight, and that you would be deploying public money for improvements, surely it makes sense to establish with the landlord an in-principle renewal of the lease before a penny piece is spent, in order to not have abortive expenditure.

Vijay Rangarajan: I very much agree. The discussion that we are currently having with the landlord is exactly about the prospects for an extension.

Q34 **Simon Hoare:** You must be a good tenant. You have not defaulted on the rent, had any wild parties or wrecked the joint in any way?

Vijay Rangarajan: I think we are a good tenant. We do want to drive some value for money. Commercial rents in London are rising and are very high, so I hope that we are quite a hard negotiator with them, to try to make sure that, if we are going to stay, we do so on a good and long-term basis.

Q35 **Simon Hoare:** We are obviously all legislators for rates of tax, and so on and so forth, and we are trying to drive value for money and to ensure the best use of taxpayers' money. Do we have your assurance that there will be no capital expenditure on the building unless or until the position on the renewal of the lease is known? If you have to move, then, almost by definition, your costs are going to go up, just to reflect changes in market conditions—notwithstanding the fact that everybody seems to be working



HOUSE OF COMMONS

from home, and there seem to be thousands of square feet of office space just sitting vacant looking for somebody to occupy them just to keep the mice out.

Vijay Rangarajan: The capital we refer to in the supplementary estimate was only in case there is a lease extension and we have to account for it in this next year. We are not spending large amounts of money on the buildings themselves—that is largely for the landlord—or on upgrading anything that we are doing. We are not investing a huge amount. Clearly, if we are going to stay for a much longer time, we will look at the use of the space. We are keeping it up to date as a good tenant, basically.

Chris Pleass: That is right. If we were looking to invest in upgrading the property, we would also carry out a value for money assessment, taking account of the duration of the lease.

Q36 **Simon Hoare:** Is it an FRI lease?

Chris Pleass: The lease is accounted under IFRS 15. That is right.

Simon Hoare: No, is it a fully repairing and insuring lease?

Chris Pleass: I do not know.

Vijay Rangarajan: We can check and write.

Simon Hoare: It is important to know.

Q37 **Samantha Dixon:** While the funding returned at the supplementary estimate was largely attributable to electoral activities outside your control, a significant proportion related to recruitment delays and corporate plan delivery. In that context, how have you calculated the proposed uplift to the corporate plan budget for '26-27?

Chris Pleass: We commenced our budget planning in June of last year, and that was to meet the estimate cycles for Wales and Scotland, which run ahead of this estimate process. That has given me an opportunity to oversee the full budget cycle since I joined the commission just over a year ago. Despite quite large uplifts in our funding requests to Scotland and Wales—those were mainly due to election events, of course—both of those estimates have been approved, which is obviously very pleasing.

A number of factors should give us increased confidence in this estimate. One is that the most of our corporate plan projects are now under way, so we can be more confident about the activity and the spend profiles associated with those projects. We have established a small recruitment team, and we are now consistently delivering recruitment to our plans. Our forecasting capability has improved significantly: we are currently at 95% accuracy, and I expect that to continue to improve.

I am pleased that we have been able to reduce our funding requests for our core costs by about £1 million in the estimate. That is mostly because we have critically reviewed our approach to requesting contingency



funding, but I am still confident that our reduced bid allows for sufficient contingency for unplanned events.

- Q38 **Samantha Dixon:** Vijay, you and I talk about AI a lot, but I am going to talk about it in a different context. Individuals who have access to AI write to us, but they probably write to you as well, generating considerable correspondence. Has the commission seen any change in the volume or the nature of those inquiries? As parliamentarians, we have seen AI-generated correspondence increasing, and I wonder if it is similar for you.

Vijay Rangarajan: The number of formal complaints we receive is holding roughly steady at nine or 10 a year. We have had a look, and none of them is apparently AI generated. The general inquiries run at about 10,000 to 12,000 a year. Some of those could be, but we have not seen very many; it is largely members of the public at the time of an election, or parties or agents phoning up and asking.

We are seeing an increase in FOIs. It is not a massive increase: it is a 38% increase on 2024. Again, we have had a look. We do not think they are being generated by AIs. The one area in which we are seeing a significant increase is parliamentary questions. In 2022 we had two; in 2023 we had eight; in 2024 we had eight; last year it was 94, so I just want to say thank you to Sir Jeremy for fielding so many of these on our behalf.

Sir Jeremy Wright: I think it is all down to me!

Vijay Rangarajan: That is one area in which we are seeing more. There might be an issue there. We are also seeing that in Parliament as well.

- Q39 **Samantha Dixon:** Are you able to use AI to improve efficiency in your processes as well? I think you touched on this earlier.

Vijay Rangarajan: We are not using it yet in anything that is going out of the building. We are using AIs to look at things outside in the rest of the world, for example social media tracking—we may come back to that. At the moment, something that leaves our building and goes to a member of the public, to an MP or to Parliament is human-generated. We will keep it that way until we are much more certain that it is really accurate.

- Q40 **Stephen Gethins:** On AI, Vijay, have you picked anything up from Holyrood or the other devolved Administrations? The AI generation of parliamentary questions is something that came up there. You talked about 94 questions, but they reckon that hundreds of them were being generated there. Is there any learning from one another on that? Nobody is saying that we should prevent anybody from putting down parliamentary questions; it should be encouraged, but I suspect that how we manage AI, in terms of engagement with the wider public and among ourselves, will become a much bigger challenge for all of us.

Vijay Rangarajan: We have not actually talked to others about numbers of parliamentary questions, but thank you—we will.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

John Pullinger: We have been talking very actively to the Scottish Parliament about some of their social media monitoring, which is picking up some of this AI stuff. The Scottish Parliament has done a really interesting job, which has already resulted in a conviction for illegal content that has been found. We are trying to build some of that into the work that we are doing on deepfake detection, which we will deploy ahead of the elections this May. There is very good working between the three Parliaments on these kinds of question.

Stephen Gethins: It comes into focus at election time.

John Pullinger: It does.

Chair: To follow up on that, what we are finding is that there are more AI-generated questions coming in. The volumes are becoming phenomenal. The problem is that if we then use AI to answer them, there are no humans involved. Where are we going, and are you ready for it? I will hand over to Rachel.

Q41 **Rachel Hopkins:** How is the commission prioritising its programme of work in response to the initiatives set out in the election strategy, including votes at 16, candidate registration and improvements to voter ID? What criteria are being used to prioritise and resource all those activities?

Vijay Rangarajan: The main criteria we are using, working very closely with the Minister and her team, are when the various provisions would come into force and when voters and others in the process need help. The very first thing—we have already started this, as you know—is the education work to get out to schools, because the lead times are very high. Secondly, we will pick up potential changes to candidate registration addresses and all of those issues in the guidance that we would produce at the normal time.

I think the most complex thing is the political finance changes. If the Bill is passed and there is then secondary legislation and guidance, there will need to be a lot of training of political parties, their treasurers, staff and people across the country to comply with the political finance rules in time for the reporting and financial years when it enters into force. There are a lot of stages that would need to go through. That is probably the tightest of the timetables, but we will sequence each of them in as quickly as we can.

Q42 **Lisa Smart:** On the elections strategy, we have mentioned that the Bill is not yet final, but we know the broad thrust of a lot of it. I notice that in your estimates report you talk about electoral reform. It remains unclear at this stage whether additional funding will be required for it in 2026-27.

I am somebody who would embrace the need for change when it comes to electoral reform, but the Bill has been written in a way that means that electoral reform is out of scope. It has been written in that way on purpose, so that a change to the voting system could not be introduced as an amendment, for example. When you are thinking about planning and



HOUSE OF COMMONS

deploying resources accordingly, how agile can you be? I feel reasonably confident that the Bill will be amended. The Government has said that it is open to some of the changes in Rycroft. How agile can you be, reflecting the changes that will come through with the final Bill?

Vijay Rangarajan: We can definitely be extremely agile as the Bill goes through. We will obviously be commenting on amendments and briefing parliamentarians as the Bill goes through, if anyone would like us to, on how this could be implemented. We have already begun thinking through the implementation of quite a few of the provisions. Particularly for the candidate finance regime, which is a major set of issues, we need to have quite a lot of thought in place. The “know your donor” regime is really important and complex, so how would we do it and how would the guidance work?

One area that I would flag, which is a sort of electoral reform and raises a major set of issues, is automatic registration. We need to look at the steps that would lead to that, for example integration with other business processes. When you apply for a passport or a driving licence, could you then be added to the register at some point? That is even before one gets to full-fat automatic registration.

We have learned a lot from evaluating the four local authority pilots in Wales last year, and we can see how elements of this can be done. Because of the sheer number of people not on the electoral register who are eligible, we would obviously be very, very supportive of any speedy implementation of automatic registration. It looks possible to do so while maintaining accuracy and increasing completeness of the register. That is a great thing to be able to do. At the moment, a lot will depend on the implementation programme, which the Department is working on but which is not yet set in timing terms.

There is one tension that I want to flag, which will also take some very careful management. If the Welsh Government go ahead with an automatic registration system in one part of the UK, while the Scottish Parliament and Scottish Government are thinking about it and the UK system is on a different timescale, we would end up with a differential registration rate, with very different registration systems in different parts of the UK.

Lisa Smart: Different electoral systems already exist in different parts of the UK.

John Pullinger: May I add one thing, in answer to Lisa’s question? You asked about the costs this year. Because of the timing of the Bill and when Royal Assent might come, it is unlikely that in this financial year there will be costs that we are not be able to absorb. If it turns out that there are things that we need to be doing earlier in order to accelerate, as Vijay said, we will come back to you later in the year, but at the moment we do not think so. For next year, 2027-28, if the Bill goes through more or less as it is, there will be quite substantial costs: that is why we are working

with the Government on the public costs generally. Obviously, it is not just for us: it is for local authorities and central Government, too.

- Q43 **Lisa Smart:** The Electoral Commission made some public comments when the Bill was published. You said that you welcome some of the measures, but that there are areas in which you felt that the impact will not be as strong as had perhaps been hoped. Could you say a little about that?

As a supplementary point, before my time on the Speaker's Committee, it expressed views about, for example, the strategy and policy statement. Mr Speaker, I wonder whether there are measures where this Committee can agree to encourage the Government to ensure that the Electoral Commission has the powers and resources that we would expect. I wonder whether there is a role for this Committee to encourage the Government to go in what we consider to be a good direction.

Chair: Just to answer that, it will be for them to come to us to give the money. The encouragement is that way, and then we can address it.

John Pullinger: Thank you for that. To respond specifically to that question, we are working very closely and very well with the Minister and her colleagues. Many of the aspects of the Bill are things that we have talked about for a while and are extremely welcome. You will not be surprised to hear me welcome, in particular, the strategy and policy statement repeal, which we touched on at the last meeting with the Committee. In some of the other areas, we will be briefing parliamentarians, working with you and supporting the Government, particularly following the Rycroft review, which is very pertinent to some of the issues that we have been talking about this afternoon.

- Q44 **Rachel Hopkins:** May I say that we were very clear, as the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission, about rescinding the policy statement? Again, I am personally pleased to see that, Minister, having been on the Committee for a while.

Building on Lisa's question and John's helpful reply, I am going to merge a couple of questions that I had about costs and risks. You rightly say that the coming financial year is one thing, but looking ahead would be another. Costs come financially, with staffing, but also technically, and there are risks that come with that. Can you give us a flavour, building on what you have said, about the mitigation that you might put in place to manage the risks, given that we are in the phase of the Bill coming through, Rycroft and more than one financial year?

John Pullinger: I will give you a very simple answer. We have already discussed one risk, which is around divergence in different parts of the UK, but my assessment is that the biggest risk is the timetable. The Government are really keen to get the provisions in place before the next general election, and to do so consistently across the country. If you work back from that to now, as Vijay has illustrated, there are a lot of steps to take. In some ways, the simplest is the primary legislation.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

The timetable is that we will get primary legislation before Christmas, hopefully, then secondary legislation, and then guidance. We will then have the most important bit, which is implementation. That involves supporting parties and campaigners to understand their responsibilities, training them and ensuring that they are ready to comply—even more so for local authorities, which are the unsung heroes as always. There will be significant work for local authorities to get everything in place—and of course, for us, the Government and others. That is the stage that we must absolutely not allow to be compressed.

The clock is ticking quite loudly for us, so a key thing for us is to make sure that consideration is right and is consistent with delivering this properly and effectively, by the time it needs to be delivered. There are loads of other risks, but I thought that I would highlight that one because it is the most significant.

Vijay Ranganathan: I think I agree. With the political finance regime, given when the reporting year and the financial year start, it will be tight to get all that in place by, say, 2028.

Chair: There are no more questions, so let me thank you for coming before us today.