

Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission

Oral evidence: Local Government Boundary Commission for England and Electoral Commission: Main Estimates 2021-22

Tuesday 23 March 2021

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 23 March 2021.

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Sir Lindsay Hoyle (Chair); Rt Hon Michael Gove; Craig Mackinlay; Christian Matheson; Karl McCartney; Cat Smith; Owen Thompson; Mr William Wragg.

Questions 1 - 35

Witnesses

I: Professor Colin Mellors OBE, Chair, Local Government Boundary Commission for England; Jolyon Jackson CBE, Chief Executive, LGBCE; and Lynn Ingram, Director of Finance and Resources, LGBCE.

II: Rob Vincent CBE, Acting Chair, Electoral Commission; Bob Posner, Chief Executive, Electoral Commission; and Kieran Rix, Director of Finance and Corporate Services, Electoral Commission.



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Professor Colin Mellors, Jolyon Jackson and Lynn Ingram.

Chair: May I welcome our guests from the Local Government Boundary Commission for England, Professor Colin Mellors, Jolyon Jackson and Lynn Ingram? Thank you for joining us. We appreciate you giving up your time. I want to get under way with the questions if that is all right with you. We are going to start off with question one, which I would like William Wragg to take us through.

Q1 **Mr Wragg:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. Good afternoon, everybody. I want to ask the standard question of these meetings, which is taking into account the context of covid in your working practices. What key adjustments have you made in response to the covid pandemic? Will you need to undertake visits to local authorities in the future or is it possible to conduct the work entirely remotely? That is to any of our first witnesses.

Chair: Who would like to pick that up?

Professor Mellors: Mr Speaker, should I start on that one?

Chair: Please do.

Professor Mellors: First, thank you for this annual opportunity to meet your Committee. We value this opportunity and look forward to the questions and the advice that we always get from you, which is very helpful. Clearly, the pandemic has impacted on most of us and the way that we work. We were quite fortunate as an organisation that we had already anticipated—not because we knew the pandemic was coming but as part of our smart working approach—how we would operate with remote working and virtual meetings. So, in fact, the switchover was really quite smooth to us.

The challenge we had is that we are also highly dependent on local authorities and local communities for our work. While we are a statutory body, we feel very strongly that we need their active participation, rather than their passive acquiescence to what we do. Consequently, we paused for a little while in the beginning of the pandemic, which of course started with the lockdown a year ago today, and then we have made further adjustments over the past year in response to other demands, both upon their time and their capacity to do our work.

Has it worked well? Some bits have, and some bits have worked less well. Like most organisations, we are now thinking about what we retain from the last year and what we wish to return to. What has worked well is that, by and large, we have briefed local authorities quite effectively by remote, virtual means, and indeed, it has meant that communities have been able to listen to our presentations at a time of their own convenience and at a location of their own convenience.



What has worked less well is the work on the ground. Part of our review means actually looking at particular areas. I never cease to be amazed by the capabilities of Google Maps and Street View, but there is no substitute for seeing the real crunch points. Also, I think, in some ways, that face-to-face engagement with political leaderships and communities can be important. However, we are relatively open-minded about the precise blend and, in fact, the way that we are approaching the issue is to consider three things. First, the way that we work; secondly, the way that we do our business; and thirdly, the way that we engage. That engagement is particularly important to us because we have to be cautious not to disadvantage communities that would find it less easy by us not distributing some materials in non-digital ways. I do not know if that is an answer to the question. I am happy to develop on that or, indeed, if any colleagues wish to add anything else.

Q2 Mr Wragg: No, I think that is fairly comprehensive. It seems to come to a conclusion that there will be a blend of working practices in the way forward. On that theme, I wonder therefore the implications of homeworking and your office needs. If I can put it as bluntly as this: would you be considering downsizing office space, particularly the one you have in London?

Jolyon Jackson: May I pick this up, Chair?

Chair: Absolutely. Come in, Jolyon.

Jolyon Jackson: I think the real issue—everyone is struggling with this at the moment—is, how do you keep an organisational culture together? There are only 22 of us at the moment, plus six commissioners, so how do we keep an organisational culture together and keep our outputs at the correct level? It is the bit that my chair referred to, which is how we work.

Clearly, we are not going to go back to five days a week with everyone in the office, but we will need to meet from time to time, because there are all sorts of human interactions that we make. People work differently. Some people like being collaborative and working in an office, and some people like being stuck in an attic or a room, just getting their work done. We really have to work a way through, first, what is best for the business and, secondly, how we can meet the aspirations of our workers.

The short answer to, “Will we be looking at office space?” is, “Yes, we certainly will.” At the moment, we are in a Government property in—I say “in”—Victoria. We have a floor in Victoria, in Windsor House, which seats us all and has a boardroom. Will we want all that in the future? Probably not. How will we operate? We are now taking that work forward.

Professor Mellors: May I add a sentence? I will tackle it head-on. At the moment, we have choice. What we have been doing for the past year has been out of necessity, but what we can do now is to have choice. By and large, if I may make a distinction—it is interesting, and other chairs of public bodies say the same—the business conducting, i.e. the having meetings, can be done fairly effectively, as transactional work down the

line; but creative or policy work, or the team building that Jolyon has just referred to, needs some degree of proximity. I think we will have a mix of those two.

May I slightly mischievously take the opportunity to throw a ball back at you? One of the reasons that has really helped us, Mr Speaker—a huge thank you to you, your secretariat and the parliamentary authorities—has been being able to lay orders electronically. That opens up interesting opportunities for us going forward.

In terms of space—we have a contract on our current location for a little while—we will have much greater choice. If I may play the northern card, since I am speaking from Ilkley—*[Interruption.]* I can see Chris is laughing, so I am pleased about that, and indeed Cat. This gives us the opportunity to be a bit more flexible, in particular if we are able to continue laying those orders like that. We will have choices, which we need to look at.

As I say, most organisations will have a blend of corporate time and, where possible, a blend of remote time. I think that can be very good, if well managed.

Mr Wragg: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. That is the end of my questions.

Chair: Craig, did you want to come in at this stage with a supplementary?

Q3 **Craig Mackinlay:** If I may. Thank you, Professor Mellors, you have explained the new working very well. What you do is, dare I say it, very cerebral work. From my personal point of view, over this period, brainstorming and blue-sky thinking among colleagues who see each other over a desk are very important in many areas of work and, I would hazard a guess, very important in yours. I am worried that if a move towards a bit more permanent homeworking is the way forward for you, some of that work will not be done. You may comment on that—I might be completely off track.

Secondly, I have presented to many of the Boundary Commission roadshows over the years, and I think that they are very important so that you can communicate and listen to what the public are saying. It is funny how Boundary Commission reviews create an awful lot of excitement, particularly among us rather more nerdy politicians. I know that that excitement is not always shared by the public, but for some it is very important in terms of the sense of place. We need to get that right, and I think meeting people fact to face at roadshows is important, so I would not like that opportunity to be diminished permanently.

Professor Mellors: Mr Mackinlay, I think you are absolutely spot-on with that. In terms of creative work, and this probably applies to the cultural industries at the moment, you can do certain things down the line, but proximity is really important. I think the Americans call them water cooler discussions, and many of the most creative things come out of serendipity and accidental rubbing together. Science parks are based on that very



HOUSE OF COMMONS

idea: you put together people and good ideas emerge. Anything that minimised that we would resist, but where there are efficiencies by doing transactions down the line, we can use those resources to augment the other things where we do need proximity.

Your last point is absolutely spot-on. I cannot codify it, and as an academic social scientist I find it difficult if I cannot measure it, but nevertheless, our street cred, our credibility, our acceptance by being there on the ground and not being a remote organisation, based with a London address, is very important to us. There are some bits of our work that, by using other things remotely, we can actually improve and enhance in terms of the quality of what we do, its legitimacy and increasingly its reach.

To paraphrase one of the things you said, sadly politics is a minority taste for many people; they do not often get involved, particularly in local government. It is a real challenge to get people to serve in local government, but here is an opportunity. We need to do more on the ground. As I said, I think we now have a blend that is more within our grasp and our control, and I find that quite exciting.

Chair: Right, Christian. May I move over to you?

Q4 **Christian Matheson:** You are working through a slight backlog at the moment. There is a bulge in the number of your reviews, understandably what with the pandemic and so on. If you can work through that bulge and remain in budget, do you see that you could bring down the cost per review in future?

Professor Mellors: I think that is a question for the chief exec.

Chair: Surely not!

Jolyon Jackson: I think that is a very good question. We are very, very tight on budget, as you have seen from our budget lines. We have achieved an enormous amount of efficiencies over the past three or four years. We have two things to do: we have to deliver reviews; and we have to deliver our governance as an organisation that spends public money. Both of those come with a cost. I believe that we are about at the place where, apart from minor efficiencies here and there, the majority of our costs are staff. If we are going to have to take much more money out, I think we will be leading to output cuts, but we are continually reviewing it and continually seeing what we can do.

Q5 **Christian Matheson:** So you reckon you are at the edge now?

Jolyon Jackson: We reckon that we're close to the edge. The difficulty with a public sector organisation is that you can't overspend by a penny because you get your accounts qualified by the NAO, and we are then up in front of you in a slightly less convivial manner. If we underspend, we are accused of not budgeting properly. We budget for what we honestly believe we will spend, but we don't go looking to spend money just because we have got it. We don't mind handing it back; it is public money,



it belongs to the Treasury—well, it belongs to Parliament, actually. I think we have done a very, very fine balance over the past five or six years.

Q6 Christian Matheson: Are you noticing, predicting or modelling any trends in demographics that may come out of the pandemic or other trends that might lead to greater needs for reviews, for example?

Jolyon Jackson: Can I hand that back to the chair?

Professor Mellors: One of the challenges that we have, and it is a difference between ourselves and the parliamentary commission, is that where they work to a fixed date for their electoral numbers, we are required under legislation to be minded to consider what the electorate will look like five years from when we complete our review. There is an old joke in academia that forecasting would be very easy if it wasn't about the future. Unfortunately, this is about the future. We have developed various approaches using ONS statistics, looking at planning permissions and a variety of other things to give our best guesstimate.

One of the challenges that we have, which is not so much about the pandemic—we have always had this—is the nature of the economy. The developers will sometimes develop land that they have acquired much more quickly in some parts, according to what is happening in the economy, than in others. One of the things that is going on at the moment is that there are some quite properly ambitious housing development targets being set by the Government. Clearly, those are things that will bring about significant change. Infill sites are not too problematic to cope with, but when you get large, new site developments, that becomes more of a difficulty.

I will look at Jolyon when I say this, because he might nod: I have been quite impressed over the past three or four months, particularly when we have been talking to local authority leaderships and chief execs, by just how good their grasp is on their future figures. They have been working through local plans and know exactly where those sites are, and they are very committed personally to making sure they happen. It will always be a challenge, and I'm not sure that it will be as associated necessarily with a post-pandemic thing, other than by a post-pandemic boost, because there is, again, quite properly an understandable commitment to rebuild the economy, and developments are part and parcel of that, post pandemic. We will have to keep an eye on this. My little joke is that when I used to catch the train to London, passing through Corby and Cambridgeshire, there would probably be a new housing development by the time I came back at teatime. There are some areas where development has been very quick, and in some urban areas the repurposing of buildings also makes massive differences.

Christian Matheson: Thank you.

Q7 Chair: Just to follow up on that, I worry that we make this bold statement about how closely you work with local government on developments and where wards are being redrawn. Sometimes you don't always listen to



HOUSE OF COMMONS

local representation in what I believe is the right way. I have a good example of that: I have a parish that you have put into one ward, but you have to go through the other ward to get to it. Sometimes what it looks like on the map is not what is on the ground. Although I appreciate that you may want more maps, sometimes if people were to walk the ground, you might get a better measure of what is needed in local areas.

Professor Mellors: I think that is a very helpful steer, Mr Speaker. That is why we want to get back to doing that.

Chair: We'll get you back to Chorley, so that you can review the mess. That's great. Let's bring in Craig, please.

Q8 **Craig Mackinlay:** Just looking at the staff survey results, you have some very good percentages compared with the general civil service and other entities—really enviable numbers and high percentages. What has been your key and your secret to such reasonable levels of staff satisfaction? That would be interesting across the rest of the civil service. Perhaps you might be able to explain that first, Professor Mellors.

Professor Mellors: I will pass on to Jolyon, but I think one of the key things there is about the size of the organisation. That has both driven what we have needed to do and given us the opportunities. We are an SMO, albeit in the public sector, but Jolyon, I think that is yours.

Jolyon Jackson: I think, bluntly—I am conscious that our team will all be watching this—it is about communication. It is about people really understanding and owning their part in the organisation, and it is easier to do it in an organisation of 22 than it is in one of 500. It is about taking ownership of their work and seeing it through the system, because we have review officers for individual reviews. They take great pride and ownership in what they do. Mr Speaker, I'll obviously have to have another look at who did Chorley.

Chair: Excellent.

Jolyon Jackson: It's that business of talking to people, understanding them and making sure that everybody understands each other. In lockdown, we have had a daily team meeting where everybody spends a couple of minutes saying what they are doing. It is amazing how many sparks you get off different people saying, "I'll help you with that," or, "I didn't realise you are doing that. I'm doing this. Can we share?" Actually, it has been more powerful doing that digitally than it has in the office.

Q9 **Craig Mackinlay:** That is very interesting. I like your comment, Professor Mellors. Small government is happy government—I like the sound of that.

Let's move on to one of the measures. Probably the biggest gap between the general civil service and yourselves is pay and benefits. That is certainly interesting. Does your pay and benefits structure outperform the general civil service? Is there something higher about what you are doing, compared with the general civil service? I know that if you ask any group of employees, pay will always be low down the list of satisfaction levels. Yours is fairly high. Perhaps Lynn is able to offer something on that.



Lynn Ingram: Yes, it is interesting, because our response on this has really risen from the previous year. In the previous year, we were all on around 40%. To go back to Jolyon's or Colin's point about our being a small organisation, being a small organisation means that we can talk to people. For instance, they are all aware that this year they won't get a pay rise. We have talked about that with them. They know the sort of challenges that we have; they know the challenges that the public sector has. And they know what our objectives are as an organisation. We have worked very carefully on that, as part of our people strategy, over the last year. And I think the fact is they have decided not to moan about it.

Chair: Craig, are you happy with that? Yes. Cat, can we move to you, please?

Q10 **Cat Smith:** In previous years, you have presented to the Committee some key performance indicators. They are not included in this year's corporate plan, so my first question is whether you are still using the same KPIs as were presented in the 2019-20 report.

Professor Mellors: We keep reviewing our KPIs—I've forgotten when the last refresh was, so they may or may not be the same ones. We normally present those in our annual report and accounts, and it will be our intention to do so again this time. One change we have made is to distinguish between KPIs and management information, because I think there was a little bit of conflation and confusion between the two. But the current KPIs that we use are grouped together under three headings and, as I say, they will be in the annual report, which is where they were last year, I think.

Clearly, they are about, first, whether we are doing what Parliament asks us to do—namely, doing the appropriate number of reviews and delivering them in time for the appropriate election. The second one is about the use of public resources and our money. And the third set, which is the one we always struggle with most, is about, in essence, the quality of or satisfaction with the things that we do. Some of those we can measure, so we measure volume of activity. The one that always is elusive to most organisations like ours—most public bodies that make decisions—is about the satisfaction of those with whom we deal, because, of course, by and large the results tend to be skewed. If people are happy, they don't tell us and don't reply; if people are unhappy—like Mr Speaker is in Chorley—they will tell us very clearly and we will hear about it. So the results are always slightly challenging.

What we are wanting to ask is, "Was the process a good one? Did we treat you with courtesy and professionally? Did we listen even if we weren't always able to hear?" So we are having another go at that, trying to increase the numbers who reply. A lot of the information that is most useful to us is qualitative. One thing we are going to do—we have just started from this year—is a post-review follow-up about six months after we have done the review, which is basically asking the group of people, "Did it work for you? How was the process?"



We have also commissioned—we have not started the second half of this work, because of the pandemic. We have been working with what used to be called the Centre for Public Scrutiny—they have changed their name slightly. They have been looking at all the reviews that we have done over the past 10 years, and we have picked out a sample of them and are going to go, one or two years after the review, and say, “Did it work? Has it allowed you to do the things you wanted to do, in terms of representational arrangements and governance?” Sadly, that won’t necessarily be in simple statistics, but the KPIs that we are using will be in the annual report; that is the answer to the question.

Q11 Cat Smith: Thank you. You will be pleased to know that it is a characteristic trait of us in Lancashire that when we’re happy, we will absolutely let you know. I am sure that once Chorley is fixed, you will get some positive feedback from Mr Speaker and the people of Chorley.

Looking at the 2019-20 KPIs—you have outlined some of this, Professor Mellors—it is very clear that in the red bar you see a failing on the timely publication of recommendations, and it’s amber for six, including stakeholder satisfaction. To some extent you have addressed that, but I just wondered how you find that you are performing against these KPIs, and do you have any evidence of performance improvements since that was last published?

Professor Mellors: Sorry, was the red one a review that unfortunately had a problem, so we had to go back again? Jolyon, could you pick that one up?

Jolyon Jackson: Yes. The one where we didn’t meet it for that election was an authority that elected by thirds. We had a couple of issues with the review, so we had to spend more time on it. I also think we went on to further draft recommendations, which puts another slab of consultation in. Consequently, we missed the election that we said we would do at the beginning, but we were able to get it in time for their next election, in the thirds.

Professor Mellors: The local authority self-requested that, as I recall. At the end, they wanted to delay it until it was done that way.

Q12 Cat Smith: That is helpful background to know. My final question is almost the same as William Wragg’s opening question. Has covid had any particular impact on the measures—the KPIs—so far?

Professor Mellors: I don’t think so. The main impact that we found with covid—I thank Mr Matheson, because we had a useful conversation about this last summer—was how we work with local authorities. We’ve been hugely sensitive to the fact that doing a boundary review is not top of their agenda. They’ve got lots of other things to do. Some of them were not very advanced in how to work remotely, or virtually, so we have had to be very sensitive, particularly in the Manchester area where a group of them were very concerned that this was going to be inconsistent with critical services that they were trying to do.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

It has been very time-consuming and I think it has worked really well. Frankly, it is one of the things we are most proud of. We worked very hard with each local authority to understand what their particular issues were, what their challenges were, and how we might work with them to help them along. We have to balance two things. Parliament is giving us money to do a certain job and we have to honour that. But at the same time, if we came along and got into a pitched battle with local authorities, saying, "Look, this is the timetable—take it or leave it," we would be in a very difficult position.

We worked very hard with each of them and had several conversations. It was a benefit of doing things remotely that we could set up a half-hour conversation very quickly and do it down the line rather than going to visit them, which is much my preference and I want to return to that. We were able to address that. The real thing was inching our way forward—we have a very bulging programme at the moment, and that's going to be an implication.

I'm a great fan of Professor Van-Tam, who explains things through metaphors. To borrow one from him: if you go through York station, on your left-hand side as you are going north there is a big building that says "Network Rail". That building controls most of the east coast network, from King's Cross right up to Scotland, and if your train is late, it is a very complicated thing. We are in that sort of position. There has been a bit of a derailment for the past year. Some things we have shunted into the slow lane, some we have paused, and some have gone through totally unaffected by it. It is just managing that process that we have tried to work, and I think the key to it is, frankly, working with local authorities and not doing things to them, even though ultimately we will make decisions where our judgment will be based on evidence but won't always be universally popular.

Q13 Cat Smith: We are talking about working with local authorities, but it is also important to work with local communities because of the consequences of this.

Professor Mellors: Oh, absolutely.

Q14 Cat Smith: This is my final question, Mr Speaker—I know it's a bit cheeky, as I've had more than my fair share. Do you think that improvements could be made to the public-facing parts of your website to help improve the user experience of members of the public who want to input into how their communities look?

Professor Mellors: Could I just come in on that, Jolyon, and then I'll pass on to you? The answer to that is absolutely yes. And thank you: whenever I say "local authorities", I do mean "local communities" as well. That is a very important part. We want to make things easier for people to access, and there is one particular scheme which I think Jolyon might talk about.

Jolyon Jackson: You have hit the nail on the head. How do you make all this accessible? If you go on the DVLA website, you can do what you want to do in about three or four clicks. This has given us a real opportunity to

look at the consultation process from the other side—from the community side—and we have called it our customer journey project. We will hopefully be able to talk more about it next year when a lot more is complete.

It is about what language we need to use to engage with people properly, and how we can make everything more accessible, including the website. There is some work on that going on at the moment. We are looking at a new mapping system, so that people can draw their own lines and work out what the numbers might be as well. We are trialling that at the moment, and I hope that within the next year or so we might be able to deliver that. There are lots of initiatives—spot on.

Chair: If there are no further questions, can I say a big thank you to Colin, Jolyon and Lynn for giving up their time and joining us today? It is much appreciated.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Rob Vincent, Bob Posner and Kieran Rix.

Chair: I now welcome our guests from the Electoral Commission. We have Rob Vincent, Bob Posner and Kieran Rix. Welcome all—it is much appreciated. Let's get straight on with it.

Q15 **Christian Matheson:** Good afternoon, everyone. You submitted a corporate plan last year. Compared with that, core spending is higher than planned and capital spending is lower than planned, so what is happening there?

Rob Vincent: Let me start off, and Kieran will fill in more detail. Some of the adjustment from capital to revenue relates to the political finance online. More generally, the plan that we put in front of you is very much in line with the five-year plan that you signed off two years ago. We have a new five-year plan that we are going to bring to you later this year once we have taken on board the recommendations of PACAC and the CSPL, and the new chair has started.

There are some variations in our budget. It has, in gross terms, gone up by £1.7 million, about half of which is an accounting change rather than a change in real functionality. The rest of it divides between the full effects of some staffing increases that this Committee agreed some time ago and some IT costs, some of which are related to covid. It is offset in net terms by the income that we are now able to account in from the Scottish and Welsh devolved Governments, so the net figure goes down. The gross figure has increased, as you rightly point out. Kieran will fill in any detail on that, if required.

Kieran Rix: There is not really a great deal to add. To confirm, all the difference—all of the move from capital to current—is about an accounting change. We planned on the basis that new accounting rules would be coming in from this year, and the Treasury has deferred them for a year,



HOUSE OF COMMONS

so we have had to restate—*[Inaudible]*—next year and we will be back on the plan that we—*[Inaudible.]*

Q16 Christian Matheson: Are you expecting to request additional funding this year as a result?

Rob Vincent: We are not expecting to. We can never guarantee in the context that there will not be a requirement for additional funding. It is dependent on the election rhythm. It will be dependent on what comes out of PACAC and the CSPL. It may be dependent on what comes out of the electoral integrity Bill, which I think is shortly to be put before Parliament. At the moment, if the context stays the same, we are not anticipating coming back with a supplementary proposition.

Q17 Mr Wragg: With the reference to PACAC, I am suitably called to ask my question. What lessons have been learned from the Scottish council by-elections during this pandemic that will be applied to the conduct of the elections throughout the UK in May?

Bob Posner: We have been keeping a very close eye on those by-elections—you are absolutely right. Indeed, we have also been keeping a close eye on international elections that have taken place in comparable democracies—New Zealand, Australia, South Korea and countries like that—so there has been good learning about how to run elections during covid.

If I pull that together, what we have seen is that, rather than trying to reinvent the wheel and try new things, the view that has been taken is to look at current systems for how elections work and to adapt them appropriately, which is what we have done in the UK, on a very good basis, because we have good options with proxy voting, postal voting and going to polling stations.

One of the lessons out of all of this—we saw it in the by-elections and we have seen it in our survey work with voters; we are doing a number of surveys—is that voters still want to go to polling stations if that is their natural way of voting, provided that those polling stations feel safe. There is a lesson there that is about the need to have strong public awareness campaigns to get across to voters the measures that are being taken, so that if they want to go to a polling station, they know what to expect and they can make their choice.

Another lesson, which is consistent and applies to by-elections and to elections overseas, is that planning is key—planning by the returning officers and the administrators, thinking about all the options and how to plan for them. With that comes additional costs—I don't think one can get away from that. Elections during covid do cost a bit of extra money. I know that Governments across the UK have been good in turning their minds to that, to make sure that returning officers are suitably funded. Those are the key lessons I would pick up. I can go into more detail, if that would assist.

Q18 Mr Wragg: In short, you have every confidence in the processes and the



procedures of the conduct of elections in May—is that correct?

Bob Posner: One is always cautious, but at this stage of the process it feels like everything is on track. That is not to underestimate in any way the huge challenges for the period of the elections and delivering in a remote scenario for people, but it feels like it is so far, so good, and everything is proceeding as it should at this stage.

Q19 **Mr Wragg:** Will the decision to delay elections last year have any lasting impact beyond the elections this year?

Bob Posner: The overlay of last year's elections to this year's elections has greater complex than other complexions. As you would expect of the Electoral Commission, we are absolutely focused for all our resources to make sure that those elections run well. That is what you want and that is what we are doing. We are very focused on that.

Equally, there are the other statutory duties of the commission that we have to deliver—and we do deliver. That is all the rules around political finance and transparency of political finance—all those things still have to happen. Just as important is all the work that we do to support politicians, Parliaments, political parties and Governments around the new legislation and all the debates around elections. Equally, we have to focus on that, and we are doing that. I wouldn't suggest that there is a lasting impact, but we are certainly having to juggle our resources accordingly to meet those demands.

Q20 **Mr Wragg:** In terms of learning about the implications for the electoral landscape during the pandemic—there has, for example, been misinformation during the pandemic—what have you done to address any of those implications?

Bob Posner: One of the big debates is around digital campaigning and the potential for where people can be misled. Digital campaigning is a good thing because it engages people in politics and is a good means of communication, but equally it carries risks.

With these elections, we have for the first time picked up a theme that we have seen electoral commissions in Canada and Australia do in the last few years, which is to focus on what the commission can do to improve people's digital literacy and to raise people's awareness of political campaigning and who is trying to influence them. We have done work on that. We have a campaign at the moment that is digitally focused—it is focused on people thinking about political ads. And we have just launched something in the last few days that I am really delighted about, because it picks up on parliamentary recommendations and recommendations from Select Committees. We have launched an information hub on the commission's website. This is a partnership piece of work with Ofcom, the Advertising Standards Authority, the UK Statistics Authority and two or three other organisations, such as the ICO.

Basically, what the website does is that if people look at the information that we put out online and they want more information, they can go to this



HOUSE OF COMMONS

hub on the commission's website—a one-stop shop almost—which is a trusted place and also hugely heavily used, and that will direct them where to go. So if it is a data protection matter, they will be taken straight to the ICO, for example, or to Ofcom if it is an Ofcom matter. That is a big step forward. It is brand-new and we will see how it works and what we learn from it. I hope that will help the public as we move forward.

Mr Wragg: Thank you very much. That is all from me for the moment, Mr Speaker.

Q21 **Chair:** Can I just take you back to something you said? You said that people really want to keep polling stations. I don't disagree with you, but what evidence have you got to support that? Is that 50% of the electorate, or 10%, or 80%? It is quite a bold statement. I do not disagree with it, but I am intrigued, given new modern methods of communication, about whether people aren't asking for a new way of voting. So I am just intrigued to hear what statistics you have got to back up that statement.

Bob Posner: I should explain. What we have been doing for quite a period during covid is a succession of survey work with the public, and then we have kept renewing that across the nations of the UK. What is interesting is that, first of all, the results are fairly consistent, whichever part of the UK you are in, and secondly, the trend has been consistent. Whereas early in the covid crisis, people were very—*[Inaudible.]*

However, as there has been communication about safety measures at polling stations, where, just like if you go out to a supermarket or wherever you will see covid safety measures, people will expect similar things at polling stations. What the survey results show is that if there are safety measures in place, those people who want to go to polling stations will hopefully still do so.

Equally important, however, are the options for them: the option to have postal voting and the option of proxy voting. Indeed, Parliaments have very helpfully changed the legislation to allow people to have the emergency proxy vote right up to 5pm on polling day, which is really good for people who may have to self-isolate late in the day or who can't get to a polling station.

So I think that in the UK we have good, strong systems for that and we are well placed for it. I think that if you pick up the slightly longer-term trends—what you might be talking about, Mr Speaker—I agree that there is a bigger debate there.

Rob Vincent: Can I just add, Mr Speaker, that particularly when looking at the longer term there is clearly a generational issue? I think that younger people are perhaps less committed to conventional polling station voting than others are. All the evidence shows that there is not necessarily going to be a lot of change this May, although the circumstances of where covid is in May will have an effect, I am sure, and we are still not sure how many postal votes there will be. In the longer term, I think there is a slow change, which we ought to be prepared for.



Chair: Thank you. Owen, welcome, and you can go straight in with your question.

Q22 **Owen Thompson:** Thank you, Mr Speaker, and apologies for being a bit late at the start.

This year you are seeking additional funding and submitting plans to the Scottish and Welsh Parliaments. In the event that there was a difference of opinion between these institutions regarding the plans, what do you see as the process for reconciliation or compromise?

Bob Posner: The good news is that there is now an agreed memorandum of understanding—at officials level, I should stress—between the three Parliaments. I know that in the three Parliaments that will need to be noted or picked up by this Committee and the respective Committees in the Scottish Parliament and the Senedd.

However, at the officials level, including in HM Treasury, there is an agreed memorandum of understanding that picks up the mechanisms for how this will work among the three Parliaments. Within that, it is acknowledged that it is possible, as you suggest, that there will be variance. For example, it is possible that, in one area, a bit more money will have to be spent than was predicted, or a bit less in another area, so variance is possible and mechanisms are in place for that.

We have also developed detailed internal financial management systems so that we can keep a good track and give an early warning and early notice if there appear to be variances on the way. Mechanisms will apply. However, I want to stress that, as you probably picked up, this is very new, so we built into the memorandum of understanding that there will be a review after one year to see how it is working. Kieran, do you want to add to that?

Kieran Rix: Where spending relates to a particular Parliament's powers, I do not think it would be terribly difficult. I think the problem might come if it were something in our common costs that we have a disagreement about. One thing we have been quite careful to do—in a limited way for the first time, but which I think we will have to build on—is make sure that we consult officials in the Parliaments when preparing the plans as we go along, so that if we have a problem, we can bring it up and hopefully resolve it before we get to the point of submitting plans formally. That will be an ever-increasingly important part of how we work. That will be quite a challenge—not an insurmountable challenge, but it will be a kind of cultural change for us in finance and in planning, which we will have to build on.

The other thing that we will try to do as we go along is to be much clearer about what powers things are being used on or who they are being delivered for—who the decision maker will be. As you say, if a common spend came up late in the process, it would have to be discussed between the Parliaments. Normally, they are—you are—the decision makers; that is not for us. We can obviously help with that, and we can help try to form a consensus, but it would be for Parliament to decide.



Q23 Owen Thompson: We have also seen the plan for the division of income between the institutions. I just wonder how you arrived at the apportionment of the costs.

Kieran Rix: It is a two-stage process. In quite a lot of cases—particularly things around specific electoral events or specific projects we are doing—it is quite easy to say, for example, that a project is for the Scottish Parliament and relates to a Scottish election, so they should pay the costs of that project. That is what we call the direct costs, and those are readily attributable.

For the common costs, which are the bits that everybody contributes to, we did a lot of work with the Scottish and Welsh Parliaments and with the Treasury on what a sensible basis was for apportioning those. We wanted something that was simple and stable and transparent, and after a lot of modelling, population share had all those advantages and was not radically different from some of the much less stable, much less transparent, kind of subjective time recording-based allocations that we tried. It has the advantage that it takes 10 minutes to do and everybody can see the basis, and it actually seems to be quite accurate, compared with more bespoke approaches, so that is the approach we use for the overheads. We will keep that under review, because we are aware that it is not—*[Inaudible]*—representation.

Q24 Karl McCartney: This question is probably for Mr Rix or Mr Posner in the first instance. Do you intend to take the National Audit Office's advice to include more measurable quality and cost metrics to better demonstrate value for money?

Bob Posner: The short answer is yes. We welcomed that report from the NAO last year. It was a good report, and they made some really good suggestions. We have been taking forward detailed work on our projects and on how we measure metrics, and part of that is the introduction of a new management system, which you approved as part of the plan last year, which is actually now in place and is reaping really good benefits in the management of information. What you will see flowing through in the next five-year corporate plan, which we will bring back to you later this year, is much more detailed than that. We are very ambitious about that, and we hope that we will be able to satisfy you on that front.

Q25 Karl McCartney: You talked a little bit about how you developed those metrics, but how are you currently performing against them? I know you just said that you will give us more information later on, but can we have a quick update at this point in time, from you or Mr Rix?

Kieran Rix: I can start to answer that. The new metrics are the ones that are in the draft plan in front of you, and we are obviously not measuring against them yet. Clearly, as Bob said, there will be more developments as we go along. I have a summary of the latest management information here—sorry, they are not numbered, so I am going to have to count them as I go. We are hitting the overwhelming majority of our metrics this year, and the two or three that I can see we are missing, we are missing by a couple of per cent. There is one that is at 100%, and we have got 93%.



That is obviously a miss, but it is not like we are miles off. I see that for one of them that we missed, we set a tolerance, and therefore we achieved it even though we didn't hit 100%. As you might expect in a disrupted year, there are one or two things that haven't gone completely to plan, but actually it is not looking that bad for performance. We can write to you with the detail.

Bob Posner: Can I pick up a real Covid impact over the last year? I hope we have done the right thing. We have been very mindful of the fact that so many of the political parties' campaigners are volunteers, so hitting the deadlines on some of the political finance rules on returns is quite a challenge. With Covid, it is obviously hugely difficult for organisations and individuals to do that, so we have been very co-operative—I will use that word—and generous on that. We have given people a longer time to get their returns in, and we have worked very hard with volunteers to support them to do that. It has been a real feature of this year for our staff in the regulation team. I know that some of the major political parties have really appreciated that, and I hope that has been helpful. That is an interesting metric. Pre-Covid, we would have been stricter on expectations, within reason, but in the practical reality of the Covid year, that didn't seem the right thing to do.

Q26 Karl McCartney: We will perhaps come back to electoral returns in a moment. Are you still intending to use the Pentana cloud-based planning and performance system, and will that change the information that you make publicly available?

Bob Posner: Yes, we are using it now. It is in place and it is already providing management information, which comes through to me, Kieran and the senior staff, and also to the commission board. Rob might want to comment on that.

Rob Vincent: I have been on the commission for maybe four and a half years now, and there has been a marked improvement in the information that comes to the full commission board meeting every month. It is based on Pentana, and also on a review of what we are trying to achieve. We have quarterly reports, which are very clear.

There are some further questions that aren't really about the system and the use of Pentana. You are always looking to make sure the targets are appropriately set for the performance of the organisation. As Kieran said, most of the targets are met, but three or four are currently not—they are 2% or 3% out. Personally, I would be worried if they were all being met. If you are meeting 100% of your targets all the time, you are not setting yourself challenging targets. Having seen this in other organisations, I am fairly confident in the approach that the commission exec takes to target setting and reporting.

Q27 Karl McCartney: On the specifics of election returns that are posted, certainly by parliamentary candidates—most candidates—you as an organisation took a decision to publish them, so to speak. I use that in the loosest sense of the word, because—I do not know what the costs are—



HOUSE OF COMMONS

you don't actually publish the full electoral returns; you publish an overview. That is actually quite misleading, some of us who are experienced in standing for elections would say. Have you any plans to spend some more money and actually put the full election expense returns for each parliamentary candidate up on the website? For how long are you going to make it available, considering that by law, if people visit the returning officer's office, they only get to see them for a year?

Bob Posner: That is absolutely right. The returns, as you know, go locally, and they are only available for inspection for so long locally. The commission has for a few years gathered that data from returning officers around the country. As a service, as it were, we try to publish helpful information about that on the website.

Q28 **Karl McCartney:** Helpful to who?

Bob Posner: To the public—to anyone.

Q29 **Karl McCartney:** Do you actually use that information? Do you look at outliers, even in the highlighted overview that you have produced?

Bob Posner: Yes. So if there are outliers, that is helpful—

Q30 **Karl McCartney:** It is helpful, but do you investigate them?

Bob Posner: No, it is not the commission's job to do that. The commission does not regulate that. But it is useful for the commission for policy and research about trends on spending, which feeds into information that we publish about our research. Moving forward, if there is a view of Parliament that it would help for there to be more information available nationally, and if there is a view that the commission can contribute and help with that, we would be delighted to do so, but we do what we do at the moment and that is where we are currently.

Karl McCartney: Do you think the overview that you put up on a website—*[Inaudible.]*

Chair: We have lost you, Karl. We might have to come back to you. I will go to Craig and we will come back to you.

Q31 **Craig Mackinlay:** My questions are to Kieran Rix and Bob Posner. Earlier, you mentioned the political finance online system, the PEF system, Mr Rix. What has been the overall cost? You said about the change of accounting regs under the Financial Reporting Advisory Board, on which I sit. You have had a swap between capital and revenue. What is the overall cost of this? Am I right in saying that this is trying to achieve a little of what Companies House does, where you can do a lot of functionality direct rather than on paper? That is the goal you are trying to achieve. How has that roll-out been going? I understand it has been a bit lumpy at times.

Bob Posner: Perhaps I can lead off on that. There is an existing online system. I think the UK was probably one of the first major democracies to do it. It was very much a world-leading system when it was introduced 10-plus years ago. It is now a very aged and old platform and we would not regard it as user-friendly these days. It doesn't have the functionality that

we expect on websites, as you are alluding to, Mr Mackinlay. That is why there is the project to refresh and renew.

In terms of cost, the original budget was just under £1 million to do that work. That compared well with what was a very difficult—impossible—task of keeping the old system going, and we would not have got the benefit from the old system. When we came back about a year ago, we reported that it was going to cost about 10% more—about £1.1 million. At that stage, to deliver it, that looked realistic. Where we are currently in the business plan, it is about £1.2 million—so instead of a 10% rise, it is a 20% rise, roughly speaking.

What has happened in the intervening period is that our external developer hasn't been able to complete the contract. That is why there have been extra costs, which you see in this budget, for us to find alternative ways to do that, and that is successful. The project currently is very advanced. One whole strand of it is around all the registration work of political parties. That is all built, ready to go and being tested. The other strand of it is the financial reporting part, which is well advanced in the building work as well. So we are now on track to get it done as originally said. It is close to completion.

It has been a project done from day one, including the specification on it, hand in hand with the major political parties, with the user group and some small parties as well. They have been part of making sure that the end product is what is most useful for the user. As you say, it is for the users, to make it much easier to report their political finance obligations, as you go into the system, which the old system could never have done. It will be intuitive. It won't let you go on without the last bit being done correctly. There will be lots of information about how to fill the sections in properly and correctly. It should be a very nice system for users and it should really help compliance.

If nothing else goes off track, we are hoping to get it done and we see it being on track to be done, obviously not for the May elections, as we are busy with that, but we should be delivering that as we move into the latter part of this year.

Chair: We are running out of time. We need to speed up the questions and answers.

Q32 **Craig Mackinlay:** Okay, I will just come back very briefly. We have a potential 20% overrun. What is the reason for that? Do you know whether the developers developed this on the back of some existing database-driven software that they may be doing for other clients, or have you asked for something so bespoke that it has had in-built complications and you have then changed your spec? What is the reason for that big overrun for something that, at the end of the day, doesn't sound horrendously complex?

Rob Vincent: It is not that the developer is using either of those; the developer has failed and withdrawn from the contract. At the board level,



HOUSE OF COMMONS

we have actually been very impressed with the speed with which the executive have picked up on that situation. There has been a small amount of lost time, but they worked extremely closely with the parties concerned, rescheduled pretty sharply and found resource in order to pick up that which the contractor would have been doing. As a board, we have been pleased with that, but we are also keen to go back over the whole project, including how the intended developer was selected. That is on the schedule for our audit and risk committee over the next few months, so that we deal with the operational challenge but then learn lessons as to how we got to where we are. I have to say that I think a change from just under £1 million to £1.2 million is a relatively good outcome from a slightly difficult set of circumstances.

Q33 Craig Mackinlay: I will leave it there, Mr Speaker, but it is rather a bizarre situation. I would have thought there would be a clawback or something.

Rob Vincent: Maybe.

Chair: Will and Chris, do you have anything to ask very briefly?

Q34 Christian Matheson: I have just one very quick question. In your latest staff survey, the scores for half of all the questions were five percentage points higher than the civil service benchmark scores. That sounds good, but in what areas were you not outperforming, or even not meeting, the benchmark?

Rob Vincent: Shall I start off? Kieran can probably come in on the detail. Some of the areas where we are below civil service averages are about individuals' confidence in their future careers. I think that relates to being a relatively small and highly specialised organisation—your opportunities are not quite as clear as they might otherwise be. One or two of them were to do with project management, and particularly projects that cut across the separate specialist teams within the organisation, which may have some connection back to the NAO responses. There is a relatively small number where we are under civil service scores, and each of those is now being picked up.

Christian Matheson: Okay, thank you.

Chair: Karl, I said I was coming back to you.

Q35 Karl McCartney: I don't know whether you actually heard the question or not, but I was basically asking about the in-perpetuity viewable returns of various candidates and whether that is something that the Electoral Commission are going to do.

Chair: Maybe you could come back and write to Karl and the Committee on that. If you could pick that up, that would be great. Rob, Bob and Kieran, thanks for coming along and giving us your time today. That concludes our public session today. Can Members please rejoin the meeting in Teams to discuss what we have just heard?