

Corporate Plan 2020–21 to 2024–25

Fourth annual update

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1. Foreword

I am pleased to present the Commission's fourth annual update to its Corporate Plan and Five-Year Strategy. It outlines how the Commission will continue to deliver fair electoral and boundary arrangements for local government electors in England and support associated changes in local governance and structures.

Our remit covers all principal English local authorities. When carrying out electoral reviews, we aim to:

- Ensure that, within each authority, every councillor represents a similar number of electors to others in that authority
- Create boundaries that are appropriate and reflect community ties and identities
- Deliver reviews that are informed by local needs, views and circumstances.

Our plan sets out how we will continue to pursue these fundamental objectives in the context of the statutory framework set by Parliament.

We have a duty to review every principal council in England 'from time to time' – too frequent and they can become a distraction; too infrequent and arrangements may no longer reflect the distribution of electors, communities and governance requirements.

Operating a rolling programme of reviews is helpful in this context. Apart from the obvious advantages of organisational stability and a steady output, it means that we can flex the programme in order to undertake earlier reviews in those authorities where substantial residential developments have caused significant electoral inequality. Accordingly, we monitor electoral registers each year and, where appropriate, undertake reviews to address imbalances.

We are particularly keen to respond positively to requests from local authorities, and from Government, when it is felt that an electoral review might assist in the delivery of effective and convenient local government. Such requests might reflect a desire by an authority to modify aspects of their own governance (for example, their electoral cycles or the overall number of elected members) or as part of broader reorganisation of local government in the area. We are, therefore, sensitive to the current devolution agenda and its consequences, including potential changes to local government structures.

More generally, whenever possible and appropriate, we are keen to make a helpful contribution to the operation of local government, so although we are an independent body working on behalf of Parliament, we liaise with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, and with affected local authorities, to build new democratic arrangements whenever changes are being implemented. We offered advice, for example, about the interim electoral arrangements for four new unitary authorities - Cumberland, Westmorland and Furness, North Yorkshire and Somerset – and are now starting full electoral reviews, the results of which will be implemented at their next elections in 2027.

Although a small organisation, we are conscious of the need to ensure best use of public money. Since we presented our first Corporate Plan to Parliament in 2010, we have delivered real-term reductions of over £1.5m (38%)¹ to our budget.

Whilst achieving efficiencies is becoming ever more challenging, especially given the small scale of our operations and the critical importance of resilience, we are keen to further embed a 'value for money' ethos across the organisation and this will be an important topic for the coming year. In addition, technology and the experience of working differently through the pandemic means we can think in more detail about how we might make our own contribution to decreasing carbon use.

Underpinning both of these agendas will be a firm resolution to ensure that we maintain the quantity, quality and rigour of our reviews.

A key resource is our people – both staff and commissioners. Our People Strategy has proven invaluable in helping us to develop, motivate and ensure the wellbeing of colleagues. It embeds our cultural behaviours in everything we do and how we work with others. It also underpins how we attract, recruit, retain and build the skills that are essential to the successful delivery of our programme.

As well as motivated people, we have benefitted from robust infrastructure, and we will continue to further develop our IT infrastructure and protocols to improve the efficiency, accessibility and accuracy of our processes. We will also continue to explore how we can further exploit digital technology in the way we conduct and present reviews.

This year we will need to identify and relocate to new offices in the autumn and we will be using this opportunity to reassess our space requirements, in order to best match the future needs of the organisation and the way we want to work.

Engaging with local people and communities is, of course, an essential aspect of our work. We have created a new website, which has enhanced online consultation opportunities to maximise public understanding of, and engagement with, our reviews. We will continue to identify additional ways of capturing customer insights on our processes and communications from those who engage with our reviews. This will help us embed continuous improvement into our website and the ways that we work.

All our work is highly dependent on the strong participation of local authorities, local communities and organisations and, not least, the thousands of local people who provide their views and insight during our reviews. We are greatly indebted to them all for their assistance.

Professor Colin Mellors
Chair, Local Government Boundary Commission for England

¹ Calculated from Bank of England Consumer Prices Index inflation calculator.

2. Setting the scene

The Local Government Boundary Commission for England (the Commission) is required to lay a new five-year strategy in Parliament every five years or following each new Parliament. In addition, to inform the Speaker's Committee about our plans and the consequent resource requirement, we produce an annual update. This is the fourth update to the original 2020–21 Corporate Plan and Five-Year Strategy of the Local Government Boundary Commission for England. It highlights our plans for 2024-25 and beyond.

Who we are

The Commission is an independent body, established by Parliament under the provisions of the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009. Our main responsibility is:

- Conducting electoral reviews by considering the electoral boundaries of local authorities in England and recommending any changes to Parliament.

We are also responsible for:

- Reviewing the administrative (external) boundaries of local authorities in England and making recommendations for changes to the Secretary of State
- Advising the Secretary of State, at their request, on proposals they receive from local authorities for changes to unitary status
- Reviewing the constituencies of the London Assembly and recommending any changes to Parliament.

What we do

- We recommend fair electoral and boundary arrangements for local authorities in England.

We aim to

- Make sure that, within each authority, each councillor represents a similar number of electors
- Create boundaries that are appropriate and reflect community ties and identities
- Deliver reviews informed by local needs, views and circumstances.

We are

- Impartial – giving equal consideration to all views
- Objective – making recommendations based on evidence
- Responsive – listening to local opinion
- Transparent – following clear and open processes
- Professional – being reliable, efficient and helpful.

3. Our work

Since our establishment in 2010, the number of electoral reviews we have undertaken has increased considerably. This has been accompanied by efficiencies and budget reductions. Over the last five years, we have aimed to start around 25 reviews annually² – each lasting approximately 15 months – and our funding has supported this level of activity. We conduct reviews to achieve electoral equality, reflect our duty to review each of the 317³ local authorities in England ‘from time to time’, and in response to local authority requests.

Figure 1 – Last four years

Financial year	Reviews started	Reviews published	Total electorate affected ⁴
2023-24 ⁵	26	24	6,000,413
2022-23	25	31	4,195,968
2021-22	28	32	5,659,534
2020-21	29	19	2,903,321

Electoral review programme

A variety of factors that affect electoral equality, for example, population growth, migration, development, levels of electoral registration and student populations, are, of course, outside of the Commission’s control. However, seeking to achieve acceptable levels of electoral equality, alongside reviewing all local authorities on a continuing basis to identify appropriate electoral boundaries, forms the statutory basis of our work. Levels of electoral equality also help shape our work programme, given some authorities experience more rapid changes in number and distribution of electors and, therefore, necessitate more frequent reviews. We assemble data on the levels of electoral equality in each local authority annually. This informs our work programme and the most appropriate, and productive, balance of review types.

The graphs below show the proportion of electors, and of local authorities, we consider to have acceptable⁶ levels of electoral equality. The graphs are affected by the number of local authorities that have been reviewed and data is gathered when the electoral registers are published annually.

² As reviews generally straddle financial years, our outputs can be influenced by external events such as elections.

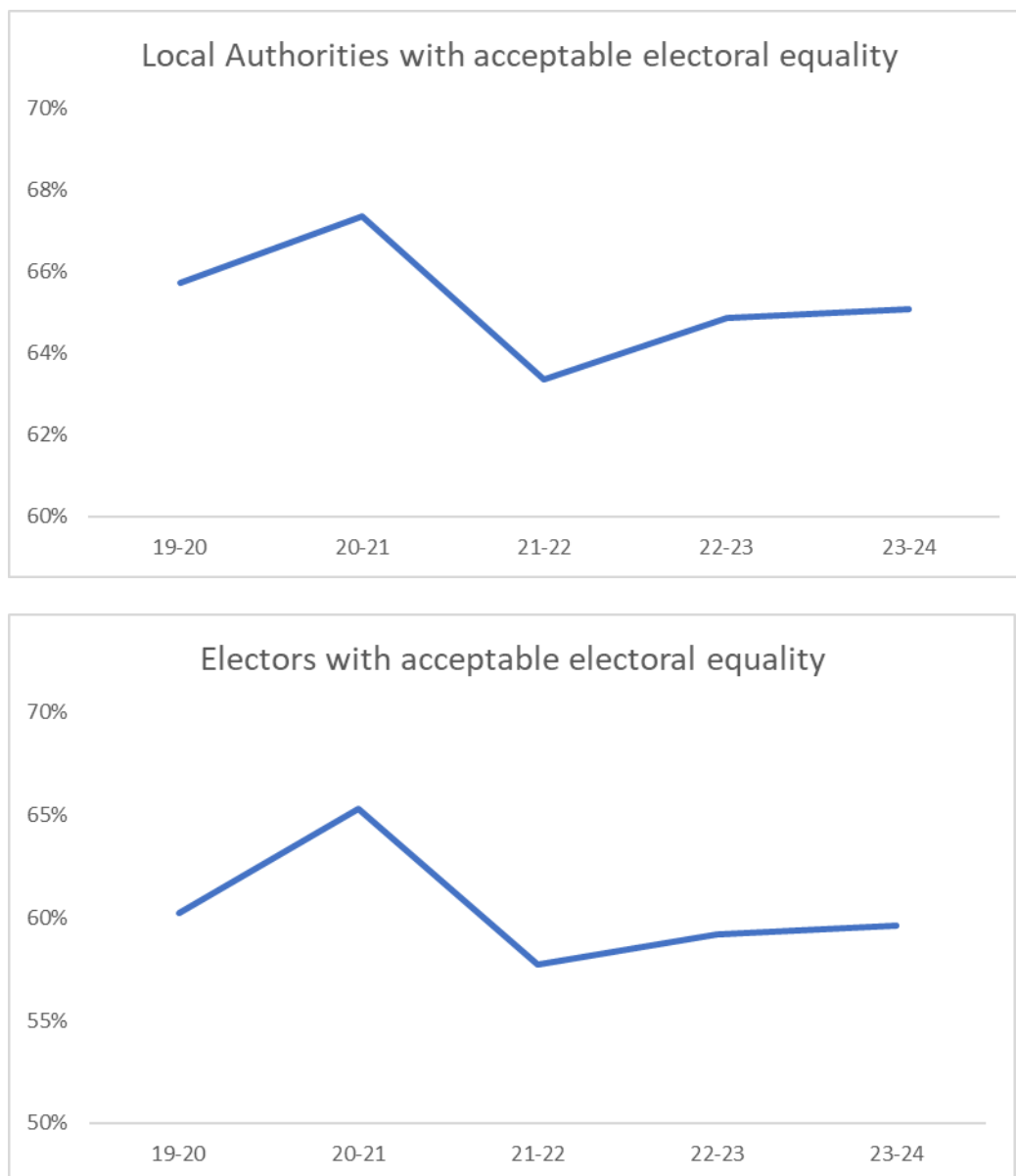
³ Local authority numbers have reduced over recent years due to mergers between authorities. The City of London authority is not included as the Commission is not responsible for conducting an electoral review of this authority.

⁴ Total electorate affected is based on reviews started.

⁵ Figures for 2023–24 are estimated based on nine months’ data.

⁶ Acceptable is defined as avoiding the levels of inequality that trigger our intervention criteria. We consider a poor level of equality to be when any ward or division in an authority has a variance greater than (+/-) 30% from the average for that authority or when 30% or more of wards or divisions have a variance greater than (+/-) 10% (i.e., where councillors represent considerably more or fewer electors compared with other councillors within their local authority).

Figure 2 – Local authorities and electors⁷ with acceptable electoral equality



⁷ Electors in two-tier areas count as electors in both county and district authorities. The electorate numbers of both are added together to calculate overall percentages.

Over the period of this corporate plan, we plan to undertake the following forms of electoral reviews:

(i) Intervention electoral reviews – We will identify authorities with poor levels of electoral equality and conduct reviews to address these anomalies. These are known as intervention reviews.

(ii) Periodic electoral reviews – The Commission has a statutory duty to review every local authority ‘from time to time’. Whilst intervention reviews are undertaken as and when individual authorities breach what we consider to be acceptable levels of electoral equality, periodic reviews represent more of a rolling element of our review programme. Whilst the legislation itself does not define ‘time to time’, we believe that, to support good governance, such reviews should take place approximately every three to four full electoral cycles, i.e., between 12 and 16 years. We will start our review of the final Metropolitan borough to be conducted as part of this rolling programme of reviews in 2024-25. This will mean we have completed electoral reviews of all Metropolitan boroughs. We are also now conducting periodic electoral reviews of six counties to meet our duty to review authorities from time to time.

(iii) Requested electoral reviews – Alongside reviews that are initiated by the Commission, we are keen to retain sufficient capacity to respond to requests made by local authorities themselves. These are intended to assist their efforts to improve local governance and, typically, result from the desire either to change numbers of councillors or the pattern of electoral cycles. It is not possible to predict how many such requests we will receive each year⁸ and we adjust our other reviews to accommodate these requests.

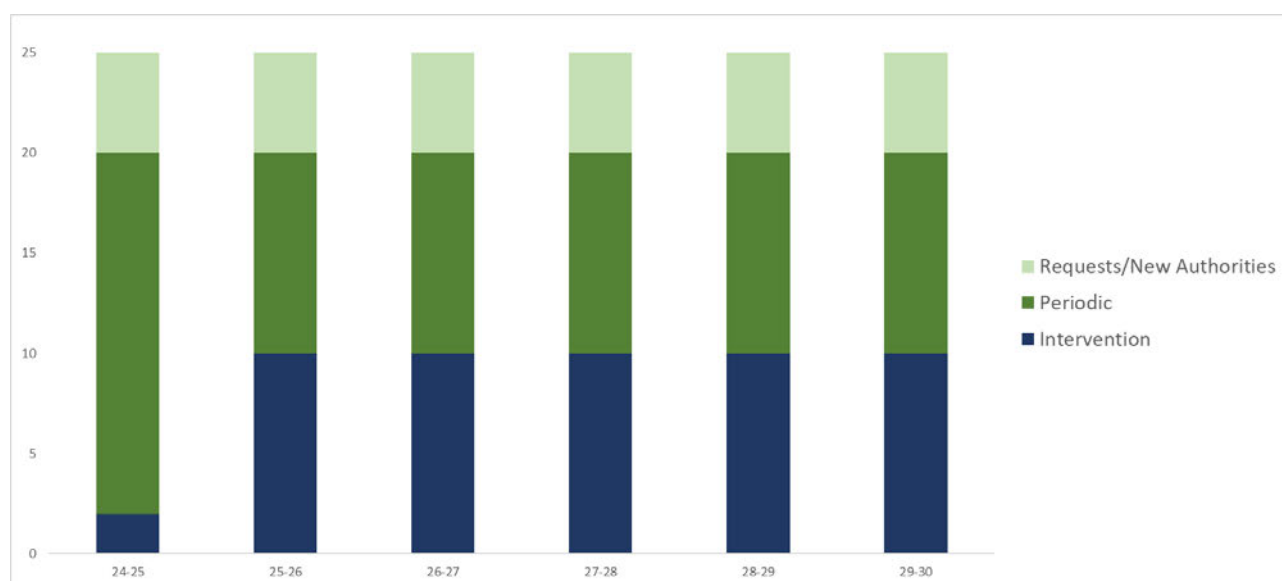
(iv) New authorities – We want to support councils that have been established on new boundaries where this has been agreed by Government and Parliament. We have completed reviews of West Northamptonshire, North Northamptonshire and Buckinghamshire Councils. We will start reviews of the new unitary authorities in Somerset, Cumberland, Westmorland & Furness and North Yorkshire in 2024-25.

(v) Principal Area Boundary Reviews (PABR)

Where local authorities request a change to the boundaries between two (or more) authorities we may conduct a Principal Area Boundary Review.

⁸ Number of requested reviews: one in 2023-24; three in 2022-23; six in 2021–22; and four in 2020–21.

Figure 3 – Planned review programme for next five years (review starts)⁹



We will continue to run a programme of starting around 25 reviews a year. In 2024/25, we recognise that a general election will take place, with consequent demands on local authority teams to administer the poll. We will work closely with those local authorities in our review programme to manage the timetables for our work in these circumstances, and to minimise the risk to our planned number of reviews being able to be started in this year.

Review costs

As part of our ongoing drive to reduce costs and increase efficiency, we keep under continuous review our processes and ways of working. Our review cost information has become more sophisticated, and we are now able to analyse by review stage and have developed a database of detailed review costs.¹⁰

We expect review costs to remain broadly in line this coming year with last, although we will continue to explore opportunities to increase efficiency in our processes.

Satisfaction

The input to our reviews from local people and organisations is essential in helping us to refine the proposals in our electoral reviews. We are therefore continuing to focus on improving public engagement in our work. As part of our approach to customer insight, we use a suite of customer satisfaction surveys covering both a general audience and more specific audiences, such as those attending full council, parish and residents' briefings. These will give us a breadth of insight over the life of this plan to improve our services. The insight has already been used to inform the development of our new website in 2022-23.

⁹ Electoral reviews of new and merged authorities are shown as 'request' reviews. 24 specific reviews are currently scheduled for 2024-25 but we will add to this programme in the coming months, holding space for request reviews.

¹⁰ Review costing information is undertaken periodically based on detailed work which considers length of reviews, size of review, time management and allocation of overheads.

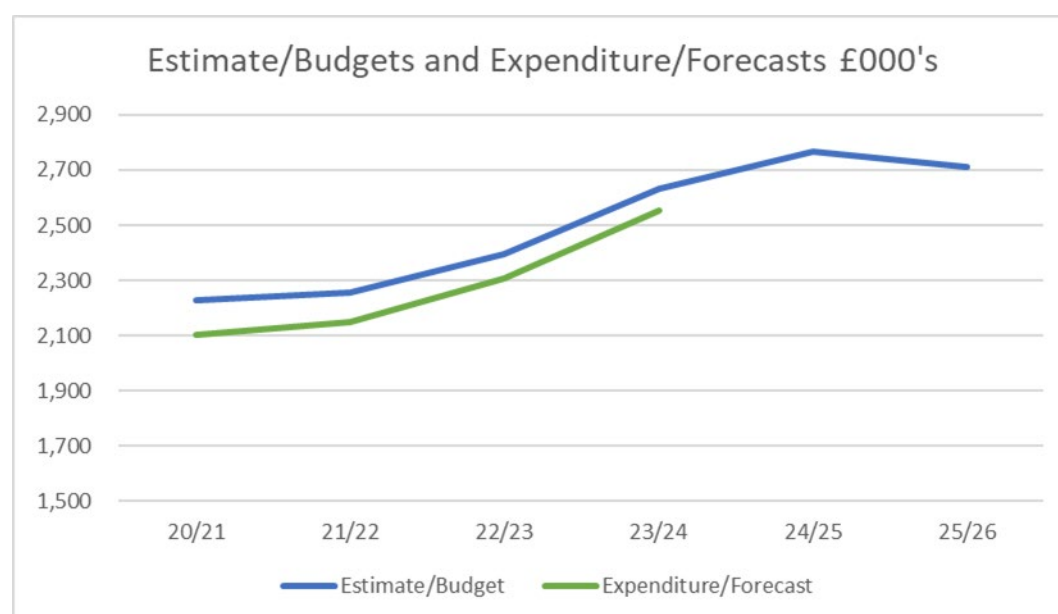
While we are currently achieving high levels of satisfaction (77% of respondents expressed being 'highly satisfied' or 'quite satisfied' with their overall experience of dealing with the Commission in 2022-23), we intend to review the questions we are asking in order to improve our understanding of their experiences and to help identify areas for improvement. To support our evaluation of the newly launched website's performance, we intend to include website-specific questions in the customer satisfaction survey and to create a pop-up survey hosted on the website, providing more opportunities for users to give their feedback.

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

Having embedded Equality, Diversity and Inclusion as a valued part of who we are and how we engage with others, we will continue to explore ways to improve the inclusivity of our reviews, working closely with councils and trialling new approaches.

4. Running costs and funding

Figure 4 – Spending profile¹¹



The efficiencies, savings and increase in review numbers we achieved in our early years means that we have reached a place where our budget currently offers little opportunity for further significant savings without reducing staff numbers, reviewing our premises footprint or compromising the quality of our reviews and the number of reviews we can deliver.

Organisational and financial resilience, both short and long-term, feature prominently in our risk management and assurance processes. In 2023-24, despite some unforeseen expenditure during the year, we remained within budget in what was a tough year financially.

¹¹ In the graph, the 4% contingency is included in the 2023-24 and 2024-25 Estimate/Budget figures.

For 2024/25, our budget reflects the following:

- 1) Inflationary and other increases to our budgets taking account of HM Treasury guidance and discussions, likely market conditions and negotiations with our individual suppliers. For 2024-25, we have asked for a 5% increase to staff costs and a 4% increase to cover inflationary increases from suppliers and other government agencies.
- 2) Revision of premises costs, considering our exit from Windsor House and a move to new premises, in autumn 2024.
- 3) A contingency of 4% of our resource budget (£106k) which will be ring-fenced and used for such exceptional and unforeseen items that would normally necessitate a small Supplementary Estimate to be sought. The Commission recognises the value for money implications of convening a Speaker's Committee to approve a small amount of expenditure and asks to build in this buffer to avoid this necessity. Any expenditure from this fund will be explained in detail to the Committee alongside our next Corporate Plan.

We also have a small annual capital budget of £50k which we use for investment in our IT and software solutions (website, SharePoint, intranet and other IT projects) and, in 2024-25, for costs associated with the move to new premises.

Figure 5 – Funding profile 2020–21 to 2025–26^{12 13}

	2020/21 £000	2021-22 £000	2022-23 £000	2023-24 £000	2024-25 £000	2025-26 £000
Staff and commissioners	1,414	1,428	1,499	1,671	1,788	1,824
Mapping and printing	126	129	135	200	226	231
Stakeholder engagement	96	98	103	57	59	60
Business costs	492	502	415	327	389	366
Legal and professional	54	55	58	68	74	75
Depreciation	48	45	182	209	127	45
Risk & resilience fund (4%) ¹²				101	106	109
DEL resource	2,230	2,257	2,393	2,633	2,769	2,710
AME ¹³		73	15	10	10	-
resource total	2,230	2,330	2,408	2,643	2,779	2,710
DEL capital	50	50	120	50	50	50
total	2,280	2,380	2,528	2,693	2,829	2,760
Supplementary Estimate			15			

¹² Changes to 2024-25 and 2025-26 depreciation and business costs reflect our rental costs reverting away from falling under IFRS16 (lease end is September 2024).

¹³ Our AME accommodation dilapidation provision (2024-25 £10k, 2023-24 £10k) will always be our best estimate as the Government Property Agency does not produce figures in time to be included within our supply estimate.