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(EC 64/20) Modernising voting (EC 65/20) Public awareness plans for elections in May

2021 (EC 66/20) Chief Executive's update (EC 67/20) Business items taken via

electronic means since the previous Board meeting First published: 14 October 2021

Last updated: 14 October 2021 Meeting summary Date: Wednesday 22 July 2020 Time:

9:30am to 12:40pm Location: By video conference Date of next scheduled meeting:

Wednesday 23 September 2020 Who was at the meeting Who was at the meeting John

Holmes, Chair Alasdair Morgan Anna Carragher Elan Closs Stephens Joan Walley Sarah

Chambers Stephen Gilbert Sue Bruce Rob Vincent In attendance: Bob Posner, Chief

Executive Craig Westwood, Director, Communications, Policy and Research Louise

Edwards, Director, Regulation Ailsa Irvine, Director, Electoral Administration and

Guidance Kieran Rix, Director, Finance and Corporate Services Amanda Kelly, General

Counsel David Bailey, Head of Strategic Planning and Performance Niki Nixon, Head of

External Communications Phil Thompson, Head of Research Tom Hawthorn, Head of Policy

Madeleine Spink, Senior Advisor, Governance Susan Crown, Head of Campaigns and

Corporate Identity (for item 5) Ben Hancock, Campaigns and Corporate Communications

Manager (for item 5) Jessica Cook, Senior Campaigns Officer, Campaigns and Corporate

Communications (for item 5) Peter Wolf, International IDEA (for item 4) Apologies

There were no apologies. Declarations of interest There were no new declarations of

interest. Minutes of items of electronic business (EC 64/20) Resolved: That the

Commission Board minutes of items of electronic business from 15 June 2020 be

approved. Modernising voting (EC 65/20) Peter Wolf from International IDEA introduced

a discussion about how the coronavirus pandemic had influenced electoral processes

across the world, giving examples of where elections had been held and in some cases

postponed, and different methods used to mitigate the consequences of the pandemic.

The Board discussed how public debate on online voting might be affected by the

coronavirus situation. Internationally, support for increased use of existing

channels including early voting, postal or proxy voting had gained more traction than

demand for online voting. Trust in new voting mechanisms was often related to the

existing levels of trust in the electoral process. There was international experience

of different methods for voting being used for different sections of the population,

for example for overseas voters. Commissioners asked how campaigning had changed in

elections held elsewhere in the pandemic. The answer appeared to be that online

campaigning had increased. The Board discussed how counts had been undertaken in

other countries and the relative prevalence of electronic and manual methods. The

Board discussed the current context of the coronavirus pandemic in the UK. It was

unlikely that large scale changes to electoral processes would be made for the May

2021 elections, given the capacity of local authorities and governments' appetite for

new legislation. Nevertheless elections needed to be conducted safely, and to be seen

as such. A lot of work was needed on the problems which might arise. The First

Minister of Wales had convened an Elections Planning Group with a view to securing

the smooth running of the Senedd 2021 election in national or local lockdowns. Any

legislation would need to be brought before the Senedd in late September or early

October. Commissioners noted for example that difficult issues might arise in

ensuring that people quarantined and in local lockdowns were able to vote. Postal

voting was likely to have a key role and risks would need to be managed around the

anticipated greater volume of postal voters. If there were to be an increase in

postal voting this would also mean that campaigning would be continuing after some people had already voted, to a greater degree than usual. The Board discussed whether postal voting should be encouraged at an early point, and also whether proxy voting could be publicised further. Postal voting was recognised as a delicate political issue. There might be a risk of perception of greater degrees of fraud with postal voting, which would need to be managed. The Board discussed the proposed modernising voting research project. This project would involve gathering qualitative data about opinions on modernising the voting process. It would be an opportunity to develop the Commission's base of knowledge and understanding. The Board discussed the role of new technology. The Commission should be at the forefront of thinking around modernisation. Younger generations needed to believe the electoral process was relevant and credible. At the same time, we needed to be clear about what problem the introduction of new technology was designed to solve. The research should help to identify specific issues or concerns particular groups might have and to update the current evidence base. Commissioners discussed the importance of good qualitative research, bringing in the views of voters and not just experts. The specific approach would be shaped with the research agency chosen, through and following the tender process. Resolved: That the proposed approach to, and outline scope of, a project to explore options for modernising voting be agreed. Public awareness plans for elections in May 2021 (EC 66/20) The Board considered the plan and budget for voter registration campaigns in May 2021. The Director of Communications, Policy and Research introduced the item. May 2021 elections would be a complex set of polls and include newly enfranchised groups in Scotland and Wales. The steer from Commissioners in a previous discussion had been to focus more than in the past on registering known under-registered groups. This strategy set the framework for the project. It was important for the Commission to be driven by evidence of under-registration, and to avoid any risk of being perceived to focus on groups who might be thought to have particular voting preferences. There would need to be clear evidence that an impact had been made and specified ways of measuring success and value for money. The aim was to make progress towards levelling up registration across demographic groups, focussing on the known under registered, but also to drive the maximum number of new registrations. This twin strategy had been signed off by the Speaker's Committee through the corporate plan approval process. However there was room for greater clarity about the respective importance of these objectives and the degree to which they could be addressed simultaneously. Commissioners discussed increasing public information activity owing to the expected high percentage of postal voting. A key aspect of this work would be through local authority partnerships. Commissioners discussed whether partners could in some cases be supported with funding, which was currently not in the plans though within the Commission's statutory powers. The Commission had stepped back from a past practice of funding partnerships. and instead provided communication resources openly for use by any organisation that wanted to encourage people to register to vote. The outcome of further discussions would inform the strategy. Action: The Director of Communications, Policy and Research to provide the Board with a further paper on the policy strategy for voter registration campaigns. Resolved: That the plan and budget for voter registration campaigns in May 2021 be otherwise approved. Chief Executive's update (EC 67/20) The Board noted the update on operations and matters arising. Commissioners discussed the Intelligence and Security Committee's report into Russian activity in the UK. They noted the broad recommendation that the Commission should have more powers to deal with foreign money. The report highlighted a gap in whose role it was to ensure security of

elections, and freedom from foreign interference. One obvious answer was increased cooperation between the various bodies with responsibilities in this area. Some of the report's comments on the role of the Commission were inaccurate. This would be brought up with the Chair of the Committee. Meanwhile there was more work to be done in raising the Commission's profile and being clear about our role. The Chief Executive noted recent meetings with the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee and Chloe Smith MP, Minister for Constitutional Affairs. An electoral integrity bill was expected to be brought forward by the UK Government in 2021. This would be discussed further with the Board as information became available. There should be time and opportunity to influence the Bill's development. Other issues raised included: devolved accountability budget submissions; the complaint to the Welsh Language Commission; and the Section 10 request from the Scottish Government for advice and assistance relating to public opinion research on voters' attitudes to voting channels for the May 2021 elections as a result of coronavirus. The Chief Executive also introduced the risk matrix. Resolved: That the update on operations and matters arising, including the update on devolved accountability, be noted. Business items taken via electronic means since the previous Board meeting The Board discussed the timelines of electronic business items, and which matters should be addressed in this way.