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On this page Update on preparations and considerations for May 2021 Update on Political Finance Online Publication of General Election spending returns Digital imprints Electoral Commission guidance Review of legal maximums Nomination process in light of COVID-19 Minutes of the last meeting Commission Update Report AOB First published: 18 June 2021 Last updated: 18 June 2021 Who was at the meeting Who was at the meeting Liberal Democrats: Kerry Buist (KB), chair of meeting Labour Party: Andrew Whyte (AW) Scottish National Party: Scott Martin (SM) Conservative Party: Catherine Latham (CL) Alan Mabutt OBE (AM) Plaid Cymru: Geraint Day (GD) Electoral Commission: Craig Westwood, Director of Communications, Policy & Research (CW) Louise Edwards, Director of Regulation (LE) Laura McLeod, Public Affairs Manager (LM) Alex White, Senior Communications Officer (AMW) Cabinet Office: Becca Crosier (BC) James Hairsnape (JH) Thomas Collie (TC) Elizabeth Parckar (EP) Liz Homans (LH) Update on preparations and considerations for May 2021 CW provided an overview of recent Commission activity, including the finalisation and publication of the shared set of objectives for delivering well run elections in the current public health environment. He noted the Commission's to publishing updated guidance for electoral administrators, with generic poll-related guidance already available and Covid-specific updates being published in sections, with guidance specifically on polling stations to be published shortly. CW provided an update on the public opinion research, commissioned by the Scottish Government in August and then in November, to understand the impact the pandemic is having on public attitudes to voting. He noted the consistent findings in both surveys. CW also provided an update on the range of Commission's communication resources that are now available for local authorities to use ahead of May 2021. He noted that the Commission would, from January, undertake additional public awareness communications to ensure voters had the necessary information to be able to vote with on 6 May. LE explained the Commission's guidance for parties and campaigners would be published in the coming weeks, with a 'change log' highlighting to users could more the parts that had been updated. LE encouraged parties to provide feedback or contact the Commission with any regulatory questions or issues in the run up to May 2021. She explained the usual advice service would be available, and individual sessions could be arranged with parties to discuss the guidance. She noted the Commission would be launching a live FAQ page for questions from parties and campaigners, but noted the questions would be general to ensure there would be no breach of confidentiality. She highlighted the Commission's upcoming a survey of parties and campaigners that would be issued later this week. LE provided an update on the enforcement approach ahead of the May 2021 elections, noting the Commission would take a similar proportionate approach to that at the 2019 UK Parliamentary general election. LE explained this would involve the Commission speaking to parties first, where an issue has arisen, to find a way to resolve matters proportionately and appropriately, where possible without the need for formal enforcement. KB raised the recent local government by-elections in Scotland and asked if the Commission had any feedback from how these were delivered. CW explained that colleagues were currently gathering information on the by-elections, and that more broadly, the Commission has been monitoring comparable elections taking place in other countries to see what may be learnt. KB asked if there would be an increase in the number of polling stations needed for the elections, and if this would impact on the number of staff required for venues. KB raised concerns this could be difficult where election volunteers were older. CW agreed to this away, but explained that the

number of polling stations was likely to be a decision taken locally. GD highlighted the link on Commission's website to a generic timetable for the Senedd elections appeared to be broken. LE agreed to take this away and check. SM raised postal voting, highlighting that in the Kincorth/Nigg/Cove by-election on 5 November 2020, the number of postal votes was very low. He suggested postal voting may have plateaued, particularly where due to the pandemic fewer people were able to travel and so would may no longer be away on polling day. CW noted that the survey only represents a snapshot of opinion and reiterated that the Commission's messaging would continue to focus on the safety of in-person voting. He explained that the Commission is currently working with charities and NGOs on ensuring absent voting messaging reached vulnerable groups. KB asked if there would be disposable face masks available at polling stations. BC explained that disposable face masks at polling stations was being considered and noted the Cabinet Office was in discussion with the Department for Health and Social Care on public health regulations and the impact on polling stations. Update on Political Finance Online LE provided an update on the timetable for the launch of the system. She explained that it would no longer be possible to implement from January 2021, owing to supplier issues that were out of the control of the Commission. She noted the final stages of development would be brought in-house, and the new system launched in September 2021. LE noted the Commission would want to come back to the parties nearer the time to talk about implementation, and explained the training would be available over the summer for parties KB asked if there would be a cap on the number of training places. LE explained that, as the Commission wanted everyone to be comfortable with the new system, training sessions would be available on an ongoing basis. Publication of General Election spending returns CL asked for an update on when the final spending returns from political parties would be published. LE explained that there were a small number of returns still due to be published and that one batch would be published before Christmas, and possibly a smaller batch after Christmas, if necessary. AM raised concerns about coming to the end of the legal timetable to compare candidate spending with party returns. LE explained that the Commission was publishing returns as quickly as possible after receiving them, having been accommodating of party circumstances owing to the COVID-19 pandemic. Digital imprints SM raised the digital imprints changes in Scotland, using the example of an MSP tweeting about the Scottish Parliament elections and asked what the tweet would need to include. LE explained it would need to include an imprint, either on the face of the material or strongly linked to the tweet, and noted that the Commission's guidance on imprints would be published very shortly. There was a discussion on how this would be enforced. KB asked if the guidance would be shared with national parties. LE confirmed it would be. LE added that the Commission was happy to run a session on the guidance for individual parties. KB noted that her concerns there may not be enough time to do before the changes come into effect. AM noted he appreciated the Commission had not introduced the change, but raised similar concerns about enforcement of material published outside of Scotland. LE explained that the Commission recommends legislative changes are place 6 months before implementation so parties and campaigners can have sufficient time. She noted the Commission would report on regulating this requirement at the elections. KB asked if the changes in Scotland would impact on UK Government's recent consultation on digital imprints. JH thanked the parties for their responses to the consultation and confirmed the UK Government would observe and learn from the changes in Scotland. He provided an update on the consultation, noting the Cabinet Office was currently working through responses, of which 98% were supportive. He

explained the Government's response would be published in the New Year. Electoral Commission guidance KB explained that some of the Commission's guidance on the website seemed to be missing, and parties needed it to prepare internal guidance. AW added that, in particular, guidance on national spending in Scottish and Welsh elections was missing, and asked for assurance it would be published in advance of the regulated period beginning 1 January 2021. LE explained most guidance would be issued within the next two weeks, and agreed to speak to colleagues and provide an update. SM asked if guidance and other content could be provided as PDFs on the Commission's website. CW explained that there were issues with PDFs which now fell outside legal accessibility requirements, but that there was a 'print to PDF' function for each page. Review of legal maximums TC provided an update on the UK Government's intention to raise the spending limit for candidates at local elections in England ahead of May 2021. He explained the limit would be increased by the rate of inflation (using the CPI rate of inflation), and that a Written Ministerial Statement would be published on Thursday 3 December. He noted the statement would include reference to a review of spending limits for other reserved elections after May 2021. Nomination process in light of COVID-19 KB asked for an update on any possible changes to the nomination process in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. BC confirmed this was part of the Cabinet Office's work with the Department for Health and Social Care on exemptions for elections as essential work. BC added that there was currently work being done to create scope for pre-checking to happen electronically, but the requirement would still require nomination papers to be handed in in person. KB raised concerns that election agents were often older, and therefore potentially more vulnerable to COVID-19 and shielding restrictions. She asked about the impact of local lockdowns or tiers and what would happen if restrictions meant someone couldn't travel to another tier in order to visit an election office. BC explained the Cabinet Office was working with the Welsh and Scottish Governments on an exemption for cross-border travel for election purposes, but noted that questions about which staff were best placed to carry out tasks would be for parties to address. KB asked if party volunteers, not just employed staff, would be covered by the exemptions, and if the exemptions would cover the whole election period. BC confirmed volunteers would be included in the exemptions, and that exemptions would cover the whole election period. Minutes of the last meeting and actions arising (PPP 1/09/2020) The Minutes were agreed. Regarding the Commission's intention to organise a session on its Corporate Plan with an expanded PPP, CW noted that this would be deferred to late summer or early autumn of 2021 owing to the likely revised timetable for the development and submission of the corporate plan. LE provided an update on how case updates could be disturbed to parties. She noted the Commission no longer provided these updates, but confirmed that she would put the parties in contact with the NPCC, who are happy to discuss further. KB indicated she would be happy to be the point of contact. KB asked for an update from the Cabinet Office on their consideration of the use of party headquarters addresses on imprints. JH confirmed this was still under consideration, and that Cabinet Office hoped to have an update soon. SM raised that it may not be appropriate for addresses of taxpayer-funded constituency offices to be used on imprints. JH explained there was a balance between ensuring transparency for voters and the need for accuracy to ensure meaningful enforcement where necessary. Commission Update Report There was no discussion and no questions asked on the paper. Any other business AW asked about the Cabinet Office looking to introduce an online system for applying for absent voting. BC confirmed the Cabinet Office was looking at this, but it may not be deliverable in

time for the May 2021 elections AW asked when the decision would be made on its introduction before May, and BC confirmed the latest a decision could be made would be mid-February, but that Cabinet Office hoped a decision could be taken sooner. AW also asked if more could be done to encourage electoral administrators to accept scanned copies of applications for postal votes. BC confirmed she would discuss with colleagues, but noted the system was largely designed for paper forms and ink signatures. AW asked about the letter from the Minister for the Constitution and Devolution regarding proposals on notional spending, and invited an open discussion. He noted the Labour Party wanted to see section 75 enforced properly and would be responding to the letter in due course. AM agreed. EP invited LH to provide an update on the use of the electoral register by parties. LH explained that work on this was now resuming after delays caused by the 2019 UK Parliamentary general election and the COVID-19 pandemic. She explained a statutory instrument would update wording in legislation to reflect data protection needs, and provide clarity for EROs on providing historic data to assess the permissibility of donors. LH highlighted that the plan was for changes to be made for UK parliamentary general elections, and local elections in England and Northern Ireland in the Spring. Changes for Wales and Scotland would come into effect in Autumn. She noted this would ensure changes were in place 6 months before the 2022 elections. LH offered to continue discussion outside of the PPP if of interest. The sequencing of chairs for future meetings was confirmed as: February (Conservatives), June (SNP), September (Labour), December (Liberal Democrats). The date of the next meeting was confirmed, Tuesday 1 February 2021. Related content Party panels Find out about the different party panels, and read the minutes of past meetings Parliamentary Parties Panel minutes: 1 September 2020 Electoral Commission Parliamentary Parties Panel minutes Parliamentary Parties Panel minutes: 2 June 2020 Parliamentary Parties Panel minutes: 3 February 2020