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Home How we make decisions Electoral Commission Board On this page Who was at the meeting Apologies and introductions Declarations of interest Public Opinion: Findings from the Winter Tracker Using research to support our work Policy priorities of the Commission Business items by electronic means First published: 26 June 2020 Last updated: 21 June 2021 Meeting overview Date: Wednesday 20 May 2020 Time: 9:30am to 12:20pm Location: By video conference to Boothroyd Room, 3 Bunhill Row, London Date of next scheduled meeting: Wednesday 24 June 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 Bob Posner, Chief Executive Craig Westwood, Director, Communications, Policy and Research Louise Edwards, Director, Regulation Ailsa Irvine, Director, Electoral Administration and Guidance Amanda Kelly, Interim General Counsel Tom Hawthorn, Head of Policy Phil Thompson, Head of Research Niki Nixon, Head of External Communications David Bailey, Head of Strategic Planning and Performance Katharine Sparrow, Senior Executive Assistant Isabella Coventry, Acting Board Secretary Madeleine Spink, Senior Advisor, Governance Sheelagh Duffield, Advanced Boardroom Excellence (observing) Apologies and introductions Apologies from Rob Vincent and Kieran Rix, Director of Finance and Corporate Services, were noted. The Chair welcomed Sheelagh Duffield, from Advanced Boardroom Excellence, to the meeting. Sheelagh was observing the meeting as part of the external Board effectiveness review. Declarations of interest There were no new declarations of interest. Public Opinion: Findings from the Winter Tracker (EC 39/20) The Head of Research gave the Board an overview of the main findings from the Commission's annual public opinion survey. Overall, confidence in the key aspects of the administration of elections remained high, although an increase in concerns around the regulation of social media and intimidation of candidates was recorded. In the area of political finance, perceptions of the transparency of the spending and funding of parties remained low, and confidence that authorities would take appropriate action if a party was caught breaking the rules continued to fall. The survey found a high level of reported interest in politics. However, three quarters of people asked felt they did not have influence on politics, although these findings were significantly affected by age. The Board discussed the findings in detail. It Board noted that further qualitative research might be valuable to fully understand the implications of some of the statistics, as they related to different demographic groups, particularly Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) communities and different age groups. The Board agreed it would be useful to see further demographic break down of the findings, where these were available from the survey. The Board noted the consistency of much of the data over time, and discussed the need to ensure we got value for money from the survey. The Director of Communications, Policy and Research said the frequency of the survey could be considered, but that it was important we regularly tested what people were thinking to understand what voters wanted and found important. The Director noted that the findings were used by many teams across the Commission to inform their work, as well as by external stakeholders. It might also be possible to supplement a core group of annual questions with others, drilling down for more detail in areas of particular interest at the time, on a less frequent basis. Resolved: That the paper be noted. Using research to support our work (EC 40/20) The Director of Communications, Policy and Research introduced discussion, saying this was an opportunity for the Board to take a strategic look at the principles, purpose and approach of our research, which would

help inform the approach we took in developing the new corporate plan. The Head of Research said the aim of the paper was to give an overview on how and why we carried out and used our research. The questions for the Board to consider were whether the principles were right, whether there were any gaps in our understanding of our external environment that could be addressed by our research strategy, and whether we should be more proactive in engaging in partnership working. The Board noted the value of our tracker and event related research work, but also expressed a desire for more research around particular electoral issues, which could help inform or influence policy decisions. In discussion, the importance of horizon scanning and the need to think about the changing nature of the environment we operate in were also flagged. More qualitative research into communities which participated less in the electoral system could be worthwhile, as well a further look at accessibility issues. The Board was supportive of the proposal to be more proactive in looking at partnership working in this area, especially with academics, and to cast our net widely. They were also interested in ensuring that the Commission looked proactively at what comparable countries were doing in the electoral field, to help inform our own decision-making. The Board noted that potential budgetary pressures in future years would make prioritisation, and value for money, even more important considerations. Resolved: That the paper be agreed, noting the Board's comments above. Policy priorities of the Commission (EC 41/20) The Director of Communications, Policy and Research introduced the discussion by reminding the Board that the specific shortlist of policy priorities was relatively new for the Commission, but had proved to be a positive step, while obviously not covering all the Commission's priorities. The Director noted that the circumstances of the past two years meant that the scale of work planned originally to help put these priorities into action had not been possible, but progress in some areas had nevertheless been registered. The Director said that, for the future, the aim was to set an ambitious five-year agenda, but to check in every 18 months to enable the Board to assess whether the priorities were still correct, and to reflect on any changes in the external environment. The Head of Policy gave a brief overview of our approach to setting the priorities, highlighting the need to balance ambition with being realistic about the circumstances in which we operated. The Head of External Communications went on to describe the plans to engage with our stakeholders on each of the priorities. The Board discussed the need to strike a balance between highlighting our priorities for change and the risk of undermining people's faith in the system by suggesting it was not sound. The Board noted that while we continued to push for electoral modernisation and a consolidation of electoral legislation, we still needed to manage our engagement with governments on their priorities and legislative proposals. One problem was how to manage incremental change, if that was what governments preferred, as that would make the system still more complex. The Board noted that it was important for us to be able to come forward with workable, credible solutions, rather than just highlighting problems that needed to be addressed. We also needed to be sensitive to the huge pressures on local and central governments during the coronavirus pandemic, as well as the difficulties it was creating for political parties. The Board noted there was a significant and challenging agenda around social media and digital campaigning extending beyond the Commission's remit. We would not have the solutions on our own in these areas, and it would be important to work with other regulators in the field, including leading that conversation as necessary. The Board was content to continue with the current priorities, but would welcome opportunities to continue to review these as we developed the new corporate plan, and

also wanted to make sure that any opportunities for constructive change arising from the coronavirus lockdown were fully seized. Resolved: That the paper be agreed. Business items by electronic means The Chief Executive updated the Board on how the organisation continued to respond to the coronavirus lockdown. The Director of Electoral Administration and Guidance gave the Board an overview of the work that was underway to plan for the significant range of polls now scheduled for 2021. The Director noted that not only were the different scenarios of combination being taken in to account, but also the implications of the public health environment, and that we were seeking to learn lessons from recent international experience to inform our approach where appropriate. The General Counsel updated the Board on an issue that had arisen around a party registration. The Director of Regulation noted that learning from this experience was being built into the decision making process. The Chair acknowledged the new process to deal with electronic business items had probably been too complicated. Commissioners' feedback would be taken on board and amendments made.