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On this page Elections Bill 2019 general election spending returns Commission enforcement policy with specific emphasis on accounting units Minutes of the last meeting and actions arising (PPP 7/12/2021) Electoral Commission update report First published: 14 June 2022 Last updated: 14 June 2022 Who was at the meeting Who was at the meeting Conservative Party: Alan Mabbutt (AM), chair of meeting Catherine Latham (CL) Liberal Democrats: Kerry Buist (KB) Labour Party: Andrew Whyte (AW) Scottish National Party: Scott Martin (SM) Plaid Cymru: Geraint Day (GD) Carl Harris (CH) Alba Party: Chris McEleny (CM) Electoral Commission: Craig Westwood, Director of Communications, Policy and Research (CW) Louise Edwards, Director of Regulation (LE) Alex White, Senior Communications Officer (AMW) Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities: Paul Docker (PD), present for agenda item 1 Becca Crosier (BC) James Hairsnape (JH) Elections Bill BC outlined the Bill's progress through Parliament, noting that the UK Government would be publishing further policy statements on online absent voting applications, and overseas voters. BC provided an update on the current implementation timetable and asked for any thoughts or concerns on this proposed timetable; none were raised. She noted that the Department was working with the Commission on implementation, given its role in supporting delivery of the measures. BC also said that some live issues had been raised since the last PPP meeting, including the Bill's measures on secrecy of postal votes, and regarding candidate and agent addresses on ballot papers. PD set out the background to the concerns about the secrecy measures, noting that they had been drafted in such a way to cover the period of time a person has their postal ballot paper, which could in theory cause issues such as if the voter decided to hand their ballot in to a polling station. PD said that officials were considering amending the measures, so that they only cover the period of time in which the postal ballot is held to when it is completed. AM agreed that this should address concerns about the original drafting. PD highlighted that a backbench amendment had been tabled at Commons Report Stage which would allow candidates to use a town or village on ballot papers, rather than their full address or constituency. He noted that it was difficult to legally define a town or village, and that the Minister was minded to agree on allowing the use of local authority names as an alternative. GD asked whether this might work in relation to those candidates who stood in a cross-county constituency. SM added that it may look like a candidate is in the constituency, even if they are not in the local authority. AM and PD highlighted it would be up to the candidate to decide which form of address worked best for them. CL asked whether the first half of a postcode could be used; PD explained this had been considered but it would not sufficiently demonstrate proximity to the constituency, and could also cause problems in Northern Ireland. PD also noted the parliamentary interest in making similar changes to agents' addresses, explaining this was being considered, but any changes were unlikely to be in the Elections Bill. 2019 general election spending returns AM asked for an update on the Commission's publication and regulatory consideration of the 2019 UK parliamentary general election spending returns. LE explained the returns had all been published, and that there was no overarching review ongoing, but that if any individual casework was underway, this would progress as normal. Commission enforcement policy with specific emphasis on accounting units AM set out his concerns with how the Commission had handled some enforcement issues relating to accounting units, noting comments made at the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee in December by the Commission Chair, John Pullinger, about supporting volunteers to meet their legal

obligations. He also highlighted that the Commission's enforcement notices incorrectly refers to volunteers as party staff, rather than volunteers, and that online training for volunteers would be useful. AW also raised concerns and highlighted the main issue as being around late reporting by accounting units. This required the central party to 'crack the whip' to follow Commission guidance, which in turn had a negative effect on the willingness of volunteers to participate. CH highlighted that PEF Online does not allow parties to update registered accounting unit officers (LE agreed to look into this, and noted the aim of making such tasks easier through the new PF Online system). GD asked whether the Commission would consider online training for volunteers and candidates, to avoid putting them off from participating. CL suggested the Commission's approach to contacting the party regarding late or impermissible donations can be inconsistent, particularly in whether it writes to the accounting unit or the central party. She explained this made it difficult for the central party to communicate to volunteers what is expected of them. LE thanked the PPP members for their feedback, noting she would take it away for further consideration. She highlighted the development of the Commission's regulatory support work, which would help support political parties at all levels, including volunteers. She noted the Commission's recent survey had received nearly 400 responses, and that a key finding had been the need to support volunteers. LE added that the Commission's new Head of Regulatory Support would be using these responses to inform an outline regulatory support strategy, which would be shared with the parties for discussion. She noted this strategy would include training and webinars for parties. LE said that the Commission wanted to work with parties to help them get it right, but that legal obligations on central parties meant that the Commission has to take a case-by-case approach. She noted the Commission is planning to review its enforcement policy during the next financial year, which would provide an opportunity for parties to provide feedback. AW said it would be useful to know what the Commission's view is of a robust compliance system within political parties, and that he was happy to work with the Commission to get it right. LE agreed to follow up on the issue of a robust compliance system, but noted it would be different for different parties depending on their structure. AW suggested that a principles-based approach would be useful, which could act as a steer to parties while acknowledging their differences in structures. AW also questioned the approach of issuing low level fines for offences, highlighting that despite the central party's best efforts, errors from volunteers happen, and a £200 fine may not be effective. LE said that enforcement action was decided on a case-by-case basis, and that while low level fines had been successful in driving up compliance, the Commission was also trying to make better use of other measures such as compliance notices. SM raised a concern with the Commission's approach to compliance notices, noting they do not invite the party to respond or provide representation, but are held on the party's record. LE explained that compliance notices are used to provide a resolution in a limited set of circumstances, and that they appear on party records to encourage them to be taken seriously, but that she would reflect on the process and language used in the notices. Minutes of the last meeting and actions arising (PPP 7/12/2021) AM noted that he had sent apologies for the last meeting, which were not reflected in the draft minutes. The minutes were agreed as amended. Electoral Commission update report CH noted that the Commission's guidance webpage for the Welsh local government elections, which was linked to in the report, contained blank or dummy documents, including the nomination papers. LE agreed to follow this up with the Commission's guidance team. The update report was noted without discussion or question. Commission

actions Status Review issue with PEF Online not allowing parties to update registered accounting unit officers.