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Panel minutes: 21 January 2021    You are in the Party panels section Home    How we make decisions Party panels On this page Who was at the meeting Welcome and introductions Minutes of the last meeting Preparations for the Scottish Parliamentary Election 2021 Report on observations from Scottish Council by-elections EMB Convener directions Electoral registration, postal voting, proxy voting Electoral Commission guidance update Inclusion Scotland - Access to Elected Office Fund Scottish Government update Scotland Office/Cabinet Office update Scottish Boundary Commissions update EMB update Dates of next meeting First published: 20 April 2021 Last updated: 21 May 2021 Who was at the meeting Who was at the meeting Matt Edmonds, Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party (Chair) Scott Martin, Scottish National Party Paul Moat, Scottish Liberal Democrats Fiona O'Donnell, Scottish Labour Party Isabel Drummond-Murray, Scottish Boundary Commissions Maria McCann, Scottish Government Iain Hockenhull, Scottish Government James Newman, Scottish Government Malcolm Burr, Convener Electoral Management Board for Scotland Chris Highcock, Electoral Management Board for Scotland Pete Wildman, Scottish Assessors Association (chair of Electoral Registration Committee) Eleanor Tankard, Office of the Secretary of State for Scotland Rachel Winham, Royal Mail Scott Forsyth, Royal Mail Ethan Young, Inclusion Scotland Dame Susan Bruce, Electoral Commissioner, Scotland Alasdair Morgan, Electoral Commissioner Andy O'Neill, Head of Electoral Commission, Scotland Sarah Mackie, Manager, Electoral Commission, Scotland Martin McKeown, Senior Adviser, Elections & s, Scotland Catherine Heggie, Partnerships and Information Officer, Scotland Lindsey Hamilton, Business Support Officer, Scotland (Minutes) Welcome and introductions Matt Edmonds (ME) welcomed those present and introductions were made. Minutes of the last meeting The minutes of the previous meeting held on 24 November 2020 were approved. Preparations for the Scottish Parliamentary Election 2021 Scottish General Election (Coronavirus) Bill and other legislation relating to Scottish Parliamentary election 2021 Maria McCann (MMcC) said the Scottish General Election (Coronavirus) Bill had been passed unanimously on 23 December and now awaited Royal Assent. The First Minister had said they were committed to going ahead with the election on 6 May and saw no reason to change that position, but if a postponement were to be required, it would take the form of an emergency Bill and come back to MSPs to vote on. Rachel Winham (RW) asked how likely an all postal election would be. MMcC said it was extremely unlikely and only in the event of a postponement. MMcC said there was an agreed approach to the vaccination programme which prioritised those most vulnerable so those working in elections could not be vaccinated earlier than planned and it was possible that by May very significant numbers would have been vaccinated. Action: MMcC to circulate a link to Jason Leitch's Q&A's Report on observations from Scottish Council by-elections Martin McKeown (MMcK) said the key point to take from the Report was elections could be conducted safely with aspects of polling adapted to the public health condition. He said there would be a briefing on 5 February with all RO/EROs in Scotland to talk through the findings and also concerns about the polls going ahead. Fiona O'Donnell (FOD) asked if there was any correlation between by-elections held and turnout, but the by-elections had been held before moving to the tier system and there was no evidence of a great upturn in postal votes. EMB Convener directions Malcolm Burr (MB) said that directions had been issued to RO/EROs and a discussion on points arising took place. See directions Electoral registration, postal voting, proxy voting Pete Wildman (PW) said that by 1st December, postal vote applications were 16.6% and by

1st January 16.69%. During this period the electorate grew by 6,500. He advised that a Household Notification Letter (HNL) would be issued across Scotland starting week of 8 February confirming who was registered to vote at the property and who had a postal vote. It would provide instructions on how to register and apply for a postal vote. A TV advert airing during the first two weeks of February would raise awareness of postal voting. Any requests for a postal vote application form made to an ERO would be supplied with a business reply paid envelope. All postal vote applications needed to be returned to the EROs by 5pm on 6 April 2021. Scott Martin (SM) asked about the postal vote signature refresh, PW confirmed that was happening and if a registered postal voter did not reply to the request they would lose their postal vote, even if listed on the HNL. Electoral Commission guidance update MMcK confirmed core guidance for parties, candidates and agents had now been published and asked it be directed to those in the parties who required it. He said the website would make it clear that early contact should be made with the RRO and ROs to go over which aspects of the election would be different, e.g. nominations. Campaigning under Covid-19 - MMcK said the consultation with parties surrounding concerns on campaigning had closed and supplementary guidance to be issued would reflect the feedback received. Briefings for Parties -MMcK noted guidance on imprints had been circulated with some taking up the invitation to meet and discuss. He said he was happy to meet with all Parties to discuss any aspect of guidance. Code of Conduct for s -Sarah Mackie (SMa) reminded all of the voluntary code for campaigners, following receipt of complaints from the public. She said the Commission had not been provided with any evidence but in light of the earlier deadline for postal vote applications asked that candidates and campaigners be aware of the deadline and to direct forms to the relevant EROs so that postal vote applications could be received in time. She confirmed Scotland was the only country holding elections this year with an earlier postal voting deadline (for the Scottish Parliament election) but there were also a number of council by-elections taking place which carried the usual minus 11 days deadline. The Commission's postal voting forms were being updated to remove deadline references but with advice to check the deadline for the specific election applied for. Action: SMa to circulate the Commission's updated postal voting form as soon as possible. PW reminded all that requests for application forms to EROs were sent out with a letter explaining the deadline and the HNL made the deadline clear. FOD asked how to establish two days from parties gathering the forms. SMa advised that if in doubt, to leave the form in the voter's hands to forward to the relevant ERO. FOD asked if the Commission's recently published report on the by-elections had any questions on the value voters placed on receiving leaflets or a door knock visit. AON replied that the Commission's research did not cover that. Public Awareness - SMa briefed the Panel on a number of awareness activities to be undertaken leading to the Scottish Parliament election. The Chief Medical officer (CMO) was going to write in February to those who were shielding and the Commission would liaise with the CMO over the content of the letter. A virtual 'Welcome to your vote' week scheduled for the end of February would be held which replicated the work which would normally be done in schools. For qualifying foreign nationals there would be workshops with refugee groups. The main electoral registration campaign would commence on 9 March with TV, online and radio focussing on encouraging registration ahead of the deadline. The household booklet would go out on 22 March and would include information on what Parliament does, voting method options, how to vote and what to expect in the polling station under Covid restrictions. SM recalled parties had been consulted on the booklet in the past and asked if that would happen this time. SMa

indicated that, as previously, finalised text would be shared with parties for their information. Inclusion Scotland - Access to Elected Office Fund Ethan young (EY) spoke of the importance in having parties' record data on protected characteristics to help reduce barriers to those who run for public office. The data should include:- how many disabled people approved/not approved for candidate selection, who had/had not been selected as a candidate, how many elected and to which office The Parties' asked if EY could send a best practice guide including the information sought and which he agreed to do. Action: Ethan Young Scottish Government update Codes of Practice on spending - MMcC explained the Codes had not been introduced to the Scottish Parliament for the reasons given in the written update circulated earlier.

e-Counting 2022 - James Newman (JN) said an early trial of the system had taken place with a number of minor changes requested which would be developed prior to further testing. He committed to coming back to the group to canvass views either writing directly to the parties' or bringing to the next meeting. Action: James Newman.

Campaigning under Covid - MMcC said current regulations didn't permit door-to-door activity or public meetings and she would be interested to hear from parties on what they were able to do under current restrictions. All the parties agreed it was not possible to do traditional door step campaigning which would have a bigger impact closer to the election. Clarification was sought following a news item which had suggested leafleting was being practiced and asked if that was indeed possible. Leafleting etc. was currently not allowed. It was confirmed it was possible to leave home to go and vote as was the submission of nomination papers which were a legal obligation, so permitted. The parties asked if consideration had been given to extra spending and MMcC confirmed it had been discussed by the cross-party group of MSPs during the Scottish General Election (Coronavirus) Bill development but had been decided against at that point. Scotland Office/Cabinet Office update Ellie Tankard (ET) reported the Parliamentary Constituencies Bill had received Royal Assent on 14 December 2020 and the 2023 Boundary review had been launched. The Draft Repeal Bill published in December had its review extended and the Joint Committee would now report by 31 March 2021. Scottish Boundary Commissions update Local Government Boundary Commission - Isabel Drummond-Murray (ID-M) said the public consultation on electoral arrangements in Argyll and Bute, North Ayrshire and Highland closed on 26 January and all responses would be considered before developing final recommendations and submitting these to Scottish Ministers in 2021. Boundary Commission for Scotland – ID-M noted legislative changes had already been covered. She confirmed the 2023 review had now formally commenced but would not report until June 2023. Consultation in Scotland would likely begin in the autumn, slightly behind the Boundary Commission were likely to out to consultation in the summer. ID-M would be happy to set up a meeting to discuss the coming review with the parties. She suggested March and would circulate something via the Electoral Commission. Action: Isabel Drummond-Murray to arrange meeting with parties through EC Royal Mail update Rachel Winham (RW) said their preparations were well under way for the May 2021 election. She would forward the candidate mail update next Tuesday. With regards to a number of concerns over the current levels of service due to the pandemic, she indicated they faced the same issues as everyone else under Covid but gave assurance that election materials were a priority and would be delivered on time. Royal Mail appreciated parties wanted mail to hit door mats a day or two before delivery of postal votes and polling and said they would do the best for them. The helpline was open 24/7 and there was a contact for support. Action: Rachel Winham to provide contact details. EMB update Chris Highcock (CH) reiterated that the EMB direction letter had been issued and was

available on the EMB website. The Convener of the EMB was likely to update his advice to Scottish Ministers regarding the issue of day(s) of poll at the end of January and was currently considering additional directions in relation to daytime counting and numbers of voters per polling station. In relation to the May 2022 Scottish Local Government election e-counting project CH updated that work on the project was continuing and the EMB would update the Panel further at a later date. PW confirmed the electoral registers were published on 1 December 2020 except for Glasgow's which will be published on 1 February 2021. Second Interim Update available fixed 8 April agreed. Electoral Commission update AON indicated Police Scotland would attend the RO/ERO briefing on 5 February and be invited to attend the next SP PPP meeting. Action: EC to invite Police Scotland. Dates of next meeting Thursday 4 March 2021 at 11am