

Scottish Parliament Political Parties Panel minutes: 4 March 2021 | Electoral

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testing of staff was still under discussion but being considered. EC guidance update MMcK confirmed core guidance for parties had been published and spending return forms would be published shortly. All core guidance for candidates was on line and spending return forms published this week. There would also be a supporting document setting out what would be different at this election. He suggested early contact with Regional and Constituency Returning Officers who would give information on the conduct of elections locally. ACTION: He would send round a link to the RRO/RO Contact details. Campaigning under Covid-19 Penelope Curtis, said the Minister for Parliamentary Business had updated on preparations for the safe running of the election but also outlined how campaigning was likely to take place. The Scottish Government update included a link to that statement which sought to align campaigning activity as closely as possible to the updated strategic framework. It was anticipated leafleting by volunteers could begin from 15 March, subject to a decision taken that restrictions would be eased. Face to face door step campaigning could commence from 5 April. The public health test would be that infection rates across Scotland had reached 50 per 100,000 across Scotland and the test positivity rate under 5%. Any individual local authority exceeding these figures would have to suspend campaigning until figures dropped below that level. She said public acceptance and reaction to campaigning would be absolutely key and not all would welcome it. Briefings for parties MMcK said he and Andy O'Neill (AON) had engaged with parties, particularly new ones, to get across key messages regarding rules they needed to be aware of, (e.g. new imprint rules). He said the offer was still there if parties wanted to meet. Public awareness Sarah Mackie (SMA) talked about the Commission's registration campaign, 'Got 5' which would launch on 9 March. She said the democratic engagement area of the website provided resources for stakeholders, including animations on how to vote, how to complete ballot papers and what to expect in the polling station. SMA also said that an animation about how postal votes are processed and kept secure would also be shared. She reported the Scottish Parliament website was developing a video on how the voting system worked. The Commission's household booklet would be distributed from the week beginning 22 March with accessible versions available week commencing 15 March. A link to the booklet has been circulated, but SMA asked that members do not share this until the accessible versions were available. There had been requests from parties to be added to the press distribution list and she asked anyone who wished to be added to send her a request (in line with GDPR regulations). Catherine Heggie (CHe) reported that the 'Welcome to your vote' campaign would begin on 9 March, was aimed at 16 & 17 year olds and newly-enfranchised foreign nationals and would run until the registration deadline. Digital and print resources were available for partners to use across their channels, as well as a voting factsheet for newly-enfranchised citizens and learning resources for 14-18 year olds. Police Scotland Superintendent Gerry Corrigan (GC) reported the policing structure was in place and key risks were public order, terrorism, cyber threat and candidate safety though he stressed no specific threat had been identified. The police intended to provide all candidates with personal safety advice in relation to being a candidate and would support ROs in facilitating the throughput of people at polling places. They would engage, explain and encourage to abide by the rules, with enforcement activity as a last resort in extreme circumstances. He said they were keen to have sight of guidance going out to canvassers so their knowledge would be in tune. He said planning meetings were well under way and divisional points of contact well linked to local authorities so building a knowledge of where polling places were to develop a local picture. On

polling day and the day of the count, police operation command centre would be maintaining a national overview of anything developing for a police perspective. Scott Martin (SM) asked if a 24 hour point of contact telephone list existed. ACTION: GC said he would communicate back on this over the next few days. Scottish Government update MMcC asked if anyone had questions regarding the previously circulated update. She said the SSI had gone to committee that morning. Scotland Office/Cabinet Office update Helena Brice (HB) asked if there were any questions regarding the previously circulated update. Scottish Boundary Commission update Isabel Drummond-Murray said there was not much to report, she had postponed the meeting with the parties about the 2023 review and were now focussed on the islands review work. She said she would be back in touch in May to set up a meeting after the election. Action: Isabel Drummond-Murray to arrange meeting with parties through EC after the election. Royal Mail update Rachel Winham (RW) commented on performance concerns from stakeholders but assured all that postal votes and election materials were a priority and contingency plans were in place. Priority mailboxes were emptied two to three times a day and managers would make sure mail with purple flashes were pulled out. There was also Sunday working. She said candidate mail could be tracked through the network and would be delivered by day 3 for addressed and day 7 for unaddressed with an update provided to any party. Final sweep information would be going out to EROs soon. She said they would be sending out packs with details of their guide and election sort details and asked to send out to candidates after close of nominations and particularly to help with Independent candidates. A meeting with parties' printers had taken place and one to one meetings about a party's mailing could be held. Pete Wildman (PW) reported that as at 1 March, 770,000 postal votes had been registered and the number was climbing daily. He could not give a definitive figure now but said it would be in excess of that. ACTION: AON said he would send Rachel Winham the Electoral Commission research. SM asked if there was an indication on uptake of postal votes at recent by elections. PW reported pre by election postal vote levels of 13.6% in the Borders which rose to 22%, an increase of 8.4% where normally would only see 1% increase. In December, postal vote demand was 16.6% and now was just over 18%. He predicted that figure would change and people do leave it to the last minute to apply. EMB update CH said they had interacted with ROs, EROS and government around the practical delivery of the election. Electoral Commission update AON said all had been covered in previous discussion. Sue Bruce informed the panel there was a preferred candidate for the position of Chair of the Electoral Commission and his name was John Pullinger who was a past president of the Royal Statistical Society. He had gone through processes led by the Speaker's Committee and on Monday had been involved in a public session with them. If they agreed it would go for debate and be subject for the Royal Warrant. Alex Attwood Northern Ireland had been appointed as smaller parties Commissioner and the Royal Warrant was in processing. The Commission was also recruiting for a country Commissioner for Northern Ireland. Dates of future meetings AON said a date approximately 10 days after the election would be set for the next meeting as well as dates from autumn onwards to May 2022 for the Scottish council elections.