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On this page Minutes of the last meeting and actions arising (PPP 6/9/2022) Elections Act – DLUHC Political Finance Online Contingency planning for the King's Coronation Electoral Commission Update Report – paper for information and any issues arising Any other business First published: 16 February 2023 Last updated: 16 February 2023 Who was at the meeting Who was at the meeting Labour Party: Andrew Whyte (AW), chair of meeting Liberal Democrats: Kerry Buist (KB) Scottish National Party: Scott Martin (SM) Conservative Party: Alan Mabbutt (AM) Jonathan Burkitt (JB) Plaid Cymru: Geraint Day (GD) 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 Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities: Paul Docker (PD) Becca Crosier (BC) James Hairsnape (JH) Minutes of the last meeting and actions arising (PPP 6/9/2022) CM noted his apologies were not listed on the minutes; GD noted a correction on his name. The minutes were approved as corrected. KB noted that the police continued to suggest the Electoral Commission should arrange any meeting between them and the parties. LE said she would remind the NPCC that the Commission remained of the view that its permission was not required for the police and the parties to speak to each other. She noted a new NPCC electoral lead was expected soon. AW suggested the parties would be happy to look at alternative formats for any meeting. AW asked for an update on a roundtable on leaders' tours. LE said that these were not an immediate priority for the Commission, as they had never been a point of controversy or enforcement. However, she noted that any engagement would be more useful nearer to a relevant election, when she would be keen to get a sense of what concerns the parties had on the issue. KB suggested it was party leaders' offices who were asking for clarity on what they could and could not do at an election with a leader's tour. AM added that some uncertainty might have arisen from turnover in leader's office staff, who would want reassurance from the Commission so that they did not make any mistakes. LE explained the Commission's regulatory support offer existed to answer queries such as this, but that she would take it away and consider moving it up the Commission's priorities as per the PPP's feedback. SM asked whether the Commission's code of practice on spending for parties and candidates would be revisited following the Elections Act provisions coming into force. LE said that the Code had been delivered to DLUHC prior to the Elections Act's introduction, but not laid. The Commission has produced guidance reflecting its contents, and guidance on new Elections Act measures. However, revisiting the Code was not currently in the Commission's plans due to other priorities and limited resources. There were no plans to present a new Code to the Minister. Elections Act – DLUHC BC provided an update on the Elections Act, noting an implementation timetable had been shared with the PPP. She explained the accessibility statutory instruments were being signed this week, and measures on expenditure had come into force in November. Parliamentary debates on the voter ID SIs are planned for next week. AW asked for clarification on the dates for voter ID, checking whether it was correct that the voter authority certificate application process goes live on 16 January, and the requirement comes into force for elections (except UK parliamentary general elections) after 3 May. BC confirmed this, explaining the application process going live ahead of the voter ID requirement itself would allow people to prepare. PD confirmed the voter ID requirement would apply after 3 May for parliamentary by-elections. KB asked when parties would be able to see the forms for applying for a voter authority certificate, and whether it would be similar to postal vote forms in

being uniform across local authorities. PD said the content is prescribed in legislation, but the form design was not. AI added that the Commission had designed a form, but had not been able to user test it owing to delays to secondary legislation. She offered to share a draft form with the PPP, when available. KB asked whether there were enough women staffing polling stations to allow for voters wearing face coverings to remove them for ID checks in a respectful way. BC explained DLUHC had been speaking to local authorities about this, and had a mixed response in terms of their levels of concern. With this in mind, the government had funded privacy screens and extra staff, and would let local authorities decide the best approach for their communities. KB asked what guidance would be available to polling station staff on checking ID, noting there was no limit on expired ID being used and that this risked a different approach across polling stations. BC confirmed that expired ID still needed to look like the voter presenting it, and that while there was some subjectivity involved in checking ID, the policy intent was one of taking a reasonable approach. She noted the presiding officer would have the final decision over any ID disputes. PD added that the presiding officer can ask a list of statutory questions about a voter's identity, and that it would be an offence to lie in response. KB raised whether there will be a deadline to return forms for a voter authority certificate, and what the expected turnaround times are for applications. BC said the deadline was at 5pm, 6 working days before polling day. She also noted that there is the option of a temporary certificate being printed if the original does not arrive, and voters can apply for an emergency proxy vote in certain prescribed circumstances. She added that the intention is for certificates to go out within one working day of the application being processed. PD explained the aim is that people do not wait until close to the deadline to apply for a voter authority certificate, which is what the communications work was focused on. KB noted the risk of further postal strikes and asked whether any thought had gone into mitigating their impact on this process, and that of postal ballots. BC explained Royal Mail prioritises electoral mail, and that DLUHC was in contact with them ahead of elections. PD noted Royal Mail have contingency plans for strike action. CM asked about public awareness work on voter ID, in particular the accepted forms of ID. AI gave an overview of the Commission's public awareness work, saying this would begin in January with an awareness-raising phase, followed by more targeted messaging in March in those areas with scheduled elections. CM raised the risk of running a communications campaign in England-only, and a parliamentary by-election being called in Scotland or Wales, where voters will not have seen any voter ID messaging. AI offered to share more details about the campaign strategy with the PPP after the meeting. AW asked if concerns about polling station staff security had been raised, and how they would be expected to handle difficult conversations when checking ID. BC said DLUHC had discussed this with electoral administrators, and the expectation is any difficult conversations will be dealt with as they are now for non-voter ID issues. She noted there had been no significant issues in Northern Ireland, where voter ID is already in place. Political Finance Online LE gave an overview of the Commission's decision to halt work on the project, which was no longer delivering value for money. She explained that the existing PEF Online system had been upgraded to the cloud and in line with Elections Act provisions, which had addressed capacity issues, and extension of the Commission's advice service meant there would be more resilience in the current system. LE said the Commission remained committed to delivering the benefits of a new system, and that a discovery phase for a new system would take place over the next 6 months, followed by a procurement process. Previous

feedback from the parties on their user requirements will inform this process, and the Commission will confirm with parties that feedback held on record is up to date. AW indicated that the parties would prefer enough clearance either side of local elections for the launch of a new system, and that at the start of the parties' new financial year (January) would be ideal. SM asked whether the discovery phase would be the Commission re-covering what it had already captured through engagement on the original project. LE explained this was not the Commission starting again, but looking to check feedback it had received was up to date. KB explained her party had put development of its internal systems on hold while waiting for the launch of the Commission's new system. She noted launching in January 2024 would be the worst timing ahead of an expected UK Parliamentary general election. LE appreciated the difficulty the delay and halting of the project had caused parties internally, and offered to help with explaining what had happened to party colleagues. SM noted the Commission had advised that it would share with the parties the user requirements and feedback received to date, in a document. LE explained the Commission was considering the best option for this, and would be guided by the parties on their preferred format. SM was happy to receive in any format. SM asked when it had become obvious that the project was going to be halted. LE explained the decision was taken in October, following the outcome of the external review she had mentioned at the September meeting of the PPP. SM suggested that the Commission could have realised this sooner, given it had only been able to demonstrate to parties the registration aspect, not the financial reporting side of the system. LE explained the background to the external review, including that the original developers' code had failed, which prompted the review to be undertaken. There was a brief discussion on commercial sensitivity and how this limited the Commission's options for discussing with the parties at an earlier stage. CM said the decision to halt had put a strain on parties internally, particularly in training those working with the system. SM suggested parties might consider going back to paper submissions to reduce the risk of this happening in future. LE reiterated the current system was more resilient following IT upgrades, and confirmed that paper submissions were available, but not ideal as they were less efficient. GD suggested there was a credibility issue for the Commission on moving to develop a further new system, and that there was scepticism about it being delivered. He suggested there was a need for a step-by-step process and realistic timelines. LE accepted the need to rebuild credibility, and noted the plans for a comprehensive discovery phase. SM asked what upgrades had been made to the current PEF Online system to account for the Elections Act provisions. LE said it had been upgraded to account for the new party registration provisions on assets and liabilities, and non-party campaigner tiers. Contingency planning for the King's Coronation AM asked whether the Commission had any guidance on mitigating the impact of the King's Coronation on counts for the May 2023 elections, given the proximity to the Bank Holiday. AI explained the Commission was having conversations with local authorities and would send out a survey to electoral administrators in January, which would provide more data on their count plans and any concerns they had about the May elections. AI said the Commission anticipated there was likely to be more overnight counting on the Thursday. BC added that the clarity on the Bank Holiday date had allowed local authorities to plan ahead with confidence. AW asked whether there were any concerns about police being drafted to London for the coronation, and whether this would have any impact on polling station security. AI said the Commission had not yet heard any such concerns. KB raised concerns about count staffing levels. BC acknowledged this was a pressure faced by local authorities over recent years. CM

asked whether it was possible for the parties to observe on polling day. AI explained this was not usually done, and was not possible under the observers scheme which is non-party political, but that it may be possible to facilitate something through a volunteer local authority, albeit the legislation meant it was unlikely that it would be possible to access polling stations. Electoral Commission Update Report – paper for information and any issues arising LE highlighted that the Commission would welcome feedback on the three open consultations noted in the update report. Any other business AW asked whether DLUHC had any updates on uprating spending limits, since it wrote to the PPP in September. JH confirmed there was nothing to update on, and that the decision was with the new Minister. SM asked what indices are used for uprating decisions; JH explained there are different measures but that last time, the CPI measure of inflation was used. SM raised the availability of PDFs on the Commission website, noting that the ‘print-to-PDF’ option produced a PDF of the text appearing on the webpage, rather than a standalone PDF document, which he could obtain directly from the Commission. LE explained the Commission had moved away from PDFs as they do not meet accessibility laws, and that guidance was transitioning to a new, more accessible format. SM challenged the assertion that PDF’s did not meet accessibility laws. KB asked when new nominations papers, requiring two subscribers, would be ready. AI offered to check this and follow up after the meeting. The next meeting was agreed for Tuesday 7 February 2023. Commission actions Status Raise with NPCC issue of meeting with the parties. Consider moving leaders’ tour queries up the Commission’s priorities as per the PPP’s feedback. Share draft forms for applying for voter authority certificate. Share further information on Commission’s voter ID public awareness work. Follow up on when new nominations papers would be ready. Consider how to disclose what had been captured from parties on PEF Online system replacement requirements