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Chair's and Chief Executive's meetings, and meetings in devolved legislatures

Commissioner wash-up First published: 23 July 2019 Last updated: 23 July 2019 Summary

Date: 24 January 2018 Time: 9:30am to 12:20pm Location: Boothroyd Room, 3 Bunhill

Row, London Date of next scheduled meeting: Wednesday 13 March Who was at the meeting

Who was at the meeting Sir John Holmes (JEH) Chair Sue Bruce (SB) (by v/c) Anna

Carragher (AC) Elan Closs Stephens (ECS) John Horam (JRH) David Howarth (DH) Alasdair

Morgan (AM) Bridget Prentice (BP) Rob Vincent (RV) Claire Bassett (CB) Carolyn Hughes

(CH) Ailsa Irvine (AI) Robert Posner (RP) Craig Westwood (CW) Katharine Sparrow (KS)

Polly Wicks (PW) Katy Thomas (KT) Louise Footner (LF) Apologies There were no

apologies. The Board noted the vote in the House of Commons the previous evening

rejecting the appointment of Professor Sir Ian Kennedy as Commissioner. JEH noted he

had been in contact with the Clerk to the Speaker's Committee. The Committee

coincidentally had a meeting later that day where they would be discussing the next

steps. Declaration of interests All the nominated Commissioners had stood for

election, and been nominated as Commissioners by political parties that had contested

recent elections and also registered as campaigners in the EU Referendum. AC was a

member of the Board of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland (which received money

from the EU Peace 3 Programme, and the Corners programme for individual artists). A

Trustee of the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust, a recipient of EU funding, she had now

returned to that role at the conclusion of the Referendum. AC declared her sister was

Head of BBC News in Northern Ireland. DH in 2008 drafted and put forward in

parliament an amendment to the then European Union (Amendment) Bill, proposing an EU

referendum in the terms 'Should the United Kingdom remain in the European Union?' DH

had stood for election on a manifesto supporting an in-out referendum on the European

Union. DH was a council member of Justice, an organisation which had in the past

received EU funding. DH reported that the European Parliament subsidised a regular

annual visit by his Public Policy students to Brussels. DH declared that he had been

awarded a research grant of over €40,000 from the European Parliament. DH declared

that he had been at university with Jon Lansman, but had no current contact with him.

JRH was a member of the pro-Europe Conservative Europe Group, the parliamentary group

Conservative European Mainstream, and of the all-party parliamentary group on Reform,

Decentralisation and Devolution Group, chaired by Lord Foulkes. CB noted she had

joined the Board of the Internet Watch Foundation. Minutes of 13 September 2017

Agreed: with an amendment to correct the date, that the minutes of the Commission

Board meeting held on 6 December 2017 be approved as an accurate record and the Chair

be authorised to sign them. Draft Corporate Plan 2018-19 to 2022-23 CB introduced the

paper noting it was an evolution of the previous Plan that the Board had approved

last year. Unfortunately this plan had not been reviewed and signed off by the

Speaker's Committee due to the calling of the UK Parliamentary General Election. CH

reminded the Board that once any comments and amendments suggested by the Board had

been incorporated, the Plan would be presented to the Speaker's Committee along with

the Main Estimate and a Value for Money Study from the NAO around the end of March.

KT noted that a key change to the Plan was the addition of a new goal, which covered

value for money and best use of resources. This ensured all work of the Commission

was covered and meant all staff could see where they were contributing to the work of the Commission. KT explained that the Plan included planning for a European Parliamentary election, but this would be kept under review and updated as and when changes were known. The funding for this area of work would be kept separate and returned if it was not required and this would be explained in the narrative accompanying the budget. The Plan also highlighted the Commission's work across the UK and noted that changes in accountability were due to be implemented over the next couple of years. The Board agreed it was a strong Plan with a good narrative and clear sense of direction. During discussion it was suggested that the Plan should be more explicit about the Commission's relationship with the voter and its work around regulating political spending and parties. CB agreed that while the plan did cover these areas it could be clearer, and thought the regulation side would probably come across more strongly once the Forewords had been written. A section specifically about voters could be added. It was agreed more could be included about the work the Commission was already doing to develop the skills and capability the organisation would require to deliver its future work as a centre of expertise on all matters electoral. The changes in devolved accountability were discussed along with what this might mean for future plans, but it was noted that until there was more clarity it was difficult to go much further on the specifics. A question was asked around the provisions for the Local Government Boundary Commission for England pensions. CH explained that advice at the time of the separation of the two organisations was that the provisions had to remain with the Electoral Commission. However, this was something that could be investigated again to establish if there had been any changes. In response to a question as to whether the Budget was flexible enough to deal with any unplanned electoral events, CB said that it should be, and if necessary the Commission would go to the Speaker's Committee with a Supplementary Estimate. Contingency planning was regularly reviewed so the organisation had a clear idea of the likely costs, so we would be able to move quickly should the need arise - once a significant, unplanned electoral event was announced a supplementary estimate could be prepared very quickly. In response to a question about a contingency provision only being included for the first year, CB explained the assumptions underlying the five year budget and how it attempted to cover planning for unknown circumstances the organisation might need to deal with. She said overall the organisation was taking a relatively cautious approach over the longer term, but the Speaker's Committee agreed one year's funding at a time. If circumstances were to change this could be reflected in future Main Estimates along with explanations for any changes. CH updated the Board on the NAO's Value for Money Study which would be a short guide to the Commission, similar to what they had done for other organisations. Agreed that with the amendments, changes and additional suggestions, the Draft Corporate Plan was approved. Amendments agreed were: Addition of a section on voters The foreword/ introduction to pull out key issues such as workload in PFR and devolution Further information about skills and capacity development to be added Agreed to review provision arrangements for Boundary Commission pensions and whether these could be changed Main Estimate for 2018/19 CH introduced the paper, noting it brought together the budget for the work the Board had been discussing over the last year. KT highlighted that the Capital budget was higher than in previous years; this was mainly a result of a lot of planned project activity originally scheduled for 2017 having to be paused and postponed as a result of the UK parliamentary general election in June. CB also highlighted the revised approach to contingency for the coming year which she hoped would give more flexibility to the budget overall. In

response to a question about how the assumptions and explanations would be presented to Speaker's Committee, CH said that a detailed covering letter would be sent alongside the Main Estimate. CB gave some additional reassurance to the Board around the discipline behind the planning for the project work and capital spend. Agreed that subject to suggested amendments the Main Estimate for 2018/19 was approved. Chief Executive's Update for January As noted in the Update CB confirmed Kieran Rix would be joining the Commission as the new Director of Finance and Corporate Services, on 1 March. AI said preparations for the May 2018 polls were going well across the organisation. Orders for four of the five Cabinet Office Pilots had been signed. However as yet we had not received details for the postal and proxy voting pilots due to take place in Tower Hamlets, Peterborough and Slough. The pilots had not been explicitly designed as comparator studies, but she noted that further pilots were expected in 2019 so there should be an opportunity to learn lessons from this round. AI said planning for any unscheduled electoral events was being kept under review. She noted that the uncertainty around the potential for a Northern Ireland Assembly election had led the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland to push back the introduction of on-line registration. The Commission was working closely with the Cabinet Office and others to try and identify options for improvements to the canvass process that could be implemented through secondary legislation. AI noted the scope for change was limited, but that the Commission was working to ensure any changes were a stepping stone for the longer term changes we wanted to see implemented. At the first meeting of the Commission's Modernising Registration Steering Group the following week they would be reviewing and agreeing a set of key principles that could then underpin all the Commission's work around electoral registration. AI updated the Board on the Delivering Modern Guidance Project which had recently completed its first phase of work. This had found that the Commission's suite of guidance was comprehensive, thorough and well respected, but difficult to navigate and maintain. The Project Board had taken the decision that it should move to an online web based system, and was now developing a delivery plan for implementation. Subject to a gateway review in the summer, the delivery phase would commence in the autumn. CW updated the Board on development with the public awareness and voter registration campaign for the May polls. The team were currently finalising detailed media plans which would specify where and when the advertising would appear. The creative approach for the new campaign had also been signed off and would be moving into production in the next couple of weeks. On the recently approved fraud campaign the team were working with the project's partners at the Cabinet Office, CrimeStoppers and key local authorities to ensure the messages were appropriate, would translate well and would be useable in as many different authorities as possible. CW said his team were also providing expertise to the Cabinet Office for the public awareness plans for the pilots. CW said planning was also underway for the public information support for the May polls, which including looking at some quick fixes to pick up the increasing number of queries through social media. He said this would be something that would be looked at more thoroughly after May. RP updated the Board on work to draft Codes of Practice to further define the split between candidate and party spending. RP updated the Board on themes that were starting to emerge as the major party returns from the General Election were examined. RP updated the Board on some of the work the Party Registration Team were dealing with, including a new party that a group wanted to register in Tower Hamlets. The Northern Ireland Transparency Order was still waiting for a date for the debate in the House of Lords. If this didn't take place till late February it would mean another

publication date would go by where the Commission was not able to publish details of donations and Loans in Northern Ireland. Noted. Appointment to Committees Agreed That: ECS would take up the vacant position on the Audit Committee RV would become Chair of the Remuneration and HR Committee AC's membership of the Remuneration and HR Committee would be extended Forward Plan of Board Business 2018-19 Noted. Decision/Action tracker for January It was agreed the first action could be made clearer. The Board reviewed the allocation of Commissioners to the different Steering Groups. Modernising Registration: BP and RV Modernising Elections: AM and SB Regulatory New Commissioner – to be kept under review Digital and Infrastructure: AC Noted Chair's and Chief Executive's meetings, and meetings in devolved legislatures Noted. Commissioner wash-up