Parliamentary Parties Panel minutes: 6 June 2023   First published: 28 September 2023 Last updated: 28 September 2023 Who was at the meeting Who was at the meeting Scottish National Party: Scott Martin (SM), chair of meeting Conservative Party: Alan Mabbutt (AM) Jonathan Burkitt (JB) Labour Party: Andrew Whyte (AW) Liberal Democrats: Kerry Buist (KB) Plaid Cymru Owen Roberts Geraint Day (GD) Alba Party: Chris McEleny (CM) Electoral Commission: Louise Edwards, Director of Regulation and Digital Transformation (LE) Craig Westwood, Director of Communications, Policy and Research (CW) Pete Mills, Senior Communications Officer Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities: Paul Docker (PD) Becca Crosier (BC) James Hairsnape (JH) Imogen Harris Minutes of the last meeting and actions arising (PPP 7/2/2023) SM raised a number of outstanding actions on behalf of the PPP. He asked for an update on the proposed meeting between the PPP and the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC). LE said that the Commission would remind the NPCC of the parties' request, reiterating that the Commission's permission is not needed to arrange a meeting with the PPP. AM suggested that KB write to the NPCC as the chair of the next PPP meeting, to arrange. KB asked for an update on previous queries about party leaders' tours; AM added it would be useful if parties could be made aware of any guidance updates. LE said the Regulatory Support team was arranging meetings with parties to make sure any updated guidance is useful, in the run up to the next UKPGE. KB asked when guidance would be ready, given the party was beginning to train staff and volunteers. LE offered to follow up on the timetable, but noted that existing guidance already covers this issue. KB expressed concern about inconsistencies between the Commission's written guidance and advice provided during recent advice surgeries. LE expressed regret about the issue, asked for details of the specific examples, and encouraged parties to raise these concerns with the Commission when they happen, so they can be looked into and addressed. SM asked whether the PPP mailing list could be better used to highlight when new items are published on the Commission's website. CW said the Commission was happy to do this, conscious of email volume and the existence of other channels to keep parties updated. SM asked for an update on stats on the Commission's guidance being accessed as PDFs rather than as HTML pages. LE said the data suggested there had been one page view of PDF guidance for political parties in recent months. SM raised cut-off dates for enforcement, which KB said related to the Commission not responding quickly during investigations. LE noted it was unfortunate that parties don't always get timely responses, which can be the result of Commission staff working on multiple investigations. She outlined two proposed changes to the Commission's enforcement policy, subject to Board approval: regular check-ins, and a senior check-in should an investigation last 12 months, which was very rare. SM asked if there was an update on aggregation of donations for accounting units. LE said the Commission was working on how better to support compliance for parties with accounting units and would consult with parties on the approach. SM asked for updates on recent discussions on the impact of spending limits on accessibility costs, and gifts in kind regarding auctions. On auctions, LE confirmed additional guidance was coming, including examples. SM said it would be helpful to have examples on the grey areas. On accessibility, LE reiterated the importance of providing information in an accessible format, and that the Commission reads a narrow definition of unsolicited material; for example, if a voter requests material in a different format, that is not unsolicited and would not need to go on a spending return. May 2023 elections KB raised concerns about the role of greeters at polling stations, including that their presence will skew statistics on voter ID, and that the PPP had not been told about

them being in place. She said in some areas it had caused problems for tellers, given the amount of people outside polling stations to talk to voters. KB reported inconsistent understanding of voter ID amongst polling station staff. CW set out the Commission's post-poll research on voter ID, including that it would publish an initial analysis later in June and that it was collecting separate data from polling stations with greeters, and from those without greeters. He said the Commission was also running a public opinion survey to capture how many voters chose not to vote and for what reason. BC explained the legislation was not prescriptive about the use of greeters; it was a decision for individual Returning Officers to make. AW said his party had a similar experience to KB, including around counts and access to turnout data. He said a significant minority of Returning Officers had made it hard to scrutinise counts, and questioned whether it was caused by a lack of training or a lack of experience. AM agreed regarding the count process, noting an example of agents not being gathered before results were declared, which he said was happening too often. He noted the Commission produces comprehensive guidance, but questioned whether it was being read and applied fully. KB said there was a lack of consistency in approach to decisions on disputed ballots. PD clarified that while greeters or tellers could remind voters to bring photo ID, it was not their job to check ID and that they should not ask for it. He also noted that there were multiple instances of voters turning up to polling stations when they had filled in postal vote application forms provided by parties, and highlighted that parties needed to make it clear what the forms were for. PD also said DLUHC had heard feedback from RNIB that there had not been a significant change in the accessibility of information provided by the parties at the May elections. Elections Act 2022 BC provided an overview of timings for the remaining Elections Act measures coming into force, and said she would circulate an updated timetable via email. Online absent voting applications and postal and proxy voting restrictions come into force in Autumn, postal vote handling and secrecy in December, and overseas electors changes in January. BC said remaining campaigner measures – digital imprints, undue influence and intimidation – will come into force in November. JH confirmed the Commission had submitted digital imprints guidance to the Minister for approval. AW asked for an update on the postal and proxy voting changes, noting recent Government announcements regarding the need for identity checks. BC clarified that online absent voting applications will require an identity check in the same way online voter registration currently does, not a requirement to produce photo ID as with in-person voting. KB asked if someone in Scotland may need two separate postal vote applications, because of different timetables for reserved elections. BC confirmed this, noting that this had been discussed with the Scottish and Welsh governments, but there is increasing divergence of electoral law. She explained work was ongoing on communicating the changes to voters. Forward look PD said the PCC elections in England and Wales in May 2024 would require voter ID, and other Elections Act measures in force by then. He confirmed the usual process for candidates would be followed. PD provided an update on boundary changes, with the Boundary Commission due to report to the Secretary of State by 1 July, with orders being made by November. DLUHC is working with the sector to identify any risks and challenges ahead of boundary changes being in place by the next UKPGE. SM asked if the RO for constituencies would be selected on the basis of having a plurality of electors; PD confirmed this. Political Finance Online LE said the Commission had made progress in its discovery phase for a new online system ahead of moving to a delivery and design phase in the future. She said a survey would be sent shortly to all parties with an income of over £250k, to understand those

parties' technical infrastructures. LE said it would be helpful if PPP members could seek input from party technology leads. LE said the Commission was working through existing user stories and removing anything related to the old platform coding, but that not much had changed in terms of the actual user stories. She offered to share examples of this if the parties had particular queries. KB said timing of the new system was key, given capacity within parties would be tight in the run up to the UKPGE. SM asked if there was a target date for going live. LE said timescales for launching would be considered as part of the delivery phase, and that the Commission would bring the user group back and factor in timings. Electoral Commission Update Report SM noted the Commission's proposals to consult on an updated Code of Conduct for campaigners. He said the Code was voluntary and ultimately owned by the parties given they sign off on adhering to it; LE explained it was the Commission who drafts the Code's content and is responsible for sharing updated versions, and so can make proposals for content to be discussed by the parties. AM said the proposed addition to the Code on handling completed absent vote applications had been rejected by the parties in the past, and that it was unlikely the parties would agree to it this time. He noted the difference in handling applications and completed ballot papers. AW agreed with this point and said his party would not support the proposal to amend the Code. He said that while completed ballot packs should not be handled, providing and handling absent voting application forms was a fundamental part of responsible campaigning. He added that anecdotal feedback from voters was that collecting application forms was helpful. SM said parties collect application forms in the absence of a freepost option for voters to return their forms directly to their local authority. CW outlined the background to the proposal, saying the evidence base had changed recently with significant public concern about campaigners encouraging voters to return application forms to a campaigner address, rather than to the ERO. He said the Commission was happy to take views from parties on how to address those concerns, and that the Commission has a duty to put forward solutions to come to a constructive outcome. CM suggested that public concerns were a result of misunderstanding of what is and isn't legitimate practice, and that this should be addressed. KB said her party had responded to complaints about another party collecting application forms by noting it was entirely legal. GD agreed with the other parties, and noted a divergence issue where different absent voting systems apply in Scotland and Wales. Any other business KB noted the IT problems which had delayed the start of the meeting and there was a discussion about how to improve this for future meetings. SM suggested the parties could move their pre-meet to a virtual meeting the day before PPP meetings, which the Commission and DLUHC both agreed with. KB said IT problems would need to be fixed before the proposed senior-level meeting in September. CW agreed but noted that this would need to be in-person, and required agreement from parties that they would send senior representatives to make it a productive meeting. There was an overview of work being done by the Defending Democracy Taskforce to support cyber security for elected officials. The next meeting was agreed for Tuesday 5 September 2023. Commission actions Status Remind NPCC of PPP request for a meeting Follow up on timetable for guidance on party leader's tours Arrange proposed senior level meeting for September DLUHC actions Status Share Elections Act timetable with PPP members Complete