

The
Electoral
Commission

Interim Corporate Plan

2020/21 – 2024/25

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Foreword

Welcome to our 2020-25 interim Corporate Plan – a new one, as required by the legislation, even though our previous plan covering 2018-2023 was only published 18 months ago. This Plan sets out our early priorities for this period and how we plan to fulfil our responsibilities, particularly in the first year, ahead of a fuller five year plan to be published later this year in line with legislative requirements.

The period since the Commission's last Corporate Plan has seen significant change, challenge and turbulence in UK politics. I believe that the electoral community have risen to these challenges and have delivered effectively for the voter, as is our primary responsibility.

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic is only beginning to be felt, most immediately in the postponement of the polls scheduled for May 2020; this step, though welcome, means a significantly greater challenge for the delivery of polls due in May 2021.

We have continued to see well-run elections, despite unscheduled national polls making considerable demands on the strengths and resourcefulness of administrators across the country. The processes of registering voters, and casting votes, have been carried out rigorously and transparently, and still attract high levels of public satisfaction. And our regulatory system on political finance has continued to prove its worth.

But undeniably our system is showing strain, particularly in the context of continuing pressure on local authorities' resources and capacity, and there are challenges which need to be faced. For the public, the system depends on trust, accumulated over many years, and trust can be lost quickly if doubt begins to set in. While our research with the public shows that a majority of people were confident the May 2019 elections were well-run, and most voters were satisfied with the voting process, overall levels of voter confidence in the running of the May local and European Parliamentary Election were lower than at previous such polls

With a majority Government now in place at Westminster, and continuing appetite in Scotland and Wales to push forward with change, the next five years will be critical to investing in reforms to support the continuing delivery of well-run elections, the effectiveness and transparency of campaigning, and the bolstering of voter confidence. The Commission has a vital role in helping governments and others to deliver.

A key challenge, perhaps the most fundamental, is the outdated legislation under which the sector is straining to deliver its services. There are more than 50 Acts and over 170 Statutory Instruments relating to the delivery of elections. In 2018, in parts of England where mayoral elections were held on the same day as local elections, electoral administrators had to refer to 11 pieces of primary legislation and six pieces of secondary legislation. This is not just a technical problem - there are real costs, consequences and risks for voters, candidates and campaigners, regulators and governments. Existing proposals from the UK's Law Commissions have provided a well-researched and widely supported basis for further work and we continue to call on the UK's governments and parliaments to take these forward.

This is ever more pressing as the relationships between laws for UK and devolved elections become more complex. Devolution from Westminster to the legislatures and governments in Scotland and Wales offers opportunities to enable and support policy diversity between elections for different bodies within the UK. However, legislation dealing with the underlying technical or administrative detail should not need to vary significantly between elections in different parts of the UK. The aim should be to provide the strongest possible common foundation for delivering well run polls in different scenarios, without unnecessary complexity for administrators or voters.

The registration system too needs modernisation, to make it fit for purpose in today's world. Canvass reform is a welcome start in the right direction, but the existence of more than 370 separate registers which do not communicate with each other leaves the system vulnerable, while the lack of ability of voters to check online whether they are already registered leads to many wasteful duplicate applications every time a new election comes round. Moves towards more automated and connected registration are long overdue.

Meanwhile the nature of political campaigning continues to change. Digital advertising spend by parties increased from 24% to 43% of advertising budgets between the UK General Elections of 2015 and 2017. We wait to see what the spending returns for the 2019 election tell us about this trend, but it is clear that regulation – and the law – needs to keep up with advances in campaign techniques. The UK has had one of the most transparent systems of political finance in the world, and voters should be able to see clearly who is spending money online to influence them at elections and referendums.

As campaigning changes, we must also ensure that the Commission has the right powers and tools to continue to be effective in regulating political finance. We are making a major effort to encourage compliance and working with all concerned to help make this happen. Nevertheless we need to be ready to take action with those who do not comply where necessary. For example, to conduct faster assessments of wrongdoing, our powers to require information should be extended; and better deterrence requires the threat of larger penalties.

None of these issues are new. They are all questions which the Commission and others have raised repeatedly. But they have not gone away and, in most cases, are increasing in risk and urgency. I believe we need a wider, more intensive and more ambitious debate about electoral reform than we have had in recent years, on issues which are after all fundamental to our democracy.

The plan below indicates how the Commission aims to play its part in addressing these challenges, ahead of the fuller plan next year, and to work with all the governments of the UK to help them take forward their own reform plans. We look forward to working constructively with all concerned – governments, parliaments, parties and campaigners, electoral administrators and other interested groups – to maintain the confidence of voters and the credibility of our elections.

Sir John Holmes, Chair

Introduction

The Electoral Commission is now in its twentieth year since being formed, by the UK Parliament, as the independent body which oversees elections and regulates political finance in the UK. Since that time the Commission has developed a substantial body of expertise and experience and its functions have become an integral part of the robustness and legitimacy of our UK democracy, both as a whole and in the nations of the UK. Voter confidence and trust in elections are high but, as outlined in the Chair's foreword, there are some key challenges to our electoral system that need addressing. This interim plan sets out how we will make progress towards meeting those challenges.

We have produced this five year Interim Corporate Plan in line with our statutory duty following December's UK Parliamentary General Election (UKPGE), and in that context it is presented at short notice. It carries forward aspects of the preceding Plan and focusses with more certainty on the coming 2020/21 year. The decision to postpone the May 2020 polls until May 2021 was made as the plan was being finalised, and so we have been able to reflect our initial understanding of the impacts of that decision. Drawing on the emerging priorities of a new UK Government and Parliament, as well as ongoing developments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, we will be preparing a fully developed five year Corporate Plan in the coming months building on this interim plan. We look forward to working with our stakeholders to develop this new strategy and to presenting it next financial year.

In this Corporate Plan the Commission takes forward its four goals with the aim of continuing to ensure that we balance our roles in supporting the delivery of elections, as a regulator, and as a thought leader whilst also being a modern, well-run organisation. We are building on a strong base: the later pages of this document include an overview of the key things we have delivered in the 2018-20 period. This plan sets out our proposals for investing in better support for our stakeholders, better information for voters and better systems to support our delivery. We will continue to work to support reform in the delivery of elections, to improve the service offered to voters and address the resource pressures being felt so keenly at a local level.

Our statutory responsibilities give us a unique position in the sector to coordinate, to guide, and to provide leadership. In many ways the Commission plays a vital supporting role to its stakeholders, and it is in these areas where this Corporate Plan seeks to most visibly strengthen our approach to address the challenges outlined in the previous pages.

We will enhance our support to electoral administrators across the UK. While we already provide guidance and support which is well-received and widely relied upon, we intend to strengthen our focus on support to help address the challenges local authorities are facing with delivering well-run electoral services, such as through increased work to identify and share good practice in electoral services and the development and roll-out of resources to help local authorities design and manage their electoral services functions.

In the UK there is a culture of compliance with and support for the regulatory regime; in the coming years, we will put renewed effort into supporting political parties, candidates and campaigners in complying with the rules before breaches happen. Most political parties, candidates, agents and established campaigners work hard and genuinely try to

comply with the political finance rules, and we want enforcement action to not normally be needed - the exception, not the rule.

As our democratic process, campaigning and the context in which we operate changes, we want to support voters to understand this, to help them to engage in, and to increase their confidence in elections. In the life of this plan we will enhance our public awareness activity to increase understanding of the rules and systems that operate around elections and referendums, and voters' abilities to raise concerns and get involved.

And finally we will undertake a broader base of activity to support the delivery of government priorities. This five year period will see the Commission respond to Government priorities on electoral reforms and developments; these include the introduction of voter ID requirements in polling stations, announced by the new UK Government, and the implementation of electoral reform legislation in Scotland and Wales which will extend the franchise to younger age groups or new categories of residents. In some areas the Commission's role is to feed directly into delivering change, such as in our work to support reforms in the electoral registration annual canvass process. In other areas we can play a role through convening and informing debate.

Through development of our work, particularly in these four areas, we can continue to play a central role in supporting well-run elections and deliver tangible improvements to the system. We will continue to build and make the case for key changes to our democratic processes, changes that will make tangible and positive differences for administrators, for campaigners and for voters.

In undertaking all of our work, we are responsive to the changing relationships we have with the administrations in the nations of the UK. As a UK-wide Commission, we continue to be proud of the role that we have played to date, working with each elected body to deliver an effective service to voters across the UK. We look forward to putting in place arrangements reflecting our increased accountability to the Scottish Parliament and National Assembly for Wales and working with them as they develop their electoral plans.

Our service to the UK electorate will continue to be underpinned by resolute focus on providing value for money. This Plan highlights the structures we have in place to increase our efficiency and to be able to respond quickly to changes in our external environment which affect our priorities, including unscheduled polls. The Commission needs to maintain itself as a modern well-run organisation and ensure it has the technology required to support our ways of working. We will enhance collaboration across teams and locations and allow higher-density and more flexible occupation of our offices.

We must also ensure the Commission has the skilled and experienced staff necessary to deliver. We will continue to promote a culture where staff members are able to perform their roles effectively, actively managing performance in line with the Commission's goals and providing development opportunities and training to develop our unique skill sets in-house and improve our effectiveness.

This is an ambitious plan. It sets out how we will continue to meet the challenges of ensuring we realise our vision of being a world-class public sector organisation – investing and improving, innovative, delivering great value and getting right what matters most to voters and legislators.

Bob Posner, Chief Executive

Our role

The Electoral Commission is the independent body which oversees elections and regulates political finance in the United Kingdom. We work to promote public confidence in the democratic process and ensure its integrity.

Our vision and goals

Our vision is to be a world-class public sector organisation – innovative, delivering great value and getting right what matters most to voters and legislators.

We plan to achieve this vision through a five year work programme with four goals:

- 1. To enable the continued delivery of free and fair elections and referendums**, focusing on the needs of electors and addressing the changing environment to ensure every vote remains secure and accessible
- 2. To ensure an increasingly trusted and transparent system of regulation** in political finance, overseeing compliance, promoting understanding amongst those regulated and proactively pursuing breaches
- 3. To be an independent and respected centre of expertise**, using knowledge and insight to further the transparency, fairness and efficiency of our democratic system, and help adapt it to the modern, digital age
- 4. To provide value for money**, making best use of our resources and expertise to deliver services that are attuned to what matters most to voters. This goal underpins and supports all of our work

Scheduled elections over the period of the Corporate Plan

All of our work is set against the backdrop of planned electoral events. As part of the development of our plans and budgets, we have included event expenditure on the preparation of, delivery of and reporting on electoral events. The table below sets out those currently scheduled over the next five years.

2020	Scheduled polls postponed, as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, to May 2021.
2021	Mayor of London and London Assembly English local government Police and Crime Commissioners (England and Wales) Senedd Scottish Parliament Combined Authority Mayoral Local Mayoral
2022	Northern Ireland Assembly English local government (including London) Welsh local Scottish Council Combined Authority Mayoral Local Mayoral
2023	English local government Northern Ireland local government Combined Authority Mayoral Local Mayoral
2024	UK Parliamentary Mayor of London and London Assembly English local government Police and Crime Commissioners (England and Wales) Combined Authority Mayoral Local Mayoral

Our goals and priorities

1. The continued delivery of free and fair elections

To enable the continued delivery of free and fair elections and referendums, focusing on the needs of electors and addressing the changing environment to ensure every vote remains secure and accessible.

Our role

This goal captures our central role in overseeing the delivery of elections and referendums across the UK's nations. We support electoral administrators, candidates and parties across the United Kingdom by providing guidance and tailored advice, as well as information for voters on registration and voting.

There are 23 scheduled electoral events during the period of this corporate plan and in the lead up to those events, we will invest in supporting electoral administrators, candidates and parties across the United Kingdom. In addition, we will ensure we are fully prepared to respond to any unscheduled electoral events during the period of this plan.

The UK Government announced on 12 March 2020 that the elections due to take place in May 2020 would be postponed until May 2021. While this welcome decision means we are not now facing the delivery of polls in an exceptionally challenging environment in May 2020, it does mean that the elections to be held in May 2021 will be more than previously expected, with events now scheduled to take place across the whole of Great Britain, and with more significant combinations of polls. We are already working to help the electoral community understand the implications of the postponement and to put in place arrangements to support the effective delivery of these polls, and this will continue throughout 2020-21.

Our plans

We will continue to **provide expert advice and guidance to local authorities, candidates and agents** to support the delivery of well-run electoral events, and propose to invest in an enhanced guidance support service including advice, challenge and further tools and resources. We will prepare guidance and resources for specific electoral events, and will continue with our transition towards providing our guidance in a new modern, more accessible format.

We will **support the scheduled electoral events** during the life of this corporate plan and work with partners to develop and deliver proposals for improving the accessibility of elections so that everyone has equal access to election information and processes.

We will **undertake voter registration campaigns** ahead of all major polls, to raise awareness of the need to register amongst all eligible electors but targeting in particular the under-registered groups.

Work to **support the UK's governments' electoral registration annual canvass reforms in Great Britain** continues. We will provide advice, guidance and resource materials for Electoral Registration Officers to support them with implementing these changes effectively. We will also work to **support the 2021 canvass in Northern Ireland**, including through a public awareness campaign to highlight what people need to do to ensure they are registered to vote.

We will also take forward work to **develop and implement a strategy to support increased resilience in the delivery of electoral services at a local level**. Working with key partners in the electoral community, we will explore initiatives such as the introduction of an induction and mentoring programme for new Returning Officers and the development of an effective electoral services toolkit.

Additionally, we will publish **new performance standards for Electoral Registration Officers (EROs)**, which will be used by the Commission and EROs to understand and improve their performance, ensuring ultimately that registers are as accurate and complete as possible and that everyone who is eligible and wants to vote is able to do so.

We will respond to and engage with the Scottish and Welsh governments' policy and legislative agendas for **changes to the franchise** to ensure they are workable for the public and EROs, and will invest in campaigns to raise public awareness of these changes.

Our **electoral fraud work** will continue to include close engagement with the police and with local authorities, and will be supported by public-facing activity such as our 'Your Vote is Yours Alone' campaign.

What impacts and benefits will this achieve?

This work will enable us to deliver enhanced support for local authorities in the delivery of electoral services and improve engagement with key partners in the electoral community such as Solace and the Association of Electoral Administrators (AEA). This will contribute to the provision of high quality services for voters and the delivery of well-run elections and registration systems.

Our work will help to ensure that the results of elections will be increasingly trusted and accepted and the number of successful legal challenges will be as close to zero as possible.

2. An increasingly trusted and transparent system of regulation

To ensure an increasingly trusted and transparent system of regulation in political finance, overseeing compliance, promoting understanding amongst those regulated and proactively pursuing breaches.

Our role

This goal captures our regulatory role, and is vital to ensuring the transparency which sits at the heart of any healthy democracy. Our work in this area is already wide-ranging, and increasingly proactive, securing compliance by supporting parties and campaigners, by real-time intervention and – when needed – by enforcement action.

We maintain published online political parties registers, giving confidence that only parties that meet the legal registration tests can appear on ballot papers. We also maintain a register of campaigners which spend substantial sums campaigning in elections. We deliver transparency of UK political finance by publishing details of donations and loans, annual accounts from registered parties, and campaign spending which parties and others are required to report to us.

We provide high quality advice and guidance to support parties, candidates and campaigners in complying with the rules. And we take action, where appropriate imposing sanctions, when the rules are broken, in accordance with the Commission's statutory Enforcement Policy.

We believe it is far better to work to ensure compliance before an electoral event rather than have to take enforcement action afterwards. So we propose to invest in supporting compliance through a user-friendly online tool and a more responsive regulatory service.

Our plans

We will **continue to maintain the registers of political parties and campaigners**, ensuring voters have clarity about registered parties and campaigners on the ballot paper. This includes completing a review of registered descriptions to make sure only those meeting the legal tests are included, and looking at how the constitutions and financial schemes of parties are formulated.

We will continue to promote transparency of political finance by **publishing financial data from parties and campaigners, including that related to elections**. Alongside this, we will deliver a new **Political Finance Online system** to support parties and campaigners to deliver their financial returns efficiently.

To promote high rates of compliance with the rules and thus transparency for voters, we will continue to provide **timely and high quality advice and guidance** to parties and

campaigners to support them in meeting their legal requirements. This will include publishing guidance for the major elections in 2021, reflecting the impacts of the complex combination of polls as appropriate, and developing codes of practice to underpin the law on reporting election spending.

Working with parties and campaigners, we will develop a new strategic framework to ensure **effective and impactful proactive support**.

We will deliver **effective enforcement of the political finance rules**, ensuring voters, parties and campaigners have confidence that the rules are enforced proportionately and with impact, within our current powers. We will continue to publish the outcome of each investigation, including in full reports where that is warranted, so voters, parties and campaigners can see the way we act to enforce the rules. To deter people from committing offences, and to make sure we can respond proportionally if they do, we will continue to build the capacity to prosecute suspected offences. We will consult on the way we approach the use of prosecutions.

We will also respond to the changing environment as more money is spent on **digital campaigning** by responding to and engaging with government policy and legislative agendas for political finance to ensure they increase transparency for the public and are workable for campaigners. We will strengthen our engagement with social media companies and other providers of digital advertising to ensure their services and policies support transparency for election and referendum campaign activity.

We will administer the **policy development grants** scheme and ensure it operates effectively by making timely recommendations to the UK Government for any necessary changes.

What impacts and benefits will we achieve?

This work will provide a faster and more responsive engagement with stakeholders and guidance that is increasingly forward looking and gets ahead of potential regulatory issues. We should achieve a deeper and wider understanding of the campaign finance laws amongst parties and campaigners, leading to higher compliance rates.

We will deliver an expanded range of tools that directly support parties and campaigners and are flexible enough to work for different structures and sizes, and that support targeted areas of the campaign finance rules, driven by strategic intelligence and horizon scanning. Together, this should result in improvement in the quality and reliability of the financial data parties and campaigners provide and we publish.

The public will see and can have confidence that the spending and funding of political parties and candidates at UK elections is and transparent, and that we will take proportionate action if anyone breaks the rules on campaign funding.

3. Be an independent and respected centre of expertise

To be an independent and respected centre of expertise, using knowledge and insight to further the transparency, fairness and efficiency of our democratic system, and help adapt it to the modern, digital age.

Our role

This goal captures our role in guiding the sector through the challenges it faces. We will provide the evidence, analysis and insight needed by us and others working in the field, to identify and address the most important issues facing the UK's democratic system.

We will also monitor changes to the system of electoral registration and use post-election opinion surveys and our annual UK-wide survey to monitor the public's view on electoral issues and their experiences when taking part in elections. This data informs our decisions and policy recommendations, helps us to influence developments in legislation, policy and practice, and supports us in ensuring we are getting right what matters most to voters. We will continue to undertake research and report on the accuracy and completeness of the UK's electoral registers.

The Commission has a statutory duty to report on elections and referendums and keep electoral law under review. We will also continue to scrutinise new electoral legislation and provide expert briefings to governments and legislatures on legislative proposals.

Voter confidence in our electoral system is crucial, and hinges on belief in the information offered. So we propose to invest in building voter awareness and education with a particular focus on digital campaigning.

Our plans

We will **provide expert advice and support** to political parties, campaigners, governments and the public to inform policy change, educate and inform the public and promote partnership working across the electoral sector. This will include public relations and public affairs support for the Government's political finance policies and electoral law reform, a press office function to manage media and public enquiries and the provision of expert advice and evidence to inform policy consultations and reviews.

We will continue to **report on the administration of elections** to ensure we utilise learning to improve the delivery of future events.

We will continue to **promote and build support for changes to our democratic processes** through dedicated campaigns and collaborative working with key partners and

stakeholders. We will work with partners to consider options for improving the accessibility of elections and the modernisation of registration through the better use of existing public data records.

We will **develop our evidence base** to enable greater understanding of the electoral environment, emerging issues, risks and opportunities that could affect the work of the Commission in the medium to long term and enable us to plan accordingly. We will gather data and information after elections, including on public attitudes as well as the experiences of electoral administrators and candidates, to deepen our understanding of the issues faced by our customers including the public and local authorities.

We will **enhance our public awareness activity** to support the voter in understanding the rules and systems that operate around elections and referendums, and their abilities to raise concerns and get involved. This will include activity around elections, related to the digital campaigning techniques increasingly used to reach voters, and the production of longer-term education materials to be used in formal and informal settings.

Promoting transparency is one of our corporate values and we will look to improve the **accessibility of our information** to partners and the public by developing our new corporate website further by updating and revising the research content it contains. This will include a project to use open data and digital tools to improve accessibility and to present the information in accessible visual formats.

We will proceed with our **research and data analysis of cases of electoral fraud** to identify any changes that could help tackle the issue and to support engagement with the UK's governments and their legislative agendas, such as the UK Government's proposal to introduce voter identity across Great Britain.

Through the development of our full Corporate Plan, and in consultation with our stakeholders, we will **develop a new work programme** to cover the next five year period. This will seek to make the greatest possible contribution to helping the sector to identify and plan for the most significant opportunities and challenges it faces.

What impacts and benefits will we achieve?

Our expert evidence and views are referenced in public debate about our democratic system and processes, and government proposals reflect our priorities and recommendations for change.

4. Provide value for money

To provide value for money, making the best use of our resources and expertise to deliver services that are attuned to what matters most to voters. This goal underpins and supports all of our work.

Our role

As a body directly accountable to Parliament the Commission is subject to the same expectations of Parliament for regularity, propriety and value for money as other public bodies. Meeting or exceeding these standards is integral to the way the Commission manages itself day-to-day. Our financial accountability to Parliament is exercised through the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission, a House of Commons committee, chaired by the Speaker and comprising ministers serving ex-officio and back-benchers appointed by the Speaker.

Key to our success over the next five years and beyond is ensuring we have the right resources in place to support the delivery of this plan, including the initial need for resilience to ensure we are able to respond appropriately to the COVID-19 pandemic. This underpinning goal provides a focus to activities that support the organisation and ensure we have the appropriate skilled people and systems; that the delivery of services is efficient, effective and economical; and that we invest in modernising our infrastructure and systems to deliver consistent and improving value for money. This includes providing consistently high quality human resources, finance, planning, legal, support and information & communication technology (ICT) functions.

Our plans

We will **implement our new People Strategy** to promote a culture where staff teams are best able to perform their roles effectively.

We will continue to deliver our Ways of Working project **to deliver digitally enabled business change** to reflect the expectations on a modern employer and ensure the core ICT offering can support those changes. Planned new investment in line-of-business systems over the coming years include the new regulatory case management system to support moving to undertake prosecutions, a replacement Client Case Management System to track public and stakeholder contact, and post-poll reporting tools.

We have successfully implemented a new corporate planning and performance system that enables the organisation to have a single, integrated picture of strategic and operational business activity, project delivery, risk and performance. This now enables us to focus on developing **improved capability and understanding of the delivery of our strategic goals** and the impact we are delivering for our customers.

We will continue to work with the Scottish Parliament and National Assembly for Wales to **implement our new accountability arrangements**, including a new funding formula and business plans for Scotland and Wales.

Our ability to meet the needs of voters, legislatures, political parties and all of our other stakeholders is indirectly reliant on the Commission having a specialist legal service. We will **review and refresh how we deliver legal services** that effectively and efficiently meet the changing and increasing requirements on the Commission, and reduce use of expensive outside expertise. This initiative will establish a more stable core base of lawyers in re-orientated working arrangements that are underpinned by strong quality management processes and case management systems.

We will **embed quality management processes** across all our services and functions, building on the sound practice in place in our regulatory teams. This will drive the development of our systems and processes and embed quality and continuous improvement in our culture.

What impacts and benefits will we achieve?

Improving our planning and performance reporting will enable improved monitoring and management across all our goals, thereby driving improved impact on the things that matter most directly to electors.

Our Ways of Working project combines real technological improvements and changes in working practices and conditions. We expect this to lead to real improvements in productivity through improved cross-team working and greater flexibility. Our people strategy is designed to ensure we have the engaged and empowered staff to deliver our ambitious agenda. We aim to see this reflected in higher staff engagement scores and higher staff retention rates.

The real impact of these changes, however, will be felt in the performance and impact measures in this and other goals as we translate these internal goals into improved delivery.

Focus on Northern Ireland

The restoration of the Northern Ireland Assembly and the formation of an Executive in January 2020 has provided some stability after three years and this is to be welcomed. Even during the long period of uncertainty there continued to be an emphasis on improving the delivery of electoral services for voters in Northern Ireland. For example, would-be voters can now register easily and quickly online following the introduction of digital registration in June 2018. The impact of this is clear to see with almost a quarter of a million applications made to register during 2019.

In addition to this, since July 2017, we are now publishing quarterly information on donations and loans reported to us by political parties and other regulated donees. Transparency is essential to ensuring public confidence in our democracy so it is important that this information is now available to see and subject to public scrutiny.

However we cannot be complacent. We continue to be of the view that the information we hold on donations and loans reported to us between January 2014 and July 2017 should be published. A commitment to review the donations and loans regime had previously been made by the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) and we would urge the UK Government to carry this forward. For our part we want to engage with and listen to the public across Northern Ireland on this issue to ensure that their views are fully considered as part of this process.

Our most recent assessment of electoral registration in Northern Ireland has found that more needs to be done to make registering to vote easier for everyone. Our research found that that 1 in 4 eligible electors in Northern Ireland were not correctly registered at their current address, representing somewhere between 360,000 to 430,000 people. Of particular concern is the fact young people continue to be less likely to be registered with only 51% of 18-34 year old correctly registered.

A full canvass of electors was due to take place in 2020, but is now being postponed to 2021 as a consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic. Regardless, this will nevertheless provide a timely opportunity to address the decline in the accuracy and completeness of the electoral registers, and we look forward to working with the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland this year to support her preparations for this exercise. However it alone is not a quick fix solution and more must be done to modernise our electoral registration processes. For example, making better use of public data could be key to improving and reforming the electoral registration process, making it easier for the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland to keep the registers up to date throughout the year.

We will continue to work closely with the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland, the UK Government and our stakeholders across Northern Ireland to bring about these important changes.

Focus on Scotland

The period covered by this corporate plan will be a challenging time for the Electoral Commission and wider electoral community in Scotland as we work to implement legislative changes brought forward by both the UK and Scottish Parliaments. Some of these changes highlight the ability of legislatures to collaborate in coordinating change in relation to registration matters where consistency is important for voters, but we are also seeing some divergence of electoral law relating to Scottish elections.

The Scottish Parliament has passed a bill setting the ground rules for future referendums in Scotland. The Referendums (Scotland) Bill provides a framework for all future referendums called by the Scottish Parliament. During the passage of the Bill, the Parliament amended the draft legislation to give effect to our recommendations for a significant increase in the level of fines available to us; wider powers to obtain information outside of formal investigations; and effective rules to require imprints on digital campaign material.

Two further bills are going through the legislative process. The Scottish Elections (Franchise and Representation) Bill extends the franchise for devolved Scottish elections to include all foreign nationals legally resident in Scotland, in addition to prisoners serving a sentence up to one year. Ensuring that those who are newly enfranchised understand that they are eligible to register and vote and know how to do so will be a significant area of work for us in the run up to both the Scottish Parliament election in 2021 and the council elections in 2022 and will run alongside our wider public awareness work.

The Scottish Elections (Reform) Bill also has implications for our work during the lifespan of this corporate plan. It makes changes to the regulation of candidates at Scottish council elections to bring them in line with the controls for all other elections in the UK. It also proposes Codes of Practice for spending at Scottish Parliament and council elections. Updated guidance and technical advice will be needed for both. The Bill also proposes changes to the role and accountability of both the EMB for Scotland and the Electoral Commission: in future the Board's remit will be extended to Scottish Parliament elections, a change we have been calling for since 2009. We will be formally accountable to and financed directly by the Scottish Parliament for the work we do in relation to Scottish devolved elections.

We will continue to work closely with colleagues in the Scottish Parliament, the EMB and others in Scotland to give effect to this agenda.

Focus on Wales

In 2020 we will see work commence on the implementation of a major programme of electoral reform in Wales which will not only have a significant impact on future Senedd (Welsh parliament) and local government elections, but also on the way the Electoral Commission itself operates in Wales.

We now have a Senedd and Elections (Wales) Act 2020 which, amongst other things, will allow two new groups to take part in the Senedd elections of 2021: 16 and 17 year olds, and foreign nationals resident in Wales.

We are already working with the wider electoral community and special interest groups to ensure that these new voters are made aware of the changes introduced by this Act so that they can participate effectively during the next canvass period in 2020 and at the 2021 Welsh general election.

We are also committed to working with the Welsh Government and the Senedd on the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Bill as it goes through the legislative process. The provisions included in the Bill could result in major changes at future local government elections and our focus here will be on ensuring that these reforms are implemented in a way which places the voters' interest at their heart.

In addition to this electoral change, from September 2020, we will also for the first time be accountable to the Senedd for our work on Welsh elections. We look forward to working with the Welsh Parliament and Government in ensuring that these new reporting and financial arrangements are timely, appropriate and effective.

We will continue to work closely with all our partners in Wales - from the Wales Electoral Coordination Board to political parties, Governments to the Senedd, the public to the police – during a busy but rewarding period for our democracy in Wales. Diolch yn fawr iawn!

Key activities 2018-20

Our previous plan covered the period 2018-23. It set out an ambitious agenda for changing and improving the electoral system. We have set out above our plans to continue pursuing this agenda, investing in supporting our stakeholders and modernising our delivery. In this section we set out some of the steps we have already taken to build a firm foundation for future change.

The continued delivery of free and fair elections

- Supported the delivery of a range of electoral events including local government elections in England and Northern Ireland, local Mayoral and Combined Authority Mayoral elections in parts of England, 5 UK parliamentary by-elections, a European Parliamentary Election and a UK Parliamentary General Election
- Delivered successful public awareness campaigns ahead of each major poll, increasing voter registration with a particular focus on under-registered groups
- Completed the observation of recall petitions in North Antrim, Peterborough and Brecon and Radnorshire, and published our recommendations for improving the petition process
- Published our views on the UK's governments' proposals to reform the annual electoral registration canvass, to inform the legislation that will enable the changes to be in place from the 2020 canvass
- Worked with the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Office to support the launch of online electoral registration there, making registering to vote as simple and accessible as in the rest of the UK
- Published a revised Code of Practice for Electoral Observers and modernised the observer application process

An increasingly transparent and trusted system of regulation

- Maintained the registers of political parties and of campaigners in elections, including adding updating and removing entries as needed, and ensuring voters can have confidence that only parties meeting the legal tests are registered
- Published financial data on political party donations and loans, annual accounts and spending in the European Parliamentary Election
- Delivered robust and effective enforcement of the political finance laws in the UK, using our legal powers to investigate potential offences and publishing the outcome of each investigation
- Published guidance on the spending rules for the European Parliamentary Election and UK Parliamentary General Election, and backed this through bespoke advice to, and engagement with, parties and campaigners

- Delivered draft spending codes for candidates and parties to the UK Government, having developed them following consultation and engagement with parties, candidates and other experts
- Made significant progress on the redevelopment of our Political Finance Online system to improve the efficiency of the way parties and campaigners register and deliver financial returns

Be an independent and respected centre of expertise

- Evaluated the UK Government's pilot schemes, which tested polling station voter identification in a number of local authorities in England at the May 2018 and 2019 local elections
- Completed a series of feasibility studies exploring options for moving towards a more efficient, secure and data-driven voter registration system in the UK. The studies are now helping to inform debate on the future of electoral registration
- Reported in detail on the accuracy and completeness of the electoral registers in the UK, highlighting those groups of people who remain less likely to be registered
- Published a report on digital campaigning, setting out a package of recommendations for improving transparency for voters, as well as for the social media platforms themselves. Our recommendations have been discussed widely in the UK's legislatures and beyond, and have attracted support from a broad range of parliamentary bodies, fellow regulators, think tanks and commentators
- Convened a group of regulators to discuss and inform government of issues of common regulatory interest, including digital campaigning and the truthfulness of campaign content. This has enabled a shared understanding of each organisation's relevant activity, to aid cooperation and best use of public resources
- Held detailed discussions with Facebook, Twitter and Google about their policies for online election adverts, to inform their proposals and our own policy positions about how best to ensure transparency

Provide value for money

- Launched our new corporate website, which significantly improves our digital services, meets user needs more effectively and provides information in easy-to-use and fully accessible ways
- Refreshed our corporate identity, ensuring our work is presented in a consistent, accessible and recognisable way, in line with our organisational values
- Implemented new systems to deliver efficiencies and enhanced transparency for key corporate functions such as procurement, project management, performance and governance
- Developed a new People Strategy to support the best use of our resources
- Benchmarked and updated our Records Policies in preparation for the organisation's twenty year anniversary

- Delivered the objectives of the Ways of Working project by developing our working practices to reflect the expectations of a modern employer and ensured that the core ICT offering supported these changes
- Enhanced our skills base across the organisation through a comprehensive learning and development programme for employees and investment in specialised technical resources

Managing our costs

Our budget includes expenditure on preparing for, supporting the delivery of and reporting on scheduled electoral events.

Over the course of the period covered by this plan, we will support the delivery of all local government, UK Parliament, devolved Parliament and Assembly, Mayoral, London Assembly and Police and Crime Commissioner elections. The table below includes our forecast resource requirements in support of these planned events. This includes our initial estimates reflecting the impact of the postponement of the May 2020 polls to May 2021. Our resource plans will be updated further if events or government legislation change.

The Commission's budget for electoral events funds the costs of producing and distributing guidance to Returning Officers and their staff, and providing ad hoc guidance to them and to parties, candidates, campaigners and members of the public. It also funds public information campaigns on voter registration and electoral integrity, our observation of the election, post-poll research into how it was conducted, and related reports. Financial regulation costs directly related to the specific event are also included.

The cancellation of the polls scheduled for May 2020 means a reduction in our scheduled events spend. In particular the canvass scheduled for Northern Ireland is delayed to 2021, and campaign spending which would have taken place ahead of the polls is no longer required other than provision for possible abortive costs arising from the postponement of the May 2020 elections. However work arising out of the December 2019 UK Parliamentary General Election needs to be completed. And other scheduled work to support and enhance the democratic process such as the canvasses in Scotland and Wales and spend on digital literacy and voter education continues. May 2021 will now see more electoral events than originally scheduled and some complex combinations of polls. This requires significant preparatory work, and a raised campaign spend in the spring of 2021.

Core costs fund the activities we will undertake regardless of the electoral cycle; this includes registering and monitoring the funding of political parties, supporting electoral administration and analysing performance standards, and some elements of our research work. Core costs also include administrative expenditure on Commission support functions including accommodation, and ICT.

Planned capital expenditure includes investment in the Commission's online Political Finance and Regulation online portal, which is used by our stakeholders to maintain their organisational details and report their financial returns to the Commission. There are also investments to update and deliver digital tools across the Commission in order to implement more flexible working practices. The Commission leases its properties; from 2021/22 we will be adopting International Financial Reporting Standard 16 (IFRS16), in line with Treasury rules. From that year, we are required to show the full value of a new lease in capital budgets when the lease begins. This means the budgets shown from 2021/22 are not directly comparable with the budgets for 2019/20 or 2020/21.

In addition to the Commission’s operational costs, we are also responsible for administering policy development grants to eligible political parties, in line with the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 (PPERA). This provides for £2 million of grants to be paid to eligible political parties to assist in developing policies for inclusion in their manifestos. We will continue to ensure there are appropriate controls over the distribution and use of these public funds.

The Commission’s spending plans for 2020/21 – 2024/25 are summarised in the table below. The figures in the table below are forecast outturn price base. When preparing this plan we have made a number of assumptions to ensure we are setting realistic plans and delivering value for money. Key amongst these is the number and type of electoral events that are planned for the period covered by this plan. The second key determinant is the level of inflation experienced by the Commission. As we develop a more robust long term corporate plan over the coming months forecast expenditure may change.

Electoral Commission forecast expenditure 2020-21 to 2024-25

Electoral £ million	2019/20*	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25
Core expenditure	12.333	13.873	13.183	12.996	13.289	13.609
Provisions #	0.400	0.400	0.400	0.400	0.400	0.400
Depreciation	0.494	0.642	1.631	1.893	1.202	1.410
Core subtotal	13.227	14.915	15.214	15.289	14.890	15.419
Event	5.998	5.037	4.867	3.970	3.972	5.378
Capital	0.990	1.301	0.966	0.485	0.468	1.555
Policy Development Grants	2.000	2.000	2.000	2.000	2.000	2.000
Total	22.215	23.253	23.048	21.744	21.331	24.351

Further expenditure in the region of £0.200 million in Commissioner fees and related expenses does not require annual Parliamentary authority and is instead funded directly from the Consolidated Fund. This amount is not included in the figures above.

* 2019-20 figures show budget after the Supplementary Estimate, including additional budget for UK Parliamentary General Election (reference purposes only).

£0.400 million for provisions covers potential legal risks, building dilapidation and impairments for leases.

Our governance arrangements

The Commission is led by a Board of Commissioners, who set the strategic direction and are responsible for the work of the organisation.

The Board comprises ten Commissioners, one of whom is the Chair. Three of the Commissioners are appointed to represent Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales respectively. These Commissioners provide advice and support in relation to their country. They also advise on the impact of the Commission's work and are consulted by the Commission Board on matters in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

Four of the Commissioners are nominated by the leaders of political parties: one by the party with the largest number of MPs in Parliament, two more by the second and third largest parties respectively, and one by the other political parties with two or more MPs elected to and having taken their seats in Parliament. The remaining two Commissioners have no specific brief. All Commissioners are appointed by Her Majesty the Queen, on a motion of Parliament.

As part of the Corporate Framework the Board has two sub-committees: the Audit Committee and the Remuneration and Human Resources Committee. Both are chaired by Commissioners.

Alongside the Board of Commissioners, we also consult regularly with a Parliamentary Parties' Panel, Parliamentary Advisory Group and with equivalent Panels for Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. These were set up to allow political parties to give us feedback about matters affecting them.

The Chief Executive is the Accounting Officer.

We are accountable to the UK Parliament, specifically the Speaker's Committee, which is chaired by the Speaker of the House of MPs. A member of the Speaker's Committee is nominated by the Committee to answer questions in the House of Commons about the Electoral Commission.

The Commission has since its establishment in 2001 also welcomed policy scrutiny from committees of the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales. The Scotland Act 2016 and Wales Act 2017 make provision for our functions relating to devolved electoral matters in Scotland and Wales to be funded by those legislatures and early in the life of this Plan that will almost certainly be implemented. The Commission is currently working closely and positively with those legislatures to ensure these new funding arrangements will work well, and to ensure corresponding accountability.

Every year we submit an estimate of our income and expenditure, together with our work plan, to the Speaker's Committee for examination and approval. In the life of this Plan we anticipate, once statutorily required, also making appropriate estimate submissions to equivalent Committees of the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales.

The Electoral Commission is the independent body which oversees elections and regulates political finance in the UK. We work to promote public confidence in the democratic process and ensure its integrity.

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