

**Minutes of the meeting held at 35 Great Smith Street, London SW1P 3BQ on  
Thursday 4 May 2017 at 14.00**

**Present**

The Hon Mr Justice Nicol, Deputy Chair

Mr David Elvin QC, Commissioner

Mr Neil Pringle, Commissioner

Mr Sam Hartley, Secretary to the Commission

Mr Tony Bellringer, Deputy Secretary to the Commission

Mr Tim Bowden, Secretariat

Mrs Wotey Tannoh, Secretariat

(Miss Aarti Soba and Miss Malak Hayek of the Secretariat as observers for  
Communications evaluation item)

**Welcome and minutes of last meeting**

1. Mr Justice Nicol was welcomed as the new Deputy Chair and expressed his sadness at the circumstances of his appointment. The Commission and Secretariat paid tribute to the late Mrs Justice Patterson, the previous Deputy Chair, who died in December 2016 after a short illness.
2. The minutes of the Commission meeting on 25 April 2016 were formally agreed and signed by the Deputy Chair.

**Programme update**

3. Mr Bellringer introduced and explained the programme update paper (Paper 1) and annexes, highlighting in particular: the main milestones met and outputs delivered, along with increased detail for the next few months of activity in the project plan; key outstanding risks and mitigating activity on the strategic risk register; and the number of responses received to the first and second consultation stages of the review.
4. In respect of the current settling of accounts for the financial year 2016-17, Commissioners enquired about the projected underspend. Mr Bellringer confirmed that this was a relatively small underspend against the budget, and primarily resulted from the Secretariat having run with slightly fewer staff than anticipated for much of the year, and in-year savings through good value for money sourcing and procuring of suppliers (particularly in relation to various aspects of delivery of the public hearings).
5. With the calling of a General Election after the papers had been issued, Commissioners also felt that the 'Legislation' risk should be increased by one level of likelihood, though the 'risk appetite' could also be increased, given the

very limited ability of the Commission itself to mitigate against either the likelihood or impact of that risk to the current 2018 Review.

### **Evaluation of initial proposals consultation communications**

6. Mr Hartley gave a presentation on the evaluation of the Communications strategy employed for the initial consultation period, drawing highlights from Paper 2a. In each of the aspects of the strategy (mainstream media coverage, social media content generation, paid-for advertising, and stakeholder engagement) he set out what had been done, how it had been evaluated and what that evaluation had said.
7. In relation to national and local media coverage, there had been good coverage in the national media during the first few days after the publication of initial proposals, with regional coverage also good at that time, but also spiking when there were public hearings taking place in the locality. There had been a good spread of television and radio interviews accompanying the launch, with broadcast and written coverage from mainstream media being objective and generally factually accurate, drawing from our news release material. 'Op ed' pieces had generally seen a more limited take up by the press.
8. There had been a significant and rolling programme of content published on the Commission's Facebook and Twitter social media sites, which had attracted a lot of attention and engagement from the public. 'Call to action' messaging had been particularly effective in generating interest and response.
9. Digital advertising had been very effective, both general advertising on related interest websites and that on Facebook and Twitter social media sites. The 'click-through' rate on digital advertising had been particularly good, both in terms of the basic numbers of individuals clicking on the advert to access the consultation website, and in respect of the subsequent 'conversion rate' (subsequent active engagement of the individual with the consultation website - e.g. postcode search - after having clicked through to it). It was harder to measure how successful the relatively expensive press and radio advertising had been, without equally relatively expensive distinct evaluation methods.
10. Stakeholder engagement activity - specifically a distinct media briefing and production of a 'partner pack' of adaptable promotional material - had been welcomed, and the Secretariat had received specific praise for its engagement with the Local Government Association (the national representative body for local government), though take-up of the pack by local bodies themselves seemed to have been relatively limited.
11. The Commission then discussed whether to change their Communications strategy for the revised proposals consultation. They agreed that the nature of the messaging would need to change - highlighting that this would be the last consultation in the review - but that there was no need to change the particular channels utilised to deliver the message - there was an expectation among the

public that the radio, print, and digital channels would be used for the remainder of this review. The Commissioners recognised the difficulty of getting respondents to disentangle their political views about the legislative rules from comments on matters within the Commission's control (i.e. how constituencies can be constructed within those rules).

12. Commissioners also agreed that these lessons should be taken through to the next review, when planning and designing the communication strategy for that review. In particular, the use of printed newspaper advertising should be fully tested and assessed (notwithstanding their decision not to change the channels used for the remainder of the 2018 Review), as it appears to be difficult to prove that this aspect provides value for money.

### **Evaluation of public hearings delivery**

13. Mrs Tannah gave a presentation highlighting the key information from her paper on this evaluation (Paper 2b), under a number of headings:

- a) Planning and preparation: Early planning was vital given the varying strands of detailed logistics that went into delivery of public hearings. The recruitment of the Assistant Commissioners (many of whom subsequently chaired the public hearings) was a particularly resource intensive task: it was recommended that it be delivered in-house again in future, though more support staff should be allocated to the task, and the availability of a Commissioner for a significant period to be involved in sifting and/or interviewing could be problematic depending on future Commissioners' employment status. Commissioners questioned whether a full written transcript of hearings needed to be produced in future. If an audio video recording was taken and that recording was published as the official 'record', it would seem that a precis might then be sufficient in terms of written format.
- b) Bookings and 'lead hearing': the facility to pre-book attendance and speaking slots at hearings had been improved at this review through the use of the Eventbrite web-booking service, which was already commonly known among the public, though a period of testing would have been useful to flush out and address some minor issues before 'go-live'. The lead hearing concept had again proven helpful, and was welcomed by the Assistant Commissioners and political parties, with the lead hearing certainly being a clear focus for media attention in each region. As previously, there had been low turnout at a number of hearings, though this was still difficult to anticipate, given the difficulty of predicting where controversy would arise and the need to also have a fair geographic spread of venues. Although evening opening hours had been relatively sparsely attended, the Commission felt it was still important to retain some degree of availability outside working hours, perhaps balanced by a later morning start and/or an afternoon break on those days. The Commission also agreed that there should be clear communication in advance about the circumstances in which a hearing might

be closed earlier than originally advertised (and the means by which any early closure would be communicated). To date the only circumstances in which consideration might have been given to early closure is where there were no further notified speakers for a particular venue.

c) Location and venue suitability: Around 80% of venues had been local authority premises, which were generally well-suited, not least as they were generally more easily accessible by public transport and should already meet disability access needs. The Commissioners felt a strong preference for local authority venues should continue in future, though there should not be a policy to use only local authority venues, as this would be overly restrictive.

d) Chairing and staffing of hearings: Feedback had been generally good on the chairing of the hearings by the Assistant Commissioners. One point of inconsistency had been picked up, in that chairs had varied in how diligent they were in ensuring speakers provided their name and address for the record. At some venues the Secretariat had had slightly too small a staffing complement. The Commissioners agreed a minimum staffing complement for each venue should be four (including the senior staff representative), with additional staff assigned if the level of pre-bookings indicated the hearing would be busy. Recruitment of temporary staff should begin early enough to ensure adequate numbers were in place to support the hearing period.

14. In conclusion, the Secretariat considered the delivery of the hearings had been generally successful, but there were still some aspects of administration that could be improved upon. No complaints had been received in relation to the administration of the hearings. The Commissioners noted the particular peak points of administrative burden at the time of recruiting the Assistant Commissioners and organising the public hearings. They also noted that the requirement for the Secretariat to use sponsor department contracts for many aspects of administration - which were not always suitable for the Commission's very particular needs - had on occasion compounded the difficulties and contrary to intention did not always provide best value for money. (e.g. group booking requirements under the Cabinet Office contract).

## Ways of working

15. Mr Hartley talked to Paper 3a, explaining the previous agreement between the Commissioners as to how to divide the work between them so that they could more effectively scrutinise the information and recommendations put to them on what revised proposals to adopt. The Commissioners endorsed the arrangement agreed with the previous Deputy Chair, i.e. Mr Elvin taking lead scrutiny responsibility for Eastern, North East, London and West Midlands, Mr Pringle taking the lead on the remaining five English regions, and the Deputy Chair providing oversight, and ensuring challenge and consistency of approach across all nine regions.

16. The Commissioners agreed the detailed timetable outlined in the paper for development and production of the revised proposals, and approved the wording and structure of the template revised proposals report at annex B of the paper.

### **Regional updates**

17. Mr Bowden talked to Paper 3b, outlining for Commissioners the national and regional statistical breakdown of consultation responses, and then highlighting for each region what the key issues of concern were, based on the strength of response on those matters, illustrating each for Commissioners using map projections. Commissioners noted that London had been a particular hotspot in the country, with around a third of all responses relating to that region.
18. Commissioners welcomed this early identification of the issues of concern in each region, and looked forward to the analysis and recommendations from each regional Assistant Commissioner and staff team that would present to them in due course on how best to address those issues.

### **Any other business**

19. A general election had now been called. Since the 2018 Review was incomplete, it would obviously not apply to that election. The Commission's work was governed by statute and its work would continue to be planned in order to meet the statutory timetable for the presentation of the final report in 2018. While the Secretariat would monitor any proposals to change the legislation, unless and until they were enacted, the Commission would continue to operate within the present legislative framework.