

## Corporate Plan 2023–24 to 2027–28

Third update to 2020–21 Five Year Plan

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# 1. Foreword

I am pleased to present the Commission's Corporate Plan and Five-Year Strategy for the period 2023–24 to 2027–28.

The plan outlines how the Commission intends to deliver fair electoral and boundary arrangements for local government electors in England, and to support related changes in local governance and structures.

Our electoral reviews address electoral inequality across all principal English local authorities. We respond positively to requests from local authorities, and from government, when it is felt an electoral review could assist in the delivery of effective and convenient local government. In carrying out our duties we aim to:

- make sure that, within an authority, each councillor represents a similar number of electors.
- create boundaries that are appropriate and reflect community ties and identities.
- deliver reviews informed by local needs, views and circumstances.

Our new plan sets out how we will continue to pursue these fundamental objectives.

We have an ongoing role since electoral registers change continuously. This impacts on levels of electoral equality within local authorities and our plan commits to monitoring and, where appropriate, addressing such imbalances.

We also have a duty to review every council in England 'from time to time'. We will do this through blending such reviews with those that we carry out to address electoral inequality.

Our Corporate Plan is also intended to support those authorities that wish to change - whether through modifying aspects of their own governance arrangements (for example, their electoral cycles or the overall number of elected members) or as part of broader reorganisation. We are, therefore, sensitive to the current devolution agenda and its potential consequences, including potential changes to local government structures.

We are keen to make a helpful contribution and will work closely with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, and with affected local authorities, to build new democratic arrangements wherever such changes are being implemented. In this context, we are intending to undertake early reviews of the new unitary authorities of Cumberland, Westmorland & Furness, North Yorkshire and Somerset during the period of this plan.

We will always remain receptive to individual local authorities seeking an electoral review to help them deliver effective and convenient local government.

Since we presented our first Corporate Plan to Parliament in 2010, we have delivered real-term reductions of over £1,478k (38%)<sup>1</sup> to our budget.

We are a small organisation. Our challenge is to manage a portfolio of reviews that reflect our statutory responsibility to undertake periodic reviews and to maintain electoral equality alongside accommodating requests, either from individual authorities or from government, for additional reviews. We achieve this through managing our work programme and resources actively and flexibly - both within and between years - to ensure that we maintain the quantity, quality and rigour of our reviews.

A key resource is, of course, our people – both staff and commissioners. Our People Strategy is proving invaluable in helping us to develop, motivate and ensure the wellbeing of colleagues. It embeds our cultural behaviours in everything we do and how we work with others. It also underpins how we attract, recruit, retain and build the skills that are essential to the successful delivery of our programme.

As well as motivated people, the period of the pandemic demonstrated the significance of robust infrastructure. Accordingly, we will further develop our IT infrastructure and protocols to improve the efficiency, accessibility and accuracy of our processes and we will continue to exploit digital technology in the way we conduct and present reviews.

Engaging with local people and communities is an essential aspect of our work. Over the period of this plan, we expect to have delivered a new website and enhanced online consultation opportunities to maximise public understanding of, and engagement with, our reviews. To develop and improve our interactions with the public, we need to know what they think. We have developed a systematic process for capturing customer insights from those who engage with our reviews. This will help us embed continuous improvement into the ways that we work.

The lease on our current accommodation is not renewable beyond September 2024 and we will use this as an opportunity to identify premises that best match the future needs of the organisation, especially at a time when many are exploring fresh ways of working. Already, we have been able to dispense with some physical infrastructure, such as a server. We want to continue to be nimble and creative, whilst not compromising the rigour of our work that underpins our statutory responsibilities.

All our work, of course, is dependent on the strong participation of local authorities, local communities and organisations and, not least, the thousands of local people who provide their views and insight during our reviews. We are greatly indebted to them all for their assistance.

Professor Colin Mellors  
Chair, Local Government Boundary  
Commission for England

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<sup>1</sup> Calculated from Bank of England Consumer Prices Index inflation calculator.

## 2. Setting the scene

The Local Government Boundary Commission for England (The Commission) is required to lay a new five-year strategy in Parliament every five years or following each new Parliament. In addition, to inform the Speaker's Committee about our plans and the consequent resource requirement, we produce an annual update. This is the 3rd update to the original 2020–21 Corporate Plan and Five-Year Strategy of the Local Government Boundary Commission for England. It highlights both our past performance and plans for 2023-24 and beyond.

### Who we are

The Commission is an independent body, established by Parliament under the provisions of the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009. Our main responsibility is:

- Conducting Electoral Reviews by considering the electoral boundaries of local authorities in England and recommending any changes to Parliament.

We are also responsible for:

- Reviewing the administrative (external) boundaries of local authorities in England and making recommendations for changes to the Secretary of State.
- Advising the Secretary of State, at their request, on proposals they receive from local authorities for changes to unitary status.
- Reviewing the constituencies of the London Assembly and recommending any changes to Parliament.

### What we do

- We recommend fair electoral and boundary arrangements for local authorities in England.

### We aim to

- Make sure that, within each authority, each councillor represents a similar number of electors.
- Create boundaries that are appropriate and reflect community ties and identities.
- Deliver reviews informed by local needs, views and circumstances.

### We want to be regarded as

- Impartial – giving equal consideration to all views
- Objective – making recommendations based on evidence
- Responsive – listening to local opinion
- Transparent – following clear and open processes
- Professional – being reliable, efficient and helpful

### 3. Our work

Since our establishment in 2010, the number of electoral reviews we have undertaken has increased considerably. This has been accompanied by efficiencies and budget reductions. Over the last five years, we have aimed to start around 25 reviews annually<sup>2</sup> – each lasting approximately 15 months – and our funding has supported this level of activity. We conduct reviews to achieve electoral equality, reflect our duty to review each of the 332<sup>3</sup> local authorities in England ‘from time to time’, and in response to local authority requests.

Figure 1 – Last four years

<b>Financial Year</b>	<b>Reviews Started</b>	<b>Reviews Published</b>	<b>Total Electorate Affected<sup>4</sup></b>
<b>2022-23<sup>5</sup></b>	26	36	4,945,024
<b>2021-22</b>	28	32	5,659,534
<b>2020-21</b>	29	19	2,903,321
<b>2019-20</b>	23	14	2,683,606

#### Electoral review programme

A variety of factors that affect electoral equality – e.g., population growth, migration, development, levels of individual electoral registration and student populations – are, of course, outside of the Commission’s control. However, seeking to achieve acceptable levels of electoral equality, alongside reviewing all local authorities on a continuing basis to identify appropriate electoral boundaries, forms the statutory basis of our work. Levels of electoral equality also help shape our work programme given that some authorities experience more rapid changes in number and distribution of electors and, therefore, necessitate more frequent reviews. We assemble data on the levels of electoral equality in each local authority annually. This informs our work programme and the most appropriate, and productive, balance of review types.

<sup>2</sup> As reviews generally straddle financial years, our outputs can be influenced by external events such as elections.

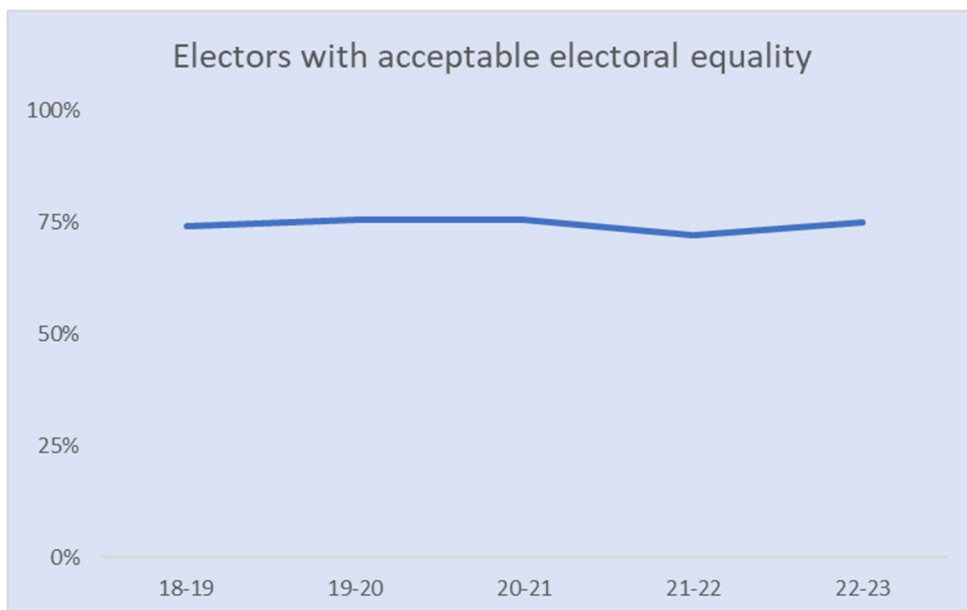
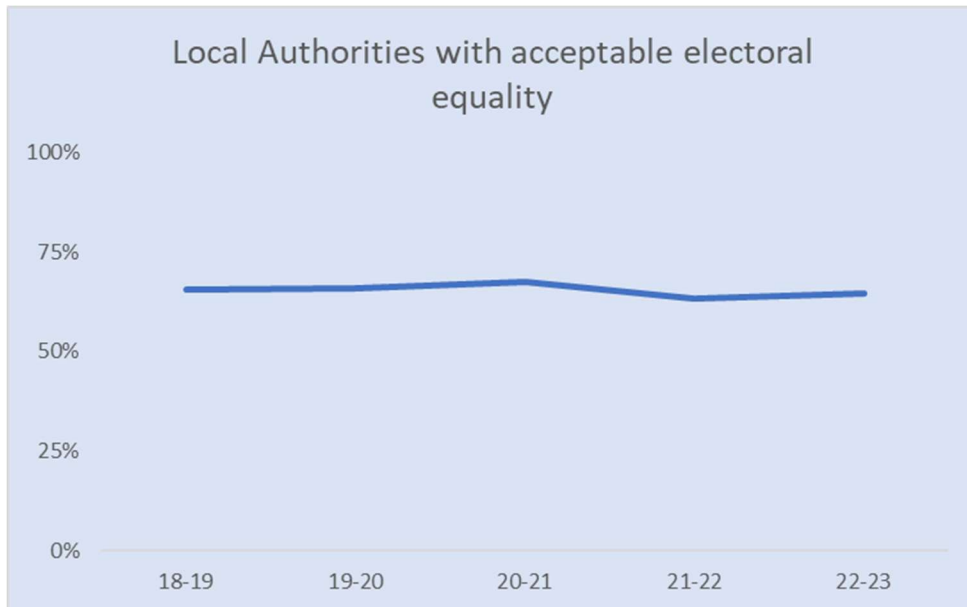
<sup>3</sup> Local Authority numbers have reduced over recent years due to mergers between authorities. The City of London authority is not included as the Commission is not responsible for conducting an electoral review of this authority.

<sup>4</sup> Total Electorate Affected is based on review started. Does not include electorate for PABR authorities.

<sup>5</sup> Figures for 2022–23 are estimated based on nine months’ data.

The graphs below indicate the most recent levels of electoral equality amongst English local authorities and electors in terms of the proportion of local authorities with acceptable<sup>6</sup> levels of electoral equality. The graph is affected by the number of local authorities that have been reviewed and data is gathered when the electoral registers are published annually.

Figure 2 – Local authorities and electors <sup>7</sup> with acceptable electoral equality



<sup>6</sup> Acceptable is defined as avoiding the levels of inequality that trigger our intervention criteria. We consider a poor level of equality to be when any ward or division in an authority has a variance greater than (+/-) 30% from the average for that authority or when 30% or more of wards or divisions have a variance greater than (+/-) 10% (i.e. where councillors represent considerably different numbers of electors compared with other councillors within their local authority).

<sup>7</sup> Electors in two-tier areas count as electors in both county and district authorities. The electorate numbers of both are added together to calculate overall percentages.

Over the next five years, we plan to undertake the following forms of electoral reviews:

**(i) Intervention electoral reviews** – We will identify authorities with poor levels of electoral equality and conduct reviews to address these anomalies. These are known as intervention reviews.

**(ii) Periodic electoral reviews** – The Commission has a statutory duty to review every local authority ‘from time to time’. Whilst intervention reviews are undertaken as and when individual authorities breach what we consider to be acceptable levels of electoral equality, periodic reviews represent more of a rolling element of our review programme. Whilst the legislation itself does not define ‘time to time’, we believe that, to support good governance, such reviews should take place approximately every three to four full electoral cycles, i.e. between 12 and 16 years. We will start the final tranche of periodic electoral reviews of Metropolitan district councils in 2023/24. We are also now conducting periodic electoral reviews of six counties to meet our duty to review authorities from time to time.

**(iii) Requested electoral reviews** – Alongside reviews that are initiated by the Commission, we are keen to retain sufficient capacity to respond to requests made by local authorities themselves. These are intended to assist their efforts to improve local governance and, typically, result from the desire either to change numbers of councillors or the pattern of electoral cycles. It is impossible to predict how many such requests we will receive each year<sup>8</sup> and we adjust our other reviews to accommodate these requests.

**(iv) New authorities** – We want to support councils that have been established on new boundaries where this has been agreed by Government and Parliament. We are reviewing West Northamptonshire, North Northamptonshire and Buckinghamshire Council. We will start reviews of the new unitary authorities in Somerset, Cumberland, Westmorland & Furness and North Yorkshire in 2024/25.

**(v) Principal Area Boundary Reviews (PABR)**

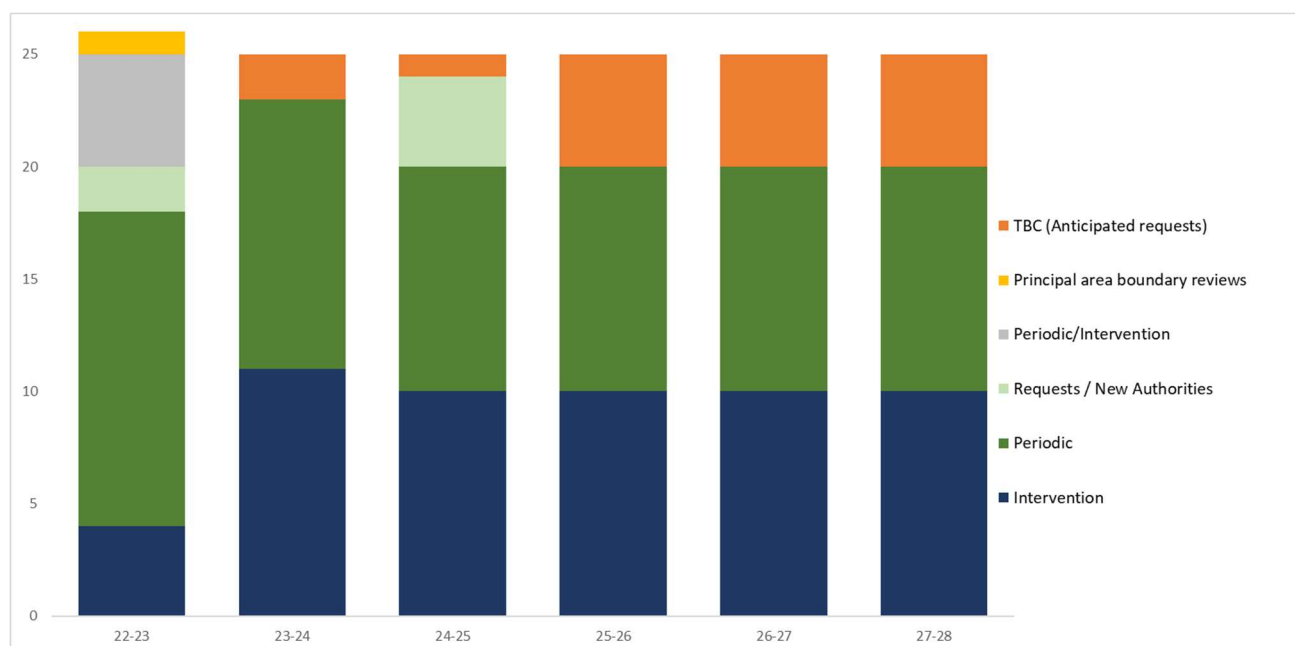
Where local authorities request a change to the boundaries between two (or more) authorities we may conduct a Principal Area Boundary Review. We have completed a small scale PABR on the boundary between Sheffield and Barnsley to reflect a development taking place on the boundary between the two authorities and have made a recommendation to the Secretary of State at DLUHC.

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<sup>8</sup> Number of requested reviews: three in 2022-23, six in 2021–22 and four in 2020–21.



Figure 3 – Planned review programme for next five years (review starts) <sup>9</sup>



The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on our review programme has eased. Where we paused our reviews to allow councils to focus on critical activities at the beginning of the pandemic, this has extended the timescale for some reviews. However, the programme is now back to normal. The overall throughput over a two to three-year period will remain as planned, or even exceeded.

## Review Costs Other activities

As part of our plans to reduce costs and increase efficiency, we have continually reviewed our processes and ways of working through several major projects. Our review cost information has become more sophisticated, and we are now able to analyse by review stage and have developed a database of detailed review costs. The table below shows our average costs per review<sup>10</sup>

Our most recent review costs are £84k per review (average of the different types of authority we review) and specifically £76k for a district/borough council.

<sup>9</sup> Electoral reviews of new and merged authorities are shown as 'request' reviews. 23 reviews are currently scheduled for 2023–24 but we will add to this programme in the coming months, holding space for request reviews.

<sup>10</sup> Review costing information is undertaken periodically based on detailed work which considers length of reviews, size of review, time management and allocation of overheads.

## Satisfaction

The input to our reviews from local people and organisations is essential in helping us refine the proposals in our electoral reviews. We have therefore continued to focus on improving public engagement in our work. As part of our new approach to customer insight we now use a suite of customer satisfaction surveys covering both a general audience and specific audiences such as those attending full council, parish and residents briefings. This will give us a new breadth of insight over the life of this plan to improve our services. We have already used insight from the surveys to feed into the replacement of our website in 2022-23.

Commission satisfaction rating	2021–22
People who express a definite opinion about satisfaction, i.e. are 'highly satisfied' or 'quite satisfied' with their overall experience of dealing with the Commission	75%

## People

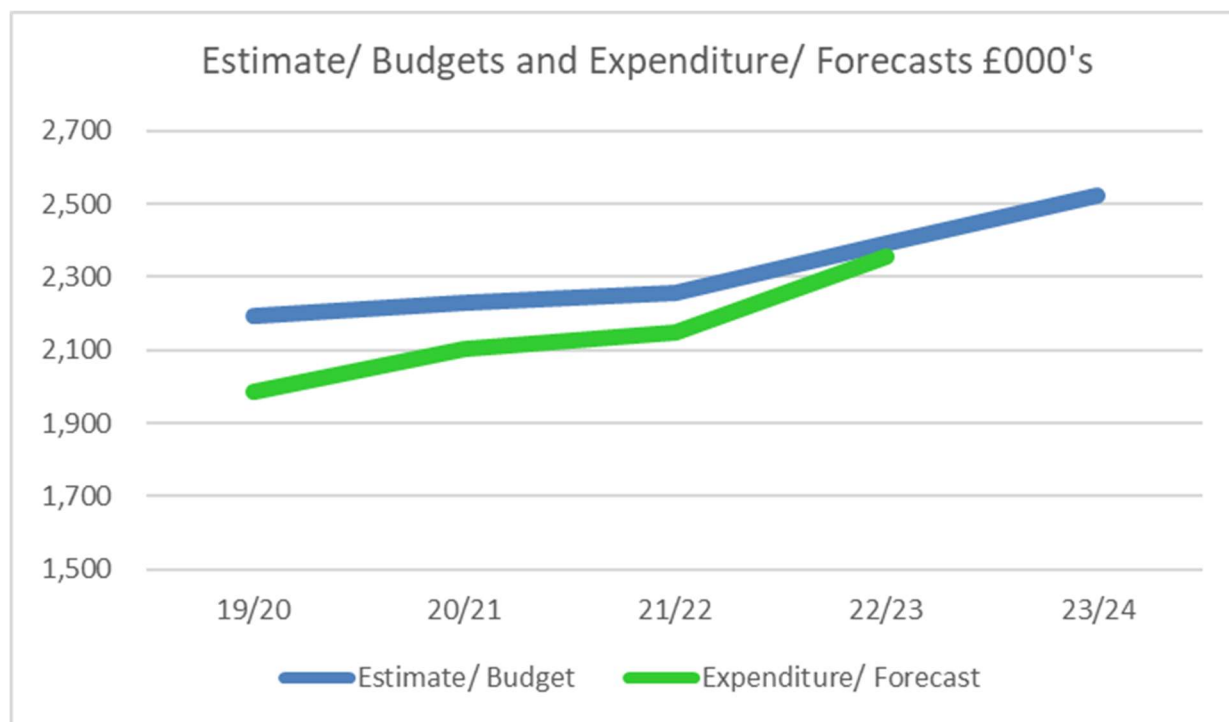
Our 2022 People Survey results remain high. Significantly, however, they remain substantially higher than earlier years and demonstrate the value of the work on our People Strategy.

Figure 4 – LGBCE staff survey v Civil Service

	LGBCE 2022	Civil Service Mean (2021)	Similar or higher than CS
Employee engagement index	50%	63%	↓
My work	84%	75%	↑
Organisational objectives and purpose	97%	81%	↑
My manager	83%	72%	↑
My team	85%	82%	↑
Learning and development	41%	57%	↓
Inclusion and fair treatment	84%	79%	↑
Resources and workload	95%	73%	↑
Pay and benefits	38%	38%	↔
Leadership and managing change	77%	51%	↑

## 4. Running costs and funding

Figure 5 – Spending profile <sup>11</sup>



The efficiencies, savings and increase in review numbers we achieved in our early years means that we have reached a place where our budget currently offers little opportunity for further significant efficiencies without reducing staff numbers or compromising the quality of our reviews and the number of reviews we can deliver.

We ask for.

- 1) inflationary and other increases to our budgets following a mixture of HM Treasury guidance and discussions, likely market conditions, and negotiations with our individual suppliers. For 2023/24 we ask for a 4% increase to both staff costs and prices which should cover supplier and other government agencies cost increases already made and to be made.
- 2) A one-off increase of £35k to recruit a new Accounting Officer/ Chief Executive due to the planned retirement of our current Chief Executive in December 2023.
- 3) A contingency of 4% of our budget (£101k) which will be ring-fenced and used for such items that would normally necessitate a small Supplementary Estimate to be sought. The Commission recognises the value for money implications in convening a Speakers Committee to approve a small amount of expenditure and asks to build in this buffer to avoid this necessity. Any expenditure from this fund will be explained in detail to the Committee alongside our following Corporate Plan.

<sup>11</sup> In the graph, the 4% contingency is not included in the 2023/24 Estimate/ Budget figure

We have a small annual capital budget of £50k which we use for investment in our IT and software solutions (website, SharePoint, intranet, and other IT projects). This budget increased by £70k during 2022/23 for the development of a new website. Our new website provides enhanced interactive mapping for the public to view, directly linking boundaries shown on maps to our reasoning for placing them where they are. The software which supports that is also a powerful tool for internal use. It allows multiple proposals to be uploaded, instantly calculating electoral variances. We are in the final stages of implementation and will exploit its benefits in the coming years.

Organisational and financial resilience, both short- and long-term, feature prominently in our risk management and assurance processes. Our Digital & IT Strategy has meant that we have decommissioned our server during this year, becoming entirely cloud based and continuing our agile agenda whilst adhering to all operational and governance imperatives and meeting the needs of our various stakeholders. Despite some unforeseen expenditure due to inflationary impacts during the year, we have remained within budget in what has been a tough year financially.

Figure 6 – Funding profile 2022–23 to 2027–28<sup>12 13 14</sup>

	2022-23 £000	2023-24 £000	2024-25 £000	2025-26 £000	2026-27 £000	2027-28 £000
staff and commissioners	1,499	1,594	1,559	1,590	1,621	1,654
mapping and printing	135	141	144	147	150	152
stakeholder engagement	103	107	109	111	113	116
business costs	415	431	504	578	589	601
legal and professional	58	60	61	63	64	65
depreciation	182	199	128	62	62	62
risk/resilience fund (4%)	-	101	100	102	104	106
<b>DEL revenue</b>	<b>2,392</b>	<b>2,633</b>	<b>2,605</b>	<b>2,653</b>	<b>2,703</b>	<b>2,756</b>
AME	15	10	-	-	-	-
<b>revenue total</b>	<b>2,407</b>	<b>2,643</b>	<b>2,605</b>	<b>2,653</b>	<b>2,703</b>	<b>2,756</b>
DEL capital	120	50	50	50	50	50
<b>total</b>	<b>2,527</b>	<b>2,693</b>	<b>2,655</b>	<b>2,703</b>	<b>2,753</b>	<b>2,806</b>

<sup>12</sup> Changes to 2024-25 and 2025-26 depreciation and business costs reflect our rental costs reverting to pre IFRS16 levels (lease end is September 2024).

<sup>13</sup> Our AME accommodation dilapidation provision (2023-24 £10k, 2022–23 £15k) will always be our best estimate as the Government Property Agency does not produce figures in time to be included within our supply estimate.

<sup>14</sup> The staffing costs reduction in 2024-25 is due to a one-off request in 2023-24 for the recruitment costs of a new chief executive.