

# **ECB response to its draft business plan consultation 2026/27**

**April 2026**

## **Executive summary**

1. The ECB would like to thank all stakeholders who have engaged with us as we develop our 2026/27 business plan.
2. We have received a range of responses from the enforcement industry and debt advice sector as well as membership bodies. In addition to the formal consultation we have also undertaken informal engagement through our stakeholder forum, and meetings with CIVEA and HCEOA members.
3. Responses to the consultation were supportive of the overall aims of the ECB but respondents from the enforcement industry made clear they had concerns with some of the proposed work and with the levy increase required to underpin the budget.
4. Having analysed and considered all of the feedback received, we have retained our overall priorities while scaling back some of our proposed work, notably our proposal to undertake our own demographic research this year. We have also made a number of amendments to our budget to enable us to reduce the levy industry is asked to pay from 0.7% of turnover to 0.64%. Attached is our final business plan which includes drafting changes following the input from stakeholders during this consultation.
5. We are grateful for the feedback received through the business plan development process which has given us a good understanding of the views of stakeholders on our plans for the next year and we look forward to engaging with them over the coming year as we deliver on the priorities we have set out in our final business plan.

## **Background**

6. The ECB is the independent oversight body for the enforcement industry. We were set up with agreement between the enforcement industry and leading debt advice charities including Money Advice Trust, Christians Against Poverty and Step Change. Our mission is to ensure that everyone who experiences enforcement action is treated fairly.
7. In February 2026 we published a consultation on our draft business plan for 2026/7, which sets out our key strategic priorities and planned deliverables for the year ahead.
8. We were interested in hearing from all stakeholders with an interest in fair enforcement, including industry, consumer groups and the debt advice sector.
9. The consultation sought responses on the following questions:

Q1 – Do you have any comments on the proposed priorities for 2026/27?

Q2 – Do you have views or ideas on how the ECB can seek to influence creditors towards fair enforcement, in a targeted and impactful manner?

Q3 – Are there any activities that you believe the ECB should be prioritising that are not contained in this plan?

Q4 – Do you have any comments on the draft budget and levy?

Q5 – Are there any other comments or observations that you would like to make?

10. The consultation closed on the **12<sup>th</sup> March 2025** and received sixteen responses, from the following bodies:

- The Civil Enforcement Association (CIVEA)
- The High Court Enforcement Officers Association (HCEOA)
- Money Advice Trust
- Step Change
- Institute of Money Advisers
- Bristow and Sutor (an ECB accredited firm)
- CDER (an ECB accredited firm)
- DCBL (an ECB accredited firm)
- Rundles (an ECB accredited firm)
- Just (an ECB accredited firm)
- Marston Holdings (an ECB accredited firm)
- Newlyn (an ECB accredited firm)
- Court Enforcement Services (ECB accredited firm)
- Excel Enforcement (an ECB accredited firm)
- High Court Enforcement Group (an ECB accredited firm)
- Wilson and Roe (an ECB accredited firm)

11. In addition to this we held two online engagement events for members of CIVEA and members of the HCEOA which have informed our response to the consultation.

12. The points below summarise the responses to each of the consultation questions, alongside the ECB's response.

## **Consultation responses**

### **Q1 – Do you have any comments on the proposed priorities for 2026/27?**

*Summary of consultation responses:*

13. Responses expressed clear support for the overall aims and principles of the ECB. Feedback from enforcement firms stated a desire for the ECB to prioritise focusing on our core business of proportionate oversight of the sector and ensuring compliance to our standards.
14. Of our proposed core priorities, the area which received the most feedback was our proposal to undertake demographic research into the people who experience enforcement. Some enforcement firms were keen to understand how we would undertake this in a way that was truly representative of the sector, noting that research methods like focus groups can risk participation bias. Other firms were clear that they felt this piece of research was of limited value and a 'nice to have' which, given the financial pressures on the sector, should be de-prioritised in the ECB's final Business Plan. Some noted that there are existing data sets in related areas that could be used instead.

15. Responses from debt advice organisations put forward a different perspective, welcoming the research and the value it could add to the overall understanding of how people are impacted by enforcement.
16. Some respondents also noted that a priority for the ECB in the coming year should be ensuring the successful implementation of our standards on vulnerability and the development of our compliance regime to ensure the standards are adhered to.

*ECB response:*

17. We are grateful for the support of stakeholders in the priorities we set out in our draft business plan and the continued commitment of the enforcement sector to proportionate, industry funded oversight.
18. In relation to the feedback we received on our proposal to undertake demographic research into people who experience enforcement, we have taken the decision not to undertake our own piece of research in this area during 2026/27. We remain committed to obtaining reliable data on the demographics of those who experience enforcement action. This is key data that will help us to understand the impact of enforcement and how we can best target our work in pursuit of our mission. However, in the light of the financial pressures highlighted in responses, we have reduced the budget for this work from £40k to £10k. This reduced budget will allow us to focus on better scoping how we might approach this work in the future, or potentially pursuing a partnership approach with another organisation.

**Q2 – Do you have views or ideas on how the ECB can seek to influence creditors towards fair enforcement, in a targeted and impactful manner?**

*Summary of consultation responses:*

19. Our proposed work on creditors received mixed feedback from respondents with some stating their view that the work of creditors was out of the ECB's remit as we have no jurisdiction over creditors. However, others from both industry and debt advice acknowledged the pivotal role creditors play in facilitating fair enforcement. Views differed on the extent to which the ECB should take on this work with some respondents stating that if the ECB intends to conduct work in this area it should limit its focus to influencing creditors through examples of good practice and work with other regulators and industry bodies, particularly in relation to council tax collection where respondents noted the challenges that pressures on local authority budgets create. While other respondents felt the ECB should go further, establishing a code of conduct for creditors to sign up to and shining a light on poor practice amongst creditors where required.

*ECB response:*

20. Our work on influencing positive creditor behaviour is about looking for upstream opportunities to support delivery of fair enforcement by accredited enforcement firms. We are in the process of properly scoping this work and will take account of the feedback received in doing so. This is not an area of work that has dedicated expenditure in the budget beyond some staff time.

**Q3 – Are there any activities that you believe the ECB should be prioritising that**

## **are not contained in this plan?**

### *Summary of consultation responses:*

21. In response to this question there were a range of suggestions for areas that the ECB should increase its focus on. A number of consultees (across debt advice and the enforcement industry) suggested we should prioritise work on making the case for the ECB to be placed on a statutory footing by government. Others thought that the ECB should do more to improve data collection and consistency across industry to ensure we have accurate data when undertaking oversight activities.
22. A number of responses from enforcement firms called on the ECB to do more in relation to agent safety and wellbeing and ensuring that we promote a balanced narrative in our public facing communications.
23. Some of the responses from debt advice firms focused on areas where we could undertake further research. Suggestions included replicating our 2024 body worn video research and more work on the types and values of debts passed to enforcement firms. We also received a response asking for confirmation that we intend to continue progressing work to publish materials to support members of public to better understand the enforcement process.

### *ECB response:*

24. We welcome the proposals from stakeholders about areas we should focus on which are not in our business plan.
25. In relation to feedback on focusing on statutory underpinning. The ECB is committed to working with government to give the ECB the necessary powers to ensure comprehensive oversight of the enforcement sector and will continue this work in 2026/27. Since we published our consultation, there has still been no public commitment from the Government on a timetable for introducing statutory regulation (although the MHCLG consultation response on Council Tax reform did reiterate Government's commitment to act as soon as possible). The Board has therefore agreed to prioritise a public affairs push in the first 6 months of 2026/27 to ensure a timetable is agreed and publicly committed to. A new line had therefore been added to the budget to gain some targeted external support at this key time.
26. We are also clear that we have a role to play in ensuring enforcement is carried out in a way that prioritises the safety of people experiencing enforcement and those undertaking enforcement action. It is for this reason that we collect data in our data returns on attacks on agents and we will consider what further role we have to play in ensuring enforcement activity is safe for all those involved.
27. On the responses from debt advice organisations about further work we might undertake. While we do not intend to undertake any further research this year, we are clear that part of the role of the ECB is undertaking research where necessary to deliver on our aims and this will be a consideration when developing our 2027/28 business plan. In relation to the work to support the public to better understand the enforcement process, we undertook work during 2025/26 in this area, as set out in our business plan.

This work is progressing and we expect to publish these materials in 2026/27, following further testing of the materials with appropriate experts.

#### **Q4 – Do you have any comments on the draft budget and levy?**

##### *Summary of consultation responses:*

28. Responses to this question from the enforcement industry were consistent in expressing their concern about the uplift in the levy the ECB has consulted on. There were several drivers industry respondents felt were behind this. A number of responses referred to the reserves the ECB is aiming to build, believing that this is an unnecessarily high figure for the ECB to aim for. Concerns were also raised about the level of salaries paid by the ECB. However, the area most frequently cited in responses was the increase in costs driven by the ECB's complaints function.
29. A number of respondents were concerned about the way the ECB had calculated demand, and thus the resources needed to deliver the complaints service, expressing a view that this included a large number of double counted complaints that is inflating the numbers used.
30. Other respondents felt that the ECB is not sufficiently controlling complaints volumes or managing productivity of existing staff sufficiently. These respondents felt this was creating an inefficient system which would continue to increase in cost year on year. A number of responses quoted firms internal complaints handling figures where the cases closed per investigator are higher than the projections on which the complaints resource modelling for the ECB are based.
31. On this topic, debt advice organisations put forward a different view, stating that they were encouraged to see the ECB increasing resource on complaints and that this would be necessary to maintain the quality of the service going forward.
32. A number of respondents also used this question to put forward their thoughts on the ECB's levy mechanism. The majority of respondents were supportive of the suggestion in the business plan that the ECB would look at options in the coming year to implement a 'polluter pays' approach where firms who required more resource intensive work from the ECB would pay an increased cost. Some respondents also suggested alternative approaches to the ECB's levy mechanism, suggesting a minimum levy to accredit with the ECB. Others proposed shifting the timetable for the levy collection process so that the ECB knows the turnover figures for firms in advance of consulting on the levy to provide greater certainty on both sides. And some argued for the ECB to seek to develop multi-year budgets to provide longer-range certainty on costs.
33. Some respondents expressed concerns that the ECB is not achieving value for money in relation to its contracted business administration services like IT, accounting, payroll and recruitment. Respondents also requested a better understanding of the ECB's financial picture throughout the year not just at year end.

##### *ECB response:*

34. We are grateful for the feedback received on this question both through consultation responses and through the informal engagement we undertook with industry. We

understand this budget represents a shift from previous years and that the increase in levy we have proposed is significant.

35. Taking the feedback as a whole into account, the Board has agreed to a number of changes to the budget that have the overall effect of reducing the headline budget from £1.96M to £1.78M. This means that the levy that we will need to set will be 0.64% for private enforcement firms, rather than the 0.7% we indicated in the consultation. For LA in-house teams, the levy for 2026/27 will be 0.38%.
36. The ECB's response to the specific points raised is set out below. We believe that the changes to the budget represent a necessary response to the feedback that we received. Whilst the budget is still increasing significantly in relation to 2025/26, that increase now stands at 27% compared to the 40% we consulted on. We do not believe that it would be appropriate to reduce the budget further, without impairing our ability to continue to deliver our important mission and maintain the momentum that has been built.

#### *Demographic research*

37. As noted above, we have reduced the budget for the demographic research from £40k to £10k with a focus on scoping this work for future years, rather than undertaking this work in 2026/27.

#### *Complaints resourcing*

38. In relation to concerns expressed over the resourcing and performance of the ECB's complaints team. We have undertaken detailed modelling based on current demand that demonstrates without any further significant increases in complaints numbers we can expect to receive 840-1,200 complaints during 2026/27. Of those complaints, 330-480 will go to our further consideration stage where we speak to the complainant and firm to better understand the case and we expect to open 280-330 investigations. We also started 2026/27 with a backlog of 76 investigations, which we would like to make some inroads into.
39. We are starting the year with a complaints team of 5.7 FTE. Based on current resourcing assumptions, which we have benchmarked against other second tier complaints handling bodies, this team would be able to undertake approximately 240-290 investigations across the year.
40. We understand that firms feel that our current approach to investigating complaints is overly resource intensive and are concerned that this has the potential to increase exponentially year on year. We will be undertaking a wide process and efficiency review of our complaints process in the coming months. This will consider how our complaints process has operated in its first year and what improvement can be made to ensure that we are providing a high quality, efficient complaints service that can handle increasing volumes of complaints swiftly and proportionately. We look forward to engaging stakeholders in this review over the coming months.
41. We have taken the decision to pause our planned recruitment of an additional complaints investigator pending the outcome of the process and efficiency review, as proposed by numerous respondents. The draft budget has this post in provisionally from January

2027 but we will only recruit this post if the process and efficiency review concludes that it is necessary. This change has achieved a significant saving compared to the draft budget, which will increase further if this post is not deemed necessary from January.

42. This decision has been made taking account of the current figures on the number of cases that are coming through to the ECB's complaint team. We believe there is scope for improvements in first tier complaints handling at enforcement firms, to help to stem the flow of escalated complaints to the ECB. We will be discussing this further in the forthcoming complaints workshops and the process and efficiency review. If, in spite of this, we see significant ongoing increases in complaint numbers, we may need to revisit the case to bring forward recruitment of an additional investigator. For example, if we were to see multiple consecutive months with over 100 complaints (the current average is 85), it may be necessary to bring forward recruitment to prevent the backlog from increasing further.

#### *Other savings*

43. In relation to feedback about the value for money of the ECB's business administration services, we have taken this on board. We have reevaluated a number of areas in the proposed budget and reduced the budget lines for insurance, external audit and training to achieve overall savings of around £30k compared to the draft budget. We also intend to review this year our contracts for accounting and payroll services to ensure we are achieving value for money.

#### *Contingency and reserves*

44. With respect to concerns raised about the ECB's reserve levels, we have made some changes to simplify the position.
45. The draft budget included a £95k contingency line, which we have now removed from the budget. However, we are still setting the levy at a level that will allow the ECB to carry reserves equal to three full months of operating costs through 2026/27. The reserves do not feature in the budget as they do not represent planned expenditure.
46. The levy of 0.64% should generate a surplus for 2026/27 of £112k, which will be sufficient to top up our reserves to the equivalent of 3 full months of operating costs.
47. In the current operating environment and before statutory powers have been delivered, the Board is clear that we need this level of reserves as a minimum, to allow us to continue to operate at an acceptable level of risk and without jeopardising the long-term future of independent oversight.

#### *Statutory powers*

48. As noted above, the Board has agreed to add a small budget line (£25k) into the final budget to allow us to obtain some targeted public affairs in relation to securing statutory powers. Achieving this will support our mission by ensuring that *everyone* who experiences enforcement is treated fairly. It will also help to secure the long-term foundations of statutory oversight, protecting the significant investment firms have

already made in independent oversight. This is a crucial time to secure a firm commitment to a timetable for action.

#### *Future funding models*

49. We are pleased to hear that the majority of respondents are supportive of our plans to consider a 'polluter pays' funding model and we welcome the other suggestions put forward by stakeholders as to how we could amend our levy model. We intend to undertake work this year to assess the different ways we might look to implement a 'polluter pays' model and we will consider as part of this the potential ways we might amend the way we calculate our levy payments.

#### *Other changes*

50. There are some other small changes to some budget lines in the final Business Plan. This represents refinements and updates to these lines during the period of the consultation. For example, the £10k line for Enforcement Industry Expert Consultancy has now been folded into the Complaints Scheme line.

#### **Q5 – Are there any other comments or observations that you would like to make?**

##### *Summary of consultation responses:*

51. In response to this question, a large number of respondents from enforcement firms made the link between the ECB's proposed levy uplift and the long awaited enforcement fee uplift (which at the time the consultation closed had not been laid before parliament) and the importance of the ECB understanding the rising cost base for enforcement firms without an associated increase in their income for a significant number of years. Respondents from some enforcement firms noted again their concerns about the figures on which the ECB has modelled the resourcing for its complaints team.

##### *ECB response:*

52. The ECB acknowledges the challenging operating environment for enforcement firms and since the conclusion of this consultation, notes that the Ministry of Justice has now laid a Statutory Instrument which allows for firms to increase the fees they charge. As an organisation we endeavour to ensure that we are delivering on the goals we were established to achieve in the most efficient way possible and look forward to working with all our stakeholders to continue this work into 2026/27.