

## **The Electoral Commission's report "Accounting for elections – The National Assembly for Wales elections 2007"**

**11 March 2008**

### **Brian Gibbons, Minister for Social Justice and Local Government**

The Electoral Commission today published its report "Accounting for elections – The National Assembly for Wales elections 2007". The exercise was undertaken at the request of the Assembly Government in order to look at the accounting arrangements operated by Returning Officers for the May 2007 Assembly elections.

This is an important piece of work. I am grateful to the Electoral Commission for accepting the request and to the Wales Audit Office for its thorough investigation. I would also like to thank all those Returning Officers and other staff who have assisted with the production of the report.

The current arrangements for the administration of electoral finance have been in place for many years. As the Report recognises, some aspects are due for a thorough review. The Welsh Assembly Government has been responsible for funding two elections and we are now in a position to take a measured view as to the effectiveness and appropriateness of the arrangements as they stand. This Report is therefore extremely useful and very timely. I am eager to work with our partners to ensure that the administrative funding system is fit for purpose, providing sufficient and appropriate rewards to those who participate.

The Electoral Commission makes 7 recommendations of which three are aimed at the Assembly Government and one jointly to the UK Government and us.

I welcome the general finding that Returning Officers operated effective controls over election expenses in 2007. We can have confidence that the accounts of Returning Officer and local authority accounts are properly separated. This was one of the chief concerns of Sue Essex, the then Finance, Local government and Public Services Minister, when she requested the Report. However, the Electoral Commission's report did identify weaknesses in the legal and administrative frameworks supporting the administration of the elections.

I am grateful to local authorities, Returning Officers and their staff for their tireless efforts which have led to the successful conduct of the last three Assembly elections. However, the current structure of legal powers and duties and how they are distributed across a number of public bodies does not provide an unambiguous framework in which Returning Officers can operate and be remunerated. For the system to command the respect and confidence of the citizen we must ensure that roles and responsibilities are clear, understandable and fit for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I intend to work closely with the Elections Planning Group, the Electoral Commission and engage fully with the UK Government on this matter.

We are now in the run up to the local elections in May of this year. The first priority must be that these are undertaken in an open and democratic way. Following these elections I propose to respond in more detail to the three recommendations that are specifically addressed to the Welsh Assembly Government and also to consider the shared recommendations of the Assembly and UK Governments.