

Response to the Electoral Commission's report "Accounting for elections – The National Assembly for Wales elections 2007"

15 July 2008

Brian Gibbons, Minister for Social Justice and Local Government

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

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

The first recommendation was that before settling the election accounts for the 2007 elections, further clarification and evidence should be sought from the Returning Officers regarding the clerical assistance and training costs elements of their claims, where appropriate. All 22 Returning Officers were asked for assurances regarding these elements of their claims. Of the 21 replies received to date, all provide written assurances that those parts of the election claims were properly incurred and fully justified for the effective and efficient conduct of the elections. On the basis of these assurances, the accounts relating to the May 2007 elections can now be settled.

The second recommendation was that the Welsh Assembly Government considers introducing a fixed fee regime for specific known tasks associated with running elections. This is something I shall consider in advance of making the fees and charges Order for the next Assembly elections in 2011.

The third recommendation is that advice is offered to Returning Officers on the VAT situation regarding election expenses. This, again, is something we shall clarify well in advance of the 2011 elections.

The joint recommendation for the Welsh Assembly and UK Governments, that there should be a review of the legislative framework surrounding the conduct of elections is something that is already being addressed. The Electoral Commission convened a round table discussion on funding for elections which was attended by representatives of the Welsh Assembly Government, the Ministry of Justice, the Wales Audit Office and the National Audit Office, the Scottish Office and the Northern Ireland Office. The group has agreed to reconvene at a future date with the aim of developing a more transparent and accountable system of financing elections.

The Electoral Commission's report suggests that there may be elements of established custom and practice in elections accounting which do not sit comfortably with the modern standards of transparency and accountability expected throughout the public service. I welcome the opportunity presented by this report to work with our partners to develop a fair and publicly acceptable method of financing Assembly elections in the future.

