

Review Of The Electoral Commission – Submission By The Returning Officer of Carmarthenshire County Council

The Electoral Commission has steadily improved in expertise and usefulness since its inception in 2000. Underpinning this progress is its independent status and also its accountability in terms of being under the scrutiny of the Comptroller and Audit General. The Commission's independent legal status from Government must remain protected, and likewise its performance with regard economy, efficiency and effectiveness should continue to be monitored and reported on by an authoritative and respected source such as the Speaker's Committee.

The Commission's corporate plan (published April 2006) details the objectives and targets for 2006 – 7 to 2010 – 11. The scope and importance of the responsibilities are far reaching and the lead given by the Commission will impact on the vibrancy and effectiveness of our democratic process. One impact on Returning Officers and Electoral Administrators is the increasing role that the Commission has in providing advice and assistance on the conduct of elections and in promoting voter encouragement. Currently, this advisory role has the right balance and is based on the exchange of skills and experience between the Commission and such organisations as the Association of Electoral Administrators (AEA). Care must be taken to ensure this balance is maintained when for example performance measurements are developed in 2006 by the Commission on the management of elections and electoral registration.

The sometimes inevitable desire to try to micro manage and produce copious, unnecessarily detailed and convoluted compulsory guidance and indicators should be avoided. Effective exchange of views and involvement of practitioners in drawing up any such guidance should be paramount.

Having a Commission Office in Wales allows for convenient access, and a growing familiarity and understanding by its staff of issues particular to Wales, bilingualism being a specific example. Carmarthenshire, as with other authorities in Wales, has responded positively to the Commission's aim of increasing democratic participation. Credit must be given to the Commission for influencing changes in the way Returning Officers and their respective electoral teams are now becoming more involved in voter encouragement activities.

At the heart of the Commission's progress is its independency, and this together with proven lines of accountability is the key to its future success.