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The Secretary
Committee on Standards in Public Life
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Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the Committee on Standards in Public Life's Review of the Electoral Commission's Issues and Questions Paper, published in February 2006.

I am writing on behalf of myself, Paul Rogerson, the Chief Executive of Leeds City Council and Ged Fitzgerald, the Chief Executive of Sunderland City Council. We three were part of a working group established by the Electoral Commission to plan for the referendum on regional assemblies originally proposed to take place in the North West, Yorkshire and Humber and the North East. We have each been Regional Returning Officers for all postal pilot elections to the European Parliament in 2004 and Mr Fitzgerald was the Counting Officer for the NE Referendum. Our response to your paper is based on our collective experience of working closely with the Electoral Commission (the Commission), the Department for Constitutional Affairs (DCA) and the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM).

As experienced local government officers with many years of experience of running local, general and European parliamentary elections we strongly welcomed the creation of the Electoral Commission and believe it has done excellent work in professionalising the approach to electoral administration and educating the electors. We would not wish any review to reduce this role in any way. We believe its mandate may be too narrow however and we would suggest that there is a need for clarity around responsibility for electoral matters.

At present ODPM and DCA have a range of functions and responsibilities with the Commission's responsibilities set out in PPERA 2000. The recent clarification of responsibility of functions between ODPM and the DCA has been helpful but the allocation of responsibilities could be further clarified.

In our view a radical approach is needed to the future management of electoral events to avoid confusion and to seek to achieve a greater consistency. We believe the referendum model has a number of advantages

over the current system and would recommend that the Chairman of the Commission, who is the Chief Counting Officer for Referendums, should become the Chief Returning Officer for all elections with the power to appoint local authority officers to be his/her deputy in their area. Instructions would then be issued from one organisation only and accountability would be enhanced.

The Commission have played an invaluable role in relation to fraud prevention. Most recently they have acted as a catalyst for considering responses to potential disruption to the electoral process by strike action by local government employees in connection with this years local elections. We believe that the Commission should be empowered to exercise a supervisory role and that the Commission has demonstrated that they have the capacity to undertake such a role.

We also strongly believe that the Commission should discharge the management of each electoral event through local authorities. This approach was successfully demonstrated at the Referendum for the regional assembly in the North East. We believe that there is a case for the Commission to have a continuing regional presence in each of the English regions to ensure consistency and professionalism throughout the country. The concept of regional co-ordination is being trialled in the North West, South West, South East and Eastern regions for the local elections this year and will be fully evaluated after the election.

The complexity of the management of elections and electoral registration has changed and has led to the engagement with partners and stakeholders, including the suppliers, the media , Royal Mail and the police. It has also become clear that there are differing levels of capacity within local authorities to carry out these vital functions.

The Electoral Administration Bill proposes new powers for the Commission in relation to electoral registration, notably being the keeper of the Co-ordinated on-line Record of Electors (CORE) and the power to set performance standards in the area of electoral registration and elections.

The Commission will have, if the Bill in its current form is enacted, the power to issue directions to officers and we believe this power should be reflected in the change of relationship to that suggested above.

We believe the restrictions on who can be an Electoral Commissioner are correct. It would not be appropriate for party affiliated commissioners to be involved especially in relation to the Commissions existing and proposed responsibilities for boundary delimitations. We also believe that the Commission benefits from having commissioners who have had recent experience as senior local government officers.