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The Committee on Standards in Public Life  
35 Great Smith Street  
London  
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Dear Sirs

### **Review of Electoral Commission**

I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to the consultation paper and I would be happy to give oral evidence, if you felt that would be helpful. I write as the Returning Officer and Registration Officer for Leicester, where I have administered all general, European and local elections since 1996.

#### Mandate of the Electoral Commission

From the Returning Officer and Registration Officer perspective, the Commission, with its current mandate, has been of immense value in promoting public awareness of and sound administration in electoral processes.

Their guidance and support to those administering registers and elections, undertaken with clarity and sensitivity, has been invaluable at a time of substantial change. They have brought about significant improvements in the standard and consistency of administration. This aspect of the Commission's role is working well and should be carefully preserved, whatever other changes are considered. Returning and Registration Officers will need the continuity of what is now an experienced Commission, as they face the next round of changes.

Work of particular value, which needs to continue, includes:

- Training and development, to ensure good quality administration of registers and elections.
- Development of core standards to ensure a consistent, auditable approach.
- Specialist advice and general guidance to avoid reinventing the wheel.
- Facilitation of self-help networks and transfer of good-practice.
- Assessment of pilots and other potential improvements.

- Co-ordination and assessment of practitioner views on electoral processes and potential improvements.
- Public awareness, both direct and in support of local initiatives, including outreach work with young people.

There is potential for the Commission to:

- Build on its work so far, for example, to set core standards and to promote awareness further through schools.
- Initiate and co-ordinate debate and commission research on the development of electoral processes, for example, enhanced participative democracy. There needs to be a catalyst for developing a vision and there will be greater public confidence if this emerges from an independent perspective.
- Channel and monitor funding to ensure it is applied effectively to the intended purpose.
- Oversee the consistent practical application of national initiatives.

### Governance of the Electoral Commission

It is essential to healthy democracy that there are checks and balances to ensure that the democratic process itself is free of, and is seen to be free of, undue political influence. Parliament, has the final say and a key safeguard is an independent body to gather evidence and advice, and to do so transparent and publicly after due discussion with all stakeholders.

In essence, the Commission's current status and relationship with the Government and Parliament fulfils this need. The Government remains free to disagree with Commission recommendations but, and make different proposals to Parliament, but importantly, it must be required to explain its reasons for doing so. An independent advisory body ensures this.

The method of financing the Commission must support its independence. Funding must be perceived as being adequate to perform its role and in no way used to influence the Commission inappropriately through financial pressure.

The requirement that Commissioners cannot be political officers is a key strength of the Commission. It is a vital feature of its independence from political influence. Anything else would seriously undermine perceptions of its independence and reduce public confidence in the integrity of electoral processes. This would be particularly acute in relation to the Boundary Committee.

Yours faithfully

Tom Stephenson  
Returning Officer for Leicester

