The Electoral Commission

Minutes of the meeting of the Electoral Commission held on Thursday 11 December 2008, London

Present: Sam Younger (SY) Chair
Max Caller (MC)
Henrietta Campbell (HC)
John McCormick (JMcC)
Ian Kelsall (IK)
Karamjit Singh (KS)

In attendance Peter Wardle (PW)
Clare Ettinghausen (CE)
Carolyn Hughes (CH)
Lisa Klein (LK)
Stephen Rooney (SR)
Andrew Scallan (AS)
Bob Posner (BP)
Louisa Parry (LP) – for item 2
Keith Stainer (KS) – for item 2
David Freeland (DL) – for item 3
Tom Hawthorn (TH) – for item 3
Archie Gall (AG) – for items 4 and 5
Elizabeth Morrow (EM) – for items 4 and 5
Tony Stafford (TS) – for item 6
Vera Markos (VM)
Sandra Anlin (SA) minutes

Jennifer Watson (Chair designate) was in attendance.

1 Minutes (EC98/08)

1.2 The Commission agreed the minutes of the meeting held on 13 November 2008, subject to an adjustment to paragraph 1.1 to take account of Commission discussion of and changes to the Commission's draft scheme of delegation.

1.3 In relation to agenda item 3 Co-ordinated Online Record of Electors (CORE) AS noted that a letter had been sent to the Ministry of Justice setting out the Commission's position.

2 Corporate Plan (EC99/08)

2.1 CE presented the draft Corporate Plan 2009/10 – 2013/14. CE noted that there had been a reduction in the number of corporate objectives from five to four. Activities of the objective 'Public understanding of the way our democracy works' had been incorporated into other objectives primarily objectives 2 and 3. It was noted that the Corporate Plan would be sent to the Speaker's Committee for review in early 2009.

2.2 The Commission discussed a number of changes to the Corporate Plan. It was noted that work continued to progress in response to legislative changes on the transfer out of the Boundary Committee for England. The Corporate Plan would incorporate changes accordingly and the Board would have a final opportunity to review the Corporate Plan at its March 2009 meeting prior to final submission to and approval by the Speaker's Committee.

2.3 CH presented the financial and resources information in the draft Corporate Plan 2009/10-2013/14 and Supply Estimate 2009/10. CH noted that meetings had been scheduled with Treasury to discuss the Commission's estimate of future resource needs, including how best to handle the resources the Commission would need to support a UK parliamentary general election and the resource implications of moving to new accommodation when the lease on the London office at Trevelyan House ends in 2011.

2.4 The Commission agreed the draft Corporate Plan subject to the amendments discussed at the meeting.

3 Report on Glenrothes by-election (EC100/08)

3.1 TH and DF presented findings from the Commission's observation of the Glenrothes by-election held on 6 November 2008. On the whole they found that the election had been well-run, and the returning officer had taken into account lessons learnt from other election reports published by the Commission.

3.2 This was the first election in Scotland where personal identifiers on postal voting statements had to be verified. The Commission had raised a concern that our recommendations for timescales had not been adhered to, but despite the first opening session for returned postal ballot packs not being held until the day before polling day, leaving no margin for error, 100% of postal voting statements were verified and there were no delays in the count.

3.3 The Commission received no complaints from electors regarding any aspect of the by-election and there were no media reports of problems with the conduct of the poll.

3.4 The Board agreed the right issues were identified for the report.

4 Boundaries: Electoral review programme and resource requirements (EC101/08)

4.1 AS introduced the item explaining that due to the shifting nature of the reviews carried out by the Boundary Committee for England, the report to the Commission was the best estimate for the moment. AG explained that the Committee had in the past completed on average 20-30 reports each year – but staffing and resource levels had been considerably higher. The Boundary Committee was due to discuss its work programme again – including the relative priority to be accorded to different types of review – at a meeting in February 2009, and the Commission Board agreed to consider the Committee's programme again at its March 2009 meeting, together with any further directions beyond those agreed at the current meeting.

4.2 In response to questions about Single Member Ward reviews, MC said that he expected these to form an increasing part of the Committee's workload as requests came forward from local authorities.

4.3 The Commission discussed the reviews for Northumberland and Co Durham. MC explained that lack of cooperation from those new authorities had prevented the Boundary Committee from progressing these reviews.

4.4 Concerns were raised about the underspend against the Boundary Reviews budget in the current year, and about whether the full budget sought for Boundary Reviews in 2009-10 was likely to be required. The Commission Board agreed to reconsider the Boundary Reviews budget for 2009-10 at its March 2009 meeting.

4.5 The Commission agreed to direct the Boundary Committee to undertake electoral reviews in Bedford, Central Bedfordshire, Mansfield and Gloucestershire County Council.

4.6 The Commission considered the timetable for the electoral review of Cornwall, noting that its views on the timing of first elections to that authority had been sought by the Minister for Local Government as part a soundings exercise. AG reported that the published draft recommendations had, to date, been well received but that the timetable for Cornwall was very tight and that external factors could still further delay the review process. However, there was no reason at that time to believe the review report date would not be met. The Commission agreed to seek the view of the Boundary Committee before responding to the Minister's soundings exercise.

5 Report on Devon, Norfolk and Suffolk structural reviews (Presentation)

5.1 MC gave a presentation to the Commission which included details of the review criteria and timetable. He also reported on the outcome of the judicial review of the Boundary Committee's process brought by a number of Norfolk local authorities, the judgment in which had generally upheld the Boundary Committee's approach to the reviews.

5.2 The Commission welcomed the presentation and noted the outcome of the judgment in the judicial review.

6 PEF update/ PPE Bill update (EC102/08)

6.1 The Commission received and noted an update on current PEF activities and performance during the month of November 2008.

6.2 TS provided an update of the Political Parties and Elections Bill progress. The Bill is now out of Committee and will proceed to Report and Third Reading stages around mid-January at the earliest. The House of Lords stages will follow.

6.3 Debate at the Public Bill Committee concentrated on functions of the Commission, donations, triggering, individual electoral registration and there was some limited discussion of changes to the Commission's governance.

6.4 It was noted that the Commission had undertaken to provide Parliament before Report stage with indicative guidance on two key aspects of the Bill: how the Commission would approach enforcement in the new regime introduced by the Bill; and how the Commission would approach giving guidance on the new 'triggering' rules on candidate spending. This would provide further opportunities to influence the debate.

Matters Arising

Matters arising	For action
Board to review Corporate Plan and Estimate at March 2009 meeting (minutes para 2.2)	Secretariat to add item to forward plan
Boundary Committee to report to March Commission Board meeting on its further consideration of its work programme (4.1)	Secretariat to add item to forward plan
Commission Board to consider budget for Boundaries at March meeting (4.4)	Secretariat to add item to forward plan
Boundary Committee's views on Cornwall to be sought before response to Minister for Local Govt (4.6)	AS