

Direct elections to National Park Authorities (NPA) Westminster Hall adjournment debate 4:30pm, Wednesday 28th November

In March and May 2012 the Electoral Commission wrote to Ministers and officials in response to DEFRA's consultation on changes to National Park governance. This briefing paper sets out the key issues that the Commission highlighted at that time and additional issues that have arisen since then, including lessons from the recent experience of the Police and Crime Commissioner elections

The Electoral Commission is an independent body which reports directly to the UK Parliament. We regulate political party and election finance and set standards for well-run elections. We put voters first by working to support a healthy democracy, where elections and referendums are based on our principles of trust, participation, and no undue influence.

Key Principles for Well Run Elections

Much of the consultation focused on proposed principles for any new elections, such as the benefits of having elected members and who should be able to vote or stand in any elections. These are not issues on which the Electoral Commission takes a view – we focus on ensuring that any new elections are well-run and that electors have appropriate access to information about the elections.

It is also vital that there is sufficient time is available for candidates and political parties to prepare and ensure they understand the rules for these new elections, and for Returning Officers and their staff to prepare to deliver the polls. The necessary rules for the conduct of the poll should therefore be clear at least six months before polling day. If there are to be rules on campaign spending at these elections by candidates, parties or other campaigners, these should be clear in good time to allow us to produce guidance for campaigners. We aim to publish guidance for campaigners at least three months before the start of the relevant regulated period.

Trust

Recent experience in establishing the detailed legal framework for new elections, including the Police and Crime Commissioner elections, has demonstrated the importance of effective coordination across different Government departments. DEFRA has no experience of running elections and it will therefore be particularly important for very close coordination to take place with those parts of Government that would usually fulfil this role (e.g. Cabinet Office).

We would also expect the Government to confirm that there will be a statutory requirement for the Electoral Commission to be consulted on the conduct rules for these elections, whenever held, as would be the case for other types of election.

Participation

It will be necessary for ward boundaries to be determined for NPA elections and for wards to be sub-divided into polling districts. The Local Government Boundary Commission for England is responsible for setting local government ward boundaries, and their views will need to be sought on how best to ward the National Parks for the purpose of direct elections. The process of warding, together with the polling district review, may present challenges to the successful delivery of these elections if not commenced in sufficient time.

Consideration will also need to be given to how to compile and publish electoral registers for use at the proposed elections, particularly given the possibility that some wards may cover parts of several different local authority areas.

The low turnout at the PCC elections also highlights the importance of a robust assessment of the information needs of voters, including information about when the elections are taking place, what they are about and who the candidates are. The Government should explain what their plans are in relation to these issues at an early stage.

No Undue Influence

The Government will also need to decide what controls should apply to the campaign spending and fundraising of candidates at these elections.

For further information:

Please contact Caroline Bolshaw, Public Affairs Manager on 020 7271 0632 or cbolshaw@electoralcommission.org.uk