

Jenny Watson
Chair of the Electoral Commission
3 Bunhill Row
London
EC1Y 8YZ

10 December 2012

Dear Jenny

As cross party lead members on the LGA's Safer and Stronger Communities Board, we are writing with regard to your forthcoming inquiry into the organisation of the Police and Crime Commissioner elections. As local government was responsible for the administration of these elections at a force level, we feel it is important that the views of the sector are incorporated into your review.

1. Local government was asked to bring forward the dates of the annual electoral canvass in order to cater for this election. Every council performed sterling work in doing this. Councils worked together across force areas – in many cases, for the first time – to agree Police Area Returning Officers, responsible for the administration of these elections across large geographies. Each council then established a full network of polling stations and polling monitoring officers, and effectively organised the whole operation of polling – including dealing with what was for many areas a new system of voting. We believe that administratively this went well. Indeed the one significant problem that did arise, which was the initial failure to produce bi-lingual material in Wales, was the result of the Home Office not immediately recognising the need for this.
2. There has been much discussion in the media about the reasons for the low turnout which averaged 14.74%. There are a number of factors which are likely to have contributed to this, including: the November date; no provision for a candidate mailout, and reliance only on internet and digital information; and the lack of information about the role of the PCC.
3. Whilst we recognise that for PCC elections a November date is a “one-off” occurrence, and we return to May elections from 2016, we still believe this is worthy of note, lest other general sets of elections are proposed for such timing. This is not to say that only May (or June for European elections) is appropriate timing, but a date in British Summer time with longer daylight hours would have been preferable.
4. Secondly the low turnout demonstrates that an argument that paper based information is no longer appropriate in a digital age does not stack up. There was one mayoral election on the same day, where voters did receive a postal communication. For the PCC elections the overall turnout in Avon and Somerset

was 19.58%, with the lowest turnout being in Sedgemoor at 14.3% However in Bristol PCC turnout was 27.48%, nearly double the Sedgemoor figure. (Turnout for the mayoral election was slightly higher at 27.92%).

5. The elections also saw a significantly higher than average (around ten times) percentage of spoilt papers. In part this may have been due to the use of the Supplementary Vote system (and the confusion caused for the vast majority of voters who do not have elected mayors, and therefore experience of this type of voting). However there is significant anecdotal evidence which suggests that many papers were returned either blank or with some form of protest against the elections themselves. We know there was significant variation in the levels of spoilt ballot papers, but our conversations with polling agents supports the view that most spoilt ballot papers were spoilt deliberately. The Electoral Commission guidance on doubtful papers was distributed to all relevant polling staff and ran to some depth on the types of votes that would or would not be permissible. This was appreciated by polling staff.
6. Whilst as politicians we always wish for more and more positive coverage in the media, we do not think that the media should be highlighted for particular criticism in the role they played. Local and regional media in particular often gave significant coverage of this agenda. Rather if government is to propose radical changes such as creating elected PCCs, government must accept a responsibility for ensuring voters receive sufficient information to allow them to participate fully.
7. It is likely that future PCC elections will see an improved turnout in some parts of the country due to a better understanding by voters of the role, and an electorate more experienced in using the Supplementary Vote. In 2016 the PCC elections will coincide with local elections only in limited parts of the country, so we will have to wait until 2020 (when the date is likely to coincide with that of the general election) to gauge the impact across the whole country.

We know that you will be examining these points in detail in your review and if we can assist in any way, please do let us know. The contact point here is Joe.Simpson@local.gov.uk.

Yours sincerely



Councillor Mehboob Khan (Labour Group),
Chair of the LGA Safer Communities Board

On behalf of:

Councillor Joanna Spicer (Conservative Group), Councillor Duwayne Brooks (Liberal Democrat Group), Councillor Philip Evans (Independent Group)