



Office of the  
Deputy Prime Minister  

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Creating sustainable communities

# **Elected Regional Assemblies**

Consultation on fees and charges for counting  
officers in the regional and local referendums

**Final report on responses**



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officers in the regional and local referendums

**Final report on responses**

Office of the Deputy Prime Minister  
Eland House  
Bressenden Place  
London SW1E 5DU  
Telephone 020 7944 4400  
Internet service [www.odpm.gov.uk](http://www.odpm.gov.uk)

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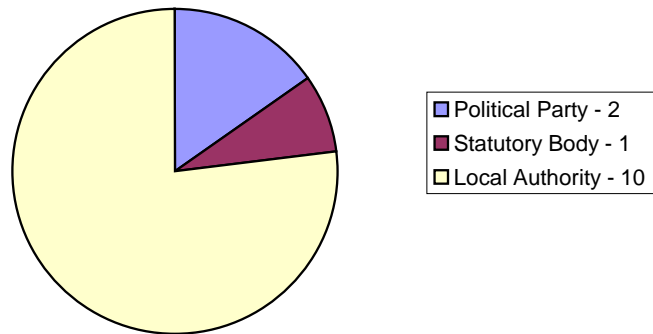
## **Introduction**

1. The Regional Assemblies (Preparations) Act 2003 provides for the holding of regional and local referendums. The Act allows the Electoral Commission to pay counting officers for the charges and expenses they incur in connection with the referendums. Provision for the Electoral Commission to pay counting officers must be set out in an Order which must be passed by Parliament.
2. In January 2004 the Government issued a consultation paper that asked questions about the content of the Order. The consultation paper was issued alongside the draft Order, both of which can be found at: <http://www.odpm.gov.uk/regions>
3. Copies of the consultation paper were sent to all English local authorities and a range of bodies that have an interest in the issues. Responses were requested by February 16<sup>th</sup> 2004.
4. This report examines the responses received to the consultation paper.
5. The next step is for the Government to lay the Order before Parliament, following statutory consultation with the Electoral Commission.

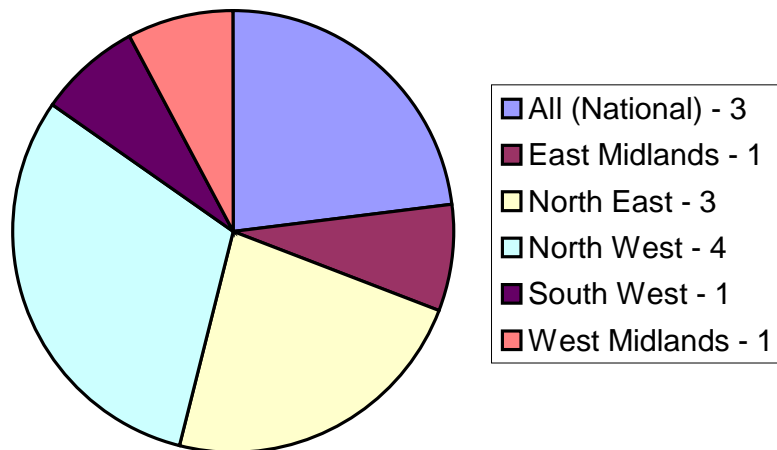
## Overview of Responses

In total, **13 responses** to the consultation were received. The charts below breakdown the responses received by organisation type and region:

**Fig. 1. Breakdown of Responses by Organisation Type**



**Fig. 2. Breakdown of Responses by Region**



## Analysis of Responses

An analysis of the responses received to each question in the consultation document is set out below:

### **1.a+b. Do you agree with the x, y, z approach taken to provide for the costs of the referendums?**

Of those that responded to this question with a definite answer there was unanimous approval, with **10 respondents answering Yes, and 3 either not answering the question or not expressing a firm opinion.**

The general view was that this was a simple and flexible approach to funding. However:

- One respondent noted that there were fixed costs that would not be dependent on turnout, and that these would need to be accounted for.
- Another respondent suggested that nationally negotiated costs should be separately identified and accounted for.

### **2.a+b. Do you agree with all the assumptions made in paragraphs 20-23 of the consultation paper?**

A significant majority of respondents did not agree with all the assumptions, with **3 answering Yes, 9 answering No and 1 either not answering the question or not expressing a firm opinion.**

A number of specific assumptions were not agreed with, the main points raised were:

- Recounts - Three respondents, including the Electoral Commission, stated that provision must be made for regional recounts.
- Training - Two respondents, one of them being the Electoral Commission, stated that provision must be made to cover training costs.
- Equipment, Staff and Storage - Two respondents stated that provision must be made to cover software and equipment upgrade, storage, staffing (for counts) and venue hire costs. Furthermore, the Electoral Commission asserted that this provision should be included in the 'per-electoral' (x) costs.
- Delivery Points - The Electoral Commission's view was that delivery points should be open for four days, including the day of the referendum, with two in each Local Authority area. The poll should close at 9pm. A further respondent noted that if delivery points were open outside normal working hours there would be a cost implication. A Local Authority respondent took the view that there should be more than one delivery point in each area, and that they should be open for the entire referendum period.
- Explanatory Material - A number of respondents were unclear as to whom would bear the costs of producing the explanatory material, and whether this was covered in the 'per elector' (x) costs. One respondent stated that the proposal for ODPM to print and administer such material was unacceptable. The Electoral

Commission suggested that the ODPM provide explanatory material to Counting Officers as a template.

- Security Statements - The Electoral Commission noted that officers would have to return unsigned security statements, and that financial provision for this would have to be provided.
- Counting Methods - One respondent raised the question of whether all manual counting methods would be available. The Electoral Commission expressed the view that electronic counting should be allowed, subject to application and approval by the Chief Counting Officer.
- Home Visits - One respondent recommended that risk assessments should be carried out if electoral or other Local Authority officers were to be expected to assist some voters in completing their ballots, in their own homes.
- Machine Printing - One respondent raised concerns over reliance on equipment to print barcodes and fill envelopes. If large numbers were being printed there was a potential for some errors to occur.
- Poll Cards - One respondent expressed concern over the proposal not to issue poll cards. These were useful in allowing enquiries and questions to be dealt with in good time.

### **3.a+b+c+d. Do you agree with the range of figures provided for x, y and z?**

Five respondents indicated that they agreed with the range of figures provided for x, y and z. Four respondents indicated specific figures that were at the maximum of the ranges provided, a further respondent indicated specific figures that were below the maximums. These were x=£1, y=0.18p and z=0.50p.

Two respondents expressed disagreement with the range of figures provided, and indicated specific, higher figures:

**Table 1.**

<b>Respondent</b>	<b>x</b>	<b>y</b>	<b>z</b>
Electoral Commission	£1.31	£0.30	£0.61
Other	£1.41	£0.28	-

The Electoral Commission expressed significant concerns regarding the adequacy of the figures proposed by ODPM. These concerns stemmed from:

- The Commission's assertion that the evidence on costs collated from the limited all-postal pilots held thus far could not straightforwardly be used to determine the likely cost of regional and local referendums.
- The Commission noting that the range of figures provided by ODPM was based on the average figures provided by the Commission, not the maximums, and that these averages were at the higher end of the figures proposed by ODPM.

The Commission had sought to gather detailed cost information from Local Authorities and had received 22 responses. Based on these responses the Commission suggested the figures set out above in Table 1.

The Commission asserted that the likely consequences of inadequate funding would be:

- A reliance on the part of Local Authorities to utilise the procedure of applying to the Commission for 'exceptional payments'. To administer such a procedure would be costly for the Commission.
- That as the Commission viewed the financial provisions as inadequate, it may well be minded to approve many claims for exceptional payments, resulting in no overall cost saving.

The general view expressed by respondents was that figures at the higher end of those provided would be necessary. However:

- A couple of respondents questioned the basis of the 'per vote' cost (y) as the figure provided did not appear to cover basic postage costs.
- Respondents also reiterated that any changes they had suggested to the underlying assumptions would need to be taken into account when determining figures for x, y and z.
- It was further noted that some costs, such as that for the explanatory material, were at the moment unknown.

**4.a+b+c+d. Do you agree with the range of figures provided for x and y, to be used in the event of a further local referendum?**

On the whole, respondents reiterated the views they had expressed in response to questions 2 and 3.

**5.a+b+c+d. Do you agree with the range of charges provided for A and B, to be used in the event of combinations with other elections?**

Three respondents indicated specific figures within the ranges provided by ODPM, either at the maximum or lower.

No respondents indicated figures that disagreed with those provided.

The Electoral Commission argued that in the event of combination the principal source of funding should not be the Local Authority, as appeared to be the case under the present proposal. The Commission did not agree with this approach, as the Authority would then be paying for the conduct of the referendums, the results of which impacted directly on the future of the Authority. The Commission recommended that:

- The Order be amended to ensure that funding for the local government referendums comes from the Consolidated Fund.
- That it be made clear either that the figures proposed for A and B are in addition to x, y and z, or they should be set at a level to include x, y and z.

**6.a+b. Do you agree that counting officers should be able to claim up to 90% of the amount available per elector (value x) in advance of the referendums?**

A large majority of respondents were in favour of this proposal, with **9 answering Yes, 2 answering No and 2 either not answering the question or not expressing a firm opinion.**

Most agreed that this was in line with established practice. However:

- The Electoral Commission stated that there must be explicit provision in the Order allowing it to draw monies from the Consolidated Fund in order for it to pay for advance expenditure.
- Two respondents suggested that some Counting Officers would need 75% of their funding based on anticipated turnout (y) as well as 90% of x, in order to pay for items necessary from the start of the referendum period.

**7.a+b. Do you agree that money should be available from the beginning of the referendum period?**

Again, a large majority of respondents were in favour of this proposal, with **10 answering Yes, 1 answering No and 2 either not answering the question or not expressing a firm opinion.**

It was recognised that Counting Officers would need to cover expenditure as it arose. However:

- One respondent questioned why Counting Officers had to apply for advances. It was asserted that the Electoral Commission or the Government could calculate and provide advances automatically.

**8.a+b. Do you agree that an application should be made to the Electoral Commission before superannuation payments may be made?**

A majority of respondents agreed with the proposal, with **7 answering Yes, 3 answering No and 3 either not answering the question or not expressing a firm opinion.**

Those agreeing with the proposal stated that this was a sensible requirement. However:

- The Electoral Commission questioned why superannuation costs were not covered in the 'per elector' formula, and stated that they should be.
- A further respondent questioned why it was necessary for an application to be made to the Commission, when superannuation payments were allowed under the relevant legislation.

**9.a. Do you wish to make any comments on the accounts process and applications for payments of the advance? Do you think that further procedures are necessary to ensure good value for money?**

Respondents stated that processes and applications should be as clear and simple as possible. Two respondents stated that further procedures to ensure value for money were unnecessary.

One respondent raised the question of how costs would be paid after the six month period, and after Counting Officers' accounts were closed.

**10.a. Do you have any comments on the draft Order?**

No significant comments were received regarding the draft Order.