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The
Electoral
Commission



Managing twenty-first century elections

a UK training strategy

The Electoral Commission

We are an independent body that was set up by Parliament. We aim to gain public confidence and encourage people to take part in the democratic process within the United Kingdom by modernising the electoral process, promoting public awareness of electoral matters, and regulating political parties.

On 1 April 2002, The Boundary Committee for England (formerly the Local Government Commission for England) became a statutory committee of The Electoral Commission. Its duties include reviewing local electoral boundaries.

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Executive summary

Modernising electoral administration requires well-trained and confident staff who can respond to change.

This strategy has been developed by The Electoral Commission in partnership with AEA and SOLACE and is intended to create the robust and effective training framework needed to enable administrators to meet the demands of managing twenty-first century elections.

The strategy covers training for all permanent full-time and part-time staff involved in delivering electoral services (both registration and elections management) at all levels across the UK. The strategy is intended to cover the five-year period beginning with the financial year 2003-04. This strategy does not deal with the training of temporary polling and count staff for elections, which will be addressed separately.

The aims of the strategy are to:

- ensure that all those involved in electoral administration in the UK are trained to carry out their roles to a high standard;
- use training and qualifications as a driver for the dissemination of knowledge; and
- use training and qualifications to enhance the appeal and standing of electoral administration as a profession.

The strategy is based on:

- revolution in terms of commitment and funding;
- evolution in terms of strategy and training design;
- extending training provision and participation;
- improving the quality and effectiveness of training;
- an overarching and coherent national election training framework;
- requirements tailored to the special needs of the devolved administrations.

Benefits

This strategy is intended to create the robust and effective training framework needed to deliver benefits in both the volume and quality of training for electoral administrators. The creation of an enhanced qualification path for electoral administrators and a clear career route, should enhance the development of electoral administration as a profession and thus enhance citizen confidence in the electoral process. The introduction of new ways of delivering training should reduce unit training costs by creating a larger and more competitive market for training and training providers.

The strategy

The key elements of the strategy that are new are targeted funding and centralised management to oversee and drive forward delivery of the strategy. A number of novel methods are also proposed for promoting participation in electoral training.

Targeted funding

New funding would initially focus on:

- providing subsidised or free training (and training materials) in advance of major elections and referendums;
- supporting the provision of more training opportunities for the development of professional skills and core competencies, with a more dispersed pattern of venues (to improve accessibility and thus increase take up) and courses specifically tailored to the different skill levels (induction, refresher, innovation, managerial);
- developing and implementing a marketing strategy aimed at encouraging increased local authority investment in training for electoral services staff in relation to core competencies and professional skills;
- improving the content, timeliness and relevance of training through coordinating feedback and practitioner involvement in course content and development, and by ensuring that all aspects of key competencies are covered;
- developing and disseminating a training calendar;
- providing a training website as part of eXtra – The Electoral Commission's extranet for electoral administrators.

In parallel with funding further extensions to training episodes, any subsequent new funding would then be aimed at:

- supporting the development of new training routes;
- accrediting training providers and courses;
- aligning training with AEA and other qualifications and CPD;
- identifying and providing specific training for the devolved administrations;
- developing and maintaining comprehensive electoral administration handbooks for the constituent parts of the UK;
- promoting participation in training and performance improvement through a 'Quality Electoral Services Unit' awards scheme.

New funding in the latter years of the strategy period is intended to consolidate the initial improvements to training by creating a clear training pathway linked to qualifications and developing a 'career map' for administrators. These measures should further strengthen the status and professional excellence of electoral administrators.

Strategy delivery

The strategy contains a significant number of innovations. Integrating these with the enhanced training proposals will require a dedicated resource to coordinate and deliver the strategy. The strategy proposes annual reviews of its programmes and their contents to reflect the shifting nature and timing of elections – and to take account of new electoral legislation.

The intention is that delivery and development of the strategy will be managed by The Electoral Commission, with support and advice from a Training Strategy Advisory Group including representatives of the relevant professional bodies across the UK (AEA, SOLACE, SAA, SOLAR), the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland, the devolved administrations and possibly academia.

The strategy envisages that local authorities will continue to fund the majority of professional training for electoral services staff; indeed, the investment in training by local authorities may need to increase if the strategy's benefits are to be fully realised. The Electoral Commission will have responsibility for promoting understanding and acceptance of the need for this increased investment.

However, the strategy envisages that The Electoral Commission will meet the costs of:

- recruiting and appointing a Training Strategy Manager;
- training for specific parliamentary elections, devolved administration elections and referendums;
- producing an annual calendar of training events and promoting training opportunities;
- coordinating feedback and practitioner involvement in course content and evolution;
- supporting new course development, including new means of training delivery;
- developing criteria for the accreditation of training providers, promoting the accreditation process and maintaining a list of accredited training organisations;
- maintaining and improving the *Managing electoral services* handbook for electoral administrators;
- working with the professional bodies to ensure the further development of qualifications for the four constituent parts of the UK;
- developing and implementing a Quality Electoral Services Unit Award scheme;
- developing the process for aligning qualifications, training and CPD;
- undertaking a feasibility study into degree and postgraduate courses;
- ensuring that training routes for staff in England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales reflect local needs;
- promoting qualifications as means to a recognised career route.

Implementation of the strategy is dependent on the availability of adequate resources. The strategy will be incorporated into the Commission's five-year corporate plan for which resources will be sought from 2003/04 onwards. In the light of the decisions taken on funding, the Commission will review the proposed strategy to identify the elements that may be achieved within available resources (either by the Commission or by others) and the proposed implementation timetable.

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Background

Free and fair elections in any democratic society depend on effective and efficient electoral administration covering the registration of voters and the conduct of the balloting process together with the counting of votes cast. Electoral administrators are the cornerstones of this process. Their training and development is therefore a key component in ensuring that the high standards achieved currently by electoral administrators in the UK are maintained and improved and that they are able to respond to new initiatives to improve electoral processes including new methods of voting.

Key drivers for change

The key drivers for change within the next five to 10 years have been identified as:

- the increasing complexity of elections, which are not now solely based on Westminster and local elections but include elections to the devolved administrations (and perhaps to the regions of England outside of Greater London and the House of Lords) and an increase in the use of referendums at local, regional and national levels;
- the need to meet the challenges of the changing face of elections (including new electoral systems and innovations in voting);
- a need to ensure that there are a sufficient number of trained and experienced electoral services staff;
- the need to deliver excellence in the provision of public services including, specifically, raising standards of customer care in the electoral process;
- the further development of electoral administration as a profession;
- the role of The Electoral Commission in promoting good practice.

Delivering excellence in the provision of public services

Traditional models for the delivery of public services are no longer adequate for the requirements of the twenty-first century. Modern public services must treat citizens as customers and put them at the centre of decisions on service delivery. So, services must be delivered to clear standards involving flexibility and choice and those delivering public services must be accountable.¹ This has been reflected in the general modernisation agenda within local government across the UK and in initiatives such as Best Value in England and Wales.

Clearly, this agenda must apply to the delivery of electoral services. One of the principles of public service

¹ See, for example, The Prime Minister's Office of Public Services Reform (2002) *Reforming Our Public Services: Principles into Practice*.

reform across the UK is that where customers have different requirements there should be more diversity of service provision. This principle is reflected clearly in the various initiatives to increase the methods of voting² and to engage young people in the process³ with the aim of increasing turnout.

Current training provision

Within the UK, there are currently over 400 Electoral Registration Officers (EROs) and Returning Officers, responsible for the registration of electors and conduct of elections in the UK. These Officers are based in 437 local authorities across Great Britain, and also include the Assessors in Scotland and the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland. It is estimated that the average electoral services section of a local authority comprises 3.04FTE staff and that over 1,200 staff are directly involved on a permanent basis in electoral administration across the UK. At peak times during an election additional staff are drawn in from other council services, increasing the potential target audience for training purposes to a figure approaching 2,500.

With the introduction of 'rolling registration', the pattern of workflow for electoral administrators is a continuing monthly process from January to August, with a far higher level of activity during the last quarter of the year arising out of the annual canvass of electors and publication of revised registers. Elections on the other hand, vary from year to year and over the next five years the highest level of activity across the UK will be in 2003 and 2007.

An audit of current training provision was published by The Electoral Commission in February 2002 as *Electoral Services: Who's being trained?*. It found that on-the-job training was the most common form of training offered; opportunities for external training for all electoral staff are limited at present. The number of staff receiving direct training from an external source is significantly lower than in most professions.

Training providers currently offer courses that cover both electoral registration and elections, either separately or combined. At present, provision centres on the AEA's current qualification that was introduced in 1998. It provides a progressive qualification route leading to a certificate and then a diploma. SOLACE offers Returning Officers CPD opportunities in electoral matters through a number of courses run by experienced practitioners. Accredited by the Law Society, these courses are supplemented by practical books and publications aimed at extending and deepening professional electoral knowledge and capabilities, and equipping Returning Officers with the skills needed to modernise the electoral process.

In most parts of the UK there are clear indications that poor funding for training activities lies at the heart of the problem. The training audit report suggests that fewer than half of authorities provide regular periodic training. The spend per head is estimated at around £350. There is some evidence to show that there is a lack of enthusiasm or desire by senior electoral managers to use external providers due to the relatively higher costs to those of in-house training. In such cases local authorities need to be encouraged to become more engaged in the concept of improving standards and knowledge within their electoral services divisions.

Feedback provided by local authorities and training providers in preparing *Electoral Services: Who's being trained?* showed support for:

- an over-arching UK strategy to frame the training needs and their means of delivery, setting standards of best practice, and achieving a professional status for the service that would be supported by CPD;
- adding value by addressing the needs of practitioners, whether related to specific elections/combined elections or different structural arrangements such as those which exist in Scotland and Northern Ireland;
- exploring new and innovative ways of delivering training such as remote learning, online and CD-ROMs etc.;

² See, for example, LGA/DTLR/IDeA/EC/SOLACE (2002) *The Implementation of Electronic Voting in the UK*.

³ Electoral Commission (2002) *Voter Engagement and Young People*.

- reducing unit costs, which could include cost reduction for current provision;
- reducing associated expenditure, such as travel and subsistence, by delivering training episodes on a regional basis and in day-based formats (for example, to minimise overnight accommodation costs);
- using acknowledged national organisations such as the AEA and SOLACE in the design of the training strategy, reputable regional providers (such as South West Regional Authority) and others for delivery.
- The consensus among local authorities on the key issues was that they are seeking revolution in terms of commitment and funding; but evolution in terms of strategy and training design (except in Scotland and Northern Ireland, where a level of revolution was regarded as desirable).

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Developing a training framework

Aims

There are, of course, generally recognised benefits in developing a well-trained workforce that can respond to change and deliver excellent customer service. The main purpose of training for electoral administrators must be to improve the quality of the service delivered to citizens who are the primary ‘customers’. In addition, electoral administrators need to be able to work effectively with other key stakeholders, including candidates and the political parties.

Setting standards of best practice and increasing the consistency of methods and procedures adopted throughout the UK should achieve these objectives.

The aims of the strategy are to:

- ensure that all those involved in electoral administration are equipped to carry out their roles to a high standard;
- use training and qualifications as a driver for the dissemination of knowledge; and
- use training and qualifications to enhance the appeal and standing of electoral administration as a profession.

The role of The Electoral Commission

Section 10 of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 empowers The Electoral Commission to provide advice and assistance to EROs and Returning Officers. In its statutory report on the 2001 Parliamentary general election⁴ The Electoral Commission indicated that it could play a pivotal role in developing and disseminating best practice and best value guidance. In addition, it could promote training programmes drawing on the expertise of electoral administrators and working alongside the existing membership organisations.

The Commission intends to play a key coordinating role (defined in more detail later in this report) in helping to set a framework of standards in training and funding the development and delivery of training and training materials. However, the Commission does not intend to become a direct training provider.

Creating the framework

The strategy outlined in this paper is based on the creation of an overarching and coherent national elections training framework. The key elements of that framework are outlined below.

⁴ The Electoral Commission (2002) Election 2001: *The Official Results*. See *References Section*.

Establishing and promoting key competencies

The process of establishing key competencies and standards for electoral administrators is essential to both developing a comprehensive and effective training strategy and developing electoral administration as a profession. Some development work on key competencies and standards has been undertaken as part of the preparation of this strategy, but further work is needed.

Induction training is essential. Following this, basic training for electoral services must include understanding of the main responsibilities and duties of the ERO (i.e. matters connected with electoral registration) and the Returning Officer (i.e. matters connected with elections administration). These two areas should form the main planks of a training programme.

Training in some areas of core competence (such as general management skills, financial management, IT skills, health and safety, equal opportunities) should be delivered through non-specialist training provided by individual local authorities, either directly or through external training providers.

However, some aspects of these competencies have particular application in an electoral context (e.g. the recruitment and management of casual staff at election periods, dealing with election funding and grants, data protection issues relating to the access and supply of the register) and training courses within this strategy should address these needs.

Raising standards of customer care

Customer care, as such, has not traditionally been a major issue in the delivery of electoral services. However, an increasingly mobile population, the need to engage key groups such as young people and minority ethnic communities, disability discrimination legislation and the introduction of different voting systems mean that customer care issues now need to be considered and thought through in a much more fundamental way than before. This applies both to registration and to actual

voting itself. Training work and research on customer care issues took place for the European Parliamentary elections in 1999 and this work needs to be built on for the future.

Supporting professional development

The value of lifelong learning is increasingly accepted across the economy and is now a cornerstone of government policy throughout the UK. The drive to link education, learning and skills is reflected by the various government agencies in the four constituent parts of the UK, promoting and funding initiatives linked to both lifelong learning and the strengthening of the UK skills base.

There is increasing evidence that the supply of experienced electoral administration practitioners is limited and this, coupled with the agenda for change in electoral issues, make it essential that a comprehensive education, learning and skills approach is taken in the further development and implementation of this strategy.

It is important that training, professional qualifications and academic education are integrated into a career map and further development work needs to take place in this area. Training should provide for induction, qualification and Continuous Professional Development (CPD). Not all staff will want to pursue a formal qualification so the training offered needs to be available to everyone and task-related where possible.

At present, apart from the AEA's Certificate and Diploma courses, few training providers in electoral matters offer attendees any form of course accreditation that employers can use to help assess the progress and development of employees involved in electoral administration. It is important that a dialogue takes place between practitioners and awarding bodies to ensure that accredited training course modules can count towards qualifications, and are compatible with any CPD requirements that might be required for future professional status. There is also a need to link into the growing work of academics in the field of electoral studies.

A move towards professional status could involve one or more of the professional associations representing electoral administrators being encouraged to set up its own professional institute, which may, in time, seek chartered status.

Creating diversity in training modules and formats

There is a clear need for a more diverse approach to training by offering a wider range of courses, supplemented by other training material. In addition to dealing with statutory and procedural issues, all training should aim to encourage the adoption of recognised 'good practice'.

Training often has to be delivered within short time scales (for example, in a matter of weeks between the time legislation is passed by Parliament and then implemented) and against a background of competing demands on the time of individual managers and staff. It is therefore necessary that training formats are available and are delivered which take into account the day-to-day reality of the time pressures on individuals.

Flexibility in training formats is therefore crucial to implementing a successful strategy. In reality, this will mean developing and delivering training products that produce focused learning outcomes and are centred around the needs of individuals and offer choice, rather than traditional standard products using standard delivery techniques. This will require products and delivery techniques designed around an individual's need to be able to access training when and where they want it. New methods of delivery might include 'self-teach' manuals, interactive IT-based learning and learning sets.

Raising training standards

Within the general framework of a training strategy, there needs to be a structured approach to setting universal standards of training delivery. In practice, most training providers operate within a commercial environment and, therefore, there already exists a certain amount of pressure to ensure training is delivered to a reasonable

standard. However, this does not guarantee the standards that need to be achieved in the future.

Currently, all training courses conducted by the AEA, both at a UK-wide level and local level are facilitated by the Association's own Accredited Trainers. The AEA's list of trainers is subject to an annual appraisal and approved by its Council. Whilst SOLACE currently does not have an accreditation scheme, training courses are effectively delivered either by members of its Society chosen by its Electoral Matters Panel, or by utilising the expertise of other professional organisations. These are, however, accredited by the Law Society as counting towards Law Society CPD requirements.

Consistent quality standards for both the development of training materials and in the delivery of training will be a key component in the successful implementation of a UK-wide training strategy. Without consistent standards it is unlikely that quality outcomes will be achieved and the successful implementation of the strategy will be at risk from poor materials, delivery and follow-up.

Encouraging participation

The training audit⁵ indicated that:

- less than 48% of authorities provided regular periodic training;
- 67% of authorities had no dedicated budget for training, reinforcing the perception of electoral services as a 'Cinderella service';
- one third provide no training;
- 65% want more training.

The current charges for training in the electoral services field are not high compared to other services. Local authorities, EROs and Returning Officers should be encouraged to provide dedicated budgets for training, and invest more effectively in the development of electoral services staff. In addition, incentives to encourage individual participation should be explored.

⁵ The Electoral Commission (2002) *Electoral Services: Who's being trained?*

The research also suggests that participation would increase if courses were available at a reduced cost. In particular, previous experience in the context of the 1999 European Parliament elections and 1998 elections to the Scottish Parliament and National Assembly for Wales shows that the central funding of training or the central funding of training materials can help to increase participation. During 2002-03, the Commission has invested £300,000 in a programme of training and support for electoral administrators at the May 2003 elections in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Following this model, the Commission recognises that an important element of the strategy will be to develop and deliver similar training programmes for returning officers and election office staff for future elections.

Evaluation

A robust evaluation process is also an essential part of any training strategy as it is essential to verify that the objectives and targets of the strategy have been met and that value for money has been achieved. The evaluation process should:

- reflect the scope, scale and significance of the strategy;
- clearly document lessons learnt from the implementation of the strategy at designated key stages; and
- use a robust methodology and have independent input.

Recognising the needs of the devolved areas of the UK

The training strategy must recognise and deal with the practical and cost implications of ensuring that the different legal and administrative systems, practices and language needs of the four parts of the UK are met. Whilst there is much that is common in the statutory framework, nonetheless, all four countries can benefit from economies of scale in developing training modules, training material and methods that provide for their different requirements.

England

The vast majority of UK electoral administrators work in England, but there is a considerable degree of inconsistency in the approach to training within English local authorities.

Staff in London also have responsibilities, under the direction of the Greater London Returning Officer (GLRO), for managing the elections to the GLA and London Mayor. In addition, it is likely that there will be regional referendums in parts of England over the next few years following the Government's White Paper on regional government and the Regional Assemblies (Preparations) Bill. Depending on the outcome of the referendums, there may also be elections to new regional assemblies. It is therefore important that the training strategy reflects the specific needs of administrators in different parts of England.

Northern Ireland

The arrangements that currently operate in Northern Ireland differ significantly from the rest of the UK because of the unique structure of electoral services. Analysis of the training requirements in Northern Ireland suggests that the training and guidance already provided to district council Chief Executives and their staff (who operate as Deputy Returning Officers and staff under the direction of the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland) should be extended.

The training and briefing currently offered by the Chief Electoral Officer is valued by the DROs. However, enhancing the present provision through more formal supplementary training and centrally-provided guidance and reference material would be welcomed by DROs as enabling them to more confidently support the Chief Electoral Officer. The strategy also suggests that the effectiveness of current training would be enhanced if further training was planned and delivered at regular intervals rather than immediately pre-election. The Electoral Office for Northern Ireland and a representative of the DROs should be actively involved in the further development of the strategy in relation to Northern Ireland.

Scotland

The training audit report suggested that practitioners in Scotland are generally the least satisfied with the training offered, although the training developed for registration staff scores well.

There are practical implications in providing satisfactory training to practitioners outside the major urban centres and the 'central belt', and the smaller numbers of staff, coupled with longer distances to travel in Scotland. This can act as a major disincentive to training provided by seminars and workshops. This report identifies the costs and practical implications of distance learning (whether by electronic means or hardcopy) and coaching/mentoring. However, it is essential that some face-to-face contact is maintained and the strategy will need to evolve ways of offering and subsidising such methods and to create networking opportunities, to extend training in Scotland.

It should also be noted that the Commission has no statutory role in relation to local elections in Scotland, but would aim to work in partnership with the Scottish Executive wherever appropriate.

Wales

The training audit report suggested that practitioners in Wales are the most satisfied with the training offered currently. It is vitally important, therefore, that the Wales dimension is addressed fully by the new strategy and that the current level of satisfaction is maintained and enhanced by explicitly involving practitioners in designing and delivering training for Wales.

Given that Wales is a bilingual nation, it is essential that all material and training can be produced and delivered in both languages (Welsh and English) and that appropriate advice is obtained from the Welsh Language Board. Experience from the European Parliament election project shows that proper planning can ensure the delivery of bilingual training at a reasonable cost.

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Training delivery

Delivery is what matters. It is critical that this strategy delivers real results on the ground over the next five years and beyond. In order to achieve this two key factors are important:

- developing and adopting detailed targets to support the strategy and then monitoring their outcomes; and
- reviewing the strategy every year in order to respond to what is likely to be a fast moving agenda in the field of elections and electoral administration.

Establishing and promoting key competencies

Funding and energy in the initial years of the strategy will be aimed at creating a new structure of training courses to be more specifically tailored to different levels (i.e. induction, refresher, and new legislation/administrative practices) rather than cover all levels. The content, timeliness and relevance of existing courses (and hence their attraction and effectiveness) will also be reviewed. The aim will be to improve the quality of training through feedback and practitioner involvement in course content and training evolution.

Induction and introductory modules should be developed to include:

- the legal framework (explanation of primary/secondary legislation and where/how to access the statutes and relevant advice and guidance);
- an explanation of the various levels of electoral areas and boundaries;
- an overview of electoral registration;
- an overview of elections administration;
- the benefits and availability of training.

Such training needs to be available fairly locally and at frequent intervals so that new starters may benefit at an early stage.

Following completion of induction training, training in the key competencies should also be offered as two sets of modules:

Electoral registration

Knowledge of the relevant primary and secondary legislation;

The maintenance of the register of electors and list of overseas voters;

The publication, supply and sale of the register;

Processing applications for postal and proxy voting;

Basic understanding of relevant data protection and human rights issues;

Use of relevant IT and software.

Elections administration

Knowledge of the relevant primary and secondary legislation;

The nomination of candidates, election notices and election agents;

Arranging polling stations, the count and staff appointments;

Organising the issue and receipt of postal ballot papers;

Use of relevant IT and software.

Such modules could be available in a combination of formats. Individuals would receive training in any module and receive a 'certificate'. Holders of the AEA Certificate or Diploma could be deemed to be competent in all modules.

Specialised training for the more experienced administrator or Senior Manager is required. Topics would follow the two main areas of the standard training referred to above, but at a higher level, plus single issues such as: boundary reviews (including use of new technology); election finance (general electoral budgets and specific election); Best Value and performance management in relation to electoral services.

The strategy would also aim to identify suitable courses for senior staff in relation to more general issues, such as management (people, information, systems, quality), planning (project management, evaluation, review) and local government (structure, finance, political process).

Raising standards of customer care

Electoral administrators need to see that training is focused, relevant, and valued by their employers and by society at large.

The Electoral Commission will sponsor a 'Quality Electoral Services Unit (ESU)' award to be made on an annual basis. Such awards should be based on excellence in service, measured by achieving customer focused best value targets and team participation in accredited training and achieving qualifications. Once awarded, its continuance would depend on maintaining the required level of achievement and training activity as set down in the Award's criteria. An annual appraisal of new applicants and an audit of past recipients would form part of the monitoring arrangements. At present, it is anticipated that there would be no limit on the number of awards made each year.

The exact requirements for the awards will be developed early on in the strategy. Criteria to achieve this award could include a requirement to indicate that over the previous 12 months, an applying ESU has achieved both of the following requirements:

- quantifiable levels of training. Allocating points to specific courses and benchmarks would quantify levels. Once the award is achieved a smaller number of CPD points would be required, each year, to maintain the award.
- service delivery improvement. This would be demonstrated, for example, by the unit attaining or exceeding specified performance benchmarks in the top quartile.

If the criteria are reasonably stretching but achievable, then it would be a UK-wide award of some consequence, and as such should be valued by an employing council as recognition of corporate excellence. As it would recognise team commitment and corporate support, we believe that it could be an additional marketing tool to promote and encourage wider participation in training and qualifications, and enhance the standing of the profession and its practitioners.

It is, of course, important to recognise that training alone does not guarantee that a unit will achieve a higher level of service and it may well be that ESU Awards will need to also take into account other factors. For example, an

electoral services unit that has been subject to a Best Value review may provide further evidence in formulating satisfactory criteria for an award scheme. In the absence of such a review, there may be other performance indicators that could be taken into account.

Supporting professional development

The strategy will involve supporting the further development of existing qualifications, and developing new routes to qualification or professional recognition.

The continued development of the AEA's qualifications is an essential component in enhancing the standing and competency of electoral practitioners. Much will need to be done to work with the Association in particular to ensure that there is a close integration between qualification requirements and more general electoral training. Such integration is essential to help provide cost effective CPD, and maintain freshness. Further consideration may be necessary to see how those who bring long experience to bear are not excluded from all or part of the qualification route.

A number of universities are involved in electoral issues, but primarily as political scientists. Electoral practitioners are generally and necessarily focused on election law and administration. Each has much to offer the other and one option is to examine the feasibility of developing relevant graduate and postgraduate courses. Such courses could potentially widen the knowledge and experience of practitioners, and hence their employment prospects, although employers' attitudes and cost benefits would need to be examined more closely. UK electoral practitioners already enjoy an enviable international reputation, and such a route to qualification would enhance that reputation.

Creating diversity in training modules and formats

The strategy will focus on exploring the scope for creating new, more flexible training formats designed to meet users' needs, including distance learning through coaching and e-material, mentoring and learning sets. Subject to available funding, the strategy will also aim

to sponsor a more dispersed pattern of venues.

The electoral administrators' extranet area of the Commission's website (launched November 2002) will be developed to include a dedicated training site with:

- an electronic version of key good practice guidance, circulars and other guidance;
- model documentation for training needs analyses, training plans and training logs;
- case studies and career maps with related information;
- information on forthcoming training events, seminars and conferences;
- access to training materials, including remote learning materials;
- information about the AEA qualifications;
- hyperlinks to other relevant UK and international websites (including Investors in People, professional bodies, training and software suppliers).

Raising training standards

Initially, the focus of work around quality assurance will be using feedback from practitioners and more formal evaluation to review existing training provision, including the quality of content and delivery. Over the longer-term, a twin track approach will involve accreditation of courses and training providers. This will be achieved by using a system of quality standards that will apply to the providers themselves as well as to their course material and delivery.

A detailed assessment process will need to be developed. However, it is important that the accreditation process is designed carefully to balance the need for high standards against the need to ensure that there is a healthy market of providers and those new entrants who can contribute new ideas or more effective delivery methods are not excluded. It is recommended that providers be initially accredited on the basis of the course content offered against course objectives, and participant feedback. The Law Society uses this model successfully.

All training materials should be high quality in terms of both presentation and content. Documentation currently available originates from a variety of sources and there are overlaps in provision. During the strategy period, the opportunity should be taken to offer a comprehensive package containing all the necessary information from the above sources in a single, branded, style. The Commission's recently produced handbook, *Managing electoral services* should be the foundation upon which to develop future publications. An electronic version, available on the internet and downloadable in pdf format, will be kept constantly up-to-date.

Encouraging participation

The principal targets for the strategy are that by the final year of the strategy:

- 95% of newly appointed electoral services staff will be receiving quality induction training within six months of appointment;
- 90% of permanent electoral services staff will be receiving core competence training appropriate to their seniority and experience at least once a year.

In addition, 95% of permanent electoral services staff should receive training for the European Parliament elections in 2004, and for any regional or national referendum held during the strategy period.

The development of more detailed targets and interim milestones will be a key objective for the first year of the strategy, focusing on increased rates of participation in training.

The strategy seeks to create conditions for securing value for money and the benefits that flow from encouraging local authorities themselves increasing their training funding. An important part of increasing participation rates will be persuading local authorities to increase current investment levels. The Electoral Commission will have responsibility for promoting understanding and acceptance of the need for this increased investment.

In addition, the Commission will aim to fund the provision

of subsidised training for major elections and referendums. The successful delivery of training for the European Parliamentary elections in 1999 was organised on a national basis (for Wales and Scotland) and on a regional basis for England. Standard, high quality, training materials were developed centrally and each Regional Returning Officer was required to ensure consistency throughout his respective region. This format is being followed by The Electoral Commission in funding the development and delivery of training programmes for the major elections in May 2003.

Table 1 gives an indication of the type of elections that are due over the next five years. Taking account of the anticipated electoral activity during the next five years, a training programme for relevant staff needs to be structured within specific timescales. For example, any training for elections being held in May ideally needs to take place between the end of January and the beginning of March. Similarly, training in canvass techniques needs to take place no later than the end of July.

Evaluation

It is important that an appropriate evaluation framework is developed during the strategy. The framework must be based on clear quality criteria against which to assess the strategy's development and output. Several methods of evaluation will need to be adopted involving a process using a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods. Evaluation should also include quality audits of training delivery by providers. Creating a detailed evaluation strategy and timetable will be a key objective for the first six months of the strategy period.

Table 1: Calendar of Elections between 2003 and 2007⁵

Type	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
European Parliament		X			
UK Parliament			?	?	
Scottish Parliament	X				X
National Assembly for Wales	X				X
NI Assembly	X				X
Greater London Assembly		X			
London Boroughs				X	
County (E)			X		
Metropolitan Districts (E)	X	X		X	X
Unitary (E)	X	X		X	X
District (E)	X	X		X	X
Unitary (S)	X				X
Unitary (W)		X			
District (NI)			X		

⁵ It should be noted, however, that the unitary and district councils in England are a mixture of 'whole' and 'by thirds' elections. The last two UK Parliamentary general elections have been combined with the county council elections in England so provision has been made for training in 2005. No account has been taken of the likely UK referendum on the 'euro' or any regional referendums in England.



Implementation plan

There are two essential components to extending electoral training:

- the organisational input required to deliver the strategy;
- additional targeted funding.

Management

A significant number of activities reinforce and support the overall strategy objectives and these will require careful integration and parallel development. A dedicated and clearly-defined project management resource is essential to achieve the strategy. It is important that whoever manages the strategy is independent of training providers and professional bodies and can be an impartial source of information, advice and accreditation for electoral services training.

The Commission intends to recruit an experienced training professional to the post of Training Strategy Manager, with responsibility for:

- coordination of training provision;
- a 'one stop shop' for information on careers, professional training, the availability of courses and training material;
- the development and maintenance of an elections training website;
- development of training and education standards;
- accreditation of courses and training providers;
- ensuring there is a sufficient number of training providers;
- liaison with academic institutions and relevant professional bodies.

Practitioner involvement in the strategy is also vital. Practitioners know what is needed by way of training and are often best placed to give the advice and feedback which is essential to make sure that quality training is being reviewed continually. It is therefore proposed to create a Training Strategy Advisory Group (TSAG) to support and advise the Training Strategy Manager. The TSAG would include representatives of the relevant professional bodies across the UK (AEA, SOLACE, SAA, SOLAR), the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland, the devolved administrations and possibly academia. The TSAG will meet at least twice a year; its secretariat will be provided and other costs met by the Commission.

Additional targeted funding

Local authorities will continue to be required to fund the majority of core training for electoral services staff; indeed, the investment in training by local authorities may need to increase over the five-year period if the strategy's benefits are to be fully realised. The Training Strategy Manager (and The Electoral Commission more widely), will have responsibility for promoting understanding and acceptance of the need for this increased investment.

Given the recent growth in new legislation, which is likely to continue into the foreseeable future, all local authorities should make realistic budget provisions for training electoral staff. At current prices, it is recommended that this should in the first instance be no less than £1,000 per annum per member of electoral staff. This figure is taken from the audit of current training provision as providing an average of over 10 training events per member of staff over two years. Once the strategy is at a more developed stage it should be possible to provide managers with more detailed information regarding the level of training recommended and the associated costs.

As indicated above, the intention is that delivery and development of the strategy itself will be managed by The Electoral Commission. The Commission will also seek to finance the development and delivery of training for major elections *where that training is not already being provided by others* (for example, as in the case of the GLA elections, where the GLRO is funded to deliver training directly).

Implementation of the strategy is dependent on the availability of adequate resources. The training strategy will be incorporated into the Commission's five-year corporate plan for which resources will be sought from 2003/4 onwards. In the light of the decisions taken on funding, the Commission will review the proposed strategy to identify the elements that may be able to be achieved within existing resources (either by the Commission or by others) and the proposed implementation timetable.

Delivering over the next five years

The strategy envisages a phased and logical route to delivering over the next five years. It will, however, need regular review to accommodate new elections, such as referendums on regional assemblies and the single European currency, and to prepare for the major changes needed if and when e-voting and further innovative changes to democratic engagement are introduced.

2003-04

Recruit and appoint Training Strategy Manager.

Establish Training Strategy Advisory Group.

Deliver training for the elections for the Scottish Parliament, the National Assembly for Wales and the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Assess training needs for following financial year and develop plans for training delivery as appropriate .

Produce a calendar of known training events for 2003-04.

Identify what additional training is to be procured and offered in 2004-05.

Agree criteria for accrediting training providers.

Review the training provided for the 2003 elections in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Commence dialogues on developing qualifications for the four constituent parts of the UK.

Review the *Managing electoral services* handbook and identify any necessary changes to content or format.

Commence dialogues on aligning AEA qualifications, training and CPD.

Develop draft criteria for the Quality Electoral Services Unit Award (QESU) scheme.

2004-05

Produce a calendar of known training events for 2004-05.

Deliver training for the elections for the European Parliament and liaise with GLRO on delivery of training for Greater London Assembly.

Review the training provided for the 2004 elections.

Assess training needs for following financial year and develop plans for training delivery as appropriate.

Establish an initial list of accredited training organisations and promote the accreditation process.

Launch the Quality Electoral Services Unit Award scheme.

Identify what additional training is to be procured and offered in 2004-05.

Put in place a process for developing qualifications for the UK as a whole.

Develop the process for aligning qualifications, training and CPD.

2005-06

Produce a calendar of known training events for 2005-06.

Deliver training for a possible general election, and ensure provision of training for local elections.

Review training for 2005 elections.

Assess training needs for following financial year and develop plans for training delivery as appropriate.

Identify provisionally what additional training is to be procured and offered in 2006.

First QESU Award presentations.

Degree and postgraduate courses – feasibility study.

Review progress towards e-voting and potential training needs.

Promote qualifications as a recognised career route.

Align qualifications, training and CPD.

Conduct a mid-term strategy review, including resources needed to support strategy.

2006-07

Produce a calendar of known training events for 2006-07.

Deliver training for a possible general election, and ensure provision of training for local elections.

Review training for 2006 elections.

Assess training needs for following financial year and develop plans for training delivery as appropriate.

Update the electoral handbook.

Second QESU Award presentations.

Review the training provided for the 2006 elections.

Review and (if needed) define e-voting training requirements.

Formulate draft proposals for training strategy to cover next five years.

Develop new five-year strategy.

2007-08

Deliver training for 2007 elections for the Scottish Parliament, and Northern Ireland and Welsh Assemblies, and ensure provision of training for local elections.

Review training delivered for 2007 elections.

Assess training needs for following financial year and develop plans for training delivery as appropriate.

Update the electoral handbook.

Third QESU Award scheme presentations.

Review the training provided for the 2007 elections.

Review the impact of promoting qualifications as a key career route.

Review the impact of promoting the alignment of qualifications, training and CPD.

Review QESU Award scheme.

The Electoral Commission

We are an independent body that was set up by Parliament. We aim to gain public confidence and encourage people to take part in the democratic process within the United Kingdom by modernising the electoral process, promoting public awareness of electoral matters, and regulating political parties.

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