

ONE of Wales' most senior lawyers last night called for a Welsh High Court to be set up.

Lord Carlile QC said the move would demonstrate the maturing of the Assembly, set up three years ago, and improve the quality of justice in the country.

Delivering the annual David Lloyd George lecture, part of the Criccieth Arts Festival, last night, Lord Carlile said Wales historically had its own legal institutions, including a chief justice.

He praised initiatives set up by senior judges to devolve legal powers to Wales.

The former Liberal Democrat MP for Montgomeryshire said: "There now sit in Wales several superior courts of record and three Civil Justice Centres have been established to provide the means for the resolution of civil disputes of all types without having the case heard in London or elsewhere outside Wales.

"It means that the judicial review of administrative action can and does routinely occur in Wales if the challenge is to the actions of the Assembly, Welsh local government or other publicly accountable bodies.

"In addition, as the Court of Appeal has sat in Cardiff on several occasions, there is a reasonable expectation that judicial review appeals to that court will be heard within Wales."

Lord Carlile said Wales was larger than several American states, each of which had its own judicial structure, and larger than some European countries.

He added: "I pose the suggestion that the development of a Wales Division of the High Court of Justice, with the full range of High Court jurisdiction for all first instance and review cases arising wholly within Wales and including mercantile, chancery and family cases, would be cost-effective and beneficial as well as consistent with the process of evolution of devolution."

Lord Carlile also suggested one single police force would better serve the Welsh people rather than the four current forces overseen by the Home Office.

He said: "A single police force for Wales might provide significant efficiency and operational improvements as well as economies of scale.

"The Assembly is already involved, as it provides 52pc of the funding for the police in Wales through the police precept on council tax bills. The Liberal Democrats and Plaid Cymru have supported the move towards devolution of police functions.

"The Labour Government has opposed it steadfastly, and the Conservative Party seems undecided - or possibly as open to suggestion as Oppositions usually are. When it was suggested, in separate debates, in the House of Lords recently by Lord Thomas of Gresford QC and myself, the government barely seemed to take it as a serious suggestion. It is."

Lord Carlile said the absence of greater powers caused "understandable frustrations".

He said: "At the height of the foot-and-mouth crisis of 2001 the Welsh Minister for Rural Affairs, Carwyn Jones, expressed mounting frustration that the Assembly was expected to manage the crisis in Wales but did not have the powers to do so effectively."