



process. The Chief Electoral Officer put in place a number of new initiatives to improve accessibility arrangements, but more needs to be done to raise awareness of the support that is available. Voting at elections On 18 May 2023 the Northern Ireland local council elections were held. A total of 807 candidates contested 462 seats across the 11 councils in Northern Ireland. The last local council elections took place in 2019. A total of 1,380,372 people were registered to vote, up from 1,305,553 at the last local council elections. The date of the local council elections was postponed by two weeks from 4 May to 18 May 2023 to avoid the counting of ballot papers clashing with the coronation of King Charles III on 6 May. The Elections Act 2022 introduced provisions to increase flexibility in relation to what support could be provided in polling stations to enable, or make it easier, for disabled people to vote independently and in secret. Voters continue to have positive views about how elections are run. Voters continue to have positive views about how elections are run. After each election we ask members of the public who were eligible to vote for their views on voting and elections. This helps us understand if views have changed since the last comparable set of elections. Satisfaction with the registration and voting processes remains high. People had high levels of satisfaction with the process of registering to vote and voting. Our research shows that: 86% of people were satisfied with the process of registering to vote – this is consistent with the levels of satisfaction reported by people after the 2019 local council elections (84%) 97% of voters were satisfied with the process of voting – this is broadly consistent with the 2019 local council elections (95%) 93% of people report being able to vote using their preferred method of voting – this is consistent with the 2022 Assembly elections (91%) Most people continue to be confident that elections are well-run. When asked, four-in-five (80%) said they were confident that the elections were well-run. This is broadly consistent with the 2019 local council elections (75%). The most chosen reasons for being confident were: it was quick and easy to vote (67%) the polling station was accessible and easy to get to (65%) a lack of negative experiences when taking part in the election (57%) Only 8% said they were not confident that the elections were well-run and when we asked people why they were not confident, it was because of issues accessing information. The most chosen reasons for not being confident were: a lack of information about the elections or candidates (28%) media, TV and press coverage was biased (27%) campaigns were based on incorrect or untrue claims (22%) Confidence that the election was well run was lower amongst those limited a lot by a disability or health condition, with 72% saying they were confident the elections were well-run. Most people think voting is safe from fraud and abuse. Views about the safety of voting and whether electoral fraud is a problem were consistent with the 2022 Assembly election, with 84% of people saying they thought voting was safe from fraud and abuse. This was an improvement when compared with the last local council elections in 2019 where 77% of people said they thought voting was safe from fraud. When asked if they thought electoral fraud was a problem in Northern Ireland, 14% of people said they thought it was, which is a significant reduction from 35% at the last local council elections and 20% at the 2022 Assembly election. The main reasons given by people who thought fraud had taken place was that they believed postal or proxy voting was not secure or that they had a general impression that fraud was a problem. The PSNI provide us with data on alleged cases of electoral fraud relating to offences under the Representation of the People Act. It has confirmed they have one allegation relating to irregularities on a nomination form that is under investigation. Turnout at these elections increased. Overall turnout at the election was 54.7%, an increase of two

percentage points on the last local council elections in 2019 (52.7%). The most common reasons given by people who told us they didn't vote were: a lack of time or being too busy at work (15%) a lack of interest in, or being fed up with, politics (14%) being away on polling day (12%) medical reasons unrelated to Covid (11%) The digital registration number continues to be a barrier to voters The digital registration number continues to be a barrier to voters In Northern Ireland, people can vote in one of three ways; in person, by post or by proxy (asking someone they trust to vote on their behalf). Unlike in the rest of the UK, voters must provide a valid reason why they cannot attend their polling station on polling day to be able to vote by post or proxy. Voters who have registered to vote online in Northern Ireland are required to provide a digital registration number (DRN) when applying to vote by post or proxy. A DRN is supplied to voters when they register online or can be requested from the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland. The DRN is intended to be a digital replacement for the wet ink signature that is required on paper registration applications. The DRN, or the wet ink signature, is a security measure used to link the person applying for a postal or proxy vote, with their electoral registration application. The DRN is not a requirement elsewhere in the UK. There are low levels of awareness surrounding the digital registration number At the 2023 Northern Ireland local council elections we ran a targeted campaign to raise awareness of the DRN, alongside our large-scale voter registration campaign, 'Got 52?'. This campaign targeted those groups we knew were more likely to need a postal or proxy vote. The campaign directed voters to the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland's website where they could request their DRN. It was supported by both partnership and public relations activity. Despite this campaign, awareness levels are low: 43% of people who registered online say they can't remember receiving a DRN 56% of people would not be confident accessing their DRN Large numbers of postal and proxy vote applications continue to be rejected In total there were 14,286 postal and proxy vote applications approved for the 2023 local council elections, with 7014 applications rejected. Of those rejected applications, 5,118 (73%) were rejected because there was no DRN. This is a significant increase from the 2022 Assembly election in which 3,636 applications were rejected because there was no DRN, which equated to 60% of all rejected applications. The Electoral Office for Northern Ireland received 8,700 requests for a DRN in the run up to the election, with 53% of those requests made in the last week before the absent vote deadline on 26 April 2023. This put a considerable administrative burden on the Electoral Office and created a significant challenge for staff to respond to requests for DRN in a timely manner. It is clear from the rejection rates and low awareness levels that the DRN is acting as a barrier to voters, a view that has also been explicitly expressed to us by candidates, political parties, and electoral administrators. It is also unclear if the DRN is achieving its intended purpose as a security measure against potential fraud. The personal identifiers required to request your DRN are the same as those needed to apply for a postal or proxy vote, which in effect means voters are being asked to supply the same information twice. The DRN is not a requirement elsewhere in the UK. Even when changes to absent voting rules are introduced in Great Britain later this year to enhance the security of the process there, a DRN will not be used but instead voters will be asked to provide their National Insurance number to confirm their identity and protect against voter fraud. The Electoral Office has advised that it is reviewing its processes relating to the administration of the DRN and has run workshops with political parties to collect their views on how the process could be improved. While this is welcome it is unlikely that this alone will

address the fundamental issues that the DRN causes for voters and the Electoral Office. Ultimately, only legislative change would be able to remove this barrier to voting. Recommendation 1 The large number of rejected postal and proxy applications show that the DRN is a barrier to voters. We recommend that the UK Government urgently reviews the operation of the DRN to ensure that these barriers are removed, while also maintaining the integrity of the absent voting process. The Chief Electoral Officer took steps to support disabled voters at the elections but more needs to be done to raise awareness of what is available The Chief Electoral Officer took steps to support disabled voters at the elections but more needs to be done to raise awareness of what is available Further to changes in the law, electoral administrators across the UK now have increased flexibility on what support and equipment they can provide in polling stations to enable, or make it easier, for disabled people to vote independently and in secret. Restrictions have also been removed on who can be a 'companion'. Anyone who is 18 or over can now accompany a disabled voter to the polling station and, if requested by the voter, provide support. The companion no longer needs to be eligible to vote at the elections taking place, but they are still required to complete a declaration before assisting the voter. The Chief Electoral Officer provided a range of support at polling stations We published guidance for Returning Officers (ROs) to support them to implement the new accessibility arrangements, which ROs across the UK are required to consider. We consulted extensively on this guidance to ensure we could get wide input to help identify the measures that would help to improve the accessibility of polling stations. The Chief Electoral Officer put in place a number of new initiatives to improve the accessibility of voting at the local council elections. These included making hearing loops available at polling stations and an online application process on the Electoral Office website where voters could make a request for additional adjustments or support to be put in place at their polling station. The Electoral Office once again ran a telephone service, in partnership with the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB), to provide an audio solution for voters with visual impairments. Almost all adults who voted in person and told us that they have a disability or long-term health condition (94%) said that, once they arrived at their polling station, it was easy to get inside the building to vote. Only a small proportion (2%) of in-person voters said that they had help filling in their ballot paper in the polling booth. Voters with a disability or long-term health condition were more likely to report needing help to vote, with most people getting help from their spouse/partner. 4% of in-person voters with a disability or long-term health condition said that they needed additional assistance or equipment to allow them to cast their vote independently and in secret. Further work is needed to ensure disabled voters receive and are aware of the support available We asked those who have a disability or long-term health condition for their views on the experience of voting. 49% agreed that they received the equipment, information and support that they need in order to vote (5% disagreed) 61% felt that staff at polling stations are properly trained to assist them with voting (9% disagreed) 60% disagreed with the fact that the way elections are run at present prevents them from voting in person, with 8% agreeing It is clear from feedback from the Chief Electoral Officer that awareness of the support available was low. This is supported by the fact that no requests were received through the new online application process where voters could request additional adjustments at polling stations. We will continue to work with the Chief Electoral Officer and civil society organisations to ensure disabled voters are aware of, and receive, the support they need to vote. Most people were confident they

knew how to vote without making a mistake Most people were confident they knew how to vote without making a mistake Nearly all voters (97%) said that they found it easy to fill in their ballot paper, but some votes continue to be rejected and not included in the count. 9,740 ballot papers were rejected at the count, which represents 1.3% of all votes cast. This was a slight increase compared to the 2019 elections (0.9%) and in line with the 2022 Assembly election (1.3%). Campaigning at the elections The experience of campaigning at the 2023 Northern Ireland local council elections Candidates report that their ability to reach voters is being constrained by spending limits. The UK Government has already indicated its intention to review the spending limits for candidates to ensure they allow candidates to effectively engage with the electorate. Half of all candidates reported experiencing threats, abuse and/or intimidation. It is completely unacceptable that candidates continue to face any form of abuse when campaigning at elections. Tackling these problems will require coordinated action from a range of partners across the electoral community, including political parties and campaigners themselves, as well as the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) and the Public Prosecution Service (PPS). Campaigning at the elections A total of 807 candidates stood in the 2023 local council elections (12 fewer than in 2019). Sinn Féin fielded the most candidates with 162, followed by the DUP with 152, Alliance with 110, the Ulster Unionist Party with 101 and the SDLP with 86. In total, 15 political parties and 56 independent candidates contested the elections. Candidates report that their ability to reach voters is being constrained by spending limits Candidates report that their ability to reach voters is being constrained by spending limits At the 2023 local council elections, campaigners provided information in a variety of different ways. The most common way people reported seeing information on parties and candidates included: leaflets from a candidate/political party (74%) posters/billboards (52%) social media (27%) advert or message on television (26%) Candidates responding to our survey also told us that leaflets, posters / billboards and social media, along with canvassing, were their most used campaigning methods, specifically: almost all (96%) of candidates told us they used leaflets and canvassing over three-quarters (79%) listed posters/billboards and social media in their top three campaigning methods Despite candidates being able to engage with the public using a variety of methods, political parties and candidates have told us that the spending limit was too low for candidates at these elections, and this impacted their ability to campaign. Candidates responding to our survey said: Level of spending appropriate for 15 years ago. Limit is now too small and unable to communicate properly with whole electorate now. The spend limit meant we had to limit the materials in terms of number and type of leaflet... The spending limit is lower at local council elections in Northern Ireland compared to local council elections elsewhere in the UK, reflecting the fact that freepost election communications are available to local election candidates in Northern Ireland. However, parties and candidates have told us that the sharp rise in the printing costs of campaign materials has impacted their ability to use this freepost entitlement. Figures provided to us from Royal Mail indicate an 8.2% drop in the number of candidate mail items being sent from the most recent comparable election in 2019 (4.5 million to 4.13 million). It is important that voters have access to information to help them make an informed decision when they vote. However, only 67% of adults said they felt they had enough information on candidates to make an informed decision. A lack of information can have an impact on confidence in the elections. While most people are confident the election was well run (80%), for those not confident the top reason for this was the lack of information on the election and

candidates (28%). The UK Government has announced that it intends to increase party and candidate spending limits for all reserved polls (except for local council elections in England, which it did in 2020), in line with inflation. While we wait to see the full proposals, we welcome the proposed review of the spending limits for candidates at the Northern Ireland local council elections. It is important to ensure any changes to the limits allow candidates to effectively engage with the electorate and for voters to be confident they have the information they need to inform their decision at the ballot box. Candidates continue to raise concerns about harassment. After each election we ask candidates about their experiences of taking part. Our research following the 2022 Northern Ireland Assembly highlighted that a majority of candidates (71%) said they had some sort of problem with threats, abuse, or intimidation. Candidate responses after the 2023 local council elections indicate that harassment continues to be a significant issue (note: responses cannot be directly compared due to the different elections taking place each year and the self-selecting nature of the sample). In the lead up to the local council elections, we made it clear that intimidating and abusive behaviour has no place in our political system and worked closely with the PSNI to raise awareness of the support available to candidates, particularly female candidates, who face abuse and/or intimidation while campaigning. In March 2023, we published joint guidance with the PSNI, the PPS and the Electoral Office on the steps candidates can take to campaign safely, what support is available, and how to report an incident. The PSNI also attended our pre-election seminars for candidates to share this information and make contact with candidates. Almost half (46%) of all candidates reported looking at the guidance on campaigning safely. Half of all candidates reported experiencing threats, abuse and/or intimidation. When asked about how much of a problem candidates had with harassment, intimidation, or threats in this election, 50% of those who responded to our survey said they had a problem, with 6% reporting having a serious problem. 50% of candidates reported having no problem with harassment, intimidation or threats. The types of harassment most frequently experienced included: having campaign assets (such as posters) removed or destroyed (74%) or defaced (65%) someone intimidating or intentionally making you feel unsafe (41%) abuse posted on social media (26%) Women were more likely than men to have experienced harassment. The harassment most frequently came from members of the public (57%) and anonymous/unknown sources (40%). 17% was received from campaigners/volunteers and 13% from other candidates. When asked if they had avoided doing something as part of their campaign to keep themselves safe, 39% of respondents said that they avoided campaigning on their own and 19% avoided campaigning on social media. Almost 200 incidents were reported to the police relating to the elections. The vast majority of these (168) related to the theft, removal or damage of election posters. Other incidents reported related to intimidation, harassment or assault linked to campaigning. Despite the significant number of reported incidents, it appears many more go unreported, with only 25% of candidates telling us they reported incidents that happened to them or they witnessed happening to others. The Elections Act 2022 introduces a new electoral sanction for those found guilty of intimidating candidates, campaigners and elected representatives. This will come into force from 1 November 2023. This should strengthen the deterrent against intimidating behaviour by enabling someone to be banned from standing for elected office, as well as imposing criminal sanctions, such as a prison sentence or fine. The UK Government has also recently committed to explicitly exempt reasonable security expenses from contributing to spending limits for parties and candidates at certain elections, to

ensure that these limits are not a barrier to providing adequate security during election campaigns. Recommendation 2: The electoral community should take action to protect voter trust and confidence in the democratic system Recommendation 2: The electoral community should take action to protect voter trust and confidence in the democratic system Candidates and campaigners should be able to participate freely in the democratic process, ensuring that voters can hear from a range of voices and have confidence in our elections. However, abuse and intimidation continue to persist. Tackling these problems will require coordinated action from a range of partners across the electoral community, including political parties and campaigners themselves, as well as the PSNI and PPS. s should recognise the impact their choices have on how the public views our democratic system. They should actively discourage the use of inflammatory language and emphasise the importance of respect and constructive engagement with opposing viewpoints. Political parties should consider reviewing their membership criteria to include a clause explicitly emphasising respect for other campaigners and fostering a healthy political debate. The PSNI and PPS must continue to treat allegations and cases of election-related intimidation seriously and demonstrate that those committing offences against candidates and campaigners will face significant sanctions. Candidates continue to raise concerns about harassment We will build on the positive relationship we have with the PSNI, PPS and the Electoral Office and will continue to work together to promote our joint guidance on campaigning safely to ensure all candidates and campaigners are able to freely participate in the democratic process. Delivering the elections The experience of electoral administration at the 2023 Northern Ireland local council elections The 2023 Northern Ireland local council elections were well-run, with voters and campaigners reporting high levels of confidence. The administration of polling day generally went well, although some concerns were raised relating to campaigning in the vicinity of polling stations. A review of the Code of Conduct for campaigning in the vicinity of polling stations should be undertaken ahead of the next elections to help address these concerns. The administration of the counts generally went well, but more could still be done to improve their efficiency. The Chief Electoral Officer should explore what improvements can be made to the count process and its management that will support efficient count calculations and provide effective oversight of count processes. The capacity and resilience of electoral administration teams remains a significant challenge and the UK Government must carefully consider if the necessary time and resources are, or will be, available before making any final decisions about implementing the remaining Elections Act changes. Delivering the elections The local council elections took place across all 11 councils in Northern Ireland. Each council is made up of seven District Electoral Areas (DEAs), except for Belfast which has 10. In total there are 80 DEAs across the 11 councils. Councillors are elected to represent a DEA, with each DEA made up of five, six or seven wards. In total there are 462 wards. For the Northern Ireland local council elections, the local council Chief Executives are appointed as Deputy Returning Officers (DROs). There are 11 DROs, one for each of the 11 councils in Northern Ireland. The DROs act with the authority of the Returning Officer. Their responsibilities at these elections included managing nominations, the counting of votes and the receipt of candidate spending returns. The Chief Electoral Officer (CEO) for Northern Ireland is the registration officer and returning officer for all elections in Northern Ireland. The Chief Electoral Officer's duties include managing electoral registration, absent voting, and polling stations. An interim CEO was appointed on 3 April 2023 to oversee the local council elections while the process to recruit a permanent CEO was

completed. Our evidence shows that, overall, the elections were well-run, and voters and campaigners reported high levels of confidence. However, underlying issues relating to capacity and resilience remain. Additionally, improvements to the efficiency of the count process are needed to support the effective delivery of future elections. The administration of polling day generally went well, although campaigning in the vicinity of polling stations remains an issue. The administration of polling day generally went well, with a majority of voters (80%) and most candidates (89%) reporting that they were confident the elections were well run. Concerns raised relating to campaigning in the vicinity of polling stations. A small number of complaints were received relating to the behaviour of campaigners in the vicinity of polling stations. Candidates responding to our survey said: The guidance to stay a distance from polling stations and not hand out sample ballots is widely ignored by some parties. ...area in which candidates and supporters are able to hand out leaflets at the polling station seems to change from election to election... s are an essential element of a healthy democracy, and their right to put their arguments to voters should be supported and protected. It is equally important, however, that the activities of campaigners do not bring into question the integrity of the electoral process. All political parties have agreed to a Code of Conduct for canvassing in the vicinity of polling stations, which provides a guide on what is considered acceptable behaviour. However, it has been some time since this Code was reviewed. Also, its scope is limited to campaigning in the vicinity of polling stations. Elsewhere in the UK, political parties have agreed to a code that also covers campaigning in the community in the run up to polling day. Upcoming Elections Act changes to the rules on postal and proxy voting provide an opportune time to review the scope of the Code in Northern Ireland. Recommendation 3 Recommendation 3 The Chief Electoral Officer, working in consultation with political parties and the Electoral Commission, should review and update the Code of Conduct for canvassing in the vicinity of the polling stations. The updated Code should provide political parties with agreed standards on what is acceptable behaviour both before and during polling day. Improvements to the count process are needed to support the effective delivery of future elections. Improvements to the count process are needed to support the effective delivery of future elections. The counting of votes was managed by the 11 DROs, across 11 count venues, to fill 462 council seats across Northern Ireland. The majority of candidates (81%) were satisfied with the efficiency of the count, and the majority of voters (70%) agreed the votes were counted accurately. However, it is clear from our observations and feedback provided to us that the latter stages of the count are not as efficient as they could be. Action needed to improve the efficiency of the count. Single Transferable Vote (STV) election counts are historically long events, with most taking two days to complete, subject to how the votes fall. 1 Improvements introduced to the verification and primary sort stages in 2016 and 2017 have supported the effective management of the early parts of the count. However, it is clear that improvements could be made to the latter stages of the count which could improve the efficiency of the process as a whole. The management of the adjudication of doubtful ballots and the decision making on the transfer and exclusion of ballot papers in some instances took a considerable time. In one instance, in the Waterside DEA of Derry and Strabane City Council, there was an error at the final stage of the count, which was confirmed by an election petition. The high court ordered a continuation of the count, with the redistribution of surplus votes from elected candidates. The



continuation of the count took place on 9 August with the initial result remaining unchanged. Positive steps were taken to improve oversight of the count process, including through the establishment of a central hub by the Electoral Office, to which all 11 councils shared their count sheets digitally. This allowed the Chief Electoral Officer to see in real time what was happening and help identify any potential discrepancies. Nevertheless, the hub's ability to provide oversight was limited by its reliance on a small number of people checking a selection of stages of the count across 11 councils. An increased use of technology could play an important role in improving efficiencies at the count and supporting the further development of an oversight mechanism for the Chief Electoral Officer. It could also mitigate against the risk of human error and potentially, in time, provide cost savings in the delivery of elections. Recommendation 4 Recommendation 4 The Chief Electoral Officer, working with us and other key stakeholders, should explore what improvements can be made to the count process and its management that will support efficient count calculations and provide effective oversight of count processes. The capacity and resilience of electoral administrators remains a significant challenge The capacity and resilience of electoral administrators remains a significant challenge The Chief Electoral Officer continued to highlight problems around recruiting and retaining experienced polling station and count staff, with a growing number of recruits dropping out ahead of polling day. Alongside this, these were the first elections in Northern Ireland when changes introduced by the Elections Act came into force. Further significant electoral administration changes arising from the Elections Act are expected to be implemented ahead of elections across the UK in 2024. These include changes to the arrangements for postal and proxy voting appointments, and the removal of the 15-year registration limit for overseas voters. This will increase risks, which will be exacerbated without sufficient clarity and resources for the Chief Electoral Officer to prepare effectively, well in advance of delivery. Before making any final decisions about implementing the remaining Elections Act changes, the UK Government must carefully consider whether the necessary time and resources are, or will be, available. Any decisions must be informed by a robust analysis of available data and evidence about realistic levels of preparedness, particularly given the complex range of changes that must be delivered and the interdependencies between them. The UK Government should continue to work with the electoral community in Northern Ireland to ensure there is sufficient clarity and time to implement these changes. Supporting evidence Post poll 2023 Northern Ireland Tables 1. In STV elections, voters rank candidates in order of preference. Any candidate who obtains enough first preference votes to reach the minimum required to be elected (known as the quota), is deemed elected. If a voter's first-choice candidate does not get elected, or if they are elected with more votes than the next candidate, their vote can be transferred to help elect their second choice and so on. If no candidate has reached the quota at the end of a stage, the candidate with the lowest number of votes is excluded and their votes transferred. At the 2023 local council elections and 2022 Northern Ireland Assembly elections, there were many stages of the count where only a small number of votes were able to be transferred at each stage, with more stages than needed before candidates had enough votes to get above the quota and be deemed elected. ■ Back to content at footnote 1 Page history First published: 13 July 2023 Last updated: 13 September 2023