

Northern Ireland Assembly Parties Panel minutes: 29 January 2019 | Electoral Commission Search Northern Ireland Assembly Parties Panel minutes: 29 January 2019 You are in the Party panels section Home How we make decisions Party panels On this page Welcome and introductions Notes of previous meeting on 10 April 2018 Issues raised by the political parties Planning for local government elections – May 2019 Electoral Commission issues Update from Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland Next meeting date – 19 March 2019 First published: 12 June 2019 Last updated: 2 September 2019 Meeting overview Date: 29 January 2019 Time: 9.30 am Location: Radisson Blu Hotel, Belfast Date of next scheduled meeting: 19 March 2019 Who was at the meeting Who was at the meeting DUP: Lee Reynolds Green Party: Kate Barry Sinn Féin: Gary Fleming UUP: Barbara Knox The Electoral Commission: Anna Carragher, Commissioner Ann Watt, Head of Electoral Commission, Northern Ireland Cahir Hughes, Manager, Electoral Commission, Northern Ireland Roisin McDaid, Senior Officer (Political Parties Liaison) Caralyn Morton, Business Support Officer Electoral Office for Northern Ireland: Virginia McVea, Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland Royal Mail: Rachel Winham, Head of Elections and Political Parties Scott Forsyth, Special Events Planning Manager NI Claire Connolly, Elections Manager NI Apology: Alliance Party, Sharon Lowry SDLP, Catherine Matthews Welcome and introductions The Chair, Anna Carragher, welcomed everyone to the meeting, introducing Rachel Winham, Claire Connolly and Scott Forsyth from Royal Mail. Notes of previous meeting on 10 April 2018 The Panel agreed the notes of the previous meeting. There were no matters arising. Issues raised by the political parties No items had been raised by the parties in advance of the meeting. Planning for local government elections – May 2019 Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland The Chief Electoral Officer (CEO) gave an update on the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland's (EONI) plans for the May local government elections. As discussed at the Panel's last meeting, training of Council staff was a key part of the planning process as many trained staff had moved on since the local government review. The scenario based training schedule had included a masterclass for Council Chief Executives and STV training featuring a mock count. Most councils intended to run their own mock count training, and Chief Executives had plans for count centres in place. The CEO highlighted other training materials including videos on the EONI website. She thought there could be potential to do videos of Royal Mail freepost mailing processes in a similar way. She advised that following the recent review, the polling stations scheme was to be published within a week and reminded the Panel of the recently introduced app showing the location of polling stations for all addresses in Northern Ireland. Following engagement by the Northern Ireland Office on a Fees and Charges Order, a draft of NIO proposals was anticipated in the very near future. One party raised concerns about the closure of local EONI offices and the centralisation of EONI's work in Belfast. In particular the party said that those who needed to hand deliver application forms (for registration or absent votes) would have to travel to Belfast if it was too close to the deadline to post the forms. The CEO said she was confident that the centralisation of EONI offices in Belfast would have little impact on the forthcoming elections and absent voting in particular. The new data management system would offer more flexibility for managing workloads. A centralised absent voting process had been used successfully at the recent West Tyrone by-election and the recall petition in North Antrim. However, she acknowledged that parties would not be able to drop off collections of absent vote applications at the deadline in Banbridge for example, but freepost was available. People wishing to register would be encouraged to do so via the quicker online process. Plans were

currently being considered for dropoff facilities for registration forms to be available at the 11 local councils venues and additional facilities (i.e. kiosk or other IT hardware) to be piloted in mid-Antrim and Dungannon where broadband coverage was limited. If electors experienced difficulties, they would be able to contact the EONI helpline who would be able to send out freepost forms. The centralisation of the EONI's services had followed significant funding cuts. Staff from Banbridge and Newtownabbey had now been relocated to Belfast and it is intended that the Derry/Londonderry and Omagh offices would remain open until after the election in May 2019. The CEO would be happy to engage in discussions with parties to explore issues of concern. Information on arrangements, including how-to videos would be shared via the EONI website and Councils hoped to also use these voter information resources at a local level. Meetings had also been held with NILGA to share information. The CEO was also currently reviewing capacity to hold registrations clinics. The Chief Electoral Officer (CEO) gave the Panel an update on online registration statistics. From 19 June 2018 to 29 January there had been 37,299 online and 13,461 paper applications. The Electoral Commission Public awareness The Commission will launch a large scale public awareness campaign on 21 February with the key message that the public can now register online ahead of the local council elections. The campaign will run until the registration deadline of 12 April and will include TV, radio, press, digital and outdoor advertising. This will be supported by public relations work to highlight key information and deadlines, such as the absent vote deadline, and how to complete the ballot paper. Guidance for candidates on spending and donations The Commission published its guidance on spending and donations for candidates and agents on its website in December. Parties were alerted to possible changes affecting personal and disability expenses ahead of the election. It was stressed that parties should check the website regularly for any updates to this guidance and contact Roisin McDaid with any queries. There was a discussion relating to Brexit and the possibility of a European Parliamentary election – for which the regulated period would have started on 23 January 2019. Ann Watt said that as a responsible regulator, the Electoral Commission had to prepare for a range of possible unexpected events. The Commission would keep the parties updated as and when they knew more. Royal Mail Rachel Winham gave the Panel an overview of the Royal Mail's contingency planning for various potential electoral event scenarios. She explained the structure of its elections operation, with the Doxford team as the hub for elections operations, Clare Connolly the lead in Northern Ireland and main contact for candidates, and Scott Forsyth in charge of overall planning for Northern Ireland and East of Scotland. Rachel talked the Panel through the free mailing process, highlighting the introduction of Streetsort, artwork checks and electronic billing. There would be 11 drop-off points across the 11 council areas with 26 April being the final drop-off day. She also offered as much support as was needed to parties, asking them to contact her by phone. Information on local elections would be emailed to Panel members following the meeting. Pre-election seminars EONI, the Electoral Commission and Royal Mail would jointly be delivering seminars for candidates and agents in March 2019. The Commission would inform representatives of dates and venues as soon as possible, and encouraged party officials to publicise these widely so those standing for election could attend these briefing sessions. Electoral Commission issues Recent Commission publications Report on recall petition in North Antrim On 5 November the Commission published its report on the North Antrim recall petition. The overall assessment was that the petition was well-run with no significant problems affecting voters or campaigners. The petition was the first to

take place across the UK since the Recall of MPs Act was introduced in 2015, and therefore the first time the legislation was tested. The report noted that there was a lot of debate about the number and location of signing venues. Some parties had said that three signing venues was insufficient. The Chief Electoral Officer's view was that three venues were adequate when combined with the availability of postal signing on demand. In the report the Commission concluded they had seen no evidence that more signing venues would have increased the number of people who signed. The report identified a number of practical issues which the UK Government should consider addressing to help voters, campaigners and administrators at any future petition. It had been circulated to all APP members and was also available on the Commission's website. 'Protecting the debate' report The Commission had responded to the UK Government's consultation on the above report, urging the Government to introduce urgent changes to the law so that voters could see who was responsible for online election and referendum campaign material. The Commission had recommended: all non-printed material should contain an imprint new regulations should apply to any online platform, even those yet to developed, to future-proof legislation The Commission should have enhanced powers to obtain information from digital platforms Code of Practice for electoral observers Cahir Hughes said that following the 2018 review and consultation on a proposed Code of Practice for Electoral Observers, a revised Code of Practice had been laid on 19 December 2018 in the UK Parliament and Scottish Parliament. The new Code is more accessible and easier to read and has been strengthened to ensure observers are aware of their obligation to remain politically impartial. There is also an increased period of accreditation from 1 to 3 years. The observer scheme has also introduced an online application system with new ID badges and enhanced security. Further information about the Code of Practice, application process and additional guidance is available on the Commission's website. To date there have been fifty applications to the revised scheme. Legislation to postpone an election to the Northern Ireland Assembly The Commission had expressed its concern to the Government about its recent legislation postponing the requirement to call an election to the Northern Ireland Assembly. Whilst the Commission Board recognise the realities of the current political situation, it wanted to express its concerns about the postponement of an election that is due. New Commissioners The Chair made the Panel aware that three new Commissioners nominated by the political parties had been approved by the House of Commons to serve on the Electoral Commission Board. They replace individuals whose terms had come to an end. Lord Gilbert of Panteg, Chair of the House of Lords Communication Select Committee - Conservative Party nominated Commissioner. Joan Whalley, a former Labour MP for Stoke on Trent North – Labour Party nominated Commissioner. Alastair Ross, a former DUP MLA – Commissioner nominated by the smaller parties. The CEONI extended an invitation to the new Commissioner for the smaller parties to meet her. Update from Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland Schools registration project The CEO told the Panel of her ongoing work to reach young people. She had now been able to access the NI system with unique access to each pupil on the C2K database – which she hoped would help increase the number of attainments registered. She asked for the parties help in her continued efforts to explore how best to reach people with influence over young people. Political finance – statutory return deadlines Parties were reminded of the following deadlines: Quarter 4 - 2018 donation and loan returns to be submitted by 30 January 2019. Statement of accounts for the year ending 31 December 2018 for parties with income and expenditure of £250,000 or less must be submitted by 30 April 2019. Statement of accounts for accounting units with income of expenditure over £25,000

but under £250,000 must also be submitted by 30 April 2019. Next meeting date – 19 March 2019 The next Panel meeting is scheduled for Tuesday 19 March 2019 at 9.30am at the Radisson Blu Hotel. List of agreed actions Action Responsible Royal Mail – Mailing information to be circulated Rachel Winham and Caralyn Morton Submit donation and loan returns for Quarter 4 by 30 January 2019. Party representatives Submit Statement of Accounts up to £250,000 by 30 April 2019. Party representatives Submit Statement of Accounts for Accounting Units as detailed by 30 April 2019. Party representatives