

Northern Ireland Assembly Parties' Panel: 25 January 2023 | Electoral Commission Search

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First published: 11 May 2023 Last updated: 16 May 2023 Meeting Overview Date: 25 January 2023 Time: 9:30am Date of next scheduled meeting: Tuesday 28 March Who was at the meeting Who was at the meeting The Electoral Commission Dr Katy Radford, Electoral Commissioner for Northern Ireland (KR) Cahir Hughes, Head of Electoral Commission, Northern Ireland (CH) Jonathan Mitchell, Manager of Electoral Commission, Northern Ireland (JM) Roisin McDaid, Senior Office (Political Parties Liaison) (RM) Sarah Doherty, Senior Comms Officer (SD) James Ringland, Advice and Information Advisor (JR) The Electoral Office for Northern Ireland Virginia McVea, Chief Electoral Officer (VM) Political Parties Alliance- Alliance Party of Northern Ireland – Sharon Lowry (SL) and Peter McCully (PM) Democratic Unionist Party D.U.P. – George Dorrian (GD) SDLP (Social Democratic & Labour Party) – Catherine Matthews (CM) and Jack Molly (JM) Sinn Féin – Gary Fleming (GF) Ulster Unionist Party – Tim Lemon (TM) Apologies N/A Welcome, apologies and introductions KR welcomed attendees and introduced Sarah Doherty and James Ringland as two new Electoral Commission employees. Minutes from NIAPP meeting Tuesday 7 June and any matters arising The minutes of the previous meeting were agreed. Issues raised by political parties in advance of the meeting No specific issues raised by political parties in advance of the meeting. Planning for 2023 Local Council Elections VM provided an update from EONI. The electoral register currently has 1.37m electors registered. After the canvass there were 113000 non-responders. The Electoral Office will utilise data matching to confirm that these elector's details are accurate, non-responders who cannot be data matched will not be removed before the local elections. EONI are currently working on the polling station scheme for the local elections. Approximately 400 out of the usual 600+ stations have responded to their digital request for availability. The plan is for no polling station to serve more than one council area, however some may serve more than one DEA. Polling station scheme is set to published on 22 February. Training for senior count staff was held over the Christmas period. This included STV count and overnight verification training. Every template of count material will be available for staff online from next week. EONI election staff have been contacted about availability for working with the potential of 5000 staff of the list of over 8000 to be used. The 3 April Register will be used for the local elections with any changes needed to be made for a 3 May update. Digital Registration Numbers remain a big challenge and EONI are always open to suggestions from the parties about how to improve the process. GF reiterated concern for issues around DRN and that some electors were only made aware of the need for a DRN when they received their poll card. By this time, it was already too late for some to apply for an absent vote. Sinn Féin have been in contact with VM and EONI about potential solutions. SD responded on the upcoming DRN communications campaign which will run alongside the Commission's "Got 5?" voter registration campaign in the run up to the local elections. The campaign will run from 27 March to 24 April and will be backloaded with a higher spend in the week before the registration deadline when people are more aware of the elections happening and any issues they may have that would prevent them voting in person. The campaign will be running across print media as well as digital media. VM is sending figures regularly to the NIO so it is aware of challenges arising from DRN's. Update from the Electoral Commission RM advised that the Commission published its spending and donation guidance for candidates on 24 January 2023. Changes to the guidance following implementation of Elections Act provisions were highlighted. Parties were asked to share the guidance

with their candidates and agents. In advance of publication of notice of election (11 April), the Electoral Commission will run seminars for candidates and agents in conjunction with the Electoral Office and Royal Mail. Those will provide an overview of rules on candidate spending, nominations, count arrangements and accessing the candidate's free post entitlement. The Commission will invite the PSNI to the seminars to provide a briefing on safe campaigning. The Commission would be in contact shortly with arrangements. SD provided an update on the Electoral Commission's public awareness activity The "Got 5?" registration awareness campaign, will run across TV, digital, radio, and outdoor display for 5 weeks in the lead up to the local elections, commencing on 20 March and finishing on 28 April, the registration deadline. The Commission will be implementing a new stakeholder engagement plan over the next few months which is focused on revitalising existing partnerships and creating new ones in areas which are typically under-registered (young people, disabled people, private renters/recent movers, students and Black and minority ethnic voters). This will mean that the Commission can build on the focused pre-election information dissemination and begin creating year-round partnership working. Welcome to Your Vote Week will be running in Northern Ireland next week, with the theme "Our Democracy". 18 schools have signed up from across Northern Ireland to deliver presentations and lessons on the week and have been provided with a pack of resources including posters, social media assets and an assembly presentation. The Commission's youth voice partner, NI Youth Forum will also be marking the week by creating content including a vlog. Press releases from the Commission will be released promoting the week. The Commission hopes to be able to grow the week as the years continue and that increased popularity will give it more of a platform in wider education discussions. GD and GF requested a list of the schools which are signed up and the specific resources. Contingency planning for an Assembly election JM provided an update on the Commission's contingency planning. In the Autumn of last year, the Commission wrote to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on two occasions to highlight the challenges in planning for an election across multiple dates and continue to encourage the Government to provide clarity on arrangements for an election. Such clarity is important not only for the Chief Electoral Officer to prepare for the poll, but for voters and campaigners to be ready to participate – and for the Commission to be able to deliver its statutory duty to raise awareness of the poll and help voters understand what they need to do to take part. Despite these challenges both the Electoral Office and Electoral Commission are experienced in delivering well-run electoral events and maintain up to date contingency plans to enable them to respond quickly to any unscheduled polls. Elections Act changes RM advised members of several changes arising from the Elections Act. Members were advised of changes arising from the Elections Act including;

- Technical changes to notional spending and local non-party campaigning rules which parties were advised of in November last year.
- Controlled expenditure of third parties which means third parties based outside of the UK are now limited to spending £700 on campaigning during a regulated period.
- Third parties are not eligible to register as political parties and vice versa.
- The consultation on the draft Code of Practice on the laws relating to non-party campaigning closed last week and the Commission would consider the responses before producing a final draft, planned for the summer.
- New parties would be required to declare assets or liabilities over £500 when applying to register. Members were invited to contact the Commission for further information on any of the changes.

SL asked how the spending limit for third party campaigners had changed? RM clarified

that at the local elections non-party campaigners can spend up to £50 plus a half a pence per elector in the DEA. The candidate's agent must authorise any additional spending and any spending authorised by the agent must be included in the candidate's spending return and there were forms that needed to be completed by the agent and party and submitted with the candidate's return. RM invited members to speak to the Commission directly to discuss what campaigns they were running and how the third-party campaign rules might apply. provisions. JM discussed how the provisions in the Elections Act have changed the level of assistance available to those with disabilities in a polling station. Disabled voters can now choose anyone who is over 18 to accompany and assist them when voting. The Elections Act also introduces a duty on the Commission to provide guidance for the Chief Electoral Officer on the requirement to provide reasonable equipment which enables disabled voters to vote independently and in secret. This guidance highlights barriers to voting and is designed to support the Chief Electoral Officer in making informed decisions on what can be done to help make voting accessible for all. The Commission have consulted extensively on the guidance with the statutory phase of the consultation closing on 16 January with the final guidance available in time to inform the support available for voters at the May 2023 elections. VM highlighted that EONI used a call line which would recite the candidate's names for sight impaired people during the last election yet found that the number of people using it was low. With an increased number of candidates (850 approximately) for the upcoming local elections it is still possible to use a call line but the user will need to input the DEA on the call line to hear the relevant candidates. Hearing loops are being considered where resources will allow. EONI are open to the idea of Elector's suggesting the polling stations where hearing loops should be used, so that EONI can locate them at Polling Stations where they are needed. KR raised the importance of equality and diversity and inclusion across the Commission's work and suggested a standing agenda item on this in future. Work to replace the Commission's online political finance system RM advised that the Commission has now halted work developing a bespoke online political finance system. The system would not achieve its aims in its current form, and it is more cost effective to stop the project and take a new approach. Instead the Commission would purchase and customise an off-the-shelf software product. The work done to date, both in terms of input from parties, would be used to procure and customise a new software product. Update from the Electoral Commission CH explained that every few years the Electoral Commission conducts a study into the accuracy and completeness of the electoral registers. This involves drawing a sample of addresses across Northern Ireland and conducting face-to-face interviews with households. Information gathered from interviews is compared against the Electoral Register to allow the Commission to estimate the proportion of entries on the register which are correctly recorded (accuracy) and the proportion of eligible adults who are correctly registered (completeness). Ipsos MORI will be conducting interviews with households across Northern Ireland from January to March 2023, with the findings published in the Autumn. This study will be the Commission's first assessment of the register since the 2021 canvass. 2023 Financial Reporting dates for political parties RM advised the parties of the following date: Donation and loan reports for the period 1 October – 31 December 2022 had to be submitted by 30 January 2023. Upcoming meetings dates for 2023 The next NIAPP meeting is has been suggested for 28 March and JR will send correspondence to Panel members regarding this. Any other business CM raised concerns regarding the behaviour of polling agents, suggesting polling staff requiring more training to challenge behaviours. VM informed the panel that online training was

available for all election staff and that stations are frequented by polling station inspectors who keep staff and agents informed of what is permitted. VM will write to parties regarding this and is happy to meet with the SDLP to discuss. SD made the panel aware that after 20 years of APP's, the minutes from previous panel meetings are now required to be passed to The National Archives, and would be added annually. No issues were raised by attendees. VM, highlighted that HalfFare SmartPass and biometric residence permits will be accepted forms of ID at the local elections in May. Disabled person's blue badges cannot be used as there no date of birth on them. CH informed the panel that VM is now leaving her position as Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland and on behalf of the Electoral Commission thanked her for her contribution to panel meetings and wished her well for the future.