

Northern Ireland Assembly Parties Panel: 26 January 2021 | Electoral Commission Search

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On this page Welcomes, apologies, and introductions Minutes from Tuesday 6 October Issues raised by parties Update from Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland Electoral Commission Update Meeting dates for 2021 Any other business First published: 17 June 2022 Last updated: 17 June 2022 Meeting overview Date: 26 January 2021 Time: 10:00am Date of next scheduled meeting: Tuesday 23 March Who was at the meeting Who was at the meeting The Electoral Commission: Cahir Hughes (Chair) Mairaid McMahon Hannah Greenfield Electoral Office for Northern Ireland: Virginia McVea Political Parties: Alliance Party - Sharon Lowry and Peter McCully DUP - George Dorrian Green Party - Kate Barry Sinn Féin - Gary Fleming Apologies: Roisin McDaid Welcomes, apologies, and introductions The Chair welcomed everybody to the meeting. Minutes from Tuesday 6 October Minutes from previous NIAPP meeting agreed. Issues raised by parties No issues were raised by parties in advance, or at the start, of the meeting. Update from Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland Planning for Canvass 2021 Virginia McVea provided an update on the plans for the re-scheduled canvass, now due to take place in 2021. She explained that the first activity would be delivery of an unaddressed mail-drop to all houses in Northern Ireland in June, to advise the public that the Canvass will begin in July. A second unaddressed mail-drop will be sent in July advising the Canvass is open. A pre-populated form will be sent out to each Housing Executive tenant to target this harder to reach group. People aged over 75, and those in their households, will also receive a pre-populated form. Another unaddressed mail-drop will be sent out in August, and a further targeted mail-drop will be sent in October to non-responders. Whilst there are no active plans to send canvassers out door to door on the scale used in previous years, contingency plans are in place for use of canvassers if it became safe and necessary to do so. During the registration period, the Electoral Office are planning to produce a weekly update of the response data in an interactive mapped format which should highlight the areas with lowest response rates. Attainers and pre-attainers will be identified through data provided by the Department of Education and will be contacted directly by email through the C2K system. On the basis that the canvass will close in December, Tuesday 9 November will be the deadline for applications for the December register. Applications received after this date will still be processed but will not be included in the December register. The Electoral Office are developing video guides, with step by step instructions and highlighting common errors, to help the general public complete their forms correctly. A party representative suggested that the electoral registration letters sent to the general public sometimes use difficult terminology that is not easily understood by the recipients. Virginia advised that, by law, the registration forms must include two pieces of legislation. However, the bulk of communication with the general public (the mail-drops) will be using plain and do not have the legislation inclusion requirement. Another party representative noted that it could be a particular challenge to register those aged over 75 given the pandemic climate. Turning to the public awareness campaign, Mairaid McMahon noted the Electoral Commission is working with the Electoral Office, as well as advertising and media agencies, on its development for the 2021 Canvass. The key message will be encouraging people to register online, and the Commission is working with the agencies to ensure the messaging is clear and effective, as well as identifying the best channels to use to target those who are traditionally harder to engage in campaigns like this, such as students for example. Once the campaign messaging and creative is finalised, she added that materials would be shared with the parties.

Electoral Commission Update Proposed changes to imprint requirements Mairaid McMahon explained that, in its recent consultation on transparency in digital campaigning, the UK Government had indicated its intention to extend imprint requirements to digital material. The Government also said it intended to legislate so that all printed election material in Northern Ireland will need an imprint. The proposed changes in relation to printed material will require all printed party and non-party campaign material in Northern Ireland to have an imprint. The changes will also mean that the imprint requirements on printed candidate material will be brought in line with Great Britain. She noted that we await the UK Government's response on the consultation and the associated legislative timings, and will advise further in due course. She also highlighted that the Scottish Government has already implemented legislation that will require imprints on digital material at the Scottish Parliamentary elections in May and at the next Scottish local government elections.

Party Conference Stands Mairaid informed the meeting that the Electoral Commission is currently carrying out a review of the maximum rate amount that parties can charge for the hire of a stand at a party conference before it constitutes a donation to the party. The current maximum is £15,000. The Commission has already spoken to a variety of parties whose charges range from significant amounts to much smaller amounts, which has provided us with a range of views. She concluded by suggesting that if any party would like to contribute to the review, they should contact Roisin McDaid.

Consultation on draft Disability Action Plan Mairaid advised that the Electoral Commission has recently published their draft Disability Action Plan for consultation, and that a link will be circulated to NIAPP members. She encouraged all parties to provide feedback on any aspect of the draft Plan, and in particular on the performance measures and targets that have been included. She also welcomed the opportunity to discuss further with any party that might be interested in doing so.

The First Count Mairaid noted that, following the previous NIAPP meeting, the Electoral Commission had launched The First Count, which is intended to be a quarterly newsletter summarising the key issues discussed at each meeting. She encouraged recipients to provide feedback on any aspect of its tone, content or presentation.

Update on Commissioner Appointments Cahir Hughes provided an update on the appointment of Electoral Commissioners to various vacant positions on the Commission Board. He began by explaining that the Speaker's Committee, who manage all of these appointments independently of the Commission, are in the process of recruiting a Northern Ireland Commissioner, filling the vacancy created when Anna Carragher's term of office concluded. As the deadline for applications was Friday 15 January, and there will be a process of shortlisting and interviewing in the coming months, as well as political and parliamentary scrutiny, he suggested that it could be early summer before any such appointment would be in place. Cahir noted that a recruitment process for the new Chair is also underway, filling the vacancy left by the departure of Sir John Holmes. It is anticipated that the successful candidate will take up the post before the summer. Finally, Cahir drew attention to the ratification by Parliament of the appointment of Alex Attwood as Commissioner representing smaller parties on 20 January, filling the vacancy created by the departure of Alastair Ross. As this appointment remains subject to the issuing of a Royal Warrant, it is anticipated that Alex will take up post in the coming months.

Meeting dates for 2021 Cahir reminded attendees of the following forthcoming dates for meetings: Tuesday 23 March Tuesday 22 June Tuesday 22 October Any other business Cahir reminded attendees for the forthcoming deadline of 30 January 2021 for submitting the quarter 4 (1 October – 31 December 2020) donations and loans reports.

As there was no further business, Cahir thanked everyone for their attendance and drew the meeting to a close.