

Northern Ireland Assembly Parties' Panel: 28 March 2023 | Electoral Commission

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First published: 15 June 2023 Last updated: 15 June 2023 Meeting overview Date: 28 March 2023 Time: 09:30 am Date of next scheduled meeting: Tuesday 13 June 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) James Ringland, Support and Information Advisor (JR) Electoral Office for Northern Ireland: Sarah Ling, Interim Chief Electoral Officer (VM) Political Parties: Alliance Party - Tierna Kelly (TK) DUP - George Dorrian (GD) SDLP (Social Democratic & Labour Party) – Catherine Matthews (CM) Sinn Féin - Gary Fleming (GF) Ulster Unionist Party – Tim Lemon (TM) Royal Mail Claire Connolly (CC) Apologies: Alliance Party of Northern Ireland – Sharon Lowry, Peter McCully Virginia McVea, Chief Electoral Officer - EONI 1. Welcome, apologies and introductions 1.1 KR welcomed attendees. Apologies were made for Sharon Lowry and Peter McCully from Alliance who could not attend, Tierna Kelly from Alliance attended in their place. Virginia McVea had to cancel her attendance at short notice. Sarah Ling, interim Chief Electoral Officer attended in her place. Both Sarah Ling and James Ringland attended virtually. 2. Minutes from NIAPP meeting Wednesday 25 January and any matters arising 2.1. The minutes of the previous meeting were agreed. 3. Issues raised by political parties in advance of the meeting 3.1. No specific issues raised by political parties in advance of the meeting. 4. Update from Electoral Commission. 4.1.1. Guidance update from RM. The Commission alongside EONI, Royal Mail and the PSNI are holding pre-election seminars to provide guidance on the rules on spending and donations, candidate freepost entitlement and candidate safety guidance. One seminar has been held in Belfast. There will be a seminar held in Omagh on March 29 and virtually on March 30th. The Commission will make presentations available online after all three seminars have been held. The Commission will be running advice surgeries for candidates regarding campaign spending and donations. There will be two before poll and two after. These will be 1-2-1 sessions between candidates and the Commission. The Commission remains contactable as usual if candidates/agents have any further queries. The dates of these surgeries will be published after the pre-election seminars. RM will email out guidance on difference between local campaigning and notional spending to parties. 4.1.2. Comms update from CH Update. The Commission's Got 5 campaign which launched 20 March across TV, radio, paid social and out of home advertising. The campaign will run until 28 April, the registration deadline. The Commission's separate DRN campaign which will run across paid social and print media will launch on March 27 and run until April 24, with a tapering off towards the end to prevent EONI being overwhelmed with a rush of applications. 4.2.1 SL provided an update from EONI. 4.2.2 SL provided a timetable for the elections. The publishing of notice of election will be on April 11 and nominations run from April 12-24. These nominations are to be given to local councils from 10:00-16:00 each day (except April 24 where the deadline is 13:00). SL asked parties to encourage candidates to put nomination papers in early as it would help councils process the applications but will also allow time to amend any mistakes made on nomination papers. The deadline for absent votes will be 26 April at 17:00 and the deadline to register is April 28. The publication of the final notice of registrations will be 11 May. Polling day will be May 18 and from close of poll on the 18 the verification of unused votes begins which will run into the 19 May. The counts are run by the councils and will start on

19 May at 8am and continue into the 20 May. EONI has seen a typical surge in registration applications of several hundred a day. A slightly higher than normal 1000+ temporary absent vote applications have been made. There have been just over 400 proxy vote applications which is also slightly higher than normal. Of all rejected absent vote (AV) applications, a high number are being rejected due to lack of Digital Registration Number (DRN). SL estimates this to be about 80% of all AV rejections. SL finished by asking all parties to raise awareness of DRN's as best they could. GF when voters are applying for DRN's, it must be using the same email they registered with. There is a concern for those who no longer have access to their old email addresses. Can this process be amended to allow those who this affects to apply for their DRN's. SL will speak to the EONI team and will get back to GF. 4.3.1 Update from Royal Mail. CC informed all that the 12 May is the final drop off date for campaign material. CM asked if campaign material must be addressed? CC confirmed that all campaign material had to be addressed and Royal Mail have asked candidates to use street sort. There will be 11 drop off points, one for each for council area and these listed in on the Royal Mail's candidate mail guide which can be accessed on the EONI website 5. Promoting Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion. 5.1. The panel was invited to discuss accessibility at the election. GD raised the issue of access in Braniel Primary School which is used as a polling place. Whilst there is a car park, staff have refused cars access which affects voters with mobility issues. SL confirmed she will discuss this issue with the school. SL advised EONI have new duties in terms of accessibility. Last year a telephone service for visually impaired voters started, and they will be providing this again. This service will read out the list of candidates as they appear on the Ballot paper. There was some very good feedback from those few who used it last year. EONI will raise awareness for this best they can but ask parties to promote it as well. Hearing loops will be available in Polling Stations on request. The request form for this will be on EONI's website. EONI continues to provide polling stations with the usual equipment for accessibility. On the back of the Commission's guidance EONI are providing pencil grips, magnifying glasses and handheld lights to voters. Additional training for Polling staff will be given so they can talk about accessibility equipment with voters. EONI are setting up a dedicated page on their website regarding accessibility provisions. The Commission alongside the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), the Public Prosecution Service and EONI have produced joint guidance on how candidates can stay safe whilst campaigning. This is on the back of growing incidents of harassment and intimidation, especially during the Northern Ireland Assembly Election in 2022. This guidance will be published this week and the Commission encourages parties to look at and share it. PSNI are very keen to hear all reports of any potential offences. KR raised a number of initiatives taken by the Commission. The Commission is reaching out to the race equality subgroups as convened by the executive office which comprises a range of groups representing the needs of minority ethnic groups. KR asks all to please stay in touch with EC about any concerns. The Commission has been in contact with the Equality Commission who are interested in seeing what data we have regarding equality monitoring of political representation in Northern Ireland. KR asks all to please stay in touch with EC about any concerns. The Commission has been in contact with the Equality Commission who are interested in seeing what data we have regarding equality monitoring of political representation in Northern Ireland. We plan to reach out to the Alzheimer's society who run a four nations peer support group to see how we can work in partnership to support to their users. 6. dates for political parties. 6.1. RM advised the deadline for parties with

income and expenditure of £250,000 or less to submit statement of accounts for year ending 31 December 2022 is 30 April 2023. Accounting units with income or expenditure over £25,000 (but less than £250,000) must also submit their accounts by 30 April 2023 The deadline for Quarter 1 Donation and Loan reports for the period 1Jan – 31 March 2023 is 30 April 2023. Reminders will be sent to parties. 7. Upcoming Meeting dates for 2023 7.1. Proposed dates are 13 June and 3 October. 8. Any other business. 8.1. CM thanked the panel for facilitating Jack Molly's attendance at the last NIAPP (25.01.2023). Jack was on work experience and the NIAPP was excellent insight to the electoral process for him. KR reiterated Jack's welcome and wanted it on record that such instances would be more than welcome from all parties to engage with young party activists. The panel acknowledged the contribution of Virginia McVea to the electoral process in Northern Ireland. CH agreed to pass on the panels thanks and best wishes for the future.