

Report: How the 2011 Northern Ireland Assembly election was run | Electoral Commission    Search    Report: How the 2011 Northern Ireland Assembly election was run    You are in the Northern Ireland Assembly elections section Home Northern Ireland Assembly elections On this page Summary Planning for the election Polling day The count Moving forward Recommendations Our recommendations to the UK Government Our recommendations to the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland Our commitments Download our full report First published: 5 December 2019 Last updated: 7 August 2019 Summary There was no security disruption either on polling day or at the counts and the elections passed off peacefully. The vast majority of voters interviewed in our public opinion survey felt that the Assembly election was well run. However, the time taken to complete the single transferable vote (STV) counts continues to be a source of considerable frustration among political parties, candidates and the media in Northern Ireland. The administration of the combined elections and referendum in Northern Ireland was a significant challenge for the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland (CEO) and his staff. The evidence suggests that the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland (EONI) had the capacity to deliver two elections and a referendum on the same day, and should be able to do so in the future – provided there is effective planning and resources in place. Planning for the election Planning began well in advance of polling day and our regular monitoring showed that the CEO and his senior staff put a considerable amount of time and effort into planning for the successful delivery of three polls on one day. However, it was evident that much less focus and attention had been given to planning for the counts, with Area Electoral Officers (AEOs) left to plan and manage their own counts. There was no evidence of an overall plan on how the counts should be delivered, and instructions on how to conduct the counts were very late in being sent to AEOs from the EONI head office. Sufficient funding was made available by the government to the CEO to deliver the elections and referendum in Northern Ireland. It remains difficult to benchmark the funding of electoral services in Northern Ireland in comparison to other parts of the UK. In Great Britain, through the Electoral Commission's performance standards regime, information is collected from local authorities about the cost of electoral administration, but these standards do not apply to Northern Ireland. Over 17,000 voters were added to the register during the period of 'late registration' and much of this can be attributed to the fact that poll cards were issued much earlier than at any previous election in Northern Ireland. The number of postal and proxy votes also increased at this election. Candidates and agents were generally complimentary about the nominations process and the support they received from electoral administrators in advance of the polls. AEOs were responsible for the recruitment and training of approximately 6,000 election staff. This proved to be a particular challenge and placed a considerable burden on their preparations for polling day and the count. Although feedback from the EONI evaluation of the training was largely positive, it was clear at the count that presiding officers encountered significant difficulties completing their paperwork at the close of poll. The structure of the EONI and the combined polls highlighted the heavy reliance placed on a small number of staff within the EONI. AEOs in particular had significant workloads in preparing for polling day and the counts. There was evidence that they were overstretched and had to work long hours to get the job done. As a result, some were fatigued by the time it came to managing their counts. Polling day The overall conduct and management of polling day proved to be successful. The day passed off without any significant interruption and there were no reports of queues outside polling places when the polls closed at 10pm. The appointment of an

additional poll clerk proved to be of particular benefit given that three ballot boxes were used at each polling station. There was some confusion on polling day resulting in a number of voters being unable to distinguish between the Assembly and local council ballot papers. The number of ballot papers spoilt at STV elections continued to be high even though the same voting system was used for the Assembly and local council elections. There was frustration amongst candidates and political parties about the lack of clarity and consistency regarding the right to canvass outside polling places and a desire on their part to have the matter resolved before the next election in Northern Ireland. Some parties again suggested that there was a need for an exclusion zone outside polling places where canvassing would be prohibited. The count The STV counts were, not for the first time, the subject of sustained criticism from some candidates, political parties and the media. The primary cause of complaint concerned slowness and the general lack of information on how counts were progressing. As at previous Assembly elections the entire count process (verification and counting) lasted two full days. However, having to verify three sets of ballot papers simultaneously before counting began, caused significant delays in announcing turnout and first preference totals. Other factors also had an impact on the speed of the count, including staff failing to turn up at some count venues and the poor quality of paperwork returned by many presiding officers. There was also evidence of inconsistent practice and the lack of an overall plan for the Assembly and referendum counts. AEOs were also unclear about how the referendum count totals should be collated and communicated. As a result the referendum count total in Northern Ireland was not declared until 2am on Saturday 7 May, long after the result was known in the rest of the UK. The process of manually counting ballot papers in an election using STV is by its nature a time-consuming one and it appeared that many of those present at the count, including candidates, agents and the media, did not understand the verification and counting processes. Overall, there was a general lack of information on how the counts were progressing, and this contributed to a growing sense of frustration and tension amongst those present and in the media. This could have been avoided if better communication plans had been put in place, if regular updates through public announcements were made and through making better use of technology. Moving forward After the election the CEO made a commitment to carrying out a full review of the arrangements in place for managing elections and conducting counts in Northern Ireland. We welcome this initiative. The difficulties encountered at the May polls mean it is imperative that the review's terms of reference are sufficiently wide to address the shortcomings identified in this report. The review should be led by the CEO with input from experienced electoral administrators and Electoral Commission representatives. One of its outputs should be a timetabled and resourced action plan for improving the future delivery of elections and counts in Northern Ireland. The accountability of the CEO to the electorate in Northern Ireland has been identified in previous Commission reports as an area that needs to improve. All electoral matters remain the responsibility of the UK Government and the Northern Ireland Assembly has no remit in this area. In order to enhance the confidence of the electorate, the UK Government should introduce improved accountability arrangements. These include extending to Northern Ireland the statutory framework of performance standards that apply in the rest of the UK, and considering how the people of Northern Ireland and their elected representatives can have greater visibility of, and a greater stake in, how the CEO manages electoral matters. Currently the CEO is the only electoral officer in the UK whose performance against independent standards is not reported publicly to electors. It is therefore difficult to make comparisons

about how well electoral services are administered in Northern Ireland compared to the rest of the UK. Although the structures in place for the delivery of electoral registration and elections are different, the provision of such comparative data is necessary, to benchmark the CEO's delivery against other Returning Officers in the UK and to make future improvements. In order to address this, the CEO has committed in his 2011/12 Business Plan to working with the Commission on the development of performance standards for elections and electoral registration in Northern Ireland. This has the potential to transform how elections and electoral registration are administered. We will work with the CEO in developing appropriate performance standards for Northern Ireland by April 2012. Recommendations Throughout this report we make a number of recommendations aimed at improving the provision of electoral services in Northern Ireland. These have the potential to enhance the delivery of elections from the perspectives of voters, those standing for election, and electoral administrators who manage elections and counts. Many of the recommendations in this report are addressed to the CEO and are relevant to the strategic review of elections and counts that he announced at our post-election seminar at the end of May 2011. We will work with the CEO in ensuring that the recommendations in this report are addressed in full. We have also made a number of recommendations to the UK Government, some of which will require legislative change. We have also set out a number of our own commitments to enhance electoral services in Northern Ireland and we will work with the CEO and the UK Government to ensure their implementation. Our recommendations to the UK Government To enhance the experience of voters, electoral administrators and candidates we recommend that the UK government addresses the following issues in advance of the next scheduled elections in Northern Ireland in 2014: Legislative change Amend the law to permit the name of the election being contested to be clearly printed on the ballot paper when elections are combined in any part of the UK. Amend or clarify the law in respect of the use of languages, other than , on electoral documentation in Northern Ireland Amend the Electoral Administration Act (2006) so that the performance standards regime that applies in Great Britain is extended to Northern Ireland. Policy reviews Review the deadlines for absent voting in Northern Ireland so that those who apply during the 'late registration window' can avail of an absent vote if they are eligible. Review the arrangements for postal voting in Northern Ireland to ensure that there is consistency across the UK. Consult with parties across the UK on the future of polling agents with a view to having their role either abolished or modified. Review freepost at combined elections in Northern Ireland, consulting political parties and relevant stakeholders to develop recommendations. Complete an equality impact assessment on candidate deposits and subscribers before making a final decision on the way forward in Northern Ireland. Consult stakeholders in Northern Ireland on what accountability arrangements could be put in place to enhance confidence and transparency in the CEO's decision making. Our recommendations to the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland To enhance the experience of voters and improve the administration of elections in Northern Ireland we recommend that the Chief Electoral Officer addresses the following issues in advance of the next elections in 2014: Poll cards Issue poll cards to electors at least four weeks before polling day. Review the messaging on poll cards for future elections informing voters that he has a legal obligation to send poll cards to all eligible voters, including those who have permanent postal or proxy votes. Electoral registration and absent voting Consider what else he could do to simplify electoral registration in Northern Ireland, without compromising the security of the system. Record the reasons why applications for

postal and proxy votes at elections in Northern Ireland have been rejected. Introduce a system to give voters applying for a postal or proxy vote the opportunity to refresh their signature. Ballot papers Conduct user-testing of ballot papers used at combined elections to alleviate the potential for voter confusion. Polling places Clarify what parts of a polling place party campaigners can access and canvass at on polling day and ensure that presiding officers are trained consistently on this issue. In the absence of legislation, work with political parties in developing a voluntary code of practice on canvassing outside polling places and have this in place for the next election in Northern Ireland. Review the design and content of the documentation used at the close of poll with a view to simplifying it for use at future stand-alone or combined polls. Training and management Review how training is organised and managed in advance of the next set of elections. Review the working practices of AEOs in the future management of elections and clarify their roles. Counts Ensure that the verification of unused ballot papers is conducted in accordance with the law at all elections in Northern Ireland. Ensure that teams responsible for classifying doubtful ballot papers are trained in this aspect of the count. Review how new technology can be used to keep the public better informed of how election counts are progressing. Review the potential for conducting constituency-based counts for the 2015 Assembly election. Establish a broadcasters' liaison group to ensure that arrangements for media access and reporting at counts are improved. Local elections Publish details of the expenditure returns received from the councils on the cost of local elections on the EONI website. CEO strategic review Ensure that the strategic review of elections and counts is led by the CEO and draws input from experienced electoral administrators and Commission representatives. Complete the strategic review by September 2012 as outlined in the terms of reference. Share his final report of the strategic review of elections and the count with political parties and other key stakeholders. Our commitments We have given a number of commitments to enhance electoral services in Northern Ireland and we will work with the CEO, the UK Government and relevant stakeholders where appropriate, to deliver these. We will work with the CEO and the Northern Ireland Office to ensure that the recommendations contained in this report are addressed in full. We will report on the progress achieved in implementing the recommendations by October 2012. We will report separately on integrity issues arising at the 2011 polls across the UK in early 2012. We will report on the financial aspects of the 2011 elections in early 2012, after all campaign spending returns have been submitted. We will work with the CEO to consider what further action could be taken before the next election to instil greater confidence and trust in the electoral process in Northern Ireland. We will work with the CEO in addressing count issues in Northern Ireland with the aim of improving the effectiveness of the count model for the next set of elections using STV in Northern Ireland. We will work with the CEO in developing appropriate performance standards for elections and electoral registration in Northern Ireland by April 2012. We will work with the EONI to ensure improvements are in place for the delivery of the public helpline by the next election in 2014. Download our full report Report on the Northern Ireland Assembly election on 5 May 2011 Related content Report: How the 2016 Northern Ireland Assembly election was run Read our report about how the 2016 Northern Ireland Assembly election was run Report: The March 2017 Northern Ireland Assembly election Read our report about the 2017 Northern Ireland Assembly election Report on the May 2022 Northern Ireland Assembly election Read our report on the May 2022 Northern Ireland Assembly election Northern Ireland Assembly