

Northern Ireland Assembly Parties Panel minutes: 28 January 2020 | Electoral Commission    Search    Northern Ireland Assembly Parties Panel minutes: 28 January 2020    You are in the Party panels section Home    How we make decisions Party panels First published: 6 November 2020 Last updated: 3 February 2021 Meeting overview Date: 28 January 2020 Time: 9:30am Location: Boardroom, Ormeau Business Park, Belfast Date of next scheduled meeting: 9 June 2020 Who was at the meeting Who was at the meeting Alliance Party: Sharon Lowry and Scott Redenbaugh DUP: Allan Ewart Green Party: Liz Byrne Sinn Féin: Gary Fleming SDLP: Catherine Matthews UUP: Nicholas Trimble The Electoral Commission: Anna Carragher, Commissioner Cahir Hughes, Head of Electoral Commission NI Mairaid McMahon, Manager Roisin McDaid, Senior Officer (Political Parties Liaison) Hannah Greenfield, Information and Support Officer Electoral Office for Northern Ireland Virginia McVea, Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland Royal Mail Claire Connolly and Scott Forsyth Welcome and introductions The Chair, Anna Carragher, welcomed everyone to the meeting and round table introductions were made. Anna introduced Mairaid and Hannah to the table as new members of staff at the Electoral Commission. Notes of previous meeting held on 1 October 2019 An amendment was tabled to item 6.1, to make it clear that the Codes of Practice on spending by candidates and spending by parties, if approved, would only apply at local government elections in Northern Ireland where the regulated period was combined with the regulated period for another election. Issues raised by the political parties No items had been raised by the parties in advance of the meeting. December 2019 post-election review – 12 December UK Parliamentary General Election The Chair invited feedback from the Panel on all aspects of the 2019 UK Parliamentary General Election. She noted that the discussions would inform the Electoral Commission's report into the election, and that any further feedback could be provided to the Commission in due course. Registration The Electoral Office for Northern Ireland (EONI) has investigated a number of allegations made on two radio shows on 20 December and 23 December. The Chief Electoral Officer (CEO) had prepared a report for the Secretary of State which addressed these and she outlined the content of the report to the Panel. She suggested that there were two systemic issues that emerged during the election: that members of the public did not know their Digital Registration Number (DRN); and that some students were not able to provide the evidence of residence required to process their application. The CEO highlighted the surge in applications to join the register in the run up to the election. A total of around 84,500 applications were made during the general election campaign. Over 40,000 of these were made in the last six days before the registration deadline. The EONI plans for installing extra phone lines was delayed by the election but this work should be completed in the near future. The CEO commended staff at the EONI who had worked very hard over the period running up to the election, particularly given the proximity of Christmas. The Chair asked if the Panel had any comments on registration. One party suggested that some proxy voters had been unable to utilise their proxy votes at polling stations. The CEO advised she would look into it further. Another party raised a concern around EONI's capacity to cope with the number of registrations made. The Chair noted this had been a UK wide issue. The CEO advised that all applications for registration made before the deadline had been processed in time. Another panel member was concerned that some members of the public didn't understand the postal vote application process. The CEO stated the EONI will be reviewing their letters. Nominations There was a request made for counting agents to be able to register by email due the centralisation of EONI in Belfast. The CEO advised that she was planning to address this by running more pop-ups in local

council offices. Postal voting A Panel member asked for data about the number of postal votes applied for, issued and utilised and the CEO advised she would report back to the next meeting. Campaign issues and campaign material The Chair discussed the issue of unsavoury campaigning during the election throughout the UK. One party highlighted that third party campaigners don't have to register until they spend over £10,000. Roisin acknowledged this and stated that campaigning for or against a candidate has a lower threshold. Roisin also advised that the Electoral Commission carry out campaign monitoring and contact organisations during the campaigns. Candidate mailing (Royal Mail) This was dealt with under item 6. Public awareness There was a suggestion that more effort should have been made to raise public awareness of DRNs. Cahir advised that the Electoral Commission would bear this in mind in future public awareness campaigns. Polling stations There were some issues raised regarding the electoral registers available in polling stations. The CEO indicated that she was aware of these and would seek to address them in future. The CEO noted that whilst she had received some complaints from members of the public regarding the polling stations used, there was limited flexibility and choice given the last-minute nature of the election and the fact it was held in the run up to Christmas. The count There was general agreement from the panel that the count was well run, and members commended the CEO for this. Commission guidance No issues were raised Update from the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland The CEO discussed the data that would be available during the canvass. The canvass is due to start in July and the EONI expect most registrations will be made online. There may be some training opportunities available for Single Transferable Vote counting, and Panel members would be informed in due course. Update from Royal Mail A Panel member raised concerns with Royal Mail over inconsistencies in the rules about what constituency names were allowed on the election communications. This had meant that some election materials were sent very late. Scott noted these concerns and noted that work was ongoing to clarify this for the future. Royal Mail raised issues with the way that poll cards were delivered to them. Whilst they are generally received sequentially, for this election there was no order, which meant that poll cards were sent out in an ad hoc manner. This also created confusion in households where some electors received their poll cards in advance of others. A Panel member noted that some election communications had been delivered to the wrong addresses, and Royal Mail stated this was due to a change in processing which is being looked into. Electoral Commission Updates Roisin brought attention to the financial returns deadlines: Quarter 4 2019 donation and loan returns These must be submitted to the Commission by Thursday 30 January UKPGE Party Campaign Spending Return Parties that spent £250,000 or less on campaigning at the UK Parliamentary general election must submit their spending return to the Commission by 12 March 2020. The Electoral Commission submitted the draft codes of practice to the Minister for Cabinet Office in July 2019. Cabinet Office officials came back with a number of suggested modifications. The Electoral Commission are currently working their way through these. The amended drafts will be submitted to the Minister to lay before Parliament. If approved, the codes will apply to UK Parliamentary and Northern Ireland Assembly elections. The UK wide report on the European election was published in October. It identified two key issues that had a detrimental impact on voters: the difficulties experienced by some EU citizens living in the UK who wanted to vote in the European Parliamentary elections in the UK; and the difficulties experienced by overseas British voters who were unable to return postal votes in time to be counted. The report also showed that overall levels of voter confidence in the running of these elections were lower than at other recent

polls. Research carried out for the Commission showed that public confidence that the European Parliamentary elections were well-run had fallen by more than ten percentage points since the elections in 2014. AOB The Electoral Commission provided an update on PFR online. Significant progress has been made over the last year with developing both the registration and the financial reporting side of the online system. It will make it quicker and easier for parties and campaigners to register with the Commission and to report financial information, enhancing their ability to comply with their legal obligations. After input from the party user group, the Electoral Commission plan to roll out the new system in January 2021 instead of January 2020 to provide additional time for development and user testing. Parties can submit their reports for the unscheduled elections in 2019 on the old system. Training and familiarisation will be provided for the new system in the summer/autumn of 2020.

Next meeting dates As the previously published date of Tuesday 24 March was no longer suitable, it was agreed that Hannah would contact Panel members to agree an alternative. Tuesday 9 June Tuesday 6 October