

Northern Ireland Assembly Parties Panel minutes: 11 June 2019 | Electoral Commission Search

Northern Ireland Assembly Parties Panel minutes: 11 June 2019 You are in the Party panels section Home How we make decisions Party panels First published: 16 October 2019 Last updated: 27 July 2021 Meeting overview Date: 11 June 2019 Time: 2pm Location: Training room, Oremeau Business Park, Belfast Date of next scheduled meeting: 1 October 2019 Who was at the meeting Who was at the meeting Alliance Party: Sharon Lowry DUP: George Dorrian Green Party: Kate Barry Sinn Féin: Gary Fleming SDLP: Catherine Matthews UUP: Barbara Knox The Electoral Commission: Anna Carragher, Commissioner Ann Watt, Head of Electoral Commission, Northern Ireland Cahir Hughes, Manager, Electoral Commission, Northern Ireland Roisin McDaid, Senior Officer (Political Parties Liaison) Caralyn Morton, Business Support Officer Electoral Office for Northern Ireland: Virginia McVea, Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland Royal Mail: Rachel Winham, Head of Elections and Political Parties Scott Forsyth, Special Events Planning Manager NI Claire Connolly, Elections Manager NI Welcome and introductions The Chair, Anna Carragher, welcomed everyone to the meeting and round table introductions were made. The meeting planned for 14 May 2019 had been postponed due to the announcement of a European Parliamentary election. Notes of previous meeting on 19 March 2019 The Panel agreed the notes of the previous meeting. There were no matters arising. Issues raised by the political parties No items had been raised by the parties in advance of the meeting. May 2019 post-election review – 2 May local government elections and 23 May European Parliamentary election The Chair invited feedback from the Panel on all aspects of the recent elections. Although the Commission has no formal statutory obligation for the Commission to report on local government elections, it would be writing to the Secretary of State to raise a number of legal issues including feedback from today's meeting, summarised below. The Commission would be reporting formally on the European Parliamentary election and planned to publish its report in the autumn. Registration At the local government election there had been a problem affecting some electors, who as late additions to the register, had not appeared on addendum lists at polling stations. One party noted their concern that when polling station staff had not been able to clarify the position with EONI Head Office, these electors were not able to vote. The CEO reported that due to a clerical error the addendum lists at polling stations had some omissions. The telephone helpline had been staffed to 7pm but unfortunately, phone lines had been very busy and staff had difficulty handling calls. The CEO accepted the criticism that some electors had consequently left polling stations without voting. She had subsequently reviewed registers and telephone system to see what improvements could be made. Separate telephone numbers for staff and public enquiries had been introduced ahead of the European election. Nominations There was concern that current legislation for local government elections required candidates to record their home address, resulting in the withdrawal of one candidate's nomination. The Chief Electoral Officer (CEO) noted a couple of points of confusion relating to spelling of names, "commonly used name" and logos. She had subsequently met with SOLACE and Council Chief Executives to improve clarity. Campaign Issues An issue of poor conduct at a polling station witnessed by one Panel member had been effectively handled by the Presiding Officer. She asked that parties should take responsibility for emphasising the code of conduct to all their members, to prevent such instances of intimidation. The CEO agreed, noting the majority of candidates/agents remained outside polling station gates, but there had been some issues where there were inner and outer gated entrances. Candidate mailing Rachel Winham reminded the Panel of recent changes to the candidate

mailings process: namely, art checks prior to submission, booking-in system and submissions sorted by street order. This process had revised as necessary when all mailings going via one contact, Claire Connolly, had created a bottleneck. She reported that staff on the Royal Mail 24 hours helpline had noted how pleasant Northern Ireland candidates had been. Two parties reported issues with delayed mailings delivered late on election day or the day before. Rachel Winham asked the parties to email her details of the areas in which this happened, and any similar instances. A system change via a third party provider had resulted in polling cards for the European election having to be manually sorted by Royal Mail staff at a slower rate of 1,000 an hour. This had to be done in operatives' spare time, and had led to considerable delays. Royal Mail would not accommodate this 1400 Sort in future. Polling cards had been delivered late or had not arrived in East Belfast due to the above. The much shorter deadlines for the European election meant some parties dropped off literature after the recommended date, so some items were not delivered. There was a wider discussion on the reference to absent/proxy voting deadlines that had already passed on the European poll card, which had added to voter confusion. Rachel had asked Returning Officers via an insert in the AEA newsletter to inform her about problems relating to poll cards. The CEO had also been concerned about reports of inconsistent delivery in Mid Ulster and delays at Post Office locations. She asked for ongoing feedback from both party representatives and Royal Mail if future issues arose, to allow fuller investigation. Public awareness In a wide ranging discussion the Panel covered various points which had contributed to public confusion in relation to the European Parliamentary election. These included: Some media and party literature featuring visuals showed an "X" to vote. It was however recognised that polling station staff explained the STV numeric voting procedure to individual voters. People were unaware of the two distinct electoral timetables for the separate elections. The deadline for applying for a proxy or postal vote for the European election was the same date as the local government election day. Although the CEO had written a briefing paper for the media and covered this herself in interviews, the complexities of this message had not been widely covered. It was noted that due to different sets of legislation, the Northern Ireland absent voting deadline was earlier than that in England. Of the 34,000 requests for registered EU citizens to return a UCI form, approximately 4,000 had been returned. The CEO asked for the parties' support in re-emphasising the importance of retaining the Digital Registration Number (DRN) issued when registering online. This is a lifelong number, similar to a National Insurance Number. If online applicants registered a personal email address with their original application, a reminder of their DRN could be emailed to this initial address. Polling Stations Some confusion had arisen when a venue which had not been used for the local poll, had initially been advised for use at the European election and then withdrawn. The CEO explained the reasons for this and the issues the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland (EONI) were currently experiencing with the impact of fewer available caretakers to open/close buildings and insurance implications. EONI was working internally to check the accuracy of its data. There had also been some resistance from schools to the increased exceptional closure days. The Count It was noted that most count centres except Newtownabbey had followed the recommended layout. There had been some complaints that agents were not close enough to tally. The CEO planned to carry out future training with council staff to keep them updated. She asked party representatives whether they would have an interest in a half-day STV counting training session to help demystify the process. Given the positive level of interest, she would gauge a possible date

subject to future election dates. The Panel congratulated EONI staff on how well the European election count had gone. The Chairman agreed and highlighted that candidate speeches had also reflected this. The difficulty of recruiting staff for the European election (3,500 for polling stations plus 800 for verification/count) so soon after the local election was discussed. The CEO asked for guidance from the Electoral Commission regarding how to improve transparency in recording any discrepancy in numbers between the verification and count. Ann Watt would review. The CEO reported that the effect of two elections not being held on a combined date, and the resultant two distinct timetables had had a much greater impact in Northern Ireland than elsewhere. She felt factors such as the high number of candidates (800) at local elections had not been sufficiently taken account of. The CEO considered that the exceptional circumstances when the European elections were called, had led to confusion amongst the electorate. The CEO emphasised that EONI had very good working relations with partners Royal Mail, Whistl and its printers. Unfortunately the lack of notice for the European election had brought unrealistic deadlines resulting in a service delivery that was outside "the norm". The lack of notice had been the key impacting factor. Royal Mail noted it usually operated a 5 month lead time for planned elections. They considered the recent 6 week timetable had been challenging. The Panel recorded its thanks to Claire Connolly and Royal Mail for their assistance at all hours during the recent elections. Update from Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland The CEO informed the Panel that EONI were working on an issue regarding the way addresses had been grouped on registers supplied to parties. She also made the Panel aware that EONI would be making contingency plans for a possible autumn poll. As discussed at previous Panel meetings, the Derry/Londonderry and Omagh offices would relocate to Belfast at the end of June. Kiosks for online registration would be piloted at two Council venues where broadband coverage was limited. The CEO would be in contact with party representatives regarding the Northern Ireland canvass in 2020. The Chair noted that the Panel had a good appreciation of the difficult circumstances of the recent election and recorded thanks to all EONI staff. Electoral Commission updates Recent Commission publications Codes of Practice on election spending Updated drafts of two codes of practice on campaign spending: one on candidate spending and one on party spending, were tabled. These incorporated significant redrafting following wide-scale consultation. We are very grateful to those who provided feedback. The draft Codes had also been shared with parties at the recent Westminster PPP. If parties had urgent comments, they should let the Commission know as soon as possible. The Codes were due to be finalised in July and would be circulated to the parties. PACAC response The Chair informed the Panel of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee's (PACAC) new inquiry to examine the case for comprehensive reform of electoral law. The Committee is looking at how urgently comprehensive electoral reform is required, and whether there is a need to go beyond the Law Commission's proposals outlined in their 2016 interim report. The Electoral Commission welcomed the inquiry and responded to the call for written evidence, highlighting the urgent need to simplify and modernise electoral law, together with the real costs and consequences for voters, campaigners and election officials. Political finance – statutory return deadlines Parties were reminded of the following deadlines: Quarter 2 - 2019 donation and loan returns to be submitted by 30 July 2019. Statement of accounts for the year ending 31 December 2018 for parties with income and expenditure over £250,000 must be audited and delivered to the Commission (with the auditor's certificate) by 7 July 2019. Candidate and Party campaign spending returns Candidate spending returns and declarations for the

European Parliamentary election must be submitted to the Chief Electoral Officer by 16 July. Parties were reminded that both the candidate and agent declarations have to be witnessed by a Justice of the Peace or equivalent. Party spending returns for the Local Government and European Parliamentary elections must be delivered to the Electoral Commission by Friday 23 August 2019. Next meeting date – 1 October 2019 The next Panel meeting is scheduled for Tuesday 1 October 2019 at 9.30am. The Electoral Commission would advise Panel members of the venue. List of agreed actions Action Responsible Finalised Codes of Practice on election spending to be circulated Electoral Commission Submit returns by following deadlines: • Quarter 2 donation and loan returns by 30 July • Statement of Accounts income/exp over £250k • Candidate spending returns for European Parliamentary election to Chief Electoral Officer by 16 July. • Party spending returns for the Local Government and European Parliamentary elections to the Electoral Commission by 23 August. Party representatives