

Consultation 'Future Delivery of Electoral Services in Northern Ireland'	15th November 2016
Corporate Policy and Resources Committee For decision	

Linkage to Council Strategy (2015-19)	
Strategic Theme	Leader and Champion
Outcome	Provide civic leadership
Lead Officer	Director of Performance
Cost: (If applicable)	N/A

1.0 Background

- 1.1 The Northern Ireland Office (NIO) launched the consultation on the Future Delivery of Electoral Services in Northern Ireland in October 2016.
- 1.2 The consultation and response template is attached at Appendix A for Members' consideration.

1.3 Key Issues

- 1.4 The key issues outlined in the consultation involve a greater role for local councils in the delivery of electoral services in terms of digital registration, advice and support to local residents and taking on more responsibility for managing elections.

Section 2.2

A modern electoral registration process

The introduction of digital registration. Digital registration will be introduced alongside paper-based registration.

Section 2.3

Enhancing the provision of local services

Local councils could have a role in providing face to face advice for local residents by:

- providing registration forms and advice on how to complete them.
- assisting in applications for those that require electoral ID cards.
- verifying documentation local.

Section 2.4

Maintaining the electoral register

The focus of the EONI's work would be working with key partners to increase the accuracy of the electoral register. The consultation suggests this work

could be completed from a single site. The consultation proposes moving from the reliance on area electoral offices to greater use of local councils and a possible streamlining of the current area electoral offices. The consultation outlines plans for either a single Electoral Office Northern Ireland (EONI) site or to retain up to three regional electoral offices, in addition to the Belfast Headquarters. The EONI regional offices could potentially be co-located within district council offices.

Section 2.5

Increasing the role of district councils in running elections and referendums

The consultation proposes local councils taking on greater responsibility for the management of all elections and referendums in Northern Ireland. The full list of responsibilities is outlined in Annex C to the consultation but could include:

- Receiving and processing candidate and agent nominations.
- Packing and storing ballot boxes.
- Securing appropriate venues for the count.
- Recruitment and training of count staff.
- Managing the verification and count processes.
- Managing some post-election returns and procedures.

The consultation notes that Council would be funded for taking on these additional responsibilities.

1.5 The reforms contained in the consultation papers could have impacts on employment in area electoral offices, the possibility of local people playing an active role in the delivery of elections and on the role of the Council in terms of running elections.

1.6 The closing date for receipt of comments is 9th January 2017.

2.0 Recommendation

It is recommended that Committee considers the issues and questions in the consultation paper and offers comments to enable a draft response to be prepared for Council's approval at its December meeting. All comments to be forwarded to the Director of Performance by Friday 9th December.



Northern
Ireland
Office



The Electoral Office for
Northern Ireland

Future delivery of electoral services in Northern Ireland

Consultation Paper

11 October 2016

Foreword by Graham Shields, Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland



The Electoral Office for Northern Ireland (EONI) was established in 1972 at the height of the 'Troubles'. In the years since then the organisation has played a pivotal role in delivering democratic services and maintaining public confidence in the democratic process in Northern Ireland.

EONI has been at the forefront of many developments in the electoral process. For example, individual electoral registration and the requirement for photographic identification for voting were introduced here in 2002. The process of continuous registration commenced in 2006 and has continued to evolve up to the present. Further changes will soon take effect, with the introduction of a new electoral administration system and online registration, which will simplify and revolutionise the registration process. These changes, which represent a significant financial investment, will significantly impact on how EONI operates by reducing the administrative burden associated with the present paper based registration system.

These new systems, coupled with the challenges of the current financial environment, mean that it is an appropriate time to implement the necessary changes to ensure that EONI remains fit for purpose in the future. It is also an opportune time to put any new arrangements in place before the next cycle of elections commences in 2019.

This consultation contains a number of issues for consideration and all of them envisage a greater role for our district councils in the future delivery of electoral services in Northern Ireland. I strongly encourage everyone with an interest in this important issue to submit their views on how we should go forward.

Graham Shields, Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland

Foreword by Kris Hopkins MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland



Maintaining public confidence in how elections are managed is critical to ensuring public confidence in democracy more generally in any society. This is particularly the case in Northern Ireland where widespread confidence in the political process is vital.

The Chief Electoral Officer, supported by his team at the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland (EONI), has operational responsibility for the effective management of electoral registration and running elections and referendums in Northern Ireland. Since May 2014, EONI has delivered European Parliamentary elections, District Council elections, Westminster elections, Northern Ireland Assembly elections and the EU referendum. I am very grateful to the Chief Electoral Officer and his team at EONI for their hard work and dedication in delivering these important polls.

With the recent electoral cycle now complete and the introduction of digital registration likely to make registration more straightforward for the vast majority of people, it is a good time to examine how electoral services in Northern Ireland can be delivered even more efficiently and effectively. As a former leader of Bradford Council, I have seen first hand how councils can play an important role in the delivery of elections, maintaining a vital local link to the wider democratic process. I am pleased therefore that this consultation seeks views on an enhanced role for district councils in delivering electoral services in Northern Ireland.

This consultation will run until 09 January 2017 and during that time I will engage with a wide range of stakeholders across Northern Ireland to hear first hand what challenges and opportunities they see for improving the way in which electoral services are delivered to the people of Northern Ireland. I look forward to receiving responses from all those with an interest in this important issue.

Kris Hopkins MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland

Table of contents

1. Introduction

2. Issues for consideration

2.1 Introduction

2.2 A modern electoral registration process

2.3 Enhancing local services

2.4 Maintaining the electoral register

2.5 An increased role for district councils at all elections

2.6 Electoral fraud

2.7 Next steps

3. Responses

3.1 Responding to this consultation

3.2 Confidentiality and disclaimer

3.3. Section 75

Annex A - Response Form

Annex B - Current delivery of electoral services

Annex C - Proposed roles and responsibilities for councils and EONI at elections

1. Introduction

1.1.1 Maintaining public confidence that elections are being managed securely and effectively in Northern Ireland is crucial to ensuring continued support for the wider political process. We are also living in a digital world where there is a growing expectation that all services – in both the private and public sectors - can be accessed online. There has been a great deal of progress in delivering public services throughout the UK through a digital platform, including in Northern Ireland where a range of local services are now available online.

1.1.2 The introduction of **digital electoral registration** in Great Britain in 2014 has been a major success, with around 90% of registrations now made online. It is a quick, easy and secure way of registering and anyone with access to the internet, whether on their desktop, phone or other device, will benefit from this. We expect digital registration to be a similar success when it is introduced in Northern Ireland¹.

1.1.3 In the rest of the UK, **local councils play a major role** in both managing elections and electoral registration. Councils provide advice and support to local residents and are able to absorb peaks by assigning staff to election duties during busy times and to other responsibilities at other times. This flexibility is not currently achievable in Northern Ireland under the current election management structures. This consultation examines the case for councils in Northern Ireland taking on more responsibility for managing elections and providing local electoral services, while ensuring overall responsibility remains with the Chief Electoral Officer.

1.1.4 The Chief Electoral Officer and the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland (EONI) have ensured that Northern Ireland has benefitted from secure, fair and impartial elections for many decades. Implementing the proposed reforms set out in this paper would ensure that EONI can continue to deliver important electoral services and operate on a **sustainable financial footing** for years to come.

¹ Additional work is needed to ensure compatibility with the system of electoral registration in Northern Ireland. This work is now in its final stages and the intention is to introduce secondary legislation in Parliament in October. If passed, this will allow for digital registration to 'go live' in Northern Ireland shortly after.

1.1.5 Our overarching aim is to ensure that the people of Northern Ireland can enjoy access to electoral services in a modern, efficient way while maintaining public support and confidence in the safety and security of the electoral process. We would welcome views on the options for modernisation set out in this paper.

2. Issues for consideration

2.1 Introduction

2.1.1 This consultation seeks views on a range of issues relating to both maintaining the electoral register and delivering elections themselves. The aim in all cases is to improve the accessibility of services for users and to look at ways to increase the availability of local services. In particular, the consultation explores the following issues:

- A modern electoral registration process (2.2)
- Enhancing the provision of local services (2.3)
- Maintaining the electoral register (2.4)
- Increasing the role of district councils in running elections and referendums (2.5)

2.1.2 A more detailed overview of how electoral services are currently delivered in Northern Ireland is attached at Annex B. However, the delivery of these services can be divided into two distinct, but related, categories:

- **maintaining the electoral register**, which requires management on a routine basis, but often peaks at certain times, such as in the run up to elections; and
- **delivering elections and referendums**, which is usually managed on a cyclical basis, although unscheduled polls may occur within those cycles.

2.2 A modern electoral registration process

2.2.1 The Chief Electoral Officer is responsible for maintaining the electoral register in Northern Ireland and will retain that responsibility under all proposals set out in this paper. The Chief Electoral Officer is under a statutory duty to ensure that the register is as accurate and comprehensive as is reasonably practicable². EONI effectively manages all aspects of the electoral registration process in Northern Ireland, which includes:

² Section 10ZB(1) Representation of the People Act 1983. A full account of how these objectives are currently met is included in Annex B.

- Processing all electoral registration applications
- Requesting and verifying supporting documentation
- Promoting electoral registration among under-represented groups
- Verifying details contained in the register to ensure consistency with information held by other agencies

Digital Registration

2.2.2 The introduction of digital registration is a major step forward and will significantly improve the experience of the vast majority of those seeking to register in Northern Ireland. It is a quick, easy and secure way of registering and anyone with access to the internet, whether on their desktop, phone or other device, will benefit from this. With approximately 90% of all new registration applications now being made online in GB, there is clear evidence that the introduction of online registration will significantly reduce the time spent by people in Northern Ireland on registering to vote and make it more straightforward.

2.2.3 Digital registration will be introduced alongside paper-based registration, it will not replace it. The provision of advice and support to the public, whether they register online or by paper, will still be available from a range of sources, including by phone through the EONI helpline and online through the EONI, GOV.UK, NIDirect and Electoral Commission websites.

2.3 Enhancing local services

2.3.1 While digital registration will mean the vast majority of voters will register online in future, some people may still seek to register using the paper-based system and people may also wish to access services such as obtaining an electoral ID card locally. EONI would continue to provide a registration and ID card service by post and provide advice through the EONI helpline. However, district councils could also have a role in providing face to face advice for local residents who still need it by:

- providing registration forms and advice on how to complete them
- assisting in applications for those that require electoral ID cards
- verifying documentation locally

2.3.2 Having all district councils providing local services would lead to an increase in local access to electoral services in many areas (four councils currently do not have an electoral office in their area). There would also be added convenience for residents being able to access advice and electoral services at council offices, alongside other important local services. If there was support for councils taking on these additional functions, full training would be provided by EONI to council staff.³

Q.1 Do you see benefit in having all district councils providing advice and support to local residents on electoral matters, particularly those who do not wish to use online registration?

Q.2 Are there other electoral services that you would like to see district councils providing locally?

³ If there was support for this option, further discussions would take place with district councils about how this local service could be implemented in the most efficient and effective way.

2.4 Maintaining the electoral register

2.4.1 With most people registering online, there will be significantly less demand for registration applications to be made and processed manually. The provision of advice and support to the public will be available both online – through the EONI, GOV.UK, NIDirect and Electoral Commission websites – and also by phone through the EONI helpline. This consultation also envisages district councils providing face to face advice and support across all council areas, not just those which currently have an area electoral office.

2.4.2 The focus of EONI's routine work will therefore change with a greater emphasis on working with key partners to increase the accuracy and comprehensiveness of the electoral register. Work on maintaining the accuracy of the register will be focussed on data matching and verification, which will involve working with partner organisations, such as the Department of Work and Pensions and Business Service Organisation, to actively ensure that information contained in the register is up to date. EONI will also continue to work closely with local schools, colleges, Northern Ireland Housing Executive and other organisations to encourage registration across Northern Ireland, particularly from under-represented groups.

2.4.3 This work on maintaining the register could be completed from a single site and, if the proposal at paragraph 2.3 was accepted, district councils would then also provide a local face to face service for electors in each district council area. An alternative approach would be to retain up to three⁴ regional electoral offices, in addition to the Belfast HQ. Under this option, the delivery of EONI's services would be split between these four offices, with regional offices undertaking outreach and verification activity across their specific geographical area of responsibility. This would allow for a greater EONI presence at regional level across Northern Ireland, but potentially at some extra cost, although these could be mitigated if EONI regional offices were co-located within district council offices.

2.4.4 Under this approach, four council areas would have an electoral office within their council area providing advice and support to electors on a face to face basis, in addition to

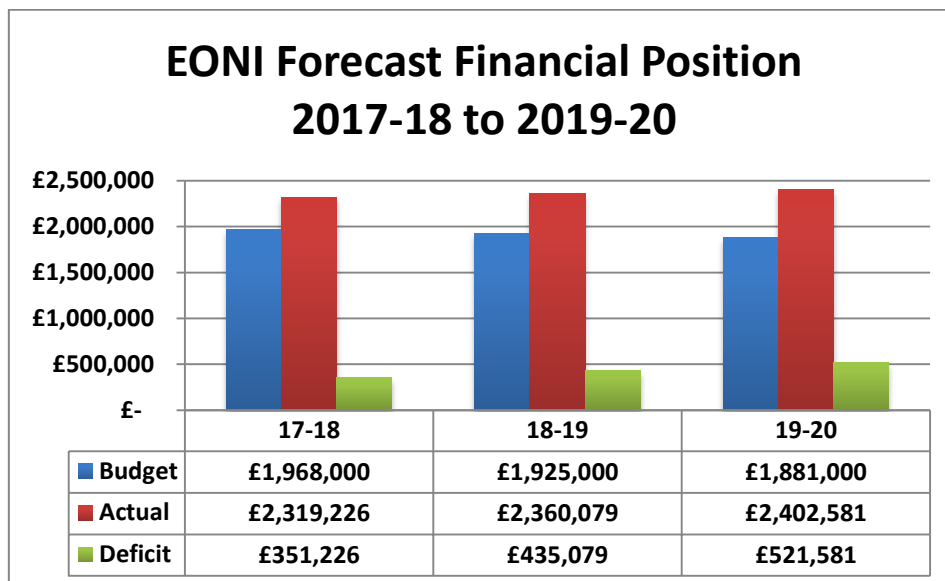
⁴ The Chief Electoral Officer believes that three regional offices is the maximum number that would enable EONI to meet future budget and staffing requirements. Further discussions with district councils will take place on locations, but the aim would be to ensure appropriate geographic and demographic coverage.

undertaking outreach and verification work on the electoral register. Remaining councils could offer the enhanced local service proposed in section 2.3 above. The four site approach would also have the benefit of providing regional centres of excellence for councils on electoral matters. This could be particularly important over the next few years to ensure that councils are equipped to undertake their new electoral responsibilities well in advance of the next electoral cycle

2.4.5 Implementing either of the proposed models outlined above would allow EONI to operate within its allocated budget from the NIO (see Table A for more detail) and to operate on a sustainable financial footing in future.

Q.3 With EONI's routine work more focussed on maintaining the accuracy and comprehensiveness of the electoral register, and district councils providing advice to the public at local level, would you see a role for regional electoral offices?

Table A - EONI FINANCIAL POSITION TO 2019/20



Note: Actual expenditure reflects the cost of running EONI in its current form adjusted for inflation.

EONI, like all publicly funded bodies, has delivered savings since the Spending Review in 2010 but has been able to operate within budget due to the receipt of additional funding to deliver elections over 2014-16. The EONI budget in 2015-16 was £2,054K.

From 2017-18, in the absence of additional funding for elections, EONI will face a shortfall estimated at £351k, rising to almost £522k by the end of the spending review period. This demonstrates why the current model is unsustainable and we are not therefore consulting on retaining the status quo. Implementing either of the two options set out in section 2.4 would involve reductions in staffing and accommodation that would allow EONI to operate within its allocated budget.

2.5 An increased role for district councils at all elections

2.5.1 District councils already play an important role in the delivery of council elections in Northern Ireland. Council Chief Executives are appointed as Deputy Returning Officers, under the direction of the Chief Electoral Officer, and are largely responsible for management of the election count and processing nominations.

2.5.2 In the rest of the UK, local councils have responsibility for managing the delivery of all elections and referendums. Councils are well-placed to manage the variable workload by assigning staff to election duties during busy times and to other important responsibilities at other times.

2.5.3 District councils could take on greater responsibility for the management of all elections and referendums in Northern Ireland, not just district council elections. This could involve extending their current role at district council elections to cover Parliamentary and Northern Ireland Assembly elections and referendums. A full list of proposed responsibilities is attached at Annex C, but this may include:

- Receiving and processing candidate and agent nominations
- Packing and storing ballot boxes
- Securing appropriate venues for the count
- Recruitment and training of count staff
- Managing the verification and count processes
- Managing some post-election returns and procedures

2.5.4 Councils would be funded for taking on these additional responsibilities. Funding for Parliamentary elections and referendums comes directly from the UK Consolidated Fund, with funding for Northern Ireland Assembly elections coming directly from the NI Consolidated Fund. This funding is currently allocated to EONI and EONI provides fully itemised costs for the activities they have undertaken in respect of each election and referendum. Under this proposal, councils would similarly have all costs for activities they have undertaken at Parliamentary and NI Assembly elections and referendums reimbursed from the UK and NI Consolidated Funds.

2.5.5 It is important to emphasise that the Chief Electoral Officer retains overall responsibility for district council elections and currently delegates responsibility for certain functions to district councils. The Chief Electoral Officer also has a power of direction over the Clerk to the District Council, in practice the Chief Executive, in respect of electoral functions they undertake.⁵ The effect is that Chief Executives are subject to direction of the Chief Electoral Officer and not their individual councils when it comes to the performance of their election duties. This is an important safeguard and ensures that they can perform their elections duties free from any risk of political interference.

2.5.6 Under existing legislation, the Chief Electoral Officer's power of direction to Chief Executives extends to Parliamentary and Northern Ireland Assembly elections. However, the NIO would seek to update this legislation⁶ to fully reflect new governance arrangements set out in this consultation by giving the Chief Electoral Officer powers of delegation and direction to all council employees in respect of functions they undertake in running all elections and referendums in Northern Ireland. The Chief Electoral Officer would, therefore, retain overall responsibility for the management of all elections in Northern Ireland, including those functions being carried out by district councils. This should address concerns about the risk of political interference and ensure that elections are delivered consistently across all electoral areas.

2.5.7 The Chief Electoral Officer would provide full training to councils to ensure they have the capability to take on additional functions and continue to offer regular subsequent training sessions.

Q.4 Should district councils have a role in delivering all elections and referendums in Northern Ireland, including Parliamentary and NI Assembly elections and referendums?

Q.5 Should councils take on the functions set out in paragraph 2.5.3 (and Annex C) at all elections and referendums?

⁵ See section 14A of the Electoral Law Act (NI) 1962.

⁶ Such amendments would require primary legislation. The NIO would therefore seek a suitable legislative vehicle in the third session of Parliament.

Q.6 *Are the safeguards set out in paragraph 2.5.5 & 2.5.6 sufficient to protect council employees undertaking electoral functions from the risk of political interference?*

2.6 **Electoral fraud**

2.6.1 In August 2016, Sir Eric Pickles published an independent report into tackling electoral fraud⁷. The UK Government is now carefully considering the report. Northern Ireland already has successfully implemented individual electoral registration and identification at polling stations which has reduced the opportunities for electoral fraud. In addition to seeking views on the issues raised in this consultation paper about electoral services in Northern Ireland, the Government continues to welcome comments or representations on the content of Sir Eric's Report, including whether particular proposals could apply to the whole of the United Kingdom.

2.7 **Next steps**

2.7.1 When the consultation has closed, all responses will be considered with a view to an announcement taking place in early 2017. Everyone with an interest is encouraged to have their say by filling in the response form at Annex A.

⁷ See <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/securing-the-ballot-review-into-electoral-fraud>

3. Responses

3.1 Responding to this consultation

3.1.1 This consultation will run for 13 weeks with responses requested by 5:00 pm on Monday 9 January 2017. Comments on the proposals should be e-mailed to elections.unit@nio.gov.uk. Responses can also be sent by post to:

Future Delivery of Electoral Services Consultation
Northern Ireland Office
Stormont House
Stormont Estate
BELFAST
BT4 3SH

3.1.2 Please call 02890 523503 for queries in relation to this consultation or email elections.unit@nio.gov.uk.

3.1.3 This consultation document is available on the GOV.UK website under www.gov.uk/nio. Printed copies of this consultation document may be obtained free of charge from the above address. You may make additional copies of this document without seeking permission. **This document can also be made available on request in different formats**, for individuals with particular needs.

3.1.4 If you are responding on behalf of a group or organisation please make this clear. The NIO is committed to publishing a list of those organisations that comment on these proposals and to making available, to anyone who asks for it, a copy of the comments and our response to them. If you do not wish your comments to be published in this way, you must make this clear in any response you submit.

3.1.5 If you have any concerns or complaints about the consultation process you should contact the NIO's consultation co-ordinator on 02890 765497, or e-mail richard.steven@nio.gov.uk or by post:

Consultation Co-ordinator
Corporate Governance Unit
Stormont House
Stormont Estate
BELFAST
BT4 3SH

3.2 Confidentiality and Disclaimer

3.2.1 The information you send us may be passed to colleagues within the Northern Ireland Office, the Government or related agencies. **Individual responses may also be published on the internet at www.gov.uk/nio unless a respondent has requested otherwise.** Information provided in response to this consultation, including personal information, may be published or disclosed in accordance with the access to information regimes. These are primarily: the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA), the Data Protection Act 1998 (DPA) and the Environmental Information Regulations 2004.

3.2.2 If you want the information that you provide to be treated as confidential, please be aware that, under the FOIA, there is a statutory Code of Practice, with which public authorities must comply, and which deals, amongst other things, with obligations regarding confidence. In view of this, it would be helpful if you could explain to us why you regard the information you have provided as confidential. If we receive a request for disclosure of the information we will take full account of your explanation, but we cannot give an assurance that confidentiality can be maintained in all circumstances.

3.2.3 Please ensure that your response is marked clearly if you wish your response to be kept anonymous. An automatic confidentiality disclaimer generated by your IT system will not, of itself, be regarded as binding on the Department. Confidential responses, included in any statistical summary of numbers of comments received and views expressed, will be anonymised. The Department will process your personal data strictly in accordance with the Data Protection Act. In most circumstances this will mean that your personal data will not be disclosed to third parties.

3.3 Section 75

3.3.1 A section 75 equality screening has been carried out in relation to the proposals set out in this consultation paper and found no adverse impact on any of the s.75 groups. We will conduct a further screening exercise when the consultation has concluded and in advance of final decisions being made on future policy. Please contact the NIO consultation co-ordinator if you wish to obtain a copy of the screening report.

**FUTURE DELIVERY OF ELECTORAL SERVICES IN NORTHERN IRELAND
RESPONSE TEMPLATE****RESPONDENT INFORMATION**

Please Note this form **must** be returned with your response to ensure that we handle your response appropriately.

1. Name / Organisation

Organisation Name (If applicable):

Title: Mr Ms Mrs Miss Dr **Please tick as appropriate**

Surname:

Forename

2. Postal Address

<input type="text"/>		
<input type="text"/>		
<input type="text"/>		
<input type="text"/>		
Postcode	Phone	Email

RESPONSES TO CONSULTATION QUESTIONS

Please provide below any comments you may have on the consultation options, as outlined above in chapter 2.3 of the consultation document. Please use additional pages as necessary.

Q.1 *Do you see benefit in having all district councils providing advice and support to local residents on electoral matters, particularly those who do not wish to use online registration?*

Yes No

[Click here to enter text.](#)

Q.2 *Are there other electoral services that you would like to see district councils providing locally?*

Yes No

[Click here to enter text.](#)

Please provide below any comments you may have on the consultation options, as outlined above in chapter 2.4 of the consultation document. Please use additional pages as necessary.

Q.3 *With EONI's routine work more focussed on maintaining the accuracy and comprehensiveness of the electoral register, and district councils providing advice to the public at local level, would you see a role for regional electoral offices?*

Yes No

[Click here to enter text.](#)

Please provide below any comments you may have on the consultation options, as outlined above in chapter 2.5 of the consultation document. Please use additional pages as necessary.

Q.4 *Should district councils have a role in delivering all elections and referendums in Northern Ireland, including Parliamentary and NI Assembly elections and referendums?*

Yes No

[Click here to enter text.](#)

Q.5 *Should councils take on the functions set out in paragraph 2.5.3 (and Annex C) at all elections and referendums?*

Yes No

[Click here to enter text.](#)

Q.6 *Are the safeguards set out in paragraph 2.5.5 & 2.5.6 sufficient to protect council employees undertaking electoral functions from the risk of political interference?*

Yes No

[Click here to enter text.](#)

The current delivery of electoral services in Northern Ireland

1. This Annex provides an overview of the way in which electoral services are currently provided in Northern Ireland.

2. Policy relating to elections in Northern Ireland is 'excepted' under the devolution settlement. The NIO maintains the legal framework governing elections in Northern Ireland and the Secretary of State appoints a Chief Electoral Officer who has operational responsibility for managing electoral registration and delivering all elections and referendums in Northern Ireland. The Chief Electoral Officer is supported by the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland (EONI) and both are operationally independent of Government. The Secretary of State is ultimately responsible to Parliament for ensuring that EONI operates effectively and efficiently.

3. EONI has a central HQ in Belfast and seven area offices spread throughout Northern Ireland – Ballymena, Banbridge, Belfast, Derry-Londonderry, Newtownabbey, Newtownards and Omagh⁸. The current staff complement is 45, with 16 staff situated in the Belfast HQ and around 4-5 staff in each of the area offices. The Chief Electoral Officer and EONI's responsibilities are set out below.

A. Delivering elections and referendums

4. The Chief Electoral Officer is responsible for delivering all elections and referendums in Northern Ireland. EONI manages Parliamentary, European and Northern Ireland Assembly elections and also referendums, such as the recent EU Referendum. District councils currently manage some aspects of local elections, particularly the election count, under the overall supervision and direction of the Chief Electoral Officer.

⁸ The Ballymena and Newtownards offices will close on 31 October 2016 at the end of their current leases

Pre-election responsibilities

5. The Chief Electoral Officer must fulfil a range of statutory obligations in the weeks before an election. This includes publishing formal election notices and related timetables, preparing candidate information packs, receiving and reviewing candidate and agent nominations and printing ballot papers, poll cards and number lists. These tasks are currently undertaken by EONI for all elections, with the exception of district council elections, where councils have responsibility for delivering some of these functions (see Annex C).

Polling

6. The Chief Electoral Officer is required by law to develop a polling station scheme to allocate the polling stations that will be used at forthcoming elections. In advance of elections, EONI ensures that the 1380 or so proposed polling stations in Northern Ireland are available and appropriate equipment is in place. EONI also recruits and trains approximately 3500 polling station staff and ensures that monitoring and contingency arrangements are in place for polling day. EONI also arranges for ballot boxes to be transported to and from polling stations.

Election counts

7. The management of election counts is currently undertaken by EONI for all elections and referendums, except district council election counts, which are managed by councils themselves under the overall direction of the Chief Electoral Officer. A successful count involves the delivery of a range of important tasks such as providing secure venues and equipment, recruiting and training capable verification and count staff and conducting a successful and timely verification and count process. Election counts are often high profile events requiring regular liaison with political representatives and media.

8. EONI is also responsible for managing the absent vote process. This currently involves processing applications for postal votes in the run up to elections, liaising with

postal providers to ensure timely delivery of votes and verifying and counting postal votes centrally. EONI must also fulfil a range of post-election statutory obligations, such as receiving and reviewing candidate expense returns, storing documentation and preparing statistical returns, in addition to operational obligations such as arranging payment to staff and suppliers.

Electoral Identity Cards

9. In Northern Ireland, there is a requirement for voters to provide specified photographic identification at polling stations, such as a passport, driving licence etc. EONI also provides, free of charge, an Electoral Identity Card which can be used as an acceptable form of ID at polling stations. In 2015-16, EONI issued 24,232 Electoral Identity Cards.

B. Maintaining the Northern Ireland Electoral Register

10. The Chief Electoral Officer is responsible for maintaining the electoral register in Northern Ireland and must fulfil the registration objectives for Northern Ireland, set out in legislation⁹, to secure so far as reasonably practicable—

- (a) that every person who is entitled to be registered in a register is registered in it,
- (b) that no person who is not entitled to be registered in a register is registered in it, and
- (c) that none of the required information relating to any person registered in a register is false.

11. In order to meet these legislative requirements, the Chief Electoral Officer and EONI undertake a range of measures to constantly improve both the accuracy and comprehensiveness of the NI register.

⁹ Section 10ZB(1) Representation of the People Act 1983

Maintaining an accurate register

12. Maintaining an accurate electoral register is critical to ensuring confidence in the democratic system in any society. This is particularly the case in Northern Ireland where there has been increased concern over potential electoral fraud. The introduction in 2002 of individual electoral registration in Northern Ireland provided an important safeguard to ensure greater accuracy of the NI register and its success is reflected in the recent roll out of individual electoral registration across the rest of the UK.

13. EONI also undertakes a range of measures to ensure the accuracy of the register in Northern Ireland, including working closely with statutory organisations such as the Business Services Organisation (BSO) and the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) to determine whether an individual's registration status needs to be updated.

14. For example, EONI receives quarterly data from the BSO containing the names and addresses of those who had registered a change of name and/or address with their health provider and then contacts those individuals to invite them to also update their electoral registration details. In 2015-16, 67,148 records were removed as deceased or no longer eligible for registration at a given address and 6,414 records were modified.

Maintaining a comprehensive register

15. The obligation to ensure that the register is as comprehensive as possible is also critical in ensuring confidence in the democratic process. Responsibility for processing applications to register currently rests mainly with regional offices, who also offer advice and support to applicants. A dedicated EONI telephone helpline, which operates out of the Belfast HQ, also provides advice and support to applicants and a range of online advice and support is available both on the EONI and Electoral Commission websites.

16. EONI also undertakes a range of measures to promote registration, particularly among groups that are often under-represented on the register, such as young people or those in short-term rented accommodation. For example, EONI works with the Northern

Ireland Housing Executive to ensure that registration forms were included in their 'New Tenant' packs and conducts similar outreach to pupils of NI schools and students of NI Universities and Further Education Colleges.

17. In total, 82,812 additions were made to the electoral register over the 2015-2016 financial year and the register published in December 2015 held 1,270,764 electors, suggesting it is 88% comprehensive. Maintaining a high level of comprehensiveness and accuracy of the NI electoral register will remain a priority for the Chief Electoral Officer in the years ahead.

Annual Canvass

18. There is no longer a requirement for an annual canvass in Northern Ireland, however the Chief Electoral Officer has a responsibility to advise the Secretary of State if a canvass is required and one must take place within ten years of the previous canvass, which was held in 2013. EONI is responsible for delivering the NI canvass.

CURRENT DISTRICT COUNCIL ELECTION DUTIES AND RESPONSIBILITIES AND PROPOSED ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

TOPIC	ACTION REQUIRED	CURRENT RESPONSIBILITIES	PROPOSED RESPONSIBILITIES ¹⁰		
		LOCAL COUNCIL ELECTION	WESTMINSTER ELECTION	NI ASSEMBLY ELECTION	REFERENDUM
Candidate and agent nominations	Prepare all Candidates' Guides (including nomination pack)	EONI	EONI	EONI	
	Receive and process nominations	LC	LC	LC	
Packing and storing ballot boxes	Procure for printing of ballot papers and corresponding number lists, hand-held posters etc.	LC	EONI	EONI	EONI
	Prepare and approve ballot paper proofs etc. and arrange printing	LC	LC	LC	EONI
	Receive and copy polling/referendum agents list for ballot boxes	LC	LC	LC	LC
	Liaise with transportation contractors re delivery and collection of ballot boxes	EONI/LC	EONI/LC	EONI/LC	EONI/LC
	Pack ballot boxes	LC	LC	LC	LC
	Store all ballot boxes the night before poll and distribute to designated officer on polling day	LC	LC	LC	LC
Securing appropriate venue for count	Contact premises and book polling places	EONI	EONI	EONI	EONI
	Ensure contingency arrangements in place for polling places	EONI	EONI	EONI	EONI
	Make arrangements for booking, setting up and managing count venues	LC	LC	LC	LC
	Ensure contingency and security arrangements are in place for count venues	LC	LC	LC	LC
Recruitment and training	Prepare Deputy Returning Officers' Guide	EONI	EONI	EONI	EONI
	Prepare poll staff handbook	EONI	EONI	EONI	EONI
	Prepare and deliver training to polling staff	EONI	EONI	EONI	EONI

¹⁰ Responsibility for all aspects of these elections currently rests with EONI

TOPIC	ACTION REQUIRED	CURRENT RESPONSIBILITIES	PROPOSED RESPONSIBILITIES ¹⁰		
		LOCAL COUNCIL ELECTION	WESTMINSTER ELECTION	NI ASSEMBLY ELECTION	REFERENDUM
	Establish polling staff complement	EONI	EONI	EONI	EONI
	Carry out recruitment, selection, appointment and training of polling staff	EONI	EONI	EONI	EONI
	Establish count staff complement	EONI/LC	EONI/LC	EONI/LC	EONI/LC
	Carry out recruitment, selection, appointment and training of verification and count staff	LC	LC	LC	LC
Managing the verification and count processes	Manage ID clinics (including staffing)	EONI	EONI	EONI	EONI
	Hold registration day	EONI	EONI	EONI	EONI
	Manage absent voting process	EONI	EONI	EONI	EONI
	Arrange postal vote issue and opening	EONI	EONI	EONI	EONI
	Advise EONI of attendees at postal vote issue and opening	LC	LC	LC	EONI
	Liaison with postal service provider re: postal votes	EONI	EONI	EONI	EONI
	Manage the verification process	LC	LC	LC	LC
	Receive counting agent lists	LC	LC	LC	LC
	Manage the count process and declare results	LC	LC	LC	LC
	Liaise with PSNI re: count security	LC	LC	LC	LC
Liaise with the media	LC	LC	LC	LC	
Post-election returns and procedures	Prepare statistical returns	EONI/LC	EONI/LC	EONI/LC	EONI/LC
	Review all election procedures	EONI/LC	EONI/LC	EONI/LC	EONI/LC
	Carry out post-election procedures	LC	EONI/LC	EONI/LC	EONI/LC
	Receive and check returns and declarations of election expenses	LC	EONI	EONI	EONI
	Publish expenditure information on organisational website	LC	EONI	EONI	EONI

