

*Dear Lord Laird,*

The Secretary of State has asked me, as Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland, to answer your two recent Parliamentary Questions in respect of people whose names appear more than once on the Northern Ireland Electoral Register with the same National Insurance Number and what steps are taken to investigate criminal offences concerning duplicate entries.

As you know, every elector in Northern Ireland is required now to provide at annual registration the three personal identifiers of National Insurance Number, date of birth and signature, as well as name, address, nationality, previous address and any other residences in the United Kingdom at which they have applied to be registered. It is, of course, perfectly legal to be registered at more than one residence, but it is illegal to vote more than once in a Parliamentary General Election, although voting in more than one District Council area is permissible provided the elector is resident in each. Unfortunately, there is no statute law on residence and little case law, but legal advice is that it might be considered acceptable for an elector to have up to three residencies, but five or more would be questionable.

The Electoral Office regularly carries out an analysis of the names, addresses, dates of birth and National Insurance numbers of every person registered to vote in Northern Ireland. There are 184 electors who on the current Register legitimately appear more than once. Follow-up action is taken where an elector has not declared that they have another residence. In addition, the entire Northern Ireland Register has been compared against the

Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) National Insurance Number database. This gives us a 94% match rate at present and again follow-up action is taken where the details supplied by an elector do not match DWP records. The Electoral Office does not at present have a facility to check whether electors who are legitimately registered more than once voted more than once on 5 May. However, if any allegation that this might have been done illegally was to be made, the matter would immediately be passed to the Police for investigation.

The policy of the Electoral Office is that where there is evidence of attempt at fraud or to mislead in respect of any electoral matter there is immediate involvement of the Police. I am, however, glad to be able to report that the effects of the Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002 have been largely to eliminate fraud from the Northern Ireland electoral system and I believe our Register now to be robust (and relatively complete at 92% of the eligible electorate).

I trust this answers your questions, however, if it would be helpful, I would be pleased to brief you in person on how we seek to ensure the integrity of electoral process is maintained in Northern Ireland and on our proposals to modernise the registration system.

A copy of this reply will be placed in the Library of the House of Lords.

Yours sincerely

Figure 1