

THE ELECTORAL OFFICE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

Chief Electoral Officer: Douglas Bain CBE TD Advocate

3rd Floor, St Anne's House, 15 Church Street, Belfast BT1 1ER Telephone: 0800 4320 712
Fax: 028 9023 5612
Textphone: 0800 3284 502
Email: douglas.bain@eoni.org.uk
Website: www.eoni.org.uk



TUESDAY 1 JULY 2008

NEW ELECTORAL LAWS BRING WELCOME CHANGES FOR THOUSANDS ACROSS NORTHERN IRELAND

The Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland, Douglas Bain has welcomed the wide ranging changes to electoral law that make registering and voting even easier. The new laws will be of particular benefit for anyone who has a disability and for young people.

The changes, which come into effect today, remove the dated common law on mental capacity to register and vote. From today anyone who has any form of disability which prevents them from going to vote in person will be entitled to a postal or proxy vote and a new booklet giving information on registration and voting for those with a disability has been published to coincide with the announcement.

Other changes now permit the use of War Disabled SmartPass and the Blind Persons SmartPass as means of identification when voting. Also changed today is the requirement that the other forms of identification used when voting are current and in date. However, the presiding officer must be satisfied that the elector is the person whose photograph appears on the document produced.

Douglas Bain said: **“I very much welcome these changes to electoral law which will make it easier for everyone, but particularly those with a disability, to exercise their democratic rights to register as electors and to vote.**

The booklet, which gives information on the adjustments made to electoral law and practice to assist those with a disability, is another first for Northern Ireland in the field of electoral administration. I hope those with a disability and those who work with them will find it useful.”

Young people across Northern Ireland are also helped by the changes. The Chief Electoral Officer has been given new powers to obtain from secondary schools, the names, addresses and dates of birth of all pupils over 16 years of age. This information will be used to enable the Electoral Office to partially complete registration forms before planned visits to at least 95% of secondary schools by 31 March 2009 to encourage eligible pupils to register.

Copies of the new booklet can be obtained by calling the Electoral Office Helpline on 0800 4320 712 or Text Phone 0800 3284 502. Copies are also available and can be downloaded from www.eoni.org.uk

Notes of Editors

1. The changes to electoral law are made by three pieces of legislation all of which come into operation on 1 July.

The Representation of the People (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2008

The Electoral Administration Act 2006 (Commencement No 7) Order 2008

The Service Voters' Registration Period (Northern Ireland) Order 2008.

2. The main changes are:

The out of date common law on mental capacity to register and to vote, which discriminated against those with learning disabilities, ceases to apply. Every individual who meets the criteria such as residence, age and nationality can now register and vote whatever their mental capacity.

The law on entitlement to a permanent postal vote has been simplified and extended to cover people with any disability that prevents them going to vote in person. It used to be restricted to those with a physical disability or who were blind.

The types of photographic identification that can be used when voting have been extended to include the War Disabled SmartPass and the Blind Persons SmartPass. Further, the requirement that the document produced is "current" has been removed. From today any of the specified documents (the two mentioned above, passport, driving licence, senior smartpass and electoral identity card) can be used whatever their expiry dates. The presiding officer will not issue a ballot paper unless he or she is satisfied that the elector is the person whose photograph appears on the document produced.

People will be able to register as electors until around 15 days before an election (11 working days). At present the cut-off date for registration can be up to six weeks before polling day.

The Chief Electoral Officer has been given a new power to obtain from secondary schools the names, addresses and dates of birth of all pupils over 16 years of age. This power, which is similar to the power to obtain information from the Central Services Agency which has proved so successful (see note 5 below), will be used to partially complete registration forms before visiting at least 95% of schools each year to encourage eligible pupils to register.

Service voters will only have to renew their registration every 3 years rather than every year.

3. The booklet, which is believed to be the first of its kind in the United Kingdom, sets out all the changes to electoral law and practice made to make it easier for those with a disability, who make up 26% of the Northern Ireland population, to exercise their democratic rights. It gives details of the changes noted above but also of all the existing adjustments made to law and practice to assist those with a disability and of the new arrangements to be made at the next election to allow those with a disability to vote at an alternative polling station.
4. The booklet can be obtained by calling the Electoral Office Helpline on 0800 4320 712 (text phone 0800 3284 502) or from the Electoral Office website www.eoni.org.uk. Copies of it have been made available for distribution to a number of statutory and voluntary sector organisations working with those with a disability.
5. In the period March to May this year the number of registration applications received by the Electoral Office increased by more than 440%

compared with the same period last year. This was in large part due to the more than 60,000 letters sent to individuals who, according to information provided by the Central Services Agency, had moved house, to the announcement by the Chief Electoral Officer that those who wilfully fail to provide him with information risk prosecution and to the launch of the free prize draw. Letters have today been sent to the 20 individuals who are in line to win one of the four prizes totalling £1,000 which will be drawn in August.

6. While most of the changes to electoral law affect Westminster elections. Corresponding changes to the law for Assembly, European and district council elections will be made shortly.