

ELECTORAL OFFICE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

Chief Electoral Officer: Dr David Marshall



The Rt Hon Chris Heaton-Harris MP
Secretary of State for Northern Ireland
Northern Ireland Office
1 Horse Guards Road
LONDON
SW1A 2HQ

15 April 2024

Dear Secretary of State,

Under section 10ZA of the Representation of the People Act 1983 the Chief Electoral Officer is obliged to write to you on or before 15 April each year advising you about the need for an Electoral Canvass for Northern Ireland.

My advice would be **not** to hold an Electoral Canvass in Northern Ireland in 2024. This advice is based on a variety of evidence including that brought forward by the Electoral Commission in their report on the 2022 Register in Northern Ireland which stated:

“The level of completeness of Northern Ireland registers has increased substantially since 2018. Both the local government and parliamentary registers have improved by 10 percentage points, standing at 83% complete and 84% complete respectively.”

<https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/research-reports-and-data/electoral-registration-research/accuracy-and-completeness-electoral-registers/2023-report-electoral-registers-uk>

That said, I am duty bound to add that I would find it difficult to advise, under current Northern Ireland law, to hold a Canvass in the future. My reasons for this include:

- (i) unlike in Great Britain where Canvass law has been reformed, the Northern Ireland Canvass law requires all electors to be removed from the Register prior to holding a Canvass. This step represents a large risk to the Northern Ireland Electoral Register;
- (ii) whilst the Northern Ireland Canvass law has provision for a two-year carryover period for non-responders, the Great Britain Canvass law does not have any time-limitation. In Great Britain the Canvass is an annual advisory exercise,

with Electoral Register removal processes being based on administrative data coupled with results from the Great Britain Canvass;

- (iii) thankfully, the UK Government has over the last decade made regular law changes to extend for each Canvass the Northern Ireland carryover period. However, the need for rule changes requires regular time in Parliament and the support of the Government. This creates an unnecessary risk to the management of the Northern Ireland Register. Within the United Kingdom, this risk is unique to Northern Ireland;
- (iv) whilst the 2021 Northern Ireland Canvass worked, it did so in large part as it was buttressed by the entirely separate local Department of the Economy £100 High Street voucher scheme which fortunately was held at the same time. Without the Department of the Economy scheme, which markedly incentivised response, up to 500,000 people could have been removed from the Northern Ireland Electoral Register – this shows the scale of the risk that the current Northern Ireland Canvass law brings.

In short, by law the Northern Ireland Canvass cannot be informed *a priori* by secondary data sources, is no longer efficient and the initial full removal step creates large risks when compared to the Great Britain Canvass. I add that the current law has the potential for substantial disenfranchisement and, in my view, is no longer fit for purpose. This is also the view of the previous Chief Electoral Officer and the view of the Electoral Commission(*). Subject to your approval, I am happy to work with your officials to address this issue.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink that reads "David Marshall". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line underneath the name.

Dr David Marshall

Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland

*see <https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/research-reports-and-data/electoral-registration-research/northern-ireland-electoral-registration-canvass-2021>