

Electoral Office for Northern Ireland

Report of the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland 2022-2023

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Presented to Parliament pursuant to section 9(1) of the Northern Ireland
(Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2006

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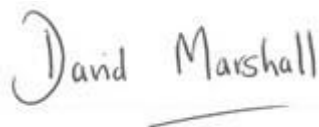
The Rt Hon Hilary Benn MP,
Secretary of State for Northern Ireland,
Northern Ireland Office,
1 Horse Guards Road,
LONDON
SW1A 2HQ

21 August 2024

Dear Secretary of State for Northern Ireland,

In accordance with section 9(1) of the Northern Ireland (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2006, I present this Report on how the previous Chief Electoral Officer discharged her duties and functions for the financial year ending 31 March 2023.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink that reads "David Marshall". The signature is written in a cursive style, with the first name "David" and the last name "Marshall" clearly legible. A horizontal line is drawn underneath the signature.

Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland

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FOREWORD

This Annual Report covers the period 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023. During this period the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland ran the Northern Ireland Assembly elections on 5 May 2022. In doing this the Electoral Office managed the hiring of 6,000 staff, printing 1.4 million poll cards and ballot papers, running over 600 Polling Stations and 3 Count Centres to elect 90 members to the Assembly. During the year the Electoral Office also reviewed Polling Stations for the 2023 Local Council elections and further prepared for the Local Council elections scheduled for May 2023.

The Northern Ireland Assembly elections operated with one of the largest registers held by the Electoral Office (1.375 million electors). Following these elections the Electoral Office provided administrative advice to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on a potential election in December 2022.

Online registration application was in the fifth year of operation and the Electoral Office continued to see increased up take of digital applications. In total during the year nearly 80,000 Northern Ireland applications to register to vote were made online.

During the year, the Electoral Office was involved in dialogue with the Northern Ireland Office and the Department for Levelling Up Housing and Communities in relation to the Election Act 2022 and how changes in the law could be operationalised.

The Electoral Office continued its outreach with education services through the Department for Education for Northern Ireland and the Education Authority. This engagement attempted to improve registration of younger people.

As part of this report, I wish to record thanks to the previous Chief Electoral Officer Virginia McVea and her dedication to serve the public of Northern Ireland. This report covers Virginia's final year as Chief Electoral Officer and over her tenure significant improvements were made including online electoral registration and the running of six elections in 2017 (x2), 2019 (x3) and 2022.

Dr David Marshall

Chief Electoral Officer Northern Ireland

21 August 2024

SECTION 1 - INTRODUCTION

- Elections in Northern Ireland are administered by and run under the responsibility of the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland. The postholder is a statutory office holder appointed by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.
- The Chief Electoral Officer is assisted by the staff of the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland – there are just over 20 whole team equivalent staff in the Office. This administrative structure is used to support the Chief Electoral Officer.
- The Chief Electoral Officer is both the electoral registration officer for all 18 constituencies in Northern Ireland and returning officer for elections and referendums in this jurisdiction.
- The main duties of the Chief Electoral Officer are:
 - to act as electoral registration officer for all Northern Ireland constituencies;
 - to act as returning officer for all Northern Ireland elections & referendums;
 - to act as petition officer for recall petitions for the United Kingdom Parliament;
 - to recommend to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland by 16 April each year whether or not an electoral canvass should be conducted;
 - to act as an assessor to the Parliamentary and Local Government Boundary Commission in Northern Ireland; and
 - to lead and manage the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland.
- The Chief Electoral Officer's duties and responsibilities are set out in the Electoral Law Act (Northern Ireland) 1962, the Representation of the People Act 1983, the Northern Ireland (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2006 and other accompanying legislation. The Accounting Officer of the Northern Ireland Office is responsible to Parliament for all expenditure incurred by the Chief Electoral Officer.
- The Chief Electoral Officer is required to report to the Secretary of State on an annual basis. Section 9(2) of the Northern Ireland (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2006 requires the Chief Electoral Officer to include an assessment of whether the relevant registration objectives have been met. This report covers both of these duties.

SECTION 2 – REGISTRATION

- Under Section 9 of the Northern Ireland (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2006 the Chief Electoral Officer is required to include in the Annual Report an assessment of the extent to which the relevant registration objectives have been met. These are “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,
 - (c) that none of the required information relating to any person registered in a register is false.”
- On 1 December 2022 the Electoral Register for Northern Ireland contained 1.372 million electors. In total over 80,000 registration applications (paper and online) were processed (between 1 April 2022 and 31 March 2023).
- The Electoral Office continued to deliver online registration in Northern Ireland. The online system www.gov.uk/register-to-vote collected data on 78,900 Northern Ireland based applications to register to vote (between 1 April 2022 and 31 March 2023). These data were further processed by Electoral Office to determine inclusion on the electoral register.
- During the year the Electoral Office received personal data (name & address) from the Health Service Business Services Organisation of people who changed their registration with their family doctor. This was ‘matched’ with the electoral register and people who had not yet moved/changed name on the register were requested to update their details.
- The General Register Office provided weekly lists of deaths recorded in Northern Ireland. This information was matched with the electoral register database and around 15,000 records of deceased electors were removed from the electoral register.
- The Electoral Office have data sharing agreements with the Department for Education for young people in schools / colleges and with the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to get access to data on people living in properties owned by the Housing Executive. These data were both used to maintain the electoral register.

- There were around 7,000 Electoral Identity Cards issued between 1 April 2022 and 31 March 2023. This service supports not only the delivery of elections in Northern Ireland and by default a wider identity service for the delivery of public and private sector services in Northern Ireland.

SECTION 3 – ELECTIONS

- During the year the Electoral Office ran the 2022 Northern Ireland Assembly elections on 5 May 2022. In addition, work was undertaken to prepare for a potential further set of Northern Ireland Assembly elections in Autumn/Winter 2022.
- The May 2022 Northern Ireland Assembly elections required hiring of 4,000 temporary poll staff to cover around 600 Polling Stations and around 2,000 count staff to cover the verification and count of the votes using the Single Transferable Vote system over the weekend of 5-7 May 2022.
- The 2022 Northern Ireland Assembly elections required significant work around Covid-19 safety for the provision of the election. A programme of work was undertaken to keep the public safe in Polling Stations and count centres. Buildings used during the election were made as safe as possible with hand sanitiser stations, sign posting, reminder materials on hand washing and distancing and cleaning rotas introduced.
- In addition, work was started to prepare for Local Council elections in Spring 2023. This included developing a Polling Station scheme for the 2023 Local Council elections – this work used a new local polling station catalogue with photographs and mapping details of all aspects of Polling Places that could be considered for the Local Council elections.

SECTION 4 – CORPORATE GOVERNANCE

- During the year, the Electoral Office had meetings with Internal Auditors and senior management team meetings.
- Electoral Office staff completed training courses in relation to health and safety, data protection, equality, mental health and Microsoft Excel.
- An annual IT health check of IT systems was carried out and any vulnerabilities were addressed, and remedial action taken. The Data Protection Officer continued to assist in the monitoring of internal Data Protection compliance and provided training, information and advice on data protection obligations. In total 29 requests were received for information under the Freedom of Information Act 2000.
- The annual fair employment return was submitted to the Equality Commission and the annual statutory equality progress report was submitted to the Equality Commission.
- Total funding provided to the Electoral Office for 2022/23 was £2.075m and a staffing complement of just over 20 whole time equivalent staff people was in place at the end of the year. Funding for elections does not form part of the Electoral Office core funding.
- The Chief Electoral Officer attended Assembly Parties Panel meetings to discuss electoral matters. In addition, strategic meetings were held with the Electoral Commission which included regular ongoing communication. There has also been regular contact with the Northern Ireland Office on electoral legislation including issues in relation to Covid-19, the new Elections Act 2022 and future legislative changes in relation to the annual canvass.
- Staff dealt with 29,000 phone calls during the year and there were around 160,000 visits to the Electoral Office website.

ANNEX A: PERFORMANCE AGAINST TARGETS 2022/23



REGISTRATION

Strategic Aims:

- Carry out follow-up work with those who did not respond to the Canvass but who were retained in order to add them to the Electoral Register.
- Improve the accuracy and completeness of the data on the Electoral Register including making best use of administrative data sets available and optimising data analytics.
- Carry out research to identify sectors of the population with lower levels of registration and from that prioritise outreach programmes to enhance the comprehensiveness of the Electoral Register.
- Develop a programme of work with the education and care sectors following up on our new data sets to ensure improved levels of registration with attainners and those in care facilities.
- Scope the possibility of look-up facilities for electors to check if they are registered to vote.
- Review access for the electorate to their Digital Registration Number

Business Objectives:		Status	Comment
1	By 5 May 2022 to have processed registration applications for the Northern Ireland Assembly election in accordance with the election timetable.		
2	By September 2022 following the Northern Ireland Assembly election to have cleansed the electoral register with the benefit of the election updated data.		
3	By December 2022 to have undertaken a further follow up with those retained who were Canvass non-responders.		Delayed by potential December 2022 Assembly election.
4	By March 2023 to have scoped a 'look up' facility online for Canvass non responders.		Delayed by potential December 2022 Assembly election.
5	By December 2022 to have engaged with all Schools on registration data.		
6	By December 2022 to have reviewed elector ranges in the parliamentary scheme following the May 2022 Northern Ireland Assembly election.		
7	By October 2022 to have engaged with Regulation Quality Improvement Authority on the care facilities registration data and develop a plan for ongoing engagement.		

8	By March 2023 to have completed a data cleansing programme of work in preparation for the May 2023 Local Council elections.		
9	By end of July 2022 to have carried out an Audit on all special category electors type against current data held.		
10	By March 2023 to have conducted research to identify harder to reach groups in Northern Ireland for those not on the electoral register.		
11	By March 2023 to have conducted at least 7 registration events across Northern Ireland.		
12	By December 2022 have engaged with government and the Electoral Commission on Digital Registration Number issues for the electorate at elections with a view to optimising support for the electorate going forward.		
13	By March 2023 to have reviewed and updated absent vote systems in checking signatures and Digital Registration Numbers this will engage with any potential 'look up' system.		
14	By March 2023 to have reviewed indefinite absent voter data.		
15	To support the Local Government Boundary Review process.		
16	To support the Parliamentary Boundary Review process.		

	Achieved		Not Achieved
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ELECTIONS

Strategic Aims:

- Ensure the administration of free and fair elections in Northern Ireland
- Provide the Parliamentary polling station scheme review in 2022.
- Provide the Local Council polling station scheme review in 2023.
- Set out the programme of election readiness for each election.
- Review count operations in 2023-24.
- Improve accessibility for candidates and agents to information.
- Improve access to information and statistics for the public and media.
- Review communications practices and process for casual staff operating at elections to improve efficiency and experience for our key staff.

Business Objectives:		Status	Comment
1	To ensure preparedness for the May 2022 Northern Ireland Assembly elections		
2	For the May 2022 Northern Ireland Assembly elections to ensure all covid protection measures are in place.		
3	To administer the May 2022 Northern Ireland Assembly elections to include set up for polling stations and count centres.		
4	By the end of June 2022 to have concluded the storage of all May 2022 Northern Ireland Assembly election materials.		
5	By the end of June 2022 to have concluded the processing of candidates expenses from the May 2022 Northern Ireland Assembly election and to return to the Electoral Commission.		
6	By the end of May 2022 to have reported to the Electoral Commission on the May 2022 Northern Ireland Assembly elections.		
7	By June 2022 to have updated all election data from the May 2022 Northern Ireland Assembly elections.		
8	By end of June 2022 to have paid staff working at the May 2022 Northern Ireland Assembly elections.		
9	By September 2022 to have reviewed the May 2022 Northern Ireland Assembly elections and operationalise an improvement plan.		
10	By March 2023 to have completed all digital materials including task timetables, both overarching schedules and		

	team detail to accompany election readiness guidance and monitoring tools for 2023 Local Council elections.		
11	By December 2022 to have prepared overnight verification training and developed team guidance for caretaker and premises management at elections.		
12	By December 2022 to finalise performance targets and staffing needs for election readiness.		
13	By September 2022 to have refreshed Single Transferrable Voting count training internally with a work through for all staff of the 2022 May Northern Ireland Assembly election.		
14	By March 2023 to have updated Polling Station caretaker details for any upcoming elections.		
15	By March 2023 to have reviewed and created a workplan with some updated electronic count calculator materials and processes.		
16	By March 2023 to have set up barcoding for all electoral equipment.		Only for polling booths
17	By March 2023 to have updated the polling station catalogue.		
18	By December 2022 develop a process for Polling Station Inspectors returns at elections.		
19	By September 2022 to have presented a plan on upscaling of Electoral Office staff for upcoming elections		
20	By February 2023 to have reviewed and updated virtual polling station staff training materials and count staff virtual training materials.		
21	By March 2023 develop proposals for a new sign in system for staff at polling stations and create proposals for the count.		This was reviewed but not implemented
22	By November 2022 to have developed a communication plan including outreach for the election.		

	Achieved		Not Achieved
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CORPORATE SERVICES

Strategic Aims:

- Review how we work at the Electoral Office considering the impact of Covid, automation potential, working from home elements and staff welfare.
- Institute a continuous improvement process which will include a review of election administration 2022 - 2023.
- Design and roll out a legal awareness programme with supporting internal systems.
- Further develop our data protection programme across operations in the Electoral Office.
- Develop and roll out online internal and external training programmes with review processes.
- Develop enhanced communication tools internally and with external partners.
- Develop performance management and accountability tools for the Electoral Office.
- Develop contract monitoring tools and roll out programme.
- Roll out Association of Electoral Administrators accreditation for the Electoral Office staff.
- Design and roll out a programme for maximum agility in staffing roles.
- Review Electoral Identity card production.

Business Objectives:		Status	Comment
1	By March 2023 to have developed the website platform with a focus on security and accessibility.		
2	By December 2022 to have updated IT infrastructure (IT Servers in St Anne's and disaster recovery site).		
3	By December 2022 to undertake a review of current IT software and digital communications requirements.		
4	Continuing to March 2023 provide support of current Electoral Management System and identify any low-risk enhancements that could be developed and tested to enhance user experience.		
5	By March 2023 to have developed recruitment to gain further temporary staff in hard to recruit areas.		
6	By March 2023 to have begun a training programme for staff aimed at Association of Electoral Administrators accreditation.		
7	To March 2023 ongoing development of the new Election Management System.		
8	By March 2023 to move to plan final stages of user acceptance testing of a new Election Management System.		
9	By September 2022 to have drafted phone instructions for the May 2023 Local Council elections.		

10	By March 2023 to have implemented actions from internal audit reports.		
11	By September 2022 to roll out the first year of development of the legal search and training tool for the Electoral Office.		
12	By September 2022 to have a training plan in place to ensure optimal agility of staff in counter, recruitment, registration and absent vote administration.		
13	By December 2022 to move to consultation on the Local Council polling station scheme.		
14	By September 2022 to run a development programme for junior staff.		
15	By March 2023 to have reviewed the mid-level group development programme and engaged with staff to discuss future development need and potential.		

	Achieved		Not Achieved
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