

# The future of Electoral Registration & the Canvass in Northern Ireland



## July 2026

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### Section 1. Introduction

- 1.1 Maintaining an accurate and complete<sup>1</sup> Electoral Register is fundamental to the integrity of democratic participation. The Electoral Register underpins all elections and referenda, ensuring that all eligible citizens can exercise their right to vote and that the administration of elections is both fair and credible.
- 1.2 The Chief Electoral Officer, through the Electoral Office, maintains a single Electoral Register covering all of Northern Ireland. The Chief Electoral Officer has a statutory duty to secure the accuracy and completeness of this register<sup>2</sup>. While the ongoing mechanisms designed to support this duty have undergone marked changes over the last twenty years, the once-a-decade statutory Canvass that underpins electoral registration has distinct flaws. In addition, the legislation behind the Canvass—and, to a lesser extent, general electoral registration—is misaligned with modern population patterns and technological capabilities.
- 1.3 In the 2026 Representation of the People Bill, the United Kingdom Government committed to bringing forward automatic voter registration and reforming the Canvass in Northern Ireland. The Regulations to support these changes will need to be developed over the coming years. It is critical that these reforms are in place at least one year prior to the next scheduled Canvass in 2030. This paper is written in that context.
- 1.4 The first part of this paper concentrates on electoral registration and the current Canvass arrangements in Northern Ireland, comparing them to the "canvass process" in Great Britain and equivalent arrangements in Ireland. The paper then examines the challenges inherent in each system and sets out principles for a reformed model in Northern Ireland.
- 1.5 This paper does not represent official policy and solely reflects the views of the Chief Electoral Officer. It is written with the purpose of informing debate on the way forward.

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<sup>1</sup> The accuracy of electoral registers is the percentage of entries which relate to verified and eligible electors. The completeness of electoral registers is the percentage of eligible people who are registered.

Electoral Commission research is then further focussed on a tighter definition of these measures at the individual address level - see <https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/research-reports-and-data/electoral-registration-research/2023-report-electoral-registers-uk> for their definition of accuracy and completeness.

<sup>2</sup> In section 10ZB of Representation of the People Act 1983 <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1983/2/section/10ZB>

## Section 2. Electoral Registration in Northern Ireland and the purpose of the Northern Ireland Canvass

2.1 Electoral registration processes in Northern Ireland differ from the rest of the United Kingdom. While all parts of the United Kingdom operate on individual electoral registration—where each person is responsible for registering themselves—Northern Ireland applies more stringent verification requirements for both standard registration and the Canvass.<sup>3</sup>

2.2 In Northern Ireland, the current framework for electoral registration and the Canvass was introduced following the Electoral Fraud Act 2002. At the time, evidence suggested a marked perception of electoral fraud. In October 2002, when surveyed 66% of respondents felt that “electoral fraud is very common”. However, over the past two decades, public perception of electoral fraud has declined sharply. The Electoral Commission’s report on the 2023 local elections found that 84% of people considered voting to be safe from fraud. Furthermore, following the 2024 UK General Election, public confidence in the election was highest across the United Kingdom in Northern Ireland at 85%.<sup>4,5</sup>

2.3 Over the last two decades, there have also been marked changes and increased security in electoral registration in Northern Ireland. This includes:

- (i) Around 100,000 people register to vote each year. Online electoral registration was introduced in Northern Ireland in 2018 and by 2025/6 over 99% of applicants registered online. The online system cross references personal data supplied at registration against the National Insurance and Health Register databases for additional verification.
- (ii) Online registration has increased accessibility, helping the public resolve registration issues ahead of major polls (for example 55,000 people applied to register in the 6-week run-up to the 2024 General Election).
- (iii) The Electoral Office uses automated digital data-matching to help maintain register accuracy. For example, a weekly digital process matches electoral registration against the General Register Office death registrations to remove approximately 15,000 deceased records annually.
- (iv) The Electoral Register database is now underpinned by the Ordnance Survey Northern Ireland address register database POINTER. This assigns a Unique Property Reference

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<sup>3</sup> These requirements could mean that there is a risk of differential representation in the United Kingdom Parliament. This is because the allocation of seats in each part of the United Kingdom is determined based on a d’Hondt allocation using the number of electors on the register in each area. With more stringent electoral registration requirements and no annual Canvass review in Northern Ireland this could lead to differential representation across the United Kingdom.

<sup>4</sup> Electoral Commission report on the Northern Ireland Local Elections in May 2023  
<https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/research-reports-and-data/our-reports-and-data-past-elections-and-referendums/report-may-2023-local-elections-northern-ireland>

<sup>5</sup> Electoral Commission report on the 2024 UK Parliamentary general election  
<https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/research-reports-and-data/our-reports-and-data-past-elections-and-referendums/report-2024-uk-parliamentary-general-election-and-may-2024-elections>

Number and geo-location to each property, ensuring electors are linked to valid addresses and assisting household-based data quality reviews.

- (v) Today 99.9% of all electors on the Electoral Register in Northern Ireland have their National Insurance Number attached to their register entry. This helps ensure that the Electoral Office can link any new registrations using the National Insurance Number supplied on the online registration form. This helps to stop duplicate registrations and keeps the Electoral Register up to date.
- (vi) Today the Electoral Office undertakes at least 3 audit exercises each year by email/writing to target people who have moved house or are not registered. This includes
  - a. identifying households with unregistered 16- to 19-year-olds. While invitations are sent out to all such households, only 30-35% of young adults take up this offer, making this one area where automatic registration could be effective (see section 7);
  - b. identifying electors whose other administrative data suggests that have either moved house or changed name (for example through marriage). The Electoral Office then emails and/or writes to those electors inviting them to re-register to vote; and
  - c. identifying people who based on other administrative data are likely **not** to be on the Electoral Register and then writing to those people inviting them to register to vote.

2.4 Despite the use of administrative data, all applicants must fill out an (online) application form and provide their personal data, which is then used to prove their identity and address/place of residence. This address/place of residence verification is unique to Northern Ireland and makes registration more stringent here than in Great Britain.

2.5 While modern day to day methods have evolved, the once a decade Canvass, which underpins electoral registration, has as a statutory basis which has remained static. The next sections review the limitations of the Northern Ireland Canvass.

### Section 3. Structural issues in the current Canvass process in Northern Ireland

- 3.1 The Canvass in Northern Ireland is underpinned by section 10 of the Representation of the People Act 1983 (with a number of subsequent temporary amendments). Under these provisions, the Chief Electoral Officer is required to conduct a full Canvass every ten years.
- 3.2 Since the introduction of the Electoral Fraud Act 2002, Canvasses have taken place in Northern Ireland in 2006, 2013, and 2021. This pattern does not follow the ten-year cycle set out in legislation, reflecting a variety of concerns about the quality of the register and the delay due to the 2020 pandemic. In any year when a Canvass is conducted, it must run between 1 July and 1 December, and a newly revised Electoral Register is published at the end of that period.
- 3.3 By law in Northern Ireland once a Canvass is started all electors are removed from the Electoral Register. This happens even if the elector has registered to vote recently or if the administrative data held by the Electoral Office indicates that the elector is still resident at their electoral registration address. **This creates two key challenges:**
- **firstly the calling of the Canvass wipes out all the previous efforts to maintain the Electoral Register; and**
  - **secondly and more significantly all existing electors must re-register at each Canvass – irrespective of whether their information is likely to be up to date.**
- 3.4 During the Canvass, the Electoral Office undertakes a series of steps to inform, prompt, and support electors to complete their registration applications. The most recent Canvass, held in 2021 followed a structured sequence of communications:
- a pre-canvass leaflet delivered to every address
  - a Canvass launch leaflet issued in July
  - personally addressed letters sent to individuals in September
  - door-to-door visits by canvassers during September and October
  - a final personally addressed reminder letter issued at the end of October.
- 3.5 The 2021 Canvass was the first in which citizens could complete their electoral registration online at [www.gov.uk/register-to-vote](http://www.gov.uk/register-to-vote). Canvass leaflets were designed to encourage digital responses. In running the Canvass, the Electoral Office used administrative data to segment the population, for example, into different groups by age or housing tenure (e.g., extra help for social housing). This allowed different treatments to be adopted - for example, where administrative data suggested that all electors living in the house were aged over 75, then pre-populated paper forms were issued to facilitate paper or digital responses. This segmentation approach is not unique and was also used in the 2021 Census.
- 3.6 This process was supplemented by targeted engagement with education providers and voluntary sector organisations. Registration hubs and clinics were also established across

Northern Ireland to provide additional support. Including advertising the total cost for running the Electoral Canvass in 2021 was £6.3 million (in 2026 prices).<sup>6</sup>

- 3.7 At the conclusion of the Canvass in December 2021, the Electoral Register contained 1.37 million electors. According to the Electoral Commission report<sup>7</sup> the 2021 Electoral Register in Northern Ireland was 93% (address) complete – this ranged from 96% in Foyle to 90% in East Londonderry – but with an outlier at 76% in Belfast South.

#### Retained Electors

- 3.8 Canvass legislation allows the Chief Electoral Officer to retain individuals for up to two years on the register even if they do not respond to the Canvass. However, this retention can only be used if there is reliable data indicating that the retained elector is still resident at their registered address. At the conclusion of the 2021 Canvass, 114,000 of the 1.37 million electors fell into this category. Thus 8.3% of the post-Canvass register related to people who did not fill out a registration and whose registration remained “at risk.” Clearly without this short-term rule then the level of completeness of the register would have fallen markedly due to the 2021 Canvass.
- 3.9 For the 2021 Canvass subsequent pieces of temporary legislation have been passed in Parliament to extend the short-term carry forward period. This has meant that the retained elector period was extended to the end of 2027 - six years after the Canvass. This is not unique to the 2021 Canvass similar legislation was passed after the 2013 Canvass.

**This creates the third challenge which is the accuracy and completeness of the Electoral Register is now determined by temporary changes in the law.**

- 3.10 While some of the electors retained in 2021 have re-registered to vote since then or been removed from the register, today 75,000 electors remain as retained electors (or 5.3% of the 1.41 million electorate in 2026). Work is continually undertaken by the Electoral Office to address this issue. However, today the vast majority of those retained electors are live registrations on the Health and National Insurance Register systems at their Electoral Registration address.

- 3.11 The legislation for the Canvass also requires the Chief Electoral Officer to make recommendations every year to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on whether a Canvass should be conducted. In such cases, the Secretary of State must be satisfied that conducting a Canvass is necessary.

**This creates the final challenge which is that the decision to run a Canvass is a matter for the Government and not the legislature. This is different to the situation in Great Britain where an annual data gathering exercise also labelled a “Canvass” is legislated**

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<sup>6</sup> This estimate is based on the reported costs made in the Electoral Commission report in 2021 plus an estimate of the 2021 Canvass publicity costs incurred by the Electoral Commission and finally some additional Canvass related costs not included in the 2021 report. These costs have been uprated by 27% to allow for inflation from 2021 to 2026 based on the Bank of England calculator - <https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/monetary-policy/inflation/inflation-calculator>. It could be argued this is an underestimate as it does not include any of the costs of the High Street Voucher Scheme which clearly had a significant impact.

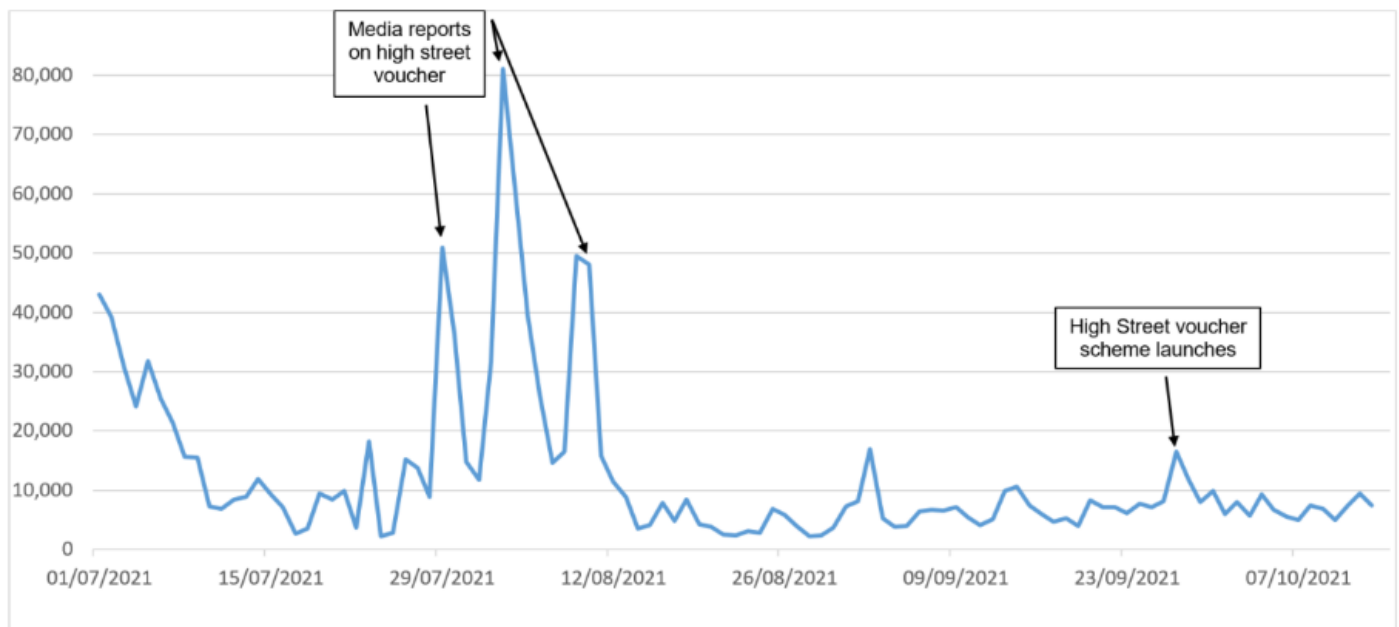
<sup>7</sup> Electoral Commission report - Report on the Northern Ireland canvass 2021  
<https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/research-reports-and-data/electoral-registration-research/northern-ireland-electoral-registration-canvass-2021>

for and must be run each year (see section 5). In Great Britain this exercise is funded and run each year to improve the quality of the Electoral Register.

## Section 4. The 2021 Canvass and issues with the current Canvass model

- 4.1 Despite the issues listed in section 3 the 2021 Canvass was a success. As noted above the 2021 Canvass resulted in the Electoral Register in Northern Ireland having 1.37 million voters registered. However, two key factors (one fortuitous) heavily buttressed this success.
- 4.2 Firstly, during the 2021 Canvass the Northern Ireland Department for the Economy ran an independent High Street Voucher Scheme<sup>8</sup>. This offered Northern Ireland citizens a £100 voucher as part of the Covid-19 recovery measures. Eligibility for the separate Department for the Economy scheme was linked to being on the Electoral Register. This triggered a surge in electoral registration applications during the 2021 Canvass (as shown in Figure 1 below).
- 4.3 **At the peak of this impact, 81,000 electoral registration applications were received in a single day, and it is estimated that without this scheme up to 500,000 less Canvass registration applications would have been submitted<sup>9</sup>.** This raises critical questions about using the current Canvass method to maintain the Electoral Register.

**Figure 1: Number of applications to register to vote, 1 July 2021 to 13 October 2021**



Source: Electoral Commission Report on the 2021 Canvass

- 4.4 Secondly, as noted above, even with the Department for the Economy High Street Voucher scheme a further 114,000 electors (or 8.3%) were included in the December 2021 Electoral

<sup>8</sup> See <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/articles/ni-high-street-scheme> for further details of the 2021 High Street Voucher scheme run by the Department for Economy in Northern Ireland.

<sup>9</sup> This estimate is based on the sum of the additional registrations over baseline that took place when the media reports for the High Street Voucher scheme raised the volume of electoral registration application – these are denoted in the chart above.

Register due to the retained electors option detailed in section 3. Also as noted above the total cost of the 2021 Canvass (in 2026 prices) was £6.3 million<sup>10</sup>. This excludes the Department for the Economy High Street Voucher scheme (around £189m in 2026 prices).

- 4.5 In total, the 2021 Canvass created around 100,000 changes to the Electoral Register (either people re-registering at a new address or people added to the register during the Canvass). Thus, the exercise carried the risk of over 500,000 people being removed (without the help of the High Street Voucher Scheme) to gain 100,000 changes to the register.
- 4.6 Added to this, as noted in section 2, the Chief Electoral Officer has made greater use of administrative data to target individuals who genuinely require registration intervention. This includes those not registered or registered at the wrong address. However, the current Canvass model obliges the Electoral Office to undo this work. This is particularly challenging given that the Electoral Office has faced 60% staff/resource cuts in the last few years. Thus, reform of the Canvass is required to fit in with the ongoing reform of day-to-day work of the Electoral Office.

#### View of the Electoral Commission

- 4.7 The view that the Canvass needs reformed is not just the view of the Chief Electoral Officer. As early as 2014, the Electoral Commission recommended that the Canvass in Northern Ireland should be reformed. The Electoral Commission advised Government that the Electoral Office should undertake targeted registration activity and the Canvass process risked a substantial reduction in the number of registered electors<sup>11</sup>. Their position has been stated repeatedly. In its report on the 2021 Canvass, the Electoral Commission stated:

*“The canvass in its current format is not an efficient tool for helping to maintain an accurate and complete Electoral Register..... As such we recommend that the Government should reform the canvass and wider electoral registration process in Northern Ireland.”<sup>12</sup>*

Electoral Commission – 2021

- 4.8 Electoral Commission studies consistently show that the (address) accuracy and (address) completeness of the Northern Ireland register fluctuate over time. In Northern Ireland, the quality of the register varies from Great Britain – see Table below.

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<sup>10</sup> This is based upon the 2021 Canvass costs uplifted by the Bank of England inflation calculator of 27.4% over the last five years (2021-2026).

<sup>11</sup> Electoral Commission report - Report on the Northern Ireland electoral registration canvass 2013  
[https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/sites/default/files/pdf\\_file/Report-on-the-Northern-Ireland-electoral-registration-canvass-2013.pdf](https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/sites/default/files/pdf_file/Report-on-the-Northern-Ireland-electoral-registration-canvass-2013.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> Electoral Commission report - Report on the Northern Ireland canvass 2021  
<https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/research-reports-and-data/electoral-registration-research/northern-ireland-electoral-registration-canvass-2021>

**Table 1: (Address) Accuracy and (Address) Completeness research – Electoral Commission samples 2018 & 2022**

|                               |                  | 2022 | Percentage change from 2018 survey |
|-------------------------------|------------------|------|------------------------------------|
| <b>(Address) Accuracy</b>     | Northern Ireland | 86%  | +6%                                |
|                               | Great Britain    | 88%  | -1%                                |
| <b>(Address) Completeness</b> | Northern Ireland | 83%  | +10%                               |
|                               | Great Britain    | 86%  | +3%                                |

(Address) Accuracy and Completeness Electoral Commission sample surveys run in 2018 and 2022<sup>13</sup>

- 4.9 In contrast in Great Britain Electoral Registration Officers conduct a funded **annual data gathering exercise (also labelled a” Canvass” – see section 5)** – which is fundamentally different from the Northern Ireland Canvass and thus reforms the peaks and troughs of the Northern Ireland approach. Taken together, this demonstrates that the current system is no longer fit for purpose. The Government have recognised this and indicated in their July 2025 policy paper that the Canvass will be reformed. This brings us to options for the future. Before discussing this, I will review the current situation in Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland.

<sup>13</sup> Electoral Commission, 2023 report on Electoral Registers in the UK <https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/research-reports-and-data/electoral-registration-research/2023-report-electoral-registers-uk>

## Section 5. Electoral Registration and the “Canvass” in Great Britain

- 5.1 The “canvass” process in Great Britain was reformed in 2020 following the introduction of Individual Electoral Registration in 2013. It functions differently to the Northern Ireland model.
- 5.2 In Great Britain, the “canvass” is a **property-based information-gathering exercise rather than a mass-re-registration vehicle**. At the outset of the Great Britain Canvass, Registration Officers conduct a data-matching exercise comparing their existing Electoral Registers against National Insurance records and local datasets. Then a choice is made:
- If **all** electors on the Electoral Register at a property match the administrative datasets – the property is allocated to **Route 1**. The Registration Officer then sends a communication to “the property” (by post or by email) listing all electors registered at the property. Recipients only need to respond if the information is incorrect. No follow-up activity is undertaken and no response is required.
  - If **any** elector on the Electoral Register does not match the administrative datasets, the property is allocated to **Route 2**. Officers must make at least 3 attempts to contact the household<sup>14</sup>. Crucially there is no automatic deletion of electors for non-response. Once registered, an elector can only be removed where the Registration Officer has a statutory reason to do so.
- 5.3 The initial data-matching stage therefore allows Registration Officers to focus resources on high-turnover properties where change is likely.
- 5.4 However the Great Britain “canvass” has a number of weaknesses. The Great Britain “canvass” itself does not register individuals. If someone adds their name to the reply from Routes 1 or 2, they must then still complete a separate Individual Electoral Registration application. Adopting a Great Britain-style two-step model would represent a backwards step for Northern Ireland.**
- 5.5 In addition, the Electoral Commission’s most recent report<sup>15</sup> also noted that the Great Britain Canvass fails to identify new or unregistered electors in the data match stage. The Electoral Commission also recommends reviewing and extending the legislation governing data use and ensuring clear legal pathways for additional data sharing.
- 5.6 Any reformed Northern Ireland electoral registration system/canvass should address these issues.

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<sup>14</sup> There is also a further smaller Route 3 group. These are electors who are listed on the Electoral Register as living in “Communal Establishments” – this is a collective term which includes Nursing/Residential Homes, Student Halls of Residence and other places which have a collective living arrangement.

<sup>15</sup> Electoral Commission, Report on Electoral Registration in Great Britain in 2024  
<https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/research-reports-and-data/electoral-registration-research/electoral-registration-great-britain-2024>

## Section 6. Electoral Registration in Ireland

- 6.1 Responsibility for maintaining the register in Ireland rests across 31 individual local authorities. Following reforms in 2022, the system transitioned from a household model to an individual registration framework with continuous "rolling" registration.
- 6.2 However, a systematic, data-driven audit equivalent to a Canvass is not legally embedded within Ireland's ongoing registration process. Instead, local authorities conduct a mix of informal, ad-hoc activities throughout the year to manage duplicates and conduct public outreach.
- 6.3 The An Coimisiún Toghcháin (Ireland's Electoral Commission) has recently completed an audit of Ireland's Electoral Registers<sup>16</sup>. This highlighted significant concerns regarding regional inaccuracies and completeness gaps stemming from this fragmented, multi-register framework.
- 6.4 This stands in contrast to Northern Ireland's centralised register. The findings from the Republic of Ireland underline the risks of removing a comprehensive auditing process and show that consistent, centralized oversight is essential.

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<sup>16</sup> See [https://cdn.electoralcommission.ie/app/uploads/2025/04/30104313/Oversight-Report-on-the-Electoral-Registers\\_online\\_english\\_tagged.pdf](https://cdn.electoralcommission.ie/app/uploads/2025/04/30104313/Oversight-Report-on-the-Electoral-Registers_online_english_tagged.pdf) for further details on the Republic of Ireland model

## Section 7. The future of Electoral Registration & the Canvass in Northern Ireland

- 7.1 In its July 2025 policy paper “*Restoring trust in our democracy: Our strategy for modern and secure elections*”<sup>17</sup> the UK Government announced plans to transition toward data-driven automated systems for electoral registration across the United Kingdom.<sup>18</sup> The policy paper also committed to reforming the registration/Electoral Canvass model in Northern Ireland.

*“The way the electoral Canvass is run in Northern Ireland is unlike that in the rest of the UK and over time has become less efficient at ensuring the accuracy and completeness of the register. The Northern Ireland Office has committed to updating the Canvass in Northern Ireland to enable the Chief Electoral Officer to make best use of the high-quality data from local and central government sources to which they already have access, to ensure that eligible voters are not removed from the register unnecessarily and to focus Canvass efforts on unregistered group”<sup>19</sup>*

### UK Government July 2025

- 7.2 To inform these upcoming legislative reforms, as Chief Electoral Officer I set out four key principles and an implementation framework.

#### Principle 1: Remove the requirement for all electors to re-register at each Canvass

- 7.3 Prior to the 2021 Canvass, 90% of all electors on the Northern Ireland register were correctly registered. Requiring all electors to re-register under penalty of removal from the Electoral Register during the Canvass is unique in Northern Ireland across the United Kingdom. This is inefficient and poses an unnecessary risk to the completeness of the register.
- 7.4 If adopted, this change alone would bring the Northern Ireland model closer to the approach in Great Britain. There electors remain registered to vote until the Electoral Registration Officer has data driven evidence that they no longer reside at the address listed for them on the Electoral Register.

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<sup>17</sup> UK Government, Restoring trust in our democracy: Our strategy for modern and secure elections  
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/restoring-trust-in-our-democracy-our-strategy-for-modern-and-secure-elections/restoring-trust-in-our-democracy-our-strategy-for-modern-and-secure-elections>

<sup>18</sup> UK Government, Restoring trust in our democracy: Our strategy for modern and secure elections  
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/restoring-trust-in-our-democracy-our-strategy-for-modern-and-secure-elections/restoring-trust-in-our-democracy-our-strategy-for-modern-and-secure-elections>

<sup>19</sup> UK Government, Restoring trust in our democracy: Our strategy for modern and secure elections  
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/restoring-trust-in-our-democracy-our-strategy-for-modern-and-secure-elections/restoring-trust-in-our-democracy-our-strategy-for-modern-and-secure-elections>

Principle 2: Replace the ten-yearly Canvass with a funded annual data-driven “Canvass” exercise

- 7.5 A ten-yearly Canvass causes the quality of the Electoral Register to vary over time. Spreading the ten-yearly Canvass work across annual exercises (and allocating 10% of the £6.3 million ten-yearly cost to each year) would provide greater stability. This would provide sustained annual exercises and be cost neutral.
- 7.6 However, an annual “Canvass/Audit” should not impose excessive burdens on the public. Instead, the Chief Electoral Officer should have flexibility to determine and set out a planned level of activity each year. The annual “Canvass/Audit” should, unlike Great Britain, be a one-step registration activity. This may mean adopting in part a householder-based approach to registration to make the process easier for the public.

Principle 3: Introduce controlled automatic Electoral Registration in Northern Ireland

- 7.7 Automated registration—where eligible citizens can be directly added to the register via trusted administrative data without requiring a manual application—is used successfully in roughly half of democracies globally<sup>20</sup>. The move to automatic electoral registration is supported by the UK Government in their 2025 policy paper:

*“The Government will work to create an automated registration system. Automated approaches to registration are where an application from a citizen to register is not necessarily needed and instead eligible citizens can be directly added to the Electoral Register.*

*To support this transformation the Government will actively test methods of automated registration. The Government will legislate to ensure changes can be brought in that will have a positive impact on registration levels.<sup>21</sup>”* UK Government July 2025

- 7.8 I support this as part of the new system, Northern Ireland should run controlled automatic registration exercises focused on people with highly reliable demographic data. This could include young citizens (at age 16-18 via National Insurance/health data) and elderly residents moving into communal care establishments. Implementation will require a local specific data

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<sup>20</sup> Roughly half of countries around the world use some form of automatic voter registration – including Germany, the Netherlands, Iceland and Finland. Countries such as US, Malta, Canada and Australia, have also all moved to at least partially implement it over recent years.

<sup>21</sup> UK Government, Restoring trust in our democracy: Our strategy for modern and secure elections <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/restoring-trust-in-our-democracy-our-strategy-for-modern-and-secure-elections/restoring-trust-in-our-democracy-our-strategy-for-modern-and-secure-elections>

model managed in a controlled way. The evidence from work in Wales<sup>22</sup> is that a controlled version of automatic electoral registration would work<sup>23</sup>

Principle 4: Review the effectiveness of the reformed model after five years

7.9 Finally given the scale of these changes, the effectiveness of the reformed Canvass model should be reviewed five years after implementation. The review should assess the accuracy and completeness of the Electoral Register and identify whether any further measures would be merited. This means that the Government should retain a legislative safeguard allowing the option to call a full Canvass/Audit (which complies with Principle 1 above).

How to implement this: The “Rolling Canvass”

7.10 To implement these principles three high-level options exist:

**Option 1:** Continue with current registration processes but introduce a targeted annual **whole-population** “Canvass/Audit” process – focusing on addresses/households where registration is likely to be inaccurate/incomplete. This could be buttressed by a notice to all other addresses

**Option 2:** Develop enhanced ongoing electoral registration processes with auto-registration alongside “Canvass/Audit” of specific addresses where registration is likely to be inaccurate/incomplete.

**Option 3 (No Canvass):** Develop enhanced rolling registration processes but do not undertake any “Canvass/Audit” activities

7.11 Clearly Option 3 is sub-optimal as it does not include a regular audit function. Ideally a full combination of Options 1 and 2 is best – but implementation may cost more than the financial figures listed above. Options 1 and 2 exist on a continuum and differ in terms of the degree of regular Canvass/Audit required and how far you can go with automatic registration/ongoing registration activities. I label any combination of Options 1 or 2 a “Rolling Canvass”.

7.12 This “Rolling Canvass” model combines continuous data-driven analysis, proactive automatic registration and targeted annual audits. It shifts the Electoral Office from a cycle of re-registration to a modern, stable, and continuous validation and registration model. I welcome all

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<sup>22</sup> See <https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/research-reports-and-data/electoral-registration-research/automatic-registration-pilots-evaluation> for information on the evaluation of automatic registration research in Wales.

<sup>23</sup> The research in Wales is backed up by evidence from Northern Ireland around the relatively low-take up (30-35%) of local households when the Electoral Office writes asking young people in those households to register to vote. The automatic registration process would be more efficient and effective if ran in a similar way to the pilot process run recently in Wales.

comments on the principles set out above, the implementation options or any other points/options you wish to make.

## **Section 8. Conclusion**

- 8.1 The evidence set out in this paper demonstrates that Northern Ireland's once a decade Canvass is no longer fit for purpose. Its perceived successes have relied on independent financial incentives or emergency short-term legislation.
- 8.2 The reformed Great Britain Canvass demonstrates how a data-driven, targeted Canvass model might work. Lessons from the Republic of Ireland also suggest that the concept of an ongoing data driven audit is critical. Northern Ireland is, however in a different position from both Great Britain and Republic of Ireland, benefitting from a central electoral register model and a strong data environment to support audit. These provide a sound basis to develop a tailored model.
- 8.3 The UK Government's stated ambition is to move towards automated, data-enabled registration. Northern Ireland thus provides an opportunity to lead this. While the precise direction of UK-wide reforms will take time to develop, Northern Ireland could be positioned to lead this work while ensuring our future registration / Canvass methods reflect our unique circumstances.
- 8.4 The principles outlined in this report provide a possible foundation. This would include removing mandatory re-registration, establishing a stable year-round Canvass/audit, allowing a simple one-step household level update process, and integrating automated registration. By embracing this approach, Northern Ireland can secure a resilient, cost-efficient electoral register that matches our current population and reduces burdens on the public.

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