Electoral Office for Northern Ireland

Report of the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland 2023-2024

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

Ordered by the House of Commons to be printed on 29 October 2024



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ISBN 978-1-5286-5225-4 E03219286 10/24

Printed on paper containing 40% recycled fibre content minimum

Printed in the UK by HH Associates Ltd. on behalf of the Controller of His Majesty's Stationery Office

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 I discharged the duties of Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland for the financial year ending 31 March 2024.

Yours sincerely,

Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland

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FOREWORD

This Annual Report covers the period 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024. During this period, the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland working with local councils and under the direction of the Chief Electoral Officer, ran the 2023 Local Council elections on 18 May 2023. The Electoral Office and Local Councils hired 6,000 poll and count staff, printed / delivered 1.4 million poll cards and issued ballot papers at 600 Polling Stations to allow electors to vote. The Electoral Office, with Local Councils, also ran 11 simultaneous count centres over the weekend 19-21 May 2023 to count 80 District Electoral Areas and elect 462 councillors.

The 2023 Local Council elections operated with the largest electoral register ever in the history of Northern Ireland. A total of 1.380 million electors were registered to vote (up 6% from 2019) and 807 candidates stood for the 462 seats. The scale of this election creates challenges in terms of delivery. Local Council elections are a complex and challenging electoral event with more candidates, more different ballot papers and more single transferrable vote counts to run simultaneously. This election is unique in the United Kingdom and is the most complex that the Electoral Office runs. The election requires all involved to work together and requires significant effort. Section 3 of the report provides more detail.

Also, this year key electoral registration events continued at pace - online electoral registration was in its sixth year of operation and the Electoral Office continued to see an uptake of online applications. In total 103,000 Northern Ireland based applications to register to vote were made – of this over 95% (98,000) were made online.

To maintain the Register, the Electoral Office runs registration initiatives each year. Last year working with schools, the Electoral Office undertook a new approach to improve registration of younger people. In October/November 2023 the Electoral Office wrote to 220 secondary schools and issued 42,800 letters to householders to encourage 16–18-year-olds living in those households to register to vote. This exercise proved successful with around 14,000 young people registering to vote over this period.

The Electoral Office also wrote to around 30,000 people who, from administrative data held within Government, were assessed as having moved house and needed to update their electoral registration. This resulted in enhanced re-registrations. Lastly the Electoral Office

also used death certificate information to remove from the register those electors who had passed away.

During this year, the Electoral Office started the implementation of changes in relation to the Elections Act 2022. This included reviewing all permanent proxy votes over Autumn/Winter 2023, changing the proxy vote application process and moving to new proxy voting rights. The Electoral Office also started planning a review of a subset of European Union national electors to determine whether they are still eligible to be registered to vote. This work will continue into 2024/25.

This year has been one of change, but also delivery, and was only possible with the support of staff in the Electoral Office, political parties and the public. I thank them all for their support. Lastly, I wish to record thanks to the interim Chief Electoral Officer Sarah Ling who stepped in to manage the delivery of the 2023 Local Council elections. Sarah undertook her duties most effectively and handed over to me in August 2023, with the elections fully completed on time and to budget.

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
 with a team of just over 20 whole team equivalent officials. This administrative structure supports the Chief Electoral Officer in carrying out his duties.
- 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 2023, the Electoral Register for Northern Ireland contained 1.384 million electors. This is the highest number in the history of the Electoral Office. To maintain the register 103,000 registration and re-registration applications (paper and online) were processed between 1 April 2023 and 31 March 2024. This is the highest number of registration and re-registration applications on record. This is in part due to the increased use of online registration in Northern Ireland which makes the process easier for the public.
- Last year the online register to vote system¹ collected data on 97,000 Northern Ireland based online applications to register or re-register to vote (between 1 April 2023 and 31 March 2024). These data were further processed by the Electoral Office to determine inclusion on the electoral register.
- Alongside this the Electoral Office undertook targeted initiatives to improve registration.
 Last year the Office worked with the Department for Education (NI), secondary schools
 and the Education Authority to improve registration of young people. In October/November
 2023 the Electoral Office wrote to 220 secondary schools and issued 42,800 letters to
 householders to encourage 16–18-year-olds living in those households to register to vote.
 This exercise proved successful with around 14,000 young people registering to vote over
 this period.
- 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 electors who

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¹ The United Kingdom wide online register to vote system is available at www.gov.uk/register-to-vote

had not moved/changed name on the electoral register were requested to amend their details.

- Lastly, the General Register Office provided weekly lists of deaths here. This information
 was matched with the electoral register database and around 15,000 records of deceased
 electors were removed from the electoral register.
- Taken together these initiatives along with a host of routine data quality steps continue to maintain the quality of the Electoral Register.
- By law, the Chief Electoral Officer must write to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland regarding the current quality of the Electoral Register and whether an electoral canvass is required.
- The letter for 2023/24 was sent to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on 15 April 2024 and was published on the Electoral Office website².
- The advice given to the Secretary of State was **not** to hold an Electoral Canvass in 2024. This advice is based on a variety of evidence including the Electoral Commission report on the 2022 Electoral Register in Northern Ireland³. It would be remiss not to reiterate here points made to the previous Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.
- The canvass law requires that everyone on the register at the start of the Canvass is removed unless they re-register during the Canvass period. This represents a substantial risk to the electoral register as there is no guarantee these people will re-register.
- Currently register maintenance uses a data driven approach with targeted registration initiatives underpinned and verified by data collection. It is my view, that Canvass law should mirror this with a more targeted data driven approach adopted. If so, this would bring Northern Ireland into line with Great Britain where Canvass law was updated recently.

² Letter is available at <a href="https://www.eoni.org.uk/getmedia/7d662bcc-51c7-4561-94a1-823c5a658947/2024-Statutory-Letter-%e2%80%93-Electoral-Canvass-Section-10ZA-of-the-Representation-of-the-People-Act-(1983)

³ See https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/research-reports-and-data/electoral-registration-research/accuracy-and-completeness-electoral-registers/2023-report-electoral-registers-uk for further details

• Lastly, there were around 6,750 Electoral Identity Cards issued between 1 April 2023 and 31 March 2024. This service supports not only the delivery of elections in Northern Ireland but, by default, a wider identity service for the delivery of public services here. In Great Britain, a new Voter Authority Certificate service has been introduced following the introduction of electoral identification in the Elections Act 2022. Given these changes in Great Britain the Electoral Office are looking at administrative changes to bring Northern Ireland more into line with Great Britain.

SECTION 3 – ELECTIONS

- During the year, the Electoral Office working with Councils and under the direction of the Chief Electoral Officer ran the Local Council elections on 18 May 2023. To run these elections the Electoral Office and Local Councils hired 6,000 poll & count staff, printed/delivered 1.4 million poll cards and printed 1.4 million ballot papers which were delivered to over 600 Polling Stations. In addition, working with Local Councils 11 simultaneous count centres were run over 19-21 May to count the 80 District Electoral Areas and elect 462 members to the 11 Local Councils.
- The 2023 Local Council elections operated with the largest electoral register ever. A total
 of 1.380 million electors were registered (up 6% from 2019) and 807 candidates stood for
 462 seats. This volume creates challenges for delivery in a short time window.
- One of the other issues that arose at the 2023 Local Council elections was the need for most people to provide their Digital Registration Number when applying for a postal or proxy vote. The Digital Registration Number postal or proxy vote process is defined by law and the Chief Electoral Officer has no latitude in its application. However, this process was a barrier to postal and proxy voting in the 2023 Local Council elections⁴. Following the elections the Electoral Office undertook a review and published a report⁵ in January 2024.
- The Digital Registration Number review⁵ found that a solution is required and asked the Government to look again at the Digital Registration Number law. However, in the interim the review set out administrative mitigations. Some of these mitigations were introduced in late 2023/24 and helped alleviate this issue for the 2024 United Kingdom General Election held in July 2024. The mitigations included simpler absent vote application forms, faster ways to process absent vote applications and better ways to tell the public that their applications had either been approved or rejected. In addition, a new "Am I Registered" service was introduced this is described in section 4 below.

⁴ See https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-66268221 for further details.

⁵ The report "2023 Local Elections - Digital Registration Number review Electoral Office for Northern Ireland - January 2024" – is available at https://www.eoni.org.uk/getmedia/cf355481-2750-4bec-a87b-c20254891e7d/EONI-Digital-Registration-Number-Review-January-2024 1

 Lastly, work was undertaken to prepare for the United Kingdom General Election in 2024/25 (subsequently held on 4 July 2024). This included changing Electoral Office IT systems to relate to the new 18 Constituencies and reviewing any Polling Stations that had issues in the 2023 Local Council elections.

SECTION 4 – DIGITAL / DATA ENHANCEMENTS

- During the year, the Electoral Office emphasised the delivery of improved data services and digital developments. This will help the delivery of future elections and referendums in Northern Ireland.
- The duties undertaken this year included work to ensure Electoral Office data assets were managed safely and securely. Alongside this an annual IT health check of systems was undertaken and the Data Protection Officer continued to assist in the monitoring of Data Protection compliance. This included providing information and advice on data protection obligations. In addition, a new method for delivering electoral register data to statutory users was developed this enhanced service was developed over Winter 2023 and now all users, including local political representatives, can obtain digital copies of the electoral register.
- As noted in section 3, the Electoral Office set up a new online service (Am I Registered)⁶ to help electors quickly check if they are accurately "Registered to Vote". The new service also acts as a way for electors to apply to get their Electoral Office Digital Registration Number.
- The Am I Registered service was built in-house and to use this service the elector must provide a validated mobile phone number and personal details (name, address, date of birth, part of their National Insurance Number). Although strictly outside the time frame of this report, as of August 2024 this service has had 55,000 applications and over 40,000 people had their registration status confirmed with a further 15,000 people being informed that they need to update their registration. This service was vital in the delivery of the 2024 General Election.
- This has given the Electoral Office confidence that it can make services digital by design, either working with Great Britain systems or developing them locally. Going forward this will be the position for the development of key Electoral Office services.

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⁶ The Northern Ireland Am I Registered system is available at www.eoni.org.uk/Am-I-Registered. The system has been live since 26 March 2024.

SECTION 5 – CORPORATE GOVERNANCE

- During the year, the Electoral Office had meetings with Government Internal Auditors and the Senior Management Team. Electoral Office staff completed training courses on health and safety, data protection and mental health.
- In total 19 requests were received for information under the Freedom of Information Act 2000. Staff dealt with 21,100 phone calls during the year and maintained the Electoral Office website (www.eoni.org.uk).
- 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 2023/24 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 the Digital Registration Number, the Elections Act 2022 and other legislative changes. This resulted in papers being published on the Electoral Office website (see footnotes 2 and 5).

ANNEX A: PERFORMANCE AGAINST TARGETS (SEP 2023 – MARCH 2024)

The 2023/24 Business Plan covers the period September 2023 to March 2024.

Registration (N	Maintain & Enhance the Register)
Business Plan C	Objective (Indicators) and Status
Registration 1	Ongoing throughout the year to continue to process & verify in line with deadlines all digital/paper applications for registration.
	 Number of paper and online applications received and any applications not initially processed within 5 working days.
Registration 2	Ongoing throughout the year to promote the continued uptake of digital registration (www.gov.uk/register-to-vote)
	 Undertake schools and other administrative data led registration initiatives with focus on digital first registration. Number of online applications received. By end of year add www.gov.uk/registertovote to Electoral Office key letters.
Registration 3	Ongoing throughout the year to process, where possible digitally, persons to be removed from the register via information received from statutory death certificates or other sources.
	Undertake removal of electors who have death certificate data supplied by the General Register Office.
Registration 4	Ongoing throughout the year to use high quality data from official sources to drive forward improvements in the accuracy and completeness of the Electoral Register.
	To ensure routine data cleansing exercises are undertaken (data cleansing on National Insurance Numbers and Unique Property Reference Numbers).
	 To review polling stations for 2024/5 General Election and update Polling Station Catalogue with any issues found (c250 Premises reviewed).
	 To run young person's initiative with schools and targeted households to increase registration of young people.
	To run administrative data initiative targeted on improving registration of people who have moved house.
Registration 5	By Winter 2023 to have reviewed and started consulting on polling station scheme. The review will take account of the Parliamentary Boundary Commission & feedback from 2023 Local Elections.
	 Polling Stations were reviewed in Summer 2023 and further work was required to relate these to new Parliamentary Constituencies (addressing shared and replacement polling premises & balancing ballot boxes in those premises).
	 Following the Parliamentary Constituencies Order in October 2023, the Electoral Office engaged with the Northern Ireland Office to ensure polling stations lined up with polling districts. The consultation was then re-planned for May 2024 but was overtaken by the General Election timing.

Achieved Partially / Not Achieved

Elections (Readiness & Delivery)					
Business Plan Objective (Indicators) and Status					
Elections 1	Ongoing throughout the year to maintain readiness for any upcoming elections.				
	 To ensure current Electoral Management system is maintained & by year end includes new Parliamentary Constituencies. To progress staffing and logistics for 2024/5 General Election (contracts, count centres, communications etc.). To enhance approach for temporary staff in 2024/5 General Election. 				
Elections 2	By Winter 2023 to have started election readiness preparations for the United				
Licotions 2	Kingdom General Election				
	By March 2024 ensured current Electoral Management System was using new Parliamentary Constituencies for Polling Stations / Registers etc				
Elections 3	By Winter 2023 to have reviewed the local council elections and documented principal areas for improvement.				
	To document areas of improvement from the 2023 Local Council elections.				
Elections 4	By Winter 2023 to have developed methods to mitigate Digital Registration Number issues on future elections.				
	To document actions to mitigate Digital Registration Number issues at 2023 Local Council Elections (see https://www.eoni.org.uk/getmedia/cf355481-2750-4bec-a87b-c20254891e7d/EONI-Digital-Registration-Number-Review-January-2024 1).				
	 To develop an online tool for electors to get apply to get their Digital Registration Number – service went live on 26 March 2024 (www.eoni.org.uk/drn). 				
Elections 5	By Spring 2024 to have worked with Electoral Commission and disability organisations to develop enhanced election support for those with a disability.				
	To continue to provide relevant polling station support mechanisms for those with a disability (hearing loops, magnifying glasses, pencil grips).				
	 To procure and make available the ballot paper recording service for 2024/5 General Election. 				
	To procure 100 additional disability friendly polling booths for future elections.				
Elections 6	By Spring 2024 to have started development of an improved programme for single transferrable vote training and calculation software – this is planned to include improved training & enhanced digital calculation methods.				
	To set up group to develop improvements to count calculator software. Work paused due to the need for project manager – work carried into 2024/5				
Elections 7	Ongoing throughout the year to develop and deliver changes required under the Elections Act 2022.				
	By Autumn 2023 set up internal Electoral Office Elections Act 2022 working group.				
	To develop & undertake actions defined by Elections Act 2022. For staff to attend Asses, of Electoral Administrators Elections Act 2022 training.				
	For staff to attend Assoc. of Electoral Administrators Elections Act 2022 training. Achieved Partially / Not Achieved				

Corporate Serv	vices
Business Plan C	Objective (Indicators) and Status
Corporate Services 1	Ongoing throughout the year to work with commercial supplier to develop plans for the implementation of a new Election Management Software in late 2024/25.
	 To undertake work with supplier to deliver new Electoral Management System by late 2024/5.
Corporate Services 2	Ongoing throughout the year to continue to deliver an Electoral Identity Card service.
	To continue to deliver Electoral Identity Card service.
Corporate Services 3	By Winter 2023 to have developed plans to reform the delivery of Electoral Identity Card service.
	To undertake a review of the Electoral Identity Card service by Winter 2023 and develop plans to enhance the Electoral Identity Card service (review was undertaken & plans enhanced by input from auditors).
Corporate Services 4	By Winter 2023 to have developed and submitted to the Secretary of State the 2022/23 Annual Report of the Chief Electoral Officer.
	To deliver Annual Report to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland by Winter 2023 (not fully achieved). Report drafted but delayed due to need to present 2022/23 & 23/24 reports together.
Corporate Services 5	By Spring 2024 to have started work with Association of Electoral Administrators to bring professional training for key Electoral Office staff.
	 Senior staff attended Association of Electoral Administrators 2024 annual conference.
	Staff attended Association of Electoral Administrators Elections Act 2022 professional training.
Corporate Services 6	Ongoing throughout the year to ensure that internal financial, procurement and personnel controls are adhered to.
	Worked with external auditors – reviews undertake of Electoral Identity Card service and Data Protection.

Achieved	Partially / Not Achieved

Digital & Data Services				
Business Plan Objective (Indicators) and Status				
Digital & Data Services 1	By Winter 2023 to have moved Electoral Office to Microsoft Office365 and, where possible, to rationalise software from other vendors into an overall Microsoft Office365 approach.			
	Microsoft Office 365 was installed across all Electoral Office estate in 2023/24 and a review of other software that may be replaced by Microsoft Office 365 was started.			
Digital & Data Services 2	Ongoing throughout the year to maintain security of all Electoral Office data assets – while at the same delivering training / measures to enhance our data security.			
	Information Governance Group meetings were held during year.			
	Auditors assessed Electoral Office information governance.			
	Data Protection was included and delivered in staff training.			
	Information assets register maintained.			
	IT Health Check undertaken, and issues addressed.			
Digital & Data Services 3	By Winter 2023 to have developed an enhanced means to supply data to external users of the electoral register.			
	 In Autumn 2023 new software for the delivery of digital copies of the electoral register to users was introduced and new processes implemented. 			
Digital & Data Services 4	By Winter 2023 to have piloted a digital self-service registration verification system.			
	The new "Am I Registered" service went live on 26 March 2024 (www.eoni.org.uk/am-I-registered).			
Digital & Data Services 5	By Spring 2024 to have agreed requirements and, if possible, started procurement of new Electoral Office website (www.eoni.org.uk).			
	Website requirements developed and work started with contractor to deliver enhanced website.			

Achieved	Partially / Not Achieved	l