



The Electoral Office for
Northern Ireland



Northern
Ireland
Office

Future Delivery of Electoral Services in Northern Ireland

Response to consultation

June 2018

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1. Introduction

1.1. The Chief Electoral Officer and Northern Ireland Office published a joint consultation 'The Future Delivery of Electoral Services in Northern Ireland' <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/future-delivery-of-electoral-services-in-northern-ireland> which closed in 2017. The paper sought views on a range of measures to modernise and improve the provision of Northern Ireland's electoral services, including maintaining the accuracy and comprehensiveness of the electoral register and delivering elections and referendums.

1.2 This response sets out how the Chief Electoral Officer and NIO intend to proceed in light of the responses received to the consultation. We are grateful to all those who participated in the consultation exercise, which included the district councils, trade unions, political representatives and members of the public. The list of respondents to the consultation is at Annex A of this document. The Chief Electoral Officer looks forward to discussing proposed reforms with interested parties in the months ahead.

1.3 This document is available on the NIO Website: www.nio.gov.uk under Public Consultation and the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland website: <http://www.eoni.org.uk/Home> . Printed copies of this response may be obtained free of charge from:

Corporate Governance Team Northern Ireland Office Stormont House Stormont Estate Belfast BT4 3SH Email: elections.unit@nio.gov.uk Tel: 028 9076 5497	Information Team Electoral Office Headquarters St Anne's House 15 Church Street Belfast BT1 1ER Email: info@eoni.org.uk Tel: 028 9044 6680
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Digital Registration

1.4 Digital registration which was launched in Northern Ireland on 18th June 2018 offers a quick, easy and secure alternative to the more traditional option of paper application forms and since its introduction in Great Britain it has been a huge success, with the vast majority of people choosing to register online. The user-friendly nature of the service is underlined by the fact that it regularly receives customer satisfaction levels of above 90%. It will typically take less than ten minutes for people in Northern Ireland to register digitally. The service can be accessed on a computer, tablet or mobile device, offering people the opportunity to register at a time and location most convenient to them.

1.5 The consultation reaffirmed broad support for the introduction of digital registration across Northern Ireland. The service will represent a major step forward which, combined with the existing traditional paper method of registering, will offer maximum opportunities for everyone in Northern Ireland to engage with the democratic process. The introduction of digital registration offers an opportunity for the Chief Electoral Officer to consider the future structure of the Electoral Office in order to optimise the service provided to the public.

2. Proposed reforms

2.1 The consultation paper also sought views on proposals relating to:

- a) Enhancing the provision of local services
- b) Maintaining the electoral register
- c) Increasing the role of district councils in running elections and referendums

A) Enhancing the provision of local services

2.2 The consultation paper discussed the benefits to the public of some electoral services being delivered at district council level and asked two specific questions in relation to this:

Q.1 Do you see benefit in having all district councils providing advice and support to local residents on electoral matters, particularly those who do not wish to use online registration?

Q.2 Are there other electoral services that you would like to see district councils providing locally?

2.3 Responses to the consultation paper demonstrated that there was broad support for district councils having an enhanced role in providing advice and support to local residents on routine electoral matters, particularly to those who do not wish to avail of online registration. A number of respondents wanted to see further information on the resource implications of providing such services, with a particular concern that additional costs should not fall to the ratepayer. Many respondents were open to further discussions about councils providing other electoral services locally, but again with the caveat that the provision of such services should be properly resourced and financed.

2.4 The consultation has demonstrated that there is support for district councils providing advice and support to local residents on routine electoral matters, particularly those who may not wish to avail of digital registration. Having help points across the eleven councils would result in an increase in accessibility compared to the current model. However, we recognise the concerns that councils may have about resourcing and financing such a service. The Chief Electoral Officer will therefore now take forward discussions with district councils to agree what services could be implemented as soon as possible to ensure that an effective advice and support service can be provided to local residents.

B) Maintaining the electoral register

2.5 The consultation paper discussed the benefits that digital registration would bring to members of the public who wished to register in a quick, safe and secure way. It also discussed the impact that digital registration would have on the work of the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland (EONI). In particular, with most people expected to take up the opportunity to register online, there will be a reduced need for applications to be distributed and processed at regional sites and a greater emphasis on improving the accuracy and comprehensiveness of the electoral register through working with partners with expertise in data and statistical analysis. This in turn will have implications for the organisational structure of EONI, particularly the need for area offices. The consultation paper discussed two possible models for taking forward EONI's work on maintaining the electoral register, either of which would allow EONI to operate on a sustainable financial footing in future. The first model was maintaining the register from a single site, with an alternative approach of retaining up to three area electoral offices (possibly co-located within district councils), in addition to the Belfast HQ. The consultation paper asked specifically:

Q.3 With EONI's routine work more focussed on maintaining the accuracy and comprehensiveness of the electoral register, and district councils providing advice to the public at local level, would you see a role for regional electoral offices?

2.6 Some respondents believed that the introduction of digital registration, coupled with the provision of local advice services within all eleven district councils, would reduce the need for regional area offices. Other respondents supported the retention of three area EONI offices, including co-locating these offices within district council offices. However, some respondents were critical of this approach on the basis that it could cause confusion for the public to have EONI provide a local advice service in some areas but district councils providing a local advice service in other areas.

2.7 The consultation was clear that the current model is financially and administratively unsustainable and decisions taken by the Chief Electoral Officer on the future structure of the Electoral Office must be financially viable. The consultation

did not therefore consult on retaining the status quo. However many respondents expressed broad opposition to the reduction or closure of any EONI area offices. There were concerns that a reduction would be a barrier to outreach work and that public confidence in the electoral process could be diminished if regional electoral offices were not retained. Digital registration will offer significant opportunities to look at new ways to improve the service offered to the public and implement new models of engagement to help increase registration.

2.8 The introduction of digital registration will lead to significant changes in how people in Northern Ireland choose to access registration services. Those wishing to register will be able to do so in a matter of minutes using their computer, tablet or mobile phone at a time that is convenient to them. In Great Britain, the digital service has proved extremely popular and now accounts for a huge proportion of all new registration applications. The Chief Electoral Officer has confirmed that outreach activity across Northern Ireland - including promoting registration to underrepresented groups, particularly young people - will benefit from the opportunities and flexibilities offered by digital registration.

The introduction of online registration, a new approach to outreach programmes, coupled with a local walk in service provided by district councils, would ensure that people wishing to register to vote would have more options than ever to do so.

2.9 The roll out of digital registration on 18th June 2018 will impact the way EONI delivers its statutory obligations and priorities and the Chief Electoral Officer has benefitted from hearing the views expressed as part of this consultation when considering the future structure of EONI. As some consultees noted, to have a small number of offices located within some district council offices could lead to potential confusion in the roles of EONI and councils. Continuing to equip smaller offices with the necessary IT to manage the digital registration system would also require significant funding from EONI which would have implications for the delivery of other areas of service provision. Taking account of views raised in the consultation the Chief Electoral

Officer will now consider how best to configure her offices and staff to optimise the opportunities offered by digital registration and in the context of reduced Electoral Office budgets.

C) Increasing the role of district councils in running elections and referendums

2.10 The consultation paper highlighted the responsibilities that district councils currently discharge in respect of local elections and sought views on whether they should have similar responsibilities in respect of other elections and referendums, which would bring Northern Ireland more in line with the responsibilities that councils perform in the rest of the UK. Specifically, the consultation paper asked:

Q.4 Should district councils have a role in delivering all elections and referendums in Northern Ireland, including Parliamentary and NI Assembly elections and referendums?

Q.5 Should councils take on the functions set out in paragraph 2.5.3 (and Annex C) at all elections and referendums?¹

Q.6 Are the safeguards set out in paragraph 2.5.5 & 2.5.6 sufficient to protect council employees undertaking electoral functions from the risk of political interference?²

2.11 Many respondents, including local government organisations, were supportive of district councils taking an enhanced role in delivering election counts. These respondents recognised the opportunity to strengthen and normalise local democratic

¹ Paragraph 2.5.3 of the consultation paper identified the main functions as: receiving and processing candidate and agent nominations; packing and storing ballot boxes; securing appropriate venues for the count; recruitment and training of count staff; managing the verification and count processes; managing some post-election returns and procedures.

² The safeguards set out in paragraphs 2.5.5 and 2.5.6 of the consultation paper involve giving the Chief Electoral Officer powers of delegation and direction to all council employees in respect of functions they undertake in running all elections and referendums in Northern Ireland. The Chief Electoral Officer would, therefore, retain overall responsibility for the management of all elections in Northern Ireland, including those functions being carried out by district councils

processes and bring arrangements for elections in Northern Ireland into line with the rest of the UK.

2.12 Some respondents however expressed concern about councils taking on these additional responsibilities, with the main objection that councils did not have the capacity to take on additional responsibilities following reductions in staff and the loss of experienced elections staff following the reorganisation of local councils.

2.13 A number of councils were also concerned about the implications for the delivery of day to day services and the impact on broader transformation agendas if additional electoral duties were to be incorporated into council responsibilities. The issue of ensuring that necessary resources and funding would be made available was raised both by those objecting to and supporting the proposal. Most councils also stated that they would need assurance that an increased burden would not fall on the ratepayer in relation to financing the running of elections.

2.14 The need for training of council staff and capacity building plans to be put in place featured in some responses from councils. Some respondents wanted more detail on related issues, for example how elections would be run across constituencies where the local council boundaries do not coincide. There were also concerns about the Chief Electoral Officer being given a power of delegation and direction, although others believed that such a power would be an important safeguard against both the risk of political interference and to ensuring consistent and successful counts.

2.15 There remains a case for councils having the responsibilities for other elections and referendums that they currently have for district council elections, which would will bring Northern Ireland more in line with how elections are managed in the rest of the UK. The Chief Electoral Officer will therefore conduct discussions with district councils on how best to move forward, including examining what resources and training would be required. The Chief Electoral Officer will also work closely with the NIO to ensure the necessary legislative measures and safeguards are in place to ensure that councils could discharge these roles with the Chief Electoral Officer retaining

overall control. This includes ensuring the Chief Electoral Officer has the necessary powers of delegation and direction, ensuring that the Chief Electoral Officer retains overall responsibility for delivering elections and referendums in Northern Ireland.

3. Summary of next steps

3.1 The Chief Electoral Officer will undertake the following next steps in the reform process:

- Implement digital registration in June 2018 (paragraph 2.9)
- Consider how the Electoral Office estate might best meet the needs of the electorate once digital registration is in place (paragraph 2.9)
- Engage with district councils on providing local services (paragraph 2.4)
- Engage with district councils on how the role of councils at elections and referendums could be developed (paragraph 2.15)
- Work with the NIO on ensuring that the necessary legislation and safeguards are in place to implement the proposed reforms (paragraph 2.15)

ANNEX A - List of responses to consultation

In total 29 responses to the consultation were received from:

Alan Robinson, Councillor
Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council
Ards and North Down Borough Council
Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council
Belfast City Council
Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council
Derry City and Strabane District Council
Electoral Commission
Fermanagh and Omagh District Council
Gregory Campbell, MP
Margaret Ritchie, MP
Mark Fielding, Councillor, Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council
Mid and East Antrim Borough Council
Mid Ulster District Council
Newry, Mourne and Down Borough Council
National Union of Students - Union of Students in Ireland
Northern Ireland Local Government Association
Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP)
Paul Frew, MLA
Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers, Northern Ireland
Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance (NIPSA)

8 responses were received from members of the public
A petition containing 440 names was received from NIPSA

