



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for the Office of the First Minister
and deputy First Minister

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Electoral Registration in Northern Ireland:
Electoral Commission Briefing

23 January 2013

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mike Nesbitt (Chairperson)
Mr Chris Lyttle (Deputy Chairperson)
Mrs Brenda Hale
Mr Alex Maskey
Mr John McCallister
Ms Bronwyn McGahan
Mr George Robinson

Witnesses:

Ms Anna Carragher	Electoral Commission
Mr Seamus Magee	Electoral Commission

The Chairperson: We welcome from the Electoral Commission Anna Carragher and Seamus Magee. Good afternoon. You are both very welcome. Anna, will you make a few opening remarks?

Ms Anna Carragher (Electoral Commission): Thank you very much. I start by thanking the Committee for inviting us to brief it on the report 'Continuous Electoral Registration in Northern Ireland'. I will give a couple of thoughts, and then Seamus can talk in slightly more detail about the findings.

You are experts in this as well as us, and you know that there has been a fundamental change in electoral registration over the past decade. The register is very much the bedrock of that. It underpins elections by providing a list of those who are eligible to vote, and if you are not on the register, you cannot vote. So it is, obviously, crucial for democracy, and it is also useful for other purposes. For example, boundary commissions use the register to calculate electoral quotas in determining parliamentary and local government boundaries, and it is also used to select people for jury service and for certain law enforcement and crime prevention purposes.

As you know, the final annual canvass of electors in Northern Ireland took place in 2006, and a system of continual electoral registration was then introduced. In 2008, the commission published the first research report into this system, and it found that the then Chief Electoral Officer had maintained quite high levels of accuracy but more needed to be done to sustain that level and improve the completeness of the register.

The recent report on continuous registration has found a very worrying decline in the accuracy and the completeness of the register. The primary reason for this is that the data-matching processes

employed by the Electoral Office have been, by themselves, insufficient to maintain a complete and accurate register. That results in the fact that people cannot vote, either because they are not registered or they are wrongly registered, perhaps at a polling station miles from their new home. There are obviously opportunities for electoral fraud if someone uses an old entry in the register to vote in the name of someone who has moved away, and people will not necessarily be contacted by candidates during the election. Campaigners can find themselves writing to or visiting people who are no longer there. It obviously means that people are not taken into account in the setting of the ward and constituency boundaries, and it has an effect on the summoning of people to jury service.

So, it is very clear that this is a situation that has to be addressed. The status quo is not an option. The commission made a number of recommendations to be taken forward by the Chief Electoral Officer, with the support of the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) and the commission. We are pleased to note that the Chief Electoral Officer and the NIO have accepted the report's overall findings and are now considering how they can move forward, based on our recommendations. I know that you will be talking to the Chief Electoral Officer after this session, and I am sure that he will provide further details on that.

I would point out some of the good work that the Electoral Office has done, particularly on registering young people in schools. Also, the last time that we appeared before the Committee to talk about the report on the elections, we mentioned performance standards, and we are piloting performance standards with the Chief Electoral Officer. That includes standards for electoral registration, and I think that will help all of us in managing the transparency of, and confidence in, the process.

I am sure that one of the things that the Committee is very conscious of is the worrying trend in political disengagement. We told you that in the recent elections, the turnout was about 55-6%, compared to a 2007 turnout of 62-9% and of just under 70% in 1998. One of the most common reasons that people gave for not voting was a lack of interest — not being bothered. Some 30% of respondents said that in our post-election survey, and that was higher than the proportion of voters in England at 19%, Scotland at 16% and Wales at 20%. Given recent events in Northern Ireland, I think it is obvious that there is an onus on us all to ensure that voters engage with the democratic process, and that engagement begins with being registered. So, I think that we all know how important this issue is.

That's the broad outline. Seamus has some of the details.

Mr Seamus Magee (Electoral Commission): Good afternoon and thanks for this opportunity. This is a fairly detailed report into the register in Northern Ireland. We looked at two areas: the accuracy of the register and how complete or comprehensive it was. What we mean by "accuracy" is that there are no false entries on the electoral register. By "completeness" or "comprehensiveness", we mean that every person who is entitled to be on the register is registered.

We did some work in 2008 — a similar survey with slightly different methodology — that looked at the electoral register that had been compiled, which was under continuous registration, and we published a report in 2008. At that time, there were high levels of accuracy and completeness of the register.

In this research, we took the register that was published on 1 April 2012. We engaged a company called ICM to do the fieldwork, and it used local fieldworkers. There were 50 sampling points across Northern Ireland for house-to-house enquiries. Our target was to visit 1,500 homes across Northern Ireland. Altogether, we ended up with a response rate of just over 73%. In other words, 1,118 homes were visited, and that elicited information from just over 2,100 people who lived there. We then checked the information against the electoral register that was in place at 1 April; the information gathered by interviewers on doorsteps was compared to that on the electoral register. It is important to point out that we were not conducting a census but a survey. However, overall, we are very confident in the reliability of the findings.

As you know, there are two registers: the local government and the UK parliamentary. The results found that the UK parliamentary register was 73% complete, and the local government register was 71% complete. In 2008, the equivalent figure was 83-4%, but as I said, the methodology then was slightly different, so I would not read too much into that. The completeness figure for Great Britain in 2011 was 82%. So, for Northern Ireland it is 73% for the UK parliamentary register, but the equivalent GB figure is 82%. That means that there were around 400,000 people not on the electoral register on 1 April at their current address. We are not saying that 400,000 more should be on the register. Many of those people are on the electoral register, but at an inaccurate address — if that makes sense to you. So, in other words, somebody could have moved, but is still on the register at his or her previous

address. The address is inaccurate. We found that the completeness of the register has deteriorated quite significantly since 2008.

We found, overall, that the register is 78% accurate. So, of all of the entries on the register — just over 1.2 million — 78% are accurate and 22% are inaccurate. That equates to around 270,000 inaccurate entries on the electoral register. The majority of those are due to the fact that people are no longer resident at their current registered address. Again, accuracy has deteriorated since 2008. What is actually happening is that the inclusion of those inaccurate entries actually inflates the size of the register. So, when people say that there are an awful lot of names on the register, the issue is that it is being inflated by a large number of inaccurate entries.

There are a number of significant demographic differences when you look at the research. If you look, for example, at the length of residence — the length of time that somebody lives in a property — you see that for anybody living there for over five years, the chances of their being on the register is 85%. For somebody who lives in a property for less than one year, the chances of their being registered is 7%. That compares with the GB figure of 26%. So, what you find is that for people who are in properties, whether rented accommodation or privately owned properties, for less than one year, the chances of their being registered is extremely low. When they have been there for five years, the chances of their being on the register is much higher.

We also found that homeowners are more likely to be registered. Among people who own their own houses, the registration rate is 85%. Among those in privately rented accommodation, it is 26%. There has been a very big change since the last work was done in 2008. At that time, around 78% of people in privately rented accommodation were registered. The figure has now fallen to 26%.

We have found that there is a very clear correlation with age. Of people who are over 65 years of age, 90% are registered. The figure declines among the other age groups; the only exception being 16- and 17-year-olds. That is clearly because of work that the Electoral Office does to visit all schools in Northern Ireland and register young people. That sort of bucks the trend, if you like, with regard to young people being registered.

With regard to nationality, of people who said that they were British or Irish, 73% are registered. Of people who described their nationality as European or Commonwealth, 58% were registered. However, among people who were clearly from the European Union, the figure fell very significantly. Only 20% said that they were registered to vote in Northern Ireland. That figures compares with 56% in Great Britain.

Again, with regard to social grouping, people who are in social group C2, as opposed to A or B, are less likely to be registered. It is not a huge difference. However, there is a difference.

What the findings really show us is that population movement is a key factor that affects electoral registration and that the processes that are currently employed to keep the register up to date are not really keeping pace with population change or, indeed, home movement. Not all of the people who are eligible to be registered or are actually moving house are being added to the electoral register.

Earlier, Anna mentioned data matching. A data-matching process has been in place since 2008 to allow the Chief Electoral Officer to use other data sources to help to maintain a register. However, research shows that data matching, basically, is not able to compensate for the movement that is happening in the register. That is fairly clear. Some of the recommendations are on improving those processes.

The other issue is that not actually removing redundant entries from the register simply inflates that register. It makes it look very big, but when we actually drill down into it, there are huge inaccuracies in it.

Another driver that affects electoral registration is interest in politics. From 1998 to 2009, 25% fewer people indicated that they are less interested or not interested in politics.

We made a number of recommendations to the Chief Electoral Officer and the Northern Ireland Office, which have responsibility for electoral registration issues. First, we want to see household registration activity taking place this autumn, in advance of the European election. That will ensure that people are on the electoral register for the European election and possible local elections in 2014. Secondly, we have recommended that the Chief Electoral Officer in Northern Ireland is given sufficient funding to conduct that work. We are responsible for public awareness of electoral registration and elections.

Therefore, we will support the Electoral Office's promotion of electoral registration and have plans afoot to do that in the autumn. Thirdly, we want the Chief Electoral Officer to review other data sources to see whether the ones that are used are the best sources, whether others could be added and how effective they are. We have recommended that some work is done on that, and I know that Graham will talk to you very briefly about that later. Finally, we also want performance standards to be set for the Chief Electoral Officer in Northern Ireland. There are performance standards for all returning officers across Great Britain. We want that framework applied to the Chief Electoral Officer in Northern Ireland so that performance standards can be set and comparisons made with elsewhere.

I have given you an overview of the report. It is available on the website and goes into very significant detail on the work that was completed. I should say that the fieldwork was done between April and July 2012.

The Chairperson: Seamus and Anna, thank you very much. We will go to questions. As we are all elected politicians, I suppose that we should all declare an interest.

Mr Lyttle: Thank you for your presentation, Seamus and Anna. The reports states that the current techniques used to manage the elected register are:

"insufficient for maintaining an accurate and complete register".

What specifically will be done to improve that?

Also, we have heard significant rhetoric recently about voter registration campaigns and increasing voter numbers. The Rock the Vote campaign that visited us from the US suggested that it was looking at automatic voter registration. Could that be explored in this jurisdiction?

Mr Magee: We have recommended that the Chief Electoral Officer takes forward work on the data matching. Currently, he uses data from the Department for Work and Pensions, but he could also match information held by designated bodies, such as the Housing Executive, to improve the electoral registration. We recommended that that work is done to look at how effective those data-matching organisations are in working with the Electoral Office and to identify others. I know that Graham has commissioned research by consultants to look into that, and that that work is ongoing. If other organisations or groups are identified, they will need to be included in legislation. The Northern Ireland Office is in a position to change the legislation, and a Northern Ireland miscellaneous provisions Bill, which is due to be introduced in February, will address a number of the recommendations in the report.

We were at the presentation from Rock the Vote. As you know, voter registration in America is done differently and there is no state funding for it. Rock the Vote is a movement of volunteers and private funds to encourage electoral registration. There is a different process here. During the evidence session with the Electoral Office, Graham Shields will be in a position to talk more clearly about whether people can be automatically registered to vote here. There is a possibility of people being registered online in future. People in Northern Ireland need a signature to register to vote. That and the provision of identifiers make online registration a bit more difficult. Hopefully, some of those issues can be addressed in the future. Graham can talk more about some of those issues.

Ms Carragher: I will pick up on that. We have been talking about the possibility of using much more online registration. As Seamus rightly said, the signature is an issue, but it is not an insurmountable one. There are ways round it, and we are discussing how we might do that with the Chief Electoral Officer.

I would point out that a lot of work has been done with schools. However, there is a cohort that leave school at 16 and miss out on that process at school. It is about finding ways of targeting that age group. That is the point of Rock the Vote — it is a very interesting organisation.

You have put your finger on something. There is a bit of gap in Northern Ireland. It is the job of the Electoral Commission to raise awareness about the process of registering and voting, rather than being a campaigning organisation to get people to vote. Bodies, such as the Hansard Society, that operate across the water do not operate here. There could be an opening here for such a body or something could be done in voluntary or community way to raise the importance of registering to vote and then being able to use the vote, particularly among those underrepresented groups.

Ms McGahan: Thank you for your presentation. You talked about campaigns to get people registered, but you also said that one of the big issues is population movement. People are registered, but when they go to vote, they are at a different address. I represent Fermanagh and South Tyrone, and Dungannon has one of the fastest growing populations in the North of Ireland. We have put that down to our foreign national community, people who work in the meat industry. Our office has been involved in registering those people and has found it to be a nightmare. For whatever reason, they move houses very quickly, and when they go to vote — I think it is in the council election — they are unable to do so because their addresses are different. Do you have any plans to deal with the issue of population movement? Dungannon and a few other areas have some of the fastest growing populations, and it is really difficult to keep on top of it.

Another example that I came across involved a young person who moved out of the family home to a new house and then decided to go to Australia for a year. As soon as someone moved in to rent their house, that young person was automatically struck off the electoral register. I thought that was ridiculous. I contacted the Omagh electoral office, but that was it. They were off the register because they no longer resided at that address. The family was very disappointed as it meant that the young person had to go through the whole process of registering again when they came back.

Mr Magee: I think that it is worth pointing out that the last full canvass of electors was carried out in 2006. That was five or six years ago. In the intervening period, the Electoral Office has relied on information from other bodies to keep the register up to date. The report found that that process has not been fully effective in doing that and that there has been much more movement or churn within the register than the information that was provided to the Electoral Office would suggest. We have recommended that household activity is carried out across Northern Ireland in the autumn and that a letter is sent to every household to try to update the electoral register. That will deal with your issue.

Quite a large proportion of people are not registered, but a significant proportion of people are no longer at the address at which they were previously registered. Those issues need to be addressed. I know that the Chief Electoral Officer has some planned activity for the autumn. He will tell you about that. It is his responsibility to compile the register. Our responsibility is to ensure that there are complete and accurate registers for elections in Northern Ireland.

Ms Carragher: I would just add to that that we have also made recommendations to ensure that, as well as activity this autumn, there is an ongoing process of review of the existing arrangements. That will ensure that we have the best possible continuous ability to update the register. In the last election, only 691 people out of the 666,000-odd who came to vote were unable to vote because they were wrongly registered. I absolutely take your point. Although the evidence was that it was not such an enormous problem at the last election, it could be worse going forward. Part of our objective is to ensure that the new arrangements that are put in place continuously address those issues.

Mr G Robinson: Following on from Chris's point, I have a couple of questions. First, do you ever see a time in the United Kingdom when it will be compulsory for everyone to vote? Secondly, I think that the 10-year ID that is issued to people who apply for it should automatically be given to everyone. Instead of passports, driving licences, and so forth, with people's photos on them, there should simply be one form of identification. A lot of people come into our office looking for help in obtaining ID cards. Given that the card lasts 10 years, it is a great way of turning up at a poll with a form of ID. It would be valid for the next couple of elections — possibly three or four elections.

Ms Carragher: Compulsory voting is really a matter for the various legislatures, so the commission does not have a remit or a particular view on the matter. If you will forgive me, I will pass on that one. The Chief Electoral Officer will want to pick up on the issue of ID cards.

Mr Magee: Electoral ID cards were introduced just over 10 years ago when individual electoral registration was introduced. You are right in saying that those cards will expire in 2013. However, the law was changed a number of years ago. People used to need current ID to vote, but now, as long as the photographic ID is sufficient to identify who someone is, he or she can still use that. The Electoral Office is available to provide people with photographic ID as and when required, and it runs a programme throughout the year; Graham Shields will cover that point.

Mr G Robinson: That would streamline things and make the situation more efficient than it currently is.

Mr McCallister: Following on from George's point, compulsory voting would compel only those who are on the register to vote, but the thousands who are not on the register would not have to turn up. Do you see us eventually having to go back to an annual canvass? Seamus made the point that a canvass has not been conducted since 2006, which is almost seven years ago. Will you have to go in that direction for accuracy? I should probably declare that I think that I am one of those people who might not be registered at the right address. I moved only 300 yards and did not leave the constituency or the district, but I think that I am still registered at the wrong address. I will ensure that I fix that promptly.

Mr Maskey: Did you leave the party as well then? *[Laughter.]*

Mr McCallister: No, definitely not.

The Chairperson: Is there any chance of your number 2?

Mr McCallister: Do you think that I am in Strangford? For accuracy, will we have to move back to an annual canvass? I am not getting a lot of comfort from the presentation, in that since the 2006 canvass, accuracy has fallen. We are further behind now than we were in 2008. The message that I am getting from both of you is that, year on year, accuracy levels will probably fall further behind.

Mr Magee: We have recommended that there should be annual activity. We are not talking about a full canvass every year, but activity should be undertaken every year to update the information on the electoral register. In Great Britain, individual electoral registration is being introduced. As part of that process, returning officers or registration officers will be allowed to carry out household activity every year to keep their registers up to date. The recommendation is that annual activity is also necessary. Data matching can serve a useful purpose, but annual door-to-door, house-to-house enquiries will be required, which must be targeted.

Ms Carragher: That is not the only thing that will be required. We also identified that the processes for continuous registration have been deficient, so we have recommended a number of improvements to those processes. A combination of improving the process and annual activity will address the issues.

Mr McCallister: Colleagues have fired out some ideas. Chris talked about making online registration easier. Has much work been done on that, perhaps targeting 10% for a verification check to ensure accuracy and completeness? Surely systems can be put in place to make any change easier.

Bronwyn spoke about population movement, for work purposes, and so on. That is a big issue. People, particularly young people, move about in rented accommodation. We need to make it easy for people to register, but with the safeguard of a checking system. Whatever percentage is checked, there must be safeguards that information is not being duplicated and people do not have votes in multiple constituencies — unless they are voting for me, of course, which is an entirely different issue.

Mr Maskey: Anna and Seamus, thank you for your presentation. I am interested in a breakdown by constituency of the 690 people who turned up and were not on the register. I am curious to drill down on that. George mentioned compulsory registration, and John talked about making systems easier. I wonder whether there is an ethos problem. Seamus, you and I have had discussions in polling stations and count centres. In my opinion, over the years, the electorate have been treated as hostiles by the Electoral Office. Pensioners had to leave polling stations because their driving licences were out of date by a day, and they were not allowed to vote. As Bronwyn said, difficulties arise in trying to get people onto the electoral register. It is not easy.

It is a bit of a mixed bag because some changes have been made. However, by the same token, there has to be an understanding that the Electoral Office is there to get people the right to vote and to discharge that right. In my opinion, there is still an ethos whereby people are treated as suspects. There was an attitude that every voter was a fraud and a lot of personation was going on. Thankfully, in recent years, we have not heard one allegation against any party that people had been elected on the basis of personated votes. That is all gone. In fact, we hear quite the reverse now, and people have difficulty getting onto the electoral register. It is a good campaign to encourage people to get on the register, however they choose to vote. However, there is an ethos underpinning some of the difficulties, and it should be made easier.

You outlined a decline in the situation, so how do you determine how much responsibility lies with the Electoral Office? Somebody, somewhere is not getting it right. National insurance numbers, for instance, are used for many things, so why can they not be used as a means of identification? As soon as you are eligible for that, do you die? For the life of me, I cannot understand why something like that could not be applied in a place with such a small population. For me, there is an issue around ethos.

The report includes a question about people's interest in politics. I remember a congressman coming here in the 1990s, and he said that he found it remarkable that everybody to whom he spoke, from the moment he got off the plane until he went home, told him that they were not interested in politics but spent the next half-hour talking about politics. That is interesting, so perhaps a different question should have been asked. People might be switched off or not bothered about politics. That is a person's choice, but a lot of people are interested in politics. We all know that. What is your view on ethos and how it impacts on people's willingness to take that extra step to get on the electoral register and make it easier? If you are employed by the Electoral Office and have it in your mind that it is your job to get people onto that register and have their right to cast their vote, those people might see fewer obstacles in their way. Do you have performance rating? We will talk directly to the Electoral Office later this afternoon, but do you have any way to judge or benchmark how that office is discharging its duties?

Ms Carragher: I am talking about the Electoral Commission's responsibilities in that arena. I mentioned performance standards, which we are piloting with the Electoral Office. Part of that relates to the number of people who are registered and how easy it is for them to register. There will be measurements of those numbers from the Electoral Commission to the Electoral Office.

As for ethos, we mentioned that we will look at public awareness, which was very much the responsibility of the Electoral Commission until, I think, 2010.

Mr Magee: It was 2007.

Ms Carragher: However, we bid for and received funding to carry out a public awareness campaign in the autumn to run alongside the Electoral Office's campaign. Part of that will be targeted at ethos, making it easier for people to register, making sure that people know how to register, and after they have registered, how to use their vote. That is our response to the ethos part of your question.

Mr Magee: Certainly, in the early days of individual electoral registration, people had difficulties getting onto the electoral register. Things have improved. Photographic ID, for example, no longer needs to be current. At one time, people turned up to vote and were told that their passport was out of date by two days, a week and so on. That has changed. There have been other changes in the Electoral Office to encourage people to register. I am not sure whether there is an ethos. We are conscious of the fact that the Electoral Office sees it as its role to get people registered to vote.

We pointed out that over 1.2 million people are registered. That is good, but we want to ensure that those people are at the right address so that, when they come to vote, they can vote without any difficulty. That is the challenge.

Mrs Hale: Welcome to the Committee. My point expands on what Alex, George and others have said. Perhaps the lack of interest and engagement is, unfortunately, a by-product of a more settled and peaceful society. People are disengaging and feeling that there is no need to use their vote. You talked about the lower social groups, C2, and so on. The indigenous population is given a number at birth, and it comes through with a national insurance card at 16 years of age. If people move house or change doctors, that number carries through. Changes of address happen all the time, including when people attend a health centre, and so on.

How are we getting on with people who vote by proxy? My daughter has just gone away to university. She is aware of proxy voting because I told her about it, but her friends at uni are not aware that they are able to vote in that way. They have no idea of how to do that once they register. How are we educating our young people who go to the mainland to university?

Have you evaluated the voting campaigns? Do we know how successful they are? Is there an increase in registration after those campaigns?

Ms Carragher: I will deal with your last point. There is an upsurge in people registering. The awareness campaigns tend to be carried out before elections, and, at that point, there is a definite uptake in registration. Seamus, will you pick up on the point about people going to university?

Mr Magee: All our campaigns are evaluated independently. They are proven in electoral registration and in what people need to do on polling day with photographic ID. They are all evaluated. Over the years, they have proven to be good value for money for registration and for elections.

The use of a national insurance number is an interesting idea. Perhaps Graham will pick up on that, given that, as you say, all individuals are given a national insurance number at the age of 16, which could, perhaps, carry through. What was the other point?

Ms Carragher: It was about people who go to university in Northern Ireland and use a proxy vote.

Mr Magee: As part of our campaigns at election time, we do quite a lot of media and press publicity about proxy votes and postal votes. We set out clearly how to apply for a postal vote and how to obtain a proxy vote.

Mrs Hale: What about running those campaigns on the mainland as well, given that a lot of our students attend universities there, and given that Northern Ireland elections do not always run in tandem with those at Westminster?

Ms Carragher: We have not done that, but we can certainly take that idea away and think about it.

We talked about national insurance numbers. Data protection is important in this matter. Getting access to some of those databases is not particularly simple, and people are rightly cautious about organisations having access to public databases. Nevertheless, it is an interesting idea.

The Chairperson: I will conclude by suggesting that that is the key issue. The issue is not the availability of the information, whether it is national insurance numbers or information held by HMRC or even estate agents, the Housing Executive or Royal Mail. People know when there are changes that knock people off the electoral register. The issue is not the availability of the information but the access to it.

Ms Carragher: Quite rightly, there are cautions about access to people's confidential information. They are not insuperable, but they are there for good reasons.

The Chairperson: Anna and Seamus, thank you very much.