



Northern Ireland
Assembly

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Single Transferable Vote: Operation in the new councils

Introduction

The following paper is a supplementary to the briefing note on Single Transferable Vote (STV) (NIAR 854-13). Information on how STV may operate in the new councils was discussed with Departmental Officials. Detail on the specific operations of STV has not been confirmed as yet; therefore information provided in this paper may alter in any resulting guidance to come.

To fill positions of responsibility, councils will have to choose between nomination using D'Hondt or St Lague (both of which are very similar but use different formulas) or electing through Single Transferable Vote. Councils will decide on the model using Qualified Majority Vote (80%), however should agreement not be reached, then D'Hondt will be the default model.

In Practice

It is not clear as yet how STV will operate at the practical level within the new councils. However through discussions with Departmental Officials it is understood that STV will have to operate at a far larger scale compared to how it is used currently, this is due to the number of council positions of responsibility that have to be filled. These are listed in the original briefing note on STV.

There will be two main stages to election through STV:

Stage 1: Councils will nominate suitable candidates for a particular position.

Detail on how this will operate is not available as yet, however during discussion it was suggested that candidates will have to agree to be nominated (a mechanism will have to be provided to ensure this i.e. a proposer and a seconder). Whether parties will put candidates forward through their nominating officer is not known at this stage – however this may be thought about under Part 2 of Schedule 3 which states

“(3) The Department may by order make provision about elections under this Part or any matter relating to them.”

Stage 2: STV will be used to elect one of the nominated candidates for a particular position

The process will be run over a four year period. This means councils will use STV to elect a person for a position for each of the four years e.g. Council Chair for yr.1, then again for yr.2, yr.3 and then finally for yr.4. This will be the same for each of the positions of responsibility requiring a separate STV to be run four times for each position.

It is not known at this stage whether the process will use a series of ballot papers.

The difference between how STV will operate at council level compared to Assembly elections is the fact only one person needs to reach the quota in order to fill the position instead of six. Should no one reach the quota, the candidate with the lowest votes is dropped and their votes redistributed. This process is continued until one candidate reaches the quota. Should more than one candidate reach the quota, it is not clear as yet whether the person with the highest votes is given the position. However it was suggested by the Department that the formula for calculating the quota could possibly be adjusted to ensure that it is only possible for one person to reach the quota (for the Assembly elections it is used to allow for six people to reach it).

Candidates can put their name down for a number of different positions- however they can only be elected for one.

Which Model?

At this stage it is hard to speculate which of the models councils will choose to use. The Department is however of the opinion that D'Hondt and St Lague may run the risk of smaller parties and independents forming a coalition that may in fact end up larger than the main party- however this may not be welcomed by the majority of the voting public. With STV, groups/parties may come together in more of an informal way by agreeing to support one another for a particular position. Therefore it was suggested by the Department that STV could allow for more flexibility to elect candidates across all parties, giving members the opportunity to vote for the most suitable candidate for a particular post, rather than restricting it to a specific party for a particular position (as is the case more so with D'Hondt).

However, because in the past D'Hondt has been known to favour the larger parties, the Bill aims to address this by running the process over a four year period to give smaller parties an opportunity to get a position of responsibility. Also, the Department has found that in the past the use of D'Hondt has varied to some degree across councils, therefore the Bill aims to create a form of consistency to ensure there is less variation from one council to the next.

The Department is currently working on further guidance for the operation of STV. The Bill gives more detail on the operation of D'Hondt and St Lague as both processes are more familiar; in fact the Bill aims to tighten up the use of D'Hondt and make it more of a fair process for all parties concerned. However, the main example of how STV operates is at Assembly and European elections which are not applicable at council level. Due to this, the Department informed that it appears that STV within the new councils will need to operate differently than it is currently understood to operate.