



House of Commons
Northern Ireland Affairs
Committee

**Electoral Registration
in Northern Ireland**

First Report of Session 2004–05

*Report, together with formal minutes, oral and
written evidence*

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The Northern Ireland Affairs Committee

The Northern Ireland Affairs Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration, and policy of the Northern Ireland Office (but excluding individual cases and advice given by the Crown Solicitor); and other matters within the responsibilities of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (but excluding the expenditure, administration and policy of the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions, Northern Ireland and the drafting of legislation by the Office of the Legislative Counsel).

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Summary

The Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002 has been successful in reducing fraud and establishing a more transparent electoral system for the people of Northern Ireland but our inquiry has uncovered a number of serious flaws in the current arrangements:

The rate of voter registration has been declining at an alarming rate and stands at less than 84% of those eligible. This level is a threat to the confidence in the present electoral arrangements and action to reverse the decline is required as a matter of urgency.

Young people and socially and economically depressed groups are under-represented on the register. Less than 25% of 17 and 18 year olds are registered. Sustained action needs to be taken to improve registration levels for these groups.

The registration forms provided for use by people with disabilities and learning difficulties are unwieldy and measures to improve arrangements for registering voters in these categories need to be devised.

Names of voters are no longer placed automatically on next year's register irrespective of whether they have registered to vote. We support fully this key measure to exclude so-called 'phantom' names from the register. However, imaginative measures are required to provide those who have failed to re-register with further opportunities to do so.

Some good work to publicise the changes in election arrangements has been done by the Electoral Commission but much more is required, particularly to target young people and those vulnerable groups which are under-represented on the electoral register.

We support the requirement for photographic identification to be produced before a vote is able to be cast. A number of photographic documents are acceptable including the new Electoral Identity Card (EID). Fewer EIDs were issued than expected, and while the Electoral Office of Northern Ireland believes that the original requirement for EIDs has been met by other forms of photographic ID, over 3,500 voters were rejected at polling stations at both the Northern Ireland Assembly and the European Parliament elections as a result of not having adequate ID. We recommend that efforts to increase the uptake of the EID should be redoubled.

Assembly elections in 2003 took place in the period of the annual canvass. This caused confusion among the electorate and overburdened the staff of the Electoral Office of Northern Ireland. The government should consider legislation to ensure that this unsatisfactory state of affairs does not recur.

There is evidence that the arrangements for funding the Electoral Office of Northern Ireland are insufficiently flexible to meet its responsibilities under the 2002 Act, and could generally be improved. We call on the government to review the Office's funding mechanism with a view to making any necessary improvements.

There was evidence that the working relationship between the Electoral Commission and the Electoral Office of Northern Ireland could be improved. One example of poor working practice was the failure of these bodies to co-ordinate telephone help lines properly during

the 2003 canvass period. This risked confusing those calling to seek advice. It is not cost-effective when the two organisations run competing services. The Electoral Commission and Electoral Office must lead the drive to engender confidence in the new voting arrangements and by co-ordinating their operations ensure fulfilment of their shared aims. The government needs to satisfy itself that the allocation of responsibilities between these bodies is fully transparent, and that there is no structural impediment to their full co-operation.

1 Introduction

1. The Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002 introduced major changes to the electoral registration process aimed at combating electoral fraud which had long been perceived as a significant problem in Northern Ireland. Following the publication of the first electoral register compiled under the new system, this Committee launched an inquiry into the operation and effects of the Act in February 2003. The terms of reference were to examine:

the reasons for the reported drop in voter registration in some areas

the procedures in place for publicising and issuing the new electoral identity card

the measures taken to prepare voters and presiding officers at polling stations for other changes in voting procedures; and

the effectiveness of measures taken by Government and other bodies to promote participation in parliamentary elections in Northern Ireland, while tackling electoral fraud

2. The Committee issued a call for evidence on 6 February 2003 and took oral evidence on 2 April 2003.¹ We extended our inquiry to enable us to consider evidence arising from the first elections held under the new system, and to take account of reports published by the Electoral Commission about the first year of operation and the 2003 Assembly elections.

3. We are grateful to those who assisted us with the inquiry; in particular, the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Office of the Electoral Commission who gave oral evidence to us twice. We also wish to thank the House of Commons Committee Office Scrutiny Unit for its assistance throughout this inquiry.

¹ The Committee published the Minutes of Evidence of the first session in May 2003 (HC619). Further evidence and minutes are published in this volume

2 Background

The reasons for introducing the Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002

4. The 2002 Act sought to address a widespread and longstanding perception that electoral fraud was rife in Northern Ireland. While the evidence for this remains largely anecdotal, a review of the electoral processes in Northern Ireland in 1998 by the Northern Ireland Office concluded that “Despite the lack of hard evidence presented to the Review” it was “convinced that a level of abuse exists which is unacceptable.”²

5. In 1998 this Committee investigated electoral fraud in Northern Ireland and identified four main forms of fraud which were thought to be prevalent and significant:

Multiple entries on the register. It is legal for individuals to be registered at more than one address; and for some groups, such as students, this is entirely legitimate. However, this renders the system vulnerable to multiple voting. Our 1998 Report, concluded that “in our view the evidence indicates that there may be a serious level of multiple registrations, at least in some parts of Northern Ireland.”³

Personation, which “is where a vote is stolen by someone who pretends to be another person entitled to vote.”⁴

Absent voting abuse, which involves postal or proxy voting. The 1998 report noted that “there is a remarkably high rate of absent voting in some areas.”⁵ “The target group for having their votes stolen were those who were judged least likely to vote, namely the infirm; the old; students; known alcoholics; or those who had never voted in the past.” ... “despite the difficulties of finally assessing the extent of this form of abuse, Mr Bradley [then Chief Electoral Officer] is satisfied beyond any shadow of a doubt that the problem is extensive and involves otherwise law-abiding citizens.”⁶

Undue influence, which covers a range of behaviour including “not only intimidation, but also the use of activists to follow postmen delivering postal votes and then to call at houses to collect the postal vote forms or the votes themselves.”⁷

The provisions of the Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002

6. The 2002 Act goes a considerable way to meeting the recommendations made in our 1998 report on Electoral Malpractice in Northern Ireland⁸ by changing fundamentally the system of registration in a number of ways:

2 Northern Ireland Office: *Administering Elections in Northern Ireland*: Report of the Elections Review October 1998; <http://www.nio.gov.uk/press/1998/oct/981021z-nio.htm>

3 Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, 1997-1998, Second Report: *Electoral Malpractice in Northern Ireland*, para. 23

4 Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, 1997-1998, Second Report: *Electoral Malpractice in Northern Ireland*, para. 25

5 Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, 1997-1998, Second Report: *Electoral Malpractice in Northern Ireland*, para. 33

6 Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, 1997-1998, Second Report: *Electoral Malpractice in Northern Ireland*, para. 37

7 Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, 1997-1998, Second Report: *Electoral Malpractice in Northern Ireland*, para. 42 referring to evidence given by the then Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland.

Registration is on an individual rather than a household basis.

The annual canvass is supplemented by rolling registration.

The carry-forward mechanism is abolished.

The Act also provides a number of safeguards against electoral fraud.⁹

Applications for voter registration must be signed by the applicant, except where the Chief Electoral Officer (CEO) deems that incapacity or illiteracy makes this impossible.

Applicants must provide their date of birth and National Insurance Number (or a signed declaration that they do not have an NI number).

Applicants have to confirm that they have been resident in Northern Ireland for three months, and also provide details of any electoral registrations elsewhere in the UK.

Any person who fails to provide the above information to the satisfaction of the CEO will be excluded from the register.

At polling stations, staff may ask electors for their date of birth in order to compare this with the date given at the time of application for registration. If staff are not satisfied with the answer, the ballot paper may be marked.

At polling stations, electors will be required to produce photographic ID, either in the form of a valid UK or EU Passport, a photographic senior SmartPass, a valid photographic UK Driving Licence, or an Electoral Identity Card.

The Electoral Identity Card is issued free of charge by the CEO to all electors who do not have other photographic ID acceptable at polling stations, and who apply for the card;

3 Impact of the Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002

Successful in eliminating fraud?

7. Although irrefutable evidence of electoral fraud in Northern Ireland has not been produced, public opinion surveys have revealed that the majority of the population considered fraud to be a widespread and significant problem. In October 2002, 66% of the population agreed that “electoral fraud is very common in some areas” whilst 64% thought that “electoral fraud in some areas is enough to change the election results.”¹⁰ Such perceptions are not proof that the actual level of fraud is high but it is reasonable to adduce

8 A summary of the recommendations of the Committee compared to the provisions of the Act are provided in the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee Annual Report 2002 (HC271)

9 Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002 Chapter 13; ER5, para 2.1

10 Electoral Commission: *The Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002: An Assessment of its First Year in Operation*, table 3, page 17. Percentages are the total of respondents who answered either “tend to agree” or “strongly agree”.

a correlation between actual and perceived levels of fraud. Furthermore, if electors perceive fraud to be rife, and sufficient to change the outcome of elections, this is likely to undermine their confidence in the integrity of the electoral process. Such lack of confidence may, in turn, affect people's interest in politics and their propensity to vote.

8. Following the November 2003 Assembly elections which were the first to be held under the new system introduced by the Electoral Fraud Act, a representative survey conducted by the Electoral Commission found that 65% of the population believed that “new laws about registering and voting have helped to overcome electoral fraud.”¹¹ A further survey in April 2003 indicated that approximately 72% of the population then felt that the new system would help alleviate their concerns about electoral fraud.¹² Before the implementation of the 2002 Act some two thirds of the population thought electoral fraud was common. After its implementation, more than two thirds had confidence that the new system would help to reduce fraud, though the majority did not believe that fraud had been eliminated altogether. This is a significant improvement in perception.

9. A survey of presiding officers in the 2001 general election, and repeated after the 2003 Assembly elections, indicated that the percentage of presiding officers who reported having seen people voting more than once under different names had decreased from 3% in 2001 to 0.1% in 2003. The proportion who had experience of voters being turned away because someone had already voted in their name had declined from 4% to 1%, and the proportion who had been presented with ID documents which they suspected to be forgeries had dropped from 3% in 2001 to 0.2% in 2003.¹³ This evidence was further supported by evidence given by the Northern Ireland Police Service to the Electoral Commission.¹⁴

10. On the basis of the all the evidence currently available to us, we are satisfied that the Electoral Fraud Act (Northern Ireland) 2002 has been successful in reducing both the perception among the electorate of the prevalence of fraud and the actual level of electoral fraud, so far as it can be measured. The measures introduced in the Act have served to increase the level of public confidence in the integrity of the electoral process.

The decline in registered voters

The difference between the registers of August and December 2002

11. The August 2002 register of electors was the last to be compiled on the basis of the former registration system. The former register contained 1,192,136 names, whilst the first register under the new system published in December 2002 contained 1,072,346 names¹⁵... a reduction of some 10% or 119,790 names.

11 Electoral Commission: *The Northern Ireland Assembly Elections 2003: The Official Report on the Northern Ireland Assembly Elections 26 November 2003*, para 5.64

12 Q1, Mr Singh

13 Electoral Commission: *The Northern Ireland Assembly Elections 2003: The Official Report on the Northern Ireland Assembly Elections 26 November 2003*, Figure 7, p84

14 Q1, Mr Magee

15 Electoral Commission: *The Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002: An Assessment of its First Year in Operation*, para. 4.2

12. The Electoral Commission has conducted an analysis of the available evidence on the pre- and post-2002 Act electoral registers in Northern Ireland and compared these to Census data. The total number of names on the August 2002 electoral register made up 95.5% of the number of people who, according to the 2001 Census, were eligible to vote. In theory, this indicates that the registration level was 95.5% of the population, a high figure compared to the 93% UK-wide registration level of 93%¹⁶. On the December 2002 register, the number of registered voters as compared to census data on the number of eligible voters had dropped to just 86% as compared to the 95.5% on the August 2002 register.

13. In practice, matching the names of the electoral register to people counted accurately in the Census is not possible because the recorded registration level will be affected by people who are not registered, as well as ‘phantom names’ that should not be on the register. These two groups in part cancel each other out although the net reported registration level will be skewed one way or the other if one of the two groups is significantly greater than the other. Ward-level data from the former, pre-2002 Act register lends support to the Electoral Commission’s conclusion that the 95.5% registration level under the previous system was inflated. The former register reflected a “significant proportion of wards...[with] registration rates well in excess of 100%, illustrating the fact that there are more people registered in these wards than are recorded as actually living there.” Indeed, one ward had a registration level of 126%.¹⁷

14. There is a high correlation between the registration levels of the August and December 2002 registers. Wards that had had high registration levels under the former system tended also to have high levels of registration under the new system. The opposite was also the case. The generally high level of correlation between the registration levels in wards under the former and the new registers is reassuring. However, the level of registration declined disproportionately in the most economically deprived areas and urban areas¹⁸. Seventeen of the 20 wards with the greatest decline in registrations are in Belfast constituencies.

Subsequent developments in the Electoral Register

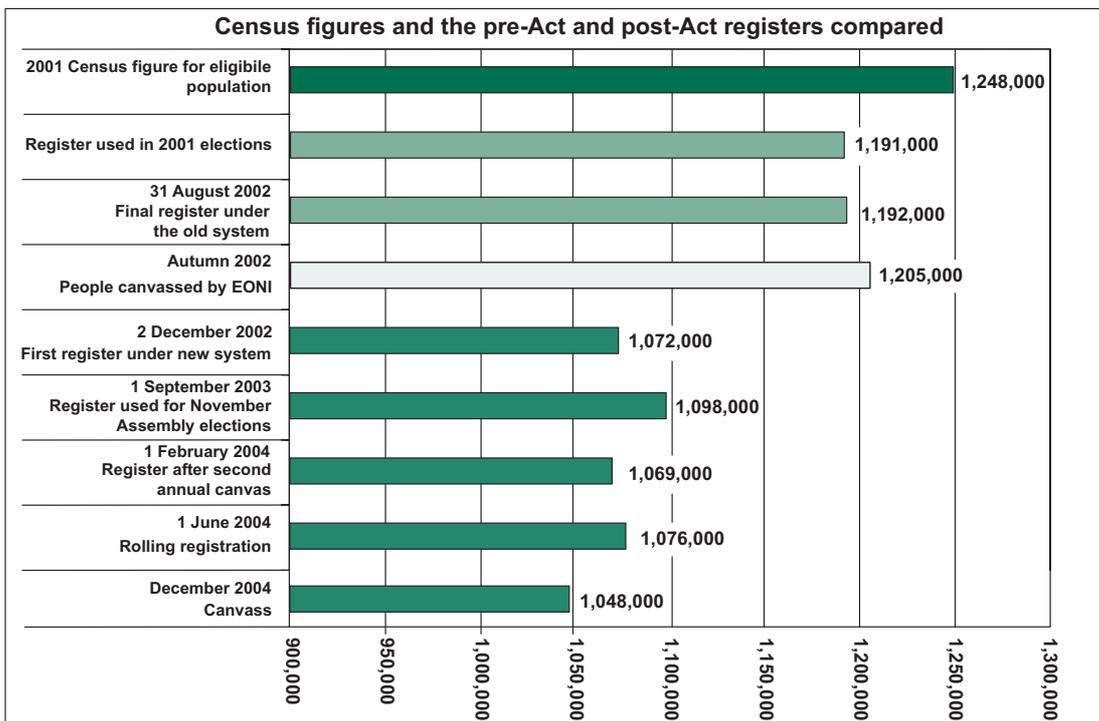
15. As illustrated in Figure 1, between December 2002 and September 2003 the number of registered persons had increased by 25,205 as a result of rolling registration. Despite this the number of names on the register used for the 2003 Assembly elections

16 Electoral Commission (2003), *Attitudes towards Voting and the Political Process in 2003*

17 Electoral Commission: *The Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002: An Assessment of its First Year in Operation*, para. 4.13.

18 Electoral Commission: *The Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002: An Assessment of its First Year in Operation*, para. 5.8 & 5.11.

Figure 1



DATA SOURCE: Electoral Commission and Electoral Office Northern Ireland

(the September 2003 register) was still 7.9% below the number included on the August 2002 register, the final register to be compiled under the former system of registration.

16. Following the second annual canvass in the autumn of 2003, the number of names on the register (published in February 2004) decreased again, falling below even the level from the first annual canvass in 2002. Names have subsequently been added and removed through rolling registration and by 1 June 2004, the register stood at 1,076,198. The 2004 canvass (published 1 December 2004) has seen a further decline in the register, whether compared to the 2003 canvass, or the subsequent rolling registration figures. The electoral register now contains the names of 1,047,601 voters, as compared to the 2001 census figure of 1,248,301. The level of registration as compared to the census figure is thus 83.9%

17. The Electoral Commission and the Chief Electoral Officer both acknowledge that, whilst the new register is more robust than registers under the former system, the decline in the registration rate is a cause for concern.¹⁹ Northern Ireland political parties across the political spectrum have also expressed disquiet about the number of individuals eligible to register but who do not figure on the current register.²⁰ UUP and Sinn Fein have scrutinised the 2001 Census figures and argue that in December 2002 a further 50,000 – 60,000 eligible individuals remained unregistered in Northern Ireland in addition to the 115,680 persons missing as compared to the August register.²¹ These arguments assume that an unprecedented registration level of 100% is attainable.

19 Q3 Electoral Commission, Mr Singh; Q41 The Chief Electoral Office, Mr Stanley

20 ER1, ER2 & ER2A, ER6A

21 ER1, ER2 & ER2A

A spiral of continuous structural decline in the register?

18. A pattern appears to be emerging for the number of registered electors to decline at each canvass only to show a slow increase thereafter as a consequence of rolling registrations. The Electoral Commission pointed to evidence suggesting “an emerging downward trend in the electoral register.” Although this evidence was limited because the new system had been in operation for 18 months at the time, the Commission considered that “nonetheless the available ‘like-for-like’ comparisons indicate that the register is falling by about 1.5-2 per cent per annum.”²² This view is backed up by the 2004 canvass results, published on 1 December 2004, which show a further decline in the register to a registration level of just 83.9%

This finding is a particular cause for concern in Northern Ireland because the adult population of Northern Ireland is increasing at a rate of 0.7% per annum.²³ The Electoral Commission warned that:

“...unless it is rectified, the downward trend in the register has the potential of embedding itself structurally in the registration process. If the register is in decline, then the number that can be canvassed will also tend to fall from one canvass to the next, thus reinforcing the cycle.”²⁴

The registration rate in May 2004 had declined to just 84.8% of those eligible for inclusion on the register.

19. We are concerned by the emerging evidence of a continuous structural process of decline in the electoral register. Further serious decline would place the democratic integrity of the electoral system in Northern Ireland at risk. We recommend that the Electoral Commission should identify and evaluate the options available for arresting the decline in the register within the framework of the Electoral Fraud Act as a matter of urgency. The Electoral Commission should involve the Chief Electoral Officer in this process in order to ensure that any recommendations for improvement made are practical and capable of implementation.

Adverse impacts

20. Electoral Commission research has demonstrated that the changes in the system of electoral registration have had a particularly adverse effect on the levels of registration, particularly among three groups which we discuss below: young people; people living in areas characterised by high levels of social deprivation; and people with disabilities.²⁵

22 ER5A, para 3.5

23 ER5A, para 3.4

24 ER5A, para 3.14

25 ER5B section 2

Young people

21. The age group 18–24 were the least likely to be registered in the first register to be compiled under the new arrangements in December 2002, with 29% not registered.²⁶ When giving evidence to us in July 2004, the Electoral Commission noted that this figure had risen to 33%. This compares to a non-registration level for the same age group of 11% in England, Scotland and Wales.²⁷ The levels of registration among 17-18 year-olds is only 20–25%²⁸. Three out of four young people who may be eligible to vote in the next election are not on the electoral register. The Electoral Office for Northern Ireland clearly recognises that improving the numbers of young people on the register is a priority :

“What we would ultimately like to see is that the process of elections and registration is part of the curriculum in the final years of secondary schools and perhaps in the first year in tertiary education whereby it becomes the norm that the students in that age group be given some instruction on the political process, on the parliamentary process and on the registration process, and as part of that system that people are encouraged to register both for the main register but equally in order to get an electoral identity card because we see that as being somewhat of an attractive item for people of that age.”²⁹

22. Electoral processes do not currently appear in the school curriculum, and the Electoral Office is discussing with the Northern Ireland Office the possibility of launching an outreach programme in schools, colleges, and possibly universities in Northern Ireland.³⁰ This would involve a workshop, possibly in conjunction with visits by the mobile ID card unit. However, this proposal depends on funding being made available to the Electoral Office.³¹

23. The Electoral Commission is also targeting young people with specific advertising and outreach campaigns. Campaigns on student campuses, outreach campaigns in post-primary schools, as well as promotional activities at locations likely to be attended by young people have taken place.³² The Commission told us that, in the course of one weekend, a Commission outreach officer attending a summer festival in Belfast was able to identify and sign up 500 young people who were not on the electoral register.³³

24. Another novel approach which could increase the levels of registration among young people is to advertise the electoral identity card to them as a desirable means of proving their age and identity, for example, in clubs or to obtain credit.³⁴ Once the interest of young

26 Figure based on data from opinion surveys. Electoral Commission: *The Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002: An Assessment of its First Year in Operation*, para 5.10.

27 Q14, Electoral Commission, Mr Magee

28 Q5, The Electoral Commission, Mr Magee; Q50, Electoral Office, Mrs Butler

29 Q47, The Electoral Office, Mr Stanley

30 Q48, The Electoral Office, Mr Stanley

31 Q49, The Electoral Office, Mrs Butler

32 ER5B, section 2

33 Q4, Electoral Commission, Mr Magee

34 Q15, The Electoral Commission, Mr Singh

people has been stimulated and they have made contact with the Electoral Office, the Office considered that it would be easier to achieve their registration:

“...there has been some indication that when young people are trying to get the ID card—and they are trying perhaps to get it for other reasons to prove that they are 18 or over—there is some carry-forward interest into the area of registration and some of the rolling registration applications have come about because of young people trying to get ID cards.”³⁵

25. These initiatives are worthwhile and should continue. Consideration should also be given to placing responsibility on adult members of households who are being canvassed to identify young people who are 17 to the Electoral Office. This will assist the Office to contact those who will soon be eligible to vote, and help ensure that future voters are properly informed. While the responsibility for registering should remain that of the individual concerned, it is vital that those who are ‘coming of age’ should be made aware of their future role in the electoral system.

26. We are especially concerned about the unacceptably low levels of registration in the 17–24 age group. We commend the initiatives of the Electoral Office and the Electoral Commission in taking the electoral registration process to young people in schools, colleges and festivals and urge that this should be developed further. We recommend that the Government ensures that extra funding be made available to develop adequately a full range of outreach programmes to engage young people.

27. Intensive efforts must be made to bring about a system in which 17 and 18 year olds are entered on the electoral register as a matter of course. We recommend that consideration is given to making electoral registration, and the electoral process in general, a compulsory part of the curriculum for 16-17 year olds; and that adults in households should be made responsible for identifying to the Electoral Office of Northern Ireland young people of 17 residing in their households to assist the Electoral Office in making contact with them.

Socially and economically deprived groups

28. Many of the wards experiencing the greatest decline in registration rates between the August and December 2002 registers were characterised by high levels of social and economic deprivation.³⁶ Among these wards are Whiterock, Falls, Twinbrook, Ardoyne, Woodstock, Shaftesbury and Springfarm. In the 20 wards with the greatest decline in electoral registrations, the percentage of people in receipt of income support and jobseekers allowance (33.5%) was significantly above the Northern Ireland average (17%). The unemployment rate in these 20 wards was 15% on average, compared to a Northern Ireland average at that time of 6.9%.³⁷

35 2003 - Q21

36 Electoral Commission: *The Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002: An Assessment of its First Year in Operation*, para. 5.8. See also para 7.17

37 Electoral Commission: *The Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002: An Assessment of its First Year in Operation*, para 5.8

29. Subsequent research carried out by the Electoral Commission has indicated that the association between social deprivation and electoral registration, as reflected in annual canvass data, is only part of the picture since the uptake of rolling registration appears to be higher in areas of high social deprivation than in other areas, therefore partially offsetting the lower levels of registration achieved in annual canvasses in these areas.³⁸

30. In the December 2002 canvass, the inverse correlation between areas of high deprivation and low levels of electoral registration was exacerbated by the fact that areas of high deprivation were more likely than other areas to be canvassed by post as opposed to a canvasser. For example, the Belfast wards of Ardoyne, Woodstock and Shaftesbury were all canvassed fully or in part by post due to a shortage of canvassers. This situation arose as a result of difficulties in recruiting canvassers for those areas. This was particularly unfortunate because postal canvassing is correlated with lower than average levels of registration.³⁹ However, the Electoral Office has assured us that this situation had changed by the time of the 2003 canvass when canvassers were recruited for all wards.⁴⁰

31. The Electoral Commission is prioritising its work in areas of social deprivation, for example, by initiating cooperation with the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, and by encouraging advice workers from the voluntary sector to highlight electoral registration in their work.⁴¹

People with physical disabilities and learning disabilities

32. MENCAP Northern Ireland and the SDLP were both critical of the new electoral registration procedures because they believe that there are aspects of the system that make it more complicated for people with learning difficulties to be entered on the electoral register.⁴²

33. The Electoral Commission has acknowledged that people with disabilities are less likely than others to be on the electoral register.⁴³ Survey evidence suggests that disabled people were almost twice as likely not to be registered as other people because they had found the forms difficult to understand.⁴⁴ The Electoral Office has initiated a programme of cooperation with charities and other disability groups in order to make the electoral registration process more accessible to people with a variety of disabilities.⁴⁵ The Electoral Commission now makes its material available in formats such as Braille and audio tape.⁴⁶

38 Q16, The Electoral Commission, Mr Singh

39 Electoral Commission: *The Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002: An Assessment of its First Year in Operation*, para 3.10

40 Q57, Electoral Office, Mrs Butler

41 ER5B, section 2

42 ER6A paras 33 – 35

43 Q16, Electoral Commission, Mr Magee

44 Electoral Commission: *The Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002: An Assessment of its First Year in Operation*, para. 7.13

45 Q53, Electoral Office, Mrs Butler

46 ER5B, section 2

34. Under the current arrangements for individual registration, a parent or carer of a person with a learning disability or mental health problem may sign on that person's behalf. Thereafter they receive a letter from the Electoral Office in which they are asked to confirm that the person in question would "be capable of personally making a decision for whom to vote, without the assistance of another person". MENCAP claims that this procedure is liable to lead to eligible persons being omitted from the register, and that the letter "can be read as if to emphasise the denial of registration." MENCAP argues that the letter should be worded in a more positive manner. Based on information from the Chief Electoral Officer, the Electoral Commission states that approximately 1,000 such letters were sent out to carers, but of these, only 120 carers / relatives subsequently confirmed the request for registration.⁴⁷ However, the Chief Electoral Officer defended current practice:⁴⁸

"We have had quite a number of people who have accepted that, having attested on behalf of someone else, that person should not be on the register. Therefore we have a number of people who previously, under the old family system, were probably wrongly included on the register and really should not have been there, but that has now come to light under individual registration and as a result some people with learning disabilities have been taken off the register. That is perhaps the way it should be: people who are not capable of making up their own minds should never have been there in the first place."⁴⁹

However, it seems unlikely that such a high proportion of carers (nearly 90%), would have submitted an electoral registration form on behalf of their relative or friend without due consideration for the mental capacity of the person being registered. The Electoral Commission has admitted that "the process of individual registration may inadvertently have impacted on people with learning disabilities, thus effectively disenfranchising hundreds of people who in the past may have voted."⁵⁰

35. Although there is clearly a balance to be struck, it would appear that a review of procedures and correspondence relating to electors with learning disabilities is justified. **We recommend that the Electoral Office of Northern Ireland reviews its procedures for dealing with persons with learning disabilities and their carers with the aim of trying to be more inclusive.**

36. **The particularly low levels of registration among young people, less advantaged social groups, and people with disabilities, are a cause of concern. We believe that strategies need to be put in place by the Chief Electoral Officer to increase the level of registration in these groups. The Northern Ireland Office must also be prepared to make extra funding available to achieve this.**

47 Electoral Commission: *The Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002: An Assessment of its First Year in Operation*, para. 7.8

48 Q53, Electoral Office, Mr Stanley

49 2003 - Q16

50 Electoral Commission: *The Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002: An Assessment of its First Year in Operation*, para. 7.11

Causes for the declining number of registered voters

37. The Electoral Commission has concluded that the pre-Act electoral register was inflated by two factors at least:⁵¹

Electoral fraud: as discussed previously, there is no means of gauging accurately the real extent of fraudulent entries on the electoral register.

The carry-forward mechanism: under the former registration system, the carry-forward mechanism meant that names of non-respondents would be carried over from one register to the next for one year before being deleted. This meant that a name could have remained on the register for up to 24 months even though the person in question had died or moved away. This applied equally to a person who had moved within Northern Ireland and whose name would therefore have been registered at two different addresses. This may have accounted for up to 10% of the register at any point in time in the view of the Electoral Office.⁵²

38. In addition to reducing electoral fraud as discussed earlier, the changes in the registration process following the Electoral Fraud Act 2002 have resulted in a reduction in the number of registered electors for at least two other reasons: the abolition of the carry-over mechanism which accounts for the greatest part of the decline in the number of people on the electoral register; and individuals not returning registration forms because of apathy or concerns about the disclosure of personal information such as national insurance numbers.

The removal of the carry-forward mechanism

39. The Electoral Commission has concluded that the removal of the carry-forward mechanism is likely to be the most important factor by far in the decline in the level of voter registration following the introduction of the 2002 Act. According to the Chief Electoral Officer, the response rate in canvasses has not changed with the introduction of the new system. The rate of responses has in the past been approximately 90%, and in the December 2002 canvass, the response rate was also about 90%. The difference is that whereas the non-responding 10% in the past would have been given one year's grace and left on the register, under the new system the 10% are now immediately removed from the register⁵³. Both the Electoral Commission and the Chief Electoral Officer indicate that the drop in registrations of about ten percentage points is likely to result primarily from the fact that approximately 10% of names are no longer carried forward from one register to the next⁵⁴.

40. While there is agreement between the Electoral Office and the Electoral Commission about the main cause of the drop in voter registrations, the view of the Electoral Office that

51 Electoral Commission: *The Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002: An Assessment of its First Year in Operation*, para. 6.1

52 Electoral Commission: *The Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002: An Assessment of its First Year in Operation*, paras 4.6

53 2003 - Q 1-5

54 Electoral Commission: *The Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002: An Assessment of its First Year in Operation*, paras 6.7-6.9

a system of carry-forward should be introduced is not shared by the Electoral Commission.⁵⁵ The view of the Chief Electoral Officer was that in the absence of a carry-forward mechanism, the register's year-on-year decrease was inevitable and he argued for a revised system of carry-forward:

“...I would like...to go further than simply having the carry forward, I would like to see a register that had occurrence of perhaps three years. I see the reinstatement of the carry forward as in effect giving us a register with a lifetime of two years but I think it would be better to have a register with a period of three years. I think we could then spend our resources and time in the interim period looking out and finding those people who are in the marginalised groups and getting them on to the register, getting them into the system rather than going around and finding the same people who year on year conscientiously complete their forms and send them in. I think we could spend our time and our money in a much better way to a better effect as far as the register is concerned.”⁵⁶

However, Mr Singh of the Electoral Commission thought that carry-forward in the current circumstance held dangers, “...if you simply reintroduce the carry forward facility for a new system of individual registration...there is a concern we would have this might actually muddy the waters and actually perhaps lead to needless duplication.”⁵⁷

41. In a written statement to the House of Commons on 30 November 2004, John Spellar, Minister of State for Northern Ireland, announced that the Government is “committed to moving away from the legal requirement for the register to be completely refreshed each year.” He announced a consultation with political parties in Northern Ireland, and indicated that primary legislation may be brought forward in order to reinstate the carry-forward mechanism at least as a temporary measure ahead of the local elections in May 2005.

42. Any electoral registration system has to balance inclusiveness with accuracy.

43. There is little doubt that the decline in registrations results largely from the abolition of the carry-forward mechanism. Ways must be sought to counter the unfortunate effect of a sound decision. This change was crucial in eliminating ‘phantom’ names from the register and we do not recommend the re-introduction of the former carry-forward mechanism. It is also our view that the lifespan of the electoral register should be maintained at 12 months.

44. There is clearly a need for urgent action, but we believe that alternative and perhaps unconventional options should be explored. For example, it could be worthwhile exploring a compromise in which people who fail to respond to a canvass are excluded from the register but their details are retained for a further twelve months in order that they can be canvassed again the following year. Such a solution might give rise to data protection issues, but it may be worth considering whether these could be resolved.

55 Electoral Commission: *The Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002: An Assessment of its First Year in Operation*, paras 6.10-6.11

56 Qq 42, 43, Electoral Officer, Mr Stanley

57 Q29, Electoral Commission, Mr Singh

45. We are puzzled that the views of the Electoral Commission and the Electoral Office of Northern Ireland differ markedly as to whether or not a system of carry-forward should be implemented. This issue is of considerable importance to the electoral process in Northern Ireland and we expect the Electoral Commission and the Electoral Office to examine the issue together and come to a clear conclusion which best ensures the integrity of the register. For example, it could be worthwhile exploring a compromise in which people who fail to respond to a canvass are excluded from the register but their details are retained for a further twelve months in order that they can be canvassed again the following year. Such a solution might give rise to data protection issues, but it may be worth considering whether these could be resolved.

Eligible voters not returning registration forms

46. A range of factors, including apathy, lack of understanding about the system, and concerns over the disclosure of personal information (particularly National Insurance numbers) have been suggested as causes for eligible voters not returning registration forms. Research carried out by the Electoral Commission suggests that these factors are vital only in conjunction with the key change introduced by the 2002 Act from household-based to individual registration.⁵⁸

Individual vs. household registration

47. The most significant reason for young people and other vulnerable groups not registering appears to be the introduction of individual as opposed to household registration.⁵⁹ The former arrangements were that the head of household completed a registration form for the whole household. Under the new system, every individual, including 17 and 18 year olds are responsible for registering themselves. Many people who would have been registered by someone else in the past have become responsible for their own registration.

48. The problems of young people registering are compounded by their high mobility, and among students in particular it is common to have two addresses.⁶⁰ **The Electoral Office has no way of routinely acquiring information about all young people reaching the age of eighteen,⁶¹ and those aged 17 and 18 do not automatically receive a pre-printed form but have to request one. This places the onus on them to play an active role in achieving registration. The issue of low levels of electoral registration and turnout among young people is not unique to Northern Ireland, but it is a major cause for concern if the system of registration there amplifies such a tendency.**

49. **The shift from household to individual registration is one of the key changes resulting from the Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002. This change was essential to eliminate some of the possible sources of ‘phantom’ names on the register.**

58 Q5, Electoral Commission, Mr Magee; Electoral Commission: *The Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002: An Assessment of its First Year in Operation*, para 6.12

59 Q5, The Electoral Commission, Mr Magee

60 Q4, Electoral Commission, Mr Singh; See also: Electoral Commission: *The Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002: An Assessment of its First Year in Operation*, para 7.6

61 2003 - Q21

However, this is now one of the key factors contributing to the low levels of registration in certain population groups.

Voter apathy and alienation

50. Survey and focus group evidence suggests that apathy and alienation from the political process is a further factor which, together with individual registration arrangements, results in non-registration. The Electoral Commission found that 36% of non-registered respondents had failed to register because they had no intention of voting, whilst similar proportions said they could not be bothered, or just had not ‘got round to it’.⁶² The Commission concluded that “The move to individual registration is likely to have had the effect of ‘flushing out’ apathetic voters and those not used to registering.”⁶³ In evidence supplied to the Electoral Commission, the National Union of Students and the Union of Students in Ireland thought that alienation and disengagement from political processes were particularly prevalent among students⁶⁴

51. Apathy and a lack of engagement in politics is not unique to Northern Ireland and it is crucial to attempt to stimulate greater participation in the democratic process throughout the UK. But we believe this task assumes a special urgency in Northern Ireland where the history of violent conflict make efforts to ensure that the entire population feels able to engage in the electoral process a vital factor in the goal of establishing a fully normal society.

Publicity and education

52. Electoral registration and voting is voluntary in the UK. Whilst complete registration of all eligible voters is, rightly, the aim of those responsible, we accept that this is unlikely to be achieved⁶⁵. However, it remains essential for the integrity of the democratic process that people consider themselves well informed about how to register and vote and that they can do so with ease.

53. The Commission has monitored the degree to which people in Northern Ireland consider themselves to be well informed about the requirements for registering and voting. In July 2004, that level of awareness was “very high”.⁶⁶ Prior to the last canvass in April 2003, 84% of the population said they knew about the changes to the electoral registration system.⁶⁷ Although this is a relatively high level of awareness, the level of awareness of the changes in the registration process is relatively low among the young people. In April 2003,

62 Electoral Commission: *The Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002: An Assessment of its First Year in Operation*, figure 14, p 51

63 Electoral Commission: *The Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002: An Assessment of its First Year in Operation*, para. 6.36

64 Electoral Commission: *The Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002: An Assessment of its First Year in Operation*, para 7.7. See also:

Q51, Electoral Office, Mr Stanley

65 Q41, The Chief Electoral Officer, Mr Stanley

66 Q12 Electoral Commission, Mr Singh

67 Electoral Commission: *The Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002: An Assessment of its First Year in Operation*, para 6.19

only 68% of the 17-24 age group said they were aware of the changes in the electoral process.

54. The Electoral Commission is responsible for publicising the political process, although the Electoral Office also undertakes some work in this area. Since the implementation of the 2002 Act, the Electoral Commission has engaged in extensive public awareness campaigns including television advertisements, bill-board posters, and posters on buses.⁶⁸

55. We commend the work that has been done by the Electoral Commission in informing and educating the public in Northern Ireland about the changes in the process of electoral registration and in the process of voting. We believe that regular, hard hitting campaigns to promote general awareness of the electoral and registration systems amongst the general population are required to prevent the registration level dropping. In addition, advertising and outreach campaigns targeted specifically at young people and vulnerable groups who have below average registration levels should be developed further as a matter of urgency.

Electoral process issues

The requirement for photographic ID

56. Under the provisions of the 2002 Act, voters are able to cast their vote only once they have produced photographic ID. The forms of ID accepted are valid UK and EU passports, photographic senior SmartPasses, a valid photographic UK driving license, or an Electoral Identity Card (EIC). The EIC was introduced in the 2002 Act, and is available free of charge to all voters who request one.

57. Voters may indicate on their electoral registration forms if they wish to apply for the Card. In the first annual canvass under the new system in the autumn of 2002, 235,000 electors indicated that they required an EIC. However, by July 2004, only 93,000 people had applied for and received one.⁶⁹ The discrepancy between these figures has given rise to speculation that large numbers of people in Northern Ireland are effectively disenfranchised because of a lack of appropriate photographic ID.

58. When giving evidence to the Committee in July 2004, the Electoral Commission as well as the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland (EONI) indicated that the numbers of people without some form of appropriate photographic ID were likely to be relatively low.⁷⁰ In its report on the 2002 Act published in December 2003, the Electoral Commission estimated that some 37,000 voters who are on the electoral register do not have the appropriate photographic ID required to vote. At that time, the Commission indicated that every effort needed to be made to increase the take-up of the ID card.⁷¹

68 ER5B, section1

69 Q19, Electoral Commission, Mr Magee

70 Q21, Electoral Commission, Mr Magee; Q22, Mr Singh

71 Electoral Commission: *The Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002: An Assessment of its First Year in Operation*, para. 8.15

71 ER3a para. 7

59. In trying to explain the discrepancy between the number who had indicated an interest in getting an EIC in 2002 and the actual application rate for the card, the Electoral Office told us that:

“...there were 235,000 people who ticked the box on the 2002 registration form, and we simply believe that many of those people ticked the box but when they got the application form which explained they could use a driving licence, passport or translink senior smart pass, they realised they did not perhaps need it. We believe that there is not a huge demand over and above the 90,000 odd that we have produced.”⁷²

60. Meanwhile, between 3,500 and 4,000 voters were rejected at polling stations during the November 2003 Assembly elections and the June 2004 European Parliament elections. About half were rejected because their ID, for example, passport or driving licence was out of date.⁷³ This is not a significant number in the view of the Electoral Office.⁷⁴

61. We believe that the introduction of a requirement for voters to show photographic ID at polling stations was right and has been modestly successful. However, a number of voters were unable to cast their votes in the 2003 Assembly and 2004 European Parliament elections because they lacked appropriate ID. This consequence is unfortunate and we recommend that efforts to increase the uptake of the Electoral Identity Card should be redoubled. Campaigns to remind voters of the requirement for photographic ID need to be repeated regularly, particularly ahead of elections.

Holding elections in the annual canvass period

62. During the second annual canvass in the autumn of 2003, one important problem emerged. After the canvass had started, it was announced that the Northern Ireland Assembly elections (postponed from May 2003) would take place within the canvass period and, as a consequence, the publication of the new register had to be postponed until February 2004. According to the Electoral Commission’s Official Report on the Assembly elections, this caused confusion among the electorate, and a significant overburdening of Electoral Office staff.⁷⁵

63. Holding elections in the period of the annual canvass causes confusion on the part of the public and places enormous burdens on election staff. We recommend that the Government should consider amending legislation to ensure that elections are not called within the annual canvass period.

72 Q66, Electoral Office, Mr Stanley

73 Q25, Electoral Commission, Mr Singh; Q26, Electoral Commission, Mr Singh

74 Q67, Electoral Office, Ms Butler

75 Electoral Commission: *The Northern Ireland Assembly Elections 2003: The Official Report on the Northern Ireland Assembly Elections 26 November 2003*, paras. 3.6–3.7

4 The institutional structure

The Electoral Commission and the Electoral Office of Northern Ireland

64. Northern Ireland, together with the rest of the UK, is covered by the Political Parties, Elections, and Referendums Act 2000, which established the Electoral Commission. The Commission reports directly to Parliament, and is responsible for overseeing a number of aspects of electoral law. The Commission is also responsible for encouraging democratic participation and plays a crucial role in campaigns to inform the electorate of changes to electoral procedures, in addition to promoting electoral registration and voting in general.

65. Northern Ireland also has a Chief Electoral Officer, appointed directly by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland⁷⁶. The Chief Electoral Officer (CEO) runs the Electoral Office of Northern Ireland (EONI), and is charged, inter alia, with:

- “the smooth running of elections and referendums in Northern Ireland and maintaining the public perception of an impartial and independent electoral service;
- preparing and maintaining an accurate electoral register;
- minimising the scope of electoral abuse.”⁷⁷

66. Consequently, whilst the Electoral Commission in Northern Ireland is responsible for the monitoring of political parties in addition to keeping the public informed of electoral rules and procedures,⁷⁸ it is the Chief Electoral Officer who manages voter registration and the practical management of elections. It is intended that the two bodies should work in tandem, and the 2002 Act has implications for both.

Funding of the EONI

67. In the course of this inquiry, the funding arrangements for the Electoral Office were raised on a number of occasions. The EONI is funded by the Northern Ireland Office for all its expenditure, apart from that which arises directly from running elections.⁷⁹ In the view of the Electoral Commission, these arrangements are unsatisfactory. It believes that the EONI should be financially independent in the manner of the Electoral Commission, and funded from the Consolidated Fund via Parliament.⁸⁰ Were the EONI were to be funded in this way, it could operate on the basis of a business plan which would allow it to take a more hands-on approach.⁸¹ The Commission concluded that under current

76 The Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland: Annual Report 2003-04, para. 1.1

77 ER3, para 1.2

78 ER2, para 5.1

79 Election costs are met by HM Treasury from the Consolidated Fund, *Electoral Commission, The Northern Ireland Assembly Election 2003*, para 8.5

80 Electoral Commission: *The Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002: An Assessment of its First Year in Operation*, para 8.8

81 ER3B, para 13

arrangements “there had been a lack of infrastructure investment, little or no training for staff, poor control of money, and a run down in the level of service to voters”.⁸²

68. One reason for this highly unsatisfactory state of affairs is that the budget baseline for the EONI in the Northern Ireland Office Estimate was set before the Electoral Fraud Act came into force in 2002. Both the Electoral Office and the Electoral Commission acknowledge that financial pressure on the EONI has increased as a result of the Electoral Fraud Act.⁸³ For example, the significant extra expenditure incurred by having to canvass 1,2 million individuals instead of 650,000 households is not provided for in the baseline budget of the EONI.

69. The Electoral Office told us that it “has insufficient money at the start of each year to deliver the requirements of the Act”; and that while “[the] Department seeks to address this under-provision by way of in-year pressures...these are assessed along with all the other demands on the Northern Ireland Office budget and consequently decisions on the full extent of funding are not taken until the final quarter of each year.” The Office pointed out that this “method of funding leaves the EONI as front-line service deliverer with great uncertainty until very late in the financial year.”⁸⁴ The Electoral Commission considered that an “efficiency, economy and effectiveness” audit of the EONI should be conducted by the National Audit Office to benchmark performance and identify funding issues.⁸⁵ This proposal was welcomed by the Electoral Office as a means of addressing its problem of under-resourcing.⁸⁶

70. The present funding arrangements for the Electoral Office of Northern Ireland are insufficiently flexible to accommodate new pressures which have arisen as a result of the Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002. The Northern Ireland Office needs to fund the Electoral Office properly in order to enable it to adopt a more focussed and proactive approach to its vital role in the electoral process. The Government must give urgent consideration to the present funding mechanism and level of funding for the Electoral Office and how this could best be undertaken.

The relationship between the EONI and the Electoral Commission

71. There is evidence to suggest that communication and cooperation between the Electoral Commission and the Electoral Office have been less than fully satisfactory during the planning of the annual canvass in both 2002 and 2003. The Electoral Commission was positive about the effectiveness of its relations with the Electoral Office stating that “there is a good working relationship between the two organisations [and that] there has developed a mutual understanding of our respective roles and a willingness to work together to deliver real improvements in the electoral process.”⁸⁷ However, the Electoral Office

82 Electoral Commission: *The Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002: An Assessment of its First Year in Operation*, para 8.6

83 ER3B para 12. and Electoral Commission: *The Northern Ireland Assembly Elections 2003: The Official Report on the Northern Ireland Assembly Elections 26 November 2003*, para. 8.7

84 ER3B, para 12

85 Electoral Commission: *The Northern Ireland Assembly Elections 2003: The Official Report on the Northern Ireland Assembly Elections 26 November 2003*, para 8.3

86 ER3B, para 15

87 ER 5B, Section 5

provided a more cautious characterisation describing the relationship as “Cordial and relatively effective.”⁸⁸

72. We asked the Electoral Office why it had operated a separate telephone advice line during the 2003 canvass in parallel with the helpline run by the Electoral Commission:

“The Electoral Commission’s help line was operated by a commercial call centre using 90 frequently asked questions and answers provided by the EONI. The call centre, however, did not have on-line access to the Register, nor did it employ staff with knowledge of the registration system and consequently could only answer questions of a general nature. Consequently, many callers to the Commission’s helpline who wanted personal registration information or answers to questions which were non-routine were passed on to the Electoral Office. It then became impossible for the EONI Information Unit to handle the calls and it was necessary to set up a specialist EONI advice line for the duration of the canvass. This was manned by experienced part-time EONI staff who had expertise in registration and were able to answer all questions fully. The EONI, having anticipated the problem, had suggested to the Electoral Commission in the spring of 2003 that a combined operation would be more effective but this was rejected.”⁸⁹

The Electoral Commission described the same episode in their report on the 2002 Act:

“As a result of the perceived shortcomings identified with the Commission’s helpline, the EONI established, from its own resources, an advice line for the 2003 canvass. This was designed to handle more complicated inquiries from the electorate. ...The Commission ... advised that, while it did not regard the existence of two help lines as mutually exclusive, there was a need to guard against sending mixed and confusing messages to the electorate.”⁹⁰

73. This example of competing initiatives is not unique. During the autumn 2002 canvass, the Electoral Office ran its own poster campaign targeting young people and first time voters although such publicity work falls within the remit of the Electoral Commission.⁹¹ The EONI explained to us that they had taken this step because “There appeared to be gaps in the Electoral Commission’s campaign which were being left unfilled. Consequently, the EONI decided that action needed to be taken in respect of more focused targeting of young people and first-time voters.”⁹²

74. The recent changes to the system of electoral registration present a major challenge to those responsible for elections in Northern Ireland.⁹³ The Electoral Commission concludes its Report on the operation of the Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002 with a plea that all “stakeholders” involved with the electoral process need to

88 ER 3B para. 17

89 ER 3B, para 18

90 Electoral Commission: *The Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002: An Assessment of its First Year in Operation*, footnote 38, p46

91 2003 - Q21; EONI, Ms Butler

92 ER3B, para. 19

93 Electoral Commission: *The Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002: An Assessment of its First Year in Operation*, para 7.21

promote “confidence in the democratic process”.⁹⁴ We share this aspiration. The Electoral Commission and the Electoral Office must take the lead in effective, focussed co-operation if public confidence is to be won for the new arrangements.

75. It is a matter for concern that, despite the acknowledgement by the Electoral Commission of the importance of seamless cooperation with the Electoral Office⁹⁵ and the assertion that the two bodies are working together closely⁹⁶ we have discovered evidence to suggest that their communication has been poor and that, as a result, resources might not have been used efficiently and effectively. It is most important that these bodies work well together to achieve their shared aims, particularly when the new registration and other electoral arrangements are bedding down. We recommend that the Government should review the division of responsibilities between the Electoral Office and the Electoral Commission to ensure that these are completely clear to both organisations and that there is no structural impediment to complete co-operation.

94 Electoral Commission: *The Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002: An Assessment of its First Year in Operation*, footnote para 10.4

95 ER5B, section 5

96 ER5B, section 5; Q17, Electoral Commission, Mr Singh; Q35, Electoral Commission, Mr Magee

5 Conclusion

76. Following the introduction of the Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002, significant changes were made to electoral registration and the electoral process in Northern Ireland. The most significant change in the registration process has been the move from household to individual registration. Electoral registers produced under the new system have indicated an apparently dramatic decline in the proportion of the eligible population who are registered. There is a difference of 10 percent between the proportion of the eligible population included on the last pre-Act register and the current register.

77. It seems clear to us that this decline has been caused by several factors. The first, and most significant, is the abolition of carry-over from one register to the next, which has meant that names of people who do not respond to the annual canvass are no longer automatically left on the register for one year. As a result, people on the register who move to a new address, leave Northern Ireland, or die during the year no longer appear on the next register.

78. The second appears to be that a significant proportion of the eligible population does not register. There are several causes for this but there is little doubt that one of the most significant is the change to individual registration. The shift away from a system, where one person in each household registers the entire household to one in which each individual has the responsibility for their own registration requires individuals to be more pro-active if their names are to be included on the register. Factors ranging from political disengagement to practical obstacles can result in people from any social group failing to register. However, it is clear to us that it is among groups such as young people (particularly 17 and 18 year olds) people with disabilities, and people from socially deprived areas, that individual registration is problematic. These groups are more difficult for election publicity to reach partly because of higher than average levels of personal mobility and lower than average levels of political engagement and exposure to the media.

79. The third reason for the decline in the electoral register is these are less fraudulent entries on the register. The level of actual fraud committed before and after the introduction of the Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002 cannot be established, but it is clear that the public perceives fraud to be much less prevalent now than before the introduction of the 2002 Act.

80. We are deeply concerned by signs that the system of individual registration is causing a spiral of structural decline in the electoral register. This appears to occur because every year only those people who were registered the previous year are directly canvassed. While people are able to register outside the canvass periods through rolling registration, the number registering each year through this mechanism is lower than the number of people dropping out of the register in canvass registrations from one year to the next. Consequently, the register has been shrinking progressively. We believe that the level of electoral registration in Northern Ireland has now reached the point at which it will begin to have an adverse effect on public confidence in the integrity of the process. We have recommended that a full evaluation be undertaken after the next canvass has been published and corrective action taken as a matter of priority.

81. Despite these concerns, we believe that the Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002 has been successful in its main purpose of bringing about a reduction in electoral fraud and a restoration of faith in the integrity of the electoral process among the people of Northern Ireland. However, a great deal more work needs to be done to fulfil the promise of the Act, in particular to increase the levels of registration among young people and vulnerable groups. The present work of the Electoral Commission and the Electoral Office of Northern Ireland is encouraging, but this effort needs to be redoubled. It is essential that the Electoral Office is properly resourced, and that the two institutions work seamlessly with each other and with other stakeholders in the political process.

82. The Electoral Commission recommended that individual registration as well as the abolition of the carry-forward mechanism should be extended to Great Britain.⁹⁷ In view of the problems identified in this report, we strongly recommend that the Government follows this advice only once satisfactory strategies have been put in place in Northern Ireland for alleviating the problems of under-registration among particular population groups.

Conclusions and recommendations

1. On the basis of the all the evidence currently available to us, we are satisfied that the Electoral Fraud Act (Northern Ireland) 2002 has been successful in reducing both the perception among the electorate of the prevalence of fraud and the actual level of electoral fraud, so far as it can be measured. The measures introduced in the Act have served to increase the level of public confidence in the integrity of the electoral process. (Paragraph 10)
2. We are concerned by the emerging evidence of a continuous structural process of decline in the electoral register. Further serious decline would place the democratic integrity of the electoral system in Northern Ireland at risk. We recommend that the Electoral Commission should identify and evaluate the options available for arresting the decline in the register within the framework of the Electoral Fraud Act as a matter of urgency. The Electoral Commission should involve the Chief Electoral Officer in this process in order to ensure that any recommendations for improvement made are practical and capable of implementation. (Paragraph 19)
3. We are especially concerned about the unacceptably low levels of registration in the 17–24 age group. We commend the initiatives of the Electoral Office and the Electoral Commission in taking the electoral registration process to young people in schools, colleges and festivals and urge that this should be developed further. We recommend that the Government ensures that extra funding be made available to develop adequately a full range of outreach programmes to engage young people. (Paragraph 26)
4. Intensive efforts must be made to bring about a system in which 17 and 18 year olds are entered on the electoral register as a matter of course. We recommend that consideration is given to making electoral registration, and the electoral process in general, a compulsory part of the curriculum for 16-17 year olds; and that adults in households should be made responsible for identifying to the Electoral Office of Northern Ireland young people of 17 residing in their households to assist the Electoral Office in making contact with them. (Paragraph 27)
5. We recommend that the Electoral Office of Northern Ireland reviews its procedures for dealing with persons with learning disabilities and their carers with the aim of trying to be more inclusive. (Paragraph 35)
6. The particularly low levels of registration among young people, less advantaged social groups, and people with disabilities, are a cause of concern. We believe that strategies need to be put in place by the Chief Electoral Officer to increase the level of registration in these groups. The Northern Ireland Office must also be prepared to make extra funding available to achieve this. (Paragraph 36)
7. Any electoral registration system has to balance inclusiveness with accuracy. (Paragraph 42)
8. There is little doubt that the decline in registrations results largely from the abolition of the carry-forward mechanism. Ways must be sought to counter the unfortunate

effect of a sound decision. This change was crucial in eliminating ‘phantom’ names from the register and we do not recommend the re-introduction of the former carry-forward mechanism. It is also our view that the lifespan of the electoral register should be maintained at 12 months. (Paragraph 43)

9. There is clearly a need for urgent action, but we believe that alternative and perhaps unconventional options should be explored. For example, it could be worthwhile exploring a compromise in which people who fail to respond to a canvass are excluded from the register but their details are retained for a further twelve months in order that they can be canvassed again the following year. Such a solution might give rise to data protection issues, but it may be worth considering whether these could be resolved. (Paragraph 44)
10. We are puzzled that the views of the Electoral Commission and the Electoral Office of Northern Ireland differ markedly as to whether or not a system of carry-forward should be implemented. This issue is of considerable importance to the electoral process in Northern Ireland and we expect the Electoral Commission and the Electoral Office to examine the issue together and come to a clear conclusion which best ensures the integrity of the register. For example, it could be worthwhile exploring a compromise in which people who fail to respond to a canvass are excluded from the register but their details are retained for a further twelve months in order that they can be canvassed again the following year. Such a solution might give rise to data protection issues, but it may be worth considering whether these could be resolved (Paragraph 45)
11. A range of factors, including apathy, lack of understanding about the system, and concerns over the disclosure of personal information (particularly National Insurance numbers) have been suggested as causes for eligible voters not returning registration forms. Research carried out by the Electoral Commission suggests that these factors are vital only in conjunction with the key change introduced by the 2002 Act from household-based to individual registration (Paragraph 46)
12. The Electoral Office has no way of routinely acquiring information about all young people reaching the age of eighteen, and those aged 17 and 18 do not automatically receive a pre-printed form but have to request one. This places the onus on them to play an active role in achieving registration. The issue of low levels of electoral registration and turnout among young people is not unique to Northern Ireland, but it is a major cause for concern if the system of registration there amplifies such a tendency. (Paragraph 48)
13. The shift from household to individual registration is one of the key changes resulting from the Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002. This change was essential to eliminate some of the possible sources of ‘phantom’ names on the register. However, this is now one of the key factors contributing to the low levels of registration in certain population groups. (Paragraph 49)
14. Apathy and a lack of engagement in politics is not unique to Northern Ireland and it is crucial to attempt to stimulate greater participation in the democratic process throughout the UK. But we believe this task assumes a special urgency in Northern

Ireland where the history of violent conflict make efforts to ensure that the entire population feels able to engage in the electoral process a vital factor in the goal of establishing a fully normal society. (Paragraph 51)

15. We commend the work that has been done by the Electoral Commission in informing and educating the public in Northern Ireland about the changes in the process of electoral registration and in the process of voting. We believe that regular, hard hitting campaigns to promote general awareness of the electoral and registration systems amongst the general population are required to prevent the registration level dropping. In addition, advertising and outreach campaigns targeted specifically at young people and vulnerable groups who have below average registration levels should be developed further as a matter of urgency. (Paragraph 55)
16. We believe that the introduction of a requirement for voters to show photographic ID at polling stations was right and has been modestly successful. However, a number of voters were unable to cast their votes in the 2003 Assembly and 2004 European Parliament elections because they lacked appropriate ID. This consequence is unfortunate and we recommend that efforts to increase the uptake of the Electoral Identity Card should be redoubled. Campaigns to remind voters of the requirement for photographic ID need to be repeated regularly, particularly ahead of elections. (Paragraph 61)
17. Holding elections in the period of the annual canvass causes confusion on the part of the public and places enormous burdens on election staff. We recommend that the Government should consider amending legislation to ensure that elections are not called within the annual canvass period. (Paragraph 63)
18. The present funding arrangements for the Electoral Office of Northern Ireland are insufficiently flexible to accommodate new pressures which have arisen as a result of the Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002. The Northern Ireland Office needs to fund the Electoral Office properly in order to enable it to adopt a more focussed and proactive approach to its vital role in the electoral process. The Government must give urgent consideration to the present funding mechanism and level of funding for the Electoral Office and how this could best be undertaken. (Paragraph 70)
19. The recent changes to the system of electoral registration present a major challenge to those responsible for elections in Northern Ireland. The Electoral Commission concludes its Report on the operation of the Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002 with a plea that all “stakeholders” involved with the electoral process need to promote “confidence in the democratic process”. We share this aspiration. The Electoral Commission and the Electoral Office must take the lead in effective, focussed co-operation if public confidence is to be won for the new arrangements (Paragraph 74)
20. It is a matter for concern that, despite the acknowledgement by the Electoral Commission of the importance of seamless cooperation with the Electoral Office and the assertion that the two bodies are working together closely we have discovered evidence to suggest that their communication has been poor and that, as a result,

resources might not have been used efficiently and effectively. It is most important that these bodies work well together to achieve their shared aims, particularly when the new registration and other electoral arrangements are bedding down. We recommend that the Government should review the division of responsibilities between the Electoral Office and the Electoral Commission to ensure that these are completely clear to both organisations and that there is no structural impediment to complete co-operation. (Paragraph 75)

21. The Electoral Commission recommended that individual registration as well as the abolition of the carry-forward mechanism should be extended to Great Britain. In view of the problems identified in this report, we strongly recommend that the Government follows this advice only once satisfactory strategies have been put in place in Northern Ireland for alleviating the problems of under-registration among particular population groups. (Paragraph 82)

Formal minutes

Wednesday 8 December 2004

Members present:

Mr Michael Mates, in the Chair

Mr Adrian Bailey	Mr Stephen Pound
Mr Roy Beggs	Reverend Martin Smyth
Mr Tony Clarke	Mr Hugo Swire
Mr Stephen Hepburn	Mark Tami
Mr Iain Luke	Mr Bill Tynan

The Committee deliberated.

Draft Report (Electoral Registration in Northern Ireland), proposed by the Chairman, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the Chairman's draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 82 read and agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the First Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chairman do make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That the provisions of Standing Order No. 134 (Select Committees (reports)) be applied to the Report.—(*The Chairman.*)

Ordered, That the Appendices to the Minutes of Evidence taken before the Committee be reported to the House.—(*The Chairman.*)

[Adjourned till Wednesday 15 December at 3.30 pm]

Witnesses

Wednesday 7 July 2004

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Mr Karamjit Singh and Mr Seamus Magee, **Electoral Commission** Ev 9

Mr Dennis Stanley, Mrs June Butler and Ms Jocelyn McCarley, **Electoral Office for Northern Ireland** Ev 33

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Reports from the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee since 2001

The following reports have been produced by the Committee since the start of the 2001 Parliament.

Session 2004–05

First Report	Electoral Registration in Northern Ireland	HC 131
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Session 2003–04

First Report	The Committee's work in 2003	HC 146
Second Report	The separation of paramilitary prisoners at HMP Maghaberry	HC 302
Third Report	Introduction of the Aggregates Levy in Northern Ireland: one year on	HC 395
Fourth Report	The Compensation Agency	HC 271
Fifth Report	'Hate Crime': The Draft Criminal Justice Northern Ireland Order 2004	HC 615
Sixth Report	Social Housing Provision in Northern Ireland	HC 493-1
First Special Report	Government Response to the Committee's Eighth Report on The Illegal Drugs Trade and Drug Culture in Northern Ireland, Session 2002–2003	HC 180
Second Special Report	Government Response to the Committee's First Report on the Work of the Committee in 2003	HC 510
Third Special Report	The Separation of Paramilitary Prisoners at HMP Maghaberry: Government's Response to the Committee's Second Report of Session 2003-04	HC 583
Fourth Special Report	Introduction of the Aggregates Levy in Northern Ireland: one year on The Government's Response	HC 666
Fifth Special Report	'Hate Crime' the Draft Criminal Justice Northern Ireland Order 2004 Government Response	HC 954
Sixth Special Report	The Compensation Agency Government Response	HC 955

Session 2002–03

First Report	The Impact in Northern Ireland of Cross-Border Road Fuel Price Differentials: Three years on	HC 105-I
Second Report	Annual Report 2002	HC 271
Third Report	The Police (Northern Ireland) Bill	HC 233
Fourth Report	The Control of Firearms in Northern Ireland and the draft Firearms (Northern Ireland) Order 2002	HC 67-I
Fifth Report	Forensic Science Northern Ireland	HC 204
Sixth Report	The Illegal Drugs Trade and Drug Culture in Northern Ireland: Interim Report on Cannabis	HC 353-I
Seventh Report	Peace II	HC 653-I

Eighth Report	The Illegal Drugs Trade and Drug Culture in Northern Ireland	HC 1217-I
First Special Report	Government Response to the Committee's First Report: The Impact in Northern Ireland of Cross-Border Road Fuel Price Differentials: Three Years On	HC 412
Second Special Report	Government Response to the Committee's Third Report: The Police (Northern Ireland) Bill	HC 555
Third Special Report	Government Response to the Committee's Second Report: Annual Report 2002	HC 583
Fourth Special Report	Government Response to the Committee's Fourth Report on the Control of Firearms in Northern Ireland and the Proposed Draft Firearms (Northern Ireland) Order 2002, HC 67-I, Session 2002-03	HC 677
Fifth Special Report	Government Response to the Committee's Fifth Report on Forensic Science Northern Ireland	HC 722
Sixth Special Report	Government Response to the Committee's Sixth Report on the Illegal Drugs Trade and Drug Culture in Northern Ireland: Interim Report on Cannabis	HC 935
Seventh Special Report	Government Response to the Committee's Seventh Report on Peace II	HC 1077

Session 2001-02

First Report	Introduction of the Aggregates Levy in Northern Ireland	HC 333
Second Report	The Financing of Terrorism in Northern Ireland: Interim Report on the Proceeds of Crime Bill	HC 628
Third Report	Introduction of the Aggregates Levy in Northern Ireland: The Government's Response	HC 713
Fourth Report	The Financing of Terrorism in Northern Ireland. Volume II of this Report (HC 987-II) includes the Government Response to the Second Report, Session 2001-02, The Financing of Terrorism in Northern Ireland: Interim Report on the Proceeds of Crime Bill, HC 628	HC 978-I
First Special Report	Government Response to the Committee's Fifth Report, Miscellaneous Financial Matters, Session 2000-01, and the Government Response to the Committee's Third Report, The Northern Ireland Office 2000 Departmental Report, Session 1999-2000	HC 332
Second Special Report	Government Response to the Committee's Fourth Report, Legal Aid In Northern Ireland, Session 2000-01	HC 400
Third Special Report	Government Response to the Committee's Second Report, The Parades Commission, Session 2000-01	HC 401
Fourth Special Report	Government Response to the Committee's Third Report, Relocation Following Paramilitary Intimidation, Session 2000-01	HC 461
Fifth Special Report	Government Response to the Committee's Third Report, Introduction of the Aggregates Levy in Northern Ireland, Session 2001-02	HC 1118

Oral evidence

Taken before the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee

on Wednesday 7 July 2004

Members present

Mr Michael Mates, in the Chair

Mr Roy Beggs
Mr Tony Clarke
Mr Stephen Pound

Reverend Martin Smyth
Mr Hugo Swire
Mr Bill Tynan

Memorandum submitted by The Electoral Commission

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Electoral Commission welcomes the opportunity to present further evidence to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee on the new arrangements for voter registration in Northern Ireland introduced in September 2002. We believe voter registration is the lynchpin of the electoral system and changes in registration and in particular individual registration have potentially far reaching implications for the electorate and political parties alike. Consequently, the Commission has been keen to monitor developments in Northern Ireland in order to learn lessons for the future.

1.2 Since the Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002 became law in May 2002 the Commission has monitored its impact on voter registration. To date we have published two reports on the subject, one examining the impact of the legislation after one year and the other examining how the legislation worked at the Northern Ireland Assembly election held in November 2003. Copies of both reports have previously been circulated to the Committee and executive summaries of both are attached to this paper.

1.3 More recently we commissioned PricewaterhouseCoopers to conduct further desk research examining the fluctuations in the register between September 2003 and May 2004. A summary of the research findings is set out in section three of this paper. We will be conducting further work in this area when the December 2004 register is published.

2. THE ELECTORAL COMMISSION

2.1 Following the enactment of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 (PPERA), The Electoral Commission was established on 30 November 2000 as an independent statutory body covering the whole of the United Kingdom. The Commission is headed by a Chairman with four other Commissioners. The Chairman and Commissioners do not have connections to any political party, nor is the Commission accountable to the Government. It reports directly to Parliament through a committee chaired by the Speaker of the House of Commons.

2.2 The Commission is responsible for overseeing a number of aspects of electoral law, including the registration of political parties and third parties, monitoring and publication of significant donations to registered political parties and holders of elective office, and the regulation of party spending on election campaigns. The Commission also has a role in advising those involved in elections on practice and procedure and is required to report on the administration of every major election. However, unlike many electoral commissions outside the UK, the Commission does not have responsibility for maintaining and updating electoral rolls, employing electoral services staff, or conducting parliamentary or local elections.

2.3 The Commission aims to:

- promote and maintain openness and transparency in the financial affairs of the UK's political parties and others involved in elections;
- review the administration and law of elections and encourage good practice;
- encourage greater participation in and increased understanding of the democratic process;
- ensure that the Commission is able to undertake the effective conduct of a referendum;
- provide for electoral equality in each local authority area in England while also reflecting community identity and interests;
- carry out all the Commission's statutory functions impartially using resources efficiently, effectively and economically.

2.4 In addition to the UK Headquarters in London, the Commission has three devolved offices serving Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The Commission's office in Northern Ireland has responsibility for delivering the corporate aims in the context of Northern Ireland. It is also able to ensure that the Northern Ireland dimension is fully represented in the strategic thinking and operational planning of the Commission. The focus of the office is very much on the relationship with political parties, developing and advising on electoral policy and practice and raising awareness of electoral matters. It does not have an operational role in maintaining the register of electors or conducting elections since this falls to the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland (EONI) and the Chief Electoral Officer. The Commission has a statutory duty to report on the administration of elections held in Northern Ireland (other than local elections) and its first statutory report as published in April 2004.

2.5 The Commission's Northern Ireland office is located in Belfast and has five staff. Since its establishment the Commission has developed strong links with a range of stakeholders, including the political parties, the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland (EONI), the Chief Electoral Officer, the Northern Ireland Office, academics with an interest in electoral and political matters and the voluntary and community sectors.

2.6 The Commission has also established an Assembly Parties Panel along the lines of the UK Parliamentary Parties Panel. The Panel meets on a quarterly basis and is chaired by the Commissioner with a specific interest in Northern Ireland. All parties represented in the Northern Ireland Assembly are members and its minutes are made public. The purpose of the panel is to facilitate discussion in areas of mutual interest between the political parties and The Electoral Commission. The Panel acts as a forum for sharing information on electoral matters and has been central to developing good working relationships with all the political parties. The Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland and his senior staff attend meetings of the panel.

3. PRICEWATERHOUSECOOPERS UPDATE REPORT ON THE NORTHERN IRELAND ELECTORAL REGISTERS

3.1 In addition to wide-ranging consultations with a cross-section of stakeholders, the report published by the Commission in December 2003 drew upon independent research reports designed to provide the Commission with a better understanding of how the new registration processes had affected the voter franchise in Northern Ireland.

3.2 These independent research reports were commissioned in order to assist The Electoral Commission in meeting its statutory duty to keep under review and, from time to time, submit reports to government on electoral law and practice. As a continuation of this process, and to assist in continuing to monitor the trends in the electoral register, The Electoral Commission appointed PricewaterhouseCoopers to undertake further desk research on the trends and patterns in electoral registration in Northern Ireland. This is the first report to be prepared in this second stage of the desk research statistical analysis of the electoral register. It focuses on:

- The September 2003 register, which was the basis for the November 2003 Northern Ireland Assembly Elections, the first elections to make use of the new register.
- The February 2004 register, which was the second register compiled under the new system following an annual canvass.
- The May 2004 register, which was used for the June 2004 European Elections.

3.3 The key issue addressed is the decline in the Northern Ireland electoral register from a peak of 1,098,726 in May 2003 to 1,076,937 by May 2004. The framework within which this issue is addressed is the registration cycle, comprised of the annual canvass undertaken in autumn of each year followed by the rolling registration process for updating the register in the period between each annual canvass.

3.4 The decline in the Electoral Register from May 2003 to May 2004 has occurred in the face of an increasing eligible population. Based on Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency's (NISRA) Mid-Year Population Estimates, the population aged 18+ is growing at about 0.7% per annum.

3.5 When the change in the register is assessed from one registration cycle to another, the main finding is that the evidence points to an emerging downward trend in the electoral register. While the number of observations is limited, since the new system has only been in operation for a little over one and a half years, nonetheless the available "like-for-like" comparisons indicate that the register is falling by about 1.5–2% per annum.

3.6 A similar trend can be seen in each of the 18 parliamentary constituencies, albeit the trend varies from –1% in a number of rural constituencies and those surrounding Belfast to –3 to –4% in the urban constituencies of Belfast and Foyle. There is therefore a clear urban-rural/suburban divide in the emerging trend in the electoral register.

3.7 The emerging downward trend comprises two effects:

- the canvass effect;
- the rolling registration effect.

3.8 The canvass effect is the more important of the two. The electoral register is compiled afresh each year, based on a canvass of the preexisting register. Inevitably, there will be some element of non-response, leading to a reduction in the Register. In the most recent annual canvass, the new February 2004 Register contained 2.6% fewer entries than the pre-existing September 2003 Register. Each of the 18 parliamentary constituencies also recorded a decline over the same period, as did 82% of the 582 Wards.

3.9 Counteracting the canvass effect, but only partially, is the rolling registration bounce-back that typically occurs in the months immediately following the annual canvass. There is some evidence to suggest that the timing and magnitude of the bounce-back reflects a “looming election effect”, whereby effort is expended by political parties to encourage people to register.

3.10 The second important finding to emerge is that deprivation is only slightly correlated with the downward trend in the Register. Indeed, when other factors are controlled for, deprivation is not a significant influence on the trend in the Register. But this in turn owes much to the fact that the rolling registration bounce-back tends to be stronger in the more deprived areas, offsetting the negative correlation that appears to exist between deprivation and the annual canvass effect.

3.11 The Northern Ireland registration rate is declining in tandem with the fall in the electoral register described above. When attainers and those living abroad are netted out of the Register, the estimated Northern Ireland registration rate was 84.8% in May 2004, representing a two percentage points reduction compared to the 87% achieved in September 2003.

3.12 Though constrained by lack of more up-to-date population data, the findings by parliamentary constituency and the ward are broadly consistent with the analysis of the emerging trend in the electoral register. Thus, the registration rate at parliamentary constituency level has fallen more sharply in urban areas, notably Belfast and Foyle, than in other areas of Northern Ireland.

3.13 While there have been shifts, the pattern of registration rates at ward level in May 2004 showed a considerable degree of stability when compared with previous registers.

3.14 Unless it is rectified, the downward trend in the register has the potential of embedding itself structurally in the registration process. If the register is in decline, then the number that can be canvassed will also tend to fall from one canvass to the next, thus reinforcing the cycle.

3.15 Other findings from the research that have policy implications include the following:

- A consistent finding, both in this report and in the earlier July 2003 PricewaterhouseCoopers report, is that the use of a postal canvass is usually associated with an above-average reduction in the registration rate for the affected ward. In other contexts, notably survey research, reliance on postal returns tends to result in lower response rates compared to more direct methods.
- The analysis of attainers on the Register revealed a registration rate in the region of 20–25% for persons aged 17 at the conclusion of the annual canvass. Boosting this registration rate would help to increase the Register, as well as bringing young people into the system at an early age.
- As in the July 2003 PricewaterhouseCoopers report, deprivation was found not to exert a significant independent influence on the rate of change in the register. Nonetheless, this is largely because the rolling registration bounce-back tends to be greater in the more deprived areas, offsetting an above-average negative canvass effect. To the extent that this reflects a looming election effect, this finding would give rise to a concern that deprivation may yet emerge as a factor in registration process.

4. THE ELECTORAL COMMISSION PUBLIC AWARENESS CAMPAIGNS

4.1 Under Section 13 of PPERA, The Electoral Commission has a duty to promote the public awareness of electoral and democratic systems and therefore has a responsibility for ensuring that the electorate in Northern Ireland is aware of and understands the new registration process and what identification documents are required for voting at polling stations. In the context of Northern Ireland our public awareness campaigns to date have been information-based with a particular emphasis on the requirements for individual registration and photographic identification.

4.2 The Commission’s first public awareness campaign in respect of individual registration and photographic identification commenced in September 2002. It was multi-media in nature and included:

- television advertising;
- radio advertising;
- regional and local newspaper advertising;
- outdoor advertising;
- a dedicated freephone helpline number;
- a dedicated website (www.secureyourvote.com);
- posters for schools, colleges and universities;
- a household leaflet distributed by EONI canvassers (available in a range of formats and languages).

4.3 Following the annual canvass a further campaign promoting rolling registration and the requirement for photographic identification was conducted using television and radio advertising, regional and local newspaper advertising and outdoor poster advertising. The dedicated freephone helpline continued to operate until the middle of May and was terminated after the postponement of the 29 May Assembly elections. Altogether the Commission spent almost £1 million promoting the new arrangements for electoral registration and identification.

4.4 Tracking research commissioned to test the effectiveness of the 2002 campaign was positive and a majority of those interviewed indicated that they found the advertising engaging and informative. A representative sample of the electorate was asked for its views on the changes to electoral registration before and after the Commission's public awareness campaign commenced in Autumn 2002. Prior to the campaign commencing, 15% were aware that changes were planned. Following the campaign nearly two thirds (63%) were aware of the planned changes. By April 2003, 79% were aware that changes had been made to the electoral registration and voter identification process. Overall the publicity campaign was reasonably effective in increasing public awareness of the new arrangements.

4.5 Our public awareness campaign in respect of the election commenced soon after the date of the election was announced in October 2003. It was entitled the "turnout essentials" campaign and emphasised what documents were permissible to vote at the Assembly election. Another theme adopted in the advertising campaign was that of "No picture? No vote". The campaign was multi-media in nature and comprised:

- television advertising;
- radio advertising;
- regional and local newspaper advertising;
- outdoor advertising;
- a dedicated telephone helpline;
- information leaflet drop to 650,000 households;
- a dedicated website (www.secureyourvote.com).

4.6 This activity was supported by a range of public relations initiatives aimed at keeping the key messages of the campaign to the forefront of the electorate's mind in the run-up to the election. Altogether the Commission's public awareness campaign cost approximately £400K of which almost 75% was spent promoting the prescribed forms of photographic identification.

4.7 Tracking research was again used to gauge the effectiveness of our campaign. Altogether 75% of those interviewed spontaneously recalled either seeing or hearing advertising about photographic identification. When asked to comment on the advertising 67% said they found it informative, 35% that it held their attention, 32% that it made them think and 30% that it was humorous.

5. CONCLUSIONS

5.1 The new system for voter registration in Northern Ireland has resulted in a more robust register, but with the potential to become less accurate with each annual canvass. A particular focus is needed on targeting hard to reach groups during the registration process. The Commission will be reviewing its strategy and contribution to this process.

Executive Summary—December 2003

THE ELECTORAL FRAUD (NORTHERN IRELAND) ACT 2002

AN ASSESSMENT OF ITS FIRST YEAR IN OPERATION

The Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002 received Royal Assent on 1 May 2002. The Act was primarily introduced to overcome impersonation and electoral abuse which were widely perceived to occur in Northern Ireland. It followed the publication of a number of reports on the subject between 1997 and 2001 all of which concluded that electoral fraud was a major issue in Northern Ireland and needed to be addressed if confidence in the democratic process was to be maintained.

BACKGROUND

The Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002 brought about the most significant change to electoral law and practice in Northern Ireland for many years. It replaced household registration with a new system of individual registration. Under the new rules, those having their name included on the register must provide personal identification information in the form of their date of birth, national insurance number and signature. Implementation of the Act also involved the introduction of photographic identification at polling stations.

ISSUES

Under Section 6 of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 (PPERA) The Electoral Commission has a duty to keep under review and, from time to time, submit reports to government on electoral law. In accordance with its remit the Commission has undertaken research into the introduction and operation of the Act. Our report considers how the legislation was implemented by the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland (EONI) and reflects the views of key stakeholders, including the electorate and political parties. The report identifies a number of specific issues which have the potential to bring about improvements in individual registration for the electorate. The November 2003 Assembly election should provide us with a further opportunity to comment in more detail on provisions of the Act which can only be tested during an election.

THE PUBLIC INTEREST

The introduction of individual registration in September 2002 and the publication of the first new register in December 2002 were subject to much debate and speculation. Interest mainly derived from the fact that the number of names on the new register had reduced by 10%, representing an estimated 120,000 potential voters. At the time, we gave an undertaking to the political parties and others that we would conduct research to establish the facts behind the reduction and that our findings would be made public.

PERCEPTIONS OF ELECTORAL FRAUD

Despite the fact that electoral fraud is perceived to be a major issue there are no statistics to support these widely held perceptions and there have been few if any successful prosecutions. Official reports published between 1997 and 2001 identified consistent themes in respect of electoral fraud in Northern Ireland. All confirmed that the extent of fraud was difficult to quantify and conclusive evidence for it was hard to obtain. Consequently, the impact of the Act on actual levels of fraud cannot be gauged, as there is no readily available benchmark against which to measure.

Public opinion research conducted in April 2003 suggests that the measures introduced to combat electoral fraud have had a positive impact and confidence levels in the integrity of the electoral process have increased as a result of the Act. Altogether, 72% of a representative sample of the Northern Ireland population either strongly agreed or tended to agree that the new system should reduce electoral fraud.

IMPLEMENTATION

The Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland and his staff had the responsibility for implementing the operational detail of the Act. He was supported in this task by the Northern Ireland Office who made the necessary resources available and The Electoral Commission who had responsibility for ensuring the electorate was aware of and understood the new arrangements. Other stakeholders including the political parties, representatives from the voluntary sector, civic society and the media played a constructive role in disseminating key messages about the new arrangements.

ANALYSIS OF THE REGISTERS

A key part of our research has involved comparing the last register produced under the old household system (August 2002) and the first individual register produced under the new system (December 2002). The May 2003 register was also analysed to gauge the impact rolling registration had on increasing the number of people registered.

In respect of the last household register it was concluded that the registration rate of 95.5% was likely to have been an overestimate of the actual number of eligible persons registered to vote. However, it was not possible to quantify the factors that inflated the register. The analysis of the August 2002 register also showed there were wide variations between those registered by constituency and that these were more pronounced at ward level. We considered various explanations for some of the differentials identified.

The first register produced under the individual registration system (December 2002) suggests that the numbers on the register as a proportion of the 18+ population was approximately 86%. The non-registration rate is largely explained by the fact that the carry forward facility (the mechanism used under the old household system to allow names to be carried forward for one year when a registration form was not returned) no longer applies.

The impact of removing the other inflationary factors from the December 2002 register is also considered. The December 2002 register shows that the largest declines in registration rates occurred in the Belfast constituencies and that rural constituencies continued to have the highest rates of registration. At ward level the analysis of the December 2002 suggests that there is a clear correlation between deprivation and percentage decline on the register.

IMPACT OF INDIVIDUAL REGISTRATION ON SPECIFIC GROUPS

Individual registration tended to have an adverse impact on disadvantaged, marginalised and hard-to-reach groups. Young people and students, people with learning disabilities and other forms of disability, and those living in areas of high social deprivation were less likely to be registered and encountered specific problems with the new registration process. These findings are not unique to Northern Ireland and are a recognised phenomenon across the UK.

THE ELECTORAL IDENTITY CARD

The uptake of the electoral identity card varied from constituency to constituency with the overall uptake at just over 7%. Some of the concerns expressed in respect of access to the electoral identity card have been endorsed by the Commission's public opinion survey. This revealed that a number of disadvantaged groups were less likely to have eligible identification. Evidence from a local by-election suggests that the message about electoral identification at polling stations is generally understood by the electorate. However, efforts will need to be maintained to ensure that those without eligible identification and young people coming onto the register for the first time are aware of the requirement and have the opportunity to apply for an electoral identity card.

ROLLING REGISTRATION

The number of names on the May 2003 register increased by 2.1 percentage points from the December 2002 register. However, this increase was not uniform across the Northern Ireland constituencies and was even more pronounced at ward level.

Electoral hearings are a feature of rolling registration that appears to be unique to Northern Ireland. In practice it means that electors are being treated differently. There also appear to be differences between the EONI's local offices in terms of the proportion of applicants called to hearings. The reasons for these variations are unclear. Fewer than half of those invited to hearings actually attend (leading to automatic non-registration) and the reasons for this require further exploration.

Executive Summary—April 2004

THE NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS—NOVEMBER 2003

This is the Commission's first report on a Northern Ireland election. We have a statutory duty to report on the administration of Northern Ireland Assembly elections. In reviewing this election, the Commission has aimed to place the interests of the electorate at the centre of its consideration. The November 2003 election was the first election where the provisions of the Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002 were tested across Northern Ireland. Our report contains a number of recommendations aimed at improving the overall administration of elections in Northern Ireland.

ELECTION ADMINISTRATION

The postponement of the May elections, followed by the decision to hold an election in the middle of the annual registration period, caused major logistical difficulties for the chief Electoral Officer and his staff. Work on the compilation of the annual register had to be suspended while staff turned their attention to the election.

The chief Electoral Officer feared that the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland (EONI) would be unable to retain sufficient people to staff the election. Consequently a number of staff recruited to work at the election were inexperienced and some had received little or no training.

Following criticism after the 2001 combined elections when a few hundred electors were refused a ballot paper because of queues at the close of poll, the chief Electoral Officer revised the polling station scheme, increasing both the number of polling places and polling stations.

This initiative appears to have been relatively successful with The Electoral Commission electors and presiding officers experiencing few difficulties with overcrowding and queuing. However the significant reduction in the number of people voting may have also contributed to this.

The main cause of complaint reported by presiding officers was from people turning up to vote but refused a ballot paper because their name was not on the electoral register. Confusion arose from the fact that many electors who had completed their annual registration form in the weeks leading up to the election assumed their name would be on the register and that they would therefore be entitled to vote.

TURNOUT

There is a widely held perception that turnout rates at elections in Northern Ireland are consistently high. However, the reality is somewhat different.

Turnout at the November election was officially recorded at 64%, representing a drop of six percentage points from the 1998 Assembly election and four percentage points from the 2001 election. In terms of votes polled, over 122,000 fewer people voted in 2003 than in 1998 while the corresponding figure for 2001 was 115,000. This represents a 15% reduction from 1998 in the number of people actually voting. In the report we explain that comparing turnout before and after the introduction of individual registration in 2002 gives a distorted picture because of the decrease in numbers registered.

However, when turnout is measured against the voting age population, it can be seen that just over half (56%) of those entitled to vote in Northern Ireland actually voted. Even taking account of the time of year the election was held and the problems encountered with the register, the overall drop in turnout is a cause for concern.

PHOTOGRAPHIC IDENTIFICATION

For the first time all electors had to present one of four forms of prescribed photographic identification before being issued with a ballot paper. According to the EONI, 3,493 people turned up to vote without valid or current identification. Overall, presiding officers reported that no significant problems were encountered at polling stations with identification and this aspect of the election appears to have gone well.

However we cannot be sure how many voters did not turn out to vote because they possessed none of the four forms of prescribed identification. We know from our public opinion survey that 2% of those interviewed said they had not voted for this reason. Some political parties felt the current forms of prescribed identification were restrictive and should be expanded, a view shared by Disability Action, the organisation who conducted a polling place access audit on our behalf.

We do not share this view and believe that four forms of identification prescribed in the legislation are sufficient and do not need to be extended. However, opportunities to obtain an electoral identity card, free of charge, must continue to be made readily available.

ELECTORAL FRAUD

On the wider issue of electoral fraud, the commission has received no evidence to suggest that this was an issue at the election. Presiding officers, the police and the political parties were in agreement on this point. The view generally expressed was that individual registration and the requirement for photographic identification had instilled greater confidence in the democratic process in Northern Ireland.

We have previously highlighted the adverse impact that individual registration appears to have had on disadvantaged, marginalised and hard to reach groups, including young people and people with disabilities.

ELECTION PROCEDURES

Despite the fact that the Single Transferable Vote (STV) has been used in Northern Ireland for 30 years, over 10,200 invalid votes were cast at the election. According to EONI statistics, the vast majority of ballot papers were spoiled because of a lack of understanding of the STV system of voting. This highlights the need for continued voter education and awareness of electoral systems.

The levels of privacy and secrecy of the process were also highlighted as being far from ideal, with many of the difficulties encountered linked to the design of the new polling booths. Access to polling places for older people and people with disabilities was considered inadequate, although problems were exacerbated by holding the election in late November.

We concluded that there should be a wide-ranging review of the systems and procedures used at the counts and that the electronic counting of votes should be explored. The media encountered significant difficulties in reporting at the counts and felt their role was not fully understood or appreciated. Comparisons with access granted to the media elsewhere in the UK and the Republic of Ireland supports this assertion and highlights the need for new arrangements to be established between the media and the EONI.

The counting of votes was judged by many external observers to be a long and laborious exercise that was neither transparent nor in some cases particularly well managed. The Commission shares these concerns but acknowledges that no political party or candidate questioned the validity of the results either during or after the counts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The build-up

- In order to maintain public confidence in the integrity of elections in Northern Ireland, we recommend that statutory dates set in advance for elections be changed only in exceptional circumstances.
- To avoid confusion about whether people are registered to vote we recommend to Government that elections are not held during the annual canvass period.
- We recommend that the Government should amend the law so that the timeframe for including names on the register be moved closer to election day.
- We recommend that the Government should amend the law so that the timetable for future elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly is set at 25 days.
- We recommend that the review of the Northern Ireland Assembly Disqualification Act 1975 is completed by the Secretary of State.
- We will examine the application of the disqualification legislation across the UK within the current legal framework and will make recommendations to Government.
- We recommend to the EONI that all communications to electors clearly identify the name and address of the sender.
- We recommend that the EONI conducts a regular revision of its polling station scheme. Consultees should be given at least eight weeks to respond to the proposals outlined in the consultation paper.
- We will conduct a review of absent voting in Northern Ireland and will make recommendations to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.
- The EONI, in conjunction with the Northern Ireland Office (NIO), should conduct a review of the current arrangements for recruiting, retaining and paying staff for election duty.
- We recommend that the EONI should be funded by the NIO to employ a dedicated training officer to work with all staff. We recommend that all presiding officers and poll clerks, especially newly appointed staff, be given comprehensive training in the practicalities of running a polling station.

Public awareness and participation

- Given the concerns raised by the EONI we will conduct a review of the helpline and consider how best this service can be provided to the public in future.
- We will take steps to ensure (that the electorate is better informed about the arrangements for absent voting.
- We will increase our efforts to promote greater awareness and understanding of individual registration and the requirement for photographic identification.

Polling day

- We recommend to the EONI that for future elections polling clerks should be instructed to turn up for duty at the same time as presiding officers in order to avoid any potential delay in the opening of the poll.
- Given that so many primary schools in Northern Ireland are considered inaccessible to people with disabilities, consideration should be given to alternative venues for polling places.
- Prior to election day the EONI should conduct an access audit of polling places in order to identify access issues that may prevent people with disabilities from voting.
- The EONI should consult with local disability groups about the measures needed to ensure local polling places are made more accessible.
- We will undertake a UK-wide review of the use of tendered ballot papers and will make recommendations on their future use at elections.
- We reaffirm our recommendation that the Government should amend the law to allow for the introduction of watermarks on ballot papers.
- We reaffirm our recommendation that guidance notes explaining the voting system be available both at polling stations and on ballot papers.
- We recommend that the EONI continues to liaise with manufacturers of voting equipment about the development of appropriate devices for people with visual impairments to use at STV elections.
- We will conduct a UK-wide policy review of the current assistance provided to voters in polling stations and will make recommendations.
- We recommend that the EONI should review the current layout of polling places to ensure the secrecy of the ballot is maintained and enhanced.

- We recommend to the EONI that estimated figures on turnout be made routinely available on request to candidates and agents during election day by presiding officers.
- We recommend to the Government that the law be amended for all UK elections to enable voters present inside polling places at the close of poll to be issued with a ballot paper.
- We recommend that the EONI should develop and make available a complaints leaflet for use by presiding officers in polling places.
- We will undertake a UK-wide review of the role and function of polling agents and will make recommendations.

The count and thereafter

- We recommend that the EONI reviews the current location and suitability of count venues.
- We recommend that external consultants be appointed to conduct a review of the entire count process with the aim of increasing its efficiency and timeliness. The review should also consider the scope for computerising all or part of the count.
- We recommend that steps should be taken to ensure that the transparency of the count is enhanced.
- We recommend that the EONI explores ways of making greater use of information technology at STV counts. We further recommend that the NIO put in place the necessary statutory provisions to ensure that the EONI is in a position to conduct a number of pilots in respect of electronic counting at the 2005 local council elections.
- We recommend to the EONI that it convenes a working group involving broadcasters, the Commission and other interested stakeholders with a view to developing and putting in place a code of good practice on media access for use at future elections in Northern Ireland.

Looking forward

- In order to benchmark performance and identify funding issues we recommend that an audit of the efficiency, economy and effectiveness of the EONI be conducted by the National Audit Office.
- We strongly urge the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to take forward the recommendations outlined in our 2003 report *Funding electoral services*.

Witnesses: Mr Karamjit Singh, Commissioner of the Electoral Commission, and Mr Seamus Magee, Head of the Electoral Commission's Office Northern Ireland, examined

Q1 Chairman: Mr Singh, Mr Magee, thank you very much for coming to help us with the questions we have to ask about the Electoral Registration System in Northern Ireland. I must start with an apology: the bell is going to ring and we are going to have to go and vote some time, maybe 20 minutes, maybe half hour. I am very sorry but that is the way it is in Westminster. The Government said: "It believes its anti-fraud measures have been successful in restoring integrity to the electoral process in Northern Ireland". Do you agree?

Mr Singh: Yes, we do, Chairman. We commissioned a survey in April 2003 which showed a representative sample of the community in Northern Ireland, over a thousand people, this showed that something like 72% of that sample felt that the new legislative framework would actually deal with their concerns about the question of actual or potential fraud. In addition to that, we also commissioned another survey as part of our report on the Northern Ireland Assembly elections that also showed that a majority, somewhere in the region of two-thirds of respondents again felt very confident with the new legislative framework.

Mr Magee: Could I also just add another point? At the Assembly election we did some very detailed work which is included in the report. All presiding officers who worked at the election were surveyed.

Out of the 1500 who worked there who received responses from 1100 presiding officers were very clear on election day that there was no evidence of fraud or alleged fraud. We received the same comments from the PSNI in Northern Ireland, and indeed the political parties. Indeed, one political party in Northern Ireland commented that it was the fairest and cleanest election that had taken place in Northern Ireland.

Q2 Chairman: Which party was that?

Mr Magee: The SDLP.

Q3 Chairman: In your report on the first year, "Living the Act", you say the new reduced register is likely to be more robust and accurate, but given that the level of regulation across the United Kingdom is 93%, is 86% registration not rather low?

Mr Singh: I think that there are a number of points there, Chairman. The first is that if you look at our report we have looked at a number of reasons why the register declined by some 11% from the previous register based on household registration. We identified the carry forward as being a major factor in this. We have to remember that in England, Scotland and Wales, of course, we have the household registration system. Therefore, I think

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the question we need to bear in mind is that we are not comparing like with like here. There is a question here, obviously, that the Commission believes that, yes, the register is more accurate than its predecessor. However, what it then raises is the question that if you compare the electoral register with, for example, other population data, such as the census, there clearly is a gap. The Commission has concerns about that and we believe those are the challenges that need to be addressed.

Q4 Chairman: How do you think that and downward trend might be arrested?

Mr Singh: I think that there are three points, if I may make this point very quickly. One is that, again, we have concerns that where you have a situation where there is a fresh slate approach, if I may put it, every year, where you have effectively an annual canvas, that is one problem. I think the second problem, inevitably, is that if you look at the reasons, we need to focus much more on why is it that people do not wish to register. Certainly, two years ago the Commission did some overall research into the question of why young people participate or do not participate in the electoral process. We identified five areas. One was the question of people's awareness or lack of it. Second was the question of the administrative arrangements which might be there for registration, whether they militate against registration. The third was the question of people moving around. Indeed, if you look at the reports which came out from the last census, it is estimated that something like one in twelve of the population overall moved in the twelve months before the last census. If we think about that in the context of young people, if we think about that in the context of multiple occupation in some communities, that figure is likely to be much greater. Then there are two other factors, one of which is that people may actively be avoiding going on to the register for various reasons. Lastly, people may be alienated from the political system, and therefore may not see a connection with the issue of a need to register, voting or indeed have any interest in that process.

Mr Magee: May I just add a couple of points? I think we know very clearly from the research that we have done in commissioning both the EFA report and the Elections Report, those groups in society in Northern Ireland who are not registered. We know very clearly that young people aged between 18 and 24, roughly 33% are registered. We know groups living within inner city Belfast and Derry, in areas of higher social deprivation, minority ethnic communities in Northern Ireland and students; we know very clearly that those groups are under represented on the Crown register. In order to get the register up we clearly need to outreach to those groups to reach almost, not on a one-to-one basis, but to get much more involved with those communities on the ground to increase registration rates. If I could just give one example: last weekend there was a festival in Belfast called Summer Madness which took place at the Kings Hall in Belfast. Over the weekend our outreach officer was able to identify 500 young people at the festival who

were not on the register and who have asked for their names to be included on the register this time around. It is activities like that that we need to address on an outreach capacity in order to build the register and to close the gap from the current 84–85%, at least October 1990.

Q5 Chairman: Did you find out why these young people were not registered?

Mr Magee: There are a whole range of reasons why young people are not registered. One very significant point is that under the old household registration system the names of young people were registered on the household registration form. When we moved to a new system of individual registration it was then up to the individual young persons to register. Clearly, those numbers have dropped off very significantly. We have, in our submission from Price Waterhouse Coopers indicated to you that currently 20 to 25% of young people, attainers, are on the register. There is a significant area of work to be done there.

Chairman: Mr Tony Clarke.

Q6 Mr Clarke: Thank you, Chairman. To find 500 young people who are not registered at a festival is a cause of huge concern rather than a celebration I would imagine in terms of highlighting how serious the problem is in terms of registration of young people. We have a situation, have we not, where year on year on year the register of electors is shrinking. We have not arrested some of the deficits. Every year we have less people on the register. It is estimated that we have 30,000 people who were denied the right to vote because of not having photo ID. Is there not a threat that the surveys you have carried out of electoral presiding officers, and perhaps those that have participated in elections, only tell you that it is working for those that are participating. Is not a major concern the growing number of people who are not registering and are not able to take part in the electoral process, particularly when they are from some of the most disadvantaged groups in Northern Ireland?

Mr Singh: I think we have to look at the picture overall. I think the Commission would take the view that the introduction of individual registration and voter ID cards actually has made a positive contribution, we believe, to promoting confidence in the integrity of the electoral process in Northern Ireland. I think the point that you have made is exactly the issue that I was raising, which is that there is a potential in this system, if you work on the basis of an annual canvas, there is a potential that you could have a long-term trend. Let us not forget that we are something like 18 months to 21 months into this new system. Our concern is, and I think the PriceWaterhouseCoopers interim results, and they are interim results, suggest that if you had a trend that continued then you would have a problem with something like 2% or so effectively falling off the register. That cannot be right. There is an issue there about, obviously, making sure that we retain all the people on the register. The second issue is actually what do we do in terms of those people who are not on the register in the first place. This is where I think

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the issue of outreach, looking at the issue of the reasons why people choose not to register and the question of effective strategies that are necessary for that. What we hope, from the Commission's point of view, that by actually producing these two reports what we have done is actually we have managed to look at the impact of the legislation. We have actually put that into the public arena because we think it is very important that the political parties and other stakeholders actually are aware of what is going on. Lastly, the implications for the Commission are that we have a role in promoting participation in the electoral process. Clearly, we have to think about the campaigns, the strategies that we are developing, and that is obviously one of the issues. I am very happy to talk about that further.

Q7 Mr Clarke: I can see that you are trying to balance, trying to grow confidence in the electoral system against having a system that is robust, but surely there must be a limit. We start off with a figure of 1.21 million in the census who are eligible to vote. That has declined year on year. Next year we could see that falling below one million. Is there a figure at which somebody says: hang on, if we carry on on this road only 50% will be registered to vote but it will still be a fair election?

Mr Singh: No. The Commission would really want to make three points. One is that all those persons who are eligible to be registered, the Commission would wish to see all those persons on the register. Secondly, I think that all those persons on the register feel that they are able to vote in an atmosphere that is free from intimidation and in an appropriate context in terms of free from intimidation of any kind. Thirdly, I think that the Commission would also take a view that it is very important that political parties in Northern Ireland feel able to access the information, to be able to campaign and to be able to engage with all the communities in Northern Ireland. The last thing is that we think it is very important that people in the wider community are aware of what is going on. From the Commission's point of view we certainly do not subscribe to the idea that you somehow have a series of checks and balances that are so stringent that they, effectively, disenfranchise people. We do not believe that is the case. What we do think is the case is that there are certain sections of the community, and Mr Magee has alluded to some of them, who are not on the register. Some of these people may never have registered in the first place. That is an issue. That is part of the challenges that we have.

Chairman: Reverend Martin Smyth.

Q8 Reverend Smyth: Thank you, Mr Chairman. I understand the last point well, but they would not have been on the register anywhere in the past. It does not actually explain the missing from the register. That is one aspect. I commend you on the attempt at the Kings Hall to discover young people's view. How actually were you able to confirm they were not on the register because they have come

from all over Ireland. Secondly, did they give you any explanation why they were not on? What steps have been taken to put into effect by the Commission the lessons you have learnt to reach out to the young people, bearing in mind that when you send a note through the post it is quite often the recipient does not receive it, not only because of the failure of the post, but also in some of the homes whoever picks it up throws it to the side. What way are we going to reach the people?

Mr Singh: Can I make two general points then invite Mr Magee to come back to the 500. Again, we commissioned some research two years ago which looked at electoral registration. We found two things. One was that actually only about half the sample of people identified the fact, were aware that they needed to register on an annual basis. This was quite a large sample of people. Secondly, we also discovered in the same survey that a number of people were not particularly aware of what the requirements were for the registration process. That is the first point. I think the other issue is that one of the things that we did allude to in our report with the household registration process was that you obviously had a certain amount of name duplication. You had people who were registered in two addresses, and students are an obvious example: at their parents' home and also at university. This is something we have in England, Scotland and Wales. I think that there are those factors, but perhaps Mr Magee can talk about the 500.

Q9 Reverend Smyth: Can I just question you on that one? Would you not have a right to be registered at different addresses? The crime would be if they voted in the same election twice. It is possible, for example, to live at an address and vote in a Local Government election where you are paying rates because you are a student or business person living away part of the week, but you can only vote once, in a Local Government general election. Why would they not be able to be on the elective register in the two areas if they were genuine?

Mr Singh: Presumably with the computerised data that Mr Stanley now has, presumably one would be able, with the data of birth and National Insurance number, to identify who the individual was. As you say, one would hope that, clearly Mr Stanley will I am sure talk about this, we will obviously be able to look at this question of where people are registered and where they vote. I think that one of the things that we were very conscious of when we commissioned some of the surveys is that perceptions matter a great deal, have mattered a great deal in Northern Ireland. We have to recognise that whatever the reality of the situation, it is about what is necessary to deal with some of those perceptions.

Mr Magee: Just on the Kings Hall event. Altogether there were 3,500 young people, you are quite right, from all over Ireland at the Kings Hall in the last few days. As part of our outreach programme within the Electoral Commission we were engaged in a range of activities with young people around, politics and their interest in politics and politics in Europe,

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etcetera. As part of that we did survey the views of over 1000 young people there. Part of the questionnaire dealt with the issue of registration in Northern Ireland. 500 young people indicated to us that either they were not registered or did not know if they were registered. We now have the names and addresses to provide to the Electoral Office in Northern Ireland who will now send out registration forms to those young people. That was basically the methodology formed.

Q10 Reverend Smyth: You did not know they were registered but they might have been.

Mr Magee: That is exactly it. We do find very clearly that some people, and we found even out at the election where a number of people turned up to vote at the election in November thinking they were on the register but were not actually on it. There are quite a number of people who are not clear from year to year if they are actually on the electoral register. Very often, around election time, it is only if somebody does not receive a poll card that it immediately strikes them that they may not be on the register.

Q11 Reverend Smyth: I might make the point, Chairman, representing the university constituency we are never able to fill out the full vote register because they went home to vote on the general election in their own areas, for which I am truly thankful in many cases. On the other hand, I have to make the point: they were living in residencies and paying rates and rents, they were entitled actually, they do not have to, so long as they were citizens they are entitled to vote, they would have been entitled, surely, in the Local Government to cast a vote in such a way to influence those who provided them with very bad accommodation.

Chairman: After that non-political point: Mr Hugo Swire.

Q12 Mr Swire: Can we return to the question of the 18 to 24 year old age group, which your research clearly shows there is a problem with the representation. You talked about some ideas you have had for getting them more involved. Can you elaborate on some of the strategies you are considering for getting younger voters registered?

Mr Singh: If I can make a general point and then pass to Mr Magee. One of the responsibilities the Commission has under section 13 of the Political Parties Elections Referendums Act is in the broad area of encouraging participation. We have, over the last two years, focused our campaigns in Northern Ireland on the question of making people across the community aware of the new arrangements for registration and the new arrangements for voter ID. The survey material that we have and the responses we have indicate there is now a very high level of awareness. We are talking round about 70 to 80% of the new arrangements. The question now for us, and particularly in the light of the concerns and the potential trend of a possible long term decline in the register is that we need to have a targeted approach.

What we need to do is to target our approach on the reasons why people do not register, and the groups who do not register.

Q13 Mr Swire: What is your current estimate of the 18 to 24 year old under representation, the level of it?

Mr Singh: In terms of attainers, we think about 20 to 25%.

Q14 Mr Swire: 20 to 25% of 18 to 24 year olds are unregistered currently?

Mr Singh: No.

Mr Magee: The most recent research we have done would indicate that 33% of young people aged between 18 and 24 are not registered. The figure in England, Scotland and Wales is roughly 11%.

Mr Singh: I think that the issue this now raises for the Commission is that apart from targeted PR campaigns, focusing perhaps used mainly to focus on young people, there is a question here about how do we actually reach out and engage with other groups in civic society across Northern Ireland, as well as political parties, and actually seek to use those particular networks. I also think that in addition to the Commission this does have clearly implications for Mr Stanley and his colleagues in how they undertake the registration process as well. I think what we have to do now is to have an outreach programme, in the broadest sense which actually seeks to engage with young people, but I come back to the four or five issues which I identified before. We have to recognise that this is a very complex area and we are talking about a group of people, some of whom have never registered at all in the first place and perhaps have never seen any benefits from registering.

Q15 Mr Swire: That leads me nicely on to my next point really. You talked earlier about the festival in Belfast and your outreach programme and you were able to sign up 500 there. The representatives of the Electoral Office have suggested that some young voters are keen to get the identity card in order to prove they are over 18 and constantly some get registered via the back door. The question, therefore, is, and this may be something you want to consider, whether or not there is room to be a little unconventional by advertising the ID card as a means of proving one's age in order to encourage registration.

Mr Singh: I think the Commission would welcome any ideas that will be effective in encouraging the rate of registration. If I may put it in a slightly wider context, we also have to recognise the reasons why some people who are out of the 18 to 24 age group, the reason why some people may register on the electoral register is not because they wish to vote, but because, for example, for credit reasons, etcetera, they may wish to be on the electoral register. We are very happy to consider any ideas and be as unconventional as possible. We also recognise, certainly I recognise as someone who certainly falls outside that age group, that we do need to think

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about engaging, and we clearly need to think about what are the particular outlets that we could utilise and why people want these cards.

Q16 Mr Beggs: Your report shows that people living in areas of high social deprivation are less likely to be registered to vote. These are the areas where the registration has declined disproportionately. Have you developed a specific strategy to try to alleviate the problem in those areas?

Mr Singh: May I make two points, and perhaps Seamus can respond. You are presumably referring to our first report, which was published in December 2003, because if you look at our latest response, and some of the comments from the interim Price Waterhouse Coopers report, what that shows is that actually during the actual canvas process it certainly is the case, or appears to be the case, that there is a lower level of registration in areas of higher social deprivation. During the rolling registration process this seems to be alleviated to the extent that the rolling registration appears to be greater in those areas where there is higher social deprivation. The Price Waterhouse Coopers report results appear to suggest that that link between deprivation and registration is not as clear-cut. I think it is an area we need to look further at. In terms of your general point, we would certainly take the view that the hard to reach groups that we have talked about are certainly more likely to be living in areas of relative social deprivation.

Mr Magee: If I could just comment very briefly. I think over the last two years our strategy overall has been to get the message across about individual registration, the fact that you have to register on an annual basis and the requirements of photographic ID at polling stations. Just turning to registration: we have taken forward a number of initiatives. For example, we were in contact with all post-primary schools last year around registration time. We certainly feel that having the registration form more widely available within, for example, the voluntary and community sector would make a significant difference. Up to now, the availability of the form has been really once a canvasser had called. If a canvasser missed somebody, they were unlikely to get a registration form. What we would like to see would be the form made more widely available, for example, through the Housing Executive in Northern Ireland, through DHSS, through Citizens Advice Bureaus, through a whole range of organisations that come in contact on a daily basis with the population. We are also currently talking to Royal Mail about the possibility of having the electoral registration form available at post offices. As you know, there are 600 post offices in Northern Ireland. That, we feel, would be an ideal location for people to register. People with difficulty registering could have assistance from, say, the post master. There are a certain number of initiatives in terms of increasing activities in terms of retaining the real post offices in Northern Ireland and elsewhere in the UK. We are taking forward a number of initiatives, as Karamjit mentioned earlier. We do have an outreach programme which is targeted at 18 to 24

years olds outside mainstream education. We are developing a number of initiatives with young people in terms of creating a greater interest in politics and registration, etcetera. We recognise this will be a long process because if you advertise on an annual basis you certainly will pick up the 18%, but the real challenge is getting at the hard to reach groups. Indeed, we also know that people, for example, with disabilities in Northern Ireland are less likely to be registered. Again, we have been doing work with Disability Action in Northern Ireland to pick up those people and ensure they are registered. There are a number of strategies that we are taking forward.

*The Committee suspended from 4.20 pm to 4.33 pm
for a division in the House*

Q17 Mr Beggs: If you would like to comment on how closely you are working with the Electoral Office in Northern Ireland to develop joined-up strategies in these areas?

Mr Singh: Yes. We certainly work closely with the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland. We obviously have distinct roles. An electoral officer's role is very clearly to compile the register. Our responsibility is very much to promote awareness and encourage participation. We have regular meetings between, obviously, Mr Stanley and his colleagues and Mr Magee and myself, obviously, and our colleagues. We also, for example, have a assemblies parties panel that I chair that meets every three months, with all the parties in Northern Ireland. As a matter of course, we regularly invite Mr Stanley and his colleagues. Obviously, we spend a great deal of time there discussing electoral issues. Clearly, registration issues have been very much on the agenda in a whole series of meetings during the last year, 18 months. Certainly, from the Electoral Commission's perspective, we are very committed to working very closely with Mr Stanley and his colleagues. We recognise that obviously we do have distinct roles because one of the roles we also have is that we have to produce a statutory report on the conduct of administration of elections. Clearly, to that extent we clearly have to stand back a bit and really look at in a dispassionate way, look at what is going on. We also, obviously, have to look at the registration process in the same way. I think it may be that on matters of detail from time to time we may have a different view.

Q18 Mr Beggs: According to MENCAP, the guidance you provide for parents and carers of people with learning difficulties referred to the terms "idiot" and "lunatic". Although this is correct Common Law terminology, do you think it is helpful to use such terms in guidance to carers and parents?

Mr Singh: I wonder if I can ask Mr Magee to respond to that point.

Mr Magee: It goes back some time in history, the use of the term "idiots" and "lunatics". Clearly, it is not appropriate terminology in this day and age at all. It did appear on the Commission's website. In fact, it

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was actually taken from the Home Office circular published a number of years back. It has since been removed from the website and we have apologised for it appearing on our website. You are quite right: it is inappropriate terminology and should not be used.

Q19 Mr Tynan: I would like to turn to the electoral identity cards. Do you find the level of take up of the electoral identity cards satisfactory?

Mr Singh: If I may make two points. One is that we have commissioned a survey, which shows that something like 7% of the persons registered have an electoral ID card, that something like 70% of those persons who registered might well rely on a UK or Irish passport, and somewhere in the same region might rely on a driving licence. I think that we have to recognise that that is one factor, that people will never, in a sense, rely on the electoral ID card as their main identification document in the voting process. Having said that, we also recognise that some communities, particularly those who are socially deprived, are less likely to have a driving licence, are less likely to have a passport. It is very important that we make sure that the take up of electoral identity cards is as full as possible. The third issue is that we are also aware that a number of people, a small number, because again this was recorded at the election somewhere in the region of 3,400 persons turned up on the day of the elections with identifying material, such as a passport or driving licence, which was not current. Therefore, that was in breach of the legislation. There were some concerns that were expressed, certainly by the political parties and others, to myself and Mr Stanley about the question of take up of the cards, but I think you will see from our report that certainly Mr Stanley and his colleagues instituted quite a considerable programme of mobile centres and tried to ensure that the take up of the cards was as full as possible. I do not think we can say that every single person who wished to have a voter ID card obviously was able to receive one because, clearly, at the end of the day there is a certain period between people applying and actually the issuing of the card. Certainly, it may well be, I think our view is that this is likely to be a very low number, but there would have been a small number of people who may not, indeed, have had a card by the time the election occurred. I do not know if Mr Magee wants to add something.

Mr Magee: It is the responsibility of the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland to deal with the electoral ID card. Our responsibility has been to support the public advertisement of the mobile sites, *etcetera*. I understand that the latest figure is that 93,000 people have now availed of the opportunity to have an ID card in Northern Ireland. We still think that in the future there will be a need to maintain some process to ensure, particularly young people, turned 18, etc, have an opportunity to avail of an electoral identity card, but certainly the electoral officer over the last two years has put a lot of work in with our support in terms of targeting communities right across

Northern Ireland with the ID card. I am sure there are still some people who have no form of ID and we do need to target those people in the future.

Q20 Mr Tynan: The 93,000 you speak of, I understand that number of cards have been registered. Have you any idea of the numbers that may need registration so that a comparison can be done? I have a figure of something like 230,000 people who may need registration cards. If that is the number and there are only 93,000 registered, then obviously there is a huge gap there.

Mr Singh: The figure you are alluding to is the estimate of the gap between the numbers of people who are on the electoral register and the numbers that have been identified as part of the census. This is really the 13 or 14% that we need to ensure are actually on the register. That is assuming that 100%, all those people actually would want to rely on the electoral identity card as their primary source of identification at the voting stage. The point we are making is that if you were to look at the current trends, the current trends are that something like 7% of cards. Firstly, the assumption is that you get all those people on the register. Secondly, the assumption is that if you follow existing trends then some 7% of those 200,000-odd would be a much lower figure.

Q21 Mr Tynan: I was not assuming. I was really looking for information as regards the 93,000 that are registered, what you believed was the maximum amount who would require a card, in order to register?

Mr Magee: If I can clarify the point. I think the 230,000 figure was the number of people who initially ticked the electoral application form for an ID card. Obviously, a significant number of those people would have discovered that they were in possession of a driving licence or passport, or a senior smart pass after that event. Therefore, they did not proceed in applying for the electoral ID card. Certainly, we have no strong evidence that there are very large numbers of people without ID cards. Certainly, in the last run that the Electoral Office did in the run up to the election I think they suggested that 5000 cards were issued at that time. As I say, throughout the year people can apply through the Electoral Office and their local office for an electoral ID card. They can apply 9 to 5 every day. I understand it does take a bit longer for the card to be issued if there is not an election looming and it takes six to eight weeks for a card.

Q22 Mr Tynan: I was only trying to ascertain that if we have 93,000 people have cards at the present time, what was your best guesstimate of a situation of other people who did not have a driving licence, who did not have any other registration card that would require one? That was really the question I was asking.

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Mr Singh: The figures that we quoted to you were based on the survey which asked people, a sample survey which asked people what document did you rely on when you voted. That is where we have got the 7% from.

Mr Magee: If I can clarify. In the survey a few years ago at the time the legislation was being planned, the Northern Ireland office did some work, I understand the estimate at that time was around about 350,000 people had no access to either the prescribed forms of ID in Northern Ireland. Obviously, the senior smart pass kicked in after the event. We now understand that over 130,000 people in Northern Ireland have the senior smart pass, which is one of the prescribed forms of ID.

Mr Singh: If I may just add one point. I think the concerns expressed in the past that large numbers of people would not have a voter ID card and thus would be prevented from voting has certainly not materialised, if you look at both the November assembly election and indeed the June European elections.

Q23 Mr Tynan: I particularly want to pursue the point that there was a difference I was thinking of, if you had any idea of the people, you say it is a small number, have you any idea what that number is?

Mr Singh: No, we do not.

Q24 Mr Tynan: That was really the question being asked. It could be much more than you think it is or it could be much less; you do not know at the present time. Do you have any plans or do you have any programme to ensure that people who do not have ID for registering apart from advertisements, advertise the fact that people need cards, do you have any programme other than that in order to ensure that people who do not have ID at the present time have ID and are able to vote?

Mr Magee: The programme is obviously something that the Electoral Office and the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland are responsible for because they are responsible for the card. Where we come in is in terms of supporting them in terms of advertising their mobile units, etcetera. Certainly, we have worked very closely with the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland, in not only identifying the areas where the mobile unit could work well, but also advertising in local and regional newspapers in Northern Ireland, the mobile units and also the Electoral Offices. Our primary role is in terms of supporting the Electoral Office which is responsible for this activity.

Mr Singh: One last word, if I may say so. We have commissioned tracking research that measures the impact of our campaigns. What that does show is that there is a very high level of awareness that people need to have the approved form of voter identification at the voting stage.

Mr Tynan: Thank you very much for your response. I am sure my colleagues seem desperate to come in on this question.

Q25 Mr Pound: I am not sure that desperation is the word I would use, Chairman. It was simply further to a point that Mr Karamjit Singh raised earlier on about applicable identification. If I may: in the evidence submitted to us by Sinn Fein they quote two or three times Mr Magee's statement of November last year about 30,000 people turning up to vote and not having the applicable ID. For the record, can you say: does the expression "applicable ID" refer to, as you suggest, Mr Singh, out-of-date ID or is it the wrong ID? Could you, for the record, flesh that out?

Mr Singh: Yes. I was using the word "applicable", perhaps the appropriate word should have been approved. There are four forms of approved identification: that is what I should have said. I apologise to the Committee if I am not being clear here. What is the case, and I think our report of the assembly election shows, is that a number of people turned up, for example, with driving licences and passports, for example, but they were out-of-date. I think the legislation makes it very clear that they have to be current. There is a question there of not just simply having the legislation, obviously, but ensuring that people have the approved ID. The fact of the matter is that some people, because they have passports, because they have driving licences, because they have trans-link cards, may not see the need to apply for an electoral identity card. The fact that these other forms are not current obviously will not become apparent until they turn up at the polling station and when they have a difficulty. What we are also aware of is that a number of people turned up with some of these forms of identification on the day and we understand returned subsequently with something that was current. It was not a question of people not coming back, as it were.

Q26 Mr Pound: Sorry, Chairman, the last point, I do not want to be pedantic. I think there is a difference between "approved" and "applicable". Are you saying in the majority of cases it was an approved form of ID which was either out-of-date or any other reason, or was it an inapplicable form of ID, like a Glen Thoren(?) season ticket or something or was it a mixture of both?

Mr Magee: Can I just clarify the point? I think at the election there were roughly 3,500 people turned up to vote. Half of those had ID that would have been acceptable but was out-of-date. The other half had ID that was not applicable at all, that was not acceptable and was outside the terms of the legislation.

Q27 Mr Pound: Did they come into any category, the latter form of identification, the applicable ones; could you categorise them in any way?

Mr Magee: Yes, they were categorised into things, for example, like pension books, works medical cards, etcetera. There were the non-photographic types of ID that were used at previous elections.

Chairman: I think the detailed questions might be better put to our next set of witnesses who are the people on the ground. Let us not get too far down the road. The Reverend Martin Smyth.

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Q28 Reverend Smyth: I just add one simple question. Would the Commission, therefore, in the light of experience favour the dropping of the word "current", since the picture and the details do not change other than the date on driving licences and passports. They identify a real person and a real place.

Mr Singh: I think the Commission would be happy to support anything which encourages, which ensures that people are properly registered and are able to vote. We do also recognise that the thinking, obviously, behind the legislation was to promote confidence in the integrity of the registration and voting process. I think there is a balancing act here. If, for example, someone has a passport which is just about to expire, or has recently expired, that is one thing. If someone has a passport which is perhaps several years out-of-date you might wish to take a different view. Admittedly, perhaps you could still recognise facial features. One of the things I think is important here is that presiding officers and polling staff really ought to be in a position where whatever form of identification is put in front of them that they are able to make an assessment very easily and that they are not in a position where they are having to make perhaps difficult assessments on the day.

Q29 Reverend Smyth: My experience of our presiding officers is they abide by the law, even to the detriment of a person who had them in the home the night before. Can I proceed then. Looking at your report in which you actually acknowledge that the Chief Electoral Officer favours a reinstatement of the carry forward mechanism. As I understand it you do not. Why?

Mr Singh: I think that, if I could put this in a slightly broader context, I think we need to appreciate that Northern Ireland is unique in the United Kingdom in the sense that you have a system of individual registration. I think the Commission feels that individual registration is something which ought to be considered very seriously in the context of England, Scotland and Wales. We also believe that actually one of the issues linked up with household registration is the question of the carry forward facility. We believe, again, as a Commission, that the emphasis should be on ensuring the accuracy of the register as much as possible. We believe that individual registration is the way to do that. Secondly, we believe that additional efforts in ensuring the continued accuracy of the register is really by targeting efforts on the hard to reach groups and really trying to understand why it is that people choose not to register and trying to develop effective strategies that counter that. I think our feeling and our concerns are that if you simply reintroduce the carry forward facility for a new system of individual registration that there is a concern we would have this might actually muddy the waters and actually perhaps lead to needless duplication. We would also make the comment that actually with the fact that under the new system Mr Stanley and his colleagues may have details of National Insurance numbers, dates of birth, etcetera, actually it is important to maintain the

robustness and integrity of the register. We understand the concerns about the potential for declining numbers, but we do not believe the Commission's perspective . . .

Q30 Reverend Smyth: The registration numbers, National Insurance numbers and dates of birth do not change from year to year. The age goes up but the date of birth remains the same.

Mr Singh: That is surely an argument for looking at the question of whether or not you have a fresh slate approach each year, in other words, that you might want to move away from an annual canvas. The question I think you are raising is about the carry forward. I think what we are saying, and that is a different thing. What you are saying is that you simply perhaps move from an annual canvas to every other year or every third year. The question of the carry forward, I responded to your question in the traditional sense, that obviously in terms of the perspective of the system that we have in England, Scotland, Wales at the present time.

Q31 Reverend Smyth: I know that the Treasury would be very sympathetic to the Chief Electoral Officer who suggests on grounds of cost effectiveness that the proposed future canvas be pre-printed registration forms delivered to households by post rather than done by canvassers. Do you support this idea?

Mr Singh: I think we would again sound a note of caution on this. I think, of course, like any other public service it is important that with registration services clearly one needs to look at the question of efficiency, but we also have to consider the question of effectiveness. The fact of the matter is that if you look at the use of, for example, postal questionnaires or surveys, the fact is that the response rate is lower than it is if undertaken certainly on the ground. I do know for a fact because this issue has been raised in the assemblies parties panel, that certainly all the political parties in Northern Ireland would wish to see canvassing on the ground, ideally. I think that the concern here is that, certainly the interim report of the Price Waterhouse Coopers raises this, that where you have postal canvassing, and certainly we picked this up before in the earlier report, that actually the registration rate is lower. We have to balance the cost issue with the question of impact. At the end of the day there is a balancing exercise.

Q32 Reverend Smyth: I was not so sure the forms that have been returned could have been verified in the Electoral Office and then the canvassers could come to those homes that had not responded, then that would have been fairly effective. Canvas: not by party officials but by agents of the Commission or the Electoral Office. If such a thing was being done do you think it would reduce their role even further?

Mr Singh: We think that there is that potential. I think that all these measures have to be looked at in terms of what are we trying to achieve. What we are trying to achieve at the end of the day is to ensure that the electoral register in Northern Ireland actually accurately reflects, as far as possible, those

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people who are entitled to be registered. We would simply point to the experience both that we have identified in our first report of December 2003 and the interim Price Waterhouse Coopers interim report which suggests, and it is admittedly for a small number because Mr Stanley has obviously made this point many times in the past, that postal canvassing only occurs in a small numbers of wards in Northern Ireland. Based on that very small sample there certainly is an indication that the figures for registration are lower. If you had the system that you suggest, which is that you sent forms out initially and you had the facility, the computerised facility, for example, to compare the data, to ensure whether or not people are on the register, then, of course, you could then focus the rest of your attention and efforts on the range of the population. We also have to remember in some communities, particularly multi-occupied properties, young people, etcetera, there will be a great deal of movement around. I suppose the question we would raise from the Commission's perspective is: is it actually cost effective in the long run to actually undertake that process.

Q33 Reverend Smyth: You proposed that in certain circumstances it should be possible for citizens to register up to six days before an election. How would you ensure such application, the process in time, even in cases where there might be late surges in applications?

Mr Singh: I suppose I have to say that the Commission obviously puts that proposal forward knowing that we do not have the direct responsibility for compiling the register; Mr Stanley does. Can I say, again, just to take you through where we have come to that point. We recognise that when you looked at the assemblies election last year, last November, that that was based on the Electoral Register which existed at 1st September last year. Actually, if you looked at when that was compiled, that was compiled from Autumn 2002 onwards, then if you include rolling registration, effectively, the latest by which anyone could have got on to that register was effectively early, mid-July. That was something like four and a half months before the election. The question we are raising is really from the Commission's perspective is not just in Northern Ireland, but more generally in the United Kingdom: should we not be seen to move to a system where in order to maximise the number of people to be able to vote should we not seek to move forward the dates, as it were, for potential registration, perhaps linking them to, for example, the dates of when nominations close. Of course, we recognise that in making this proposal this does have implications for those who are charged with administering the registration process, but that was the thinking behind the recommendation. Of course, we certainly are not suggesting that these dates should be curtailed and brought forward at any price. There should be no compromising of the integrity of the register and checks that need to be made.

Q34 Mr Pound: You have mentioned the relationship between EONI and the Electoral Commission during the course of the evidence you have given. Could you just tell me how that relationship works? I do not know if it is difficult for you to say, but realistically. It just suddenly occurred to me. In all honesty, does it function well and smoothly because if there is anything at all you feel we should know, now is the time to tell us?

Mr Singh: We would hope that you have the Commission's views in the two very public reports that we have published. I think I made this point earlier to one of your colleagues that inevitably we have to work together in a sense that very clearly Mr Stanley's colleagues are responsible for compiling the register and the administration of elections and count, etcetera. We obviously have a responsibility for trying to promote participation. Therefore, it is important we work together. Having said that, we also have a statutory responsibility to comment on the efficiency and the effectiveness of the conduct of the administration of elections. That is the background to our report on the assembly election. We hope that what we have produced is a very fair report there and, equally, in our research report on the registration process. We have included comments from a wide variety of stakeholders, some of which are very supportive, others which are less supportive, as it were, but we believe that actually we are discharging our role properly by raising those points. We also believe that we are, Mr Magee used the word "support" on several occasions, we are there to support each other. That does not mean to say that we necessarily will agree on every single issue. For example, Reverend Smyth referred to the carry forward. Certainly, in the past I know that Mr Stanley has had a very different view about the carry forward to that of the Commission. At the end of the day, I think as two independent public authorities I hope that you, as a Committee, will appreciate that clearly we need to say things as they are.

Q35 Mr Pound: You have rightly been praised for your Kings Hall initiative. I am sure that it was implicit in most of our comments about how we support this sort of effort. It is good to actually put it on the record. Do you fully coordinate your public awareness campaigns with EONI?

Mr Magee: Since we started being after 2002 the legislation, the Electoral Fraud Act was introduced in May 2002 we have worked very closely in terms of sharing our information with the Electoral Office, for example, in terms of any advertisements that have been produced in Northern Ireland. The Electoral Office has been involved in not approving but agreeing the text of those in terms of the voiceover that is required of the TV ads. In terms of any leaflets that have been produced we have circulated the text of those leaflets to the Electoral Office for comment and have taken on board comments that the Electoral Office have made. In terms of the remit that we have in terms of producing television, radio ads or whatever, our public information, information leaflets would collaborate fully with the Electoral Office in those areas.

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Q36 Mr Pound: Earlier evidence that we have received from Mr Stanley seems to give the indication, which I hope is wrong, that there is almost a rival series of campaigns which were cutting across each others bows here. I am wondering if it is perhaps, in your opinion, helpful to have two streams of campaigning going on which may occasionally muddy the waters of the other?

Mr Singh: Can I say, again, from the Commission's perspective, we do not see it like that. We do not see it in terms of two campaigns. I think that we see, and I do emphasise the point, we do see Mr Stanley's statutory responsibility as being very distinct from ours. They are concerned with compiling the register and the administration of the election. We are very clear that those responsibilities are not those of the Commission, but we also take the view that Parliament has entrusted us with the responsibility of Section 13 of the legislation to deal with the whole question of participation and voter education. Therefore, what has happened is that in the last two years the Commission, in the Northern Ireland context, has chosen to interpret that as focusing on promoting awareness of the new legislation and its implications. Therefore, trying to explain the process, trying to explain the prescribed forms of approved forms of voter ID has really been the emphasis of our campaign and strategy.

One of the things that we are now thinking about very seriously as a result of not only research we have commissioned but also PriceWaterhouse research in particular is that we now need to move away from perhaps the general awareness campaigns, and we need to focus on looking at those particular groups, targeting those groups, who do not register, are not likely to register and trying to get making an impact there. We would not see that as cutting across anything that Mr Stanley and his colleagues do but I think it may well be the case that they have undertaken some initiatives where they have sought to raise awareness of the registration process. I think certainly in the last two years we felt it was very important to support them in doing that.

Mr Pound: That is very helpful. I am reassured. Thank you.

Q37 Chairman: Why did you recommend that the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland should be investigated by the National Audit Office?

Mr Singh: One of the things which struck us—and I think we freely accept and we have said this in the Report, that we are relative newcomers to Northern Ireland as an organisation—is that the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland, and, indeed, the role of Chief Electoral Officer, has been there, in statutory terms, since the early 1960s. I think that although Mr Stanley is an independent office holder he does not have an independent budget approved in the same

way, for example, that the Commission does. I think the one thing which stems from this is that I think certainly he is on record as having made the point that he has difficulties in terms of trying to meet perhaps his responsibilities in terms of the budgetary constraints that he has to work under. Now, it seems to us, from the Commission, that is one set of issues. Another set of issues is that—again, if I can put this in a wider UK context—the Commission has been commenting very much on the issue of performance assessment, of benchmarking of electoral services in the context of the United Kingdom. Actually I am sure all of you will be aware that if you think about this in the United Kingdom context there are considerable differences from area to area in terms of the level of resources, the way they are organised, et cetera. I think our concern was that perhaps what might be most helpful—and we have to look at this and we have made our recommendations from the perspective of what is in the best interests of the electorate of Northern Ireland—is what you need to have is a properly resourced process of electoral services in Northern Ireland. We do not believe it is the role of the Commission to say what level it is. It may well be that the perspectives that Mr Stanley have or the perspectives the Northern Ireland Office may have, they may be the same, they may differ, but we do believe that one thing that is important is that if we are to ensure confidence in the integrity of electoral services in Northern Ireland then there must be some sort of independent process which audits what is going on in terms of the question of resource allocation and then looks at the question of the efficiency and the effectiveness. That was the background to that recommendation.

Q38 Chairman: Is it not a bit like me asking the tax man to look at your affairs so that they are more efficient at the end of it?

Mr Singh: Well, I am a member of the Commission's Audit Committee and we have the NAO come along very often.

Q39 Chairman: You think he should visit others, do you?

Mr Singh: No, no. If I may say so, Chairman, as a public organisation, as public servants, I think we should all be prepared to accept the concept of accountability.

Q40 Chairman: My tongue is slightly in my cheek.

Mr Singh: It is important, also, if I may, to stress the point, all of us may have a vested interest and it is very important to make sure you have an independent third body doing that.

Chairman: My tongue was slightly in my cheek, it is the end of a long day. Mr Singh, and Mr Magee, thank you very much indeed. Those are all the questions we have for you.

Supplementary memorandum submitted by the Electoral Commission

RESPONSE TO QUESTIONS FROM THE COMMITTEE

1. *What are your future plans for campaigns and information dispersal to promote electoral registration?*

Since the introduction of individual registration, the Commission has engaged in extensive public awareness campaigns to coincide with the annual canvass and rolling registration. For the upcoming canvass we intend building on the efforts of our previous campaigns to highlight the need for people to register on an annual basis. Our multi-media public awareness campaign will feature:

- television and radio advertisements;
- a dedicated website offering information on the registration process—www.secureyourvote.com;
- a helpline operational from 1 September until mid-November;
- regional and local newspaper advertising with a greater emphasis on areas of low registration;
- leaflet distribution;
- 90 large poster sites mainly in the Greater Belfast area;
- posters on bus sides for coverage in rural areas.

The estimated cost for the 2004 campaign is £360,000.

The public awareness campaign will also be supported by public relations activities which will include promoting articles about electoral registration in the media. Furthermore, a number of outreach activities will be conducted to promote registration. Some of these will be undertaken in co-operation with the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland (EONI). These include:

- The Ideal Home exhibition in September promoting electoral registration and providing an opportunity to apply for electoral ID cards.
- A campaign targeting students through attendance at student freshers events. The campaign will visit 23 campuses and will provide students with an opportunity to register to vote and apply for an electoral identity card. Promotional materials encouraging students to register to vote will be included in 20,000 higher and further education student packs.
- Participation in Local Democracy Week in conjunction with the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA).
- A coordinated campaign to outreach to Year 13 and 14 pupils in all 400 post-primary schools in Northern Ireland in an attempt to register attainees.
- A downloadable registration form will be available on the EONI website with links from other sites including the Commission's www.secureyourvote.com

While we have a particular responsibility to promote electoral registration, we also recognise the need to engage other agencies in supporting the EONI's annual canvass. To this end, we have invited a range of statutory, voluntary, charitable, sporting and religious organisations to attend a round table discussion on 3 September to explore ways in which other organisations can work with the Commission and EONI to increase registration rates, particularly amongst the hard to reach groups identified in our research into the Electoral Fraud Act. This is likely to be an ongoing element of the Commission's work in this area.

2. *What are your target areas and who are your target groups?*

Target groups

Our report on the Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002 identified areas and groups that found it difficult to access the electoral process as a result of the new legislation. We found that individual registration tended to have an adverse impact on young people and students, people with learning disabilities and other forms of disability and those living in areas of high social deprivation. Our research also highlighted that these groups are less likely to have one of the four forms of prescribed photographic identification.

The Commission is engaging in specific advertising and outreach campaigns to target these groups. Much of the work will focus on young people, including:

- the student campus campaign;
- the post-primary schools outreach campaign;
- promotional activities at locations likely to be attended by young people.

We are currently in discussion with a number of agencies, including the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and the Simon Community, about promoting electoral registration among people living in areas of high social deprivation. We are also running an advert in the Law Centre's quarterly magazine, *Frontline*, encouraging advice workers to highlight registration. The publication reaches over 500 voluntary advice organisations.

All public awareness information produced by the Commission is available, on request, in a range of other formats including Braille, large print and audio tape. We have also had discussions with Disability Action on how to best reach disabled people.

3. *How much funding do you have available on an annual basis for such work?*

The amount the Commission can spend on promoting public awareness of UK electoral systems, systems of government, and the institutions of the EU under Section 13 of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 (PPERA) is capped by the Electoral Commission (Limit on Public Awareness Expenditure) Order 2002. The Commission can spend no more than £7.5 million per annum on this activity across the United Kingdom.

The Commission has developed a broad strategy for meeting its corporate aim of encouraging greater participation in, and increased understanding of, the democratic process. The pattern of spending on s13 activity reflects the timing of elections but the Commission has recognised the need particularly to promote awareness of the new registration and photographic ID arrangements for Northern Ireland. The budget for this is set on an annual basis.

4. *How do you engage and co-opt stakeholders, such as political parties, into your information campaigns?*

The Commission has established an Assembly Parties Panel that meets on a quarterly basis and is attended by those parties that have achieved representation in the Northern Ireland Assembly. The Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland and members of his senior management team also attend by invitation. The meetings provide a forum for key stakeholders to discuss a broad range of electoral matters, including the Commission's public awareness campaigns. All the political parties were written to in July 2004 and asked for their views on how registration could be promoted.

The Electoral Commission has undertaken an intensive effort to engage and co-opt key stakeholder groups ahead of the annual canvass beginning at the end of August 2004. As previously mentioned we have invited over 40 statutory, voluntary, charitable, sporting and religious organisations to a round table discussion in Belfast at the beginning of September to discuss ways of increasing numbers on the register.

The Commission has corresponded with all Councillors in the 26 local authorities and with all 108 MLAs asking for their cooperation in encouraging as many people as possible to register. Both of these initiatives have been met with a positive response.

The Electoral Commission, the EONI and the Northern Ireland Office have established a group to coordinate activity around registration and where applicable share resources and avoid duplication of effort.

5. *Do you believe that the current distribution of labour between the EONI and The Electoral Commission is optimal?*

Both organisations share similar aims and objectives. We aim to ensure that the electorate in Northern Ireland can participate fully in well run elections. Although our roles are complementary we recognise the potential for confusion amongst the public as to which body is responsible for which activity. It is important that we maintain close contacts with EONI, that we send clear messages about our respective responsibilities and that we co-operate to make best use of available resources.

There is a good working relationship between the two organisations and only through open dialogue can we ensure that we work jointly to achieve common aims. However, it is fair to say that the arrival of the Commission on the scene has prompted the EONI to examine what its role should be. It would appear to have changed little since its establishment in 1973. We welcome such a review as enabling EONI to more clearly establish its operational priorities and resource needs. We look to NIO to ensure that the EONI is properly funded to carry out the tasks it is given.

For the Commission's part, we wish to ensure that the resources we have at our disposal are used to complement and support the work of EONI. Joint working can bring real benefits and the respective investment of resources will reflect particular circumstances. In some areas the Commission will take the lead and in others it will be the EONI—liaison and co-operation are key. Since the opening of our office in Northern Ireland in 2002 there has developed a mutual understanding of our respective roles and a willingness to work together to deliver real improvements in the electoral process.

31 August 2004

Memorandum submitted by The Electoral Office for Northern Ireland

1. INTRODUCTION

This further Memorandum has been prepared in advance of the session of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee to be held on 17 May 2004 to take oral evidence on electoral registration in Northern Ireland. This document should be read in conjunction with the memorandum submitted in advance of the Committee session of 2 April 2003.

2. ELECTORAL REGISTRATION

2.1 *The Electoral Register*

The Chief Electoral Officer (CEO) is by law required to publish a fresh Electoral Register not later than 1 December each year. As usual, in 2003 the annual canvass was arranged for September/October and upwards of 1,000 part-time canvassers engaged. However, on 21 October it was announced from Downing Street that the Northern Ireland Assembly election, which had first been postponed from 1 May to 29 May and then to an undefined date in the autumn, would take place on 26 November. The following day the Secretary of State announced that because the date of the election fell in the week before the new Register was to be published, he would put forward legislation so that publication could be postponed to 2 February 2004.

However, a difficulty was thereby created for electors because of the Register to be used at the Assembly election. Legislation requires that the Register to be used at any election is that which applies on the first day of the month in which nominations are to be taken. However, legislation also stipulates that no amendments to the Register are to be made in October or November (because of the annual canvass), therefore the Register which was used at the Assembly election was that published on 1 September. Many people who were not on this Register, but who completed registration forms in September or October as part of the annual canvass, expected to be able to vote on 26 November but were not able to do so. The Electoral Office was subsequently inundated with complaints when these electors did not receive poll cards or were turned away from polling stations.

A breakdown of the Register as published on 2 February 2004 by ward is attached at Annex A. The breakdown also shows the number of electors on the Register at 1 December 2002, 1 September 2003 and 1 April 2004.

2.2 *The Autumn Canvass 2003*

As in 2002, from early September personal registration forms, pre-printed with the names and addresses of the 1.09 million electors who were on the Register at the beginning of September 2003, were progressively distributed by around 1,000 canvassers. The canvassers then revisited each address a week to 10 days after they had delivered the registration forms to answer questions, assist electors complete the new form (which, of course, required every elector again to provide their National Insurance Number, Date of Birth and sign the form) and collect forms for processing. Where there was no answer on this second call, canvassers left further blank forms and pre-paid return envelopes, together with a covering letter explaining how to submit the form.

In late October further personal registration forms were sent to the 276,600 previous electors who had not by that point returned a form; these were accompanied by further explanatory notes and a pre-paid return envelope. (Although the date of publication of the new Register had by that time been postponed to 2 February 2004, because of contractual arrangements, the post out of reminders had to go ahead.) In the period up to the announcement of the date of the election the Electoral Commission ran a major publicity campaign on television, in the newspapers and on public billboards on the theme "Secure Your Vote or Lose It". This was then switched to a campaign focusing on the four forms of photographic identification which would be needed on 26 November.

2.3 *Rolling Registration*

In compliance with normal practice when the new Register was published on 2 February 2004 copies were placed in each of the nine Area Electoral Offices and in the 26 District Council offices for public inspection and made available to political parties, MPs, MLAs and Councillors so that electors could check that names and addresses were properly recorded. Through the normal system of Rolling Registration anyone not on the Register may apply to have their name added or a change recorded (such as a new address or married name) at any time outside the canvass period. Again, the Electoral Commission has been running a publicity campaign to encourage registration before the European Parliamentary election on 10 June. Electoral Office posters have also been sent to schools and colleges to encourage young people to register and advertisements placed in newspapers reminding people of the need to register if they want to vote.

The number of electors included in the 1 April 2004 revision of the Register was 1,070,017; this represents 3,052 electors who have been added and 2,195 deleted through death or having moved permanently to an address outside Northern Ireland since 2 February.

3. THE ELECTORAL IDENTITY CARD

Applications for the Card can be made by post or in person at a number of fixed centres and mobile sites (the latter will operate in April and May in preparation for the European Parliamentary election). Around 90,000 cards have been issued since January 2003. Fixed centres operate permanently in each of the Area Offices whilst mobile units will again be visiting towns throughout Northern Ireland. The precise programme will be advertised in the local press in due course. In addition, the Electoral Commission will be running another series of advertisements on television, radio and in the press reminding people of the photographic identification they will need in order to vote on 10 June.

Provided that they are on the Register, and allow a reasonable time for their application to be processed, everyone who wants the Card will be able to obtain one in good time for the European Parliamentary election. A cut-off date for applications has, however, been set at 20 May to guarantee delivery before 10 June.

4. POLLING STAFF

In the four weeks between the announcement of the Assembly election and polling day on 26 November about half of the Presiding Officers and Poll Clerks who had been recruited to work at the May election dates withdrew. This was largely due to the time of year with only a limited period of daylight and a reduction in the fees which HM Treasury set for this election. The Presiding Officer's fee was reduced to £135 from the £190 which had pertained previously and that of poll clerks was reduced to £90 from £112. This was on the grounds that on the previous occasion the general election had been run synchronously with district council elections. Unfortunately poll staff did not see it that way. This, together with the need for all part-time staff to have full business insurance if they used their cars on election day and a reduction in police presence at polling stations, were sufficient to dissuade many from working on 26 November.

The Electoral Office was therefore faced with a significant crisis in the run-up to the election and had to embark on a major campaign to find sufficient polling staff. This included enlisting the help of Ministers, the Permanent Under Secretary of State at the Northern Ireland Office and the Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service to encourage civil servants to volunteer as polling staff. In the end, sufficient staff were found and each of the 1,532 polling stations opened on time. It was, however, very closely run and in the view of the Electoral Office is not the way to run elections. The CEO is relieved to note that Treasury officials have reverted to the earlier fees for polling staff in respect of the forthcoming European Parliamentary election and that the Northern Ireland Office is seeking to make more permanent arrangements in respect of the use of civil servants as election staff.

5. PROCEDURES AT THE POLLING STATION

The Assembly election was the first major election in Northern Ireland at which all those voting in person had to provide one of the four approved forms of photographic identity. In addition, Presiding officers could, where they had doubt about the identity of the would-be elector, ask the person the statutory question "What is your date of birth?"

Election day, despite all the problems in finding so many polling staff at the last minute, went well. There were few queues and most electors produced the correct forms of photographic identification. All polling stations closed at 10.00pm and there were few reports of electors being refused ballot papers because of having to queue. Most locations were peaceful throughout the day, but at three polling places in Londonderry civil unrest broke out with petrol and paint bombs being thrown at the buildings and then at the police called in to protect the electors and staff inside. This is not an easily resolved problem as, despite moving location from previous trouble spots, the unrest simply reappears at the new location.

6. ABSENT VOTING

In addition to the changes for electors voting at polling stations, the Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002 also introduced changes in the way in which the identity of absent voters is checked. In Northern Ireland under earlier legislation absent votes (ie postal and proxy votes) have for some years only been available on medical grounds, because of short absence abroad due to work or holiday, being a student studying away from home or where a recent move of home within the Province makes it impracticable for the voter to attend his assigned polling station. It is now necessary for the voter applying for an absent vote to provide three personal identifiers (date of birth, national insurance number and signature) which must match those supplied during registration. When the ballot paper is returned the date of birth and signature

on the accompanying declaration of identity are again checked against those supplied at registration. These extra identity checks now greatly slow the processing of absent votes, although not to the point of adversely affecting either electors or their votes.

7. CHANGES PROPOSED TO THE ANNUAL CANVASS

The Electoral Office has recently proposed changes to Ministers in the way in which the annual canvass is conducted. From autumn 2004 registration forms, again pre-printed with the name and address of each elector on the Register at 1 September will be delivered by post. Forms sent to each elector will include an explanatory leaflet in respect of how to fill in the form and a pre-paid return envelope. A blank form will also be enclosed with the envelope addressed to the first named elector at each address to facilitate anyone in the household not on the previous Register. A canvasser will subsequently call with each elector who has not returned a completed form by the end of September to answer questions, help the elector fill in his form and collect his completed form. They will also provide additional blank forms where needed. In the event that a canvasser cannot make contact with residents, further blank forms and return envelopes will be left for return by post. The Electoral Office believes these changes will be more cost effective than using canvassers to deliver forms in previous years. Nevertheless, we will closely monitor the rate at which completed forms are returned to ensure that the completeness of the Register is not put in jeopardy.

Annex A

ELECTORAL REGISTER STATISTICS

<i>Constituency</i>	<i>01/12/2002</i>	<i>01/09/2003</i>	<i>02/02/2004</i>	<i>01/04/2004</i>
Belfast East	50,929	51,852	50,005	50,006
2506 Tullycarnet	1,481	1,504	1,449	1,449
2507 Gilnahirk	1,784	1,795	1,736	1,730
2508 Upper Braniel	1,614	1,627	1,618	1,616
2511 Lower Braniel	1,787	1,828	1,800	1,800
2512 Hillfoot	1,886	1,902	1,809	1,812
2513 Lisnasharragh	1,559	1,579	1,498	1,501
2514 Downshire	1,630	1,638	1,590	1,590
2515 Cregagh	1,447	1,438	1,350	1,349
2516 Wynchurch	1,439	1,463	1,431	1,430
2601 Sydenham	3,123	3,217	3,004	3,005
2602 Island	2,282	2,319	2,275	2,283
2603 Ballymacarrett	2,926	2,991	2,834	2,835
2604 Bloomfield	3,188	3,310	3,105	3,106
2605 Ballyhackamore	3,718	3,813	3,682	3,682
2606 Belmont	3,879	3,964	3,823	3,824
2607 Stormont	3,947	3,992	3,853	3,848
2608 Cherryvalley	3,708	3,811	3,770	3,768
2609 Knock	3,391	3,435	3,338	3,339
2610 Orangefield	3,725	3,795	3,696	3,697
2611 The Mount	2,415	2,431	2,344	2,342
Belfast North	49,937	51,355	49,114	49,110
2121 Coole	1,442	1,465	1,352	1,355
2122 Dunanney	1,250	1,296	1,305	1,304
2123 Abbey	1,837	1,889	1,831	1,833
2124 Whitehouse	1,546	1,571	1,546	1,544
2125 Valley	1,879	1,928	1,809	1,814
2635 Woodvale	2,687	2,714	2,624	2,619
2636 Crumlin	2,567	2,575	2,479	2,473
2640 New Lodge	2,978	3,126	2,886	2,896
2641 Duncairn	2,227	2,264	2,232	2,232
2642 Water Works	3,229	3,387	3,134	3,134
2643 Ardoyne	3,174	3,368	3,166	3,165
2644 LegonieL	3,195	3,254	3,132	3,126
2645 Ballysillan	3,413	3,519	3,524	3,518
2646 Cliftonville	3,089	3,192	2,984	2,988
2647 Chichester Park	3,068	3,173	2,949	2,946
2648 Fortwilliam	3,024	3,073	2,951	2,952
2649 Cavehill	3,493	3,565	3,435	3,440

<i>Constituency</i>		<i>01/12/2002</i>	<i>01/09/2003</i>	<i>02/02/2004</i>	<i>01/04/2004</i>
2650	Castleview	3,093	3,181	3,105	3,107
2651	Bellevue	2,746	2,815	2,670	2,664
Belfast South		49,349	50,707	49,403	49,447
2510	Galwally	1,609	1,667	1,633	1,635
2517	Newtownbreda	1,727	1,752	1,712	1,715
2518	Cairnshill	2,210	2,269	2,213	2,212
2519	Knockbracken	1,966	1,992	1,959	1,960
2522	Beechill	2,750	2,811	2,748	2,753
2523	Minnowburn	1,560	1,574	1,528	1,526
2612	Woodstock	2,862	2,901	2,786	2,792
2613	Ravenhill	3,326	3,435	3,358	3,361
2614	Ballynafeigh	2,546	2,628	2,514	2,513
2615	Rosetta	3,320	3,385	3,364	3,363
2616	Upper Malone	3,074	3,115	3,016	3,016
2617	Finaghy	3,235	3,343	3,313	3,307
2618	Musgrave	3,221	3,290	3,157	3,155
2619	Blackstaff	2,208	2,272	2,118	2,117
2620	Malone	3,313	3,424	3,485	3,493
2621	Stranmillis	3,089	3,189	3,204	3,205
2622	Windsor	2,331	2,425	2,291	2,307
2623	Botanic	1,977	2,081	1,957	1,963
2624	Shaftesbury	3,025	3,154	3,047	3,054
Belfast West		48,153	50,873	47,183	47,283
1927	Twinbrook	1,545	1,618	1,496	1,495
1928	Poleglass	2,046	2,147	1,901	1,928
1929	Kilwee	1,920	2,008	1,905	1,907
1930	Collin Glen	2,572	2,744	2,307	2,364
2625	Ladybrook	3,690	3,880	3,739	3,738
2626	Glencolin	3,684	3,976	3,711	3,712
2627	Andersonstown	3,631	3,796	3,568	3,569
2628	Glen Road	3,434	3,557	3,436	3,435
2629	Falls Park	3,639	3,801	3,471	3,466
2630	Upper Springfield	3,093	3,313	3,062	3,075
2631	Whiterock	2,838	3,220	3,031	3,032
2632	Beechmount	2,975	3,140	2,779	2,776
2633	Highfield	3,317	3,366	3,278	3,270
2634	Glencairn	2,318	2,361	2,227	2,222
2637	Shankill	2,287	2,320	2,174	2,170
2638	Clonard	2,450	2,589	2,378	2,385
2639	Falls	2,714	3,037	2,720	2,739
East Antrim		54,569	55,477	54,727	54,727
0601	Carnlough	1,381	1,385	1,347	1,346
0602	Glenarm	1,150	1,174	1,200	1,198
0603	Carncastle	1,881	1,902	1,906	1,910
0604	Blackcave	1,107	1,118	1,104	1,108
0605	Harbour	1,246	1,244	1,195	1,198
0606	Central	1,373	1,393	1,356	1,354
0607	Town Parks	1,155	1,157	1,101	1,101
0608	Gardenmore	1,506	1,530	1,416	1,414
0609	Craigy Hill	1,060	1,074	944	943
0610	Ballyloran	856	870	843	843
0611	Antiville	993	992	971	970
0612	Kilwaughter	2,507	2,557	2,620	2,620
0613	Glynn	1,324	1,335	1,299	1,297
0614	Ballycarry	1,435	1,464	1,470	1,471
0615	Island Magee	1,573	1,604	1,638	1,638
108	Jordanstown	3,740	3,807	3,802	3,802
2109	Rostulla	2,097	2,137	2,134	2,130
2110	Monkstown	2,000	2,032	2,003	2,005
2115	Cloughfern	1,899	1,942	1,895	1,894
2201	Blackhead	1,333	1,369	1,358	1,356

<i>Constituency</i>		<i>01/12/2002</i>	<i>01/09/2003</i>	<i>02/02/2004</i>	<i>01/04/2004</i>
2202	Whitehead	1,278	1,294	1,293	1,297
2203	Eden	2,720	2,784	2,760	2,764
2204	Boneybefore	1,330	1,334	1,322	1,322
2205	Bluefield	1,625	1,665	1,700	1,700
2206	Victoria	1,567	1,592	1,566	1,565
2207	Milebush	1,077	1,112	1,056	1,056
2208	Love Lane	918	929	932	933
2209	Sunnylands	1,057	1,071	1,069	1,065
2210	Northland	834	857	817	814
2211	Clipperstown	1,229	1,259	1,262	1,263
2212	Killycrot	1,659	1,699	1,699	1,697
2213	Woodburn	1,569	1,582	1,522	1,528
2214	Burleigh Hill	2,075	2,150	2,099	2,097
2215	Greenisland	1,653	1,669	1,648	1,649
2216	Gortalee	963	968	914	913
2217	Knockagh	1,399	1,426	1,466	1,466
East Londonderry		55,466	56,202	55,260	55,206
0201	Magilligan	1,255	1,267	1,253	1,251
0202	Aghanloo	2,137	2,200	2,173	2,172
0203	Forest	1,321	1,344	1,372	1,369
0204	Upper Glenshane	1,361	1,386	1,484	1,481
0205	Feeny	1,295	1,316	1,299	1,296
0206	Dungiven	1,317	1,343	1,295	1,294
0207	The Highlands	1,101	1,121	1,152	1,152
0208	Glack	1,283	1,298	1,319	1,319
0209	Greestel	1,607	1,639	1,594	1,593
0210	Ballykelly	1,166	1,188	1,131	1,128
0211	Roeside	910	928	986	985
0212	Rathbrady	1,204	1,220	1,166	1,161
0213	Enagh	1,935	1,987	1,920	1,920
0214	Coolessan	1,053	1,051	978	978
0215	Greystone	1,024	1,028	972	972
0301	Kilrea	1,608	1,636	1,588	1,587
0302	Agivey	1,471	1,479	1,502	1,497
0303	Dundooan	1,737	1,737	1,691	1,692
0304	Knocklynn	2,211	2,266	2,230	2,226
0305	Dunluce	1,411	1,423	1,441	1,439
0306	Royal Portrush	1,449	1,460	1,476	1,483
0307	Hopefield	2,091	2,110	2,141	2,141
0308	Atlantic	1,486	1,490	1,446	1,448
0309	Portstewart	1,215	1,226	1,134	1,130
0310	Strand	1,456	1,493	1,483	1,480
0311	University	1,415	1,430	1,405	1,401
0312	Ballysally	1,420	1,434	1,316	1,313
0313	Central	1,209	1,208	1,150	1,148
0314	Cross Glebe	1,399	1,425	1,390	1,388
0315	Mount Sandel	1,238	1,245	1,244	1,236
0316	The Cuts	2,685	2,719	2,651	2,652
0317	Churchland	1,435	1,454	1,338	1,337
0318	Waterside	1,855	1,879	1,881	1,880
0319	Castlerock	1,943	1,959	1,896	1,897
0320	Macosquin	1,524	1,541	1,513	1,512
0321	Ringsend	1,542	1,549	1,560	1,558
0322	Garvagh	1,697	1,723	1,690	1,690
Fermanagh and South Tyrone		63,010	64,355	62,993	63,148
1201	Rosslea	1,664	1,722	1,653	1,657
1202	Newtownbutler	1,653	1,722	1,674	1,689
1203	Donagh	1,627	1,684	1,675	1,675
1204	Lisnaskea	1,790	1,860	1,750	1,819
1205	Brookeborough	1,682	1,700	1,716	1,707
1206	Maguires Bridge	1,819	1,842	1,833	1,833

<i>Constituency</i>		<i>01/12/2002</i>	<i>01/09/2003</i>	<i>02/02/2004</i>	<i>01/04/2004</i>
1207	Tempo	1,776	1,784	1,783	1,781
1208	Lisbellaw	1,816	1,855	1,798	1,796
1209	Ballinamallard	1,699	1,728	1,736	1,735
1210	Irvinestown	1,457	1,499	1,444	1,444
1211	Lisnarrick	1,341	1,350	1,315	1,321
1212	Kesh Ederney and Lack	2,300	2,367	2,324	2,330
1213	Belleek and Boa	1,547	1,601	1,604	1,597
1214	Belcoo and Garrison	1,663	1,736	1,698	1,694
1215	Derrygonnelly	1,781	1,797	1,759	1,755
1216	Boho, Cleenish and Letterbreen	1,821	1,852	1,848	1,850
1217	Florence Court and Kinawley	1,774	1,819	1,797	1,805
1218	Derrylin	1,716	1,751	1,722	1,727
1219	Rossorry	1,726	1,774	1,771	1,775
1220	Portora	1,819	1,839	1,821	1,820
1221	Devenish	1,228	1,220	1,173	1,169
1222	Erne	1,669	1,694	1,620	1,626
1223	Castlecoole	2,465	2,539	2,472	2,472
1301	Fivemiletown	1,428	1,451	1,442	1,443
1302	Clogher	1,464	1,463	1,417	1,421
1303	Augher	1,478	1,497	1,488	1,486
1304	Ballygawley	1,545	1,577	1,553	1,555
1305	Castlecaulfield	1,625	1,682	1,631	1,628
1312	Killyman	1,621	1,632	1,596	1,600
1313	Moy	1,625	1,638	1,614	1,612
1314	Benburb	1,543	1,583	1,529	1,533
1315	Caledon	1,553	1,572	1,558	1,558
1316	Aughnacloy	1,463	1,479	1,541	1,543
1317	Mullaghmore	1,173	1,221	1,173	1,193
1318	Ballysaggart	1,269	1,337	1,098	1,125
1319	Moygashel	1,413	1,433	1,409	1,408
1320	Coolhill	1,352	1,369	1,324	1,324
1321	Killymeal	1,518	1,545	1,539	1,539
1322	Drumglass	1,107	1,141	1,095	1,103
Foyle		62,801	65,312	62,404	62,569
0101	Banagher	1,993	2,005	1,995	1,993
0102	Claudy	2,274	2,313	2,264	2,262
0103	Eglinton	2,581	2,625	2,580	2,578
0104	Holly Mount	2,420	2,492	2,407	2,411
0105	New Buildings	2,362	2,389	2,314	2,316
0106	Enagh	2,133	2,177	2,116	2,113
0107	Caw	1,684	1,760	1,577	1,576
0108	Kilfennan	2,230	2,273	2,187	2,184
0109	Altnagelvin	2,590	2,658	2,614	2,610
0110	Lisnagelvin	2,242	2,271	2,178	2,174
0111	Clondermot	1,961	2,019	2,010	2,016
0112	Victoria	1,738	1,763	1,662	1,667
0113	Ebrington	1,629	1,665	1,601	1,596
0114	Crevagh	2,608	2,830	2,704	2,719
0115	Springtown	2,032	2,171	1,974	1,981
0116	Creggan South	1,509	1,590	1,543	1,542
0117	Brandywell	1,628	1,727	1,577	1,579
0118	The Diamond	1,490	1,533	1,424	1,430
0119	Westland	1,476	1,556	1,484	1,488
0120	Beechwood	1,633	1,722	1,579	1,589
0121	Creggan Central	1,601	1,757	1,540	1,547
0122	Rosemount	1,581	1,659	1,510	1,521
0123	Foyle Springs	2,420	2,540	2,428	2,431
0124	Strand	1,794	1,894	1,707	1,718
0125	Pennyburn	1,937	2,004	1,922	1,924
0126	Carn Hill	1,749	1,833	1,783	1,842
0127	Shantallow West	3,233	3,387	3,305	3,316
0128	Shantallow East	1,645	1,696	1,598	1,615

<i>Constituency</i>		<i>01/12/2002</i>	<i>01/09/2003</i>	<i>02/02/2004</i>	<i>01/04/2004</i>
0129	Ballynashallog	2,483	2,551	2,399	2,412
0130	Culmore	4,145	4,452	4,422	4,419
Lagan Valley		65,939	67,921	65,642	65,612
1707	Gransha	1,800	1,828	1,814	1,818
1708	Dromore South	2,260	2,305	2,316	2,313
1709	Dromore North	1,618	1,694	1,627	1,624
1710	Quilly	1,585	1,617	1,639	1,636
1901	Glenavy	2,736	2,838	2,770	2,767
1902	Ballinderry	2,733	2,782	2,725	2,726
1903	Moira	2,779	2,860	2,802	2,801
1904	Maghaberry	2,597	2,678	2,623	2,621
1905	Maze	2,295	2,388	2,377	2,377
1906	Hillsborough	2,423	2,485	2,441	2,437
1907	Dromara	2,744	2,811	2,858	2,855
1908	Ballymacbrennan	2,306	2,361	2,264	2,265
1909	Drumbo	2,254	2,294	2,217	2,215
1910	Hillhall	1,824	1,868	1,789	1,790
1911	Blaris	2,166	2,187	2,071	2,072
1912	Knockmore	2,129	2,163	2,093	2,093
1913	Old Warren	1,415	1,447	1,332	1,331
1914	Lagan Valley	1,888	1,914	1,803	1,797
1915	Tonagh	1,629	1,663	1,532	1,531
1916	Ballymacoss	3,335	3,484	3,277	3,281
1917	Ballymacash	2,652	2,712	2,637	2,640
1918	Lisnagarvey	2,014	2,064	1,982	1,982
1919	Wallace Park	1,940	1,971	1,928	1,921
1920	Magheralave	1,913	1,966	1,928	1,927
1921	Harmony Hill	2,003	2,051	2,010	2,012
1922	Hilden	1,759	1,811	1,718	1,717
1923	Lambeg	1,801	1,831	1,716	1,713
1924	Derryagh	3,318	3,645	3,355	3,356
1925	Seymour Hill	1,657	1,701	1,612	1,608
1926	Dunmurry	2,366	2,502	2,386	2,386
Mid Ulster		58,810	60,113	58,950	59,045
0801	Swatragh	1,942	1,983	1,995	1,991
0802	Upperlands	1,499	1,514	1,483	1,485
0803	Valley	1,610	1,651	1,631	1,631
0804	Lower Glenshane	1,908	1,960	1,946	1,955
0805	Maghera	1,595	1,647	1,550	1,550
0806	Gulladuff	1,630	1,655	1,683	1,683
0807	Tobermore	1,547	1,567	1,581	1,589
0808	Knockcloghrim	1,595	1,631	1,634	1,633
0809	Bellaghy	1,633	1,734	1,657	1,661
0810	Castledawson	1,900	1,922	1,847	1,848
0811	Draperstown	1,777	1,830	1,833	1,841
0812	Lecumpher	1,664	1,688	1,687	1,686
0813	Ballymaguigan	1,624	1,680	1,661	1,660
0814	Town Parks West	1,460	1,498	1,435	1,432
0815	Glebe	1,914	1,923	1,873	1,884
0816	Town Parks East	1,771	1,792	1,747	1,749
0901	Dunnamore	1,381	1,410	1,344	1,340
0902	Pomeroy	1,261	1,305	1,294	1,294
0903	Lissan	1,350	1,363	1,263	1,264
0904	Oaklands	1,249	1,265	1,266	1,265
0905	Sandholes	1,197	1,221	1,222	1,220
0906	Moneymore	1,413	1,427	1,395	1,398
0907	Coagh	1,285	1,306	1,291	1,290
0908	Stewartstown	1,165	1,192	1,172	1,166
0909	The Loop	1,571	1,592	1,625	1,627
0910	Ardboe	1,565	1,598	1,589	1,591
0911	Killycolpy	1,575	1,608	1,486	1,484
0912	Oldtown	1,442	1,480	1,485	1,484

<i>Constituency</i>		<i>01/12/2002</i>	<i>01/09/2003</i>	<i>02/02/2004</i>	<i>01/04/2004</i>
0913	Newbuildings	1,271	1,298	1,266	1,237
0914	Tullagh	1,474	1,500	1,442	1,439
0915	Gortallowry	1,560	1,591	1,551	1,548
0916	Killymoon	1,292	1,341	1,269	1,295
1306	Altmore	1,576	1,600	1,619	1,621
1307	Donaghmore	1,434	1,462	1,418	1,447
1308	Coalisland West and Newmills	1,569	1,605	1,572	1,575
1309	Coalisland North	1,831	1,906	1,878	1,920
1310	Coalisland South	1,513	1,561	1,510	1,514
1311	Washing Bay	1,767	1,807	1,750	1,748
Newry and Armagh		66,802	68,740	67,433	67,560
1501	Charlemont	1,688	1,715	1,613	1,608
1502	Loughgall	1,797	1,821	1,832	1,835
1503	Hockley	1,700	1,708	1,656	1,656
1504	Ballymartrim	1,703	1,764	1,710	1,709
1505	Killylea	1,673	1,705	1,680	1,677
1506	Milford	1,523	1,588	1,577	1,579
1507	Derrynoose	1,882	1,960	2,007	2,007
1508	Keady	1,316	1,365	1,309	1,309
1509	Carrigatuke	1,475	1,523	1,483	1,484
1510	Killeen	1,712	1,752	1,743	1,743
1511	Markethill	1,642	1,673	1,630	1,630
1512	Poyntz Pass	1,617	1,641	1,655	1,655
1513	Tandragee	1,809	1,832	1,831	1,831
1514	Laurelvale	1,882	1,923	1,932	1,930
1515	Rich Hill	1,879	1,907	1,874	1,873
1516	Hamiltonsbawn	2,080	2,107	2,120	2,117
1517	Downs	1,620	1,648	1,571	1,564
1518	Callan Bridge	1,464	1,493	1,394	1,393
1519	Abbey Park	1,480	1,569	1,481	1,481
1520	Observatory	1,602	1,642	1,610	1,608
1521	The Mall	1,287	1,282	1,298	1,296
1522	Demesne	1,826	1,864	1,843	1,846
1614	Windsor Hill	1,768	1,836	1,770	1,770
1615	St. Patrick's	1,951	2,005	1,943	1,942
1616	St. Mary's	1,465	1,514	1,446	1,444
1617	Drumgullion	1,743	1,806	1,788	1,809
1618	Ballybot	1,328	1,358	1,280	1,309
1619	Daisy Hill	1,697	1,766	1,697	1,706
1620	Drumalane	1,876	1,932	1,812	1,810
1621	Derrymore	1,760	1,829	1,706	1,706
1622	Bessbrook	1,567	1,580	1,530	1,529
1623	Tullyhappy	1,828	1,857	1,890	1,889
1624	Camlough	1,826	1,969	2,017	2,012
1625	Newtownhamilton	1,641	1,694	1,640	1,638
1626	Creggan	1,874	1,951	1,982	2,008
1627	Crossmaglen	1,626	1,718	1,710	1,729
1628	Silver Bridge	2,040	2,152	2,134	2,157
1629	Forkhill	2,254	2,349	2,339	2,356
1630	Fathom	1,901	1,942	1,900	1,915
North Antrim		69,728	70,493	69,942	69,898
0401	Benvardin	1,134	1,146	1,193	1,193
0402	Seacon	1,339	1,360	1,444	1,444
0403	Dervock	1,014	1,017	1,026	1,024
0404	Stranocum	1,020	1,041	1,031	1,028
0405	Ballyhoe and Corkey	1,083	1,105	1,093	1,094
0406	Knockaholet	1,029	1,038	999	1,000
0407	Route	1,118	1,122	1,074	1,073
0408	Glebe	1,310	1,299	1,280	1,272
0409	Newhill	1,210	1,252	1,265	1,263
0410	Carnany	1,180	1,182	1,218	1,224
0411	Fairhill	1,279	1,287	1,268	1,266
0412	The Vow	1,151	1,164	1,122	1,121
0413	Killoquin Lower	1,089	1,090	1,063	1,062

<i>Constituency</i>		<i>01/12/2002</i>	<i>01/09/2003</i>	<i>02/02/2004</i>	<i>01/04/2004</i>
0414	Dunloy	1,225	1,264	1,219	1,225
0415	Clogh Mills	1,320	1,329	1,299	1,300
0416	Killoquin Upper	1,009	1,013	1,010	1,005
0501	Bushmills	493	496	462	461
0502	Ballylough	672	681	663	658
0503	Dunseverick	539	544	520	519
0504	Carnmoon	594	593	609	607
0505	Kinbane	511	522	528	522
0506	Moss-Side and Moyarget	594	593	606	607
0507	Armoy	614	619	627	627
0508	Dalriada	931	956	964	960
0509	Knocklayd	916	954	961	959
0510	Glentaisie	726	738	736	734
0511	Bonamargy and Rathlin	660	667	652	656
0512	Glenshesk	617	621	595	596
0513	Glendun	705	721	752	750
0514	Gleanna	828	837	831	828
0515	Glenariff	1,029	1,053	1,058	1,057
0701	Glenravel	1,931	1,961	1,990	1,990
0702	Slemish	1,541	1,554	1,560	1,563
0703	Glenwhirry	1,830	1,839	1,847	1,849
0704	Kells	2,153	2,171	2,074	2,075
0705	Grange	2,001	2,030	2,027	2,027
0706	Ahoghill	2,483	2,509	2,482	2,478
0707	Portglenone	1,976	1,995	1,977	1,978
0708	Dunminning	1,685	1,679	1,657	1,656
0709	Craigyarren	1,718	1,736	1,795	1,796
0710	Cullybackey	1,986	2,017	1,990	1,991
0711	Broughshane	2,029	2,060	2,049	2,053
0712	Galgorm	2,030	2,051	2,055	2,051
0713	Academy	1,584	1,594	1,580	1,578
0714	Ballyloughan	1,840	1,868	1,854	1,857
0715	Park	1,432	1,417	1,406	1,404
0716	Dunclug	1,387	1,415	1,310	1,303
0717	Fair Green	1,094	1,128	1,116	1,112
0718	Summerfield	1,794	1,828	1,801	1,801
0719	Castle Demesne	1,395	1,388	1,380	1,380
0720	Ardeevin	1,934	1,950	1,998	1,998
0721	Harryville	1,365	1,367	1,343	1,341
0722	Ballee	1,280	1,294	1,218	1,219
0723	Moat	1,246	1,253	1,204	1,202
0724	Ballykeel	1,075	1,085	1,061	1,061
North Down		56,606	57,426	56,137	56,074
2301	Groomsport	2,089	2,124	2,098	2,096
2302	Churchill	1,980	1,988	1,918	1,914
2303	Ballyholme	1,735	1,775	1,721	1,725
2304	Broadway	2,240	2,245	2,193	2,187
2305	Ballymacconnell	2,074	2,073	1,971	1,974
2306	Ballymagee	2,389	2,419	2,389	2,386
2307	Ballycrochan	3,119	3,188	3,112	3,112
2308	Harbour	1,657	1,696	1,644	1,646
2309	Bangor Castle	1,886	1,877	1,839	1,839
2310	Bloomfield	2,198	2,234	2,270	2,269
2311	Whitehill	1,586	1,615	1,559	1,554
2312	Conlig	2,762	2,844	2,891	2,891
2313	Princetown	1,915	1,917	1,924	1,916
2314	Bryansburn	1,929	1,949	1,964	1,963
2315	Silverstream	1,750	1,766	1,719	1,713
2316	Rathgael	1,690	1,711	1,613	1,610
2317	Clandeboyne	2,537	2,625	2,532	2,533
2318	Dufferin	1,600	1,647	1,632	1,626
2319	Spring Hill	2,120	2,145	2,102	2,100
2320	Crawfordsburn	2,024	2,044	1,954	1,948
2321	Craigavad	1,800	1,839	1,825	1,825
2322	Cultra	1,729	1,764	1,690	1,688

<i>Constituency</i>		<i>01/12/2002</i>	<i>01/09/2003</i>	<i>02/02/2004</i>	<i>01/04/2004</i>
2323	Holywood Priory	1,803	1,839	1,781	1,781
2324	Holywood Demesne	1,811	1,838	1,832	1,834
2325	Loughview	1,591	1,605	1,525	1,526
2416	Donaghadee North	2,244	2,242	2,200	2,191
2417	Donaghadee South	2,020	2,066	1,900	1,896
2418	Millisle	2,328	2,351	2,339	2,331
South Antrim		62,349	63,644	62,983	62,989
2001	Toome	1,554	1,608	1,608	1,610
2002	Drumanaway	1,300	1,331	1,331	1,335
2003	Cranfield	1,602	1,629	1,616	1,613
2004	Randalstown	1,916	1,951	1,917	1,917
2005	Shilvodan	1,405	1,429	1,412	1,410
2006	Templepatrick	1,629	1,653	1,573	1,572
2007	Farranshane	1,082	1,117	1,074	1,074
2008	Springfarm	1,313	1,339	1,383	1,380
2009	Massereene	2,522	2,603	2,680	2,677
2010	Balloo	1,153	1,162	1,142	1,142
2011	Fountain Hill	1,247	1,266	1,252	1,253
2012	Steeple	995	999	968	973
2013	Stiles	1,302	1,332	1,280	1,280
2014	Greystone	1,285	1,306	1,328	1,328
2015	Parkgate	1,498	1,538	1,537	1,541
2016	Ballycraigy	1,241	1,250	1,246	1,247
2017	Clady	1,748	1,794	1,792	1,797
2018	Aldergrove	1,716	1,752	1,756	1,753
2019	Crumlin	2,153	2,286	2,254	2,255
2101	Mallusk	3,498	3,589	3,733	3,736
2102	Doagh	2,220	2,264	2,231	2,232
2103	Ballyclare North	2,110	2,173	2,300	2,301
2104	Ballyclare South	2,235	2,275	2,212	2,209
2105	Ballynure	2,065	2,101	2,022	2,026
2106	Ballyrobert	2,784	2,822	2,765	2,765
2107	Hawthorne	1,580	1,604	1,583	1,582
2111	Ballyduff	1,997	2,040	1,968	1,968
2112	Carnmoney	1,806	1,823	1,851	1,852
2113	Mossley	1,822	1,840	1,795	1,797
2114	Burnthill	1,921	1,931	1,867	1,864
2116	Ballyhenry	2,142	2,169	2,092	2,089
2117	Glengormley	1,808	1,840	1,756	1,756
2118	Glebe	2,127	2,155	2,055	2,051
2119	Hightown	1,654	1,681	1,610	1,606
2120	Collinbridge	1,919	1,992	1,994	1,998
South Down		68,317	70,155	68,515	68,545
1601	Annalong	1,973	2,029	2,035	2,037
1602	Binnian	1,769	1,844	1,885	1,885
1603	Kilkeel Central	2,276	2,319	2,194	2,188
1604	Kilkeel South	1,939	1,950	1,871	1,873
1605	Lisnacree	1,721	1,741	1,683	1,684
1606	Rostrevor	1,910	1,949	1,793	1,797
1607	Seaview	1,857	1,939	1,811	1,810
1608	Clonallan	2,515	2,564	2,461	2,460
1609	Derryleckagh	2,370	2,530	2,400	2,400
1610	Burren and Kilbroney	1,952	2,154	2,077	2,081
1611	Spelga	1,851	1,907	1,837	1,837
1612	Mayobridge	1,967	2,053	1,991	1,982
1613	Donaghmore	1,940	1,988	2,012	2,014
1704	Bannside	1,518	1,556	1,554	1,555
1705	Katesbridge	1,601	1,626	1,632	1,632
1706	Ballyward	1,565	1,600	1,578	1,577
1711	Rathfriland	1,701	1,704	1,680	1,676
1802	Kilmore	2,071	2,099	2,079	2,082
1803	Ballynahinch East	1,500	1,544	1,532	1,540
1804	Ballymaglave	1,952	1,997	1,902	1,899
1805	Drumaness	2,190	2,246	2,242	2,241

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1808	Crossgar	1,960	1,992	1,966	1,965
1809	Quoile	1,716	1,741	1,622	1,623
1810	Audleys Acre	1,624	1,664	1,670	1,668
1811	Ballymote	1,356	1,407	1,407	1,431
1812	Cathedral	1,924	1,966	1,968	1,968
1813	Strangford	1,664	1,704	1,643	1,638
1814	Ardglass	1,853	1,905	1,805	1,809
1815	Killough	1,712	1,790	1,723	1,734
1816	Seaforde	1,866	1,883	1,875	1,874
1817	Dunmore	1,837	1,867	1,917	1,916
1818	Castlewellan	1,925	1,981	1,918	1,916
1819	Dundrum	1,598	1,625	1,594	1,593
1820	Murlough	1,534	1,553	1,432	1,431
1821	Shimna	1,734	1,773	1,757	1,764
1822	Donard	2,010	2,045	2,042	2,036
1823	Tollymore	1,866	1,920	1,927	1,929
Strangford		65,558	66,314	64,796	64,773
1801	Saintfield	2,042	2,062	2,037	2,037
1806	Derryboy	1,911	1,948	1,899	1,898
1807	Killyleagh	1,762	1,761	1,711	1,712
2401	Killinchy	1,991	2,012	1,999	1,996
2402	Ballygowan	2,281	2,342	2,277	2,275
2403	Lisbane	2,115	2,123	2,027	2,025
2404	Comber West	2,072	2,108	2,056	2,054
2405	Comber East	1,951	1,968	1,862	1,862
2406	Comber North	1,895	1,897	1,876	1,876
2407	Scrabo	1,677	1,695	1,690	1,691
2408	Ballyrainey	1,789	1,803	1,773	1,768
2409	Bradshaw's Brae	2,200	2,202	2,185	2,184
2410	Glen	1,777	1,797	1,761	1,765
2411	Whitespots	2,303	2,333	2,279	2,280
2412	Movilla	3,080	3,118	3,055	3,055
2413	Central	1,799	1,832	1,776	1,774
2414	Gregstown	2,896	2,954	2,845	2,846
2415	Loughries	2,199	2,226	2,235	2,239
2419	Carrowdore	2,062	2,077	2,082	2,078
2420	Ballywalter	2,323	2,364	2,302	2,300
2421	Portavogie	2,377	2,423	2,491	2,491
2422	Kircubbin	1,881	1,911	1,796	1,797
2423	Portaferry	2,247	2,248	2,171	2,170
2501	Dundonald	2,058	2,070	2,069	2,066
2502	Carrowreagh	2,405	2,445	2,420	2,419
2503	Enler	1,579	1,585	1,511	1,510
2504	Graham's Bridge	1,864	1,865	1,765	1,758
2505	Ballyhanwood	2,209	2,260	2,207	2,205
2509	Moneyreagh	2,599	2,630	2,455	2,458
2520	Carryduff West	1,936	1,964	1,942	1,945
2521	Carryduff East	2,278	2,291	2,242	2,239
Upper Bann		67,595	68,816	67,713	67,695
1401	The Birches	2,159	2,172	2,104	2,103
1402	Derrytrasna	2,915	2,989	2,992	2,993
1403	Aghagallon	2,497	2,601	2,541	2,541
1404	Magheralin	2,857	2,879	2,923	2,923
1405	Donaghcloney	1,927	1,976	2,000	2,001
1406	Waringstown	2,286	2,324	2,349	2,352
1407	Bleary	2,585	2,637	2,595	2,592
1408	Ballyoran	1,824	1,852	1,776	1,775
1409	Corcrain	1,591	1,635	1,655	1,656
1410	Ballybay	1,407	1,426	1,389	1,388
1411	Brownstown	2,184	2,199	2,119	2,117
1412	Tavanagh	1,544	1,523	1,503	1,505
1413	Annagh	1,789	1,821	1,803	1,802
1414	Edenderry (Craigavon)	2,152	2,184	2,139	2,135
1415	Killycomain	1,810	1,810	1,746	1,745

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1416	Kernan	2,746	2,809	2,893	2,896
1417	Drumgor	1,527	1,572	1,499	1,498
1418	Drumgask	1,773	1,825	1,816	1,819
1419	Woodville	2,397	2,454	2,336	2,337
1420	Drumnamoe	1,876	1,946	1,790	1,790
1421	Parklake	1,887	1,909	1,903	1,905
1422	Court	1,930	1,960	1,913	1,913
1423	Taghnevan	1,951	2,008	1,954	1,954
1424	Mourneview	1,608	1,619	1,555	1,554
1425	Church	1,465	1,476	1,442	1,438
1426	Knocknashane	2,109	2,147	2,111	2,110
1701	Gilford	1,593	1,595	1,565	1,560
1702	Lawrencetown	1,539	1,576	1,547	1,546
1703	Loughbrickland	1,687	1,716	1,763	1,761
1712	Edenderry (Banbridge)	1,575	1,600	1,556	1,555
1713	Banbridge West	1,690	1,702	1,633	1,633
1714	Fort	1,672	1,705	1,680	1,681
1715	Ballydown	2,309	2,383	2,393	2,389
1716	Seapatrick	1,563	1,599	1,571	1,570
1717	The Cut	1171	1,187	1,159	1,158
West Tyrone		56,507	57,796	55,960	56,330
1001	Glenderg	1,717	1,727	1,745	1,771
1002	Castlederg	1,423	1,452	1,432	1,453
1003	Clare	1,697	1,733	1,721	1,718
1004	Newtownstewart	1,468	1,505	1,472	1,475
1005	Plumbridge	1,442	1,489	1,442	1,448
1006	Victoria Bridge	1,459	1,474	1,478	1,480
1007	Finn	1,542	1,556	1,500	1,506
1008	Sion Mills	1,443	1,460	1,421	1,442
1009	Dunnamanagh	1,462	1,493	1,471	1,471
1010	Slievekirk	1,407	1,423	1,420	1,420
1011	Artigarvan	1,661	1,693	1,652	1,653
1012	North	1,630	1,740	1,703	1,699
1013	West	2,064	2,109	2,045	2,067
1014	East	1,440	1,426	1,277	1,280
1015	South	1,841	1,925	1,850	1,863
1016	Ballycolman	1,412	1,456	1,338	1,382
1101	Trillick	1,512	1,542	1,482	1,506
1102	Dromore	1,564	1,597	1,527	1,556
1103	Drumquin	1,378	1,409	1,373	1,381
1104	Fairy Water	1,416	1,420	1,362	1,366
1105	Clanabogan	1,766	1,802	1,779	1,781
1106	Fintona	1,384	1,446	1,329	1,328
1107	Newtownsaville	1,584	1,614	1,554	1,557
1108	Sixmilecross	1,400	1,446	1,394	1,398
1109	Beragh	1,462	1,475	1,461	1,465
1110	Drumnakilly	1,665	1,737	1,678	1,696
1111	Termon	1,655	1,694	1,584	1,591
1112	Owenkillew	1,502	1,553	1,521	1,560
1113	Gortin	1,425	1,454	1,440	1,439
1114	Lisanelly	1,150	1,206	1,134	1,164
1115	Killyclogher	1,673	1,729	1,689	1,704
1116	Camowen	1,420	1,440	1,394	1,394
1117	Drumragh	1,633	1,647	1,615	1,626
1118	Dergmoney	1,290	1,285	1,254	1,254
1119	Coolnagard	1,952	2,023	1,962	1,963
1120	Gortrush	1,527	1,573	1,458	1,468
1121	Strule	1,041	1,043	1,003	1,005
Total Published Electorate:		1,072,425	1,097,551	1,069,160	1,070,017

Witnesses: **Mr Denis Stanley**, Chief Electoral Officer, **Mrs June Butler**, Assistant Chief Electoral Officer, and **Ms Jocelyn McCarley**, Operations Manager, The Electoral Office for Northern Ireland, examined.

Q41 Chairman: Thank you very much for coming back. It is nice to see you again. First of all, can we talk about the rate of registration which was the first question we asked the members of the Commission, but you may well have a different perspective. Do you think that 86% is a satisfactory level?

Mr Stanley: No, Chairman, I do not. Anything less than 100% is unsatisfactory, we are very anxious, as we said at the last hearing, that we should have the register as complete as is possible.

Q42 Chairman: Okay. You think the carry forward mechanism would help that?

Mr Stanley: I think certainly it would help. I believe that to have the register completely deleted each year and reconstituted afresh, amongst the other problems that are associated with that there is a certain amount of fatigue on the part of electors who year after year have to supply us with National Insurance numbers, dates of birth and signatures. I think that for perhaps the early implementation period of the Electoral Fraud Act I would concede that the carry forward was perhaps not appropriate but it has always been my view that by not having the carry forward inevitably, year on year, the register would decrease. I think that is now the position we are finding ourselves in.

Q43 Chairman: Okay. What about the drop between September 2003 and June 2004? You cannot put that down to the change in the system, can you?

Mr Stanley: When we had the September 2003 register, that was the register, of course, that was used prior to the Assembly elections in November, there was clearly a lot of effort on the part of political parties to get as many people on to that register as was possible. That imperative has not been quite so apparent thereafter. Again, I think it would be our great concern that we do need to get some mechanism. It would be my view that we need to look more radically at the way in which the register is compiled in order that we maximise the number of people on the register without compromising the accuracy of the register. I do have a concern that each canvass costs a huge amount of money in terms of our budgets and to simply take a register that has been compiled and added to or amended by rolling registration for a period of perhaps 10 months, to set that aside and then start afresh is not the best use of resources. I would, if I may, take it one step forward. I would like, in fact, to go further than simply having the carry forward, I would like to see a register that had occurrence of perhaps three years. I see the reinstatement of the carry forward as in effect giving us a register with a lifetime of two years but I think it would be better to have a register with a period of three years. I think we could then spend our resources and time in the interim period looking out and finding those people who are in the marginalised groups and getting them on to the register, getting them into the system rather than going around and finding the same people who year on year conscientiously complete their forms and send them

in. I think we could spend our time and our money in a much better way to a better effect as far as the register is concerned.

Q44 Chairman: That is a very interesting answer. It cannot be satisfactory that you depend on the energy of the political parties when an election is coming to get people on.

Mr Stanley: Absolutely not.

Q45 Chairman: That is not part of the system at all, is it?

Mr Stanley: They do it, and of course they do it voluntarily but they should not feel they have to do it.

Q46 Chairman: They do feel they have to do it because otherwise this will not get their votes. There should be a system that delivers votes.

Mr Stanley: Absolutely.

Q47 Mr Swire: Last year you told us with the individual registration system you were having a problem in identifying those young people turning 18 and that is the group which is under-represented, as we heard earlier, on the register itself. Have you developed any strategies since then for getting new voters registered?

Mr Stanley: What we would ultimately like to see is that the process of elections and registration is part of the curriculum in the final years of secondary schools and perhaps in the first year in tertiary education whereby it becomes the norm that the students in that age group be given some instruction on the political process, on the parliamentary process and on the registration process, and as part of that system that people are encouraged to register both for the main register but equally in order to get an electoral identity card because we see that as being somewhat of an attractive item for people of that age.

Q48 Mr Swire: Who have you shared these ideas with?

Mr Stanley: We have been discussing them with John Spellar, the Minister in the Northern Ireland Office, and we are keen to take those forward, perhaps not as radically as I have just described but that would be our ultimate aim. In the interim we will do what we can by way of sending material to schools and colleges, and we have already identified those schools and colleges in Northern Ireland that would benefit. My concern in that is if we send the material it is really up to the lecturers whether they distribute it or not. We would like to see it incorporated in a more proactive way into the syllabus.

Q49 Mr Swire: Did you get a warm response from the Minister?

Mr Stanley: Yes, I think we did.

Mrs Butler: If I can just comment here, Mr Swire. Certainly we are hoping that we will roll out a proactive approach through perhaps some sort of a

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workshop in schools and colleges which have sixth forms. We are very conscious that in the 18 year age group, from the evidence that we have, only 25% of people in the approximately 17–18 year old age group are registered, so we are focusing first on that area. We will hope to roll it out, also, to FE colleges both for full-time and part-time students and also hopefully in universities, especially in fresher weeks. We would like to do it in combination with the mobile ID card sites but that may be a matter of funding because our budget would not have that automatically in it and we will have to make a special bid to our funders for that.

Q50 Mr Swire: Is that, therefore, your current understanding of how many 18 to 24 year olds are under-represented, 75%, is that what you are saying?

Mrs Butler: That is the evidence that is provided in the draft PriceWaterhouseCoopers report that has been commissioned by the Electoral Commission. It is the 18 year olds, it is not the 18 to 24 year olds.

Q51 Mr Swire: You suggested last year, and we talked about this earlier, that some younger voters are keen to get identity cards for other reasons and that they could be registered through the backdoor, as it were. Mr Stanley, would there be any merit in taking what you were saying further in terms of not only having it as part of the National Curriculum in the final year of secondary school, first year in tertiary education, but actually encouraging people to register for other reasons to get an ID card?

Mr Stanley: If I can just say, we are anxious to do anything that would encourage people to get on the register. The point that I was making about curriculum is based on my own experience of the young people that I know, including my own son. They simply have no exposure to the political process. They do not understand it, they do not understand elections or, indeed, registration. I think it is really to tackle the problem at source rather than tinker around with dealing with the symptoms. We really ought to be going to the cause of the problem and that is, in my view, a lack of understanding of politics or what politics is all about on the part of young people. If we could get them interested at an earlier age so they wanted to partake I think these problems would largely be self-resolving.

Mrs Butler: Mr Swire, also, on the comments that you made, we have had some publicity in relation to the ID card. One of the councils in Northern Ireland did that in the latter part of last year when they were trying to do some promotion in relation to identification that is required at age 18, presumably to get into clubs and so forth and they did use our identification card as one of their documents. We have started down that route.

Q52 Mr Beggs: Could I take you back to disadvantaged groups, people living in the areas of high social deprivation being less likely to register to vote and these areas where registration rates have declined disproportionately. Have you now developed a canvassing strategy to try to alleviate this problem?

Mr Stanley: We will carry out an annual canvass this year. The information that I put forward in my memorandum, the Minister has now decided he does not want to follow the particular route that we were putting forward and he wants a full annual canvass with the forms being delivered to each person and household and then collected again by canvassers. We see that as an effective way as we can of targeting every single individual in Northern Ireland. Rather than going to find groups of people as such, we think that by calling on every household and leaving a pre-printed form with the person's name and address for them simply to complete the personal identifiers and return it to us or wait for the canvasser to collect it, plus delivering to every single address in Northern Ireland, everywhere that people live, forms and notes to ask them to complete, that is our primary way of doing this. Yes, we do try and ensure that if there are small groups. For instance, last year we had forms available in Cantonese so that people who had Cantonese as their first language would at least be able to understand some of the process. We are keen to take these forward in that way. I would be concerned, I have to say, that the resources that we have in order to do the annual canvass really address the majority of people who will return the form, we do not have an unlimited amount of money to go out and pursue people who are not on the register. That is why I believe we need to look at things more radically, continuing to perhaps address the symptoms rather than get at the cause and then have the resources available to follow up that major change in policy.

Q53 Mr Beggs: You are, in fact, saying you are moving away from canvassing by post?

Mr Stanley: It was never a canvass by post as such, it was simply a cost cutting measure which the Northern Ireland Office had asked us to consider. It was a matter of the cost of posting out a form to an individual is less than the cost of delivering it by hand, and we saw there were savings there of some £200,000. That was the motive behind that change rather than necessarily finding a better way to do it, it was a less expensive way to achieve the same thing we believed.

Mrs Butler: We feel we have better outreach especially in areas perhaps of deprivation where there are people calling and making an effort to get to each dwelling, that we have a better chance of being able to identify these. Also, I have to say that we do work with special groups and last year we started the process of dealing with areas of people who have special disabilities, such as working with the RNIB and the RNID and disability groups. This year we do hope to improve in that area by attempting to get registration forms, not only through post offices, as Mr Magee has said to you, but also hopefully getting them into benefit offices and Government offices such as Jobcentres and other areas where perhaps there are jobseekers, in other words a different type of outreach to complement the annual canvass.

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Q54 Mr Beggs: It has been argued that the new system of electoral registration has resulted in many people with learning difficulties being left off the electoral register. Do you think this is an accurate assessment?

Mr Stanley: I think they addressed it the last time around. We do not remove people from the register, we simply need to establish that everyone on the register is capable of making up their own minds and that is on the premise that no-one can take or use anyone else's vote. If someone is incapable of using it themselves it should not be open to anyone else to use it on their behalf and that is the only concern that we have. The figures—if you do want them, and I can perhaps explain those to you—are based on the registration form on which people are required to put their own signature. There is a box on the registration form which allows people to have the form attested on their behalf but a reason must be given. Where the reason is something that would indicate that the person has a mental problem, should it be that it is written as perhaps Alzheimer's Disease or mental disability or Down's Syndrome or any indication of that nature, when the registration form is returned we would follow that up with a standardised letter which we think is quite a sympathetic letter explaining the position, as I have just described it to you, that no-one is able to take anyone else's vote, and simply seeking confirmation that the person can make up their own minds. If we get an answer back from the person or their carer or a friend or whatever that that is indeed the case, and the person can make up their mind, then we accept that absolutely. We are not in any way making clinical judgments, we leave that entirely to the judgment of the person themselves or their carer. In that context, last year, during the 2003 annual canvass, we had 614 people who had mental difficulties when the form was completed, and 614 who did not provide any follow-up to answer whether they were capable of making the decision or not. In addition, we had the carers of a further 848 people who made contact with us to declare that the person concerned was not capable of making up their own mind, and, therefore, they were not included in the register. Those are the numbers that we have in respect of the canvass 2003.

Q55 Mr Beggs: What is your view of the use of the terms "idiot" and "lunatic"?

Mr Stanley: We would never use those terms.

Q56 Mr Beggs: That is very commendable. Do you think your approach in dealing with carers and parents of people with learning difficulties could actually be more positive and encouraging?

Mr Stanley: I think it is as encouraging as we can be given that it is not appropriate for someone to have or use anyone else's vote. I think the letter we send out is a very sympathetic and understanding letter. We have spent a lot of time carefully preparing the letter so that it does not cause offence to anyone. When anyone would make contact with us by telephone or call into one of our area offices we would attempt to be as sympathetic and

understanding as we can. At the end of the day we are not making a decision about whether the person is capable, we are simply asking for confirmation and we would accept that in any way. We try to be as sympathetic and as understanding as possible and, indeed, our emphasis is one of inclusion rather than exclusion. We would much prefer to see people with mild learning disabilities, who are capable of exercising the franchise, to be on the register because that is where they should be.

Q57 Mr Pound: Can I say with great prescience you have answered already most of the questions I was going to ask. I do not know whether this is due to the fact that you are prescient or I am predictable. With your permission, could I just take you back to a point relative to the question that Roy Beggs asked. It was about the question of personal versus postal canvassing. In the one year report of the Electoral Commission after the first year of operation the point was made that in a number of wards, I think Ardoyne, Woodstock and Shaftesbury were mentioned, there was no canvass—I think Ardoyne must be Belfast North and Woodstock and Shaftesbury would be presumably Belfast South—not that it was due to cost but it was due to a shortage of canvassers. Could you say was that due to—how shall I say—geographic or demographic reasons or was it to do with the amount you could pay the canvassers?

Mrs Butler: It is nothing whatever to do with the amount we paid. In 2002 there were still at that point certain areas of Belfast which there were some problems with in terms of violence and at that stage it was difficult to persuade anyone that they wished to canvass, to knock on doors, certainly in the evenings which is the time that we would prefer that they did. In 2002 there were some 15 wards or parts of wards, if I remember correctly, where we were unable to recruit canvassers, and we did not believe that was because of money. The situation was completely different in 2003. We started the canvass in 2003 with every area having someone to go out and canvass it. In the end there were three wards or parts of wards which received a postal canvass or some supplementary postal canvass because three canvassers involved withdrew, two withdrew because they were involved in car accidents at the very beginning of their canvass, while they were out canvassing in one case, and in the third case a family member took ill and they could not continue and we could not get anyone to replace them, in fact it was an area in Mr Beggs' constituency that that happened.

Q58 Mr Pound: I would say it is not entirely unique. I have one ward in my constituency where the police cannot guarantee the safety of the polling clerks and the tellers, let alone the canvassers, so it is not unique. I am grateful for that. You mentioned the possibility earlier on of registering, I think it was five days before the election?

Mr Stanley: Six days. The Electoral Commission suggested that.

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Q59 Mr Pound: Would such a change, if implemented, cause logistical problems? This is a question to which I suspect the answer is yes but I would ask you your opinion.

Mr Stanley: Yes, I think absolutely. With our present method of producing registers for polling stations and, indeed, for candidates well in advance of nomination, we would not be in a position to do that with a six day cut-off for registration so it would be a major logistics task. I believe that the only way in which it could be achieved is if we had an electronic on-line register in each polling station whereby anyone could go into any polling station and, having identified themselves, vote at that polling station. If we had that system then in effect we would be able to produce the register on the morning of the poll electronically. Without that system, and given that we have to produce registers for each polling station with the details on those of the people who are entitled to vote on the day, six days would be extremely difficult for us. My other concern in that particular respect would be that it might be an invitation to the less scrupulous to bombard us with a huge number of applications six days before in the anticipation that we could not check them thoroughly and thereby fraud might be perpetrated. There would be two concerns in there, I think.

Q60 Mr Pound: Do you have any idea—it is a completely unfair question and you can refuse to answer it—what the cost of implementing such an IT system would be?

Mr Stanley: We have not costed it out, no, absolutely not. It could be done in a number of ways. It could be on-line, which would be the ideal one that I have just described, or it could be simply that each presiding officer had a laptop computer with a CD in it that had it and you could mark them off there and then. Ultimately we would like to see the opportunity for anyone, wherever they might be, instead of having to go to their assigned polling station to be able to go anywhere and cast their vote at any polling station but, no, I am afraid I have not got costs.

Q61 Mr Pound: Would there be an issue of the integrity of such a system in terms of its safety from people actually hacking into it? Do you feel confident that a system could exist that would be bullet proof? Sorry, that is an unfortunate expression.

Mr Stanley: One would hope so. There would be little point in putting one into place if it was open to such abuse.

Q62 Mr Pound: Finally, if not six days, what would be your preference?

Mr Stanley: I think we are reasonably content with the days as they currently sit. The timing, as is set in legislation, is one that has been devised and developed over a number of decades and it seems to work reasonably satisfactorily.

Q63 Mr Pound: I was simply asking your opinion. This is an opportunity for you to put down a marker if you feel it is too long or too short.

Mr Stanley: I think we are quite content. My two colleagues are the experts on delivering the various functions.

Q64 Mr Pound: The people who do the real work.

Mr Stanley: Absolutely right.

Mrs Butler: I think from our experience with absent voting the longer the period we have before an election the better because of the rigorous and scrupulous investigation we have to do against absent vote applications. That would be a problem if there was to be a register closure much closer to the date of an election.

Q65 Mr Pound: Equally there is a sort of lacuna where the longer the period the more the likelihood of people dropping off would apply, surely? That was the problem with annual registration, the longer the period of registration the more likely the people simply were not there.

Mrs Butler: For example, we get weekly the details of deaths from the Registrar of Births, Marriages and Deaths in Northern Ireland so those are updated right to the last minute on the register and we get them weekly.

Mr Pound: May I say, where Belfast leads may London follow. Thank you.

Q66 Mr Tynan: Could I ask a question with regard to electoral identity cards. Are you satisfied with the level of take-up of electoral identity cards?

Mr Stanley: Could I simply take the lead on that and then June can add in some of the figures if it is helpful? We believe that we have addressed those people who required the identity documents because there are four prescribed in legislation, the electoral ID card is only one and perhaps might even be regarded as the fallback document. We have issued now over 90,000 of these documents, as you have heard, and we have not in hand any applications that should have been processed in time for the election on 10 June. We believe we have a system in place whereby when someone applies for a card the information is processed relatively quickly and the card is produced in time for elections. We do not produce cards in a short timescale outside election time and that is simply in order to save money. They are sent to our card producing company and they are processed and produced in batches, which is much cheaper than producing a few every week. Clearly as we come nearer elections that process is speeded up and it is done within a few days right up until a cut-off date which ensures that those people who apply will get their card before the election. As you know, there were 235,000 people who ticked the box on the 2002 registration form, and we simply believe that many of those people ticked the box but when they got the application form which explained they could use a driving licence, passport or translink senior smart pass, they realised they did not perhaps need it. We believe that there is not a huge demand over and above the 90,000 odd that we have produced.

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Mrs Butler: If I can give you some statistics, Mr Tynan. For the November election, the Assembly election, by that stage we had had just over 94,000 applications and there were 86,746 cards issued, to be precise. The rate of rejection then was about 8%. A lot of that, there was a push prior to that election and we had just short of 40 sites out and in a very short period of time, remembering that we got very little notice of the election, there were just over 8,000 cards issued immediately prior to the November Assembly elections. We had much more notice for the European election and by the time we had finished that process we had over 102,000 applications and about 92,600 cards have now been issued. The mobile site effort, I should explain we do that to complement our area office sites, there are fixed sites operating in our area offices during normal working hours every day. The area offices at that stage had a really very low uptake because the push was on the mobile sites but we only had over 1,290, just short of 1,300 applications, through 44 sites which was a very low return. We had listened to the lessons of the earlier exercise in November. We had gone back to areas and, in fact, to locations where we had a good take up then, and we went to different places. There was not such a rush to get the cards so we feel the demand may have peaked which is why we would like now to focus on putting sites in other areas like schools and colleges where perhaps people coming on to the register who might need it might benefit more from it.

Q67 Mr Tynan: You are quite content with the numbers that have them but you have no special strategy as regards making sure that people who do not have appropriate ID receive ID cards because you do not feel there is a problem, is that correct?

Mrs Butler: We do not know where those people would be. We have no evidence that there is any area particularly, either a social area or a geographical area. If I can give you some statistics—maybe you are a bit fed up with me and my statistics—from the two elections. At the Assembly election in November 2003 we had just over 60,000 people coming along with their ID card across the 18 constituency areas and that represented 9% of those people who voted. In the election just passed in June, we had 48,000 people using the ID card when they came to vote and believe it or not that also represented 9% of the people who voted. Actually the whole banding appropriation of the types of identification that people produced were almost identical in terms of percentage. All these figures, by the way, are on the Electoral Office website if you want to have a look at them in further detail. Someone mentioned earlier that some of the representations that had been made to you, Chairman, had said there were 30,000 people who did not have identification and, therefore, could not vote. Can I just say that at both the Assembly election in November and the European

Parliamentary election in June, the number of people who turned up without appropriate identification to vote was, in fact, just about 3,500 to 4,000 so really there was no evidence of a great number of people.

Q68 Chairman: Good.

Mr Stanley: Can I just add one more point to emphasise. Mr Tynan, you were asking about targeting particular groups. Could I say that is what we are aiming to do with our mobile sites in the run up to any election. We had 40 or so different locations in use in the run up to the European Parliamentary election over a period of weeks and that was where we were asked by community groups, by political parties, where we thought there was a deficit. Then we had a programme which we prepared and, in conjunction with the Electoral Commission who advertised these various locations, we had mobile teams going round for periods of half a day, typically, to community centres, church halls, or wherever they were required in order that people in that area who needed an electoral identity card could simply turn up, have their photograph taken, complete the form and the process as far as they were concerned was over and done with. We then took that back, verified it against our database and if all was in order the card was produced and sent out to them.

Q69 Mr Tynan: Could I turn to the electoral hearings. Why are voters wishing to register by means of the rolling registration process more likely to be called to electoral hearings than those registering through the annual canvass?

Mr Stanley: That might have been the case in the past and that was due to the fact that the legislation requires that the registration officer should be satisfied as to the details and accuracy of the person applying. We believed that we should have a robust system. We had to accept people at annual registration at face value because at that stage we were unable to check the records against the social security agency or the Department of Work and Pensions' National Insurance records. We felt that it was necessary where the registration officer was not content, they had no knowledge of anyone before, they should be brought to a hearing and simply asked to produce the appropriate documentation. We have, however, now largely dispensed with that. We have had success with the Department of Work and Pensions in allowing access and comparing their records against ours. In general we would only ask people to come to a hearing where there were concerns about the accuracy of the information they were supplying.

Ms McCarley: Can I give some figures on this. We have had 20,000 odd applications under rolling registration since the register was published in February. Just over 600 people were called to hearings from that number.

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Q70 Mr Tynan: Is there any evidence of some regional offices calling more applicants for hearings than others?

Mr Stanley: There was a suggestion on the part of the Electoral Commission that people in the west of the Province were more likely to be called to hearings, particularly I think in our Omagh office but our understanding of the position is that was purely as a result of the circumstances of people applying, nothing to do with discretion on the part of the Omagh office. They were applying the rules and it so turned out that there was a higher percentage of the people who applied who were unknown to them who had something not entirely satisfactory in the information they were supplying.

Mrs Butler: I think, Mr Tynan, you have to appreciate the spread of applications varies considerably across Northern Ireland and, therefore, the number of people called varies.

Q71 Chairman: You said that in the 2003 elections you had a significant crisis in the run up and this was not the way to run elections.

Mr Stanley: Absolutely.

Q72 Chairman: Tell us about that.

Mr Stanley: We had arranged, as everyone will be well aware, the Assembly elections for 1 May and then the latter part of May and then they were put off until the autumn. Then we had the autumn election called on, I think it was, 26 October; it then took place on 26 November. When we went back to the polling staff who had volunteered and been appointed for the May elections we had a very substantial percentage of those people who simply refused to work at the November election. That caused a great crisis because then we had to find large numbers of presiding officers and poll clerks who would come and work for us on the day. We almost got to the stage of not having an election because we had not staff almost the day before to run the election. We begged and cajoled anyone we could find to go and work, and that included members of our own families and all sorts of people, to work at that election. Our great annoyance, I think would be the right term, was there was a great difference between the fees that the staff were to be paid at the November Assembly election as compared with the previous election, the main election being the synchronised election of 2001 where it was the district council election and the General Election. As a result, it is our view that many people when they looked at the amount of money that they were going to be paid, and they worked it out on the basis of the number of hours that they were expected to be there, from half past six in the morning, perhaps, until eleven, and compared that with the hourly rate worked out, given overtime and the like, it ended up they were being offered slightly more than the National Minimum Wage. We believe that many people felt that was not appropriate and simply were not prepared to turn up and do the work.

Q73 Chairman: What was the hourly rate?

Mr Stanley: I think it was £135 for a presiding officer and £90 for a poll clerk which worked out at something around £5.50 or £5.60 an hour. We believed that was inappropriate and I would contrast that with the European Parliamentary elections where a UK wide figure was established of £190 for a presiding officer and £135 for a poll clerk and we had absolutely no problems, everyone turned up on the day. The point I was trying to make was we have 1,532 polling stations in Northern Ireland, that is the presiding officers and the poll clerks, and if any one of those does not turn up we cannot run the polling stations. If we cannot run the polling station the whole vote in that constituency may be brought into doubt and that is my concern. On the day we must have 100% turn out, that was the crisis that we faced.

Q74 Reverend Smyth: According to the Electoral Commission there are no formal mechanisms in place to record complaints regarding the election proceedings. It is an issue that I have raised myself at times. Why is there no formal investigation?

Mr Stanley: That is totally wrong. There are formal complaint mechanisms. June, perhaps, will describe them in detail to you.

Q75 Reverend Smyth: I will be happy because at times I have asked for information in the past and have been told "We do not have that".

Mrs Butler: There is a complaint form which is available at each polling station. Any person who wishes to make a complaint may do so. I have a small bundle of complaints from the European Parliamentary election and they range from everything to do with people not being able to vote, the activities of the police, what the agents were doing, what the agents were perceived to be doing and people who could not get an absent vote. There is a whole range there. The only thing that we specified the form should not be used for is people complaining that they are not on the register because that is something outside the control of the polling station.

Q76 Reverend Smyth: We have been told by the Electoral Commission that something like a quarter of the complaints concerned electors turning up to vote but finding that they were not on the register. Is there any way of getting this down into real numbers? You said you had a small list.

Mrs Butler: I should explain, if I may. That small list relates purely to the European Parliamentary election, there was no method of recording at the Assembly election that very fact but we changed what we call the polling station log for the European Parliamentary election and that was one of the items which they were asked to record. Someone at the

7 July 2004 Mr Denis Stanley, Mrs June Butler and Ms Jocelyn McCarley

present time is collating all that information. We have been rather busy mopping up and getting ready for registration.

Q77 Reverend Smyth: Of course we might be able to deal not with percentages, because percentages mean nothing if we do not have some figures.

Mrs Butler: No, we will have real figures. I suspect, if I may say, the number of people coming forward with that complaint this time will be much, much less than before. The problem at the Assembly election in November was the confusion because of the fact that the election period was running together with the registration and a lot of people thought they had filled in a registration form and, therefore, would be able to vote.

Q78 Reverend Smyth: It has been suggested that it should not be possible to call elections within the annual canvass period, would you agree?

Mrs Butler: Yes.

Mr Stanley: Yes. I would have to say it would be my understanding that the legislation as drafted did not anticipate elections during the months of the canvass. There are two months, October and November, in which rolling registration does not operate. It would be my view that is intended to be purely for the canvass and not for elections.

Reverend Smyth: Has anyone ever told the person who calls those elections that is a law!

Chairman: Try telling that to a Prime Minister after a vote of confidence! Mr Stanley, ladies, thank you very much indeed for helping us. We have got a few more questions which we will follow up in writing as they are mainly factual ones.

Supplementary memorandum submitted by the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland

RESPONSE TO QUESTIONS FROM THE COMMITTEE

THE NOVEMBER 2003 ASSEMBLY ELECTION AND JUNE 2004 EUROPEAN PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

1. *Survey evidence indicates that up to 6% of the electorate did not vote in the November 2003 elections solely because they were not on the register. Do you believe this figure is accurate?*

The Electoral Office for Northern Ireland (EONI) has no reason to disagree with the figure.

2. *In your view, what were the primary causes of this high proportion of people who wanted to vote being excluded from the Register in the Assembly elections?*

No one was excluded from the Register as such. Legislation, however, requires that the Register to be used at any election is that which applied on the first day of the month in which nominations are taken. Legislation also stipulates that no amendments to the Register are to be made in October or November (because that is when the annual canvass takes place); therefore the Register used at the Assembly election was that published on 1 September 2003. Many people who had failed to submit registration forms up to August 2003 then did so during the canvass in September or October in the expectation of being able to vote on 26 November, but were not.

3. *According to a survey of returning officers, people turning up to vote but finding that they were not on the register accounted for 26% of all complaints received by presiding officers. Do you accept that this figure indicates a significant procedural failure?*

There is a legal obligation on all eligible persons to register (as it is from the Register that names are selected for jury duty). Both the Electoral Commission (by way of publicising the registration process) and the EONI (by way of conducting the annual canvass and administering rolling registration) have expended considerable efforts and resources on ensuring that the opportunity to register is available to every person of voting age in Northern Ireland. The EONI does not accept that there has been any procedural failure as the legislation has been followed meticulously. The level of complaint about non-registration was primarily caused by the timing of the election *vis-à-vis* the annual canvass. It is also likely that many so called "non-registered" persons were probably included on the Register at former addresses.

4. *Are you satisfied that the level of security at polling stations in the 2003 Assembly elections was right? What improvements, if any, are required?*

Security at and surrounding polling stations is a matter for the Chief Constable. Other than disturbances outside three Londonderry polling stations in the latter part of polling days in both November 2003 and June 2004, security does not seem to be a serious issue now at elections in Northern Ireland. At the Assembly elections, however, some Presiding Officers, especially in rural areas, were discomforted by not having a police presence during the hours of darkness.

5. *Given the range of complaints from presiding officers following the 2003 Assembly elections, do you think the current arrangements for polling agents are justified?*

Unfortunately, some polling agents seem unwilling to abide by the declaration of secrecy they sign prior to being accepted as agents and seek to remove from their stations during the day the names and addresses of electors who at that point have yet to vote. In some areas it is a fear that they may also intimidate poll staff to overlook such practices. It would be better if parties appointed fewer polling agents and arranged for changes of agents to occur less frequently during the day. There is also concern amongst Presiding Officers that persons who act as polling agents are not those whose names have been advised in advance. It would be helpful if legislation could be introduced to ensure that polling agents are required to produce recognised photographic identification to Presiding Officers.

6. *When giving oral evidence, you told the Committee that, for the first time, you are collating figures for the number of people turning up to vote in the European Elections only to find that they were not on the register. When will these figures be available?*

This information was collected by Presiding Officers at the European Parliamentary Election in June 2004. In total 2042 persons who turned up to vote found they were not registered at the local polling station. The constituency where this occurred least was North Down with 49 cases and most was Belfast West with 345.

ELECTION HEARINGS

7. *What are you doing to reduce the discrepancies between the use of electoral hearings by different regional offices?*

The apparent “discrepancy” is a persistent misunderstanding on the part of the Electoral Commission as the same policy is applied equally across the Province. Some Area Electoral Offices, however, have more people applying under rolling registration than others while some offices have applications from a greater number of “previously unknown” people. These factors have a direct bearing on the number called to hearings by any Registration Officer, but the criteria used is universal. In early 2004, the EONI reviewed the policy on calling applicants to Hearings and applicants are now invited to submit evidence by post to the Registration Officer to confirm identification and period of residence. Very few applicants are now called to Hearings—only where the Registration Officer is suspicious that fraud may be an element.

8. *Between 2002 and April 2003, 4,733 applicants who had been invited for an electoral hearing (58%) did not turn up for the hearing. Do you perform any kind of follow-up on such applicants?*

No, the EONI did not have sufficient resources to undertake a study of this nature. However, the volume of non-attendees was one of the reasons the policy of accepting evidence by post was introduced.

9. *Some applicants have to travel significant distances to electoral hearings, and perhaps take time off work. Do applicants get reimbursed for expenses incurred in order to attend electoral hearings?*

The EONI operates a policy of conducting hearings when and where they are needed, provided sufficient people wish to make use of the facility to justify the Registration Officer travelling. In addition, it is not necessary for individuals to appear at a hearing in person and it is not uncommon for a party or community worker to represent several people at a hearing. This is perfectly acceptable, providing the person’s written authority has been obtained by his/her representative. There is no legal authority to pay expenses to those attending hearings.

10. *Are electoral hearings still necessary? What value do they add?*

Having been able, after more than a year of negotiations, to arrange with the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) to check the personal details of electors against the National Insurance database, hearings are now largely unnecessary. As shown at answer seven above, evidence of residence is now requested by post.

11. *Do you calculate the costs of such hearings?*

No, not in precise terms. The cost to the EONI is part of normal running costs which include rolling registration and is incorporated within staff costs at various levels and overheads, such as travelling expenses.

 THE FINANCIAL POSITION OF THE ELECTORAL OFFICE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

12. *According to the Electoral Commission, the current mechanisms for funding your office are problematic. Do you agree? If yes, what are the problems with the current financial arrangements?*

Yes. Expenditure on elections is funded by HM Treasury through the Northern Ireland Office. Expenditure at any election is governed by the Fees and Charges approved by Parliament for that election and all legitimate expenditure within these limits is met.

The cost of registration work and the general expenditure incurred in maintaining the organisation and an office infrastructure capable of delivering electoral services is, however, met from the Northern Ireland Office Estimate, approved annually by Parliament. Because the current EONI baseline was set before the Electoral Fraud Act became law and the cost of implementing the Act (other than the cost of producing the Electoral identity Card) was overlooked by the Department, the EONI has insufficient money at the start of each year to deliver the requirements of the Act. The Department seeks to address this underprovision by way of in-year pressures, but these are assessed along with all the other demands on the Northern Ireland Office budget and consequently decisions on the full extent of funding are not taken until the final quarter of each year. This method of funding leaves the EONI as front line service deliverer with great uncertainty, until very late in the financial year. In the demand-led environment in which the EONI operates, this in effect erodes to a significant extent the independence of the organisation.

13. *Can you provide us with any specific recommendations with regard to a revised funding set-up for the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland (EONI)?*

The EONI needs to have a proper baseline agreed before the beginning of each year so that an annual Business Plan can be completed and promulgated to all staff by 1 April. (At present the Business Plan has to await decisions on funding which means final completion of the Plan may not be possible until the latter half of the financial year making it somewhat meaningless.) It would, in the view of the EONI, be better to remove the funding of registration completely from the current Departmental arrangements and put in place a funding regime akin to that under which the Electoral Commission operates. This would allow the EONI to plan and operate in a more pro-active way and would restore the independence of the Chief Electoral Officer (which, after all, is the reason this office was originally created).

PROPOSAL MADE BY THE ELECTORAL COMMISSION

14. *Are you proposing to implement the recommendations of the Electoral Commission contained in its report on the functioning of the 2002 Act, including:*

(a) *Developing performance indicators.*

The EONI has operated on "Next Step Agency" lines since I became CEO in autumn 2000. This has entailed the introduction of a three-year Corporate Plan and an annual Business Plan with Aims and Objectives, Performance Indicators, Key Performance Targets, plans for financial management, quality service, human resources and reporting. These Plans are not, however, published as the Northern Ireland Office has felt it unwise to make public such matters as EONI speculation on when major elections may take place, an important element in the planning process. As a result, the Electoral Commission is largely unaware of how the EONI operates its plans and targets.

(b) *conducting an equality impact assessment of the effect of the act on people with disabilities.*

As part of the EONI Equality Scheme Equality Impact Assessments (EQ IAs) are being carried out in a number of areas, The EQIA on access by disabled voters to polling stations is now almost complete. It is, however, a requirement of Northern Ireland equality legislation that every new policy must be subjected to screening and this is currently being conducted in respect of the Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002 by the Northern Ireland Office.

(c) *making electoral registration forms available on-line?*

From autumn 2004 blank electoral registration forms will be available widely in schools, colleges, libraries, universities, Citizens' Advice Bureaux offices, Social Security Offices, as well as being available on-line. (This has not been considered practicable previously because of technical difficulties with the DWP in checking the personal identifiers of electors against the National Insurance database.) In addition, the EONI will again as part of this year's annual canvass send individual registration forms, pre-printed with the elector's name and address, to each of the 1.07 million people on the Register at 1 September 2004. Blank forms will be delivered by canvassers to all other dwellings in Northern Ireland.

15. *Do you welcome the Electoral Commission's recommendation that the National Audit Office should conduct a study of the "efficiency, economy, and effectiveness" of your office?*

16. *What added value do you consider that it might provide to EONI operations?*

The EONI would welcome any measure to address the under-resourcing of registration.

RELATIONS AND CO-OPERATION BETWEEN THE ELECTORAL COMMISSION AND THE EONI

17. *How would you characterize your working relationship with the Electoral Commission?*

Cordial and relatively effective.

18. *Could you explain why the Electoral Office (EONI) decided to set up a telephone advice line during the 2003 canvass despite the fact that the Electoral Commission already ran such a help line?*

The Electoral Commission's help line was operated by a commercial call centre using 90 frequently asked questions and answers provided by the EONI. The call centre, however, did not have on-line access to the Register nor did it employ staff with knowledge of the registration system and consequently could only answer questions of a general nature. Consequently, many callers to the Commission's helpline who wanted personal registration information or answers to questions which were non-routine were passed on to the Electoral Office. It then became impossible for the EONI Information Unit to handle the calls and it was necessary to set up a specialist EONI advice line for the duration of the canvass. This was manned by experienced part-time EONI staff who had expertise in registration and were able to answer all questions fully. The EONI, having anticipated the problem, had suggested to the Electoral Commission in the Spring of 2003 that a combined operation would be more effective but this was rejected.

19. *During the 2002 canvass you also decided to publish your own poster and as part of a general campaign targeting young people and first-time voters. In principle, such campaign work comes under the remit of the Electoral Commission. Did you feel that the Commission was not doing its job properly?*

There appeared to be gaps in the Electoral Commission's campaign which were being left unfilled. Consequently, the EONI decided that action needed to be taken in respect of more focused targeting of young people and first-time voters. Financial restrictions, however, meant that the EONI poster campaign was conducted within relatively modest resources.

September 2004

Written evidence

APPENDIX 1

Memorandum submitted by the Northern Ireland Office

INTRODUCTION

It is a fundamental duty of any Government in a democratic society to ensure that voters have confidence in the electoral system, including electoral registration and the voting procedures used at polling stations. For many years in Northern Ireland there had been persistent allegations from across the community that the electoral process was being undermined by electoral fraud. In its report on the Electoral Fraud Act, the Electoral Commission commented that “The existence of electoral fraud is acknowledged on all sides of the political divide although its scale and level of intensity remain unknown”. It was against this background that the Government introduced the Northern Ireland Electoral Fraud Act 2002 in an attempt to restore confidence to the electoral process.

2. The new arrangements specifically tackled potential abuse at registration, applications for absent votes and procedures at polling stations. The measures included:

- The abolition of household registration and the introduction of individual registration. This measure was designed not only to stop individuals being registered who no longer lived at an address, but also to stop the register being packed with fictitious names. For example, it was possible for the head of a household to continue to register his children even when they had grown up and left the parental home. The introduction of individual registration means that every eligible person living in a household has to register personally, supplying their own personal identifiers and signing the form.
- The ending of the carryover whereby individuals had the right to stay on the register for an additional 12 months if they failed to re-register. Of course, the availability of rolling registration means that any person who misses registering during the annual canvass can register at other times as an updated register is published on a monthly basis until the start of the next annual canvass.
- Every person having to provide their signature, date of birth and National Insurance number at registration. This measure was intended to stop both multiple entries and the use of fictitious names.
- Absent vote applicants having to provide their date of birth and National Insurance number when applying. This was introduced to ensure that votes could not be stolen from other individuals.
- Presiding Officers being given the authority to ask a third statutory question (namely, a person’s date of birth) in addition to asking the person’s name and whether the person has already voted.
- The introduction of photographic identification for voters at polling stations. This measure was introduced to stop personation at polling stations.

These measures were supported by all of the main political parties in Northern Ireland with the exception of Sinn Féin.

ELECTORAL REGISTRATION

3. The new arrangements came into force in time for the annual canvass in 2002. The number of individuals registered in September 2002, the last register produced under the pre-Fraud Act registration system, was 1,192,136. The figure for the first Register under the new rules, published on 2 December 2002 was 1,072,346, a reduction of over 119,000 (11%).

4. The register published in February 2004 following the next annual canvass contained just over 1,069,000 individuals. This represented a small drop of around 3,000 on the previous year’s annual canvass. The register used for the Assembly elections in November 2003, however, showed an increase of nearly 250,000 on the December 2002 Register to 1,097,000. This was due to the use of rolling registration in the period between the two annual canvasses.

<i>Publication of Register</i>	<i>Numbers on Register</i>
September 2002 (pre-Fraud Act)	1,192,136
December 2002 (first post-Fraud Act annual canvass)	1,072,346
September 2003 (used for assembly election)	1,097,526
February 2004 (second post-Fraud Act annual canvass)	1,069,160

5. The Government believes there are a number of factors which account for the significant drop in the number of individuals registered following the introduction of the Electoral Fraud Act. The first is the unquantifiable effect of the legislation in deterring fraudsters. But other factors are also likely to have played a part, quite apart from more general changes in individuals' political engagement which affect the whole of the United Kingdom:

- The ending of the carryover. Every person had to register afresh and individually for inclusion on the register.
- The ending of household registration. This will have removed a number of individuals no longer living in the family home unless they took steps to register themselves individually.
- The reluctance of a number of former and current members of the security forces and prison service to register, because political parties' access to the full Register might in some cases enable paramilitary organisations to obtain these details.
- Individuals involved in the black economy wanting to protect their personal details. Under the previous registration system individuals did not have to provide details of their National Insurance numbers or date of birth. Having to supply such information would probably have deterred individuals who are avoiding paying income tax or defrauding the social security system, as they are likely to have believed that by supplying such details they might be tracked down by the authorities.

6. In its report Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002, the Electoral Commission concluded that the removal of the carryover was likely to be the most significant of these factors. The Commission did not agree with the assertion that 120,000 people had been disenfranchised as a result of the new legislation being introduced. It commented that "Arguably one of the benefits of the Act has been the creation of an accurate and robust electronic register, free from carry forward and inflationary factors. Taking these factors into account a drop in the numbers registered was to be expected." The Commission also noted that "it is satisfied that the 2002 electoral register accurately reflects those entitled to be registered". A survey carried out on the Commission's behalf showed that 65% of voters believed that the anti-fraud measures had restored integrity to the electoral system, with only 7% indicating that it had not. And following the elections the PSNI confirmed that it had received no reports of attempted personation at any of the polling stations.

7. The Commission also noted that individual registration tended to have an adverse impact on disadvantaged, marginalised and hard to reach groups within Northern Ireland society. Young people and students, people with learning disabilities and other forms of disability and those living in areas of high deprivation were less likely to be registered and encountered specific problems with the new registration process. The Commission also pointed out, however, that this problem was not confined to Northern Ireland, but was a UK-wide phenomenon.

8. The Commission also expressed concern at the 14% of the adult population, as compared with Census data, who were not registered. The Government accepts that there are a significant number of individuals entitled to be on the Register but who are not. However, because the old register was inflated, it is quite conceivable that a significant number of individuals who are not currently registered were also not registered under the old system of registration.

9. The Government regards the question of registration levels as a serious issue. Ministers are actively looking at ways to try and close the gap between those who are eligible to register and the actual numbers registered, including a range of administrative and legislative options. In addition, the Chief Electoral Officer will be working to target those groups who appear to be under-represented on the Register.

REGISTRATION AND THE ASSEMBLY ELECTION

10. The Government made a political judgement that the Assembly elections due on 1 May 2003 should be postponed until 29 May to give the political parties time to discuss proposals on a way forward through the political impasse that then existed. Unfortunately there was no breakthrough and the elections were postponed again until the autumn. Whilst it was regrettable that the elections had to be cancelled, the Government took the decision to do so in the circumstances of the time in support of the objective of restoring the devolved institutions in Northern Ireland on a stable and inclusive basis.

11. Prior to setting a new date of 26 November 2003 for the elections, the Government discussed with the Chief Electoral Officer and the Electoral Commission the practical problems that might arise with holding an election at that time of the year. There was a shared concern that requiring the Chief Electoral Officer to both organise the election and simultaneously continue with the annual canvass would pose severe operational risks to the effective delivery of both. In the light of this, the Government introduced legislation moving the publication of the new Register from 1 December to 2 February 2004.

12. Holding the election in November had an impact on the ability of some voters to register. Under current legislation rolling registration is suspended during October and November, meaning that no new registers are published either in October or November in any given year. As a result of this, the Register used for the elections was the monthly updated register published at the beginning of September 2003, so that individuals not on the register when the elections were called on 21 October were unable to vote. The Government looked at the possibility of legislating to enable a new register to be published much nearer the elections. It decided against including legislation in the Northern Ireland Assembly (Elections and Periods

of Suspension) Act because Ministers could not be sure of timing for an autumn election. In addition, when the election was eventually called in October, the practicalities of such a move were all but impossible because of the very limited time available, and the Chief Electoral Officer indicated that such a move could damage preparations for the elections. The Government decided to accept his advice.

13. The distribution and collection of registration forms for the planned annual canvass had, however, continued until the election was called and the canvass postponed. In order to deal with any resulting confusion among the public about their entitlement to vote—as they had completed their registration form at the beginning of the annual canvass—the Electoral Commission ran a high level publicity campaign to inform the public that unless they were on the Register published in September 2003 they were ineligible to vote. A telephone help line was also made available for individuals to check whether they were indeed on the Register.

14. It is difficult to ascertain how many people were in this position as the Chief Electoral Officer has no available figures. However, during the previous 12 months the Electoral Commission had also run an extensive publicity campaign to inform the public that if they wanted to vote at the elections originally planned for 1 May then they needed to register.

PHOTOGRAPHIC IDENTIFICATION

15. This was the first election in Northern Ireland when voters had to produce photographic identification at polling stations if they wanted to vote. There were four acceptable means of identification set out in the Electoral Fraud Act 2002:

- UK or Irish passport.
- Northern Ireland or GB photo driving licence.
- Translink Senior Smart Pass.
- Electoral Identity Card.

16. The most popular form of identification used was the driving licence (52.4%) followed by a passport (26.5%), the Senior Smart Pass (11.8%) and the Electoral Identity Card (9.3%). Altogether, 3,493 people (less than 1% of the total number of people who voted) who turned up to vote failed to produce the correct form of identification. There are no figures to show how many of those individuals subsequently returned with the correct identification.

CONCLUSION

17. The Government believes that its anti-fraud measures have been successful in restoring integrity to the electoral process in Northern Ireland and in substantially reducing the incidence and risk of electoral fraud. (Following the elections the PSNI confirmed that it had received no reports of attempted personation at any of the polling stations. The Electoral Commission has commented that there is sufficient evidence to suggest that the new legislation has instilled greater confidence in the democratic process.

18. The Government is concerned, however, that a significant number of eligible individuals are not registered to vote and is committed to taking what steps it can to ensure that as many eligible individuals as possible are registered to vote.

June 2004

APPENDIX 2

Memorandum submitted by Sinn Fein

ELECTORAL REGISTRATION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE ELECTORAL FRAUD (NORTHERN IRELAND) ACT 2002

THE RIGHT TO VOTE—BRITISH GOVERNMENT GUILTY OF ELECTORAL FRAUD—211,000 PEOPLE DENIED THE RIGHT TO VOTE

The democratic objective should be to facilitate the exercise of the right to vote, to enable the maximum number of people to vote and to remove deliberate and other impediments to the exercise of this fundamental right.

In May 2002 the British government, in a gross interference in the electoral process, introduced restrictive electoral legislation for the north of Ireland, which has resulted in the disenfranchisement of 211,000 voters (16.5% of the overall electorate).

This is not simply a failure of the system to register people to vote, this was designed to happen and legislated for in the “Electoral Fraud (NI) Act 2002”.

The 2001 Census figures indicated that 1,280,480 people would be eligible to vote by 2004. Under the British government’s 2002 electoral legislation, however, only 1,069,160 voters appear on the February 2004 register. This means that 211,000 people are being denied their vote.

If this political discrimination is allowed to continue the electoral register will continue to get smaller with every year that passes.

POLITICAL DISCRIMINATION

This electoral legislation and the new practices, which it sets out are completely out of step with practices in the rest of Ireland and Britain. Among the discriminatory practices introduced in May 2002 were:

- Individual registration of voters as opposed to household registration of voters, which is the case in the rest of Ireland and Britain.
- A requirement on each individual to provide personal identifiers including date of birth and national insurance numbers when applying to go on the Register of Electors. Voters in the rest of Ireland and in Britain do not have to do this.
- Annual Registration—this form of rolling registration has caused huge confusion. Electors in the rest of Ireland and in Britain are not removed from the electoral register if they do not apply annually.
- Statutory requirement on voters to produce personal photographic identification from a narrow band of photographic ID. This does not apply to voters in the rest of Ireland or to Britain.

This legislation was introduced on foot of false claims by Sinn Féin’s political opponents that the party was involved in electoral fraud.

These allegations are not only untrue but hide the real reason behind the legislation which was to remove the number of actual or potential Sinn Féin voters on the Register of Electors and erect barriers to those who want to exercise their right to vote.

The Electoral Commission in its December 2003 report commented thus on the question of electoral fraud: “Despite the fact that electoral fraud is perceived to be a major issue there are no statistics to support these widely held perceptions and there have been few if any successful prosecutions. Official reports published between 1997 and 2001 identified consistent themes in respect of electoral fraud in Northern Ireland. All confirmed that the extent of fraud was difficult to quantify and conclusive evidence was hard to obtain. Consequently the impact of the Act on actual levels of fraud cannot be gauged, as there is no readily available benchmark against which to measure.”

This observation reflects the reality of the situation on the ground. The electoral process was turned on its head to facilitate those political parties making groundless allegations to explain away the decline in their support at the polls.

In addition to this there is evidence now emerging that the new regulations are adversely affecting people living in areas of high social and economic deprivation.

Research by the Electoral Commission has shown that the highest decline in electoral registration occurred in the top 20 most deprived wards of which 69% are catholic and 27% protestant.

This represents a serious adverse impact on the catholic/nationalist community in particular and exposes the highly political motivation behind the electoral legislation.

Those who supported this legislation must look to the effect it is having, not just in terms of denying large numbers of people their right to vote, but in the categories of people being affected: the poorest within the nationalist community and to a lesser degree the poorest within the protestant community.

It has affected the young, the old, those with disabilities and ethnic minorities.

The pattern emerging across the north is that this legislation is producing a two-tier system whereby affluent areas are returning high registration uptake and the poorest areas, mostly in deprived catholic and protestant wards, are alarmingly low.

The social exclusion of large sections of the electorate breaches the existing anti-discrimination legislation. In terms of the catholic and nationalist people it does so on the grounds of religious belief and political opinion.

The right to vote is a basic democratic right. The denial of this right and the related issue of political discrimination cannot be allowed to continue.

CENSUS FIGURES AND REGISTER OF ELECTORS

Eligible to Vote?

The following figures set out the facts—those eligible to vote and those who are actually on the register and proves that the British government are guilty of electoral fraud. The information below includes:

- the number of people indicated as eligible to vote by the Census of 2001;
- the number of people on the Register of Electors published in November 2001 and compiled under the “Representation of the People” Act;
- the number of people on the Register of Electors published in September 2003 and February 2004 and compiled under the new legislation the “Electoral Fraud (NI) Act 2002”.

2001 Census: people entitled to vote

The 2001 Census figure indicated that 1,233,753 people were entitled to vote at that time.

The Census figures also indicated that 104,727 young people would reach voting age between 2001 and 2004.

This makes a sub-total of 1,338,480 who are entitled to vote. This, however, is affected by the number of deaths—58,000 since the census was taken.

This reduction leaves a total of 1,280,480 approximately who are entitled to vote and who should be on the register of electors. Factors such as emigration would have an insignificant effect on this figure.

2001: Register of Electors Compiled under “Representation of the People Act”

The Register of Electors published on 30 November 2001 contained 1,198,504 voters.

2003 and 2004 Register of Electors Compiled under “Electoral Fraud (NI) Act 2002”

The Register of Electors on which the 2nd Assembly Elections were fought in November 2003 contained 1,097,551.

The Register of Electors published in February 2004 contained 1,069,160.

Discrepancy between electoral register and those entitled to vote

The most recent Register of Electors, as set out above, published in February 2004 shows a shortfall of:

- 28,391 on the September 2003 Register of Electors;
- 129,344 on the November 2001 Register of Electors; and
- 211,000 on the Census figures of 2001, which indicated the number of people entitled to vote at that time and the number of young people who would reach voting age by 2004. (This figure has been adjusted to take into account the number of deaths since 2001.)

A pattern of annual reductions has been set in place by the new legislation.

In addition to the above, 30,000 people were denied the right to vote last November because of the new photographic ID requirements: “There are approximately 30,000 people who, if they turn out to vote, would not have the applicable ID.” Seamus Magee, Head of the Electoral Commission, 25 November 2003.

The process is so complicated for voters that the Electoral Office, which is responsible for compiling the Register of Electors, lists 50 frequently asked questions about the registration process on its website.

Righting an undemocratic wrong—summary of proposals

1. Household Registration should replace the new individual Registration scheme. This will require amending legislation.

2. Voter registration should take place every year and voters should stay on the register for five years.

3. Photographic and non-photographic forms of personal identification should be acceptable. These should include:

- Irish, British and European passports;
- Irish, British and European driving licences including provisional driving licences;
- Government agency issued benefit books;
- Translink Senior Travel passes;
- Student and Trades Union membership cards;

- Marriage licence if married within the previous two years; and
- Official electoral photographic identification.

The Electoral Office should continue to provide mobile photographic booths across the north of Ireland to provide official electoral photographic identification.

4. Registration forms should be made widely available to the general public. They should be made available at Post Offices, Council Offices, libraries, advice centres, schools, colleges, universities and through political parties.

5. Electoral Courts should be abolished. The personal identifier requirements supplied on the registration form should be sufficient proof of identification and validation of an application.

6. Registration should be allowed up to seven days before polling day.

SUMMARY OF STATISTICS

Census Figures 2001 and the Register of Electors Shredding the Vote

16.5% of Electorate not registered to vote	
Eligible to Vote 2004	1,280,480
Registered to vote 2004	1,069,160
Shortfall 2004	211,320
Shortfall as a percentage of the eligible vote	16.5%

The Census 2001 and the Register of Electors

Census 2001 figures indicated the following:

— Eligible to vote at that time	1,233,753
— The number of young people to reach voting age Between 2001–04	104,727
— The sub-total of the above is	1,338,480
— Approximately 58,000 names have been removed from the register due to deaths between 2001–04	58,000
— New sub-total eligible to vote 2004	1,280,480
— Registered to vote 2004	1,069,160
— Shortfall as between those eligible to vote and those registered to vote	211,320

Register of Electors 2001–04

— November 2001	1,198,504
— September 2003	1,097,551
— February 2004	1,069,160

Shredding the Vote

The February 2004 Register of Electors shows a reduction of:

- 28,391 on the September 2003 Register
- 129,344 on the November 2001 Register
- 211,000 on the adjusted Census figures of 2001.

A pattern of annual reductions has been set in place by the new legislation.

Photographic Identification

- Photographic ID: In addition to the above 30,000 people were denied the right to vote in the 2nd Assembly Elections because of the photographic ID requirements.

“There are approximately 30,000 people who, if they turn out to vote, would not have the applicable ID.”

Seamus Magee, Head of the Electoral Commission 25 November 2003.

Righting An Undemocratic Wrong—background information

The democratic objective is to enable the maximum number of people to vote and to remove deliberate and other impediments to the exercise of the fundamental democratic right to vote. Towards this end Sinn Féin is proposing the following:

1. Voter Registration should take place every five years instead of the new arrangement, which requires voters to register every year or lose their right to vote.

In Britain a voter will stay on the Register of Electors for at least two years while in the rest of Ireland it is quite common for a voter to register only once in a lifetime. In both Britain and the rest of Ireland effective measures and processes are implemented annually to weed from the register

names of people who, for instance, have died or left the jurisdiction, validate names currently on the register and to update the register with first time voters and others new to the register without resort to an annual register which removes voters who have not made application.

2. Household Registration should replace the new Individual Registration scheme. This would require amending legislation.

Household registration is the proven effective norm in England while in the rest of Ireland a process of continuous registration is the norm. The single application form used in both jurisdictions for all voters in a household also provides an effective trawl for first time voters and others who are proven to be particularly disadvantaged by the new scheme. This requires young people who have reached voting age to personally take the initiative to be included on the Register of Electors. The household register helps ensure that first time voters, the elderly, disabled or those with a learning disability do not fall through the net.

3. Photographic and non-photographic forms of personal identification should be acceptable. These should include:

- Irish, British and European passports.
- Irish, British and European driving licences including provisional driving licences.
- The range of government agency issued benefit books.
- Translink Senior Travelpasses.
- Student and Trades Union membership cards.
- Marriage license if married within the previous two years.
- Electoral ID Cards.

The Electoral Office should continue to provide mobile photographic booths across the north of Ireland to facilitate the provision official Electoral Identity cards.

In the rest of Ireland and Britain there is no statutory, universal requirement on voters to produce identification of any sort at polling stations on election day. An unquantifiable but significant number of voters in the north of Ireland were refused their right to vote at the last election because they could not comply with this regulation. This requirement discriminates again against a wide spectrum of the electorate including the young and the elderly, people with learning disabilities and people from areas of social deprivation. In the days preceding the November 2003 elections to the Assembly in the north of Ireland Séamus Magee, head of the Electoral Commission publicly stated that up to 30,000 would be denied their right to vote because of photographic ID requirements if they turned up at election stations.

4. Registration forms should be made widely available to the general public. They should be made available on-line and at Post Offices, Council offices, libraries, advice centres, schools, colleges, universities and through political parties.

The 2001 Census figures indicate that 1,280,480 people would be eligible to vote by 2004. The Electoral Office canvassed only 1,204,548 people in compiling the 2002 register under the new regulations. This further reduced to 1,098,301 individuals canvassed for the February '04 register. That is roughly the equivalent of the number of people on the September '03 register. This approach strongly suggests that we will see an annual reduction in the number of people registered to vote.

That is 182,189 individuals indicated as eligible to vote by the 2001 Census were not canvassed for the register of February '04 and did not receive an application form to register to vote.

5. Electoral courts should be abolished. The personal identifier requirements supplied in the registration form should be sufficient proof of identification and validation of an application.

Electoral courts exist in the rest of Ireland and in Britain but are rarely used. Indeed their use should be either random or where clear cause for challenge is present. However, their use in the north of Ireland, in relative terms, is extensive.* see below

The two-way function is for electors to challenge the absence of their name from the register and for the Electoral Office to challenge an application. The reality, in practice, is that electors who challenge the Electoral Office are more likely to turn up at an Electoral Court than electors whose application has been challenged by the Electoral Office. The latter simply do not want the inconvenience. This is a matter of individual commitment.

Moreover, the requirement that electors applying to get enrolled on the register furnish personal identifiers such as date of birth and national insurance number on their application form should be sufficient proof of identification and validation of an application. Instead of facilitating enrolment on the register the use of Electoral Courts and Personal Identification is being used as a "belt and braces" approach to keeping electors off the register.

* On 14 February 2003 Sinn Féin local government Councillor Elena Martin forwarded by recorded delivery, 32 late applications to be enrolled on the Register of Electors to the Electoral Office in Banbridge, County Down. She attached a cover letter in her capacity as a publicly elected

Sinn Féin representative. 28 of the 32 applicants were called before an Electoral Court. Later that month, Councillor Martin forwarded, in the same manner, an additional 18 applications. 10 of those 18 applicants were called before an Election Court.

6. Registration should be allowed up to seven days before polling day.

Current practice could mean that an application to get on the Register of Electors would have to be submitted as long as 10 weeks in advance of an election and no shorter than six weeks in advance of an election.

For instance, the 26 November 2003 Assembly elections in the north of Ireland were contested on the register published in September 2003. The 16 June 2004 European elections will be fought on the register published in early May. There is no good practical reason for not issuing a supplementary register later than these publication dates to accord voters their democratic right.

- 211, 000 voters are not on the Register of Electors.
- This represents 16.5% of the overall electorate.
- An additional 30,000 voters could not vote at the last election because they did not have prescribed photographic identification.
- The law and practices which give rise to this denial of a fundamental democratic right are applied exclusively to the north of Ireland.
- Practices in the rest of Ireland and Britain seek to facilitate the electorate and not to erect barriers to the exercise of a democratic right.

19 April 2004

APPENDIX 3

Memorandum submitted by the Socialist Democratic Labour Party

REGISTRATION

1. The SDLP welcomes the opportunity to present evidence on the new electoral registration process in Northern Ireland and the conduct of the 2003 Assembly Elections.

2. The SDLP met with the Electoral Commission, on 12 March 2004, as part of their review of the Electoral Fraud Act.

3. The SDLP campaigned for decades for legislation to combat electoral fraud.

4. The SDLP supported the introduction of the Electoral Fraud Act to Northern Ireland.

At the time SDLP Justice Spokesperson Alex Attwood MLA, said:

“It is essential that the right to vote is protected and abuse of that right suppressed. These new measures need to be carefully monitored to ensure that they achieve both these objectives.”

5. The SDLP welcomes the fact that research undertaken by the Electoral Commission shows that there is a high level of public support for the new electoral fraud legislation.

“72% of a representative sample of the Northern Ireland population either strongly agreed or tended to agree that the new system would reduce electoral fraud.”¹

6. The SDLP believes that the Assembly Elections in November 2003 were probably the cleanest and fairest elections ever in Northern Ireland.

REGISTRATION

7. The SDLP is concerned that the number of people registered to vote dropped in both December 2002 and February 2004.

8. The SDLP notes that the February 2004 Register of Electors shows a reduction of 28,391 on the September 2003 Register.²

9. The SDLP notes that in respect of the last household register in 2001 the Electoral Commission concluded that the registration rate of “95.5% was likely to have been an overestimate of the actual number of eligible persons registered to vote.”³

Indeed, the first register produced under the individual registration system (December 2002) suggests that the numbers on the register as a proportion of the 18+ population was approximately 86%.

¹ The Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002: An assessment of its first year in operation The Electoral Commission.

² Figures from the NI Electoral Office.

³ The Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002: An assessment of its first year in operation The Electoral Commission.

10. In the 2003 Assembly Elections, the SDLP public representatives and members encountered a number of difficulties with the new registration process in advance of the 2003 Assembly Elections. The Party encountered people from areas of acute need, elderly persons and people with disabilities who were not on the register.

11. In the polling station, on the day of the election, voters were confused over the September 2002 and September 2003 registration date.

12. The SDLP continues to have deep concerns that the new registration process tended to have an adverse impact on disadvantaged, marginalised and hard-to-reach groups. Young people and students, people with learning disabilities and other forms of disability, and those living in areas of high social deprivation were all less likely to be registered.

13. Both the Electoral Commission and Electoral office have taken steps to promote and advertise the registration process. These efforts need to be intensified.

14. The SDLP also believes it is necessary to review and modernise the legislation to ensure the right to vote is protected and abuse of that is suppressed.

15. The SDLP would support a change to the legislation to allow for the full individual registration process to be conducted once every two or three years.

This would enable the Electoral Office to concentrate their resources and time in targeting those people, who are not on the register, especially those from disadvantaged communities.

16. The SDLP also suggests that the cycle for the annual canvass does not have to be uniform. The Electoral Office may wish to concentrate their resources by conducting an annual canvass in a number of constituencies in one year and in other constituencies in other years, especially if there is a pattern of under-registration in certain constituencies.

17. Individuals should be made aware that their credit rating might be affected if their name is not on the electoral register.

18. The SDLP would support any measures that would ensure registration forms were more widely available.

ROLLING REGISTRATION

19. The SDLP received a number of complaints about the necessity of calling people to electoral court hearings who have applied under rolling registration. The question arises about the need for electoral court hearings if the personal identifiers provide a check against electoral fraud.

20. The SDLP would support a review of the electoral court procedure under rolling registration.

21. The SDLP suggests that the Chief Electoral Officer should retain a reserved authority, which will allow him the powers to investigate rolling registration applications if he is concerned about a pattern developing.

ELECTORAL IDENTIFICATION

22. Many constituencies reported that there were problems with ID cards. Voters indicated that although they had submitted their details for ID cards, they had not received their cards in time for the Election.

23. Voters believed the ID process was too slow.

24. Some voters enquired why the blue pass for disabled people and blind pass were not valid forms of identification.

25. The SDLP believes that continued efforts should be made to maximise awareness of the identification requirements. The Electoral Commission should consider running a road show in schools and colleges.

ELECTION DAY—POLLING STATIONS

26. There were a number of complaints from constituencies about personation agents taking information out of the polling stations or using mobile phones to text information. The SDLP believes that the presiding officers should ensure that no information is taken from the polling stations. The use of mobile phones should be prohibited.

Case Study 1

In the Castlewellan polling station, in South Down, there were concerns that SF polling clerks were removing information from the polling station. After concerns were expressed material was seized and held.

The SDLP made a formal complaint to the Electoral Office on 8 December 2003. The EO stated on 2 January 2004 that no formal complaint had been made against the polling agent.

The EO admitted there had been several incidents on the day of the election and stated “The Senior Presiding Officer at that polling station was threatened and intimidated to such an extent that she has been taking extra personal safety precautions ever since”

27. There were complaints from political representatives and voters that canvassers were in too close proximity to the polling station. Voters felt intimidated by the numbers of people canvassing outside polling station.

28. The SDLP believes that political parties should be prohibited from canvassing within 100 yards of a polling station.

29. The staff working in polling stations should be provided with a comprehensive training programme.

LOCATION OF POLLING STATIONS

30. A number of constituencies expressed concern that polling stations did not cater for the disabled.

31. There were also concerns about the location of polling stations at some sectarian interfaces. The Electoral Office should afford more time for parties to consider the location of polling stations.

PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

32. The SDLP is concerned about the issue of access raised by the Disability Action report into the 2003 Assembly Elections.⁴

33. The SDLP notes that Mencap has highlighted several potential barriers to the voting process for people with a learning disability.

34. There is a lack of knowledge by people with a learning disability about their right to vote.

35. There is little assistance given to parents/carers to help them making a decision about their charge's competence to vote. The letter, which the area electoral officer sends to parents/carers of people with learning difficulty, to follow up on the declaration in the registration form, is also quite negative.

36. There should be a specific promotional campaign targeted at people with a learning disability and their families and carers.

37. People with a learning disability may also require additional assistance to cast their votes.

38. There is a lack of accessible transport to and from polling stations creates an additional barrier.

POLICING THE ELECTION

39. There were serious concerns about the decision by the police to deploy only mobile units outside polling stations. The SDLP believe that the police should be located at each polling station.

THE COUNT

40. A number of constituencies complained that the count was too slow.

41. There were complaints that there were no tallies of the postal ballot papers permitted at the Dromore count in South Down.

42. Candidates and election agents were not allowed to inspect the “spoiled votes” at the Dromore count.

43. A number of constituencies said there was inadequate space for the appointed representatives, candidates, press and electoral officials at the count centres

44. Candidates expressed concern that there was no communication system to call all candidates to the meeting room with officials. As a result, in certain count centres, declarations were not made in the presence of all the relevant candidates.

ELECTORAL OFFICE

45. There is a concern that on occasions that some staff in the Electoral Office take a confrontational approach to their dealings with political parties. Programmes should be developed to improve understanding of the respective roles and functions of both the Electoral Commission the Electoral Office and political parties.

⁴ Disability Action NI was commissioned by the Electoral Commission to undertake an access audit.

46. The SDLP is also concerned that the Northern Ireland Office is considering reducing the level of financial support to the Electoral Office. The SDLP believes the Electoral Office need a stable level of financial support to meet the additional requirements of the Electoral Office.

March 2004

APPENDIX 4

Memorandum submitted by Mencap in Northern Ireland

RESPONSE TO THE NORTHERN IRELAND AFFAIRS COMMITTEE REQUEST FOR WRITTEN INFORMATION ON ELECTORAL REGISTRATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND

ABOUT MENCAP IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Mencap is a voluntary organisation which works with people with a learning disability and their families. We provide information and advice as well as a range of direct services for people with a learning disability and their families and carers. We support a membership network of over 70 local groups and Clubs. We believe that people with a learning disability should have an equal right to choice, opportunity and respect. We believe that support for families and carers is essential to making these rights a reality.

OUR COMMENTS

Mencap in Northern Ireland welcome the opportunity to comment on Electoral Registration in Northern Ireland following the implementation of the Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002.

Mencap welcomes the comments of the Electoral Commission in Section 7.8 “People with Learning Disabilities” of the “The Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002: An assessment of its first year in operation.” We agree with the Commission’s finding that

“The process of individual registration may inadvertently have impacted on people with learning disabilities, thus effectively disenfranchising hundreds of people who in the past may have voted.”

THE POINTS WE WOULD MAKE ARE AS FOLLOWS

1. Some people with a learning disability are able to understand and complete voter registration forms themselves—many are not. They depend upon parents/carers filling in forms on their behalf. The existing scheme means that parents or carers of people with a learning disability are faced with making a decision about the competence of the individual concerned on an annual basis.

There is little assistance or guidance given to parents/carers on the issue. The Commission’s guidance on access to the voting process for people with a learning difficulty is problematic. In particular, there are references within the text to the common law terms “idiot” and “lunatic”. The text says:

“The eligibility of someone who has a profound learning disability might, however, in certain cases be called into question because under the common law so called ‘idiots’ cannot vote. So-called ‘Lunatics’ on the other hand can vote . . .”

Mencap find the use of these terms objectionable and believe that the guidance should be changed to clarify the position of people with a learning disability in relation to electoral registration.

2. The letter sent by the Electoral Office is also quite negative. The letter which the area electoral officer sends to parents/carers of people with learning difficulty, once the registration form has been signed by another person, can be read as if to emphasise the denial of registration. After a pre-ambule, the letter continues with—“Under current legislation we are unable to include certain people on the Register of Electors.”

As we stated in our response to the Commission on the impact of the Act, the focus on individuals who should not be included on the Register of Electors may reinforce the view that people with a learning disability are not entitled to vote.

Mencap believes that the inclusion of a more positive and pro-active text in the letter would increase the number of people with a learning disability who register to vote.

3. Proof of Identification has also been raised as an issue with regard to the impact of the Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act. Mencap believes that identification issues impact harshly on people with a learning disability. People with learning difficulty are less likely to drive or hold a passport than the general population.

This means that more people with a learning disability are dependent upon acquiring an electoral identification card. This, in itself, is a complex process which adds to the disincentive for people with a learning disability to register.

4. Mencap would suggest that a specific promotional campaign targeted at people with a learning disability, their families and carers would be of great value. It is important that the perception that people with a learning disability do not have a right to vote be challenged.

When voting, individuals need only to make a choice, there is no requirement to be literate or to be conversant with party political literature or provide a rational justification for that choice.

APPENDIX 5

Extract from a letter from the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to the Chairman of the Committee

Turning to the Committee's concerns about the issue of Electoral ID cards, getting people registered etc, the position is as follows. As of 1 September (the cut-off day for registering to vote for the Assembly election) the number of people registered to vote stood at 1,097,551. This compares 1,088,947 who were registered as of 1 March 2003. There has been a drop in numbers from the pre-Electoral Fraud Act Register (which totalled 1,204,547) but this can be largely accounted for by the fact that it is usual for 10–15% of those registered not to re-register the following year. Previously this has been disguised because voters were given a year's grace before having their names removed from the register. This does not happen now that individual registration has been introduced under the Electoral Fraud Act 2002.

Turning to the Electoral Identity Card, since 25 March 2003 approximately 54,000 cards have been issued. The total number of cards issued as at 17 November was 82,157. The card, one of the four specified documents of which one is needed to be presented at the polling station in order to vote, has been issued free of charge to all those who have applied for it.

More generally, measures that were taken to highlight the need for individual registration and, if necessary, to apply for the card included:

- A high profile TV and radio advertising campaign;
- The Chief Electoral Officer writing to MPs, MLAs and individuals who indicated they needed a card; and
- The setting up of mobile Electoral Identity Card application centres.

10 December 2003
