



House of Commons  
Northern Ireland Affairs  
Committee

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**Electoral Registration  
in Northern Ireland:  
Government Response  
to the Committee's  
First Report of Session  
2004–05**

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**Second Special Report of Session  
2004–05**

*Ordered by The House of Commons  
to be printed date 9 March 2005*

## 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).

### Current membership

Mr Michael Mates, MP (*Conservative, East Hampshire*) (Chairman)  
Mr Adrian Bailey, MP (*Labour / Co-operative, West Bromwich West*)  
Mr Roy Beggs, MP (*Ulster Unionist Party, East Antrim*)  
Mr Tony Clarke, MP (*Labour, Northampton South*)  
Mr Iain Luke, MP (*Labour, Dundee East*) (Added 20 October 2003)  
Mr Eddie McGrady, MP (*Socialist Democratic Labour Party, South Down*)  
Mr Stephen Pound, MP (*Labour, Ealing North*)  
Mr Gregory Campbell, MP (*Democratic Unionist Party, East Londonderry*)  
Rev Martin Smyth, MP (*Ulster Unionist Party, Belfast South*)  
Mr Hugo Swire, MP (*Conservative, East Devon*)  
Mr Mark Tami, MP (*Labour, Alyn & Deeside*)  
Mr Bill Tynan, MP (*Labour, Hamilton South*)

### Powers

The committee is one of the departmental select committees, the powers of which are set out in House of Commons Standing Orders, principally in SO No 152. These are available on the Internet via [www.parliament.uk](http://www.parliament.uk).

### Publications

The Reports and evidence of the Committee are published by The Stationery Office by Order of the House. All publications of the Committee (including press notices) are on the Internet at :

[www.parliament.uk/parliamentary\\_committees/northern\\_ireland\\_affairs.cfm](http://www.parliament.uk/parliamentary_committees/northern_ireland_affairs.cfm)

A list of Reports of the Committee in the present Parliament is at the back of this volume.

### Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are Dr John Patterson (Clerk), Hugh Farren (Attached Clerk), Dr Aileen O'Neill (Committee Specialist), Tony Catinella (Committee Assistant), Chryssa Poupard (Secretary).

### Contacts

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## Second Special Report

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The Committee published its First Report of Session 200405 on 15 December 2004. The response from the Northern Ireland Office was received in the form of a Memorandum on 3 March 2005. The response from Seamus Magee, Head of Office Northern Ireland, The Electoral Commission, was received in the form of a Memorandum dated 2 March 2005. The response from Denis Stanley, Chief Electoral Officer, The Electoral Office for Northern Ireland, was received in the form of a Memorandum dated 12 January 2005. The responses from the Northern Ireland Office, The Electoral Commission and the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland are published as appendices to this report.

## Appendix 1

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### **NORTHERN IRELAND OFFICE RESPONSE**

The Government welcomes the report by the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee on Electoral Registration in Northern Ireland. The Government shares the Committee's view that as many eligible electors as possible should participate in the democratic process. It also agrees with the Committee that this aim of a comprehensive register must proceed hand in hand with measures to ensure that it is also as accurate as possible.

Prior to the measures put in place by the Electoral Fraud Act 2002, the integrity of the electoral process in Northern Ireland was badly damaged by allegations that democracy was being undermined by fraud, and in particular an inflated electoral register. The anti-fraud measures the Government put in place in that Act were central to re-establishing the integrity of the electoral process in Northern Ireland. The Government believes that those measures have been successful in restoring confidence in the electoral process as evidenced by the views of the public reported by the Electoral Commission in its report on the implementation of the Electoral Fraud Act.

However, as the Committee itself notes, an unfortunate feature of electoral registration in the period since the 2002 Act has been a steady decline in the numbers of electors registering. The Government expected some fall in the numbers registered following the switch from household registration to individual registration. However, the continued downward drift in numbers registered at each annual canvass since the new measures were introduced is a matter for real concern.

In light of these concerns the Government has recently indicated that it is minded to reform the registration arrangements in a way which, while preserving the integrity and accuracy of the register, can raise the numbers registered, particularly among under-represented groups. As John Spellar said in his written statement to Parliament on 30 November 2004:

“The Government is determined to ensure that as many people as possible both secure and use their right to vote. Our goal is an electoral register that is both accurate and as comprehensive as possible. The Government is committed to moving away from the legal requirement for the register to be completely refreshed each year. This will reduce the

burden on the individual citizen. And it will allow resources to be redirected towards targeting those groups where rates of registration are low.”

The Government is in discussion with the Chief Electoral Officer about the shape of a new system which can marry the vastly improved accuracy of the current register with greater comprehensiveness. Views have also been invited from the Northern Ireland political parties.

These reforms will require significant legislative and administrative work to design and implement. Given that local elections will take place in Northern Ireland this May, the Government has brought forward the Electoral Registration (Northern Ireland) Act 2005 which received Royal Assent on the 25 February 2005. The Act puts in place a temporary arrangement whereby around 80,000 individuals who were registered last September but did not re-register during the annual canvass in the autumn of 2004 will be put back on to the register on 1 April in time to vote at those local elections. The Act also gives the Chief Electoral Officer the authority to carry forward those currently registered but who do not re-register in the annual canvass in the autumn of 2005. However, no individual may be “carried forward” in this way more than once; and the CEO’s power to do so expires following this year’s annual canvass. These steps, combined with careful scrutiny of applications for absent votes from the individuals put back on to the register, are designed to ensure that as many people as possible are eligible to vote at the local elections without compromise to the integrity of the register.

The Committee has made a number of specific recommendations in its Report addressed to Government, the Chief Electoral Officer and the Electoral Commission. This response explicitly addresses those recommendations directed wholly or in part at Government. The responses below follow the recommendations highlighted in bold in the main body of the text of the Committee’s report.

#### **Paragraph 10**

The Government welcomes the Committee’s conclusion that the measures in the Electoral Fraud Act have been successful in reducing both the perception among the electorate of fraud and the actual level of fraud. In particular, the incidents of reported fraud to the PSNI at polling stations in the 2003 Assembly elections and last year’s European Parliamentary elections were negligible. This was subsequently confirmed by the Electoral Commission. There was also a large fall in the number of absent vote applications in both elections which also suggests that the anti fraud measures have had a large impact in reducing fraud in this area. However, the Government is not complacent about fraud, and it will with the help of the Electoral Commission and Chief Electoral Officer, be closely monitoring developments at each future elections.

#### **Paragraph 19**

The Government shares the Committee’s concerns about the continuous decline in the number of people on the electoral register. There may be a number of reasons why this is happening, of which some – potentially including apathy, particular among younger people - are not necessarily peculiar to Northern Ireland. The Government is committed to addressing this decline in the numbers registered through reform of the system. But it will

be important too to take any additional measures necessary to tackle the other factors underlying non-registration. The Electoral Commission has already issued a report on the impact of the Electoral Fraud Act, and it continues to monitor its impact closely. The Government is working closely with the Commission, and it has recently commissioned it to undertake some work on identifying the specific reasons why so many individuals are not registering.

### **Paragraphs 26/27**

The Government shares the concerns of the Committee and welcomes the work being carried out by both the Electoral Commission and the Chief Electoral Officer in reaching out to schools and colleges. Funding for the EONI is addressed below.

However, outreach programmes are a key responsibility of the Electoral Commission

For its part, the Government would be happy to see schools and Further Education Colleges take a more active role to encourage young people to engage in the electoral process, and will reflect on the points the Committee has made in this area.

### **Paragraph 36**

The Government accepts that more work needs to be done to ensure that some groups of people in society are better represented on the Register: however, direct responsibility for this lies with the Electoral Commission and the Chief Electoral Officer. The Government will reflect on measures that might be put in place to try and alleviate this problem as part of any new registration arrangements. The question of funding is addressed below.

### **Paragraphs 42, 43, 44, 45, 46**

The Government agrees that an electoral registration system has to balance inclusiveness with accuracy. John Spellar's statement to Parliament of 30 November 2004 sets out in detail the Government's approach to delivering this goal.

The Government has reintroduced the carry forward on a temporary basis because the Chief Electoral Officer now has the information required through checking each individual's personal identifiers to deal with fraudulent applications. Therefore, the Government believes that the measures contained in the Electoral Registration (Northern Ireland) Act will have a significant impact in increasing the numbers on the electoral register to over 90% of the eligible population.

### **Paragraph 48**

The Government agrees that it is a major cause of concern that so many young people are opting out of the political process, and it has encouraged the Chief Electoral Officer to play a more active role in addressing this problem. The Government will reflect on measures that might be put in place to try and alleviate this problem as part of any new registration arrangements.

**Paragraph 49**

The Government agrees that the shift to individual registration was essential to eliminate fraudulent or inaccurate entries from the register. Whilst it is entirely possible that individual registration is a contributory factor to the continuing low levels of registration in certain population groups, in the interests of accuracy and preventing fraud the Government intends that any new registration system in Northern Ireland will be based on individual registration.

**Paragraph 61**

The Government welcomes the Committee's view that the introduction of photographic identification at polling stations was a justified step. It is the Government's view that this measure has been responsible for virtually eliminating personation at polling stations, and has therefore been an important contributor to restored confidence among the public in the electoral process.

The Government regrets that a number of individuals did not have the appropriate identification at recent elections in Northern Ireland. The Electoral Commission ran high profile publicity campaigns on the need for appropriate identification, and the Electoral Office operated mobile stations throughout the Province in the run-up to both the Assembly and European elections. Both organisations will be actively promoting the Electoral Identity Card in the run-up to the local elections in May. Furthermore, there has been a significant decline in the number of people turning up at polling stations unable to vote because of the lack of photographic identification.

**Paragraph 63**

The Assembly elections in 2003 were held under exceptional circumstances. Whilst the Government accepts that the timing of the election placed significant demands on the Electoral Office, it did put in place a number of measures, including moving the date of publication of the new register to 1 February 2004 from 1 December 2003, to alleviate the burden on the Chief Electoral Officer and his staff. The Government does not intend to legislate to exclude the possibility that a future election might necessitate the postponement of a canvass; however, the Government's view is that the particular circumstances are unlikely to arise again, not least given the intention to move away from an annual canvass.

**Paragraph 70**

The Government does not accept that it has underfunded the Electoral Office of Northern Ireland in relation to the new pressures that have arisen as a result of the implementation of the Electoral Fraud Act. Over the last four years, funding to the Electoral Office has risen significantly and the Department has met all of its funding requirements. The Electoral Office, in common with other areas of the public sector, is required to allocate its resources as efficiently and effectively as possible. The Department works closely with the Chief Electoral Officer to ensure that this requirement is met.

However, the Government notes the Committee's recommendation that it should review the system through which the Electoral Office is currently funded. Over the coming

months the funding of the Electoral Office will form part of discussions on future registration arrangements and the future status of the Electoral Office.

### **Paragraphs 74 and 75**

The Government agrees that the recent and prospective changes to the electoral registration system in Northern Ireland present a challenge to all of those responsible for the administration of the electoral process in the Province. And it is important that the Electoral Commission and Electoral Office are seen to be co-operating effectively in all areas. Government too has responsibilities in this area, which it takes seriously.

The Northern Ireland Office encourages co-operation and officials meet with staff from both the Electoral Commission and Electoral Office on a regular basis. The three organisations will be signing a Memorandum of Understanding before Easter which will set out clearly roles and responsibilities and avenues for closer working.

## Appendix 2

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### THE ELECTORAL COMMISSION RESPONSE

#### *Summary*

**Page 3, para 6: 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.**

The Commission has been engaged in a number of initiatives aimed at increasing levels of registration among groups currently under-represented on the register, particularly young people. During the annual canvass in 2004 the Commission's Outreach team embarked on a Northern Ireland-wide tour of all 22 college and university campuses in an effort to register students and provide them with the opportunity to obtain an electoral identity card. Over 1,100 young people registered and applied for the card over a six-week period.

In September 2004 the Commission facilitated a stakeholder seminar to consider how levels of electoral registration could be increased among marginal and hard to reach groups. Representatives from the statutory, voluntary and community sectors attended, including the main churches. A number of initiatives were put forward, several of which were taken forward by The Electoral Commission and the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland (EONI). We aim to build on these initiatives in the years ahead.

As part of the Commission's public awareness campaign to promote the annual canvass in 2004 a targeted approach was adopted with regard to areas with lower registration rates. Advertisements were placed in over 20 local newspapers covering Belfast, East Antrim, East Londonderry, Foyle, Lagan Valley, North Down, South Antrim, West Tyrone and South Tyrone. Advertisements were also placed in selected disability titles.

During the 2004 annual canvass over 65,000 leaflets containing information on how to register were distributed to the DVLNI, the Housing Executive, the five education and library boards, all 26 district councils and all colleges and universities. In addition, over 1,000 posters carrying the registration message were distributed to hospitals throughout Northern Ireland.

The Commission believes that this targeted approach will continue to prove beneficial in reaching under-represented groups. At present, the Commission has outsourced three research projects focusing on groups within society who are less likely to be registered to vote – young people, members of black and minority ethnic communities and those living in communal establishments. The findings from these projects will provide a framework to more effectively target and encourage these groups to register to vote.

**Page 3, para 10: 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 two organisations run competing services.**

The Commission has a remit to raise awareness of electoral matters. As part of this we remit provide a freephone helpline during the annual canvass period and in the lead-up to elections. Since its establishment in 2002 the helpline has handled approximately 50,000 calls ranging from requests for electoral registration forms, ID application forms and general information based on a set of frequently asked questions approved by the EONI. Helpline staff have no access to the electoral register and are not in a position to confirm whether or not a person's name is included on the register. As a result callers with such queries are advised to contact the EONI advice line. In order to provide the public with a seamless service the Commission believes that a single point of contact for all enquiries is preferable.

**Page 4, para 10: 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.**

Although the Commission has a duty to foster confidence in the democratic process, where we identify flaws in the voting and registration systems, we will comment on them. We have done this with regards to individual registration in our report on the Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002 and in subsequent registration research updates. The Commission continues to work closely with the EONI to raise awareness of individual registration and the requirements for photographic identification at polling stations.

Public opinion research undertaken on behalf of the Commission has shown that the introduction of the Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002 has significantly increased levels of confidence in the democratic process among members of the public, political parties and election staff. Awareness of individual registration remains high, with 84% of a representative sample of the Northern Ireland population as of October 2004 aware of the need to complete a registration form every year.

**Page 9, paragraph 15: 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 (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.**

The drawback to comparing registers compiled under the old system of household registration and those compiled since the introduction of individual registration is that such comparisons are not 'like-for-like'. The abolition of the carry forward facility means that any such comparisons are inevitably skewed. It is more beneficial to compare registers compiled since the inception of individual registration. This forms the basis of the work currently being carried out on behalf of the Commission by PricewaterhouseCoopers which assesses the impact of individual registration on registration rates. The Commission will be publishing an update based on the key findings of the second PWC report in April 2005 with a third report to follow in summer 2005.

**Page 11, paragraph 19: 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.**

In Northern Ireland the Chief Electoral Officer is responsible for all operational matters in respect of registration and has put forward a number of options to Government to arrest the decline in registration. As a result of representations made by the EONI the Government has committed itself to the abolition of the annual canvass and the reinstatement of the carry forward for a limited period in an effort to boost registration levels. The Commission expects to be consulted on what alternative arrangements are planned to replace the annual canvass.

**Page 13, paragraph 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.**

The Commission's Outreach team in Northern Ireland has been actively engaged with the 17-24 age group. Recently we worked closely with the Falls Community Council in a community registration week aimed at increasing levels of registration in North and West Belfast. The programme covered Protestant and Catholic schools, shopping centres and community facilities. This initiative received widespread publicity in the local media.

The Commission is working with the Institute for Conflict Research and PricewaterhouseCoopers in a major research project focusing on young people and their participation in the democratic process. Among the issues being addressed is electoral registration.

**Page 14, paragraph 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 social deprivation than in other areas, therefore partially offsetting the lower levels of registration achieved in annual canvasses in these areas.**

Research conducted on behalf of the Commission identified a close correlation between the number of names added to the register during rolling registration and proximity to an election – in other words a looming election had the effect of increasing numbers on the register. This effect was more pronounced in some areas compared to others, reflecting the work of some political parties in encouraging potential supporters onto the register. This phenomenon tends to be stronger in areas suffering from higher levels of social deprivation and offsets the negative impact that the annual canvass has in such areas. The research report concluded that social deprivation is likely to be a more significant factor in years where no elections are planned and parties have less incentive to register potential supporters.

**Page 14, paragraph 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.**

In September 2004 the Commission facilitated a stakeholder seminar to consider how levels of electoral registration could be increased among marginal and hard to reach groups. Representatives from the voluntary and statutory sectors attended including the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, Rate Collection Agency, Social Security Agency, Simon Community and the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action. All those attending agreed to work with the Commission and the EONI in promoting electoral registration.

The Commission is also currently engaged in research to assess the uptake of individual registration among people living in communal establishments such as nursing homes, sheltered accommodation and long stay hospitals. The Commission had previously identified this group as being less likely to register to vote and committed to undertake detailed research that will inform the most productive way of maximising registration rates in communal establishments.

**Page 16, paragraph 39: 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 register. 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 next.**

This appears to imply that the register decreases by approximately 10% after each annual canvass, whereas the 10% decline occurred after the abolition of the carry forward and was represented only in the December 2002 register. It does not manifest itself as a year-on-year decrease. Again, the Commission would caution against making direct comparisons between registers compiled under the old system of household registration and the new system of individual registration.

**Page 18, paragraph 45: We are puzzled that the views of the Electoral Commission and the Electoral Office for 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.**

The Commission is concerned that simply reinstating eligible voters who have failed to register undermines the system of individual registration and could potentially result in confusion as to who is registered and who is not at any given point. The Commission is on record as saying that individual registration has resulted in the creation of a robust and accurate register and the reintroduction of the carry forward may in the longer term result in a more unreliable register. The Commission favours addressing under-registration by targeting and working directly with marginalized and hard to reach groups.

Following the enactment of recent legislation reinstating the carry forward for a limited period of time the Commission will monitor the impact of this legislation on the electoral register.

**Page 18, paragraph 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.**

To coincide with the introduction of individual registration in 2002, the Commission undertook an extensive public awareness campaign explaining the new registration process. Similar campaigns have been conducted before each annual canvass to reinforce the message that people are required to register individually on an annual basis. As a result, awareness of individual registration has been consistently high. The most recent tracking research carried out for the Commission in October 2004 showed that 84% of a representative sample of the Northern Ireland population was aware that each person had to fill in an individual registration form. We intend conducting further research as to the reasons why people fail to register and the findings will inform our future campaigns.

**Page 20, paragraph 55: 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.**

We acknowledge the Committee's recognition of our work in informing and educating the public in Northern Ireland. However, we are conscious of the fact that advertising can only do so much in terms of getting delivering key messages and that a more targeted approach is necessary to reach those groups currently under-represented on the electoral register. Accordingly, the Commission liaises with a range of statutory, voluntary, charitable and religious organisations in a coordinated effort to increase awareness of registration.

Research undertaken for the Commission's report on the Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002 identified members of minority ethnic communities as being less likely to register and vote in Northern Ireland. As a result, we have commissioned research to investigate this matter further with a view to increasing levels of registration.

**Page 24, paragraph 73: 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. 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.'**

There is now a much more coordinated approach between the Commission and the EONI in terms of public awareness. The respective role of each organisation is clearly defined with the Commission taking the lead responsibility for raising public awareness of electoral

matters in accordance with Section 13 of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000.

Engagement with young people has also been enhanced through our Outreach programme.

**Page 24, paragraph 74: 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, focused cooperation if public confidence is to be won for the new arrangements.**

Over the last two years the Commission has established good working relationships with the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland. Tripartite meetings are held on a regular basis with representatives from the Commission, the EONI and the Northern Ireland Office. This forum has been particularly successful in ensuring a coordinated approach is adopted to electoral matters for the benefit of the electorate. One recent example occurred during the annual canvass in 2004 when the Commission and the EONI undertook a joint tour of college campuses promoting both registration and the electoral identity cards. The Commission will continue to work collaboratively with the EONI for the benefit of the electorate.

**Page 25, paragraph 75: 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 cooperation.**

The Commission recognises the need for a coordinated approach with the EONI and believes that levels of cooperation have increased significantly in the last two years, as evidenced by recent joint activity in respect of the 2004 canvass. The Commission has a statutory duty to report on the administration of elections and to raise awareness of the registration and voting systems but has no remit for electoral administration in Northern Ireland. This is the responsibility of the Chief Electoral officer under the Electoral Law (Northern Ireland) Act 1962. The Commission is committed to working collaboratively with the Chief Electoral Officer for the benefit of the electorate in Northern Ireland.

## Appendix 3

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### THE ELECTORAL OFFICE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND RESPONSE

Further to the Report of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee on Electoral Registration in Northern Ireland, published on 15 December, the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland (EONI) would want to make the following comments. For the sake of clarity the same numbering system is used as in the Report.

**Paragraph 6, line 19** - It is incorrect to say that a ballot paper may be marked in some way; rather, where the Presiding Officer is not satisfied as to the identity of the elector, a normal ballot paper cannot be issued and a tendered ballot paper will be offered.

**Paragraph 26** - The Electoral Office would be very keen to extend the outreach programme in the way recommended and seeks the support of the Committee in doing so.

**Paragraph 27** - The Electoral Office would be glad to see legislation enacted which placed a responsibility on adults in households to ensure that 17 year olds are entered on the Register.

**Paragraph 35** - Procedures were revised some time ago and a more sympathetically worded letter to attestors drawn up in conjunction with Mencap. Nevertheless, it is a fundamental principle that no one may take or use the vote of another and so it is necessary to continue to ensure that every elector on the Register is capable of reaching a decision about for whom they wish to vote and casting their vote personally.

**Paragraph 36** - Again, the Electoral Office would be very keen to extend the outreach programme in the way recommended and again seeks the support of the Committee in doing so.

**Paragraph 37, line 9** - The names of deceased electors have, for some years, been removed from the Register on the basis of information supplied weekly by the Northern Ireland Registrar General. Such deceased electors are removed each month under Rolling Registration.

**Paragraph 38** - The Electoral Office believes that prior to the implementation of individual registration under the 2002 Act the Northern Ireland Register contained about 85% of those legitimately eligible, plus a further 10% duplicate and “phantom” names. The present figure of 85% is therefore directly compatible with the previous level of legitimate registration. Furthermore, there must be considerable doubt about the 93% level of registration claimed in Great Britain as we are led to believe that many Registration Officers there have a policy of rarely removing names from their Registers. This, it has been suggested to us, is because the fees payable to Returning Officers at elections are based on the number of electors on Registers. The higher the number of electors, the higher the fees paid to Returning Officers in Great Britain. As a result, we are of the view that the level of legitimate registration in Great Britain could well be considerably below that in Northern Ireland.

**Paragraph 44** - This process has broadly been in use since 2002. Every elector on the previous Register who fails to submit a registration form during the autumn canvass is written to with a personalised letter in December explaining that their name does not appear on the new Register and inviting them to register under Rolling Registration. In addition, each household in Northern Ireland from which no registration form is received is contacted by letter to warn of the omission and offer potential electors the opportunity to register under Rolling Registration. The canvasser, when making house calls each autumn, is instructed to enquire if all eligible electors are being registered and to leave as many blank registration forms as might be needed for those whose names

were not on the previous Register. This, of course, includes households where no one has previously been registered.

**Paragraph 45** - The Electoral Office considers that it has examined the implication of re-introduction of the carry forward in some depth and is firmly of the view that it should be re-introduced as soon as practicable. It is unclear to the EONI why the Electoral Commission should support retention of the carry forward in Great Britain, while not supporting its re-introduction in Northern Ireland. In addition, the EONI has recently made major proposals to Ministers which, if adopted, would radically change the way in which registration is carried out in Northern Ireland by introducing a form of continuous carry forward.

**Paragraph 61** - Almost half of the electors who were unable to vote at the last election because of incorrect identity documents did present correct forms of identity, but, unfortunately, out-of-date versions. It is probable that such people were unaware of their documents being out-of-date and therefore probably would not have considered it necessary to apply for an Electoral Identity Card. In addition, a significant number returned later on polling day with valid forms of identity and indeed were able to cast their vote. Nevertheless, the Electoral Office is fully committed to the Committee's recommendation that the campaigns to remind voters of the requirement for photographic ID should be repeated regularly, particularly ahead of elections.

**Paragraph 63** - The Electoral Office advised Ministers that holding an Assembly election in the autumn canvass period was likely to cause considerable confusion for electors and difficulty for the EONI. Nevertheless, Parliament decided to enact legislation to suspend the canvass half way through and run an Assembly election on 26 November 2003. The resultant pressures on EONI staff were horrendous and it is a testament to their long hours of hard work, dedication and attention to detail that a successful election was run and a new Register subsequently published in February 2004. Unfortunately, it was also the case that many electors were confused about the Register used at this election and the relevance of the February publication date.

**Paragraph 70** - The Electoral Office strongly welcomes the Committee's recommendation that urgent consideration should be given to the funding mechanism and level of funding for the EONI. Without adequate resources the gains emanating from the 2002 Act may well be lost and the size of the Register may fall significantly.

**Paragraph 73** - The Electoral Office does not accept that its initiatives in any way competed with those of the Electoral Commission. The EONI has always provided a service to answer electors' queries in advance of elections and, on this occasion, the EONI sought only to address problems which had become apparent when the Commission's initiatives were being implemented. In the case of the Commission's Help Line, the commercial call centre used was unable to answer questions of a personal or non-routine nature and the call centre staff were instructed by the Commission to advise callers to contact the EONI Information Unit. The Unit simply could not handle the subsequent volumes of calls and the only expedient was to set up a specialist EONI advice line. This was done in the best interest of electors and was considered to be complementary to the Commission's Help Line. It is difficult to see what else might have been done in the circumstances.

A similar imperative prompted the Electoral Office to run a poster campaign in autumn 2002 targeting young people and first-time voters. The EONI was very concerned that individual registration would have an adverse affect on the number of young people registering. The Commission seemed unable to address the problem and in the end the EONI felt it necessary to act. Again this was considered to be complementary to the Commission's work.

**Paragraph 75** - Recognising the need for seamless co-operation between the Commission, the Northern Ireland Office and the Electoral Office, the EONI instigated some time ago the drawing up of a Memorandum of Agreement between all three organisations. It is expected that the Memorandum will be finalised shortly. In practical terms, staff from the three organisations meet very frequently and the EONI is an important producer of training and guidance materials in advance of all elections.