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The
Electoral
Commission

Election 2005: Northern Ireland

The combined UK Parliamentary
and local government elections



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The Electoral Commission

We are an independent body that was set up by the UK Parliament. Our mission is to foster public confidence and participation by promoting integrity, involvement and effectiveness in the democratic process.

Election 2005: Northern Ireland
The combined UK Parliamentary and local government elections

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Preface

This is our second statutory report on elections in Northern Ireland and covers the combined elections which took place in May 2005 to the UK Parliament and local councils.

The Electoral Commission is a relatively new organisation in Northern Ireland having only been established on a UK-wide basis in 2000. The Commission seeks to place the interests of the electorate at the centre of its thinking. Given the wider context in Northern Ireland politics, this means that systems for registration and voting should be underpinned by high levels of public confidence. Convenience, accessibility, secrecy, integrity, simplicity, high standards and lack of intimidation must be concepts that the electorate associates with the registration and voting process.

The introduction of individual registration as part of the provisions of the Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002 has instilled greater confidence in the democratic process in Northern Ireland. We believe that the Northern Ireland experience can provide several positive learning points for the remainder of the UK, and particularly at this juncture with the recent introduction of the Electoral Administration Bill to the UK Parliament.

The report brings together information from a wide range of sources dealing with various aspects of the administration of these combined elections within Northern Ireland as well as dealing with other matters such as media coverage and the views of the electorate. Among several themes highlighted in the report, there are three which deserve special mention. These are participation, confidence and standards in electoral administration.

There is a continuing trend of fewer people voting in each successive election since 1998. This may be partially explained by continuing

uncertainty in relation to devolved institutions and no clear link between the act of voting and outcomes in the minds of voters. What should be of great concern to all those having an interest in the democratic process are clear indicators showing that young people are increasingly becoming disengaged. This needs a sustained process of voter education which is targeted not only at the voters of today but those of tomorrow.

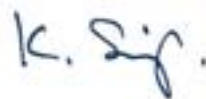
As mentioned above, the introduction of new electoral legislation in the Northern Ireland context has done much to instil a greater sense of confidence. However, it is important to recognise that such positive perceptions and opinions can easily be undermined by the corrosive cynicism highlighted by anecdotes which are told and retold. Voters in Northern Ireland should rightly expect that they can cast their votes in an atmosphere free from intimidation and in complete secrecy. The reported activities of a small minority of political activists, both inside and outside polling stations, should be a matter of concern to all those who recognise that political parties have a legitimate campaigning and observation role within the democratic process.

It is also important that electoral administration should be appropriately resourced and conducted to the highest standards. As with any other public service, the electorate should rightly expect transparency in the provision of information about these matters. The Commission has worked closely with the Chief Electoral Officer and the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland (EONI) during the past three years and particularly in relation to promoting the new system of voter

registration. We appreciate the assistance and information provided to the Commission during the completion of this report. We have made a number of recommendations which we believe will further assist the Chief Electoral Officer in his efforts to strengthen the accountability framework for electoral administration in Northern Ireland, whether undertaken directly by his staff or as a delegated function.

The Commission would also like to thank all those who have assisted us with information including members of the public, political parties, community groups, the media, research organisations, local councils and the Chief Electoral Officer and his staff.

On a personal note, I would also wish to record my appreciation for the hard work undertaken at the Commission's Northern Ireland office under the leadership of Séamus Magee and additional contributions made from elsewhere in the Commission.



Karamjit Singh CBE
Electoral Commissioner

Executive summary

This is The Electoral Commission's first report on a combined election in Northern Ireland and follows on from our report on the 2003 Northern Ireland Assembly election. We have a statutory duty to report on the UK Parliamentary election and have reported on the local government elections at the request of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

Background

Elections to the UK Parliament and Northern Ireland's 26 local councils were held on Thursday 5 May 2005. This was the second consecutive combined UK Parliamentary and local government election to be held in Northern Ireland, the first being held in June 2001. The May 2005 elections were the first UK Parliamentary and local government elections where the provisions of the Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002 applied.

The number of people eligible to vote at the May 2005 elections increased to an estimated 91% of the voting age population as a result of the Electoral Registration (Northern Ireland) Act 2005. This legislation reinstated onto the register just over 70,000 people who had failed to re-register during the autumn 2004 canvass, but whose names had appeared on the register on 1 September 2004.

Polling day was largely successful and incident free. Feedback from political parties, candidates, voters and poll staff revealed broad satisfaction at how polling day passed, although areas of concern were identified. These included confusion over the two different voting systems in use, the behaviour of some polling agents and queues developing at busy times. The main cause of complaint reported by Presiding Officers was from people who presented incorrect identification and who therefore could not be given a ballot paper.

The Electoral Office for Northern Ireland (EONI) advised us that 3,818 people turned up to vote without the correct identification, although almost half returned later in the day with one of the four

forms of prescribed photographic identification. The Pollen Shop, who conducted an access audit on our behalf, felt that unacceptable forms of ID were more likely to be possessed by people with disabilities, and that the process for obtaining an electoral identity card was not fully accessible.

For many years turnouts at elections in Northern Ireland were considered healthy, but at recent elections declining turnouts have given increasing cause for concern. Altogether, 93,644 fewer people in Northern Ireland voted at the UK Parliamentary election in 2005 than voted in 2001, representing a decrease of almost 12%. The figures for the local government elections were broadly similar. Published turnout at the UK Parliamentary election in Northern Ireland was 63.5%. However, when turnout is measured against the voting age population it falls to 57.4%. Our post-election public opinion survey found that the main reason given for not voting was a lack of interest in politics. The decline in turnout presents a major challenge to all those with an interest in the democratic process.

Voter confusion was again prevalent at the May 2005 elections. Over 20,000 votes were spoiled, with the vast majority spoiled due to a lack of understanding of the single transferable vote (STV) voting process. The confusion was exacerbated by sequential numbering on the UK Parliamentary ballot paper, which voters were required to mark with an 'X'.

Stakeholders expressed dissatisfaction at the decision to delay the start of the UK Parliamentary count until the morning after the poll and the subsequent length of time taken to count the votes.

Although Northern Ireland's 26 councils are largely responsible for the administration of their own local government elections, at combined elections many of their duties and responsibilities are undertaken by the EONI. This placed additional pressure on EONI staff, who felt the councils relied on them to a large degree to 'guide' them through the electoral process. We found that liaison between the councils and the EONI was often inconsistent, with no formal communications structures in place. The Chief Electoral Officer and his colleagues in the EONI were of the opinion that responsibility for the entire electoral process should fall under the remit of the EONI. We have concluded that although the current arrangements for electoral administration in Northern Ireland have generally served the electorate well, certain aspects of the system are outdated and no longer fit for purpose.

Recommendations

Recommendations are made in respect of the Northern Ireland Office (NIO), the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland (EONI) and The Electoral Commission (EC).

The build up

- In our 2003 report on the Assembly election we recommended that the EONI be funded to employ a dedicated training officer. We reaffirm this recommendation and believe that such an appointment is vital if staff are to continue to have the necessary skills, competencies and confidence to provide a quality public service. (NIO)
- In light of the concerns raised by the Chief Electoral Officer there would be merit in

clarifying the legislation with regard to the power of direction, if any, which the Chief Electoral Officer has over council chief executives in their role as Deputy Returning Officers for local government elections. (NIO)

- In 2006 the Commission intends seeking the views of stakeholders in Northern Ireland on the current and future use of postal and proxy voting. (EC)

Polling day

- The findings from the Disability Action access survey largely mirror those contained in our report on the 2003 Assembly election. There is some evidence to suggest that access has improved, however, we largely concur with the recommendations made by The Pollen Shop and Disability Action. The EONI, the Commission and other stakeholders must continue to work towards fully accessible elections in Northern Ireland. (EONI, EC)
- EONI should conduct a review of how best to lay out a polling place and label ballot boxes at combined elections to reduce voter confusion and increase efficiency. (EONI)
- In our report on the 2003 Assembly election we recommended 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. This issue was also addressed by the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe's (OSCE) Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) Assessment Mission Report on the May 2005 elections, where it stated that consideration could be given to permit voters, already in line when the polling station closes, to receive and cast their ballot. We reaffirm our earlier recommendation. (NIO)
- The EONI should review planned staffing levels with a view to better managing the flow of voters at busy periods. (EONI)
- Written guidance on the display of material should be issued to school principals in advance of future elections. (EONI)
- We recommend that the legislation be amended to give the Chief Electoral Officer the power to remove the sequential numbers contained on the UK Parliamentary ballot paper in circumstances where elections are combined. (NIO)
- We reaffirm our recommendation that the EONI liaise with manufacturers of voting equipment to develop a suitable alternative for people with visual impairments for use at STV elections. (EONI)
- The Commission intends initiating a UK-wide policy review of the use of serial numbers on ballot papers at a future date and will report separately on this issue. The Commission also intends to conduct a UK-wide review of the use of tendered ballots and this work will be taken forward in 2006. (EC)
- We reaffirm the recommendation made in our report on the 2003 Assembly election that alternatives or modifications to the current polling booths be considered. (EONI)
- The EONI should review the suitability of ballot boxes for use at future elections. (EONI)
- The EONI should conduct a review of the documentation and forms used at elections with a view to making them more user-friendly. (EONI)

- In our report on the 2003 Assembly election we concluded that the four forms of photographic identification were sufficient and did not need to be extended. While this remains our view we would like to see EONI adopt a more targeted approach in terms of ensuring that those with disabilities and those from minority ethnic backgrounds have improved access to photographic identification. (EONI)
- In our report on the 2003 Assembly election we gave an undertaking not only to conduct a UK-wide review of the role and conduct of polling agents but also to produce good practice guidance. Given the strength of feeling raised about this matter by a large number of stakeholders, we intend taking this forward in 2006. (EC)

The count and thereafter

- The Commission endorses the recommendations made by the independent election consultant who conducted an investigation into the accidental removal of two ballot boxes from the Mid Ulster count centre, and suggests that they are implemented across all counts at future elections. (EONI)
- We recommend that the current level of remuneration paid to count staff be reviewed. (NIO)
- In our report on the 2003 Assembly election we recommended that external consultants be appointed by the EONI to conduct a review of the entire count process with the aim of increasing its efficiency. In light of continuing criticism from stakeholders we reaffirm this recommendation and suggest that the review encompasses both STV and first past the post counts. (EONI, NIO)
- In our report on the 2003 Assembly election we recommended that EONI develop up-to-date procedures on the process to be adopted for rejecting ballot papers. We also said that those who have responsibility for recording and classifying rejected ballot papers should be trained in their use. Given the inconsistencies identified at these elections we reaffirm these recommendations. (EONI)

Moving forward

- NIO should conduct a review of the fees paid to council chief executives in their capacity as Deputy Returning Officers at local government elections. (NIO)
- Where an election is UK-wide, consideration should be given to the count in Northern Ireland beginning at the same time as those in Great Britain. Where the election is specific to Northern Ireland, such as an Assembly election, the commencement of the count should be left to the discretion of the Chief Electoral Officer. (EONI)
- In planning future elections the Chief Electoral Officer should establish and chair an elections steering group comprising representatives from the NIO, the Commission and the local councils. (EONI)
- After each election council Deputy Returning Officers should also be required to report to the Chief Electoral Officer and the public on the conduct of elections in their area. Details of the performance achieved by council Deputy Returning Officers should be published in the annual report of the Chief Electoral Officer. (EONI).

1 Introduction

This is The Electoral Commission's second statutory report on the administration of elections in Northern Ireland. Our first report covered the Northern Ireland Assembly elections held on 26 November 2003. This report addresses the administration of the combined UK Parliamentary and local government council elections held on 5 May 2005, and related issues.

The Electoral Commission

1.1 The Electoral Commission is a UK-wide independent public body established on 30 November 2000 under Section 1 of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 (PPERA). The Commission is independent of government and political parties and is directly accountable to Parliament through a committee chaired by the Speaker of the House of Commons. The Commission is responsible for overseeing a number of aspects of electoral law including the registration of political parties, monitoring and publication of significant donations to registered political parties¹ and the regulation of political party spending at elections. We aim to foster public confidence and participation in elections by promoting integrity, involvement and effectiveness in the democratic process.

1.2 Under Section 5 of PERA, the Commission has a statutory duty to report on the administration of referendums and certain elections including UK Parliamentary elections, European Parliamentary elections and elections to the devolved institutions including the Northern Ireland Assembly. The Commission is not required to report on local elections but can do so at the request of a relevant body. In this case we were asked to do so by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. Under Section 10(6) of PERA the Northern Ireland Assembly is listed as a relevant body. However, since the suspension of the Assembly in October 2002 the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has assumed the powers of the

¹ Currently this Section of PERA does not apply to political parties on the Northern Ireland register of political parties.

Assembly and is therefore considered a relevant body under Section 10(6). The Commission has previously produced separate reports for the Scottish Executive and the National Assembly for Wales in respect of local government elections held on 1 May 2003 and 10 June 2004.

1.3 Unlike many electoral commissions outside the UK, the Commission does not have a responsibility for maintaining and updating electoral rolls, employing electoral services staff, or conducting elections. In Northern Ireland these tasks are the responsibility of the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland. The Chief Electoral Officer is both the Registration Officer and Returning Officer for all elections in Northern Ireland including those to local councils. The duties and responsibilities of the Chief Electoral Officer are conferred on him by the Electoral Law (Northern Ireland) Act 1962.

1.4 While the Commission's main office is located in London it has three other offices, in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The Commission's office in Belfast has responsibility for delivering the corporate aims of the Commission in the context of Northern Ireland. The office ensures that the Northern Ireland dimension is fully represented in the strategic thinking and operational planning of the Commission. As is the case in Scotland and Wales, one Commissioner takes a special interest in Northern Ireland affairs.

1.5 Since our establishment we have developed good working relations with the Chief Electoral Officer, his senior colleagues and the Northern Ireland Office (NIO), which is responsible for electoral law and policy in Northern Ireland.

Key priorities for the Commission are strengthening relationships with key stakeholders including the political parties, reviewing electoral policy and practice, raising awareness of electoral and democratic systems and encouraging greater participation in democracy. PPERA also provides for the transfer of the functions of the UK Parliamentary Boundary Commissions for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to the Commission.

1.6 Following the setting up of the Commission's office in Northern Ireland a forum was established where meetings with the political parties represented in the Assembly could take place. The Assembly's Parties' Panel meets on a quarterly basis and acts primarily as a forum for sharing information, and has been central to developing good working relations with all the political parties. The Chief Electoral Officer and senior staff from the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland (EONI) attend meetings of the panel by invitation.

Information and sources

1.7 This report which covers both the UK Parliamentary and local government council elections in Northern Ireland has been informed by a large number of sources including externally commissioned research. Key stakeholders have also contributed their views in a number of different ways and we are grateful to them for the insights they have brought to the report. We sought comments from the Chief Electoral Officer on the factual accuracy of the report and are grateful for the comments received. It should be emphasised, however, that the views, conclusions and recommendations contained

in the report are those of the Commission alone. The following sources have been used to inform our report.

Public opinion surveys – quantitative

1.8 PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) was commissioned to conduct public opinion research about people's attitudes to the UK Parliamentary and local government elections. The survey in Northern Ireland was designed to complement the British Election Study (BES), which was confined to Great Britain. The results from both surveys have combined to give a UK-wide picture. Questions from the BES survey, the 2003 Assembly election public opinion questionnaire and the 2004 European Parliamentary election survey informed the design of the final questionnaire for use in Northern Ireland. Specific questions addressing key aspects of the local government elections were also included.

1.9 In the PwC post-election survey a representative sample (817) of the Northern Ireland population aged 18+ was asked for its views.² To ensure Northern Ireland-wide coverage there was at least one sampling point in each of the 18 UK Parliamentary constituencies and in each of the 26 local council areas. In the report we refer to this as the PwC post-election survey.

1.10 The report was also informed by the Commission's campaigns tracking research. This was initially conducted in October 2002 and is repeated each time the Commission conducts

a major advertising campaign. The objectives of the research are to measure the effectiveness of our specific advertising campaigns in respect of registration and 'call to vote' activity.

1.11 The methodology used for the campaigns tracking research is the monthly Millward Brown Ulster omnibus survey.³ To date nine waves of campaigns tracking research have been conducted giving the Commission a wealth of information, not only about awareness of its campaigns, but also about aspects relevant to the Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002, including individual registration and photographic ID. In the report this research is referred to as the campaigns tracking research.

Focus groups – qualitative

1.12 PwC also conducted eight focus groups between 12 May and 26 May 2005 with each session lasting approximately one and a half hours. The structure of the groups was designed to ensure that the views of those living in urban and rural parts of Northern Ireland were obtained as well as voters and non-voters. The structure of the groups is shown in Table 1.

² The survey had a sampling tolerance of +/- 4% and interviewing was carried out face to face in people's homes between 26 May and 24 June 2005.

³ A representative sample of 961 people is interviewed face-to-face in their own homes about a range of topics. The sampling tolerance is +/-3%.

Table 1: Focus group structure

Gender	Age	Socio-economic group	Religion	Voter/non-voter	Location	Constituency
Male	25–44	ABC1*	Catholic	Voter	Urban	Belfast North
Female	18–24	C2DE**	Protestant	Non-voter †	Rural	Belfast North
Female	45+	C2DE	Protestant	Voter	Rural	West Tyrone
Male	25–44	ABC1	Catholic	Voter	Rural	West Tyrone
Female	45+	C2DE	Catholic	Voter	Rural	East Londonderry
Male	25–44	ABC1	Protestant	Voter	Rural	East Londonderry
Female	18–24	C2DE	Catholic	Non-voter †	Urban	Foyle
Male	45+	ABC1	Protestant	Voter	Urban	Upper Bann

Notes: * ABC1 = managers, administrators, professionals and clerical workers.

** C2DE = skilled and unskilled manual workers, those on long-term benefit and the retired drawing a state pension.

† Group included two to three non-registered participants.

Observer reports

1.13 The Commission used 20 independent observers on polling day who visited just over 20% of the 612 polling places in use. All were given a detailed briefing the day before the elections and each was asked to report on a range of perspectives including those of voters, candidates and polling staff. Observers were also present at all counts for the UK Parliamentary election and at a number of the local government counts. Reports of their experiences have been used to inform our report. Observers from the Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) visited Northern Ireland for the UK Parliamentary election and met key stakeholders, including representatives of the

Commission. The ODIHR delegates were not given access to polling places because current legislation prohibits this. However, they attended a number of the UK Parliamentary election counts. The ODIHR published its report on 5 August 2005.

1.14 Given the introduction of the single transferable vote (STV) for local government elections in Scotland in 2007, the EONI, on behalf of the Scottish Elections Steering Group, also facilitated the attendance of 52 Scottish observers at the Northern Ireland local government elections counts. The observers consisted of Returning Officers, leaders of councils, senior councillors, electoral administrators and senior civil servants. The Commission's office in Scotland has

coordinated the drawing together of observers' views to highlight key learning points ahead of the implementation of STV. We have also drawn on the experience of the Scottish observers to inform our report.

Analysis of party campaigns

1.15 LizFawcett Consulting was commissioned to conduct an analysis of the campaigns undertaken by the five main political parties in Northern Ireland in the run up to the UK Parliamentary and local government elections. The research objectives included an analysis of the campaign messages used by the political parties, the methods used by the parties to get their respective messages across and a comparison of the different campaign methods used by the parties. In addition, a series of semi-structured interviews were held with party campaign directors and political editors of the main print and broadcast media in Northern Ireland.

Analysis of media coverage

1.16 The Institute of Governance, Public Policy and Social Research at Queen's University Belfast was commissioned to conduct an analysis of the media's coverage of the elections. The content of the main Northern Ireland daily newspapers was analysed as well as one local paper from each of Northern Ireland's six counties. In addition, the content of at least one prominent web log was examined and news and current affairs programmes were scrutinised throughout the campaign. Information gathered was analysed from the point of view of the balance in coverage between constitutional and 'socio-economic' issues, between political parties and

their leaders and whether coverage of the local elections was overshadowed by having both elections on the same day. Information was analysed from 7 April and concluded shortly after the election results were announced.

Accessibility reviews

1.17 The Pollen Shop Limited, in association with Disability Action Northern Ireland, Capability Scotland and Scope, was contracted to review the accessibility of information provided to the electorate generally and more specifically to those with physical disabilities, low levels of literacy and people with learning disabilities. The information produced by the five main political parties contesting the UK Parliamentary election in Northern Ireland was also reviewed as was that produced by the parties standing in 10 of the 26 local council areas. The Pollen Shop was also asked to comment on the accessibility of information produced both by the Commission in Northern Ireland and the EONI.

Presiding Officer and Poll Clerk questionnaires

1.18 The Commission drafted and, with the assistance of the EONI, distributed a detailed questionnaire to half the Presiding Officers and a quarter of the Poll Clerks who worked during the elections. Altogether 80% of Presiding Officers (583) and 88% of Poll Clerks (450) responded, providing the Commission with a great deal of information about their direct experiences. Presiding Officers were asked for their views on a range of issues including the training provided by the EONI, managing the polling place, opening and closing the poll, difficulties encountered on the day, use of

photographic identification and how the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) policed the elections. Poll Clerks, who had not previously been formally trained or asked for their views, were asked about the training they received and what problems, if any, they encountered on the day.

Candidate and agent questionnaires

1.19 A postal questionnaire was sent to 301 candidates for completion either by the candidate themselves or their election agent. Of these, 260 were sent to candidates who stood for the local government election and the remainder were sent to those who stood at the UK Parliamentary election. In total 48 responses were received representing a response rate of 16%. Twelve responses were received from the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), 11 from the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), nine from the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), six from the Alliance Party, three from Sinn Féin, two from the Green Party and five from independents.

Consultations

Pre-election

1.20 Prior to the elections we spoke to two local council chief executives who also act as Deputy Returning Officers for local government elections in Northern Ireland. The purpose of the discussions was to find out more about their role and how this is coordinated with the EONI. Following the elections all 26 chief executives were written to by the Commission and were asked to complete a short questionnaire about their experiences. Areas addressed included the nominations procedures, postal voting,

staffing, management of the count, resources expended by the council in conducting the elections and liaison with the EONI. Altogether 22 council chief executives responded to our request for information.

Post-election

1.21 Following the elections the Commission held a focus group discussion with the Chief Electoral Officer and his senior colleagues. The views of a large number of other stakeholders including the political parties, the voluntary and statutory sectors, the media, the PSNI and those representing the interests of people with disabilities were also sought for their perspectives on the elections. Written submissions received from these organisations have informed the report.

1.22 All nine Deputy Returning Officers who worked at the UK Parliamentary election were surveyed as part of a UK-wide project undertaken by the Commission. The survey covered a range of topics including registration, absent voting, staffing, voting procedures, the count and access issues. In addition, half were asked for more detailed information about nominations, candidates and agents, polling station information, voter feedback, electoral fraud, contact with the Commission and the local elections in Northern Ireland.

1.23 The Commission hosted a post-election seminar on 27 May 2005 at Queen's University Belfast. Over 90 delegates representing key stakeholder groups, including the media, attended. Contributors included the Chief Electoral Officer and the main political parties who contested the elections. A political analyst

also gave his perspective on the elections. Workshops were held in the afternoon to discuss the administration of the election, the media, party campaigns and access issues.

Election statistics

1.24 Key statistics including turnout levels, numbers of absent votes and spoiled votes at both the UK Parliamentary and local government elections are included throughout our report. All statistical information was sourced from the EONI.

Other sources

1.25 A number of other sources were used to inform the report including:

- statistical information and correspondence received directly from the EONI;
- comments from the general public received by external post, telephone and email;
- information received from the Commission's public helpline; and
- representations and queries raised with the Commission during the course of the election campaigns.

1.26 Copies of the full reports funded by the Commission and produced by external organisations are available on our website at www.electoralcommission.org.uk or on request from the Commission's office in Northern Ireland.

Scope of report

1.27 The combined elections on 5 May 2005 presented us with a unique opportunity to report on both the UK Parliamentary and local

government elections. In addition to fulfilling our statutory obligation to report on the administration of the election, our report gives an overview of campaign activity during the elections, comments on voter turnout and examines the public's attitudes to elections generally. Where appropriate, it makes comparisons with previous elections in Northern Ireland and with the position elsewhere in the UK. Our report excludes an analysis of election campaign expenditure by political parties and candidates standing for the UK Parliamentary election as this will be the subject of a separate Commission report in Spring 2006.

1.28 This is the first independent public report on local government elections in Northern Ireland following the reform of local government in 1972 when the current 26 council structure was established. It does not provide an analysis of what candidates or parties spent at the local elections, as expenditure at local elections in Northern Ireland is not covered by the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000. Candidates have 35 days, following the date the election result is declared, to make their returns to the Deputy Returning Officer. Returns are available for public inspection following their submission to the relevant local council.

Recommendations

1.29 This report has been published as a comprehensive account of the administration of the combined elections held on 5 May 2005. It has been submitted to the current Secretary of State for Northern Ireland following his predecessor's request that we report on the local government elections in Northern Ireland,

in the context generally of his responsibilities for legislation relating to Northern Ireland elections. A copy has been sent to the Chief Electoral Officer, given his central role in the administration of all elections in Northern Ireland. A copy has also been sent to each of the 26 local council chief executives who acted as Deputy Returning Officers for the local elections. All stakeholders in Northern Ireland with an interest in electoral matters have also been sent a copy of the report.

1.30 The Commission's role with regard to electoral law and administration is advisory only. It is for the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to decide on any legislative change in response to our proposals, and for the Chief Electoral Officer to consider the administrative implications.

2 Background

Although much of the legislation governing the conduct of elections in Northern Ireland is similar to that operating in the rest of the UK there are key differences. Electoral administration is the responsibility of a Chief Electoral Officer who acts both as Returning Officer and Registration Officer for all elections, including local government elections.

Electoral administration in Northern Ireland

2.1 The arrangements for electoral administration in Northern Ireland are different from elsewhere in the UK. The system in Northern Ireland is administered centrally by a Chief Electoral Officer and the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland (EONI). The Chief Electoral Officer is both the Returning Officer and Registration Officer for all elections including local government elections. The Chief Electoral Officer is appointed by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland under Section 14 of the Electoral Law (Northern Ireland) Act 1962 (as substituted by Article 6 of the Electoral Law (Northern Ireland) Order 1972). The Northern Ireland Office's Accounting Officer is accountable to Parliament for all EONI expenditure.

Role of the Chief Electoral Officer

2.2 The Chief Electoral Officer has summarised his duties as follows:

- ensuring the smooth running of elections and referendums in Northern Ireland;
- maintaining the public perception of an impartial and independent electoral service;
- preparing and maintaining an accurate electoral register that also serves to select a panel for jury service;
- preparing a polling station scheme;
- minimising the scope for electoral abuse;
- providing advice to the Secretary of State on all electoral matters;

- providing advice to the Local Government Boundary Commission and the Boundary Commission for Northern Ireland; and
- ensuring that services are delivered efficiently and effectively with due consideration for value-for-money.

2.3 The EONI is the organisation that supports the Chief Electoral Officer in carrying out his statutory duties. The EONI consists of a headquarters in Belfast and nine area electoral offices located across Northern Ireland. Each office is headed by an area electoral officer whose role is primarily to manage the compilation of the electoral register, while also acting as Deputy Returning Officer for two constituencies each at the UK Parliamentary and Northern Ireland Assembly elections. In total the EONI employs 46 staff.

Role of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland

2.4 In Northern Ireland electoral matters are excepted, meaning they have not been devolved to the Northern Ireland Assembly. The Secretary of State is responsible for electoral law and policy, including:

- maintaining the legal framework that is necessary for elections to the European Parliament, the UK Parliament, the Northern Ireland Assembly and to local councils;
- funding the EONI;
- providing staffing and other resources necessary to maintain the Boundary Commission for Northern Ireland; and

- consulting as necessary with the Chief Electoral Officer and The Electoral Commission on legislation and policy proposals.

Elections in Northern Ireland

2.5 In Northern Ireland elections are held to:

- 26 city, district and borough councils (582 councillors);
- Northern Ireland Assembly (108 Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs));
- UK Parliament (18 Northern Ireland MPs); and
- European Parliament (three MEPs).

During the last 22 years there have been 19 Northern Ireland-wide elections and one referendum.

2.6 All elections in Northern Ireland, except those to the UK Parliament, use the single transferable vote (STV), a form of proportional representation which has been in use in Northern Ireland for over 30 years. At an STV election, voters are asked to rate candidates in order of preference by putting a '1' beside their first choice, a '2' beside their second choice, and so on down the ballot paper for as many or as few candidates as they wish. Elections to the UK Parliament are conducted using the first past the post system of voting (vote 'X' for one candidate only).

Eligibility to vote in Northern Ireland elections

2.7 Eligibility to vote depends on the type of election. In order to vote at a UK Parliamentary election an individual must be:

- aged 18 or above;
- a citizen of the UK, another Commonwealth country, or a citizen of the Irish Republic who is resident in the UK;
- listed on the relevant Northern Ireland register for that election; and
- not subject to any legal incapacity to vote.

Citizens of EU Member States are entitled to vote at local government and European Parliamentary elections in Northern Ireland, but not at UK Parliamentary elections. The number of people on the register eligible to vote at the UK Parliamentary election on 5 May 2005 was 1,139,933, while the eligible electorate for the local government elections was 1,142,433.

2.8 In order to be included on the electoral register an individual must also meet one of the following criteria:

- been resident in Northern Ireland during the whole of the three month period prior to their application;
- made a service declaration (military personnel serving away from home);
- made an overseas citizen's declaration; or
- be a merchant seaman.

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

2.9 The provisions of the Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002 apply equally at all elections. The Act was introduced primarily to overcome perceptions of electoral fraud, which had existed in Northern Ireland for many decades. It brought

about significant changes to the registration and voting processes. It replaced household registration with a system of annual individual registration, which required personal identifiers in the form of date of birth, National Insurance number and signature. The Act also requires voters to produce a specified form of photographic identification at a polling station before they are issued with a ballot paper.

2.10 In December 2003 we produced a research report which assessed the workings of the Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002 during its first year in operation.⁴ The report found that while the Act had increased public confidence in the electoral process, it tended to have a negative impact on registration rates, particularly on people living in areas of higher social deprivation, members of black and minority ethnic groups, young people and students and people with disabilities. Subsequent research by PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) produced on behalf of the Commission showed that since the introduction of the Act registration rates across all 18 Parliamentary constituencies in Northern Ireland had declined.

2.11 In November 2004 the Government announced its intention to move away from an annual canvass and in August 2005 launched a consultation paper to consider proposals on the future of electoral registration in Northern Ireland. The Commission will monitor the impact of any new system put in place.

⁴ The Electoral Commission, *The Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002: an assessment of its first year in operation*, December 2003.

Local government in Northern Ireland

2.12 Northern Ireland's current structure for local government dates from the early 1970s when the Local Government (Northern Ireland) Act 1972 introduced significant changes to the roles and responsibilities of councils. At the time key areas such as education, health care provision and housing were transferred to new statutory bodies.

2.13 The 26 district councils shown in Figure 1, form Northern Ireland's third tier of government, below the UK Parliament and the devolved Assembly at Stormont. The 26 councils comprise 101 district electoral areas (DEAs). Each council area has between three and five DEAs, although Belfast has nine. Each DEA comprises a number of wards whose boundaries are reviewed

Figure 1: Distribution of Northern Ireland's 26 local councils



every 10–15 years by the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner, who is appointed by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. The 101 DEAs currently comprise 582 wards.

City, borough and district councils

2.14 A local government district may be designated a city, borough or district council. Belfast, Derry, Armagh and Lisburn have city council status while the remaining 22 are either borough or district councils. A mayor and deputy mayor head city and borough councils, while chairpersons head district councils. Councils vary considerably in size, with Belfast being by far the largest in terms of population, followed by Lisburn, Derry, Craigavon and Newry & Mourne. There is also considerable variation in the geographical area covered by councils, with Belfast, Castlereagh and North Down among the smallest and Fermanagh the largest followed by Omagh and Strabane.

Roles and functions of local government

2.15 The roles and functions conferred on the councils by the Local Government (Northern Ireland) Act 1972 and other legislation fall into three distinct groups:⁵

- a direct role in which the council is responsible within its own area for the provision and management of certain services;
- a representative role where local council nominees sit as representatives on a range of statutory bodies; and

- a consultative role through which the council reflects the views of the community on the operation of certain Northern Ireland-wide services.

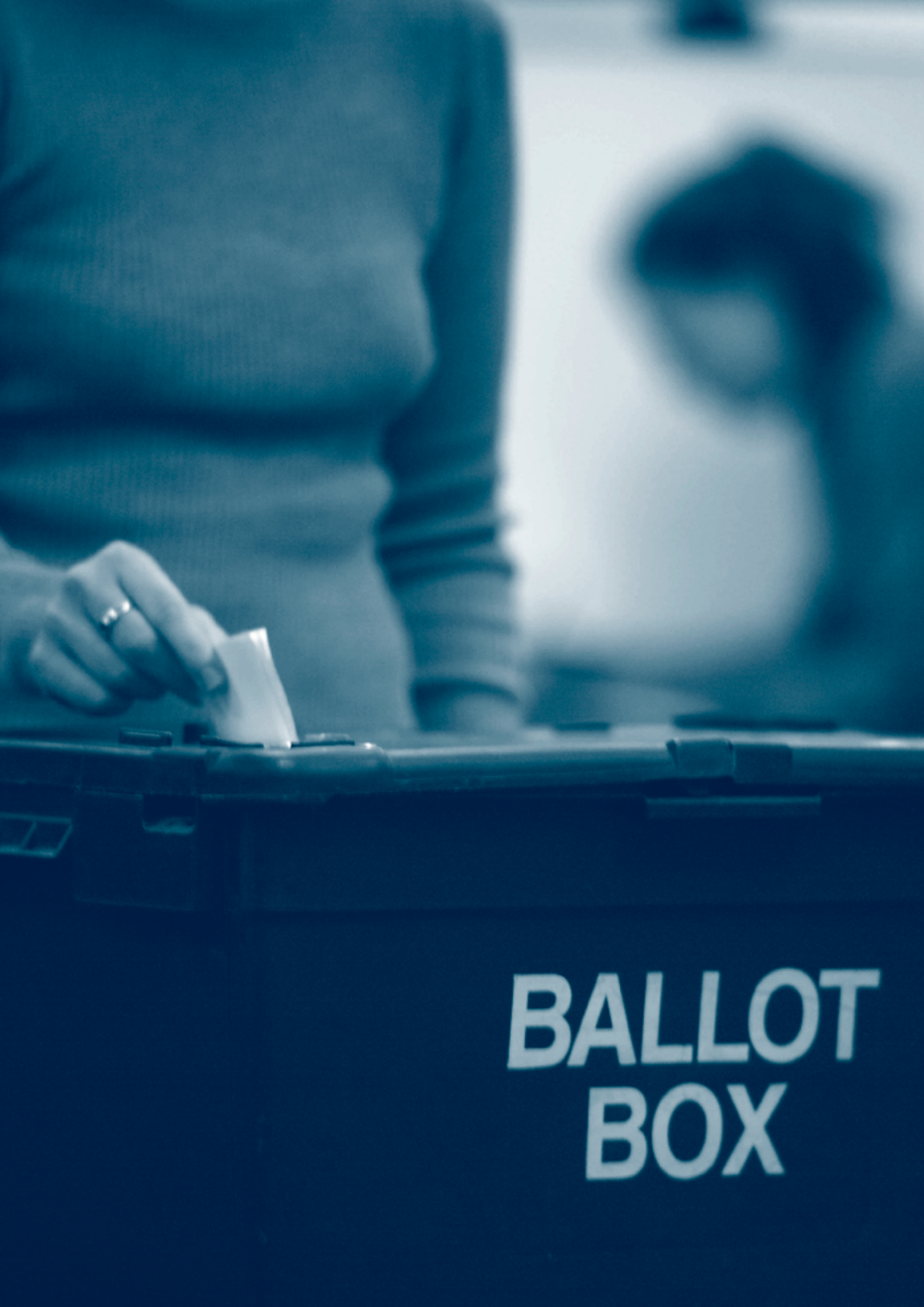
Review of public administration

2.16 In 2002 the Executive of the Northern Ireland Assembly established a group to review public administration (RPA). In March 2005 it issued a consultative document⁶ on its proposals. The consultative document envisages a regional tier of government including the Assembly, government departments and regional authorities which would focus on policy development, setting standards and delivering services. The document refers to local government as the bedrock of a reformed and streamlined system of public administration with councils having increased powers and a strong leadership role.

2.17 The Government published its response to the RPA on 22 November 2005. It concluded that the 26 councils would be replaced by seven. The new councils will have increased functions.

⁵ A full list of the roles and functions carried out by councils can be found at: www.nilga.org

⁶ The consultative document can be found at: www.rpani.gov.uk/consult.htm



**BALLOT
BOX**

3 Local government elections in Northern Ireland

Local government elections in Northern Ireland were traditionally held on the third Wednesday in May of the relevant year. However, the Electoral Law (Northern Ireland) Act 1962 (Amendment) Order 2005 permanently moved the date to the first Thursday in May bringing it into line with the rest of UK scheduled elections. The elections on 5 May 2005 were the second consecutive combined UK Parliamentary and local government elections in Northern Ireland, following the first combined elections in 2001.

Legal framework

3.1 The law on local elections is set out in the Electoral Law (Northern Ireland) Act 1962 as amended by the Local Elections (Northern Ireland) Order 1985, the Elected Authorities (Northern Ireland) Act 1989 and subsequent pieces of legislation. Under Section 11(1) of the Electoral Law (Northern Ireland) Act 1962, elections to councils should be held every four years. Councillors are elected by proportional representation using the single transferable vote (STV), with each district electoral area forming a multi-seat constituency. Until 2005 local government elections were traditionally held on the third Wednesday in May, but from 2005 the date was changed to the first Thursday in May.

Deputy Returning Officers

3.2 The 26 Deputy Returning Officers conduct various aspects of the local government elections and are responsible to the Chief Electoral Officer in his capacity as Returning Officer for all elections in Northern Ireland. In circumstances where the UK Parliamentary and local government elections are combined the responsibilities of local councils are significantly reduced and the majority of the tasks associated with the election are undertaken by the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland (EONI). Councils have more responsibilities if there is a local government election only, including greater responsibility for staffing, the use of premises as polling places, liaison with the police and the issuing of postal votes.

3.3 Under Section 23(1) of the Electoral Law (Northern Ireland) Act 1962 Deputy Returning Officers are entitled to payment for duties

performed at local government elections. Following representation to the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) by the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers (SOLACE), fees in respect of the 2005 local elections were increased by 11% from 2001. Deputy Returning Officers can claim a lump sum which is calculated on the basis of the number of entries on the electoral register used for the election. For example, a Deputy Returning Officer in a local government electoral area where the number of entries is less than 20,000 would be entitled to claim £1,177.72 increasing to £2,502.63 if there are between 50–60,000 entries on the register. In Belfast City Council the maximum amount a Deputy Returning Officer can claim is £7,360.70. In circumstances where an Assistant Returning Officer is appointed, or in the case of Belfast City Council where up to two Assistant Returning Officers can be appointed, the amount recoverable is half that which a Deputy Returning Officer can claim. In addition, a Deputy Returning Officer is entitled to claim a fee for the issue and receipt of postal votes and the issuing of poll cards.

3.4 In 2001 the total amount claimed by 25 of the 26 chief executives in their role as Deputy Returning Officers was £89,301.⁷ The highest claim was from Belfast City Council (£14,976) and the lowest was from Ballymoney Borough Council (£1,512), with the average claim being £3,096. If these figures are extrapolated for the 2005 elections, costs would increase to

approximately £102,500. The fees claimed by Deputy Returning Officers are consolidated into their salaries for pension purposes. In circumstances where the local government elections are combined with a UK Parliamentary election the fees payable to council Deputy Returning Officers are increased on a sliding scale. Those working in council areas with smaller numbers on the register receive proportionally more for covering both elections. Deputy Returning Officers are entitled to claim more at combined elections even though a significant proportion of their duties is undertaken centrally by the EONI.

Facts and figures

Ratio of eligible electors to councillors

3.5 The number of people registered and entitled to vote at the 2005 local government elections was 1,142,433. The number of electors represented by a local councillor varies significantly between councils as shown in Table 2. In Belfast a councillor represents 3,271 registered electors, in Lisburn the figure is 2,390 and in Ballymena 1,789. In Moyle there is one councillor for every 748 electors. On average in Northern Ireland a local councillor represents 1,962 electors.

⁷ Twenty-five of the 26 local councils submitted expense claims. The return for Castlereagh Borough Council appears to have combined the Deputy Returning Officer's expenses with other staff costs.

Table 2: Number of registered electors per councillor

Council	Number of councillors	Registered electorate (for local elections)	Average
Belfast	51	166,824	3,271
Lisburn	30	71,696	2,390
Derry	30	68,843	2,295
Ards	23	51,803	2,252
Newtownabbey	25	54,399	2,176
Craigavon	26	56,321	2,166
North Down	25	52,658	2,106
Newry & Mourne	30	61,253	2,042
Castlereagh	23	44,863	1,951
Down	23	44,434	1,932
Fermanagh	23	42,426	1,845
Ballymena	24	42,925	1,789
Banbridge	17	30,303	1,783
Magherafelt	16	28,507	1,782
Armagh	22	38,838	1,765
Coleraine	22	37,235	1,693
Strabane	16	26,623	1,664
Antrim	19	31,142	1,639
Omagh	21	33,279	1,585
Dungannon & South Tyrone	22	34,666	1,576
Carrickfergus	17	25,978	1,528
Cookstown	16	23,303	1,456
Larne	15	21,674	1,445
Limavady	15	21,328	1,422
Ballymoney	16	19,886	1,243
Moyle	15	11,226	748
Total	582	1,142,433	1,962

Source: EONI.

The cost of administering local government elections in Northern Ireland

3.6 In Northern Ireland, as in Great Britain, local councils are responsible for paying for their own elections with the cost ultimately borne by the ratepayer. In circumstances where local government elections are held as single elections the EONI undertakes work on behalf of the councils and hires out equipment including ballot boxes, polling screens and also prints electoral registers. Expenditure incurred by the EONI is recouped from the councils and is returned to the Treasury.

3.7 When elections are combined the position on funding is different in that overall costs are apportioned between the EONI and the local councils. The EONI anticipates that the local councils will be billed for approximately 50% of the cost of the 2005 combined elections. There is some evidence to suggest that combining elections results in savings to the ratepayer. According to figures provided to the EONI, Belfast City Council made savings of approximately 15% when the elections were combined in 2001.

3.8 Election expenditure returns are not usually submitted to the EONI until approximately six months after a local election, following approval by the relevant council. Given the timeframe for completion of this report it was therefore not possible to include the costs of the 2005 election. However, we asked council chief executives for an estimate of the hours spent by them and other staff on pre-election, polling day and post-election activities.

3.9 Twelve councils were able to provide an estimate of time spent on election activities. Some councils compiled a detailed analysis of the hours spent on election activities while others presented only limited information making comparisons between councils difficult. For example, North Down Borough Council used 2,296 staff hours whereas the equivalent figure for Lisburn was 1,991, Strabane 947, Coleraine 768 and Ballymena 861. In some council areas we were informed that the Deputy Returning Officer spent a lot of time covering all aspects of the election. In others relatively little time was spent by the Deputy Returning Officer on election activities with the bulk of the work delegated to the Assistant Returning Officer who worked with administrative, clerical and security staff. Eight of the 22 councils who responded to our post-election survey were unable to give a breakdown either because the information was not collated or did not exist.

I cannot provide this in quantitative terms at this point. Overall it was the most time consuming and exhausting exercise while our normal heavy workload had to continue.

Borough council

No record of the hours spent was kept by myself or my Assistant Returning Officer. However, they were considerable and by no means was reflected in the Deputy and Assistant Returning Officers' fees!

District council

An extensive amount of time spent on administrative issues by Deputy Returning Officer and staff prior to nomination day and in preparation for the election. To date this has not been quantified. However, two officers were engaged practically full time on election duties over the election period.

Borough council

The 2001 local government election

3.10 In the absence of the actual costs expended at the 2005 local government election, the costs of the 2001 combined elections have been used as a proxy to help inform our understanding of the areas in which expenditure is incurred. We do not expect the costs for the 2005 election to have changed significantly since 2001.⁸ The figures show wide variations in how much councils spend both in real terms and per elector.

3.11 In total, the 26 councils spent just over £1.5m on the 2001 election. Belfast City Council, which has 51 seats, spent the most followed by Lisburn and North Down councils. The councils spending the least included Moyle, Ballymoney and Cookstown. The cost of filling a council seat varied significantly between councils, with Belfast being the most expensive at £5,072 and Ballymoney the least expensive at £1,279. The average cost of filling a council seat in Northern Ireland was £2,602.

3.12 The average cost per registered elector of the 2001 local government elections was £1.29. When comparisons are made between councils

it can be seen in Table 3 that unit costs varied significantly with some councils incurring much higher costs than their counterparts for the same activities. North Down electors, for example, paid on average £1.80 while those living in the Derry City Council area paid 86p. On average Belfast City Council spent £1.36 per elector. Although Moyle incurred the least amount of expenditure in real terms, when compared to the registered electorate in the area the cost was almost the highest of any of the 26 local councils.

⁸ The councils no longer have responsibility for administering postal voting at local government elections. This now falls under the remit of the EONI.

Table 3: Total costs at the 2001 local government elections in Northern Ireland, by council

Council	Number of seats	Cost per seat (£)	Cost per elector (£)	Total (£)
Belfast	51	5,072	1.36	258,658
Lisburn	30	3,421	1.36	102,622
North Down	25	4,081	1.80	102,031
Newtownabbey	25	3,385	1.44	84,631
Castlereagh	23	3,338	1.57	76,776
Newry & Mourne	30	2,430	1.18	72,893
Derry	30	2,052	0.86	61,553
Craigavon	26	2,163	1.06	56,239
Down	23	2,426	1.24	55,807
Ballymena	24	2,297	1.25	55,138
Armagh	22	2,298	1.30	50,565
Fermanagh	23	2,143	1.17	49,299
Omagh	21	2,273	1.43	47,731
Coleraine	22	2,065	1.16	45,419
Ards	23	1,941	1.16	44,637
Banbridge	17	2,594	1.47	44,099
Dungannon & South Tyrone	22	1,981	1.25	43,589
Antrim	19	2,145	1.24	40,748
Carrickfergus	17	2,163	1.35	36,770
Strabane	16	2,053	1.20	32,847
Larne	15	2,089	1.35	31,337
Magherafelt	16	1,871	1.07	29,934
Limavady	15	1,773	1.25	26,596
Cookstown	16	1,514	1.05	24,224
Ballymoney	16	1,279	1.06	20,458
Moyle	15	1,322	1.76	19,828
Total	582	2,602	1.29	1,514,442

Source: EONI.

3.13 Expenditure was incurred in four broad areas – postage, staff costs, printing and stationery, and postal votes. As Table 4 illustrates, the biggest cost incurred by the councils related to the postage of candidates' election addresses, sometimes referred to as 'freepost', which accounted for just over half (54%) the total expenditure. This was followed by staff costs at 24%, printing and stationery costs at 20% and postal votes at just over 2%.

Table 4: Cost of administering the 2001 local government elections in Northern Ireland

Expenditure type	Cost (£)	Total (%)
Postage ('freepost')	810,479	54
Staff costs	364,085	24
Printing and stationery	303,806	20
Postal votes	33,913	2
Other costs	2,157	<1
Total	1,514,442	100

Source: EONI.

Candidates' election addresses (freepost)

3.14 In total the councils spent £810,479 on postage for candidates' election addresses, an average of 67p per registered elector. As Table 5 shows, Belfast City Council, with the largest electorate and number of candidates, spent just over 17% of the overall total, equating to £139,774 or 74p per eligible elector. Other councils spent significantly more on posting candidates' election addresses, with North Down spending £1.18 and Newtownabbey 94p. Of the 26 councils Derry spent the least (41p), closely followed by Newry & Mourne at 42p.

Staff costs

3.15 Staff costs were the next biggest area of expenditure, equating to 24% of the total and an average of 31p per elector. Again, this varied across the councils with Armagh spending 52p and Moyle 50p per elector. Eight councils spent less than 25p on staff costs, with Carrickfergus the lowest at 19p.

Printing and stationery

3.16 One-fifth of the total expenditure incurred by the councils in 2001 was in respect of printing and stationery. Belfast City Council spent on average 27p per elector whereas Castlereagh spent 42p and Moyle 39p. The councils spending the least on printing and stationery per elector were Derry City Council (17p) and Banbridge District Council (16p).

Absent votes

3.17 Prior to the introduction of the Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002 the councils were responsible for administering postal and proxy votes (absent votes) at local government elections. This activity is now the sole responsibility of the EONI because it is the only organisation with access to the personal identifiers collected at the time of registration.⁹ The EONI's costs of administering absent votes at the 2005 local government elections will be passed on to the councils. At the 2001 combined elections the councils spent £33,913 on postal voting with levels of expenditure higher in rural areas. Banbridge District Council incurred the most expenditure at 19p per elector, followed by Carrickfergus at 14p and Fermanagh at 10p. Belfast City Council spent 1p per elector.

⁹ The information given on an absent vote application is verified against that submitted at the time of registration.

Table 5: Average postage, staff, and printing and stationery costs at the 2001 local government elections in Northern Ireland

Council	Costs per eligible elector			Total (£)
	Postage (£)	Staff (£)	Printing and stationery (£)	
North Down	1.18	0.40	0.21	1.79
Newtownabbey	0.94	0.24	0.26	1.44
Banbridge	0.90	0.23	0.16	1.29
Castlereagh	0.86	0.29	0.42	1.57
Moyle	0.83	0.50	0.39	1.72
Lisburn	0.79	0.30	0.26	1.35
Ards	0.77	0.20	0.18	1.15
Coleraine	0.74	0.21	0.19	1.14
Ballymena	0.74	0.24	0.25	1.23
Carrickfergus	0.74	0.19	0.28	1.21
Belfast	0.74	0.35	0.27	1.36
Larne	0.73	0.30	0.32	1.35
Antrim	0.69	0.30	0.23	1.22
Omagh	0.69	0.29	0.38	1.36
Down	0.68	0.28	0.27	1.23
Craigavon	0.59	0.22	0.21	1.02
Dungannon & South Tyrone	0.59	0.34	0.25	1.18
Fermanagh	0.55	0.26	0.27	1.08
Ballymoney	0.53	0.21	0.31	1.05
Limavady	0.51	0.40	0.33	1.24
Armagh	0.51	0.52	0.23	1.26
Magherafelt	0.47	0.29	0.22	0.98
Strabane	0.45	0.41	0.31	1.17
Cookstown	0.44	0.29	0.27	1.00
Newry & Mourne	0.42	0.46	0.28	1.16
Derry	0.41	0.27	0.17	0.85
Average	0.67	0.31	0.27	1.25

Source: EONI.

Liaison between the EONI and local councils

3.18 Overall, liaison between the EONI and the local councils in respect of electoral matters seems limited, although some councils appear to have closer working relations than others. Some council chief executives in their role as Deputy Returning Officers advised us that there was little or no contact between elections, although it did increase in the months leading up to an election. One chief executive felt that it would have been beneficial for him and his staff to have met with the EONI much earlier in the process to plan all aspects of the election.

3.19 We sought the views of council Deputy Returning Officers regarding the administration of local elections and who in their opinion was best placed to run future local government elections in Northern Ireland following the review of public administration. Altogether 22 responded. Eight wanted local elections to be administered jointly by the councils and the EONI, a further eight were of the opinion that local councils themselves were best placed to take overall responsibility and three felt that the EONI should have sole responsibility.¹⁰ One did not respond to this question.

3.20 At the post-election focus group the Chief Electoral Officer and his colleagues expressed reservations about the role of councils in the local government electoral process and suggested that certain aspects of the administration of local elections had evolved through custom and practice. As a result, the Chief Electoral Officer

¹⁰ Two chief executives suggested the councils themselves or a combination of both.

said that although he was ultimately accountable for all elections, he had limited control over how councils planned and conducted local government elections. In his view there were inconsistencies in how the electoral process was managed and there were no agreed standards or benchmarks against which performance could be measured. There was a consensus among senior EONI staff and area electoral officers that responsibility for the entire electoral process in Northern Ireland should rest with the EONI. The Electoral Law (Northern Ireland) Order 1972 states:

The clerk of a district council shall be the Deputy Returning Officer for elections to that council...and shall perform, on behalf of the Chief Electoral Officer, such functions in relation to those elections as shall be delegated to him by the Chief Electoral Officer.

In light of the concerns raised by the Chief Electoral Officer there would be merit in clarifying the legislation with regard to the power of direction, if any, which the Chief Electoral Officer has over council chief executives in their role as Deputy Returning Officers for local government elections.

Summary

3.21 Local government elections in Northern Ireland are held every four years. Legislation was introduced in 2005 to bring the date of the election permanently into line with the rest of the UK. Local councils are responsible for administering local government elections but in the event of a combined election the majority of their duties and responsibilities are undertaken

by the EONI. However, council chief executives, in their capacity as Deputy Returning Officers, receive a higher fee for administering combined elections even though they have fewer duties to perform. In addition, these fees reflect previous arrangements for absent voting and not the current centralisation of these functions.

3.22 There appear to be considerable variations in the cost of administering elections across the 26 councils as evidenced by the 2001 election. The estimates provided by councils of the amount of staff time expended at the 2005 election also varied. There are no benchmarks or comparators in place against which councils can measure their own performance against other councils, both in terms of efficiency and value for money. Given the incompleteness of the information provided by councils it is difficult to draw firm conclusions about the cost of administering local government elections or to judge whether ratepayers in Northern Ireland are getting good value for money.

3.23 Although the Chief Electoral Officer is ultimately responsible for all elections in Northern Ireland he feels he has limited control over how individual councils plan and conduct elections. Election planning between the EONI and councils in many cases is limited to the months leading up to an election.

4 The build up to election day

The register used for the combined elections was that published on 1 April 2005. The number of people on this register had been increased by just over 70,000 names as a result of the Government introducing the Electoral Registration (Northern Ireland) Act 2005. The legislation reinstated onto the register all those who had failed to re-register during the 2004 annual canvass but whose names appeared on the register on 1 September 2004. It is estimated that 91% of the 18+ population were included on the register for the elections.

The announcement of the UK Parliamentary election

4.1 The Prime Minister announced on Tuesday 5 April that a UK Parliamentary election would be held on Thursday 5 May 2005. Parliament was subsequently dissolved on Monday 11 April. As a result the UK Parliamentary election in Northern Ireland on 5 May was combined with the local government elections. This was the second consecutive occasion at which the UK Parliamentary election was combined with local elections in Northern Ireland, the first being June 2001. It was the first combined election where the requirements of the Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002 applied.

Views on the combined elections

4.2 Representatives of the four largest political parties in Northern Ireland informed the Commission at a meeting of the Assembly's Parties' Panel in October 2004 that they were in support of a combined election. However, the Alliance Party raised concerns about having both elections on the same day because it felt that the UK Parliamentary election would overshadow the local government election. It also highlighted the fact that two different voting systems would be in operation and that this had the potential to confuse the electorate. The Alliance Party also questioned the apparent lack of consultation by Government in respect of having both elections on the same day and sought information concerning this matter under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 from a number of bodies including the Commission.

4.3 In the PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) post-election survey funded by the Commission, respondents were asked if they felt elections should be combined on the same date. Almost six in 10 of those interviewed (58%) were in favour of combining future elections whereas less than a quarter (24%) were opposed. Males (64%) were more likely than females (52%) to favour combined elections as were those aged between 18 and 60. Those classified in social group ABC1 (64%) showed more support than those in group C2DE (54%).

4.4 EONI area electoral officers, who worked as Deputy Returning Officers at the UK Parliamentary election, said that having both elections on the same day not only greatly increased their workload but in many instances led to confusion as to the roles and responsibilities of the EONI and local councils. The feedback received from council chief executives suggested that there was a significant variation across councils regarding both involvement in and preparedness for the local government elections. Several councils were very 'hands on' while others tended to delegate many of their duties. In most instances local council chief executives acknowledged the increased workload on the EONI and were appreciative of the support received from area electoral offices and EONI headquarters.

The combined elections increased workload enormously. It would be much better if EONI had control of and was allowed to run both elections. It would prove much more efficient. A lot of unnecessary work was carried out in dealing with different council areas.

EONI Deputy Returning Officer

In view of the fact that the EONI assumed responsibility for the issue and receipt of postal votes and the staffing of polling places, council involvement was limited to recruitment of staff for the local government count.

City council

Prior to election I delegated most of the election duties to the Director of Corporate Services, who in turn appointed an experienced non-council officer. This person, with assistance of my staff, liaised with EONI, prepared nomination packs, liaised with PSNI and performed most of the other routine tasks.

City council

Area electoral office was excellent to deal with and we worked well together. I was kept informed at all times by area electoral office and EONI HQ.

Borough council

4.5 Despite the generally positive feedback a number of councils also reported difficulties in maintaining effective contact with the EONI. Among the issues highlighted were the new centralised telephone system introduced just before the election and the volume and duplication of paperwork issued by the EONI. The EONI acknowledged there were teething problems with its new centralised telephone system and had been initially overwhelmed by the number of calls received. Six operators were employed but this number was increased to meet demand in the run up to the elections.

Liaison with EONI was generally good, but communication problems were encountered with the new central phone number, which was often engaged – staff had to resort to using mobile phones. There also seemed to be duplication in the electronic version of forms which caused confusion. The addition of forms not relevant to this particular election (i.e. stationery for a single election and/or a by-election) didn't help the situation.

Submission from council

There was much more confusion in this election than previously and I believe that the EONI could have been more helpful. The amount of emails with attachments and forms sent out by them was mind-boggling and there was a great lack of clarity. As the election got closer, the Electoral Office stopped answering its phone. Many forms, etc. arrived late as did most of the stationery.

Submission from council

Changes to legislation

4.6 A number of amendments and new pieces of legislation were enacted for the 2005 elections.

- The Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 (Disapplication of Part IV for Northern Ireland Parties) Order 2005 extended the disapplication until February 2007. As a result political parties in Northern Ireland are exempt from reporting donations to The Electoral Commission unlike parties elsewhere in the UK.
- The Representation of the People (Variation of limits of candidates' election expenses) Order

2005 increased the expenditure limits for candidates' expenses at UK Parliamentary elections. The new limits were set at £7,150 plus 7p per registered elector for a county constituency and £7,150 plus 5p per registered elector for a borough constituency. Borough constituencies in Northern Ireland are the four Belfast constituencies.

- Candidates' expenditure limits were also increased at local government elections in Northern Ireland. The Electoral Law (Northern Ireland) Act 1962 (Amendment No. 3) Order 2005 increased the amount from £242 plus 4.8p for each registered elector, to £600 plus 5p per registered elector. Similar legislation was enacted in England and Wales.
- The Electoral Law (Northern Ireland) Act 1962 (Amendment No. 2) Order 2005 amended Schedule 5 of the 1962 Act to allow Commission staff and persons authorised by the Commission access to polling places during the local government elections.
- The Electoral Registration (Northern Ireland) Act 2005 reinstated onto the register published on 1 April 2005 all persons who failed to re-register during the 2004 annual canvass but whose names appeared on the register published on 1 September 2004.
- The Parliamentary Elections (Returning Officer Charges) (Northern Ireland) Order 2005 specified the expenses that could be incurred by a Returning Officer for, or in connection with, a Parliamentary election.

4.7 One political party said it was 'frustrated' at what it described as the tendency for changes

in legislation to be passed in the ‘immediate run up to elections’. It argued that the Government should be able to ensure that necessary legislative changes were put in place well before an election.¹¹ The Commission has previously recommended that all legislation pertaining to an election – particularly a fixed-term election – should be in place in time to allow the implementation of a proper and robust procurement process.¹² However, we recognise that changes were necessary to bring certain legislation in Northern Ireland into line with that in Great Britain.

Individual registration

4.8 The Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002 which became law on 1 May 2002 fundamentally changed the system of voter registration in Northern Ireland. Under the system, people are required to register individually on an annual basis and provide personal identifiers in the form of their National Insurance number, date of birth and signature. The system replaced household registration which permitted one member of a household to complete a registration form for all those living at the address. Household registration also allowed names to be carried forward for one year in circumstances where a person failed to re-register. This facility was abolished with the introduction of the Act. The introduction of individual registration significantly improved the accuracy of the register although concerns were raised about its comprehensiveness. In September 2005 the

Government published a consultation paper¹³ proposing a system of continuing registration, thereby removing the requirement for individuals to register on an annual basis. It is anticipated that this will improve the comprehensiveness of the register while maintaining its accuracy and integrity. All the main political parties in Northern Ireland have expressed support for individual registration under a process of continuous registration.

The relevant register

4.9 The electoral register used at the combined elections was that published on 1 April 2005. The numbers of people on the 1 April register had been significantly increased as a result of the Electoral Registration (Northern Ireland) Act 2005. This reinstated onto the register all eligible persons who had failed to re-register during the 2004 annual canvass but whose names appeared on the register published on 1 September 2004. Approximately 70,000 electors were reinstated as a result of the Act, increasing the numbers registered to 1,148,486 (estimated to be 91% of the eligible population). Rolling registration, the process whereby eligible persons can register to vote outside the annual canvass, had continued as in previous years. The deadline for registering to vote at the May 2005 elections was 10 March. Figure 2 illustrates how numbers on the register have fluctuated since the introduction of individual registration in 2002. It should be noted that the August 2002 register was compiled under the system of household registration and according

¹¹ Submission from political party, 30 August 2005.

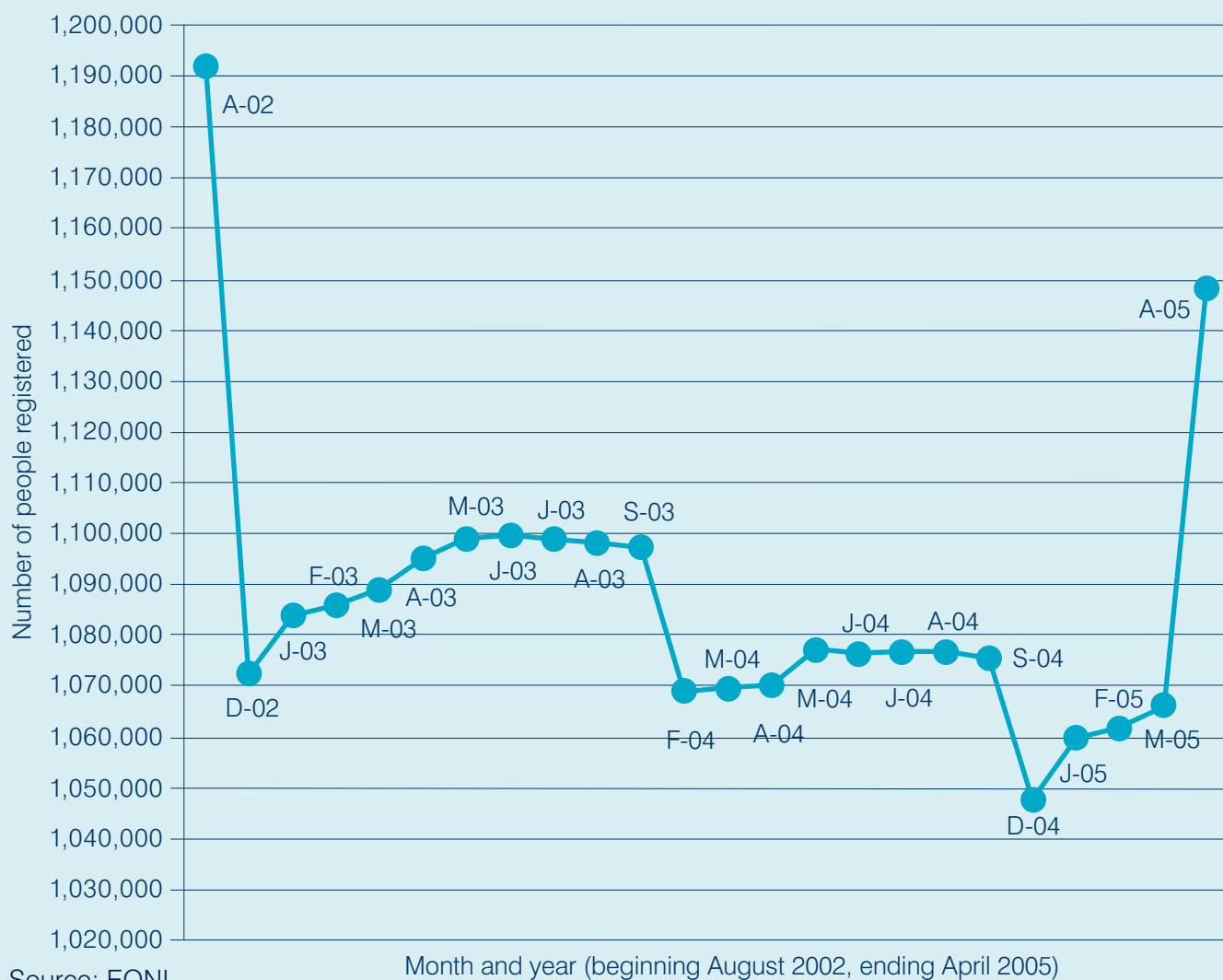
¹² The Electoral Commission, *Delivering democracy – The future of postal voting*, August 2004.

¹³ Proposals on the future of electoral registration in Northern Ireland, NIO, August 2005.

to research conducted by PwC¹⁴ on behalf of the Commission, was likely to have been in excess of the true registration rate given

inflationary factors such as multiple registrations and the carry-forward.

Figure 2: Number of people on the electoral register, August 2002 to April 2005



14 PricewaterhouseCoopers, *A statistical analysis of electoral registration in Northern Ireland, August 2002 – May 2003*.

Support to candidates and agents

4.10 The Commission, in conjunction with the EONI, produced a guide for candidates and agents contesting the UK Parliamentary election. The document provided assistance on all aspects of the electoral process, including nominations, the campaign, polling day, the count and the return of election expenses. The EONI produced a separate guide for candidates contesting the local government elections. Both documents were available to download from the Commission and EONI websites.

4.11 In February and March 2005 the Commission, in cooperation with the EONI and Royal Mail, hosted three election information seminars for prospective candidates and agents contesting the local government elections and the anticipated UK Parliamentary election. Two of the seminars were held in Royal Mail's Northern Ireland Mail Centre in Mallusk, while a third was held at the City Hotel in Londonderry. The seminars offered practical advice on standing for election and outlined the assistance available from the Commission, the EONI and Royal Mail. Copies of the guidance for candidates and agents contesting both the local government and UK Parliamentary elections were distributed and representatives from the three organisations were available to answer questions.

4.12 In total, the seminars were attended by over 150 candidates and agents from a range of political parties. Issues raised included availability of absent voting forms, campaign expenditure limits and Royal Mail's freepost facility. Feedback from candidates and agents indicated that the

joint workshops helped to improve candidates' understanding of the roles and responsibilities of each organisation and explained changes to the vetting procedures for campaign literature and expenditure limits. It was agreed by the Commission, the EONI and Royal Mail to hold similar events ahead of future elections.

Nominations

4.13 Nominations for the local government election took place between 10am and 5pm on Monday 11 and Tuesday 12 April. Nomination papers had to be submitted to the relevant local council. For the UK Parliamentary election, nomination papers had to be delivered to the relevant area electoral office between 10am and 4pm on either Thursday 14, Friday 15, Monday 18 or Tuesday 19 April. The responses received from the survey of candidates and agents suggest widespread satisfaction with the nominations process.

4.14 Table 6 shows the total number of candidates nominated to stand at the UK Parliamentary election was 105, of which 19 (18%) were women. The DUP, Sinn Féin, UUP and SDLP contested all 18 constituencies. The Alliance Party stood in 12 constituencies, the Workers' Party in six, the Conservative Party in three and the Socialist Environmental Alliance in one. In addition there were five independent candidates.

Table 6: Number of candidates nominated at the 2001 and 2005 UK Parliamentary elections in Northern Ireland

Constituency	Number of candidates 2001	Number of candidates 2005	Difference
Belfast East	9	8	-1
Belfast North	6	7	+1
Belfast South	8	7	-1
Belfast West	7	7	0
East Antrim	7	6	-1
East Londonderry	5	6	+1
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	4	4	0
Foyle	5	6	+1
Lagan Valley	5	5	0
Mid Ulster	4	5	+1
Newry & Armagh	4	5	+1
North Antrim	5	5	0
North Down	6	7	+1
South Antrim	6	5	-1
South Down	5	5	0
Strangford	6	6	0
Upper Bann	5	6	+1
West Tyrone	3	5	+2
Total	100	105*	+5

Note: * Lynda Gilby was nominated for the Vote For Yourself Party in all four Belfast constituencies with the result that there were in fact 102 individual candidates.

Source: EONI.

4.15 As Table 7 shows, 918 candidates were nominated to stand at the local government elections. This comprised 718 (78%) male candidates and 200 (22%) female. The percentage of female candidates standing in the local elections was slightly up on the 2003

Assembly election when the proportion was 19%. The DUP fielded the largest number of candidates (216) followed by the UUP (190), Sinn Féin (183), the SDLP (157) and the Alliance Party (48). There were 64 (7%) independent candidates.

Table 7: Number of candidates nominated at the 2001 and 2005 local government elections in Northern Ireland

Council	Number of candidates 2001	Number of candidates 2005	Difference
Derry	56	52	-4
Limavady	24	23	-1
Coleraine	36	37	+1
Ballymoney	25	22	-3
Moyle	27	21	-6
Larne	27	28	+1
Ballymena	43	36	-7
Magherafelt	23	24	+1
Cookstown	22	19	-3
Strabane	26	24	-2
Omagh	33	26	-7
Fermanagh	36	36	0
Dungannon & South Tyrone	32	32	0
Craigavon	47	46	-1
Armagh	37	32	-5
Newry & Mourne	46	52	+6
Banbridge	25	24	-1
Down	42	39	-3
Lisburn	53	51	-2
Antrim	32	34	+2
Newtownabbey	48	38	-10
Carrickfergus	23	24	+1
North Down	47	41	-6
Ards	27	34	+7
Castlereagh	41	37	-4
Belfast	98	86	-12
Total	975	918	-57

Source: EONI.

4.16 Elections were contested in 100 of the 101 district electoral areas (DEA). In Ballinderry DEA, Cookstown District Council, six candidates were declared elected following the close of nominations because there were the same number of candidates as seats available – hence no election took place.

4.17 Candidates wishing to contest the UK Parliamentary election had to pay a deposit of £500 to the relevant Deputy Returning Officer. Thirty-three candidates subsequently lost their deposit because they did not receive enough votes. No deposit was required to stand at the local government election.

4.18 A Lisburn City councillor attempted to withdraw from the election race before polling day but because of legislation was unable to do so. Consequently, his name appeared on the ballot paper. He was subsequently elected and eventually decided to take his seat.¹⁵

Royal Mail

4.19 In the run up to the elections Royal Mail delivered over 6 million items of election material. The vast majority of candidates and agents (83%) who responded to our post-election survey said they were either satisfied or very satisfied with the performance of Royal Mail in respect of the operation of the freepost system, with a small number saying they were either dissatisfied or very dissatisfied.

4.20 Some party literature was not delivered by Royal Mail in the Foyle constituency due to strike action by postal workers at a sorting

office in Derry city. As a show of support the SDLP, Sinn Féin and the Socialist Environmental Alliance withdrew their election literature from the sorting office and found alternative ways to distribute it.¹⁶ Royal Mail advised us that all election material in its possession prior to the dispute was delivered by it and a subcontractor was employed to deliver any outstanding election material.

4.21 A number of candidates, agents and parties were unhappy that local election literature had to be addressed to specific names on the register whereas that for the UK Parliamentary election did not require to be labelled. This placed an additional burden on parties contesting the local government election.

4.22 Two political parties and a small number of candidates raised concerns about the new vetting arrangements for election addresses introduced prior to the elections and claimed this resulted in delays and unnecessary bureaucracy. One party commented:

The desire for the Royal Mail to centralise is understandable, but for future elections it is better for the management of elections in Northern Ireland to be decentralised. This should certainly be the case for future Assembly and local government elections, where the timings and entitlements are sufficiently different from the rest of the UK.

Submission from political party

¹⁵ *Belfast Telegraph*, 7 June 2005.

¹⁶ *News Letter*, 25 April 2005, *Daily Ireland*, 29 April 2005.

However, Royal Mail advised the Commission that all election material for the UK was being vetted centrally both to enhance customer service and ensure consistency of approach. This was instituted partly to address concerns from political parties about inconsistent decisions in the past.

4.23 The EONI also identified an inconsistency with regard to security in Royal Mail's delivery and collection of postal votes. This issue was raised by the EONI in its post-election debrief with Royal Mail who gave an undertaking to review the arrangements for postal voting at future elections.

Campaign complaints

4.24 An independent candidate standing in Belfast West had his billboard advertising campaign dropped by an advertising agency on the basis that it could cause offence. The campaign contained images of a 'punishment beating'. Royal Mail had previously approved the same image for distribution via the freepost literature drop.

4.25 The Alliance Party complained to the Commission that it suspected that another party may have been responsible for a 'dirty tricks' campaign aimed at undermining the Alliance Party's electoral support. A leaflet, in the Alliance Party's colours, called on traditional Alliance voters to 'lend' their votes to the UUP at the UK Parliamentary election to keep the DUP out. At the same time they were advised to vote for the Alliance Party at the local government elections. The leaflet was published by a group calling itself 'Concerned Citizens for a Shared Future'.

As this group was not registered with the Commission as a third party, it was not entitled to spend more than £5,000 on the election campaign. The Alliance Party referred the matter to the PSNI and the matter is subject to an ongoing investigation.

4.26 A large number of incidents were reported in the press concerning election posters either being defaced or pulled down by alleged supporters of rival political parties. Allegations of this nature were made by all the main political parties and by an independent candidate standing in the constituency of West Tyrone.

Party election broadcasts

4.27 In Northern Ireland the present requirement for a political party to qualify for a party election broadcast is that the party fields candidates in at least one-sixth of the total constituencies. Each of the four largest political parties contesting the UK Parliamentary election was allocated four party election broadcasts each. The Alliance Party was given two while the Conservative Party, the Workers Party and the Vote For Yourself Party were each allocated one broadcast. Broadcasts commenced on Monday 11 April 2005.

Requests for information and advice EONI's centralised telephone number

4.28 A number of callers complained that they had been trying to contact the EONI by telephone but had been unable to get through. One candidate expressed frustration that the EONI's telephone number had been 'constantly engaged for three days'. The EONI advised the Commission that they had taken the decision to

switch to a centralised number ahead of the elections from which callers could be directed to the relevant area electoral office if necessary.

The Commission's helpline

4.29 In the weeks leading up to 5 May the Commission's office in Northern Ireland handled approximately 300 requests for information or advice about the elections from members of the public, candidates and agents. The calls covered a range of issues including provision of electoral identity cards, information on the electoral register, non-arrival of poll cards, postal voting and regulatory issues concerning campaign literature and candidates' expenses.

4.30 The Commission received complaints about the placement of party literature which was deemed to be either obstructive or perceived to be intimidating or offensive. The Commission advised callers that it had no remit in this area.

4.31 The Commission's separate public helpline, which was contracted to an external provider, was operational from February 2005 to assist the public with queries on the registration process, photographic ID and absent voting. Helpline staff worked from answers to a set of 'Frequently Asked Questions' provided by the EONI. Queries concerning the electoral register and those requiring a detailed response were referred to the EONI. As Table 8 shows, during the period 14 February to 9 May 5,663 calls were handled.

4.32 On 14 April a complaint was received by the Commission concerning an absent vote application that had been requested from the

helpline but which had not been delivered. A second complaint of a similar nature a few days later led to the Commission initiating an investigation into the helpline provider's procedures. A technical problem was discovered regarding the processing of absent vote applications, with the result that 103 people failed to receive a postal vote application pack. The Commission was criticised by a number of political parties, individual candidates and members of the public for the problems encountered:

At least four constituents who applied for postal votes through the Commission helpline were denied a vote as a result of a technical error – this is clearly unacceptable.

Candidate

4.33 A letter of apology along with a full explanation was issued by the Commission to those affected. The Commission made representations to the Chief Electoral Officer to see if anything could be done to alleviate the situation given the special circumstances. However, he advised that legislation on postal voting was prescriptive in terms of timescales and therefore this could not be done. The Commission has since reviewed the management of the helpline and a new provider has been appointed.

Table 8: Breakdown of calls handled by the helpline, 14 February to 9 May 2005

Nature of call	Number of calls
Requesting registration forms	1,707
Checking to see if on register	1,385
Registration query	765
Help needed with completion of form	615
General enquiry	441
Requesting ID application form	416
Request for absent vote application	292
Referral to EONI	36
Complaint	5
Requesting information leaflet	1
Total	5,663

Source: The Electoral Commission.

Access to public information

4.34 The Pollen Shop, together with Disability Action, was commissioned to evaluate the accessibility of all aspects of the election in Northern Ireland. The researchers commented in particular on the availability of standard election documents in alternative formats in Northern Ireland. For example, in other parts of the UK electoral registration forms are available on audio tape, on a British Sign Language video, in Braille, in large print and in languages other than English. In Northern Ireland the system is more complex yet no alternative formats are available.¹⁷

4.35 A key finding from the research was that formal support available to voters in Northern

¹⁷ The EONI confirmed it produces materials in alternative formats.

Ireland was of a lower quality than the rest of the UK. It was felt that while the EONI:

did a commendable job in difficult circumstances, [it] did not provide the same level of support to disabled voters and voters with low literacy as electoral administrators in the rest of the UK.

It went on to say that the EONI's website did not conform to the basic accessibility standard:

We consider compliance with the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) to be important as it indicates that an organisation has systematically considered the needs of disabled people.

4.36 It was also noted that a number of local councils in Northern Ireland were unable to provide basic levels of support to disabled voters. Councils were contacted by the researchers on an anonymous basis via phone and email to see if they could provide basic information on how a person with a visual impairment would get assistance in voting at the elections. Most of the local councils tested were unable to provide this information and furthermore did not indicate that a person seeking such assistance could contact the EONI for further information. The report concluded that:

There is a gap in the provision of support for disabled people including people with learning disabilities and those with low levels of literacy during the election cycle. Organisations involved in the administration of elections want to help voters who cannot access information. This is however, not the same as providing a universal accessible service or... an organisation meeting its duties within the scope of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995.

Absent voting

4.37 Absent voting is the term used at elections to describe postal and proxy voting. A person applying for a postal vote in Northern Ireland must give a valid reason for their application. Valid reasons include the inability to attend the polling place due to illness, physical incapacity, absence on the day of the poll due to work commitments, holiday arrangements or having moved outside the locality of their previous polling place. Legislation introduced in Great Britain in 2000 allowing electors to apply for a postal vote on demand was not extended to Northern Ireland.

4.38 A proxy voter is an elector who appoints another person to vote on their behalf. The proxy must either go to the elector's allocated polling station and vote on behalf of the elector or request a postal vote. This process then becomes a 'postal proxy'. Persons applying for a proxy vote in Northern Ireland must provide the EONI with a valid reason as to why they require one. Valid reasons are the same as those applying for postal votes.

4.39 The deadline for applications, as set in legislation, for absent votes at the May 2005 elections was 5pm on Thursday 14 April. There was some dissatisfaction among candidates and agents at the tight deadline that applied to absent voting in Northern Ireland. In Great Britain the deadline was 26 April.¹⁸ There was also some criticism of the EONI for its perceived inflexibility in relation to absent voting while

¹⁸ The 26 April deadline also applied in Northern Ireland for late postal vote applications. These are only issued in exceptional circumstances.

some candidates felt that absent voting could have been better advertised by the Commission.

People didn't have enough time or information to arrange postal or proxy voting.

Postal vote applications should be allowed over a longer period.

Information too late, timescales too tight – large element of student population studying in Great Britain did not get a vote.

Postal vote deadline not adequately publicised.

Candidates

4.40 The EONI has advised the Commission that several police investigations were initiated at the time of the election into alleged abuse of the postal vote system. In particular, the EONI raised concerns about the activities of one political party which had made repeated requests for large batches of postal vote applications in the lead up to the elections. It was alleged that postal vote applications had been photocopied and people had been asked to sign forms that had already been completed with their details. Several candidates and agents also expressed concern at the approach adopted by other political parties. Allegations were made that older voters were pressurised into handing over their postal vote application to party activists.

Members of two different political parties were visiting elderly voters demanding their voting papers and instructing them how to vote. One party made people sign the form for postal and proxy votes – I received two or three complaints about this behaviour.

Candidate

Statistics on absent voting

4.41 At the 2005 combined elections the EONI issued a total of 34,377 absent votes (27,680 postal and 6,697 proxy). These comprised 20,418 new applications of which 17,932 were approved and 2,486 were rejected. The balance (13,959) comprised those on the permanent list of absent voters.

Proxy votes

4.42 The total number of proxy votes issued by the EONI was 6,697. This compares to 9,970 issued for the 2001 combined elections, representing a 33% reduction. The constituencies recording the highest demands for proxy votes were West Tyrone (1,247), Fermanagh & South Tyrone (1,052), Newry & Armagh (779) and Mid

Ulster (745). These constituencies accounted for 57% of all proxy votes issued. Belfast East had the lowest demand for proxy votes (71), followed by East Antrim (89) and North Down (91).

Postal votes

4.43 Altogether 87.4% of those who applied for a postal ballot in Northern Ireland returned their ballot paper, a figure approximately 10 percentage points higher than that recorded in the rest of the UK. The percentage of electors in Northern Ireland issued with a postal ballot was 2.4%, a slight decrease since 2001. This compares to 12.8% in England, 8.1% in Scotland and 12.7% in Wales,¹⁹ where postal voting is available on demand. In Great Britain the proportion of electors with postal votes trebled from 2001 to 2005.

Table 9: Number of postal votes issued, returned and included in the count in Northern Ireland, 1998 to 2005

Year	Election	Number of postal votes issued	Number of postal votes returned	Number of postal votes included in the count	% of total valid vote
1998	Northern Ireland Assembly election	37,070	32,285	31,816 (86%)	3.9
2001	UK Parliamentary election	31,111	26,541	26,078 (84%)	3.2
2003	Northern Ireland Assembly election	19,969	17,563	16,437 (82%)	2.4
2004	European Parliamentary election	19,957	17,066	16,093 (81%)	2.9
2005	Combined UK Parliamentary and local government elections	27,680	24,200	22,962 (83%)	3.2

Source: EONI.

¹⁹ Some or all data missing for 35 constituencies in England and one in Wales.

4.44 Table 10 illustrates the main reasons provided by the EONI for ballot papers being rejected including 'no/incorrect signature', 'unsatisfactory reason why required', 'attested own form' or 'submitted late'.

Table 10: Reasons given for rejecting absent vote applications at the May 2005 combined UK Parliamentary and local government elections in Northern Ireland

Reason	Number of rejections
Signature (none/incorrect)	639
Submitted late	428
Unsatisfactory reason as to why required	345
Problems with attestation	275
National Insurance number not supplied/incorrect	219
Not registered	205
Date of birth not supplied/incorrect	118
Absent vote no longer required	85
Not signed by doctor	74
Medical not completed	32
Other	12
Total	2,486

Source: EONI.

4.45 Of the total postal ballot papers issued, Table 11 shows that 86% were returned before close of poll, ranging from 91% in Mid Ulster to 71% in Belfast South. The overall figure in percentage terms was similar to the number returned at the 2003 Assembly election. Constituencies recording the biggest demand for postal votes were

Fermanagh & South Tyrone, West Tyrone, Mid Ulster and Foyle. Together these constituencies accounted for almost half (47%) of all postal votes issued. The number of postal votes issued in the Foyle constituency more than doubled since the 2003 Assembly election. All the constituencies recording the highest number of postal vote applications were in rural areas, with the exception of Foyle.

4.46 The four Belfast constituencies accounted for just over 9% of the total postal ballot papers issued, again the same proportion as at the 2003 Assembly election. Altogether 1,238 postal ballots (5.2%) were rejected from the count. This figure was slightly down on the 2003 Assembly election when the proportion rejected was 6.4%. At the 2001 UK Parliamentary election, prior to the introduction of the Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002, the total number of rejected ballot papers was 415. The increase in rejected postal votes is likely explained by the more stringent measures introduced by the EONI to check the validity of postal ballots.²⁰ In our report on the 2003 Assembly election we stated that the Commission had conducted a review of absent voting in Great Britain and that Northern Ireland was excluded from the review because of the different legal framework established by the Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002. The Commission intends in 2006 seeking the views of stakeholders in Northern Ireland on the current and future use of postal and proxy voting.

²⁰ At the 2001 combined elections the local councils had responsibility for the issuing and receipt of local government postal ballots.

Table 11: Summary of postal ballot papers issued, returned and rejected at the May 2005 combined UK Parliamentary and local government elections in Northern Ireland

Constituency	Number of postal ballots issued	Number of postal ballots returned	Return rate (%)	Number rejected	Rejection rate (%)
Belfast West	743	573	77.1	47	8.2
Mid Ulster	2,891	2,635	91.1	206	7.8
South Down	2,041	1,728	84.7	131	7.6
Upper Bann	1,162	1,034	89	76	7.4
Newry & Armagh	1,873	1,647	88	117	7.1
Lagan Valley	1,087	935	86	65	7
Belfast North	570	481	84.4	29	6
North Antrim	1,444	1,225	84.8	69	5.6
West Tyrone	2,962	2,682	90.5	117	4.4
North Down	727	562	77.3	22	4
Foyle	2,515	2,177	86.6	87	4
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	4,559	4,023	88.2	154	3.9
Strangford	861	705	81.9	27	3.8
East Antrim	622	504	81	18	3.6
South Antrim	711	627	88.2	20	3.2
Belfast East	584	491	84.1	16	3.2
Belfast South	681	484	71.1	15	3.1
East Londonderry	1,647	1,377	83.6	22	1.6
Total	27,680	23,890	86.3	1,238	5.2

Source: EONI.

Electoral identification

4.47 The Representation of the People (Northern Ireland) (Variation of Specified Documents) Regulations 2003 removed all forms of non-photographic identification from the list of specified documents. To vote at an election in Northern Ireland an elector must present

photographic identification in the form of a current British or Irish passport, or a passport of another EU Member State, a current UK photographic driving licence, a Translink Senior SmartPass (bus pass) or an electoral identity card. These are the only forms of identification permissible.

4.48 Altogether just over 100,000 people in Northern Ireland have been issued with an electoral identity card since its introduction in 2002. In March 2005 the EONI advertised the availability of the electoral identity card in a number of newspapers under the caption, 'Do you need an electoral ID card?'. In addition to the mobile sites, those requiring a card could also apply at any area electoral office. The EONI advised the Commission that uptake in March 2005 was low and that the vast majority of those requiring this form of ID may already possess it.

4.49 The EONI advised us that in the period from January 2005 to the cut-off date on 19 April 2005 approximately 4,000 applications for electoral ID cards were made. All cards were issued in time for the election except those where the information contained on the application form did not match that on the applicant's registration form.

Training

The Commission's role in training

4.50 Training material for poll staff for use at the May 2005 combined elections was produced by the Commission in conjunction with the EONI. The materials were developed to suit the unique circumstances of electoral administration in Northern Ireland. The format of the materials was based upon those previously developed for the 2004 European Parliamentary election. However, the uncertainty surrounding the announcement of a date for the UK Parliamentary election impacted on both the development and delivery of printed materials for poll staff. The following materials were produced:

- a detailed good practice guide for poll staff along with a quick guide version;
- a summary sheet for doubtful ballot papers for the UK Parliamentary count staff;
- DVD copies of the video produced for the 2004 European Parliamentary election; and
- PowerPoint presentation for poll staff training sessions.

Training for local council staff

4.51 Prior to the election the EONI arranged training for all senior council staff to prepare them for their duties. The training was generally well received and although one council claimed that no training was given, the EONI has confirmed that it was offered to all councils. At a post-election focus group EONI senior management expressed frustration that some council chief executives had not attended the training sessions.

Initial training was provided by EONI for senior council staff on liaison with EONI, changes in legislation, nomination procedures, absent voting procedures, logistics of a combined election, poll staff training, post-poll duties and the count.

District council

No real training given for the role. I wouldn't let a handyman use a piece of machinery without a day's training – chief executives didn't even get a day's training in running an election.

Borough council

The Commission continues to believe that adequate training should be undertaken by all key electoral staff and will continue to work with the EONI to ensure that this can be done in the context of Northern Ireland.

Recruitment and training of poll staff

4.52 At the time of the November 2003 Assembly election the Chief Electoral Officer raised concerns about the number of Presiding Officers and Poll Clerks who withdrew their services prior to the election. Several reasons were given for this including the fact that the election was called in winter, the short notice and rate of pay. At the time the Chief Electoral Officer commented that the level of pay was just above the minimum wage when measured against a 16-hour day and that the Government needed to be more realistic in terms of the fees paid. At the 2005 combined elections senior Presiding Officers were paid £255, Presiding Officers received £240 and Poll Clerks received £175. In 2003 the comparable figures for the Assembly election were £135 for senior Presiding Officers, £125 for Presiding Officers and £90 for Poll Clerks. The EONI advised us that they had no difficulty recruiting staff to work at the May 2005 elections.

4.53 The May 2005 combined elections were the first in Northern Ireland at which Poll Clerks were officially trained and received a training fee of £40, the equivalent to Presiding Officers. At previous elections, Presiding Officers were required to brief Poll Clerks on the morning of the poll as to what their duties were. As noted in our report on the 2003 Assembly election, this proved to be an unsatisfactory arrangement as it left Presiding Officers with little time to

prepare polling places for opening and did not provide Poll Clerks with sufficient information.

4.54 The decision to provide Poll Clerks with training was made following representations from the Chief Electoral Officer to the NIO. His request was supported by the Commission on the basis that Poll Clerks elsewhere in the UK received formal training and that Poll Clerks in Northern Ireland had additional duties emanating from the Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002. The EONI believed that the decision to train Poll Clerks made a significant difference to their performance overall and few withdrew at the last minute. The EONI informed us that 2005 was the first time in 20 years that all Poll Clerks had turned up for duty in Derry city. Presiding Officers confirmed that it was easier for them to carry out their own duties because Poll Clerks had received training.

The fact that Poll Clerks also received training was a great help. They were more aware of what was expected from them which made the whole day easier than before.

Presiding Officer

Presiding Officer training

4.55 Of those Presiding Officers who responded to our survey 99% said they had received training prior to the May 2005 elections. A similar number (95%) said they were satisfied with the training and support received from the EONI.

I was very satisfied with the training and support. It was very well presented and everyone was free to ask questions if they were not sure of something.

Presiding Officer

I was really pleased with the training as I have done Presiding Officer many times. It was very refreshing.

Presiding Officer

4.56 In total, only 5% of Presiding Officers expressed dissatisfaction at the training and support received from the EONI. Perceived shortcomings in training included lack of instructions on both the use of ballot boxes and the close of poll, insufficient advice on how to assist disabled voters and the precise role of polling agents. Other comments focused on the late availability of the Commission's good practice guide for poll staff, which in many cases did not arrive until one or two days before the election. Some Presiding Officers were concerned about a perceived lack of support from colleagues on the day.

The procedure for opening and closing the ballot boxes was never discussed.

The training does not prepare you for the amount of forms you have to consider at the end of poll.

I believe that the 'roving' Presiding Officer should have been in attendance during the early part of the day...to ensure that everything was in order.

I would like the forms for assisting a blind voter, disabled voter or assisted voter explained at a session before polling day...rather than having to just read the section in the training manual.

Good practice guides were only received by some Presiding Officers on the day before the election. These should be available in advance of the training sessions.

Presiding Officers

Poll Clerk training

4.57 In response to our Poll Clerk survey, 98% said that they had received training prior to the May 2005 elections. Over half (58%) found the training 'very' informative, with 41% saying it was 'quite' informative. Only 1% found the training 'not at all' informative. The vast majority (97%) received a procedures manual through the post before the elections. Of those who received it, two-thirds found it 'very useful' and a third 'quite useful'. Again, 1% said it was 'not at all useful'. Despite the positive response to the training in general, several areas were identified where the training did not live up to expectations, such as the late arrival of the training manual, which in some cases was only received on the day prior to polling day or not at all. Other Poll Clerks said the materials provided were too detailed and there was insufficient time to digest the information.

The training manual only arrived by post two days before the election. At the training it was stressed how important it was to read it. I felt I wasn't given enough time to do so.

Poll Clerk

4.58 Poll Clerks were asked to identify areas where training could be improved and a number of suggestions were made, including advice on the layout to be followed when setting up a polling station, how and where to position posters, a greater emphasis on mock election scenarios and the precise role of the Presiding Officer.

Hands-on workshop showing you how to complete the register – drawing lines and marking appropriate letters.

Poll Clerks have to take over from Presiding Officers at breaks and I feel they should have received the same training that Presiding Officers got.

I feel it would have been useful to have a 'dummy run' on training night because no matter how many times you have worked at an election... it takes a while before you are comfortable doing your job.

A sight of all notices and posters at the training session would be useful and suggested locations in a polling station. Setting up a station by 7am is quite a rush when all these documents are seen for the first time.

Poll Clerks

4.59 While the vast majority of Presiding Officers were happy with the training they received and Poll Clerks received training for the first time, there remains a degree of inconsistency in how Deputy Returning Officers train poll staff. It is acknowledged that training large numbers of people over a short period of time presents a number of logistical problems. However, small organisational changes in the following areas could potentially bring about improvements:

- implementation of a structured training programme for all staff;
- choice of suitable venues for training;
- use of accredited trainers;
- appropriate use of IT and audio visual equipment, with people trained in its use;
- training materials available for distribution on the night;

- greater emphasis on practical matters related to polling day including layout, completion of paperwork, use of ballot boxes and close of poll;
- restricting numbers at individual training sessions;
- development of online interactive training materials for use by poll staff; and
- development of 'cascade' training via accredited Presiding Officers and Poll Clerks.

4.60 The Commission is currently reviewing its five-year UK-wide training strategy for electoral staff and the Assistant Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland is a member of the advisory group. The Commission will take into account the feedback received from poll staff at the May 2005 elections as part of its review.

In our report on the 2003 Assembly election we recommended that the EONI be funded to employ a dedicated training officer. We reaffirm this recommendation and believe that such an appointment is vital if staff are to have the necessary skills, competencies and confidence to provide a quality public service.

Summary

4.61 There was a broad consensus among stakeholders including the political parties, electoral administrators and the electorate that elections should be combined where it is practical to do so. The Government's decision to introduce legislation reinstating just over 70,000 electors onto the register alleviated concerns about the number of people registered and increased the overall registration rate to an estimated 91%.

4.62 The number of candidates standing at the UK Parliamentary election remained largely unchanged from 2001, while the number of candidates standing at the local government elections decreased by 57. Approximately one in five candidates at the combined elections was female. Candidates expressed general satisfaction with the nominations procedures and the arrangements for the freepost election literature drop via Royal Mail.

4.63 Access research found that formal support available to voters in Northern Ireland fell below that offered by electoral administrators in Great Britain. The report found that while the EONI had done a commendable job in difficult circumstances, its website did not meet basic accessibility standards, while a mystery shopper exercise revealed that most of the local councils tested were unable to provide information that would assist people with visual impairments. The report identified a gap in the provision of support for disabled people and expressed concern that the provisions of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 were not being adequately considered by organisations involved in the running of elections in Northern Ireland.

4.64 The number of postal votes issued in Northern Ireland decreased slightly from 2001, with a significant number rejected for reasons directly related to the Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002. Approximately 4,000 applications were made for electoral identification cards in advance of the elections and in total just over 100,000 cards have now been issued in Northern Ireland.



5 Communicating with the electorate

Political parties at election time have had to adopt increasingly sophisticated campaigning methods to ensure their message is heard. The use of websites, email and text messaging is now commonplace in the quest by parties to attract new and continuing support. At the same time the media offer an ever increasing choice about how, when and where people receive news. Here we analyse the findings of research into the party and media campaigns and look at the impact of our own public awareness campaign.

The party campaigns

5.1 LizFawcett Consulting was commissioned to undertake research and analysis of the political party campaigns at both the UK Parliamentary and local government elections. Key aspects of the research included parties' objectives and expectations, techniques adopted in getting messages across and the impact of the media. The views expressed in the following paragraphs are those of LizFawcett Consulting.

5.2 Four of the five main parties expressed satisfaction with their campaigns. The four largest parties (DUP, Sinn Féin, SDLP and UUP) contested all 18 UK Parliamentary seats and the Alliance Party 12. The parties also focused their attention on particular local government areas.

5.3 Both the DUP and the UUP felt that most unionist voters had made their minds up long before the elections. The UUP entered the campaign privately hoping to retain at least three of its seats in the UK Parliament. This was despite a poll in the *Belfast Telegraph* on 11 March 2005 which indicated that the UUP's support had decreased from 22.7%, at the Assembly election in 2003, to just 16%. Nevertheless, the party was heartened by a perceived positive reception from voters on the doorsteps.

5.4 The DUP's Director of Elections said the election campaign was not primarily about winning over undecided voters, at least as far as his party was concerned.

I think a large part of our vote has been building up for core political issues over a long period of time. The key issue for you during a campaign is to motivate your vote to come out.

I very seldom regard an election campaign as an opportunity to win people over. I always regard that as the job to be done between elections. The election campaign is your opportunity to motivate and get your vote out.

DUP Director of Elections

5.5 Most of the party campaign directors interviewed for this report felt that it was preferable to hold the UK Parliamentary and local government elections on the same day. In Northern Ireland, the electorate has demonstrated a greater willingness to vote at the UK Parliamentary election than the local government elections where these are held separately. However, where elections are combined the numbers voting at the local government elections has increased. The UUP Director of Elections mentioned his party's long-standing enthusiasm for the 'Westminster effect' of holding combined elections as traditionally this tended to result in a higher local government vote for his party. However, he admitted this may not have been the case in the May 2005 elections. The Alliance Party's Director of Elections was adamant that such a 'Westminster effect' benefited only the DUP and Sinn Féin.

Purely financially it works better [because it's more economical to run two campaigns at once] but, in terms of the sheer logistics of organising two elections, it is a mountain. And from the point of view of the voters, and more importantly, the consequences for the political system, it's an absolute disaster – because the local elections are crowded out by Westminster, there's no doubt about that.

Alliance Party Director of Elections

5.6 The research found that door-to-door canvassing was central to the main parties' campaigns. In the Foyle constituency, the SDLP demonstrated how proficient and systematic door-to-door canvassing could reap dividends. The party emphasised connecting as early and as often as possible with voters in all its target constituencies. Both Sinn Féin and the SDLP said they felt that urging people to register paid dividends, ensuring that as many as possible of their potential supporters were on the register.

5.7 The single transferable vote (STV) system afforded parties an opportunity to maximise the number of seats by providing voters with advice on how to cast their preferences. The DUP attributed the party's success in East Belfast and Castlereagh to the use of this tactic where all their local government candidates were elected. In these and in other areas, the party printed mock ballot papers and voting advice leaflets tailored to each individual district. The literature also contained information on the difference between the UK Parliamentary and local government election ballot papers, which, the DUP believes, cut the number of spoiled DUP votes in East Belfast by 50%. However, the DUP admitted that the printing of voting advice literature added about 50% to the party's campaign costs in East Belfast and Castlereagh.

The campaign agenda

5.8 Most party campaign directors felt that the broadcast media had little interest in policy issues during the run up to the elections. Of particular concern to the parties was the media's perceived lack of interest in 'socio-economic' issues. Indeed, the allegedly

lukewarm manner in which the media approached the elections appeared to have influenced the campaign strategy of the parties.

5.9 Three of the parties reported warnings from the broadcast media that coverage of pre-election party events would be restricted. As a result, the Alliance Party decided not to launch any policy documents, apart from its manifesto, opting for a policy-related stunt close to the election. Likewise, the SDLP abandoned a series of document launches, pertaining to socio-economic issues, halfway through the campaign. In general, the parties adopted greater use of newspaper advertising, direct mailing and leaflet drops in an attempt to redress the balance of their restricted broadcast coverage.

5.10 The Political Correspondent of the *News Letter* said that while his newspaper covered numerous statements from local government candidates, many candidates were disappointed with the coverage of the local government election. The Ireland Political Editor at the Press Association believed that small parties who were not running UK Parliamentary candidates were at a distinct disadvantage.

The broadcaster's view

5.11 Broadcasters were asked to respond to some of the points made by the parties. UTV confirmed that it held discussions on its plans for election coverage with each of the main parties early on in the campaign. It denied that any 'warning' was issued. BBC Northern Ireland said that, in the course of regular discussions with parties, its journalists outlined how the relevant editorial guidelines would impact on election

coverage. Both UTV and the BBC felt it was unrealistic of any party to expect broadcasters to turn up at a party news conference simply because one had been arranged.

5.12 The broadcasters also believed that constitutional issues were of greater relevance than socio-economic issues at the May 2005 elections. The Political Editor at BBC Northern Ireland felt that:

This election was widely seen by both the British and Irish governments as another test of the parties' respective strengths in any forthcoming negotiations. So we have to achieve an appropriate balance between socio-economic and constitutional issues.

5.13 According to the research, both UTV and BBC Northern Ireland tried to be innovative in their approach to election campaign coverage of socio-economic issues. During the first week of the election campaign, UTV's daily news magazine programme, UTV Live, ran a series of five five-minute special reports on socio-economic issues. These attempted to set the scene by outlining some of the major issues which were facing the Government and politicians in Northern Ireland. The main parties were also questioned on their policies in discussion programmes and in UTV Live's set-piece interviews with each of the main party leaders.

5.14 BBC Northern Ireland's TV and radio current affairs programmes ran a number of special items and discussions focusing on socio-economic issues. BBC News Online showed particular innovation in its attempts to engage online users in debate on both the Northern

Ireland and UK-wide election campaign. One of its initiatives was an 'issues/policy grid' which summarised the policies of the main parties, including the five main Northern Ireland parties, on a range of issues including health, education and pensions. In addition, BBC Newsline ran a series of outside broadcasts from across Northern Ireland covering four key policy areas – planning and the environment, health, water charges and education.

Media content analysis

5.15 The Institute of Governance, Public Policy and Social Research at Queen's University Belfast was commissioned to conduct qualitative and quantitative research of the media coverage at the May 2005 combined elections. This included newspaper and television content analysis of Northern Ireland's daily newspapers, local weekly papers and broadcast media. Key aspects of the research included the extent of media coverage generally, use of web logs, the coverage and treatment of opinion polls, coverage of the party campaigns and editorial treatment of the key issues and personalities.

5.16 According to the researchers, the May 2005 elections saw little difference in media coverage from that witnessed at the Assembly election in 2003. Coverage largely concentrated on the competition between the two main unionist parties (DUP and UUP) and the two main nationalist parties (Sinn Féin and SDLP) thus reinforcing the feeling of separate intra-communal contests within both communities. The UK Parliamentary election campaign was driven by discussion of the parties' potential negotiating strengths and positions post-election. As a result there was less emphasis on the views of the smaller parties and discussion of socio-economic issues was more limited.

5.17 The researchers felt that coverage given to political parties in the Northern Ireland's daily newspapers reflected the editorial stance of the particular paper in respect of the broader constitutional issues. They concluded that, as a result, the *Belfast Telegraph* and *News Letter* referred more often to the unionist parties in their coverage while the *Irish News* and *Daily Ireland* focused more on the nationalist parties. Coverage of the smaller parties and independent candidates was quite restricted as can be seen in Table 12.

Table 12: Proportion of party references by Northern Ireland daily newspapers

	DUP (%)	UUP (%)	Sinn Féin (%)	SDLP (%)	Alliance (%)	Independents (%)
<i>Belfast Telegraph</i>	36	41	24	22	8	10
<i>Daily Ireland</i>	24	18	48	48	6	12
<i>News Letter</i>	46	54	14	12	4	7
<i>Irish News</i>	31	28	35	39	5	6

Note: Articles analysed: 655.

Source: Institute of Governance, Public Policy and Social Research.

5.18 The local weekly press also varied in the space devoted to different political parties. For example, the *Derry Journal* focused on the SDLP and Sinn Féin, both involved in a very close contest for Foyle. On the other hand the *East Antrim Gazette* concentrated on the election prospects of the DUP and UUP in East Antrim with significant interest also in the prospects of the Alliance Party as Table 13 illustrates.

5.19 In general, the local weekly papers were more likely to cover the local elections than were the Northern Ireland dailies. The local press was also more likely to cover 'socio-economic' issues in their coverage of both the UK Parliamentary election and local government election. They were also more likely to devote space to the smaller parties. The research suggested that the interviews conducted with party leaders on BBC's *Hearts and Minds* concentrated on constitutional issues to the detriment of 'socio-economic' issues.

Access to campaign information

5.20 The research conducted by The Pollen Shop employed a number of techniques including an access audit of election literature, 'mystery shopper' exercises and face-to-face interviews. Comparisons were also made with the accessibility of information in other parts of the UK. The report found that overall the UK Parliamentary and local government elections in Northern Ireland were less accessible than those in other parts of the UK, although there were instances where information was more accessible.

Election literature

5.21 The Pollen Shop report found that the five main political parties in Northern Ireland were less likely to provide information in accessible formats than the major parties in Great Britain. This may have been due to the fact that many

Table 13: Proportion of party references by local weekly newspapers

	DUP (%)	UUP (%)	Sinn Féin (%)	SDLP (%)	Alliance (%)	Independents (%)
<i>East Antrim Gazette</i>	24	43	3	3	24	8
<i>Tyrone Courier</i>	20	25	25	17	1	4
<i>Ulster Gazette</i>	18	15	33	30	0	2
<i>Impartial Reporter</i>	26	29	24	21	0	7
<i>Derry Journal</i>	4	3	48	47	0	6
<i>Down Recorder</i>	24	21	27	3	7	0

Note: Articles analysed: 424.

Source: Institute of Governance, Public Policy and Social Research.

smaller parties across the UK did not have the systems or structures in place to ensure communication tools such as websites or helplines provide for the needs of disabled people or those with low levels of literacy.

5.22 Although election material produced by the five main political parties in Northern Ireland was not entirely accessible, the researchers found that in most cases the literature produced contained basic good practice such as large-print and clear contact information. It was identified that literature for the local government campaign had three clear functions:

- to support the party's UK Parliamentary candidate;
- to provide information on the candidate standing at the local government election; and
- to explain a preferred order of voting under the STV system.

The Pollen Shop concluded that some parties communicated this information more effectively than others, although the need for leaflets to contain a significant amount of information led to a reduction in font size, which may have adversely impacted upon people with visual impairments.

The Commission's public awareness campaign

5.23 The Commission has a duty to promote public awareness of 'electoral and democratic systems' under Section 13 of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000. Our public awareness campaign in respect of the UK Parliamentary and local government

elections was primarily information based with 'key dates' and 'call to action' central components. The campaign in respect of the May 2005 elections started in the middle of February when the 10 March deadline for registering to vote for local elections scheduled for 5 May 2005 was extensively advertised. We used television, radio and print media to publicise the cut-off date.

5.24 This activity was followed by newspaper advertising in support of the ID application centres operated by the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland (EONI). The advertisement, which appeared in the daily and Sunday newspapers, gave details of the 54 locations where applications for electoral ID cards could be made. It also highlighted the fact that the closing date for receipt of properly completed applications was 19 April 2005.

5.25 The 14 April deadline for applications for postal and proxy votes was also publicised in the print media under the banner 'Home or away, have your say'. The EONI also placed advertisements in the main daily papers offering advice to postal voters about the operation of the system and the need to retain the secrecy of the ballot.

5.26 In the month leading up to the elections the Commission embarked on a major television advertising campaign informing the electorate about the requirement for photographic ID. The advert also advised voters about the opening hours of polling places and gave details of the helpline number. The television campaign was supported by a 30-second radio commercial which ran from 18 April to polling day and web

links leading internet users to key sites providing electoral information.

5.27 Given that 27,000 ballot papers were spoiled at the combined elections in 2001, largely as a result of voter confusion, and that over 10,000 were spoiled at the Assembly election in 2003, the Commission initiated a specific campaign explaining the difference between the two voting systems in use on 5 May 2005. The campaign involved advertising in the daily and Sunday papers, outdoor advertising on bus sides, bus shelters and billboards. In addition, a poster was designed for display at the entrance to all polling places. The advertisements also reminded voters not to forget their photographic ID.

5.28 The Commission's public awareness campaign was also 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 elections. Among the activities conducted were web links to key sites. The *Belfast Telegraph* published, free of charge, details of the ID requirements on its politics pages and leaflets explaining the two different voting systems were distributed at the Belfast Marathon on 2 May 2005. Altogether the Commission's public awareness campaign in Northern Ireland in support of registration and the election cost approximately £400,000.

5.29 The campaign tracking research conducted after the 10 March registration deadline and the 5 May 2005 elections revealed the extent of uptake of the Commission's campaign. Spontaneous recall of the 'registration deadline'

advertising was 58% and for the 'call to vote' advertising it was 78%. This was the highest awareness level recorded in Northern Ireland since the Commission's public awareness campaigns started in 2002. The highest recognition level of Commission advertising at the 'call to vote' phase was for television (64%), followed by outdoor posters (26%), newspaper advertisements (17%) and radio (9%). Prompted advertising recall was also very high with almost nine in 10 people (87%) having seen or heard at least one element of the advertising campaign. Of those who had either heard or seen the TV or radio advertising 70% described it as 'informative' while less than one in 10 (7%) described it as either 'boring' or 'annoying'.

5.30 The tracking research also revealed that awareness generally of the correct and incorrect forms of electoral ID has continued to increase year on year as Tables 14 and 15 illustrate.

Table 14: Awareness of acceptable forms of ID for voting

ID type	Oct 02 (%)	Oct 03 (%)	June 04 (%)	May 05 (%)
Driving licence	81	86	88	88
British passport	65	81	89	87
Irish passport	17	37	50	42
Electoral ID card	22	59	72	60
Translink Senior SmartPass	6	19	43	43

Source: Millward Brown Ulster.

Table 15: Awareness of unacceptable forms of ID for voting

ID type	Oct 02 (%)	Oct 03 (%)	June 04 (%)	May 05 (%)
Pension book	22	15	5	3
Medical card	27	13	4	3
Social security book	11	11	3	2

Source: Millward Brown Ulster.

5.31 Altogether, 92% of those surveyed for the 'call to vote' phase of the tracking research indicated that they possessed at least one of the four forms of ID prescribed for voting at polling stations in Northern Ireland. The remaining 8% either said that they had none or that they did not know. Those without eligible ID were more likely to be female, aged between 18–24, to be Protestant, to be classified into socio-economic group C2DE and live in Belfast.

Sources of information about the elections

5.32 The vast majority (87%) of respondents to our public opinion survey had read or heard either 'a lot' or 'a little' about the elections. A wide variety of sources of information were available to respondents during the election campaign. Just over seven in 10 (71%) saw party election broadcasts on television, while 43% heard a party election broadcast on the radio. Figure 3 shows other major sources of information were election leaflets put through the letterbox (67%), TV and radio programmes (58%), canvassers from political parties calling to people's homes (55%) and newspapers (51%).

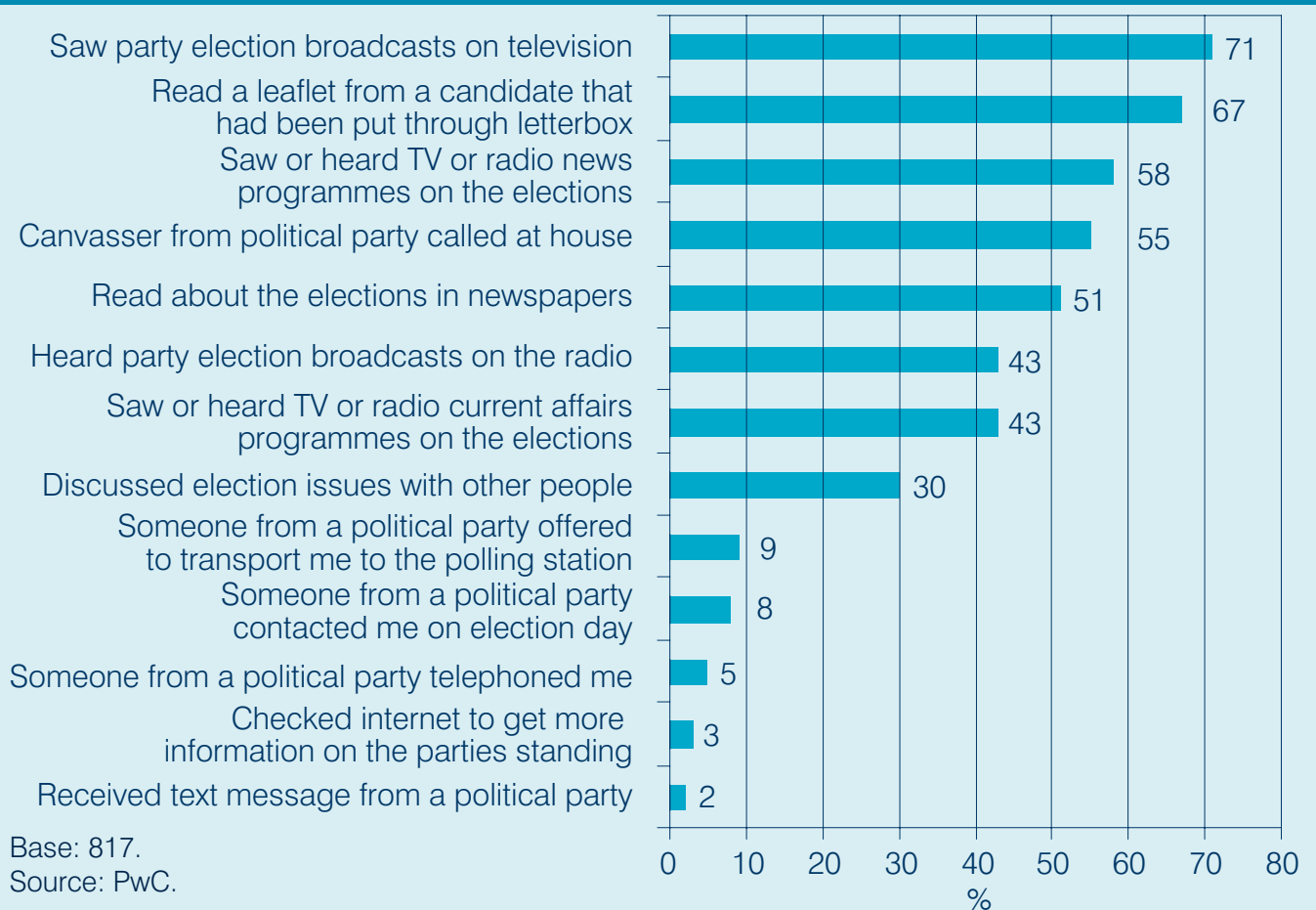
5.33 Respondents were asked what sources of information were the most effective in persuading them to vote. Almost one-quarter (24%) said that a canvasser from a political party calling to their home was the most effective. This was followed by party election broadcasts on television (16%) and a leaflet put through the letterbox (13%). Surprisingly only 8% considered TV and radio programmes to be the most effective while 7% suggested newspapers.

5.34 Overall the party campaigns were perceived to have provided reasonable information but respondents were critical of some of the content.

- Almost two-thirds (66%) considered that the parties spent too much time during the campaign criticising each other.
- A similar proportion (57%) felt that the election campaigns provided enough information to make a good choice between the parties.
- Less than half (43%) felt that the party election broadcasts helped them understand what the parties stood for.
- Opinion was evenly divided between those who thought the parties did not talk about any of the issues relevant to them and those who felt the opposite to be the case (34%).
- One in five young people (20%) aged between 18–24 were of the opinion that parties did not talk about issues that mattered to them.

5.35 Respondents to the survey believed that the media's coverage of the elections helped explain what the parties stood for. Only 18% believed that media coverage made it difficult for them to learn what the parties stood for, whereas just under half (46%) had the opposite viewpoint.

Figure 3: Sources of information about the UK Parliamentary and local government elections



Summary

5.36 We commissioned research to look at the party campaigns, media content and the accessibility of election material produced by key stakeholders including the political parties and electoral administrators. Our post-election public opinion survey also asked respondents how they received news and information about the election.

5.37 An accessibility audit of election information found that election literature produced by the

main political parties in Northern Ireland was deemed to be less accessible than that produced by the main parties in Great Britain, but in most cases did contain large-print and clear contact information.

5.38 The Commission's public awareness campaign included television, radio, print and outdoor advertising to communicate key messages to the electorate. These included the date of the combined elections, the requirement

for photographic ID and information on the two different voting systems in use on polling day. Tracking research conducted on behalf of the Commission showed that awareness of the key messages remained high.

6 Polling day

The combined elections on 5 May 2005 were the first UK Parliamentary and local government elections at which the provisions of the Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002 were fully tested. The two different voting systems in use on the day presented particular difficulties for some voters and poll staff.

Polling station scheme

6.1 The Electoral Office for Northern Ireland (EONI) retained approximately the same number of polling places and polling stations for the May 2005 elections as had been in place at the 2003 Assembly election. There had been a significant increase in numbers in 2003 after the 2001 combined elections, when a large number of voters were turned away at the close of poll. Our report on the 2003 Assembly election found that the position with regard to crowding and queuing in polling places had improved considerably since 2001. The EONI consulted on its polling station scheme in early 2005 and made a number of changes. Some polling places were relocated to more accessible venues or more neutral locations.

6.2 Following violence at the close of poll and subsequent removal of ballot boxes in the Shantallow and Creggan areas of the Foyle constituency at the 2003 Assembly election and 2004 European Parliamentary election, the Chief Electoral Officer advised the political parties and Derry City Council that he was not prepared to compromise the safety of staff and as a result the schools affected would no longer be used as polling places. However, after discussions between the Chief Electoral Officer, Derry City Council, the clergy, school principals, community representatives and the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), a compromise was reached whereby ballot boxes were removed from the schools by the EONI without police escorts. As a result of the agreement brokered, polling day in this part of Foyle passed off peacefully for the first time in many years.

Observers

6.3 The Electoral Law (Northern Ireland) Act 1962 (Amendment No. 2) Order 2005 amended Schedule 5 of the 1962 Act to allow Electoral Commission staff and persons authorised by the Commission access to polling places during the local government elections. Observers comprised an Electoral Commissioner, Commission staff from across the UK and members of statutory and voluntary organisations based in Northern Ireland. All observers were given a detailed briefing ahead of polling day which outlined their duties and responsibilities. Commission staff also observed at the local government and UK Parliamentary counts.

6.4 A delegation from the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe's (OSCE) Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) also conducted an Election Assessment Mission (EAM) across the UK between 28 April and 7 May 2005. A small number of assessment team members visited Belfast and met representatives of the political parties, the media and the electoral authorities in advance of the election. ODIHR observers were unable to gain admittance to polling places because UK legislation restricts access to voters, candidates and agents, poll staff and police officers. However, the Chief Electoral Officer gave members of the delegation access to the counts. In its report on the election OSCE/ODIHR reaffirmed its earlier recommendation that the UK should adopt legislative provisions enabling international observers to attend all stages of the election process. The Commission welcomes the fact that the Electoral Administration Bill

published on 11 October 2005 includes provision for observers to observe proceedings at elections in the UK.

Polling stations Staffing

6.5 Polling stations opened at 7am and closed at 10pm. Each polling station was staffed by a Presiding Officer and a Poll Clerk. Some polling places which contained several polling stations had an additional Presiding Officer assigned and a large number had an additional Poll Clerk on duty to direct voters to the relevant polling station. All polling places had a designated senior Presiding Officer. In all cases EONI Deputy Returning Officers appointed 'roving' Presiding Officers who visited all polling places in their area during the day. Presiding Officers were asked to arrive at the polling place by 6.20am at the latest. Poll Clerks were asked to arrive by 6.30am.

6.6 Analysis of the questionnaires returned by Presiding Officers and Poll Clerks showed that just over two-thirds (67%) of Presiding Officers and three-quarters (75%) of Poll Clerks were female. Almost half of the Presiding Officers (49%) were aged 50 and over and only 7% were under 30. The age profile of Poll Clerks was different in that almost one in five (18%) were aged under 30, while 38% were over 50. There was a significant increase in the number of Presiding Officers who said they had worked at previous elections compared to the 2003 Assembly election. Just over nine in 10 (92%) had worked as a Presiding Officer before while 84% had acted as a Poll Clerk. In 2003, 58% of

Presiding Officers had previous experience in the role. Similarly, a high proportion (82%) of Poll Clerks working at the 2005 elections had worked at previous elections.

6.7 A small number of respondents raised concerns about the recruitment policy adopted with regard to the appointment of poll staff and it was suggested that this be reviewed. The concerns expressed were in relation to how representative of the community poll staff were. The EONI is a designated body under the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and as such has an approved equality scheme. Given the concerns raised about recruitment and the age and gender profile of election staff this may be a suitable topic on which to conduct an equality impact assessment in advance of the next election.

I would like to see more local people involved in polling station work. Recruitment in future should be specifically targeted at people who have never worked at elections before. The same staff seem to appear at every election.

Candidate

More independent recruiting of staff as most staff seem to be from one persuasion.

Candidate

I feel the workforce is one-sided and a better religious mix should be encouraged. Perhaps the jobs could be advertised stating that as Catholics are under-represented their application would be most welcome.

Presiding Officer

One political party at our post-election seminar suggested that staff working at polling places should be rotated to different polling places from election to election in order to avoid 'an air of familiarity' developing. However, the EONI advised us that many poll staff are unwilling to work outside their own area.

6.8 Polling stations comprised desks, ballot boxes, documentation for the day and polling booths. The ballot boxes for the UK Parliamentary election containing the ballot papers and stationery were stored either in local police stations or area electoral offices. Ballot boxes for use at the local government elections were distributed by local councils. The vast majority of Presiding Officers reported that they experienced no problems in setting up and opening their polling station at 7am. However, as in the 2003 Assembly election a number of Presiding Officers identified problems at the opening of poll.

I had no tally sheet, no log and only some of the paperwork.

Presiding Officer

Somewhat of a 'scramble' to get polling place ready. Putting up signs and checking all implements and forms is a necessary and time consuming task.

Presiding Officer

Despite the fact that Poll Clerks had received training and had been told to arrive in good time to assist the Presiding Officer in preparing for the opening of the poll, a number turned up late.

My Poll Clerk did not arrive until 6.45am. This caused quite a strain on myself as I was trying to prepare the polling place alone.

Presiding Officer

This was my first time as senior Presiding Officer and I was at the polling place at 6.05am. The caretaker showed up at 6.30am. I needed more time to have the polling place ready for 7am. An earlier opening time (of the premises) would be beneficial, say 6.15am.

Presiding Officer

A small number of Poll Clerks encountered difficulties when they arrived at the polling place.

The Presiding Officer showed up after everyone else and failed to organise properly – the Poll Clerks ended up doing most of it.

Poll Clerk

The senior Presiding Officer arrived later than expected and everything was rushed prior to the opening of the poll.

Poll Clerk

6.9 Observers noted that there was no consistency as to the layout of polling stations and this appeared to be at the discretion of the Presiding Officer. It was also noted that some polling places were inadequate in terms of size and floor space and could not cope with the number of polling stations located there.

The polling place was insufficient with only one room provided for four boxes. Presiding Officers made the best of a bad situation but chaos reigned.

Poll Clerk

Initially the senior Presiding Officer had the three polling stations organised in such a way that it would have been very easy for a voter to place their vote in the wrong ballot box. I made a suggestion to fix this and it was accepted and we had no problems.

Presiding Officer

Accessing the polling place

Location of polling places

6.10 Observers noted that external signposting was generally poor. Some signage had been rendered illegible by the rain and it was suggested that signage should be laminated to prevent this. One Presiding Officer alerted the EONI to the fact that electors would have difficulty in finding their designated polling place.

The polling station was not suitable at all and I told the Electoral Office that electors would not be able to find it – which is exactly what happened. I said I would need loads of posters to show where it was. I didn't get any, but got a few directional arrows in late afternoon. The person bringing them had to phone and find out where the polling station was.

Presiding Officer

6.11 The vast majority (97%) of those interviewed in our post-election public opinion survey said they experienced no difficulty finding their polling place. The address of an elector's polling place is printed on their poll card. Nevertheless, several Presiding Officers noted instances where voters had reported problems.

Some electors phoned the Electoral Office because they were unable to find the polling station.

Presiding Officer

People came to the polling station because they had voted there for years, but the station had been reduced in size and half the voters had been relocated. They only realised this when we pointed it out to them.

Presiding Officer

Obstructions

6.12 All polling places visited had party workers and candidates in close proximity to the entrance. At several polling places the high volume of party workers combined to restrict access to the building, although in the vast majority of cases observers found the atmosphere outside polling places to be relaxed. A small proportion (3%) of Presiding Officers said they were aware of intimidation by party supporters, which usually occurred outside the boundary of the polling place.

6.13 Many polling places were only identifiable by party literature adorning lampposts and party caravans parked at the side of the road or on the pavement in close proximity to the entrance to polling places. This issue was commented on by a number of political parties who suggested

that there should be a 100-yard exclusion zone around polling places where parties would not be allowed to canvass. This was also highlighted in our UK-wide access report prepared by The Pollen Shop.

An unwelcoming, over-politicised atmosphere outside a number of polling places was a unique feature to Northern Ireland. Examples of this included large numbers of political activists or party vehicles parked directly outside polling stations. Political parties may have good intentions...but the consequence of having party activists too visible is that it can leave other voters feeling vulnerable. We are concerned that people with mental health or learning disabilities may have been affected. Representations were made to the research team from young peoples' organisations that this issue also left some young people intimidated.

Accessibility review

We witnessed many voters being bombarded by party canvassers...We think there should be a total ban on canvassers within a wide radius of the polling stations. We think most parties would welcome such a ban...but would be reluctant to take part in a voluntary ban for fear that other parties would not comply.

Submission from political party

We share the view of a number of stakeholders that this is an issue which needs to be addressed. While we do not propose a change to the legislation at this stage, we believe there would be merit in all the political parties subscribing to a voluntary code of practice aimed at improving access to polling places. This is a matter which the Commission will pursue with the political parties through the Assembly's Parties' Panel (APP).

Disabled access

6.14 Observers' reports indicated that there remained inadequate access for disabled people at a number of polling places and that very few polling places could boast excellent access. Wheelchair users were still being forced to use alternative entrances as main entrances were not equipped with ramps. The lack of clearly marked disabled parking was also a cause for concern. At one polling place it was explained that the school caretaker would occasionally 'go outside to deal with disabled voters'. Staff at some polling places appeared better equipped to assist voters than at others. One Poll Clerk admitted that she would have no idea what to do if a disabled person arrived. More modern buildings in urban locations offered excellent access and parking – but again the issue was raised as to why schools continue to be used as polling places even though they are currently exempt from compliance with the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, which states that service providers may have to make 'reasonable adjustments' to the physical features of their premises to overcome barriers to access.

6.15 In response to a Parliamentary question from Lady Sylvia Hermon MP (North Down) about wheelchair access to polling places in Northern Ireland, the Chief Electoral Officer said that 534 venues out of 610 were wheelchair accessible and that alternative venues had been sought for the remaining 76, without success. He indicated that he was working with the Equality Commission to assist the owners of such properties to address their statutory obligations. He emphasised that the position had greatly improved in recent years. His view was endorsed by the vast majority (94%) of Presiding Officers who considered their polling place to be accessible. This compares with a figure of 56% of Presiding Officers who considered their polling place to be accessible at the 2003 Assembly election. However, some concerns were raised by Presiding Officers about steps at the entrance to, and inside, polling places, lack of ramped access and the distance older people had to walk to reach polling places.

People with disabilities gained access through emergency exit doors as steps and stairs prevented them gaining access through the main doors.

There was no ramp into the station and people with wheelchairs couldn't get up the steps into the hall.

The polling place had six steps at its entrance – one lady fell and others, particularly the elderly, had great difficulty getting down stairs.

A number of people complained that the front gates were not open and this increased the distance they had to walk.

Presiding Officers

6.16 Deputy Returning Officers employed by the EONI advised us that in their opinion the vast majority of polling places were generally accessible, although many were not entirely suitable. Where inaccessible premises were used this was due to a lack of suitable alternative facilities. One Deputy Returning Officer commented that poll staff, as part of their training, had been instructed to familiarise themselves with the arrangements for disabled access at their polling place and to set up the polling stations with this in mind.

6.17 Few Deputy Returning Officers reported feedback from disabled voters regarding voting arrangements. Similarly, the Equality Commission has advised us that none of its service users raised any concerns about accessibility in respect of the May 2005 elections.

Disability Action – access to polling places survey

6.18 Disability Action, an umbrella organisation representing the views of 180 member groups in Northern Ireland, conducted its own small scale access survey of polling places.²¹ The study utilised a questionnaire, a focus group and a post-election workshop. Altogether, 56 responses from disabled people were received about voting at polling stations while 15 related to postal voting. Questions were asked about a range of issues including:

- the distance people had to travel to polling stations;
- the availability of designated car parking;

- appropriate design of ramps;
- access inside the polling place;
- the availability of low-level polling booths;
- display of large-print ballot papers;
- availability of the tactile voting device for visually impaired people; and
- the helpfulness of poll staff.

6.19 Disability Action highlighted a number of issues raised by respondents to its survey including:

- the restriction on some forms of ID continue to be barriers to voting for many disabled people;
- the availability of parking close to the entrance of polling places is essential in ensuring the accessibility of the election to disabled people;
- only buildings which are accessible should be used as polling places;
- information regarding the accessibility of polling places should be made available in advance of election day;
- routes within polling places should be clearly signposted, rest points provided and doors kept open;
- half (50%) of those who took part in the survey were not aware of the provision of low-level booths, large-print ballot papers or the tactile voting device for visually impaired people; and
- ballot papers were not accessible to voters with visual impairments because it was difficult to distinguish between the colours used.²²

²¹ Disability Action, *Polls Apart: Access to polling stations at the Westminster and local elections*, August 2005.

²² The EONI advised us that the colours chosen were agreed between the Department for Constitutional Affairs and RNIB and were applicable throughout the UK.

6.20 In the conclusion to its report Disability Action states:

It is disappointing and of real concern that disabled people continue to be disenfranchised by barriers built into the system and the continued failure on the part of the administration to deal with this issue. The accessibility of the entire voting process should be subject to continued review. Simple, achievable and measurable objectives should be identified and a work programme established to ensure the future accessibility of elections in Northern Ireland. A comprehensive study of all aspects of accessibility should take place at the next and all future elections.

The findings from the Disability Action survey largely mirror those contained in our report on the Assembly elections in 2003, when we commissioned Disability Action to conduct a large scale access survey. There is some evidence to suggest that access has improved, for example, there are now more polling places with ramped access. However, we largely concur with the recommendations made by The Pollen Shop and Disability Action. The EONI, the Commission and other stakeholders must continue to work towards fully accessible elections in Northern Ireland.

Inside the polling place

Layout of the polling place

6.21 Despite being given instructions on how to vote and where to deposit the ballot papers, on many occasions observers witnessed people attempting to place both papers in one box. Poll staff had to spend a considerable amount

of time attempting to prevent this. Many poll staff had improvised and placed handwritten labels on the boxes telling voters into which box the ballot should be placed. However in most cases it was difficult to distinguish between ballot boxes which were often placed side-by-side. The responses to the Presiding Officers and Poll Clerk questionnaires revealed that many polling staff recognised that there were shortcomings in the positioning of ballot boxes. Some felt that there was insufficient separation of and distinction between the local government and UK Parliamentary boxes. This confusion was confirmed at the counts, when considerable time was spent separating local government and UK Parliamentary ballot papers.

Given the difficulties encountered by poll staff at elections we recommend that EONI conduct a review of how best to lay out a polling place and label ballot boxes at a combined election to reduce voter confusion and increase efficiency.

One man complained that the ballot boxes were not marked clearly enough as to which was the local government box and which was the Westminster box. We then put labels beneath and at sides of boxes and instructed every voter which box to put the papers into. It made no difference, they still put them in the wrong box.

Presiding Officer

There was confusion on the part of voters where to put the Parliamentary and local government ballots, even though they were told by us and the ballot boxes were clearly marked.

Presiding Officer

6.22 We sought the views of Presiding Officers about their experiences inside polling places. They were asked to comment on a series of statements describing the atmosphere in the polling place. Almost nine in 10 (88%) considered the atmosphere to be 'good humoured'. A similar proportion (89%) felt that it was 'well-ordered' and 84% said it was 'relaxed'. A very small proportion (2%) said it was 'chaotic', a further 2% said it was intimidating, while one in 10 agreed that the polling place was 'crowded'.

6.23 The vast majority (95%) of problems with queuing occurred between 5pm and 10pm, with only 3% outside this timeframe. Altogether 4% of Presiding Officers said they had to turn potential voters away because they were not issued with ballot papers before the 10pm close of poll. In most instances the number of people turned away ranged from one person up to five. One candidate claimed that staff shortages led to queues with the result that some electors left without voting. In another instance a Poll Clerk commented:

There was great anger and confusion from voters and candidates alike because there was one person telling voters which ballot box to vote at. There were a lot of mistakes made and after queuing for a considerable time voters were turned away as they were at the wrong ballot box. Most of these voters chose to leave the polling station due to this, instead of joining another queue.

Poll Clerk

6.24 At one polling place in the Lagan Valley constituency, a local councillor alleged that up to 30 voters were not issued with ballot papers even though they were inside the polling place.

He further alleged that long queues were forming after 6pm and that he had raised his concerns about staffing levels with the senior Presiding Officer. He described the situation as a 'shambles' which the EONI did nothing to try to avoid.²³ In response, the Chief Electoral Officer said that the EONI was aware of some queues and disquiet at the polling place in question and arranged for an additional Poll Clerk to be deployed. Furthermore, he advised that in order to ensure calm and orderly behaviour inside the school, the police provided a permanent presence until the close of poll. He set out the legal position with regard to the issuing of ballot papers, explaining that even if an elector has been waiting inside the polling place for some time, unless the ballot paper is issued prior to 10pm, the elector cannot vote.²⁴ A Poll Clerk who witnessed the situation made the following comments:

A very ugly situation developed when 40–50 voters who had queued for up to an hour were unable to cast their votes as the poll had closed at 10pm. If the police had not been present in substantial numbers there would have been disorder and possible injury to electoral staff who were verbally abused by disappointed voters. This situation was caused solely by the understaffing and poor organisation of the polling place.

Poll Clerk

²³ Letter from Lisburn City Councillor, 31 May 2005.

²⁴ Copy of letter from the Chief Electoral Officer to Lisburn City Councillor, 6 June 2005.

In our statutory report on the 2003 Assembly election we recommended to 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. This issue was also addressed by the OSCE/ODIHR Assessment Mission Report on the May 2005 elections, where it stated that consideration could be given to permit voters, already in line when the polling station closes, to receive and cast their ballot. We reaffirm our earlier recommendation.

6.25 We also asked the public for its views on the atmosphere inside polling places and found that overall electors were not as positive as they were at the 2003 Assembly election. This is likely to be explained by the fact that there were two elections on the same day. For example, Table 16 shows 21% of those interviewed felt that the

polling place was crowded, as opposed to 4% in 2003. The numbers agreeing that the polling place was 'chaotic' increased from 1% in 2003 to 7% in 2005. There was also a slight increase among those who considered the atmosphere intimidating. Overall focus group participants found the process relatively straightforward, although a few said they were slightly nervous because of the unfamiliar surroundings and that they were unsure about the voting process.

Uncomfortable, you're going into a strange building, it makes me nervous.

Focus group participant

Slightly nervous because I really don't know what I'm going to do until it's handed to me.

Focus group participant

Table 16: Agreement with statements about the atmosphere in polling places

'I found it...'	Presiding Officers 2001* (%)	Presiding Officers 2003** (%)	Presiding Officers 2005† (%)	Public 2003‡ (%)	Public 2005‡‡ (%)
Good-humoured	76	89	88	61	59
Relaxed	60	90	83	86	71
Well-ordered	64	91	89	94	81
Intimidating	1	3	2	2	5
Chaotic	1	2	2	1	7
Crowded	(not asked)	6	10	4	21

Notes: * Northern Ireland Office survey, base 926.

** Electoral Commission survey, base 1,102.

† Electoral Commission survey, base 583.

‡ Millward Brown Ulster public opinion research, base 1,444.

‡‡ PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) public opinion research, base 561.

We suggest that on the basis that problems with queuing occur between 5pm and 10pm, the EONI review staffing levels with a view to managing the flow of voters at busy periods. It might be feasible, for example, that additional staff be employed later in the day with fewer staff being deployed during less busy times.

Internal signage

6.26 Our observers noted that there was no shortage of signposting inside polling places, although at several schools it had become lost among children's artwork. This was a theme picked up by one candidate, who commented:

Too much clutter in rooms, polling notices impossible to read against background of schoolwork.

Submission from candidate

6.27 There was significant information for voters available on walls and in polling booths, but on occasion its placement was somewhat haphazard with no consistency of approach between polling places. Observers noted official large-print sample ballot papers were posted in some polling booths, but not in others. A number of Presiding Officers spoken to said that the guidance from the EONI was limited and that the issue had not been adequately addressed during training.

6.28 Observers also commented that more could be done to ensure that polling places serving both sides of the community were free from religious and/or political symbols. This matter was also raised at the post-election seminar where both the internal and external environments of some polling places were

highlighted as not being welcoming to one side of the community or the other. In response the Chief Electoral Officer said that there was regular consultation on the polling station scheme and that the locations of polling places were changed where representations had been made. He emphasised, however, that this was not always possible as there were not always suitable alternatives. He also explained that the EONI did not have the time or resources to monitor over 600 polling places.

We recommend that written guidance on the display of material should be issued to school principals in advance of future elections.

The voting process

Voter confusion

6.29 All those involved in the May 2005 elections including political parties, candidates and agents, Presiding Officers, Poll Clerks and the electorate raised voter confusion as a significant issue. Their concerns are borne out by the number of ballot papers inadvertently spoiled because of confusion between the two different voting systems. Altogether 14,758 votes were spoiled at the local government elections, representing 2.05% of all votes polled. The equivalent figure for the UK Parliamentary election was 6,166, representing 0.85% of all ballots cast. Overall, the figures were a slight improvement from the 2001 combined elections, when 2.41% of local government and 0.86% of UK Parliamentary ballots were spoiled. In England, Scotland and Wales the percentages of spoiled ballot papers at the UK Parliamentary election were 0.31%, 0.20% and 0.26% respectively. From the

sources used to inform this report we have identified some reasons why the proportion of spoilt ballot papers in Northern Ireland remains high including:

- a lack of understanding of the single transferable vote (STV) voting system;
- two different voting systems in use on the same day;
- the overall design of the UK Parliamentary election ballot paper;
- the similarity in appearance of local government and UK Parliamentary ballot papers; and
- mock ballot papers distributed by parties to resemble official ballots.

6.30 A significant number of Presiding Officers and Poll Clerks who responded to our surveys commented on the confusion experienced by voters, which was a view endorsed by EONI Deputy Returning Officers. Almost 80% of Presiding Officers agreed with the statement that 'Some voters had difficulty in understanding how to vote'. The Commission's observers also noted that voter confusion, especially among older people, was a recurring theme throughout polling day. Voters were observed on several occasions asking for replacement ballots having inadvertently spoiled their original paper. Polling staff informed observers that confusion was exacerbated by the legal requirement for numbers to appear on the left-hand side of the UK Parliamentary ballot papers, a view shared by many candidates who responded to our survey:

Many people complained that Parliamentary ballot papers were very confusing due to numbers printed on them.

Presiding Officer

The two ballot papers caused a lot of confusion on election day. The buff coloured council ballot paper was too similar to the white Parliamentary ballot paper.

Presiding Officer

Comments were relayed by Presiding Officers regarding confusion between voting systems and the fact that the Westminster ballot paper had sequential numbers on the left hand side of the page.

Deputy Returning Officer

People got confused by the two ballot papers, two ballot boxes and two methods of voting. They were posting the advice slips handed out by the parties instead of their ballot papers.

Poll Clerk

6.31 The Pollen Shop's research reported that the fact that the two ballot papers in use were of a similar colour was a significant access barrier for voters with visual impairments and communication and learning disabilities. This was further complicated by the fact that the local elections used the STV system of voting, which some parties attempted to explain using mock ballot papers distributed to voters outside polling places. The report found that although a number of these were helpful, others were difficult to understand and potentially confusing.

6.32 Just over one in five of those interviewed for our post-election survey (21%) found the two different methods of voting confusing.

Two different systems should never be used.

Candidate

Lots of promotion on the television but not enough instructions on the two different systems. The two different ballot papers should have been shown time and again.

Candidate

Numbers down the left-hand side of the UK Parliamentary ballot paper in a single election are unlikely to be a problem. However, where elections are combined and two different voting systems are in use they cause confusion. This added to the number of votes spoiled as evidenced by the combined elections in 2001 and 2005. At combined elections careful attention needs to be given to the design of the ballot paper.

We recommend that the legislation be amended to give the Chief Electoral Officer the power to remove the sequential numbers contained on the UK Parliamentary ballot paper in circumstances where elections are combined.

Assisting voters

6.33 Observers noted that the vast majority of polling staff carried out their duties in a helpful and friendly manner and this was endorsed by the fact that 85% of those interviewed for the public opinion survey said that poll staff were helpful. Confusion surrounding the two different voting systems would have been even greater if Presiding Officers had not explained the difference in the two voting systems as electors were handed their ballot papers. It was acknowledged by some Presiding Officers that once the polling place became busy it was not always possible to instruct voters.

6.34 Findings from the public opinion survey show high levels of satisfaction with the guidance on procedures for voting and the helpfulness of staff. Over eight in 10 respondents said that they were either fairly or very satisfied with these aspects of the voting process. In total 83% of Presiding Officers said they offered assistance with voting instructions, 15% helped voters read the ballot paper and 12% assisted in actually marking the ballot paper. At the 2003 Assembly election the proportion of Presiding Officers offering assistance with voting instructions was lower at 68% whereas it was almost the same for those requiring help with reading ballot papers and requiring assistance in marking the ballot papers.

6.35 Deputy Returning Officers reported that there was very little use made of the selector device for people with visual impairments and it was estimated it was used once or twice in each constituency, with the exception of Foyle, where it was used on six occasions. We highlighted in our report on the 2003 Assembly elections that the effectiveness of the selector device is largely determined by the voters' ability to memorise the names of the candidates in the order in which they appear on the ballot paper. It is recognised that the device is particularly unsuitable for use at STV elections and we reaffirm our recommendation that the EONI continue to liaise with manufacturers of voting equipment about the development of a suitable alternative for use at STV elections.

Sample ballot papers

6.36 Some of the main parties produced sample ballot papers for distribution to voters at the entrance to polling places. These were designed to ensure electors voted in the party's predetermined order of preference for the UK Parliamentary and local government elections. Voters brought these into the polling places and observers noted that in many instances the preferences were copied directly onto the actual ballot paper. A number of sample ballot papers were placed in ballot boxes alongside the official ballot, while others were left in the polling booths or dropped to the floor. Whilst the production of such material may be beneficial to the political parties in more effectively managing their vote and assist some voters in marking their ballot papers, there are concerns that in other instances it leads to confusion.

Some political parties were handing out sample ballot papers which were identical to the ballot paper I was handing out. This, I felt, was confusing and some were being put into the ballot boxes.

Presiding Officer

Secrecy

6.37 The public opinion survey found that the vast majority (87%) were satisfied with the privacy they felt in casting their vote. However, as at the 2003 Assembly election a number of concerns were raised about the lack of privacy offered by the polling booths. The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission in its response²⁵ said that the secrecy of the ballot could be compromised by the use of open-fronted voting booths.

²⁵ Correspondence received from The Human Rights Commission, 16 August 2005.

It suggested that curtained or box booths should also be available for those who preferred them. A number of complaints were made to Presiding Officers by members of the public about the perceived secrecy of the ballot overall and whether or not ballot papers could be traced to a particular voter. Feedback from the focus groups also revealed concerns about privacy.

One person complained about the fact that his electoral number was marked on the counterfoil. He insisted this made a nonsense of the secrecy of the ballot, as the ballot paper could be matched with the counterfoil.

Presiding Officer

I think it could have been a bit more private... it was quite open... I don't want people knowing who I voted for.

Focus group participant

6.38 This issue was addressed by OSCE/ODIHR in its report on the 2003 Assembly election and was again highlighted in its Assessment Mission Report on the 2005 elections. It suggested that other procedures that do not risk compromising the secrecy of the ballot might be instituted. It concluded that consideration should be given to abolishing the printing of serial numbers on the ballots and replacing them with other safeguards such as presenting an identification document before receiving a ballot. The Commission intends initiating a UK-wide policy review of the use of serial numbers on ballot papers at a future date and will report separately on this issue. We also reaffirm the recommendation made in our report on the 2003 Assembly election that alternatives or modifications to the current polling booths be considered.

Tendered ballot papers

6.39 Tendered ballot papers should be issued in the following circumstances only:

- if an elector has been marked on the register as apparently already having voted;
- if a proxy has been marked on the register as apparently having voted for an elector;
- if a proxy was appointed, but the elector has been marked as apparently already having voted, despite the proxy's insistence that they could not have done so; and
- if there is reasonable doubt about the identity of the elector or proxy from the specified documents produced.

6.40 According to the EONI, 97 tendered ballot papers (55 UK Parliamentary election and 42 local government elections) were issued at the May 2005 elections. At the 2003 Assembly election 69 were issued and at the 2001 combined elections 70 tendered ballots were issued. Only a small proportion (7.5%) of Presiding Officers surveyed issued tendered ballot papers. It appears that some were issued in circumstances where it was inappropriate to do so. For example, some Presiding Officers issued tendered ballot papers where ID was out of date or where ballot papers had been spoiled accidentally. Most, however, were issued in circumstances where it appeared that a voter's name had erroneously been marked off the register, as provided for in law. In most of these cases the Presiding Officer suggested that clerical error was to blame for the voter's name being marked off the register rather than fraudulent activity.

Because the driving licence was out of date – new one had been applied for but had not been received by the voter. He claimed it was not his fault that there was a delay in receiving the new one. He was more or less demanding a vote!

Presiding Officer

Voter's name was already marked off the register. The person was known to me and I am sure they had not already voted. I assume a mistake was made in marking the register.

Presiding Officer

6.41 Although the number of tendered ballot papers issued was small in comparison to the overall number of ballot papers issued, it once again highlights the need for additional training for Presiding Officers to ensure that tendered ballots are not issued when it is inappropriate to do so.

This issue was raised at the 2003 Assembly election by OSCE/ODIHR who suggested that the use of tendered ballot papers should be reviewed to determine if they should be eliminated altogether. The Commission will undertake a UK-wide review of the use of tendered ballot papers and make recommendations on their future use at elections.

Ballot paper perforation

6.42 In the vast majority of cases ballot papers were perforated correctly before being issued to the voter. However, 426 ballot papers were rejected at the count for the UK Parliamentary election because they had not been perforated by

the Presiding Officer, a figure almost identical to the 2003 Assembly election. This number almost doubled from the 2001 combined elections when the number without an official mark was 234. Similarly the number of ballot papers not included in the count for the local government elections in 2005 was 509, up from 421 in 2001.

6.43 In our report on the 2003 Assembly election we suggested that the increased number of ballot papers not being perforated may have been the result of inexperienced staff. However, we are aware from the Presiding Officer survey that the staff working at the 2005 elections were more experienced and consequently this increase reinforces the requirement for greater training. It also confirms the need to replace perforated ballots with watermarks on ballot papers as previously recommended by the Commission.

Ballot boxes

6.44 Three different types of ballot boxes were used on polling day. For the UK Parliamentary election a light, compact plastic ballot box that could be extended to accommodate additional ballot papers and could be concertinaed for ease of storage was used. Some councils used the traditional square metal ballot box while others employed a new 'pedal-bin' type box. We understand the latter were hired by the EONI at short notice and consequently not all poll staff had been trained in their use.

6.45 A significant number of Presiding Officers reported that the 'pedal bin' boxes were flawed both in design and operation and on occasions the lids had smashed as attempts were made at securing them. One Presiding Officer reported

that he had broken three lids and had to have replacements sent for. The new boxes were also difficult to seal and on one occasion had caused an injury to a staff member. Some councils, although supplied with the new boxes, decided to use the older metal boxes.

Given the litany of problems encountered by poll staff with the new-style ballot boxes we recommend that the EONI should review their suitability for use at future elections.

I had a problem with one of the ballot boxes as I had not been shown it at the training night. I hadn't closed it properly and had to stick it down with gaffer tape. I learned that this type of ballot box had presented similar problems to other Presiding Officers.

Presiding Officer

No information on how to close the local government ballot box was given.

Presiding Officer

Problems did arise relating to the 'pedal-bin' type ballot boxes brought into use by the EONI at the last minute without adequate training being provided for Presiding Officers in their use resulting in boxes not being properly sealed on polling day and during transit to the count centres.

Submission from local council

Paperwork at the close of poll

6.46 Concerns were raised by some local councils at the poor quality of the paperwork completed by Presiding Officers at the close of poll. Some chief executives said this was a

contributory factor in slowing the count process and greater diligence was required on the part of Presiding Officers. This view was shared by a number of Presiding Officers who felt that staff simply wanted to leave after the close of poll and seemed to forget there were other duties to complete. Others felt that they had not received adequate training to carry out this task and some were overwhelmed by the amount of paperwork involved.

The extent of discrepancy in ballot paper accounts completed by Presiding Officers was alarming.

Submission from local council

I have now worked as Presiding Officer at three elections. The Electoral Office expect staff to be at the polling station at least 30 minutes before the opening of poll. This is only right and gives staff time to set up the station. I think the Electoral Office should also stipulate a 30 minute finishing off time. This would give more time to check paperwork and ballot account, without the 'mad rush' of polling clerks to get home.

Presiding Officer

The training does not prepare you for the amount of forms you have to complete at the end of poll.

Presiding Officer

6.47 At the time of the 2003 Assembly election the EONI acknowledged that some of the paperwork used at the close of poll was time consuming to complete and bureaucratic in nature, but because it is a legislative requirement there was no choice other than to complete it.

The Commission believes there may be scope to simplify some of the documentation and recommends that the EONI conducts a review of the documentation and forms used at elections with a view to making them more user-friendly. The Commission would be willing to work with the EONI in addressing this matter.

Involvement of PSNI

6.48 Prior to the elections, the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) appointed a liaison officer to attend meetings of the electoral steering committee chaired by the Chief Electoral Officer. According to the PSNI, this ensured effective communication between the police and the EONI. At a local level, police planning officers liaised with area electoral officers to establish plans for the provision of police support on polling day and at the count. The police deployed approximately 230 patrols, of varying strengths, dedicated to the elections during polling hours. These comprised mainly dedicated mobile patrolling and response provision, although at certain locations the risk assessment prompted a static police presence. At polling places with no permanent presence, the Presiding Officer in charge was provided with contact details for the roving patrols who visited the polling places throughout the day.

6.49 The PSNI informed the Commission that there were no serious incidents connected to polling day or the counts. There were a number of minor stone and bottle throwing incidents, but these were targeted at police vehicles away from the vicinity of polling places. There were also complaints made to the police about

canvassing taking place within the grounds of polling places and disputes concerning the issuing of ballot papers at the close of poll. According to the police these were effectively dealt with by Presiding Officers. In another instance, at 11.30pm on polling day, a number of political delegations requested entry to Enniskillen PSNI station to inspect a ballot box amid concern that it had not been properly sealed. The persons present were advised by the police that they could attend the count in Omagh, where the seal on the box could be shown to be intact. The police reported that in the Foyle constituency a 'carefully crafted operation was implemented following extensive consultation with the community and the Electoral Office', which resulted in 'a greatly reduced number of incidents of disorder'.

6.50 The PSNI adopted a different approach to policing the 2005 elections in comparison to previous elections. At the 2003 Assembly election 40% of Presiding Officers said the polling place had a permanent police presence, while the remainder were served by mobile units. Prior to 2003 there had been a permanent police presence at all polling places for the last 35 years. In 2005, 7% of Presiding Officers said their polling place had a permanent police presence while 91% said their polling place was served by a mobile unit. A third of those who had a permanent police presence said the police were present inside the polling place, a quarter said they were based outside and 40% had both an internal and external presence. Seven Presiding Officers (1%) who responded to our survey had cause to ask the police or other security staff to control a situation. The vast majority of Presiding Officers (75%) who

responded to our survey described the police presence as 'about right'. Only 1% described the police presence as 'too much'.

6.51 Of the 583 Presiding Officers who responded to our survey 101 (17%) considered that the police presence at polling places was 'too little'. Those working in constituencies considered unionist were more likely to hold this view compared to their counterparts who worked in constituencies considered nationalist. For example, in South Antrim almost one in three Presiding Officers felt the police presence was 'too little' in comparison to 9% who held this view in South Down. In the post-election public opinion survey respondents were asked if they encountered any difficulties at the polling place. Altogether 28 respondents out of 561 said they experienced difficulties. Of these 10 identified a police presence around the building, followed by six who identified a large number of party workers around the building.

6.52 Prior to the election, one party had requested a meeting with the Chief Electoral Officer to discuss arrangements for policing the elections. At the post-election seminar a representative from the same party welcomed the lower level of policing adopted at the election and said that in some areas this had transformed the atmosphere in a number of polling places. Commission observers were informed by Presiding Officers in a number of constituencies that the low-level police presence had been welcomed by voters, although some Presiding Officers would have preferred a greater police presence. However, having the mobile telephone number of the roving police patrol did offer Presiding Officers some reassurance.

Electoral identification

6.53 Presiding Officers were asked to keep a record of the forms of identification presented at polling stations. In most instances information was collated, but during busy periods staff had difficulty recording all information. Data supplied by the EONI and shown in Table 17, revealed that 52% of voters used a photographic driving licence, 29% a passport, 11% the Senior SmartPass and 9% the electoral identity card. These figures are almost identical to those recorded by Presiding Officers at the 2003 Assembly election. Altogether

3,818 people turned up at polling stations without the correct identification (just over 0.5% of the total number of people who voted), although 1,555 returned later in the day with a correct form of photographic identification. Of the 3,818 people who presented invalid ID, the constituency of Fermanagh & South Tyrone recorded the largest percentage (9.6%) followed by Newry & Armagh (9.2%) and North Antrim (7.9%). The constituencies with the lowest rate of invalid identification were North Down (3.3%) followed by Belfast East and Lagan Valley (4.2%).

Table 17: Valid forms of identification presented at polling stations by constituency

Constituency	Driving licence (%)	Passport (%)	SmartPass (%)	Electoral ID card (%)
Belfast East	42.8	30.9	18.8	7.5
Belfast North	35.3	31.4	19.4	13.9
Belfast West	31.3	34.4	14.7	19.6
Belfast South	42	34.5	16.1	7.3
East Antrim	48.2	31.3	13.7	6.7
East Londonderry	53.3	27.4	10.4	8.9
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	62.3	22.2	6.3	9.2
Foyle	47	30.8	9.6	12.6
Lagan Valley	53.9	29.7	11.4	5
Mid Ulster	61.9	24.1	5.7	8.3
Newry & Armagh	58.2	26.8	8	7
North Antrim	55.8	25.9	10	8.3
North Down	48.2	30.5	16	5.3
South Antrim	51.9	30.5	11.3	6.3
South Down	56.8	27.6	8.7	6.8
Strangford	52	29.5	11.9	6.7
Upper Bann	53.2	29.2	10.9	6.7
West Tyrone	58.3	23.9	7	10.8
Total	51.6	28.6	11.2	8.6

Source: EONI.

6.54 Over half (54%) the ID documents were rejected because they were not current as the law requires. Others presented non-photographic forms of ID including passes other than the Senior SmartPasses, for example medical cards and allowance books. Almost one in ten (9.9%) of those who presented invalid ID had used a travel concessionary pass. The Department of Regional Development (DRD) issues a range of photographic passes for use on Translink services including a half-fare SmartPass and a pass for those who are partially sighted. It appears many of these are being presented at polling stations but as they are not prescribed in legislation they cannot be accepted. A number of candidates and one political party suggested that all SmartPasses issued by DRD should be acceptable forms of photographic identification. However, the DRD has advised us that the criteria used for issuing its concessionary passes vary depending on the type of SmartPass and that the burden of proof for receipt of a Senior SmartPass is more stringent.

6.55 The Pollen Shop researchers also concluded that many forms of ID not acceptable at polling stations are more likely to be possessed by people with disabilities. For example, people with visual impairments were unable to use their Blind Person's SmartPass. It was suggested that among people who require an electoral identity card there would be a higher concentration of people with disabilities and those with lower levels of literacy. It was therefore expected that the process of obtaining a card would be 'fully accessible and highly user-friendly'. However, the application forms for the card:

...were not available in Braille, Easy-read or even large print...voters were given a telephone number to call if they required assistance. We do not consider this to be a reasonable adjustment within the context of the Disability Discrimination Act.

The Pollen Shop

6.56 In the post-election public opinion survey 5% of those who did not vote in the elections claimed they were unable to do so because they did not possess one of the four forms of photographic identification. This equates to 1.3% of the total sample and, if extrapolated to the numbers on the register at the time of the election, means that an estimated 14,000 people were without one of the correct forms of photographic identification.²⁶ When these figures are compared to those published in our report on the 2003 Assembly election, it can be seen that the proportion of people on the register without one of the four forms of prescribed photographic identification has reduced. In 2003 the equivalent estimated figure was 25,000. Despite the welcome decrease, the numbers of electors apparently ineligible to vote because of a lack of suitable ID remain a cause for concern.

6.57 Presiding Officers and over half the Poll Clerks (56%) said that the main cause of complaint on polling day was in respect of the validity or otherwise of photographic ID. Some electors were allegedly unhappy that their tendered forms of ID were not accepted by staff who knew them from their local community. A few complaints were received from foreign nationals unaware of the ID requirements and

²⁶ The survey had a sampling tolerance of +/- 4%.

others from electors who claimed to have applied for an electoral ID card in good time but did not receive it before polling day. Problems reported by polling station staff included the following.

Lady complained that she wasn't aware a concession card was not a valid form of ID. I pointed to the sign on the wall listing the four forms acceptable but she still insisted that her husband should be able to use it. She took my name. Later, however, her husband returned with a SmartPass.

Presiding Officer

Not allowing ID for blind people and those with learning disabilities who don't have a driving licence or passport. We couldn't accept photo ID on disability cards.

Poll Clerk

A mentally handicapped voter arrived with his mother. The only ID he had or possessed was a half-fare SmartPass. His mother stated that as she was his 'appointee' she should be able to help him vote. I refused the vote.

Presiding Officer

In our report on the 2003 Assembly election we concluded that the four forms of photographic identification were sufficient and did not need to be extended. While this remains our view we would like to see EONI adopt a more targeted approach in terms of ensuring that those with disabilities and those from minority ethnic backgrounds have improved access to photographic identification.

Complaints

6.58 Just over 10% of Presiding Officers said they had received complaints from electors during the course of polling day. This is half the number who received complaints during the 2003 Assembly election. Along with issues concerning photographic identification, other areas of complaint included the behaviour of polling agents and party workers, people turning up to vote but being told they were not registered, confusion over the combined elections and disability access. The vast majority of respondents to our public opinion survey (85%) were either fairly or very satisfied with the helpfulness of poll staff.

6.59 In response to a Parliamentary question to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland from Lord Hylton, the Chief Electoral Officer confirmed that his office received 34 formal complaints. Of these 13 concerned issues to do with electoral identification, four were about access to polling places, six were about the conduct of poll staff and two concerned the conduct of polling agents. One party complained about interference in the absent voting process and this matter was referred to the police for investigation.²⁷

Electoral fraud

6.60 The Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002 was introduced primarily in response to widespread perceptions of electoral fraud. Our report on the workings of the Act found that although the extent of fraud had been difficult to quantify, the Act appeared to have been successful in eliminating perceptions of fraud.

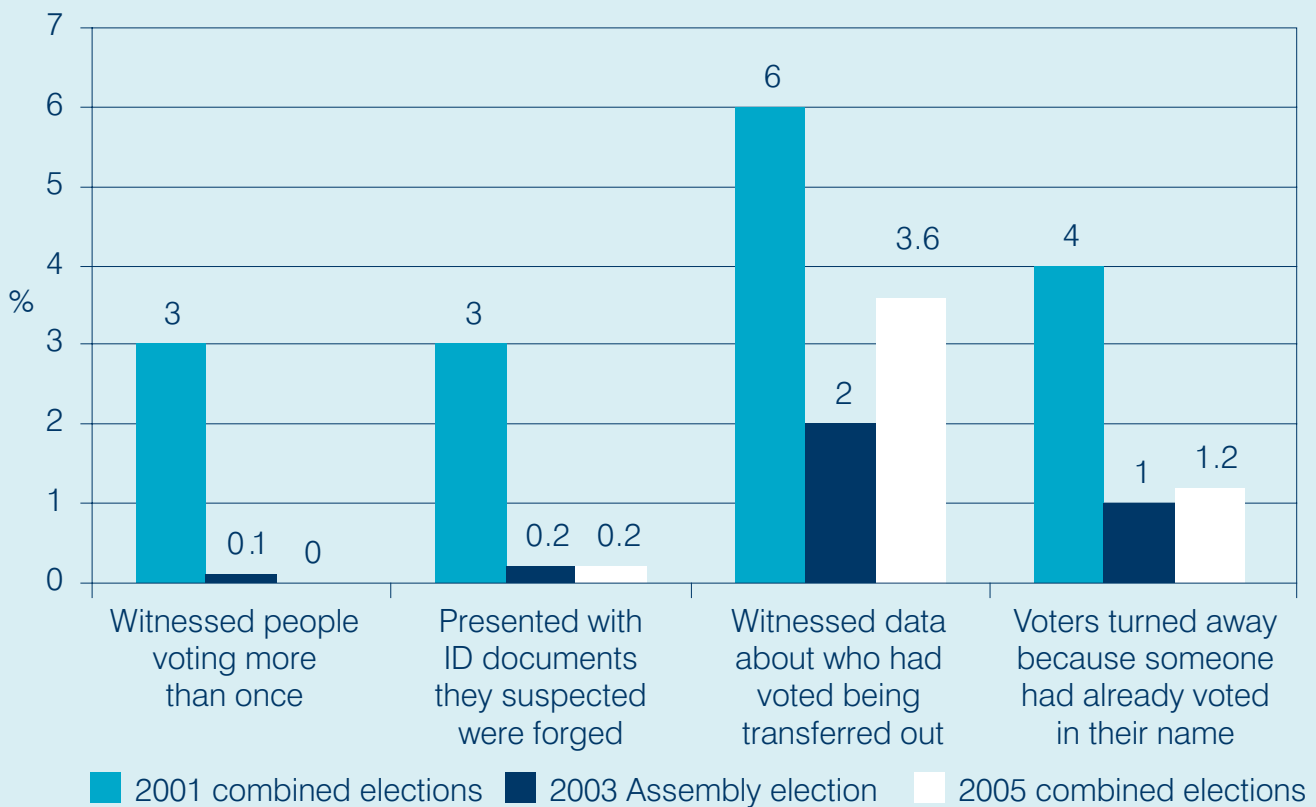
²⁷ Correspondence from the Chief Electoral Officer to Lord Hylton, 21 July 2005.

The 2003 Assembly election was the first Northern Ireland-wide election at which the provisions of the Act were fully tested and our survey at that time found that suspicions of electoral fraud had reduced significantly since the 2001 combined elections. The findings from the 2005 Presiding Officer survey shown in Figure 4, revealed that suspicions of malpractice, while remaining relatively low, had increased marginally since 2003, particularly in relation

to information being transferred outside the polling place by polling agents.

6.61 Our post-election public opinion survey revealed that 70% of respondents felt either fairly or very safe casting their vote in person, while 50% agreed that 'new laws about registering and voting had helped overcome electoral fraud', with 8% disagreeing. Just over a quarter agreed that electoral fraud in Northern

Figure 4: Proportions of Presiding Officers who suspected malpractice at the 2001 combined elections, 2003 Assembly election and 2005 combined elections



Source: Electoral Commission Presiding Officer surveys 2003 and 2005. Northern Ireland Office (NIO) Presiding Officer survey 2001.

Ireland had largely been eliminated, a decrease of 8% from the 2003 Assembly election. Almost half (48%) believed that electoral fraud 'was still going on'. Of those interviewed 16% were of the opinion that electoral fraud was a problem at the May 2005 elections.

Polling agents

6.62 As with the Commission's 2003 Assembly election report, the behaviour of polling agents on election day was a major theme to emerge from the survey of Poll Clerks and Presiding Officers. Polling agents are appointed by candidates to perform a number of duties on election day, although their principal function is to assist in the detection of personation at polling stations. Polling agents may challenge voters they suspect of personation before they leave the polling place and the person may be arrested by police. To assist in the detection of personation polling agents mark off on their copy of the register voters who have been issued with ballot papers. During the course of polling day agents must not remove their copy of the register from the polling place or relay information to anyone regarding who has or has not voted. Polling agents may assist candidates by informing them as to how the poll is progressing. They are also entitled to attach their seal to any packets made up by the Presiding Officer, including the ballot box.

6.63 As at the 2003 Assembly election, only one Presiding Officer who participated in our survey said that a polling agent had challenged a voter at a polling station. Similarly, the vast majority of Presiding Officers experienced no difficulties with polling agents at the 2005 elections.

However, as in 2003 there were a number of instances where the behaviour and presence of polling agents was perceived to be detrimental to the smooth running of the poll. Overall, 6% of Presiding Officers said that the presence of polling agents had caused problems, ranging from abuse of the electoral register to disruptive behaviour.

Agents from one party accused agents from another of taking information out of the polling station. This led to verbal and physical exchanges between a number of female agents from both parties.

Voters do not like the idea of polling agents marking off their names on identical registers.

Polling agents were checking voters' poll cards. Tried to instruct me on layout of room and reprimanded me for not issuing a paper to a voter whose ID was out of date.

Presence of election agent caused a problem. Presiding Officer and Poll Clerk informed me that he was looking over a voter's shoulder.

Presiding Officers

6.64 Before election day, all polling agents were made aware of Section 66 of the Representation of the People Act 1983 which requires candidates and election agents to uphold the secrecy of the ballot and prohibits them from communicating any information prior to the close of poll regarding who has or has not voted. However, it appears from the feedback received from Presiding Officers that this legal requirement was systematically breached on a number of occasions.

Please deal with the real issue here. Polling agents are not here for 'challenging personation'. They rotate and communicate with other party members outside to say who has/has not voted. The door-knockers and mini-buses then go into operation. We all know this...Ban polling agents and keep the ballot secret.

Presiding Officer

Polling agents (for one party) continually wrote and carried out notes during the day. This should be stamped out!

Presiding Officer

6.65 Political parties, candidates and agents and Commission observers also raised concerns about the behaviour of polling agents during the course of the day. On one occasion a polling agent was witnessed using a Blackberry portable email device inside a polling place, while in other instances it was suggested that suspicious behaviour on the part of polling agents went unchallenged. One political party stated that in many constituencies polling agents from one political party were noting individual elector numbers and removing them from the polling place. It was further alleged that in many instances Presiding Officers did nothing to prevent this.

Some Presiding Officers did not challenge polling agents who were breaking the law. They were possibly scared.

The flow of information continues to get out of the polling station unabated.

I witnessed information regarding people on the register who had not voted being

transmitted from polling stations to an external central register and then being used in a corrupt manner.

Measures introduced to counteract fraud are seen by some as a challenge to be overcome. The passing of information on non-voters has become a fine art.

Various candidates

6.66 In our report on the 2003 Assembly election we stated that the introduction of the Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002 with its requirement that voters must present prescribed photographic identification raised questions about the future role of polling agents. At the post-election discussion the EONI said that this legislation had made the role of polling agents redundant and that they were no longer required. In our report on the 2003 election we gave an undertaking, not only to conduct a UK-wide review of the role and conduct of polling agents, but also to produce good practice guidance following consultation with relevant stakeholders including the political parties. Given the strength of feeling raised about this matter by a large number of stakeholders, we intend taking this forward in 2006.

Summary

6.67 The combined elections on 5 May 2005 witnessed several new developments since the previous combined poll in June 2001. They were the first at which the provisions of the Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002 applied and the first at which Poll Clerks received formal training. It was also the first time the Commission had observers at the UK

Parliamentary and Northern Ireland local government elections, who visited polling stations across all 18 constituencies on polling day.

6.68 Feedback received from our survey of Presiding Officers and Poll Clerks revealed widespread satisfaction at both the training given by the EONI and at how polling day itself passed off. Nevertheless, areas for improvement were identified by Presiding Officers, Poll Clerks, political parties and observers. These included inconsistency in the layout of polling stations, poor signposting, inadequate disabled access, difficulties with the new 'pedal-bin' type ballot box and confusion due to the layout of the UK Parliamentary ballot paper.

6.69 The number of complaints made to poll staff at the May 2005 elections was half that raised at the 2003 Assembly election when a large number of complaints were made by people who turned up to vote but whose names were not on the register. The biggest area of complaint on this occasion concerned the validity or otherwise of photographic ID.

6.70 As at the 2003 Assembly election, the presence and behaviour of some polling agents continued to be a source of difficulty for a number of Presiding Officers, political parties and voters. Despite being made aware of secrecy requirements, some polling agents transmitted information from the marked register to party workers outside the polling place. Some candidates felt that Presiding Officers did little to prevent this and the behaviour of polling agents went largely unchallenged.

6.71 The police presence at polling places on 5 May 2005 was the most low key in 35 years. The vast majority of polling places were policed by a 'roving patrol'. Presiding Officers were provided with a mobile telephone number for the roving patrol. The vast majority of Presiding Officers who responded to our survey were satisfied at this arrangement, although a significant minority felt that the police presence should have been greater. A number of political parties commented that the overall policing of the election was satisfactory.



7 Participation and turnout

Across Northern Ireland 93,644 fewer people voted at the UK Parliamentary election in 2005 than voted in 2001, representing a decrease of almost 12% in the popular vote and the figures for the local government elections were broadly similar. For many years turnouts in Northern Ireland were considered healthy. However, in recent elections declining turnouts have given increasing cause for concern.

Numbers registered to vote

7.1 The franchise for voting at the UK Parliamentary election is different from that for local government elections. Altogether 1,139,993 people in Northern Ireland were entitled to vote at the UK Parliamentary election and 1,142,433 were entitled to vote at the local government elections. This represented an increase of 42,442 (3.72%) and 67,324 (5.9%) on the numbers registered for the 2003 Assembly election and the 2004 European Parliamentary election respectively.

7.2 Following concerns about the decline in the number of people registered, the Government introduced the Electoral Registration (Northern Ireland) Act 2005, reinstating the ability of the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland (EONI) to 'carry forward' names from one year's register to the next. This added 70,363 names to the register resulting in the highest number of people registered since the introduction of individual registration in 2002. The overall impact of the reinstatement was to increase the registration rate in Northern Ireland by almost six percentage points (5.6%) to an estimated 91.1% of the 18+ population.

7.3 Table 18 illustrates the fluctuations which have taken place in the register since the introduction of individual registration. The first register of this type was published on 1 December 2002.

Table 18: Changes in electoral registration, August 2002 to June 2005

Date published	Number of names registered	Change	Registration rate (%)	Changes +/-
Aug 2002*	1,192,136		95.4	
Dec 2002	1,072,346	-119,790	85.6	-9.8
May 2003	1,098,726	+26,380	87.4	+1.8
Sept 2003	1,097,551	-1,175	87.1	-0.3
Feb 2004	1,069,160	-28,391	84.6	-2.5
May 2004	1,076,940	+7,780	85.1	+0.5
Mar 2005	1,066,392	-10,548	84.6	-0.5
April 2005	1,148,486	+82,094	91.1	+6.5
May 2005	1,148,010	-476	91.1	-
June 2005	1,148,172	+162	91.1	-

Note: * Register compiled under household registration.

Source: EONI.

Turnout at the elections

7.4 The reinstatement of the 'carry forward' provisions also had an impact on published turnout because it is calculated by expressing the number of people voting as a proportion of the registered electorate. If there had been no reinstatement the percentage turnout at the election would have been higher, as Table 19 illustrates.

7.5 Turnout at the UK Parliamentary election was 63.49%, slightly lower than that achieved at the 2003 Assembly election (63.98%). This compares favourably to a turnout of 51.72% achieved at the European Parliamentary election held in June 2004. Turnout for the local government elections was slightly down on that at the UK Parliamentary election at 62.84%.

Table 19: The reinstatement effect on percentage turnout at the May 2005 UK Parliamentary election in Northern Ireland

Reinstatement effect	Number registered	Number voting	Turnout (%)
Before reinstatement	1,078,123	723,768	67.13
After reinstatement	1,148,486	723,768	63.49

7.6 Altogether, 93,644 fewer votes were cast at the 2005 UK Parliamentary election than in 2001, while the equivalent figure for the local government elections was 91,631. In percentage terms this represents a drop of 11.46% for the UK Parliamentary elections and 11.31% for the local government elections.

2005 elections. For the UK Parliamentary election the percentage was 57.4% and for the local government election it was 57%. This compares to published turnout figures of 63.5% and 62.8% respectively. Overall, the table illustrates that fewer people are turning out to vote at elections in Northern Ireland.

Table 20: Trends in the numbers of votes cast between 1998 and 2005

Year	Election	Total votes cast	Difference +/-
1998	Northern Ireland Assembly election	824,391	
2001	UK Parliamentary election	817,412	-6,979
2003	Northern Ireland Assembly election	702,249	-115,163
2004	European Parliamentary election	554,744	-147,505
2005	UK Parliamentary election	723,768	+169,024

7.7 Both the 2005 and the 2001 local government elections in Northern Ireland were combined with the UK Parliamentary election with the result that the numbers of people turning out to vote increased significantly. In 1993 the total valid vote for local government elections was 629,106 while the corresponding figure in 1997 was 632,197. Table 20 details the variance of votes cast.

Voting age population

7.8 An alternative approach to analysing turnout is to present the number of people who voted as a percentage of the estimated voting age population.²⁸ This methodology allows useful comparisons to be made in circumstances where there are considerable variations in registration rates or where the basis for compiling registration rates has changed. Table 21 shows the proportion of the voting age population who voted at the

²⁸ It should be noted that a small proportion of the 18+ population are not eligible to vote due to the reasons outlined in paragraph 2.7.

Table 21: Comparison between turnout and proportion of voting age population (VAP) at elections in Northern Ireland, 1994 to 2005

Year	Election	Published turnout (%)	% VAP	Differential (%)
2005	UK Parliamentary election	63.5	57.4	6.1
2005	Local government elections	63	57	6
2004	European Parliamentary election	51.7	44	7.7
2003	Northern Ireland Assembly election	64	56.2	7.8
2001	UK Parliamentary election	68	66	2
2001	Local government elections	68.7	65.4	3.3
1999	European Parliamentary election	57.7	56.4	1.3
1998	Northern Ireland Assembly election	70	67.9	2.1
1998	Referendum	81.1	78.5	2.6
1997	UK Parliamentary election	67.1	65.9	1.2
1997	Local government elections	55.1	53.9	1.2
1996	Forum	64.7	63.1	1.6
1994	European Parliamentary election	49.4	48.4	1

Source: EONI, Northern Ireland Census 2001, Northern Ireland Statistical Research Agency updates, mid-2003.

Turnout across constituencies and local councils

7.9 Turnout across the 18 Northern Ireland constituencies and the 26 local councils varied significantly.²⁹ In terms of the UK Parliamentary election the constituency recording the highest turnout was Fermanagh & South Tyrone (74.3%), closely followed by Mid Ulster (73.9%), West Tyrone (73.5%) and Newry & Armagh (71.5%). The lowest recorded turnout was in the constituency of Strangford where 54.3% of the registered electorate voted. This was followed

by North Down (54.6%) and East Antrim (55.1%). Overall, turnout was generally higher in constituencies considered nationalist than in those considered unionist.

7.10 The same pattern was largely repeated with regard to the local government elections where turnouts ranged from 52.3% (Ards Borough Council) to 75.2% (Magherafelt District Council). Turnouts were higher in nationalist dominated councils particularly in the west of Northern Ireland. In the Erne East district electoral area (DEA) in Fermanagh turnout reached 81.19% and in the Abbey DEA (North Down) less than half (48.5%) of those registered voted.

²⁹ In this report, turnout is calculated by expressing the total vote as a percentage of the number of people registered to vote (unadjusted turnout).

7.11 Turnout at the UK Parliamentary election ranged from 74.3% in Fermanagh & South Tyrone to 54.3% in Strangford as illustrated by Table 22. However, if turnout is expressed using the voting age population the variations are much greater, as illustrated by the situation in Belfast South and Mid Ulster. In the

constituency of Belfast South where the registration rate is low (68.8%), a turnout of 42.5% was recorded, almost 20 percentage points lower than the published turnout figure of 61%. In contrast, the Mid Ulster constituency, with a high registration rate (98.5%), shows a differential of just over one percentage point.

Table 22: Turnout by constituency and voting age population (VAP) at the UK Parliamentary election 2005

Constituency	Published turnout (%)	VAP turnout (%)	Difference % points
Belfast East	58.6	51.1	-7.6
Belfast North	58.6	49.6	-9
Belfast South	61.7	42.5	-19.2
Belfast West	65.2	58.2	-7
East Antrim	55.2	49.7	-5.4
East Londonderry	61.3	54.1	-7.1
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	74.3	72.3	-2
Foyle	67	61.4	-5.6
Lagan Valley	61	55.3	-5.7
Mid Ulster	73.9	72.8	-1.1
Newry & Armagh	71.5	69.2	-2.3
North Antrim	62.5	59.6	-2.9
North Down	54.7	47.9	-6.8
South Antrim	57.3	50.7	-6.7
South Down	66.5	63.1	-3.4
Strangford	54.3	49.5	-4.8
Upper Bann	62.5	58.2	-4.3
West Tyrone	73.5	69.6	-4
Total	63.5	57.4	-6

Table 23: Decrease in votes polled between UK Parliamentary elections in Northern Ireland, 2001 and 2005

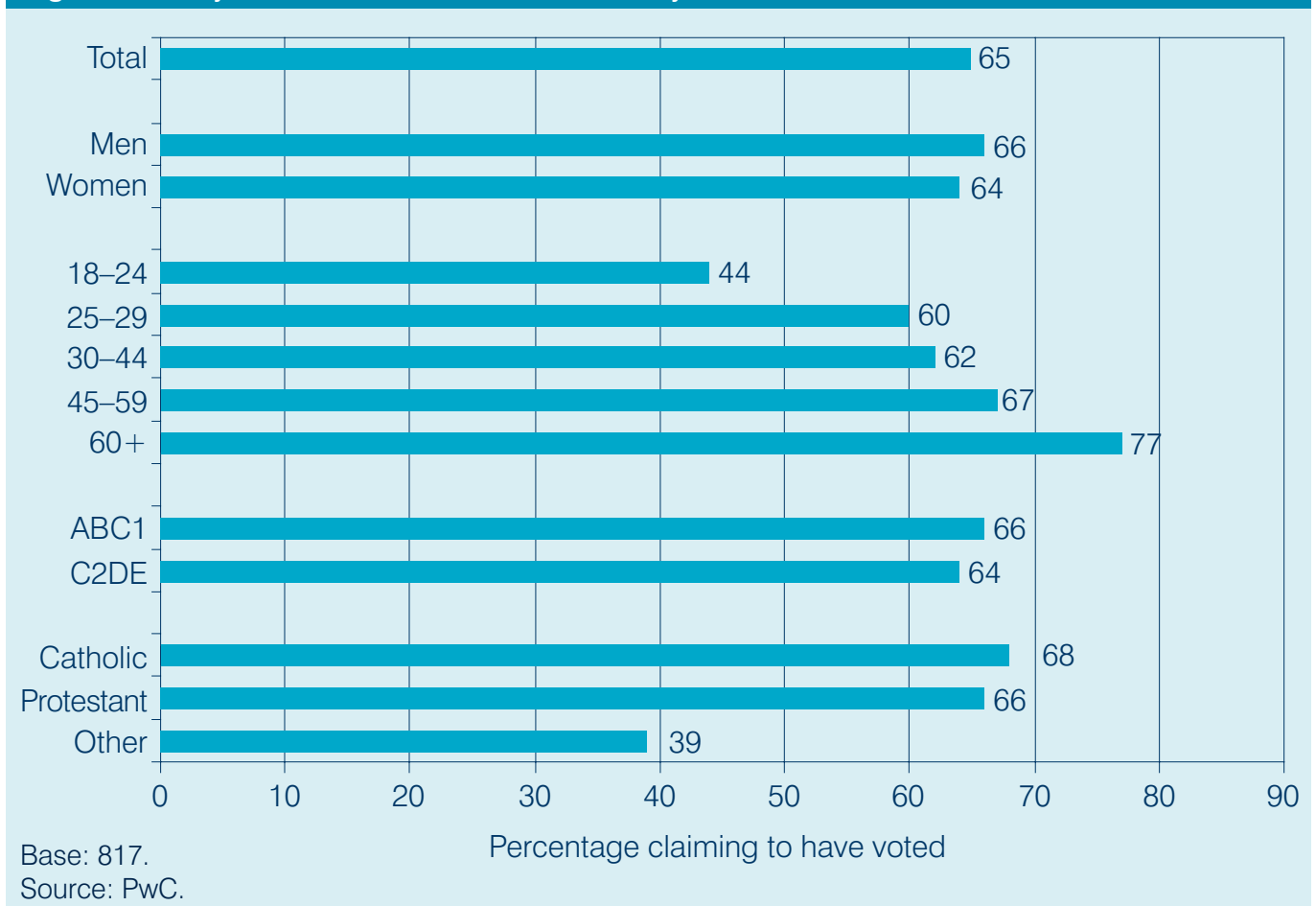
Constituency	Votes polled 2001	Votes polled 2005	Decrease	Differential (%)
Belfast East	37,031	31,019	6,012	16.2
Belfast North	41,309	30,790	10,519	25.5
Belfast South	38,185	32,239	5,946	15.6
Belfast West	41,698	34,928	6,770	16.2
East Antrim	36,327	31,974	4,353	12
East Londonderry	40,268	35,812	4,456	11.1
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	52,667	49,351	3,316	6.3
Foyle	49,374	46,072	3,302	6.9
Lagan Valley	46,222	42,849	3,373	7.3
Mid Ulster	50,388	45,894	4,494	8.9
Newry & Armagh	56,208	51,326	4,882	8.7
North Antrim	49,545	46,226	3,319	6.7
North Down	37,377	32,461	4,916	13.1
South Down	44,354	38,180	6,174	13.9
South Antrim	52,648	48,666	3,982	7.6
Strangford	43,471	37,222	6,249	14.4
Upper Bann	51,376	44,749	6,627	12.9
West Tyrone	48,964	44,010	4,954	10.1
Total	817,412	723,768	93,644	

7.12 As shown in Table 23, the percentage drop in numbers voting in May 2005 varied across the 18 constituencies with over 25% fewer people voting in Belfast North and 6.3% fewer voting in Fermanagh & South Tyrone. When the four Belfast constituencies are taken together the percentage decrease in numbers voting from 2001 to 2005 was 18.5%. Outside Belfast the average reduction was 9.8%.

Factors affecting turnout

7.13 Our post-election public opinion survey assessed the factors impacting on turnout. Altogether 817 face-to-face interviews were conducted with a representative sample of the Northern Ireland population between 26 May and 24 June 2005. In addition, eight focus groups were held comprising voters and non-voters. Issues discussed with focus group participants included registration, voting and politics generally in Northern Ireland.

Figure 5: Analysis of those who voted at the May 2005 combined elections



The demographics of voting

7.14 Just under two-thirds (65%) of those interviewed for the public opinion survey said they had voted at both the UK Parliamentary and local government elections, with just over a quarter (26%) saying that they had not voted at all. At the last combined elections in Northern Ireland in 2001, 74% said that they had voted

in both elections.³⁰ As Figure 5 shows, in the 2005 elections slightly more males (66%) voted than females (64%) and there was a clear correlation with age. Those aged between 18–24 were the least likely to have voted (44%) and those aged 60 or over (77%) the most likely.

³⁰ *The combined election: An analysis of the combined Parliamentary and District Council elections in Northern Ireland on 7 June 2001*, Northern Ireland Office, NIO Research and Statistical Series: Report No. 6.

7.15 The numbers of young people aged between 18–24 claiming to have voted reduced to 44% from 49% at the 2003 Assembly election. Catholics (68%) were slightly more likely to have voted than Protestants (66%) while voting among those who classified themselves as ‘others’ decreased significantly since the 2003 Assembly election, from 62% to 39%. The analysis in Figure 5 shows there was no difference in propensity to vote between those classified in social group ABC1 and those in group C2DE.

Reasons for voting

7.16 Respondents who said they had voted were asked to choose from a list the reasons why they had done so. Figure 6 shows that almost two-thirds (66%) felt it was their duty to vote. Males (71%) were more likely to feel it was their duty to vote than females (61%) while young people aged between 18–24 were the least likely (57%) to believe they had a duty to vote. However, those aged between 25–29 were the most likely (74%) to agree with the statement ‘I believe it is my duty to vote’. Protestants were more likely (70%) to feel duty bound to vote than Catholics (61%), while there was no difference between the different socio-economic groups.

7.17 The second most commonly chosen reason for voting was ‘I wanted the party I supported to win’ (53%). Almost three in 10 (29%) voted because they thought it would make a difference to the outcome and a similar number (28%) voted because they believed it was a good way to have their say. Overall the number of respondents feeling ‘it is their duty

to vote’, ‘that voting could make a difference to the outcome’ and ‘that voting is a good way to have your say’ decreased significantly since the 2003 Assembly election. There was also a marked decline in the number of people who felt positive about the future of Northern Ireland.

7.18 When focus group participants were asked to say why they had voted they endorsed the public opinion survey findings.

It is a duty; if you don’t you are more or less saying you are content with the status quo.

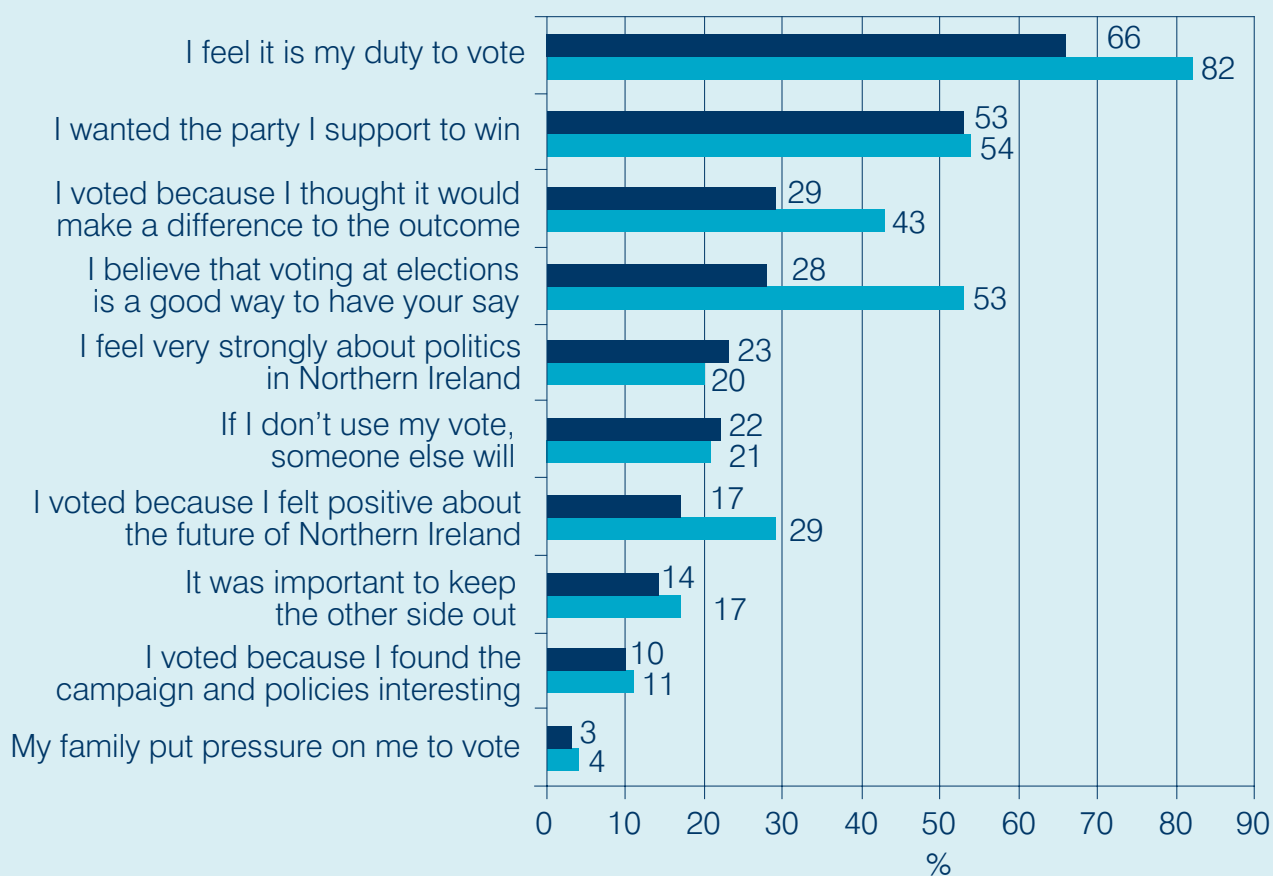
Focus group, May 2005

To show support for those who best represent your views.

Focus group, May 2005

7.19 Since the 2003 Assembly election there has been a shift in the number of people saying ‘I’ve always voted the same way’. In 2003 just over half (55%) said they always voted the same way, whereas this number had decreased to 39% in 2005 as Figure 7 shows. This could in part be explained by the shift in support from the UUP to the DUP in recent years. It is also noteworthy that one in five voters (20%) only decide who to vote for either on election day or in the week leading up to the election.

Figure 6: Reasons given for voting at the May 2005 combined elections and November 2003 Assembly election

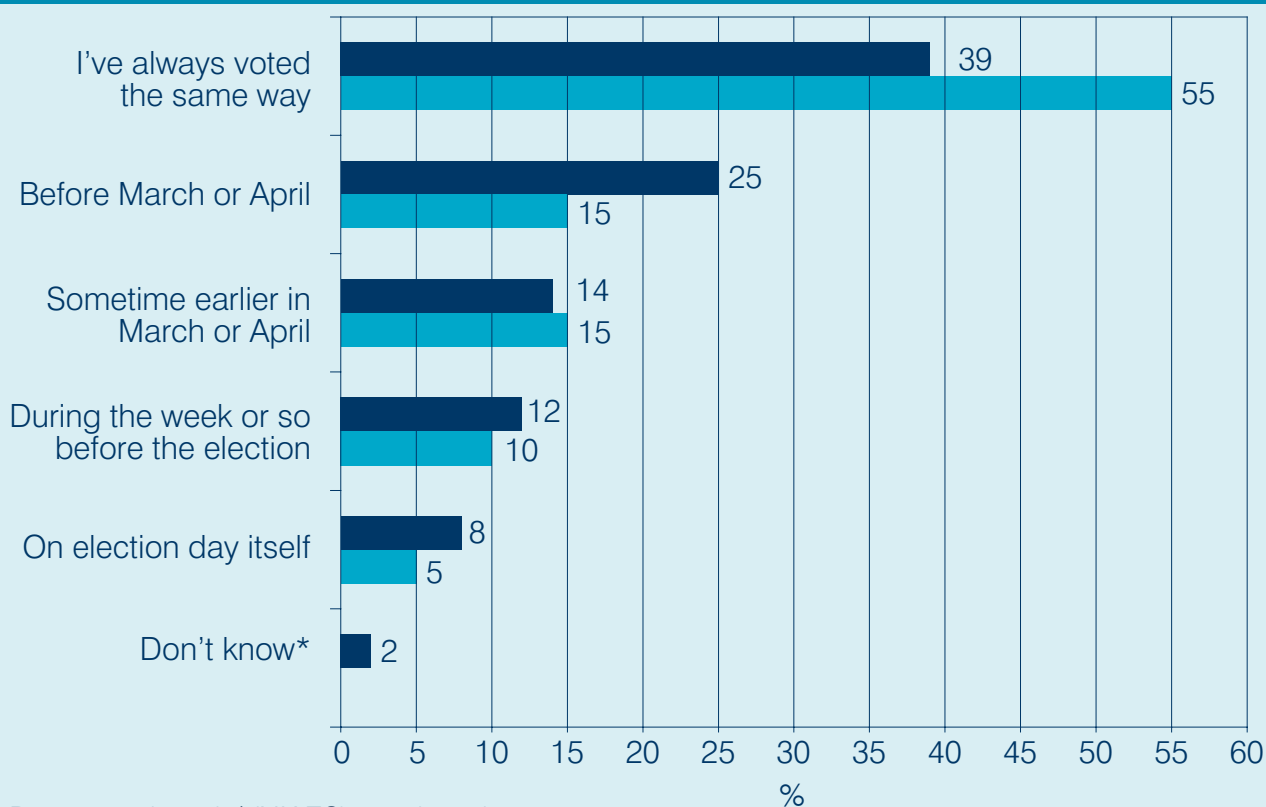


Base: 592 (2005) / Northern Ireland Assembly election survey (NIAES) 687 (2003).

Source: PwC (2005) / Millward Brown Ulster (2003).

■ Nov 03 ■ May 05

Figure 7: Shifts in voting patterns at the May 2005 combined elections and November 2003 Assembly election



Base: 592 (2005) / (NIAES) 967 (2003).

Note: * The option for 'Don't know' was not given in the 2003 survey.

Source: PwC (2005) / Millward Brown Ulster (2003).

7.20 The main reasons given by respondents for voting for one party over another were that 'the party had the best policies' (70%) or that 'the party had the best leader' (40%). Given media speculation about tactical voting in the run up to the elections, it is interesting to note that 10% of respondents said that they voted tactically to keep out a party they did not like. Other factors identified by focus group participants included

tradition/family and what the party had done for the local community. Voters differentiated between the UK Parliamentary election and the local elections in determining how they cast their vote. At local government elections they were more likely to vote for an individual candidate based on their stance on social issues, whereas at the UK Parliamentary election they were more likely to vote for the party of their choice.

Based on tradition, you're brought up with a certain party in mind and you'll always stick with them.

In Northern Ireland voting is very private and you tend to vote for what you were brought up in and you tend to be afraid to go against the norm of what was in the past.

Probably how they've spoken out for the community in the past and what they say they are going to do with regards to the hospitals.

Certainly it came to social issues in the council elections whereas in the Westminster election it was more to do with the party.

Focus groups, May 2005

Absent voting

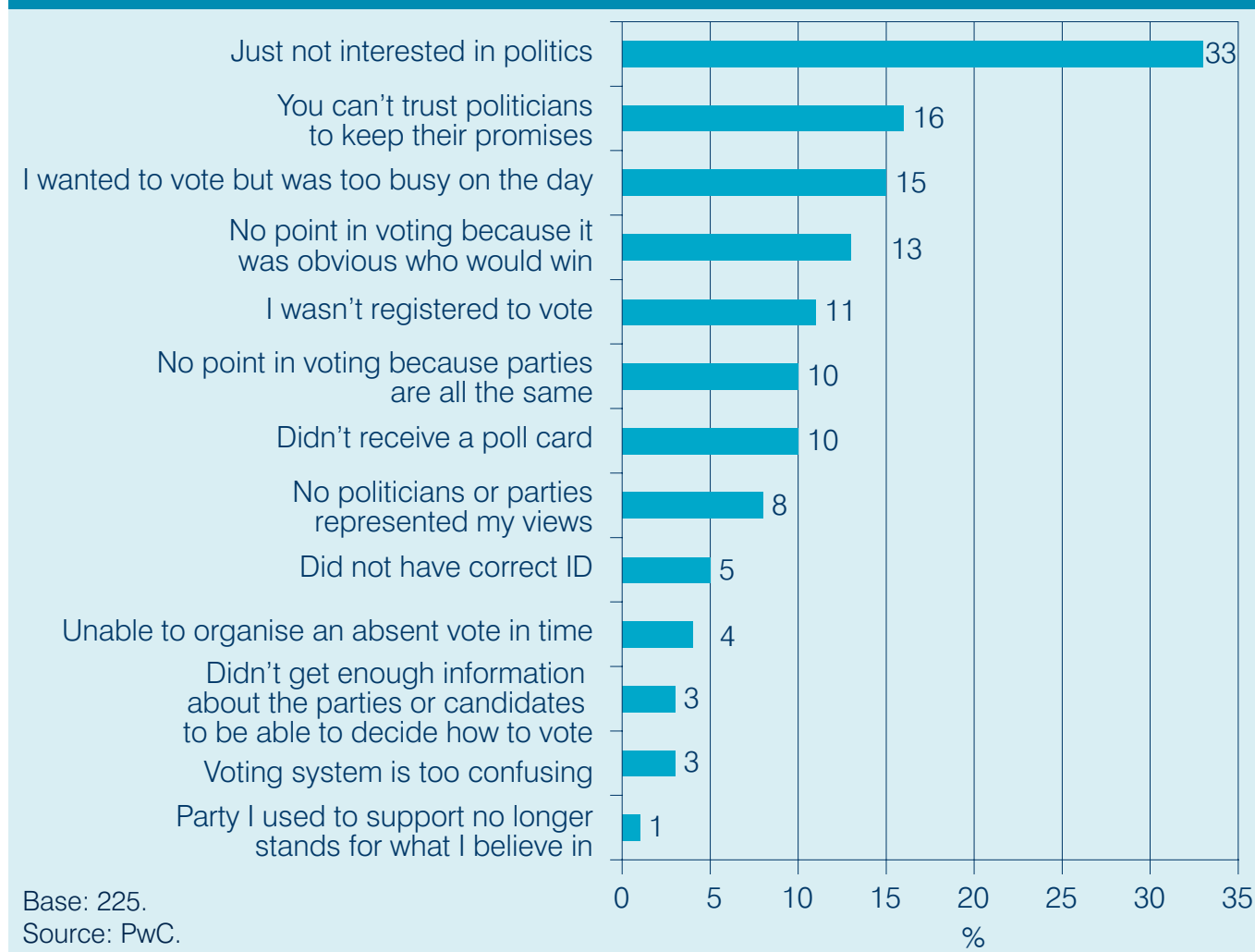
7.21 Results from the PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) public opinion survey revealed that almost all of those who voted (95%) cast their vote in person, with 4% voting by post and 1% by proxy. These figures have not changed significantly since the 2003 Assembly election, although the number saying they voted by post has doubled since the 2001 combined elections. Just over one in 10 (11%) said they voted in person because they were unaware of any other method of voting or because they did not know how to arrange an absent vote. The findings also showed that just over four in 10 (43%) of those interviewed said they would make use of postal voting on demand if it were available in Northern Ireland with 38% saying they would not.

Reasons for not voting

7.22 As part of our public opinion survey, non-voters were asked to choose from a list of reasons for not voting. The main reason given as Figure 8 illustrates, was a lack of interest in politics. Just over three in 10 (33%) cited this as their main reason for not voting. This figure has not changed significantly since the combined elections in 2001 and the Assembly election in 2003 when the comparable figures were 36% and 37% respectively. Young people aged between 18–24 were more likely to give this as their reason for not voting (47%). There was also a correlation between socio-economic groups with those in group C2DE more likely to say that they had not voted because they had no interest in politics.

7.23 The second most popular reason for not voting was that people felt that they could not trust politicians (16%). This figure was similar to that given at the 2003 Assembly election when the equivalent figure was 17%. Another key reason given for not voting was that people were too busy on the day (15%). This represents a slight decrease since the 2003 Assembly election. Twice the number of females (20%) than males (10%) cited this as their reason for not voting. This appeared to be an issue for all age groups except for those aged 60+. Those in socio-economic group ABC1 were much more likely (19%) to have been too busy on the day than those in group C2DE (12%).

Figure 8: Reasons identified for not voting at the May 2005 combined elections



7.24 Not being registered to vote (11%) and not receiving a poll card (10%) were significant reasons given for not voting. Almost a quarter (23%) of those aged 18–24 said they did not vote because they were not registered and 19% said it was due to the fact that they had not received a poll card. The corresponding figure for those aged 60+ was 3% in both cases.

Protestants were more likely (13%) than Catholics (11%) to say that the reason they had not voted was because they were either not registered or had not received a poll card. The percentage of people unable to vote because they did not have the correct identification reduced slightly from 7% at the 2003 Assembly election to 5% in 2005.

At the May 2005 elections more females (7%) gave lack of correct identification as their reason for not voting than males (4%), while the number of Catholics citing this reason was higher (8%) than Protestants (5%).

7.25 Focus group participants identified a number of perceived barriers to voting including insufficient information about the parties standing, lack of awareness of registration and politicians in Northern Ireland having no power.

I find politics in Northern Ireland really confusing. You just don't know who you are going to vote for, you don't know any of the parties' policies and there is nothing to encourage you to vote.

Focus group, May 2005

I think it is a waste of time to vote because you're voting for people who have no power. The water charge issue is coming from Westminster and the parties here don't seem to have any interest in it and they have no power to do anything anyway.

Focus group, May 2005

Interest in politics

7.26 To gauge the level of interest in politics generally all participants in our public opinion survey were asked for their views. Six in 10 (60%) had at least some interest in politics, while 39% said they had 'not much' or 'no interest at all'. Males (66%) appeared to be more interested in politics than females (55%). There was a direct correlation with age and socio-economic group, with those in younger age groups and lower socio-economic groups

being less interested in politics. There was no significant difference between Protestants and Catholics in respect of interest in politics. Those who defined themselves as 'others' were less interested in politics. Overall, interest in politics had increased marginally since the 2003 Assembly election.

7.27 As Figure 9 shows, overall, there was slightly more interest in Northern Ireland/local politics than UK-wide political issues. Almost seven in ten (67%) said they had at least some interest in Northern Ireland political issues whereas the equivalent figure for politics on a UK-wide basis was 55%. There has been little change in attitudes towards politics in Northern Ireland since the 2003 Assembly election. However, the percentage of people stating they have 'not very much' or 'no interest at all' in UK-wide politics has increased by 8% to 44%. On the whole focus group participants endorsed these findings. Most felt that there had been little progress over the years in relation to Northern Ireland politics, which many associated with 'arguing and fighting'. Despite this finding, local politicians tended to be trusted more than politicians generally.

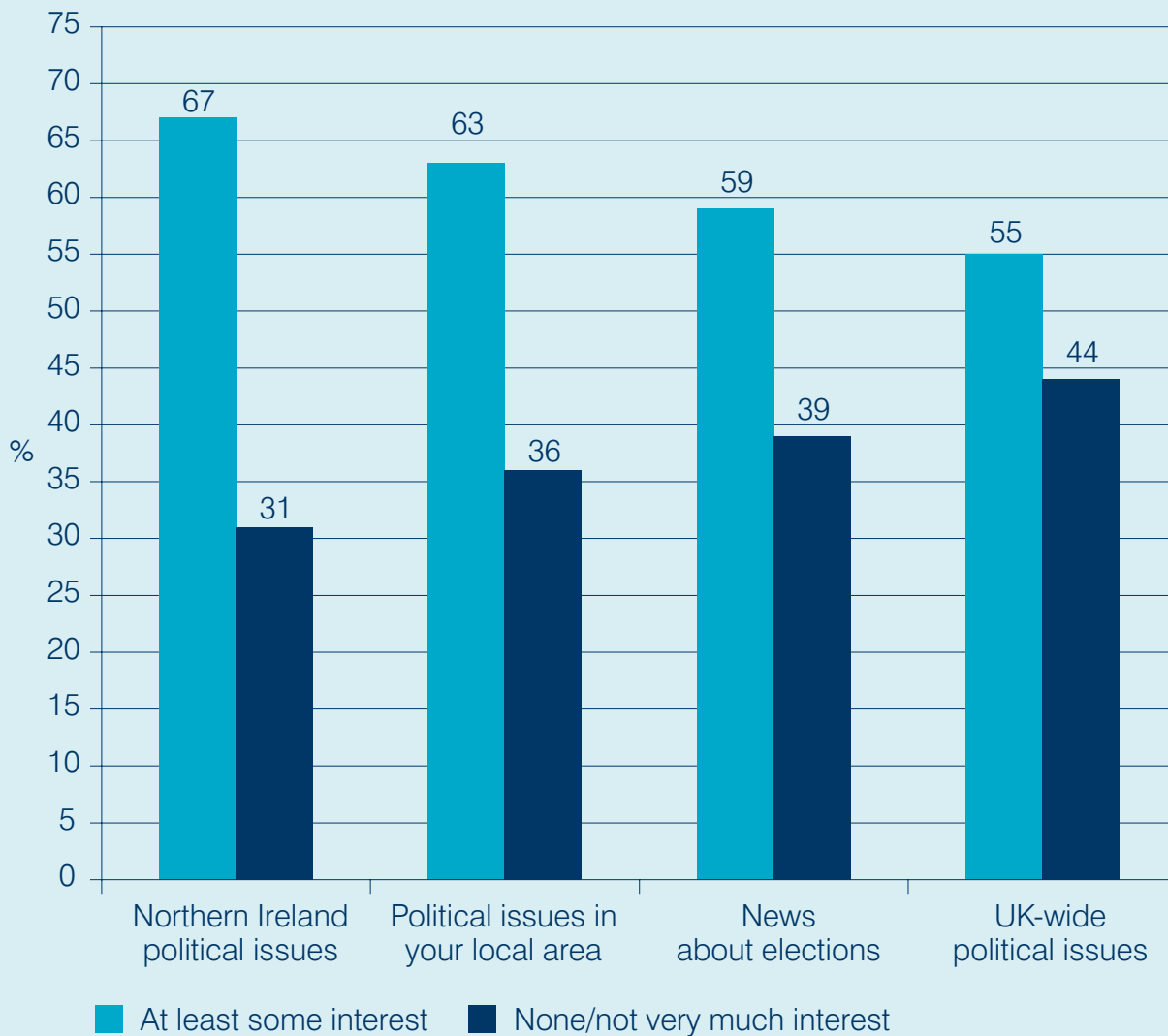
I would have more interest in stuff that affects my local area because you would know the candidates or at least know of them.

Focus group, May 2005

In England politics is more about your own social beliefs than tribal. I would find that more interesting. Over here they say absolutely nothing about policies, nothing constructive at all.

Focus group, May 2005

Figure 9: Percentage of people surveyed saying they had at least some interest in politics, May 2005



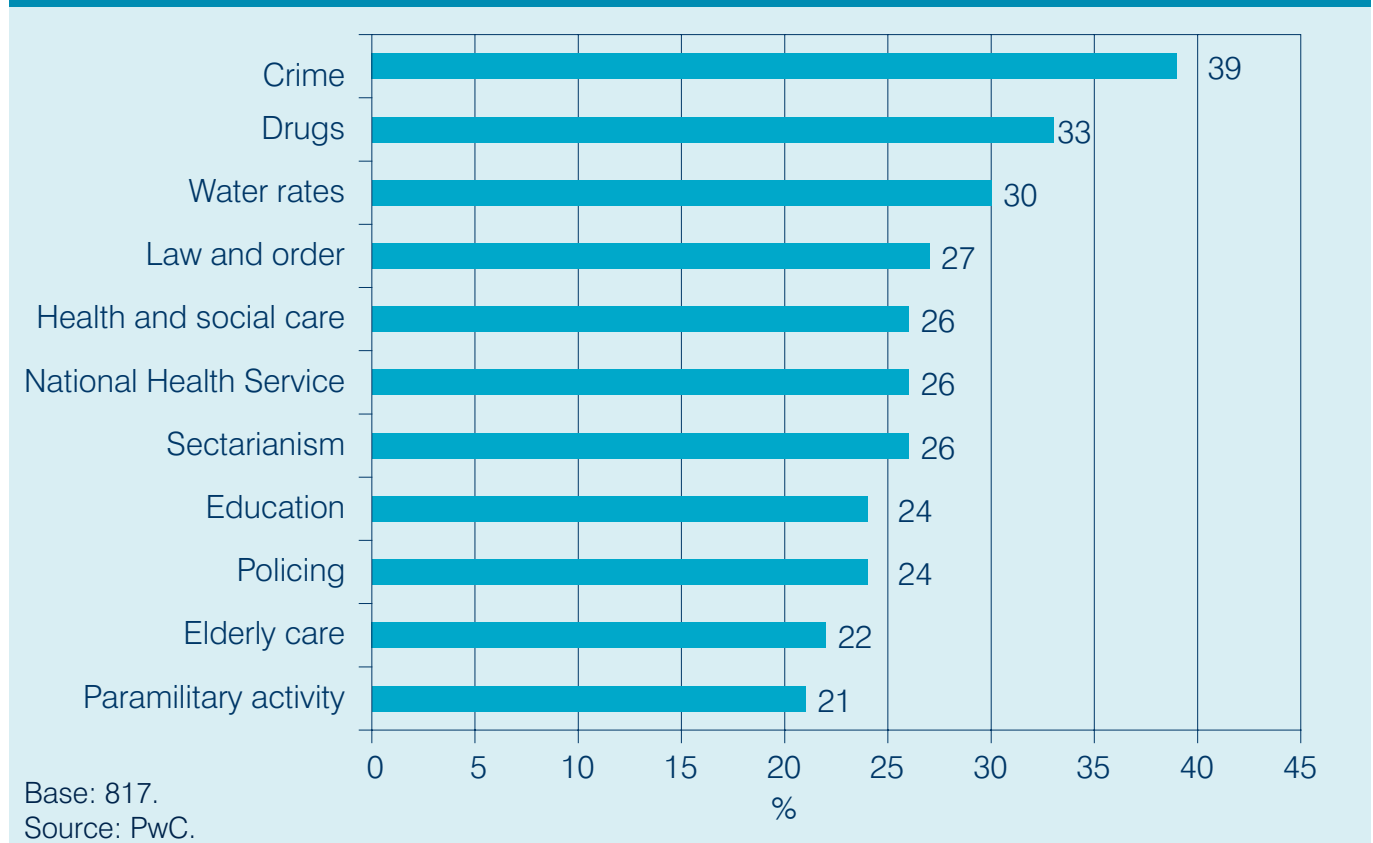
Base: 817.
Source: PwC.

Issues affecting the electorate in Northern Ireland

7.28 Respondents to the public opinion survey were asked what they considered to be the most important issues facing Northern Ireland. Figure 10 shows that crime (39%), drugs (33%) and water rates (30%) were identified as the three biggest concerns followed by law and order and health and social care. Young people between the ages of 18–24, while concerned about crime and drugs, identified sectarianism (35%) as the biggest issue. While an equal

number of Protestants and Catholics (24%) felt that sectarianism was an issue, it was of significantly greater concern to those who did not classify themselves as Protestant or Catholic (37%). When asked to comment on wider issues impacting on the UK as a whole, the National Health Service, asylum seekers and the war in Iraq were among the top five issues alongside crime and drugs.

Figure 10: The biggest issues facing Northern Ireland today as given by respondents to survey



Political activism

7.29 In order to gauge the extent of political activism (excluding voting) we asked respondents to indicate what activities they had undertaken in the last two or three years. Altogether 16% of the sample had urged someone outside their family to vote, 15% had presented their views to a local councillor or MP and 11% had urged someone to get in touch with a local councillor or MP. Those engaging in these type of activities in Northern Ireland are proportionally more likely to be from a middle class than working class background. Protestants are more likely than Catholics to present their views to a local councillor or MP whereas Catholics are more likely than Protestants to urge someone outside their family to vote. There is a clear correlation with age and social class in respect of urging someone to get in touch with an MP or councillor. Those in social group ABC1 and those aged 60+ are much more likely to do this than their counterparts in social group C2DE and those aged between 18–24.

Summary

7.30 The number of people voting at elections in Northern Ireland continues to decline. Altogether, 93,644 fewer votes were cast at the 2005 UK Parliamentary election than in 2001, while the equivalent figure for the local government elections was 91,631.

7.31 It is estimated that 91% of the 18+ population was eligible to vote at the combined elections. Numbers on the register had been boosted by reinstatement

of just over 70,000 electors following the introduction of new legislation.

7.32 There were significant variations in turnout across the 18 Parliamentary constituencies and the 26 local councils. Fermanagh & South Tyrone recorded the highest turnout at the UK Parliamentary election, with Strangford recording the lowest. At the local government elections, Magherafelt District Council achieved the highest average turnout, with Ards Borough Council recording the lowest.

7.33 The Commission's post-election public opinion survey addressed reasons for voting and non-voting. Of those who voted, two-thirds said they did so because they felt it was their duty, while a lack of interest in politics was cited as the most popular reason among those who did not vote. There was a reasonably high level of interest in politics generally, with six in 10 respondents claiming to have at least some interest. This increased when respondents were asked about Northern Ireland politics specifically, as opposed to UK-wide politics. Respondents identified crime, drugs and water rates as the top three issues facing Northern Ireland.

8 The count and thereafter

At a combined election the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland (EONI) has responsibility for the conduct and administration of the UK Parliamentary election count, whereas local government election counts are the responsibility of the council chief executives in their capacity as Deputy Returning Officers. However, the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland is ultimately responsible for the conduct of all counts, including the results.

8.1 At a combined election the EONI has responsibility for the conduct and administration of the UK Parliamentary election count including the recruitment of staff such as count coordinators, count controllers, calculators, supervisors, count clerks and security personnel. At the local government elections responsibility for the administration of the count rests with the chief executive of the council in their role as Deputy Returning Officer. However the Chief Electoral Officer is ultimately responsible for the conduct of all counts. On average about 40–50 count staff were employed to cover each of the 18 UK Parliamentary counts, with about half this number employed to count each district electoral area at the local government counts. Prior to the election, a number of local councils held mock counts in order to assist staff in preparing for their duties.

The UK Parliamentary count

8.2 The count for the UK Parliamentary election in Northern Ireland commenced at 9am on Friday 6 May. The practice of starting the count on the morning after the poll is different to the rest of the UK, where counting begins soon after the close of poll. There was considerable frustration on the part of political parties, candidates, agents, local councils and some elements of the media that the overall outcome of the UK Parliamentary election is known long before the ballot boxes are opened in Northern Ireland.

Westminster votes should be counted straight away as in Great Britain. Council votes should be counted the next day, not four days later.

Candidate

The count did not begin quickly enough. The process should commence in line with other parts of the UK immediately after the poll closes.

Candidate

When (the election) is first past the post we can't understand why it isn't started automatically as soon as the polling stations are closed.

Political party

There are continued frustrations with the timing of the election counts. The verification of local government ballots on the Friday certainly helped the speed of the counts on the Monday and Tuesday. However, even allowing for this additional procedure, most Westminster counts were taking far longer than their equivalents in Great Britain.

Political party

The Northern Ireland Electoral Office seems to be committed...to robbing elections of every possible sense of drama. Not for the North the all-night counts that kept the rest of the UK out of bed and which contributes so much to voter education.

**Contributor to *Belfast Telegraph*,
10 May 2005**

You must say to yourself why is Northern Ireland so different from England, Scotland and Wales? It used to be we had our counts the same night so we can do it. The question is why does the Electoral Office not do it now?

Member of the House of Lords

8.3 In response to criticism about commencing the count on the morning after the poll, the Chief Electoral Officer advised the Commission that this was done for practical reasons. He explained that a large proportion of UK Parliamentary count staff in Northern Ireland had also acted as poll staff on election day and it would have been unreasonable to expect them to begin counting votes immediately after the close of poll.

Count venues

8.4 The counts for the UK Parliamentary election were held at the following venues.

Constituency	Count venue
Belfast East	City Hall, Belfast
Belfast West	
Belfast North	
Belfast South	
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	Omagh Leisure Centre, Omagh
West Tyrone	
Foyle	Templemore Sports Complex, Derry
Mid Ulster	
North Antrim	Joey Dunlop Centre, Ballymoney
East Londonderry	
Upper Bann	Banbridge Leisure Centre, Banbridge
Newry & Armagh	
South Down	Dromore Community Centre, Dromore
Lagan Valley	
East Antrim	Valley Leisure Centre, Newtownabbey
South Antrim	
Strangford	Ards Leisure Centre, Newtownards
North Down	

8.5 Prior to the 2003 Assembly election the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) informed the EONI that for security reasons the Mid Ulster count had to be transferred from the Joey Dunlop Centre in Ballymoney to the Templemore Sports Complex in Derry city. For the May 2005 elections the Mid Ulster count was again transferred. One Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) was unhappy that the count for Mid Ulster took place outside the constituency.

I should like to formally request that the count for Mid Ulster be transferred from Londonderry to a count centre in the constituency. It simply does not make sense that the registration of voters and postal vote requests are dealt with by the Ballymoney area electoral office and then the count transferred to Londonderry area electoral office...on the grounds that holding it in Ballymoney could be expected to lead to public unrest and confrontation in the town.

Submission from MLA

8.6 The Chief Electoral Officer advised the Commission that he and his colleagues also found this arrangement unsatisfactory and that in future the count for Mid Ulster would be held at its original venue. His view was shared by an independent election consultant who was asked to investigate an incident involving the removal of ballot papers from the count centre at the Templemore Sports Complex.

I understand that security considerations played a part in the determination for the location of various counts but from a management point of view it seems to me unsatisfactory that the area electoral office which is responsible for administering elections in certain constituencies is not also responsible for the counts for the same constituencies.³¹

Election consultant

Management of the UK Parliamentary count

Time taken to count the votes

8.7 In our report on the 2003 Assembly election we highlighted a number of concerns expressed by political parties, local councils, observers and the media about the length of time taken to complete the counts. Feedback received after the May 2005 UK Parliamentary election suggested that there remains dissatisfaction at the count process in Northern Ireland, both for the UK Parliamentary election which uses first past the post and the local government elections which use the single transferable vote (STV) system.

Shocking – there is no excuse for not using council staff as in GB to conduct the Westminster count immediately after close of polls. There is no excuse for not counting on Saturdays and there is no need for such a lengthy verification process.

Submission from candidate

³¹ *Report of investigation into circumstances relating to the removal of ballot papers from count centre*, (unpublished) Robert Wilson – Election consultant, June 2005.

The counting of votes in Mid Ulster and indeed throughout Northern Ireland seemed to lack direction and urgency and the length of time taken for the result to be announced – at nearly 10pm on Friday – was totally unacceptable.

Submission from MLA

8.8 Some of the main political parties in Northern Ireland including the UUP, SDLP and Sinn Féin also criticised the count process with the (then) leader of the Ulster Unionist Party stating:

We need to ask why we cannot have sensible counting arrangements. Here we are, with the elections over and announced in Britain, and we won't know the result for hours...there is no reason as far as I am aware for this cumbersome system.³²

8.9 The slowness of the counts was a theme picked up by the media after the elections. Members of the media informed Commission observers that the length of time taken to complete the counts in some constituencies had played havoc with their schedules and overall coverage was affected. One commentator said that once it got past Friday teatime the weekend schedules were underway and it was almost impossible to disrupt these for further election coverage especially since many hours of coverage had already been devoted to the results. Comments regarding the speed of the count were also made in the press.

Fresh calls for sweeping changes to the (counting) process in Northern Ireland came during a day of slow counting sparking a barrage of criticism. By 4pm yesterday only one of the 18 seats had been declared... the first seat in England – Sunderland South – was declared within an hour of polling.

Irish News, 7 May 2005

8.10 In response to criticisms about the time taken to conduct the count, the Chief Electoral Officer told the Commission that in his view the verification process in Great Britain was not carried out strictly in accordance with the legislation and therefore making a direct comparison was unhelpful.³³ He also stated that hostility around elections in Northern Ireland made it especially important to ensure that no mistakes were made during the process. As a result he emphasised the EONI's priority as being accuracy rather than speed.

8.11 At the 2005 UK Parliamentary election the number of votes polled decreased by 93,644 from the 2001 election, representing an average reduction of 5,202 per constituency across Northern Ireland. Some constituencies saw a significant decrease in the number of votes polled between 2001 and 2005. North Belfast witnessed a decrease of 25%, Belfast West and Belfast East 16% and Belfast South 15%. The decrease in some rural constituencies was equally pronounced, with a 14% reduction in Strangford and 13% in Upper Bann, South Antrim and North Down. Despite this reduction

³² *Belfast Telegraph*, 6 May 2005.

³³ It should be noted that the Commission has no evidence to suggest that Returning Officers in Great Britain are not complying with the law in this regard.

in the number of votes polled, there was little difference in the time taken to conduct the counts. In 2001 the counts lasted in the region of 168 hours, whereas in 2005 this had reduced to approximately 162 hours. However, it should be noted that there were two recounts in 2001, one in Fermanagh & South Tyrone and one in East Antrim.

8.12 The constituencies experiencing the longest counts were Mid Ulster (12 hours), South Down (11 hours 45 minutes), Newry & Armagh (10 hours 45 minutes), Foyle (10 hours 30 minutes) and Lagan Valley (10 hours 30 minutes).³⁴ The constituency with the fastest count was Belfast West (five hours) followed by East Antrim, Belfast East, Belfast South and Belfast North (all lasting just over seven hours). In our report on the 2003 Assembly election we recommended that external consultants be appointed by the EONI to conduct a review of the entire count process with the aim of increasing its efficiency. In light of continuing criticism from stakeholders we reaffirm this recommendation and suggest that the review encompasses both STV and first past the post counts.

Verification

8.13 Verification of votes is the process whereby the number of ballot papers in the ballot boxes is reconciled with the ballot paper account. In many cases, the verification process at the UK Parliamentary count was not completed until well into the afternoon. This was due to the fact that the local government ballot boxes had to be opened first to ensure that any

UK Parliamentary ballots inadvertently placed there were removed. At this stage the number of local government ballot papers was also recorded, before being returned to the ballot boxes and resealed. The local government ballot boxes were then removed from the count centres and were stored in council accommodation until Monday 9 May. One observer commented that this had the effect of significantly slowing the count process for the UK Parliamentary election.

It would surely have been more sensible and efficient to follow a similar process to that used at combined elections in Scotland, which involves taking both ballot boxes from a polling station to the count centre and carrying out a rummage process to identify any papers that have been placed in the wrong box. From there, the local government papers could be returned to the ballot box and the box resealed without the papers needing to be counted at this stage. This would save both time at the UK Parliamentary count and the double counting process whereby the number of papers was recorded at this stage and then the papers were again counted and verified at the commencement of the local government count process.

Electoral Commission observer

8.14 There also appeared to be confusion as to when local government candidates, who were present for the verification process, had to leave the count hall.

³⁴ These times have been calculated using a 9am start.

After the local government ballot boxes had been opened and the number of papers audited, the Deputy Returning Officer made an announcement asking local government candidates to leave the hall and stated that the Parliamentary boxes would be opened when staff returned from their breaks. Several moments later, the Deputy Returning Officer made a further announcement stating that the local government candidates did not in fact have to leave at this point but could wait until the Parliamentary boxes were verified to see if they contained any local government ballot papers.

Electoral Commission observer

Management and utilisation of staff

8.15 Many of the concerns highlighted in our report on the 2003 Assembly elections were again present at the UK Parliamentary election count. It was noted by Commission observers that at a number of count venues staff were not well-managed and it was not always obvious who was running the count. There were often periods of inactivity, with staff either sitting at the count tables with nothing to do or spending long periods of time in the cafeteria. One observer noted that staff returned much later than requested because they had to compete with the media and others for refreshments. It was also noted by observers that during periods of inactivity food was consumed at the count tables and personal belongings were placed under tables, potentially compromising the integrity of the count.

Counting assistants seemed to be able to come and go as they pleased and, even when they were actually working, speed did not seem to be a consideration. The person in charge of the count stated that the staff breaks were 'staggered' but this did not appear to be what happened in practice, with staff instead seeming to please themselves and taking as long as they liked.

Electoral Commission observer

8.16 None of the EONI Deputy Returning Officers who participated in our survey reported having encountered any particular problems during the count, with one remarking that 'the count was generally excellent'.

Public announcements

8.17 At several counts observers noted that public address (PA) systems were either not working or infrequently employed. This was an issue also highlighted at the 2003 Assembly election when we recommended that a modern PA system should be an important factor in the choice of a count venue. At the 2005 UK Parliamentary count there was at least one instance where a PA system appeared not to work.

Unauthorised removal of ballot papers from count centre

8.18 During the UK Parliamentary count for Mid Ulster held in Templemore Sports Complex in Derry city, a quantity of ballot papers was inadvertently removed from the count centre before the completion of the count. A transport company contracted by the EONI to remove

empty ballot boxes to a storage depot on the outskirts of the city picked up two ballot boxes believing them to be empty and removed them along with empty boxes. At around 7pm it transpired among those managing the count that approximately 3,500 ballot papers were unaccounted for. Following a thorough search of the count area the contractor was contacted and asked to check all ballot boxes in his possession to ascertain if they contained any ballot papers. A short time later the contractor confirmed to the Assistant Chief Electoral Officer (who by coincidence was attending both the Mid Ulster and Foyle counts) that he had recovered two ballot boxes containing ballot papers which had already been sorted and bundled.

8.19 Candidates and agents for the Mid Ulster constituency were immediately called together by the Assistant Chief Electoral Officer who explained the situation and confirmed that some ballot papers had been removed in error, but had been located at the contractor's depot. It was agreed with the candidates and agents that an observer from the Commission should accompany the Assistant Chief Electoral Officer in the retrieval of the ballots. A short time later the two ballot boxes were returned to the count centre and the count completed with the declaration made at 10pm. The MP elected for the area called on the electoral authorities to initiate an investigation into how ballot papers could be removed from a count centre in the middle of a count.

8.20 The issue of the missing ballot papers received widespread media coverage and a few days after the election the Chief Electoral

Officer asked an independent election consultant to investigate the matter, make recommendations to avoid such a situation occurring in the future and identify learning points. The consultant interviewed key witnesses to the event and submitted his report to the Chief Electoral Officer in June 2005. His report concluded that there was no evidence to suggest that the removal of the ballot papers was anything other than a genuine mistake on the part of those responsible for organising and running the count. However, he said that the incident had been a serious lapse and on another occasion might have had much more serious repercussions. He concluded that other factors may have indirectly contributed to the situation stating:

The poor catering facilities amongst other factors delayed progress on the count and if this had not happened then the count may have been concluded before the boxes were collected. There was no count officer specifically tasked with checking boxes being removed from the count. If this had been done then it is highly likely that the boxes with the papers would not have been removed. It has also been shown that the ancillary facilities in the count venue are almost as important as those available for the counting of votes and that problems arising from poor facilities can impact on the actual counting of votes.

Election consultant

8.21 The independent election consultant recommended that the Chief Electoral Officer consider drafting guidelines on the conduct of future counts containing advice not just on the counting of votes but also on all aspects of the management of counts including those such as security, media, catering, count documentation and procedures for dealing with the ballot papers. It was further recommended that on the basis of the guidelines produced, Deputy Returning Officers at future elections be required to produce detailed count plans to satisfy the Chief Electoral Officer that suitable arrangements are in place in relation to all relevant aspects of count management. Altogether, the consultant made 11 recommendations to the Chief Electoral Officer, which are detailed in his report. The Commission endorses the recommendations made by the independent election consultant and suggests that they are implemented across all counts at future elections.

The local government counts

8.22 Local councils were responsible for the administration of their own counts and by and large used their own staff to complete each stage of the process. All the counts commenced at 9am on Monday 9 May at 26 venues across Northern Ireland and continued in many instances through to Tuesday 10 May. The feedback received from council chief executives in their capacity as Deputy Returning Officers was that this aspect of the election was largely successful, with no significant problems reported. A number of chief executives commented that using their own administrative staff made the process run more smoothly because staff were

used to working with each other. A number of senior staff at the local government counts said that the fee they received for managing the count was inadequate given the level of responsibility and suggested that this be reviewed or the number of staff willing to work at future counts would diminish further.

We recommend that the current levels of remuneration for count staff be reviewed.

Count venues

8.23 Counts were conducted in council-owned facilities, including leisure centres which were well-equipped and provided adequate catering facilities. Most observers agreed that, in the main, the layout of the count centre contributed to the efficiency of the process, allowing 'good control and transparency' with counts conducted in a relaxed atmosphere.

8.24 The counts for the 26 councils were held at the following venues.

Council	Count centre
Derry City Council	Guildhall, Derry
Limavady Borough Council	Roe Valley Leisure Centre, Limavady
Coleraine Borough Council	Coleraine Leisure Centre, Coleraine
Ballymoney Borough Council	Joey Dunlop Centre, Ballymoney
Moyle District Council	Sheskburn House, Ballycastle
Larne Borough Council	Larne Leisure Centre, Larne
Ballymena Borough Council	Seven Towers Leisure Centre, Ballymena
Magherafelt District Council	Greenvale Leisure Centre, Magherafelt
Cookstown District Council	The Burnavon, Cookstown
Strabane District Council	Abercorn Factory, Strabane
Omagh District Council	Omagh Leisure Complex, Omagh
Fermanagh District Council	Fermanagh Lakeland Forum, Enniskillen
Dungannon & South Tyrone Borough Council	Dungannon Leisure Centre, Dungannon
Craigavon Borough Council	Craigavon Civic Centre, Craigavon
Armagh City and District Council	Orchard Leisure Centre, Armagh
Newry & Mourne District Council	Newry Sports Centre, Newry
Banbridge District Council	Banbridge Leisure Centre, Banbridge
Down District Council	Down Leisure Centre, Downpatrick
Lisburn City Council	Lagan Valley Leisureplex, Lisburn
Antrim Borough Council	Antrim Forum, Antrim
Newtownabbey Borough Council	Valley Leisure Centre, Newtownabbey
Carrickfergus Borough Council	Jubilee Hall, Carrickfergus
North Down Borough Council	Town Hall, Bangor
Ards Borough Council	Ards Leisure Centre, Newtownards
Castlereagh Borough Council	Cregagh Youth and Community Centre, Belfast
Belfast City Council	City Hall, Belfast

8.25 A number of count centres, including Belfast, Carrickfergus and Derry were considered less suitable due to space restrictions. At several venues candidates and agents expressed concerns about the visibility of the enumerator tables and felt this compromised the transparency of the count.

At the count in Derry's Guildhall independent observers from Scotland, while conceding that the barrier separating count staff from candidates and agents was very close to the count tables, nevertheless stated that this afforded them a clear view of proceedings. However, one agent was heard to complain that

the barrier only served to inhibit the view of observers. At the Belfast count, staff reported that they were unconcerned by the close scrutiny of candidates, party workers and other observers. However, one count official remarked that count staff felt 'harassed' by the proximity of the barrier. In Ballymena the large leisure centre space enabled four simultaneous counts to be administered, each area 'roped in' to ensure that only staff had access.

Management of the local government counts

Time taken to count the votes

8.26 The fact that the count for the local government elections did not start until four days after the close of poll was a source of frustration for some candidates and agents. The EONI had requested an amendment to the legislation to allow counting to begin on Saturday 7 May but this was not possible given timescales. A number of Deputy Returning Officers felt that there were additional, unnecessary security costs and that some leisure facilities were out of commission for the entire weekend. However, one observer from Scotland, where STV will be employed for the 2007 local elections, defended the practice of delaying the start of the count.

The main lesson I learned is that counting the following day, which tends to detract from the excitement of a count commencing when the polls close, does allow you to commence the process when everybody, electoral administrators and their staff, and candidates and agents etc. are fresh and alert and this seems to reduce the tension with the result that the process appears to move very smoothly.

Observer from Scotland

Due to the fact that counting could not start until Monday 9 May 2005 there was a major impact on the sports centre which was our count centre. Large parts of the centre were not available from 5 May to 10 May inclusive. Staff were also continuously involved in providing security for the ballot boxes from 6 May 2005 to mid afternoon on 10 May.

District Council

We should try to become as quick as other areas of UK in doing the count. An observer from Scotland referred to it as the Slow Transferable Vote. There were long periods where count staff just sat around.

Submission from candidate

The calculation of the results took an alarmingly long time even with officials who have been involved in the process for many years. After each reallocation of votes there was another lengthy delay in which all work stopped...The delays, the apparently intense discussion of every point and the very regular use of erasers were concerning.

Observer from Scotland

Verification

8.27 Observers noted that in most instances the verification process ran smoothly although it was felt by some to lack urgency due to the relaxed approach of count staff. A number of Deputy Returning Officers commented that the verification process took longer than expected because the ballot paper account submitted by Presiding Officers lacked important information, thus slowing the process. On other occasions,

observers noted that the verification of votes had already been carried out at the UK Parliamentary count.

Presiding Officers could have been more diligent in completing their paperwork.

Borough Council

In essence this amounted to a re-verification – with the combined elections the boxes had already been opened to identify any stray Parliamentary votes and, as the ballot papers were in bundles of 100, it would appear that the opportunity had then been taken to carry out a preliminary verification.

Observer from Scotland

Public announcements

8.28 There was a general lack of consistency in how announcements were made at counts. Some councils made regular use of PA equipment after each stage of the count to inform those present about the outcome, including, for example, which candidate had been elected or eliminated.

Candidates and agents were kept fully informed throughout both by means of regular announcements at the various stages of the count and by means of computer monitors.

Observer from Scotland

There were regular announcements at each stage and the results of each stage were posted on a board for public inspection.

Observer from Scotland

8.29 Others chose not to make the announcements public and instead gathered candidates and agents around to explain to them what was happening. A number of observers noted that many candidates and agents' understanding of the count process appeared to 'grind to a halt' after the calculation of the quota. A Scottish Returning Officer commented:

From my observations, I do not think that the calculation of transfer values was generally understood. There is a need to consider candidate/agents education about the electoral system. The decisions at each stage, where someone is deemed elected or is excluded, must be clearly explained.

Observer from Scotland

8.30 Some councils made use of overhead projectors and plasma screens to display results, although this was the exception rather than the rule. One observer commented that this improved the transparency of the count process. In all council areas the results were recorded manually on a large white sheet of paper fastened to a noticeboard which was updated throughout the count. In order to improve consistency and to ensure greater transparency and openness at counts, it would be beneficial if councils worked to a set of basic guidelines aimed at improving the dissemination of information.

8.31 Once all candidates were elected for a district electoral area, the Deputy Returning Officer made a public announcement, usually in the media centre. This gave candidates an opportunity to make speeches and thank their supporters.

Information technology

8.32 The EONI provided the local councils with an electronic spreadsheet for verifying each stage of the local government count. The technology was first piloted at the 2004 European Parliamentary election and local councils had been trained in its use ahead of the 2005 local government elections. The purpose of the exercise was to test further the software as the spreadsheet was not intended to replace manual counting but was there to provide a means to check calculations as the count progressed. It was also used by some councils as a means of publicising the progress of the count by projecting the results onto overhead projectors. Although it was generally regarded by the councils as being beneficial, a number of problems were identified. The EONI reported that one council adjusted the software in order that the electronic results matched the manual results. The EONI made strong representations to the council concerned about the approach adopted.

The electronic spreadsheet...was effective but at times it wanted to exclude candidates when in fact the correct thing to do was transfer the surplus of another candidate.

Electoral Commission observer

The electronic count calculator programme was an interesting development as a pilot but, on balance, proved to be a distraction.

City council

Regrettably, the process did not include the calculation by the computer of either the electoral quota or the transfer value

of votes...It is understood that the figures produced were not identical to those of the official count procedure but were not radically different.

Observer from Scotland

Calculators advised that the software wasn't exactly accurate despite being tested a number of times and required checking at each stage. One count area preferred using the software, the other did not.

Observer from Scotland

8.33 Observers from Scotland were in general agreement that although the manual counting process was slow and ponderous there was confidence in how the counts were conducted. However, most felt that the process lent itself to electronic counting and one Scottish Returning Officer said that the introduction of a manual process for Scotland was 'unthinkable'. At a post-election focus group the Chief Electoral Officer advised the Commission that he was keen to develop the use of IT to assist the count process at all STV elections, although parties, candidates and the electorate would need to have confidence in the system.

The Commission would be supportive of pilot schemes being developed in Northern Ireland to test new ways of both e-voting and e-counting and recommends that the Government amends the necessary legislation enabling the EONI and local councils to undertake pilot schemes.

Media presence at the counts

8.34 In our report on the 2003 Assembly election we noted that the arrangements in place for media access to the count process were ‘far from satisfactory’. The two main broadcasters in Northern Ireland, the BBC and UTV, alleged that access to the counts for the media in general was much more restricted than elsewhere in the UK and in the Republic of Ireland. At the time the Chief Electoral Officer commented that while the EONI did its best to facilitate the media, its main priority had to be the effective administration of the count. In order to address the shortcomings identified in 2003 we recommended to the EONI that a working group involving broadcasters and other interested parties be established with a view to developing a code of good practice on media access to the elections. While a group was not established discussions took place between the BBC, UTV, RTE, Sky Television and the EONI before the 2005 elections.

8.35 The EONI sought guidance from the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) press office about improving access for the media at the UK Parliamentary election count. A representative from the NIO press office visited the UK Parliamentary count centres and prepared a report for the Chief Electoral Officer. He presented suggestions to the EONI on the layout of the count centres in order that media access could be maximised without compromising secrecy or the smooth running of the counts.

8.36 Observers from the Commission who attended the counts acknowledged that

some venues were more suited to the media both in respect of layout and the facilities they could offer. Others were far from satisfactory, including the Templemore Sports Complex in Londonderry. Although an area had been identified for the media at this venue, they chose to set up their equipment in the foyer area as was normal practice at the venue. As a result, broadcasting equipment and cables were strewn across the floor, creating a health and safety hazard for those entering and leaving the count venue.

8.37 A number of journalists and broadcasters also raised concerns about the approach adopted by security staff in respect of the use of mobile phones at the same venue. A notice at the entrance to the count centre advised those entering that the use of mobile phones was prohibited. Consequently, when reporters attempted to use their phones in the media centre, they were asked by security personnel to step outside the count centre if they wished to make a call. This caused considerable frustration and annoyance and highlighted a potential training issue for those charged with count security. Despite such difficulties, feedback received from representatives of the print and broadcast media was generally positive about the efforts made by the EONI to improve media access.

8.38 Representatives from the media attended all the local government counts, although their presence was often low key. In some council areas media presence consisted only of local newspaper journalists. There appears to be inconsistency regarding media access to

local government counts. A number of Deputy Returning Officers said there was confusion about the level of access which should be given to the media and suggested that this was an area where guidance would be helpful.

I understand that in some areas the media were allowed admittance, whereas in others they were not. Clear and definitive guidance on this matter would be appreciated.

District council

8.39 Some councils were quite restrictive in granting access to the media while others were more accommodating. Overall observers noted that the presence of the media was much less obtrusive at the local government counts than at the UK Parliamentary count and that generally the atmosphere was more relaxed. Media access to counts has been raised with the Commission in Great Britain and we will examine the issue in 2006.

Ballot papers not included in the counts

8.40 Altogether 20,924 ballot papers were spoiled at the 2005 combined elections, comprising 14,758 at the local government elections and 6,166 at the UK Parliamentary election (as shown in Table 24). The proportion of votes spoiled at the UK Parliamentary election in Northern Ireland remained largely unchanged from 2001, while there was a slight reduction in the proportion of ballots spoiled at the local government elections.

8.41 The constituencies with the largest percentage of spoiled votes were West Tyrone (1.2%), Fermanagh & South Tyrone (1.1%), Belfast West (1.1%) and Mid Ulster (1%). Those with the lowest number were Strangford (0.5%) and North Down (0.5%). The number of ballot papers spoiled in Belfast West decreased by 54% on the 2001 UK Parliamentary election whereas in three constituencies, Mid Ulster, Newry & Armagh and West Tyrone, the numbers increased despite the lower turnout. The councils recording the highest proportion of spoiled votes were Belfast (2.7%), Castlereagh (2.7%) and Derry (2.5%) and those with the lowest were Dungannon (1.3%), Ballymena (1.5%) and Cookstown (2.2%).

Table 24: Proportion of ballot papers not included in the count in recent elections

Year	Election	No. of spoiled ballot papers	%
2005	UK Parliamentary election	6,166	0.85
2005	Local government elections	14,758	2.05
2004	European Parliamentary election	5,467	0.99
2003	Northern Ireland Assembly election	10,221	1.5
2001	UK Parliamentary election	7,038	0.86
2001	Local government elections	19,477	2.41

Table 25: Rejected ballot papers at the UK Parliamentary election in Northern Ireland, May 2005

Reason for rejection	Number rejected	% rejected
No official mark	426	6.9
Voting for more than one candidate	4,121	67
Voter can be identified	127	2
Unmarked or void for uncertainty	1,492	24.1
Total	6,166	100

The UK Parliamentary election

8.42 Ballot papers rejected at the UK Parliamentary election were classified into the following four categories:

- no official mark;
- voting for more than one candidate;
- voter can be identified; and
- unmarked or void for uncertainty.

The EONI advised us their Deputy Returning Officers were given guidance on how invalid ballot papers at the UK Parliamentary count should be classified and a joint EONI-Commission guide was produced.

No official mark

8.43 Table 25 shows that altogether 426 ballot papers were rejected for want of an official mark (no perforation on the ballot paper). This varied by constituency with none rejected in any of the four Belfast constituencies, North Antrim or West Tyrone. The constituency with the largest number of rejected papers was South Down (75), Lagan Valley (65) and Upper Bann (51). The number of ballot papers rejected for this reason increased by over 80% from the 2001 UK Parliamentary election, when significantly more people voted. Given the investment in training staff at recent elections, this is a cause for concern. It again highlights the case for alternatives to the current official mark, including the use of watermarks and half tone marks.

Voting for more than one candidate

8.44 Altogether, 4,121 ballot papers were rejected because voters had voted for more than one candidate equating to 67% of the total number rejected. Fermanagh & South Tyrone (491), West Tyrone (377) and Mid Ulster (377) had the highest number of ballots rejected for this reason. North Down (104), Belfast East (129) and South Antrim (130) recorded the lowest number. When compared to 2001 the number of ballot papers rejected for this reason increased by 8%.

Voter can be identified

8.45 In total 127 ballot papers were rejected for the reason that the voter could be identified from the ballot paper. The majority of those recorded were confined to three constituencies – Foyle (69), North Down (31) and Belfast East (24). Thirteen of the 18 constituencies recorded no instances whereby the voter could be identified. The total number of ballots in this category almost trebled since 2001.

Unmarked or void for uncertainty

8.46 Almost a quarter (24.1%) of the rejected ballot papers were unmarked or void for uncertainty. Again numbers varied across constituencies, with 286 recorded in Newry & Armagh and 17 in North Down. Overall, there were over 1,000 fewer spoiled votes in this category than in 2001.

Local government elections

8.47 The categories used to record invalid votes at an STV election are broadly similar to those at the UK Parliamentary election except that ‘voting for more than one candidate’ is replaced with:

- no first preference indicated; and
- first preference given for more than one candidate.

Adjudication of ballots was carried out at each count venue in view of observers including candidates and agents. One Scottish observer who attended the Belfast count made the following comment:

The most notable feature (of the adjudication process) was the sheer number of rejected papers – typically 500 per ward. Given that this was from an electorate with over 30 years experience of STV and political parties who are very well organised to advise their supporters as to how they should vote, serious concern must be expressed as to what is likely to happen if STV is introduced in Scotland without a major and prolonged campaign of voter/political party/staff education.

Observer from Scotland

No official mark

8.48 Altogether, 509 ballots (3.4%) were rejected for want of an official mark as shown in Table 26. Newry & Mourne (63) and Lisburn (60) had the highest number of rejected ballots, while Magherafelt, Belfast, Dungannon, Carrickfergus and Fermanagh recorded no ballots rejected for this reason. Newry & Mourne also recorded the highest total in 2001 when 102 ballots were rejected for want of an official mark.

Table 26: Rejected ballot papers at the local government elections in Northern Ireland, May 2005

Reason for rejection	Number rejected	% rejected
No official mark	509	3.42
No first preference indicated	4,113	28
First preference for more than one candidate	7,227	49
Voter can be identified	40	0.27
Unmarked or void for uncertainty	2,869	19.4
Total	14,758	100

No first preference indicated

8.49 The lack of a clear first preference accounted for 4,113 rejected ballots (28%). There were significant variations between councils, with 740 in Lisburn but none in North Down, Newry & Mourne or Down. In 2001, 71 ballot papers were rejected in Lisburn for this reason.

First preference for more than one candidate

8.50 In total 7,227 (49%) ballot papers were rejected due to voters expressing a first preference for more than one candidate. Again, there were considerable variations between council areas, with two of the largest councils in terms of population, Belfast (1,857) and Derry (1,076), responsible for 40% of ballots spoiled in this manner while Larne and Antrim recorded none. In 2001 a total of five ballot papers out of 809 were rejected in Castlereagh because voters had indicated a first preference for more than one candidate. In 2005, 469 out of 719 were rejected for this reason.

Voter can be identified

8.51 Only seven of the councils recorded spoiled ballots in this category – Castlereagh had the highest number with 15, followed by Derry with 10. In 2001 all ballot papers recorded in this category (48) were in Lisburn.

Unmarked or void for uncertainty

8.52 Altogether 2,869 ballot papers (19.4%), were unmarked or void for uncertainty, and again there were wide variations between councils with Belfast recording 907 while none were recorded for Moyle, Banbridge, Newry & Mourne and Armagh. In a number of councils 'unmarked or void for uncertainty' was used as a catch-all for most spoiled ballots. For example, almost all invalid ballots in Carrickfergus and North Down were allocated to this category in 2005. This contrasts with 2001 when none were recorded in this category for Carrickfergus and the number in North Down was significantly smaller.

8.53 There is a clear lack of consistency in how invalid ballot papers are categorised, especially at local government elections.

Proper categorisation of rejected ballot papers is necessary both from the point of view of accuracy and transparency. The EONI confirmed that they did not issue separate guidance on this matter to the councils but had emphasised to them that the process was outlined in legislation. In our report on the 2003 Assembly election we recommended that EONI develop up-to-date procedures on the process to be adopted for rejecting ballot papers. We also said that those who have responsibility for recording and classifying rejected ballot papers should be trained in their use. Given the inconsistencies identified at these elections we reaffirm these recommendations. The Commission will incorporate these procedures into training and guidance materials.

Post-election issues

Return of deposits

8.54 Thirty-three candidates forfeited their deposits at the UK Parliamentary election at a total cost of £16,500. The candidates did not reach the 5% threshold of total votes cast in the constituency they had contested. Candidates from the four largest political parties lost relatively few deposits while the Conservative Party, Workers' Party and the Socialist Environmental Alliance lost all their deposits. Four out of the five independent candidates also forfeited their deposits. In our report *Standing for election in the United Kingdom* we recommended that the threshold for forfeiture should be lowered from 5% to 2%. If this recommendation had been in place at the 2005 UK Parliamentary election, the number of candidates who lost their deposit would have decreased to 20.

Summary

8.55 There were two different counting systems in use at the 2005 combined elections. The UK Parliamentary election used the first past the post system, while the local government elections employed the STV system. Counting for the UK Parliamentary election began at 9am on Friday 6 May, with the local government counts commencing at 9am on Monday 9 May. The Commission received representations from political parties and candidates who criticised the decision to delay the UK Parliamentary count until the morning after the poll. There were calls for Northern Ireland to be brought into line with the rest of the UK, where counting begins immediately after the close of poll.

8.56 Feedback from a range of stakeholders suggested continued dissatisfaction at the length of time taken to count the votes at the UK Parliamentary election, with several political parties questioning why a first past the post count should take so long to complete. The Chief Electoral Officer responded by saying that the procedures for conducting the count are more strictly adhered to in Northern Ireland, making comparisons with Great Britain unhelpful. However, observers at the UK Parliamentary count raised concerns about the management and utilisation of staff, whose frequent breaks resulted in long periods of inactivity.

8.57 The count for the Mid Ulster constituency was delayed for a period of time when approximately 3,500 ballot papers were inadvertently removed from the count hall. The ballot papers were eventually retrieved

and the EONI instigated an investigation into what had occurred. An independent report on the incident concluded that the ballots were removed by mistake and the report identified areas for improvement to prevent such an error reoccurring.

8.58 The local government election counts were the responsibility of the local councils and as such were held at council-owned venues. A number of chief executives expressed frustration that the counts were unable to begin until four days after the close of poll, which resulted in a number of council facilities being out of use for a considerable time.

8.59 Observers from local authorities in Scotland, where STV will be implemented at local elections in 2007, felt that in general the local government counts were slow, but recognised that this was the nature of an STV count. However, there was a consensus that the process lent itself to electronic counting. The EONI had provided local councils with a software package to assist in the checking of manual calculations, but several councils questioned the usefulness of the programme.

8.60 Over 20,000 ballot papers were spoiled at the 2005 combined elections – 6,166 at the UK Parliamentary election and 14,758 at the local government elections. The vast majority of UK Parliamentary ballot papers were spoiled because people had voted for more than one candidate, while the majority of those spoiled at the local government elections were due to voters marking a first preference for more than one candidate. We identified a clear lack of

consistency in how councils categorise rejected ballot papers.



9 Moving forward

The structure of electoral services in Northern Ireland is such that the Chief Electoral Officer and the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland (EONI) are well placed to manage all elections in Northern Ireland. However, a number of areas require modernisation if electoral services are to be fit for purpose in the 21st century. In this chapter we comment on a number of issues aimed at improving electoral services generally in Northern Ireland.

9.1 Overall, the administration of the combined UK Parliamentary and local government elections on 5 May 2005 was successful. The EONI was faced with a significant logistical challenge in terms of administering two elections on the same day and managing the counts for 18 Parliamentary constituencies the following day. Polling day passed without major incident and there were no legal challenges to either the results of the UK Parliamentary or local government elections.

9.2 A number of shortcomings identified in our report on the 2003 Assembly election were again present at these elections. In this regard we have taken the opportunity to reaffirm a number of our earlier recommendations and trust that these will be taken forward. However, improvements were also made in some areas.

Funding electoral services in Northern Ireland

9.3 In our report on the 2003 Assembly election we commented on the funding of electoral services in Northern Ireland and reached the conclusion that it would be useful to benchmark electoral services with providers elsewhere in the UK and the Republic of Ireland. The EONI has regularly informed the Commission that the office is not sufficiently funded to run its estate and administer elections in Northern Ireland. Given the introduction of the Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002 and the planned move to continuous registration there is a strong case for conducting a thorough review of the resources required to deliver electoral services to over one million potential voters.

9.4 The current infrastructure of the EONI has been in place for many years and may no longer be ‘fit for purpose’. It pre-dates individual registration and the centralisation of an electronic register for Northern Ireland. In the past area electoral offices were used to conduct electoral hearings as part of the registration process, but these are less frequently held. Retaining a headquarters and nine area electoral offices may not be sustainable in the longer term, particularly given Government proposals to move to a system of continuous registration. Alternatives will need to be explored including potentially using the reconfigured councils to assist with registration and provide an outlet for EONI registration activities.

9.5 In our report on the 2003 Assembly election we recommended to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland that the recommendations in our 2003 report *Funding electoral services*³⁵ be taken forward. These included a thorough review of the budget of the EONI taking into account key changes in the legislative and wider context and the need to recover from previous years of under-investment in training, IT and other infrastructure costs. We also reached the conclusion that there was a need to move to a more stable, longer-term financial arrangement which would allow the EONI to retain its independence from central government and allow it to plan in a more measured way. Given the Government’s proposal to move to continuous registration in Northern Ireland, now would be an appropriate time to address the recommendations of this report.

³⁵ The Electoral Commission, *Funding electoral services*, February 2003.

Combining elections

9.6 The political parties and the electorate in Northern Ireland are generally supportive of combining elections where practical to do so. However, there are particular challenges when elections are combined and different voting systems are in use. The large number of spoiled ballot papers at the elections on 5 May 2005 is testimony to this. If combined elections are to become the norm then much more needs to be done by the EONI and the Commission to ensure the electorate understands the different voting systems.

9.7 When elections in Northern Ireland are combined the bulk of the work falls to the EONI and the councils’ involvement is largely, although not exclusively, focused on the count.

This position is not reflected in the fees claimed by council Deputy Returning Officers and we therefore recommend that the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) conduct a review of fees generally and more particularly when elections are combined.

9.8 Combined elections require specific administrative planning on the part of the EONI and the councils. There was some evidence at the 2005 elections that planning was not as thorough as it could have been. This matter could, in part, be addressed by the establishment of an elections steering group comprising representatives from the EONI, the councils, the NIO and The Electoral Commission. The steering group would meet well in advance of elections to discuss and plan

the administration of the election, precise roles to be undertaken, training, proposed or new legislation and public awareness.

We recommend that the Chief Electoral Officer take the lead in establishing the group and that he chair regular meetings of the group.

Liaison between the EONI and the councils

9.9 Overall, we found that liaison between the EONI and the councils was limited with some councils and Deputy Returning Officers more willing to engage than others. As a result there was evidence of inconsistent practices between councils with regard to how they planned for, and managed, their election.

9.10 The Chief Electoral Officer has expressed concern that although he is ultimately responsible for all elections in Northern Ireland he has no control over how council chief executives in their role as Deputy Returning Officers conduct elections. He has also raised concerns about the fact that he has no say in who is appointed as a Deputy Returning Officer, as under current legislation this role automatically falls to the councils' chief executive.

9.11 The structure of electoral services in Northern Ireland is such that the Chief Electoral Officer and the EONI are well placed to manage all elections. However, in order to do the job effectively the Chief Electoral Officer needs to be in a position whereby he can more effectively direct council Deputy Returning Officers to meet agreed targets and standards. Consequently,

there would be merit in clarifying the legislation with regard to the power of direction, if any, which the Chief Electoral Officer currently has over council chief executives in their role as Deputy Returning Officers.

After each election, council Deputy Returning Officers should also be required to report to the Chief Electoral Officer and the public on the conduct of elections in their area. Details of the performance achieved by council Deputy Returning Officers should be published in the annual report of the Chief Electoral Officer.

9.12 Before an election, whether it is a local government election or combined UK Parliamentary and local government elections, the EONI and the council Deputy Returning Officer should undertake a thorough review of the administration of the previous election. It would also be beneficial to involve experienced Presiding Officers and Poll Clerks. Comments could also be invited from political parties, candidates and agents. Improved communication would ensure that suitable reporting structures are established and maintained by all staff engaged in the day-to-day running of the election.

The count

9.13 The administration of election counts in Northern Ireland continues to be a source of considerable frustration among some political parties, candidates and elements of the media. Representations were made to the Commission questioning various aspects of the UK Parliamentary count including the decision to

delay the count until the morning after the poll and the subsequent time taken to count the votes.

The Commission recommends that where an election is UK-wide consideration should be given to the count in Northern Ireland beginning at the same time as those in Great Britain. Where the election is specific to Northern Ireland, such as an Assembly election, the commencement of the count should be left to the discretion of the Chief Electoral Officer.

9.14 Local councils should continue to conduct local government election counts, but with greater input and support from the EONI. Many stakeholders, including the EONI and a number of the councils, would like to see e-counting taken forward at single transferable vote (STV) elections.

Participation

9.15 The continuing decline in turnout at elections in Northern Ireland is a major cause for concern. Almost 12% fewer people voted at the combined elections in 2005 than voted in 2001. When compared against the voting age population just over 57% of the 18+ population voted. Some constituencies, particularly in urban areas, experienced a significant drop in numbers voting with the four Belfast constituencies between them witnessing an average reduction of 18.5% since 2001. Young people aged between 18 and 24 were the least likely to vote whereas those aged 60+ were the most likely to vote.

9.16 A third of those who did not vote said that they were just not interested in politics, 16% said that politicians cannot be trusted to keep their promises and 8% felt that no politicians or parties represented their views. Almost half (47%) of those aged between 18 and 24 said they did not vote because they had no interest in politics.

9.17 The decline in turnout presents a major challenge to all those with an interest in the democratic process. All stakeholders, including the political parties and the media, have a key role to play in re-engaging those who, for whatever reason, no longer vote, while encouraging young people to vote for the first time.

Appendix

Results of May 2005 Northern Ireland local government elections – council seats won

Results of May 2005 Northern Ireland local government elections – council seats won											
Council	APNI	DUP	Green	IND	NRA	PUP	SDLP	SF	UUC	UUP	Total
Derry		5					14	10		1	30
Limavady		3					3	6	1	2	15
Coleraine		9		1			3	1		8	22
Ballymoney		8		1			2	3		2	16
Moyle		2		3			3	4		3	15
Larne	2	5		2			2			4	15
Ballymena		14		1			3	1		5	24
Magherafelt		4					2	8		2	16
Cookstown		3					5	5		3	16
Strabane		3		1			2	8		2	16
Omagh		3		2			3	10		3	21
Fermanagh		4					5	9		5	23
Dungannon & South Tyrone		5					4	9		4	22
Craigavon		9		1			4	6		6	26
Armagh		6					6	5		5	22
Newry & Mourne		2	1	2			9	13		3	30
Banbridge	1	7					3	1		5	17
Down		3	1				10	5		4	23
Lisburn	3	13					3	4		7	30
Antrim	2	6					3	3		5	19
Newtownabbey	2	12		1	1		1	1	1	6	25
Carrickfergus	3	8		2						4	17
North Down	6	8	1	2						8	25
Ards	3	12					1			7	23
Castlereagh	4	13					2			4	23
Belfast	4	15		1		2	8	14		7	51
Total	30	182	3	20	1	2	101	126	2	115	582

Source: EONI.

Key:

APNI	Alliance Party of Northern Ireland
DUP	Democratic Unionist Party
IND	Independent
NRA	Newtownabbey Ratepayers' Association
PUP	Progressive Unionist Party
SDLP	Social Democratic Labour Party
SF	Sinn Féin
UUC	Ulster Unionist Coalition
UUP	Ulster Unionist Party

The Electoral Commission

We are an independent body that was set up by the UK Parliament. Our mission is to foster public confidence and participation by promoting integrity, involvement and effectiveness in the democratic process.

Democracy matters

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