

Northern Ireland Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Conduct of elections in Northern Ireland, HC 584.

Wednesday 29 January 2025

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Members present: Tonia Antoniazzi (Chair); Chris Bloore; Adam Jogee; Katrina Murray; Dr Al Pinkerton; Gavin Robinson.

Questions 1 to 58

Witnesses

I: Cahir Hughes, Head, Electoral Commission Northern Ireland; Sarah Ling, Deputy Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland, Electoral Office of Northern Ireland; Dr David Marshall, Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland, Electoral Office of Northern Ireland; Vijay Rangarajan, Chief Executive Officer, Electoral Commission.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Cahir Hughes, Sarah Ling, Dr David Marshall and Vijay Rangarajan.

Chair: I would like to welcome our witnesses to our session on the conduct of elections in Northern Ireland. Could you say who you are and what your role is?

Sarah Ling: I am Sarah Ling. I am the deputy chief electoral officer for Northern Ireland.

Dr Marshall: I am David Marshall. I am the chief electoral officer for Northern Ireland.

Cahir Hughes: I am Cahir Hughes. I am head of the Electoral Commission in Northern Ireland.

Vijay Rangarajan: I am Vijay Rangarajan. I am chief executive of the UK Electoral Commission.

Q1 **Chair:** Thank you very much for coming today. Could you briefly set out your responsibilities regarding the running of the elections in Northern Ireland and your organisation's relationship to each other?

Vijay Rangarajan: As the UK Electoral Commission, we are responsible for and oversee all the elections across the UK, including devolved elections in Wales and Scotland. Elections are not devolved in Northern Ireland, so we work incredibly closely, through Cahir and his team, with David and Sarah in the running of the elections. We set the performance standards across the whole UK. There is an interesting question about whether we should do more in Northern Ireland.

We are also working very closely with all the various Governments in the UK about improvements. We may come on to some of the improvements we are looking for, based on our learning from the general election and previous elections, in the systems that come—not least given some of the threats and challenges to our electoral system.

Finally, we are in charge of the transparency for political finance. We collate the parties' returns and candidate returns, and publish those, so people can see who is financing what. We maintain that system and have made recommendations about improving that system as well.

Cahir Hughes: We have a very close, positive working relationship with the Electoral Office of Northern Ireland; "constructive friends" is what we like to call it—being challenging but respectful. In the run-up to the parliamentary election, as with all elections, we work very closely, ensuring that we are giving consistent advice to candidates and agents on how to participate in the election. Post election, we work very closely with David and Sarah in looking at where improvements could be made. They are responsible for the delivery of the poll, which I am sure David will go into, but that gives us the opportunity to come to people such as you and make the case for reform.



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Dr Marshall: As the chief electoral officer, I am responsible in law for the operational running of the elections. There is a holy trinity, if you like, in terms of elections in Northern Ireland. There is the Electoral Office, which runs and administers the elections. There is the commission, which referees and provides communications in the elections space. Ultimately, there is the UK Government, who set the laws and rules around how elections should be run. We administer under those rules.

I could say a bit around how the election in 2024 was run, but it is a vast exercise in Northern Ireland. It is one singular Electoral Office. It is not local authorities. There is a singular office covering the whole of Northern Ireland. We have 6,000 staff to hire for the election day. We have 605 polling places. We have 1,409 polling stations. We have 1.4 million electors, all of that, and then at the election itself we had 136 candidates. It is a huge exercise and we cannot do that without the support of the commission, but also the Police Service of Northern Ireland, local authorities and a whole host of other people. I can maybe come on to that in questions, but we cannot do that on our own in the Electoral Office. It is a group exercise.

Sarah Ling: As deputy chief electoral officer, I support David in his role. My background is elections across the UK, so I came to the Electoral Office with experience of running elections in GB. For me, the crucial challenge for David and the team is the scale in Northern Ireland. In GB, elections are run at council level and you are dealing with much smaller numbers. The challenge is huge for Northern Ireland on the scale.

Q2 **Chair:** David, what are your main reflections on the running of the recent general election in Northern Ireland and the experience of, as you have spoken about, how many voters, candidates and electoral staff?

Dr Marshall: I was actually out of the country on 22 May, would you believe? I had no forewarning and neither did the Electoral Office. I do not think that very many people had, to be fair. We quickly mobilised everybody to get ready for 4 July. Over the bank holiday, 27 May, we were getting everybody in position.

Very quickly, we were able to get all our polling stations. We had already worked through that. Because 4 July is a summer holiday for schools in Northern Ireland—schools run from 1 July right through to the end of August as summer holidays—there were some teachers we had to talk to and make sure they were comfortable with the election running at that point. Those would be fairly unique, but we were able to get the poll cards out fairly quickly, with the help of the suppliers.

One thing that we did in Northern Ireland this time is that we expected a lot more demand for postal votes and proxy votes, given the summer holidays, so we changed the way we do that. Typically, we would have run postal votes through two tranches. We realised that we would have been delivering postal votes while people were on their way to the plane on their holidays, so we brought forward 10 tranches.



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If you look at the Electoral Commission's report, we distributed postal votes as quickly as we could get them out. That meant that the return rate or the turnout for postal votes in Northern Ireland was over 90%, which was the highest in the United Kingdom, and we think that was driven by the fact that we did this not in two tranches, but in 10. We think that there might be learning for other parts of the United Kingdom on that.

We also put forward a new system for this thing called the digital registration number, which is a unique policy in Northern Ireland. The vast majority of people have to have a digital registration number to get a postal or proxy vote and we had a new online system that facilitated that. 50,000 people used the online system, which is fairly unique.

As I said, we ran the nominations. Sarah managed that end in terms of 136 candidates. We also worked very closely with the police and with Cahir and colleagues in giving information and advice to candidates around security and things like that.

The hiring of the 6,000 staff is no easy task. My predecessor, Mr Bradley, and others used to do that all manually. We now use a digital process. We could not do that manually with the timescale, so it is all done through text messaging and communications like that. We also set up the three count centres in Belfast, Magherafelt and Craigavon. We work with the police, media and others on that.

In conclusion, I want to say that I cannot do this on my own as the chief electoral officer with the staff I have. We have the support of the local authorities in Northern Ireland, the commission, the Government, the police and a whole host of others. To give you an example, a headmistress of a special school across from the polling station in Magherafelt made her car park available for us for the Magherafelt count centre. I could go on and on about the support, but we cannot do that on our own. The support we got was phenomenal.

Q3 **Chair:** Cahir, what would your reflections be?

Cahir Hughes: I would echo a lot of what David says there. In terms of what the report found, overall there were high levels of satisfaction with the voter registration and voter experience on polling day, which is quite consistent in Northern Ireland, which is great to see. It is fair to say that resilience is an issue, not only in Northern Ireland but across the UK. David has given some examples of that. The sheer scale of it in Northern Ireland can be quite overwhelming, particularly with the parliamentary, with such a short timetable to prepare for it.

On highlights for Northern Ireland, as David alluded to, postal voting worked quite well in Northern Ireland. That was not the case in some parts of GB, and maybe Vijay can touch on that. Issues around the digital registration number, which we have highlighted in the past as a concern, were dealt with again by the "Am I Registered" look-up search that David



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introduced on the Electoral Office website. There is certainly merit in trying to roll something similar out across the UK.

There are issues about the accessibility. There is a duty on not just David but returning officers across the UK to make polling stations accessible. A lot of excellent work has been done about that, but there is a lack of awareness. I am not sure I remember—was it 2023 where there was an option where people could request hearing loops or go online and put a request in? Nobody did, so clearly there is more work to be done around communications and increasing awareness of the support that is available for people who need it.

The other thing I would flag from the election—I can touch on this and then I will come back to it later—is that the parliamentary election back in July showed the lack of transparency in the co-option system that is used to replace vacancies in the Northern Ireland Assembly and local councils. I am sure that Members will have questions on that as well, so I am happy to leave that for now.

Vijay Ranganathan: I had one other significant issue that we saw across the whole of the UK, which was the abuse and intimidation of political party candidates. That was a real feature. We made that one of the main recommendations of our post-poll report published late last year. We saw a significant increase in the abuse and intimidation in the election and it looks like it is at very similar levels in Northern Ireland as across the whole of the UK. There was a tremendous amount online, particularly directed at women and ethnic minorities, and a significant amount offline as well. We saw issues with posters, abuse and people outside family homes.

Mr Speaker here is convening a Speaker's conference to look at the issues around that and we are feeding in some of the thoughts. Some are very technical, such as work on candidate addresses, but there is a lot to do with the police across the whole of the UK. There is some really good learning from Northern Ireland as well that we will bring into that. That is probably the single most disturbing issue from the 2024 election.

There were several dogs that did not bark. We did not see a massive AI deepfake set of issues. That is not to be complacent; we think that there are significant problems that could come and are coming. We have recently been working with the Alan Turing Institute and many others on trying to get ahead of that curve and put some protections in place against a combination of deepfakes, mis and disinformation, and the increasing uses of lowering the barriers to entry from AI. We noted in our post-poll report that we did not see anything that, in our view, invalidated any of the elections or any of the processes that were running then.

Administratively, it worked pretty well across the UK. We have broad, high levels of voter satisfaction in the high 80s or 90s. As David said, postal voting in some areas of the UK definitely needs to improve. That is



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partly due to the fact that there were continuously produced postal votes, whereas, when the election was called, in some areas of the UK the second batch of postal votes went out very late and that meant people were on holiday. That did not happen in Northern Ireland, so there is definitely some really good practice that we want to learn from that.

Q4 **Gavin Robinson:** Good morning, everyone. On that last point first, we had cause to raise some issues around people receiving an envelope with no postal ballot in it, but subsequently no ability to verify that with the Electoral Office, and that was your problem. I suspect that there may be merit in having some thought as to how, if a ballot is issued, it can be destroyed or you know that only one is returned from the elector. I do not know whether you want to touch on that, but on postal ballots, for me, it is very frustrating for people phoning up saying, "I have received my postal ballot, but there is nothing in it. There is no ballot paper".

Sarah Ling: Absolutely, and it is a challenge. There is a difference in law between GB and Northern Ireland on that. In GB, you have a reissue postal vote process, so that if there are any issues with the postal vote, if the person has not received the pack or part of the pack, you can reissue that. That legislation was not extended to Northern Ireland, so we are hamstrung by the law on that.

What we do though is that, in the issuing of postal votes, we issue all in-house manually. We have layers and layers of checks and audits to minimise the problem. Yes, we are aware of a certain number of people who rang and complained about that. That number was small, although arguably that number should be zero, and we will continue to work on the processes internally to make sure that happens. Then it would be for the UK Government to decide whether they extended any reissue provision to Northern Ireland, considering the impact of us then being able to reissue the postal votes in the time required.

Dr Marshall: The numbers, Mr Robinson, were that about 20 people rang us. That does not mean that there were not others. We issued 25,500, so that is the scale. There could have been others, but we looked at our systems and they were as solid as we felt they could be.

One thing is that the postal pack has a number of different pieces of information in it. It has about four or five pieces of information. We are looking at the possibility of creating a pack where the four or five pieces of information are actually joined together so that they are one continuous document and you tear the ballot paper off the end of that. We think that what has happened is that some people did not find their ballot paper because it was in among those four or five pieces of information, so that that was lost in there, especially for a general election, when the number of candidates is quite small. We are looking at all the alternative ways of doing it that would help the voter and help us as well.

Q5 **Gavin Robinson:** That then takes us into your relationship with the



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Northern Ireland Office and your ability to propose or push for, and even whether it is your role to push for, amendments to electoral law. Tell the Committee how that looks. Does the window of two years without elections provide a space of time where you have proposals you are going to bring forward to seek legislative change as to how elections are run in Northern Ireland?

Dr Marshall: I am not responsible for bringing forward new laws; it is up to the Northern Ireland Office and the UK Government to do that. I know that the UK Government are working on new legislation with regard to votes at 16, or at least there is a plan.

Q6 **Gavin Robinson:** It is not that you would be responsible for bringing them forward, but nobody is going to bring them forward unless somebody is saying that there is a problem that needs fixing. What sort of engagement do you have? What is your relationship like with the Northern Ireland Office where you are saying, "Here is a problem"—such as postal votes for example—"Here is legislation in GB that could be usefully transferred to NI". Are you having those conversations?

Dr Marshall: We have regular conversations with the Northern Ireland Office around lots of different matters. A specific one would be around the canvass in Northern Ireland. Maybe you want to discuss that, but that is one area where we have put in writing that we have concerns over it. We would like a reform of the canvass and I think the commission is on record as saying that as well. There are a significant number of small changes that would be beneficial, but the reality is that the Government have a host of other demands on their time in terms of legislative change. We are trying our best to put forward the small things such as the postal vote issue, but there are obviously bigger issues that our Government are looking at as well.

Q7 **Gavin Robinson:** The legislative programme is their problem. You can use this Committee as your battering ram on issues, so start spelling them out. What are the sorts of things that you would like to see over the next two years before you get to the next council and Assembly election?

Dr Marshall: The critical one in the medium term is that the canvass needs reforming. It absolutely needs reforming. I would put that at the top of the list. We are currently sitting with around 85,000 people on the register who, come the end of 2027, will be removed from the register. The canvass in Northern Ireland is different to Great Britain and the legislation requires those people, if they have not responded to the 2021 canvass, to be removed, even though we believe they could and should be on the register, and they currently are. That requires legislation every time, so it is a regular process. There are pieces around that.

There is the conversation around postal votes and maybe a situation there where we could change the law. The mitigation for that is this administrative change, where we make it all a linear ballot paper, which does not require legislative change. We are looking at other changes that



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do not require legislation, because we recognise that getting legislation changed is difficult.

Q8 Gavin Robinson: Do you publish all your aspirations on legislative change, or do you just go to the NIO and tell it?

Dr Marshall: There are private conversations between us and the NIO. We do not publish our manifesto for change, but the Association of Electoral Administrators across the United Kingdom does have a list of changes that it would wish. One of them, for example, would be that the legislation for elections across the United Kingdom is quite a number of different pieces of legislation. It goes back to the 1983 Representation of the People Act. The AEA—and we would support that—would like a reform of the legislation so that it is simplified and easier for administrators across the UK.

Q9 Gavin Robinson: I saw that Mr Hughes wanted to come in, but I have one final question, David, for you. How many reports in the 2024 Westminster election did you get of people turning up to a polling station to find their vote had already been cast?

Dr Marshall: None.

Gavin Robinson: There were none at all.

Dr Marshall: None to me.

Q10 Gavin Robinson: Were there any issues about personation?

Dr Marshall: None to me.

Q11 Gavin Robinson: What does that mean? Are you aware of reports having been made to others?

Dr Marshall: No, not about personation.

Q12 Gavin Robinson: You are aware of people turning up and, what, complaining to parties, police or the Electoral Commission?

Dr Marshall: There were complaints made to the police. There were one or two complaints made to the police, not about personation but about behaviours at polling stations and things like that.

Q13 Gavin Robinson: What about fraud?

Dr Marshall: No, nothing about fraud.

Gavin Robinson: There was nothing.

Dr Marshall: At this stage, there is nothing about fraud.

Q14 Gavin Robinson: Is that to you or to the police?

Dr Marshall: There was nothing to me.

Q15 Gavin Robinson: Are you aware of any to the police?



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Dr Marshall: The police are looking into cases. I do not know how many or where, but they are looking into cases.

Cahir Hughes: I was going to pick up on the point that David made, coming back to postal voting. In terms of the NIO, we are the ones that would make that case for change in our regular contact with NIO. In terms of reformed postal voting, that is a longstanding recommendation of ours. It is indeed a modernisation. It is a paper-based system. In GB, they have moved to an online voting system application process that does not exist in Northern Ireland. That creates numerous problems if electors fill in the form incorrectly, because it is such a short timetable.

To give credit to David and Sarah, they did as much as they can to support voters. We found that applications not having the digital registration number was down. The problem is, because it is a paper-based form, that people were still making mistakes in the form, whether that was putting the wrong date on it or not getting it properly attested. We have been making the case to the NIO for a long time that there is a need for modernisation. Electoral registration is online and the absent voting process is not, so they clash, if you like.

Going back to the point on resilience, though, the reason why postal voting works so well in Northern Ireland compared to elsewhere in the UK is the fact that we have quite low numbers of postal vote applications. I think that it is about 3%. David, is that right? That is compared to 20% in GB. In Great Britain, it is postal voting on demand, so once the election is called you get your postal ballot paper, whereas the Electoral Office has to deal with thousands of applications coming in on a very short timetable.

Reform is not without its challenges, because it will test the resilience of the system. Picking up on the point about canvass, that is essential. We cannot get into 2030 without reform. There is a real risk that hundreds of thousands of people will fall off the register between 2030 and 2032. Regulations came into effect in the last week, which will carry forward electors up until the end of 2027, which means they would be able to participate in the Assembly and the local government elections. We know that around 50% of those voters that have this stay of execution have voted at the Assembly and local government elections. They are engaged and participating in the process, but it shows that canvass is not working.

It is also hugely expensive for what you are doing. Looking at our own assessments of the register, you are looking at accuracy/completeness of around 85%, and there is very little movement there. Focus and resource would be much better spent on targeting that 15% of people who are not registered and using the wealth of data that is available to the Electoral Office to manage the register. The NIO is very aware of our position on that need of reform and the urgency. It cannot wait until 2028, 2029 or 2030.

Q16 **Gavin Robinson:** Were Electoral Commission observers aware of



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anybody having turned up at a polling station to find their vote had been cast already?

Cahir Hughes: No.

- Q17 **Gavin Robinson:** To check with Dr Marshall, your answer was “not to me”. I assume you are speaking on behalf of the Electoral Office when you say “not to me”, and none of your polling captains or anything reported anybody coming up to find that they could not vote because their vote had already been cast.

Dr Marshall: No, not to me and not that we were aware of. There may well have been people who said on the day, but there was nothing in writing to me.

- Q18 **Gavin Robinson:** That is from either the elector or a station captain to report at the end of the day.

Dr Marshall: Yes, exactly.

Vijay Rangarajan: I was going to take up your very kind offer, Mr Robinson, to help with some of the modernisation issues that we face. There are some different systems between Northern Ireland and GB, some of them for good reason, but some where we do not see the need. We have already touched on issues of the canvass.

We have touched on issues of the absent voting online portal, but there are quite a few others where the probable forthcoming legislation may give us an opportunity, as systems are modernised across the whole UK, to bring Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK into much more of a single system, particularly the register, but, for example, things such as the power to set the perimeter of a polling station or various issues on candidate addresses. There are a whole series of things that could be harmonised and made the same across the UK, where we cannot see a specific reason why they should be different.

- Q19 **Adam Jogee:** Good morning. Welcome. It is nice to see you all. I have a couple of questions, Chair, if you do not mind, before I go into the substantive one, in relation to a couple of points that have been raised. I want to acknowledge the work that all those who work on council elections do. It is an intense period of time, ending with a very long night, for both candidates and those counting, so I want to acknowledge the work that people do. How many full-time members of staff does the Electoral Office have?

Dr Marshall: We have just less than 25 whole-time equivalent staff.

- Q20 **Adam Jogee:** When you ask for people to work at the count centres—and there are three in Northern Ireland—how are those roles advertised and how much are people paid?

Dr Marshall: There are 6,000-odd temporary staff who we use at polling stations and count centres. There are about 4,000 in polling stations and



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about 2,000 at the count centre. They get various rates of pay. For the polling station staff, the more junior staff—this includes training—would get paid around about £300, say less than £300, for the full day, plus the training. That goes up.

Obviously, the more senior get paid slightly more. For the people who work on the count, it would be less than that. There is not a full 18-hour day or whatever it is, so it would be less than that, but they would get paid a couple of hundred pounds or something along those lines. From memory, the total pay bill for the whole of the temporary staff is just over £1 million.

Q21 Adam Jogee: In my view you cannot put a price on democracy, so that is helpful. On behaviour, you touched on particularly the police looking at issues of fraud at, potentially, polling stations. We have also touched, chief executive, on intimidation and abuse, and the experience of candidates. Can I ask what the experience of polling station staff was like and what you would have had back from them? Did they experience anything on the frontline?

Dr Marshall: I want to reiterate that the instances of anything that we would see to be close to anything like fraud would be really quite small. In the past, historically, in Northern Ireland, there was lots of concern or issues that led to an Act in Parliament in the early 2000s. We do not believe that there is a significant issue or concern in and around those matters. Clearly, at any election there are people who want to, if you like, move the system towards suiting their advantage, but that is just part of the normal run-of-the-mill process of elections.

In terms of the issues that we found at polling stations, there is clearly campaigning in the vicinity of polling stations, some of which we cannot easily manage. Legally, there is an environ of the polling station that we are allowed to control in terms of entrance and egress, but beyond that we cannot control that. There are some instances of that. It is not in all polling stations, but there are some instances where people can get exercised about that.

We try our best to manage that but, frankly, the only way that that is going to be addressed or fixed is, again, if there was a change in the law. There are other parts of the world where on the day there is no campaigning allowed. Perhaps that is maybe something that the Government might wish to look at. That is not for me; that is for the Government to look at. It is something that does agitate voters. We did have one or two instances of people being concerned around the campaigning in the vicinity of polling stations.

Gavin Robinson: Just to say, Adam, I personally had to remove people from a polling station in Clarawood two years ago. I was the only person from a party there and the electoral staff could not cope with how they were being overrun by people who were just in for vandalism and pure thuggery. I removed them and the police came 20 minutes later, so



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sometimes having political parties in and around polling stations to defend the process is not necessarily a bad thing.

Q22 **Adam Jogee:** I would not mess with Big Gav; that is the man they need. I have two final questions. Mr Hughes, you touched on how 3% of eligible voters in Northern Ireland use the postal vote. Do you get 100% return on the postal vote?

Cahir Hughes: You would be better placed to answer that.

Sarah Ling: It was about a 90% return rate on the postal votes, which is higher than the return rate in Great Britain. That is probably a combination of the fact that, in Northern Ireland, to secure a postal vote you have to have a specific reason, as opposed to it being on demand as you wish, and the secondary point that we got our postal votes out arguably substantially earlier than a lot of places in GB did. People had more time to return them.

Q23 **Adam Jogee:** For clarity, in Northern Ireland, you cannot do the up-to-three-year request for the postal vote. Each individual election requires a separate application.

Sarah Ling: There are certain groups who can have a permanent postal vote, so for disability, employment and education. Those applications have to be supported in a set way, so signed by a medical professional or professors, that type of thing. We have a small number of them. It is about 5,000 that we have a hold on permanently with postal votes or absent votes, because they will be split between postals and proxies. Everybody else would need a specific reason for that election.

Q24 **Adam Jogee:** Who determines the threshold on eligibility for those 5,000 people? I am just thinking. There was an article I read in the paper—I think it was today, but it may have been yesterday—that talked about Northern Ireland's population getting older. Age was not one of the criteria that you referred to. In the context of the storm we saw recently, age becomes quite an important thing, particularly if you live on your own or are a widow or widower, et cetera. Age is not currently a qualifying factor. How can that be made one?

Sarah Ling: What evidence you need to provide is set out in the legislation. In some cases, that will be documentary evidence. In others, it is an attestation signed by a specific person with the declaration that the person would find it difficult to get to the polling station and vote in person, but age would not allow that. You would potentially have the ability if you were housebound or found it difficult to get out because of mobility issues and that type of thing. You would possibly be able to get a medical attestation.

Q25 **Adam Jogee:** Lastly, chief executive, you said that there were a number of lessons that GB and more generally the rest of us could look to and pick up from Northern Ireland. Can you expand on what they are?



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Vijay Rangarajan: They come in several areas. One of them is just to pay tribute to the work that David and Sarah have done on the way that registration is done in Northern Ireland and the way they have done postal voting. In many cases, for example in the rest of the UK, you cannot check whether you are on the electoral register. You have to send in another registration form.

We think that somewhere around half of the registrations that returning officers received just before the general election were duplicate. That is a really significant waste of voters' and returning officers' time. In Northern Ireland, as David said, you can check your DRN. You know whether you are on the register.

There has been some really good work in the past and we have learned a lot from PSNI on policing around polling stations and on the abuse and intimidation work. We will be bringing that into the Speaker's conference, as well as learning from Wales, Scotland and around the UK.

There are a number of areas where we think the systems in Northern Ireland are good, and we would like to build on all the best practice. We have quite a dappled, complex picture now of electoral legislation, with different systems in Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and the UK, and potentially getting even more complex with local government reorganisations coming.

In terms of running a number of different electoral systems themselves and election law underneath it, we will be looking closely at where there is a need for divergence and difference, and where it makes local sense, but also where there is not and we should have a slightly more uniform system. Some of our core systems, not voting itself, can be improved and made more accessible by being online. The DRN and being able to check your registration is a great example.

Adam Jogee: That brings with it the challenge of accessibility of course, but you are right. "United in our difference" speaks to the story of our kingdom, does it not? That gives us food for thought.

Q26 **Dr Pinkerton:** Thank you very much for those answers already. I am going to ask about the candidate experience, particularly around that point about harassment and abuse.

Mr Rangarajan, you have already said that Northern Ireland was broadly similar to the rest of the UK in terms of the experience of candidates. Could you draw out that picture for us? What was that experience as you would characterise it and did it inflect in any way differently in Northern Ireland? Were there different issues? Was the abuse the same? Even if it was at the same level, was the nature of the abuse the same, or did that take on a slightly different inflection?

Vijay Rangarajan: I am sure that colleagues will want to add to this. Overall the picture looks similar. Let me pull together the numbers and data that we have on the 2022 Northern Ireland Assembly, the 2023



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Northern Ireland local elections and then the general election. They were broadly a very similar picture.

We survey all candidates afterwards. Somewhere around about half of them said that they had endured harassment, intimidation or threats. They had a problem with it. Some 6%—it varies from about 6% to 10%—say that they have a serious problem. The kinds of intimidation include having campaign assets such as posters defaced or destroyed. There is a group who are then made to feel intentionally unsafe, and some of you may have experienced that. Then there is a very significant group who have endured tremendous abuse on social media and sometimes that is spilling over.

It is not an enormous problem yet with the most serious forms of that, but we have been doing a lot of work before this election and now, with both PSNI and police forces across the UK, to try to get the guidance right for the police, to make sure that they can respond, know the standards here and can apply that uniformly—there has been an issue of uniform application—but also so that candidates know what they have a right to expect. They know that this is not okay and they can go to the police, to their SPOC—single point of contact—or Operation Bridger. There is a lot of work now trying to improve that.

There are two points from us. First, it needs to apply for all candidates, not just Members of Parliament, although Members of Parliament are obviously crucial for this. Secondly, we are concerned about the future because in our public polling we see a really clear age trend in who thinks it is acceptable to abuse a politician. If you ask people aged over 60, high 80s or 90s say that it is not acceptable to abuse either a member of the public or a politician. In the 25 to 34-year-old bracket, there is a very large difference. It is still 80s or 90s who say it is not okay to abuse a member of the public. Under half think that it is unacceptable to abuse a politician and there is a straight age gradient. We have published this. All the public polling we do is published and on our website, but that is the graph that concerns us most, because it indicates that the problem could get worse.

Why? There is a possible link to social media. There may be a bit of, “It is okay to troll someone. I can post some things about someone. It is therefore okay to say to them in the street. It may even be okay to say to them in the street in front of their family and their family home”, and then you are down a path that does not end well. We think that it is really important that some of these trends are picked up.

The final one is that it is very directed, or at least it appears to be very directed. Women in particular have got some horrendously misogynistic soft-porn threats. There is clearly a group of people out there who are making fake videos and posting them. There is some very interesting evidence from Channel 4 and from various others who found some of



these sites. We need to put some defences up, in our view, online as well as offline.

We obviously work closely with the social media firms and sometimes they will take some of this material down, but sometimes they will not and sometimes it spreads very quickly. There is clearly a lot of work, which we are trying to do with our colleagues in Ofcom and with the police, about how they can police that. Maybe there is something also about collating together some of the abuse and intimidation that comes through on social media and looking at how we can track back to who is producing it. The Scottish Parliament has an interesting experiment running on that, which we think could be really valuable to generalise across the UK.

Q27 Dr Pinkerton: Can I open up that same question to any of the others who want to pick it up?

Cahir Hughes: The Northern Ireland experience is very similar to the UK. As Vijay touched on there, certainly since 2022 female candidates and elected representatives have reported horrific misogynistic, sexist and violent abuse. We have been working very closely with the PSNI to challenge that over the last number of years. It links into the PSNI's strategy of tackling violence against women and young girls, so we have linked in with it very closely on that.

The change that has happened in recent elections is that the PSNI now will give each candidate a single point of contact, so that, when they are out campaigning, they know that there is a police officer they can contact. I think at the councils there was one for each district council. Last July, they had four areas within Northern Ireland, so every candidate knew what to do. PSNI is much more active now in providing briefings for candidates and elected Members, in terms of stepping up their own security and what support the PSNI can give to them to keep them safe.

We should also probably give credit to the Northern Ireland Assembly. The commission there has now put forward funding for MLAs so that they can put security features in, be it at their personal address or at the office. That is something that we would like to see potentially rolled out across the UK.

The problem is that we have spent these years providing that guidance and support, but we need a cultural change within our society as Vijay alludes to. We have a younger generation coming through who think that this is accepted and a normal part of politics. The threat in Northern Ireland and I suppose across the UK, particularly when we speak to female candidates, is that people are going to stop putting themselves forward. That would be hugely damaging to our democracy.

Dr Marshall: Mr Robinson asked about fraud on election day itself. The biggest concern that we had in the office was about intimidation of the polling station staff, in part because people did not bring ID with them



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and had to be turned away, and there were harsh words and things like that. In part, it was because, as Mr Robinson has indicated, they are exposed because they are running a polling station. It is extremely difficult when people are doing a public service. To be abused in that way is just unacceptable.

Q28 Dr Pinkerton: That was a concern that you had in advance. Was that concern realised on the day?

Dr Marshall: Yes, absolutely.

Q29 Dr Pinkerton: Can you give some examples of kind of thing you are talking about?

Dr Marshall: People did not bring their ID with them, were turned away and then said things, and those sorts of things. We had situations where people were concerned over their safety in terms of coming and going from the polling station. The police were involved in helping and supporting that. Those are the sorts of things that we would be concerned about. I do not know how you manage that. It involves a cultural change, as Cahir has said, but that is definitely something that concerns me.

Q30 Dr Pinkerton: Bringing it back to that level of what that broader cultural or governmental response might be, do you have any suggestions? I know that you have written a report based on the most recent election. Do you have suggestions that the Government might want to take up to try to address some of these things that clearly go beyond just the limited period of an election campaign, but that perhaps talk about the way that we consume or engage with politics more generally?

Vijay Rangarajan: Yes, we have a series of recommendations. At the moment we are feeding these into the Speaker's conference, because that will be a very helpful place to debate these. They fall into several categories. One is a series of more technical things.

For example, we sometimes put candidates in a difficult position of choosing between proving how local they are and their own personal security by publishing their home address. The Welsh Government have made some interesting changes there, where they do not have to publish a home address. We want to look at that. Is it a good idea to have some candidates, particularly if they are independent or are their own agent, having to publish their own personal home address? It is quite technical things that would help.

Around polling stations themselves, we think we ought to give returning officers the power, with the police, to say, "This should be the perimeter" and to define that. There are some difficult areas. Much more broadly, coming back to Cahir's point on cultural change, we have sent some evidence and proposals into the Department for Education and we will be talking to the Northern Ireland Department of Education as well about the need to improve the citizenship teaching in schools.



This is clearly essential should votes at 16 happen and we will need to build on the sort of work that we did in Wales and Scotland when that happened. We think that a combination of showing young people in schools why it is important to participate in a democratic process, what that gets them, why it is important for them at all and, to be honest, humanising politicians and candidates to them, making them not appear as other and someone else a very long way away, would be really useful.

It would also help with two of the linked challenges and partly this issue of abuse and intimidation if they get to know why people stand to be candidates, that they are human, that it is a good thing to be a candidate—not something I think people often say—and that it is someone standing on their beliefs saying, “This is what I can do to help you”, great. It would also help with the digital literacy mis and disinformation parts as well to understand. We have put in evidence, having brought together 40 civil society and other organisations across the UK, to say that this is how we think it can be done across the UK, which will help some of these longer-term trends.

Finally, we run very big public campaigns. We run them on registration, voter ID and vote security, such as, “Your vote is yours alone”. We are thinking about how to build into our public campaigns more of an emphasis on this to cover all voters, not just those in schools.

Q31 Dr Pinkerton: I really appreciate those broader reflections. It is something that I have experienced as well. Many of the things that you have described in terms of defacing of posters, but also physical attacks, not in this election but in previous, I have experienced directly.

I am going to very clearly flag up that I am moving on to the next question now, which is about the experience of women in particular, because there is a gender dynamic that you have already alluded to here. It is a shame that the Member for Lagan Valley is not here, because I know that this is something that she feels very particularly about, but she is unable to be here today.

You have talked about the experience of women participating in elections. I do not know whether necessarily you are saying that there is a higher level of abuse directed towards women, but that abuse takes on a very particular kind, very often involving sexualised imagery and things like that. Can you give us an insight into the nature of that abuse? Does it take on a particular form in Northern Ireland? What is the PSNI doing to help you to keep these elections fair, open, honest and transparent? I will leave that question there and then I have a potential follow-up as well.

Cahir Hughes: Some of the stuff is pretty grim, to be honest with you, and horrific. I have had female candidates and elected representatives with deepfakes that are highly pornographic and hugely upsetting to their families. We have heard from candidates and elected representatives who have been stalked because of the imprint on your election material.



Some candidates use their home address or an office address and they will have people maybe standing at the end of the driveway or outside their office. We know of female candidates who have been intentionally made to feel uncomfortable when they are out canvassing, be that by hurling verbal abuse or just stalking and following.

I go back to the point about the PSNI and how this links to its strategy for tackling violence against women and young girls. It has been much more proactive in working in partnership with us. We work very closely with the Assembly looking at how we can go and speak to all Members, but particularly on the issues that arise with female candidates and elected representatives, to provide that support to them.

We are trying as much as we can, but I go back to that point that it is that cultural change that is needed and, as Vijay was saying, doing that education and so forth. Ultimately, it is going to be a long haul to do that, but it is, frankly, unacceptable. As I say, the real challenge is that female candidates are now having reservations about putting themselves forward for election. They have told us that as well.

Vijay Rangarajan: I have one answer to your question. Yes, there is both a quantitative and a qualitative difference. This comes from our direct surveys of candidates. The women candidates reported twice as much serious abuse and harassment as the male candidates. It is lumpy. It is not uniformly distributed, but that is the sort of scale.

When we ask people, "Is it serious?", twice as many women say it is serious as men. It is three times as many for ethnic minorities. If you are a woman and an ethnic minority, you probably get even more than that. If you are on the Front Bench, you get even more. There is a clear scale in this, but we definitely see a major gender divide, both qualitative and quantitative.

In terms of the actual abuse suffered, things such as inappropriate touching and kissing happened to women candidates and did not really happen to many men. Online, it is a completely different experience, as Cahir has already said.

Q32 **Dr Pinkerton:** In terms of something that Cahir finished on right at the end there, which was about this having a direct impact on the willingness of women to participate in elections and put themselves forward as candidates, you alluded to that. What is the evidence of it? What are people saying to you? Ultimately, can we quantify who and how many we are missing out on because of the experience that they may have had or they hear about?

Vijay Rangarajan: We are looking at that. I do not think that I can give you very good data that actually says, "Here is who is not standing". We obviously have the experiences of, say, ex-Members of Parliament or of different Assemblies who have said that they are standing down. We have quite a few testimonies and we have talked to a lot of candidates who say



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things such as, "I would stand, but I would not put my family through this again". It is that kind of phraseology coming through that makes us concerned that we could see a significant reduction in people standing. Having said all that, we had a lot of people. We had a record number of candidates stand at this general election, so we are not yet seeing a real problem, we think, but it is a concern.

What we are seeing and can put numbers on is that, when threatened, candidates are changing their own behaviour. A very large number say that they are changing how they interact with voters. Women are about twice as likely as men to say that they will not canvass alone. They will not walk down the streets alone. We have had plenty of evidence of that, so that is a real worry. Our system is a very low-money system compared to many others around the world, but it is very much dependent, as you know better than I, on direct voter contact with candidates. If that is off-putting to some candidates, they are changing and not talking to voters. We have had some very clear testimony from quite a few women candidates that that is what is going on.

Cahir Hughes: On the point about what candidates now think is acceptable behaviour, there is now this attitude of, "Take it on the chin if you are putting yourself forward" and that is having a real negative impact as well. We have encouraged candidates at recent elections to report all of it to the PSNI. I think there is an attitude of, "Somebody put a tweet up or they called me this out in the street". It needs reporting and we really are strongly encouraging that. No matter how trivial it may seem, the only way we are going to change this is if it is reported to the PSNI. If the PSNI has that data, it can put more resource into tackling that, and that is something we have been certainly advocating for the last number of years.

Chair: Cahir, on that point you made about things needing reporting, all elected representatives in post also should report everything. It is good practice, because there is a track and a record of everything. That allows you, and the police, to be able to track it as well.

Q33 **Gavin Robinson:** Very quickly, I think you said, Vijay, that there were double the number of negative experiences for females over males and then there were other factors that you said contributed further. Was that a UK average? Was that a Northern Ireland experience, or is there a difference between Northern Ireland and other parts of the United Kingdom?

Vijay Rangarajan: That is broadly a UK-wide experience and I think a Northern Ireland one. We cannot see a really major difference between the two. It is broadly a comparable set of experiences, yes, and that is across several elections as well. We are not just taking this general election.

Q34 **Gavin Robinson:** From this Committee's perspective, it is useful to know whether there was a distinguishing feature. You have mentioned on a



couple of occasions now the Speaker's conference around the experience for candidates. There has been some political consternation—or maybe not as hard as that, but concern—that, when it is being considered through the prism of the Speaker's conference, it is almost as if it is for those who are already elected.

There is a concern that we are worried about ourselves and that that does not then translate to those who aspire to be parliamentarians, Assembly Members or councillors. Have you any concerns that that process is very much seen to be an internal Parliament discussion for existing Members, as opposed to those who wish to put their hat in the ring? Should it be organised by the Speaker's conference, or should these discussions be had outside for all of those seeking to come here?

Vijay Ranganathan: We will be putting in quite a significant piece of evidence to the Speaker's conference. From our point of view, this should be about candidates, and not just the candidates for Westminster but also very much for the Senedd, the Scottish Parliament and councillors, who actually are the ones who take a lot of the brunt of this. To pick up on your point earlier, it is also the abuse and intimidation suffered unacceptably by any electoral staff who are involved in the process.

It is about the culture. Obviously we need extremely robust disagreement. Offence can be taken and people can say the strongest things, but there is such a big line between that and what we are actually talking about here, which is the real abuse and intimidation that people know is unacceptable and no members of the public really support. We would like to see this done really quite broadly, not least given the age figures I gave earlier. This is something that could become an even bigger problem as online media grows and potentially as acceptability of this grows.

Q35 **Gavin Robinson:** As it stands, you will give evidence but you have no concerns.

Vijay Ranganathan: Yes, exactly. There is another part. I would not say that it is a concern, but there is an understandable wish to reduce the vulnerability of candidates and elected representatives, so put some shielding around them and get the police to give security advice. There is a concern on that, which is that it is possible to move into a place where candidates and elected representatives are distanced from voters and cannot interact with them in the way that they want to. We would really want to focus, and we are focusing in our recommendations, on reducing the threat, not just reducing the vulnerability of candidates, trying to get people not to make these sorts of threats or behave in this way, rather than protecting candidates when members of the public do. We will need to do a little bit of both.

Cahir Hughes: Can I repeat a point that Vijay made as well? Education is very important in challenging this. We have started to develop an increasing number of resources bespoke for Northern Ireland but also in



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other parts of the UK, trying to change the cultures as our younger generations are coming through, helping them learn about why you should participate in politics and what a candidate is there for, and moving away from the idea that they are fair game for abuse. Over the coming years, we are certainly looking to link much more closely with the Department of Education, the Minister and the Education Authority to try to embed this into the curriculum.

Q36 Chair: On the point about education, that is really important. I used to be a schoolteacher and feel very strongly that there is a lot more that we can do across all the devolved nations and in the United Kingdom. Vijay, you have spoken quite a lot about social media and the impact of social media on families. It is off-putting also for candidates to put themselves forward. It is something that is a real issue.

You have spoken about having regular contact with social media platforms, Ofcom and the police about candidate online abuse, but what do they need to do? What needs to change? You said that they were reacting and working well with you, but, if we are going to remove or limit abuse online, what actually needs to change?

Vijay Rangarajan: If I may, that is a very big question to which we only have a very small part of the answer.

Chair: From your perspective, then.

Vijay Rangarajan: We have to work very much with Ofcom and many of the other regulators on this. Our answer so far has been that, if we see illegal content, incitements to violence for example, that clearly needs to be referred very quickly to the police and social media firms and taken down. There is a lot of political content and obviously political free speech is not regulated. We are not the regulator for that in this country. That will happen and be open to everyone.

Where we have seen particular instances of abuse and intimidation has actually been in closed groups. Some of the candidates have been telling us that it has come through in closed Facebook and WhatsApp groups that are quite local. That is really very hard to track down and clearly we are not present in those. To echo your point, it is really important that elected representatives and others report material such as that, because I do not think it is all reported at the moment.

Then there is a broader issue online of mis and disinformation. So far the approach we have taken, as campaign material and free speech is not regulated by us, is that, where we see mis or disinformation about the electoral process, we will move in very quickly and loudly. We saw some examples of that. With Government and in our own systems, in the run-up to the general election, we stood up a process. If we saw people saying, for example, "You do not need to bring your voter ID", we would, on whatever social media channel that was, contradict that really loudly and link to the right material.



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We were also monitoring some of the AI answers to these and whether they were actually giving misleading answers. Some of those were very responsive, actually. One in particular, when asked before the election what the outcome was of the UK general election, gave a very definitive answer. We asked them not to do that and they then just linked to our pages. Some of them were very open, but this is clearly a matter of real concern now with the changes in social media regulation. Now we are working very much with Ofcom on implementation of the Online Safety Act, so there is a lot more that we will need to do here.

Q37 Chair: From your perspective, Cahir, is there anything from Northern Ireland that is specific that you would like to see change?

Cahir Hughes: It is a UK-wide problem, as you alluded to. Yes, there are peculiarities to Northern Ireland, I suppose, given the legacy of home and the issues that emerged in the past, but what is good for the goose is good for the gander. We will all have to work together on this. It is a UK-wide problem. It is a global problem, really.

Q38 Chris Bloore: Like often happens, my question has kind of been answered by some of the earlier questions, but there is a supplementary, particularly focusing on the code of conduct. I guess this is more focused on you, Sarah and David, about the code of conduct for campaigning in and around polling stations in general.

I wanted to hear your feedback on whether the majority of the political parties had signed up to the code of conduct, whether they had abided by it and whether there was any potential room for improvements or updates and further changes, and to get your perspective on how that worked out.

Dr Marshall: We and the commission worked together on the code of conduct. I will say a few words, but Cahir will maybe speak about the detail. We had a previous code around campaigning in the vicinity of polling stations. The code of conduct that we have just published in the last few days goes wider than that and covers wider issues.

It is fair to say—and Sarah will comment on this in terms of the local elections in 2023—that, where we have identified issues in campaigning near polling stations and where they were substantial, we were able to communicate with the senior officials in the relevant parties to address those as much as we could. I mentioned in the earlier answers that we feel that, coming back to our staff, there needs to be some further look at how best to approach campaigning in the vicinity of polling stations. I appreciate that that is going to be difficult, but that is something. In terms of the code of conduct, Cahir can come back with the detail on that.

Cahir Hughes: The code of conduct was published last week, so it was not in place for the parliamentary election. We had consulted widely on it with all registered political parties in Northern Ireland, the PSNI, the PPS,



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Information Commissioner's Office and so forth. We had to delay it because of the election and then we started it again in autumn.

Have all the parties supported it? Most of the parties gave us feedback and we have been very explicit with the parties that silence is consent. The proof of the pudding is in the eating, I suppose, when we get to 2027. The code goes much wider than the previous code that David alluded to. It is behaviours in the run-up to polling day, so looking at how you encourage people to register to vote, the handling of absent vote papers and applications and so forth, and then behaviours outside of polling stations.

We have touched in the conversation earlier on those behaviours outside polling stations. It is a mixed bag. You can go to some polling stations and there is not a sinner about, and you go to some and I can appreciate why it would be intimidating for voters. There is a balance to be struck in allowing campaigning to happen. It is a feature of our democracy. It is very important that candidates get that opportunity to get their message out there, but it should not be at the expense of electors feeling uncomfortable going to a polling station.

We use the words "must" and "should" throughout the code quite a lot. "Must" is legal and that has to happen. If there was any breach of that, that would be a matter for the PSNI. Where we say "should", I suppose, to give the example of improper behaviour outside of a polling station, we would like whoever witnesses that to contact either us or the chief electoral officer. We will directly appoint a contact within each of the political parties and ask them to sort it out.

It happens and it has happened in the past. Unintentionally, I have seen examples of canvassers stopping cars from going into the car park just to hand them a leaflet. That looked quite intimidating because it is kind of a security guard or a bouncer. You see huddles of people maybe standing by a narrow entrance. I am not suggesting that they are intentionally trying to be intimidating, but I can see for voters why that would be the case.

In terms of the electorate and the public view, they are largely ambivalent towards it. We have done survey work and asked about that, and most voters would say "Yes, I have seen somebody outside a polling station", but their mind is already made up before they have gone to the polling station. There is a question there about what value they add, but, by law, they are entitled to be there. In other parts of the world there is an exclusion zone, if you like. We do not have that, and that is why the code has been drafted.

Q39 Chris Bloore: To follow up on that, for politicians and political parties it is a turnout operation, trying to work out who has not been to the polls as such. Having experienced some election protocols in the United States, some of the states have much wider exclusion zones for campaigning around their polling stations. Do you think that even the appearance of



intimidation of people being near the polling station might have an impact on people's turnout? I know that it is anecdotal.

Cahir Hughes: It is hard to quantify. I observed in the Irish general election at the end of November with Sarah. We went down to Dublin and some colleagues went to Donegal. It was a very different atmosphere. There was nobody outside of the polling station at all. It was a normal polling station. It is difficult to quantify. As I say, voters generally are indifferent towards it. That is what they are telling us, but it is very difficult to know whether somebody has made a conscious decision not to go to the polling station because of who may or may not be outside of it. The law allows it to happen at the minute, so we are working around that framework.

Sarah Ling: While the code of conduct is excellent and a really good starting point for us, with 500 or 600 polling station managers, who are responsible for those polling stations on one day every year or every few years, trying to manage a very complex process, what they need more than anything is clarity. Where they are having potentially difficult conversations with candidates and people who they see as public figures, that clarity is going to be the single most important thing for them to have those conversations.

Q40 **Katrina Murray:** You mentioned earlier the subject of co-option now coming from Scotland, which operates STV elections for local authorities and is in a perpetual round of local council by-elections, which completely skewed the picture that was there to begin with. You can understand that one thing that is being talked about is whether the Northern Ireland system of co-option would be quite good, particularly by political activists who are sick of continually being on the doors in the round of by-elections. Given that there have been concerns expressed about the system of co-options or the co-option process, could you give us a bit more detail about those concerns?

Cahir Hughes: David and I were in Glasgow last March for a by-election. We were looking into e-counting and the merits of that in Northern Ireland, but I thought, "This is a bit mad" that you are having a by-election for an STV election. To be clear, we would not advocate a return to by-elections in Northern Ireland. I do not think that they work under the single transferable vote system. They happen elsewhere in the Irish Republic. Vacancies are filled by by-elections.

We have this process in Northern Ireland called co-options. It has been in place for—I am going to say—around 15 years, but do not quote me exactly on that, and we see increasing use of it. Co-option has a place, I suppose. Our concern is that it lacks transparency and potentially is damaging to voter choice. All parties use it, as is their right to do so. Why this became an issue last July was that five MPs who were elected created four vacancies in the Assembly and a vacancy in a council. Those four vacancies in the Assembly were filled by four councillors, therefore creating a further four vacancies in council.



Our concern is that, looking ahead to 2027, this could be potentially damaging to voter confidence and the integrity of the poll. You could see a situation where a candidate stands for local government with a running mate who is also standing in the Assembly. They get elected into both institutions and then stand down in one. Then somebody who does not get elected ends up in a local council. It is not that we are advocating that the system needs to go, but we need to find ways that can make it more transparent.

One suggestion we made, which is stealing a wee bit from Scotland as well, is a kind of substitutes list and using the list system. At the time of their nominations, candidates would provide a name, or maybe even the party could provide a list of names to cover all the constituencies that its candidates are standing in, just so that is available and voters can see, in the event that the person is deceased or stands down from office, that there is some transparency as to who will fill that vacancy, as we are seeing an increasing use of it. Continuing as we are in that pattern could be very damaging to confidence in the electoral process.

Vijay Rangarajan: That is exactly the issue we are seeing. Looking ahead, this could be significantly worse, particularly when there is a confluence of elections in 2027, where the knock-on effects make it quite hard to work out what could happen.

Q41 **Katrina Murray:** Following on from that, particularly if you are looking at the substitution list, or, as you outlined, the Scottish Parliament, that is a completely different D'Hondt system where people are expressing a preference for the party, not necessarily an individual candidate. In STV, people make that choice as to an absolute individual candidate. Within that, if somebody has stood and has been part of that list, voters have arguably made a very distinct choice that they do not want the person who might be next on the list. My understanding was that that was the system that was in place until about 2009. You said 15 years.

Cahir Hughes: Yes, that is correct.

Q42 **Katrina Murray:** Yes, 2009. Why should we return to it?

Cahir Hughes: The problem we have at the minute is that—your point is right—electors vote for somebody and expect that person to be in office. The co-option system takes that decision from the voter and puts it in the hands of the nominating officer of the political party of the candidate at the time that they were elected. If they have changed party or become independent, it does not matter because it rests with the presiding officer.

The reason that we have highlighted in this report is that there is no perfect answer. We get that and see that in Scotland, because it is a challenge in terms of how you move away from this process of by-elections. I have no doubt that the substitutes list may very well throw up a lot of other unintended consequences, but the key issue is the lack of



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transparency around it. We need to find a system, certainly ahead of 2027, that is more transparent in the decision-making process of the co-options.

Q43 Katrina Murray: I recognise that no system is perfect. There is nothing that has that level of perfection there. One thing we are also concerned about is how we make sure that we increase participation, and not just democratic accountability but participation in the process as well. Have there been other approaches considered with that?

Cahir Hughes: Participation in the wider electoral process and democracy goes back to what we were talking about earlier on about the voter education. Vijay, you may want to touch on this in terms of our corporate plan over the next five years. That is a key aspect of work for us going forward, particularly in Northern Ireland, from my perspective, but across the UK. It is getting that younger generation and giving them that information. Historically, our focus has been on giving people the tools and information about being registered to vote and how to participate in election and vote. It is much wider than that. Vijay, do you want to pick up on that?

Vijay Rangarajan: To build a little, under the legislation, we are required to produce a five-year corporate plan, which will come to the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission in time for this financial year. As Cahir says, a big part is going to be on education. A big part is going to be on voter information and trying to ensure that people actually have access to everything from the list of candidates to where a polling station is. "Is it accessible and can I actually get in in this particular way?" All of that can be significantly improved.

We are also thinking hard about the broader campaigns and media work that we do. It clearly has to be value for money. Some of it on registration may need to change its focus a bit depending on the registration system. Some of it is on voter ID. We spent a lot of money on voter ID before this election. That is not something this Committee may be that interested in because obviously it works very well in Northern Ireland, but we were taking the learning from Northern Ireland.

We were concerned about making sure that awareness of voter ID was as uniform as it could be across the UK. Having very different levels would have generated real concern about turnout in different areas. We got to around the 90% mark in all areas of the UK, in Wales and in Scotland, which had not had a voter ID, whereas it is been there for 20 years in Northern Ireland. That was good. There was a degree of uniformity. We are trying to look ahead at what the right set of policies and changes is that we need to do across all the elections in the UK.

Sarah Ling: As a broader point, there is an element here about accessibility and elector expectation as well. We live in a day where you can put an Amazon order in and get stuff delivered that day, whereas, if we think about registering to vote, you are going to do an application and



we are going to have a five-day clear objection period for people to object to that. We are then going to put you on at the next prescribed in time notice of alteration, at which point you can apply for a postal vote by paper in Northern Ireland. We will then put that into a run. The way the law is structured as a whole has not kept up with public expectation on doing something and getting that instant reaction.

Q44 Katrina Murray: Sarah and David, how have you found the administration of the co-option process?

Dr Marshall: It is a process that is well defined in law. We have administered it over the last number of years. We do not have a particular position to take on the process, apart from the fact that, black and white, it is clear what we do. The nominating officers are prescribed in law. We deal directly with them and, by and large, it works for us. That said, we hear what the commission is saying, but it will be up to Government to determine whether to amend the law.

Q45 Gavin Robinson: I probably should declare that I am a nominating officer of a party. I think that I was the last person to have been co-opted when there could have been a by-election to Belfast City Council in March 2010. In the next month, six more came in, including Claire Hanna on this Committee, because co-options were then in place where there was no by-election.

There were two reasons for that. One was the one I am going to come on to. The other reason was the ending of double jobbing. There were so many transitioning from having two positions to one that scores of by-elections across Northern Ireland would not have been appropriate.

The other issue, Cahir, I wanted to raise with you was around the durability of a list. I was on a list in east Belfast for Wallace, Lord Browne, when he was an Assembly Member. You put down five names and over a five-year term those five people have changed in circumstances, in political interests and in life, or may not live in the same constituency and have no desire to stand. If there is an aspiration to have more transparency around a list system, what flexibility would there be in that to account for the changes in life circumstances for anybody named on that list? That was the secondary issue that meant that the system had to change.

Cahir Hughes: I do not disagree with anything you are saying. The reason we flagged this in the report was just that lack of transparency. I recognise that that is a particular risk. Things evolve very quickly. As you say, people might change party allegiance and so forth. As it stands, and as you know, it rests with the nominating officer and that is it. The public have no sight of that or awareness of it. There may well be an education aspect to it about what the co-option process is there, why we do it and why we do not have by-elections.

Starting that conversation, Gavin, is what we want to do by putting that in the report. There is no perfect solution. With what we have at the



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minute, particularly when we look ahead to 2027, the impact that that will have on the integrity of the polls concerns me if we are seeing a lot of movement after an election has just happened.

Q46 **Chair:** Vijay, with your oversight, the Labour Party's election manifesto promised to extend the franchise to 16 and 17-year-olds to vote in all elections. Is it your understanding that this will include Northern Ireland?

Vijay Rangarajan: That is our understanding at the moment, yes. Clearly, this depends on the Government bringing forward a bill and then Parliament working through it. At the moment, we are advising and looking at the implications of that and what we would need to do. A big part of that would be, first, voter education and, second, the public campaigns around this. The third is going to be what kind of voter ID would be used. We are trying to work through each of the implications of that in order to be able to advise both Government and Parliament when the legislation comes.

Q47 **Chair:** What considerations need to be taken into account in extending this franchise into Northern Ireland?

Dr Marshall: The next set of elections in Northern Ireland is not due until 2027. One thing for sure is that, if the law is to be amended, we need plenty of time to be able to implement the changes locally in terms of the registration process. It will not just be people registering aged 16. There will be people registering to vote aged 14 and 15, on the assumption that the law follows broadly what happens in Scotland and Wales.

Therein lies a challenge, because at the minute we use national insurance numbers as a framework to verify people's identity. When children are aged 14 or 15, they will not have a national insurance number to help that process, so we need to find a way to address that specific issue in Northern Ireland.

Voter ID in Northern Ireland runs through passports or driving licences. Anybody less than 17 will not have a driving licence, so there is a challenge there around the electoral identity card in Northern Ireland, which we produce.

It is not like the voter authority certificate in Great Britain. The electoral identity card in Northern Ireland is de facto a public sector card for people to use to get services. If you have children age 14 or 15, there is a whole range of safeguarding issues that we need to look through as well. We would strive that, if this Bill is brought forward, it is brought forward as promptly as possible to give us time to implement that for the 2027 elections.

Q48 **Chair:** David, what you have just explained is a lot of work and perhaps a lot of money. Have you measured that? Do you have any scope to see what you are going to need?



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Dr Marshall: Not to the level of right down to the absolute pounds, shillings and pence. Clearly, there will be changes. There will be changes in procedures at polling stations, for example, in terms of maybe changes in how people understand how to deal with younger folk when they come into the polling station. There is a whole raft of challenges that it will create. I appreciate that it has happened in Scotland and Wales and clearly we can learn from that. Yes, it is not without its challenges and it will take time and effort.

Q49 **Chair:** There is another question I have there. You said about identifying young people in time for them to be able to vote and be registered. How does that happen if there is no national insurance? How does that happen in Wales and Scotland? I should know the answer.

Sarah Ling: Where they are registering at 14 or 15, the councils and VJBs in Scotland are using other council records. They are using things such as education records. In Wales, they are held within the county council anyway and there are data-sharing agreements that can be put in place to use that instead. In Northern Ireland, we have the challenge that we need to get the datasets across the whole of Northern Ireland. There is not always a one-on-one relationship.

The other key challenge to pull out on Northern Ireland that is different to Scotland and Wales is that, in Scotland and Wales, the national insurance number is only used at the point of the person applying. Once they have applied, it is removed. In Northern Ireland, they have the legal provision to retain the national insurance number.

We actually hold that on a person's record and use that as part of a personal identifier where we have a much bigger dataset and link it with the digital registration number as well. For 14 and 15-year-olds in Northern Ireland, they will need to register not using a national insurance number, because they will not have one. We will need to get the national data, but we will then also need to back supplement the national insurance numbers once they have already registered and they get one.

Q50 **Chair:** This question is a bit off beam. There is an issue around data. What needs to be done around data gathering in Northern Ireland in order to improve that situation with local authorities in general?

Dr Marshall: We have been looking at this in terms of the data that might be required. We currently use the health service register. There is a health service register that covers anybody registered with a family doctor, dentist or optician. That also has included in it the last activity or the last prescription. There is a timeline, which gives you a sense of currency. That would be available for people aged 14 and 15. We currently have access to that for anybody over 16, but we do not have it for access for anybody aged 14 and 15.

It would be a matter of extending that register as just one way, but that would not include the national insurance number. We would also then



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have to find a way to repopulate national insurance numbers as and when those 14 and 15-year-olds turn 16. There is a challenge here—there is no doubt—and it is not straightforward.

Sarah Ling: To add on that—and I am sure you would have the learning from Scotland and Wales as well—people get really jumpy about 14 and 15-year-olds' data as opposed to people who are over 16. In making the law in the UK Parliament, there is just a plea about making it explicitly clear, so that people do not come up against those kinds of data protection hurdles on it.

Vijay Rangarajan: Chair, you are absolutely right. This issue about, first, what data sources are used to assist or actually put people on to the register is crucial. The second question is what is then held on the register and of use to the returning officers, registration officers or voters after that. There are pilots about to start in Wales in four local authorities looking at assisted and automated registration using the local council data. The discussions that we are having with central Government in Westminster are about the use of some of the UK-wide datasets.

There are ways on both of these. Clearly, there are extremely good international comparators about ways to simultaneously push up both the completeness and the accuracy of the register. Our register is good, but it is by no means as good as it could be. We think that there are millions of people who are eligible. There are estimates of between 5 million and 8 million people in the UK who should be on the register. There is a big opportunity to try to improve the completeness and accuracy of the register at the moment and make it much more usable for everyone who uses it, including political parties.

Cahir Hughes: Northern Ireland is probably a little bit ahead of the game here in terms of the datasets that are available. The structure of electoral administration is different in Northern Ireland in that you have a centralised electoral register, managed by David and Sarah, but the data is rich. Going back to the earlier discussion about canvass, when the last canvass took place in 2021—Sarah will correct me if I am wrong—we took that data and matched it against the register. Obviously, everybody came off, but the data showed that about 85% of the population were still there.

You were spending millions of pounds taking people off an electoral register and this will happen in 2030 without a legislative change. It was millions of pounds to take people off and put them back on again. Is 85% right, Sarah, roughly?

Sarah Ling: Yes, it was.

Cahir Hughes: It was about 85% of people. The data shows that they are there. David and I have had a discussion as well. With the data that is available to David, he can pinpoint down to a house and know who is in there and that that person is eligible to vote. The data shows it, but,



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because that individual has not taken the time to fill in a form or gone online to do that, they are missing from the register.

Dr Marshall: As an example, today we write to householders in houses where we know there is a 16 or 17-year-old who is there but not on the register. We do not write to the 16 or 17-year-old, because that would be disclosing a particular person's name. We write to the householder and say, "It is our understanding that there is a young person living in this house", and we do that every year. That is the sort of thing that we think we could do. We could have some sort of a targeted initiative.

Q51 **Chair:** That is good. I want to turn to turnout. The UK turnout in general elections has seen a steady decline over the past 25 years. Is that true in Northern Ireland?

Cahir Hughes: Yes, it is a steady decline. I have been with the commission for quite some time. It was in the high 60s and 70s and now it is slipping to the mid-50s and low 60s.

Q52 **Chair:** Are you seeing the difference in the turnout at Westminster elections compared to Assembly elections? What trends are you seeing there?

Cahir Hughes: It is roughly the same. We saw lower turnout at European parliamentary elections when they happened. That, again, was not a unique Northern Ireland problem. We would have thought that local government election turnout would have been lower, but it was not. In 2023, I think that it was fairly consistent. It is around that 55% to 60% mark and that has been quite consistent over the last number of years.

Q53 **Chair:** What is your assessment of—this has been spoken about—the public level of trust in elections in Northern Ireland?

Cahir Hughes: We find that it still exists, thankfully. There are high levels. In recent elections, it has been in the mid to high 80s. People trust the process and see that it works. Despite a lot of our criticism about it being a bit antiquated, the fact that it is a paper-based system is safe in some ways. If it was more digitalised, maybe it might be more prone to cyber-attack and so forth.

People, by and large, trust the system. Their experience of their interaction with the Electoral Office, be that through the electoral registration process or at the polling station, is generally a positive one, which is good, given some of the issues that we have talked about today and the challenges that poses to democracy.

Q54 **Dr Pinkerton:** I want to ask a question about something that has been touched upon multiple times before, and that is the digital registration numbers. Can you give us a sense of what changes were introduced in that process for this most recent general election? Do you consider these to be in any way a barrier to participation in elections? It sounds like they are not, because there are some very clever mechanisms, or maybe. I do



not want to pre-empt it.

You talked about the possibility of this “Am I Registered” look-up, which sounds as though that is directly related to the digital registration, which allows people to check whether they are on the roll. I will leave it there. I do not want to pre-empt any of the answers, but I also have a follow-up, probably.

Dr Marshall: Northern Ireland has a specific difference to the rest of the United Kingdom around digital registration number. When you go to register to vote online, the elector, when they become registered, gets given a digital registration number that is on the piece of paper that tells them that they have been registered to vote. When you then go to apply for an absent vote, be that a postal vote or a proxy vote, you have to provide that number to verify.

The rationale that the Northern Ireland Office brought forward was that there was a wet signature. Once you were registered online, you removed that safeguard. That was fine for a period, but the canvass brought forward that a lot more people then registered online, because it was easier to do it. It was in the middle of the pandemic. We found then in the 2022 and 2023 elections that a lot of people did not realise that they had a digital registration number. They were applying for an absent vote, but did not know that they had a digital registration number.

Q55 **Dr Pinkerton:** They had done this sometime in the past and had not kept a note of the number. Let us face it: who does?

Cahir Hughes: The digital registration number was introduced in 2017, when online registration was introduced in Northern Ireland. As David alluded to, the problem was that you were still working on a register from the 2013 canvass. I think that there are maybe 12,500—I have a feeling—people who would have had a digital registration number at that time. When the canvass happened, all of a sudden nearly a million people then got a DRN.

Dr Marshall: It became a major concern, or at least an issue that got media coverage, in the 2023 local elections in Northern Ireland when quite a number of people applied for an absent vote, but were not successful because they did not provide their digital registration number. From that point, we identified a number of actions, but the primary one was this online “Am I Registered” tool. You do not do things for one reason, but for two reasons.

The tool allows people to identify, if they provide information about themselves such as their date of birth, part of their national insurance number, their address and their full name, whether they are registered to vote at that address. It also critically, and speedily because it is done through text messaging, gives them their digital registration number as part of that confirmation. 50,000 people used that service during the short period of the 2024 general election.



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I would commend the service to the United Kingdom as a whole, to the point Vijay made about duplicate registrations. We think it would be useful. There is an "Am I Registered" service in most parts of the world. All the American states have it. The Canadians have it. The Irish Republic has it. This is not my idea. We have essentially lifted and shifted the idea from there, and it has helped us.

There is still a challenge. Some people do not need their digital registration number because they applied to vote on paper, and some people applied to vote online. We think the issue here is that some people need it and some people do not. Either make it for everybody, so that the messaging is simple, or else remove it. That is what we are asking of Government. I have been on the record to say that this needs to be reformed. There is a paper on our website that says that.

I am not necessarily saying, "Get rid of it". It am saying, "Either keep it for everybody or remove it".

Q56 Dr Pinkerton: That would be the change, or at least the clarification, that you are looking for.

Dr Marshall: We already have digital registration numbers for everybody on the register. We just do not give them out to the people who do not need them, and we would like to change that so that they would be used for everybody. Otherwise, remove it entirely.

Q57 Dr Pinkerton: That does raise a question. What does this digital registration offer? What benefit does it bring? Why would you want to keep it if it acts as an impediment? Presumably, there was a sound justification for its introduction.

Dr Marshall: The justification goes back to the wet signature that we had in historical times when it was all paper registration and this was essentially an additional safeguard. Going forward, there is the genesis, if we move to automatic registration or for people who maybe do not have a national insurance number. There is a scenario that, now that we have it, it might be sensible to keep it, but to make it ubiquitous and for everybody.

Cahir Hughes: From the commission's perspective, when it was introduced in 2017, we flagged concerns with it in terms of what its actual purpose is. As David alluded to, the Government told us that it was a security feature to replace the wet signature. Our concern was what public awareness would be, particularly after the canvass in 2021. That is exactly what happened, as David alluded to, in 2022 and 2023.

David has, to a large extent, fixed the problem with the online checking system, but with the 2022 and 2023 elections, if you applied for an absent vote, you realised you needed a digital registration number and you were going, "What is a digital registration number?", you would have to provide all this information to get the digital registration number, such



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as your name, national insurance number, address, date of birth and so forth.

This is exactly the same stuff that you put on the absent vote application, so you provide the same information twice. We have never comprehended this and I will ask Government for clarification. What extra level of security is the digital registration number bringing? We still have not got a satisfactory answer, but, as David has alluded to, with this new system, people are getting it within seconds. They get a digital registration number, and, as we saw in the 2024 elections, the number of applications rejected for not having a digital registration number fell dramatically.

It did highlight that there are other issues with the phone in terms of people's understanding of how to complete that correctly. There still is a question on what the purpose of the digital registration number is and, as David alluded to, maybe it evolves into something else as another safeguard. In terms of its purpose in 2017, I am not sure it is doing what it is meant to, and I am not clear what it is meant to do, to be honest.

Q58 Dr Pinkerton: Once you do this look-up, then you get a text message. I suppose that at least provides you with an electronic record for future elections as to what it is. If people are as bad at deleting their text messages as I am, it will remain there on their phone. Does this in any way dovetail with the Government's proposal for digital IDs?

Vijay Rangarajan: It does not actually dovetail but we have to make these systems, at the very least, interoperate. Maybe it is the same system, but that is very much the work we are doing now. In all of our work, we try to make sure we are taking full account of the differences in every region, in Northern Ireland in particular, which is why the work that Cahir and his team do is so crucial.

While I am here, I will make tribute to Dr Katy Radford, who is just behind me, who is our commissioner for Northern Ireland and lives there. She makes sure that, on the commission board, we have a real understanding of what is happening in Northern Ireland and take full account of that. Clearly, it is part of a broader UK system. Particularly on the paper that the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology brought out last week on digital identification and online verification, it is going to be absolutely crucial.

That, coupled with whatever is happening in automatic or assisted registration, will be an essential part of the context for where this goes. Our plea would be to have a single system which actually gets the best learning from all of these rather than multiple different systems where there is no need for differences like that. People moving across the UK is definitely one of the reasons why people fall off the register as people move frequently. The more we have an integrated system, the better.

Chair: Thank you very much. It was very interesting, and I look forward



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to the Speaker's conference and seeing the outcomes of that, as well. I would like to thank our witnesses today.