

Northern Ireland Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: [The work of the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland](#), HC 617

Wednesday 12 October 2016

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Members present: Mr Laurence Robertson (Chair); Nigel Mills; Lady Hermon, Dr Alasdair McDonnell, Ian Paisley, Jack Lopresti

Questions 1 - 123

Witness

I: Graham Shields, Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland

Examination of Witness

Graham Shields, Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland

Q1 **Chair:** Mr Shields, thank you very much for joining us. There will be one or two more members coming and going as we proceed. It is good to see you. This is a one-off session as far as we are concerned—or that is certainly the intention. We look forward to hearing what you have to say. Please introduce yourself briefly and make an opening statement, in particular to tell us how we have got to the point we have. We received the *Future delivery of electoral services in Northern Ireland* last night. It was embargoed until midnight. You might want to tell us how that has been put together; the introduction is by you and the Minister. Talk us through where we are up to and we will ask some questions, if that is okay. Thank you very much.

Graham Shields: Thank you, Chairman. Good morning, ladies and gentleman. Thank you for the opportunity to give evidence here this morning. My name is Graham Shields, as you know, and I have held the post of Chief Electoral Officer for the past six years. In fact, I completed six years in the role as of yesterday. My principal duties include acting as the returning officer for all elections and referendums in Northern Ireland. I am then responsible for ensuring that the electoral register is as complete and accurate as reasonably possible. I also have duties in respect of minimising electoral fraud and abuse while maintaining public confidence in the impartial and independent electoral service.

I will be retiring at the end of this year, and a competition is under way to appoint my successor. I have thoroughly enjoyed my time doing this important job, which I have found to be both interesting and, at times, challenging. I would also like to take this opportunity to put on record my appreciation and admiration for the staff of the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland who have worked so hard over the years and, indeed, have frequently gone above and beyond any reasonable expectation to successfully deliver our elections and manage our registration system.

We are currently undergoing a process of modernising how electoral services are delivered in Northern Ireland to avail of new technology and bring services in line with the rest of the United Kingdom. As you have already said, Mr Chairman, a consultation paper on that subject was published yesterday. The prospect of change presents a number of challenges, as well as significant opportunities. A new electoral administration system that will replace the current ageing system is presently under development and it will go live before the end of this year. It will provide the platform for the introduction of online registration, which is due to go live in January 2017.

Online registration was introduced to Great Britain in 2014 and it has proved to be hugely popular. I have every expectation that this success will be replicated in Northern Ireland. The introduction of this new



system will reduce the bureaucracy of the current paper-based registration system. With the next elections not due until May 2019, we now have a timely opportunity to rethink how we should deliver electoral services in the coming decades, while ensuring that the Electoral Office remains fit for purpose and public confidence in the electoral process is maintained.

Q2 Chair: Thank you very much for the opening remarks. This document was only published yesterday, but we already understand that two offices are due for closure. It seems a bit cart before the horse. Would it not be sensible to carry out the consultation before making those decisions?

Graham Shields: That decision was taken purely on business and financial grounds. The offices—in Newtownards and Ballymena—were scheduled to close earlier this year, but the leases were extended to allow us to get through the Northern Ireland Assembly election and the EU referendum. With the approval of the Northern Ireland Office, the leases were extended until the end of October of this year. The offices will close.

Does that mean there is a lesser service to the public as a result of the closures? No, I firmly believe it does not. The majority of our work is done by postal communication, and the staff from both offices are moving to the next nearest offices. In the case of the Ballymena staff, they are moving to the Newtownabbey office, and in the case of the Newtownards staff, they are moving to the Belfast office. We continue to be contactable through telephone, through our helpline service, and most of the communication is through the postal service in any event. I am confident that we will continue to deliver the service that the people in those areas will need.

Q3 Chair: There will be no staff redundancies because of those two closures; is that correct?

Graham Shields: The staff are relocating to the next nearest offices.

Q4 Lady Hermon: It is very good of you to come so early in the morning to give us evidence, and we will ensure our colleagues join us in due course. I had a series of questions arising from your opening statement to us. Can I just ask you a number of things? You have said that you have thoroughly enjoyed your time but some of it was challenging. Reflecting on your six years, which bits were challenging?

Graham Shields: Particularly around election time, it can be a very fraught experience. As you will be aware, particularly going back a few years, there were some criticisms—in many respects, I feel, unfair—about the duration of the counts, but nonetheless we have in recent years undertaken a programme of work in conjunction with colleagues in the Electoral Commission to see what can be done to improve that process. The last number of elections have shown a significant improvement in terms of the count timings. Polling stations can also be difficult, but by and large I would say it has been more enjoyable than challenging.



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Q5 **Lady Hermon:** Thank you. If you were asked to give a bit of advice to your successor, whoever that will be, what would be on your list of to-do items?

Graham Shields: It is a difficult job to come into cold.

Lady Hermon: As you did.

Graham Shields: Yes. It is challenging if you have no background in the political world, as I did not. It is very important to listen to the staff. I would encourage whoever follows me to listen to what they have to say and be guided by the people with the experience within the organisation, who I have certainly found to be of tremendous help and supportive during my tenure.

Q6 **Lady Hermon:** That is a very kind comment. You will be aware that staff who have been affected by the closures of particular offices are very unhappy about that. Could you say, hand on heart, that you have listened to their concerns and their objections about the closure of their particular offices? I am talking about the one that concerns me, and I know that Mr Paisley will be speaking on behalf of his constituents. I do not think that my constituents who are affected by the closure of the Newtownards office feel they have been listened to.

Graham Shields: I do understand that and I do understand the attachment that people have to their locality. I do understand that change is never easy; I came from an organisation, the police service, that underwent significant change and I was aware of the impact that had on people. I do realise that there is very much that personal sense of loss, maybe, whenever change happens.

I have to detach myself from the emotion of this and concentrate on providing a service—and a service that works into the future. The people concerned in the case of the Newtownards office are moving to Belfast. I am quite sure and certain they will continue to provide the first-class service that they have over the years in Newtownards. I suppose it is like anything in life: things change; nothing forever can stay the same. We have to move forward. We have to concentrate on the good things about moving forward and the changes that we are making that will have a positive impact on the future delivery of services in Northern Ireland, because the environment around us is changing, largely driven by technological change.

Q7 **Lady Hermon:** In relation to the Newtownards office, I understand the lease expires at the end of this month—October—and the office will be closed. When asked by the Chairman about the reasons for closing those offices, you said it was because of “business grounds” and “financial grounds”. Those are the two words that you used. How much money is going to be saved by closing the Newtownards office?

Graham Shields: Very approximately, something in the order of about £20,000 up until the end of the current financial year, which may not



sound like a lot of money, but it is a lot of money if you do not have it. Again, as you can see from looking at the consultation paper, the Electoral Office in recent years has been spending more than the operational budget allocated to it.

Q8 Lady Hermon: What numbers are we talking about? Has the budget been reduced?

Graham Shields: The budget has been reducing year-on-year since 2009-10. We have, in recent years, had a series of elections, which has allowed us to continue to operate in our current format. That series of elections has now concluded. As the consultation paper shows, over the course of the next three years there are significant deficits in the budget if things do not change.

If I tie that back to the issue of technological change and the introduction of online registration, that presents an opportunity to improve the efficiency of the service that we deliver in how it is delivered. I reflect back again to my opening comments and the success of the online system in Great Britain over the past couple of years. It is clear that, at this stage, in the region of 90% of all new registrations are conducted online in Great Britain. There is no reason why we should not see something similar in Northern Ireland.

That being the case, it hugely reduces the bureaucracy and paper-based administration associated with the registration process. That affords all sorts of opportunities to do things in a much more efficient way. That is very much a positive story to tell. It is going to result in a much more efficient system and give people the opportunity to register from their own homes.

Q9 Lady Hermon: You described online registration as “hugely popular” in Great Britain. Those were your words. Of course, there is an annual canvass in Great Britain. Is there an annual canvass, or any proposal for an annual canvass, in Northern Ireland?

Graham Shields: There is no annual canvass in Northern Ireland by law. There must be a canvass at least once in every 10 years. Personally, I do not think that is sufficient, but I would also add that we have a system of continuous registration in Northern Ireland. We are getting information in from a variety of official sources that inform our knowledge of changes to the register. What does that look like? I will give you one example. In the case of the Business Services Organisation, they supply us with information of people who have moved address or whose names have changed through marriage.

We send out approximately 180,000 letters a year—about 120,000 initial letters and roughly 60,000 follow-up letters—to attempt to glean information back from people to update their registration information. That continuous registration process rolls on every year.



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It is my view that there should be some form of canvass activity not more than every five years. Coming into the next cycle of elections for 2018, there should be a canvass of sorts, or a process of household contact as recently recommended by the Electoral Commission in their report on the state of the register in Northern Ireland, prior to that next cycle of elections so that we get the opportunity to update the register prior to each cycle of elections. I do not think an annual canvass is necessary; I really do not. But the process of a culmination of continuous registration, plus a “once in every five years” canvass—for want of a better term—will sustain the register.

Q10 Lady Hermon: Have the staff in your office already started training in online registration for when people do register? You think it is going to be popular in Northern Ireland. Are you going to have to recruit new staff to deal with the online registration and the increase that you expect?

Graham Shields: No. If the system works, and, again, there is no reason to suspect that it will not work as well as it has worked in Great Britain, of those 90% of applications that are made online, approximately 5% are rejected because the information does not match up with the Department for Work and Pensions’ database. They have to be manually processed. Of the other 95%, there is a direct match and the register can be updated in a quite straightforward way. If that happens in our case, and I do think it will, it should reduce the amount of bureaucracy and administration associated with the registration process.

Q11 Lady Hermon: Of the 5% that are rejected as not compatible with the information you already have, is it the case that it is around signatures not matching?

Graham Shields: This is the online process, so there will be no signature associated with it. Say if somebody put the wrong National Insurance number into their application, it would take it out for a manual intervention at that point, and the applicant would have to be written to.

Q12 Lady Hermon: One of the key components of driving down electoral fraud and vote-stealing was the legislation that went through this House in 2002, whereby you were required to give details such as your signature, National Insurance number and date of birth. Now we are going to lose one of those. We are going to lose the signature.

Graham Shields: Bear in mind that we have a huge advantage over colleagues in the electoral world in Great Britain; that is that if somebody wants to vote in Northern Ireland, they have to produce photographic identification. That is a huge safeguard to the point where I would say there is no evidence of electoral fraud in any of our elections. Insofar as postal vote or absent vote applications, they will continue to require a signature for the application to be processed.

Lady Hermon: Thank you. I must open up to other colleagues and then I will come back, because I have another list of questions.



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Q13 Ian Paisley: Graham, it is very nice to meet you. I have been trying to meet you since July. It has been very hard to get a meeting with you. This is the first time I have got a chance to meet you. It might have been easier to get an audience with the Pope.

Graham Shields: I am more than happy to meet with anyone. I contacted your office after I got a call and suggested dates. I never heard anything back. That would have been in August. I will make myself available as best I can at any time.

Q14 Ian Paisley: It is good to meet you. I have had a lot of dealings with your staff. I think you employ 45 people in total, both at your headquarters office and around your various regional offices, but principally your Ballymena office. They are excellent people. Do you accept that there is a significant degree of uncertainty and nervousness among your staff about their future because of the way this consultation process has been handled?

Graham Shields: Absolutely. I know that there is. It is difficult for staff. I absolutely get that. Clarity and certainty is the best way of easing that. It is unfortunate that the consultation paper has taken so long to be released. Thankfully, it is now out there. People will see what the potential direction of travel for the future is. The timing of that, unfortunately, was beyond my control, but I want to do all that I can in my remaining time in the organisation to provide the certainty and the knowledge that I have to give to staff as we go forward.

Q15 Ian Paisley: On the release of the paper, it is kind of convenient that it came out at one minute past midnight this morning and you are in front of us at half past nine.

Graham Shields: As I say, I had no say or part in the decision as to when the paper would be released.

Q16 Ian Paisley: It has not been well handled. I think we can agree on that. I got to read the paper last night. Can we look at the finances on it? You have told my colleague, Lady Hermon, that you are saving £20,000 by the closure of Ards office. How much are you saving by the closure of the Ballymena office?

Graham Shields: It is somewhere in the same order: £20,000, £22,000, £23,000 or thereabouts.

Q17 Ian Paisley: £40,000. On page 12 of your report, you say that you are going to be in a deficit of £522,000. How is that made up when only £40,000 of it accounts for Ards and Ballymena and yet the inference has been that these offices are so expensive they are going to run you into deficit? £40,000 is hardly the problem.

Graham Shields: It is if you do not have it, first of all. In terms of the size of the deficit, over the course of the past three years an element of full-time staff cost has been charged to successive election accounts. That option is no longer available because we do not have any planned



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elections over the course of the next few years. Because of the fact that there are no elections, there is no avenue by which to direct those costs into the election accounts, which are funded through a separate funding stream at Treasury. Therefore, the organisation would have to bear the full running cost as incurred in recent years. Those figures reflect the true cost of what maintaining the organisation in its current state would be over the remainder of the spending review period.

Q18 Ian Paisley: You get a budget of £1.9 million, £1.925 million and £1.8 million over the next three financial years. Are you telling us that because of an accountancy issue and how that is accounted for, that is putting you into deficit, not the running of the offices?

Graham Shields: I receive an operational budget funded through the Northern Ireland Office. Those figures are reflected in the figures that you have quoted. The actual running costs of maintaining the staffing complements that I have and the operating costs of the offices run substantially above that. If we kept on as we are going, that is effectively the position that we would be in in terms of overspend over the next number of years.

Q19 Ian Paisley: Is this projected deficit as opposed to actual deficit?

Graham Shields: Yes, for the years to come.

Q20 Ian Paisley: Give us an example. For 2017-18, you are going to be in a projected deficit of £351,000. How is that £351,000 made up? Obviously, £40,000 of that is made up by the terribly expensive Ards and Ballymena offices, but how is the other £311,000 made up?

Graham Shields: I have not got a breakdown of those costs.

Q21 Ian Paisley: Why not?

Graham Shields: A substantial element of them would come from staffing costs.

Q22 Ian Paisley: Should the financial savings not be in this report? On reading that without that knowledge, you would have thought that these offices were the primary cost. You are telling us it is how you manage your staff budget.

Graham Shields: It is a combination of estate and budget and staff costs that contribute to the size of the projected overspend.

Q23 Ian Paisley: Have you not just plucked those figures out of the air?

Graham Shields: Certainly not. Those figures are reflective of what the costs are.

Q24 Ian Paisley: Reflective? What does that mean?

Graham Shields: It means that, based on the costs incurred in the last number of years during the last election cycle, they are reflective of what those costs would be in the future.



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Q25 **Ian Paisley:** You could not go into your bank manager and sell that as a business report: "This is my reflective cost." They would want to know how that cost was made up.

Graham Shields: Those are the projected costs based on current levels of expenditure into those financial years. If things do not change—if we continue to spend as we currently spend—that is the level of overspend that will be incurred over those next number of years.

Q26 **Chair:** You are saying that your staff are too expensive. Is that what you are saying?

Graham Shields: I am saying that the budget is not enough. My operating budget is not sufficient.

Q27 **Ian Paisley:** Where is this budget going? It is going on staff. Is that what you are saying? The staff are costing you too much because there are no elections.

Graham Shields: Yes—and accommodation. There are issues around the office estate, much of which is not fit for purpose and carries an excess of accommodation that for large periods of time is not utilised.

Q28 **Ian Paisley:** Give me that, because Ballymena and Ards are being blamed as big problems here. How does the estate issue affect you there?

Graham Shields: Simply the running cost of the offices.

Q29 **Ian Paisley:** £40,000?

Graham Shields: That is for six months. The entire estate is in the order of, I think, £470,000, which we pay annually for the estate costs and the running costs.

Q30 **Ian Paisley:** That is Belfast. You have to keep Belfast.

Graham Shields: Yes.

Q31 **Ian Paisley:** You are not closing Belfast. No one would dare close Belfast. My goodness, everything has to be in Belfast, and you will not close anything around Belfast; but the rest of Ulster can go and get stuffed. What are the rest of the costs here? These figures are ridiculous.

Chair: Can we perhaps stick to parliamentary language a little more?

Graham Shields: First of all, it is certainly not the case that I or my colleagues—and I believe I can also speak for the Northern Ireland Office—want to see the rest of Northern Ireland unserved. That is clearly not the case. Whatever the future outcome and shape of the delivery of services in future, it will include provision for local service for people across Northern Ireland, not just in Belfast.

Ian Paisley: We will come to that in a minute. Give us these



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breakdowns of costs.

Q32 **Chair:** Can I just make a point of clarification? How long have these deficits been running?

Graham Shields: Since 2013-14.

Chair: Thank you.

Q33 **Ian Paisley:** I think you threw in the red herring about the estate costs, because you have to pay for Belfast. You have to pay this, so what are the real estate pressures? These figures are supposition, Graham. You have made up these figures to support your case for closing these offices. Give us the evidence. Give us the robust basis of the £351,000.

Graham Shields: I cannot break it down. What I can tell you is that it is a combination. The costs principally are made up of staff costs and then estate and operating costs.

Ian Paisley: How much? 40%? 50%? How much of that is staff?

Chair: Order, order. I do not mind the robust questioning but we have to let the witness answer one question before we move on to another. Mr Shields.

Graham Shields: I will get you precise figures, but I do not have it off the top of my head. I could not commit to saying it is 65% or 70%, but a substantial proportion of the cost, more than 50%, is attributable to staff costs.

Q34 **Ian Paisley:** Graham, you say you are going to get me precise figures. Thank you. However, I am bitterly disappointed, because since I have known about these potential closures, Sylvia and I have contacted the NIO on a number of occasions and have asked for those figures. Importantly, in writing, we asked for them to be included in this report so that people could make their minds up logically. If you can provide a good financial basis, Graham, I support you. I have no difficulty if public money has to be saved. I would support that if you could provide a good basis, but to come to us the morning after this has been produced and then tell us, "And I will get you precise figures," is wrong. That is why your staff, to go back to the point, feel unsettled and nervous about their future, because they feel the die is cast.

Going back to the point I made about Belfast, there has been an ever-decreasing circle of Electoral Office supply in Northern Ireland. I used to have an electoral office in Ballymoney. It was moved down to Ballymena. It is now being moved to Newtownabbey. It is going to Belfast. That is the ever-decreasing circle we are living in. Mid Ulster is the same. They used the Ballymena office; they are now heading to Belfast. It is an even further journey. Rural Ulster is being treated disgracefully by the location plan of these offices and where this goes, and that is wrong.



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Graham Shields: I do not accept that, with all due respect. If you look at the consultation paper, it does refer to an option of collocating electoral office staff within council premises. That is an option that I have been exploring and consulting on with councils and colleagues in Northern Ireland.

Q35 **Ian Paisley:** Mid and East Antrim Borough Council offered you an office space.

Graham Shields: They did.

Q36 **Ian Paisley:** Why did you not take it?

Graham Shields: There were a number of reasons. First of all, there are set-up costs, in running secure lines and making sure that accommodation is secure to an appropriate standard, because of the amount of personal data that we maintain. It also, in a sense, pre-empts the outcome of the consultation and could send confusing messages to the public if we say, "We are closing this office, but we are relocating here," and then, for whatever reason, something was to change a few months afterwards.

But I can tell you I have been in discussions with the chief executive in your local council and, indeed, a number of other councils across Northern Ireland. One of the clear options in the paper, and indeed it is one that I would prefer, is to see electoral office staff colocated in a number of sites strategically to give us the demographic and geographic coverage that we need to cover all of Northern Ireland. That probably amounts to having a presence in four council offices where our staff would be located.

Q37 **Ian Paisley:** Can you name those four council offices?

Graham Shields: Suffice it to say I would want coverage to the north-west, to the south-west, to the north and in Belfast. I cannot say specifically; I have not firmed up agreements but I have had discussions with a number of chief executives and there is a clear willingness.

Q38 **Ian Paisley:** Why is that not an option in this report? You have 33 pages of report and you do not have that as an option. You do not have that as one of the six questions to ask: would it be a good idea to locate in these geographical locations? Why is that not a question, Graham? That is a great suggestion; why is it not in your report?

Graham Shields: I cannot answer for all of the contents in that report, but I am telling you what I have done and the fact that my negotiations are ongoing with those chief executives.

Q39 **Ian Paisley:** You wrote it. Can you not answer for it? That is you, is it not?

Graham Shields: I contributed to it, yes. I did.

Q40 **Chair:** The question is whether it was put together by the Minister, by



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you or jointly.

Graham Shields: It was jointly prepared. A large amount of the drafting was done by colleagues in the Northern Ireland Office and I certainly contributed to it.

Q41 **Ian Paisley:** Mr Chairman, he should change his name to Pontius Pilate. That is an incredible response: washing your hands like that by saying someone else is to blame when your name is on this. This is your report.

Q42 **Chair:** Order. Perhaps if I could put it slightly less robustly, if it is a joint report surely you have a duty to answer that question of why it was not in the report. Did you take it up with the Minister?

Graham Shields: The report does mention the fact that there could be up to four electoral offices across Northern Ireland, Mr Chairman. The exact location of those offices would have to be agreed.

Q43 **Ian Paisley:** In 2.53 of your report, you indicate that district council offices could take a greater responsibility for management. You do not go into the locations. You do not then pose the question, as you have posed today, that you have done some draft research on this and this could be a geographical response to what you are trying to do. Yet, you are telling us that today. That is a real shame because that might provide a much better and healthier discussion as how this problem could be solved.

In saying that, because you want to colocate or potentially colocate, can you give us the assurance that we will not get a second-class system and the colocated offices will not be seen as junior offices? Can you give us an assurance that when people go to the colocated offices—if that materialises—they will get the first-class system that they currently get from your Electoral Office staff and it will not be a threadbare response up there?

Graham Shields: Absolutely not. I would go back to the point that I made earlier on: the majority of communication with the public and through the Electoral Office is by post. The service that we would provide would continue to be, as you describe, a first-class service. There are sensitivities around this and negotiations with councils around the location of these offices. I would not want to say publicly until those negotiations on potential locations are finished, but I can tell you with confidence that there are a number of councils very willing to have our offices present with them.

Q44 **Ian Paisley:** Is that because council staff are going to take these jobs?

Graham Shields: No.

Q45 **Ian Paisley:** Really?

Graham Shields: The Electoral Office staff would be taking—

Q46 **Ian Paisley:** Tell me again why you are saying on page 15 that you are



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going to put safeguards in place to protect council employees undertaking electoral functions from risk of political interference?

Graham Shields: If I could just finish what I was saying earlier, in those council areas where the Electoral Office did not have staff present, I would like to see a facility where members of the public could go into the council office to hand in a registration form that would be sent on to the Electoral Office for processing, and where they could go in and have their photograph taken for an electoral identity card and that is electronically transmitted to the Electoral Office for processing. In actual fact, you would be extending the level of service potentially available to people around the country.

Q47 **Ian Paisley:** Will you be using council employees to do that?

Graham Shields: Yes.

Q48 **Ian Paisley:** Will you be training them?

Graham Shields: Yes.

Q49 **Ian Paisley:** You will be paying them, probably, or paying the council for the service.

Graham Shields: Yes.

Q50 **Ian Paisley:** That is quite costly, and you have 45 staff that do that at the minute.

Graham Shields: It increases the footprint of offices that people could go to.

Q51 **Ian Paisley:** It leads to the sacking of some of your staff. That is what it leads to, and the closure of a number of offices and a second-rate system rolled out to certain areas. That is what it leads to, Graham. That is my impression.

Graham Shields: I cannot accept that, respectfully. It is an opportunity to increase the level of service that is provided to the public. To go on to the second point in relation to the safeguards around councils and so on, that specifically is in relation to the role of council staff in assisting with the delivery of elections. At present, the electoral office is a small organisation. It has very little in terms of resilience when it comes to running elections, and it is entirely reasonable to expand that cadre of knowledge and experience around the running of elections to ensure there is a sufficient pool of people to do that. In actual fact, by asking councils to take on more of a role we are bringing Northern Ireland much more into line with how things are done in Great Britain, indeed the Republic of Ireland and much further afield.

Q52 **Ian Paisley:** Great Britain does not have Section 75. You have mentioned Section 75 in 3.3 of your report. Have you done any modelling about how Section 75 could affect the group of people living in rural Ulster vis-à-vis those who work and live in the city of Belfast?



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Graham Shields: In respect of what?

Q53 **Ian Paisley:** In respect of services that are now available to them in rural parts of the community and are being removed.

Graham Shields: There is nothing that has been done yet.

Q54 **Ian Paisley:** You have closed Ballymena and Ards.

Graham Shields: Again, I want to make clear: when online registration comes in, and assuming we get the level of take-up there is in Great Britain—with 90% of people registering online—people will be equally serviced throughout Northern Ireland because they will be able to apply online and through paper.

Q55 **Ian Paisley:** Did you test Section 75 and the rural community vis-à-vis the Belfast community or see that as a separate group?

Graham Shields: In relation to accessing electoral services, I do not see that being an issue because, again, we can contact them and deal with them by post, as happens in the overwhelming majority of cases at the minute. At the minute, okay, we have seven offices, but if you live in Lisnaskea it is quite a journey to Omagh. If you want to go to an electoral office—and I have to say there would not be that many people from Lisnaskea who ever feel the need—

Q56 **Ian Paisley:** It is a bigger journey to Belfast.

Graham Shields: One of the options is we have staff colocated in a number of councils and the councils augment those services to provide a service, perhaps in Enniskillen, where somebody from Lisnaskea could go in if they so desired to use the paper-based registration system. They could leave their form there and have their photograph taken for an electoral identity card if they wanted to do that.

Q57 **Chair:** Before I bring Nigel in, in answer to a question I asked, I think you said the deficit started in 2013-14.

Graham Shields: Yes, I believe that is right.

Q58 **Chair:** What changed to bring the deficit about? Remind us what happened there.

Graham Shields: The operational budget has been reduced over time.

Q59 **Chair:** It was just reduced. There was nothing more than that.

Graham Shields: No.

Q60 **Nigel Mills:** Who takes the final decision, Mr Shields, on this?

Graham Shields: It will be passed by the Minister of State, Mr Hopkins.

Q61 **Nigel Mills:** It is not your decision. It is for him to decide.



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Graham Shields: I have operational independence in terms of how services are delivered, but the Minister will have the final say on that.

Q62 **Nigel Mills:** If he decided we are going to give district councils far more responsibility for registering and for the conduct of elections, is that his choice?

Graham Shields: It is, but again it is not the case that we are talking about giving district councils a lot more responsibility for registration.

Q63 **Nigel Mills:** Okay—a bit of a role in registration then. But you are talking about giving them quite a bit more of a role in the conduct of elections.

Graham Shields: Yes. The local council staff currently undertake a range of functions around the delivery of local council elections. In very simple and crude terms, on the day of a local council election the electoral office do all of the work around the polling arrangements, staffing polling stations and so on. The local councils run their election counts and the chief executives receive the nominations for those elections. I would see a role for the councils to become involved in a similar way in the running of the Assembly and Westminster elections, where chief executives could receive nominations and run and staff the election counts.

Q64 **Nigel Mills:** The reason for asking that is that, when reading the Minister's foreword to this consultation, it struck me as quite unusual that he seems to advocate one option in his own foreword. He says, "As a former leader of Bradford Council, I have seen first hand how councils can play an important role in the delivery of elections ... I am pleased therefore that this consultation seeks views on an enhanced role for district councils." If I was a member of staff working in one of your current offices and I saw the person deciding on the outcome of this consultation in the consultation foreword advocating one of the options, I might think this was a bit of a slam dunk, might I not?

Graham Shields: From my point of view, it certainly is not. I have made it clear to the Committee what my preferred option is.

Q65 **Nigel Mills:** Is your preferred option not the same as the one the Minister is at least in some way advocating in his foreword on the next page to your foreword?

Graham Shields: I cannot speak for the Minister. The feedback that comes in as a result of the consultation process will be carefully considered, but it makes clear sense to me to have a number of Electoral Office offices regionally sited where our staff would work closely with council staff to ensure that they are up to speed and know what they need to do prior to the next cycle of elections.

Q66 **Nigel Mills:** We have a consultation where you have one preferred option and the person that decides it has some different thoughts. In



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terms of the savings that you talk about, you can save staff costs by paying out lots of redundancies. I get that. How many of the premises that you are trying to avoid having to use in future can you avoid the cost of? How many have leases expiring?

Graham Shields: All of the remaining leases outside of Newtownards and Ballymena are due to expire in July and August of next year.

Nigel Mills: They are all avoidable if you so choose.

Graham Shields: All.

Q67 **Nigel Mills:** This paper talks about a lot of the savings effectively coming from the fact that district councils can use staff at election time and then use them for other things the rest of the year, so you do not have to pay some money all year round. How critical is that assumption to the level of savings you need to avoid the deficit? Is effectively only paying them for six weeks of the year for electoral services rather than 52 key?

Graham Shields: The role of councils primarily, going forward, will be potentially around the area of election delivery. Election funding is quite separate and distinct from funding for the core operating functions of the Electoral Office. In terms of how councils are paid for that work, that would come through the election funding stream and not the normal operating stream.

Q68 **Nigel Mills:** That would not have helped you with the deficit that you are trying to eliminate of £500,000 a year.

Graham Shields: If we reduce the number of offices, colocate within a council setting and, through the process of online registration, improve the overall efficiency of the registration operation, we will then not need as many staff. The operation can continue to function effectively into the future.

Q69 **Dr McDonnell:** Thank you very much, Graham, for being here with us. I want to compliment you on the progress that has been made and the courtesy and professionalism that your staff display in any contact I have had with them. I certainly detect an improving efficiency and effectiveness year-on-year. That is not just in Belfast; I would apply that to other offices I have had occasion to be in, like Ballymena for instance. I noticed that you are probably suggesting we are 88% to 90% accurate. I noticed also recently you are undertaking a removal exercise. My concern is the 10% we are not getting to. How do we get to them?

My own calculation is that about 20% of people in my own constituency are not registered. For other constituencies, it is probably only 4% or 5%. How do we get to them? I have tried to work. Maureen Carroll, your deputy, was outstanding in Belfast. She worked very closely, openly and honestly. We were not doing anything untoward, but she trusted the effort we made. At times we were getting a few hundred people on to the register, which was very useful, but it taxes me to figure out how we



can get that last 10% registered. It is not just a question of absolute administrative accuracy; those people surge at election time. They discover a week before an election, certainly after the time has passed, that they want to vote. They rush in and end up blaming public representatives for somehow or another not providing them with the vote. Could you give us some suggestion as to how we might close that gap?

Graham Shields: Thank you for your kind remarks at the outset. It is a hugely difficult area. You may have seen the recent report by the Electoral Commission on the state of the Northern Ireland register published last month, which indicated that the parliamentary register is 81% complete and 87% accurate. That would imply 19% of the population are not on the register for various reasons. It is incredibly challenging for us because, obviously, there is no compunction or legal obligation. Perhaps there is a moral obligation for people to register, but for whatever reason there is a significant rump of people out there who do not want to engage in the process and do not want to play any part in politics, voting or elections.

In fact, every year around election time we get letters from people asking to be removed from the register because they just do not want to be part of it. I know that the Commission, and it is referred to in the report, have talked about auto-enrolment of people so that every eligible person is put on to the register and that that process is informed through the use of official data sources. That is no bad thing if that is the route that we did go down, because you could, with a high degree of confidence, using official data sources, ensure that the register contained the people who were meant to be on it.

Whether they choose subsequently to exercise their right to go out and vote is quite a different matter, but there is clearly a challenge. It is also reflective of the fact that turnout at elections in Northern Ireland in recent years has dropped off. There is most certainly a disengagement with the political process, and that should be troubling for all of us. The introduction of online registration in Great Britain has substantially helped the registration situation there.

The fact that people were able to register up to the hours before the referendum, and there was a huge surge—the system fell over at one point because of the surge in numbers—is all extremely positive in terms of helping numbers get on to the register. That should certainly help us. If you make things as easy as possible for people, hopefully they will show more interest and be a bit more proactive about getting registered.

Q70 **Dr McDonnell:** Digital registration is excellent and I encourage it. Provided you have a few other pillars, like National Insurance and date of birth, to compare it with, it works very well. Beyond that, however, we still have people who cannot read and write, never mind use a computer. That is where we need to reach into, because those people are as entitled to vote as you or I. My concern is that as we move digitally and move



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into more sophisticated methods of simpler working, those people are being left out.

I would want to probe, if I could, on the void list. I have been working on it for the last week and I am shocked at the number of households in my own constituency that do not have a vote. Is there no way aside from a global canvass that we do not focus on the void list in some way? I know you send letters to them, but if somebody is illiterate, they will find it very difficult to cope with a government form—and to all intents and purposes, it is a government form in their eyes. The reaction is to put it behind the clock or put it on the mantelpiece and hope that it goes away.

Graham Shields: I take your point entirely, and some form of canvassing activity in the autumn of 2018 before the May elections in 2019 should be very much an exercise targeted at the homes of those who are either not on the register or who may be on the register at the wrong address. We have the technology, quite simply, to do that. We can do a canvass that is much more focused, efficient, economically efficient and can allow us to go through a process of door-to-door engagement, rather than just writing letters. It is definitely much more impactful to call at someone's door and follow up on a registration issue than write a letter that people will throw in the bin.

Albeit it is a more expensive option, but doing things in a much more focused way, and not going to the people currently on the register at the right address with all the correct details, as we would have done in previous canvasses, allows us to use our money and conduct the process much more smartly and efficiently.

Q71 Dr McDonnell: One of my problems is the Boundary Commission in its wisdom has decided to exterminate South Belfast and, aside from many personal vested interests, I would be aggrieved at that, because I believe Belfast should retain four constituencies. My loyalty obviously is to my own constituency but also to the wider city. We have massive development going on. It slowed down for a bit, but even during the crash we were still building houses out opposite Purdysburn, the back of Brooke Hall and that area. How long does it take for us to catch up using the technology? I know from my previous experience as a GP that sometimes it took me four or five years checking up on somebody's change of address. How reliable is a change of address coming from the DHSS?

For instance, at the moment on the site of Belvoir Park Hospital, there are about 30 or 40 houses lived in. Maybe a couple of hundred are in the process of being built on that site. Equally, on the site of the Balmoral showgrounds, I recently counted about 19 or 20 new houses occupied. I am being genuine in this, because it is a challenge for me. I do not have the resources. I try to generate whatever resource I can to feed in to backing up your professional efforts. How can we get those people on? If those people move into new housing, the registration at the house they left is not accurate and it will get knocked back.



Graham Shields: We will get information from a number of sources. We will get information from the council about any new streets, new roads or new addresses that are established. We get quarterly information through from the Business Services Organisation.

Q72 **Dr McDonnell:** Is that at DHSS?

Graham Shields: Yes. That will inform us of any changes to address.

Q73 **Dr McDonnell:** My point is some of that can take years. If you are a healthy young man in your 30s, certainly from my own perspective I never saw a doctor for 10 years. I did not see one for 20 years. That is a gap. That is useful as a validator; it is not useful as an initiator.

Graham Shields: We also get an annual data return from the Department for Work and Pensions, which is a full refresh of the full DWP register for Northern Ireland. Again, we can extract the information from any changes to that and contact the people. Also, we have the option of doing many canvasses in areas where there is new housing or new housing developments to encourage people to register. Again, that will be done by post. It would not be done by door-to-door visits. We have some really good data sources.

The problem is not in identifying movements of people or potential new registrants coming on to the system; it is getting those people to participate in the process or update their information. We referred earlier to approximately 180,000 letters that were sent out on the foot of the Business Services Organisation information. We are doing really well to get a 50% response rate after two mail-outs because, for whatever reason, it is just not a priority for people. If there is not an election, they just do not bother to update their information.

Q74 **Dr McDonnell:** I asked the question because, again, I had a small development down the Ravenhill Road, Ballynafoy Close. There were about 40 houses in it. Yet, after about two years there were still only six of them registered, which is why I am testing, if you like, your practices and sources of information. Some may have been reluctant. There are legitimate and illegitimate reasons as to why people do not want to be on the register. Some people are cohabiting, some people are pretending to be separated or whatever and all the rest. There are all sorts of social services fraud or other fraudulent reasons why people do not want to be on, but equally, sometimes for security reasons or other reasons, people do not want to expose themselves.

Graham Shields: Of course. We welcome the support that we get, too, from the parties around this.

Dr McDonnell: I welcome the support we get back from you, because 30 years ago a party went in to try to do something about some of the flaws. It was presumed you were up to some fiddle, whereas today the partnership is there. I welcome that change, because I have no interest in getting somebody on illegitimately or whatever. I would urge you,



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while you remain and as you go forward, with whoever your successor might be, to ensure that the culture that has changed and the openness and partnership of approach is retained. I would, if not as aggressively, endorse some of the anxieties about rural areas that have been raised earlier by my colleague here. We are indebted to you here today because you flushed out the fact that Ian Paisley wants to meet the Pope.

Q75 Chair: I am going to ask a question based on Alasdair's comments there. It seems that in some ways we are moving towards replicating the system in GB in Northern Ireland, but we are not having the annual canvass, which, as far as I know, we do in GB. I certainly receive regular communications. What is the difference?

Graham Shields: The difference is that we adopted back in 2006 a process of continuous registration on foot of the fact that the annual canvasses, which occurred up until that time, were producing diminishing returns and people were unnecessarily being taken off the register whenever they did not respond to the canvass. The continuous registration process relies on us receiving information from a diverse range of official data sources: the Department for Work and Pensions, the Business Services Organisation, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, the General Register Office and others.

We use the information supplied by those bodies to inform us of changes to the register. I talked about the quarterly return that we get from the Business Services Organisation, which is basically the health service information. If somebody has changed their optician or GP or whatever, we will write out to them.

Q76 Chair: I understand how you do it, but why is it different from GB? Was the return declining in GB as well? Is it declining? What is the difference?

Graham Shields: I do not know. That was a decision taken by my predecessors at the time. In GB, there is a system of annual household letters being written. Our view has been that that can be confusing for people in Northern Ireland because we have moved away, as GB has, from the system of household registration to individual registration. A household letter is not in keeping with the ethos, in our opinion in the Electoral Office, of the individual registration process, if you are with me.

Q77 Chair: I am with you, but I am not sure I would come to the same conclusion. I do not see why, if there is a declining response in Northern Ireland, there is not in GB. If there is in GB, why are we not looking at that? I know that is not your responsibility, but part of the consultation describes bringing in the same system for Northern Ireland, certainly in terms of electronic registration. This does seem to be a glaring omission or problem, as Alasdair has highlighted. I do not understand why if it works here it will not work in Northern Ireland.

Graham Shields: I can only say that we have access to data sources and information that colleagues in Great Britain would be delighted to



have. Our system in our context does work. I think the problem with our system is that the legislation was framed around the holding of the canvass and it was decided back in 2006 that a canvass would only be needed once in every 10 years. I think that is wrong. I still would have to give an annual recommendation to the Secretary of State as to whether or not there should be a canvass, but I think we should formalise that a bit more around some kind of canvass process once in every five years, supplementing the work that is done through the continuous registration process that we employ. I am satisfied that will keep our registers in good shape.

Q78 Chair: Do you have discussions with your counterpart in GB about the best way and best practice?

Graham Shields: Yes, we do talk about how things are done. They see things their way and we see things our way. It works for us because Northern Ireland is a relatively small area with a small population. It has the luxury of a number of data sources that can inform the Electoral Office as a central organisation to control registration for that whole area. I suppose it is more difficult if you are talking at council level in GB and how you then share that information between councils. That becomes a much more complex operation than what we have to deal with. It might not work as well. What we do might not work as well for them as it does for us.

Q79 Lady Hermon: I did indicate that I had a long list of questions. I have added to it as well. You mentioned in response to my colleague, Dr McDonnell, that at the time of the EU referendum there had been online registration in GB, there was not in Northern Ireland, and at one stage, rightly, you said that it crashed and therefore there had to be legislation rushed through this place and the other place to extend online registration.

That gives rise to two thoughts. If the crash of the online registration was a bad experience, what are the contingency plans if it crashes in Northern Ireland? If we are moving in that direction, putting all or most of our eggs in this basket, thinking that online registration is going to work, does the experience of GB tell us that it does not always work and we have to have contingency plans?

Graham Shields: First of all, we retain the paper-based registration process, which will continue to operate in tandem with the online process.

Q80 Lady Hermon: Is that indefinitely?

Graham Shields: That is indefinitely. There are no plans to dispense with the paper-based system. That will continue. There are no plans to do anything with it, as far as I am aware, well into the future. There were indeed problems with the online system prior to the referendum. I know that colleagues in the Cabinet Office have conducted substantial work to improve the robustness of the system and its capacity for dealing with a high number of simultaneous applications.



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Q81 **Lady Hermon:** That is in GB. What would happen in Northern Ireland if we are moving to that?

Graham Shields: The Northern Ireland system will tap into the GB system, so we will all be operating off the same platform.

Q82 **Lady Hermon:** Really?

Graham Shields: Yes. I am entirely confident that the system is now much more robust than it was prior to the referendum and that strenuous efforts have been made to make sure that what happened then will not be repeated in future.

Q83 **Lady Hermon:** Were you concerned at that time that while the legislation extended the online registration in GB, late registration was not also extended at that time in Northern Ireland? Was that a concern to you?

Graham Shields: I do not know if it is appropriate for me to comment on that. I purely administrate the law.

Q84 **Lady Hermon:** You are leaving office shortly. You can tell us what you really think about late registration not being extended to Northern Ireland, because I know that I wrote on behalf of constituents who were absolutely furious they could not make a late registration.

Graham Shields: In some respects, it could have made it much more difficult for my staff, because we would then have been under more pressure to process paper-based applications.

Q85 **Lady Hermon:** Your staff are terrific. They would have been able to do that, having been given the opportunity.

Graham Shields: If they could have, that would have been fine, but I do know that it would have put them under substantial pressure because the turnaround times and deadlines for processing are very tight. With the online system, that was not an issue because it went through automatically.

Q86 **Lady Hermon:** I understand that my office—my area office—in Newtownards is going to close; likewise, Mr Paisley's local office is going to close shortly. What happens to electors? What happens to those who want to avail of registration or getting an electoral identity card? What happens as of 1 November 2016, in a few weeks? What happens to those people who are going to be affected by two local area offices being closed within a matter of weeks?

Graham Shields: The number of people crossing the threshold—the number of members of the public that use the office as a proportion of the overall registration activity—is very small. Most people will submit a registration form through the post, which they can do by downloading it off the website or by contacting our office; we will post them one out and send them a freepost return envelope to send it back to us. They will be



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able to do that into the future as they have done. The system, substantially, is the same.

Q87 Lady Hermon: Electoral identity cards, which are free to members of the public, are valid for 10 years. They are very useful indeed. The theme has been that we are really quite concerned about lack of engagement and declining engagement by the public. How are we going to encourage young people if those in my area in North Down and Strangford constituency and further afield cannot go and get an electoral identity card? They can be useful for ID purposes, and airlines also accept them as photographic ID. Are you now obliging those young people to spend their money going to Belfast to get an electoral identity card?

Graham Shields: Once again, they can apply by post if they complete the form and send in the photographs, properly verified. We will process the application and send it out.

Q88 Lady Hermon: Do you not think that is a barrier for a young person who is so familiar with sending email? Do you not think it is quite unusual to say, "Get a stamp, and go to the post office," and force young people down that avenue?

Graham Shields: For significant numbers of young people, through the schools initiative, we take their photographs during visits to schools and issue them with the electoral identity card.

Q89 Lady Hermon: How often do you do a school visit?

Graham Shields: The school visits are done in the autumn of every year.

Q90 Lady Hermon: Every single year?

Graham Shields: Every single year.

Q91 Lady Hermon: That is very good. Is that all schools—secondary, grammar schools?

Graham Shields: That is all post-primary schools.

Q92 Lady Hermon: Is that, for example, the colleges, the South Eastern Regional College in Bangor—all of those areas?

Graham Shields: We do them all. We go to every post-primary school with sixth-form pupils in the autumn of every year. The young people are all registered. It is a great process to watch. It is like a production line.

Q93 Lady Hermon: Do you attend? Have you been out to schools?

Graham Shields: I have been out to a number of them, yes.

Q94 Lady Hermon: That is very encouraging. I now know where I am supposed to be going if in fact my local office has closed. That brings me



on to the candidates. We have talked about online registration. We are moving to online registration, but as you will know in elections there are candidates. What is the point of having an election if we do not have the candidates? You will also be aware, having lived in Northern Ireland, as I have, that one of the reasons we set up the independent Electoral Office of Northern Ireland is to get rid of electoral fraud and the fear that elections are in some way compromised.

The drift of this consultation paper—and it is more than a drift—to my mind indicates that there is a predetermined decision, which there should not be, that we are going to move to local councils. Are you confident that we are ready in Northern Ireland—that electors and candidates are not going to feel there is a barrier when they go to a local council that might not reflect their own political views? Let us put it like that. Do you not accept that there will be a nervousness among candidates in particular, and among electors, going up to a local council area and saying, “I want to give you my details; this is my personal data”?

You mentioned the sensitivity around personal data. Can you accept that in Northern Ireland we still have dissident republicans; we still have loyalist paramilitaries—unfortunately. What makes you think that moving back to local councils and giving them further responsibility for elections, which seems to be the drift in this consultation paper, is not going to have a deterrent effect on both candidates and electors?

Graham Shields: First of all, it is important to say the Chief Electoral Officer would continue to have responsibility for the efficient running of all elections in Northern Ireland.

Q95 **Lady Hermon:** With the greatest respect to whomever he or she will be after you, they cannot be in every local council. I have huge regard for local councils and their chief executives. That is not the point I am making. It is in the minds of those who come forward and members of the public. We want to engage in the democratic process. We want to encourage engagement. Is this the right way to go about it? The area electoral offices are seen as totally impartial and independent. How are we going to address that mindset?

Graham Shields: The fact that the Chief Electoral Officer retains that overall responsibility for the delivery of elections, and that the chief executives, as currently happens in the local council elections—

Q96 **Lady Hermon:** That is for local council elections, but certainly not for Westminster and not for the Assembly election.

Graham Shields: No, but they would operate under his power of direction. This is a process that we use for the local council elections. There is no suggestion or evidence that I am aware of that there is any interference with the conduct of those elections and that anyone has at any time called into question the manner in which any of the chief executives of our local councils have acted.

Q97 **Lady Hermon:** I accept that wholeheartedly. That is not the point I am



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making. It is the members of the public coming forward or those who wish to be candidates. It is not a reflection on the councils or the chief executives, in whom I have complete confidence. My concern is that this becomes a deterrent to those who wish to be candidates whose political views would not be reflected in the majority of the council members or, indeed, of electors. That is the point I am making. How do you address that? How do you give those people confidence?

Graham Shields: We currently have candidates for all parties that go to the council chief executives to submit their nominations for local council elections. I see no difference if they are submitting nominations either for an Assembly election or a Westminster election. It is effectively the same issue as you describe. I am confident that our chief executives and our councils can conduct this process and that they can do it in an upright fashion. I do not doubt their integrity for one second.

Lady Hermon: Neither do I. That is not the point I am making.

Graham Shields: I think the councils and the chief executives can do it. I cannot see the difference. If somebody is standing as a candidate for a local council election and has to go and submit their nomination papers to the chief executives, why should it be any different for somebody standing as a candidate in an Assembly election or a Westminster election, if it comes to that.

Q98 **Lady Hermon:** In the early part of your evidence to us in response to Mr Paisley's questions, you explained that you favoured—correct me if I am wrong—collocating in four different areas outside Belfast.

Graham Shields: Three outside of Belfast.

Lady Hermon: Three. The total would be four.

Graham Shields: Yes.

Q99 **Lady Hermon:** That is what you are minded to do already.

Graham Shields: That would be my view.

Q100 **Lady Hermon:** Is the Northern Ireland Office Minister, in whose name this has jointly been published, along with yours, aware of the options that you would prefer?

Graham Shields: Yes, that is hopefully clear in the paper. I cannot speak for the Minister.

Q101 **Lady Hermon:** I am slightly bothered, because when we have a consultation—and this is a major consultation, because this will be a major change—on a very sensitive issue around electoral registration and voting, these are still sensitive issues in Northern Ireland. We cannot get away from that. We are not, in electoral terms, the same as the rest of the United Kingdom. That is a mark of our history. What concerns me is in fact, from the point of judicial review, when it comes to consultation—



and I am reading here the key elements of a consultation—"The information provided to consultees," i.e. the general public, "must be sufficiently detailed as to enable consultees to understand the proposal and make meaningful representations on it." It must be "accurate, and provided in a form that is comprehensible to the general audience of consultees." and the public body must give "genuine and conscientious consideration to the responses received." Those are key components when it comes to judicial review on the grounds of a genuine free and open consultation. Can I just have you confirm to us that there will be a genuine and conscientious consideration of the responses—that we do not have a predetermined outcome in your mind and in that of the Minister?

Graham Shields: I can absolutely tell you, as far as I am concerned, there is most certainly no predetermined outcome with this process. I make it clear what my preferred option would be, which is to retain a number of local electoral offices and to supplement the level of service to the public by providing limited registration information at key council locations beyond those offices. But there is most certainly no predetermined outcome.

Q102 **Lady Hermon:** You have questions like question 1, "Do you see benefit in having all district councils providing advice and support to local residents on electoral matters, particularly those who do not wish to use online registration?" and question 2, "Are there other electoral services that you would like to see district councils providing locally?" The whole drift is that we are going to give powers to district councils. Would you not regard those as rather loaded questions?

Graham Shields: I can tell you the Chief Electoral Officer has the operational independence to implement such a structure and arrangement as he or she thinks is appropriate to fulfil their duties.

Q103 **Lady Hermon:** Will that decision be made by your successor if this consultation runs for 12 weeks?

Graham Shields: Yes. I will hopefully have the opportunity to feed in to it as well.

Q104 **Lady Hermon:** Do you not see these as loaded questions? Do you see these as open questions? You have repeated the fact that your office is independent and, again, I am confident that you have operational independence, but I want to ask about this consultation paper. I am quite worried about it. I am worried about the whole drift of it and whether it meets the criteria. When it comes to judicial review, the case law is now well established that the public body that is entering into this consultation must give sufficient detail to enable the consultees to understand the proposal and make meaningful representations on it. I am not sure that all the information has been provided in this consultation paper to entitle and allow consultees to make that informed response.



Graham Shields: There is sufficient information to show, first of all, the financial position of the organisation and to set out, in broad terms, the direction of travel, which could be either towards a centralisation of the office and a greater degree of delegation of functions to councils, or the retention of a number of electoral offices, albeit colocated with councils, and a lesser role for councils in the delivery of some registration functions. In both cases, there is a bigger role for councils in the delivery of elections. That is the biggest part of what any change would be. There is quite a clear breakdown in annex C of the paper, which shows potentially how those duties would be separated between the Electoral Office and the councils.

Q105 **Lady Hermon:** I am almost finished. We know Newtownards is going to expire at the end of this month. You mentioned in response to one of my colleagues that there are leases on some of the other electoral offices that are due to expire next July.

Graham Shields: All of the remaining leases will expire in July and August.

Q106 **Lady Hermon:** Will you guarantee to those people who are employed in those offices that the same fate that has happened in the Newtownards office is not going to happen to them—that when their leases expire, they are not going to be deployed elsewhere and their office closed? I think you need to give that guarantee to those staff. It is not the case that every time a lease expires, we close the office. Can you possibly do that?

Graham Shields: It would be disingenuous of me to say that those offices are going to remain open. They will not. In my estimation, albeit it will be for my successor to make that final decision, the offices by and large are not fit for purpose. They do not provide suitable accommodation. The future of the organisation is going to be one that is smaller, both in terms of its staff and in the number of offices.

Q107 **Lady Hermon:** There is no guarantee that these offices will remain open. Let me just translate that: these offices you think may well close when their leases expire.

Graham Shields: Yes.

Q108 **Lady Hermon:** Are there no exceptions to that?

Graham Shields: No, but I am looking at the collocation of staff within some council premises. In three locations outside of Belfast, staff would be located or embedded in offices within the council estate, which minimises the cost.

Q109 **Lady Hermon:** Had those decisions been made, or at least made in your head, before this consultation paper was published?

Graham Shields: In terms of those offices, yes. It is not the accommodation; it is how the service is provided. Even if I had a blank



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cheque to have as many offices as I wanted, I would not want to stay in those offices.

Q110 Lady Hermon: You say they are not fit for purpose. Those are your words. What makes them unfit for purpose?

Graham Shields: They are not compliant with disability discrimination legislation in some cases.

Lady Hermon: They do not have a lift.

Graham Shields: They are not readily accessible—there are access issues. The premises are old. The layout of the offices is not suitable and, in many cases, they have an excess of accommodation, which is certainly used at election time, but in non-election years we are carrying substantial additional accommodation that just lies empty. It is not efficient to do that.

Q111 Lady Hermon: Are the staff that will be affected aware of this threat to their jobs in their current location? Before the broadcast of this Committee session, have they been notified of all this? Are they aware?

Graham Shields: The staff have been briefed. We had a briefing day last month in relation to issues going forward and there is ad hoc communication between me and individual members of staff. We also issue regular updates on where we are in the process, so there is an awareness around that.

Q112 Lady Hermon: It would be very helpful in the circumstances to put on the record the gratitude and respect for all of the wonderful work they have done over the years. It is not a reflection on their work but, as you are now saying or indicating to us, the fitness or the non-fitness-for-purpose of the actual buildings.

Graham Shields: I want to be very clear about that. We all owe a great debt of gratitude to the work the staff of the electoral office do. Before I came into the organisation, I had absolutely no idea what they did and thought that outside of election time they did not do an awful lot at all. How much further from the truth is that? Certainly the work and effort that is put in in the weeks and months before an election that I know they do, and the hours that they work, from six in the morning until midnight and later, are way beyond what anybody could reasonably expect people to do. The people of Northern Ireland generally owe them a great deal of gratitude for maintaining a fine and first-class democratic process throughout many difficult years.

Q113 Lady Hermon: Yes. I just hope we are not going to lose that. Thank you for doing that. Could I just ask you one niggling question? Please correct me if I am wrong. Am I right in thinking there are car park spaces reserved in Belfast city centre for the staff or some of the staff—maybe for you—who work in Belfast in the Electoral Office?



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Graham Shields: There are a number of parking spaces reserved for staff, not only in the Belfast office but some of the regional offices.

Q114 **Lady Hermon:** There is obviously a charge by Belfast City Council. How much does that cost?

Graham Shields: There is a charge. We rent a number of spaces in Saint Anne's Cathedral car park and a number of car parks for each of the area electoral offices.

Q115 **Lady Hermon:** How much does that cost? At the very beginning, you told us that it was £20,000 for the Newtownards office and a comparable figure for Ballymena. How much rental is paid for car parking spaces in the Cathedral Quarter?

Graham Shields: I think it is about either £10,000 or £12,000 a year.

Q116 **Lady Hermon:** We are paying that for car parking spaces.

Graham Shields: There are a number of people within the organisation who need to have mobility, because they travel frequently outside of the office, either to other offices or to meetings outside of Belfast.

Q117 **Lady Hermon:** Can you understand that, for those who are affected in the Newtownards office and, indeed, Mr Paisley's office, when you weigh those things in the balance, the saving of £20,000 by the closing the Newtownards office plays very badly indeed when we are talking about car parking spaces, which are so expensive in Belfast?

Graham Shields: Yes, I can see that, but there is a legitimate need for people to have access to vehicles, particularly IT staff. I and my deputy are out round the offices regularly, and it is impracticable for us not to have our cars readily available to go and visit offices.

Q118 **Lady Hermon:** Is it an issue that you might look at in the overall costs? In response to the Chairman, you talked about the deficit and the growing deficit; you do not have the money to spend. Is this an issue that you might review? That might be helpful—

Graham Shields: Yes, it is.

Q119 **Lady Hermon:** —with a view to reducing the cost of car parking spaces?

Graham Shields: Most certainly.

Q120 **Lady Hermon:** I am quite shocked by the amount that is paid for car parking spaces.

Graham Shields: As of last month, we have changed our arrangements so that the leases on the spaces are on a monthly basis. It is reviewed month by month. I suspect that for the new financial year, there will be substantially fewer parking spaces made available.

Lady Hermon: Thank you. That makes sense in the circumstances.



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Q121 Chair: In September, we had the new Secretary of State to discuss various issues. This was one of them. I asked him whether there was any intention to transfer responsibility for elections to local councils. The reason I was asking was the reason Sylvia has given. Given that he is a very new Secretary of State, certainly at that time, his answer was no—there was no intention to do that. He was accompanied by Sir Jonathan Stephens, who has been around a long time and would have presumably known what was coming in the consultation paper. I understand it depends on the language one uses and you are saying, yes, the Chief Electoral Officer will retain overall control, but even allowing for the newness of the Secretary of State, looking back, having read this now, it seems a bit of an odd answer. I would have expected him perhaps to have elucidated a bit on it, because there is some transfer intended. I do not mean that as a criticism, but there seems to be a right hand and left hand not knowing what they are doing here. No doubt that will be corrected now that he has been in position for another month or so.

Graham Shields: It is important to stress, as you have said, that the Chief Electoral Officer will continue to retain full responsibility for the conduct and efficiency of all elections. This is about asking councils, chief executives and their staff to take on some of additional functions. Even the number of functions will vary from council to council. If it comes to that, not all will have the same amount to do. We certainly would be asking them to do more for the running of an Assembly election or a Westminster election.

Q122 Chair: What I am getting at, though, is acknowledging the inexperience of the new Secretary of State at that time. Even now, it is not that long. It will be important to sing off the same hymn sheet on this issue. His answer was I think—we can check—one word: “no”, there is no intention, whereas there is an intention, in part, to move responsibility, is there not?

Graham Shields: There is an intention to at least have the discretion and the ability to do that. It is important to put it in that context. I am not saying that all council chief executives will be asked to do all these things, but at least to have the opportunity to do that if required.

Chair: I know Mr Hopkins is dealing with it more than Mr Brokenshire. The point is made. Thank you very much, indeed. That was a very useful session. Thank you.