

## **Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland, Electoral Office for Northern Ireland – written evidence (VID0001)**

*Submitted by Dr David Marshall, Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland, Electoral Office for Northern Ireland*

### **House of Lords Constitution Committee inquiry into voter ID**

I will reply with an overarching response rather than focussing on specific points.

Firstly, it is important to note the Northern Ireland policy position - set by the UK Government - on electoral registration and voter identification:

- (i) Northern Ireland has requirements to provide Date of Birth & National Insurance Number<sup>1</sup> when you register to vote – voter registrations are verified with the National Insurance and Health Service registers or with attestations from a third party. Importantly both data items (National Insurance Number and Date of Birth) are retained by the Electoral Office to help verify subsequent requests for further electoral services.
- (ii) Northern Ireland had **non-photographic** voter identification for elections from 1985 to 2003 (nearly 40 years ago – driven from [The Elections \(Northern Ireland\) Act 1985](#))
- (iii) Northern Ireland then moved to **photographic** voter identification at all elections from 2003 onwards. This followed the passing of [The Electoral Fraud \(Northern Ireland\) Act 2002](#) (in Westminster). The change to photographic voter identification was driven by a report to the UK Parliament and the UK Government response<sup>2</sup> - this change was also evaluated as a positive step by the Electoral Commission and the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee<sup>3,4</sup>.

Thus, even with the change in law in Great Britain there remains differences between Great Britain and Northern Ireland in terms of voter identification at elections. I set out a few differences below:

- (i) In Northern Ireland my Office creates for people, who apply successfully, a physical Voter Identification card. This plastic card includes a photograph of the applicant, their name and their Date of Birth as data items on the card (see [https://twitter.com/eoni\\_official/status/1430153133683056641](https://twitter.com/eoni_official/status/1430153133683056641)). Thus, in Northern Ireland there is a physical Voter Identification plastic card with a picture, name and date of birth – this is different to the less stringent policy position in Great Britain.
- (ii) In Northern Ireland there is an attestation process by a third party of the applicant's photograph on the application for the physical Voter

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<sup>1</sup> Required only for those that have a National Insurance Number

<sup>2</sup> See <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7c9ced40f0b6629523aa70/5080.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> See <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200405/cmselect/cmniaf/131/13102.htm>

<sup>4</sup> See <https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/issues/politics/election/electoralcommission1203.pdf>

Identification card – thus the Northern Ireland Voter ID card is akin to a passport. The Northern Ireland Voter ID card is thus reused as a de-facto “free” form of identification by banks, airlines etc.... This has created a local issue in that the Northern Ireland Voter ID Card is providing a wider identification service. This has no specific funding stream or legislative basis and was raised by my predecessor with Government Departments but a solution has not as yet arisen.

Lastly a few points on public acceptability/communication:

- (i) Voter identification for elections is in place in most countries around the world (e.g. Canada, France, Republic of Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, USA (in part)) and the trend globally is towards this. The voter identification system in Northern Ireland is both accepted and expected - I believe the concerns in Great Britain may be short-term and with good communication the public in Great Britain will get used to voter identification.
- (ii) The new Great Britain policy on voter identification may indirectly create communication problems in Northern Ireland. In short, the different forms of identity documents accepted in Great Britain will be communicated across the United Kingdom (including in Northern Ireland). This will create problems in Northern Ireland as some members of the public will assume they can use the Great Britain forms of identity document when voting here in Northern Ireland, when they cannot. The forms of identity used in Northern Ireland, while similar, all include the Date of Birth - this is **not** true in Great Britain. As an example, there is a specific issue with the Blue Badge scheme, which is a form of voter identification in Great Britain but not in Northern Ireland. **This will cause confusion across the United Kingdom – one suggestion is that across the United Kingdom all forms of voter identification must include Date of Birth and this is communicated as a key message for the public.**

One further and final point:

- (i) The Committee also sought information on any impact the ability to apply for a postal/proxy vote online is having. At present there is no ability to apply for a postal/proxy vote online in Northern Ireland. Once the Great Britain system is fully bedded in, it would be important that this is extended to the Northern Ireland population. Around 200,000 people in Northern Ireland could apply for a postal/proxy vote on the grounds of disability and I would like to advertise an online solution to bring a better experience for the Northern Ireland population.
- (ii) As an example of the benefits of digitisation, the UK Government legislated for the ability in Northern Ireland to apply online for voter registration in 2018 (after an initial period in Great Britain). This has both proved popular, with 90% of registrations now made online, and delivered efficiency savings.

I hope this is helpful and I am happy to answer further questions as necessary.

*1 November 2023*