

Belfast City Council Response to the Consultation on the Future Delivery of Electoral Services in Northern Ireland

Introduction

Belfast City Council welcomes the opportunity to provide a response to the consultation on the future delivery of electoral services in Northern Ireland.

The Council recognises that there may well be different views on the regional impact of the proposals amongst the political parties in Northern Ireland. The Council notes that the Northern Ireland Assembly passed the following motion in June, 2016:

“This Assembly notes with concern the proposals from the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland to close regional electoral offices in Ballymena, Banbridge, Londonderry, Newtownabbey, Newtownards and Omagh; believes that this will damage democracy in Northern Ireland, lead to fewer people on the electoral register and to a diminished role for the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland in local schools and communities; and calls on the Secretary of State, the Northern Ireland Office and the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland to retain and fund all regional offices currently under threat of closure”.

Accordingly, this response is from Belfast City Council alone and should not be taken to represent the views of all or any of the political parties represented on it.

Digital Registration and Enhancing Local Services

The Council welcomes the proposals to move to digital registration in Northern Ireland as it considers that this has the potential, combined with the traditional methods of registration, to maximise the opportunities for citizens to participate in the future elections and referendums. This will be particularly attractive to younger people.

The Council would urge that all reasonable steps must be taken when designing the digital registration system to provide reassurance that electoral fraud will be eliminated.

The Council notes that the proposals do not envisage the provision of counter services in Belfast, unlike other parts of Northern Ireland where several District Councils may be required to undertake the provision of advice and support. Should this change and should the Council be requested to provide this service, then the Council would strongly be of the opinion that the necessary financial and human resources must be transferred or made available to it on an ongoing basis. The transfer of the proposed functions from the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland (EONI) must not impose additional costs on the Council.

An Increased Role for the Council at all Elections and Referendums

The Council agrees with the assertion in the consultation document that it has the relevant expertise to assume greater responsibility for all elections and referendums in Northern Ireland, including Parliamentary and Northern Ireland Assembly elections. Belfast City Council is well placed to manage the delivery of the nomination and local count functions outlined in paragraph 2.5.3.

The Council welcomes the guarantee that it will be fully funded for taking on these additional responsibilities through the UK and NI Consolidated Funds and that there will not be any additional costs to local ratepayers. The Council would request that this guarantee is enshrined in any new

legislation required for the transfer of functions so as to provide assurance for it and for local ratepayers that there will not be any additional financial burden to be borne at a local level.

The Council does not have any concerns that its Chief Executive or other senior officers involved in the delivery of elections will be subject to any political interference in undertaking these roles. This has not been the case during many local elections where the Chief Executive has acted as the Deputy Returning Officer under the direction of the Chief Electoral Officer.

Conclusion

The Council believes that the reform proposals have the potential to normalise local democratic processes and bring Northern Ireland more in line with neighbouring jurisdictions. The Council will stand ready to work closely with the Northern Ireland Office and the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland to ensure the future delivery of efficient, effective and accessible electoral services.