

Report on	Correspondence to Council – November 2017
Reporting Officer	P Moffett, Head of Democratic Services
Contact Officer	P Moffett, Head of Democratic Services

Is this report restricted for confidential business?	Yes	
If 'Yes', confirm below the exempt information category relied upon	No	x

1.0	Purpose of Report
1.1	Provide an update on correspondence received for attention of Council.
2.0	Background
2.1	This paper makes reference to correspondence received to be brought to the attention of Council. Items are referred to in 3.0 below.
3.0	Main Report
3.1	<p>Correspondence from NIPSA – Closure of Omagh Electoral Office</p> <p>Council has received correspondence from NIPSA on the “.....<i>the likely closure of Omagh Electoral Office</i>.....” and is attached as appendix A to this report.</p> <p>The Northern Ireland Office and Electoral Office undertook a consultation in 2016 on future delivery of electoral services, part of which related to the future of Offices. The below is an extract from the council's response to this consultation, relevant to this matter, which was submitted in December 2016. For completeness council's full response to this consultation is also included in appendix A.</p> <p>Extract</p> <p><i>“Q.3 With EONI's routine work more focussed on maintaining the accuracy and comprehensiveness of the electoral register, and district councils providing advice to the public at local level, would you see a role for regional electoral offices?”</i></p> <p>Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>On the basis of the specialised nature of maintaining the accuracy and comprehensiveness of the electoral register the Council believes that, in the first instance, Regional Offices of the EONI should be established as self-contained units to provide specialised advice with expertise on electoral matters. Given the democratic link to councils and the role they play in providing local services to local people the Council agrees that regional offices be co-located within district councils. Should the NIO opt to locate regional offices the Council request that consideration be given to an office in Mid Ulster given its central location with a population of some 141,000 and a high demographic of young people coming onto the register compared to the rest of N Ireland. Mid Ulster is also within</p>

	reach for electors of 5 constituencies (West Tyrone, East Londonderry, Fermanagh & South Tyrone Mid Ulster and Upper Bann)”
4.0	Other Considerations
4.1	<u>Financial & Human Resources Implications</u> Financial: Not applicable Human: Not applicable
4.2	<u>Equality and Good Relations Implications</u> Not applicable
4.3	<u>Risk Management Implications</u> Not applicable
5.0	Recommendation(s)
5.1	That Council notes and consider, as necessary, the correspondence received.
6.0	Documents Attached & References
	Appendix A Correspondence from NIPSA Response previously submitted to NIO consultation on future of electoral services

Your ref:

Our ref:



Ms Kim Ashton
Chairperson
Mid Ulster Council
Circular Road
DUNGANNON
BT71 6DT

13 November 2017

Dear Ms Ashton

CLOSURE OF OMAGH ELECTORAL OFFICE

I am writing to bring to your attention the likely closure of Omagh Electoral Office and plans to move staff and services to Derry/Londonderry.

NIPSA is the trade union that represents staff employed by the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland and we have been involved in a long running campaign to protect electoral services across Northern Ireland. Last year, Minister Kris Hopkins MP released a public consultation on the future delivery of electoral services but no decisions have been published from this consultation despite it closing some 9 months ago. We also understand that a decision on this public consultation may be pending but any implementation, especially if elections are passed to councils, would take at least 12 months to implement.

At a recent meeting with the Chief Electoral Officer, she stated that EONI have as yet been unable to agree an extension to the current lease for the building on Kelvin Avenue, Omagh with the current agreement due to end at the end of December. Given this, it was likely that the office would close with all staff and services moving to Derry/Londonderry. With the absence of online services and an assembly election in the near future a possibility, this would leave your constituents at a significant disadvantage and may seriously impact on any election result.

I would therefore ask that you contact the Chief Electoral Officer, the Northern Ireland Office and the recently appointed Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Lord Duncan, to have the necessary funds provided to obtain new premises in Omagh for electoral services. NIPSA understands that the main prohibiting factor to obtaining new premises in Omagh is the cost of funding new secure IT and building security but this would likely be in the region of £12-15k and we consider this would be a small cost to retain electoral services for such a large geographical area and to ensure your constituents are treated equally.

NIPSA are happy to meet with you on this matter and I would ask you to contact Elizabeth Buchanan at NIPSA Headquarters on 02890 661831 to organise a time and date. However given the timeframes, there is an urgent need to register concerns on these plans and I would ask that you correspond immediately seeking a

Alison Millar General Secretary

Headquarters

54 Wellington Park, Belfast. BT9 6DP Tel: 028 9066 1831 Fax: 028 9066 5847

Contact

Email: info@nipsa.org.uk Web: www.nipsa.org.uk

Follow us



postponement of any decision and demand that electoral services are retained in Omagh.

I look forward to your help in this matter.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Dooley Harte', written in a cursive style.

DOOLEY HARTE
Higher Executive Officer

Dh13111e

Appendix A:
Response previously submitted to NIO/ Electoral Office Consultation (Dec 2016)

**FUTURE DELIVERY OF ELECTORAL SERVICES IN NORTHERN IRELAND
RESPONSE TEMPLATE**

RESPONDENT INFORMATION

Please Note this form **must** be returned with your response to ensure that we handle your response appropriately.

1. Name / Organisation

Organisation Name (If applicable):

Mid Ulster District Council

Title: Mr ☒ Ms ☐ Mrs ☐ Miss ☐ Dr ☐ **Please tick as appropriate**

Surname:

Tohill

Forename

Anthony

2. Postal Address

Chief Executive

Mid Ulster District Council

Circular Road

DUNGANNON

Postcode BT71 6DT

Phone 03000 132 132

Email chief.executive@midulstercouncil.org

Appendix A:
Response previously submitted to NIO/ Electoral Office Consultation (Dec 2016)

Mid Ulster District Council - RESPONSES TO CONSULTATION QUESTIONS

Please provide below any comments you may have on the consultation options, as outlined above in chapter 2.3 of the consultation document. Please use additional pages as necessary.

Q.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?

Yes ☒ No ☐

Mid Ulster District Council (the Council) welcomes this consultation as an opportunity to open discussion on the role of councils in the administration of electoral services in N Ireland. The Council believes that local authorities are well positioned both geographically and in terms of their democratic connection with the wider public to offer advice and assistance on electoral matters. The Council believes a 'high street' presence to provide advice and support on electoral matters offers opportunities to furthering access to public services and in generating a local interest in the democratic process, particularly by those identified as hard to reach and all Section 75 groups within our district. It notes that particular mention is made to councils providing advice on registration, electoral ID applications and verifying documentation but acknowledges that whilst it agrees in principle to a role for the Council given the clear benefits to opening access to electoral services and to those not wishing to avail of on-line registration expectations need to be managed in terms of what the Council can deliver across its civic offices. Council acknowledges that not everyone would be in a position to register on-line as an elector and that arrangements in local district council offices would be necessary to meet the needs of such people, with outreach available to rural areas.

Q.2 Are there other electoral services that you would like to see district councils providing locally?

Yes ☒ No ☐

Council believes that they could be undertaken but this would be subject to required budget being allocated by the NIO and passing of expertise, learning and capacity to provide same. Any other electoral services being considered should be fully documented and communicated to councils and not be more than what is already being undertaken by EONI which may currently not be resourced for by the NIO. Council stresses that services could only be undertaken with allocation of resource and capacity to undertake same.

Please provide below any comments you may have on the consultation options, as outlined above in chapter 2.4 of the consultation document. Please use additional pages as necessary.

Q.3 With EONI's routine work more focussed on maintaining the accuracy and comprehensiveness of the electoral register, and district councils providing advice to the public at local level, would you see a role for regional electoral offices?

Yes ☒ No ☐

On the basis of the specialised nature of maintaining the accuracy and comprehensiveness of the electoral register the Council believes that, in the first instance, Regional Offices of the EONI should be established as self-contained units to provide specialised advice with expertise on electoral matters. Given the democratic link to councils and the role they play in providing local services to local people the Council agrees that regional offices be co-located within district councils. Should the NIO opt to locate regional offices the Council request that consideration be given to an office in Mid Ulster given its central location with a population of some 141,000 and a high demographic of young people coming onto the register compared to the rest of N Ireland. Mid Ulster is also within reach for electors of 5 constituencies (West Tyrone, East Londonderry, Fermanagh & South Tyrone Mid Ulster and Upper Bann).

Appendix A:
Response previously submitted to NIO/ Electoral Office Consultation (Dec 2016)

Please provide below any comments you may have on the consultation options, as outlined above in chapter 2.5 of the consultation document. Please use additional pages as necessary.

Q.4 Should district councils have a role in delivering all elections and referendums in Northern Ireland, including Parliamentary and NI Assembly elections and referendums?

Yes ☒ No ☐

The Council is supportive of district councils having a role in elections and referendums however what that role is and how it would work would require further discussion with local government as a sector. Councils are well placed and positioned to provide support on such matters but would add that careful consideration and co-ordination should be given by the NIO and EONI on how this could be undertaken. For example, whilst the councils are made up of electoral wards which in turn make up parliamentary constituencies their boundaries are not co-terminus with local government boundaries meaning councils could be working on an election to a constituency where some of the electoral wards are from another council.

The role could only be adequately fulfilled and accepted with the required transfer of financial resource, learning and capacity to undertake the required activities, which should be more than merely providing one off training sessions but rather on-going support. The Council would welcome a clear definition on what is meant by ‘...a role...’.

Q.5 Should councils take on the functions set out in paragraph 2.5.3 (and Annex C) at all elections and referendums?

Yes ☒ No ☐

The Council feels that this question and implied proposal suggests that it would be taking on more than ‘...a role...’ in delivering all elections as referred to in Question 4. The Council however feels that it is well placed and positioned to take on and deliver functions at a local level but this could only be successfully undertaken with the transfer of learning, capacity and ongoing support from EONI to undertake same as referred to in Question 4. It would move towards bringing the provision/availability of electoral services into line with the rest of the UK and the Republic of Ireland. Should the NIO be minded to seek councils to undertake functions in 2.5.3 they should be introduced in a phased and controlled manner with co-ordination still undertaken by EONI for consistency.

Q.6 Are the safeguards set out in paragraph 2.5.5 & 2.5.6 sufficient to protect council employees undertaking electoral functions from the risk of political interference?

Yes ☒ No ☐

Whilst the Council has selected yes, it would encourage the NIO to consider all options available to it to ensure council employees are able to undertake election duties conferred upon in an environment which is free from political interference. The Council believes that all options should be considered, to include the practices in other jurisdictions (UK and Republic of Ireland) to enshrine the principle of independence when facilitating and administering any election. Existing codes of conduct and protocols will provide safeguards and assurance - the Code of Conduct for Local Govt Employees, Local Govt Employee and Councillor Working Relationship Protocol and the Local Govt Code of Conduct for Councillors. These codes should be consulted by the NIO for their robustness to support safeguards from the risk of political interference.