

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Opening statement to be delivered to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage by the Chief Executive of An Coimisiún Toghcháin, Mr. Art O'Leary.

28 November 2023 – Committee Room 3, Leinster House.

Introduction

My thanks, Chair, Members,

Our appearance today marks the very first appearance by An Coimisiún Toghcháin before this Committee in our new role as Ireland's independent electoral commission.

The work and functions of our Commission resonate particularly with the role and responsibilities of this Committee and so I expect to be in regular contact with you about many issues of relevance to our functions.

We are coming into a potentially very busy electoral period, with the possibility of every possible type of electoral event – all eight – being held within the next 24 months, but we embrace that challenge.

Although the subject of discussion here in the Oireachtas for many decades, this is the first time an independent body like ours has been tasked with protecting the integrity of our democracy, to scrutinise and modernise our register, to examine and report on how our elections happen, to research key challenges facing our democracy, and to ensure people can trust that their vote counts and is counted.

An Coimisiún Toghcháin

We were established just 9 months ago, so perhaps I should first take a moment to outline our work and functions.

As the Members of the Committee are aware, An Coimisiún Toghcháin has taken on a range of pre-existing electoral functions, along with new functions as set out in the Electoral Reform Act 2022.

The pre-existing functions include the carrying out of constituency reviews for local, Dáil and European elections; the registration of Ireland's political parties; undertaking the role and work on referendums previously held by the Referendum Commission, and encouraging people to get out and vote across our electoral events.

Our new functions include preparing research and providing advice on electoral policy and procedure; building awareness of our democratic processes through education and information, and oversight of Ireland's electoral register.

We also have functions related to the regulation of online political advertising and online misinformation and disinformation around election periods. These functions, set out in Parts 4 and 5 of our founding legislation have yet to be commenced.

Very pertinently to today's discussion on the upcoming Local and European elections, as well as the next General Election, we have also been tasked after every electoral event with preparing an independent report on how those events were administered. This work will include visits to polling places, observing the voting process in action, attending and observing local and national counts and gathering on-the-ground detail on the operation of our electoral events.

While we are not tasked with the keeping of the register of electors, which remains the preserve of our local authorities, or administering the elections, which remains under the auspices of the Department of Housing, we do have a significant oversight role, which will allow us to report to these Houses after each electoral event on the administration of that election.

Our first electoral event now seems likely to come in early March with two referendums. An Coimisiún has the responsibility to deliver the independent information campaign for these referendums, a role previously held by the Referendum Commission, and through that work seek to engage people across the State to get registered, get informed and get out to vote.

In relation to the electoral register, An Coimisiún Toghcháin may commission or carry out research in relation to: the accuracy and completeness of electoral registers; the maintenance of electoral registers and the processes relating to the compilation and the overall functioning of the electoral registers.

Each year, An Coimisiún will publish a report setting out our assessment of the status and functioning of the electoral register, and any recommendations the Commission considers necessary to maintain and enhance the integrity of the electoral register and the registration process.

Another significant responsibility is our research function. This will allow us, as a Commission, to identify key issues within our democracy that need specific scrutiny and to make necessary recommendations to Government.

Our first Draft Research Programme was published for consultation on 10 November 2023. It sets out initial potential research priorities for the next three years (2024-2026) across five strands.

We are currently seeking submissions from this committee as well as experts, stakeholders and members of the public to inform and shape the Programme, with a deadline of January 12.

We wanted to give everyone, from all sections of society, a chance to shape our Research Programme – with inclusivity and fairness set out as key values of our research.

An Coimisiún will conduct and commission research to inform its approach to our education and public engagement remit, and to encourage the electoral participation

of under-reached groups including increasing representation of women, people with disabilities and people from diverse ethnic backgrounds, including Traveller and Roma communities.

Conclusion

Cathaoirleach, members of these Houses are already very familiar with the work of An Coimisiún Toghcháin, mostly through our early work on both the Dáil and European Parliament Constituency Reviews, in which Members have obviously a keen and direct interest.

That work however is just one strand of a diverse range of functions which I expect you will get to know in much more detail and depth in the days, months, and years ahead.

ENDS