

**Opening statement to Joint Oireachtas Committee on Housing Local  
Government and Heritage 28 November 2023**

Good afternoon. I would like to thank the committee for this opportunity to discuss the forthcoming electoral events, which in the immediate future will include the local and European elections and the next general election. Over the next 18 months to two years, we can expect the full suite of electoral events to take place.

I am joined today by Ms Petra Woods, Principal Officer in the Electoral Register Modernisation Programme, and Mr Paris Beausang, Assistant Principal Officer in the Franchise Section.

Chair, the forthcoming electoral events will be the first elections since the enactment of the Electoral Reform Act 2022, which set out an ambitious set of electoral reforms.

Principal among those reforms was the establishment of an independent electoral commission, An Coimisiún Toghcháin, which was established on 9 February this year, and which is represented here today. The commission has already discharged several functions in relation to the upcoming elections including through its review and revision of Dáil and European Parliament constituencies. The Electoral (Amendment) Bill 2023, which gives effect to the commission's recommendations in respect of constituencies, is currently before the Dáil with report and final stages scheduled for tomorrow.

The commission has assumed responsibility for the registration of political parties and has an education remit that entails encouraging people to vote and participate in our democratic processes. The post-electoral event reviews of the commission will provide important opportunities to learn what processes and procedures in our electoral system can be improved.

Modernisation of the electoral registration process was another important reform arising from the Electoral Reform Act. Commenced in October 2022, the provisions in Part 3 of the Act introduced continuous registration along with a number of changes to streamline the process and make it more accessible. Arising from those changes, people can now register and amend their details at any time of year and can do so online. Many people have taken the opportunity to do just that and we continue working with Local Authorities to encourage more people to do so. The legislation also introduced a form of identity check for all new applicants and updates to the register and provided the legal basis for the use of the PPSN in the process. The legislation also provided for some new cohorts: sixteen and seventeen-year olds can now pre-register to vote; provision was made for people with no address; and for those whose safety would be at risk if their information was published on the register. To ensure there is ongoing progress in relation to the integrity of the electoral register and its processes, An Coimisiún Toghcháin now has an oversight role and can make recommendations to individual registration authorities or to the Minister in that regard.

The Electoral Reform Act – in Part 4 when commenced – also provides for a framework for the regulation by the electoral commission of online political advertising during election periods, along with the labelling of online political advertisements and transparency notices for such ads.

Part 5 of the Act, when commenced, will provide for a regulatory framework to protect the integrity of elections and referendums against the dissemination or publication of online disinformation, online misinformation and manipulative or inauthentic behaviour online. The Department is continuing to engage with the European Commission in relation to the provisions of Parts 4 and 5.

In addition to the commitment to establish an independent electoral commission the Programme for Government, Our Shared Future, also contains commitments to examine a number of issues relating to voting, namely:

- examining the Scottish experience of reducing the voting age
- the use of posters at elections and referendums
- the use of postal voting, with a view to expanding it
- the replacement of by-elections with an alternate list system, and
- the time limitation on people who are temporarily living outside the State to remain on the electoral register

An examination of these issues, along with other electoral matters, are contained in the commission's draft research programme, on which it is currently consulting.

Thank you Cathaoirleach, myself and colleagues will be happy to engage further with the Committee this afternoon.