



THE ELECTORAL OFFICE

FOR

NORTHERN IRELAND

BUSINESS PLAN 2008-09

FOREWORD

By

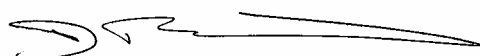
Douglas Bain, Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland

I am often asked what the Chief Electoral Officer and his staff in the Electoral Office do in years in which there is no Northern Ireland wide election. In future I will respond by inviting the questioners to read this Business Plan.

Although no Northern Ireland wide election is scheduled for 2008/09, the year will be a busy and challenging one for myself and my staff. The processes connected with continuous registration will be further developed and refined to ensure that the Northern Ireland electoral register remains at its present high level of accuracy and that its comprehensiveness continues to increase. The public will be invited to comment on the suitability of the current polling stations and the options for addressing any issues identified either by way of mitigating action or re-location of the polling station will be explored.

Significant changes to electoral law and practice are likely to come into effect in the summer. Staff will have to be trained in these changes and the public will have to be informed of them. Over the past year significant improvements have been made to the service provided to the public: in 2008/09 we will consolidate these improvements as well as taking forward a number of new initiatives to further improve our service.

I am confident that the dedicated staff of the Electoral Office will once again rise to the challenge and that by the year end preparations will be well advanced for the European Parliamentary elections which will take place in June 2009 and any other Northern Ireland wide elections that may be held in 2009/10.



Douglas Bain CBE TD Advocate
Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland

27 March 2008

EONI BUSINESS PLAN 2008 - 2009

Introduction

This Business Plan, after outlining the planning process followed for its preparation, sets out the assumptions made in drawing it up and the key Electoral Office Targets for 2008/09. It goes on to list the Development Objectives for the year. These are the significant areas of new work which it is intended to complete during the year.

The Plan does not include the routine work carried out by the Electoral Office in connection with electoral registration or the preparation for, and conduct of, free and fair elections. These matters are dealt with either in Area Offices or business unit plans or in the forward job plans of individual members of staff.

The Plan is available on request, in other formats and languages. Please phone 0800 4320 712 (textphone 028 9044 6698) or email info@eoni.org.uk.

The Planning Process

In October 2007 the Chief Electoral Officer wrote to key stakeholders including the main political parties, the Electoral Commission, the Northern Ireland Office and Disability Action seeking their views on a first draft of the proposed Planning Assumptions and Targets for 2008/09. The draft was revised in light of those few responses that were received. A further draft was circulated to all Electoral Office staff and discussed at a meeting with them at the end of January. At this meeting staff worked in groups to identify possible Development Objectives relating to their own areas of responsibility. These were collated and accepted, with minor adjustments, by the Management Board at its February meeting. The supporting text was then added and the first draft of the entire Plan was again circulated to staff for comment. A further draft, taking account of the staff comments received, was considered and approved by the Management Board on 20 March 2008.

The Plan is a working document and will be used by the Board to allocate resources. Progress against the Targets and Development Objectives will be reviewed on a monthly basis. External circumstances may result in changes being made during the year to both the Targets and the Development Objectives.

Planning Assumptions

- **There will be no Northern Ireland wide election during the planning period.**

The dates of all Northern Ireland wide elections, other than elections to the Westminster Parliament, are fixed by law. None of them is scheduled to take place during 2008/09. It appears unlikely that a Westminster general election will take place during that period.

- **There will be no full canvass during the planning period.**

Although the next full canvass is scheduled to take place in 2010/11 it is open to the Secretary of State, following a recommendation from the Chief Electoral Officer, to order that a canvass be held at an earlier date. Given the significant increase in the electoral register since the last annual canvass and its continued high level of accuracy it is unlikely that any such recommendation will be made.

- **The NIO will continue to provide adequate funding to the Chief Electoral Officer to allow him to carry out his functions.**

Achievement of the Targets and Development Objectives is dependent on the availability of adequate funding. Further action will be taken to increase efficiency so that the funding available is used to best effect.

- **The number of potential electors from EU States will continue to increase.**

All available statistics indicate a year on year increase in the number of EU citizens resident in Northern Ireland. There is no reason to doubt that this will continue in 2008/09.

- **The Chief Electoral Officer will, by 1 August 2008, have power to require the principals of secondary schools to provide information on pupils.**

A much higher level of registration amongst eligible school pupils is essential if the comprehensiveness of the register is to be maintained at its current high level. The power to require information from school principals is to be included in draft secondary legislation to be laid before Parliament. Unless the power is available by 1 August it is unlikely that it will be possible to benefit from it during the 2008/09 academic year or, accordingly, to achieve the registration target.

- **School principals will facilitate registration events during the autumn term.**

Even if the new power is available its effectiveness depends on school principals working with the Electoral Office and allowing access to the pupils of registration age during the autumn term.

- **There will continue to be effective and harmonious working relations with the Electoral Commission which will facilitate joint working where practicable.**

Although the Electoral Commission has no responsibility for the registration process or the conduct of elections it makes a valuable contribution to the work of the Electoral Office. Any diminution in the

current relationship would have an adverse effect on the Office's ability to achieve some of the Targets and Development Objectives set out in this Plan.

Targets

- 1. By 30 June 2008 to submit to the Secretary of State the report of the Chief Electoral Officer for the year ended 31 March 2008.**

By virtue of section 9 of the Northern Ireland (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2006, the Chief Electoral Officer must each year submit to the Secretary of State a report on how he has discharged his functions. Submission of the report by 30 June will facilitate its laying before both Houses of Parliament before the summer recess.

- 2. By 31 August 2008 to have identified any current polling stations that may be unavailable for an election in 2009/10 or unsuitable for use by those with a disability and by 30 November to have explored the options for either mitigating action or re-location of the polling station to more suitable premises.**

The next statutory review of the Polling Station Scheme cannot take place before December 2009. In view of the likelihood of Northern Ireland wide elections before that date an exercise will be undertaken to identify any current polling stations that are unlikely to be available for elections in 2009/10 or that are unsuitable for use by those with disabilities. The findings will be carefully evaluated and the options for re-location of the polling station or mitigating action will be explored by 30 November 2008. In carrying out this work particular regard will be had to school closures that have taken place or are planned, the new Parliamentary boundaries and the needs of those with disabilities.

- 3. On 1 December 2008 to publish a revised register of electors which contains at least 11,500 more electors and is at least as accurate as the December 2007 register.**

Section 13(1)(b) of the Representation of the People Act 1983 requires the publication of a revised register of electors on 1 December each year. Achievement of the target will result in a register which is approximately 86% comprehensive. In addition to the increase in the numbers registered approximately 150,000 changes to the existing register will be required to secure its current high level of accuracy.

- 4. By 31 March 2009 to have identified qualified individuals to staff polling stations and count centres for any elections to be held in the year commencing 1 April 2009.**

Elections to the European Parliament are due to take place in June 2009 and the possibility of a general election early in 2009/10 cannot be excluded. To avoid undue pressure during the run up period, staff will be identified following testing where appropriate, by 31 March.

Development Objectives

Registration

- 1. By 1 November 2008 to be ready in all respects to process applications for anonymous registration.**

The Northern Ireland Office is currently consulting on the details of anonymous registration in Northern Ireland with a view to its introduction by 1 November. Before that appropriate internal procedures will have to be developed and staff trained in them. Potential users of anonymous registration, such as the victims of domestic violence and sexual crime,

will have to be advised of this change to the law which will allow them to exercise their democratic rights, and to enjoy the other benefits of electoral registration, without the risk of being traced from their entry on the electoral register.

2. By 31 March 2009 to have conducted registration events at 95% of secondary schools

The register published on 1 December 2007 showed a marked decrease in registration levels amongst young people. Under new powers that should be in place by 1 August the Chief Electoral Officer will be able to require the principal of any secondary school to provide him with basic information on pupils of registration age. Electoral Office staff will then visit schools by arrangement and assist the pupils to complete registration forms. In this way, and through other initiatives with young people, a significant increase in registration levels amongst this group will be achieved.

3. By 31 August 2008 to have informed those enfranchised by the changes to the law on mental capacity of their entitlement and, where possible, to secure their registration.

The present very unsatisfactory law on mental incapacity to register and to vote should, at last, cease to have effect this summer. Action will be taken to ensure, so far as practicable, that those affected by the change are aware of it and that they secure their right to play a full part in the democratic process by registering as electors.

4. By 31 March 2009 to trial a 'mini canvass' in at least four areas with low registration levels and four with significant new developments.

The continuous registration process that has replaced the annual canvass is unique to Northern Ireland. A number of further initiatives to

promote registration during the year will take place. One of these will be in the form of a 'mini canvass' for four areas with low levels of registration and four areas where there have been significant new residential developments. The results of this initiative will be evaluated and compared with others to inform decisions on the work to be undertaken in 2009/10.

5. By 31 March 2009 to contact EU citizens resident in Northern Ireland and encourage electoral registration ahead of the European Parliamentary elections.

Building on the work done in 2007/08 at polling stations in Northern Ireland for the Polish and Romanian elections, contact will be made, through community groups and otherwise, with EU citizens in Northern Ireland to encourage them to register as electors before the European Parliamentary elections in June 2009.

6 By 31 March 2009 to have referred as least 50 cases of alleged wilful failure to provide information required for registration purposes to the PSNI for investigation with a view to prosecution.

Providing information to the Chief Electoral Officer to enable him to carry out his registration duties is not optional: it is a legal obligation. Failure to provide such information is an offence punishable by a fine of up to £1000. Whilst the Electoral Office will continue to do all that is reasonably practicable to assist those entitled to register to do so, firm action will be taken against those who wilfully refuse to comply with the law.

Elections

7. By 30 June 2008, for all matters except elections and by 1 January 2009 in respect of elections, to train staff in and be ready in all

respects to implement changes to practice and procedure made as a result of the Representation of the People (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2008, the Electoral Administration Act 2006 (Commencement No6) Order 2008 and the Service Voters' Registration Period (Northern Ireland) Order 2008.

Significant changes to electoral law are likely to be in force by 1 July. Staff will be trained in the consequential changes to practice and procedure. This will be done by 1 January 2009 for the changes relating to elections and by 1 July 2008 for all other matters.

- 8. By 30 June 2008 to have identified the election documents to be made available in other formats and to have put in place arrangements for their production.**

Under new legislation, likely to be in force by 1 July, the Chief Electoral Officer will have to decide which election documents he should make available in other formats. Although no Northern Ireland wide election is likely to occur during 2008/09 the new provision would apply to any by-election which could occur at any time. It is therefore necessary to be ready to give effect to the new provision as soon as it is in force.

- 9. By 31 August 2008 to have explored the practicality of PASS accreditation of the Electoral Identity Card and, if it is decided to proceed, to have commenced the issue of accredited cards.**

Cards bearing the Proof Age Standards Scheme (PASS) logo are widely recognised throughout the UK as proof of the bearer's name and age. To increase the functionality of the electoral ID card, and so make it more attractive particularly to young people, the option of having it PASS accredited will be taken forward.

- 10. By 30 November 2008 to evaluate options for the provision of**

electoral identity cards having regard in particular to the security of the personal data used in the production process, the security of the cards, the time within which they can be produced and cost.

The current arrangements for the production of electoral identity cards have been in place for more than five years and it is now appropriate to review them to see if an even better service can be provided.

- 11. By 31 January 2009 to have evaluated options for the provision of additional lighting for at least one compartment at each polling station.**

The feasibility of providing safe additional lighting in at least 1 compartment at each polling station to assist those with visual impairment will be explored in time for any solution to be implemented at elections in 2009/10.

- 12. By 31 March 2009 to have completed a review of all forms used in connection with Westminster and European Parliamentary elections.**

The forms for use at these elections will be revised, simplified and reduced in number. Where possible a standard form for use at all types of election will be adopted.

- 13. By 31 March 2009 to have reviewed the procedures for entry to election counts.**

The law imposes tight controls on who may be present at an election count. The current procedures for securing compliance will be reviewed and where necessary amended.

- 14. By 31 March 2009 to have in place revised procedures for the**

checking of absent vote applications and declarations of identity.

Changes to the law on absent voting are expected to be in force by 1 July. The associated procedures will be revised with dual aims of making it easier for those entitled to an absent vote to exercise that right and more difficult for those not entitled to such a vote to obtain one.

- 15. By 31 March 2009 to be ready in all respects to implement the new Parliamentary constituency boundaries and any changes to be made to the Polling Station Scheme.**

The new Parliamentary boundaries will take effect only when the writ is moved for the next Westminster general election. Any consequential changes to the Polling Station Scheme will take effect at the same time. Before these changes can be implemented considerable work to amend the relevant records has to be undertaken.

Corporate Services

- 16. By 31 May 2008 to develop a process which will ensure that throughout the year there are in place properly let contracts for the provision of all routine goods and services.**

To avoid the risk of having to delay operational action due to the procurement process, a process will be developed to ensure that a new contract is in place as soon as the existing one expires in respect of the provision of all routine goods and services.

- 17. By 30 June 2008 to have submitted to the Equality Commission a report on the five year review of the Electoral Office Equality Scheme.**

The Electoral Office Equality Scheme was approved in 2003. It will be reviewed in light of experience gained over the last five years and of the need for a good relations strategy to inform the pro-active promotion of good relations between those in all the section 75 categories.

18. By 30 June 2008 to fully implement the planned upgrade of the EONI IT network.

The eight Electoral Office premises are linked by an IT network which requires upgrading to meet the current and likely future needs of the Office. The work, started in 2007/08, will be completed by 30 June.

19. By 30 September 2008, following the development of procedures and the delivery of training, to devolve appropriate budgets to Area Offices.

Following job evaluations carried out in 2007/08 a number of Electoral Office posts were upgraded and it has been decided to devolve budgets to them, where appropriate, to free up senior management time. The first phase of delegation will take place on 1 April and the second phase, delegation to each Area Office, will be completed by 1 October.

20. By 30 September 2008 to have commenced delivery of the AEA Certificate in Electoral Administration to at least 20% of qualified EONI staff.

The Association of Electoral Administrators (AEA) has for some years been the examining body for the professional qualifications for electoral administrators in Great Britain. Because of the significant differences in electoral law between Great Britain and Northern Ireland these examinations have not, in practice, been open to Electoral Office staff. It has been agreed with the AEA that Northern Ireland versions of the qualifications will be made available. By the year end the Foundation

Course, the lowest qualification, will have been delivered to at least 25% of Electoral Office permanent staff.

- 21. By 31 March 2009 to have delivered the AEA Foundation Course in electoral administration to at least 25% of EONI permanent staff.**

The Certificate of Electoral Administration is the second level AEA qualification and is open only to individuals who have achieved the first level qualification. The Certificate training course will commence by 1 October 2008 leading to an examination in 2009/10.

- 22. By 31 March 2009 to have in place a revised Equal Opportunities Policy in which all staff have been trained.**

The current Electoral Office Equal Opportunities Policy was adopted in 1994 and requires updating. All staff will receive training in the revised policy by 31 March 2009.

- 23. By 31 March 2009 to have implemented all agreed actions arising from the 2008 staff survey.**

Each year an anonymous survey of Electoral Office staff is conducted. An action plan to address the issues that arose from the survey conducted in January 2008 was agreed by the Management Board at its March meeting. All agreed actions will be completed by 31 March 2009.

Corporate Governance

- 24. By 31 May 2008 to have in place a process to monitor and evaluate all initiatives and significant changes of practice and procedure and, where appropriate, to amend these.**

It is vital that all initiatives are properly evaluated so that in future

resources can be directed to what is known to work. Building on existing practice a uniform evaluation process will be developed and implemented by 31 May.

- 25. By 31 May 2008 to provide an improved call logging system that will provide required management information.**

Following on the very significant increase in the number of calls to the Electoral Office Helpline an improved call logging system, which will provide improved management information on the nature of calls and the response to them, will be developed and implemented.

- 26. By 30 June 2008 to design and implement an access database to provide Helpline staff with more comprehensive information for use when responding to calls about Electoral Identity Card applications and to provide management information on card applications and processing.**

Although the production of Electoral Identity Cards is undertaken by a private sector contractor numerous enquiries about perceived delays in delivery are received by the Electoral Office Helpline. Changes will be made to assist Helpline staff in dealing with such calls and so to improve the service to the public.

- 27. By 30 June 2008 to have agreed with the NIO a revised Management Statement and Financial Memorandum.**

Although the Chief Electoral Officer is an independent statutory office holder he is funded by the Northern Ireland Office. The Management Statement and Financial Memorandum, which deal largely with the general way in which the funding may be used and the controls in place, is due for revision by 30 June.

- 28. By 30 June 2008 to publish a booklet setting out the reasonable adjustments to electoral law and practice to enable those with disabilities to play their full part in the democratic process.**

So that they can exercise their right to play a full part in the democratic process electoral law and practice include a number of reasonable adjustments for those with disabilities. A booklet giving details of all these adjustments will be published and made available to relevant stakeholders and the public by 30 June.

- 29. By 31 October 2008 to have carried out a review of the TRIM records management system and of the Records Management Policy and to have implemented the agreed recommendations.**

The TRIM electronic records management system was successfully introduced during 2007/08 and has radically affected work within the Electoral Office. A review of that system and the associated Records Management Policy will be completed by 31 October.

- 30. By 31 March 2009 to have formalised the respective responsibilities of the returning officer and the deputy returning officers at district council elections.**

By law the Chief Electoral Officer is the returning officer for all district council elections and has responsibility for their proper conduct. By custom and practice council Chief Executives act as the deputy returning officer at these elections and carry out many of the tasks. The respective responsibilities of the returning officer and the deputy returning officers will be formalised by 31 March 2009.

- 31. By 31 March 2009 to review the operation of the Electoral Office corporate social responsibility strategy, to amend it as necessary, and to have in place an action plan for 2009/10.**

An Electoral Office Corporate Social Responsibility Policy will be agreed by 1 June 2008. By 31 March 2009 its workings will be reviewed and any necessary adjustments made. A plan setting out the actions to take place in 2009/10 will have been approved.