



ELECTORAL OFFICE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

CORPORATE PLAN 2007 - 2010

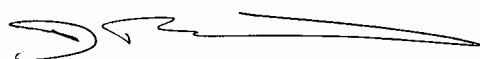
BUSINESS PLAN 2007 - 2008

FOREWORD BY THE CHIEF ELECTORAL OFFICER FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

The current year marks the 35th anniversary of the creation of the Electoral Office. In 1972-73 the decision was taken to appoint a number of permanent staff to support the Chief Electoral Officer in the discharge of his statutory duties. Over time the collective name for these staff became the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland.

This 35th year will be unusual. There will be no annual canvass and it is unlikely that there will be any Northern Ireland wide election. The absence of these major events will afford staff the opportunity to devote extra time to the introduction and development of the continuous registration process and to introduce new procedures to cater for changes to electoral law that will be made during the year.

The targets and development objectives set out in the Business Plan 2007-2008 are challenging but I have no doubt that my staff will demonstrate their customary dedication in doing everything practicable to secure their achievement.



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Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland

1 May 2007

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STATEMENT OF PURPOSE, VISION AND VALUES

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

- 1.1 The Electoral Office for Northern Ireland will support the Chief Electoral Officer in his role of enabling all eligible persons to participate in the democratic process in Northern Ireland by registering and voting free from intimidation and threats and subject only to those controls and safeguards necessary to secure the integrity of the electoral process.

THE VISION

- 1.2 To be recognised as a model of good practice in electoral administration in the United Kingdom and elsewhere.

VALUES

- 1.3
- **Honesty and integrity** in all we do.
 - **Equality** of treatment for all.
 - **Leading** well those both within the Office and others open to our influence.
 - **Managing Resources**, including our time, effectively.
 - **Professionalism** in all we do.
 - **Openness** in our decision making processes.
 - **Team working** and working in partnership with other organisations.

INTRODUCTION

- 2.1 The Electoral Office for Northern Ireland exists to support the Chief Electoral Officer in the performance of his statutory duties set out in the Representation of the People Act 1983 and other primary and subordinate legislation.
- 2.2 The Electoral Office for Northern Ireland, referred to as “the Electoral Office” or “the Office” in this Corporate and Business Plan is the collective name for the group of staff employed to support the Chief Electoral Officer.
- 2.3 The Chief Electoral Officer is required by law to submit an Annual Report on the discharge of his functions to the Secretary of State who must lay it before both Houses of Parliament. The Chief Electoral Officer is an independent statutory office holder.
- 2.4 The Chief Electoral Officer is supported in his management of the Office by a Management Board comprised of the senior Headquarters staff. Two trade union representatives, both currently Area Electoral Officers, are invited to attend all meetings the minutes of which are made available to all staff.
- 2.5 Because of the small size of the Electoral Office it has been agreed with the Northern Ireland Office that a separate Risk Management Committee would be inappropriate. The duties are therefore undertaken by the Management Board. Risks are managed in accordance with a Risk Management Strategy finalised in early 2007.

CORPORATE PLAN 2007 – 2010

INTRODUCTION

- 3.1 This three year Corporate Plan is consistent with the Electoral Office's Statement of Purpose, Vision and Values
- 3.2 The work is set in four key business areas –
- ◆ Registration
 - ◆ Elections
 - ◆ Central Services
 - ◆ Corporate Governance
- 3.3 The Business Plan 2007 – 2008, set out later in this document, lays out the specific performance targets and development objectives for that year under the same four headings.
- 3.4 Further business plans will, taking account of results in the current year, build towards achievement of the current Corporate Plan strategic aims by the end of 2009 – 2010.

PLANNING ASSUMPTIONS

- 3.5 The operation of the Electoral Office and its ability to deliver the programme of work set out in this three year Corporate Plan and the Business Plan 2007 - 2008 is influenced by a range of factors outwith the control of either the Office or the Chief Electoral Officer.
- 3.6 To enable planning to proceed it is necessary to make assumptions as to the most critical external factors. These are set out below:
- ◆ **Elections**

Northern Ireland wide elections will take place as follows –

Westminster Parliamentary	-	not before April 2008
European Parliamentary	-	June 2009
District Council	-	not before autumn 2008
Northern Ireland Assembly	-	March 2011

◆ **Canvass**

No full canvass will take place before autumn 2010.

◆ **Polling Station Scheme**

A complete review of the Polling Station Scheme will take place during the currency of this Plan.

◆ **Electoral Modernisation**

E-counting and other modernisation measures will be introduced before the expiry of this Plan.

◆ **Premises**

Dependent on the outcome of the proposed reorganisation of local government there will be a reduction in the number of Electoral Office premises.

◆ **Resources**

The Electoral Office will be adequately funded.

OUR STAFF

3.7 The Electoral Office is comprised of 46 permanent staff with more than 4,000 temporary posts being filled on election and count days. The number of permanent staff is unlikely to change significantly during the currency of this Plan. .

OUR PREMISES

- 3.8 The Electoral Office has its Headquarters in Belfast and has nine Area Offices at seven other locations throughout Northern Ireland. The current locations are Belfast, Banbridge, Londonderry, Ballymena, Omagh, Newtownabbey and Newtownards. The Belfast and Banbridge premises are each occupied by two Area Offices. Each Area Office serves two Parliamentary constituencies.
- 3.9 As noted, and dependent on the outcome of Local Government reorganisation, some reduction in the number of premises is likely by the end of 2009/10.

FUNDING

- 3.10 Funds for the Electoral Office are provided by the Northern Ireland Office out of monies voted by Parliament. The Chief Electoral Officer is under a duty to account to the Accounting Officer for the Northern Ireland Office for the use of these funds. A Management Statement and Financial Memorandum were agreed between the Northern Ireland Office and the Chief Electoral Officer in August 2006 and are due for revision in 2008.

CORPORATE GOVERNANCE AND RISK MANAGEMENT

- 3.11 The Management Board meets monthly and more often when required. All papers submitted to the Board are required to address the resource, human rights and equality implications of the proposals.

- 3.12 A corporate risk register is maintained and is reviewed by the Board every 3 months and more frequently when appropriate.

REGISTRATION

- 3.13 Accurate and comprehensive registers are the foundation of a sound electoral process. We will roll out the new system of continuous registration and modify it as necessary in the light of experience gained. We will strive to make registration as straight forward as possible for all our communities having in place only those safeguards and other measures considered necessary to protect the integrity of the democratic process.

Strategic Aim 2007/10

- 3.14 We aim:

To maintain electoral registers that are at least as accurate and comprehensive as those published following the canvass in 2006.

To increase registration levels amongst the disadvantaged, the young, the disabled and those from ethnic minorities.

Major Work Programmes

- 3.15

- ◆ We will roll out and modify as necessary the continuous registration process.
- ◆ We will continue the review of electoral registration forms making them available in plain English and in a range of other languages.

ELECTIONS

3.16 We will continue to deliver elections efficiently and effectively changing current procedures where appropriate in light of new legislation, experience and the outcome of pilot schemes in other jurisdictions.

Strategic Aim 2007/10

3.17 We aim:

- ◆ To deliver any election efficiently and effectively.

Major Work Programme

3.18

- ◆ We will keep under review the election procedures and practices revising them as necessary to take account of changes in electoral law and other factors.

CENTRAL SERVICES

3.19 The Electoral Office will strive to enhance the level of service it provides to the public in a number of ways including through development of its staff and improving and simplifying the ways in which the Electoral Office services can be accessed. This will be achieved within an increasingly tight financial settlement.

Strategic Aim

3.20 We aim:

To provide electoral services to the people of Northern Ireland efficiently and effectively by having the right number of staff, equipped with the required skills and knowledge, available at suitable locations.

Major Work Programme

3.21

- ◆ We will have in place recognised professional qualifications for electoral staff.

- ◆ We will have decided on the future structure of the Electoral Office estate and implementation of that decision will have been progressed.

CORPORATE GOVERNANCE

3.22 Any perception that the Election Office is not meeting the highest standards of corporate governance would tend to undermine public confidence in the organisation and could have an adverse impact on electoral participation.

Strategic aim

3.23 We aim:

To conduct our business in a way which is beyond reproach and in accordance with all legal obligations and in line with relevant best practice guidance.

Major Work Programmes

3.24

- ◆ We will continue to monitor and review electoral law and practice making proposals for change when appropriate.
- ◆ We will continue to provide a high quality electoral service to the people of Northern Ireland in a way that is increasingly efficient and which provides value for money.

BUSINESS PLAN 2007 – 2008

INTRODUCTION

- 4.1 In drawing up this Business Plan for 2007 - 2008 regard has been had to the planning assumptions set out below. Preparation of the Plan started in autumn 2006; it involved informal discussion with a range of stakeholders and culminated in an opportunity for all staff to contribute at a planning day held at the end of January. Unfortunately, work in connection with the conduct of the unexpected Northern Ireland Assembly elections on 7 March delayed final preparation of the plan which was approved by the Management Board in April. Prior to that date the targets and development objectives were agreed and made available to all staff to facilitate the preparation of the business unit plans and individual forward job plans. In the course of the coming year business planning will be put on a more structured footing with the aim that in future the plan should be published no later than 31 March.

PLANNING ASSUMPTIONS

- 4.2 The following assumptions were made in drawing up the Business Plan 2007-2008:

Elections – there would be no Northern Ireland wide elections during the year.

Canvass - there would be no annual canvass during 2007-2008.

Legislation - The provisions of the Electoral Administration Act 2006 that are to extend to Northern Ireland together with the remaining electoral provisions of the Northern Ireland (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2006 would be brought into operation during the year and subordinate legislation to support the continuous registration process

would be in place, substantially in the form requested, by 30 September 2007.

Resources - The Electoral Office would be allocated a budget in line with the final bid.

- 4.3 In the event that any of these assumptions turns out to be incorrect it is almost inevitable that the development objectives, and perhaps even the targets for 2007/08, will have to be revised downwards.

OTHER FACTORS

- 4.4 Other than the views of stakeholders, regard has been had to a range of relevant factors in drawing up the Plan. These factors include matters set by law, such as the requirement to submit an Annual Report to the Secretary of State, and other matters upon which a public commitment to improvement has been given.
- 4.5 Like all parts of the public sector in Northern Ireland the Electoral Office can expect to operate under an increasingly stringent financial regime. This will on occasion require prioritisation and acceptance that some business improvements may have to be delayed until resources become available. There will plainly be a need this year, and for the foreseeable future, to ensure that tax payer's money is well spent and that wastage is kept to an absolute minimum.

TARGETS AND DEVELOPMENT OBJECTIVES

- 4.6 This section sets out the targets and development objectives which the Electoral Office intends to achieve in the current year. They are grouped for ease of reference under the same four headings used in the Corporate Plan, namely:

- ◆ Registration
- ◆ Elections
- ◆ Central Services
- ◆ Corporate Governance

4.7 It should be understood, however, that many of the subjects are inter-related and that any slippage on one will often have an adverse impact on another target or objective.

4.8 The Electoral Office is committed to the continuous improvement not only of the services it provides to the public and other stakeholders but also to the leadership, support and development opportunities available to its staff. Whilst all members of staff are encouraged at all times to be on the lookout for better ways of working it has been decided to set a number of organisational development objectives to assist in the continuous improvement process.

REGISTRATION

Targets

4.9 By 1 December 2007 to increase the comprehensiveness of the electoral registers by 5% compared with 1 December 2006.

Comprehensive and accurate electoral registers are the foundation upon which the whole electoral process is based. The 2006 annual canvass resulted in registers published on 1 December 2006 which were estimated to include only 80.9% of the eligible population. This is unsatisfactory. The targeted improvement will be achieved largely through the implementation of the continuous registration process outlined below. The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency have agreed to provide each year an assessment of the eligible

electorate as at 1 December, the date upon which the revised electoral registers are published. It will therefore be straightforward to determine whether or not this target has been met.

4.10 To ensure that the registers published on 1 December 2007 are at least as accurate as the ones published on 1 December 2006.

Accuracy of the registers is at least as important as their comprehensiveness. The registers in Northern Ireland are by far the most accurate in the United Kingdom and it is vital that nothing is done which might undermine public confidence in them. The 2006 annual canvass established the baseline against which accuracy will be assessed each year until the next full canvass. "Accuracy" is not straightforward to define and the Electoral Commission have undertaken to bring forward proposals on how it should be measured. If acceptable, these proposals will be used to determine whether or not this target has been met.

Development Objectives

4.11 To progress the implementation of continuous registration in accordance with the agreed plan.

Continuous registration is the new process which has replaced the annual canvass. In essence electors are added to and removed from the electoral registers when they inform the Electoral Office of relevant changes in their circumstances. The Chief Electoral Officer is to be provided with new powers to obtain information on such changes from specified public authorities and will use the information obtained to encourage individuals to complete and return the appropriate registration form. The way in which these new powers are exercised and the progress made with other initiatives to encourage registration will be monitored against an implementation plan to be agreed early in the business year.

4.12 To develop comprehensive desk instructions on continuous registration by 31 March 2008.

Continuous registration is unique to Northern Ireland and it is essential that the processes are fully documented for the staff who will be responsible for their smooth working. Guidance and instructions issued through the year will be revised and brought together in comprehensive desk instructions by 31 March 2008.

ELECTIONS

Target

4.13 Throughout the year to have in place an outline plan for the conduct of any Northern Ireland wide election.

Although it has been assumed in drawing up this plan that no Northern Ireland wide election will be held during the year, the possibility of a Westminster General election cannot be wholly excluded. It is therefore necessary to have in place an outline plan for such an election should it be called. The plan will require updating throughout the year to take account of changes in the surrounding environment including amendments to electoral law and the closure of many primary schools currently used as polling stations. The outline plan will be reviewed by the Management Board at least quarterly. The existence of the plan is a matter of fact and it will therefore be straightforward to determine whether or not this target has been met.

Development Objectives

4.14 To implement the changes to practice and procedure required as a result of the commencement of provisions of the Electoral Administration Act 2006 in accordance with the agreed plan.

The Northern Ireland Office intend to bring a number of provisions of the Electoral Administration Act 2006 into operation in Northern Ireland during the year. The Electoral Office will work with them on that process but will also have sole responsibility for development of the practices and procedures required to implement the new statutory arrangements. There will also be a need to inform the public and other stakeholders of the changes that affect them. Progress towards achieving this development objective will be monitored against a plan which is currently in preparation.

4.15 To progress work on electronic counting to enable a decision to be taken by the Secretary of State no later than 1 October 2007.

The Chief Electoral Officer has already committed to progressing a move to e-counting of votes as soon as practicable provided the Scottish elections in May 2007, where e-counting will be used for the first time at national level, proceed in a satisfactory manner. A number of senior Electoral Office staff will be present at various locations in Scotland to observe the counts and an assessment of the acceptability of the process will be made during May. Subject to discussions with other stakeholders it is planned, by 1 October, to seek a commitment from the Secretary of State to take forward the legislative amendments required to allow e-counting to be introduced for any suitable election occurring after autumn 2008.

4.16 To develop comprehensive desk instructions for staff on the preparation for and conduct of elections by 31 March 2008.

Many Electoral Office staff have great experience in the running of elections. Over the years customs and practices have been developed not all of which are fully documented. This makes the task of running an election challenging for new staff who have no comprehensive written guidance on the subject. Such a manual will be compiled by 31 March 2008. When doing so, the opportunity will be taken to review all existing practices and to simplify them whenever that can be done without risking the integrity of the electoral process.

CENTRAL SERVICES

Target

4.17 To deliver the Electoral Office work programme within the budget available.

The work programme includes not only the achievement of these targets and the development objectives set out below but also all the routine work of the Electoral Office not identified in this Plan. The Northern Ireland Office has not yet allocated the Electoral Office budget for 2007/08 and it has been assumed for planning purposes that the budget will be substantially in line with the final bid which is outlined at Annex A. When a budget is allocated it will be published on the Electoral Office website www.eoni.org.uk. If the budget allocated is not in line with the final bid the work programme will require downward adjustment. Expenditure against the profiled budget will be monitored by the Management Board at each meeting and any necessary adjustments made. Whether or not this target has been met is a question of fact that can readily be determined.

Development Objectives

4.18 To obtain Charter Mark status by 31 March 2008.

The Electoral Office exists to provide a service to the people of Northern Ireland. Whilst feedback from the public indicates that they are in general satisfied with the level of service provided the time is now right to seek an independent assessment of performance. The Charter Mark process has been identified as the best way of ensuring that the Electoral Office is operating to best practice standards in customer care.

4.19 To establish by 31 March 2008 a pool of individuals suitable to fill posts in connection with any election occurring before 31 March 2009.

At any Northern Ireland wide election around 4,500 casual employees are required to staff polling stations and count centres and to carry out additional work within the Electoral Office. The time normally available between the calling of an election and polling day is insufficient to carry out the recruitment process effectively. Accordingly, it is intended to establish a pool of staff willing to be appointed to the range of posts available in the event of an election prior to 31 March 2009.

4.20 To take forward with the Association of Electoral Administrators arrangements for professional qualifications for staff.

Electoral law and practice is becoming increasingly complex yet there are, in Northern Ireland, no recognised professional qualifications for staff carrying out this important public function. In Great Britain the Association of Electoral Administrators provides qualifications at a number of levels. It is intended, in conjunction with that Association, to work towards introducing such qualifications in Northern Ireland. Because of the significant differences in electoral law and practice new

training materials will have to be developed and suitable examiners identified. An outline action plan will be drawn up following a meeting with the Association in May.

4.21 To progress the Electoral Office Estate Review in accordance with the agreed plan.

A review of the Electoral Office estate setting out a number of actions to be taken before a final decision on the structure of the estate can be taken was completed and published last year. These actions, where appropriate, will be carried out during the current year.

4.22 To review, in liaison with the Electoral Commission, the arrangements for handling telephone enquiries particularly at elections and other peak periods.

In the course of last year the service provided by the Electoral Office Advice Line was improved through the provision of a freephone telephone number and extended operating hours at peak periods in connection with the 2006 canvass and the March 2007 Assembly elections. The Electoral Commission operated their own Helpline during these peak periods and delivered the service by way of a call centre. Neither service was wholly satisfactory. Discussions will take place with the Commission to identify the best and most effective way of delivering the service during future peak periods.

4.23 To deliver a minimum of 95% of the agreed Training Plan.

Ensuring that Electoral Office staff are equipped with the right skills and knowledge is critical to the continued provision of a good service to the public. Each year development plans are agreed for each member of staff as part of the performance appraisal process. These are combined to provide the Electoral Office Training Plan at least 95% of which is to be delivered by the end of the year – some shortfall is

inevitable due to illness, family commitments, bereavement and other external causes.

4.24 To continue to have an annual sick absence level not exceeding 4% (9 days per staff member).

The sick absence target of 4% or less (equivalent to 9 days per year per staff member) is one of the lowest in the public sector in Northern Ireland. The good practices already in place which have allowed that target to be achieved will be continued and built on as necessary to ensure they remain in line with best practice.

4.25 To implement the action plan for the 2006/07 Staff Survey and to conduct a further survey by March 2008.

Staff surveys were conducted in 2005/06 and 2006/07 the latter showing a marked improvement in almost all areas examined. The Management Board has drawn up and published an Action Plan to address the key issues flowing from the latest survey and progress against the targets set will be monitored personally by the Chief Electoral Officer throughout the year. A further survey will be conducted before the end of the year to inform a further action plan in 2008/09.

CORPORATE GOVERNANCE

Targets

4.26 By 16 April 2007 to recommend to the Secretary of State whether or not a full canvass should take place in autumn 2007.

The Northern Ireland (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2006 replaced the annual canvass with a new process of continuous registration. It provided that the next full canvass would take place in 2010 unless by 16 April in any year the Chief Electoral Officer recommends to the Secretary of State that a full canvass should take place and the Secretary of State is satisfied that it is in the public interest that it should. The Chief Electoral Officer has committed to providing appropriate advice to the Secretary of State by 16 April each year. Achievement of this target is a question of fact and assessment of its achievement or otherwise poses no difficulty.

4.27 By 1 June 2007 to submit the Annual Report for 2006/07 to the Secretary of State.

The requirement for the Chief Electoral Officer to submit an Annual Report on his work and that of the Electoral Office was amended by the Northern Ireland (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2006. The report must now include an assessment of the extent of which the relevant registration objectives, set out in section 4 of the Act, have been met. The submission date of 1 June has been agreed with the Secretary of State's officials and will enable the report to be laid before Parliament before the summer recess.

Development Objectives

4.28 To implement all agreed audit recommendations within the agreed timescales.

The Electoral Office has the benefit of an extensive programme of internal audit and is also subject to external audit carried out by the Northern Ireland Audit Office. Any audit recommendations made are considered at the next Management Board and an action plan setting out how, when and by whom all accepted recommendations will be

implemented is prepared. Implementation of these plans is monitored by the Board on a quarterly basis.

4.29 To issue Part 1 of the Finance Manual by 31 May 2007 and progress work on further parts in accordance with the agreed plan.

Whilst extensive financial guidance and instructions are available within the Electoral Office it is intended to bring it together, revising it as necessary, in a comprehensive Finance Manual, Part 1 of which will be issued by 31 May.

4.30 To introduce EDRMS throughout the organisation by 1 July 2007.

Introduction of EDRMS was scheduled for last year but had to be postponed on account of the full canvass and then the Assembly elections. Its introduction is already underway and will be completed throughout the organisation by 1 July 2007 bringing obvious benefits to the staff and the public.

4.31 To have in place by 1 August 2007 a Business Continuity Plan, including an IT Disaster Recovery Plan, and to test it by 1 December 2007.

In line with the greater emphasis on identifying and managing key business risks a plan will be put in place to secure, so far as practicable, that the Electoral Office can continue to deliver its core services to the public in the event of loss of any of its premises or key personnel or of its IT systems. The plan will be tested by 1 December 2007 and thereafter amended as necessary.

4.32 To develop a Disability Action Plan by 30 June 2007 and to commence its implementation.

The Chief Electoral Officer is fully committed to doing all that is reasonably practicable to remove any barriers to full participation in the electoral process or employment in the Electoral Office for those with any disability. A Disability Action Plan, setting out the practical measures to be taken, will be submitted to the Equality Commission by 30 June and its implementation will be commenced.

OTHER WORK

4.33 There is, of course, much other routine but nonetheless very important work to be carried out by the Electoral Office at all its locations during 2007/08. Whilst such work is not appropriate to this Business Plan it is set out in lower level plans and monitored by the responsible line managers.

ELECTORAL OFFICE BUDGET BID 2007-2008

	2007/08
	£
<u>Basic Pay -</u>	
Permanent Staff (includes help-line staff)	830,000
Temporary Staff in Offices	50,000
Canvassers	
Basic Pay Total	880,000
<u>Overtime -</u>	
Permanent Staff	30,000
Overtime Total	30,000
<u>Employers National Insurance -</u>	
Permanent Staff	56,000
Temporary Staff	3,500
Employers National Insurance Total	59,500
A.S.L.C	137,000
Total Staff	1,106,500
Power	40,000
Premises (keyholding)	2,000
Maintenance And Minor Works	30,000
Professional Staff Costs	1,000
Training	31,000
Travel	25,500
Subsistence	6,000
Personnel Costs	6,000
Other Employee Costs	5,000
Hospitality	2,000
Office Services (Printing/equipment hire/window cleaning)	100,000
Computers (software,hardware maintenance, line rental etc)	250,000
Professional Services	10,000
Materials (mainly stationery orders)	30,000
Property charges	120,000
Postage	100,000
Telecommunications	25,000
Furniture & Fittings	2,500
Office Equipment	2,500

Central & Common Services (cleaning offices)	18,000
Estate Management	15,000
Insurance (premises)	7,000
Advertising	15,000
Fees	2,000
Transport Costs	5,000
Advisory Services	20,000
Operating Leases (rent of offices & photocopiers)	235,000
Total Goods & Services	1,105,500
Electoral Identity Card	70,000
Non Cash Costs - Depreciation	300,000
Receipts	-130,000
TOTAL PROGRAMME	2,452,000
Capital	377,000
GRAND TOTAL	2,829,000