

**ELECTORAL OFFICE
FOR
NORTHERN IRELAND**

ESTATE REVIEW

December 2006

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Electoral Office for Northern Ireland supports the Chief Electoral Officer in the performance of his statutory duties as the Registration Officer and the Returning Officer for the whole of Northern Ireland. The Office currently has its headquarters in Belfast and local offices in Belfast and six other locations across Northern Ireland. All the premises are leased. The current annual cost of running the premises (e.g. rent, rates, heat, light etc) is around £418,000.

There are many drivers for change: the impact of the Review of Public Administration; the ongoing reviews of the arrangements for district council elections and of both Parliamentary and local government boundaries; the abolition of the annual canvass; its replacement with a process of continuous registration and the associated need for greater outreach work to maintain the comprehensiveness and accuracy of the electoral register; the possible introduction of e-counting of votes in Northern Ireland; and the need to minimise public expenditure.

Other important factors to be taken into account when considering options for the configuration of the Electoral Office estate include the need to maintain public confidence in the electoral process, the staffing issues which will arise in the event of any closures or moves and the views of local politicians.

Against that background the review considers four options and concludes that the one most likely to be assessed, following the preparation of a full business case, as best is to retain the existing headquarters and Belfast office premises but not to renew the leases on any of the premises outside Belfast. The number of premises outside Belfast would reduce from six to three with the new offices being located in district council premises. It is likely that this model would result in a saving of around £100,000 (24%) per year in the cost of running the estate.

Unfortunately, for a number of reasons set out in the review, it is not possible at this time to prepare a business case. Many of the drivers for change are not themselves finalised and until they are a realistic case cannot be drafted. It is unlikely that this task could be undertaken before late 2008/early 2009; and that, as a result, a move to the new office premises would not be possible until late 2009/2010.

However, pending the preparation of a full business case the review recommends a number of actions that can be taken now to reduce the risk of nugatory expenditure.

1. BACKGROUND

1.1 This review of the estate used by the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland (EONI), after setting out the aim of the review, first describes the roles and responsibilities of the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland (CEO) and of EONI. It outlines the main drivers for a comprehensive review and the reasons why reaching a firm decision on the way forward would not be prudent at this time. Against that background a number of options are identified and, to the extent practicable, evaluated. Before reaching a conclusion, a provisional decision-making timetable and the actions that could be taken before reaching a final decision are identified.

2 AIM OF THE REVIEW

2.1 To review the estate requirements of EONI as they are likely to be beyond 2007 and to identify alternative, less expensive, options for delivering a service which will continue to enable the CEO to meet his statutory obligations.

3 ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

The Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland

3.1 The CEO is a Crown appointment, independent of Government in his interpretation and administration of electoral law. He is appointed by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland under section 8 of the Northern Ireland (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2006. For policy and administrative purposes the CEO is classified as an Independent Statutory Office Holder. His duties are mainly statutory and may be summarised as follows:-

- acting as registration officer for all constituencies in Northern Ireland;

- acting as returning officer for all elections and referenda in Northern Ireland;
- advising the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on matters relating to the electoral process;
- acting as an assessor to the Boundary Commission for Northern Ireland;
- acting as an assessor to the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner; and
- leadership and management of EONI.

Further details of his role and responsibilities are set out in the Management Statement which is available on www.electoralficeni.gov.uk.

- 3.2 Of the main statutory duties only the first two, acting as registration officer for all constituencies of Northern Ireland and acting as returning officer for all elections and referenda in Northern Ireland are relevant to this review. Their particular relevance is explained later in this report.
- 3.3 The CEO is based at EONI Headquarters in Belfast city centre.

The Electoral Office for Northern Ireland

- 3.4 EONI is an administrative group of around 45 permanent staff whose role is to support the CEO in performance of his statutory duties. Almost all of the time of the staff is expended in relation to the registration and returning officer functions mentioned above. Although staff enjoy terms and conditions of service identical to those of the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS), they are not civil servants. In the view of the Chief Electoral Officer this absence of civil service status is a significant impediment to the continued delivery of the high quality

service to the public as the staff have virtually no prospects of advancement or opportunities to gain wider experience.

3.5 As noted above EONI HQ is located in Belfast city centre. The staff based there undertake the full range of corporate services required by any independent organisation including the finance and personnel functions. In addition the staff are responsible for supporting the CEO in relation to developing policy and issuing guidance on electoral issues including registration and elections. These staff are the main contact point for key stakeholders such as the Electoral Commission, the Northern Ireland political parties and the Northern Ireland Office. In addition they operate the public advice line which deals with calls from throughout Northern Ireland. Usage of the line varies considerably with peaks occurring in the run up to elections and during the annual canvass. During the early stages of the 2006 canvass more than 2000 calls per week were received.

3.6 The nine Area Electoral Offices are concerned primarily with supporting the CEO in relation to his registration and returning officer duties. Under the old registration process¹ each office was the base for the canvass of their registration area. The local offices recruited and trained over 1,100 canvassers and electoral assistants who were employed during the canvass period. The local offices prepared the canvass material and received the completed registration forms either from the canvassers or direct from the public. The forms were processed in each office and, where appropriate, details were entered on the database from which the new annual register of electors was printed in December each year. Outside the annual canvass period, the local offices were responsible for rolling registration, that is, the processing of forms from individuals who gave notice that their registration details, usually their address, had changed. Rolling

¹ For an outline of the new registration process see paragraph 4.6 et seq.

registration also allowed the names of those eligible for the first time to be added to the register.

3.7 Another important function connected with registration was the processing of applications for electoral identity cards. These cards, which are unique to Northern Ireland, can be issued on request, and free of charge, to anyone who has applied to be registered to vote. Although intended solely as a means of providing identity for the purposes of the Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002 the cards are now widely used to provide identity for the purpose of travel on airlines and to prove age to gain entry to licensed premises. The latter use largely explains their popularity amongst the 17 to 21 age group. During 2005/06 more than 8,000 cards were issued.

3.8 Each Area Electoral Office has a staff compliment of three headed by an Area Electoral Officer (AEO) (executive officer/ grade C equivalent). In relation to Parliamentary and Assembly elections each AEO acts as the Deputy Returning Officer and is responsible to the CEO for performing the full range of returning officer duties for two Parliamentary constituencies. This requires a sound knowledge of the area and a well established network of contacts with local representatives of the political parties, the district councils and other providers of polling stations as well as with the local police. The nine AEO's also have responsibility for constantly keeping under review the polling station scheme. On average each AEO is responsible for nearly 70 polling stations. Each of these must be checked to see that so far as reasonably practicable it is convenient for voters and has suitable access for the disabled. And in Northern Ireland there are issues that do not arise elsewhere in the UK. Polling stations must, where possible, be in premises in which all sections of the community feel at ease. This excludes the use of most church halls. And regrettably in some parts of Northern Ireland proximity to an interface

can exclude otherwise suitable premises. With the ongoing programme of amalgamation and closure of primary schools, which are often used as polling stations, this task requires both considerable local knowledge and time.

- 3.9 In the run up to any election considerable numbers of the public call at the local offices with a wide range of enquires relating to registration and the arrangements for election day. Similar enquiries made by telephone or email are dealt with centrally at EONI Headquarters.
- 3.10 At present the Chief Executive of each of the 26 district councils is by statute the Deputy Returning Officer for local government elections. Currently, however, the CEO who is the Returning Officer has no power either to set standards or to direct his deputies. The Electoral Commission examined the nature of the relationship, at the request of the Northern Ireland Office, in their report "Election 2005: Northern Ireland" and recommended that a review of the position be undertaken with a view to taking action to address perceived weaknesses in the current arrangements. Although the area office staff have no statutory responsibility in relation to local government elections, in practice they undertake an ever increasing proportion of the work. One area of particular significance is the processing of postal voting applications and the issue and receipt of postal votes on behalf of the Chief Executive. In reality the local office staff have to carry out this task because only they have access to the EONI database against which the completed forms have to be checked. Each local office and the EONI HQ are linked and have access to the EONI database containing previous application forms and other documents relating to everyone on the Northern Ireland electoral register. The EONI local office staff are also responsible for the appointment and training of all the polling station and count centre staff.

4 DRIVERS FOR CHANGE

- 4.1 Quite apart from the need for a review of the EONI estate as a small part of the NIO VFM review programme, there are a number of other significant drivers for a review of the estate at this time.

Budgetary pressures

- 4.2 It is clear that the whole public sector will be under considerable pressure to reduce running costs for the foreseeable future and to deliver at least the required level of service at the same or, where possible, lower cost. The cost of running the estate represents 11.6% of the EONI resource budget and if EONI is to achieve the objective of providing an effective service at a lower cost, the estate must be examined with rigor and any realistic options identified and explored.

Review of Public Administration

- 4.3 The Review of Public Administration (RPA), is likely to result in a reduction of the number of district councils in Northern Ireland from 26 to 7 by early 2009. The boundaries of the new council areas have been provisionally identified by the independent Local Government Boundary Commissioner and are currently the subject of public consultation. The Commissioner expects to submit his final recommendations in May 2007. Thereafter an Order to give effect to the recommendations (with or without modifications) will be considered either by Parliament, or if devolution has been restored by the Assembly. It is likely that Parliament would approve such an Order almost immediately but in view of the public position of the main Northern Ireland parties on the RPA the Assembly would be likely to take a considerable time to do so and the possibility of the final number of councils being greater than 7 cannot be excluded. Ministers have expressed the view that wherever practicable all public services should

be based on the new district councils. It would therefore be appropriate to consider an EONI estate based on the current proposed new councils rather than on Parliamentary constituencies.

Review of District Council election arrangements

- 4.4 The present unsatisfactory arrangements for the conduct of local government elections referred to above are currently the subject of a NIO led consultation exercise. With the increased pressure from the Electoral Commission and others for higher standards for the delivery of the electoral function throughout the UK, one option to be considered is the transfer of all responsibility for the running of local government elections from the district council Chief Executives and their staff, many of whom have no expertise in this area, to the CEO and his staff in EONI who are experienced in the running of elections. It is likely that such a transfer of functions would result in significant savings. At present Chief Executives, in their role of deputy returning officers, are paid a total of £102K for running district council elections. It is likely that the work could be undertaken by the CEO and his staff largely from within existing budgets with a saving of around £75k for the ratepayers in each district council election year. EONI have communicated this to the NIO in its response to the consultation exercise. The NIO will announce the outcome of the review early next year.

Report of the Parliamentary Boundaries Commission

- 4.5 The Parliamentary Boundaries Commission will not submit its final recommendation on Parliamentary constituency boundaries in Northern Ireland until after the new local government boundaries are settled which will be in summer 2007 at earliest. It is understood that the Commission is likely to recommend the retention of the existing 18 Westminster constituencies albeit with some re-alignment of their boundaries. At present each area office services two Westminster

constituencies which are also the constituencies for elections for the Northern Ireland Assembly. One of the current area offices will, if the proposed boundary changes are given effect, no longer be in either of the Parliamentary constituencies that it services. Some change will therefore be required.

Continuous Registration

- 4.6 Perhaps the strongest driver for a review of the estate is the change to the registration process introduced by the Northern Ireland (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2006. In essence the annual canvass, which currently takes place throughout the United Kingdom, will cease in Northern Ireland after 2006. On current projections, it is likely that the next full canvass will take place in 2010 and at least every 10 years thereafter. Instead of the annual canvass the CEO is to be empowered to require various public authorities to provide him with information indicating that an individual has changed name or address, has attained registration age or has died. The statutory instrument is being drafted and should be in force early in 2007.
- 4.7 The CEO will not be able to use the information provided to change the register. It will trigger a process, the details of which are being considered, under which those whose details appear to have altered, or who appear to have become eligible for the first time, will be invited to complete a new registration form. Experience strongly indicates that “persuading” individuals to notify changes in their registration details will have to be a multi-stage process. Whilst hopefully the early stages of the process will be largely automated, and so capable of being carried out centrally, it is highly probable that later stages will require at least some house calls. For obvious reasons these would be best undertaken by individuals with the knowledge of the particular area. Although the possibility of contracting out this function should not be discounted at this stage, it is unlikely that the volume of work would,

given the wide geographical spread, be sufficient to interest the private sector. A cheaper alternative may be to use low grade staff, perhaps employed on non-standard terms and conditions, working from the local offices. Alternatively it might be decided by Ministers that the inevitable reduction in the comprehensiveness of the register should be accepted. However, this is highly unlikely to be politically acceptable, given that Ministers made clear to Parliament during the passage of the Northern Ireland (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2006, which establishes the new system of continuous registration, that the reforms were being introduced with the express purpose of increasing the number of people registered to vote. It is assessed as unlikely that the processing of registration forms received as a result of continuous registration will require any significant additional staff resource or office accommodation.

- 4.8 It has been estimated that in Northern Ireland there are around 150,000 changes of registration particulars each year. Given the additional safeguards in place in Northern Ireland to reduce the risk of electoral fraud the processing of the registration forms that are likely to be submitted, initially at least, will require a significant amount of staff resource. It will also require knowledge of the local area. The work will best be carried out at the local offices where the capacity freed up by the abolition of the annual canvass is likely to be sufficient to deal with these new pressures. The feasibility of automating the process will be considered but no system could be designed and procured before 2008 at the earliest. Even if there was an automated process manual processing of the 'mismatches' at local offices would still be required.

E-counting

- 4.9 The recruitment of polling station and count staff is at present an important role for each area electoral office. During 2006 e-counting of ballot papers was piloted at various locations in England and votes cast

at the elections for the Scottish Parliament and local authorities in May 2007 are to be e-counted. This will be the first occasion on which e-counting has been used in the UK for other than a first past the post election. Provided the Scottish experience is favourable it is possible that e-counting of votes for all elections in Northern Ireland could, subject to the availability of finance and a sound business case, be introduced in late 2008 or early 2009. With e-counting in place for all elections the task of recruiting count staff would be hugely reduced. It is hoped that the scanning equipment used for e-counting might also be able to check postal vote applications, another task that would in part justify the current physical size of the local offices.

Electoral Identity Cards

- 4.10 Whatever other work they have to undertake in the future, and that cannot be decided until the way forward on continuous registration is clearer, area offices will certainly continue to have an important role in relation to outreach and the processing of applications for electoral identity cards.
- 4.11 Electoral identity cards were a key part of the counter fraud measures introduced by the Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002 and are one of only three forms of photographic identification available to anyone under the age of 65 years wishing to vote in Northern Ireland. Approximately 10% of registered electors have been issued with such a card. Although individuals can apply by post and provide their own passport style photograph, around 45% apply in person by calling at the local offices where their photograph is taken using a digital camera. The image is stored on disc and provided to the firm who produce the cards. Postal applications frequently cause difficulty in processing and many have to be returned to the applicant because either they are incomplete or the photograph provided is not of the required standard.

Although postal applications will continue as an option the aim should be to increase the proportion of the personal applications.

Outreach

- 4.12 ID cards are particularly popular amongst young persons many of whom will not possess either a driving licence or a passport which are the only other forms of photographic identification available to them. Research by the Electoral Commission indicates that young people are under-represented on the electoral register and it is envisaged that to tackle this problem local offices will take the lead in visiting every school with pupils of relevant age in their area at least once each year. Such visits would, where possible, be co-ordinated with delivery with the citizenship module of the curriculum and with work undertaken by the Electoral Commission. At such visits electoral registration forms and ID card application forms would be completed and digital photographs taken.
- 4.13 Similarly, there are other cohorts such as the disabled, those with dependants, those in residential homes, individuals from ethnic minorities and those about to be released from prison who are under-represented on the register. It is vital to target them as well as young persons if the CEO is to be able to meet his statutory obligations in respect of the comprehensiveness and accuracy of the register. This work would be carried out by the area offices.
- 4.14 The present office structure is a barrier to carrying out meaningful outreach work on a significant scale. The staff compliment at each office is three. Two members of staff are required for each outreach event leaving only one person in the office which is plainly unacceptable. A change, either to more staff at each office or fewer offices but with more staff in each therefore requires consideration. The later is the preferred option.

5 OTHER FACTORS

- 5.1 Other factors to which due regard will have to be paid in reaching any decision on the future shape and size of the EONI estate are set out in the following paragraphs.

Need to preserve the accuracy and comprehensiveness of the Electoral Register

- 5.2 The CEO has a duty to maintain an electoral register that is accurate and comprehensive and to include in his statutory report to the Secretary of State an assessment of the extent to which the prescribed registration objectives have been met. Any reduction in the accuracy and comprehensiveness of the register as a result of change to the present area office network would be likely to result in severe criticism of Ministers as well as to a reduction in the level of public confidence in the electoral process. It should therefore be avoided.

Need to maintain public confidence in the electoral process

- 5.3 Public confidence in the democratic process, of which the electoral process is a key part, is a cornerstone of securing a peaceful and prosperous Northern Ireland. The measures introduced in the Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002 have gone a long way to increase public confidence in the electoral process and it is vital that nothing is done which reduces the current level of confidence. Some opinion formers are likely to portray any reduction in the number of area offices as a reduction in the service to the public and a barrier to their participation in the democratic process. They might point out, for example, that the elderly and disadvantaged may find it difficult to travel further to the nearest office. Unless appropriate assurances can

be given in this matter there is a risk that public confidence in the electoral process would be reduced.

Equality

- 5.4 Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 imposes equality duties on public authorities including the CEO. Any alteration to the present configuration of offices will require to be equality screened and to be the subject of a screening consultation exercise. If, as is likely, it is alleged that any changes would have an adverse differential impact on one or more of the section 75 groups then a full equality impact assessment may be required. This would delay a final decision by a minimum of 9 months.

Setting up Costs

- 5.5 Any change to the current area office arrangements would inevitably incur setting up costs. Their extent would depend on the degree of change and on the individual premises and it is, accordingly not possible to even estimate a figure at this stage. Plainly this matter would be fully set out in the business case that would be required before taking any decision.

Staff Issues

- 5.6 EONI staff are not, as noted above, currently civil servants. The extent to which they are “mobile” in civil service terms is unclear. It is probably the case that staff could properly be required to make reasonable adjustments to their place of work provided they were compensated for any increased travel costs. Until the possible future

location of area offices can be determined it is not possible to express any view on whether asking staff to move to them would be reasonable or whether it would amount to constructive dismissal. If at all possible the loss of experienced staff is to be avoided. The financial implications of potential excess fares and/or unfair dismissal claims will be addressed in any business case.

Views of Local Politicians

- 5.7 The CEO has already received representations from a number of local politicians all of whom were strongly of the view that the local offices were an essential part of the democratic process. Any attempt to reduce the number of local offices will be opposed by local politicians unless they can be satisfied that the level of service to the public will be maintained or even improved. The significance to be attached to such opposition is primarily a matter for Ministers and may depend on the prevailing political climate in Northern Ireland.

Suitability for Canvass in 2010 and for Elections

- 5.8 Any alteration to the current area office structure and premises must make provision for the increased space required to conduct the planned full canvass in 2010 and for the effective running of elections. Although again it is not possible to provide precise figures at this stage it appears highly improbable that the current practice of permanently renting the office space required for these functions will, in future, be the most cost effective option.

6 THE EXISTING ESTATE

- 6.1 The existing estate, all of which is rented, is comprised of the HQ building in central Belfast and offices in seven locations across Northern Ireland namely Londonderry, Ballymena, Omagh, Newtownabbey, Newtownards, Banbridge and Belfast. The Banbridge and Belfast offices are each occupied by two area electoral offices whilst the other five premises are used by a single office. Each area electoral office, except one of the two offices in Belfast and Banbridge, services the Parliamentary constituency in which it is located and one adjoining constituency. The other Belfast office services the two remaining Belfast constituencies whilst the other Banbridge office services two adjoining constituencies. Each electoral office has a staff compliment of three in grades equivalent to grade C/EO1, grade D1/AO and grade D2/AA. The Belfast premises are adjacent to the HQ building. In addition EONI continues to be the tenant of the old Londonderry area electoral office, the lease of which runs until January 2011. The property is sublet and in effect costs the Exchequer almost nothing. The lease will not be renewed. This property is not included in any of the average costs given below and is not further referred to in this report.
- 6.2 Details in respect of each property are at Annex A. Points of note in respect of the area electoral office premises are as follows –
- (a) The average floor area is 2355 square feet (24 square meters).
 - (b) The average annual rent is £18,312 whilst the average property cost is £31,811. This figure includes rent, rates, insurance, service charge, water charge, car parking fees, utility bills, cleaning costs and other related charges. It does not include staff costs (either at the office or at HQ), legal costs or IT costs all of which are met from Headquarters.

- (c) The leases are of various length and only some have a break clause – four of the leases have a minimum of five years to run until termination or the break.
- (d) The properties are without exception far in excess of the size required for the likely future role of an area electoral office.
- (e) Some of the properties are barely of an acceptable standard for either the staff or the public.

6.3 The lease on the Headquarters building runs until September 2012. Whilst the building currently has small amount of spare capacity it is likely that this will be utilised in connection with the enhanced role of headquarters as a result of the continuous registration project. If it is discovered, once continuous registration is bedded in, that there continues to be spare capacity the option of subletting the Belfast area office premises and relocating it within the HQ building will be considered. A number of public sector organisations are located nearby and some have indicated that they would be interested in a sub-lease in the event that the Belfast area office premises are no longer required by EONI.

7 OTHER MODELS

7.1 The CEO/EONI model is unique in the United Kingdom. In Great Britain there is no dedicated official or body responsible for registration or the conduct of elections. The tasks fall to local government officials who appear to perform the duties to differing standards and with differing enthusiasm. They use council staff and premises. It is understood that the Committee on Standards in Public Life may, in their forthcoming report on the Electoral Commission, make recommendations for the introduction in Great Britain of structures based on the CEO/EONI model.

7.2 In Northern Ireland the Registrar General is responsible for, inter alia, the registration of births, deaths and marriages. The function is carried out from 26 offices, one in each district council area, that he rents from the councils. The offices are staffed by council employees, paid for and accountable to the Registrar General. It is understood that a reduction in the number of offices from 26 to 19 is being considered in response to the RPA.

8 THE OPTIONS

8.1 The following options for future of the EONI estate have been considered:

Option 1 – The status quo

Option 2 – Centralisation in one office probably in Belfast

Option 3 – A headquarters building in Belfast and 7 local offices

Option 4 – A headquarters building in Belfast and 4 local offices

Option 1 – The Status Quo

8.2 Adoption of this option would not achieve any cost reduction, nor would it allow the CEO to continue to meet his statutory duties.

8.3 It is not a realistic option. Whilst the present office structure may have been appropriate when it was adopted, the significant changes referred to above, in particular the abolition of the annual canvass, the likely introduction of e-counting and the need for effective outreach work to maintain the accuracy and the comprehensiveness of the register, make the status quo unsustainable. In any event one of the present area offices, namely Newtownabbey, will following the implementation

of the new Parliamentary boundaries no longer be in either of the constituencies it serves. This option is not further considered but provides a baseline against which to assess the others.

Option 2 – Centralisation in one office probably Belfast

- 8.4 This option would be more expensive than the status quo and would make it very difficult for the CEO to meet his statutory obligations.
- 8.5 In some respects this is the other extreme from the status quo. Whilst it is plainly the case that some processing of forms for the continuous registration process and perhaps even the processing of absent votes could be centralised, the outreach work which is essential if the comprehensiveness of the register is to be maintained could not be conducted effectively from a single location in Belfast. Any attempt to close all of the area offices would certainly be strongly resisted by all the Northern Ireland political parties as well as by EONI staff. Because the staff are not civil servants it is likely that many would have to leave on redundancy terms resulting in a very significant loss of expertise. Attempting to run all Northern Ireland elections from a single location in Belfast would be high risk. In any event it is plain that the present headquarters building and the adjoining Belfast Area office would be too small for a centralised office. Given the property market in Belfast it is almost inconceivable that the cost of a larger office in Belfast could be cheaper than those of the options considered below.
- 8.6 Whilst the cost of suitable premises outside Belfast would probably be lower there would be real risks of losing many of the very experienced HQ staff. Initial soundings indicate that suitable premises outside Belfast would not be readily available and a centralised office outside Belfast would certainly not be acceptable to local politicians. It would make contact with key stakeholders more difficult, time consuming and expensive. Option 2 is not considered viable.

Option 3 – Headquarters building in central Belfast and seven local offices

- 8.7 This option would be cheaper than the current arrangements and would enable the CEO to meet his statutory obligations.
- 8.8 The rationale for this option is that there would continue to be a headquarters building in central Belfast but that the existing 9 area offices (7 premises) would be reduced to 7 offices, one in each of the new district council areas. The Belfast area office would be likely to remain in its present location with the possibility of relocating it within the HQ building being considered once continuous registration had bedded in.
- 8.9 All the remaining area offices are significantly too large for their revised role. The additional space required for the annual canvass is unlikely to be needed again until 2010 and thereafter only at ten yearly intervals. It makes no sense to pay annual rent and all the other costs on this additional space. It is therefore assessed that new much smaller premises would be appropriate for the six area offices outside Belfast.
- 8.10 While these could probably be leased from the private sector a more attractive, and almost certainly cheaper, option would be to seek to accommodate the area electoral offices in district council premises, preferably in the new district council headquarters buildings to which it is likely that there will be good public transport links. The locations of the headquarters of the new district councils has yet to be decided. Informal soundings with a number of the current Chief Executives has indicated that councils would be likely to welcome such an approach by the CEO, that office space for area electoral offices is likely to be

available and that the councils would be unlikely to have difficulty in making additional space available at election time or in the event of a full canvass. The rent would be fixed by the district valuer. It is not, of course, possible to give any accurate assessment of the cost of this option until the new shadow councils exist and can be approached but informal contact with a district valuer has indicated that a rent of between £8 and £10 per square foot would be likely. Professional advice is that, having regard to the nature of EONI's business, it would be reasonable to allow an area of around 160 square feet per staff member. On that basis each of the 7 offices would have a floor area of around 480 sq ft for which an annual rent in the range of £3.8k to £4.8k would be likely. Even the higher end of the range would result in a saving in rent alone of around £100k per year for the offices located outside Belfast. It is likely that there would be further as yet unquantifiable savings in other costs such as cleaning, insurance and rates which would be likely to be sufficient to meet any extra expenditure required on off-site storage and the hire of additional accommodation for any election or canvass.

- 8.11 This option would probably be most acceptable to local politicians. It would, however, be far from ideal for meaningful outreach. With a staff of only three in each office it is not really practicable to operate outreach and still continue to have the office open to the public. There is also a risk that if there are area electoral offices in each council area politicians will expect everything, including election counts, to be conducted on a district council basis. Whilst that could be done the cost of doing it would be very significantly higher than conducting e-counts at a smaller number of locations. The major cost for an e-count relates to the counting equipment and the expert staff required to operate it. Plainly the greater the number of count centres the greater the cost.

- 8.12 Under this model each of the seven area offices would be responsible for their own district council election. The Belfast area office would continue to be responsible for elections to the four Belfast Parliamentary constituencies and for the assembly elections using the same constituencies. Outside Belfast the remaining fourteen Parliamentary constituencies would be split between the six area offices. The precise split cannot be determined until the new Parliamentary and District council boundaries and the likely locations of the offices are known.
- 8.13 It is probable that existing staff would only have to travel relatively short additional distances to the new offices and that unfair dismissal/ redundancy would be unlikely to be a major issue. The cost of excess fares would not be significant.

Option 4 – Headquarters building in central Belfast and four local offices

- 8.14 This is likely to be the cheapest of all the options and also the one which would best facilitate the CEO in meeting his statutory obligations.
- 8.15 This is a variation of Option 3. The arrangements for headquarters and the Belfast area office would be the same but instead of one area electoral office in each of the new district councils outside Belfast there would be one larger area office in each pair of district council areas. The cost of this option, which cannot be accurately estimated for the reasons given above, is likely to be less than Option 3. There would be savings on equipment costs, for example, one rather than two photocopiers and the rent of one large office may be less than that of two small ones.

8.16 Whilst not as attractive to local politicians as the previous option it is likely that their concerns could be allayed if an offer was made to provide area electoral office services at a suitable location in the district council area that did not have an office for a limited period each week or fortnight and more frequently at other periods of high activity such as the run-up to an election or a full canvass. Because under this option each office would have a staff of 5 or 6 it would be perfectly possible to provide such a service whilst at the same time undertaking the outreach work with schools and elsewhere that is essential if the comprehensiveness and the accuracy of the register is to be maintained.

8.17 Under this option the Belfast area office would continue to be responsible for elections in the Belfast District Council and to the four Belfast Parliamentary constituencies. Outside Belfast each of the three offices would be responsible for the elections to two district councils and to either 4 or 5 Parliamentary constituencies.

9 EVALUATION OF OPTIONS

9.1 Due to the degree of uncertainty identified it is not possible to carry out a full assessment of options of the kind required for a business case. However, on the basis of the information currently available and making reasonable assumptions it would appear likely that Option 4 (HQ plus 4 local offices) is likely to be both the least expensive as well as most effective and acceptable option. If implemented it would be likely to result in an annual reduction in premises costs of around £100k or a reduction of nearly 24%.

9.2 Before a business case can be prepared clarification is required in relation to a number of issues including the following (the likely date on which the information will become available is shown in brackets) –

- new Parliamentary and district council boundaries (late 2007)
- location of new district council headquarters (early 2009)
- willingness of the new district councils to provide suitable accommodation (late 2008)
- assessment by district valuer of the rent payable (late 2008)
- bedding in of continuous registration process (mid-late 2007)
- decision on introduction of e-counting (late 2007)
- professional assessment of likelihood of sub-letting existing premises until expiry or termination of lease (immediately prior to preparation of business case)
- professional assessment of transfer and setting up costs (immediately prior to preparation of business case)

9.3 These factors point to the business case being prepared in late 2008 with a view to a decision on the way forward being taken in early 2009 and implemented as soon as practicable thereafter. What is practicable will depend on the timing of elections. It is known that the European elections will take place in June 2009 and a general election is likely that year. Elections to the shadow ‘super councils’ are planned for 2008. **Given that a canvass is likely to be undertaken in late summer/autumn 2010 there would seem to be a possible window for relocation during the six months commencing September 2009.**

10 ACTION TO BE TAKEN NOW

10.1 Pending the preparation of a business case there are a number of steps that should be taken. These include –

- Consulting local politicians (late 2006)
- Consulting staff (late 2006)
- Ensuring that any lease expiring or with a break clause before 2009 is renewed only up till then and thereafter on an annual basis (immediate)
- Maintenance costs and new equipment cost on all premises except those in Belfast to be minimised (immediate)
- The decision on the role of the CEO/EONI in relation to district council elections to be progressed (late 2006)
- Continuous registration to be progress in accordance with the project plan (ongoing)
- Use of e-counting at the Scottish elections in May 2007 to be monitored and a Ministerial decision on its introduction for all elections in Northern Ireland to be sought as soon as possible thereafter (mid-late 2007)
- EONI interest in locating a number of area electoral offices in district council HQ buildings to be flagged up with the appropriate RPA steering group (late 2006)
- Consideration of civil service status for EONI staff to be progressed (late 2006)
- Ensuring that all EONI decisions are compatible with the proposed new structure.

11 CONCLUSION

- 11.1 The present structure of the EONI estate is not sustainable. In view of the significant changes that will take place over the next two years it is likely that the future estate should be comprised of the existing HQ building in central Belfast and either 3 or 6 area electoral offices located in the headquarters of the new district councils. The Belfast area electoral office should continue in its present premises adjacent to EONI HQ but its relocation within the HQ building should be considered after rolling registration has bedded in.
- 11.2 The best estimate is that the new structure, once implemented, would result in an annual saving of around £100k if Option 4 is implemented, which equates to a reduction of nearly 24% in the cost of the estate. The Option 3, whilst it would deliver almost as great a saving would operationally be less attractive.
- 11.3 The new structure would enable the CEO to continue to maintain a register which is the most accurate and comprehensive in the United Kingdom and in which all the people of Northern Ireland could continue to have confidence. It would also facilitate the efficient and effective conduct of elections.
- 11.4 It will not be practicable to prepare a business case to inform a decision on this matter until late 2008 or early 2009 but action should be taken now to pave the way for the likely moves.