

The Electoral Office for Northern Ireland

Internal Audit report 2007/08

Area Electoral Offices

31 January 2008

Ref: BC/lb

Private and Confidential

D Bain Esq
Chief Electoral Officer
Electoral Office for Northern Ireland
2nd Floor
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31 January 2008

Dear Sir

Re: Fieldwork visit – Area electoral offices

Introduction

1. We completed our internal audit fieldwork visit in respect of the 2007/08 financial year in relation to the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland's ("EONI's") area electoral offices. This report summarises our findings.
2. We previously undertook a review of the EONI's area electoral offices in February 2007 and determined that a "reasonable" assurance rating was appropriate. We reported five recommendations within our report of which four were accepted by EONI Management. The recommendations accepted by EONI management related to the timely completion of the election timetable, the formal review of the canvassers' weekly work record sheets, the amendment of the Electoral Assistants Manual and the management of absent voters.
3. We revisited these recommendations as part of our 2007/08 internal audit follow-up report and noted that two of the four recommendations had been fully implemented (the formal review of the canvassers' weekly work record sheets and amendments to the Electoral Assistants Manual.) We note that our recommendation made in respect of the management of absent voters is subject to changes in the legislation which is beyond EONI's remit. The remaining recommendation in respect of the timely completion of the election timetable cannot be tested until the next election.

Background

4. There are eight Area Electoral Offices located in seven different locations throughout Northern Ireland (two of these Area Electoral Offices share accommodation in Banbridge). Each Area Electoral Office is managed by an Area Electoral Officer ("AEO"). As part of our fieldwork we visited the Newtownards and Omagh areas offices.
5. The key responsibilities of each Area Electoral Office are as follows:
 - a) responsibility for ongoing review of the polling station scheme, preparing and maintaining polling station schemes which effectively meet the needs of the public, political parties and EONI;
 - b) responsibility for registration:
 - i) ensuring that all necessary preparations for the registration cycle are made;

- ii) producing accurate lists of amendments to the published Register by the statutory publication dates;
 - iii) providing an efficient and courteous service to the public throughout the registration process; and
 - iv) maintaining efficiently accurate lists of special category voters.
- c) database management: maintaining a property database which accurately reflects any demolition or new properties;
- d) electoral abuse prevention: implementing policies and procedures relating to electoral abuse prevention, including the introduction of personal identifiers;
- e) absent voting: producing and maintaining accurate lists of absent voters;
- f) information technology (“IT”) systems introduction: ensuring that all procedures in connection with the IT system are fully implemented; and
- g) elections:
- i) ensuring that all administrative matters relating to elections are completed in accordance with the election task timetable. This includes recruitment and training of election staff, hiring premises for polling stations and count centres, organising stationery, ballot boxes and transport; and
 - ii) conducting elections efficiently in accordance with legislation and preparing all relevant accounts.

6. We note that the EONI have recently introduced a series of area electoral office compliance reviews which are undertaken by the Assistant Chief Electoral Officer or the Project Manager.

7. We note that the EONI launched a registration awareness week in October 2007. The aim of the campaign was to increase registration levels, in particular, targeting people with a disability who are underrepresented on the electoral register. Over thirty public events were held across Northern Ireland with each area electoral office devising a registration initiative plan to target groups within their constituency.

Scope

8. In line with EONI’s annual internal audit plan, approved by the Board on 16 August 2007, the fieldwork visit focussed on assessing the following control objectives in respect of the system of area electoral offices:

- a) to ensure that the Electoral Register is updated accurately and by the statutory publication dates;
- b) to ensure that all registration initiatives are documented, monitored and evaluated;
- c) to ensure that the property database is updated accurately and on a timely basis for additions and disposals;
- d) to ensure that Headquarters audit and checking procedures for Area Offices are adequate for their purpose;
- e) to ensure that policies and procedures relating to the prevention of electoral abuse, including the introduction of personal identifiers, are implemented;
- f) to ensure that preparation and maintenance of the polling station schemes are adequate and efficient;

- g) to ensure that accurate lists of absent voters are produced and maintained;
- h) to ensure that procedures in respect of the IT system are fully implemented;
- i) to ensure that staff employed by the area electoral offices are recruited fairly, trained effectively in all procedures and managed effectively to achieve office objectives;
- j) to ensure that office expenditure is maintained within the budgets agreed with the CEO;
- k) to ensure that administrative matters relating to elections are completed in accordance with the election task timetable, including recruitment and training of election staff, hiring premises for poll stations and count centres, organising stationery, ballot boxes and transport; and
- l) to ensure that elections are conducted efficiently in accordance with legislation and that all relevant accounts are prepared.

9. This report is addressed to the Chief Electoral Officer (“CEO”) and as required by our terms of appointment, copies of all finalised reports will be issued to the NIO’s Head of Internal Audit, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Rights and International Relations Division (“RIR”) – the relevant sponsoring division within the NIO. No duty of care is accepted to any party other than those to whom the report is addressed. No responsibility is accepted for any reliance placed upon our report, should it be used for any purpose other than that stated above.

Basis of assurance

10. We conducted our internal audit work in accordance with the Government Internal Audit Manual (“GIAM”). Our work included an examination, on a test basis, of transactions processed in accordance with EONI’s system of internal control.

11. This review has been conducted within the context of an internal audit review process designed to address key risks on an annual basis. Only 3.5 days was allocated to this review and consequently there was a requirement to conduct a general assessment of the key aspects of the systems and then to focus on a limited number of specific areas. In these circumstances, this review should not be regarded as being an extensive and detailed review sufficient to test and assess all aspects of EONI’s area electoral offices activities.

12. We planned and performed our internal audit work to obtain reasonable assurance that the systems were operating as described. However, you should not rely on our work to identify all instances of fraud or error. The responsibility for these matters rests with management and the Chief Electoral Officer.

Findings

13. Our review identified that procedures had been established in respect of the documentation, monitoring and evaluation of registration initiatives. However, we identified weaknesses in relation to the frequency of the area electoral offices compliance visits and the sample sizes to test compliance with EONI procedures.

14. We have attached at *Appendix A* the key findings identified during the course of our review.

15. The findings included in this report were discussed with Mr Douglas Bain (Chief Electoral Officer), Mrs Margaret McMullen (Head of Corporate Services) and Mr Peter Mullan (Finance Officer) on 12 October 2007. Further discussions were held with Mrs June Butler (Assistant Chief Electoral Officer) on 11 January 2008. A draft of this report was issued for management comments on 11 January 2008.

Management responses

16. We have attached an implementation table at *Appendix B* for management to record their responses and implementation dates for each of the audit recommendations. Responses confirm if each recommendation is accepted, partially accepted or not accepted and, if accepted, management have provided details of their strategy for implementing each recommendation.

Assurance rating – satisfactory

17. In our opinion, there are a number of improvements which could be incorporated within EONI's internal control system for area electoral offices particularly, in relation to the frequency of the area electoral offices compliance visits and the sample sizes to test compliance with EONI procedures. However, the existing controls in place within the area electoral offices system are basically sound and provide **satisfactory** assurance regarding the effective and efficient achievement of EONI's objectives in relation to area electoral offices.

18. We have attached a definition of the assurance ratings at *Appendix C*.

Other matters

19. We would take this opportunity to thank EONI's management and staff for their assistance and co-operation during the course of this assignment.

20. If you have any queries in relation to this correspondence, please do not hesitate to contact Brian Clerkin or Lacey Beckett.

Yours faithfully

ASM Horwath

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Area electoral offices monitoring procedures

A

Weaknesses

A1. We note that the EONI have recently introduced a series of area electoral office compliance reviews which are undertaken by the Assistant Chief Electoral Officer or the Project Manager. The monitoring procedures are summarised as follows:

- a) **registration forms and addendum lists** – a sample of forms are to be selected and vouched to the addendum list. The sample size of the forms to be checked is not specified although a sample of ten to fifteen forms is considered reasonable;
- b) **audit reports** – the focus of the review will ensure that audit reports have been completed and retained. A sample of errors highlighted in the audit reports are to be selected and reviewed to ensure that corrective action has been completed. The required sample level is not specified;
- c) **special category electors** – a review in this area is to be completed as deemed necessary. The aim of the review is to ensure that forms are filed in a clear and orderly manner and that the forms has been correctly processed on EROS with attention given to the declaration and absent voters. We note that a small sample of forms is considered sufficient to review;
- d) **european electors** – a sample of ten european elector forms should be selected for review to ensure that the correct nationality code has been added;
- e) **absent votes** – periodically an additional review will be undertaken of a random sample of new absent votes entered on to EROS; and
- f) **general area office** – to include housekeeping related issues at each of the area electoral office including identification card applications, the sale of the register, complaints, human resources and finance.

A2. We noted the following points in relation to our review of the monitoring procedures:

- a) the frequency by which the checks should be completed in respect of all areas is not documented within the monitoring procedures; and
- b) the sample sizes to be selected for review is not specified for all areas.

Effect

A3. There is a risk that, if the frequency and sample size is not specified in respect of each area there is a risk of a lack of adequate review.

Recommendation

A4. We recommend that frequency and level of monitoring checks within each of the areas should be established and documented within the monitoring procedures. Furthermore, we recommend that a risk based approach should be used to establish the required level of monitoring checks to be completed with consideration given to the individual circumstances of the area electoral office e.g. the varying level of absent voters across the area electoral offices.

Summary of recommendations and implementation schedule

B

Reference	Recommendation	Management response	Action Taken / To be Taken	Implementation Date
A6.	We recommend that frequency and level of monitoring checks within each of the areas should be established and documented within the monitoring procedures. Furthermore, we recommend that a risk based approach should be used to establish the required level of monitoring checks to be completed with consideration given to the individual circumstances of the area electoral office e.g. the varying level of absent voters across the area electoral offices.	Accepted	Area Office Management Audit/Monitoring Procedures and checklist to be amended.	28 February 2008.

Assurance rating definitions

C

Substantial – There is a robust system of risk management, control and governance which should ensure that objectives are fully achieved.

Satisfactory – There is some risk that objectives may not be fully achieved. Some improvements are required to enhance the adequacy and / or effectiveness of risk management, control and governance.

Limited – There is considerable risk that the system will fail to meet its objectives. Prompt action is required to improve the adequacy and effectiveness of risk management, control and governance.

Unacceptable – The system has failed or there is a real and substantial risk that the system will fail to meet its objectives. Urgent action is required to improve the adequacy and effectiveness of risk management, control and governance.