

Report of the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland 2018-2019

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Presented to Parliament pursuant to section 9(1) of the
Northern Ireland (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2006

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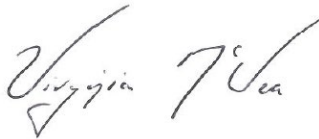
The Rt. Hon Brandon Lewis MP
Secretary of State for Northern Ireland
Northern Ireland Office
1 Horse Guards Road
LONDON
SW1A 2HQ

18th February 2020

Dear Secretary of State,

I have the honour, in accordance with section 9(1) of the Northern Ireland (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2006, to present this Report on how I have discharged my functions for the year ending 31 March 2019.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Virginia McVea', written in a cursive style.

Virginia McVea

Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland

St. Anne's House
15 Church Street
Belfast
BT1 1ER

FOREWORD

This Annual report covers the last year up to 31 March 2019.

The Electoral Office for Northern Ireland (EONI) administered three unplanned electoral events during this period; the West Tyrone Parliamentary by-election in May 2018, the Recall petition in respect of Mr Ian Paisley MP in August and September 2018 and a Local Council by-election in November 2018. We also continued preparation work for the planned Local Council Elections in May 2019. During this time EONI remained on standby for a further Assembly election.

Online registration was successfully launched in June 2018 with record levels of applications averaging 7,888 per month to the end of the business year. We had 21,017 online registrations during March 2019. The Register is at its largest ever at the close of the business year, being 1,284,472.

Secondment of a data lead from the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency has enabled greater performance management and improvements in completeness and accuracy with the development of processes to enable EONI to drill down house to house and street by street to show where registration should be higher when comparing our Register to other administrative data sets.

Following the response to the public consultation on the Future Delivery of Electoral Services in Northern Ireland, EONI has moved to centralise all of its work and this should complete in June 2019.

EONI completed consultation on Local Council Polling stations in January 2019 and will move now to review of Parliamentary Polling stations in the 2019-20 year.

Thanks are due to our dedicated team at EONI. I wish to thank first those staff who left us as a consequence of centralisation. The conscientiousness of these

individuals cannot be overstated in working so closely with the rest of the team as we prepared for the Local Council elections that took place in May 2019. I must then move to the broader staff team who are working so hard to transform EONI with modernisation processes and thank them for the tremendous effort working through many challenges.

Beyond our internal team we also developed our larger team within Councils in preparation for the Local Council elections.

Thanks to SOLACE and each of the Chief Executives along with their teams for the attention to detail and support of all our training events. Thanks to our casual staff particularly at the Recall Petition who worked to ensure that this first electoral event of its kind ran so smoothly. Electoral administration does not operate without the goodwill and effort of thousands of additional staff at election time.

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SECTION 1 - INTRODUCTION

Electoral Administration in Northern Ireland

1.1 The arrangements for electoral administration in Northern Ireland are different from elsewhere in the United Kingdom. The system in Northern Ireland is administered centrally by the Chief Electoral Officer (CEO) for Northern Ireland who is a statutory office holder appointed by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. The CEO is assisted by the staff of the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland (EONI), the administrative structure created to support the CEO in the discharge of her duties. The CEO is both the electoral registration officer for all 18 constituencies in Northern Ireland and returning officer for all elections and referendums in that jurisdiction. The CEO's main duties and responsibilities are set out in the Electoral Law Act (Northern Ireland) 1962 (as amended by Article 6 of the Electoral Law (Northern Ireland) Order 1972), the Representation of the People Act 1983 and the Northern Ireland (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2006. The Accounting Officer of the Northern Ireland Office is responsible to Parliament for all expenditure incurred by the CEO.

Role of the Chief Electoral Officer (CEO)

1.2 The main duties of the CEO are:

- to act as electoral registration officer for all constituencies in Northern Ireland;
- to act as returning officer for all elections and Referendums in Northern Ireland;
- to recommend to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland by 16 April each year whether or not a registration canvass should be conducted;
- to act as an assessor to the Boundary Commission for Northern Ireland;
- to act as an assessor to the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner; and
- to lead and manage the EONI.

- 1.3 The CEO is required to report to the Secretary of State on an annual basis on how she has discharged her functions. Section 9(2) of the Northern Ireland (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2006 requires her to include in her Report an assessment of the extent to which the relevant registration objectives in Northern Ireland have been met in the year to which the report relates.

Role of the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland (EONI)

- 1.4 The Electoral Office for Northern Ireland is the name given to the organisation that supports the CEO in the performance of her duties. It operates from a headquarters building in Belfast and area offices across Northern Ireland.
- 1.5 There are five Area Electoral Offices located across Northern Ireland. During 2018-2019 these offices were moving to centralisation. All offices outside Belfast will be closed by June 2019.

SECTION 2 - PERFORMANCE AGAINST TARGETS

2.1 This section summarises the performance achieved against the Targets and Development Objectives set out in the Business Plan 2018/19 which can be viewed at www.eoni.org.uk.

2.2 Thirteen targets were achieved in full.

Further information can be found at Annex A.

SECTION 3 – REGISTRATION

- 3.1 High levels of registration were administrated during the business year in Northern Ireland. There were 1,284,472 electors registered on 1 March 2019.
- 3.2 EONI continued to receive quarterly data from the Business Services Organisation (BSO) containing the names and addresses of those who had moved address or had registered a change of name with a health professional in the previous quarter. This was 'data matched' against the information held on the EONI database. As a result, during the period covered by this report, initial 'invitations to register' or to update information on the register were issued to around 53,892 electors.
- 3.3 The Vital Statistics Department of Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency provide weekly lists of births, deaths and marriages. Information on deaths is data matched with the EONI database and approximately 255 records are removed from the register on a weekly basis. Marriage data is also data matched and a report showing change of name and/or address is used by Area Offices to issue registration forms to those who may need to update their details.
- 3.4 Lisburn and Castlereagh District Council continued to send fortnightly records to EONI of those who have attended Citizenship ceremonies and who have attained British Citizenship. Between 1 April 2018 and 31 March 2019 letters were sent to 481 individuals who were not already registered or who had changed their details.
- 3.5 EONI has worked with education team at Parliament Buildings, Hazelwood Integrated School and Department of Education to scope potential high impact, efficient ways to secure attainers on the register and this work will be further developed in 2019/2020.

Online Registration

- 3.6 In the reporting year EONI worked to deliver online registration in Northern Ireland. The system went live in June 2018. Online registration figures were 78,884.

Data matching

- 3.7 Following successful collaboration with NISRA (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency) a secondment has been put in place in EONI to develop data analysis and ensure optimal use of data to improve the completeness and accuracy of the Register. We were able to launch a new app matching electorate properties to polling stations and further new data analysis is planned for 2019/2020.

Registration Statistics

- 3.8 Since December 2018 publication of the register there were 14,753 additions to the register and 13,260 records were removed as deceased, no longer eligible for registration at a given address or in accordance with the legislation (see paragraph 3.4). There were 4,464 registrants modified, for example as a result of a name change.

Meeting the Registration Objectives

- 3.9 Under Section 9 of the Northern Ireland (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2006 I am required to include in the Annual Report an assessment of the extent to which the relevant registration objectives have been met.

- 3.10 These objectives as set out in Section 10ZB of the Representation of the People Act 1983 are –

“to secure, so far as reasonably practicable –

- (a) that every person who is entitled to be registered in a register is registered in it,

- (b) that no person who is not entitled to be registered in a register is registered in it, and
- (c) that none of the required information relating to any person registered in a register is false.”

3.11 I am satisfied that the work completed during the reporting period has ensured, so far as reasonably practicable, the successful delivery of these objectives. The register published in December 2018 held 1,281,738 electors, an increase of 8,096 electors from the figure at December 2017. By the end of the period covered in this report, the register had risen to 1,273,642.

3.12 Having regard to the comments and observations above, a recommendation for a Canvass in the year 2019/20 was made to the Secretary of State.

SECTION 4 – ELECTIONS

In the last reporting year there were three unscheduled electoral events, namely a UK Parliamentary by-election in the constituency of West Tyrone on 3 May 2018, the first Recall petition in the UK which opened on 8 August 2018 and reported to the Speaker of the House on 20 September 2018 and a Local Council by-election with polling day on 18 October 2018. Additionally, the EONI was preparing for the Local Council Elections to be held on 2 May 2019.

West Tyrone UK Parliamentary By-election

- 4.1 The by-election was held on 3 May 2018. The eligible electorate was 64,101.
- 4.2 There were 82 polling stations and 200 polling staff. Polling day was successful with all polling stations opened on time and no queues reported.
- 4.3 Omagh Leisure Complex was the count venue. The count was conducted overnight.
- 4.4 The overall turnout was 55.13 percent and the total number of spoiled votes was 305 of the 35,337 votes cast. The total number of postal votes issued was 1,431 and the total number of proxy votes issued was 588.

Recall Petition for Mr Ian Paisley August 2018

- 4.5 The Recall Petition opened on 8 August 2018 and closed on 19 September 2018. The eligible electorate was 75,428.
- 4.6 Absent voting was available on demand and the usual reasons were not required.
- 4.7 There were three signing places opened for those who wish to attend in person.
- 4.8 Boxes were returned and verified each night at EONI headquarters.

4.9 The petitions signed accounted for 9.4 percent and the total no of spoiled petitions were 14 of the 7,099 petitions signed.

4.10 Mr Paisley was returned to his seat.

Carrick Castle Local By-election

4.11 The by-election was held on 18 October 2018. The eligible electorate was 13,181.

4.12 There was 15 polling stations and 41 polling staff. Polling day was successful with all polling stations opened on time and no queues reported.

4.13 Carrickfergus amphitheatre leisure centre was the count venue The count commenced at 08.41 on 19 October 2018.

4.14 The overall turnout was 21.8 percent and the total number of spoiled votes was 24 of the 2,873 votes cast. The total number of postal votes issued was 64 and the total number of proxy votes issued was 8.

Electoral Offences

4.15 No cases were reported by EONI to the PSNI during this reporting year.

SECTION 5 – CENTRAL SERVICES

Corporate

- 5.1 Following the response to the public consultation on the Future Delivery of Electoral Services in NI and the expiry of the leases in the four offices outside Belfast, we are moving to centralise services and plan for all outer offices to be closed by June 2019. Online applications have been made at a higher rate than anticipated and we plan to pilot a kiosk at a Council office to investigate the demand for access to online beyond personal phones and other devices.

Staffing

- 5.2 In year we began redundancy processes in respect of 10 staff members.
- 5.3 In anticipation of the closure of offices we initiated a recruitment programme for central office staff at Administrative Officer level in July 2019 and there were nine fixed term staff recruited.
- 5.3 Throughout the year there were meetings with the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance (NIPSA) in accordance with the recognised JCC process.

Training

- 5.4 Annual mandatory e-learning was completed by permanent and casual staff on information assurance and data handling through the Civil Services Learning website. Further cyber security training was rolled out across the organisation.
- 5.5 The Equality Commission provided good relations training for all staff at EONI headquarters in August 2018.
- 5.6 GDPR training was provided across the organisation and the appointment of a Data Protection Officer will provide audit and further training packages.

Equality

- 5.7 The annual fair employment return was submitted to the Equality Commission for the 12 month period to 1 May 2018.
- 5.8 A section 75 annual progress report was completed and submitted to the Equality Commission in August 2018.

Funding

- 5.10 Total operational funding, excluding capital and depreciation, provided to EONI for 2018/19 was £2,045,000. Total expenditure excluding capital and depreciation was £ 2,032,600. Capital expenditure was £ 62,000 with corresponding budget of £ 62,000.
- 5.11 Approximately 90 procurement exercises were completed. EONI now process the majority of operational invoices through Account NI. Suppliers are issued with a purchase order number by EONI and instructed to send their invoices directly to Account NI. The majority of valid invoices were paid within five working days.
- 5.12 Funding for elections is non-voted money and does not form part of EONI core funding. Election expenditure is accounted for in the annual Returning Officer's Expenses, Northern Ireland which are audited by the National Audit Office before being presented to Parliament.
- 5.13 The spending limit (maximum recoverable amount) for the West Tyrone UK Parliamentary by-election held on 3 May 2018 was £ 202,000. Estimated expenditure at 31 March 2019 was £ 195,581. The cost of candidates mailing expenses are not included in the maximum recoverable amount and are funded separately. These amounted to £ 59,000 for this by election.
- 5.14 The spending limit (maximum recoverable amount) for the Recall Petition held between August and September 2018 was £ 188,926. Estimated expenditure at 31 March 2019 was £ 165,644.

- 5.15 The total cost of the Carrick Castle by election - £ 65,936.11 - was paid for by Mid and East Antrim Borough Council. This figure includes candidate's mailings of £ 21,139.45 and a recharge from the Electoral Office of £ 25,850.37 which covers expenditure on polling staff, postage of poll cards and printing. The costs of the Local Council elections in May 2019 will be reflected in the 2019-20 annual report.

Stakeholder and Media Relations

Stakeholders

- 5.16 The statutory duty for raising awareness lies with the Electoral Commission but the EONI has developed communication tools and is planning to provide briefings to media and make more information available on the website faster for the Local Council elections in May 2019.

Political Parties

- 5.17 I attended all of the Assembly Parties Panel meetings convened by the Electoral Commission to discuss electoral matters. At these meetings, information was provided on changes made to electoral law and practice, on current initiatives such as go live of online registration and data analytics as well as planning arrangements for electoral events.

Electoral Commission

- 5.18 Strategic planning meetings were held with the Electoral Commission which included regular ongoing communication and review to ensure continuous improvements. The EONI advised of its performance management initiatives and new facilities through data analytics to ensure continuous improvements. Further to the request of the EONI, The Electoral Commission attended many verifications during the Recall. We had requested that every night be attended.

Northern Ireland Office

5.19 There is regular contact on a range of issues, including suggested amendments to various aspects of electoral legislation and Canvass preparation.

Helpline

5.20 My staff dealt with 6,784 calls from 15 January 2019. No call statistics taken before then.

Website

5.21 There were 214,756 visits to the EONI website during the year.

Records Management

5.22 22 requests were received for information under the Freedom of Information Act 2000.

Electoral Identity Cards

5.23 There were 11,417 Electoral Identity Cards issued during the reporting year.

Complaints

5.24 The EONI operated satisfactorily, responding to all queries and concerns raised and continued to provide counter, electronic and phone line services.

IT Systems

5.25 In addition to launch of the online application for registration service in NI, the EONI moved to a new electronic management system in year.

5.26 The IT health check on the EONI IT systems was carried out in December 2018. We had a further opportunity to invite the National cyber security centre to inspect our systems and this took place in May 2019 with

assurances provided by them as to the health of our system. All identified vulnerabilities are addressed and Remedial Action plan is up to date.

SECTION 6 – CORPORATE GOVERNANCE

Governance

- 6.1 As the EONI moves through transformation it sought internal audit aligned with areas highlighted for development.
- 6.2 The senior management team began a bespoke training package to ensure optimal performance of the EONI through transformation being led by the team.

Internal Audit

- 6.3 During 2018/19 the Government Internal Audit Agency (GIAA) provided services and undertook planned audits of Finance and Logistics and governance.
- 6.4 The internal Audit opinion for 2018/19 Finance and logistics reported a limited level of assurance with development opportunity identified in line with transformation plans. Auditors made a total of 13 recommendations which were accepted.
- 6.5 Internal Audit reported that they were satisfied with progress made and highly supportive of transformation plans and improvements to date. They have noted in engagement the impact of unplanned electoral work. The majority of recommendations were implemented by agreed dates or explanation provided if any slippage. Progress reports were provided to the Audit and risk Committee of the Northern Ireland Office.
- 6.6 The governance report is anticipated in 2019/20 business year.

SECTION 7 – THE AREA OFFICES

7.1 At the end of the reporting period there were three EONI offices and constituencies for which they are responsible are shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1 – Area Electoral Offices

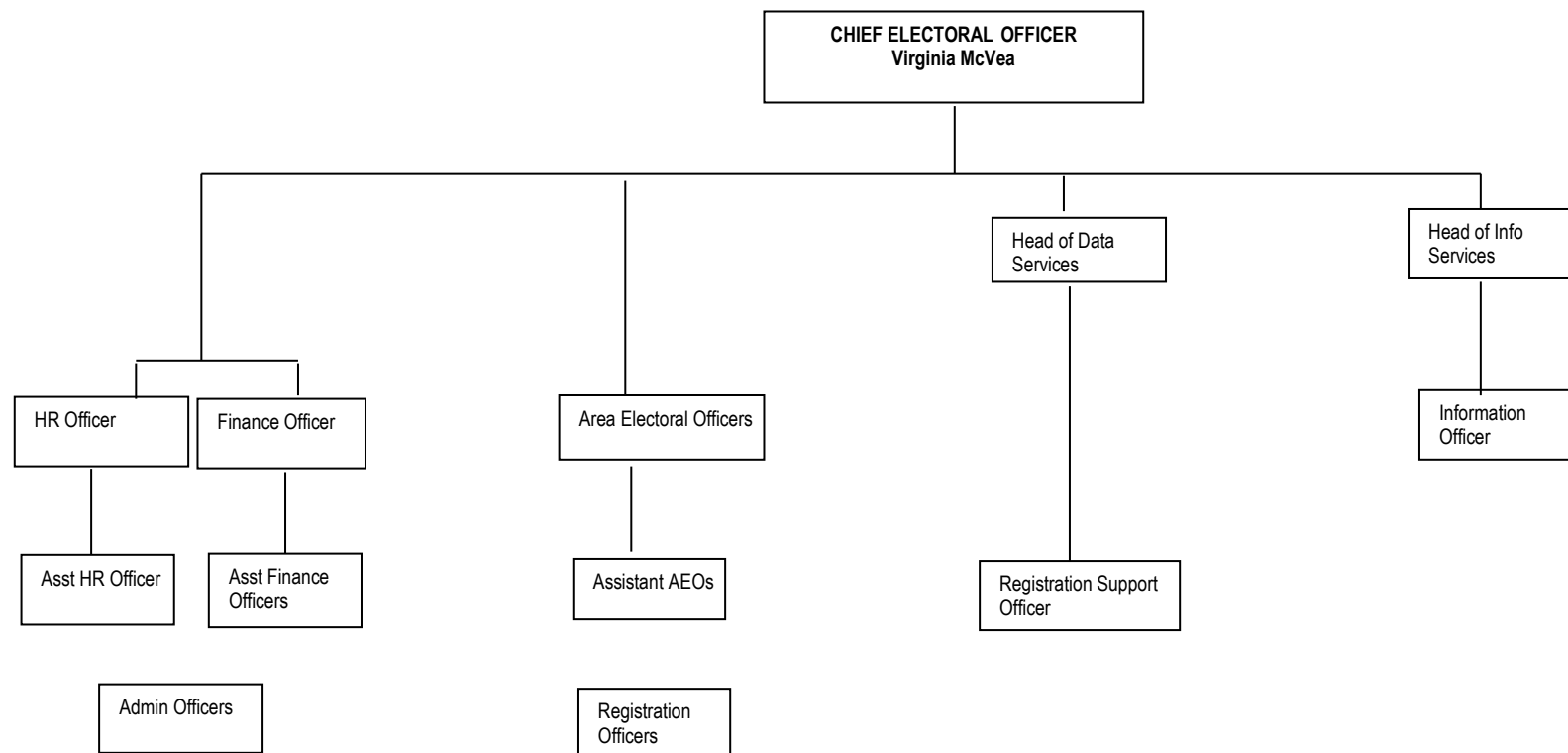
LOCATION	CONSTITUENCIES
Derry/Londonderry	East Londonderry Foyle
Omagh	Fermanagh & South Tyrone West Tyrone
Belfast – covered by four Deputy Returning Officers	Belfast East Belfast North Belfast South Belfast West East Antrim Lagan Valley Mid Ulster Newry & Armagh North Antrim North Down South Antrim South Down Strangford Upper Bann

7.2 Each office is managed by an Area Electoral Officer who acted as Deputy Registration Officer for either 2, 3 or 4 constituencies. As such, these officers had, under my supervision, responsibility for all matters relating to electoral registration. Each Area Electoral Officer was supported by an Assistant Area Electoral Officer and a number of registration officers appropriate to the workload of that office.

Performance Against targets and Development Objectives 2018/19

Business Objectives		Status
1.	By 1 December 2018 to initiate a new project to increase the number of attainers on the Register.	A
2.	By March 2019 to have completed scoping on the comparison of areas of deprivation and levels of Registration.	A
3.	By 1 December 2018, working in partnership with Land and Property Services, Ordnance Survey to have identified opportunities for improvement in the mapping used for data matching at EONI.	A
4.	By March 2019 to have made preparations to run a Canvass for Northern Ireland.	A
5.	By July 2018 to have initiated on-line registration services.	A
Business Objectives		Status
1.	To prepare for a by-election in West Tyrone.	A
2.	In the by-election to pilot a single Absent Vote processing team at EONI.	A
3.	By December 2018 to have completed the suite of training materials for elections.	A
4.	By June 2018 to have initiated a training programme for Local Government staff in preparation for Local Government elections in May 2019.	A
Business Objectives		Status
1.	By December 2018 to have completed a data analytics scoping study on opportunities to improve our data handling.	A
2.	By December 2018 to have reviewed cybersecurity arrangements at EONI with the National Cyber Security Centre at GCHQ.	A
3.	By May 2018 to have reviewed and updated all data policies in line with GDPR.	A
Business Objectives		Status
1.	By December 2018 to have reviewed finance procedures and processes.	A
2.	By March 2019 to have reviewed the staffing structure at EONI.	A
3.	By 31 August 2018 to have completed a further three year Action Plan in accordance with the Equality Scheme and Disability Action Plan.	A
4.	To remain prepared to respond to potential publication of the response to the public consultation on future delivery of electoral services in NI.	A

ANNEX B
As of March 2019



PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCIES:

Lagan Valley South Down Upper Bann	Foyle East Londonderry	West Tyrone Fermanagh & South Tyrone	Strangford North Down Belfast East	North Antrim Mid Ulster	Belfast North East Antrim South Antrim
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OPERATING COSTS 2018/19

	£k
<u>Basic Pay -</u>	
Permanent Staff	894.6
Temporary Staff	8.6
Basic Pay Total	903.2
<u>Overtime -</u>	
Permanent Staff	4.0
Overtime Total	4.0
<u>Employers National Insurance -</u>	
Permanent & Temporary Staff	97.0
Employers National Insurance Total	97.0
Accrued Superannuation Liability Charge	187.0
Total Staff	1,191.2
Travel & Subsistence	13.1
Staff Training & Development	16.1
Other Staff Costs	11.7
Operating Leases	207.2
Accommodation Costs	226.1
Communications	88.2
Computer Charges	153.6
Other Office Services - Postage	157.9
Advertisement & Publicity	8.1
Contracted-out Services	18.7
Professional Costs	41.7
Consultancy Costs	5.6
Hospitality	3.2
Non Capital Purchases	0.5
Inter Departmental Notional Charges	8.7
Total Goods & Services	960.4
Non Cash Costs (Depreciation)	191.0
Receipts	-119.0
TOTAL PROGRAMME	2,223.6
Capital	59.0
GRAND TOTAL	2,282.6

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