

Report of the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland 2019-2020

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

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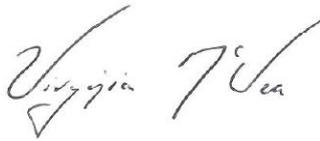
The Rt Hon Brandon Lewis MP, CBE
Secretary of State for Northern Ireland
Northern Ireland Office
1 Horse Guards Road
LONDON
SW1A 2HQ

2 February 2021

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 2020.

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 2020.

The Electoral Office for Northern Ireland (EONI) administered three electoral events during this period; the Northern Ireland Local Government elections in May 2019, the European Parliamentary election in June 2019 and the UK Parliamentary election in December 2019. We also continued preparation work for the Canvass planned for July 2020. In June 2019 we completed the programme of centralisation of electoral administration services, which saw the closure of the final offices in Omagh and Londonderry.

The Register saw increases again this year being at its largest at the close of a business year, being 1,330,381¹. The online registration process was into its second year of operation and we facilitated approximately 204,000 (179,000 online and 25,000 paper) applications during the year.

The EONI completed consultation on the Parliamentary Polling Station scheme in year. A total of 29 submissions were received from elected representatives and members of the public. After reviewing the details from these submissions a total of 44 amendments were made to the final published scheme.

Interruption to electoral administration services in Northern Ireland (NI) due to Covid 19 was minimalised due to the EONI remote access planning. We stopped counter services in March 2020 but were able to provide all services online including ID cards. We hope to resume counter service and searches of the Register as early as safely possible in 2020.

Thanks are due to our dedicated team at the EONI working through the final stages of centralisation as well as serving three elections with two of those being unplanned. Particularly with the complexities caused by Covid I wish to commend the senior management team and staff for their dedication leading to minimal down hours in service provision.

¹ Total electorate for 2 March 2020

I wish to thank the Chief Executives of our eleven local councils for their work, along with their dedicated teams in running the Local Government elections. Still further, the thousands of members of the public who form part of our elections teams in working at such short notice and particularly for an election at Christmas time last year. This thanks extends to the schools, religious halls, community centres and local facilities who ensured that we could allow people to vote close to home and safely in the depth of winter. We are grateful to all our contractors for diligent and patient service in such a demanding year. Finally, thanks to the team at the NIO who were of great assistance in a year of so many unpredictable events.

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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, Referendums and Recall Petitions 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.

1.5 There were five Area Electoral Offices located across Northern Ireland. During 2019 these offices completed centralisation and all operations were moved to operate from Belfast in June 2019 in accordance with plans.

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 2019/20 which can be viewed at www.eoni.org.uk.

2.2 Twenty-one targets were achieved in full.

Further information can be found at Annex A.

SECTION 3 – REGISTRATION

- 3.1 High levels of registration were processed during this business year in Northern Ireland. There were 1,330,381 electors registered on 2 March 2020.
- 3.2 The 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 approximately 59,000 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 250 records are removed from the register on a weekly basis.
- 3.4 Lisburn and Castlereagh Council continued to send fortnightly records to the EONI of those who have attended Citizenship ceremonies and who have attained British Citizenship. Between 1 April 2019 and 31 March 2020 letters were sent to 410 individuals who were not already registered or who had changed their details.
- 3.5 The EONI has worked with the education team at Parliament Buildings, Council for the Curriculum, Examinations & Assessment (CCEA) and the Department of Education to scope potential high impact, efficient ways to secure attainers on the register and this work will be further rolled out in 2020/21 with access to the education data and lesson plans for the curriculum having been developed. We wish to express our thanks to Derek Baker, Permanent Secretary and Justin Edwards, Chief Executive of CCEA and their teams for the partnership working in year.

For those young people not in employment or education the EONI wants to thank the team at Start 360 for their dedication to the outreach project with

those young people. Interrupted by Covid 19, we look forward to rolling all this work on attainers out as soon as possible.

Online Registration

- 3.6 In the reporting year the EONI continued to deliver online registration in Northern Ireland. The system received huge demand in 2019/20 processing approximately 204,000 applications during the year.

Data matching

- 3.7 Following successful collaboration with NISRA (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency) a secondment has been put in place in the EONI to develop data analysis and ensure optimal use of data to improve the completeness and accuracy of the Register. We were able to develop a range of data cleansing initiatives to enhance the accuracy of the register with the potential for reviewing, updating and cleansing up to 75,000 addresses.

We were also able to undertake several data matching exercises using the range of data available to the EONI to identify areas of low registration for outreach. The EONI polling station application/website (link below) was updated to include more data and more functionality.

(https://apps.spatialni.gov.uk/ElectoralOffice/ElectoralOffice_PollingStations/index.html)

Registration Statistics

- 3.8 During the reporting period approximately 135,000 electors were added to the electoral register, 90,000 records were removed as deceased, no longer eligible for registration at a given address or in accordance with the legislation. There were over 20,000 records modified, for example as a result of a name change.

Data Protection

3.9 The Data Protection Officer assisted in the monitoring of internal Data Protection compliance and provided training, information and advice on data protection obligations. This included the provision of training and advice on Data Protection Impact Assessments and advising and liaising in relation to Subject Access Requests and with the supervisory authority.

Meeting the Registration Objectives

3.10 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.

3.11 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.”

3.12 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 2019 held 1,330,905 electors, an increase of 49,167 electors from the figure at December 2018. By the end of the period covered in this report, the register was 1,330,381.

3.13 Under s10(1A) of the Representation of the People Act 1983 there was a statutory requirement to conduct a Canvass in 2020 to produce a new register on 1 December 2020. However given the situation created by the

Covid 19 pandemic the Government legislated in the Coronavirus Act 2020 to postpone Canvass until 2021 and consequently plans in relation to Canvass were interrupted.

SECTION 4 – ELECTIONS

In the last reporting year there were three electoral events, the last two of which were unscheduled; Northern Ireland Local Government elections on 2 May 2019, European Parliamentary election on 23 May 2019, and a UK Parliamentary election with polling day on 12 December 2019.

NI Local Government Election

4.1 The election was held on 2 May 2019. The eligible electorate was 1,305,553.

4.2 There were 614 polling stations and approximately 3,700 polling staff. Polling day was successful with all polling stations opened on time and no queues reported.

4.3 Count venues were located in each Council –

Council	Count venue
Antrim and Newtownabbey	Valley Leisure Centre
Ards and North Down	Bangor Aurora Aquatic & Leisure Complex
Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	Banbridge Leisure Centre
Belfast	Belfast City Hall
Causeway Coast and Glens	Coleraine Leisure Centre
Derry and Strabane	Foyle Arena
Fermanagh and Omagh	Omagh Leisure Complex
Lisburn and Castlereagh	Lagan Valley Leisureplex
Mid and East Antrim	Seven Towers Leisure Centre
Mid Ulster	Meadowbank Sports Arena
Newry, Mourne and Down	Newry Leisure Centre

4.4 The overall turnout was 52.68% and the total number of spoiled votes was 9,763 of the 687,733 votes cast. The total number of postal votes issued was 15,465 and the total number of proxy votes issued was 8,413.

European Parliamentary Election

- 4.5 The election was held on 23 May 2019. The eligible electorate was 1,278,951.
- 4.6 There were 614 polling stations and approximately 3,700 poll staff employed. Polling day was successful with all polling stations opened on time and no queues reported.
- 4.7 NI was a single constituency for the purposes of European Elections and the count venue was Meadowbank, Magherafelt. The count was conducted on Monday 27 May 2019. There were 700 count staff employed
- 4.8 The overall turnout was 45.14% and the total number of spoiled votes was 4,649 of the 577,275 votes cast. The total number of postal votes issued was 11,673 and the total number of proxy votes issued was 2,796

UK Parliamentary Election

- 4.9 The election was held on 12 December 2019. The eligible electorate was 1,293,971.
- 4.10 There were 608 polling stations and approximately 3,500 poll staff employed. Polling day was successful with all polling stations opened on time and no queues reported.
- 4.11 The count venues were Titanic Exhibition Centre, Meadowbank Sports Arena, Omagh Leisure Complex and the Aurora Leisure Centre. The count was conducted overnight. There were approx 1,900 count staff employed.
- 4.12 The overall turnout was 62.09% and the total number of spoiled votes was 4,258 of the 803,367 votes cast. The total number of postal votes issued was 16,993 and the total number of proxy votes issued was 8,820.

Electoral Offences

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

SECTION 5 – CENTRAL SERVICES

Recruitment

5.1 Following recruitment exercises for casual staff to assist in delivery of the the Local Government, European Parliamentary and UK Parliamentary elections, there were over 3,000 new applicants processed by the Business Support Unit. This ensured there was a sufficient reserve pool in place. Preparations were put in place to engage canvassers for the 2020 Canvass.

Staffing

5.2 There were three resignations during the reporting year.

5.3 During 2019 the EONI recruited a number of fixed term staff and these contracts have now been made permanent.

5.4 Throughout the year there were meetings with the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance (NIPSA) in accordance with the recognised Joint Consultative Committee process.

Training

5.5 The EONI staff have now been registered onto the LINKs training platform with the Centre for Applied Learning and an SLA agreement is in place which will facilitate an improvement learning pool and mandatory training.

5.6 A number of training sessions were conducted during November 2019 for senior count staff for the UK Parliamentary Elections in December 2019.

Equality

- 5.7 The annual fair employment return was submitted to the Equality Commission for the 12 month period to 1 May 2020.
- 5.8 A section 75 annual progress report was completed and submitted to the Equality Commission in August 2019.

Funding

- 5.9 Total operational funding, excluding capital and depreciation, provided to the EONI for 2019/20 was £2,184,000. Total expenditure excluding capital and depreciation was £ 2,184,000. Capital expenditure was £ 160,000 with corresponding budget of £160,000.
- 5.10 Approximately 133 procurement exercises were completed. The EONI now process the majority of operational invoices through Account NI. Suppliers are issued with a purchase order number by the EONI and instructed to send their invoices directly to Account NI. The majority of valid invoices were paid within five working days.
- 5.11 Funding for elections is non-voted money and does not form part of the EONI core funding. Election expenditure is accounted for in the annual Returning Officer's Expenses for Northern Ireland which are audited by the National Audit Office before being presented to Parliament.
- 5.12 The 2019 Local Council Elections were held on 2 May 2019. The local councils meet the costs of these elections.
- 5.13 The spending limit (maximum recoverable amount) for the European Parliamentary election held on 23 May 2019 was £2,850,000. Estimated expenditure at 31 March 2020 was £2,491,874. The cost of candidates mailing expenses are not included in the maximum recoverable amount and are funded separately. These amounted to £1,343,941 for this election.

5.14 The spending limit (maximum recoverable amount) for the UK Parliamentary election held on 12 December 2019 was £3,500,000. Estimated expenditure at 31 March 2020 was £3,230,759. The cost of candidates mailing expenses are not included in the maximum recoverable amount and are funded separately. These amounted to £1,033,520 for this election.

Stakeholders

5.15 The statutory duty for raising awareness of electoral events and registration lies with the Electoral Commission but the EONI led communication strategies for three electoral events in this business year. Development with the Department of Education and CCEA is building to registration becoming part of the curriculum for attainers with data allowing follow up through the schools C2k network. The EONI was only able to run one suite of outreach clinics during the reporting period due to the heavy electoral activity in year.

Political Parties

5.16 I attended Assembly Parties Panel meetings convened by the Electoral Commission to discuss electoral matters. At these meetings, information was provided on electoral events, changes made to electoral law and practice, on current initiatives and data analytics.

Electoral Commission

5.17 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.

Northern Ireland Office

5.18 There has been regular contact with the NIO across the year including on various aspects of electoral legislation and Canvass preparation.

Helpline

5.19 My staff dealt with 53,247 calls during the year. Due to the unscheduled electoral activity, the EONI had to delay updating of the telephony system but this was started before the end of the business year and although interrupted by Covid 19 we hope to have completed before the summer of 2020.

Website

5.20 There were 612,965 visits to the EONI website during the year.

Records Management

5.21 26 requests were received for information under the Freedom of Information Act 2000.

Electoral Identity Cards

5.22 There were 9,961 Electoral Identity Cards issued during the reporting year.

Complaints

5.23 The EONI has improved it's process for recording complaints and the tracking process is more efficient. The EONI has also carried out an analysis of complaints and will take forward procedures to further improve the system including a new telephone system which will facilitate the monitoring of calls to assist with supervision of temporary staff.

IT Systems

- 5.24 The IT health check on the EONI IT systems was carried out in December 2019. 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 continued with an executive training programme designed to build capacity for optimal performance of the EONI through transformation being led by the team. This programme began roll out to managers and supervisors and will then be provided to all staff in the next year.

Internal Audit

- 6.3 During 2019/20 the Government Internal Audit Agency (GIAA) provided services and undertook a Consolidated Governance and Finance Review which included a follow-up.
- 6.4 The Internal Audit opinion for 2019/20 reported a moderate level of assurance with development opportunity identified in line with transformation plans. Auditors made a total of 10 recommendations which were accepted. There are also 16 recommendations from previous audits which are ongoing.
- 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. Progress reports were provided to the Audit and Risk Committee of the Northern Ireland Office.

ANNEX A

Performance Against Targets and Development Objectives 2019/20

Registration - Strategic Aim <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Conduct a Canvass in 2020. ● Develop and roll out an ‘attainers’ programme to improve the rates of adding ‘attainers’ to the Register. ● Develop and roll out an outreach programme in NI. ● Develop the electronic management system relating to the Register to optimise accuracy, completeness and efficiency. ● Develop additional data sources to improve the quality of information on the Register. 			
Business Objectives		Status	Comments
1.	By 1 December 2019 to have produced a data audit on the potential to improve the accuracy and comprehensiveness of the Register.	A	
2.	By March 2020 to have produced a response programme of work.	A	
3.	On the basis of data analytics and engagement with stakeholders develop an outreach programme. By February 2020 to have completed a proposal for outreach in NI.	A	
4.	By December 2020 to develop an ‘attainer’ project.	A	CCEA partnering on three programmes of outreach and DoE to share data so that each child with an address can be connected to a school for further development in 2020-21
5	Carry out all necessary planning for Canvass and begin operations.	A	This work was completed as far as it could be given the change in the law created by the Coronavirus Act 2020
6	By March 2020 to review online registration processes.	A	Very high levels of use of online service over 80%
7	By October 2019 to finalise a development programme for the electronic management system relating to the Register.	A	Delivered from the EONI – some aspects of dispute on elements from provider remain
8	By December 2019 to extend online access to overseas electors.	A	
9	By December 2019 to have a programme in place to add NIHE data to our sources.	A	Delayed by NIHE who have committed to provision. We note the impact of unplanned European and Uk Parliamentary elections
Elections - Strategic Aim			

- Ensure the administration of all electoral events in NI and in particular to administer Local Council Elections on 2 May 2019 and to be in readiness for potential NI Assembly Elections.
- Provide a Parliamentary Polling station scheme review.
- Develop the electronic management system to optimise the accuracy and efficiency of electoral processes.
- Develop a recruitment programme to optimise staffing long term for electoral events

Business Objectives		Status	Comments
1.	By the end of May 2019 to hold a Local Council Election for NI.	A	
2.	To prepare for potential NI Assembly Elections in business year.	A	We remained on standby until the Executive was formed in year
3..	By March 2020 provide online mapping application to display the properties and their respective parliamentary polling station mapping services using Parliamentary boundaries.	A	
4.	By March 2020 develop a recruitment programme and procedure linked to the electronic management system.	A	Developments identified, roll out now to be taken forward following registration programme.
5	Conduct a parliamentary polling station scheme review in year.	A	

Corporate Services - Strategic Aim

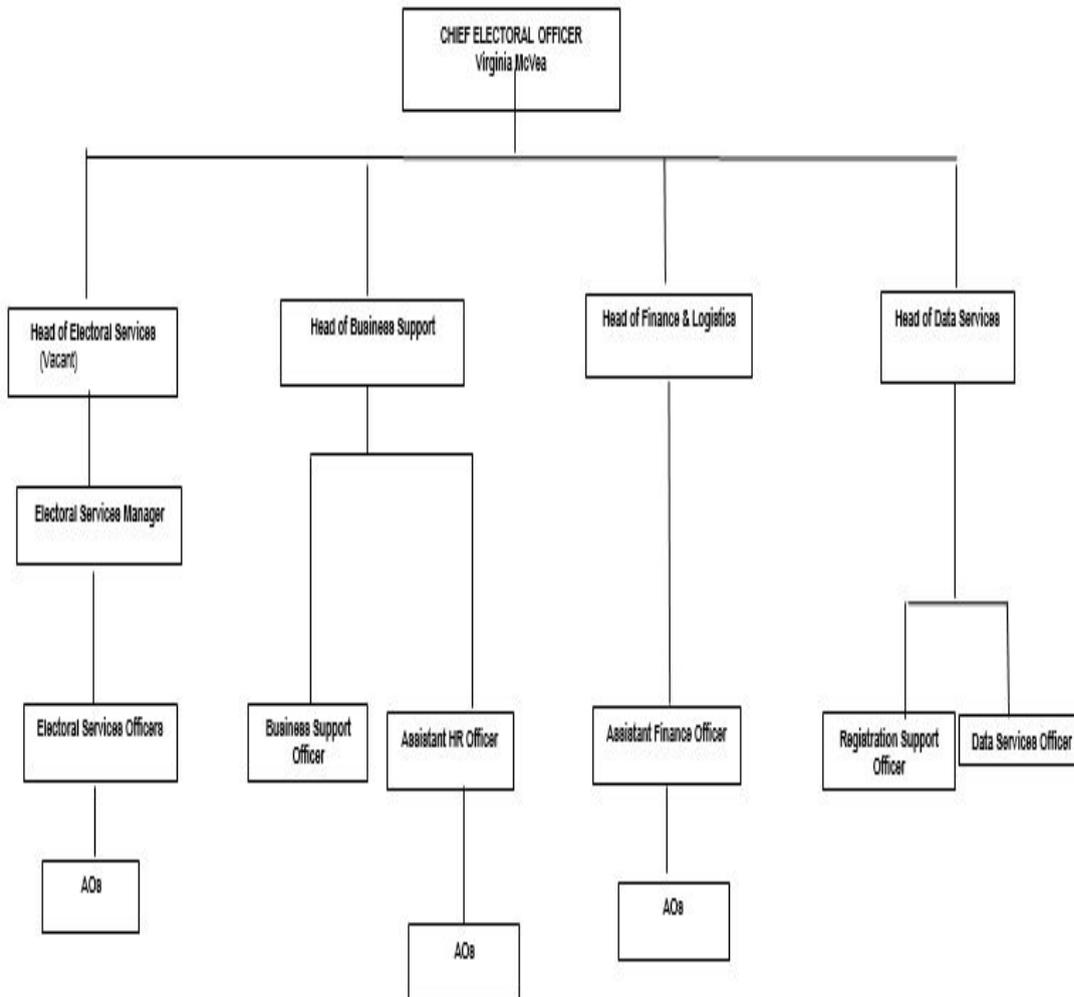
- Develop the EONI as a centre of excellence on the Single Transferable Vote system.
- Develop a continuous professional improvement programme.
- Review and improve governance processes.
- Optimise protection of our data.

Business Objectives		Status	Comments
1	By December 2019 to have operationalised a new centralised administration electoral service for NI.	A	
2	By October 2019 to have completed an induction training package for new staff in the EONI.	A	
3	By September 2019 to have conducted an audit of data handling in accordance with GDPR.	A	
4	By June 2019 to have put in place a development plan for financial procedures and processes to include electoral events.	PA	ASM facilitated the beginning of a planning process but the demands of three elections in year, two unplanned, interrupted further development.
5	By April 2019 to have developed a training programme for the EONI staff.	A	
6	By December 2019 to have reviewed the operation of the SMT.	PA	Delay due to unplanned elections
7	By December 2019 to have developed a set of key performance indicators for managing the Register and Elections.	PA	Much work was completed with new achievements and targets especially in

			registration but overall delay due to unplanned elections
8	By June 2019 to have conducted a training needs analysis for those operating the IDOX system.	A	
9	By March 2020 to roll out actions from the governance audit.	A	
10	By March 2020 to have completed an induction training programme.	A	

OT	On Target
A	Achieved
PA	Part Achieved
NA	Not Achieved
NP	Not Proceeding

ELECTORAL OFFICE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND



OPERATING COSTS 2019/20

ANNEX C

OPERATING COSTS 2019/20

£k

<u>Basic Pay -</u>	
Permanent Staff	929.1
Temporary Staff	58.1
Basic Pay Total	987.2
<u>Overtime -</u>	
Permanent Staff	3.6
Overtime Total	3.6
<u>Employers National Insurance -</u>	
Permanent & Temporary Staff	97.7
Employers National Insurance Total	97.7
Accrued Superannuation Liability Charge	237.5
Total Staff	1,326.0
Travel & Subsistence	10.4
Staff Training & Development	26.8
Other Staff Costs	63.4
Operating Leases	171.9
Accommodation Costs	152.0
Communications	114.7
Computer Charges	243.1
Other Office Services – Postage	127.0
Advertisement & Publicity	4.3
Contracted-out Services	10.5
Professional Costs	40.6
Consultancy Costs	8.7
Hospitality	2.9
Non Capital Purchases	0.0
Other Charges	3.4

Total Goods & Services	979.7
Non Cash Costs (Depreciation)	173.2
Receipts	-121.7
TOTAL PROGRAMME	2,357.2
Capital	160.0
GRAND TOTAL	2,517.2

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