

Report of the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland 2021- 2022

HC557

Electoral Office for Northern Ireland

Report of the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland 2021-2022

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

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The Rt Hon Chris Heaton-Harris MP,
Secretary of State for Northern Ireland
Northern Ireland Office
1 Horse Guards Road
LONDON
SW1A 2HQ

04 August 2023

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 the discharge of the functions of the Chief Electoral Officer for the year ending 31 March 2022.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'SL', with a small circular mark at the end.

Sarah Ling

Interim Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland

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

FOREWORD

This Annual report covers the year up to 31 March 2022. The Electoral Office for Northern Ireland (EONI) during this period completed canvass and preparation for the Northern Ireland Assembly elections planned for May 2022 and continued during this period to operate within Coronavirus constraints.

The EONI designed and delivered a new highly automated process for canvass. The significantly increased capabilities of the EONI to analyse administrative data sets as well as our own Register resulted in our predicting very accurately the rate of less reliable data on electors to the extent that we were able to show government that application of technology means that it may be possible to avoid the breadth and depth of the canvass in terms of cost to the public purse but focusing on less reliable data. This canvass has led to the most complete and accurate Register held in Northern Ireland (NI).

Online application was in its fourth year of operation and the EONI continued to see increased take up compared to paper applications. During canvass this was measured at around 86% online.

The EONI prepared to administer the NI Assembly elections scheduled for May 2022. The EONI with the support of polling station inspectors carried out a survey of all polling stations and created a new polling station register with details, including photographs, for polling stations across Northern Ireland.

During the pandemic the EONI continued to keep counter services open for the majority of the time and the public had access to the virtual counter so that more vulnerable electors could be supported remotely using a smartphone to register or secure an ID card.

The EONI began development of a new electoral management system in year and the team worked alongside contractors to procure and begin the development of an enhanced and digitally innovative new electoral management system to enhance the administration of electoral tasks in EONI.

The EONI worked with Land and Property Services to provide the first mapping facility for canvass so that a secure platform was available to all political representatives to chart response rates in their wards. We connected our communication strategy to the data analytics so that the EONI would be able to focus our social media campaign including digital advertising in areas or with age groups with lowest responses. We shared data throughout with the Electoral Commission.

During this business year the EONI was heavily involved in dialogue with the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) and the Department for Levelling Up Housing and Communities in relation to the new Elections Act 2022 and how changes in the law could be operationalised. This work is anticipated to continue into the next business year.

As part of our ongoing commitment to improving the accessibility of elections in NI the EONI worked with the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) to develop services for those with sight impairment in polling stations and prior to the elections so that those electors could more easily and privately inform themselves as to the candidates and the parties standing in each area. This is to be rolled out in the scheduled May NI Assembly elections. I would wish to record our thanks to the team at RNIB for all of their advice, support and guidance and to the group of service users who engaged with such enthusiasm throughout. We are indebted to you and spurred on to greater effort in the future so that everyone in NI is supported to vote.

The EONI continued its outreach with education services through the Department and the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations & Assessment (CCEA) as well as with care facilities through the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) and directly with providers. This engagement was based upon new data analytics allowing sight of registration by school and facility mapping percentages which facilitate specific follow up designed to work with partners to improve their rates of registration.

Reflecting now on another business year impacted substantially by the pandemic it is with grateful thanks that I acknowledge a staff team at headquarters and nearly

600 canvassers who work so collaboratively and patiently to optimise support to electors to ensure the most complete and accurate Register held for Northern Ireland. Core staff and our extended team are to be congratulated for their extraordinary efforts serving the people of NI. Recognising the vital role that the extended team play in democratic services in NI we planned to survey staff after the NI Assembly elections.

CONTENTS

Foreword

Section

- | | |
|---|-----------------------------|
| 1 | Introduction |
| 2 | Performance against Targets |
| 3 | Registration |
| 4 | Elections |
| 5 | Central Services |
| 6 | Corporate Governance |

Annexes

- | | |
|---|--|
| A | Performance Against Targets and Development Objectives |
| B | Electoral Office staff structure as at 31 March 2021 |
| C | Operating Costs |

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 their 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, the Northern Ireland (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2006 and the Recall of MPs Act 2015. 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 they have discharged their functions. Section 9(2) of the Northern Ireland (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2006 requires them to include in the 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 their duties. It operates from 15 Church Street, Belfast with pop-up services when required at local government facilities across Northern Ireland.

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 2021/22 which can be viewed at www.eoni.org.uk.

2.2 Twenty-eight targets were achieved in full.

Further information can be found at Annex A.

SECTION 3 – REGISTRATION

- 3.1 Total registrations processed between 1 April 2021 and 31 March 2022 were 1,450,872 of which 87% were submitted online. Paper applications accounted for a smaller number as EONI promoted the digital channel. The EONI ran the canvass during this period, which was previously delayed from 2020 due to the pandemic. During the Canvass all electors must re-register in order to stay on the electoral register. All residents were contacted and encouraged to re-register. Papers forms were sent to all properties that had electors over the age of 65 registered in. A revised electoral register was published at the end of the canvass. The register at December 2021 contained 1,368,091 electors which is approximately 93% of the eligible electors. The constituency with the highest estimated registration rate was Foyle at 96.5% with the lowest being Belfast South at 76.4%.
- 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 32,000 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 300 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 2021 and 31 March 2022 letters were sent to 290 individuals who were not already registered or who had changed their details.

Online Registration

- 3.5 In the reporting year the EONI continued to deliver online registration in Northern Ireland. The system processed approximately 1,256,990 online applications during the year. During and post canvass the Operations Unit carried out several data cleansing projects as a result of information received via online registrations. 42,000 electors' name records were corrected, picking up elector inputting errors. Cleansing on addressing inputting errors and missing Unique Property Reference Numbers (UPRNs) was also carried out.

Data matching

- 3.6 New digital products were developed by EONI alongside contractors to help facilitate the canvass which included a new automated system to send the majority of our letters via email or to the remote printing contractor, a new rules based system to determine some of the most common types of elector applications and a new scanning and verification module to scan and process paper canvass forms.
- 3.7 We have data sharing agreements with the Department for Education for the young people registered in the School Census each year and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) to get access to data on properties owned by the NIHE. The NIHE data was used in the canvass preparation and the schools data will enable more targeted outreach with Schools.
- 3.8 Data matching for EONI data to Business Services Organisation, Department for Work and Pensions, General Registrar Office (Births, Deaths and Marriages), Department Education and Northern Ireland Housing Executive continued and work on measuring accuracy and completeness on an ongoing basis was further developed.

Registration Statistics

- 3.9 During the reporting period, in addition to all electors having to re-register, 152,608 records were removed as deceased, no longer eligible for registration at a given address or in accordance with the legislation. There were also over 509,000 records modified, for example as a result of a name change.

Data Protection

- 3.10 The Data Protection Officer continued to assist in the monitoring of internal Data Protection compliance and provided training, information and advice on data protection obligations including specific data protection training for canvassers.

Meeting the Registration Objectives

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

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 with canvass has ensured, so far as reasonably practicable, the successful delivery of these objectives. The register published in December 2021 held 1,368,091 electors, an increase of 41,771 electors from the figure at December 2020. By the end of the period covered in this report, the register was 1,367,979.

- 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.

SECTION 4 – ELECTIONS

The Northern Ireland Assembly election will be reported on in the Annual report for 2022-23.

The process of appointing staff to work at this election started in January 2022. Information for Assembly election candidates and the temporary absent vote form were added to the EONI website on 1 February. The polling station scheme for the election was finalised and added to the website on 1 March 2022.

A revised register for the election was published on 1 March. The Electoral Commission, in partnership with the Electoral Office and Royal Mail, ran two seminars for candidates and agents which took place on 9 and 16 March. The Notice of Election for the Assembly election was published on 28 March and nominations opened on 29 March.

SECTION 5 – CENTRAL SERVICES

Recruitment

- 5.1 Preparations were put in place to recruit poll and count staff for the NI Assembly election in May 2022. Ongoing recruitment also took place to ensure a sufficient pool of reserve staff.

Staffing

- 5.2 There were three resignations during the reporting year.
- 5.3 Two members of staff were on maternity leave and another staff member was on temporary promotion during the reporting year.

- 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 Staff completed diversity and inclusion in the workplace training through Legal Island e-learning.
- 5.6 Data Protection/GDPR training was provided to staff in July/August 2021 and a number of staff attended First Aid at Work training in February 2022.

Equality

- 5.7 The annual fair employment return was submitted to the Equality Commission.
- 5.8 A section 75 annual progress report was completed and submitted to the Equality Commission in August 2021

Funding

- 5.9 Total operational funding, excluding the canvass, capital and depreciation, provided to the EONI for 2021/22 was £2,045,000. Total expenditure excluding the canvass, capital and depreciation was £2,048,700. An additional £51,300 was set aside to cover accrued annual leave. Capital expenditure was £130,000 with corresponding budget of £130,000. Expenditure on the canvass was £ 3,230,000.
- 5.10 Approximately 54 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 Northern

Ireland Office Annual Report and Accounts. There were no elections held during the reporting period.

Stakeholders

5.12 The statutory duty for raising awareness of electoral events and registration lies with the Electoral Commission. EONI developed a Communications and Engagement Strategy for canvass which rolled out to provide unprecedented access to an unparalleled breadth and depth of information for political representatives across NI and included care facilities and schools as well as major employers.

Political Parties

5.13 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

5.14 Strategic planning meetings were held with the Electoral Commission which included regular ongoing communication and review to ensure continuous improvements.

Northern Ireland Office

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

Helpline

5.16 Staff dealt with 56,314 calls during the year.

Website

5.17 There were 504,787 visits to the EONI website during the year.

Records Management

5.18 Five requests were received for information under the Freedom of Information Act 2000.

Electoral Identity Cards

5.19 There were 8,480 Electoral Identity Cards issued during the year.

Complaints

5.20 There were 42 formal complaints received during the year as follows:

- 5 related to absent votes
- 2 related to Electoral ID Cards
- 3 related to registration
- 29 related to the canvass
- 2 related to use of personal data
- 1 related to staff

IT Systems

5.21 The IT health check on the EONI IT systems was carried out in March 2022. Any unidentified vulnerabilities were addressed and remedial action taken.

SECTION 6 – CORPORATE GOVERNANCE

6.1 The EONI continued with its good governance development programme with the Government Internal Auditors attending certain scheduled senior management team (SMT) meetings.

6.2 As part of good governance, staff welfare and succession planning the Mid Level group has continued to develop new projects and attend the SMT.

- 6.3 The CEO developed plans to recruit a Deputy in year and will move to external advertisement in the new business year as part of the final stage of transformation.
- 6.4 During 2021/22 the Government Internal Audit Agency (GIAA) provided services and undertook a review of data services development and finance work.
- 6.5 The Internal Audit opinion for 2021/22 reported a moderate level of assurance noting that transformation was ongoing. Auditors made a total of 16 recommendations which were accepted. There had also been 11 recommendations carried forward from previous audits and these were reduced in year to 5.
- 6.6 The EONI continued with a Covid programme around staff safety and provision of service. The buildings were made as safe as possible with hand sanitiser stations, sign posting, reminder materials on hand washing and distancing and cleaning rotas including touch points were introduced. At the beginning of the business year we were working with lockdown, we developed a plan from the operation of canvass including canvassers on the ground but made changes in early 2022 to prepare to administer the May NI Assembly elections with a higher number of staff in the office in Belfast. A programme of work around keeping the broader team safe in polling stations and count centres across Northern Ireland was initiated.

Performance Against Targets and Development Objectives 2021/22

A	Achieved
NA	Not Achieved
PA	Partly Achieved

REGISTRATION

Strategic Aims 2019-22:

- Improve the accuracy and completeness of the data on the Register.
- Conduct a canvass in 2021.
- Prioritise outreach to enhance the comprehensiveness of the Register.

Ensure a particular focus on ensuring attainers are added to the Register.

Business Objectives:		Status
1	By 1 July 2021 to have opened canvass.	A
2	By December 2021 to have closed canvass.	A
3	By February 2022 to have concluded the initial 'roll over processing'.	A
4	By April 2021 to have completed all final testing of systems for canvass.	A
5	By May 2021 to carry out all necessary review and planning for canvass 2021 and begin operations.	A
6	By April 2021 to have ensured integration of NIHE and Education data.	A
7	By June 2021 to have completed the development of the monitoring process for registration levels for schools and care homes.	A
8	To support the Local Government Boundary Review process.	A
9	To support the Parliamentary Boundary Review process.	A
10	By May 2021 to have rolled out a suite of registration 'how to' videos.	A
11	By June 2021 to have reviewed the pilot 'virtual counter' for ID cards.	A
12	By September 2021 to have rolled out registration lesson plans hosted on the CCEA website and to have advised all schools and colleges.	A

ELECTIONS

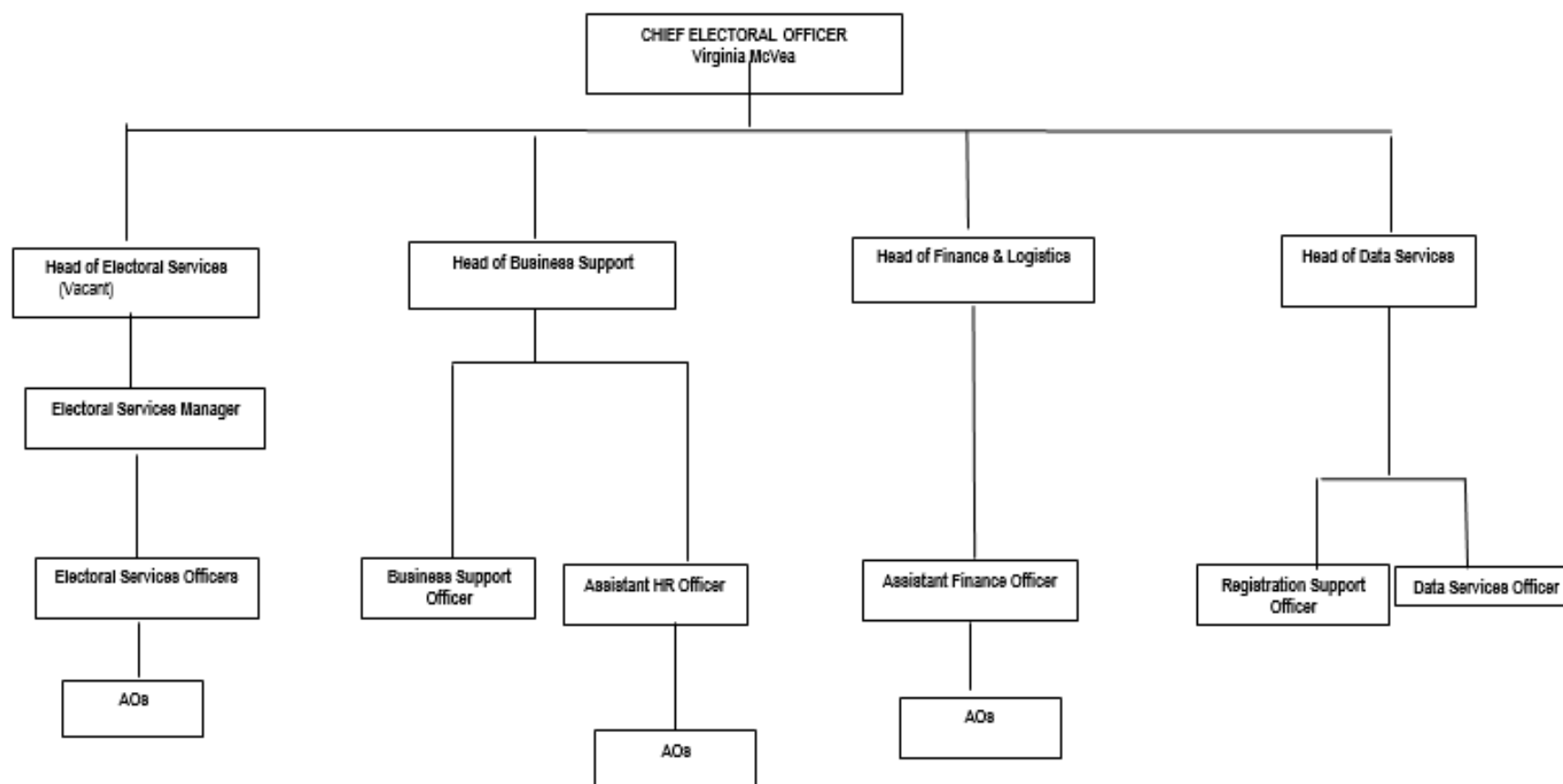
Strategic Aims 2019-22:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure the administration of free and fair elections in NI. Provide a Parliamentary polling station scheme review.		
Business Objectives:		
1	By March 2022 to have completed all digital materials to accompany election readiness guidance and monitoring tools.	A
2	By December 2021 to finalise performance targets for election readiness.	A
3	By March 2022 to have rolled out STV count training.	A
4	By March 2022 to have developed a communication strategy for the election.	A
5	By March 2022 to have completed a survey of all polling stations.	A
6	By December 2021 to have conducted a legal audit of all EONI materials and developed a plan for ensuring all materials are continually updated.	A
7	By February 2022 to have completed a virtual refresher exercise for polling station inspectors and count managers.	A
8	By December 2021 to have set up a training programme for staff and included an Association of Electoral Administrators (AEA) assessment process.	PA

CORPORATE SERVICES Strategic Aims 2019-22: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop EONI as a centre of excellence on the single transferable vote system. • Ensure continuous professional improvement. • Optimise governance processes. • Create a programme for excellence in management. Optimise protection of our data.		
1	By March 2022 to have developed the website and social media platform with a focus on security and accessibility.	A
2	By December 2021 to have developed a communication strategy for the outreach of the EONI.	Change in prioritisation
3	By March 2022 to have procured and developed a new EMS for deployment in the next business year.	PA
4	By June 2021 to have produced the first reporting on the phone system use.	A

5	By March 2022 to have rolled out actions from the audit.	A
6	By June 2021 to have rolled out automation enhancements to the Electronic Management System.	A
7	By August 2021 to have recruited and trained canvassers.	A
8	By April 2021 to have accommodation plans for canvass during Covid.	A
9	By March 2022 to have reviewed SMT meeting processes and documentation.	A
10	By March 2022 to have reviewed the mid-level group development programme and engaged with staff to discuss future development need and potential.	A
11	By June 2021 to have recruited and trained all Canvass casual processors.	A

ELECTORAL OFFICE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND



ANNEX C

OPERATING COSTS 2021/22

OPERATING COSTS 2021/22	
Basic Pay -	
Permanent Staff	
Temporary Staff	101.4
Basic Pay Total	751.5
Overtime -	
Permanent Staff	9.4
Overtime Total	9.4
Employers National Insurance -	
Permanent & Temporary Staff	68.6
Employers National Insurance Total	68.6
Accrued Superannuation Liability Charge	215.2
Total Staff	1,044.7
Travel & Subsistence	1.6
Staff Training & Development	21.6
Other Staff Costs	48.2
Operating Leases	140.6
Accommodation Costs	123.5
Communications	70.5
Computer Charges	300.5
Other Office Services – Postage	82.2
Advertisement & Publicity	1.9
Contracted-out Services	16.6
Professional Costs	65.5
Consultancy Costs	294.5
Hospitality	2.7
Non Capital Purchases	3.4
Other Charges	2.0
Total Goods & Services	1,175.3
Non Cash Costs (Depreciation)	204.4
Receipts	-120.0
TOTAL PROGRAMME	2,304.4
Capital	130.0
GRAND TOTAL	2,434.4

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