



THE ELECTORAL OFFICE

FOR

NORTHERN IRELAND

BUSINESS PLAN 2009-10

FOREWORD

by

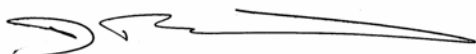
Douglas Bain, Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland

2009/10 is likely to be a challenging year for the Electoral Office. As well as delivering the European Parliamentary elections in June we will have to prepare for, and perhaps run, a Westminster General Election before the year end.

We will continue our efforts to maintain the electoral registers at a high level of comprehensiveness by operating the new late registration provisions in the run up to elections and by engaging with potential overseas electors and young people who have left school to secure their registration.

We will again make determined efforts to ensure that the Northern Ireland registers remain the most accurate anywhere in the United Kingdom or the Republic of Ireland. The statutory procedure for removal from the register of those whose details are incorrect will be streamlined and the discrepancies identified as a result of participation in the National Fraud Initiative will be fully exploited. Robust action will be taken when appropriate.

Whilst carrying out all our work we will strive to further improve our currently high level of customer service. To this end office opening hours will be increased and late opening and opening in other locations will be piloted. The processing time for electoral identity cards will be reduced by at least half.



Douglas Bain CBE TD Advocate
Chief Electoral Office for Northern Ireland

19 March 2009

EONI BUSINESS PLAN 2009 - 2010

Introduction

This Business Plan, after outlining the planning process followed for its preparation, sets out the assumptions made in drawing it up and the Electoral Office Targets for 2009/10. It goes on to list the Development Objectives for the year. These are the significant areas of new work which it is intended to complete during the year.

The Plan does not include the routine work carried out by the Electoral Office in connection with electoral registration or the preparation for, and conduct of, free and fair elections. These matters are dealt with either in Area Office or business unit plans or in the forward job plans of individual members of staff.

The Plan is available on request, in other formats and languages. Please phone 0800 4320 712 (textphone 028 9044 6698) or email info@eoni.org.uk.

The Planning Process

In early October 2008 the Chief Electoral Officer invited comments from his senior colleagues on potential Assumptions and Targets for the 2009/10 Plan. The following month draft Assumptions and Targets were considered by the Management Board and at a meeting with the eight Area Electoral Officers. After these meetings a revised draft was prepared. Comments on it were invited from all the Northern Ireland political parties, the Electoral Commission, the Northern Ireland Office and Disability Action. The draft, adjusted to take account of comments received, was discussed at a meeting with all staff on 9 December. Shortly thereafter staff were asked to discuss a further draft at their team meetings and to submit any proposed amendments along with potential Development Objectives for the coming year. At the end of January 2009 a revised draft of the Plan was sent to all staff with a request for their views ahead of the February Management Board. Having agreed the Assumptions, Targets and Development Objectives at the Board meeting, the

supporting text was added. This new document was circulated to all staff for comment. A further draft, adjusted as a result of representations received, was considered and approved by the Board on 19 March 2009.

The Plan is a working document and will be used by the Board to allocate resources. Progress against the Targets and Development Objectives will be reviewed on a monthly basis. External circumstances may result in changes being made during the year to both the Targets and the Development Objectives.

Planning Assumptions

In drawing up this Business Plan the planning assumptions set out below have been made. The Targets and Development Objectives are set on the basis that these assumptions will turn out to be correct. If that does not prove to be so then changes to them may be required:

- Elections to the European Parliament will be held on 4 June 2009.
- A General Election may take place during the year.
- There will be no Northern Ireland wide elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly or to district councils.
- There will be an increased number of district council by-elections.
- There will be no annual canvass of electors.
- Due to the economic climate there will be a reduction in the number of registered electors who move house.
- There will be no statutory polling station scheme review.

- An adequate running cost budget available to the Electoral Office.
- An adequate budget, having regard to the changes in law and practice in recent years, will be provided for the European Parliamentary elections and for the General Election, if called during the year.
- Good relations, facilitating joint working where appropriate, will exist with the Electoral Commission and other key stakeholders.

Targets

1. **To publish on 1 December 2009, a revised register of electors that is at least as accurate and comprehensive as the December 2008 register.**

There is a statutory requirement to publish a revised register of electors on 1 December each year. The comprehensiveness of the register will be maintained through the continuous registration process. Its accuracy will be maintained by removal from the register of those who have died or have ceased to meet the registration criteria and by amending the registration particulars for those who notify a change of name or address.

2. **To submit the CEO's annual report for the year ended 31 March 2009 to the Secretary of State by 1 September 2009.**

Section 9 of the Northern Ireland (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2006 requires the CEO to submit an annual report on how he has carried out his duties. The Secretary of State lays that report before both Houses of Parliament. Work in connection with the European Parliamentary elections is likely to delay submission of the report until late summer.

- 3. To conduct the European Parliamentary elections, and the General Election if held during the year, so that they are free, fair, efficient and within budget.**

Preparation for the European Parliamentary elections was well advanced at the start of the year. Between 1 April and the poll on 4 June further action will be taken to ensure that this target is met. A Westminster General Election may be called during the year. Much of the work undertaken for the June elections will be relevant to any General Election.

Development Objectives

Customer Service

- 1. By 31 May 2009 to reduce to 7 days or less the average delivery time for Electoral Identity Cards.**

New arrangements for the production of Electoral Identity Cards will be introduced on 1 April. By 31 May we will have halved the average time from receipt of a completed application to provision of the card.

- 2. From 1 April 2009 to increase the opening hours of all Area Electoral Offices by remaining open over lunchtime.**

To make it easier for the public to access our services all eight Area Electoral Offices will be open from 9am to 4.30pm Monday to Thursday and from 9am to 4pm on Fridays.

- 3. By 31 March 2010 to pilot “late opening” at a minimum of 3 Area Electoral Offices.**

Some customers in full time employment have told us that they find it difficult to visit one of our offices during normal working hours. We will pilot 'late opening' at a minimum of 3 of our offices and depending on the usage take decisions on future opening hours.

4. By 4 June 2009 to pilot Saturday morning opening at all Area Electoral Offices.

Experience shows that in the run up to elections there is an increase in the number of personal callers at our offices. This year we expect an even greater increase ahead of the European Parliamentary elections as a result of the new late registration arrangements. Before these elections we will pilot Saturday morning opening at all of our offices. The results will be evaluated and will inform our future decisions.

5. By 31 March 2010 to pilot, in at least 2 constituencies, the provision of a limited opening office, providing the full range of services, in towns away from the Area Electoral Office.

Although we have offices at 7 locations across Northern Ireland we are conscious that in some areas people have to travel considerable distances to use our services. During the year we will pilot the use of limited opening offices at locations away from the Area Offices in at least 2 constituencies.

Registration Process

6. By 31st March 2010 to consider the feasibility of "cleansing" data received from the Central Services Agency to reduce the number of 'duplicate' letters sent to the same elector.

Information provided by the Central Services Agency is critical to the success of the continuous registration process that replaced the annual canvass in 2006. Every 3 months the Agency provides details of those

who, according to their records, have moved house. This information is used as the basis of letters sent to these individuals reminding them of the need to change their registration details. It has become apparent that the data provided by the Agency contains a small number of duplicate entries with the result that some people receive two or more letters from us. During the year we will explore options for electronically identifying these duplicates so as to avoid individuals receiving more than one letter.

- 7. By 30 September 2009 to review the registration process in light of best practice and experience of the late registration process and operate it, as amended as necessary, in a standard way throughout Northern Ireland.**

Since 2006 continuous registration has been an evolving process. Late registration will be available for the first time at the June 2009 elections. The practices in relation to the processing of applications have varied, to some extent, between our eight offices. We will review the continuous registration process, building on best practice, and implement it in a standard way at all our offices.

- 8. By the date on which the legislation comes into force to be ready in all respects to process applications for anonymous registration.**

The Government have announced that the proposed legislation to introduce anonymous registration should be enacted later this year. We will build on the work already undertaken to ensure that we are ready to offer this new service to the public as soon as the legislation comes into force.

Comprehensiveness and Accuracy of Registers

- 9. Particularly from September 2009 onwards, to engage proactively with 16-18 year olds who are not attending school so as to encourage their registration.**

Building on the success of our “Schools Initiative” in 2008/09 we will this year engage proactively with young people who have left school so as to encourage their electoral registration.

- 10. By 31st March 2010, to have increased by at least 25% compared with 1st December 2008, the number of registered overseas electors.**

Those who were previously registered in Northern Ireland are entitled to register as overseas electors and to vote in certain elections. We will engage with such individuals and encourage them to exercise their legal right to register.

- 11. By 31st March 2010 to have explored and implemented, where practicable, the benefits available from use of the Pointer system.**

Pointer is an address database providing a common standard address for every property in Northern Ireland. We will explore how it could assist us in delivering an improved and more efficient service and implement any changes to current practices where practicable.

- 12. By 31 March 2010 to pilot in at least 6 wards or part-wards the effectiveness of a household leaflet drop to encourage registration.**

Household leaflet drops are a relatively inexpensive way of contacting the public in a particular area. We will pilot and evaluate the effectiveness of such drops in at least 6 wards or part wards as a

method of maintaining both the accuracy and comprehensiveness of the electoral register.

- 13. By 31 March 2010 to have carried out a further 8 pilot mini-canvasses as a means of maintaining the accuracy of the register.**

Taking account of lessons learned from the mini canvass pilots in 2008/09 we will carry out further pilots this year.

- 14. By 31 March 2010 to have exploited in full the information gained from participation in the National Fraud Initiative.**

Last autumn we announced our participation in NFI. The results will become available early in 2009/10. All inconsistencies between our records and those of the other public sector authorities will be considered and appropriate action will be taken.

Elections

- 15. By 31st December 2009 to have amended the processes and procedures as necessary in light of lessons learned at the June 2009 elections.**

Significant changes to both law and practice will be implemented at the European Parliamentary elections. We will consider how these, and all our other processes, worked at the June elections and make any necessary adjustments to our processes by 31 December.

- 16. Within 5 working days of the calling of the next General Election we will implement the new parliamentary boundaries.**

The changes to the parliamentary boundaries made by the Parliamentary Constituencies (Northern Ireland) 2008 do not take effect until the next General Election is called. Within 5 working days

of that event we will amend our electronic records to reflect the new boundaries and, where necessary, transfer any paper records to the appropriate Area Electoral Office.

Corporate Services

- 17. Prior to any re-structuring of the Northern Ireland Office as a consequence of the devolution of policing and criminal justice, to have established procedures for the continued support of the Electoral Office finance and information services functions.**

The Northern Ireland Office will be restructured following any devolution of the policing and criminal justice functions. As part of the restructuring the arrangements for supporting our finance and information services functions are likely to change and to be moved to London. Prior to that we will discuss the new arrangements with the NIO to ensure that we continue to be well supported.

- 18. By 30 August 2009 to have reviewed, and revised as necessary, the policy on the recruitment and use of casual staff.**

Our policy for the recruitment and use of casual staff has been developed incrementally over a number of years. By 30 August 2009 we will have reviewed the policy and amended it as necessary.

- 19. By 31 March 2010 to have reviewed, and revised as necessary, the policy on the recruitment and selection of permanent staff.**

The review will take account of changes to employment law and will include subjects such as the advertising of vacancies and the qualifications required for particular posts.