

Report of the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland 2005–2006

*Presented to Parliament pursuant to section 14(4) of the
Electoral Law Act (Northern Ireland) 1962 as amended by
Article 6(1) of the Electoral Law (Northern Ireland) Order 1972*

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Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland Report for the Year 2005–2006

The Rt. Hon. Peter Hain MP
Her Majesty's Secretary of State for Northern Ireland
Northern Ireland Office
11 Millbank
LONDON SW1P 4QA

30 September 2006

Dear Secretary of State

In accordance with section 14 of the Electoral Law Act (Northern Ireland) 1962, I have the honour of submitting the report of the proceedings of the Chief Electoral Officer for the year to 31 March 2006. As you will be aware the post was held by my predecessor Denis Stanley throughout that period.

Douglas Bain CBE TD Advocate
Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland

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1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1** This is the report of the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland (CEO) for the period 1 April 2005 to 31 March 2006. By virtue of section 14 of the Electoral Law Act (Northern Ireland) 1962 the CEO is required to prepare an annual report and submit it to the Secretary of State. The CEO is a Crown appointment, being appointed under statute by the Secretary of State.
- 1.2** During the period covered by this report the CEO was Denis Stanley who retired on 31 March 2006 after 32 years of public service, the last five and a half of which were as the Chief Electoral Officer. During his period in office significant changes were made to the structure of EONI and there were major improvements to the working practices including a much greater use of information technology. He was largely responsible for the details of the counter fraud measures enacted in the Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002 and for their successful implementation. The increased level of public confidence in the electoral process in Northern Ireland would not have been achieved without his leadership and commitment.
- 1.3** The main functions of the CEO were:
- acting as registration officer for all constituencies in Northern Ireland;
 - acting as returning officer for all elections and referenda in Northern Ireland;
 - advising the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on matters relating to his work;
 - acting as an assessor to the Boundary Commission for Northern Ireland;
 - acting as an assessor to the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner for Northern Ireland; and
 - leading and managing of the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland (EONI).
- 1.4** EONI is the administrative grouping of staff whose role is to support the CEO in the performance of his statutory duties. During the year it continued to operate from a headquarters office in central Belfast and nine area electoral offices in seven locations across Northern Ireland, namely, Newtownards, Newtownabbey, Ballymena, Londonderry, Omagh, Banbridge and Belfast. Two area electoral offices were situated in the premises in both Banbridge and Belfast whilst the other premises were each occupied by a single office. Each area office served two Parliamentary constituencies.
- 1.5** Whilst the CEO continued to delegate the day-to-day administration of his functions to the staff of EONI, he remained responsible for its overall organisation, management and performance.
- 1.6** The costs of EONI, other than the costs of running elections, are funded by the Northern Ireland Office out of monies voted by Parliament. HM Treasury are responsible for the costs of Parliamentary elections whilst those of Assembly and district council elections are met by the Northern Ireland Assembly and the councils.

2. PERFORMANCE AGAINST KEY TARGETS

This section shows performance against the objectives and key targets set out in Section 3 of the EONI Annual Plan 2005-06 which may be viewed at www.electoralofficeni.gov.uk.

<i>Objective</i>	<i>Key Target</i>	<i>Outcome</i>
To prepare, publish and maintain an up-to-date, accurate and comprehensive Electoral Register for Northern Ireland.	1. To compile a Register at 1 December 2005, with reference to 15 October 2005, which is not less complete in respect of eligible applicants than the Register at 1 September 2005.	The number of individuals on the Register published on 1 December 2005 showed an increase of 1% compared with those registered on 1 September 2005. The new Register included 95,120 electors who had been carried over from the Register at 1 September 2005.
	2. To compare all dates of birth, national insurance numbers and signatures provided on registration forms with previously obtained personal identifiers and request and obtain clarification on all inconsistent data.	Achieved.
	3. To continue comparing all national insurance numbers and dates of birth of registered electors with the Department of Work and Pensions.	Achieved.
	4. To publish a Register at 1 December 2005 and revisions of the Register at the first of each month.	Achieved.

<i>Objective</i>	<i>Key Target</i>	<i>Outcome</i>
To conduct Parliamentary, Assembly, European and District Council elections and referendums in Northern Ireland effectively, impartially, within statutory timetables and to prevent electoral fraud.	1. In the event of any election to be held up to 1 June 2006 to take all the preliminary statutory action required strictly in accordance with the legislation and statutory timetables and all other preparatory steps as necessary.	Achieved in respect of combined elections on 5 May 2005.
	2. In the event of any election held up to 31 March 2006 to operate all the polling stations listed in the Polling Station Scheme during the whole of the prescribed duration of the election so that each polling station is manned during the whole period by a Presiding Officer and Poll Clerk(s) and to provide appropriate absent voting facilities.	Achieved in respect of combined elections on 5 May 2005.
	3. Not less than 90% of people who voted should view the election arrangements as effective and impartial.	Achieved in respect of combined elections on 5 May 2005.
To design, publish and maintain a Polling Station Scheme.	1. To evaluate the polling station arrangements within one month of any election up to 31 March 2006 and consult on and implement changes as appropriate.	Achieved in respect of combined elections on 5 May 2005.
	2. Not less than 90% of electors should view the arrangements as satisfactory.	Achieved in respect of combined elections on 5 May 2005.
To provide advice to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on electoral matters.	To take a view from the Secretary of State on the timeliness, quality and range of advice given.	Achieved.
To provide advice to the Boundary Commission for Northern Ireland and the Local Government Boundary Commission.	To take the views of the Commissions on the timeliness, quality and range of advice given.	Achieved.

3. OPERATIONAL DETAILS

Parliamentary and District Council Elections (May 2005)

3.1 Elections to the House of Commons in eighteen constituencies and elections to the twenty six district councils were conducted simultaneously on 5 May 2005. The Parliamentary election was conducted on a first past the post basis while proportional representation was employed for the district council elections. There were 1.14m eligible electors. The overall turnout at the Parliamentary election was 723,768 representing 63.5% of the eligible electorate. The turnout in the district council elections was 717,913 or 62.8% of the eligible electorate. The total number of spoiled votes in the Parliamentary election was 6,166 or 0.9% of the votes cast while the corresponding figure for the district council elections was 14,758 (2.1%). 22,962 (3.2%) of the valid votes cast in the Parliamentary election were by post whilst 6,697 proxy votes (0.9%) were issued. 19,478 (2.7%) votes were cast by post in the district council elections and 5,716 proxy votes (0.8%) were issued. The total cost of the Parliamentary election was £1.8m which was funded by HM Treasury and the overall cost of the district council elections was £1.8m which was paid by the councils. 4,920 polling station and count staff were employed for the combined election.

3.2 Following on from the work after the disturbances at polling stations in Derry/Londonderry at the election to the European Parliament in June 2004, the CEO and his staff worked closely with the churches, the police, the political parties and others to secure what turned out to be a trouble free election in 2005. In view of the difficulties in 2004 and in previous years this was a significant achievement.

Annual Canvass (Autumn 2005)

3.3 The electoral register numbered 1.14 million electors at 1 September 2005. The annual canvass was conducted between September and November 2005 at a cost of £1.5m, using 964 canvassers and temporary staff. A new approach to the canvass, which proved successful and more economic, was employed in 2005. It involved posting registration forms out to all electors on the existing register and to all residences where no one was currently registered, rather than having the forms delivered by canvassers. Following the canvass the new register published at 1 December 2005 was comprised of 1.15 million electors. Of these 53,000 were completely new electors. Under the provisions of the Electoral Registration (Northern Ireland) Act 2005, 95,000 electors were carried over from the 2004 register without registering during the canvass. 91.7% of the eligible electorate are estimated to have been on the register published on 1 December 2005.¹

¹ Electoral Commission: Electoral registration in Northern Ireland update number two – summary of findings – May 2005.

Rolling Registration

- 3.4** Rolling registration is the process operated between annual canvasses to update the register to take account of new applications to register or changes to the registration details of those already on the register. The work is carried out by the staff in the area electoral offices whose role in maintaining the comprehensiveness and accuracy of the register and in interfacing with the public and local politicians should not be underestimated. The Electoral Registration (Northern Ireland) Act 2005 provided for the restoration to the electoral register of individuals who failed to register during the annual canvass. This is often referred to as the ‘carry forward’. Under this provision 70,000 electors, who had not registered during the 2004 canvass, were restored to the register used for the 2005 combined election whilst as noted above 95,000 electors, who did not register during the 2005 canvass, were included on the register published on 1 December 2005. It should be noted that the figures are not cumulative.
- 3.5** After publication of the register at 1 December 2005 electors were added to and removed from the register through the rolling registration process. As a consequence the register in use on 31 March 2006 showed a net increase of 2,806 compared with the one published on 1 December 2005.

Outreach schemes

- 3.6** The Electoral Commission has reported that young people, between 18 and 25 years of age, and certain other groups are disproportionately under-represented on the register.² EONI has very limited resources with which to undertake outreach programmes. Nevertheless in 2005/06 it supported the Commission in reaching out to young people by sending registration forms to schools with Years 13 and 14 pupils, to youth clubs, and to young farmers clubs. With the general electorate in mind, forms were also made available through district councils, citizen advice bureaux, the Housing Executive, the Social Security Agency and job centres.

The Electoral Identity Card

- 3.7** The electoral identity card is one of the four forms of photographic identity permitted by legislation for use by electors at polling stations. The CEO is required to issue the card free of charge to all persons, who have applied to be or who are registered, and who apply in the prescribed way. Cards were issued to 8,571 applicants during 2005/06. Of these 4,709 applications were made by post. In advance of the Parliamentary and district council elections held in June 2005, and in line with established practice, EONI operated a number of temporary card application centres at suitable locations across Northern Ireland. These were in addition to the permanent sites operated in area electoral offices. The cost of providing cards in 2005/06 was £97k or £11.36 per card. This figure does not include the cost of EONI staff.

² Northern Ireland electoral registration update number four – full report – November 2005.

4. STAFF

4.1 The staff of EONI, both at headquarters and at the area electoral offices, have continued to demonstrate their commitment to ensuring that the electoral process in Northern Ireland remains the best in United Kingdom. Both at the time of the combined elections and the annual canvass this required long working hours and a degree of flexibility which is unusual in the public sector. The staff of EONI enjoy terms and conditions of service which mirror those of the civil service. During the year it was agreed that they should be eligible to join the Principal Civil Service Pension Scheme (Northern Ireland) and work on the necessary subordinate legislation to give effect to this welcome change was well advanced at the year end. A staff survey conducted before the end of the year identified a number of areas in which there was room for improvement and work to address these matters was in hand at the end of the reporting period.

5. FUNDING AND EXPENDITURE

5.1 The operating costs of EONI were met from the Estimate of the Northern Ireland Office and included both the cost of all registration activities and EONI's general administration costs. Expenditure by EONI is accounted for in the annual accounts of the Northern Ireland Office which are audited by the National Audit Office. The CEO has no statutory duty to prepare formal accounts but EONI is subject to annual independent internal audit, the reports of which are made available to the Department.

5.2 The expenditure on operating cost was as follows:

	£K	£K
Pay – Permanent staff*	954	
Pay – Temporary staff	731	
Costs of the EONI office estate	465	
Printing and Stationery	168	
Postage	299	
ID Card	97	
Capital Expenditure	74	
Other costs	460	
		3248
Less Receipts		207
TOTAL		3041

*The EONI currently employs 46 permanent staff.

5.3 The expenditure on the 2005 combined election was as follows:

<i>Combined Election (May 2005)</i>	Parliamentary £K	Council £K
Pay and costs – Poll, Count & Temporary Administrative staff	763	800
Postage	168	115
Other (including Hire of Premises)	362	385
Postage – Candidates addresses	507	538
TOTAL	1800	1838

6. STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENTS

A revised approach to electoral registration

- 6.1** During the year the CEO and his staff proposed to the Northern Ireland Office a revised approach to electoral registration under which the annual canvass would be replaced by a process of continuous registration. These proposals have since been enacted in the Northern Ireland (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2006. The Act provides that, by statutory instrument, the CEO may be empowered to require public authorities to provide information to assist him in his statutory duty to maintain an accurate and comprehensive register.
- 6.2** Work on this matter was ongoing at the end of the reporting period.

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Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland

30 September 2006

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