

# Report of the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland 2020-2021

**Electoral Office for Northern Ireland**

# **Report of the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland 2020-2021**

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

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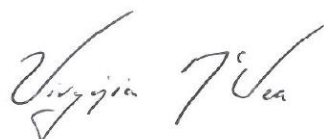
The Rt Hon Brandon Lewis MP, CBE  
Secretary of State for Northern Ireland  
Northern Ireland Office  
1 Horse Guards Road  
LONDON  
SW1A 2HQ

20 December 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 2021.

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 2021. The Electoral Office for Northern Ireland (EONI) during this period was due to hold Canvass 2020 which was then postponed under the Coronavirus Act 2020 to July 2021. The EONI moved through a programme of contingency planning to alter the arrangements for Canvass and to take account of the pandemic.

The EONI designed and initiated a significant data cleansing programme in preparation for the Canvass. This process utilised new data analytics methods to ensure the optimal quality of the data. The Register at the close of the year was 1,326,556.

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

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 has kept counter services open for the majority of the time and developed a new virtual counter so that more vulnerable electors could be supported remotely using a smart phone to register or secure an ID card. This proved a popular and successful programme which continues to operate and the EONI is considering ways to further extend access to it.

The EONI began a significant programme of work in year to procure a new electronic management service moving to a cloud based system for optimal risk management. This programme required a review of all current systems and programmes and scoping to consider further improvements which could be made to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the service.

The EONI worked with digital developers to enhance our electronic management service using the opportunity of postponement to improve processes yet further. As a result we were able to plan and operate Canvass without the need for any associated costs of running two shifts of staff through the process. The EONI automated around 80% of the application process. Further, the EONI operated the most robust checking mechanism used which planned to have every application data matched against government administrative data sets which included the newly acquired NIHE data set.

The Canvass for Northern Ireland 2021 was to open on 1<sup>st</sup> July and the EONI developed a communications plan which included the use of flyers, canvassers, print and broadcast as well as social media. Data analytics systems were set up in advance of Canvass to facilitate tracking of responses by ward and constituency as well as age range. This information was to be compiled weekly and a briefing prepared for all political representatives in Northern Ireland from local councillors through MLAs and MPs.

The EONI requested that Land and Property Services work with our office to develop 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 had also agreed to share data throughout with the Electoral Commission who had committed to an agile communications campaign that would also respond to trends shown by our data analysis.

Further to these forms of outreach the EONI developed a canvasser outreach programme which could operate within health guidelines and we prepared to recruit 583 canvassers and procured for the first time a handheld device instead of using paper lists. The canvassers were to have property details and routes provided and to be able to input their progress again so that the EONI could chart work in real time with register information being exported on a daily basis. A new remote printing service was set up to ensure uninterrupted service to the electorate during the pandemic with safe operating procedures for our staff team. A new remote operations plan was developed to recruit and train staff for Canvass.

Before Canvass opened the EONI used data analytics to project Canvass outcomes by showing the data which was least reliable and matching those currently on the register against government administrative data sets.

At the close of 2020 the EONI had been approached by the Department of Finance to advise that they were planning a voucher scheme for NI with £100 voucher for those 18 and over. In order to operate the scheme they required data and a checking scheme. The EONI provided advice and guidance to help shape the scheme initially showing the Department that the EONI could not provide the data but that a checking option to prevent fraud could be possible.

The programme of election readiness work continued and saw further development of single transferable vote (STV) expertise along with digitalisation. The EONI began planning work on procurement, task timetables, nominations processes and cyber security. This planning has also had to involve considerable contingency planning due to the pandemic.

An Attainer's programme saw new mapping tools produced showing levels of registration by school with data on each pupil so that the EONI can liaise with schools to support them to improve registration rates. This programme saw the partnership with the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) produce teacher support packages with lesson plans and a range of interactive materials for schools in their age bands which was launched by CCEA with forward plans to promote during Canvass.

A similar programme of work was initiated for care facilities in NI. In partnership with the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) planning was put in place to track registration by facility during Canvass and provide support to care facilities to improve registration processes in accordance with Care Home Standards on participation in democracy.

The 2019-20 year was as unprecedented for the EONI as it was for Northern Ireland. The impact of the pandemic was felt in every aspect of our work. I wish to commend our staff team for the care and support they showed for each other during this difficult time and record how that consideration translated on a daily basis to ensuring that

they were able to provide the most accessible service to the electorate in Northern Ireland with innovation and commitment demonstrated throughout the year. Thanks too are due to the sponsor branch support team at the NIO for their work at this challenging time and Cybersecurity services as well as the Cabinet Office procurement team. I also wish to record thanks to the RQIA, Department of Education, Land and Property Services, CCEA and the education team at Stormont.



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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 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 2020/21 which can be viewed at [www.eoni.org.uk](http://www.eoni.org.uk).

2.2 Twenty-nine targets were achieved in full.

Further information can be found at Annex A.

## **SECTION 3 – REGISTRATION**

- 3.1 Total registrations processed between 1 April 2020 and 31 March 2021 were 69,799. 92% of these applications were online.
- 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 53,000 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 350 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 2020 and 31 March 2021 letters were sent to 320 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 64,745 online applications during the year.

### **Data matching**

- 3.6 Following successful collaboration with NISRA (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency) a secondment has continued with further development of data analytics and particularly in relation to the preparation for Canvass 2021.

- 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 and their pupils in the future.
- 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 data has been revised and work on measuring accuracy and completeness on an ongoing basis is being developed.

### **Registration Statistics**

- 3.9 During the reporting period approximately 41,920 electors were added to the electoral register, 45,594 records were removed as deceased, no longer eligible for registration at a given address or in accordance with the legislation. There were over 4,163 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 has ensured, so far as reasonably practicable, the successful delivery of these objectives. The register published in December 2020 held 1,326,320 electors, a decrease of 4,585 electors from the figure at December 2019. By the end of the period covered in this report, the register was 1,326,556.

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**

There were no elections during the reporting period.

## **SECTION 5 – CENTRAL SERVICES**

### **Recruitment**

5.1 A preliminary interest exercise was undertaken to recruit canvassers in 2020, however, this postponed due to the pandemic. In January 2021 recruitment and selection resumed and preparations were made to conduct remote Canvasser ID and Assessment sessions and undertake Access NI clearance.

## **Staffing**

- 5.2 There were two resignations during the reporting year.
- 5.3 Two staff have received a temporary promotion.
- 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 received refresher awareness training through Employers for Disability NI in October 2020.
- 5.6 Mental Health Awareness sessions during the pandemic were provided remotely by Inspire.

## **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 2020.

## **Funding**

- 5.9 Total operational funding, excluding capital and depreciation, provided to the EONI for 2020/21 was £2,114,000. Total expenditure excluding capital and depreciation was £2,212,000. This figure includes a provision for dilapidations of £111,000. Capital expenditure was £100,000 with corresponding budget of £100,000.



- 5.10 Approximately 30 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. 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 included a detailed stakeholder analysis and plan to engage throughout canvass including directly with schools, Department of Education, CCEA and with RQIA in relation to care homes.

### **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 8,879 calls during the year.

## **Website**

5.17 There were 158,126 visits to the EONI website during the year.

## **Records Management**

5.18 One request was received for information under the Freedom of Information Act 2000.

## **Electoral Identity Cards**

5.19 There were 1,804 Electoral Identity Cards issued during the year.

## **Complaints**

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

- Two related to absent vote applications
- One related to an Electoral ID Card application
- One related to discrepancies at the UK Parliamentary election
- One related to the use of schools as polling stations
- One related to removal from the register

## **IT Systems**

- 5.21 The IT health check on the EONI IT systems was carried out in December 2021. Any unidentified vulnerabilities were addressed and remedial action taken.

## **SECTION 6 – CORPORATE GOVERNANCE**

- 6.1 The EONI moved further with its good governance development programme with the Government Internal Auditors invited to certain scheduled senior management team (SMT) meetings in a programme to improve communication and be more effective and efficient in securing audit recommendations.
- 6.2 A new programme of coaching began with a range of staff identified as the mid-level group (MLG) of managers and supervisors. The plan for this work is to improve communications in the organisation, foster a deeper sense of ownership of our work programme and ensure thinking and ideas from the office floor inform management thinking as quickly and clearly as possible. This is part of a succession planning model to ensure sustainability of all programmes. Plans were additionally put in place to allow the MLG to engage with the SMT. The MLG are being supported by an external facilitator to identify key projects of work to undertake together as smaller groups which includes work on communications with all staff.
- 6.3 The SMT continued with an executive training programme looking at the next stage of transformation.
- 6.4 A programme of work to develop the specification for a new electronic management system was put in place with a view to award in the spring of 2021. This involved a significant programme of review of systems across the organisation. The EONI worked with the Cabinet Office procurement team and two specialist external project advisors.

- 6.5 The EONI has developed a communications strategy for Canvass NI 2021 which will ensure optimal transparency for political representatives with data to be shared on a weekly basis with briefings prior to opening and information on our website explaining the entire Canvass process.
- 6.6 The EONI has developed plans to project Canvass outcomes in order to advise government on current legislative requirements.
- 6.7 The EONI has developed plans to improve expertise internally on electoral law and prepare an AEA accredited course for staff.
- 6.8 During 2020/21 the Government Internal Audit Agency (GIAA) provided services and undertook a review of data services development and finance work.
- 6.9 The Internal Audit opinion for 2020/21 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.
- 6.10 The EONI worked through 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 end of the business year we were working with lockdown and operated remotely with a skeleton staff in the building and post management contact in Belfast.

## Performance Against Targets and Development Objectives 2020/21

A	Achieved
	Not Achieved

### REGISTRATION

#### Strategic Aims 2019-22:

- Improve the accuracy and completeness of the data on the Register.
- Conduct a Canvass in 2020.
- Prioritise outreach to enhance the comprehensiveness of the Register.
- Ensure a particular focus on ensuring attainers are added to the Register.

Business Objectives:		Status	Comments
1	By 1 December 2020 to have produced a suite of digital developments to improve the accuracy and comprehensiveness of the Register and efficiency of processing.	A	
2	By March 2021 to have provided a suite of materials for the CCEA in Northern Ireland for key attainer influence groups in education.	A	
3	By December 2020 on the basis of data analytics engage with stakeholders to share priority areas for outreach with a focus on non-contact opportunities.	A	
4	By December 2020 review all letters to electors to optimise accessibility.	A	
5	By March 2021 carry out all necessary review and planning for Canvass 2021 and begin operations.	A	
6	By June 2020 prepare data cleansing programme for the EONI.	A	
7	By September 2020 Roll out data cleansing on UPRNs, electors at two addresses, street names and nursing home addresses.	A	
8	Work with Cabinet Office to deliver online access to overseas electors further to provision centrally.	A	
9	By December 2020 to have a programme in place to add NIHE and Education data to our sources.	A	
10	By March 2021 to have developed guidance materials on registration in NI.	A	

## ELECTIONS

### Strategic Aims 2019-22:

- Ensure the administration of free and fair elections in NI.
- Provide a Parliamentary polling station scheme review.

### Business Objectives:

1	By March 2021 to develop election readiness guidance and monitoring tools.	A
2	By December 2020 to produce performance targets for election readiness.	A
3	By March 2021 develop STV count training materials.	A

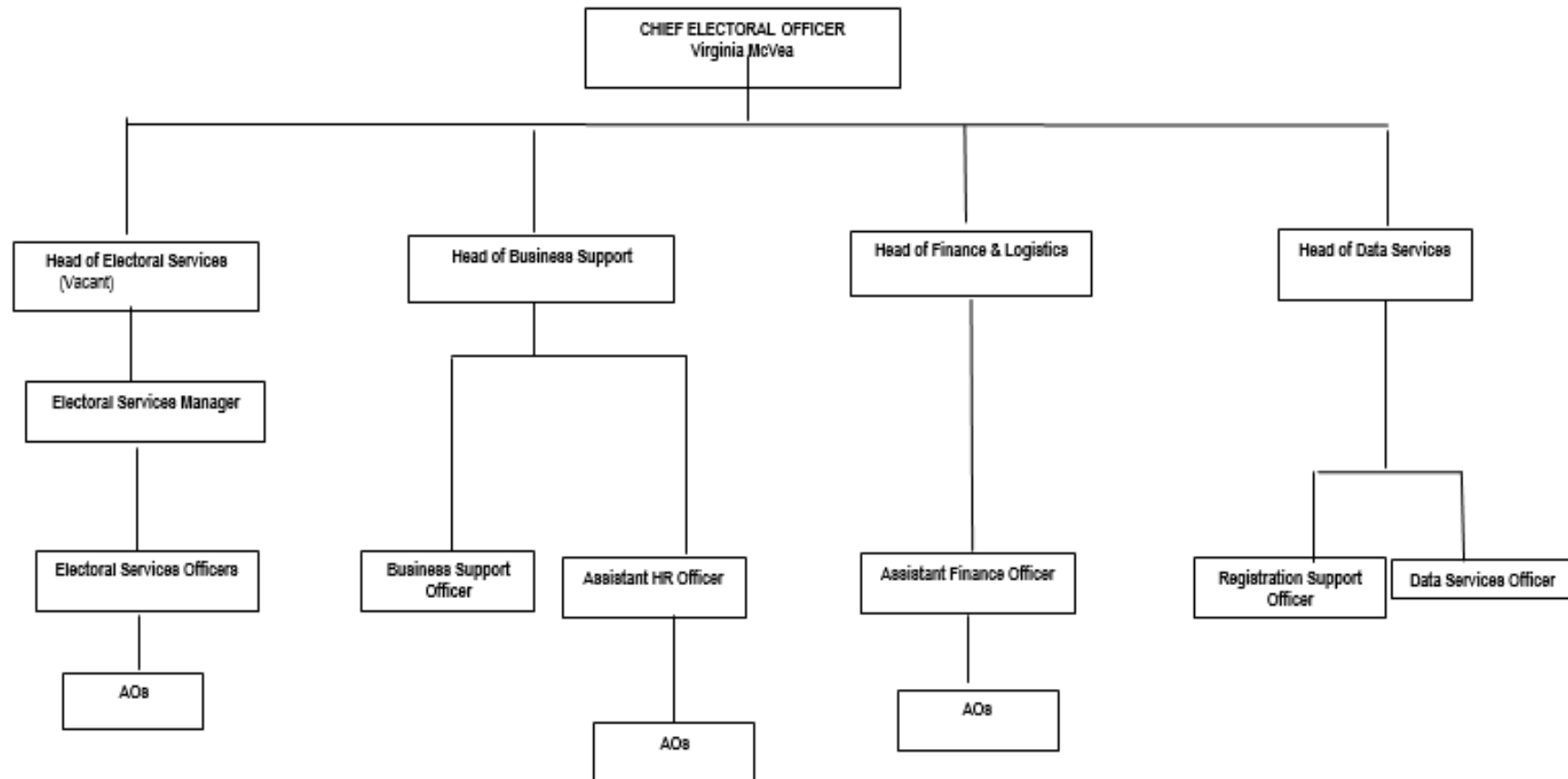
## CORPORATE SERVICES

### Strategic Aims 2019-22:

- To 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 2021 to have new governance structures and processes in place.	NA
2	By December 2020 to have a suite of materials reviewing, documenting and triggering procurement requirements.	A
3	By December 2020 to have relocated and reviewed a new disaster recovery site.	A
4	By September 2020 to have uploaded and made operational a new telephone system with new monitoring and reporting facilities for the EONI.	A
5	By March 2021 to roll out actions from the governance audit.	A

## ELECTORAL OFFICE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND



## OPERATING COSTS 2020/21

OPERATING COSTS 2020/21	£k
<u>Basic Pay -</u>	
Permanent Staff	740.2
Temporary Staff	3.5
<b>Basic Pay Total</b>	<b>743.7</b>
<u>Overtime -</u>	
Permanent Staff	2.5
<b>Overtime Total</b>	<b>2.5</b>
<u>Employers National Insurance -</u>	
Permanent & Temporary Staff	63.0
<b>Employers National Insurance Total</b>	<b>63.0</b>
Accrued Superannuation Liability Charge	205.0
<b>Total Staff</b>	<b>1,014.2</b>
Travel & Subsistence	0.5
Staff Training & Development	34.7
Other Staff Costs	23.4
Operating Leases	252.3
Accommodation Costs	113.3
Communications	82.9
Computer Charges	322.7
Other Office Services – Postage	167.3
Advertisement & Publicity	0
Contracted-out Services	12.0
Professional Costs	160.1
Consultancy Costs	148.1
Hospitality	2.1
Non Capital Purchases	0.0
Other Charges	0.1
<b>Total Goods &amp; Services</b>	<b>1,319.5</b>
Non Cash Costs (Depreciation)	201.6
Receipts	-121.9
<b>TOTAL PROGRAMME</b>	<b>2,413.4</b>
Capital	100.0
<b>GRAND TOTAL</b>	<b>2,513.4</b>



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