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Public Authority Five Year Review Report

Executive Summary

Please provide some main conclusions in terms of:

a) To what extent has your public authority's approved scheme provided a workable basis for mainstreaming the need to promote equality of opportunity and good relations into policy-making over the past five years?

Section 75 obligations as set out in the approved scheme are an essential element for all policy in the Electoral Office for NI (EONI). Consultation provides an opportunity for stakeholders to contribute to the promotion and equality of opportunity and good relations in the delivery of electoral services. In particular, developing and implementing our equality action plan has provided a workable basis for achieving both long-term and short-term goals.

b) What key lessons have been learnt over the past five years in terms of effectively implementing the approved equality scheme?

Commitment from senior management continues to be of key importance in relation to considering equality issues across all functions and services. Continuing to engage early and regularly directly with stakeholders is also of key importance through meaningful, targeting consultation and initiatives to encourage electoral registration and participation in the democratic process.

c) What more needs to be done to achieve outcomes for individuals from the nine equality categories?

Building on relations to ensure equality of opportunity through outreach and development of training programmes to not only assist voters but also those who are employed by EONI during elections.

1. A general introductory statement specifying the purpose of the scheme and the public authority's commitment to the statutory duties.

EONI's Equality Scheme was approved by the Equality Commission in 2012 and its purpose is to fulfill obligations under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 on the promotion of equality or opportunity and good relations. The scheme sets out how EONI proposes to fulfill the commitment of the CEO to effectively implementing Section 75 duties.

1a) To what extent were senior management involved in ensuring scheme compliance over the 5 year period and what further steps could be undertaken to ensure effective internal arrangements?

Overall responsibility over the 5 year period lay with the Chief Electoral Officer who consulted with staff and stakeholders in the development of equality action plans. Equality is an integral part of regular senior management meetings and new policies and amended policies are screened as required by Section 75.

1b) Outline annual **direct** expenditure of resources to ensure that the statutory duties were complied with, in terms of staff and money over the past 5 years, and comment on the extent that all necessary resources were allocated.

Direct expenditure includes an equality officer (Staff Officer grade average £30k) and other programme costs involving training, assistance provided to voters, access to information and services. Resources are allocated to ensure effective consultation with section 75 groups eg, Disability Action on the revised Corporate Plan to address concerns

regarding the implementation of online electoral registration in relation to disabled and older people and other low income families not having the economic power to purchase computers and internet services.

Throughout the review period Area Electoral Officers have written to targeted groups on proposals to close the polling places which have inadequate access arrangements and where EONI has not been able to identify a suitable alternative venue in the general locality.

2. An outline of how the public authority intends to assess its compliance with the Section 75 duties and for consulting on matters to which a duty under that section is likely to be relevant.

- Screening policies and monitoring adverse impact; undertaking EQIAs as appropriate;
- Consulting and engaging with under-represented groups on the electoral register including young people, those in disadvantaged groups and ethnic minorities.
- Producing an annual report on the progress made
- Liaison with the Northern Ireland Office, Electoral Commission and political parties to drive strategies to target groups
- Internal arrangements to continue to improve mainstreaming equality and training including casual election staff

2a) Outline impacts and outcomes (for the public authority and/or individuals from the nine equality categories) over the past five years and what further steps could be undertaken to build on these or address underreporting?

- Staff received deaf awareness training as part of benchmark audit through Action on hearing loss.

- Election guidance for Voters Translated to Polish, Portuguese and Lithuanian.
- EONI staff continued their engagement with organisations and community groups throughout Northern Ireland and participation in registration initiatives continued during the year.
- Registration forms and promotional material were supplied for display and distribution at the offices of the Registrars, District Councils, Social Security and Benefits offices, the Northern Ireland Youth Forum and the offices of the Citizens Advice Bureau. Registration forms were also supplied to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive for inclusion in their 'New Tenant' packs.

2b) Outline the number of equality scheme related consultation exercises undertaken by your authority over the past five years. Set out the number and percentage related to screening exercises and to EQIAs and indicate the extent that your scheme helped you to engage with external stakeholders.

The NIO is responsible for policies and legislation regarding electoral registration and elections, and through screening and public consultation provides an opportunity for stakeholders including the wider public to contribute to proposed or revised law. However, during the past five years a Revising Polling Station Scheme was published under Section 18CA of the Representation of the People Act 1983. A consultation exercise was carried out detailing the location of the proposed polling stations and the streets or roads allocated to each of them and all section 75 groups are engaged in the process. No EQIAs were necessary in relation to any screening exercises (see section 3a).

2c) Indicate if your list of consultees was amended during the 5 year period and what further steps could be taken to develop your level of engagement and consultation?

A list of stakeholder email addresses are retaining centrally and emailed which maintains the efficiency of the consultation process. The list is reviewed annually or amended at the request of consultees.

2d) To what extent did your authority consult directly with directly affected individuals as well as with representative groups, particularly in relation to young people and those with learning disabilities, and was this sufficient?

Outreach work was undertaken to boost registration particularly in relation to young people for example, with post-primary schools, participating in the National Unions of Students (NUS) registration week and providing Queens University and Ulster University with material for inclusion in Freshers packs. During the five year period, EONI staff also participated in a number of registration and electoral ID events aimed at encouraging registration from individuals with disabilities including attending an RNIB visual impairment awareness session.

3. The authority's arrangements for assessing and consulting on the impact of policies adopted or proposed to be adopted on the promotion of equality of opportunity.

3a) Outline and discuss the number of policies your authority subject to screening over the past five years, setting out the number and percentage of 'policies screened in' on the basis of equality considerations and the percentage 'screened in' on the basis of the good relations duty.

POLICY	OUTCOME
Voluntary Exit Scheme (2016)	No EQIA necessary, internal consultation with NIPSA.
Redundancy Policy and Procedures (2016)	No EQIA necessary, internal consultation with NIPSA.
Monitoring at Work Policy (2015)	No EQIA necessary, internal consultation with NIPSA.
Overtime Policy (2015)	No EQIA necessary, internal consultation with NIPSA.
EONI Corporate Plan (2015)	Screened out without mitigation. No EQIA necessary.
Draft Mobile Device Policy (2015)	Screened out without mitigation. No EQIA necessary, internal consultation with NIPSA.
EONI Business Plan (2014)	Screened out without mitigation. No EQIA necessary
Twitter Policy (2013)	Screened out without mitigation. No EQIA necessary
Communications Strategy (2012)	Screened out without mitigation. No EQIA necessary.

3b) To what extent did your authority's consideration of the screening criteria **not** identify equal opportunity implications on any of s75 categories, but for which consultees then highlighted problems?

N/A

3c) Outline over the past five years how many EQIAs your authority commenced as a result of i) initial screening and ii) as a result of

screening new/revised policies subsequently, and discuss the extent that your authority has become more effective at identifying equality of opportunity dimensions in its policies.

No EQIAs were necessary during the five year period.

4. The authority's arrangements for monitoring any adverse impact of policies adopted by the authority on the promotion of equality of opportunity.

4a) To what extent were sufficient arrangements put in place to collect data relating to the nine equality categories to monitor the impact of policies and what could your authority do in future to develop monitoring arrangements?

EONI continues to collect data from various sources and stakeholders eg Electoral Commission research, government agencies, section 75 groups, political parties, and staff. Data sources for comparative analysis is difficult given the nature of the information held on the Electoral Register as these types of data are not requested when an individual applies to register (e.g. with/without dependents, religious, sexual orientation, political opinion etc). There are strict provisions in the Representation of the People Acts that prevent the seeking of other than prescribed information. EONI is currently developing plans to implement a new electoral management system.

5. The authority's arrangements for publishing the results of equality impact assessments and of monitoring any adverse impact of policies adopted by the authority on the promotion of equality of opportunity.

5a) Indicate the number of reports published outlining the results of EQIAs and monitoring over the past five years, and outline what your authority could do in future in relation to improving the publication of EQIA results and monitoring.

No EQIAs were necessary during the five year period.

6. A commitment that in making any decision with respect to a policy adopted or proposed to be adopted by it, that the public authority shall take into account any equality impact assessment and consultation carried out in relation to the policy.

No EQIAs were necessary during the five year period.

7. The authority's arrangements for training staff on issues relevant to the duties.

EONI remains committed to general training for all new entrants as part of the induction process, and developing policy makers to ensure effective section 75 training. A training programme has been developed for equality training in relation to election staff, particularly those who work in polling stations, which will continue to be provided for future elections.

8. The authority's arrangements for ensuring and assessing public access to information and to services provided by the authority.

8a) To what extent were sufficient arrangements put in place to ensure and assess public access to information and to services provided by the authority?

Access to information and services provided by EONI are available through our website and various outreach initiatives. Information is available on request in alternative formats. All services and office locations are accessible for customers and staff with disabilities.

EONI has initiated a range of outreach measures during the past five years to ensure access to information and services. For example, schools and nursing home initiatives have provided information on

accessing the registration services. Also the 'Vote You are At Home' Campaign aimed at encouraging ethnic minority groups to register and vote at the elections previously launched at Parliament Buildings was attended by EONI staff who handed out registration forms and gave advice to attendees.

9. The authority's timetable for measures proposed in the scheme.

9a) Outline the extent to which measures set out in the original timetable have been implemented. Any detailed information should be included as an appendix to the report.

EONI has implemented both equality and disability action plans and these timetables have largely been met.

9b) If your authority was to be reconstituted in the next five years what would be the main scheme actions/equality considerations that an incoming authority should address? Any detailed information should be included as an appendix to the report.

There are no plans for any such reconstitution which would require primary Westminster legislation. The knowledge transfer issues would be addressed in the course of the discussions on any such reconstitution.

10. Details of how the scheme will be published.

10a) Were scheme commitments in this section delivered and what evidence supports this view?

EONI's Equality Scheme is available on our website and in accessible formats as required.

11. The authority's arrangements for dealing with complaints arising from a failure to comply with the scheme.

11a) Outline the number and nature of complaints received by your authority, and what your authority could do in future to develop its complaints handling process and learn from complaints.

Complaints are made around a variety of issues and primarily at elections. The majority of these are around applications where signatures do not match. We attempt to provide as much information as possible in advance of applications and expedite responses so as to give applicants as much time as possible to correct signature or evidential difficulties. Complaints about where Polling Stations are located can be higher profile complaints. We are entering into a Review of the Polling station scheme in the autumn of 2018 and the public will have the opportunity to engage beyond feedback already collated via a consultation scheme with the outcome published in early 2019.

Complaints about voter fraud are passed to the PSNI and there were some ten cases live during 2017 and those were almost all closed at the time of writing.

Complaints can be made about behaviour in polling stations . These should mainly be resolved on site at the time but the CEO follows up after the election and consideration is given to the potential for changes to our training and guidance. We liaise with PSNI command in planning for elections and optimal efforts are made to ensure that people are safe as they go to vote.

12. A commitment to conducting a review of the scheme within five years of its submission to the Equality Commission and to forwarding a report of this review to the Equality Commission.

12a) What has been your authority's experience of conducting this review? To what extent has the Commission's guidance been useful in undertaking the review?

The template provided by the Equality Commission and reports completed through the annual progress reporting, has ensured the completion of the 5 year review was relatively straightforward. No significant changes were made to the Scheme previously approved.