

**THE ELECTORAL OFFICE  
for  
NORTHERN IRELAND**

**Section 75 Northern Ireland Act 1998**

**Progress Report  
1 April 2003 – 31 March 2004**

Name of public authority

**The Electoral Office for Northern Ireland**

Equality Officer's name and contact details

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## **Introduction**

Danny Lambe, the Director of the Public Sector Statutory Duty Unit of the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, wrote to the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland requesting by 31 August 2004 a progress report on the implementation of the equality and good relations duties under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 to cover the period from 1 April 2003 to 31 March 2004.

Denis Stanley, the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland, commissioned the External Assessor of the Electoral Office's (EONI's) Equality Scheme, Brian Blackwell CBE, to prepare the report for his approval.

Consequently, this report was prepared in consultation with the staff of the Electoral Office and has been approved, in the absence of Mr Stanley, by the Assistant Chief Electoral Officer for submission to the Equality Commission.

**Brian Blackwell**

**BRIAN BLACKWELL**

**23 August 2004**

**THE ELECTORAL OFFICE**  
**for**  
**NORTHERN IRELAND**  
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**Section 1: Strategic Implementation of the section 75 Duties.**

**Resources and responsibilities.**

- 1.1. Responsibility to the Chief Electoral Officer for driving forward implementation of the section 75 obligations set out in the EONI's Equality Scheme continues to lie with the Assistant Chief Electoral Officer, Mrs June Butler. There is no member of the staff of the Electoral Office (EONI) whose work is solely concerned with the promotion of equality of opportunity and good relations.
- 1.2. To take forward the implementation of the section 75 duties, there is a Steering Committee chaired by the Chief Electoral Officer (CEO) and composed of Mrs Butler and the Electoral Office Team Leaders. The Committee is advised by the External Assessor, Brian Blackwell, a part-time consultant on section 75 issues. Unfortunately, because of extraordinary work pressures during the reporting period, the Committee did not meet as frequently as had been intended. In effect, therefore, responsibility for day-to-day progress with the section 75 duties during this reporting period fell to the CEO and Mrs Butler prompted by the External Assessor. However, this report has been approved by the Steering Committee chaired by the CEO.
- 1.3. A team of four staff were selected and trained to work with the External Assessor on the EONI's first Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA), the Northern Ireland Polling Station Scheme (see Section 2 below).
- 1.4. The running costs of the above appointments and responsibilities were provided for in the appropriate EONI budgets.

**Corporate planning.**

- 1.5. Objectives and targets relating to the statutory obligations are integrated into the Electoral Office's corporate and business plans and the Chief Electoral Officer's Annual Report. These objectives and targets are reflected at all levels of strategic planning within the Electoral Office including staff objectives and annual plans.

**Work with other public authorities.**

- 1.6. The Electoral Office has worked with Education and Library Boards and District Councils on improving access to some Polling Stations for wheelchair users, the physically disabled and the elderly. The EONI has consulted with North Down and Newry & Mourne District Councils on the difficult issue of the entitlement to vote for people with learning difficulties.
- 1.7. There is considerable engagement with the Electoral Commission over issues such as the take-up of voting rights by young people and ethnic minorities, and concerning disabled access to Polling Stations.

**Partnership work.**

- 1.8. In August 2003, the EONI sought assistance from Mencap, RNIB and RNID in advising Area Electoral Officer trainers on equality awareness briefing for canvassers prior to registration. Subsequently this advice was imparted to election staff. In December 2003 there was consultation with Disability Action with regard to feedback from that organisation's members on disabled access to the polling places used at the November 2003 Assembly election.

**Factors affecting strategic implementation.**

- 1.8. In the period under review, the EONI was impeded in its strategic implementation of the section 75 duties by the exceptionally heavy workload for all staff in such a small public authority caused by the intensive preparation for May Assembly elections that, in the event, did not take place. Then, in the early autumn, there was the extensive work involved in the annual canvass by individual registration as a result of the provisions of the Electoral Fraud Act 2002. Finally, in November 2003, Assembly elections did take place – simultaneously with the annual canvass - placing a formidable burden of organisation on the EONI.

**Section 2: Screening & Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA)**

- 2.1. As a public authority that is essentially a service provider rather than a policy developer, the EONI did not screen any new policies in the period under review.
- 2.2. The EONI formed and trained an EQIA team of four staff, mentored by the External Assessor, to carry out its first EQIA of the Polling Station Scheme for Northern Ireland. By 31 March 2004, the process had reached stage 4 and the EQIA Report had been discussed with the Equality Commission and then issued for public consultation.

### **Section 3: Training**

- 3.1. Again, because of the exceptionally heavy workload, the EONI fell behind on its planned provision of equality awareness training for new permanent and fixed-term staff after September 2003. It arranged one EQIA training session for four staff on 7 July 2003 provided by Focus Training (sponsored by Disability Action). As mentioned in paragraph 1.8 above, it also arranged in August 2003 equality awareness briefing for canvassing staff assisted by representatives from Mencap, RNID and RNIB.
- 3.2. An Equality training needs analysis has been commissioned so as to determine the equality training programme for the year 2004/05.

### **Section 4: Communication**

- 4.1. Internal communication of the EONI's commitment to the statutory duties is achieved by the inclusion of a statement of that commitment in the contracts of employment of all staff, and in staff access to the main equality documentation on the EONI's website. Progress in implementing the section 75 duties is also an agenda item in meetings of the Senior Management Team, ideally, on a quarterly basis.
- 4.2. External communication of the commitment and progress in implementation of the section 75 duties is provided by publishing the Equality Scheme, the Annual Progress Report and EQIA Reports on the EONI's website. The Chief Electoral Officer refers to the EONI's commitment to the section 75 duties in interviews and briefings. At the annual conference of the Association of Electoral Administrators in February 2004, the Assistant Chief Electoral Officer included section 75 issues in a presentation about the electoral process in Northern Ireland.
- 4.3. Progress on implementation of the statutory duties is communicated to the general public and affected parties by the publication of the Annual Progress Report on the EONI's website announced by means of a Press Notice inviting applications for hard copies.

### **Section 5: Data Collection and Analysis**

- 5.1. A review of data sources has confirmed that, in addition to anonymised registration data collected by the EONI, other sources of data are: analysis of Census data by NISRA; reports and surveys by the Electoral Commission; and internal records of

assistance with registration by EONI permanent staff including internal records of electors identified as possessing learning difficulties of varying degrees of severity.

- 5.2. When the EQIA on the Polling Station Scheme is completed, any future adverse impacts of the Scheme will be monitored by reviewing the Presiding Officers' Log Books after each election and by maintaining regular contacts with representatives of affected groups.

### **Section 6: Information Provision, Access to Information and Services.**

- 6.1. Provision of information to the electorate about the registration process is provided by the system of canvassing which extends across the Province. Information about elections is provided by a public information campaign mounted by the Electoral Commission and by interviews with the media by Electoral Office staff.
- 6.2. The contents of the registration form and related guidance notes are available on request in Braille, audio-tape or large print. They are also available in Cantonese and Portuguese.
- 6.3. The uptake of the 2003 registration process compared with that in 2002 was assessed by a survey conducted for the Electoral Commission by Price Waterhouse Coopers as part of a review of the working of the Electoral Fraud Act 2002. This information was made readily available to the EONI for section 75 purposes.

### **Section 7: Complaints.**

- 7.1. There were no formal section 75 complaints received by the EONI in the period covered by this Report.

### **Section 8: Timetable.**

- 8.1. In the period covered by this Report, the EQIA on the Polling Station Scheme was not completed. Its completion date is now forecast for October 2004. The timetables for Years 3, 4, and 5 are as follows:

#### **Year 3 (1 April 2004 – 31 March 2005)**

- Carry out induction equality training for new staff.
- Complete EQIA on Polling Station Scheme by end October 2004.
- Carry out EQIA on the function of preparing and maintaining an accurate electoral register. (by 31 March 2005).

- Carry out equality training needs analysis.
- Provide the necessary equality training identified in the training needs analysis.
- Monitor operation of the EONI Equality Scheme.
- Screen any new policies, powers, duties and functions.
- Prepare and publish Annual Progress Report.

**Year 4 (1 April 2005 – 31 March 2006)**

- Carry out induction equality training for new staff.
- Carry out monitoring EQIA on the introduction of the IT System (by 31 March 2006).
- Carry out monitoring EQIA on the effect of outreach measures in advertising for and recruiting staff to carry out registration duties, man Polling Stations and provide the Electoral Office with clerical staff (by 31 March 2006).
- Monitor the operation of the EONI Equality Scheme.
- Screen any new policies, powers, duties and functions.
- Prepare and publish Annual Progress Report.

**Year 5 (1 April 2006 – 31 March 2007)**

- Carry out induction equality training for new staff.
- Screen any new policies, powers, duties and functions.
- Carry out major 5 years review of the operation and effectiveness of the Equality Scheme in promoting equality of opportunity and good relations in the work of the Electoral Office.
- Publish Review Report.

**8.2.** The Electoral Office is, at present, on course to complete the commitments in the above timetable.

**Section 9: Consultation, participation and engagement.**

**9.1.** For section 75 consultation exercises the EONI has in place a two-stage process. First, key stakeholders in a policy, power, duty or function are identified and written to by the Electoral Office, enclosing details of the subject of the consultation and inviting comments or requests for meetings to discuss the issues in question. A minimum of eight weeks is allowed for this first consultation exercise.

- 9.2. The detail of the policy, power, duty or function is then amended, if necessary, to take account of the key stakeholders' comments and submitted to the Equality Commission for comment. It is then posted on the EONI's website and subject to the second stage consultation process which also extends for a minimum of eight weeks. In this case, the consultees consist of the target list of organisations and public authorities listed in the Equality Scheme who are known to hold an interest in the work of the Electoral Office and/or the issue in question. The consultation is advertised on the website, through the NIO Press Office and in the three main Northern Ireland newspapers including the North West edition of the Belfast Telegraph. Other organisations and general members of the public are also invited to comment in writing or to request meetings.
- 9.3. The detail of the outcome of the consultation exercise is then notified in writing to the Equality Commission and to the key stakeholders. The outcome is also posted on the EONI's website. This will be the case in autumn 2004 when the second consultation stage of the EQIA of the Polling Station Scheme is completed.
- 9.4. This process of consultation on the Polling Station Scheme has led to much closer engagement with groups representing the disabled, who are the section 75 category most affected by the location and conditions of access to Polling Stations and Polling Places.

#### **Section 10: The Good Relations duty.**

- 10.1. The most important role of the Electoral Office in the promotion of good relations is ensuring that every aspect of the electoral process in Northern Ireland is, and is seen to be, non-partisan. Thus, the prevention of electoral fraud and providing free and fair elections are key elements in the promotion of good relations. By rigorously applying the provisions of the Electoral Fraud Act 2002, the Electoral Office is, in effect, actively promoting good relations.

#### **Section 11: Impacts and outcomes.**

- 11.1. It is the Chief Electoral Officer's policy that all new or revised policies/services will be equality screened.
- 11.2. An early outcome of the, as yet, unfinished EQIA of the Polling Station Scheme is the continuing review of the Scheme in the light of data collected as a result of the November 2003 Assembly Election. In particular, close attention is being paid to

solving the problems of access for the elderly and wheelchair users at some Polling Places identified at the November Election.

- 11.3. The Electoral Office is continuing to benefit from the Chief Electoral Officer’s decision in 2002 to abolish the upper age limit of 65 for temporary staff. The Chief Electoral Officer is, thus, able to call from time to time on the invaluable expertise of some retired senior permanent and short term contract staff and, at election time, on the local knowledge of older temporary staff who have assisted at many previous elections and who are widely respected in the local community.

**Section 12: Additional comments on Mainstreaming.**

- 12.1. Soundings taken by the External Assessor have demonstrated that the Area Electoral Officers, who form the core of the small and very busy Electoral Office - and who are all members of the section 75 Steering Group - have developed a strong commitment to the section 75 duties contained in the EONI’s Equality Scheme. The awareness of the whole Senior Management Team of the importance of promoting equal opportunities and good relations across the section 75 categories is firmly established.
- 12.2. Bilateral meetings with organisations with section 75 interests or concerns are welcomed by the Chief Electoral Officer and by the Assistant Chief Electoral Officer.
- 12.3. The planned equality training needs analysis will provide opportunities for further training to reinforce the mainstreaming of equality of opportunity and promotion of good relations considerations.

**Section 13: Concluding questions.**

**QUESTION A**

**Does the authority believe its work to date on implementing the statutory duties has produced positive benefits for the organisation? (Please tick) YES X NO**

	Very noticeably	Noticeably	No real change
<b>Increased awareness of equality issues in policy making.</b>		X	

<b>Increased ability to ensure policies are designed and targeted to reflect equal opportunities objectives.</b>		<b>X</b>	
<b>Increased awareness of good relations issues in policy making.</b>		<b>X</b>	
<b>Increased ability to ensure policies are designed and targeted to reflect good relations objectives.</b>			<b>X</b>
<b>Increased awareness of equality issues in service delivery.</b>	<b>X</b>		
<b>Increased ability to ensure services are designed and targeted to reflect section 75 requirements.</b>	<b>X</b>		

**QUESTION B**

**Does the authority believe its work to date on implementing the statutory duties has produced positive benefits for groups within the section 75 categories?**  
 (Please tick) YES X NO

	<b>Very noticeably</b>	<b>Noticeably</b>	<b>No real change</b>
<b>Persons of different religious belief.</b>			<b>X</b>

<b>Persons of different political opinion.</b>			<b>X</b>
<b>Persons of different racial groups.</b>		<b>X</b>	
<b>Persons of different age.</b>	<b>X</b>		
<b>Persons with different marital status.</b>			<b>X</b>
<b>Persons of different sexual orientation.</b>			<b>X</b>
<b>Men and women generally.</b>			<b>X</b>
<b>Persons with and without a disability.</b>	<b>X</b>		
<b>Persons with and without dependants.</b>		<b>X</b>	

**Electoral Office  
31 August 2004**