

**THE ELECTORAL OFFICE
For
NORTHERN IRELAND**

Section 75 Northern Ireland Act 1998

**Progress Report
1 April 2004 – 31 March 2005**

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Introduction

In a letter dated 11 May 2005, Antoinette McKeown, the Head of Policy & Development in the Public Sector Statutory Duty Unit in the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, wrote to the Chief Executives of designated public authorities requesting that they prepare a progress report on their section 75 obligations to cover the period from 1 April 2004 to 31 March 2005.

Denis Stanley, the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland, once again 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 Assistant Chief Electoral Officer, Mrs June Butler, and with the staff of the Electoral Office and has been approved by Mr Stanley for submission to the Equality Commission.

Brian Blackwell

BRIAN BLACKWELL

31 August 2005

Section 1: Executive Summary

1.1. Outcomes which have impacted on the authority in terms of efficiency and effectiveness:

The outcome of the Polling Station Scheme EQIA that was submitted to the Equality Commission in January 2005 was a revised Polling Station Scheme for the 2005 District Council Elections and the anticipated General Election which would be more efficient and effective in catering for the needs of the elderly and the disabled.

Monitoring of the Presiding Officers' Polling station logs subsequent to the elections will provide data on the effectiveness of the revised Scheme.

1.2. Outcomes for people in the nine equality categories:

The 2004 Canvass and electoral registration process demonstrated the positive effect of the outreach measures taken by the Electoral Office (EONI) in 2004 ensuring that young people registering for the first time increased by almost 100% compared with the 2003 canvass.

1.3. Meetings to plan further strategies for outreach and methods of working together with the EONI were held with:

- The Chinese Welfare Association
- The National Union of Students
- RNIB
- NICVA

Contact with NICVA led to the EONI writing to over a hundred umbrella groups registered with NICVA, mostly support groups for racial or ethnic minorities, young people or disadvantaged people. These groups were informed of the availability of application forms for 'rolling registration' in job centres, benefit offices, libraries, recreation centres and Council offices or from the EONI website.

1.4. Policy considerations and decisions which took account of equality implications:

The EONI is working closely with the Electoral Commission and with other representative organisations to increase the number of qualified Travellers, members of ethnic minorities and migrant workers on the Electoral Register.

- 1.5. The EONI's Fair Employment Monitoring Information for the period 1 January 2004 to 31 December 2005 indicated an improvement in the religious balance of the EONI's temporary staff who assist with canvassing.

Section 2: Strategic Implementation of the section 75 Duties

- 2.1. Objectives and targets relating to the section 75 statutory obligations continue to be integrated into the EONI's corporate and business plans and a separate section on progress made under the Equality Scheme is included in the Chief Electoral Officer's Annual Report.
- 2.2. Early strategic planning with Ministers and officials of the Northern Ireland Office is in hand for ceasing the annual canvass after 2006 so as to increase the comprehensiveness of the Electoral Register while maintaining its high level of accuracy. This is aimed at releasing resources which will then be used to work to provide increased access to democratic politics for the young, for ethnic minorities and for those living in the most deprived areas of Northern Ireland.
- 2.3. This proposed process of continuous registration will involve work on a greater disclosure of data by a wide range of government related organisations.
- 2.4. The EONI continues to work closely with representatives of Mencap, RNIB, Disability Action, Help the Aged and Extern to improve and widen access to the electoral process for those they represent both for registration and for elections.
- 2.5. There is no **direct** resourcing of section 75 work as such. Costs of fees for the work of the External Assessor and for equality training (see Section 4) and staff costs of those working on EQIAs are met from the appropriate EONI running costs budgets.

Section 3: Screening & Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA)

- 3.1. See **Appendix A**.

Section 4: Training

- 4.1. Equality training needs identified for 2004/05 led to the provision of Equality Training by the External Assessor on Wednesday 12 January 2005 as refresher training for

some existing staff and as awareness training for new recruits (11 staff). The training provided was assessed by all those attending as 'valuable'.

- 4.2. Training on carrying out EQIAs was provided for three senior staff by Focus Training (sponsored by Disability Action) on 20 January 2005. These three staff formed the core of the EONI's EQIA Team mentored during their assessment work by the External Assessor.
- 4.3. Training in equality awareness for temporary canvassing and election staff is provided in-house by Area Electoral Officers.

Section 5: Communication

- 5.1. 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 an agenda item in the meetings of the Senior Management Team, ideally, on a quarterly basis.
- 5.2. External communication of the commitment to and progress in the implementation of the section 75 duties is provided by the publication on the EONI's website of the Equality Scheme, the Annual Progress Reports and EQIA Reports. The Chief Electoral Officer regularly refers to the EONI's commitment to the section 75 duties in interviews and briefings.
- 5.3. The publication of new equality documentation on the EONI's website is always announced by means of a Press Notice which also invites applications for hard copies and alternative formats.
- 5.4. The Chief Electoral Officer and the Assistant Chief Electoral Officer welcome discussions on equality issues with representatives of affected groups.

Section 6: Data Collection & Analysis

- 6.1. In addition to the usual data available to the EONI (see last year's Progress Report), the Electoral Office is in contact with researchers from Price Waterhouse Coopers working for the Electoral Commission on the under-representation on the electoral register of people from deprived areas and the young. The aim is to target such groups

with outreach measures in the 2005 canvass to improve their representation on the register.

- 6.2. In the year 2005/06 the EONI will be analysing the Presiding Officers' Polling Station logs from the May 2005 elections to determine whether the revised Polling Station Scheme arising from the EQIA of the Polling Station Scheme in 2004 had lessened the adverse effects of poor access to Polling Stations on the elderly and disabled.

Section 7: Information Provision, Access to Information and Services

- 7.1. During and since 2004, progress has been made by the EONI in meeting the information needs of minority ethnic groups e.g. registration forms and guidance notes have been translated into Cantonese and Portuguese; and canvasser 'flash' cards into Polish and some of the languages of the Baltic states. Contact has been established with Scope, a support group for citizens of other EU states.
- 7.2. In the 2004/05 reporting year, the EONI has drawn up an action plan for liaising with representatives of people with disabilities prior to the 2005 canvass. This requires Area Electoral Officers to make contact initially with local people from the main representative groups in their Electoral Area i.e. Mencap, Disability Action, RNIB, RNID, 'Destined', Help the Aged and Age Concern to identify those disabled people in the Electoral Area who will require assistance to register. This approach will mean that disabled people will be actively involved in the registration process. An end-of-canvass evaluation will be used to determine the effectiveness of the methodology which will be reported in next year's annual progress report.

Section 8: Complaints

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

Section 9: Scheme Timetable

- 9.1. In the period covered by this Report, the EQIA of the Polling Station Scheme was completed and submitted to the Equality Commission in January 2005. The EQIA of the function of preparing and maintaining an accurate electoral register is at Step 5 and

its completion date is now estimated as 31 October 2005. The timetables for Years 4 and 5 are as follows:

Year 4 (1 April 2005 – 31 March 2006)

- Carry out induction equality training for new staff.
- Complete and submit EQIA of the function of preparing and maintaining an accurate electoral register (by 31 October 2005).
- 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 Equality Commission's guidance on 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.

9.2. The Electoral Office is on course to complete the commitments in the above timetable.

Section 10: Consultation, Participation and Engagement

10.1. For section 75 consultation exercises the EONI has continued to use the two-stage process developed initially in 2003. Key stakeholders in a policy, power, duty or function are initially identified and written to by the EONI 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.

- 10.2.** The detail of the policy, power, duty or function is then reconsidered and amended, if necessary, to take account of the key stakeholders' comments. It is then posted on the EONI's website and subjected to the second stage consultation process which also extends for a minimum of eight weeks. In this second stage the consultees consist of the key stakeholders again plus other organisations and public authorities listed in the Equality Scheme document who are known to hold an interest in the work of the Electoral Office and/or the issue in question.. This consultation is advertised on the EONI website, through the NIO Press Office and in the three main Northern Ireland newspapers including the North West edition of the Belfast telegraph. These advertisements invite other organisations and general members of the public to comment in writing or to request meetings.
- 10.3.** The outcome of the consultation exercise and the policy decisions arising from it are notified in writing to the Equality Commission and to the key stakeholders. They are also posted on the EONI's website. The arrangements for monitoring the impact of the policy are published at the same time.

Section 11: The Good Relations duty.

- 11.1.** The prevention of electoral fraud, the reform and modernisation of the electoral registration arrangements and the provision of free and fair elections in Northern Ireland by the Electoral Office in a non-partisan way are key elements in the promotion of good relations. Ensuring public confidence in the electoral system by the community at large lies at the heart of the Electoral Office's work. That is how the EONI promotes good relations in Northern Ireland.

Section 12: Additional Comments on Mainstreaming

- 12.1.** The recruitment to the senior staff of the EONI of a former member of the Equality Commission has added significantly to the awareness within the Electoral Office of equality considerations across all of the EONI's work. For instance, systematic Fair Employment monitoring of all Electoral Office staff, permanent, casual and temporary has highlighted the need for seeking religious balance in the composition of the staff.
- 12.2.** The regular meetings of the Senior Management Team show a consistent concern to address the equality and good relations dimensions of all business issues that are discussed.

12.3. The main benefits to the Electoral Office of the mainstreaming of equality of opportunity and good relations considerations into its functions are the close working contacts established with organisations representing groups at risk of disadvantage in the electoral process such as the disabled, the elderly and minority ethnic groups. Public trust in the work of the Electoral Office is another main benefit.

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? **YES X** **NO**

	Very noticeably	Noticeably	No real change
Increased awareness of equality issues in policy making.		X	
Increased ability to ensure policies are designed and targeted to reflect equal opportunities objectives.		X	
Increased awareness of good relations issues in policy making.			X
Increased ability to ensure policies are designed and targeted to reflect good relations objectives.			X
Increased awareness of equality issues in service delivery.	X		
Increased ability to ensure services are designed and targeted to reflect section 75 requirements.	X		

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?

YES X NO

	Very noticeably	Noticeably	No real change
Persons of different religious belief.			X
Persons of different political opinion.			X
Persons of different racial groups.		X	
Persons of different age.	X		
Persons with different marital status.			X
Persons of different sexual orientation.			X
Men and women generally.			X
Persons with and without a disability.	X		
Persons with and without dependants.		X	

QUESTION C

If you answered yes to QUESTION B, for each of the categories where a noticeable or very noticeable change has occurred, please give examples of those changes to policies or practices which have resulted in positive change. If the change was a result of an EQIA please tick the appropriate box in column 3.

	Policy or Practice	Result of EQIA?
Persons of different religious belief.		
Persons of different political opinion.		
Persons of different racial groups.	<p>The Assistant CEO has given presentations on electoral registration and elections to Chinese groups.</p> <p>The EONI has worked with the Scope organisation to make contact with citizens of other EU states.</p> <p>Registration forms and guidance notes have been translated into Cantonese and Portuguese. Provision of canvasser ‘flash’ cards.</p>	No
Persons of different age.	<p>Outreach measures to encourage more young people to register.</p> <p>Improved access to Polling Stations for elderly.</p>	Yes

Persons with different marital status.		
Persons of different sexual orientation.		
Men and women generally.		
Persons with and without a disability.	Close and regular contact with groups representing the disabled. Improved access to polling stations.	Yes
Persons with and without dependants.	Policy changed to allow absent votes for people with limited mobility because of dependancy responsibilities.	No