

**THE ELECTORAL OFFICE
for
NORTHERN IRELAND**

SCREENING REPORT

**THE ELECTORAL OFFICE
for
NORTHERN IRELAND**

**Report on the Screening of all the policies, powers, functions and duties
exercised by the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As a result of the screening analysis the following functions of the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland were identified as requiring equality impact assessments.

- (a) To prepare and maintain an accurate electoral register.
- (b) To review the Polling Station Scheme so as to afford all electors an equal opportunity to exercise their right to vote in suitable premises.
- (c) To invite applications for temporary or permanent Absent Votes and to take the subsequent decision on entitlement according to the legislation; and to ensure Absent Voting procedures are strictly adhered to during elections.

In addition the Chief Electoral Officer will carry out monitoring equality impact assessments on the following two functions in Year 4:

- (d) To arrange the introduction of a new ICT System across the whole range of Electoral Office Functions.
- (e) To advertise for and recruit fairly sufficient staff to carry out canvassing, to man Polling Stations and to provide the Electoral Office with clerical support.

Report on the Screening of all the policies, powers, functions and duties exercised by the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland

Introduction

Having submitted the second draft of the Equality Scheme for the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland for approval by the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, the Chief Electoral Officer and his staff have now completed the initial screening of all the functions carried out by the Electoral Office as listed at paragraph 1.8 of the draft Scheme.

Methodology

Using the screening proforma attached at **Annex A** and basing their assessment and analysis on what data, information and experience was currently available to them, electoral staff across the Electoral Office determined those policies, powers, functions and duties that would require equality impact assessments to assess whether they were likely to have an adverse differential impact on any groups within the nine section 75 categories.

Outcome of the screening process

The screening analysis described below deals with each function in the order that it is set out in paragraph 1.8, pages 5-7 of the draft Electoral Office Equality Scheme.

1. To conduct all elections and referendums in Northern Ireland.

Comment

This is one of the prime functions of the Chief Electoral Officer. It is made up of a series of sub-functions. Screening of the sub-functions is a more helpful approach in identifying any equality issues that may arise.

Conclusion

Decisions about the section 75 categories adversely affected will be taken on the basis of separately screening the sub-functions.

2. To prepare and maintain an accurate electoral register.

Comment

Analysis indicated that some people from two of the section 75 categories might suffer an adverse differential impact in the operation of this function. It was possible that there could be discrimination by electoral canvassers on the grounds of religious belief and political opinion. Furthermore, the blind, those people with learning difficulties and some members of ethnic minorities who did not have a command of English would have difficulty with completing the household form. These adverse effects could be mitigated by having systems in place to provide copies of the household form in Braille or in ethnic minority languages.

It is likely to be necessary also to review the electoral legislation regarding the eligibility of the mentally disabled to vote.

The question also arises about the period of residential qualification necessary for the right to vote. A three months residential qualification is applicable to otherwise eligible electors who arrive in NI from outside NI. This does not apply to people who have changed their residence from elsewhere in NI.

Conclusion

An equality impact assessment is required.

3. To select randomly from the electoral register a panel for jury service.

Comment

This process uses an electronic random selection of eligible electors from the computerised electoral register database. The Chief Electoral Officer is aware that this form of selection will not ensure proportionate representation of the section 75 categories on juries. However, the information on individual electors required by law on the Electoral Registration Form (i.e. name, address, nationality, National Insurance Number and date of birth) does not provide for sorting of electors by section 75 categories.

Conclusion

An equality impact assessment is not required.

4. To prepare the Electoral Office Business Plan and to set out the programme of work for Electoral Office staff for the 12 months ahead from 1 April.

Comment

This planning process balances Electoral Office work priorities against the resources available to ensure that the Chief Electoral Officer efficiently and effectively discharges his statutory responsibilities for the year ahead. There are no equality issues involved in this process.

Conclusion

An equality impact assessment is not required.

5. To ensure internal and external services are delivered efficiently and effectively taking due account of all necessary government initiatives and strategies.

Comment

This function involves the quality control of the Electoral Office's internal and external service delivery. No equality issues arise.

Conclusion

An equality impact assessment is not required.

6. To liaise with and exchange best practice with similar bodies in Great Britain, the Republic of Ireland and the Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions.

Comment

This liaison function raises no equality issues for the section 75 categories in Northern Ireland.

Conclusion

An equality impact assessment is not required.

7. To liaise with the Electoral Commission.

Comment

This is another liaison function that raises no equality issues for the section 75 categories in Northern Ireland.

Conclusion

An equality impact assessment is not required.

8. To arrange the introduction of a new ICT System across the whole range of Electoral Office functions.

Comment

This is a technical function which raises equality issues for some disabled categories. The Chief Electoral Officer is aware that the current telephone system does not provide text-phone, induction loops and other facilities for those who are visually or aurally impaired. It is intended that the new system will include these facilities. There will be a need to monitor the take-up of these facilities in due course.

Conclusion

An equality impact assessment is not required immediately but will be used in Year 4 to assess the effectiveness of these measures in assisting the visually and aurally impaired.

9. To manage efficiently all computer systems and IT functions throughout the Electoral Office.

Comment

This technical management function raises no equality issues for the section 75 categories.

Conclusion

An equality impact assessment is not required.

10. To ensure that District Council staff are adequately trained and updated in election practices so as to enable them to conduct local government elections (every 4 years) effectively and efficiently.

Comment

This training function raises no equality issues for the section 75 categories.

Conclusion

An equality impact assessment is not required.

11. To produce Standing Operating Procedures for all functions of the Electoral Office.

Comment

This new management function is only just being implemented. It seems unlikely that this function will have an adverse differential impact on any groups in the section 75 categories but until it is fully operational it is not possible to be certain.

Conclusion

This function will be re-screened when it has been fully implemented.

12. To ensure that Forward Job Plans and Personal Development Plans are in place for all staff.

Comment

This senior management function raises no equality issues for the section 75 categories.

Conclusion

An equality impact assessment is not required.

13. To train staff properly to carry out canvass, polling station and office duties efficiently and effectively.

Comment

This training function raises no equality issues for the section 75 categories.

Conclusion

An equality impact assessment is not required.

14 (Part1). To look at the practical and functional implications of the annual canvass process and to review all procedures, taking into account available resources and implement changes as necessary. To ensure all those who are eligible are included on the register.

Comment

In reviewing procedures to ensure that all those who are eligible to vote are included on the electoral register, this function seeks to treat all groups from the section 75 categories equally. Strenuous efforts are made by canvassers to include itinerant people such as Irish Travellers and the homeless on the electoral register.

Conclusion

An equality impact assessment is not required.

14 (Part 2). To advertise for and recruit fairly sufficient staff to carry out canvassing, to man Polling Stations and to provide the Electoral Office with clerical support.

Comment

When recruiting canvassers, the Electoral Office does not offer employment opportunities to mobility, visually or mentally impaired people due to the nature of the work i.e. visiting households to ensure the completion of the registration form. The current recruitment policy discriminates against people on the grounds of age because an advertised upper age limit of 65 years has been applied when recruiting staff.

In practice, there is a greater uptake of these electoral staff posts by Protestants than Catholics. This is thought to be because there is a widespread perception across the community in Northern Ireland that the Electoral Office is a “Protestant” or “Establishment” institution.

Conclusions

There seems to be no solution to the difficulties facing certain categories of the disabled in conducting household canvassing.

As a result of this screening analysis, the Chief Electoral Officer has made a management decision to remove the upper age limit on staff, leaving fitness to perform the work as the decisive criterion.

To increase the take-up of electoral staff employment opportunities by Catholics, the Chief Electoral Officer is considering the use of affirmative action outreach measures when advertising vacancies.

In the light of these conclusions, an equality impact assessment is not required at present but could be useful in Year 4 to assess the effectiveness of any outreach measures.

15. To introduce and to operate an Equality Scheme as required by section 75 and Schedule 9 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, following the Guide to the Statutory Duties published by the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland.

Comment

Since this function implements section 75, no adverse differential impact on any of the section 75 categories arises.

Conclusion

An equality impact assessment is not required.

16. The recruitment and selection of full-time permanent staff for the Electoral Office.

Comment

There will be an adverse differential impact on those active in politics and who admit that they are members of a political party because the policy of the Chief Electoral Officer is not to recruit to his permanent staff persons who are active in politics or who admit to membership of a political party. This is to maintain the political neutrality of his role in the electoral process. This is a wholly beneficial and desirable policy and does not require an equality impact assessment.

Present recruitment policy has an adverse differential impact on persons over the age of 60 because staff in the Electoral Office at the grade of Staff Officer and above are required to retire at the age of 60.

Conclusions

Requiring Electoral Office permanent staff to hold to a public position of political neutrality is in the public interest and, therefore, an equality impact assessment is not required.

The Chief Electoral Officer is reviewing the upper age limit on the recruitment and retention of his permanent staff, therefore, no further equality impact assessment is required.

17. To manage efficiently all Electoral Office property i.e. to ensure that all Electoral Office premises are maintained in good repair within the terms of the leases that stand, and also, as necessary, to re-negotiate rent and lease arrangements and determine appropriate site locations.

Comment

The Chief Electoral Officer and his senior staff are keenly aware of the political importance of the location of electoral offices so that no group of electors within the Electoral Area is deterred from access to the electoral office because of their political opinion or religious persuasion. In practice, sites for electoral offices are located near the non-sectarian centres of towns.

The Chief Electoral Officer and his senior staff are also aware of the requirement for electoral offices to be accessible to the mobility disabled in line with the provisions of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 and action is in hand to re-site the two electoral offices that are inaccessible to those persons who use wheelchairs.

Conclusion

Because the adverse impact on some of the section 75 categories of inappropriate siting of electoral offices is fully recognised by the Chief Electoral Officer and steps have been/are being taken to address these issues, an equality impact assessment is not required.

18. To ensure that adequate Health and Safety policies and procedures are in place for staff and visitors to electoral Office Northern Ireland premises and Polling Stations.

Comment

No equality issues arise from this important function.

Conclusion

An equality impact assessment is not required.

19. To review the Polling Station Scheme so as to afford all electors an equal opportunity to exercise their right to vote in suitable premises.

Comment

There are a number of groups within the section 75 categories who could suffer an adverse differential impact from the location and type of building chosen as a Polling Station. These are as follows:

Religion, Political Opinion: Polling Stations might be sited in areas perceived as hostile to one section of the community thus deterring electors from that section from voting.

Disability: Not all Polling Stations, most often located in schools, have access for wheelchair users.

Age: Elderly persons who do not have access to a car may have to walk unacceptably long distances to reach their Polling Station. Under the current regulations, old age alone is not a reason for granting a postal vote.

Dependancy: Under the current regulations, carers are not entitled to a postal vote.

Some ways of mitigating the above adverse differential impacts being considered by the Chief Electoral Officer are as follows:

Religion, Political Opinion: Consideration could be given to seeking the use of some Maintained Schools as Polling Stations.

Disability: The Chief Electoral Officer is in contact with the Education & Library Boards about the provision of ramps for schools used as Polling Stations.

Dependancy: Consideration should be given to granting Absent Votes to carers unable to leave their dependants.

Conclusion

An equality impact assessment is required.

20. To invite applications for temporary or permanent Absent Votes and to take the subsequent decision on entitlement according to the legislation; and to ensure Absent Voting procedures are strictly adhered to during elections.

Comment

Absent Voting has been historically subject to abuse and electoral fraud in Northern Ireland. Therefore, an elector's entitlement to an Absent Vote is restricted. A number of possible causes of adverse differential impacts can arise as follows:

Disability: There is confusion over entitlement for those who suffer from mental illness, i.e. Absent Votes are approved for some sufferers of Alheimers Disease but not for those suffering from senile dementia.

Race: Information on entitlement to an Absent Vote is only available in the English language and accessible formats are not available.

Age: The elderly with some mobility difficulties but who are not officially classified as disabled are not entitled to an Absent Vote.

Dependency: Carers are not entitled to an Absent Vote.

Conclusion

An equality impact assessment is required.

21. To implement measures in the Anti-Fraud Bill when enacted.

Comment

This legislation introduced in Parliament by the Northern Ireland Office, is intended to reduce electoral fraud in Northern Ireland. Its provisions will be implemented by the Chief Electoral Officer. It is predicted that more stringent requirements for electoral registration are likely to disfranchise electors who are currently enfranchised. The section 75 categories likely to suffer adverse differential impacts are the disabled, the elderly and possibly some ethnic minority groups.

Until the legislation is enacted, it is not possible to assess the adverse differential impacts. Furthermore, it is understood that the Northern Ireland Office, as the public authority sponsoring the legislation, proposes to carry out an equality impact assessment of the measures when enacted.

Conclusion

An equality impact assessment by the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland is not required at present.

22. To provide the necessary and appropriate election equipment for all Polling Stations in all elections.

Comment

This administrative function, which includes the provision of special election equipment designed to meet the needs of the disabled, raises no equality issues for the section 75 categories.

Conclusion

An equality impact assessment is not required.

23. Re-designing election stationery and forms as necessary.

Comment

At present election stationery and forms are not provided in large print or Braille and they are only produced in the English language. These shortcomings are recognised by the Chief Electoral Officer and discussions are in hand with the affected groups to consider putting systems in place to print forms in Braille, large print and Cantonese.

Conclusion

An equality impact assessment is not required.

24. The purchase of supplies and services.

Comment

The Electoral Office is moving towards using the Government Purchasing Agency for the purchase of supplies in the future. This administrative function raises no equality issues for the section 75 categories.

Conclusion

An equality impact assessment is not required.

25. To provide satisfactory security arrangements for permanent premises, Count Centres, permanent/temporary staff and the public when on the premises, at Polling Stations and Count Centres.

Comment

This administrative security function raises no equality issues for the section 75 categories.

Conclusion

An equality impact assessment is not required.

26. To review and rationalise existing electoral legislation.

Comment

The body of electoral legislation is extremely complex and contains an accumulation of amendments over many years. This administrative function of reviewing and rationalising the legislation raises no equality issues for the section 75 categories.

Conclusion

An equality impact assessment is not required.

27. To produce a guide to current electoral legislation.

Comment

This function follows on from function 26 and, since systems for the use of accessible formats will be considered as an integral part of the function, no equality issues for the section 75 categories arise.

Conclusion

An equality impact assessment is not required.

28. To provide an efficient and comprehensive Human Resource service.

Comment

During the screening of this function the following aspects of the function were noted:

- The Finance and Personnel Officer had carried out a training needs analysis for all the permanent staff of the Electoral Office.
- Forward Job Plans have been introduced and are being regularly reviewed by District Electoral Officers.
- Each team leader is to attend the European Computer Driving Licence course and complete the qualification by mid-2002.
- A two day residential management training course took place on 4 and 5 March 2002.
- The Electoral Office has liaised with the National Minimum Wage Commission to establish that the Electoral Office is meeting the requirement for the payment of both canvassers and temporary election staff.
- The Electoral Office uses the Northern Ireland Civil Service scales of pay for all permanent staff.
- The Chief Electoral Officer is pursuing his proposal that Electoral Office permanent staff become integrated within the Northern Ireland Civil Service in order to provide better promotion and career development opportunities within the Office.

This important management and administrative function raises no equality issues for the section 75 categories.

Conclusion

An equality impact assessment is not required.

29. To manage all the finances of the Electoral Office in an efficient and effective manner.

Comment

This financial management function raises no equality issues for the section 75 categories.

Conclusion

An equality impact assessment is not required.

30. To develop teamwork within the Electoral Office and help staff identify their individual training needs and provide for those needs.

Comment

Staff with dependants (often female staff with dependant children) may sometimes face difficulties in attending residential training or development courses. The Chief Electoral Officer recognises this occasional difficulty and addresses it by encouraging a flexible and co-operative approach between management and staff. Otherwise this management function raises no equality issues for the section 75 categories.

Conclusion

An equality impact assessment is not required.

TIMETABLING

The Chief Electoral Officer, taking account of all priorities, has decided to include carrying out the equality impact assessment on Polling Station Schemes in Year 1, 1 April 2002 to 31 March 2003. He has decided to carry out the equality impact assessments on Absent Voting entitlement and on the function of preparing and maintaining an accurate electoral register in Year 2, 1 April 2003 to 31 March 2004.

The Chief Electoral Officer has also decided to carry out monitoring equality impact assessments in Year 4, 1 April 2005 to 31 March 2006, on the introduction of a new ICT System and on the effect of outreach measures in advertising for and recruiting staff to carry out canvassing, man Polling Stations and provide the Electoral Office with clerical staff.

The timetable at Part Eleven of the draft Electoral Office Equality Scheme will be amended to include these equality impact assessments. Any change in Government policy, for example, new electoral legislation, may also affect the timetable.

DENIS STANLEY

Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland

25 February 2003

CHIEF ELECTORAL OFFICER for NORTHERN IRELAND

EQUALITY SCHEME SCREENING FORM

Function I.D. :

Screened By

Date :

Recommended Action (by project group)	-	Review Priority 1	<input type="checkbox"/>
		Review Priority 2	<input type="checkbox"/>
		Review Priority 3	<input type="checkbox"/>
		No Current Action	<input type="checkbox"/>
		Decisions Review Date	/ / (3 years) Signed – Group

Chairperson _____

Questionnaire

1A Does the function referred to above involve any action which is likely to have an adverse differential impact on a person* on the basis of their:

	YES	DON'T KNOW	NO
Gender	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sexual Orientation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Religion	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Political opinion	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Disability(physical, mental, learning)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Race or ethnic origin (includes Travellers)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Age	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Dependant Responsibilities / dependancy	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Marital status	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

1B If the answer to any of the above is YES or DON'T KNOW please briefly describe the impact and the affected group:

2A Does the function referred to omit any action, the addition of which would promote the equality of opportunity, social inclusion or welfare of any person* on the basis of:

	YES	DON'T KNOW	NO
Gender	[]	[]	[]
Sexual orientation	[]	[]	[]
Religion	[]	[]	[]
Political opinion	[]	[]	[]
Disability(physical, mental, learning)	[]	[]	[]
Race or ethnic origin (includes Travellers)	[]	[]	[]
Age	[]	[]	[]
Dependant Responsibilities / dependancy	[]	[]	[]
Marital status	[]	[]	[]
Other (please specify) _____	[]	[]	[]

2B If the answer to any of the above is YES or DON'T KNOW please identify briefly the suggested amendment and beneficial impact:

3A Is there any conflict between the rights of any one person* and those of any other person* contained within the effects of this function?

YES	DON'T KNOW	NO
[]	[]	[]

3B If YES or DON'T KNOW please specify:

4. If an adverse impact has been identified how would you categorise it:

i) Adverse Impact

Significant Impact – Must be addressed []

}Priority 1

Moderate / Low Impact – Readily addressed []

Significant Impact – Difficult to address in current circumstances []

}Priority 2

Moderate Impact – Not readily addressed []

Low Impact – Not readily addressed [] Priority 3

*Person includes all individuals or groups with whom the Department interacts – employees, the public, contractors, purchasers, etc.

If the answer to any of the questions in this section is YES or DON'T KNOW, proceed to consideration as to whether to submit the function, policy or duty to a full impact assessment.

5. If the answer to all the above question is NO a full impact assessment is not required.

IMPACT ASSESSMENT REQUIRED

YES UNSURE NO

[] [] []

*Person includes all individuals or groups with whom the Department interacts – employees, the public, contractors, purchasers, etc.

5. SCREENING ANALYSIS

Screening aims to identify those policies, functions or duties which are likely to have the greatest impact on equality of opportunity and community relations.

5.1

Is there any evidence of higher or lower participation or uptake by different groups within any of the nine categories?

Please tick? **YES [] DON'T KNOW [] NO []**

If yes, give details:

