

**THE ELECTORAL OFFICE
for
NORTHERN IRELAND**

EQUALITY SCHEME

Approved by the Equality Commission 10 June 2003

**EQUALITY SCHEME FOR THE ELECTORAL OFFICE FOR
NORTHERN IRELAND
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EQUALITY SCHEME FOR THE ELECTORAL OFFICE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

Foreword by the Chief Electoral Officer

Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 requires public authorities to have **due regard** to the need to promote equality of opportunity and **regard** to the desirability of promoting good relations. These duties are designed in particular, to ensure that equality issues are integral to the whole range of public policy decision making. Designated public authorities, such as the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland, are required to submit Equality Schemes to the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland and to carry out Equality Impact Assessments of their policies, duties and functions in certain circumstances.

I am fully committed to the fulfilment of the section 75 obligations on the promotion of equality of opportunity and of good relations. Equality of opportunity for all eligible electors to register for and to exercise the franchise must lie at the heart of the electoral systems in a true parliamentary democracy. I shall ensure that the workings of my Office provide all those people of Northern Ireland, qualified by law to vote, with free and fair elections with equal regard to whichever group within the nine section 75 categories they may belong. This Equality Scheme sets out how the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland proposes to fulfil the obligations of section 75 with regard to all of its policies, powers, duties and functions.

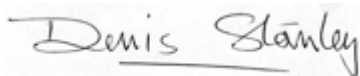
As the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland I shall ensure that all of my officials, whether full-time, part-time, contracted or casual, will be familiar with this Scheme and how it will be implemented. I shall give leadership within my Office to achieve this, particularly with regard to the development of all new policies, powers, duties and initiatives, and through the proposed review of all the existing policies, powers, duties and functions.

I shall also ensure that provision is made for the necessary resources in terms of people, time and money to ensure compliance with the statutory duties and that the Equality Scheme can be implemented effectively and on time.

I shall ensure that the Electoral Office will develop and deliver a planned programme of communication and training on this Scheme.

I shall further ensure that there are effective internal arrangements in place to make sure that the duties are effectively complied with and for monitoring and reviewing progress.

It is essential that all policies, powers, duties and functions affecting the electoral process in Northern Ireland are governed by the principles of openness and accountability which are the essence of the equality obligation arising from section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. Widespread consultation with all those affected by the policies, powers, duties and functions of the Chief Electoral Officer is welcomed by me and by my colleagues and is central to the successful operation of the Scheme.



DENIS STANLEY
CHIEF ELECTORAL OFFICER FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

**EQUALITY SCHEME FOR THE ELECTORAL OFFICE
FOR NORTHERN IRELAND**

PART ONE

1. Role, Structure, Policies, Powers, Functions and Duties.

- 1.1 The role of the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland is to support the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland – “the Chief Electoral Officer” - in carrying out his statutory duties as provided for in the Electoral Law Act (Northern Ireland) 1962, as amended.
- 1.2 The Chief Electoral Officer is required to carry out the functions conferred on him by or under the 1962 Act and by or under any other statutory provision for the time being in force.
- 1.3 Without prejudice to the generality of paragraph 1.2 above, the Chief Electoral Officer is responsible for:
- the administration and implementation of the provisions of the Electoral Law Acts (Northern Ireland) 1962 to 1971 and the Electoral Law (Northern Ireland) Order 1972;
 - the conduct of all elections to the Parliament of the United Kingdom, the European Assembly, the Northern Ireland Assembly and to Northern Ireland District Councils;
 - the conduct of all United Kingdom and Northern Ireland referendums;
 - the preparation of polling station schemes, the procurement and the maintenance of election equipment and generally all administrative matters preliminary to or consequent on an election;
 - the preparation and publication of the register of electors for Northern Ireland; and
 - as soon as possible after the publication of the register of electors in any year making a report to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland of his proceedings under the 1962 Act, as amended, which will be laid before the Parliament of the United Kingdom.
- 1.4. In order to carry out his responsibilities, the Chief Electoral Officer has established the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland which is organised as set out in the diagram at **Annex A** .
- 1.5. Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 (“the Act”) requires the Chief Electoral

Officer, in carrying out all of his policies, powers, functions and duties relating to Northern Ireland, to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity:

- between persons of different religious belief, political opinion, racial group, age, marital status or sexual orientation;
- between men and women generally;
- between persons with a disability and persons without; and
- between persons with dependants and persons without.

1.6. In addition, without prejudice to his obligation above, the Chief Electoral Officer shall, in carrying out all of his policies, powers, functions and duties relating to Northern Ireland, have regard to the desirability of promoting good relations between persons of different religious belief, political opinion or racial group.

1.7. Schedule 9 to the Act requires the Chief Electoral Officer to set out in an Equality Scheme how he proposes to fulfil that statutory requirement. Furthermore, the Chief Electoral Officer confirms his commitment to liaise with the Equality Commission so as to ensure that progress on implementing the Equality Scheme is maintained.

Functions

1.8. In carrying out his functions, the Chief Electoral Officer works through his Senior Management Team consisting of himself, the Assistant Chief Electoral Officer, the three District Electoral Officers, the Finance and Personnel Officer and the Computer Officer (see **Annex A**). Responsibilities are assigned as follows

- **The Chief Electoral Officer.**

Overall responsibility under 1962 Act, as amended, for all functions, powers and duties but specifically:

- (a) Returning Officer for all elections and referendums in Northern Ireland;
- (b) the Electoral Office Business Plan;
- (c) staff Forward Job Plans;
- (d) staff Personal Development Plans;
- (e) Management Training;
- (f) Business Consultancy Service (NIO) Review
- (g) Modernising Government;
- (h) the six Whitehall standards;
- (i) Charter Mark;
- (j) Better Public Service;

- (k) Information Age Government;
 - (l) Joined-up Government;
 - (m) developing relationships with Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland;
 - (n) the Electoral Commission; and
 - (o) the Boundary Commission.
- **Assistant Chief Electoral Officer.**
 - (a) Head of Operations;
 - (b) Electoral Registration;
 - (c) upgrade of the Dataflex system;
 - (d) replacement Computer system;
 - (e) training District Council staff;
 - (f) procedures manuals;
 - (g) job training;
 - (h) Review of the Annual Canvass;
 - (i) Equality;
 - (j) recruitment and staffing;
 - (k) Investors in People;
 - (l) property planning and management;
 - (m) health and safety.
- **District Electoral Officers.**
 - (a) Managing elections and referendums in their Districts;
 - (b) Electoral Registration in their Districts;
 - (c) Polling Station Scheme;
 - (d) training Electoral Office staff;
 - (e) Absent Voting;
 - (f) electoral anti-fraud measures;
 - (g) polling equipment;
 - (h) election stationery and forms re-design;
 - (i) purchasing;
 - (j) security arrangements;
 - (k) legislation rationalisation; and
 - (l) Guide to legislation.

- **Finance and Personnel Officer**
 - (a) Finance; and
 - (b) Human Resource management.

- **Computer Officer**

Management of computer systems.

1.9 The Chief Electoral Officer is committed to the fulfilment of his section 75 obligations in all parts of the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland. Responsibility to the Chief Electoral Officer for driving forward implementation of the Scheme across the Office lies with the Assistant Chief Electoral Officer, Mrs E J Butler. Mrs Butler's contact details for those affected by the Chief Electoral Officer's policies, powers, functions and duties are:

Mrs E J Butler

Assistant Chief Electoral Officer

The Electoral Office for Northern Ireland

3rd Floor

St Anne's House

15 Church Street

Belfast BT1 1ER

Tel: 028 9023 9437

Fax: 0289023 5612

1.10 Mrs Butler will also service a section 75 Steering Committee chaired by the Chief Electoral Officer and attended by the Electoral Office Team Leaders.. The Steering Committee will meet at least quarterly to monitor and review the implementation of the section 75 obligations.

1.11 Objectives and targets relating to the statutory obligations will be integrated into the Electoral Office's corporate and business plans. These objectives and targets will be reflected at all levels of strategic planning within the Electoral Office including staff objectives and annual plans.

PART TWO

2. Arrangements for assessing compliance with section 75 duties.

2.1. The Chief Electoral Officer will assess over a five year period the extent to which each of **all** of his current and future policies, powers, functions or duties has an impact on the promotion of equality of opportunity and the promotion of good relations within the terms of section 75 of the Act. This will be done first, through an inclusive and interactive process of **screening** policies, powers, functions and duties in consultation with representatives of affected groups listed at **Annex C**, and second, where necessary, through **equality impact assessments** (see below Part Three) and the timetable at Part Eleven will be followed. Where appropriate, an equality impact assessment will include an annex on the promotion of good relations. The organisations at **Annex C** will be consulted on these equality impact assessments. The following organisations will also be consulted specifically in relation to the annex of an assessment which deals with the promotion of good relations:

- Community Relations Council;
- Equality Commission;
- Equality Forum for Northern Ireland; and
- The Northern Ireland political parties.

2.2. The Chief Electoral Officer will also arrange for a review which will be undertaken in liaison with the Equality Commission to produce an annual report on the progress made and limitations experienced by the Electoral Office during the preceding year concerning compliance with the duty to promote equality of opportunity and the promotion of good relations. This report will be included in the Chief Electoral Officer's annual report to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and sent to the Equality Commission to ensure that progress is maintained. The Chief Electoral Officer will address any complaints with regard to section 75 and will seek to resolve such complaints bilaterally. He will aim to give a substantive response to complaints within one month.

2.3. The Chief Electoral Officer will liaise with the Political Directorate of the Northern Ireland Office. The NIO is required to operate its own Equality Scheme which has been approved by the Equality Commission.

2.4. The Chief Electoral Officer will conduct a comprehensive review of this Scheme within five years of its submission to the Equality Commission. This review will include an assessment of how the Chief Electoral Officer has complied with his section 75

obligations and how the promotion of equality of opportunity and of good relations have been advanced in relation to the main functional areas. This assessment is likely to include an input from external consultants. The Chief Electoral Officer will consult with the bodies listed at **Annex C** and any other affected or interested individuals and organisations before submission of the review to the Equality Commission. The review will be made publicly available in printed form and on request in accessible formats and minority ethnic languages.

PART THREE

3. Assessing the impact of policies, powers, functions and duties on the promotion of equality of opportunity.

- 3.1. In identifying which of his policies, powers, functions and duties will be subject to equality impact assessments, the Chief Electoral Officer will consider **all** of his current policies, powers, functions and duties listed in Part One of this Scheme and look forward to all new policies, powers, functions and duties that may be proposed for adoption during the first term of the Scheme.
- 3.2. The Chief Electoral Officer will initially consider the impact of each current or new policy, power, function or duty on the promotion of equality of opportunity in terms of the nine categories of persons listed at section 75 of the Act (examples of categories of people relevant to the section 75 categories are identified at **Annex B**). This initial process is known as **screening**; and for each policy, power, function and duty the following criteria will be applied:
- (a) is there any evidence of higher or lower participation or uptake by different groups?
 - (b) Is there any evidence that different groups have different needs, experiences, issues and priorities in relation to the particular policy?
 - (c) Is there an opportunity to promote better equality of opportunity or better community relations by altering the policy, or working with others in government or in the larger community?
 - (d) Have consultations with relevant groups, organisations or individuals indicated that particular functions, powers or duties create problems that are specific to them?

The Chief Electoral Officer will consult on the screening exercise with the Equality Commission and those bodies listed at Annex C. The aim is that this screening process will establish which of the Chief Electoral Officer's policies, powers, functions and duties has a significant impact on the promotion of equality of opportunity and should be subject to a full equality impact assessment. This exercise will also identify the group or groups within the section 75 categories on which any particular functional activity is likely to have a significant impact. Full equality impact assessments of current policies, powers, functions and duties will be conducted in accordance with the procedure set out in Annex 1 to the Equality Commission's guidelines on the form and content of Equality

Schemes and concentrate in particular but not exclusively on the categories identified in this exercise.

- 3.3. An example of the proforma used in the screening exercise is at **Annex D**.
- 3.4. It is likely that there will be insufficient statistical data or quantitative information on which to base all screening judgements, still less for impact assessments. It is intended to carry out in conjunction with the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) a data and information audit for all the Chief Electoral Officer's functional activities to identify the data and information deficits and to consider how they might be remedied. In the absence of statistical data, other qualitative means of forming objective judgements about the impact of policies, powers, functions and duties on the section 75 categories will have to be employed such as consultation with representative groups, opinion polls, surveys, etc..
- 3.5. In the case of those policies, powers, functions or duties where the answer to any of the questions in paragraph 3.2 is “Yes” or “Don’t Know”, the need for a full equality impact assessment will be considered.
- 3.6. When the screening process (which includes a comprehensive consultation exercise) has identified those policies, powers, functions and duties that will require equality impact assessments, a timetable for the conduct of the assessments will be established based on the following priorities:
 - relevance to social need;
 - effect on people’s daily lives;
 - effect on economic, social and human rights; and
 - cultural or political impact on people.
- 3.8 Equality impact assessments will aim to identify whether, within each section 75 category, the policy, power, function or duty under consideration creates differential impacts between groups or has the potential to enhance equality of opportunity between groups, particularly in terms of:
 - rights;
 - resources;
 - participation; and
 - values and norms (i.e. traditional roles, stereotypes, division of labour, attitudes and behaviour).

As with screening, the groups to be consulted on the assessments are listed at Annex C. This will include all of those directly affected by the function, power or duty to be assessed, whether or not they have a direct economic or personal interest.

- 3.9 The Chief Electoral Officer will report to the Equality Commission in his first annual progress report on the results of consultation on the screening exercise, who was consulted, their comments and any changes made consequent on consultation. He will set out a timetable for conducting the equality impact assessments. He will also include in his report those policies, powers, functions or duties, if any, proposed by those consulted as appropriate for impact assessment that have not been so included and the reason why.
- 3.10 During the period of twelve months following approval of this Scheme, the Chief Electoral Officer currently anticipates that there will be no new policies, powers, functions or duties that will require equality impact assessments. New policies, powers, functions or duties, when they occur, will as a matter of routine be subject to the screening process.
- 3.11 In making any decision on a current policy, function, power or duty or one proposed to be adopted by the Electoral Office, the Chief Electoral Officer will take into account any relevant equality impact assessment, the related consultation and the outcome.

PART FOUR

4. Consultation.

4.1. The Chief Electoral Officer will consult with regard to matters relating to the section 75 duties, the Equality Scheme, screening and impact assessments with the Equality Commission, the Community Relations Council, the Equality Forum NI, the NI political parties and representative groups of the section 75 categories listed at **Annex C** on issues relevant to the fulfilment of the section 75 obligations. He will take account of proposals from these bodies relating to his compliance with the section 75 obligations.

Consultation with groups and individuals will begin as early as possible.

4.2. Information will be made available in consultation with the affected groups, to ensure the highest level of inclusivity in any policy decision-making. The Chief Electoral Officer considers it particularly important that sufficient, timely and appropriate information is provided to enable all affected groups and individuals to consider the full implications of proposals and he will take steps to ensure this. In order to assist the consultation process, the Chief Electoral Officer will release relevant quantitative and qualitative data and other documentation as required. No information that might compromise the secrecy of the ballot will be released.

4.3. In consulting on any matter to which this Scheme relates, the Chief Electoral Officer will work with representative groups and individuals of the section 75 categories in order to identify how best to obtain their views. This may involve face-to-face meetings, advisory groups, surveys, consultative panels, internet discussions and other innovative ways of consulting as there will be different means of consultation for different groups and it will be important to establish the basis for dialogue and engagement during the life of the Scheme.

4.4. Further to consultation on equality impact assessments, the Chief Electoral Officer will also have a need from time to time to consult on other electoral matters. On each of these occasions, the bodies listed at **Annex C** will also be included in these consultations.

4.5. In consulting the representative groups of the section 75 categories, the Chief Electoral Officer will aim to provide a period for response of at least eight weeks and to begin consultation as early as possible. However, **exceptionally**, there may be circumstances when this timescale is not feasible; and the Chief Electoral has identified the following circumstances when consultation of this duration will not be possible:

- electoral actions responding urgently to changes in legislation or in the political situation; or

- policies that must be implemented urgently to comply with a court judgement or with international obligations;

when this occurs it will be monitored, kept under review, justified very clearly and reported on in the next Annual Report.

- 4.6. In consulting on any matter to which this Scheme relates, the Chief Electoral Officer will normally write to the relevant bodies referred to in this section of the Scheme and, if necessary, follow this up with a telephoned approach. He will also consult through other means such as meetings, standing or ad hoc consultative forums, attitude surveys, consultative panels, questionnaires and Internet discussion groups, having determined through partnerships with umbrella groups which format is most effective in providing satisfactory consultation for the groups identified at **Annex C**.
- 4.7. The Chief Electoral Officer will eliminate all barriers to proper consultation by ensuring accessibility of language and appropriate format. Issues concerning access to information highlighted in Part Eight of the Scheme will be given particular consideration. With the exception of certain prescribed electoral documents where the format is laid down in legislation, the Chief Electoral Officer will put systems in place to meet the needs of specific groups by ensuring that information will be made available in a timely manner on request in accessible formats, including Braille, large print, audio cassette, signed video cassette, computer disk and in minority ethnic languages for those not fluent in the English language. In addition, specific consideration will be given as to how best to communicate information to young people and those with learning disabilities. Arrangements for these contingencies are in hand with the service providers concerned.
- 4.8. Specific training will be arranged for staff engaged in consultation exercises to ensure that those facilitating consultations have the necessary skills to communicate effectively.
- 4.9. In organising consultation meetings, the Chief Electoral Officer will aim to ensure full participation in setting the time, venue, accessibility, how the meeting will be run, the possibility of the provision of childcare and alternative formats including the presence of signers for those whose hearing may be impaired.
- 4.10. The Chief Electoral Officer will publish his response to the comments from those consulted.

PART FIVE

5. Monitoring

5.1 The Chief Electoral Officer will establish a system to monitor the impact of policies, powers, functions and duties in order to identify their effects on the relevant groups. This will be reviewed on an annual basis and the results will be widely and openly published in Press Notices and in reports to the Equality Commission and to the other groups listed at

Annex C. If monitoring and evaluation show that a policy, power, function or duty results in greater adverse impact than predicted, or if opportunities arise that would allow for greater equality of opportunity to be promoted, the Chief Electoral Officer will ensure that the policy, power, function or duty is revised.

5.2 The figures for the turnout at elections in Northern Ireland will, inter alia, provide the Chief Electoral Officer with a broad indication of the impact of his policies, powers, functions and duties on the electorate as a whole. However, more analysis in depth of the turnout figures and, for example, of Polling Station logs, will be necessary before they will assist the Chief Electoral Officer in assessing their impact on groups within the nine section 75 categories and thus the progress made towards equality of opportunity in electoral matters.

5.3 In particular the Chief Electoral Officer will wish to ensure that groups such as some categories of the disabled, members of ethnic minorities qualified to vote and the elderly are not impeded from exercising the franchise. The Chief Electoral Officer will consult with relevant representative organisations to confirm that he is employing best practice to encourage all members of the electorate to cast their votes at elections in Northern Ireland; and subsequent to elections he will again consult these organisations to assist him in assessing the progress made towards equality of opportunity in voting.

5.4 The results of this consultation and monitoring will be published and made available to the Equality Commission.

PART SIX

6 Publication of Assessments and Monitoring

6.1. The Chief Electoral Officer will make publicly available the outcome of any equality impact assessment and of any monitoring undertaken in relation to Part Five above. This material will be available in printed form and on request in accessible formats such as Braille, large print, audio cassette, signed video cassette and minority ethnic languages for those not fluent in the English language from **The Assistant Chief Electoral Officer, The Electoral Office for Northern Ireland, 3rd Floor, St Anne's House, 15 Church Street, Belfast BT1 1ER. Telephone number: 028 9023 9437.** The Chief Electoral Officer will give specific consideration to how best to communicate this information to young people and those with learning difficulties. The Chief Electoral Officer will inform the general public about the availability of this material through a variety of mechanisms, including press releases and any other such mechanisms as may be required to ensure compliance with section 75. He will also directly inform bodies listed at **Annex C** and any other bodies or individuals that were involved in the consultation when this material is available.

6.2. Published documentation on an equality impact assessment will include:

- the aims of the policy, power, function or duty;
- details of the outcome of the assessment, highlighting whether an adverse impact has been identified;
- associated available monitoring data, whether statistics or the outcome of consultation;
- where there is evidence of an adverse impact not devised deliberately to rectify a previous inequality, details of any consideration given to mitigate the adverse impact of the policy, power, function or duty on the promotion of equality of opportunity; and
- details of any consideration given to alternative policies, powers, functions or duties that might better achieve the promotion of equality of opportunity in electoral matters.

PART SEVEN

7 Training

7.1. The Chief Electoral Officer will ensure that all of his staff will receive a programme of relevant communication and training on the section 75 obligations, the requirements of the Equality Scheme and the arrangements for equality impact assessments, appropriate to their responsibilities.

7.2. The training programme will have the following objectives:

- To prepare a detailed training plan for all Electoral Office staff over the five year period to which the Equality Scheme refers, that will aim to achieve the objectives listed below.
- To raise awareness of current anti-discrimination legislation in Northern Ireland, including the provisions of section 75, Schedule 9 and section 76 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. This will include an explanation of the duties and their implications for all staff.
- To provide those staff involved in the screening of policies with the necessary skills and knowledge to do this work effectively.
- To provide those staff involved in the equality impact assessment of functions, policies and duties with the necessary skills and knowledge to do this work effectively.
- To provide those staff who deal with complaints in relation to the implementation of the Electoral Office's Scheme with the necessary skills and knowledge to investigate and monitor complaints effectively.
- To provide those staff involved in the consultation processes with the necessary skills and knowledge to do this work effectively.
- To provide those staff involved in the implementation and monitoring of the effective implementation of the Electoral Office's Scheme to do this work effectively.
- To evaluate the extent to which all participants in this training programme have acquired the necessary skills and knowledge to achieve each of the above objectives.

This training will be developed in association with relevant groups drawn from and representing the section 75 groups.

7.3. Specialist training will be provided, where necessary, on communication skills for those who will be consulting with representatives of some of the nine section 75 groups.

- 7.4. The Chief Electoral Officer will promote the Electoral Office's Equality Scheme by providing copies or summaries of this Scheme when approved to all staff whether full-time, part-time, contracted or casual, to the groups listed in Annex C and to the wider public on demand including his Foreword to this document expressing his personal commitment to the successful operation of the Scheme.
- 7.5. All new staff will be trained in the requirements of section 75 and this Equality Scheme in their induction training.
- 7.6. Details of the training programmes have not yet been confirmed but will be included in the Annual Reports to the Equality Commission on the operation of the Scheme including the extent to which the above training objectives have been achieved.
- 7.7 Upon approval, the Chief Electoral Officer will produce a summary of the Scheme for the staff and the public ensuring that it is fully comprehensible and accessible.

PART EIGHT

8 Public Access to Information and Services

8.1. The Chief Electoral Officer is committed to effective communication with the public.

He recognises, however, that there is a risk that some sections of the public will not enjoy equality of opportunity in access to information provided by the Electoral Office and may, in effect, be disfranchised. There are two particular risk areas:

- People with sensory and learning disabilities may have particular difficulties with information in print; and
- Members of minority ethnic groups, whose first language is not English, may have difficulties with information provided in English .

8.2. In disseminating information through the local press, the Chief Electoral Officer will ensure that press statements and public advertisements are carried at least by all three daily Northern Ireland newspapers including the NW version of the Belfast Telegraph. Where press statements or public advertisements are aimed at a particular constituency or district electoral area within Northern Ireland, the Chief Electoral Officer will ensure that the information is disseminated through at least two local newspapers circulating in that constituency or district electoral area, ensuring that the information is accessible to all politico-religious groups in the local community. He will consider what other measures are necessary to ensure the effective dissemination of relevant information to all members of the community including young people and people with learning disabilities.

8.3. The Chief Electoral Officer will assess his arrangements for providing information in Braille, large print, audio cassette, signed video cassette and in minority ethnic language formats. The assessment will take account of the statutory requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. The Chief Electoral Officer is working to assess the likely demand for electoral information in such formats.

8.4. The Chief Electoral Officer intends that all of his services should be fully accessible to all parts of the community. Where necessary, equality impact assessments will highlight any factors that create a differential impact by making a service linked to a particular policy, power, function or duty less accessible to a particular group or groups. The Chief Electoral Officer will regularly monitor access by groups from each of the nine section 75 categories to information about his policies, powers, functions and duties and access to the services he provides.

- 8.5. In those of his offices that are open to the public, it is the Chief Electoral Officer's aim to ensure that no section of the community is deterred from visiting, for whatever reason. It is his objective, when it becomes possible, to make all Electoral Offices accessible to those who use wheelchairs. All public offices will maintain a welcoming and harmonious environment. He and all of his staff will adhere to the relevant provisions of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995.
- 8.6. The Chief Electoral Officer's commitments in this Scheme on equality of opportunity in accessing information are without prejudice to any rights to information in the current Code of Practice on Open Government or in the new Freedom of Information legislation.

PART NINE

9 Publication of the Scheme

- 9.1. Prior to being submitted formally for approval to the Equality Commission the first draft of the Chief Electoral Officer's Equality Scheme was circulated for public consultation to all the groups listed at **Annex C** and was also available in print form and accessible formats free on request from **The Electoral Office for Northern Ireland, 3rd Floor, St Anne's House, 15 Church Street, Belfast BT1 1ER**. The same arrangements apply to the publication of this Scheme.
- 9.2. Following Equality Commission approval of this Scheme it will be available at our website (www.electorlofficeni.gov.uk) in print form and, if requested, in accessible formats i.e. Braille and audio cassette. These can be requested from the Information Officer, 3rd Floor, St Anne's House, 15 Church Street, Belfast BT1 1ER.
- 9.3. The Electoral Office will issue a press statement and a prominent advertisement when the Scheme is approved by the Equality Commission and send a copy of the Scheme to every organisation listed at Annex C.

PART TEN

10 Complaints

- 10.1. When a person believes that he/she has been directly affected by a failure of the Chief Electoral Officer to comply with this Scheme, he/she should, in the first instance, bring their complaint to the attention of **Mrs E J Butler, Assistant Chief Electoral Officer, The Electoral Office for Northern Ireland, 3rd Floor, St Anne's House, 15 Church Street, Belfast BT1 1ER, Telephone number: 028 9023 9437; Fax number: 028 9023 5612.** The Chief Electoral Officer will carry out an internal, initial investigation of the complaint and will normally respond to the complainant **within one month.**
- 10.2. In responding to the complainant, the Chief Electoral Officer will inform him/her of the procedure for pursuing the complaint further with the Equality Commission, as set out in paragraph 10 of Schedule 9 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998. In any subsequent investigation by the Equality Commission, the Chief Electoral Officer will co-operate fully, providing access to any relevant documentation that the Commission may require. Similarly, the Chief Electoral Officer will co-operate fully with any investigation by the Equality Commission under sub-paragraph 11(1)(b) of Schedule 9 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

PART ELEVEN

11 Timetable

11.1 The following timetable outlines those measures under this Scheme that the Chief Electoral Officer has already put into place for completion during the five years following the Submission of this Scheme for approval. A fully comprehensive timetable will be compiled after screening of all present policies, powers, functions and duties; consultation on the outcome of the screening exercise; and identification of the required equality impact assessments have been completed. This comprehensive timetable will then be submitted to the Equality Commission and made publicly available.

Year 1: 1 April 2002 – 31 March 2003

- Complete screening exercise, including public consultation, and identify equality impact assessments.
- Conduct and evaluate training.
- Issue comprehensive Equality Scheme timetable.
- Carry out data and information availability audit.
- Develop systems for: information collection (quantitative and qualitative); information dissemination; effective consultation; accessibility to information; and screening new policies, powers, functions and duties.
- Conduct pilot equality impact assessments.
- Screen any new policies, powers, functions and duties.
- Prepare 1st Annual Report.

Year 2: 1 April 2003 – 31 March 2004

- Publish 1st Annual Report.
- Continue training programme.
- Carry out scheduled equality impact assessments.
- Monitor operation of the Scheme.
- Screen any new policies, powers, functions and duties.
- Prepare 2nd Annual Report.

Year 3: 1 April 2004 – 31 March 2005

- Publish 2nd Annual Report.
- Induction training for new staff.
- Carry out scheduled equality impact assessments.

- Monitor operation of the Scheme.
- Screen any new policies, powers, duties and functions.
- Prepare 3rd Annual Report.

Year 4: 1 April 2005 – 31 March 2006

- Publish 3rd Annual Report.
- Induction training for new staff.
- Carry out scheduled equality impact assessments.
- Monitor operation of the Scheme.
- Screen any new policies, powers, duties and functions.
- Prepare 4th Annual Report.

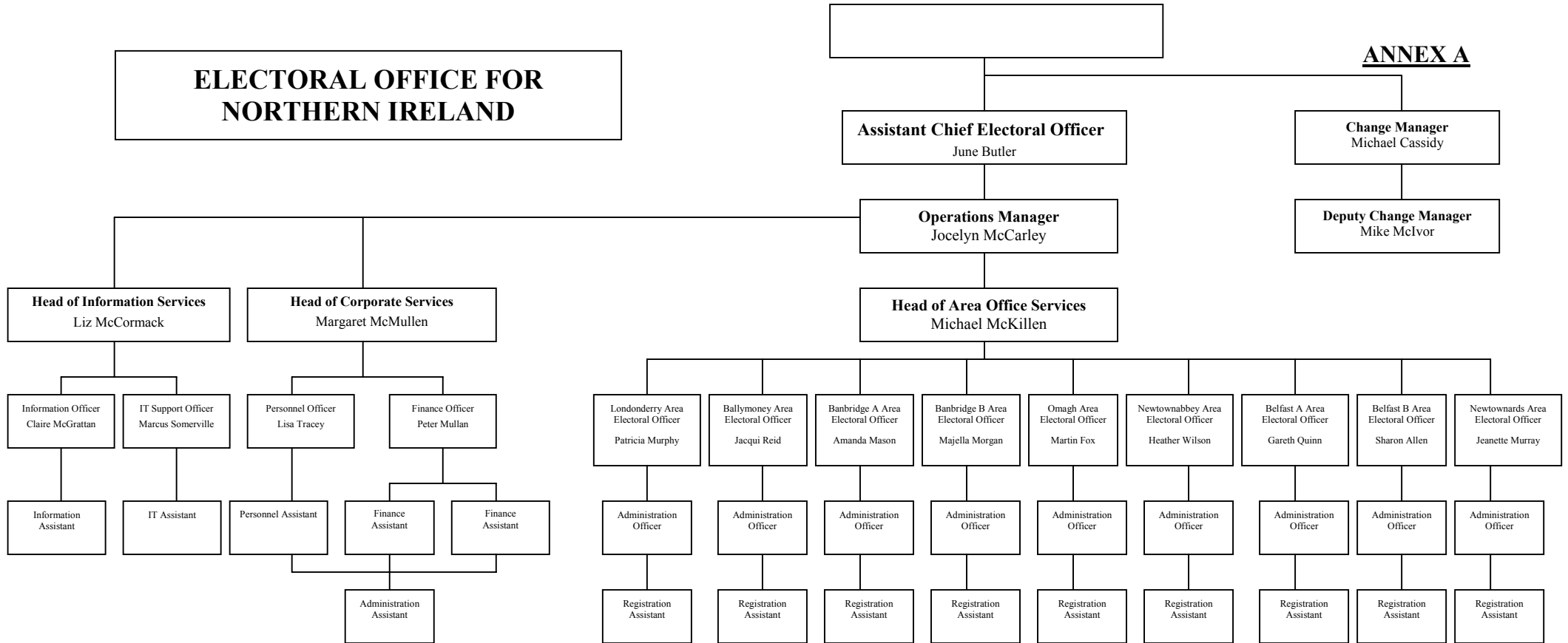
Year 5: 1 April 2007 – 31 March 2008

- Publish 4th Annual Report.
- Carry out remaining equality impact assessments, if any.
- Screen any new policies, powers, duties and functions.
- Carry out major 5 years review of the operation and effectiveness of the Scheme in promoting equality of opportunity and good relations.
- Publish Review Report.

ELECTORAL OFFICE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

June 2003

ELECTORAL OFFICE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND



ANNEX A

PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCIES

Foyle East Londonderry	North Antrim Mid Ulster	Upper Bann Newry & Armagh	Lagan Valley South Down	West Tyrone Fermanagh & South Tyrone	East Antrim South Antrim	North Belfast West Belfast	South Belfast East Belfast	Strangford North Down
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ANNEX B

EXAMPLES OF GROUPS RELEVANT TO THE SECTION 75 CATEGORIES FOR NORTHERN IRELAND PURPOSES

Category	Main Groups
Religious belief	Protestants; Catholics; people of non-Christian faiths; people of no religious belief
Political opinion	Unionists generally; Nationalists generally; members/supporters of any political party
Racial or ethnic group	Bangladeshi; Black African; Black Caribbean; Chinese; Indian Irish Traveller; Pakistani; White; Mixed Ethnic Group; and others.
‘Men and women generally’	Men (including boys); women (including girls); transgender people
Marital status	Married people; unmarried people; divorced or separated people widowed people
Age	Children under 18; people up to 25; people of working age (16/65); People over 65
‘Persons with a disability’	Persons with a physical, sensory, mental or learning disability as defined in Sections 1 and 2 and Schedules 1 and 2 of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995
‘Persons with dependants’	Persons with personal responsibility for the care of a child; persons with personal responsibility for the care of a person with an incapacitating disability; persons with personal responsibility for the care of a dependant elderly person
Sexual orientation	Heterosexual people; homosexual people; bisexual people.

BODIES TO BE CONSULTED

NB, this list is not exhaustive and will be amended in the light of circumstances.

Central Government Departments and Bodies

Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions

Home Office

Northern Ireland Office

Electoral Commission

Northern Ireland Departments

Agriculture and Rural Development

Culture, Arts and Leisure

Education

Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Environment

Finance and Personnel

Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Higher and Further Education, Training and Development

Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister

Regional Development

Social Development

Political Parties on the Electoral Commission's NI Register of Political Parties

Alliance Party of NI

Children's Party

Community Candidates

Conservative and Unionist Party

Democratic Party

Democratic Unionist Party
Flauntit.Net Internet Party
Legalise Cannabis Alliance
Liberal Unionist Party
National Front
Natural Law Party NI
Newtonabbey Ratepayers Association
No Candidate Deserves My Vote!
NI Unionist Party
NI Women's Coalition
Official Monster Raving Loony Party
People's Progressive Party
Progressive Unionist Party of NI
Renaissance Independent Party of Europe
Social Democratic & Labour Party
Sinn Fein
Socialist Party (NI)
Ulster Third Way
Ulster Unionist Party
United Kingdom Independence Party
United Kingdom Peoples Party
United Kingdom Unionist Party
United Unionist Assembly Party
Vote For Yourself
Workers Party
World

Religious Organisations

Church of Ireland

Roman Catholic Church

Presbyterian Church

Baptist Church

Methodist Church

Free Presbyterian Church

Christian Scientists

NI Inter-Faith Forum

Belfast Hebrew Congregation

Belfast Islamic Centre

Representative Organisations

Committee on the Administration of Justice

Equality Commission

Community Relations Council

NI Human Rights Commission

British-Irish Rights Watch

Age Sector Reference Group

Youth Council for NI

Chinese Welfare Association NI

Indian Community Centre

NI Council for Ethnic Minorities

Traveller Movement NI

Coalition on Sexual Orientation

NI Gay Rights Association

Disability Action

MENCAP

British Deaf Association

RNID NI

RNIB NI

Women's Forum NI

NI Women's Aid Federation

Gingerbread NI

Carers National Association NI

CHIEF ELECTORAL OFFICER for NORTHERN IRELAND

EQUALITY SCHEME SCREENING FORM

Policy I.D :

Screened By

Date :

Recommended Action - Review Priority 1
(by project group) Review Priority 2
Review Priority 3
No Current Action
Decisions Review Date / / (3 years)
Signed – Group Chairperson _____

Questionnaire

1A Does the policy 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, sensory)	<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 policy 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, sensory)[]	[]	[]	[]
Race or ethnic origin (includes Travellers)	[]	[]	[]
Age	[]	[]	[]
Dependant Responsibilities / dependency	[]	[]	[]
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:

- | | | |
|--|-----|------------|
| 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.

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:

5.2

Is there any evidence that particular groups have different needs, experiences, issues and priorities in relation to the particular main policy area?

(please tick) YES [] DON'T KNOW [] NO []

If yes, give details:

The needs of the various groups are laid down in the relevant legislation.

5.3

Is there an opportunity to promote equality of opportunity or good relations by altering Policy?

(please tick)

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

If yes, give details:

5.4

Have consultations in the past with relevant representative organisations or individuals within groups indicated that particular functions, policies or duties create problems that are specific to them?

(please tick)

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

If yes, give details:

6. 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.

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

IMPACT ASSESSMENT REQUIRED

YES	<input type="checkbox"/>	NO	<input type="checkbox"/>
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ELECTORAL OFFICE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

CONSULTATION ON THE FIRST DRAFT EQUALITY SCHEME

The Chief Electoral Officer published for public comment the first draft of the Equality Scheme for the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland on 31 August 2001. Copies of the draft Scheme inviting comments were sent to the bodies listed at **Annex C** to the Scheme, and other organisations in Northern Ireland or in Great Britain who are affected in any way by the work of the Electoral Office were invited to apply for copies and to comment.

The number of responses to this round of consultation was disappointing.

Acknowledgements were received from:

- The Northern Ireland Office;
- The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure;
- The Bar Council; and
- NIC/ICTU.

Disability Action

Detailed specific comments were received from Disability Action. These comments are set out below, followed in each case by the Chief Electoral Officer's response:

- The background information on the role, structure, policies, etc. of the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland is useful to help the reader understand the context of the Equality Scheme. (Items 1.1 – 1.11)

CEO Response

Noted.

- Disability Action advises the Electoral Office that the contact details should include a textphone number. This is the preferred method of communication for many deaf people. Is it available? (Item 1.9)

CEO Response

No. The requirement for a textphone will be included in the current review of the provision of information on the electoral process.

- The commitment to integrate objectives and targets in the Electoral Office's corporate and business plans is welcomed. However, Disability Action would ask that the revised Scheme explains what is to be included and how this will be done so that we can make comments of some relevance. (Item 1.11)

CEO Response

The integration of section 75 objectives and targets will be achieved through the annual business planning process at both corporate and individual level. Copies of the annual corporate business plan are available on request.

- Disability Action finds it unacceptable that the Electoral Office has given itself a 5 year period to assess how proposed and new policies impact on the promotion of equality of opportunity and the promotion of good relations within the terms of section 75 of the NI Act. The Statutory Duty Guidelines clearly state on page 40 that "for as long as there is a failure to implement the measures the Authority is at risk of failing to comply with the statutory duties" and it is important that the Equality Scheme measures are implemented in a "timely fashion". 5 years would appear to be well outside the "timely fashion" boundaries. (Item 2.1)

CEO Response

Schedule 9 to the NI Act 1998, Paragraph 8(3) states that "A public authority shall, before the end of the period of five years beginning with the submission of its current scheme. . . ."

... review that scheme and inform the Commission of the outcome of the review.”
(Statutory Guidelines page 30)

It is that five year period that is referred to in paragraph 2.1 of the Scheme. In practice, all existing policies, powers, duties and functions will be screened before the end of Year 1 of the Scheme (see timetable on page 20 of this Scheme); a timetable will then be published showing when those policies, powers, duties and functions that have been identified as requiring equality impact assessments will be assessed (paragraph 3.7, page 11 of the Scheme); new policies, powers, functions or duties, when they occur, will as a matter of routine be subject to the screening process before being implemented (paragraph 3.10, page 12 of the Scheme). Where screening of new policies, powers, functions or duties indicates equality impact assessments are required, those assessments will be fitted into the five year timetable in as timely a manner as is possible.

- Disability Action is concerned by the limited number of consultees used for this consultation (Annex C). The Guide to Statutory Duties, Appendix IV, provides a list of regional and local voluntary/community groups and Disability Action believes that this list should have been better utilized. Consultation is a core tenet of the duty and the Electoral Office must promote open, inclusive and meaningful consultations with those affected by the Statutory Duties to obtain the widest possible view. (Item 2.1)

CEO Response

The list of bodies to be consulted set out in Annex C was arrived at after very careful consideration of all those groups/organisations that are likely to be affected, directly or indirectly, by the activities of the Chief Electoral Officer. Nevertheless, the Electoral Office will welcome proposals from Disability Action or any other body or person for other bodies to be included in the list of the bodies to be consulted, supported by the rationale for their inclusion.

- Disability Action notes that the Electoral Office will include an input from external consultants in regard to an assessment of section 75 compliance. Disability Action would advise that any outside body used must be fully briefed on the Statutory Duties and trained on equality issues and have an awareness of the issues specific to each of the affected groups. (Item 2.4)

CEO Response

Agreed. Knowledge of the Statutory Duties and the issues specific to each of the affected groups will be key selection criteria for the consultants.

- Annex B lists the main groups relevant to the categories under section 75. Please amend “persons with a disability” to read – persons with a physical, sensory, **mental** or learning disability as defined in Section 1, Schedules 1 and 2 of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. (Item 3.2)

CEO Response

Done.

- Additionally, Disability Action requests that the Electoral Office amend Annex D, disability list, to include sensory impairments i.e. to include those persons with hearing and visual impairments within our society. (Item 3.3)

CEO Response

Done.

- Disability Action welcomes the Electoral Office’s proactive approach in conducting an audit to identify gaps in statistical data or quantitative information. However, Disability Action is disappointed that there is no reference to qualitative data Please include this omission in the revised Scheme. (Item 3.4)

CEO Response

Agreed.

- Disability Action agrees with on **rare** occasions consultation may not be feasible within the minimum 8 week period. However, with appropriate planning and efforts on the the Electoral Office's behalf such reduced period should be unusual. (Item 4.5)

CEO Response

Agreed.

- Disability Action welcomes the Electoral Office's methods of consultation but would ask if the internet discussions are designed so as to be fully accessible to the affected groups, in particular, to people with disabilities. (Item 4.6)

CEO Response

Yes, that is the intention.

- Disability Action welcomes the range of accessible formats outlined but would request that the Electoral Office adds computer disk to the list. (Item 4.7)

CEO Response

Agreed.

- Disability Action presumes that press releases will also be provided to a comprehensive range of specialist press. (Item 5.1)

CEO Response

In principle, yes, but depends on advice from organisations and interest groups.

- Physical barriers that exist in both internal and external environments can hinder access to services. Therefore, Disability Action welcomes the Chief Electoral Officer's assurance that the affected groups will not be impeded from exercising their right to vote. (Item 5.3)

CEO Response

Noted.

- Again, Disability Action request that a textphone number be added to the list of contact details. (Item 6.1)

CEO Response

In hand (see above).

- Disability Action is disappointed that the Electoral Office will "take into account" how best to communicate information to young people and people with learning disabilities. The Guide to Statutory Duties, page 33, clearly states that a Public Authority must give specific consideration as both groups are covered by the Statutory Duties and have rights to have due regard given to the need to promote equality of opportunity. (Item 6.1)

CEO Response

Agreed. Text duly amended.

- Disability Action strongly believes in the importance of staff training. Training for staff should be implemented in Year 1 not over a 5 year period and an evaluation of the training should be included in the Electoral Office's Year 1 Annual Review. (Item 7.2)

CEO Response

Agreed, that is the intention. However, a training capability must be retained over the 5 year period to provide for permanent staff turnover and for temporary staff during the Registration period and elections.

- Disability Action welcomes the Electoral Office's commitment to providing a detailed training programme in the revised Scheme. Disability Action would suggest that this training plan should include how and when the training will take place and urges that awareness training, for all staff, be sourced from the affected groups. (Item 7.6)

CEO Response

Noted.

- Disability Action welcomes the Chief Electoral Officer assessing arrangements for providing information in a range of accessible formats taking into account the anti-discrimination legislation of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. However, Disability Action would point out that the Statutory Duty requires Public Authorities to promote equality of opportunity, rather than just to **avoid** discrimination.

CEO Response

Noted.

- Referring to the comment immediately above, Disability Action would point out that, whilst access to the Goods, Services and Facilities provisions of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 will come into effect in 2004 the Statutory Duty obligations are in force now and Disability Action firmly believes that the Electoral Office should embrace the spirit of section 75 and instigate proactive measures regarding the built environment. (Item 8.5)

CEO Response

Agreed. In Year 1, four area electoral offices will be considered for re-location to improve accessibility.

- Disability Action recommends that the complaints procedure should outline how it will support the individual bringing his/her complaint e.g.(interpreter fees, specialist transport costs). The procedure should indicate the Electoral Office's agreement to respond at all times in the format preferred by the complainant. The complaints procedure must be fully accessible and proactively disseminated to those affected by section 75 duties.

CEO Response

While agreeing with the point made in the final sentence, the Electoral Office's response to any complaint must depend on the nature and merits of the complaint.

- Disability Action welcomes the opportunity to participate in the consultation process. This is the beginning of a long-term process that will be worthwhile if it is embraced by all parties involved as an opportunity for a positive partnership resulting in mutual benefit for all.

CEO Response

Agreed.

Mencap in Northern Ireland

In their response to the invitation to comment on the First Draft of this Scheme, Mencap in Northern Ireland provided an invaluable analysis of the difficulties with electoral matters faced by people with learning disabilities and their carers. The situation is too complex to deal with adequately in this Annex to the revised Scheme. The Chief Electoral Officer will, therefore, respond to Mencap's comments by inviting their representatives to face to face discussions to seek to resolve the difficulties.

SCREENING REPORT

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.

Dependency: 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.

Dependency: 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 Alzheimers 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