



## **PUBLIC AUTHORITY PROGRESS REPORT**

**1 APRIL 2006 – 31 MARCH 2007**

**Report to the Equality Commission on progress in the implementation of our equality and good relations duties under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998**

This report can be found on the EONI website [www.eoni.org.uk](http://www.eoni.org.uk) and can also be made available in alternative formats on request

**Name of Public Authority:** Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland

### **Equality Officer name and contact details:**

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## **Executive Summary**

- What were the key policy/service developments made by the authority during this reporting period to better promote equality of opportunity and good relations?

**(Enter text below)**

The Chief Electoral Officer, through his staff in the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland (EONI), continued to endeavour to make all services available equally to all those in our community and to ensure equality of opportunity for all staff. Work has been undertaken on the introduction of a revised and simplified electoral registration form which will be made available later this year in a range of languages other than English. All papers considered by the Management Board, established formally in August 2006, identify any equality implications arising from the issues to be considered. This progress in the strategic implementation of the section 75 duties supports the mainstreaming of equality and good relations objectives in all EONI activities.

- What are the main initiatives planned in the coming year to ensure the authority improves outcomes in terms of equality of opportunity and good relations for individuals from the nine categories covered by Section 75?

**(Enter text below)**

The system of registration has been changed to remove the requirement for electors to complete an annual registration form. This will free up resources to allow EONI to target under represented and marginalised groups. EONI will promote a Registration week in September/October 2007 with a theme of ‘people with disabilities’. The aim is to increase registration levels, in particular, among those with disabilities. Persons with disabilities are under-represented on the current

register. EONI also plans to encourage registration by young people by promoting the Electoral Identity Card as a proof of age card for entry to licensed premises and to prove identity for air travel. The Chief Electoral Officer intends to press the Northern Ireland Office for an early change to electoral law to remove the current archaic common law provisions on mental capacity. Such a change would benefit in particular those with learning disabilities by enabling them to register and to vote.

### **Section 1: Strategic Implementation of the Section 75 Duties**

- Outline evidence of progress made in developing and meeting equality and good relations objectives, performance indicators and targets in corporate and annual operating plans during 2006-07.

**(Enter text below)**

Objectives and targets relating to Section 75 duties were incorporated within the 2006-09 Corporate Plan and 06/07 Annual Business Plan for the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland. The plan and achievements may be viewed at [www.eoni.org.uk](http://www.eoni.org.uk). The Management Board monitors the progress of targets on a monthly basis.

In advance of the March 2007 Assembly Election, EONI explored ways to develop the service provided to the public including revising the polling station scheme to improve physical access to polling places, implementing a translation facility, providing large print posters and introducing a free phone number to access the EONI enquiry line. Overall the election was well conducted with 90% of voters, surveyed post election by the Electoral Commission, being satisfied or very satisfied with their experience.

Progress has also continued through the screening of new and revised policies and improving access to electoral services through on-going monitoring. For example, to assist individuals in registering, the registration form has been completely revised and simplified and is one of the few public sector forms in Northern Ireland to be awarded the Plain English Campaign Crystal Mark for clarity.

EONI is advanced in its planning to make the new form available in Ulster Scots and Irish and also in a range of other languages in order to assist the increasing number of the population who do not have English as their first language. During the year the good practice of replying to letters in the language used by the correspondent was also adopted.

## Section 2: Screening

- Provide an update of new/proposed/revised policies screened during the year.

<b>Title of policy subject to screening</b>	<b>Was the <u>F</u>ull Screening Report or the <u>R</u>esult of initial screening issued for consultation? <i>Please enter <u>F</u> or <u>R</u></i></b>	<b>Was initial screening decision changed following consultation? <u>Y</u>es/<u>N</u>o</b>	<b>Is policy being subject to EQIA? <u>Y</u>es/<u>N</u>o? If yes indicate year for assessment.</b>
Learning & Development	R	N	N
Harassment & Bullying	R	N	N
Gifts & Hospitality	R	N	N
Whistleblowing	R	N	N
Fraud & Response Plan	R	N	N

### Section 3: Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA)

- Provide an update of policies subject to EQIA during 2006/07, stage 7 EQIA monitoring activities and an indicative EQIA timetable for 2007-08.

#### EQIA Timetable – April 2006 - March 2007

Title of Policy EQIA	EQIA Stage at end March 07 (Steps 1-6)	Outline adjustments to policy intended to benefit individuals, and the relevant equality & good relations categories due to be affected.
Advertise and recruit staff to carry out registration duties, man polling stations and provide EONI with clerical staff	EQIA Postponed	

#### Ongoing EQIA Monitoring Activities April 2006- March 2007

Title of EQIA subject to Stage 7 monitoring	Indicate if differential impacts previously identified have reduced or increased	Indicate if adverse impacts previously identified have reduced or increased
Function of Preparing and maintaining an accurate electoral register	Reduced	Reduced
Polling Station Scheme	Reduced	Reduced

#### 2007-08 EQIA Time-table

There are no EQIAs due to be commenced during 2007-08.

- Where the EQIA timetable for 2006/07 (as detailed in the previous annual S75 progress report to the Commission) has not been met, please provide details of the factors responsible for delay and details of the timetable for re-scheduling the EQIA/s in question.

EONI is reviewing procedures on the recruitment of casual staff and is currently liaising with Equality Commission on the use of reserve list to staff elections to 2010.

#### **Section 4: Training**

- Outline training provision during the year associated with the Section 75 Duties/Equality Scheme requirements including types of training provision, numbers attending, and conclusions from any training evaluations.

**(Enter text below)**

Section 75 awareness training was carried out as an integral part of the induction process for three appointees during 2006/07. In addition, formal training was arranged through the NIO Business Improvement Team. Feedback was positive and those staff who attended found the session very informative. Equal Opportunities guidance was also issued to all staff and team briefing records were completed by managers to confirm that staff were reminded of their responsibility in promoting a harmonious working environment and complying with legal obligations.

To assist senior EONI staff to deal more effectively with the media, training was provided to all Area Electoral Officers (AEOs) prior to the 2007 Assembly elections. Subsequently, the Ballymena AEO spoke on the benefits of registration to a disability awareness seminar, whilst in Londonderry the AEO was present at the technical college freshers' day, at an awareness day organised by RNIB and at an Incore seminar focussing on participation in the electoral process by those from minority ethnic communities. There was similar involvement by other AEOs.

Staff also attended a number of equality related seminars including:

- Age Discrimination
- Recruitment and Selection
- Employment Law
- Diversity Awareness – multiple identity and employability

- Launch of Disability Action 'Count Us In' project
- Citizenship ceremonies to encourage the newly eligible to register.

A Learning and Development Policy was agreed with NIPSA during 2006/07 which has formalised and made improvements to training evaluation procedures.

### **Section 5: Communication**

- Outline how the authority communicated progress on delivery of the statutory duties during the year and evidence of the impact/success of such activities.

**(Enter text below)**

EONI Management Board comprises six senior staff. The Board meets monthly, to monitor progress against targets and objectives including the progress on delivery of statutory duties. The equality implications of proposals must be addressed in all Board papers. Minutes of meetings are made available to all staff and published on the website.

To supplement the Management Board, the Head of Area Office Services now chairs regular meetings of the nine AEOs to discuss and decide on issues relevant to their work including the delivery of statutory duties and activities. At the year end, plans were in place to introduce more structured team briefings throughout EONI to build on these higher level meetings and the widespread informal briefings that take place in most parts of the Office.

To address concerns about the standard of internal communication an internal newsletter 'The Declaration' was launched in December 2006. It provides a mixture of news for staff and has proved popular with staff.

## **Section 6: Data Collection & Analysis**

- Outline any systems that were established during the year to supplement available statistical and qualitative research.
- Outline any research undertaken/commissioned to obtain information on the needs and experiences of individuals from the nine categories covered by Section 75.

**(Enter text below)**

EONI continues to work with the Electoral Commission who contracted OMI Consultancy to conduct research into the participation of black and minority ethnic communities in the democratic process in Northern Ireland. EONI supplied numbers of electors on the register in age bands following publication of register in December 2006 and the Electoral Commission has an on-going contract with Price Waterhouse Coopers to research the democratic participation of different age groups. The outcome of this research will inform decision making within EONI as to areas which should be targeted to improve electoral registration eg, among young people, in locations with high levels of social deprivation.

## **Section 7: Information Provision, Access to Information and Services**

- Detail any initiatives/steps taken during the year to improve access to services including provision of information in accessible formats.

**(Enter text below)**

The website was redesigned during the year to make it more accessible to users with disabilities. A portable hearing loop was acquired for HQ reception, disabled toilet facilities were installed in Newtownards & Omagh area offices and a chair-lift in Newtownards Area Office. The most significant improvement was the relocation of the Ballymoney area office to Ballymena in June 2006; this office is fully accessible for customers and staff with disabilities.

The registration form and guidance notes were translated into Cantonese, Portuguese, Polish and Lithuanian and canvasser flash cards were translated into numerous languages to help those from minority groups understand the registration process when canvassers called at their homes. The form and notes were also translated into Braille, audio tape and daisy disk, along with the "Blind Persons" absent voting form. EONI took these materials to several outreach events organised by RNIB in order to facilitate those with visual impairments.

### **Section 8: Complaints**

- Identify the number of Section 75 related complaints:
  - received by the authority;
  - resolved by the authority (including how this achieved);
  - which were not resolved to the satisfaction of the complainant;
  - which were referred to the Equality Commission.

**(Enter text below)**

Just before the year end one complaint of alleged discrimination on the grounds of religious and political belief was received. The allegations, which are considered to be without foundation, are now the subject of proceedings.

### **Section 9: Consultation and Engagement**

- Provide details of the measures taken to enhance the level of engagement with individuals and representative groups during the year.

**(Enter text below)**

To start to address the issue of people with disabilities who are currently under-represented on the electoral register, regular meetings were established between the Chief Electoral Officer and a range of representative interest groups including Disability Action, RNID, RNIB and Help the Aged. It is planned to build on this beginning in the coming year. There was also engagement with local community groups with regard to access to polling stations which presented problems for those

with physical disabilities. A significant number of changes were made to the polling station scheme before the March 2007 election to accommodate voters with disabilities.

### **Section 10: The Good Relations Duty**

Provide details of additional steps taken to implement or progress the good relations duty during the year. Please indicate any findings or expected outcomes from this work.

**(Enter text below)**

During the year there were ongoing discussions with ethnic minority groups, in particular the Chinese community with a presentation being given by the Assistant Chief Electoral Officer to the Chinese Welfare Association. She also prepared an article prior to the 2006 canvass which was printed in Polish and published in 'Glosik' (a monthly magazine which communicates issues to the Polish community). Prior to the March 2007 elections a special mobile electoral ID unit was provided through An Munia Tober, the support organisation for members of the travelling community.

### **Section 11: Additional Comments**

- Please provide any additional information/comments

**(Enter text below)**

A Disability Action Plan, in accordance with section 49B of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, has recently been forwarded to the Equality Commission. The consultation period for the Plan is due to conclude on 14 September 2007.