



Strategy for Promoting Good Relations

1. Introduction

Section 75(2)(b) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 places a statutory obligation on organisations listed under the act to give regard to “promoting good relations between persons of different religious belief, political opinion and racial group”.

The Electoral Office for Northern Ireland in its equality scheme sets out how it would fulfil its statutory obligation in this regard and how it would promote equality of opportunity and good relations.

The promotion of good relations is a complex area and requires an understanding of the part sectarianism and racism play in dividing Northern Ireland’s society and how they can be challenged. Good relations practice has to engage people in seeing the “other” as a potential gift not a danger. It must promote equality, develop respect for diversity and raise awareness of the interdependence of the people and institutions within Northern Ireland.

2. Defining Good Relations

In developing a strategy for good relations, it is important to define what is meant by it. The Northern Ireland Office *A Shared Future* report, upon which this strategy is based, aspires to a vision of a “peaceful society in which everyone can freely and fully participate, achieve their full potential, and live free from poverty”. *A Shared Future* suggests a number of defined themes, some of which are the focus for the EONI strategy. These are:

- Tackling the visible manifestations of sectarianism and racism;
- Promoting diversity;
- Developing shared workspaces;
- Tackling disadvantage;
- Developing shared services.

3. The Electoral Office and Good Relations

Important legislation around equality and good relations has created new opportunities for public services to model a vision that mobilizes the diverse experiences and interests of staff in pursuit of a more plural society. EONI wants to maintain a wider vision of people and society being able to grow and change and all being able to access electoral services equally.

Over the years of conflict in our community the staff at EONI have served all strands of that community in a number of locations across the Northern Ireland. At each election they have proved themselves to be completely professional and have delivered an impartial service to electors and politicians alike.

The 'Statement of Purpose' incorporated in the corporate plan underpins the promotion of good relations:

"The Electoral Office for Northern Ireland will support the Chief Electoral Officer in his role of enabling all eligible persons to participate in the democratic process in Northern Ireland by registering and voting free from intimidation and threats and subject only to those controls and safeguards necessary to secure the integrity of the electoral process."

EONI is therefore committed to promoting good relations rather than adopting a basic legal compliance to dealing with inequality, good relations and human rights. This commitment starts internally with the recognition that the quality of internal relationships among staff is essential to the delivery of an effective service to the public.

4. Good Relations Vision

Our vision is the creation of an atmosphere of trust within EONI and with those whom we come into contact, where people feel comfortable with their individuality and are not adversely treated because of their religious belief, political opinion or race and have the strength to challenge narrow attitudes that perpetuate segregation and fear.

5. Commitment

EONI will fulfil its statutory obligations and in particular will promote:

1. Equality of opportunity
2. Good relations
3. A reflective and diverse workplace
4. Tolerance, understanding and justice

EONI demonstrates its commitment in line with public statements contained in the Corporate and Business Plans, leadership at Management level and devolving responsibility throughout the organisation by encouraging each

business unit to promote equality and good relations as part of their routine work.

6. Principles

In delivering good relations we will:

- a. Be impartial.
- b. Respect the backgrounds and cultures of others.
- c. Learn from other's experiences
- d. Support other colleagues and those with whom we come into contact in an open and tolerant environment.
- e. Accept that we might not always share the same views as others but we are comfortable with that acceptance.
- f. Help to build trust and understanding within and outside the organisation.

7. Collecting Information

In February 2008 EONI undertook a survey to establish the views of its staff about good relations within the organisation. This was followed by internal audits of the five key areas of work – registration, elections, central services, corporate governance and information services. Each function was considered for its potential for promoting good relations and assessed, if appropriate, for the impact on good relations with regard to customers, stakeholders, employees and the wider contact of Northern Ireland.

The outcomes from the survey and internal audits are shown below and will continue to form the core of EONI's action for promoting good relations.

7.1. Internal Good Relations Survey:

The key findings were as follows:

- almost 90% of EONI staff believed that their working environment was free of sectarianism and racism.
- 93% of staff believed EONI recruits fairly from both communities.
- 31% believed EONI could do more to recruit black and ethnic minority people/other nationalities.
- over 90% of staff believed EONI offered development training to staff without regard to their religion/community or ethnic/racial origin.
- over 95% of staff believed EONI offered advancement to staff without regard to community or ethnic/racial origin.
- 93% of staff felt EONI welcomed all political communities/opinions and that EONI's services were welcoming to all people regardless of race, religion or political opinion.
- only 7% of staff felt that someone who is black or from a minority ethnic background is likely to receive a poorer service than someone who is white or from Northern Ireland.

- 100 % of staff felt that a person from a minority religion/ethnic minority was unlikely to encounter greater barriers to service/access by EONI than someone from a majority religion/community.

7.2. Key work areas

Corporate Governance

The new power sharing arrangements in Northern Ireland have at their heart the promotion of good relations between all sections of our community. For the new institutions to have credibility the public must have confidence that the electoral process from which they flow is free and fair. Ensuring that it is so is the responsibility primarily of the Chief Electoral Officer and the staff of the Electoral Office. So in practice everything carried out by EONI results indirectly in the promotion of good relations across Northern Ireland.

As a public body all new policies and procedures, and significant changes to existing policies and procedures, are dealt with in accordance with the EONI Equality Scheme. Also EONI is required to comply with the myriad of legislation on subjects such as FOI, data protection, equality and health and safety. Our procedures mirror those in other similar organisations and are believed to be satisfactory.

The Management Board

The 2008 internal survey indicated that relations among the various community groups represented across EONI staff is good. In addition EONI considered how it could do more to increase the visibility of the Management Board to our stakeholders and members of the public. A Management Board page has been created on the EONI website to show photographs of the Board members and a brief description of the work areas for which they have responsibility. Board minutes are now available on the website with the purpose of increasing public confidence in the electoral process having a beneficial impact on good relations.

If the public and our stakeholders are to have confidence in the impartiality of EONI staff they have to be satisfied that the financial probity of senior managers is beyond doubt. The Register of Gifts and Hospitality is also now available on our website.

Risk management

Strategic risk is considered by the Management Board at least every three months and is also integral to any project plan. Whereas the strategic risk register is not, for obvious reasons, available to staff or the public, the publication of the Management Board minutes on the website demonstrates to our customers and stakeholders that risk management is a live issue within the Electoral Office.

Business planning process

The Business Plan published each March, sets out the targets and development objectives for the following year. The process of developing the plan gives stakeholders (both in their own right and as proxies for the public) and our staff an opportunity to contribute so that the Plan is reflective of the needs of all sections of our community.

Core Areas of work

No adverse impacts were identified in relation to registration applications. All applications are treated the same regardless of the race or ethnic origin of the potential elector

Consistent and fair procedures are in place for all applicants for ID cards regardless of race or ethnic origin.

The core business of EONI is to run efficient and fair elections and to this end every effort is made by staff to ensure that the service provided is identical for every voter and politician regardless of religious belief, political opinion or racial origin.

Consultation

As part of each consultation exercise every attempt is made to include in the process bodies representatives and individuals of all persons who might have a legislative interest.

Corporate communications

The Electoral Office tries to tailor media communications specifically to particular audiences such as the young and using mediums likely to be accessed by them. This improvement in the service to customers is supported by stakeholders and hopefully has increased confidence in the Electoral Office.

Internal Communications

No adverse impacts on good relations among staff were identified during the review of the internal communications strategy. Regular staff meetings are held at all levels which cover all pertinent issues and embrace all staff. All staff have equal access to senior management face to face, by telephone or email.

Information services

The Complaints Procedure was reviewed in early 2009 to make it easier for members of the public to lodge a complaint. It has also been approved by the Plain English Campaign. All complaints are dealt with in accordance with agreed procedures, regardless of the origin or beliefs of the complainant.

For the first time at the European Elections in June 2009, the standard complaints form was made available for use by candidates, political party representatives and voters.

A Customer Charter has been drawn up which sets performance standards for both core business areas and customer service. Customers are consulted through a range of questionnaires and comment cards and feedback reports are produced quarterly. The Charter aims to provide equality of service to all - whether by answering telephone calls, responding to faxes, letters and emails, or attending personal callers to offices - regardless of religious belief, political opinion or racial group.

Browsealoud has been added to the EONI website in the last year and EONI welcome calls via Typetalk. Also introduced was a Freephone number for both our textphone and main telephone numbers.

The registration form is translated into a range of different languages and accessible formats such as large print and Braille. Staff regularly use Language Line in order to allow them to communicate with customers in their chosen language.

During Elections instructions on how to vote are made available to voters in Polish and Portuguese, as well as in "Easyread" format. The availability of this service is advertised on a large "easyread" poster placed at the entrance to each polling place.

The Electoral Office has implemented a new Call Recording system for the Helpline. This will improve relations with the public and our stakeholders as we can monitor and improve, where necessary, the customer service we provide.

7.3. External Information

From the summer of 2008 Mystery Shoppers, representative of various ethnic groups and religious communities, have provided information about how the service provided by EONI staff is of a consistent standard regardless of the ethnic origin, race or perceived religion of the "shopper". The data collected continues to show the excellent performance of staff in the following four areas:

- the helpline
- email enquires
- letter enquires
- visits to area offices

The response in each area is measured against pre determined criteria and in almost all cases a score of 90 percent or better was achieved.

8. Action and Annual Review

Our Good Relations strategy continues to be core to our policy and EONI remains committed to its zero tolerance policy on racism and sectarianism.

The Good Relations Strategy will be reviewed by the Management Board in conjunction with the annual progress report provided to the Equality Commission, which outlines key policy developments made by EONI to better promote equality of opportunity and good relations.