

# EQUALITY COMMISSION FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

## Public Authority Annual Progress Report 2006 - 2007

This report template includes a number of self assessment questions regarding implementation of the Section 75 statutory duties from **1 April 2006 to 31 March 2007**. Please enter information at the relevant part of each section and ensure that it is submitted electronically (by completing this template) and in writing, with a signed cover letter from the Chief Executive or, in his/her absence, the Deputy Chief Executive to the Commission by **31 August 2007**.

Name of public authority (Enter details below)

Northern Ireland Audit Office

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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)

In relation to the 2006-07 reporting period, NIAO highlights the following as developments/activities it undertook which contributed to the better promotion of equality of opportunity and good relations:

- the refurbishment of the NIAO headquarters building to:
  - house all staff at the one location;
  - update IT infrastructure; and
  - convert an open storage area into a new training facility and meeting area.

The aim was to design the layout of the building in a way which best suited the needs of staff and the Office within the funding available. This involved extensive consultation with NIAO staff, Trade Unions and professional experts. The specification and drawings were in full compliance with legislative requirements including the Disability Discrimination legislation, building regulations and health and safety requirements. The project completed in June 2007, resulting in a working environment that meets best practice for inclusive design, and the needs of existing and future NIAO staff and visitors;

- reviewing progress on implementing the Equality Scheme, with a focus on how the effectiveness of the Scheme might be increased through additional activities. Arising from this, and with a view to developing the implementation of the statutory duty regarding good relations, cultural awareness training was delivered to all staff in October 2006;
- addressing equality issues in audit work, examples including:

**Improving Literacy and Numeracy in Schools: NIAO Report 29 March 2006, Public Accounts Committee Report 8 December 2006:** this study looked at, inter alia, how Literacy and Numeracy was being addressed between the different types of schools/regions in Northern Ireland; and in the subsequent PAC report, at the level of attainment between the different religions in Northern Ireland, particularly in Belfast.

**Older People and Domiciliary Care:** this study, a report on which will be published shortly, examined the provision of domiciliary care for older people across the country. In particular, it focused on the adequacy of measures to ensure domiciliary care services match their needs and enable them to live at home.

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)**

NIAO will continue to progress the commitments set out in its Equality Scheme.

Particular areas of focus in 2007-08 include:

- (1) the implementation of the measures contained in the NIAO Disability Action Plan;
- (2) reviewing how we cover equality issues in the audit work we do. The purpose of this is to ensure that we continue to comment effectively on the delivery of public services to all citizens. It is not to change the direction of our work. The NIAO Screening Report 2005, available at [www.niauditoffice.gov.uk](http://www.niauditoffice.gov.uk), sets out our view that Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 does not impact on the scope of our financial audits or value for money examinations. However, in relation to the latter, we are aware that audited bodies' section 75 responsibilities may be relevant to our judgement about the economy, efficiency and effectiveness with which they use their resources and therefore consider whether equality issues are relevant to a study topic. We do not see it as the role of the NIAO to assess how well bodies are meeting the requirements of section 75 as overall oversight of this lies with the Equality Commission. However, as part of this review, we would hope to engage with the Equality Commission on respective roles; and
- (3) upgrading the NIAO Intranet, followed by a review of the NIAO website. This will include ensuring continued compliance with best practice regarding accessibility. Consideration will also be given to matters such as plain language standards.

## 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)

The NIAO Equality Scheme, approved in November 2003, gave a commitment to integrating objectives and targets relating to the statutory duties into corporate and operational plans (Section 3.4). Since then, the NIAO Corporate Plan, produced annually, has included specific references to Section 75 responsibilities and a strategic objective in the following terms:

“to meet the requirements placed on the Office by legislation ..... This includes fulfillment of the Office’s obligations under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 in relation to the promotion of equality of opportunity and good relations in all its policies and procedures.”

The relevant Division’s 2006-07 Operational Plan also addressed the implementation of the Equality Scheme.

The NIAO has seven corporate values which underpin the way it approaches its activities, including equality, valuing individuals and working together. The wording of the equality value was reviewed in 2006-07, the outcome being that it should remain unchanged.

Targets for 2006-07 related to the implementation of the actions set in the Equality Scheme (Annex 7) by specified dates. Actions included:

- integration of equality objectives into the staff objective setting process;
- regular reports to the Senior Management Group;
- equality awareness training to all staff within one year of joining;
- specialised training for key staff, as required;
- reviewing access to information and services on an ongoing basis; and
- the annual review of the progress of the Equality Scheme.

Targets were achieved.

## Section 2: Screening

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

Title of policy subject to screening	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>	Was initial screening decision changed following consultation? <u>Y</u> es/ <u>N</u> o (See commentary below)	Is policy being subject to EQIA? <u>Y</u> es/ <u>N</u> o? If yes indicate year for assessment. (See commentary below)
Refurbishment of NIAO Headquarters Building	R		No
Car Park Policy	R		No
NIAO Information Technology Strategy	R		No
NIAO Anti Fraud Policy and Fraud Response Plan	R		No
Internal Whistleblowing	R		No
Annual Leave Entitlement	R		No
Temporary Promotions	R		No
Guidance on Sick Absence Procedures and Managing Attendance	R		No
Study Assistance for Professional Accountancy Qualifications	R		No

Policies relating to the C&AG's and Local Government Auditors' statutory audit functions in Northern Ireland were screened during the preparation and following the issue of the NIAO Equality Scheme. These included all policies relating to the audit of financial statements of public bodies and the examination of how economically, efficiently and effectively these bodies use their resources. The results of this screening were issued along side the NIAO's 2004-05 Annual Progress Report on the implementation of the Section 75 statutory duties and are available on the NIAO website.

Subsequent new and proposed policies, including those listed in the above table, have primarily related to people working in the NIAO. In relation to internal policies, consultation on proposals takes place with Trade Unions, and, where appropriate, all NIAO staff. Equality considerations are taken into account in each case.

A screening report, incorporating the above policies, is presently out for consultation with Trade Unions and NIAO staff. The results noted in the final column of the table (Is policy being subject to EQIA?) set out our current conclusions.

### **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.

No NIAO policies have been subject to an EQIA to date, nor at this point are any EQIAs planned for 2007-08. Policies have been screened out on the grounds that they:

- do not present a significant risk to its obligation to have due regard to the need to promote better equality of opportunity; and
- do not require changing to better promote equality of opportunity.

#### 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.

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

2007-08 EQIA Time-table

Title of EQIAs due to be commenced during April 2007 – March 2008	Existing or New policy?	Please indicate expected timescale of Decision Making stage i.e. Stage 6

- 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.  
**(Enter text below)**

**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)**

The effectiveness of the NIAO is almost entirely determined by the quality of its skill base; training is therefore regarded as a high priority and is well resourced. As the Office does not deliver services directly to the public, the

greatest contribution it can make in terms of promoting equality of opportunity under Section 75 is heightening awareness of the statutory equality duties in the course of audit work. Considerable emphasis has therefore been placed on ensuring that staff are fully aware of the statutory duties and their implications.

Training provided during 2006-07 included:

**(a) Induction Training**

6 new employees attended induction training in September 2006, which included a module on Equality.

**(b) Equality Awareness Training**

NIAO provided awareness training for all staff in October 2006. This comprised a refresher course for staff who had attended the previous awareness training in November 2004, and more in-depth training for those that had not. The training included modules on the statutory equality duties (Section 75) and cultural diversity. 123 staff attended.

**(c) Other**

- Evelyn Collins, Chief Executive of the Equality Commission, delivered a talk to NIAO managers on the operation of Equality Schemes in Northern Ireland. The role of NIAO in examining bodies subject to Section 75 was discussed. This highlighted the relevance of an audited body's implementation of its equality obligations to the Office's VFM and financial audits.
- 6 staff attended the 'Criterion Based Interviewing' course;
- 1 member of staff attended a 'Harassment Contact Officer' course;
- 1 member of staff attended a course on the Employment Equality (Age) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2006.

**Evaluation of Training**

The NIAO has a clear procedure for the identification of training needs, the provision of appropriate training and evaluation of the benefits of all training undertaken.

Analysis of training needs questionnaires following the October 2006 awareness training showed that just under 70% of respondents considered that they had an average amount of knowledge of the statutory equality duties while around 13% considered that they had quite a lot. The NIAO will continue to take forward its commitment to develop and deliver an effective training programme.

### **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)**

The principal means which the NIAO employs to communicate progress on the delivery of the statutory duties are:

- the corporate plan;
- the annual progress report; and
- the minutes of Senior Management Group meetings.

#### **(a) Corporate Plan**

The corporate plan reports on achievements in the previous year and targets and objectives for the coming years. The plan covers a period of three years and is reviewed and extended on an annual basis. While devolution was suspended, it was submitted to the Public Accounts Commission, Parliament. It will now be submitted to the Audit Committee of the Northern Ireland Assembly. Since the adoption of the Equality Scheme, the corporate plan has included specific reference to the implementation of the statutory duties and progress made against the action plan in Annex 7 of the Scheme. The corporate plan is available to the public on the NIAO website.

#### **(b) Annual Progress report**

The annual progress report submitted to the Equality Commission in the summer of each year contains details of the delivery of the statutory duties in the previous year. The progress report is made available to the public on the NIAO website.

### **(c) Minutes of SMG meetings**

Up to June 2007, the Senior Management Group met on a monthly basis to discuss matters affecting the NIAO programme of work and corporate issues (governance structures are currently under review). Reports on the implementation of the Equality Scheme were made to SMG.

Key points in the minutes of SMG meetings were disseminated to NIAO staff on a timely basis. SMG minutes are available on the NIAO website and can be accessed and downloaded by any member of the public.

### **Evidence of impact/success of such activities?**

It is difficult to gauge the success of the above activities but we are content that:

- (1) they inform NIAO staff of progress on delivery of the statutory duties, who can then follow up matters with senior management if they wish; and
- (2) by placing information into the public domain, they enable other interested parties to establish what we are doing.

As part of our review of the NIAO website, we will examine how accessible information is to section 75 categories, particularly disabled people.

### **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)**

As noted in Section 2, none of NIAO's policies have been subject to an EQIA. It has consequently been unnecessary to monitor the future adverse impact of policies subjected to EQIA.

However, the NIAO has developed its information base to assist with policy screening and to meet any needs to monitor adverse impact in the future. Information is available from a range of sources including published material (eg Population Census, Labour Force Survey, documents on websites etc). NIAO is also aware of information available on the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency's Equality Website (attending an event organised by the agency in November 2006).

The Office plans to undertake a Disability Monitoring exercise later this year to collect information from all employees (as set out in the NIAO Disability Action Plan).

It will remain alert to new information sources and continue to assess the need for more detailed data.

In view of the fact the no equality impact assessments have been required in 2005-06, the NIAO has not found it necessary to undertake or commission any specific research/surveys relating to the Section 75 equality categories.

### **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)**

#### **Provision of information in accessible formats**

In the Equality Scheme, the NIAO made a commitment to putting systems in place to ensure that timely information can be made available on request, in accessible formats such as Braille, large print, on disk, on audio cassette and in minority languages to meet the needs of those who are not fluent in English (Section 4.11). The Office also made a commitment to monitoring arrangements for providing such information (Section 6.14).

NIAO's approach to sourcing information in different formats on a timely basis was established in 2003-04. Recent consideration concluded that this remains appropriate.

There were no requests for information in alternative formats in 2006-07.

## **Access to services**

The Equality Scheme contains a commitment to ensuring that the information which the NIAO disseminates is made accessible to ensure equality of opportunity (Section 6.12). As the NIAO does not provide services directly to the public, the key issues relate to the general availability of information.

By law, the NIAO is required to make reports to the Northern Ireland Assembly. These reports are published in print by The Stationery Office. When NIAO staff acting as local government auditors issue a report under the Local Government (Northern Ireland) Order 2005, the audited body is required to publish information in relation to the report.

In order to promote public access, the NIAO makes a considerable amount of information available on its website. This includes reports to the Assembly, general information about the NIAO, notices about job vacancies and details of the NIAO Publication Scheme.

The website was upgraded in December 2003 and its design incorporates accessibility requirements. The NIAO plans to review its website during 2007-08 (see Executive Summary).

The Office also pays particular attention to the language used in reports, with an emphasis on Plain English, and the format of reports to ensure that no section of the community is unduly deterred from accessing information.

NIAO will continue to give consideration as to how provide information in a timely manner which is accessible to all groups.

## **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)**

The Office received no Section 75 complaints during 2006-07.

### **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)**

As evident in earlier parts of this report, NIAO has targeted its consultation on Trade Unions and staff because new and proposed policies have focused on internal matters. As the Office does not deliver services directly to the public, opportunities to engage more widely are limited. However, some measures have been taken as follows:

- The equality awareness training held in October 2006 was delivered by an external consultant with appropriate expertise. The participation of representative groups in this training was explored during the design of the course but, on this occasion, the outcome was that they were not directly involved. NIAO will continue to consider this area and, of note, has included a commitment in its Disability Action Plan to involve external disability bodies in the delivery of training.
- NIAO consulted organisations representing disabled people during the preparation of its Disability Action Plan (April to June 2007). As part of this process, face to face meetings were offered to a small number of the consultees. The Office finds this form of engagement worthwhile, as it provides a clear insight into matters and concerns relevant to the representative body. NIAO will continue to pursue this approach, where appropriate.
- NIAO consults interested parties during the course of VFM studies, however it is unlikely that this will routinely involve a wide range of representative groups.

The Office would respond positively to any approaches from individual organisations should they have a direct interest in a particular aspect of the audit programme.

## **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)**

In general, NIAO has taken forward the 'good relations' duty alongside its requirement to promote equality of opportunity. All awareness training includes information on the duty to promote good relations. Training delivered in October 2006 included a module on cultural diversity (see Executive Summary).

There is limited scope for the Office to promote good relations within the course of its programme of work, but any opportunities to do so will be identified and considered as they arise.

## **Section 11: Additional Comments**

- Please provide any additional information/comments

**(Enter text below)**

The implementation of Section 75 has resulted in NIAO having a heightened awareness of the importance of considering equality implications when formulating policy. It has also emphasised the need for the Office to be alert to issues of equality when considering specific topics in its programme of work.