

Summary of the Northern Ireland Audit Office Equality Scheme

Background

1. The Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO), headed by the Comptroller and Auditor General for Northern Ireland, undertakes the external audit of public sector bodies in Northern Ireland, including:
 - Northern Ireland Departments and their Executive Agencies, Non-Departmental Public Bodies and Health Service Bodies in the central government sector; and
 - District Councils in the local government sector.

The results of NIAO's audit work on central government bodies are reported to the Northern Ireland Assembly, or Parliament during the suspension of devolution, and on local government bodies to the Department of the Environment.

2. The vision of NIAO is to promote accountability and the best use of public money.

NIAO Equality Scheme

3. Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 requires NIAO, in carrying out its functions, 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;
 - men and women generally;
 - persons with a disability and persons without; and
 - persons with dependants and persons without.

It must also have due regard to the desirability of promoting good relations between persons of different religious belief, political opinion or racial group.

4. The NIAO Equality Scheme, approved by the Equality Commission in November 2003, sets out how NIAO intends to fulfil these requirements. This paper provides a brief summary of the key elements of the Scheme.

Commitments

5. NIAO is committed to the fulfilment of its Section 75 obligations in all parts of its work. Its Equality Scheme incorporates the following undertakings:

- (1) **To implement effective internal arrangements to ensure compliance with Section 75 duties.**

These arrangements will include:

- regular monitoring by senior management of progress in implementing the Scheme;
- the integration of objectives and targets relating to the equality duties in corporate and operational planning;
- relevant personal objectives for those staff directly engaged in the implementation of the Scheme;
- a commitment to the statutory duties in all job descriptions; and
- the submission of an annual Review of Progress to the Equality Commission.

- (2) **To undertake full and meaningful consultation on the NIAO Equality Scheme, equality impact assessments and monitoring arrangements.**

NIAO will conduct all consultations in a timely, open and inclusive way and will work with representative groups and individuals from the Section 75 categories to identify how best to obtain their views. Systems will be in place to ensure that timely information can be made available, on request, in accessible formats.

- (3) **To review all existing and proposed NIAO policies to determine whether there are any equality of opportunity implications.**

NIAO will consider the impact of each policy on equality of opportunity in terms of the Section 75 categories to decide whether any policies should be subject to an equality impact assessment. The Office is currently reviewing

all of its policies and the outcome will be formally reported in its first annual Review of Progress to the Equality Commission.

(4) To conduct Equality Impact Assessments on policies having a significant impact on equality of opportunity.

Any policies which have a significant impact on equality of opportunity will be prioritised for equality impact assessment. The assessment will be carried out in accordance with Equality Commission guidance and the outcome made publicly available.

(5) To establish a system to monitor the impact of policies on relevant Section 75 groups.

A system will be put in place, and reviewed annually. If monitoring and evaluation show that a policy results in greater adverse impact than predicted, or if opportunities arise which would allow for greater equality of opportunity to be promoted, the policy will be revised.

(6) To make accessible all information provided to the public to ensure equality of opportunity.

Consideration will be given to how to provide accessible information in a timely manner to all groups.

(7) To develop an effective communication and training programme for NIAO staff.

NIAO will ensure that all staff are made aware of and understand the new equality obligations. Focused training will be provided to those staff involved in specialised tasks. Training will be developed in association with the appropriate Section 75 groups.

(8) To review the Scheme within five years.

NIAO will evaluate how effective it has been in meeting its Section 75 obligations and copy the review to the Equality Commission and make it publicly available.

Timetable

6. Annex 7 to the Equality Scheme outlines an Action Plan for implementing the Scheme, which includes target dates for each task.

Complaints

7. Any complaint on the grounds that the NIAO has failed to comply with its Scheme should be addressed to:

Janet Sides
Director
Northern Ireland Audit Office
106 University Street
Belfast
BT7 1EU
Tel: 028 90 251118
Fax: 028 90 251051 or 251106
E-Mail: janet.sides@niauditoffice.gov.uk

Availability of Equality Scheme

8. The full Scheme can be obtained from the NIAO website at www.niauditoffice.gov.uk or from:

Mr Rodney Allen
The Equality Officer
Northern Ireland Audit Office
106 University Street
Belfast
BT7 1EU
Tel: 028 90 251031
Fax: 028 90 251051 or 251106
E-Mail: rodney.allen@niauditoffice.gov.uk

The Scheme can be made available in a range of accessible formats on request.