

Equality Scheme

Drawn up in accordance with Section 75
of the Northern Ireland Act 1998

27 April 2005

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Translations and other formats

For information on obtaining this publication in another language or in a large-print or Braille version please contact The Electoral Commission:

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Comments on the contents will be accepted in the format preferred by the consultee.

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Foreword

Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 requires public authorities, in carrying out their functions, powers and duties in respect of Northern Ireland, to promote equality of opportunity and good relations among a range of groups. Public Authorities, as defined by the legislation, are required to send an Equality Scheme to the Equality Commission, showing how they intend to carry out their new duties.

As Chairman and Chief Executive of The Electoral Commission we are pleased on behalf of our Commissioners and staff to support this Equality Scheme which arises out of the implementation of Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Although the commitments given in this Equality Scheme refer to how the Commission carries out its functions, powers and duties relating to Northern Ireland, we will apply the scheme to our work in the rest of the UK. The Commission is committed to ensuring that all necessary resources (in terms of people, time and money) are made available to support the effective promotion of equality of opportunity and good relations in all its policies and practices. This also includes making sure there are effective internal arrangements in place to ensure that the duties are effectively complied with and for monitoring and reviewing progress.

The Commission will actively seek to develop a programme of communication and training with the aim of ensuring all staff are made aware and understand the new equality obligations. The purpose of this draft Equality Scheme is to set out how the Commission will fulfil this statutory duty.

Chairman
Sam Younger

Chief Executive
Peter Wardle

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 ('the Act') requires the Commission in carrying out all its functions, powers and duties 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.

1.2 Also, without prejudice to its obligation above, the Commission will, in carrying out its functions, power 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.

1.3 Schedule 9 of the Act requires the Commission to set out in an Equality Scheme how it proposes to fulfil the duties imposed by Section 75. This scheme has been developed to satisfy that statutory requirement.

1.4 In accordance with the Race Relation's (Amendment) Act 2000 The Electoral Commission has a statutory duty to promote race equality and to meet its obligations has published a Race Relation Scheme. Given that the Northern Ireland scheme encompasses race it is our intention in the longer term to incorporate the race relation scheme into our equality scheme.

2.0 Duties and responsibilities

2.1 The Electoral Commission was established on 30 November 2000 by the UK Parliament. We are an independent body and our functions and powers are set out in the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 (PPERA). The Commission's corporate purpose is to foster public confidence and participation in the democratic process within the United Kingdom. We do this by modernising the electoral process, promoting public awareness of electoral matters and regulating political parties. The Boundary Committee for England - formerly the Local Government Commission for England - became a statutory Committee of The Electoral Commission in April 2002. The functions of the Parliamentary Boundary Commission for Northern Ireland and their equivalents in Scotland and Wales will be transferred to the Commission at a future date yet to be determined.

2.2 While the Commission's main office is located in London it has three other offices, in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The Commission's office based in Belfast has responsibility for delivering the corporate aims of the Commission in the context of Northern Ireland. It ensures that the Northern Ireland dimension is fully represented in the strategic thinking and operational planning of the Commission. The office works closely with the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Office (NIO). Important priorities for the Commission are developing relationships with the political parties, developing and advising on electoral policy and practice and raising awareness of electoral matters. To this end the Commission has established an Assembly's Parties Panel. It meets on a quarterly basis and all the political parties represented in the Assembly are members. The Panel is chaired by a Commissioner with a specific interest in Northern Ireland issues. It acts as a forum for sharing information on electoral matters and has been central to developing good working relationships with the parties. The Chief Electoral Officer and his colleagues also attend meetings of the Panel on a regular basis.

2.3 The Commission has a role in advising those involved in elections on practice and procedure and is required to report on the administration of every major election. The Commission has a statutory responsibility to report on elections to the Westminster Parliament, the European Parliament and the Northern Ireland Assembly. Unlike many electoral commissions outside the UK, the Commission does not have a responsibility for maintaining and updating electoral rolls, employing electoral services staff, or conducting elections. In Northern Ireland these tasks are the statutory responsibility of the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland.

2.4 Since the Commission's office was established in Northern Ireland in 2001 we have published a number of reports on electoral matters. In December 2002 we published a research report assessing the impact of the Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002. The Act brought about the most significant change in electoral law and practice in Northern Ireland for many years. It replaced household registration with a new system of individual registration.

Under the new system those having their name added to the electoral register must provide personal identification information in the form of their date of birth, national insurance number and signature. Implementation of the Act also provided for the requirement to present photographic identification at polling stations. Our analysis concluded that the electoral register compiled under individual registration more accurately reflected those entitled to be on the register. However it also confirmed that the new system tended to have an adverse impact on disadvantaged, marginalised and hard to reach groups. Young people and students, people with learning disabilities and other forms of disability, and those living in areas of higher social deprivation were less likely to be registered. Since the publication of this report we have followed it up with a number of research updates studying the impact of individual registration at constituency, local council and ward level. We have recently commissioned research into registration levels among residents of communal establishments and will report the findings in spring 2005.

2.5 In 2003 the Commission agreed an outreach strategy and appointed a small team of outreach workers to work throughout the UK initially with young people aged 16-24 outside formal education. One of the outreach officers is based in the Commission's office in Belfast. As part of the outreach strategy we conducted a student registration campaign in Autumn 2004 in partnership with the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland. The aim of the tour was to address low levels of registration among students. All universities and colleges of further education were visited as part of the tour and large numbers of young people registered. We have commissioned research to explore the issues around the participation of young people in the democratic process in Northern Ireland. We have also identified the participation of minority ethnic groups as a priority and have commissioned research into levels of registration and voting amongst minority ethnic groups. Reports on both of these subjects will be published in 2005.

2.6 In April 2004 we published our first independent statutory report on a Northern Ireland election. The report considered all aspects of the Northern Ireland Assembly election held on the 26 November 2003 and made a number of recommendations aimed at improving the overall administration of elections in Northern Ireland. Among the issues addressed in the report was the accessibility of the electoral process to disabled people. Disability Action, an umbrella organisation representing the views of 180 member groups was commissioned to conduct an access audit of a representative sample of polling places across Northern Ireland. Their report concluded that disabled people faced significant problems in accessing polling places due mainly to the built environment. Their report made a number of recommendations to the EONI for improving the situation and the Commission in its statutory report endorsed these.

2.7 Under Section 13 of PPERA, the Commission has a duty to promote public awareness of electoral and democratic systems and has an ongoing responsibility for ensuring that the electorate understands the electoral process. In the context of Northern Ireland our public awareness campaigns to date have been information-based with a particular emphasis on the requirements for individual registration and photographic identification introduced as a result of the Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002.

Our aims

Our six main corporate aims are:

- 1 To promote and maintain openness and transparency in the financial affairs of political parties and others involved with elections.
- 2 To review the administration and law of elections and encourage best practice.
- 3 To encourage greater participation in, and increased understanding of, the democratic process.
- 4 To ensure that we are able to undertake the effective conduct of a referendum.
- 5 To provide for electoral equality in each local authority area in England while also reflecting community identity and interests.
- 6 To carry out all our statutory functions impartially, using resources efficiently, effectively and economically.

2.7 The Commission is headed by a Chairman and four other Commissioners. The current Commissioners were appointed by the Home Office in 2001, following a public recruitment process. Future appointments will be made following a public recruitment process in consultation with the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments. All were appointed by Royal Warrant on 19 January 2001 to exercise the functions of the Commission. They are independent, non-partisan and are accountable directly to Parliament. There is no specific Commissioner for Northern Ireland although Karamjit Singh takes a particular interest in Northern Ireland affairs. The Commissioners are:

- Sam Younger, Chairman (full-time, 6 years);
- Pamela Gordon, Commissioner (part-time, 4 years);
- Glyn Mathias, Commissioner (part-time, 5 years);
- Sir Neil McIntosh CBE, Commissioner (part-time, 4 years);
- Karamjit Singh CBE, Commissioner (part-time, 5 years);

2.8 The Boundary Committee for England comprises five Deputy Commissioners under the Chairmanship of Pamela Gordon, who is also an Electoral Commissioner. The Committee is responsible for conducting reviews of local authority electoral arrangements, administrative boundaries and their structure. The Committee may also be asked to advise The Electoral Commission and through it, the Secretary of State, on proposals for the establishment, abolition or alteration of parish areas. The Committee may also be asked to undertake reviews of the Greater London Assembly.

2.9 The Commission has a remit under PPERA to:

- register political parties, third parties and participants in referendums;
- regulate political donations and election and referendum spending;
- regulate the annual accounts of political parties;
- conduct UK-wide, national and regional referendums;
- report on elections and referendums;
- review electoral law and best practice;
- promote awareness of electoral and democratic systems;
- provide grants to eligible political parties to support their policy development work;
- advise on issues relating to political broadcasting;
- comment on government's legislative proposals; and
- review and implement changes to the electoral arrangements of local authorities in England.

Chief Executive

2.10 The Chief Executive, supported by the Senior Management Team, is responsible to the Chairman and the Commissioners for the management of the Commission as a corporate body.

3.0 Arrangements for assessing compliance with Section 75 duties

Organisational arrangements

3.1 The Commission is committed to the fulfilment of its Section 75 obligations in all parts of its work. Statutory responsibility for the effective implementation of the Scheme lies with the Chief Executive.

3.2 The Chief Executive will be accountable to the Commission for the development, maintenance and review of the Scheme in accordance with the legislation, including any good practice or guidance that may be issued by the Equality Commission.

3.3 The Head of the Electoral Commission's Office in Northern Ireland will be the central point of contact with the Equality Commission, for consultation exercises in Northern Ireland and for complaints under the Scheme. His contact details are:

Séamus Magee
Head Of Office Northern Ireland
Seatem House
28-32 Alfred Street
Belfast
BT2 8EN

Tel:028 9089 4021

Textphone: To be advised

Fax: 028 9089 4026smagee@electoralcommission.org.uk

3.4 He will report regularly to the Commission's Senior Management Team (SMT) and respond to any queries for all those affected by the statutory duties.

3.5 Objectives and targets relating to the statutory duties will be integrated into the Commission's strategic and operational plans. Staffs who are directly engaged in this work will include implementation of the statutory duties in their Personal Performance Plans, which are subject to appraisal in the Annual Performance Review. In addition, a commitment to the statutory duties will be included in all job descriptions. Progress on meeting the range of objectives will be monitored and reported on to the Commission's SMT on a quarterly basis.

Progress reporting

3.6 The Commission will conduct an annual review of progress in relation to the implementation of the Equality Scheme, in complying with the statutory duties. The Commission will forward a report of this review to the Equality Commission by 31 July each year. This report, which will follow any guidance on annual reporting issued by the Equality Commission, will also be included in the Commission's Annual Report.

3.7 Moreover, the Commission will liaise closely with the Equality Commission to build a close working relationship so that progress on the implementation of the Scheme is maintained.

Consultation

3.8 The Commission acknowledges the emphasis on consultation in the development and implementation of the Scheme, and is committed to full and meaningful consultation on its Equality Scheme, equality impact assessments and monitoring arrangements. Details of this commitment are set out in the following section.

Complaints

3.9 Where a person (the complainant) believes that s/he has been directly affected by a failure by the Commission to comply with this Scheme s/he should in the first instance bring their complaint to the attention of:

Séamus Magee
Head Of Office Northern Ireland
Seatem House
28-32 Alfred Street
Belfast
BT2 8EN

Tel:028 9089 4021
Textphone: To be advised
Fax: 028 9089 4026
smagee@electoralcommission.org.uk

3.10 The Head of Office, Northern Ireland will investigate the complaint or give the complainant a reason for not investigating it. A substantive response will be provided within one month from the date of receipt of the complaint. Complaints can be made in whatever format the complainant is comfortable with including telephone, written or e-mail. During this process, the complainant will be kept fully informed of the procedures for dealing with the complaint under Schedule 9 of the Northern Ireland Act. The Commission will also undertake to provide assistance to any complainant who requires information in a format that ensures equality of opportunity and any support

needs of the complainant will be addressed where practicable. If the complainant is dissatisfied with how the complaint has been handled, the matter can be referred to the Commission's Chief Executive.

3.11 In any subsequent investigation by the Equality Commission, The Electoral Commission will co-operate fully, providing access to any relevant documentation that the Equality Commission may require. Similarly, The Electoral Commission 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.

Review of the scheme

3.12 The Commission will conduct a comprehensive review of the Scheme within five years (or sooner) of its submission to the Equality Commission. This review will evaluate the effectiveness of the Commission in meeting its Section 75 obligations. In undertaking this review the Commission will follow any guidance issued by the Equality Commission. A report of this review will be made public and sent to the Equality Commission.

4.0 Consultation

4.1 The Commission recognises the importance of consultation in all aspects of the implementation of its statutory equality duties. It affirms that all consultation will be carried out in accordance with the Equality Commission's Guiding Principles as detailed in its 'Guide to Statutory Duties'. In particular, it will endeavour to conduct all consultations in a timely, open and inclusive way in accordance with the Equality Commission's Guiding Principles.

4.2 The Commission will consult as widely as possible to ensure that any organisation or group which has a legitimate, particular interest in its work and/or the likely impact of its policies on the promotion of equality of opportunity and good relations will be included in the process of engagement.

Those being consulted

4.3 A list of those being consulted on matters relevant to the Commission's equality duties, including screening and equality impact assessments and the Scheme itself, is detailed in Appendix B. The list is not exhaustive and may be amended and reviewed throughout the lifetime of the Equality Scheme to promote inclusive consultation. The Commission welcomes enquiries from any organisation wishing to be added to the list of consultees, and should contact Séamus Magee to have their interest noted.

4.4 The Commission will include the Equality Commission, the Community Relations Council, voluntary groups, community groups and Trade Union groups in all consultations whether or not they have a direct economic or social interest in the work of the Commission. Organisations representing the various categories included in Section 75 will also be included in any consultation carried out.

Timescale for consultation

4.5 In order to facilitate meaningful consultation, the Commission will ensure that consultation with groups and individuals will begin as early as possible.

4.6 The Commission is conscious that some groups will need sufficient time to consult among themselves in order that their contributions to any consultation may be informed. All consultations will aim to allow a period of 8 weeks, and where possible 12 weeks except in emergencies. Such situations will include:

- policies which have to be implemented urgently to protect health and safety; and
- policies which have to be implemented urgently to comply with court judgements.

4.7 The Commission wishes to minimise the number of exceptions to good practice guidelines on the timescale for consultation. When exceptions do occur, the Commission will report such instances. Exceptions to the normal 8-week, and where possible 12-week consultation period will be monitored, kept under review, justified very clearly and reported by the Commission in its Annual Report to the Equality Commission.

Procedures for ensuring inclusive consultation

4.8 In consulting on any matter to which this scheme relates, the Commission will consider how best to work with representative groups and individuals of the Section 75 categories in order 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.

4.9 It is intended that barriers to proper consultation will be removed by ensuring that language is as clear as possible. Systems will be established to make presentations on the Scheme, if requested, available in an appropriate format to representatives of people with learning disabilities, minority community language speakers, people with disabilities, young people, and travellers.

4.10 To ensure the highest level of inclusivity in any policy decision-making, information will be made available in consultation with groups affected by Section 75. Systems will be in place to ensure that information will be available on request in accessible formats in a timely fashion such as Braille, disc, and audiocassette and in minority languages to meet the needs of those who are not fluent in English.

4.11 Extra consideration will be given to ensuring that all consultations reflect the needs of young people and those with learning disabilities through the provision of accessible formats in a timely manner. The Commission will liaise with representatives of young persons and learning disability organisations in the first place (by correspondence/direct communication) and take account of good practice elsewhere (e.g. Lead Report/MENCAP's guidance on accessible formats), in order to reflect the needs of these groups in consultations.

4.12 The Commission believes it especially important that sufficient timely and appropriate information is provided to enable all affected groups and individuals to consider the full implications of proposals, and it will take steps to ensure this. This will include quantitative and qualitative data that the Commission holds or has collated, and other documents such as consultants' reports. This will apply to all consultations.

4.13 Specific training will be arranged for Commission staff undertaking consultation exercises to ensure they have the necessary skills to communicate effectively.

4.14 Steps will also be taken to ensure full participation in any consultation meetings that are held. The Commission will consider the time of day, the suitability of the venue, whether it can be accessed by those with disabilities, how the meeting is to be run, the use of languages other than English, whether a signer is needed, and childcare arrangements.

5.0 Assessing the impact of policies on the promotion of equality of opportunity

Screening

5.1 The Commission is committed to carrying out a systematic review of all its existing and new/proposed policies to determine whether there is any equality of opportunity implications.

5.2 The definition of a 'policy' under the Equality Commission's Guide to the Statutory Duties has a wide remit and includes policies relating to all functions and activities. The Commission will monitor the implementation of a policy that it operates on behalf of another public authority, and will work in partnership with other bodies where such a policy is subject to an equality impact assessment.

5.3 The Commission will consider the impact of each current and new/proposed policy on equality of opportunity in terms of the nine categories listed at Section 75 of the Act when considering which policies will be subject to equality impact assessment. A systematic review of each policy is required and the Commission will take the following steps when screening:

- identify all policies, written and unwritten;
- internally appraise the significance of equality of opportunity and good relations for each policy, taking account of the screening criteria and prioritisation factors detailed below;
- produce a list detailing policies to be subject to equality impact assessment, together with a draft timetable for conducting the assessments. This should take account of the need to join up equality impact assessments of related policies;
- consult with Section 75 groups to seek their views on whether all policies have been identified, whether all equality impacts have been identified, and whether they agree with the list of policies to be subject to equality impact assessment and the proposed timetable;
- consider and take account of feedback from the consultation exercise; and
- provide information to consultees on the conclusions reached following the initial consultation on screening, on amendments made to the list of policies, and on the final equality impact assessment timetable, in a screening report.

5.4 For each policy the following criteria will be applied:

- Is there any indication or evidence of higher or lower participation or uptake by different groups*?
- Is there any indication or evidence that different groups have different needs, experiences, issues and priorities in relation to the particular policy?

- Have previous consultations with relevant groups, organisations or individuals indicated that particular policies create problems that are specific to them?
- Is there an opportunity to better promote equality of opportunity or good relations by altering the policy or working with others in government or in the larger community?

* The main groups within each of the nine categories are identified at Appendix D.

If the answer to any of these four questions is yes, consideration will be given to whether to subject the policy to the equality impact assessment procedure.

Evidence

5.5 The Commission will make arrangements to obtain relevant information, whether quantitative or qualitative, so that it can clearly demonstrate why a policy is screened in for impact assessment or screened out as not requiring an equality impact assessment.

5.6 Evidence may include information from the Commission's own information management systems, including service monitoring and complaints handling systems, or from engagement in research, surveys or consultation exercises. Information may also be sourced from commissioned research or from research produced by other public authorities, representative groups, umbrella groups, and trades unions or universities. Information from consultation exercises on previous equality impact assessments, or those undertaken by other public authorities within the same sector will also be considered. Anecdotal evidence, feedback from service users and affected groups or ongoing experience within the authority will also be considered.

Prioritisation and timetabling

5.7 Having screened existing policies or new policies using the four criteria set out above, the Commission will reach a view on prioritising policies for equality impact assessment. Priorities may be established based on factors such as:

- social need;
- effect on people's daily lives;
- effect on economic, social and human rights;
- significance of the policy in terms of expenditure; and
- significance of the policy in terms of strategic importance.

5.8 An initial timetable will be developed setting out a programme and timescale for equality impact assessments, see Appendix E.

Screening report

5.9 A detailed report of the screening exercise will be provided to consultees and included in the Annual Report sent to the Equality Commission. The report will include details of: (1) those policies which will be subject to equality impact assessment, (2) those policies proposed by those consulted, as appropriate for impact assessment, but have not been subsequently included – giving an explanation for this course of action, (3) the factors for prioritising assessments, and (4) the timetable for equality impact assessments.

5.10 Consultation on screening will allow at least 8 weeks, and where possible 12 weeks except in emergencies, and will comply with the Equality Commission's 'Guiding Principles of Consultation'. Consultations will seek the views of the Equality Commission, representative groups of Section 75 categories, other public authorities, voluntary groups, community groups, Trade Unions and other groups with a legitimate interest in the matter including those directly affected by the policy whether or not they have a direct economic or personal interest (see Appendix B).

The conduct of equality impact assessments

5.11 All equality impact assessments carried out will be conducted in accordance with all the procedures outlined in Annex 1 of the Equality Commission's 'Guide to the Statutory Duties'.

5.12 In common with other aspects of the statutory equality duties, the Commission will ensure that any equality impact assessment will be subject to consultation. All consultations will seek the views of the Equality Commission, representative groups of Section 75 categories, other public authorities, voluntary groups, community groups, Trade Unions and other groups with a legitimate interest in the matter whether or not they have a direct economic or personal interest and those directly affected by the policy (see Appendix B).

5.13 In making any decision on a current or proposed policy, the Commission will take into account any relevant equality impact assessment and the outcome of associated consultation.

Monitoring adverse impact and access to services

5.14 A system will be established to monitor the impact of policies and access to services across all functions in order to identify their effects on the relevant groups and ensure equality of opportunity. This system will involve:

- an audit of existing information systems within one year of approval of the Scheme, similar to that included in Appendix 4 of the Commission's Practical Guidance on EQIAs, to identify the extent of current monitoring and a plan to address any gaps so that impacts can effectively be monitored through equality impact assessments;

- the collection and collation of existing relevant primary quantitative and qualitative data across all nine equality categories on an ongoing basis;
- the collection and collation of existing relevant secondary sources of quantitative and qualitative data across all nine equality categories on an ongoing basis;
- identifying where more detailed data is needed in order to have the necessary information on which to base decisions; and
- undertaking or commissioning new data if necessary.

5.15 If over a three-year period 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 Commission will revise the policy as appropriate.

5.16 This system will be reviewed on an annual basis and the results will be published as part of the Commission's Annual Report to the Equality Commission. In all cases relating to the holding of monitoring information or the collection of data, the Commission will act sensitively in accordance with Equality Commission guidance and the wishes of representatives from S75 organisations.

Publication of equality impact assessments and monitoring

5.17 The Commission will make publicly available the outcome of any equality impact assessment and of any monitoring undertaken to measure the adverse impact of policies. Systems will also be established to make available, on request, impact assessments in accessible formats and a timely fashion (i.e. Braille, large print, disc, audio cassette and minority languages) from the responsible officer – Séamus Magee, Seatem House, 28-32 Alfred Street, Belfast BT2 8EN.

5.18 Extra consideration will be given to ensure that young people and those with learning disabilities are able to access impact assessments in a timely fashion.

5.19 The Commission will inform the general public about the availability of this material through public relations such as press releases and media coverage. It will also directly inform bodies listed in Appendix B when this material is available and it will place information in publications associated with Section 75 categories.

5.20 All published information will comply with guidance outlined by the Equality Commission in its 'Guide to Statutory Duty' (Section 1). The Commission will publish information on equality impact assessments that:

- includes the aims of the policy to which the assessment relates;
- details any consideration given to mitigating adverse impact of the policy on the promotion of equality of opportunity; and
- details any consideration given to the consideration of alternative policies which might better achieve the promotion of equality of opportunity.

6.0 Public access to information and services

6.1 The Commission is committed to ensuring that the information it disseminates and the services it provides are made accessible to ensure equality of opportunity. It is aware that some groups will not have the same access to information as others. These include:

- children and young people who may have difficulties in accessing or understanding information;
- people with sensory and learning disabilities that may have difficulties with information in print; and
- members of minority ethnic groups, whose first language is not English, and who may have difficulties with information provided only in English.

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

6.2 The Commission will, within a year of approval of this scheme, review its arrangements for providing information in Braille, large print, audio cassette and minority ethnic language formats. The assessment will take account of:

- the statutory requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995; the likely demand for information of various formats across its main policy areas; and
- the resource implications and recommendations from the Northern Ireland cross-departmental Promoting Social Inclusion (PSI) working groups on minority ethnic people and on access to information.

6.3 The review will make recommendations on how public access to information can be better ensured by improving arrangements for providing information in different formats and languages. The Commission will ensure that it will publicise the current situation, the findings of its review, and any proposed changes to any aspect of information and services to such groups and individuals.

6.4 In disseminating information through the media, the Commission will seek to advertise in the press. This arrangement will be kept under review, in terms of promoting wide access throughout the implementation of statutory equality duties. The Commission intends that all of its services are fully accessible to all parts of the community in Northern Ireland.

6.5 Under The Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOI) requests for information held by the Commission (unless the information falls under one of the specified exemptions in the Act) may be addressed to the Secretary of the Commission. Most of the information held by the Commission is readily available to members of the public and does not require a request under the FOI to access it. Besides contacting the Commission in writing, by telephone or fax, the public can access information via the Commission's website at

www.electoralcommission.org.uk and can request copies of publications promoted on the website. Details of how to do this are on the website.

The Commission also has a Publication Scheme. The purpose of the Publication Scheme is to ensure that a large amount of information is readily available to the public and to inform the public of the extent of information which is available. 'Readily available' means information which is available on the Commission's website, can be purchased from HMSO or TSO, can be obtained from a public library or will be supplied immediately on request in writing, by telephone or by e-mail from the Commission.

The Secretary to the Commission has overall responsibility for the FOI and Publication Scheme. The Secretary to the Commission is Jacqui Dixon. She can be contacted in writing, by telephone or e-mail to:

The Secretary to the Commission
The Electoral Commission
Trevelyan House
30 Great Peter Street
London SW1P 2HW

020 7271 0500
Textphone: To be advised
info@electoralcommission.org.uk
www.electoralcommission.org.uk

6.6 The Commission will ensure that no section of the community is deterred from visiting Commission offices, for whatever reason. Commission offices will maintain a welcoming and harmonious environment. The Commission will adhere to relevant provisions of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995.

7.0 Training and communication

7.1 The Commission will ensure that an effective communication and training programme will be developed for all staff. A series of targets for the implementation of the commitment to training and communication will be outlined in Equality Scheme Action Plan section of this document (Appendix E).

7.2 In order to share resources and expertise, the Commission will work closely with other bodies and agencies in the development and delivery of training.

Training

7.3 The Commission will draw up a detailed training plan for all its staff over the five year period to which this scheme refers which will aim to achieve the following objectives:

- to raise awareness of current anti-discrimination legislation, including the provisions of Section 75 and Section 76 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. This will include an explanation of the duties and their implications for all employees;
- to raise awareness on the specific issues pertinent to each of the 9 categories provided for under the Northern Ireland Act;
- to provide those employees involved in screening of policies with the necessary skills and knowledge to do this work effectively;
- to provide those employees involved in the equality impact assessment of policies with the necessary skills and knowledge to do this work effectively;
- to provide those employees who deal with complaints in relation to the implementation of the Insert type of body 's Scheme, with the necessary skills and knowledge to investigate and monitor complaints effectively;
- to provide those employees involved in consultation processes with the necessary skills and knowledge to do this work effectively;
- to provide those employees involved in the implementation and monitoring of the effective implementation of the Commission's Equality Scheme to do this work effectively; and
- 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.

7.4 A report indicating the extent to which training objectives have been met will be reported on as part of the Annual Review of the implementation of the statutory duties, which will be sent to the Equality Commission.

7.5 All staff in the Commission will receive awareness training within one year of the approval of the Scheme (including those being inducted). Thereafter focused training will be provided for all specialist staff within the Commission, and specific training will also be provided for those engaged in consultation. Awareness training will thereafter be incorporated in the Commission's rolling induction programme on an on-going basis.

7.6 All training will be developed in association with the appropriate Section 75 groups.

7.7 The Chief Executive wishes to communicate positively the commitment of the Commission to the statutory duties (both internally and externally). The Commission will:

- develop a summary of the Scheme and provide a copy to all staff;
- provide access to copies of the full Scheme for all staff;
- ensure that the Commission's commitment to the statutory duties are made clear in Commission publications (such as the Annual Report); and
- will ensure that any queries or questions of clarification from staff are addressed effectively.

8.0 Implementing the Scheme

Publication of the Scheme

8.1 Following submission to the Equality Commission, this scheme will be available in print form and alternative formats free on request from the Commission.

8.2 The following arrangements will be made for the publication of the Scheme and to ensure equality of access:

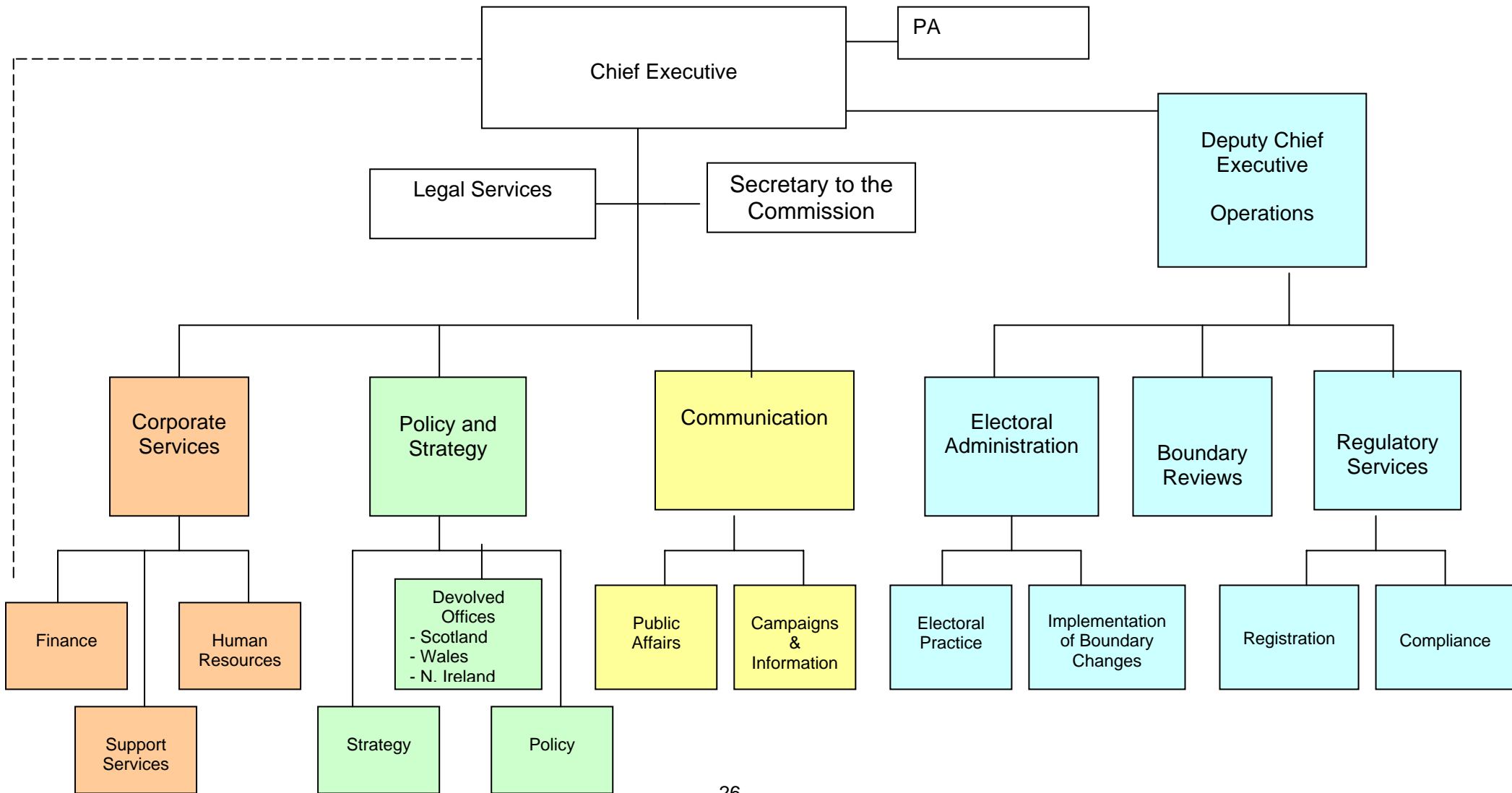
- the Scheme will be available on request in formats such as Braille, large print, disc, and audiocassette and in minority languages to meet the needs of those not fluent in English;
- systems will be in place to ensure that requests for the Scheme in accessible formats will be dealt within a timely manner;
- specific consideration will also be given to how best to communicate the Scheme to young people and those with learning disabilities;
- the Commission will develop a Plain English summary of the Scheme;
- a press release and a prominent advertisement in the press will be placed by the Commission when the Scheme is approved by the Equality Commission;
- a copy of the Scheme will also be posted on the Commission's website; and
- copies of the approved Scheme will also be sent to key stakeholders.

Timetable for implementing the Scheme

8.3 Appendix E outlines an action plan for implementing the Scheme including key dates and milestones for each task.

Appendix A

Organisational Chart



Appendix B

List of organisations to be consulted

Government Departments and Bodies outside Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland Office

Northern Ireland Departments and Bodies

Agriculture and Rural Development

Culture, Arts & Leisure

Education

Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Environment

Finance and Personnel

Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Employment and Learning

Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister

Regional Development

Social Development

City, District and Borough Councils

Antrim Borough Council

Ards Borough Council

Armagh City and District Council

Ballymena Borough Council

Ballymoney Borough Council

Banbridge District Council

Belfast City Council

Carrickfergus Borough Council

Castlereagh Borough Council

Coleraine Borough Council

Cookstown District Council

Craigavon Borough Council

Derry City Council

Down District Council

Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council

Fermanagh District Council

Larne Borough Council

Limavady Borough Council

Lisburn Borough Council

Magherafelt District Council

Moyle District Council

Newry and Mourne District Council

Newtownabbey Borough Council

North Down Borough Council

Omagh District Council
Strabane District Council

Political Parties on The Electoral Commission's Northern Ireland Register of Political Parties

Alliance Party of Northern Ireland
Anti-Trimble Unionist
Children's Party
Common Good
Community Candidates
Community Awareness Party
Congressional Party
Conservative and Unionist Party
Democratic Party
Democratic Unionist Party
Flauntit.Net Internet Party
Green Party
Labour (Federation of Labour Groups)
Liberal Unionist Party
National Front
Natural Law Party Northern Ireland
New Party
New World Socialist Green Party
Newtownabbey Ratepayers Association
Northern Ireland Unionist Party
Northern Ireland Women's Coalition
Official Monster Raving Loony Party
Party for True Democracy
People's Progressive Party
Progressive Unionist Party
Real Democracy Party
Renaissance Independent Party of Europe
Respect – The Unity Coalition
Social Democratic and Labour Party
Sinn Féin
Socialist Environmental Alliance
Socialist Party Northern Ireland
Ulster Protestant League
Ulster Third Way
Ulster Unionist Party
United Kingdom Independence Party
United Kingdom Unionist Party
United Unionist Coalition
Vote For Yourself
Workers Party
World
Your Party

Main churches

Catholic Church
Church of Ireland
Methodist Church
Presbyterian Church

Statutory and voluntary organisations

Age Concern
Age Sector Reference Group
Assistant Information Commissioner (Northern Ireland)
Association of Northern Ireland Colleges
British-Irish Secretariat
Carers National Association Northern Ireland
Coalition on Sexual Orientation
Chief Executives' Forum
Chinese Welfare Association
Committee on the Administration of Justice
Community Relations Council
Council for Catholic Maintained Schools
Disability Action
Electoral Office for Northern Ireland
Equality Commission for Northern Ireland
Equality 2000
Falls Community Council
Gingerbread Northern Ireland
Help the Aged
Indian Community Sector
Institute for Conflict Research
Irish Congress of Trade Unions, Northern Ireland Committee
Law Centre Northern Ireland
MENCAP
Multiple Sclerosis Society Northern Ireland
Multi-Cultural Resource Centre
NICVA
NILGA
NUS-USI
Northern Ireland Community Relations Council
Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities
Northern Ireland Gay Rights Association
Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission
Northern Ireland Islamic Centre
Northern Ireland Policing Board
Northern Ireland Women's Aid Federation
Northern Ireland Youth Forum
Police Service of Northern Ireland
Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland
Rate Collection Agency
RNIB Northern Ireland

RNID Northern Ireland
Royal Mail Group
Simon Community
Traveller Movement Northern Ireland
The Education and Library Boards (5 in total)
Women's Forum Northern Ireland
Women's Resource and Development Agency
Youth Council for Northern Ireland

Trade Unions

Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU)

Appendix C

Comments received from consultees and The Electoral Commission's response

Name of Consultee	Consultee's Comment	Commission's Response
North Eastern Education & Library Board	Re.1.4 : Incorporation of Race Relation Scheme. How does the Commission envisage this being done?	Being progressed with Commission's Secretariat & our Equality consultant
	Re. 4.6 and 4.7: Consultation timescales: request to clarify what the 'normal' consultation period will be; 12 weeks or 8 weeks or is it 8-12 weeks?	Agreed & Scheme amended at 4.6 & 4.7
	Re: 5.10: 'Consultation on screening will allow at least 8 weeks..'Same clarification request as above	Agreed & Scheme amended at 5.10
NI Ombudsman's Office	Acknowledgement	Acknowledgement
Dept. Culture, Arts & Leisure	Acknowledgement	Acknowledgement
Information Commissioner	Mention the Commission should include ref to FOI Act & Publications Scheme	Agreed& Scheme amended at 6.5
NICCY	Heartened to see plans for a dissemination strategy	Acknowledgement
	Positive comment regarding audit on good relations	Acknowledgement
Head of Civil Service	Acknowledgement	Acknowledgement

Name of Consultee	Consultee's Comment	Commission's Response
Disability Action	DA requests that the Commission include Audio Cassette and Computer Disk to the list of accessible formats available.	Agreed & Scheme amended at page 3
	DA requests that contact details throughout the document should include a textphone to enable deaf people the same access as those who are hearing. (Page 3)	Agreed. Being progressed with supplier. Amended throughout
	DA believes that regarding the appointment of Commissioners-appointees should be representative of the 9 affected groups listed under Section 75. (Item 2.7)	Scheme amended at 2.7
	DA believes complaints procedure should outline how it will support the individual to bring his/her complaint (eg interpreter support, specialist transport costs, advocacy services). The complaints procedure must be fully accessible and proactively disseminated to those affected by the Section 75 duties. (Item 3.10)	Agreed & Scheme amended at 3.10
	DA finds it unacceptable that the Commission has given itself a 5-year period to assess the effectiveness of the Commission in meeting its Section 75 duties. The Statutory Duty Guidelines state on p40 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 Duty" and that it is important that Equality Scheme measures are implemented in a 'timely fashion'. DA alleges that five years would appear to be well outside the 'timely fashion' boundaries. (Item 3.12)	Agreed & Scheme amended at 3.12

Name of Consultee	Consultee's Comment	Commission's Response
Disability Action	DA welcomes 12-week consultation period however is disappointed that this commitment was not adhered to for this current consultation period which includes the Christmas holidays.	The Electoral Commission acknowledges that Christmas was not the best period for consultation. This time frame had been agreed with the Equality Commission and we appreciate the fact that Disability Action responded within this time frame. The Scheme has been amended to allow for 12-week consultation period.
	DA accepts normal 8 week consultation period however with appropriate and careful planning DA feels that such reduced periods should be unusual.(Item 4.6)	Agreed & Scheme amended at 4.6
	Each Public Authority should be responsible for complying with Equality Scheme studies for any policy formulated, adopted by the Authority or imposed on the Authority by any other Authority. A public body cannot opt out of its legal responsibility to ensure that any policy, that affects its work and service delivery, is independently assessed to ensure the Authority's own compliance with statutory obligations. Such policies once accepted and put into practice within the Authority concerned becomes its policy. Such policies must be included in the screening process to ensure that a chain of Public Authorities do not abdicate responsibility. (Item 5.2)	The Commission agrees with this point and is not opting out of its legal responsibility in this regard. The Commission does not intend to exclude any policy which affects its work and service delivery.

Name of Consultee	Consultee's Comment	Commission's Response
Disability Action	Appendix D- DA suggests amending 'persons with a disability' to read - 'persons with a physical, sensory, mental or learning disability' as defined in Section 1 and Schedules 1 and 2 of the DDA 1995. (Item 5.4)	Agreed & Scheme amended at Appendix D, 5.4
	Regarding information sourced from commissioned research DA asks that the Commission ensure that any consultant commissioned is fully conversant with specific equality issues pertinent to the targeted groups. Direct consultation with such groups may be a more useful spend of financial resources (Item 5.6)	Equality issues are to the forefront of all the Commission does. It is implicit that consultants take equality issues on board when they undertake work for the Commission
	Regarding accessible formats DA requests the Commission to include Large Print in the range available. (Item 5.17)	Agreed & Scheme amended at 5.17
	<p>Query over the Commission's decision to review the arrangements for providing a range of accessible formats. Whilst the Commission must ensure that the anti discrimination legislation of the Disability Discrimination Act is adhered to, DA sates the Statutory Duties require the Commission to promote equality of opportunity rather than avoid discrimination.</p> <p>DA is concerned that the Commission will "take into account resource implications" for assessing progress to equality of opportunity. The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland's Guide to Statutory Duties clearly states that the public authority should make a commitment to the allocation of "necessary resources" in terms of money, time and people to ensure the Statutory Duties are complied with. (Item 5.17)</p>	Commission is committed to making the necessary arrangements
	Disability Action believes that the Awareness Training should include training on the specific issues pertinent to each of the 9 categories listed under Section 75.	Agreed & Scheme amended at 7.3

Name of Consultee	Consultee's Comment	Commission's Response
Disability Action	Additionally, Disability Action recommends that Awareness Training be included within the induction programme on an ongoing basis. (Item 7.5)	Agreed & Scheme amended at 7.5
	Disability Action is concerned that the Commission is "providing access to copies" rather than giving a copy of the full Equality Scheme to all staff as stated in the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland's Guidelines. (Item 7.7)	Agreed & Scheme amended at 7.7
	Disability Action requests the Commission to include Large Print in the range of accessible formats available. (Item 8.2, Page 19)	Agreed & Scheme amended at 8.2
	DA requests that contact details throughout the document should include a textphone to enable deaf people the same access as those who are hearing. (Page 3)	Agreed, Scheme amended throughout. In progress with supplier
NIACRO	NIACRO request a specific commitment to equality of opportunity for offenders who are often" disadvantaged, marginalised and hard to reach."	The Commission recognises that offenders are a hard to reach group and our overall commitment to equality includes offenders
	2.4(page 7) NIACRO agrees that "young people, students, people with learning disabilities and other forms of disability, and those in areas of higher social deprivation were less likely to be registered", but would strongly argue that offenders are also less likely to be registered. Equality Scheme should also take account of this factor and implement mechanisms to redress this balance.	The Commission recognises this as a valid point. We would welcome any further research or information from NIACRO on the correlation between offenders and access to the electoral register

Name of Consultee	Consultee's Comment	Commission's Response
NIACRO	<p>NIACRO invites the Commission to monitor how it deals with the issue of people with criminal convictions and access to the register. Commission's screening practices should take account of the fact that people with criminal convictions may often be represented within the 9 Groups and may therefore suffer adverse impacts. By way of good practice and good relations, NIACRO proposes the Commission moves beyond its statutory requirement and make a specific commitment to equality of opportunity for individuals with criminal convictions</p>	<p>The Commission is committed to taking account of offenders within its definition of 'marginalised groups'. The Commission recognises the issues raised by NIACRO and accepts that those who have been through the prison system in Northern Ireland are marginalised.</p>

Appendix D

Main groups relevant to the Section 75 categories for Northern Ireland purposes

Category	Main Groups
Religious belief	Protestants; Catholics; Hindu; Jewish; Islam/Muslim; Sikh; Buddhist; other religion; people of no religious belief
Political opinion	Unionists generally; Nationalists generally; members/supporters of any political party; other
Racial group	Chinese; Irish Traveller; Indian; Pakistani; Bangladeshi; Black African; Black Caribbean; White; mixed ethnic group; any other ethnic group or nationality
Men and women generally	Men (including boys); women (including girls), Trans-gendered people, Transsexual people
Marital status	Married people; unmarried people; divorced or separated people; widowed people
Age	Children under 16; 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 section 1 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	Gay; lesbian; bisexual; heterosexual

Appendix E

Action plan for implementing The Electoral Commission's Equality Scheme

Area of implementation	Task description	Milestone	Responsibility
Organisational arrangements	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• SMT and Electoral Commissioners briefing and approval to develop a Commission wide scheme	25 November	Head of Office NI
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Establish and facilitate Equality Working Group (EWG) with key staff from each Directorate. EWG to meet quarterly	End of March 2005	Corporate Services (HR Staff) Secretary to the Commission
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Include objectives in personal performance plans	End of April 2005	Corporate Services (HR)

The Electoral Commission's Equality Scheme	• Drafting of Equality Scheme for submission to the Equality Commission – draft based on model scheme	End of November 2004	Head of Office NI and external consultant
	• Consultation on the draft Equality Scheme	First week December 2004	“
	• Report of consultation	Third week February 2005	“
	• Amendments to the Scheme	Third week February 2005	“
	• Submission to Equality Commission	28 February 2005	“
	• Drafting of summary scheme in plain English	Following approval of scheme	As above plus Communications
Awareness training	• Develop specific awareness training materials for the Commission	April 2005	Head of Office NI, Secretary and external consultant
	• Awareness training for NI staff	April 2005	“
	• Awareness training for SMT and Commissioners	May 2005	“
	• Training of staff in London, Cardiff and Edinburgh offices	June 2005	“

Focused training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop a detailed training plan 	June 2005	Head of Office (NI), Secretary external consultant, Corporate Services (HR)
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Deliver focused training on screening; EQIAs and consultation to key staff in the Equality Working Group 	July 2005	“
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Roll out focused training to further staff 	April 2006	“
Screening	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Produce guidance on screening 	End of May 2005	Head of Office (NI), external consultant, Corporate Services and Secretary
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Produce Stage 1 consultation document (list of policies and procedures) 	End of June 2005	“
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conduct consultation 	End of September 2005	“
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Agreement with internal stakeholders including SMT and Commissioners on policies for EQIA 	End of October 2005	“
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Produce Stage 2 consultation document (proposed EQIA programme) 	End of October 2005	“
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conduct consultation 	End of October 2005	“
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Produce report on screening 	End of February 2006	“

Equality Impact Assessments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Produce practical guidance on EQIAs 	End of April 2005	Corporate Services, Head of Office NI, Secretary, EWG and external consultant
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Planning and delivery of all aspects of EQIA (in line with Equality Commission guidance) in close cooperation with Equality Working Group 	Begin April 2006	“
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implement and monitor actions emanating from EQIAs 	On an annual basis after completion	“
Developing a dissemination strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conduct audit of access to information and services involving key stakeholders 	End of September 2005	Communications, external consultant, Secretary, Head of Office NI, EWG and Corporate Services
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Produce action plan 	End of October 2005	“
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implement action plan 	End of March 2006	“
Promoting good relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conduct an audit on good relations 	End of October 2005	External consultant, Head of Office NI, Corporate Services and EWG
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Produce report on audit and consult on implementation 	End of November 2005	“
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implement action plan 	End of January 2006	“

Progress reporting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Annual review of progress to Equality Commission 	Annually in September	External consultant, Secretary, Corporate Services, Head of Office NI and Communications
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Report incorporated into the Commission's Annual Report 	Annually	"
Publication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Summary of scheme 	June 2005 (following approval)	"
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Press release 		"
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Press advertisements 		"
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Arrangements for alternative formats 		
