

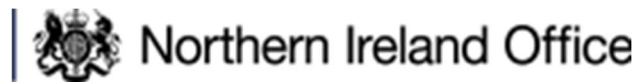


Northern  
Ireland  
Office

# Northern Ireland Office

**Public Authority Statutory Equality and  
Good Relations Duties Annual Progress  
Report for 2020-21**

**August 2021**



Passionate about Northern Ireland: flexible, empowering, inclusive

This report presents progress made by the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) during 2020/21 in fulfilling its statutory equality and good relations duties, and implementing Equality Scheme commitments with reference to Section 75 of the NI Act 1998 and Section 49A of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995.

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Documents published relating to our Equality Scheme can be found at:

<https://www.gov.uk/search/transparency-and-freedom-of-information-releases?organisations%5B%5D=northern-ireland-office&parent=northern-ireland-office>

**Signature:**

A rectangular box containing a handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Maddalena Alessandri".

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## **PART A – IMPLEMENTATION OF THE NORTHERN IRELAND OFFICE EQUALITY SCHEME**

### **Section 1: Equality and good relations outcomes, impacts and good practice**

1. The Northern Ireland Office (NIO) is dedicated to promoting equality of opportunity and good relations in Northern Ireland as it works towards its vision of ***Northern Ireland being a better place to live, work and invest.***
2. **Supporting greater inclusion, tolerance, and openness in Northern Ireland** is one of the NIO's priority outcomes and we aspire to promote equality of opportunity and supporting good relations in all of our work to deliver a more prosperous, safer and better-governed society. As an employer, the NIO puts equality at the heart of its core values of inclusiveness, empowerment and flexibility.
3. This report demonstrates:
  - **how the NIO has upheld its equality duties in 2020-21; and**
  - **highlights the positive impact our Equality Scheme has in influencing the decisions and outcomes we have delivered.**
4. To ensure the NIO upholds its legal duty comply with public sector equality duties and the Section 75 (s75) obligations set out in the Northern Ireland Act 1998, the NIO uses Screening and Equality Impact Assessments to assess the likely impact of a policy on the promotion of equality of opportunity and good relations when formulating new policies. In discharging these responsibilities the NIO undertakes to:
  - screen policies at the earliest opportunity and to ensure a system is in place to monitor the impact of these policies;
  - ensure information is accessible to all the people of Northern Ireland;
  - publish screening reports in a timely fashion;
  - ensure adequate consultation with interested or affected parties; and
  - provide staff with relevant training on equality matters.

#### **Examples of key policy / service delivery developments**

5. In 2020/21, we completed **Equality Screening exercises for consultations** on:

**Terrorism Act 2000 Code of Practice  
Same-sex religious marriage in Northern Ireland  
Conversion entitlements in Northern Ireland  
Non-jury trials Justice & Security (Northern Ireland) Act 2007**

6. We also completed **Equality Screening exercises for policy proposals** on:

**Coronavirus Act 2020  
Parliamentary Constituencies Bill 2020  
Non-Jury Trial provisions in the Justice & Security (Northern Ireland) Act 2007  
Marking the Centenary of Northern Ireland in 2021  
Shared History Fund, part of the Northern Ireland Centenary Programme**

7. As an employer, the NIO strives to ensure that its employment policies and procedures conform to best practice, employment law, and promote equality of opportunity for all employees. Examples of internal NIO developments during 2020-21 included:

**Promoting the Civil Service Disability Network and REACH Disability Mentoring Programme launched in December 2020 to mentor staff with disabilities and long-term health conditions.**

**Promoting the BAME Mentoring Scheme that supports BAME staff to develop, progress and flourish within the Civil Service**

**Supporting the Civil Service Year of Inclusion by promoting annual diversity events such as National Inclusion Week, World Autism Week, World Dyslexia Awareness Day, Sign Language Week, Loneliness Awareness Week, Mental Health Awareness Week, MS Awareness Week, LGBT + History Month, Black History month and International Women's Day**

**Launching the 'Speak Up' campaign aimed at building staff confidence to raise bullying or harassment concerns and promote the inclusive culture which the department strives towards and establishing a network of anti-bullying, harassment and discrimination champions**

**Encouraging applications from a wider, more diverse pool of applicants**

**Development of a Diversity & Inclusion Network action plan to direct activity to achieve real improvements**

**Establishing a 'Mirror Board' to ensure colleagues at all levels are included and can contribute perspectives on issues raised at quarterly NIO Board meetings**

**Posting intranet blogs about cultural events to engender staff awareness and appreciation**

8. The introduction of Marriage and Civil Partnership (Northern Ireland) Regulations that came into force on 7 December 2020 allow for a three-year period in which couples in a same-sex civil partnership formed in Northern Ireland may convert to a marriage, and couples in an opposite-sex marriage formed in Northern Ireland may convert to a civil partnership. The new policy as set out in regulations aims to be fair to both same-sex and opposite-sex couples in Northern Ireland who have historically not had access to certain legal relationships. This, alongside the legal framework for abortion services published in March 2020, are key examples of the positive outcomes that have flowed from our consultative and equality screening work.
9. The screening undertaken on the events planned in 2021 to mark the Northern Ireland Centenary have also helped inform a respectful and positive celebration of the 100 year anniversary of the creation of Northern Ireland, focusing on investment, young people, culture and the environment, reflecting on the past whilst looking forward to a bright future for Northern Ireland.

### **Application of the Equality Scheme commitments**

10. The NIO recognises that often its work is sensitive and controversial. What we learn from our consultations on policy or legislation activity, and from extensive regular engagement with the full spectrum of stakeholders, communities and those directly affected in Northern Ireland, forms a critical part of our evidence base. The equality screening process also helps inform our policy development and to be transparent about decision making which leads to better outcomes overall.
11. The **NIO uses a wide range of consultation and awareness raising methods** including written documents circulated for comment, questionnaires and engagement through face-to-face / virtual discussions involving Ministers and policy officials. Engagement with key stakeholders and interested parties on some of NIO's most sensitive and difficult work is an important part of the NIO's approach to ensuring that all those directly impacted by potential policy changes have an opportunity to provide their views and these can be properly considered by the government.
12. The **consultation on 'same-sex religious marriage and conversion entitlements in Northern Ireland'** is a **good practice example** of how the NIO carried out a large-scale consultation and targeted engagement to gather input. In in this case, over 6000 consultation responses helped to make informed balanced policy choices and promote good relations across several groups in parallel to promoting equality of opportunity.

13. The **results of all screening are routinely published on the NIO website**; further details of the screenings and consultations referenced in this report can be found at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/northern-ireland-office>

14. During the reporting period, NIO received four complaints in relation to its published Equality Scheme; two of these were escalated to the Equality Commission and one was accepted. We expect that the Equality Commission will publish the findings of their investigation in autumn 2021.

## **Section 2: Progress on Equality Scheme commitments and action plans**

15. Updates on the actions and outcomes of the NIO's Equality measures for 2020-21 are set out in **Annex A**. Most of these actions are ongoing with continuation of existing and new activities being carried out each year.
16. Some key updates and assurances for 2020-21 are summarised below:

**Section 75 statutory duties have been integrated within specific job descriptions this year through the setting of 'Diversity & Inclusion' objectives for specific roles and a dedicated 'Diversity & Inclusion' commitment section prominently featured in all NIO job adverts**

**Section 75 statutory duties are included in the personal performance plans of those individuals with specific 'Diversity & Inclusion' objectives**

**Departmental Equality Commitments have been included in the new NIO Outcomes Delivery Plan for 2020-21. This is the department's new strategy for NI and details its delivery plan for the year. Implementation and performance against this Plan and these commitments will be monitored and managed by the NIO Strategy Team, NIO Board and the Cabinet Office**

17. The Department has also delivered on its Equality Scheme training objectives by:

**Ensuring that new staff undertake Civil Service e-learning on Inclusion in the Civil Service as part of their Induction to the department**

**Actively participating in Inclusion Week during September to October 2020**

**Using the staff intranet to promote diversity & inclusion events throughout the**

### **Section 3: Looking Forward**

18. In light of the introduction of the UK Internal Market Act and new powers for UK Government Ministers, the NIO is exploring how it can enhance learning and understanding of section 75 both within the NIO but also across other Government Departments.
19. The NIO Equality scheme is due to be reviewed in 2024. During the next reporting period the focus is anticipated to be on:
- legislative changes arising from the Northern Ireland (Ministers, Elections and Petitions of Concern) Bill 2021 which includes provisions to support the sustainability of the Institutions and continuity of decision making for the Northern Ireland Executive
  - Reviewing and updating the Department's Disability Action Plan to reflect progress made since it was instigated in 2019
  - Improving diversity declaration rates for disability, ethnicity and sexual orientation
  - organisational changes relating to plans to relocate the NIO offices from Stormont House to Belfast City Centre and for rebalancing our workforce to enable staff on fixed term contracts to convert to permanent status.
20. Looking forward, the Government remains firmly committed to ensuring that rights, safeguards and equality of opportunity provisions set out in the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement, and reflected in Article 2 of the Northern Ireland Protocol, continue to be upheld.



21. The NIO will continue to work closely with the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission and the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland to operationalise the dedicated mechanism and ensure the processes and structures are embedded appropriately.

**Progress update on the specific actions and outcomes of the NIO’s Equality measures for 2020-21**

Action		Outcomes	Update
1	Communicating and assisting the understanding of Section 75 duties to Central Government Departments	Wider and more effective engagement with Section 75 duties by Central Government Departments	A staff “Guide to Section 75” has been developed with work underway to roll this out across the department to enhance training and development. Engagement with other Government Departments to promote awareness and educate departments is planned for the Autumn 2021.
2	Working with wider Government and the Northern Ireland Executive Departments to promote good relations by visiting all sections of the community and engaging with the broader political and civic society when organising Secretary of State, Ministerial and VIP visits	Opportunities to promote the interests of Section 75 groups and good relations will be identified and acted upon.	The NIO External Relations Team continues to support Ministers and teams within NIO to engage with all sections of the NI community to promote good relations on a range of issues  Further information on the programme of visits and engagements undertaken can be found on the NIO website, details of which are contained in this report.
3	Adopting a fully human rights compliant approach, and giving meaningful consideration to the impact of activities on Section 75 groups in exercising the Secretary of State’s powers under the Justice and Security Act 2007 in relation to the implementation of security measures, including conducting annual reviews	Ensures that: · The SoS is fully compliant with all Section 75 obligations in the operation of powers under the Justice and Security Act 2007. · All NIO decisions are proportionate and due consideration is given to any potential impacts on Section 75 groups	All relevant NIO policy decisions and changes have undergone an appropriate screening process  The NIO also continues to sponsor the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission and supports the Commission in their role to promote human rights in Northern Ireland and beyond

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4	<p>Reviewing the outcomes of the Staff Survey to determine whether or not any issues / trends have emerged which would provide opportunities to better meet the Department's Section 75 responsibilities</p>	<p>Opportunities to further promote the interests of Section 75 groups within and across NIO staff will be identified and acted upon</p>	<p>The results of the 2020 NIO People Survey showed an uplift in the responses for "Inclusion and Fair Treatment", which had an overall rating score of 87% (an increase of 5% vs 2019). 93% of staff indicated that the people they work with treat them with respect and 84% responded that they think that the NIO respects individual differences.</p> <p>The NIO maintains a zero tolerance approach to bullying, harassment and discrimination. The NIO has introduced a network of Anti- Bullying, Harassment and Discrimination champions to support colleagues.</p>
5	<p>Monitoring staff grievance procedures to ensure that any action, which might be taken to improve Section 75 outcomes for staff, is acted upon</p>	<p>Opportunities to further promote the interests of Section 75 groups within and across NIO staff will be identified and acted upon</p>	<p>No formal grievances were raised during the reporting period. The NIO HR team continues to promote best practice in this area and the Speak Up campaign should help encourage people to feel safe to report issues so that we can act swiftly to address them if they arise.</p>
6	<p>In developing HR policies, the Department will give particular consideration to the extent to which these support and promote the interests of Section 75 groups</p>	<p>HR policies will, where appropriate, take account of the needs of Section 75 groups</p>	<p>All NIO internal policies, including HR policies, were equality screened during the reporting period. However, some NIO HR policies are aligned to MOJ. However all MOJ policies are screened &amp; assessed against the requirements of the Equality Act 2020.</p>

## PART B - Section 49A of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (as amended) and Disability Action Plans

### Summary of action measures achieved during 2020-21:

<b>7</b>	<b>Fully Achieved</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>Partially Achieved</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>Not Achieved</b>
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### Public life measures achieved:

Level	Public Life Action Measures	Outputs <sup>1</sup>	Outcomes / Impact <sup>2</sup>
National <sup>3</sup>	NIO continues to engage with the Commissioner for Public Appointments and Cabinet Office's reporting mechanisms to monitor the diversity of public appointments and recruitment processes.	<p>Contributing to the Government wide public appointments process helps ensure transparent reporting data on the number of public appointments held by persons with a disability.</p> <p>During 2020/21 five public appointments were advertised on the Cabinet Office website.</p>	<p>Advertising campaigns via the Cabinet Office website/NIDirect and sharing with relevant public authorities ensures a wide audience is captured.</p> <p>By accepting applications in accessible formats and operating the Disability Confident Scheme, the Department continues to encourage people with disabilities to apply for these roles.</p>

<sup>1</sup> **Outputs** – defined as act of producing, amount of something produced over a period, processes undertaken to implement the action measure e.g. Undertook 10 training sessions with 100 people at customer service level.

<sup>2</sup> **Outcome / Impact** – what specifically and tangibly has changed in making progress towards the duties? What impact can directly be attributed to taking this action? Indicate the results of undertaking this action e.g. Evaluation indicating a tangible shift in attitudes before and after training.

<sup>3</sup> **National** : Situations where people can influence policy at a high impact level e.g. Public Appointments

Local <sup>4</sup>	Maintain a focus on our capability to ensure we continue to encourage people with disabilities to participate in public life.	Dedicated Diversity Champion at Director level; Network of Diversity & Inclusion Advocates supported by a steering group	Increased awareness of issues that people with disabilities may face in participating in public life and a measurable increase in blogs, intranet articles and colleagues volunteering
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**Training action measures achieved:**

	<b>Measures</b>	<b>Outputs</b>	<b>Outcomes</b>
2	All staff at management level and above will complete the online “Diversity, Equality & Disability Awareness” training on the Civil Service Learning site.	All staff at Band C have access to training and have a personal responsibility for its completion.	Embedding an equality and disability awareness culture within NIO. This will continue to be monitored and consideration will be given to putting in place mechanisms to monitor the achievement of this action measure.

**Positive attitudes communication measures achieved:**

	<b>Measures</b>	<b>Outputs</b>	<b>Outcomes</b>
4	Regular communications published on the NIO intranet site on matters relating to disability	Disability section of intranet kept up to date, and with regular articles and blogs as evidence of this being a dynamic aspect of our intranet pages	Maintaining visibility on disability issues and promoting engagement across the department

<sup>4</sup> **Local** : Situations where people can influence policy decision making at lower impact level e.g. one off consultations, local fora.

3	Annual progress report to the NIO Board on disability and equality	The 2019/20 report was signed off in January 2021.	Presentation of the report ensures discussion on diversity and equality at senior level.
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**‘Encourage others’ action measures achieved:**

	<b>Measures</b>	<b>Outputs</b>	<b>Outcomes</b>
5	NIO participation in NICS-led Equality Practitioners Group	Lessons learned and best practice integrated into departmental policy and practice	To identify and disseminate best practice and ensure we are engaged in ongoing conversations on disability issues
6	Promoting employment support programmes	Increase in staff with a disability remaining in employment	People with a disability are supported to access and remain in employment
7	Raising awareness of specific barriers faced by people with disabilities	Awareness days supported included: National Inclusion Week World Autism Week World Dyslexia Awareness Day Sign Language Week Loneliness Awareness Week Mental Health Awareness Week MS Awareness Week	Increased awareness of a range of disabilities

**Additional action measures achieved:**

	<b>Measures</b>	<b>Outputs</b>	<b>Outcomes</b>
1	Disability section included in staff induction checklist	Accurate information about staff requiring support or workplace adjustments	To ensure that new and existing employees feel empowered to declare any disability and/or request any appropriate reasonable adjustments.

**Action measures partly achieved:**

	<b>Measures</b>	<b>Outputs</b>	<b>Outcomes</b>	<b>Reasons not fully achieved</b>
8	Encourage staff to declare that they have a disability	Increase in completion of disability monitoring information; diversity data published monthly and reported quarterly to Management Board	More accurate data on % of staff with a disability	Diversity declaration data shows that c. 33% of staff have not declared.  Increasing declaration rates will be a priority for the next reporting period.

**Action measures not achieved:**

	<b>Measures</b>	<b>Reasons</b>
9	Access to Cancer Focus screening mobile facility	Covid restrictions prevented this measure being undertaken in 2020/21

## **Monitoring effectiveness**

The following measures are used to measure the effectiveness of action measures:

### **(a) Qualitative**

The NIO 2020 People Survey showed an “Inclusion and Fair Treatment” score of 87%, an improvement of 5% on last year and 5% higher than the Civil Service benchmark. We supplement this annual survey with a mid-year health check, giving us regular data on how staff feel we are performing in this important area.

### **(b) Quantitative**

The Department encourages staff to declare diversity data to help understand the make-up of the office and provide a benchmark for monitoring diversity impacts. As of end March 2021, the following percentage of staff had done so:

Disability – 68%

Ethnicity – 70%

Gender – 100%

Sexual Orientation – 62%

## **Monitoring progress**

As a result of monitoring progress against our Disability Action Plan it is intended to undertake a review and refresh of the plan during the next reporting period to ensure that actions remain appropriate and provide a sound framework for promoting effective action going forward.