

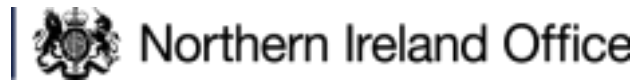


Northern  
Ireland  
Office

# Northern Ireland Office

## Public Authority Statutory Equality and Good Relations Duties Annual Progress Report for 2023-2024

August 2024



Passionate about Northern Ireland: flexible, empowering, inclusive

This report presents progress made by the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) during 2023/24 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.

For further information about the content of this report please contact:


Name: **Richard Steven**

Telephone: **07775 548419**

Email: **Richard.steven@nio.gov.uk**

Documents published relating to our Equality Scheme can be found [here](#)

**Signature:**



Julie Harrison, Permanent Secretary, Northern Ireland Office

## CONTENTS

### PART A – IMPLEMENTATION OF THE NIO EQUALITY SCHEME

<b>SECTION</b>	<b>PAGE</b>
1 Equality and Good Relations Outcomes, Impacts and Good Practice	4
- Examples of Key Policy / Service Delivery Developments	4
- Examples of Outcomes and/or Impacts of Equality Action Plans	6
- Application of the Equality Scheme commitments	6
2 Progress on Equality Scheme Commitments	8
3 Looking Forward	9
Annex A - Progress Update on NIO's Equality Measures for 2023/24	10

### PART B – DISABILITY ACTION PLANS

<b>SECTION</b>	<b>PAGE</b>
1. Summary of Action Measures Achieved	12
2. Action Measures Achieved	12
3. Action Measures Partly Achieved	15
4. Action Measures Not Achieved	16
5. Monitoring Effectiveness	17
6. Monitoring Progress	17

## **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 something that the NIO champions. We aspire to promote equality of opportunity and to support 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 delivered on its Equality Commitments during 2023/24; and**
  - **highlights the positive impact the NIO Equality Scheme has in influencing policy decisions and outcomes.**
4. To ensure the NIO upholds its legal duty to 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 new or revised policies on the promotion of equality of opportunity and good relations. 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.

#### **Key Policy / Service Delivery Developments**

5. In 2023/24 we undertook the following screening exercises:

##### Equality Screening exercises for policy proposals on:

- **Relationship & Sexuality Education Screening**
- **The Code of Practice (Northern Ireland) for the Authorisation and Exercise of Stop and Search Powers relating to Sections 43, 43A and 47A of, and Schedule 6B to, the Terrorism Act 2000.**
- **The Northern Ireland Office's Role in Relation to His Majesty The King's Portrait Scheme**
- **Hanging a Portrait of His Majesty The King in the NIO Offices**

**Equality Screening exercises for Consultations on:**

- **Update on the Code of Practice (Northern Ireland) for the Authorisation and Exercise of Stop and Search Powers Relating to Sections 43, 43A, 43C and 47A and schedule 6B to the Terrorism Act 2000.**
- **The Proposed Regulations about the Holding and Handling of Information by the Independent Commission for Reconciliation and Information Recovery (ICRIR)**

6. 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 activity undertaken during 2023/24 included:

- Adding another dimension of focus to the NIO Diversity and Inclusion Group as they joined forces with the 'Wellbeing Group'.
- Refreshing the NIO's Diversity and Inclusion Action Plan which sets out against three pillars (Representation, Progression and Inclusion) the departmental vision.
- Continuing to promote the Civil Service Diversity and Inclusion Networks that support staff to develop, progress and thrive within the Civil Service.
- Promoting annual diversity events to all staff such as Neurodiversity Week, Mental Health Awareness Week, Black History Month, Transgender Awareness Month, National Inclusion Week, LGBTQ+ & PRIDE events, and Time to Talk day.
- Hosting successful and interactive multi-faith campaigns involving both ministers and staff.
- Launching a social mobility campaign with the aim of creating pathways for young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds.
- Maintaining a zero tolerance approach to bullying, harassment and discrimination and fostering an inclusive culture where all employees feel valued and promoting a behaviours in the workplace webinar. Work is ongoing in this area to raise awareness and will be led by the HR team and the Staff Engagement Group.
- Continuing to support a 'Mirror Board' and 'Staff Engagement Group' to ensure colleagues at all levels across the department can contribute perspectives and make the department a better place to work for staff.
- Taking action on the results of the People Survey with the People Survey Working Group and Staff Engagement Group working closely with the NIO HR team to address themes raised.
- Publishing internal communications and intranet blogs to promote cultural events to engender staff awareness and appreciation as well as providing wellbeing information on work-life balance options.
- Encouraging applications from a wider, more diverse pool of applicants throughout our staff and public appointment recruitment competitions.

## **Examples of Outcomes and / or Impacts of Equality Action Plans**

7. The NIO is committed to fulfilling its obligations under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and in carrying out its functions with due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity and good relations.
8. In 2023, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland introduced regulations to give effect to the recommendations in the 2018 Report of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination of Women (CEDAW). to require age-appropriate, comprehensive and scientifically accurate education on sexual and reproductive health and rights to be a compulsory element of the curriculum for adolescents. The regulations also placed a duty on the Department of Education to issue guidance on the content and delivery of the education. A section 75 screening was completed prior to the introduction of the new regulations which concluded that there were no identified impacts to equality of opportunity or good relations.
9. In October 2023, the NIO launched a public consultation to invite views on updating the current Code of Practice (Northern Ireland) for the Authorisation and Exercise of Stop and Search Powers relating to Sections 43, 43A, and 47A of, and Schedule 6B, to the Terrorism Act 2000. The updates allowed for constables to exercise the power provided that they firstly satisfy themselves that it is necessary to do so for purposes connected with protecting members of the public from a risk of terrorism.
10. Following the coronation of King Charles III, a government-funded scheme was launched to offer public authorities across the United Kingdom the opportunity to obtain a new official portrait of His Majesty The King. It was for each public authority to decide whether they wished to avail of the scheme. The NIO's role was to ensure that authorities across Northern Ireland had equal opportunity to take part in the scheme and it was for individual organisations to determine if screening was required. The NIO engaged with staff and undertook screening in relation to the hanging of the portrait in the NIO offices and took decisions based on staff views.

## **Application of the Equality Scheme Commitments**

11. The NIO recognises that its work is sometimes sensitive and controversial. Feedback from policy consultations and regular engagement with the full spectrum of stakeholders, communities and those directly impacted in Northern Ireland, forms a critical part of our evidence base, informs policy development and facilitates transparent decision making.
12. 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.

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 [here](#).
14. During the reporting period, NIO received complaints in relation to its published Equality Scheme. The first was from the Ulster Scots Agency regarding the funding programme for the Irish Language Investment Fund, An Ciste Infheistíochta Gaeilge ('An Ciste'). The An Ciste funding programme is not financed through the NIO budget and nor has the NIO carried out any functions in relation to it. This is consistent with a number of other Unique Circumstances projects, which are being delivered by a variety of public bodies on the basis of the financial support made available under New Decade, New Approach. The second was in respect of the decision of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to set a budget for Northern Ireland as set out in the Written Ministerial Statement to Parliament on 27 April 2023. Both complaints were dealt with in line with procedures set out in the NIO's Equality Scheme.
15. During the year the NIO also took steps to implement the findings from the ECNI report into the publication of the Legacy Bill Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) to ensure that staff are properly informed about their responsibilities and have access to a range of training materials produced by ECNI to apply to their work.

## Section 2: Progress on Equality Scheme Commitments and Action Plans

16. Updates on the actions and outcomes of the NIO's Equality measures for 2023/24 are set out in **Annex A**. Most of these actions are ongoing with continuation of existing and new activities being carried out each year.
17. Some key updates and assurances for 2023/24 are summarised below:

- Internal Resources were provided to all staff on Section 75 to enhance awareness of our equality duties. A Guide for Staff on S75 Duties was circulated again to staff alongside external resources from the Equality Commission such as their Section 75 Training Video.
- Section 75 Statutory Duties are integrated into job descriptions and the personal performance plans of those individuals with specific 'Diversity & Inclusion' objectives and a dedicated 'Diversity & Inclusion' commitment section prominently features in all NIO job adverts
- Departmental Equality Commitments are written into the NIO Outcomes Delivery Plan which sets out the department's strategy for Northern Ireland and details its delivery plan for the year.

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

- Ensuring that staff undertake Mandatory Civil Service e-learning on Inclusion in the Civil Service as part of their Induction to the department and as part of refresher training.
- Encouraging active participation and membership of the Diversity, Inclusion and Wellbeing Network and promoting interaction from all staff across the department.
- Using internal communications to encourage staff to take a minimum of five days each year to focus on learning and development and to apply for up to five days special leave to undertake volunteering opportunities.
- Using the staff intranet to promote diversity & inclusion events throughout the year with a focus on a number of priority campaigns during the year such as Social Mobility and Multi-Faith.
- Issuing regular communications and reminders to staff on our equality duties and providing access to additional resources and training provided by the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland.
- Circulating guidance for staff on equality duties.



### Section 3: Looking Forward

19. The NIO Equality Scheme is due to be reviewed in Autumn 2024. During the next reporting period the NIO's focus is anticipated to be on:
  - implementing the Diversity, Inclusion and Wellbeing (DIW) Plan which sets out against three pillars (Representation, Progression and Inclusion), our departmental vision to make the NIO a place where everyone feels able to bring their whole selves to work and one that represents the customers and communities we serve; and
  - managing the impact of, and supporting staff through the transition to a new administration to ensure that the department is able to deliver its new priorities efficiently and effectively within a reducing resource profile.
20. Looking forward, the Government remains firmly committed to ensuring that the 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 2023/24**

Action	Outcomes	Update
1	Communicating and assisting the understanding of Section 75 duties to Central Government Departments	<p>Wider and more effective engagement with Section 75 duties by Central Government Departments</p> <p>The guidance on our departmental intranet has been refreshed alongside the “Guide to Section 75” which aims to provide staff with resources to enhance their awareness of our equality duties. Additional training resources and reminders have been circulated to staff via email and blog posts on the intranet.</p> <p>Staff have engaged with ECNI over the last year and have attended NICS Equality Practitioner Group meetings to enhance their knowledge and up-skill to ensure that knowledge can be shared with the wider department.</p>
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	<p>Opportunities to promote the interests of Section 75 groups and good relations will be identified and acted upon.</p> <p>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.</p> <p>Further information on the programme of visits and engagements undertaken can be found on the NIO <a href="#">website</a>.</p>
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	<p>Ensures that all NIO decisions are proportionate and due consideration is given to any potential impacts on Section 75 groups in the operation of powers under the Justice and Security Act</p> <p>All relevant NIO policy decisions and changes have undergone an appropriate screening process.</p> <p>The NIO also continues to sponsor the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission and supports</p>

	Security Act 2007 in relation to the implementation of security measures, including conducting annual reviews	2007.	the Commission in their role to promote human rights in Northern Ireland and beyond.
4	In line with our objective to provide appropriate protection for those at risk, we will assess all initial applications to the Home Protection Scheme in a just and equal manner within the terms of the Scheme, and monitor the Scheme to ensure compliance with Section 75.	Assurance that protective security measures are applied fairly across Section 75 groups.	We continue to have robust processes in place to ensure all applicants to the scheme are treated fairly and in line with the specified criteria.
5	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	Opportunities to further promote the interests of Section 75 groups within and across NIO staff will be identified and acted upon	<p>The 2023 NIO People Survey showed that the NIO is on par with the civil service benchmark for "Inclusion and Fair Treatment", with an overall rating score of 81%. Survey results also showed that 89% of NIO staff reported that they are treated with respect by the people they work with and 75% responded that they think that the NIO respects individual differences.</p> <p>The NIO Staff Engagement Group is working closely with HR to take forward the recommendations from the People Survey. .</p>
6	Monitoring staff grievance procedures to ensure that any action, which might be taken to improve Section 75 outcomes for staff, is acted upon	Opportunities to further promote the interests of Section 75 groups within and across NIO staff will be identified and acted upon	The NIO HR team continues to promote best practice in this area and encourages staff to use the Speak Up campaign to encourage people to feel safe to report issues so that we can act swiftly to address them if they arise.

NIO PUBLIC AUTHORITY STATUTORY EQUALITY AND GOOD RELATIONS DUTIES: ANNUAL PROGRESS REPORT 2023/24

7	We will ensure that all NIO staff undertake regular refresher training on equality and diversity issues.	Increased awareness of equality and diversity amongst all staff.	All staff have a personal responsibility for completing 'Civil Service Expectations' training which covers the legislation around diversity and inclusion; the Civil Service Diversity and Inclusion Strategy; why diversity and inclusion matters and what it means to you as a Civil Servant.
8	Continue to promote good relations and support integration of people from a wide range of cultural and community backgrounds through engagement with civic society	Promotion of good relations	The NIO regularly engages civic society and community groups from across Northern Ireland at official and ministerial level to better understand community priorities, through visits, meetings, roundtables and hosting events.
9	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	HR policies will, where appropriate, take account of the needs of Section 75 groups	All NIO internal policies, including HR policies, were equality screened during the reporting period. All NIO HR policies are in line with MOJ HR policy, all of which are screened & assessed against the requirements of the Equality Act 2010.

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

**1 Action measures achieved during 2023/24:**

**7**

**Fully Achieved**

**0**

**Partially Achieved**

**1**

**Not Achieved**

**2(a) 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 2023/24, twelve individual public appointment roles were advertised on the Cabinet Office website. A total of 13 applications (8.8% of all applications received in 2023/24) were from candidates identifying as disabled and 17 (11.5% of all applications received in 2023/24) were from ethnic minority candidates.</p>	<p>Advertising campaigns via the Cabinet Office website/NIDirect/local press and sharing with relevant public authorities ensures a diverse audience is captured. 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> <p>The Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments (OCPA) has noted the extensive outreach undertaken by NIO to advertise roles and the careful handling of</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

			unique NI community sensitivities when considering diversity.
Local <sup>4</sup>	Maintain a focus on our capability to ensure we continue to encourage people with disabilities to participate in public life.	<p>Dedicated Diversity Champion supported by a Diversity, Inclusion and Wellbeing Group led by staff volunteers within the department.</p> <p>Promoting encouragement and sharing of experiences through campaigns, stories and blog posts on the intranet to raise awareness of disabilities.</p>	Increased awareness of issues that people with disabilities may face in participating in public life and a measurable increase in blogs, intranet articles and interactive sessions and colleagues volunteering to run campaigns as part of the Diversity, Inclusion and Wellbeing Network.

**2(b) Training Action Measures Achieved:**

Ref	Measures	Outputs	Outcomes
1	All staff at management level and above will complete the online “Civil Service Expectations” training on the Civil Service Learning site.	All staff have a personal responsibility for completing ‘Civil Service Expectations’ training which covers the Civil Service code and values; the legislation around diversity and inclusion; the Civil Service Diversity and Inclusion Strategy; why diversity and inclusion matters and what it means to you as a Civil Servant.	<p>Embedding an equality and disability awareness culture within NIO.</p> <p>This will continue to be monitored and consideration will be given to putting in place mechanisms to monitor the achievement of this action measure. Civil Service Learning is currently unable to provide data on completion rates.</p>

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

**2(c) Positive Attitudes Communication Measures Achieved:**

Ref	Measures	Outputs	Outcomes
2	Regular communications published on the NIO intranet site on matters relating to disability.	The Diversity, Inclusion and Wellbeing group regularly run campaigns and publish regular blogs on the department's intranet to raise awareness on matters relating to disability.	Maintaining visibility on disability issues and promoting engagement across the department.

**2 (d) 'Encourage Others' Action Measures Achieved:**

Ref	Measures	Outputs	Outcomes
3	Raising awareness of specific barriers faced by people with disabilities.	<p>Awareness of barriers faced by people with disabilities was supported in 2023/24 through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Empowering Divergent Thinking</li> <li>- National Inclusion Week Campaign (September 2023)</li> <li>- World Mental Health Day (October 2023)</li> <li>- Dyslexia Awareness Week (October 2023)</li> <li>- Neurodiversity Week (March 2024)</li> </ul>	Increased awareness of a range of disabilities.

**2 (e) Additional Action Measures Achieved:**

Ref	Measures	Outputs	Outcomes
4	Disability section included within the 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.
5	NIO Participation in NICS-led Equality Practitioners Group.	To identify and disseminate best practice and ensure we are engaged in ongoing conversations on disability issues across government.	Evidence of good practice being integrated into the department's policy development practice.
6	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 and an increase in declaration rates.
7	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.
8	Annual progress report to the NIO Board on disability and equality.	Annual report included in the Management Board agenda and subsequent minutes.	Increased visibility and senior leadership awareness of actions being taken on our equality duties.

**4. Action Measures Not Achieved:**

Ref	Measures	Reasons
9	Access to Cancer Focus Screening Mobile Facility	A suitable date has not been able to be arranged for this to take place and this will be considered in the next reporting period.



## **5. Monitoring Effectiveness**

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

### **(a) Qualitative**

The 2023 People Survey showed an “Inclusion and Fair Treatment” score of 81% which was in line with the Civil Service benchmark and consistent with the score from previous years. This is an annual survey that we supplement 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 2024, the following percentage of staff had done so:

Disability – 71% (2023: 74%)

Ethnicity – 70% (2023: 77%)

Gender – 100% (2023: 100%)

Sexual Orientation – 68% (2023: 75%)

## **6. Monitoring Progress**

It is intended to undertake a review of the NIO Equality scheme and Disability Action Plan in autumn 2024 to ensure that they provide a sound framework for promoting effective action going forward.