



Northern
Ireland
Office

**Public Authority Statutory Equality and Good Relations
Duties Annual Progress Report for 2025-2026**

August 2026

NIO PUBLIC AUTHORITY STATUTORY EQUALITY AND GOOD RELATIONS DUTIES:
ANNUAL PROGRESS REPORT 2025/26



Northern Ireland Office

Passionate about Northern Ireland: flexible, empowering, inclusive

This report presents progress made by the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) during 2025/26 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?parent=northern-ireland-office&keywords=equality+scheme&organisations%5B%5D=northern-ireland-office&order=relevance>

Signature:

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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 delivering ***‘a stable, prosperous, and vibrant Northern Ireland, for the people of Northern Ireland’***.
2. Building a safer, more reconciled society is a core departmental aim, and we are committed to seeing everything we do through a reconciliation lens. We embrace diversity and promote equality of opportunity by taking an inclusive, rights-based approach across all our work, fostering good relations as we strive to deliver our strategic vision.
3. This report demonstrates:
 - how the NIO has delivered on its Equality Commitments during 2025/26; and
 - the positive impact that 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 Equality Screening and 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 2025/26 we undertook the following screening exercises:

Category / screening type	Policy / consultation title
Consultation	• Proposed amendments to the Control of Explosives Precursors etc. Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2014
Policy proposals	• The Connect Fund

	Local Growth Fund Strategic Investment Plan 2026-29
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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.
7. Examples of activities which we have undertaken during 2025/26 to celebrate and promote diversity and inclusion include:
 - Promoting and celebrating key diversity events throughout the year, including Black History Month, LGBTQ+ & PRIDE events, Carers Rights Day, Anti-Bullying Week, World Menopause Day, Holocaust Memorial Day, Stress Awareness Month, Mental Health Awareness Week, Neurodiversity Celebration Week and Time to Talk day.
 - Hosting a number of successful and interactive campaigns on Mental Health Awareness Week, Ramadan, International Women's Day alongside a regular 'Wellbeing Wednesday' segment, with Carers Tea and Talk sessions also hosted in both the Belfast and London offices.
 - 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, including the launch of the Champion Health wellbeing app through the department's Employee Assistance Programme provider.

Examples of Outcomes and / or Impacts of Equality Action Plans

8. The NIO is committed to fulfilling its obligations under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and to carrying out its functions with due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity and good relations. The following examples illustrate how the Equality Screening exercises have been embedded into the work of the department:
 - **Proposed amendments to the Control of Explosives Precursors etc. Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2014.** Explosive precursors are chemical substances that have common everyday uses, such as in farming, gardening and laboratory work, but which could be misused to manufacture homemade explosives. During Summer 2025, the NIO ran a consultation seeking feedback on tightening restrictions on their sale and use. Prior to launching the public consultation, the NIO conducted an Equality Screening exercise which concluded that the proposed amendments would have no impact across all Section 75 categories. This was because the updated regulations would apply equally and universally to all end-users and businesses in Northern Ireland to

ensure public safety, without targeting or disproportionately affecting any specific Section 75 group. Feedback on potential equality impacts was sought as part of the consultation process, with the review of responses confirming that the amendments would proceed without needing adjustments for Section 75 groups.

- **Investment Plan for the Local Growth Fund 2026-29.** In early 2026, the NIO conducted an Equality Screening exercise on the draft Investment Plan Framework for the Local Growth Fund 2026-29. This screening found that the plan's economic and socio-economic support interventions would provide economic development opportunities across all Section 75 groups. It was assessed that the Plan would likely have a positive impact on equality of opportunity by seeking to reduce disadvantage experienced. The department later conducted a seven-week consultation on the draft Investment Plan and, among other questions, specifically invited views on whether groups protected under Section 75 could be adversely affected by the proposed sub-priorities. This timeframe was necessary to finalise the design of the Investment Plan and commence implementation as soon as possible, while still ensuring a robust engagement process for stakeholders to share their views. Analysis of the responses received supported the assessment of the initial screening exercise, and equality screening and monitoring will continue on an ongoing basis as the Local Growth Fund is implemented.

Application of the Equality Scheme Commitments

9. The NIO recognises that its work is sometimes sensitive. 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 building our evidence base, informing policy development and facilitating transparent decision making.
10. 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 and virtual discussions involving Ministers and policy officials. Engagement with key stakeholders and interested parties 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.
11. 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: [NIO equality scheme documents on GOV.UK](#)
12. During the reporting period, NIO received one complaint in relation to its published Equality Scheme, to which we have responded. The NIO continues to ensure that staff

are properly educated on their responsibilities and have access to a range of training materials produced by ECNI.

Section 2: Progress on Equality Scheme Commitments and Action Plans

13. Updates on the actions and outcomes of the NIO's Equality measures for 2025/26 are set out in **Annex A**. Most of these are ongoing commitments, so the update below sets out both the activity that continued during 2025/26 and the new activity introduced in year.

14. Some key updates and assurances for 2025/26 are summarised below:

- Internal resources, including a Guide for Staff on Section 75 duties, are promoted to all staff on the departmental intranet to enhance awareness of our equality duties. The Section 75 screening template was updated and training resources were made available to staff as part of their mandatory induction training. All staff also have a personal responsibility for completing mandatory training on 'Civil Service Expectations' which covers the legislation around diversity and inclusion, the Civil Service Diversity and Inclusion Strategy, why diversity and inclusion matters, and a specific module on Section 75.
- Section 75 statutory duties continue to be integrated into job descriptions. A dedicated Diversity & Inclusion commitment section prominently features in all NIO job adverts and all staff have a Diversity & Inclusion Objective in their personal development plans.
- Departmental Equality Commitments are outlined in the NIO Strategic Business Plan which sets out the department's strategy for Northern Ireland and details its delivery plan for the year.
- The departmental Equality Officer continues to act as the central point of contact for advice and support on Section 75 screening, Equality Impact Assessments and public consultations, and is available to brief staff on all aspects of Section 75 at team meetings and departmental briefing sessions.
- As a UK Government department, the NIO also continues to meet its obligations under Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010, with further advice on the Public Sector Equality Duty available to staff from NIO Legal Advisers.

15. The department has also delivered on its Equality Scheme training objectives by:

- Encouraging active participation and membership of the Diversity, Inclusion and Wellbeing Network and promoting interaction from all staff across the department.

- 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.
- Encouraging 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.
- Promoting a series of 'Brunch and Learn' staff training sessions, including a session on Autism, Neurodiversity and Inclusion delivered as part of National Inclusion Week in September 2025.

Section 3: Looking Forward

16. Following its review in 2026, the NIO Equality Scheme was updated to ensure alignment with current equality policy and practice, as well as reflecting the department's new 2026-29 Strategic Business Plan, People Strategy, and updated directorate portfolios. During the next reporting period the NIO's focus is anticipated to be on:
 - embedding our new 2026-29 Strategic Business Plan, specifically focusing on building an agile and delivery-focused NIO, alongside the 2025-2027 People Strategy to ensure that the department remains an empowering, inclusive, and engaging place to work, supported by the Diversity, Inclusion and Wellbeing (DIW) Action Plan which celebrates our values and expected behaviours; and
 - managing the impact of, and supporting staff following, a challenging Spending Review settlement to ensure that the department is able to deliver its priorities efficiently and effectively within a reducing resource profile.
17. The Government remains fully committed to protecting the rights and equality provisions established under the Good Friday Agreement and Article 2 of the Windsor Framework.
18. To support this, the NIO is working closely with the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission and the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland to ensure the Dedicated Mechanism operates effectively.

Progress Update on the Specific Actions and Outcomes of the NIO's Equality Measures for 2025/26

Action		Outcomes	Update
1	Communicating and assisting the understanding of Section 75 duties across the department	Awareness, knowledge, and wider and more effective engagement with Section 75 duties by staff across the department.	Following the review of NIO Equality Scheme, the guidance on our departmental intranet was refreshed and is available to all staff 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 by email, provided in blog posts on the intranet and form part of the NIO Induction Pack. Staff members continue to engage with ECNI and colleagues continue to attend and participate at NICS Equality Practitioner Group meetings to enhance their knowledge and up-skill to ensure that knowledge can be shared with the wider department.
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 Visits Team continues to support Ministers and policy 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 NIO press releases on GOV.UK.

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	NIO decisions which are proportionate with due consideration given to any potential impacts on Section 75 groups in the operation of powers under the Justice and Security Act 2007.	All relevant NIO policy decisions and changes have undergone appropriate screening processes, with update reports on screenings and equality impact assessments being published on NIO equality scheme transparency releases on GOV.UK. 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.
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	The 2025 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 are treated fairly at work (83%). A number of recommendations from the People Survey continue to be taken forward by the Human Resources team (HR).

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.
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 them as Civil Servants.
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 which, where appropriate, take account of the needs of Section 75 groups	NIO internal policies, including HR policies, were equality screened during the reporting period, as part of good practice annual review processes. NIO HR policies are aligned with MOJ HR policies, all of which are screened & assessed against the requirements of the Equality Act 2010 and the NIO takes additional steps to ensure internal policies are screened when they are applied to staff based in Northern Ireland.

PART B - Section 49A of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (as amended) and Disability Action Plans
1 Action measures achieved during 2025/26:

7

Fully Achieved

0

Partially Achieved

0

Not Achieved

2(a) Public life measures achieved:

Level	Public Life Action Measures	Outputs ¹	Outcomes / Impact ²
National ³	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.	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. During 2025/26, two NIO regulated public appointment campaigns were advertised on the Cabinet Office website. Out of all applications received 21% were from candidates who recorded a disability or health condition as part of their Equality Monitoring Information. Additionally, 18% recorded an ethnic minority background as part of their Equality Monitoring Information.	Advertising campaigns through the Cabinet Office website/NIDirect/local press and sharing with relevant public authorities ensures a diverse audience is reached. 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. The Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments (OCPA) noted the extensive outreach undertaken by NIO to advertise roles and the careful handling

¹ **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.

² **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.

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

Level	Public Life Action Measures	Outputs ¹	Outcomes / Impact ²
			of unique NI community sensitivities when considering diversity.
Local ⁴	Maintain a focus on our capability to ensure we continue to encourage people with disabilities to participate in public life.	A dedicated Diversity Champion is allocated within the department and is supported by a Diversity, Inclusion and Wellbeing Group led by staff volunteers from across all teams. The DIW group continues to encourage the sharing of experiences through campaigns, stories and blog posts on the intranet to raise awareness of disabilities.	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 will complete the online “Civil Service Expectations” training on the Civil Service Learning site.	All staff are required to complete ‘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 them as Civil Servants.	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.

2(c) Positive Attitudes Communication Measures Achieved:

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

Ref	Measures	Outputs	Outcomes
2	Regular communications published on the NIO intranet site on matters relating to disability.	The Diversity, Inclusion and Wellbeing group continue to regularly run campaigns and publish blogs on the department's intranet to raise awareness of 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.	Awareness of barriers faced by people with disabilities was supported in 2025/26 through the celebration and promotion of: - Mental Health Awareness Week (May 2025) - National Inclusion Week Campaign (September 2025) - World Mental Health Day (October 2025) - OCD Awareness Week (October 2025) - World Menopause Day (October 2025) - Time to Talk Day (February 2026) - Children's Mental Health Week (February 2026) - Stress Awareness Month (April 2025 - to confirm) - Carers Rights Day (November 2025 - to confirm) - Anti-Bullying Week (November 2025 - to confirm)	Increased awareness of a range of disabilities.

Ref	Measures	Outputs	Outcomes
		- Neurodiversity Celebration Week (April 2026)	

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.	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.

5. Monitoring Effectiveness

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

(a) Qualitative

The 2025 People Survey showed an “Inclusion and Fair Treatment” score of 81% which was in line with the Civil Service benchmark and showed a positive increase consistent with previous years. Periodic ‘pulse surveys’ are also conducted across the department, 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 2026, the following percentage of staff had done so:

Disability – 60.0%

Ethnicity – 62.2%

Gender – 100%

Sexual Orientation – 57.8%

6. Monitoring Progress

After the reporting period, the NIO undertook a comprehensive review of both the Equality Scheme and the Disability Action Plan. This review process ensured that our equality framework is closely aligned with current equality policy and practice, as well as reflecting the department’s new 2026-29 Strategic Business Plan, People Strategy, and updated directorate portfolios