



**The Consumer Council**

## **The Consumer Council for Northern Ireland**

Public Authority 2013–14 Annual Progress Report on Section 75 of the *Northern Ireland Act 1998* and Section 49A of the *Disability Discrimination Order 2006* to the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland.

### **This document is available in other formats**

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## Equality Commission for Northern Ireland

### Public Authority 2013–14 Annual Progress Report on:

- **Section 75 of the *Northern Ireland Act 1998* and**
- **Section 49A of the *Disability Discrimination Order 2006***

This report template includes a number of self assessment questions regarding implementation of the **Section 75 statutory duties** from 1 April 2013 to 31 March 2014 (**Part A**).

This template also includes a number of questions regarding implementation of **Section 49A of the *Disability Discrimination Order (DDO)*** from the 1 April 2013 to 31 March 2014 (**Part B**).

Please enter information at the relevant part of each section and ensure that it is submitted electronically (by completing this template) and in hardcopy, with a signed cover letter from the Chief Executive or, in his/her absence, the Deputy Chief Executive to the Commission **by 31 August 2014**.

In completing this template it is essential to focus on the application of Section 75 and Section 49. This involves progressing the commitments in your equality scheme or disability action plan which should lead to outcomes and impacts in terms of measurable improvement for individuals from the equality categories. Such outcomes and impacts may include changes in public policy, in service provision and/or in any of the areas within your functional remit.

### Name of public authority (Enter details below)

**The Consumer Council for Northern Ireland**

### Equality Officer

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## Part A: Section 75 Annual Progress Report 2013–14

### Executive Summary

**What were the key policy/service developments made by the authority during this reporting period to better promote equality of opportunity and good relations and what outcomes were achieved?**

The four core aims of the Consumer Council's Corporate Plan (2011–15) are to:

- Ensure public policy reflects the needs of today's and tomorrow's consumers.
- Champion and protect the interests of consumers.
- Inform and empower consumers.
- Ensure the Consumer Council is fit for purpose.

By undertaking extensive consumer research and engagement during corporate planning, the following priority groups were identified:

- Low income households.
- Older people.
- Younger people and students.
- Disabled people.

The Equality Scheme is aligned to the Corporate Plan to ensure consistency and to embed equality considerations into the Consumer Council's priorities, activities, key policies and services. In the context of the Consumer Council's statutory remit, it is recognised that being fit for purpose requires an unequivocal commitment to equality and good relations. The Consumer Council's work priorities are shaped by its statutory equality duties under Section 75 of the *Northern Ireland Act* and the *Disability Discrimination Act and Order*.

The Consumer Council's Outreach Strategy aims to reach out to all consumers in NI who need support with a focus on 'hard to reach' consumers and those in greatest need. This strategy is driven by the core aims of the Corporate Plan and the priority groups identified.

The Consumer Council builds equality into all policies, services and work programmes from the early stages of project planning and policy development.

The Consumer Council responds to government consultations, represents consumers' views and makes recommendations on public policy changes. Policy responses are available on the Consumer Council's website [www.consumercouncil.org.uk](http://www.consumercouncil.org.uk).

Key equality outcomes achieved during 2013–14 were:

- Published a research report on Energy Efficiency in January 2014, with an action plan and undertook an extensive education programme to promote awareness of energy efficiency and 'switching' suppliers to save money to help address fuel poverty. We also completed research towards the end of the period to understand the views of consumers in respect of renewable energy and identify the extent of self-disconnection by consumers, which will inform our work going forward. Equality categories impacted: age, dependents, disability, gender, marital status, and race.
- Influence and supported the delivery of affordable car, travel and flood insurance for all consumers by promoting consumer views to government, regulators and the industry. Equality categories impacted: age, dependents, disability, gender, marital status, and race.
- Lead the Financial Capability Partnership and worked with DETI to help shape the Financial Capability Strategy for Northern Ireland. The Financial Capability Partnership's work included the delivery of 'Money Week' held in Newry and Mourne in November 2013. The Consumer Council also published an updated Personal Current Account Manifesto, which was circulated to all local banks. We also gave evidence to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee Inquiry into banking in September 2013. All with a view to securing greater access to affordable banking and finance. Equality categories impacted: age, dependents, disability, gender, marital status, and race.
- Increased our outreach work, with almost 40 activities with groups of vulnerable consumers. Equality categories impacted: age, dependents, disability, gender, marital status, and race.

- Supported vulnerable households get the best deal in a number of important markets by developing a programme called '*Power to the Pocket*' to train advice workers and others working to cascade information and resources to consumers on matters such as 'switching' and energy and water efficiency. Five well-attended workshops were delivered across Northern Ireland and evaluation of these showed that they were very positively received. Equality categories impacted: age, dependents, disability, gender, marital status, and race.
  
- Worked with Translink to inspect 15 separate Metro bus services, randomly chosen in Belfast City Centre to ensure that the ramp fitted to vehicles to allow wheelchair access was accessible and fully functioning – all 15 vehicles passed inspection. Equality categories impacted: disability.
  
- Worked with Disability Action to support passengers to make the transition from using the 'Door 2 Door' transport service to the Disability Action Transport Service. Equality categories impacted: disability.
  
- Worked with Stena to provide mobile hoists in accessible cabins on their overnight ferry crossing service to enable a disabled passenger to access the cabin beds. Equality categories impacted: disability.
  
- Continued to be the complaint handling body for Regulation (EC) 1107 and Regulation (EU) 1177, which gives passengers rights to special assistance when travelling by air (1107) or by ferry (1177). Equality categories impacted: disability.
  
- Actively promoted utility companies' Customer and Critical Care Registers during the winter of 2013–14. These registers help ensure that emergency resources and enhanced services can be targeted and prioritised for vulnerable consumers, particularly disabled and older consumers. The registers for five of the eight utility companies increased, with the average increase being around 20 per cent of the size of their registers. We also conducted a focus group with consumers on NI Water's Customer Care Register as a specific element of the consumer research to inform the next price control deliberations (known as PC15). Equality categories impacted: age and disability.

- Redeveloped our website to further improve its accessibility for visually impaired consumers and those whose first language is not English. Equality categories impacted: disability and race.

**What are the main initiatives planned in the coming year to ensure the authority improves outcomes in terms of equality of opportunity and good relations for individuals from the nine categories covered by Section 75?**

The Consumer Council linked the statutory equality duties under Section 75 of the *Northern Ireland Act* and Section 49A of the *Disability Discrimination Order (DDO)* 2006 to the Corporate Plan and Equality Scheme. This enables the Consumer Council to plan key initiatives within the yearly work programme. This approach ensures outcomes are improved in terms of equality of opportunity and good relations for individual consumers from the nine equality categories covered by Section 75.

The Consumer Council's Business Plan for 2014–15 focuses on two core themes, namely: **cost of living** and **consumer proficiency/rights**. Within these themes, we have identified a number of objectives that will have significant positive impacts on particular equality categories:

- **Fuel poverty:** contribute to government policy proposals and practical initiatives designed to eradicate fuel poverty and improve the affordability of energy for consumers. Equality categories impacted: age, dependents, disability, gender, marital status, and race.
- **Financial inclusion and services:** work with stakeholders to secure improvements for consumers in their financial capability and access to financial services and value for money. Equality categories impacted: age, dependents, disability, gender, marital status, and race.
- **Promotion of passenger rights:** promote and improve awareness of passenger rights among passengers and service providers. Equality categories impacted: disability.

- **Outreach Strategy:** implement the final year of the Outreach Strategy (2012–15) to ensure that the Consumer Council connects effectively with consumers across Northern Ireland so that they understand how we can support them and we understand their needs. Equality categories impacted: age, dependents, disability, gender, marital status, and race.
- **Consumer and business proficiency:** empower consumers to exercise their rights and support service providers to be more responsive to the requirements of consumers. Equality categories impacted: age, dependents, disability, gender, marital status, and race.
- **Public Transport Reform:** work with DRD and Translink to monitor improvements in public transport provision. Equality categories impacted: age and disability.

In addition to the above, the Consumer Council’s consumer complaints handling role will be expanded in 2014–15 to include postal services, with a particular remit to support vulnerable consumers. The complaints handling function impacts particularly on disabled and older people.

In addition to our consumer advocacy role, we also plan a number of actions in respect of our equality responsibilities as an employer and service provider. These are:

- Encourage the participation by disabled people in public life by working with DETI to promote the appointment of disabled Council Members in line with the DDO. Equality categories impacted: disability.
- Review the equality composition of the Consumer Council’s staff group and develop an affirmative action plan to address any under–representation, as appropriate. Equality categories impacted: all.
- Explore options to offer work experience to disabled students and trainees. Equality categories impacted: disability.
- Launch the Consumer Council’s new accessible corporate website. Equality categories impacted: disability and race.

- Implement new equality monitoring arrangements for the Consumer Council's complaint handling function. Equality categories impacted: all.
- Conduct an accessibility audit of the Consumer Council's new accommodation arrangements. Equality categories impacted: disability.

### **New/Revised Equality Schemes**

**Please indicate whether this reporting period applies to a new or revised scheme and (if appropriate) when the scheme was approved?**

This report relates to the revised equality scheme which was approved by the Equality Commission in November 2011.

## Section 1: Strategic Implementation of the Section 75 Duties

**Please outline evidence of progress made in developing and meeting equality and good relations objectives, performance indicators and targets in corporate and annual operating plans during 2013–14.**

The Chief Executive of the Consumer Council has overall responsibility for implementing the Equality Scheme. The Director of Operations represents the Consumer Council in working with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI), the Consumer Council's funding department, on the implementation of its Section 75 obligations. Throughout 2013–14, the Consumer Council has:

- **Provided strong leadership** ensuring that Section 75 statutory duties were integrated into core business activities. These are reported in this annual progress report.
- **Integrated** the Equality Scheme into corporate and business plan cycles which cascaded down into associated objectives and activities for all staff.
- Developed **realistic** and **achievable** outcome-focused action measures and performance indicators that are **mainstreamed** into the work of the organisation.
- **Allocated** resources to promote equal opportunity and good relations.

The Chief Executive ensures there are appropriately skilled staff across the organisation to support the implementation and monitoring of the Equality Scheme. The Director of Operations has responsibility for the management of the Consumer Council's statutory duties.

All Consumer Council job descriptions stipulate the need for staff to be aware of their obligations in relation to equality.

Despite the Consumer Council's limited budget, resources have been invested to ensure compliance with and promotion of statutory equality duties.

## Section 2: Examples of Section 75 Outcomes/Impacts

Given the renewed focus of Section 75 aiming to achieve more tangible impacts and outcomes and addressing key inequalities; please report in this section how the authority's work has impacted on individuals across the Section 75 categories.

- Describe the action measure / Section 75 process undertaken.
- Who was affected across the Section 75 categories?
- What impact it achieved?

Please give examples of changes to policies or practices using *screening or EQIA*, which have resulted in outcomes or impacts for individuals. If the change was a result of an EQIA please indicate this and also reference the title of the relevant EQIA.

As the Equality Scheme is integrated into corporate and business plan cycles, equality is mainstreamed into all our strategies that flow from these. In terms of our governance and employment policies, these are those of the Northern Ireland Civil Service and therefore subject to screening and equality impact assessment by the NICS.

In light of the above, no strategies or policies required screening or equality impact assessment by the Consumer Council during the last year.

**Please give examples of *outcomes or impacts on individuals* as a result of any *action measures* undertaken as part of your Section 75 action plan:**

The key equality outcomes achieved in 2013–14 are described above. One particular example to illustrate our work is set out below.

Utility companies' are required to maintain Customer and Critical Care Registers of vulnerable consumers who have additional requirements. These registers help ensure that emergency resources and enhanced services can be targeted and prioritised for vulnerable consumers, particularly disabled and older people. By reviewing the relative sizes of each company's register we were able to discern that take-up among vulnerable consumers could be increased significantly.

Therefore, during the winter of 2013–14 we undertook an awareness raising campaign through the media and stakeholders working directly with older and disabled consumers.

As a result, the registers for five of the eight utility companies increased, with the average increase being around 20 per cent of the size of their registers.

**Please give examples of *outcomes or impacts* on individuals as a result of any other Section 75 processes e.g. consultation or monitoring:**

Our website was a number of years old and when the budget became available we took the opportunity to redevelop it. Accessibility was at the core of this project in terms of making it consumer-centred (rather than having a corporate focus) and fully compliant with best practice in terms of disability access standards. In order to achieve this, we used a focus group of consumers comprising a range of demographics to consult on and test the initial design. Then as part of our acceptance testing of the new website we worked with RNIB to bring together a group of consumers with various degrees of visual impairment to trial the website. We also used Census data to identify the main languages spoken currently in Northern Ireland and translated our core information into these.

The outcome is a much different, consumer friendly website that has drawn positive comments from users and stakeholders. It has also been shortlisted for 'Website of the Year' in this year's DANI Awards (the result of this is not known at the time of writing).

### Section 3: Screening

Please provide an update of new / proposed / revised policies screened during the year.

For those authorities that have started issuing of screening reports in year; this section may be completed in part by appending, to this annual report, a copy of all screening reports issued within the reporting period.

None – see Section 2 above.

### Section 4: Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA)

- Please provide an update of policies subject to EQIA during 2013-14, stage 7

Title of Policy EQIA	EQIA Stage at end March 2014 (Steps 1-6)	Outline adjustments to policy intended to benefit individuals and the relevant Section 75 categories due to be affected.
Not applicable		

- Where the EQIA timetable for 2013–14 (as detailed in the previous annual S75 progress report to the Commission) has not been met, please provide details of the factors responsible for delay and details of the timetable for re-scheduling the EQIA/s in question.

Not applicable.

- Ongoing EQIA Monitoring Activities: April 2013 – March 2014

Title of EQIA subject to Stage 7 monitoring	Indicate if differential impacts previously identified have reduced or increased	Indicate if adverse impacts previously identified have reduced or increased
Not applicable		

**Please outline any proposals, arising from the authority's monitoring for adverse impacts, for revision of the policy to achieve better outcomes the relevant equality groups:**

Not applicable.

### **2013-14 EQIA Timetable**

<b>Title of EQIAs due to be commenced during April 2013 – March 2014</b>	<b>Revised or New policy?</b>	<b>Please indicate expected timescale of Decision Making stage i.e. Stage 6</b>
None planned / required at this stage.		

## **Section 5: Training**

**Please outline training provision during the year associated with the Section 75 Duties/Equality Scheme requirements including types of training provision and conclusions from any training evaluations.**

All staff involved in recruitment are required to undergo training, which covers all forms of unlawful direct and indirect discrimination.

All staff undergo mandatory annual training in equality issues and disability awareness.

The Consumer Council was assessed as continuing to meet the Investors in People Silver Standard in early 2014, which demonstrates that our approach to training and development is effective in meeting business needs.

## **Section 6: Communication**

**Please outline how the authority communicated progress on delivery of the Section 75 Duties during the year and evidence of the impact/success of such activities.**

The Consumer Council makes extensive use of the media (locally and regionally, press and broadcast), to communicate the work we do with and on behalf of all consumers, including vulnerable consumers.

The Consumer Council's Outreach Strategy ensures the Council communicates progress specifically with priority groups. We have increased contact with the Council across a range of indicators as a result, including: a five per cent increase in contacts in each of the five targeted geographical areas; increased social media followers by 30 per cent; and more than doubled the number of downloads/requests for our educational resources.

The Consumer Council publishes this Annual Report on the progress on delivery of the Section 75 Duties to the Equality Commission.

The Consumer Council continues to maximise the opportunities to increase public engagement by proactively seeking the views of consumers via consumer panels.

## **Section 7: Data Collection and Analysis**

**Please outline any systems that were established during the year to supplement available statistical and qualitative research or any research undertaken / commissioned to obtain information on the needs and experiences of individuals from the nine categories covered by Section 75, including the needs and experiences of people with multiple identities.**

The Consumer Council investigates complaints from consumers on issues about buses, trains, planes, ferries, natural gas, electricity, coal and water and sewage services. At the end of 2013–14, we reviewed our equality monitoring arrangements for the users of this service using the Equality Commission's Section 75 Monitoring Guide.

As a result, we have made improvements in our approach, which will enable us to better assess whether there are any barriers to using our services among any equality groups or indicate whether any groups are adversely affected by the policies and practices of utility suppliers or transport providers.

**Please outline any use of the Commission’s Section 75 Monitoring Guide.**

See above. We plan to extend the approach developed for monitoring service users to employees and job applicants.

**Section 8: Information Provision, Access to Information and Services**

**Please provide details of any initiatives/steps taken during the year, including take up, to improve access to services; including provision of information in accessible formats.**

See Section 2 above in respect of the redevelopment of the Consumer Council’s website.

**Section 9: Complaints**

**Please identify the number of Section 75 related complaints:**

- **Received and resolved by the authority (including how this was achieved);**
- **Which were not resolved to the satisfaction of the complainant; and**
- **Which were referred to the Equality Commission.**

The Consumer Council did not receive any complaints.

## **Section 10: Consultation and Engagement**

**Please provide details of the measures taken to enhance the level of engagement with individuals and representative groups during the year.**

**Please outline any use of the Commission's guidance on consulting with and involving children and young people.**

The Consumer Council uses consumer panels to:

- Ensure we are actively representing consumers on the right issues at the right time and that we are where consumers want us to be and our work is consistently relevant and reflective of need.
- Support the delivery of the Corporate Plan 2011–15.
- Inform policy formulation, education, lobbying and campaign work.
- Examine consumers' attitudes, opinions, experiences and reactions on an ongoing and regular basis.

This qualitative data supplements other ways the Consumer Council consults, surveys and engages with consumers.

Over the past year we have undertaken over 150 consumer panels and outreach events across all areas of Northern Ireland.

## **Section 11: The Good Relations Duty**

**Please provide details of additional steps taken to implement or progress the good relations duty during the year. Please indicate any findings or expected outcomes from this work.**

The Consumer Council makes a difference to the local community, which is in a deprived area of Belfast. As part of the organisation's Good Relations Duties, a number of Consumer Council staff participated each week in "Time to Read". Time to Read is a paired reading programme engaging business volunteers on a one-to-one basis with Key Stage two children (eight to ten year olds) to develop them socially and emotionally as well as enhancing their literacy skills. This is a paired reading programme operated in local primary schools by Business in the Community to develop children's literacy as well as social skills.

We also support a local school through our Corporate Social Responsibility work, which includes fund raising and volunteering.

**Please outline any use of the Commission's Good Relations Guide.**

The Council continues to reference the Commission's Guide in terms of targeting our work in specific locations and with specific groups. We continue to adhere to the principles of leadership, commitment and communication, collaboration and integration (as set out in the Guide) in our approach to work with external stakeholders and our internal work to promote a good, harmonious, diverse workforce.

The Council's Outreach strategy has been informed by the Good Relations Guide and is our key driver for contact with harder to reach and more vulnerable groups.

## **Section 12: Additional Comments**

**Please provide any additional information/comments.**

Not applicable.

**Part B: 'Disability Duties'**  
**Annual Report 1 April 2013 to 31 March 2014**

**1. How many action measures for this reporting period have been:**

Fully  
Achieved?

Partially  
Achieved?

Not  
Achieved?

2. Please outline the following detail on all actions that have been fully achieved in the reporting period.

2 (a) Please highlight what **public life measures** have been achieved to encourage disabled people to participate in public life at National, Regional and Local levels.

Level	Public Life Action Measures	Outputs <sup>1</sup>	Outcomes/Impact <sup>2</sup>
<b>National<sup>3</sup></b>	Designated complaint handling body for Regulation (EC) No. 1107/2006 (access to air travel).	This allows us to take complaints from passengers with reduced mobility and to work with the industry to improve services to disabled passengers.	97 per cent customer satisfaction rating achieved.
	Designated complaint handling body for the Maritime Passenger Regulation (EU) No. 1177/2010 which provides protection for disabled ferry passengers	This allows us to take complaints from passengers with reduced mobility and to work with the industry to improve services to disabled passengers.	97 per cent customer satisfaction rating achieved.
<b>Regional<sup>4</sup></b>			
<b>Local<sup>5</sup></b>			

<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

<sup>4</sup> **Regional:** Situations where people can influence policy decision making at a middle impact level

2(b) What **training action measures** were achieved in this reporting period?

	<b>Training Action Measures</b>	<b>Outputs</b>	<b>Outcome/Impact</b>
	Annual disability awareness training for all staff.	Awareness raising workshop delivered.	Continued heightened awareness of disability issues among Consumer Council staff.

2(c) What **Positive attitudes action measures** in the area of **Communications** were achieved in this reporting period?

	<b>Communications Action Measures</b>	<b>Outputs</b>	<b>Outcome/Impact</b>
	Accessible information published on the Consumer Council's website.	Redeveloped website in place that meets accessibility standards.	Increased usage and accessibility

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<sup>5</sup> **Local:** Situations where people can influence policy decision making at lower impact level e.g. one off consultations, local fora.

2 (d) What action measures were achieved to ‘**encourage others**’ to promote the two duties:

	<b>Encourage others Action Measures</b>	<b>Outputs</b>	<b>Outcome/Impact</b>
	Worked with Translink to ensure the accessibility of Metro bus services in Belfast.	Inspected 15 separate, randomly chosen buses in Belfast City Centre to ensure that the ramp fitted to vehicles to allow wheelchair access was accessible and fully functioning.	All 15 vehicles passed inspection.
	Worked with Stena to provide mobile hoists in accessible cabins on their overnight ferry crossing service to enable a disabled passenger to access the cabin beds.	Mobile hoist provided.	Increased accessibility of Stena ferries travelling to/from NI.

2 (e) Please outline **any additional action measures** that were fully achieved other than those listed in the tables above:

	<b>Action Measures fully implemented (other than Training and specific public life measures)</b>	<b>Outputs</b>	<b>Outcomes/Impact</b>
	Not applicable		

3. Please outline what action measures have been **partly achieved** as follows:

	Action Measures partly achieved	Milestones <sup>6</sup> / Outputs	Outcomes/Impacts	Reasons not fully achieved
	Not applicable			

4. Please outline what **action measures have not been achieved** and the reasons why?

	Action Measures not met	Reasons
	Not applicable	

5. What **monitoring tools** have been put in place to evaluate the degree to which actions have been effective/develop new opportunities for action?

- a) Qualitative: Consumer panel feedback
- b) Quantitative: Complaints handing system

<sup>6</sup> **Milestones** – Please outline what part progress has been made towards the particular measures; even if full output or outcomes/ impact have not been achieved.

6. As a result of monitoring progress against actions has your organisation either:

- made any **revisions** to your plan during the reporting period or
- taken any **additional steps** to meet the disability duties which were **not outlined in your original** disability action plan / any other changes?

No

If yes please outline below:

	Revised/Additional Action Measures	Performance Indicator	Timescale
	Not applicable		

7. Do you intend to make any further **revisions to your plan** in light of your organisation's annual review of the plan? If so, please outline proposed changes?

No