

General Consumer Council for Northern Ireland

Equality Scheme Annual Report 2001-02

Section 1

Preparation of Draft Equality Scheme

- 1.1 The Council drew up a Draft Equality Scheme in accordance with the Commission's guidelines. A consultation process was carried out which included writing directly to 92 groups and organisations representing the interests of the Section 75 groups. An advertisement was placed in all the Northern Ireland daily newspapers.
- 1.2 The number of substantive responses received was relatively small but we undertook significant revisions of the Scheme in the light of the comments. The Scheme was considered and received formal approval from the Board of the Council before being submitted to the Equality Commission.
- 1.3 Following approval in July 2001 copies of the Scheme were given to all Council members and staff, sent directly to all on the Council's consultation list and other consumer, business and interested parties. An advertisement was placed in the Belfast Telegraph drawing attention to the publication of the scheme. The Scheme is published on the Council's website.

Section 2

Strategic Implementation of the Section 75 Equality Duties

- 2.1 During 2001-02 an internal working group was established among Council staff to take forward the Council's commitments and plan of action.
- 2.2 The Council's Corporate Plan includes equality of opportunity as one of its core values. This will ensure that it pervades the GCC approach to its objectives and associated actions. The Council consulted on the development of its Corporate Plan for the period 2002-2005.
- 2.3 Quarterly Equality Progress reports which include the full range of equality related issues – i.e. Section 75, new TSN, Human Rights and so on – are prepared and considered at the high level Co-ordinating meeting between the Chairman, Deputy Chairman, Director and Assistant Director. Equality is also a standard agenda item at the monthly staff meeting.
- 2.4 The Council has worked with a number of other public authorities and other partners during the year. The Director attends the quarterly meetings of the DETI Equality Steering Group comprising members of the senior Civil Service who have been charged with the responsibility for ensuring Section 75 duties are taken forward. We have also worked with the Chief Executives' Forum, the Health Promotion Agency and the Health and Safety Executive.
- 2.5 The Council aims to take forward its work on good relations in conjunction with other relevant public authorities, in particular its sponsor Department, Enterprise Trade and Investment. We understand the Department is awaiting the outcome of the OFM/DFM review on community relations policy which is likely to have a major impact on implementation. We will work closely with the Department in implementing the good relations duty as it relates to the Council's remit.

Section 3

Screening and Equality Impact Assessment Timetable

3.1 The Council's screening report was outlined in the Scheme which was submitted to and approved by the Commission.

3.2 The following table shows the timetable of impact assessments.

Title of EQIA	Stage	Partnerships with Public Authorities	Corporate Monitoring Arrangements
Communications	Step 1		
Consumer education	Step 1		
Research policy			

3.3 The Council's timetable required us to carry out our first impact assessment on our communications policy and this has commenced. However, work undertaken as part of the first step indicated that it would be both relevant and constructive to combine the assessment of this policy with the assessment of our consumer education policy. Therefore we have decided to combine the two which will initially make for a bigger exercise but should result in a more meaningful impact assessment and avoid areas of unnecessary repetition.

3.4 In conducting the assessment we plan to meet a range of organisations to discuss the impact of the policies and gather evidence

3.5 Our timetable for 2002-2003 is to complete the joint assessment of the communications and consumer education policies and to undertake the assessment of our research policy.

3.6 In order to assist the process of policy screening the Council is using the detailed screening form developed by DETI to assist consideration of how new policies might impact on equality of opportunity.

Section 4

Communication and Training Provision

- 4.1 The Council has a planned programme of training and development in line with its business needs and has been recognised as an Investor in People for some years. In order to have a firm basis to enable us to meet our commitments under the Equality Scheme we embarked on a systematic programme of training and awareness.
- 4.2 Awareness sessions were held during the development of the Scheme prior to its submission and approval. Following approval a more structured and detailed programme was undertaken.
- All 14 Board members and 11 staff have attended half day briefing sessions on Section 75 delivered by Focus Consultancy, the training arm of Disability Action.
 - All senior staff including Consumer Affairs Officers have completed a training course regarding the completion of an EQIA.
 - Two staff have attended courses on consultation.
 - Equality matters are now included in induction training for new staff and are being built into job descriptions.
 - In addition to the training sourced from Focus Consultancy senior staff have also been briefed by the RNIB.
- 4.3 Awareness of equal opportunities, rights and responsibilities amongst staff and Board members has increased. Overall feedback from participants indicated that they were satisfied with the training in terms of relevance, objectives met and the value of the course. All the needs initially identified have been met. The challenge in the coming year will be to provide similar opportunities to new recruits at a time when the Council is due to expand and to develop existing skills appropriately.
- 4.4 The Board receives reports on training and development and a strategic evaluation of such activities at regular intervals.

Section 5

Information Provision, Data Collection and Analysis

- 5.1 The Council maintained liaison with DETI and through the Department the wider Government machine with view to having access to new statistical data and qualitative research as it became available.
- 5.2 We bought and installed new database software which will enable additional monitoring of complainants, those people who approach the Council for assistance with a complaint about passenger transport, coal or natural gas. The database became operational at the end of the year under review. Once further experience and skills have been developed, pilots will take place to extend the ability to monitor accessed information and services to assess equality of opportunity.
- 5.3 The Council extended the socio-economic data collected in survey work beyond our usual breakdowns by age and gender. In 2001-2002 enhanced data was sought in a survey of users of natural gas and an opinion survey on retailing. This will be further developed in the forthcoming year; we anticipate inclusion of questions on disability, community background and dependents in most if not all cases. These initiatives should help to extend what is at present limited data in relation to the equality groups. However given the nature of our work, detailed statistical monitoring across all Section 75 groups may not be appropriate and discussions are planned with relevant groups to assist consideration of how best to assess impact.
- 5.4 The Council has a number of initiatives regarding accessible information.
- We make our publications available in accessible formats on request and include information to this effect in each case.
 - We already have a text phone.
 - Our information and advice website, Consumerline, was Bobby accredited. Bobby accreditation was also obtained for the main website during the year.

- ‘What’s on my Record?’, a publication informing individuals of how to obtain information held about them, was made available on tape. Given its subject matter ‘What’s on my Record?’ was widely advertised including the insertion of a flyer in Scope magazine.
- 5.5 The Council has also been able to encourage providers and companies with whom it works to make their information more accessible. For example following our recommendations Phoenix Natural Gas completely revised the layout of their bills to make them more understandable to all and especially to those with a visual impairment. We also alerted them to the fact that their safety brochure was likely to be unsuitable for consumers with such an impairment. We are engaged in an extensive exercise with Translink to look at the provision of passenger information on both buses and trains and this will have a major focus on accessible formats and readability for anyone with visual impairment.
- 5.6 The Council has initiated discussion with the Department of Enterprise Trade and Investment with a view to taking part in its new Equality Forum to support implementation of our Equality Scheme.
- 5.7 The development of the new database during the coming year will offer further opportunities to supplement existing statistical and qualitative data and monitor contacts with the Council to assess knowledge of services and their take up.

Section 6

Complaints

- 6.1 No complaints were received during the year under review.

Section 7

Timetable

- 7.1 As noted above, the EQIA on the joint policies of communications and consumer education will be completed

during 2002-03. The EQIA on research will be started. It is not possible at this stage to state what if any other areas may be addressed due to the nature of the Council's work.

Section 8

Additional Information

- 8.1 It has been a challenging year for a small organisation with just eleven staff but the Council believes that it has made a positive start to the implementation of its Scheme and is fully committed to making further significant progress. Specific guidance and advice by the Commission, such as a helpline and templates or examples of best practice, would be a practical and much needed response to the common problems of very small organisations. We would like to suggest that the Commission set up a small unit for the next few years with specific responsibility for giving assistance to the smaller public bodies until the process is embedded.