



Northern Ireland Assembly

Northern Ireland Assembly Commission Audit of Inequalities - 31 January 2011

1. Role and Function of the Assembly Commission

The Northern Ireland Assembly Commission finds its statutory basis in Section 40 and Schedule 5 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. As the body corporate, it is responsible for providing the property, services and staff required for the Assembly's purposes. It consists of an MLA from each of the five main parties, plus the Speaker of the House who acts as Chairperson. It has four principal roles. These are:

- The allocation of resources;
- The provision of property to support the Members, support staff and secretariat staff for a fully functioning Assembly;
- The provision of services; and,
- The provision of a fully staffed Secretariat to support the administration of the Assembly.

In exercising the above roles the Assembly Commission carries out the following functions:

- The acquisition and maintenance of premises and equipment to provide suitable accommodation, facilities and support services in which a fully functioning Assembly can operate; and,
- The recruitment and ongoing development of suitably qualified and experienced staff to support the Assembly.

2. About Section 75

Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 (the Act) requires all public authorities designated for the purposes of the Act, including the Assembly Commission, to comply with two statutory duties.

The first duty is the *Equality of Opportunity* duty, which requires public authorities in carrying out their functions relating to Northern Ireland to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity between the nine equality categories of persons of different religious belief, political opinion, racial group, age, marital status or sexual orientation;

men and women generally; persons with a disability and persons without; and persons with dependents and persons without.

The second duty, the *Good Relations* duty, requires that public authorities in carrying out their functions relating to Northern Ireland have regard to the desirability of promoting good relations between persons of different religious belief, political opinion and racial group.

3. The Revised Guide

Following an Effectiveness Review¹, the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland published a revised guide to the two statutory duties.² This guide outlines what public authorities are required to do to comply with the statutory duties and also makes a number of recommendations in order to:

“Shift the focus within public authorities from concentrating primarily on the process of implementing Section 75, towards achieving outcomes within the Section 75 framework.”

Public authorities must submit an equality scheme to the Equality Commission detailing their arrangements for fulfilling the Section 75 statutory duties and a plan for their performance. In the revised guide, the Equality Commission recommends that public authorities develop action measures to effectively demonstrate that they have paid due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity and regard to the desirability of promoting good relations through the implementation of their equality scheme. In preparing action measures/action plans, the Equality Commission further recommends that public authorities:

“Undertake an audit of inequalities to identify the range of key inequalities which the discharge of the public authority’s functions is intended to or is likely to address.”

On 01 November 2010, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission received informal notice from the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland of the requirement to submit a revised equality scheme by 01 August 2011. This notice was provided to allow a three month lead in time to conduct an audit of inequalities. A formal call to submit a revised equality scheme is expected on 01 February 2011.

4. Purpose of this Report

This document presents the findings of the *Audit of Inequalities* which was undertaken by the Assembly Commission between November 2010 and January 2011.

5. Conducting the Audit of Inequalities

The Northern Ireland Assembly Commission’s Research and Library Service was asked to lead the audit of inequalities. Members of staff from across the Commission were also nominated to gather evidence of any inequalities that exist relevant to their function and to co-ordinate responses on behalf of their Directorate. This internal data, as well as any external sources of information available to the Assembly Commission, disaggregated by the Section 75 categories, was then reviewed by the research team.

Sources of information considered as part of the audit included:

- Section 75 and Fair Employment monitoring data, Annual progress reports to the Equality Commission and the latest Article 55 Review;

1 Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (November 2008). Keeping it Effective: Reviewing the Effectiveness of Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 – Final Report.

2 Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (April 2010). Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998: A guide for Public Authorities.

- Data used to inform equality impact assessments;
- Minutes of meetings (Assembly Commission, Management, equality working group and disability advisory group meetings);
- Questions and complaints raised by Members, staff and the public;
- Information held by Directorates relevant to the Section 75 categories;
- Findings from the Assembly Commission's 2010 Staff Survey;
- Research commissioned by the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission;
- The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland's Statement on *Key Inequalities in Northern Ireland*³ and
- External research findings such as that carried out by the Electoral Commission and data from the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey, the Electoral Office and the 2001 Census.

6. Findings of the Audit of Inequalities

The findings from the Audit of Inequalities are presented by theme relevant to the two functions of the Assembly Commission.

Function 1:

The acquisition and maintenance of premises and equipment to provide suitable accommodation, facilities and support services in which a fully functioning Assembly can operate.

1a: Access to Parliament Buildings

Evidence from annual progress reports to the Equality Commission and the work of the disability advisory group shows that access to the building for those with disabilities has been an issue but that significant work has been undertaken to improve disability access with further work planned.

Full access audits were undertaken by Disability Action (June 2010) and RNIB (June 2010). Building Services will contribute directly to the equality scheme action plan.

1b: Access to Services

The need to ensure access to support services in which a fully functioning Assembly can operate, regardless of disability status, has been identified as a potential inequality by the Commission. A programme of work is already underway to ensure the delivery and continuous improvement of support for Members in their work in Plenary sessions, Committees, constituencies and as Office Holders such as the fitting of induction loops to Committee rooms, the Senate Chamber and Education Suites.

Whilst some of the programme of work is complete or very nearly complete (such as the fitting of induction loops to Committee rooms, Building services will contribute directly to the equality scheme action plan giving a timetable for remaining projects.

1c: Good Relations

The majority of questions/comments/suggestions with an equality or good relations element received by the Assembly Commission from Members and their support staff relate to the environment of Parliament Buildings. Specifically, feedback tends to focus on the need to

3 Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (October 2007). Statement on Key Inequalities in Northern Ireland.

ensure that the building is welcoming for all sections of society and those from different cultural backgrounds.

- More than half of Written and Oral Questions asked by Members regarding the statutory duties had a good relations element concerning flags, emblems or signage/language during 2009/10.

Similarly, a significant number of questions from staff to the Director-General's Office concern the wearing of emblems at particular times of the year. Findings from the 2010 Staff Survey showed that:

- 33.5% of staff feel that there are good relations issues that the Assembly Secretariat needs to address.
- 46.7% of staff felt that more could be done to promote good relations in the Assembly Secretariat.
- 13.9% of staff felt that there would be barriers to developing good relations within the Assembly Secretariat.

The Assembly Commission is currently conducting an internal good relations audit to staff and seek Members' views on the way forward of these issues. The Holywell Consultancy report will be completed by 28 June 2011 and findings will inform the equality scheme action plan.

1d: Participation

The Equality Commissions for Northern Ireland's *Statement on key Inequalities*⁴ presented evidence that women, people with disabilities and ethnic minorities are under-represented in public life. The latest available data shows that this is still the case.

- At the end of the 2007 -2011 mandate, 15 of the 108 MLAs were women (13.8%) while there was only one MLA of minority ethnic background (less than 1%). Following the election of May 2011, 20 of the 108 MLAs are women (18.5%) and there remains only one MLA of ethnic minority background.

While MLAs are democratically elected, the Assembly Commission needs to consider what, if any, role it can play in increasing the participation of those groups which are currently under-represented in order to achieve its vision of:

"An Assembly that strengthens democracy and engages the people (of Northern Ireland) in creating a better future for all."

Research commissioned by the Electoral Commission⁵ found that overall, levels of registration and propensity to vote was lower amongst black and minority ethnic communities and was lower in Northern Ireland than in Great Britain.

- 48% of black and minority ethnic communities voted in the last Northern Ireland Assembly election compared with an overall turnout of 65%.⁶

Findings from the Assembly Commission's *Public Attitudes Survey 2009*⁷ showed that younger people and people who are neither Unionist nor Nationalist tend to be less interested in and less knowledgeable of the work of the Assembly while Unionists and Protestants are most likely to have visited Parliament Buildings.

- 30% of those who are neither Nationalist nor Unionist said they know nothing at all about the Assembly compared to 12% of Nationalists and 11% of Unionists while 29% those who

4 Ibid

5 OMI Consulting (2006) Black and minority ethnic communities' participation in democratic processes in Northern Ireland.

6 Data refers to the 2003 Assembly Election as the research was published in 2006.

7 Ipsos MORI (2010) Public Attitudes Survey 2009 COI/Northern Ireland Assembly Commission.

are neither Nationalist nor Unionist said they are not at all interested in the work of the Assembly.

- 37% of 16-24 year olds compared to 13% of those aged 65 and over said they know nothing at all about the Assembly while 29% of 16-24 year olds compared to 12% of those aged 65 and over said they are not at all interested in the work of the Assembly.
- Unionists were around one and a half times more likely to have visited Parliament Buildings than Nationalist or those who are neither Nationalist nor Unionist. The same is true for Protestants when compared to Catholics.

The Assembly Commission has taken positive steps to address some of these inequalities, such as work to establish a Youth Assembly which includes a representative proportion of people with disabilities and the translation of information into a range of different languages. Further, there will always be some individuals who do not wish to engage with politics. However, the Assembly Commission, needs to consider if anything else can be done to increase participation levels of under-represented groups and those groups that are disengaged from politics in Northern Ireland.

Function 2:

The recruitment and ongoing development of suitably qualified and experienced staff to support the Assembly

2a: Recruitment and Selection

The Article 55 Review for 2006-2008 and the Annual Fair Employment Return (as at 1 January 2010) indicate that Protestants are under-represented in the Management and Professional job group when compared to the community composition of economically active persons aged 16-64 within Northern Ireland. Roman Catholics are under-represented in the Elementary job group when compared to the community composition of economically active persons aged 16-64 within the Belfast Travel to Work Area (TTWA).

- In 2008, 44% of Secretariat staff in the Management and Professional job group were Protestant compared to 57% of all economically active persons aged 16-64 within Northern Ireland (Source: Census, 2001)
- In 2008, 16% of Secretariat staff in the Elementary job (unskilled) group were Roman Catholic compared to 33% of economically active persons aged 16-64 within the Belfast TTWA (Source: Census, 2001).

The Assembly Commission has been working to address these inequalities and will continue to do so.

2b: Equality issues for existing staff

A number of staff have raised questions with the Director General regarding perceived inequalities in terms and conditions. The 2010 Staff Survey revealed that:

- 30.5% of staff felt that there were equality issues that the Assembly Secretariat needs to address
- The Northern Ireland Assembly commissioned Carecall to undertake a series of staff focus groups and meetings to better understand perceived inequalities in terms and conditions. The resulting report will feed into the equality scheme action plan.

The Assembly Commission is currently conducting a comprehensive review of its policies Discipline Policy, Conduct Policy, Dignity at Work Policy and Grievance Policy.

Annex A

Function 1: The acquisition and maintenance of premises and equipment to provide suitable accommodation, facilities and support services in which a fully functioning Assembly can operate.

Theme	Links to Strategic Objectives	Potential inequalities identified	Proposed Actions and priorities
1a. Access to Parliament Buildings	Supporting Assembly Business.	Access for those with disabilities to Parliament Buildings or areas within Parliament Buildings.	Continued programme of work to improve access, installation of access ramps at front entrance to Parliament Buildings.
	Engaging the Public.		Tactile maps and signage for blind and visually impaired.
	Accommodating the Assembly.		Address issues from disability audits.
1b. Access to Services	Supporting Assembly Business.	Access to sessions for those with a disability.	Continued programme of work to fit induction loop systems.
	Engaging the Public.	Access to services in languages other than English.	Provision of translation from Irish and Ulster Scots to English to the Speaker and Clerks at the table.
	Accommodating the Assembly.		
1c. Good Relations	Engaging the Public.	Need to ensure accommodation welcoming to all sections of society and cultural backgrounds.	Recommendations arising from Internal Good Relations Audit to be considered for implementation.
	Accommodating the Assembly.		
1d. Participation	Engaging the Public.	Young people less involved in democracy.	Youth Assembly.
		People who are neither Unionist nor Nationalist less involved in democracy.	Projects to encourage those under-represented to become more involved in democracy.
		Women, people with disabilities and ethnic minorities under-represented in public life.	

Function 2: The recruitment and ongoing development of suitably qualified and experienced staff to support the Assembly.

Theme	Links to Strategic Objectives	Potential inequalities identified	Proposed Actions and priorities
2a. Recruitment and Selection	Supporting and developing staff.	Protestants under-represented in Management and Professional group.	Consideration of seeking further advice sought from the Equality Commission and affirmative action when advertising future vacancies within the Management and Professional job group.
		Roman Catholics under-represented in Elementary job level.	
2b. Equality issues for existing staff	Supporting and developing staff.	Work on identifying inequalities for existing staff is ongoing.	Recommendations arising from Carecall to be considered for implementation.

