

Northern Ireland Assembly
Internal Good Relations Audit
June 2011

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Section 1 – Background & Good Relations Context

Background to the Internal Good Relations Audit

- 1.1 Holywell Consultancy, with the support of Green Hat Consultancy, was commissioned by the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission to carry out an Internal Good Relations Audit in June 2010.
- 1.2 The aim of the brief was to ‘produce an audit report on Good Relations issues within the Assembly and to prepare the implementation plan for policy and practice for the 2010-2011 period.’¹ Key elements of the contract are ‘(a) design and execute the audit, analyse and report the results. The report should set out key recommendations and measureable outcomes. (b) complement and reflect priorities highlighted in the Commission’s current Good Relations Action Plan and Corporate Plan within the deliverable good relations implementation plan.’²

Northern Ireland Assembly Secretariat Corporate Plan (2008/2011)

- 1.3 The quotation below is taken from The Northern Ireland Assembly Secretariat Corporate Plan (2008/2011).

“The Assembly Commission and the Secretariat Management Group are responsible for developing the Corporate Plan and for ensuring that its objectives are met. The Commission’s purpose is to support the Assembly and its Members in their role as elected representatives and legislators and to facilitate engagement between the Assembly and the public. The Commission consists of the Speaker and five other Assembly Members.”³

The current Commissioners are:

- Chairperson, The Speaker: Mr. William Hay
 - Mr Peter Weir, DUP
 - Mr Barry McElduff, SF
 - Mr Leslie Cree, MBE, UUP
 - Mr Pat Ramsey, SDLP
 - Mrs Judith Cochrane, ALLIANCE
- 1.4 The ethos of the organisation is outlined in its purpose, vision and values, detailed below.

“Our Purpose

The Commission’s purpose is to support the Assembly and its Members in their role as elected representatives and legislators and to facilitate engagement between the Assembly and the public.

¹ Internal Good Relations Audit, Terms of Reference, NI Assembly Commission (2010)

² Internal Good Relations Audit, Terms of Reference, NI Assembly Commission (2010)

³ The Northern Ireland Assembly Secretariat Corporate Plan (2008/2011), p. 5

Our Vision

The Commission's vision is of Assembly that strengthens democracy and engages the people of Northern Ireland in creating a better future for all.

Our Values

1. Professionalism

Reflected by a commitment to excellence, team working and a focus on meeting the needs of elected Members and the public whom the Assembly serves.

2. Integrity

Reflected by political impartiality, honesty, discretion and respect for diversity.

3. Accountability

Reflected by each member of staff taking responsibility for individual, team and corporate performance, and openness and transparency towards the public."⁴

- 1.5 The Corporate Plan also details a number of Future Challenges for the organisation over the first years of delivery. The most relevant of these are:

“

- Development of an independent parliamentary service, including a major recruitment programme.
- Improving public engagement.”⁵

- 1.6 Strategic Priorities and Associated Corporate Objectives outlined in the document are also of relevance to the Internal Good Relations Audit. The most significant of these include:

“2.3 To ensure effective partnership arrangements.

2.4 To promote good relations.

2.5 To improve accessibility to the Assembly and its services.”⁶

- 1.7 Within the Business Plan element of the document the following action is included, which relates to the development of Good Relations within the NIA:

Corporate Objective	Planned Outcome			Lead Responsibility
		2009/2010	2010/2011	
2.4 To promote	Good Relations	31 March		Clerk/DG

⁴ The Northern Ireland Assembly Secretariat Corporate Plan (2008/2011), p. 7

⁵ *ibid* (2).

⁶ *ibid* (2), (p.8)

	Good Relations	Strategy developed	2010		
		Good Relations Strategy implemented		31 March 2011	Clerk/DG

- 1.8 The Engagement Strategy for the Northern Ireland Assembly (February 2009) also helps to set the context within which the Internal Audit was carried out.

“2.2.3 ...facing our society...

In May 2005 the report of the Hansard Society commission on the communication of parliamentary democracy (the ‘Puttnam Commission’), set up to examine how Parliament presents itself and is presented by others to the public, concluded that the public and Parliament has ‘stopped communicating’. The failure of Parliament to connect with the public contributed towards:

‘...public disengagement and cynicism, declining electoral turnout and low knowledge of, and satisfaction with, Parliament.’

Many of our young people have little understanding of how the political system works or the dominant figures within it. Almost a quarter of 18-24 year olds strongly agree with the statement that ‘people like me have no say in what government does’. Given the fact that this generation has grown up during the most peaceful period in Northern Ireland over the last 40 years, the challenge of strengthening democracy, and creating a better future for all cannot be underestimated.

Therefore it must be recognised that this engagement strategy cannot be achieved by the Assembly alone. The other institutions need to play their part in strengthening local democracy. It is important that the government departments as well as local government play their part. In addition, other bodies including the Electoral Office and the Electoral Commission have a role to play in strengthening democracy. ***Discussions will be initiated with a wider group of relevant organisations in order to develop a comprehensive and cross-cutting approach to engagement.***⁸

Engagement Strategy for the Northern Ireland Assembly (2009)

- 1.9 The Engagement Strategy for the Northern Ireland Assembly (February 2009) also outlines the Assembly’s commitment to working with appropriate partner organisations:

⁷ ibid (), (p.14)

⁸ Engagement Strategy for the Northern Ireland Assembly (2009), (p.7)

“The Assembly needs to work with intermediaries and partners who can reach various groups within the population better than the Assembly itself could do directly. Priority groups are teachers, teacher trainers, curriculum authorities, website owners who could re-use Assembly content, organisations with an interest in the Assembly (including non-governmental organisations, trade unions and business.

There are a range of unbiased third parties: the voluntary sector, not for profit organisations, charitable institutions, consumer groups and government bodies which routinely wish to engage with the Assembly, and currently there is no structured mechanism for such groups to do so. In addition, there are a range of biased intermediaries: commercial lobbying organisations, which either directly have a commercial interest in engaging with MLAs, or may do so indirectly through a representative body which could be charitable and/or not for profit organisation.

It is important that partner organisations are provided with access to the Assembly, both in order to engage with MLAs and committees, but also to ensure that the Assembly’s message is communicated in turn to their members and/or stakeholders. However, due to the number of organisations involved, and their interest in engaging with the Assembly, it is not feasible to permit universal access. ***As a first step, a communication strategy will be developed, to include options for future engagement.***⁹

Northern Ireland Assembly Good Relations Action Plan 2010-2011

1.10 The Northern Ireland Assembly Commission has a Good Relations Action Plan already in place to inform and support the good relations efforts of the organisation.

1.11 This action plan details a number of key components with regards to the promotion of good relations. This includes the Good Relations Vision for the Assembly Commission:

“The Commission is committed through its Equality Scheme to the principle of opportunity and good relations. In this context the Commission will aim to ensure that the entire community can enjoy full and fair access to, and participate in, the operations of the Northern Ireland Assembly. Additionally, the adoption of this action plan will ultimately support the Commission’s vision of:

‘An Assembly that strengthens democracy and engages the people (of Northern Ireland) in creating a better future for all’.¹⁰

⁹ Engagement Strategy for the Northern Ireland Assembly (2009), (p.17)

¹⁰ Northern Ireland Assembly Commission – Good Relations Action Plan (2010-11)

1.12 The commitment of the Commission to the promotion of good relations is also detailed in this document through the integration of the values of equality, diversity and interdependence into the everyday practice of the organisation.

1.13 The principles for the Commission in delivering good relations are:

- “5.1 Be impartial.
- 5.2 Respect the backgrounds and cultures of others.
- 5.3 Learn from others’ experiences.
- 5.4 Support those with whom we come into contact with in an open and tolerant manner.
- 5.5 Accept that we might not always share the same views as others but we are comfortable with that acceptance.
- 5.6 Help to build trust and understanding within and outside the organisation.”¹¹

1.14 The Action Plan has six aims, each of which has associated actions. The aims contained within the plan are:

“Aim 1 – Promotion of Good Relations

The Commission will promote equality of opportunity and good relations in all aspects of its work by ensuring that all its services are delivered impartially and effectively.

Aim 2 – Equal Protection

The Commission will provide equal protection to its staff and service-users by tackling any incident of racial harassment or sectarianism. The recent publication of our ‘Dignity at Work’ policy outlines how the Commission proposes to create and sustain an environment where everyone is treated with respect and dignity. Equity, Diversity and Interdependence within the workforce will be recognised with the aim of making the most of everyone’s potential.¹²

Aim 3 – Equality of Service Provision

The Commission will ensure equality of opportunity for all people in accessing and benefitting from its services and facilities. It will shape its policies and work with other organisations, individuals and groups to enable trust and good relations to grow.

Aim 4 – Participation (Divided between Facilities, Clerking & Reporting and Resources Directorates)

The Commission, through its Engagement Strategy, will develop partnerships with public bodies, agencies, schools and others to foster a sense of belonging to an integrated and mutually

¹¹ Northern Ireland Assembly Commission – Good Relations Action Plan (2010-11)

¹² At the time of writing the ‘Dignity at Work Policy’ is at consultation stage and has yet to be formally adopted.

supportive society in which diversity is valued and welcomed. Parliament Buildings hosts a large number of events and visitors each year and has a significant opportunity to play a leading role in the encouragement of dialogue, shared learning and mutual respect for different faiths and cultural backgrounds.

Aim 5 – Dialogue

The Commission will encourage mutual understanding and shared learning on issues related to good relations to ensure tolerance and understanding are promoted and appropriate initiatives/activities which promote equality of opportunity are fostered.

Aim 6 – Capacity Building

The Commission will aim to further build capacity internally and externally, with appropriate groups, to ensure suitable partnerships can be developed to address the Commission's commitment to Section 75 (1) and (2)."¹³

Northern Ireland Assembly Equality Scheme (Approved 2008)

- 1.15 The Northern Ireland Assembly Commission has in place an Equality Scheme which was approved in 2008. This scheme details how the Commission meets their equality duty as a designated body.
- 1.16 This is a robust scheme that is core to the working of the corporate body. Equality is placed centrally within the organisation. Where appropriate the corporate organisation regularly reports on the implementation of the scheme to the Equality to Commission, carry out public consultations, investigate complaints and review the scheme on a regular basis.

Dignity at Work Policy

- 1.17 The Northern Ireland Assembly Commission currently operates under its own Dignity at Work Policy.
- 1.18 This is a strong policy document that addresses:
- “Any form of unwanted, unreasonable and offensive conduct that has the purpose or effect of violating a person's dignity or creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment. Conduct shall be regarded as having this effect only if, having regard to all the circumstances and in particular the complainant's perception, it should be reasonably considered as having that effect.”¹⁴
- 1.19 This document also described the following in relation to the workplace:
- Harassment
 - Bullying

¹³ Northern Ireland Assembly Commission – Good Relations Action Plan (2010-11)

¹⁴ Northern Ireland Civil Service – Dignity at Work Policy

- Discrimination
- Victimisation
- Forms of unwanted, unreasonable and offensive conduct.

1.20 The policy also clearly outlines the steps that an employee should take if they feel that their dignity at work has been affected.

Promoting Good Relations – A Summary Guide for Public Authorities

1.21 This guide gives a summary of the advice, information and good practice recommendations highlighted in the Equality Commission's 'Promoting Good Relations – A Guide for Public Authorities'.

1.22 The Good Relations Duty – the guide details the statutory duty on designated public authorities with regards to good relations. This is:

“A public authority when carrying out its functions relating to Northern Ireland must have regard to the desirability of promoting good relations between persons of different religious belief, political opinion or racial group.”¹⁵

1.23 The guide continues:

“Section 75 (2) places a statutory duty on public authorities to pro-actively address good relations. This means a public authority must consider how the policies it makes and implements, affect relationships between people of different religions, political opinions and racial groups.

It involves considering steps to promote good relations amongst, for example, its employees, service users and others affected by its policies. The purpose of the duty is to mainstream good relations by placing it at the heart of public policy decision making.

Section 75 (2) formalises the shift from managing diversity and difference to promoting diversity and integration. It requires public authorities to take a pro-active initiating approach to contributing to a shared society, rather than responding to the effects of a divided one.”¹⁶

1.24 The guide also details the challenges inherent in adopting a pro-active approach to addressing good relations issues.

“It can involve tackling difficult issues, such as the display of aggressive and intimidating flags and emblems, and taking steps to create safe and shared public spaces in towns and cities that can be accessed and used by all sections of all communities. It can include

¹⁵ Section 75 (2) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998

¹⁶ Promoting Good Relations – A Summary Guide for Public Authorities, Equality Commission (2010)

promoting shared space in the workplace in order to develop respect for, and understanding of, the needs and concerns of diverse communities. Training for employees on good relations issues is one of the most important initiatives that public authorities can take to facilitate the promotion of good relations.”¹⁷

Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration (CSI)

1.25 In July 2010 the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) launched a consultation on its Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration (CSI). This programme was to replace the existing *A Shared Future* policy and include elements of, but not replace the Racial Equality Strategy.

1.26 Key elements proposed within the CSI programme included:

“Aim

The aim of the Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration (CSI) is to bring about real changes for people and places across our society. To build a strong community where everyone, regardless of race, colour, religious or political opinion, age, race, gender, disability or sexual orientation can live, work and socialise in a context of fairness, equality, rights, responsibilities and respect.

Key Themes

- Developing shared space
- Crisis intervention
- Young people
- Interfaces
- Reducing segregation
- Expression of cultural identity
- Racial equality
- Hate crime
- Secure communities.”¹⁸

1.27 The CSI strategy met with considerable criticism during the consultation period where concerns were raised that it would be less effective than the *A Shared Future* strategy. Among the main concerns, as expressed by the Community Relations Council for Northern Ireland (CRC) in its written response, were:

- “b. There is a need for clear vision and purpose and for specific actions. CRC has considerable concerns about both of these in the draft programme.
- c. The draft CSI Programme does not fully acknowledge the civic effort and international investment to date, nor does it conduct a review of these achievements. If a consequence of CSI is the destruction of inter-community infrastructure here, it will be a

¹⁷ Promoting Good Relations – A Summary Guide for Public Authorities, Equality Commission

¹⁸ Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration – Consultation Document, OFMDFM (July 2010) (p.1)

serious setback on the road to reconciliation and not progress. We believe that the policy must build on existing practice and on the contribution of thousands of people and must not be in any way regressive.

- d. We have been handed an historic opportunity to address the legacy of division. Peace brought a huge dividend that Northern Ireland became an attractive place to visit and move to. The issues of cohesion, sharing and integration do not diminish through this process, they change. This is not an additional extra but a core challenge to all in a global economy. It is vital that we take this opportunity through the CSI programme.
- e. The proper inter-relationship of Racial Equality Strategy, Sexual Orientation Strategy, Anti-sectarianism is not developed in the programme. CRC believes that the title of the document has given rise to legitimate expectations that it will deal with all aspects of these complex subjects. Racial Equality is referred to but without clear guidance on future priorities. It has also led to a real sense of frustration in relation to equality, injustice and hate crime as a result of sexual orientation. CRC urges that policy strands on all aspects of this complex overarching policy area be developed as a matter of urgency.
- f. The critical test of the proposals in the CSI document must be: ‘Do they work to promote cohesion, sharing and integration?’ CRC has concluded that the proposals do not meet this test.”¹⁹

1.28 These responses from the CRC, which outline their main concerns, are generally reflective of the community and voluntary sector as a whole.

A Racial Equality Strategy for Northern Ireland (2005-2010)

1.29 The purpose of the Racial Equality Strategy (2005-2010) is to establish a framework:

“1.1 This strategy establishes a framework

- To tackle racial inequalities in Northern Ireland and to open up opportunity for all;
- To eradicate racism and hate crime; and
- Together with A Shared Future, to initiate actions to promote good race relations.

1.2 It sets out a long term, high level vision of the society that we are working to achieve:

*A society in which racial diversity is supported, understood, valued and respected, where racism in any of its forms is not tolerated and where we live together as a society and enjoy equality of opportunity and equal protection.*²⁰

¹⁹ Community Relations Council’s CSI Response – Executive Summary

²⁰ A Racial Equality Strategy for Northern Ireland (2005-2010), (p. 7)

Public Attitude Survey 2009

1.30 Ipsos MORI facilitated a public engagement exercise, in December 2009 and January 2010, on behalf of Northern Ireland Assembly to understand public attitudes towards the Northern Ireland Assembly and to measure the level of public engagement with the Assembly on an on-going basis. The objectives of the research were to provide measurement of:

- General political awareness such as levels of interest in politics, number of visits to Assembly, voting patterns and intention to vote.
- Perceptions of work of Assembly, including levels and accuracy of perceived and actual knowledge of the same.
- Sources of political information and frequency of use.
- Views of the system of governance of Northern Ireland.”²¹

1.31 The findings from the engagement of most relevance to this audit are that:

- Three in ten (29%) have visited Parliament Buildings at Stormont, although less than a third of these people visited within the last year (8%).
- Significantly fewer Nationalists (23%) compared with (38% of) Unionists have ever visited the Assembly.

NIA Staff Survey 2010

1.32 An internal Staff Survey was carried out in 2010. The aims of the survey were to:

“Give staff an opportunity to express their views on their role within the Secretariat and the support available to them;

- Assess the attitudes of staff in relation to a range of work issues, including professionalism, motivation, development and the organisation’s values and strategic priorities; and
- Seek the views of staff in relation to the effectiveness of internal communications.”²²

1.33 Among the main issues raised through the survey was:

“ Equality/Good Relations issues – around a third of staff indicated that there are equality and good relations issues which the Assembly Commission needs to address.”²³

1.34 Whilst this issue was raised as a concern, when the comments relating to this are explored further the vast majority relate to Equality concerns

²¹ Public Attitude Survey 2009, Research Report for COI/Northern Ireland Assembly, Ipsos MORI (2010), (p. 5)

²² Northern Ireland Assembly Staff Survey (May 2010), (p. 2)

²³ Northern Ireland Assembly Staff Survey (May 2010), (p. 4)

as opposed to those concerns directly covered through good relations
i.e. essentially racism and sectarianism.

Section 2 – Methodology

Methodology Introduction

- 2.1 Holywell Consultancy was contracted by Northern Ireland Assembly Commission to carry out an independent Internal Good Relations Audit of the Northern Ireland Assembly.
- 2.2 The Internal Good Relations Audit was carried out over the period June 2010 – June 2011.

Activities Delivered

- 2.3 Holywell Consultancy used interviews, focus groups, observation, online survey and desk research to inform the findings of this Audit Report.

Interviews

- 8 people have been interviewed to date using a set of ‘trigger questions’, included in Appendix 1. Those interviewed included:
 - Northern Ireland Assembly Secretariat Staff
 - Northern Ireland Assembly Commissioners

Desk Based Research

- An analysis of the relevant policies and procedures and plans of the Northern Ireland Assembly was carried out.
- In addition, other relevant documents were reviewed to inform our findings and recommendations.
- A full list of the documents reviewed is included in Appendix 2.

Focus Groups

- A series of focus groups were held with staff Northern Ireland Assembly staff members. These focus groups were open for all members of the staff team to attend.

Online Survey

- An online survey was carried out with the staff of the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission. A copy of the survey used is included in Appendix 3. The survey was completed by 155 staff members.
- The findings from this exercise were compiled into a summary report which was used to inform this final report.

- 2.4 The information gathered from these engagement exercises have been used to inform the overall findings of this report. A synopsis of the main issues raised during each exercise is included in Appendix 4.

Section 3 – Main Findings

- 3.1 A summary of the findings from the Internal Audit Process is outlined below.
- 3.2 It is important to remember that when facilitating an audit into a difficult and sometimes divisive issue such as good relations that the process is likely to reflect problems or issues rather than successes. This is a recognition that we live in a divided society and that our perceptions and comments are often shaped by this.

Summary of Main Findings

- 3.3 The following is a summary of the main findings arising from the audit process. These findings have been themed into two broad areas – ***What Works Well*** and ***Challenges Identified***. Each of these broad themes has been further subdivided to reflect the wide range of topics covered through the audit process.

What Works Well

Positive Work Environment

- 3.4 The Northern Ireland Assembly is experienced by most staff to be a warm and welcoming workplace. As the staff members apply their values of professionalism, integrity and accountability to their everyday working lives then the workplace continues to improve. It can be characterised as a place of friendliness and harmony.

NIA as a Workplace

- 3.5 The situation can continue to develop to become more inclusive and accommodating as the work already achieved is built upon.

Historical Location

- 3.6 The NIA is an unusual working environment. Inevitably, staff have to be very sensitised to the political milieu in which they carry out their duties. This will continue to be the case. The Good Relations aspect of the workplace therefore requires frequent re-visiting and re-assessment.
- 3.7 The Stormont building and its history represent challenges which require careful presentation. These challenges have been met to date through attention to detail and sensitive negotiation. This process can be further improved using the same methods and skills in a planned incremental manner.

2011 Northern Ireland Assembly Election

- 3.8 The recent election which has demonstrated high approval ratings for the current political composition allows greater confidence in the further development of Good Relations practice.

Positive Good Relations Commitments

- 3.9 The First Minister, Peter Robinson, addressing questions relating to Community Relations Week in June 2011, stated the commitment that is held to building a developing a new, shared society.

“It (Community Relations Week) gives fresh impetus to the determination that most of us share to eradicate the divisions and hatreds that prevent so many from enjoying the benefits of the peaceful, prosperous and fair society that we are continuing to build.”²⁴

- 3.10 There is a willingness amongst staff and the Commission members to address challenges of inclusion within a context of an ever broadening conversation. Equally, there is awareness that barriers still remain and that focusing exclusively on these will only make them more difficult to overcome.

Visitors

- 3.11 Parliament Buildings is successful in attracting a large number of visitors each year. The visitors to the building are warmly received and welcomed.

Display of Artefacts and Memorabilia

- 3.12 The removal of potentially contentious artefacts and memorabilia was managed in an extremely sensitive manner. This has helped in no small way to create a positive, welcoming atmosphere within Parliament Buildings.
- 3.13 The use of art in the building is also increasingly reflective of the new reality within the Assembly. Of particular note are the portraits of Ian Paisley and Seamus Mallon and the paintings in the Senate Chamber which reflect the change from the formation of the original parliament to the new dispensation within the building. It is also welcoming to note that a new series of artworks of political figures from the recent past are soon to be unveiled.

Functioning Legislature

- 3.14 The Assembly is a functioning legislature. The significance of this fact and the realisation that political representatives are working together to deliver on issues of importance to local people cannot be underestimated. Of particular significance is the fact that the last mandate of the Assembly was served in full. This functioning government is in itself a reflection of good relations in practice.

²⁴ Assembly Questions, 6th June 2011

Shared Areas

3.15 The shared areas within Parliament Buildings work very well. These areas, e.g. café, shop, Great Hall, are all welcoming spaces to all and are serviced by friendly staff.

Security

3.16 The security provided within the building provides a safe space for visitors, staff and elected representatives. The provision of security is done in a sensitive manner and as non-intrusively as possible.

Parliament Buildings as a Seat of Power

3.17 Parliament Buildings possess a sense of gravitas and seriousness associated with a legislature. This reflects the seriousness of the work that takes place within the building.

Speaker

3.18 The Northern Ireland Assembly Speaker role, as carried out by William Hay, has been a uniting influence within the Assembly. Through his role as speaker William Hay, and his Deputy Speakers, have taken steps and risks to maintain a new shared future for Northern Ireland.

Parliamentary Procedure

3.19 The procedures adopted and implemented by the Assembly assist greatly with the building of relations between elected representatives. The direction of comments and questions through the chair helps to depersonalise and desensitise remarks and diffuse potentially difficult situations.

Changing Relationships

3.20 It is obvious that the relationships between elected representatives has softened over recent years. This is the result of development of contact through a well functioning committee system and associated legislature. This low key public change is welcome and demonstrates the establishment of positive working relationships which can be the foundation for long-term collaborative working.

Recording of Proceedings

3.21 The recording of proceedings by Hansard Society at committees and plenary sessions also assists in keeping people mindful of their behaviour with one another. Positive interaction can only help to build positive relationships.

Open Government

3.22 The openness and transparency of the functions of the Assembly are particularly welcome. The regular, and sometimes instant, reporting of issues discussed at the Assembly helps to demystify proceedings and allows people to see that elected representatives are working together for the benefit of the whole community.

Practical Approaches to Challenging Issues

3.23 The addressing of challenging issues and the arrival at informal agreements to difficult issues through the support of Assembly staff is a common sense and realistic approach. Dealing with issues in such a manner often helps to defuse potentially damaging and destabilising concerns.

Challenges Identified

3.24 The following are the main good relations challenges arising from the engagement process.

Visitors

3.25 Whilst Parliament Buildings receive a high number of visitors each year visits by members of the Nationalist/Republican community could be improved. The 'Public Attitudes Survey 2009' carried out by Ipsos MORI found that of those consulted to inform the report 23% of Nationalist had visited Parliament Buildings compared with 38% of Unionists.²⁵

Public Tour

3.26 The public tour delivered in Parliament Buildings is quite limited and relatively short. The tour also has very limited reference to the current and recent political situation, a factor behind many visits.

Political Party Staff Members

3.27 At present political party staff members are not bound by any of the rules, regulations or codes of practice that apply to Assembly staff. Whilst this is generally not an issue, it has the potential to be so in the future.

Special Advisor Appointments

3.28 The recent controversy over one special advisor appointment in particular, demonstrates the sensitivities in dealing with the past and how this can quickly become a party political and divisive issue.

Balance Between History & Historic Change

3.29 There is a balance to be sought within the building that reflects the history and historical significance of the building and the historic change that is currently being manifested.

MLA Behaviour

3.30 Despite recent acknowledged improvements in relationships and attitudes there still remain divisions between elected members. These divisions can sometimes be manifest in inappropriate or disrespectful behaviour. Whilst this may be common in other legislative chambers, it must be recognised that this is a place emerging from a violent past and the significance of actions cannot be underestimated or lost on elected representatives.

Flags & Emblems

3.31 Flags and emblems will continue to be a divisive issue within the Assembly. The visible manifestations of difference are precious to people in Northern Ireland. A limited understanding of the meaning and significance of some flags and emblems can lead to increased divisions and tensions.

²⁵ 'Public Attitudes Survey 2009', Ipsos MORI, March 2010

Presence of Media

- 3.32 There is a challenge in having a media presence within the building. Potentially challenging or divisive issues can be magnified under close examination which does not usually help with the development and building of good relations.
- 3.33 An additional challenge is the promotion of the normal functions of government as itself a worthwhile story to be reported.

Parliament Buildings Location

- 3.34 The location of Parliament Buildings, in East Belfast, means that they are relatively inaccessible to people in the West of Northern Ireland. Of the people consulted to inform the 'Public Attitudes Survey 2009' only 10% of those consulted in counties Tyrone and Fermanagh have ever visited Parliament Buildings compares with 39% of people consulted from the Greater Belfast area.²⁶
- 3.35 In addition, to access the buildings means passing through predominantly Loyalist areas of Belfast. This can be off putting for members of the Nationalist community, particularly at certain times of the year.

Fledging Peace Process

- 3.36 The Peace Process is still relatively young and as such remains quite sensitive to outside pressures and influences. The nature of the power sharing arrangements means that there is always the potential for collapse. This would have significant impact on the good relations aspect of the work of the Assembly.

²⁶ 'Public Attitudes Survey 2009', Ipsos MORI, March 2010

Section 4 – Recommendations

- 4.1 The following are the recommendations of Holywell Consultancy for the Northern Ireland Assembly arising from the findings detailed in this report. These recommendations are not listed in any order of priority, but have been themed.
- 4.2 Everything about the building is a balance in symmetry – action pursued by the Commission should reflect this symmetry, this balance.

Maximum Engagement

- 4.3 The Assembly should strive to expend the maximum possible effort in the pro-active addressing of good relations issues rather than a minimum required under the statutory duty. The Assembly should be an exemplar organisation in addressing difficult and challenging good relations issues.

Exhibition Spaces

- 4.4 The Great Hall and Long Gallery within Parliament Buildings should continue to be used as exhibition spaces;
- as a temporary museum
 - for displays of diversity
 - as a location to showcase local craft work
 - as a gallery of artwork from Northern Ireland
 - as a children’s gallery
 - as a concert hall
 - as a hall of culture
 - as a venue for the Derry/Londonderry UK City of Culture celebrations in 2013
 - as a showcase for the European Union Peace Funds and the International Fund for Ireland funds as they approach their conclusion
 - as a venue for activities and displays by the Community Relations Council during the annual Community Relations Week
 - as a display area for NGOs, community and voluntary sector and charities.

Public Engagement through Conference Series

- 4.5 Assembly, in partnership with key organisations and agencies, should embark on a programme of public engagement through a series of annual conferences. The conferences for this next year should be on the following themes:
- *Northern Ireland Assembly and the Northern Ireland Public – how the Assembly works and how you can help us.* To cover a range of issues such as:
 - Examples of good practice from elsewhere
 - Northern Ireland Assembly as a workplace
 - Parliament Buildings as an iconic artefact

- *100 Years On – How Can the Northern Ireland Assembly Commemorate the Decade 1912-1922 in ways which are shared and ethical?*
- *Engaging Young People in Active Citizenship – the Northern Ireland Youth Assembly developing models of good practice and engaging in future visioning process the results of which are promoted and displayed in the Great Hall.*

Open Government

- 4.6 Every effort should continue to be made to make government as open and accessible as possible. This openness and transparency has the potential to lead to the increased understanding and trust in the Assembly process.

Staff Approach

- 4.7 The positive, friendly approach of Assembly staff should be captured and built upon. The good will of the staff should not be taken for granted but their commitment to delivering a high quality public service must be recognised and celebrated.
- 4.8 As part of its Corporate Social Responsibility commitment, the Commission could consider the development of a volunteering strategy for staff with particular attention being dedicated to working with organisations that address good relations issues.
- 4.9 The development of an intern programme, targeted particularly at students and future community leaders, should be developed to help to develop and strengthen the connection that young people have with the Assembly.

Flag Flying & Emblems

- 4.10 This is an issue that will always be contentious. This may need to be revisited within the Assembly. The development of an agreed NIA flag that would fly as an alternative to any other flag could be considered. This could form part of the discussion on commemoration to be considered by the Assembly.

Day of Private Reflection

- 4.11 The Day of Private Reflection on 21 June is an initiative proposed by Healing Through Remembering (HTR). The Day of Private Reflection is offered as an inclusive and positive event that emphasises a commitment to a peaceful new society. It provides a voluntary opportunity for everyone in Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland and Great Britain to reflect upon the conflict in and about Northern Ireland and the future that is before us. The Day of Private Reflection on 21 June is offered as a day for personal, private and individual

reflection, for example, at home or at work or within a family, group or organisation.²⁷

- 4.12 Recognition should be given to this day within Parliament Buildings and staff and visitors should have the space and opportunity for reflection.

Impact of Building

- 4.13 The building is impressive and, to the uninitiated, somewhat daunting. Efforts should be made, through a co-ordinated outreach programme, to familiarise the public with the building.

Good Relations Branch

- 4.14 Consideration should be given to separating the duties of the Equality/Good Relations Officer into two distinctive posts with associated programme budgets. This will reinforce the importance of addressing good relations.
- 4.15 A number of good relations champions (Commissioners and staff members) should be identified and formed into a core team to ensure good relations are central within the working of the Assembly. Essential to the success of this approach will be the support that this group receives.
- 4.16 High quality, challenging good relations training, should be sought and delivered to all Assembly staff, political party staff and elected representatives.
- 4.17 The work of the good relations group within the Assembly should be widely publicised and promoted both within the Assembly and wider society.

Political Party Connection

- 4.18 Connection should be made with representatives from each political party to ensure that party staff members at the Assembly behave in a manner that best reflects a positive approach to good relations issues when present at Parliament Buildings. This could perhaps be part of the role of the NIA Commissioners.

Use of Art

- 4.19 The use of art as a vehicle through which to make Parliament Buildings a more accessible place should be considered. This should include using selected pieces from the Assembly's own collection, the development of new pieces and the use of children's art. The development of pieces such as 'The Hands Across The Divide', in Derry/Londonderry, demonstrates the positive impact that high quality art installations can have.

Education Programme

²⁷ A Day of Private Reflection website, http://www.dayofreflection.com/about_the_day.html

- 4.20 The high quality educational programme already delivered should be built on and expanded. Key to the programme in the future will be the incorporation of good relations elements within the programme, including the delivery of the programme to schools on a cross-community basis. Internship will be of particular use in this regard.

International Connections

- 4.21 The international connections open to the Assembly should be expanded. This will allow the Assembly staff and elected representatives to both learn from and influence other parts of the world emerging from recent conflict situations.

Section 5 – Appendices

5.1 Appendix 1 – Good Relations Trigger Questions



Northern Ireland Assembly Internal Good Relations Audit Consultation Trigger Questions

Buildings/Location

1. Do you feel that the Northern Ireland Assembly is a place of welcome to people from different religious/political background or ethnic group?
2. How do you feel that the symbols/emblems/artwork etc. contributes to the good relations within the Northern Ireland Assembly?
3. How can the Northern Ireland Assembly take steps to make Parliament Buildings a shared space?
4. On a personal level, is there anything within/about the buildings that you would like to see changed?

Main Current Challenges

5. What do you feel are the main good relations challenges facing the Northern Ireland Assembly?
6. The Northern Ireland Assembly can reflect the wider Northern Ireland situation. How do you feel that this impacts in relationships within the Northern Ireland Assembly?
7. Do you think there is a clear unambiguous understanding within and between the political parties of what Good Relations means/entails?
8. How do you feel that the relationship between the Northern Ireland Assembly and Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) affects good relations within the organisation?
9. How do good relations considerations impact on the decision-making of the Northern Ireland Assembly?
10. In your opinion, do you feel that good relations issues have improved/deteriorated in the last few years?

Policies & Programmes

11. Do you think that wider Equality Legislation (Section 75 Part 1) is more important/on a par with Good Relations (Section 75 Part 2)?
12. Are you aware of the policies and legislation that relate to good relations/ have an impact on good relations within the Northern Ireland Assembly?
13. Are there any additional policies that you feel may be needed to help to promote good relations within the Northern Ireland Assembly?

Main Future Challenges

14. How do you feel the Northern Ireland Assembly should build relationships to help to promote good relations? Who should be targeted?

15. What are the barriers to the Northern Ireland Assembly promoting and developing good relations between people of different religious belief, political opinion or racial background?

Next Good Relations Steps

16. What would you like to see contained in a good relations implementation plan for the Northern Ireland Assembly?

17. How do you envisage internal proactive engagement on good relations?

18. What could/do you do to promote good relations within the Northern Ireland Assembly?

Any Other Comments

19. Have you any other comments that you would like to make?

5.2 Appendix 2 – Documents Reviewed

The following documents and policies were reviewed to inform this report.

Holywell Consultancy Collated Primary Research

- Interview, Focus Group Notes
- Survey Report

Relevant General Policies

- Equality Commission for Northern Ireland – Promoting Good Relations
- Equality Commission for Northern Ireland – A Guide for Public Bodies in Northern Ireland
- Assembly Questions on Community Relations Week (June 2011)
- Racial Equality Strategy for Northern Ireland (2005-2010)
- Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration (2010)
- Community Relations Council response to Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration (2010)

NIA Documents/Reports

- Internal Good Relations Audit Terms of Reference
- Northern Ireland Assembly Secretariat Corporate Plan 2008/2011
- Northern Ireland Assembly Staff Survey May 2010
- Towards a Northern Ireland Youth Assembly Paper
- Ipsos MORI – Public Attitude Survey 2009
- Northern Ireland Civil Service Dignity at Work Policy
- Northern Ireland Civil Service Equal Opportunities Policy
- Engagement Strategy for the Northern Ireland Assembly 2009
- Northern Ireland Assembly Commission Good Relations Action Plan 2010-2011
- Northern Ireland Assembly Equality Scheme 2008
- A Racial Equality Strategy for Northern Ireland (2005-2010)

5.3 Appendix 3 – Good Relations Survey



Northern Ireland Assembly

1. Introduction

Dear Colleagues,

The Northern Ireland Act (1998) requires that public bodies have due regard under Section 75(1) to the need "to promote equality of opportunity" between the following nine groups: persons of different religious belief, political opinion, racial group, age, marital status, sexual orientation, men and women generally, persons with a disability and persons without, and persons with dependants and persons without.

In addition, Section 75(2) requires that public bodies have a regard to "the desirability of promoting good relations" between persons of different religious belief, political opinion or racial group. Put simply the Act requires public bodies to treat all nine categories of people equally and encourages public bodies to tackle sectarianism and racism.

The NI Assembly Commission is committed through its Equality Scheme to the principle of equality of opportunity and good relations. In that context, the Commission will aim to ensure that the entire community can have full and fair access to, and participate in, the operations of the Northern Ireland Assembly.

To assist in achieving its vision, the Commission, at its meeting of 10 December 2009, reiterated and formalised its commitment to Good Relations, it stated:

'The Northern Ireland Assembly Commission is committed to the promotion of good relations between persons of differing religious belief, political opinion or racial group and is committed to challenging sectarianism and racism.'

In order to take forward this area of work, the Commission approved a Draft Good Relations Action Plan, for public consultation, at its meeting on the 21st January 2010. This draft plan also contributes to the corporate objective 'to promote good relations' as stated in the Commission's 2008-2011 (Revised 2009) Secretariat Corporate Plan. Following consultation, the draft plan was amended and approved and is now available on the Assembly website.

Holywell Consultancy has been commissioned to carry out an internal audit of

how we are meeting the requirements outlined above. As an essential part of this audit they have developed this online questionnaire and I would be grateful if you could take time to complete this - it should take no longer than 20 minutes.

This questionnaire is designed to help us to develop a clear picture of the current position on good relations within the Assembly. After we have undertaken the audit we will consider what the best next steps might be. Holywell Consultancy will be using other methods which will inform this process and will also undertake focus groups and individual interviews with a selection of MLAs and secretariat staff.

All responses submitted regarding the audit questionnaire are anonymous - we will not be able to determine the identity of anyone who has completed the questionnaire. All information recorded will be held in confidence by Holywell Consultancy and will be used solely for the purpose of identifying good relations challenges and issues to be addressed.

I appreciate your cooperation in completing this important audit questionnaire.

Trevor Reaney
Clerk/Director General

2. About You

1. What directorate do you work in within the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission?

Clerking/Reporting	<input type="checkbox"/>	DG's Office	<input type="checkbox"/>	Engagement	<input type="checkbox"/>
Facilities	<input type="checkbox"/>	Resources	<input type="checkbox"/>		

2. How long have you worked in the Northern Ireland Assembly?

Less than 6 months	<input type="checkbox"/>	6 months – 1 year	<input type="checkbox"/>	1 – 3 years	<input type="checkbox"/>
3 years+	<input type="checkbox"/>				

3. What is your employment grade?

AG1 – AG3	<input type="checkbox"/>	AG4 – AG5	<input type="checkbox"/>	AG6 – AG7	<input type="checkbox"/>
AG8 – AG9	<input type="checkbox"/>				

Other (please specify) _____

4. Sex – please indicate your sex by ticking the appropriate box below.

Male	<input type="checkbox"/>	Female	<input type="checkbox"/>
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5. Community Background – regardless of whether they actually practice a particular religion, most people in Northern Ireland are perceived to be members of either the Protestant or Roman Catholic communities. Please indicate the community to which you belong by ticking the appropriate box below:

I am a member of the Protestant Community	<input type="checkbox"/>
I am a member of the Roman Catholic Community	<input type="checkbox"/>
I am not a member of either the Protestant or the Roman Catholic communities	<input type="checkbox"/>

6. Political Opinion – please tick the box that you feel most accurately reflects your political opinion.

Unionist	<input type="checkbox"/>
Loyalist	<input type="checkbox"/>
Nationalist	<input type="checkbox"/>
Republican	<input type="checkbox"/>
Socialist	<input type="checkbox"/>
None	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other (please state)	<input type="checkbox"/>

7. Racial Group

Please state your nationality:

My nationality is: _____

Please indicate your race or colour or ethnic or national origins:

White	<input type="checkbox"/>	Irish Traveller	<input type="checkbox"/>	Pakistani	<input type="checkbox"/>
Black Caribbean	<input type="checkbox"/>	Black Other	<input type="checkbox"/>	Black African	<input type="checkbox"/>
Indian	<input type="checkbox"/>	Bangladeshi	<input type="checkbox"/>	Chinese	<input type="checkbox"/>
Mixed ethnic group (please state):		Any other ethnic group (please state):			

3. Buildings/Location

8. Do you feel that Parliament Buildings, the location of the Northern Ireland Assembly, is a place of welcome to people from different religious/political backgrounds or ethnic groups?

Yes – Parliament Buildings is a place of welcome to people from different religious/political backgrounds or ethnic groups	
No – Parliament Buildings are not welcoming to people from different religious/political backgrounds or ethnic groups	
Neutral - Parliament Buildings are neither welcoming nor unwelcoming to people from different religious/political backgrounds or ethnic groups	
No opinion	

Please use this space to expand on your response.

9. How do you feel that the symbols/emblems/artwork etc. in Parliament Buildings contributes to good relations (race, religion and political opinion) within the Northern Ireland Assembly?

Symbols/emblems/artwork make a positive contribution to good relations within the Northern Ireland Assembly	
Symbols/emblems/artwork make a negative contribution to good relations within the Northern Ireland Assembly	
Symbols/emblems/artwork make neither a positive or negative contribution to good relations within the Northern Ireland Assembly	
No opinion	

Please use this space to expand on your response.

10. How can the Northern Ireland Assembly Secretariat take steps to ensure that Parliament Buildings is a shared space for all regardless of political/religious backgrounds or ethnic group?

11. On a personal level, is there anything within the building/location that you would like to see changed that may contribute to the positive promotion of good relations?

4. Good Relations and You

12. What is your general experience of good relations within the Northern Ireland Assembly?

Generally positive	
Neither positive or negative	
Generally negative	

Please use this space to expand on your response.

13. Have you ever perceived that you have been discriminated against within the Northern Ireland Assembly due to your religion/race/political background?

Yes		No	
-----	--	----	--

(Supplementary question only to be asked if the answer to No. 13. Is 'Yes')

13a. What action was/needs to be taken to address this?

Please use this space for your response.

14. Do you feel that the Northern Ireland Assembly is a workplace that encourages open discussion on good relations issues?

Yes		No		Don't know	
-----	--	----	--	------------	--

Please use this space to expand on your response.

15. Which of the following statements most accurately reflects how you feel the perceived religion/race/political opinion of your colleagues affects the relationship that you have with them?

I feel more comfortable with those people I believe are of a similar background to me.	
The religious, racial or political background of my colleagues does not matter to me at all.	
I have difficulties with/feel challenged by those people that I perceive to be from a different background to me.	
I actively seek to build relationships with those people I perceive to be of a different background to me.	
It does not affect me, or the delivery of my work, in any way.	

Please use this space to expand on your response.

16. What do you feel are the main good relations challenges facing the Northern Ireland Assembly Secretariat?

17. Do you think there is a clear commitment to promoting good relations within and between the political parties within the Northern Ireland Assembly?

Yes, all political parties have a clear commitment to promoting good relations	
Some of the political parties have a clear commitment to promoting good relations	
Not sure, I am not aware of the political parties' commitment to promoting good relations	
No, there is no clear commitment to promoting good relations within and between the political parties	

Please use this space to expand on your response.

18. Do you think that good relations considerations impact on the day-to-day operation of the Northern Ireland Assembly Secretariat?

Good relations is a central consideration	
Consideration given to good relations	
No opinion/Don't know	
Little consideration given to good relations	
No consideration given to good relations	
<p>Please use this space to expand on your response.</p>	

19. In your opinion, do you feel that good relations within the following areas of the Northern Ireland Assembly has improved/deteriorated or remained unchanged in the last few years in the following areas:

	Improved considerably	Improved	Remained Unchanged	No opinion/Don't Know	Deteriorated	Deteriorated considerably
Between staff members						
Between management and staff						
Between staff and MLAs						
Between staff and public						

Please use this space to expand on your response.

20. What importance do you think that good relations considerations should have within the Northern Ireland Assembly Secretariat?

- Central/Core – it should be reflected in all that we do
- Important – it is an issue that we must be aware of and striving to make a difference in
- No opinion
- Peripheral – it is an issue that is of peripheral importance to our work
- Not important – it is an issue that we should avoid

Please use this space to expand on your response.

21. Are you aware of the legislation and policies that relate to good relations/have an impact on good relations in Northern Ireland? Please list those that you feel are relevant.

22. Are you aware of the policies relating to good relations within the Northern Ireland Assembly Secretariat? Please list those you feel are relevant.

23. Are there any additional policies that you feel may be needed to help to promote good relations within the Northern Ireland Assembly Secretariat? Please list those areas that you feel need to be considered.

24. How do you feel the Northern Ireland Assembly Secretariat should build relationships to help to promote good relations? Who should be involved?

25. Do you feel there are any barriers to the Northern Ireland Assembly Secretariat promoting and developing good relations between people of

different religious belief, political opinion or racial background? If so, what are they?

7. Next Good Relations Steps

26. What would you like to see contained in a good relations implementation plan for the Northern Ireland Assembly Secretariat?

26. What could/do you do to promote good relations within the Northern Ireland Assembly Secretariat?

8. Other Comments

27. Please use this space for any other comments that you may have on good relations within the Northern Ireland

Assembly.

Please complete and return this survey, using the addressed envelope provided, by 17th December 2010.

5.4 Appendix 4 – Engagement Feedback

Below are the main findings from each element of the engagement process undertaken by Holywell Consultancy. These findings are displayed in the following sections:

- Feedback from Staff Interviews
- Feedback from Commissioner Interviews
- Feedback from Focus Group Sessions
- Online Survey Analysis

Staff Interview Feedback

The following are the main issues arising from the interviews carried out with staff members.

Building & General Good Relations Issues

- Staff are conscious of working in a political environment and their duty of impartiality. There is a real sense of the barriers that are not to be crossed.
- There must be people who find things like the statue of Craigavon difficult, particularly people from the Republican community.
- The building has the capacity to change culturally.
- The Chamber was rebuilt. This helped to make the building more accessible.
- The Speaker plays an important role as a uniting figure, he deserves enormous credit.
- A real challenge is having a constant media presence.
- We must continue to broaden things beyond the two traditional communities.
- The building provides gravitas – this is the seat of government. It has also become a ‘new’ place over the last few years.
- Everything that happens here has a political edge to it.
- There is an issue with political party staff who are not bound by the same rules and regulations as NIA staff.
- The workplace cannot be a sterile environment.
- Politicians have changed since 1998. Members from all parties are now more likely to use all facilities.
- Parliamentary procedures help to foster good relations. In the Chamber no remarks are personalised.

Main Current Good Relations Challenges

- There was a shift from the civil service attitude to duties as a secretariat servicing the Assembly.
- There is a significant art collection in storage that could be used throughout the building.
- The speed of change within the Assembly in generally very slow.

Good Relations Policies and Programmes

- There is a general misunderstanding between Parts 1 & 2 of Section 75 legislation.

- Good Relations is the less onerous duty.
- There is discussion needed on whether a minimum or maximum approach is adopted to addressing good relations.
- Are there formal agreements in place in relation to good relations, e.g. floral displays?
- Any future good relations policy must be contentious or will not be worth its salt. The detail needed should not be underestimated.
- Good relations is the poor cousin to equality but is more important. It is both a blessing and a curse that the legislation is relatively loose.
- A common sense approach is needed to addressing good relations – treat others as you would like to be treated.

Main Future Good Relations Challenges

- Art – development of new materials for display in the building.
- We may never arrive at a good relations initiative that is wholly supported by all political parties.
- Agreeing a good relations strategy/policy.
- Achieving political support for good relations work.
- Mainstreaming good relations.
- Dealing with issues on an informal, practical basis.
- It is important to have and to implement codes of conduct.
- Leadership on good relations will be important. This could be gentle and facilitate change. It is important that there is a public united face on good relations.
- Education programme must be delivered on a cross-community basis with schools.

Commissioner Interview Feedback

The following are the main issues arising from the interviews carried out with commissioners.

Building & General Good Relations Issues

- This is a work in progress. It is a place of welcome that is continually changing.
- It is an impressive building.
- To deny the history of the place would be wrong and counterproductive.
- We are moving towards a building where everyone takes ownership. This could be encouraged through the use of art.
- Need to complement what already exists 'holding the reality of what is there but adding to what is there also'.
- It is a shared space.
- It needs to be a more user-friendly building, particularly for people with disabilities.
- The governing issues are more stabilised and this is encouraging and reflects well in the building.
- We need to change mindsets about this being a shared space for all.

Main Current Good Relations Challenges

- 'The Assembly has moved tremendously over the last four years. There is cooperation and collaboration at a level never known before. As we move through the next four years, people are expecting a different Assembly, one that people can take ownership of. This has to be a building that is representative of the people out there, delivering for all, not just one or two. Take ownership... 'this is my Assembly'. Our politicians need to do more around this. Politicians need to engage more with people and going out and getting in touch with the grassroots work.'

'There is a major challenge to the NI Assembly on 'how do we heal the past', and how do we get to a point where victims aren't forgotten about. How do we deal with the past in a way that creates a shared future. We need to make sure the past does not destroy the future for us. We need to face up to that reality. The past will not go away and we need to confront it and face up to the responsibility of dealing with, and healing, the past. This is a huge challenge.'

'The upcoming decade of commemorations needs to be managed and dealt with sensitively. There is a danger of dividing rather than uniting and we need to find a way through all of this if NI is to have a future where everyone is at peace. Challenges include taking leadership.'

- 'There is also so much fear regarding victims issues. We cannot forget the victims, victims need healing. We need to try to apply a model that at least works for the vast majority of the people.'

Main Future Good Relations Challenges

- There is a different understanding of good relations by different political parties. Some see good relations as a threat. 'There are divisions on how we deal with good relations'.
- The Assembly needs a degree of space to address good relations.
- 'The Speaker is powerful and can set a political agenda which may be more contentious (in the future). We need to ensure that this does not happen.'
- There is ambiguity – Republicans feel good relations is about getting a balance, Unionist/Loyalist perspective is (good relations is) about the promotion of Republicanism.

Focus Group Feedback

The following are the main issues arising from the focus groups.

Building & General Good Relations Issues

- People who work here have chosen to do so. You expect flags, emblems etc. when you work in such an environment.

Main Current Good Relations Challenges

- Relationships with colleagues. You are always mindful of conversation topics.
- The focus is the 'traditional division' as opposed to race.
- There is generally avoidance of good relations issues for fear of 'opening a can of worms'.
- The tours of the building have been sanitised.
- Symbols continue to be an issue, particularly the use of the poppy.
- Politicians do not behave neutrally. Sometimes they display inappropriate behaviour towards one another.
- Training must include elected representatives.
- In general inappropriate comments are not dealt with adequately.
- We need to face the issues arising from the Troubles.
- There needs to be action about inappropriate jokes that have a sectarian or racist element.
- The atmosphere is generally 'stay neutral and say nothing' which generally reflects the wider society.

Good Relations Policies and Programmes

- MLAs are working on a relationship policy although this is at the early stages.

Main Future Good Relations Challenges

- There needs to be an increased understanding and definition of good relations within the Assembly.
- The poppy issue needs to be dealt with.
- We have the opportunity to add to the history of this building in a positive manner.
- We should engage with those disenfranchised on the good relations issue.
- The Youth Assembly is a way that good relations issues could be addressed.
- Timely reminders of good relations issues should be brought up at team meetings.
- Any good relations training needs to be of a high quality – thought provoking.

Online Survey Analysis

Holywell Consultancy conducted a survey regarding internal good relations within the Northern Ireland Assembly. The survey was available for online completion from 18 November 2010 until 13 January 2011. 155 staff members responded to the survey. These employees ranged from grades AG1 to AG9 and included employees from Clerking/Reporting, the DG's office, Engagement, Facilities, and Resources.

The survey asked questions in each of the following sections:

- The location and physical structure/appearance of Parliament Buildings;
- Good Relations within the Assembly;
- Existing policies and procedures regarding good relations; and
- Recommendations for improving good relations in the Assembly.

The following is a summary of the main findings from the survey. Comments have been included to illustrate the main points made.

Q. Do you feel that Parliament Buildings, the location of the Northern Ireland Assembly, is a place of welcome to people from different political/religious backgrounds or ethnic groups?

- Yes – 72.0% - Parliament Buildings is a place of welcome to people from different political/religious backgrounds or ethnic groups.
- No – 5.6% - Parliament Buildings is not welcoming to people from different political/religious backgrounds or ethnic groups
- Neutral – 18.9% - Parliament Buildings is neither welcoming nor unwelcoming to people from different political/religious backgrounds or ethnic groups.
- No opinion – 3.5%

Changed.

It was historically seen as a predominantly Unionist Building, perhaps – but certainly not since 1998.

Efforts made.

Staff in Parliament Buildings make a huge effort to make the building non-threatening for staff, members, and especially visitors and establish a neutral space for everyone.

More efforts needed.

While there have been some tentative but positive steps towards making Parliament Buildings more welcoming to the wider Nationalist community, there is still some way to go in terms of adequately reflecting the Irish national culture and identity. Whilst the strong British/Unionist legacy associated with Parliament Buildings should continue to be valued, specific measures are needed to achieve a working environment in which there is a parity of esteem between the main traditions.

Q. How do you feel that the symbols/emblems/artwork, etc. in Parliament Buildings contributes to good relations (race, religion, and political opinion) within the Northern Ireland Assembly?

- Neutral – 38.5% - Symbols/emblems make neither a positive or negative contribution to good relations with the Northern Ireland Assembly.
- Positive – 28.0% - Symbols/emblems make a positive contribution to good relations within the Northern Ireland Assembly.
- Negative – 20.3% - Symbols/emblems make a negative contribution to good relations within the Northern Ireland Assembly.
- No opinion – 13.3%

Reflecting neutrality.

It is increasingly improving, for example, the addition of the welcome in various languages in the Great Hall.

Let's talk about it.

I think the building is dominated by its Unionist history through artwork and statues. I think there is far too much emphasis on the Unionist history in tours and the literature and not enough on the current work of the Assembly, which is much more inclusive. I think that work to bring community groups to the building, especially disenfranchised Nationalist ones, is hampered when their preconceptions of the purpose of the building appears to be confirmed by the artwork on their arrival. Equally, I appreciate that there is a significant amount of artwork that is hidden away that has a strong Unionist history. We need an open discussion about what to do with the artwork and how and where it should be displayed instead of treating it like a secret.

Natural approach.

This is a diverse workplace and as such, symbols, emblems, artwork (within reason) are to be expected. If we cannot respect the different cultures/identities that make-up the Assembly, we should be asking ourselves why are we working here and how do we expect to contribute to the work of the Assembly.

Positive

Anything that fosters good relations, such as artwork/symbols should be encouraged as it is a fledgling Assembly – especially important after coming out of a conflict situation in the country. Therefore its members, their staff, and secretariat staff that support them need to set an example of working together and building relationships together.

Q. How can the Northern Ireland Assembly Secretariat take steps to ensure that PB is a shared space for all, regardless of political/religious backgrounds or ethnic group?

Multi-cultural approach.

Be imaginative and open up the Great Hall to displays of all our cultures and identities, including ethnic minorities, flags, emblems, costumes, photographs.

Reflective.

Stripping away the history of this building is not the answer. Instead we should lay down our own layers of symbols/emblems/artwork to show the journey that Northern Ireland has been through.

Languages.

Develop a specific plan, which seeks to extend a reasonable level of information in other languages. Get over ourselves about the whole Irish/Ulster Scots thing and treat it like any other of the languages spoken in Northern Ireland, such as Polish or Mandarin. There are lots of expensive options out there, but universal use of the current leaflets in languages other than English would be great and wouldn't cost any more.

Enforcement.

They need to have a more proactive attitude to the Engagement Strategy and even more doing things that have never been tried before. This will encourage others to promote Parliament Buildings as a shared space.

Continuation of current practice.

By being patient and continuing good work. The Secretariat is already staffed by a diverse set of people/religions/nationalities/ages who all have something to give. The Secretariat staff are aware of the need to project to its stakeholders that the Assembly is a shared space for all, regardless of who you are.

Q. What is your experience of good relations within the Northern Irish Assembly?

- 75.5% - Generally positive
- 2.1% - Generally negative
- 22.4% - Nether positive or negative

Positive

In my experience, all the people I work with here, including staff and MLAs/Party staff act in a most professional manner – impartially and with sensitivity regarding the political factors of others.

Neutral

People's social, religious, or political backgrounds don't seem to be of great importance in forging good working relationships or friendships within the directorate in which I work.

Negative

Among secretariat staff, there is tolerance and respect. Sadly, this is not reflected by many Members.

Q. Have you ever perceived that you have been discriminated against within the Northern Ireland Assembly due to your religion/race/political background?

- 91.7% - No
- 8.3% - Yes

Q. Do you feel the Northern Irish Assembly is a workplace that encourages open discussion on good relations issues?

- 35.7% - Yes
- 31.4% - No
- 32.9% - Don't Know

Relationships.

We have good discussion within our office, but I would be wary about raising issues with a colleague whom I do not know.

More could be done.

I have responded "yes", but more could be done to encourage discussion about it and I hope the actions arising from this audit will assist in doing so.

Avoidance

We do a lot of fudging over and ignoring of elephants in the room to allow us to believe that we are discussing the issue openly.

Grade dependent.

My office is a closed shop where only people at certain grades get to voice an opinion without fear of being accused of insubordination.

Need advice.

I feel that as a member of the secretariat staff, I am not supposed to have any political views. I do not ascribe to any of the traditional views, but I have opinions and would like to be able to express them in an appropriate manner without feeling that I am breaking some code. The problem is, I do not know what the code is.

Q. Which of the following statements most accurately reflects how you feel the perceived religion/race/political opinion of your colleagues affects the relationship that you have with them?

- 61.7% - It does not matter to me at all.
- 23.3% - It does not effect me or my work.
- 1.4%- I have difficulties with those I perceive to be of a different opinion.
- 5.7% - I actively seek to build relationships with those I perceive to be of a different opinion.
- 5.7% - I feel more comfortable with those people I believe are of a similar opinion.

Positive – opportunity through work.

One of the positive values of working in the Assembly is precisely that one learns to appreciate the humanity of people whose views one would disapprove of and whom, if one did not work for the Assembly, one might not encounter.

Neutrality

While other's background does not matter to me in terms of abilities, team spirit etc. I actively seek to keep my conversation neutral or invite other opinions to be respectful of diversity.

General

I really don't care what background someone comes from – it's all about how they treat others. People of the same religion/racial background can be intolerable, why discriminate against other decent people just because they are 'different'?

Q. What do you feel are the main good relations challenges facing the Northern Ireland Assembly?**Changing society.**

In hard times, views become more insular and less inclusive. People are more likely to compare their luck with others and feel comparatively hard done by. Leadership will be required to proactively state and demonstrate that the Secretariat is a meritocracy where everyone is valued equally and treated fairly.

Model of government.

Yes –the model of government emphasises difference. Some of the political parties are not committed to good relations – consider the difficulty experienced in producing a 'shared future' strategy.

Legacy – creating shared future.

Movement away from legacy issues into a genuine shared future.

Q. Do you think there is a clear commitment to promoting good relations within and between the political parties within the Northern Ireland Assembly?

- 13.6% - Yes, all parties have a clear commitment.
- 30.3% - Some of the political parties have a clear commitment.
- 40.9% - Unsure.
- 15.2% - No, there is no clear commitment.

Improvement

I think generally things have improved greatly and are continuing to improve.

Lack of Understanding

Some of the parties appear to have a clearer commitment to good relations than others. Some parties would seem to think that good relations is enforced 'getting along' and little more than wishy-washy liberal nonsense.

Entrenchment

More of the parties are still steeped in their entrenched position and are intolerant of a different view from an opposition party; especially if it will lose them voters.

Q. Do you think that good relations considerations impact the day-to-day operation of the Northern Ireland Assembly Secretariat?

- 18.5% - Central consideration is given.
- 33.1% - Consideration is given.
- 33.8% - No opinion/Don't know.
- 14.6% - Little consideration is given.
- 0.0% - No consideration is given.

Natural/normal.

There is clearly a statutory obligation, but we are a busy organisation and for most of us, it is not at the core of everything we do. Most people try their best to promote good relations and I think we get along remarkably well.

Very positive.

Perhaps more opportunities to promote good relations arise on the engagement/education side of the business. Between staff I believe consideration is given. In the procedural business, negotiation, influencing and consensus-building can improve good relations in and between parties. I am glad that progress is being made at a corporate level to address this duty.

Leadership.

The main thrust to ensure good relations has to come from Managers in the organisation. They have to encourage good relations, team working. Maybe consideration needs to be given to providing managers with this training as part of a management development programme.

Q. What importance do you think that good relations considerations should have within the Northern Ireland Assembly Secretariat?

- 51.3% - Important
- 31.9% - Central/Core
- 13.4% - Peripheral
- 4.4% - No opinion

Exemplar

This is the home of the Northern Ireland government and as such needs to be the driving force and example of good relations with a neutral working environment.

Q. Are there any additional policies that you feel may be needed to help to promote good relations within the Northern Ireland Assembly Secretariat?

Fear of Policies

I don't think we should have too many policies as this would be overload. The policy we do have on good relations should cover actions by staff of the NIAC in the work context. The MLAs could have their own policy which relates to the Assembly as a legislature. I feel there are too many policies; to change people's attitudes it would be better to help create good relations by evolving the environment and not through enforcement.

Q. How do you feel the Northern Ireland Assembly Secretariat should build relationships to help promote good relations? Who should be involved?

All.

All staff need to be doing this of course. Good relations is not a tap that can be turned on or off, or can be made to flow more vigorously. Constant reinforcement and endorsement of examples of good relations will be significantly more effective in changing people's behaviour than imposing an ill-conceived policy document on staff.

Q. Do you feel there are any barriers to the Northern Ireland Assembly Secretariat promoting and developing good relations between people of different religious beliefs, political opinion, or racial backgrounds? If so, what are they?

Other staffers (parties).

About half of the people who work in the building are not employed by the Secretariat – party staff, members etc. – so therefore its influence and ability to affect change is hampered.

Political views.

At the end of the day, we are an Assembly, with all parties having different views; we can't change this.

Addressing different issues.

MLAs – perhaps could make it difficult to focus on difference or make it difficult for an employee to admit problems with difference in this regard?

Q. What would you like to see contained in a good relations implementation plan for the Northern Ireland Assembly Secretariat?

Events

A number of events where everyone can get together.

Action Plan

A plan of how its importance will be raised to ensure increased awareness amongst staff and members.

Promotion of 'good news'

Advertising/promotion of good works that are already being done, i.e. cooperation between MLAs, parties, and Ministers from different traditions.

Champion

I would like to see it championed by a specific commissioner.

Q. What could/do you do to promote good relations within the Northern Ireland Assembly Secretariat?**Professional approach.**

I have sought to promote the concept of 'treating others as you wish to be treated' and will continue to do so. I also seek to challenge any inappropriate comments or attitudes which may adversely affect good relations.

Q. Please use this space for any other comments that you may have on good relations within the Northern Irish Assembly**Crucial work.**

It's really good to see some work beginning here on good relations because it's crucial that this society continues to transform from conflict to healthy, informed diversity, and the Assembly needs to lead it.