



***Equality Scheme
for Choice Housing Ireland Ltd.***

**Drawn up in accordance with Section 75 and Schedule 9 of
the Northern Ireland Act 1998**

***This document is available in a range of formats on request.
Please contact us with your requirements (see page 9 for
contact details).***

**Leslie Morrell House
37-41 May Street
Belfast
BT1 4DN**

Approved by the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland on:

Foreword

Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 (the Act) requires public authorities, in carrying out their functions relating to Northern Ireland, to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity and regard to the desirability of promoting good relations across a range of categories outlined in the Act¹.

In our equality scheme we set out how Choice proposes to fulfil the Section 75 statutory duties.

We will commit the necessary resources in terms of people, time and money to make sure that the Section 75 statutory duties are complied with and that the equality scheme is implemented effectively, and on time.

We commit to having effective internal arrangements in place for ensuring our effective compliance with the Section 75 statutory duties and for monitoring and reviewing our progress.

We will develop and deliver a programme of communication and training with the aim of ensuring that all our staff and board members are made fully aware of our equality scheme and understand the commitments and obligations within it. We will develop a programme of awareness raising for our consultees on the Section 75 statutory duties and our commitments in our equality scheme.

We, the Chair, Group Chief Executive and Senior Management Team of Choice, are fully committed to effectively fulfilling our Section 75 statutory duties across all our functions (including service provision, employment and procurement) through the effective implementation of our equality scheme.

We realise the important role that the community and voluntary sector and the general public have to play to ensure the Section 75 statutory duties are effectively implemented. Our equality scheme demonstrates how determined we are to ensure there are opportunities, for people affected by our work, to positively influence how we carry out our functions in line with the Section 75

¹ See section 1.1 of our Equality Scheme.

statutory duties. It also offers the means whereby persons directly affected by what they consider to be a failure on our part to comply with our equality scheme, can make complaints.

On behalf of Choice, our staff and our Board, we are pleased to support and endorse this equality scheme which has been drawn up in accordance with Section 75 and Schedule 9 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and Equality Commission guidelines.

Mrs Hazel Bell
Chair

Mr Michael McDonnell
Group Chief Executive

Date:

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Chapter 1 Introduction

Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998

1.1 Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 (the Act) requires Choice to comply with two statutory duties:

Section 75 (1)

In carrying out our functions relating to Northern Ireland we are required to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity between

- 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
- persons with dependants and persons without.

Section 75 (2)

In addition, without prejudice to the obligations above, in carrying out our functions in relation to Northern Ireland we are required to have regard to the desirability of promoting good relations between persons of different religious belief, political opinion or racial group.

“Functions” include the “powers and duties” of a housing association². This includes our employment and procurement functions. Please see below under “Who we are and what we do” for a detailed explanation of our functions.

How we propose to fulfil the Section 75 duties in relation to the relevant functions of Choice

1.2 Schedule 9 4. (1) of the Act requires Choice as a designated Housing Association to set out in an equality scheme how it proposes to fulfil the duties imposed by Section 75 in relation to its relevant functions. This equality scheme is intended to fulfil that statutory requirement. It is both a statement of our arrangements for fulfilling the Section 75 statutory duties and our plan for their implementation.

1.3 Choice is committed to the discharge of our Section 75 obligations in all parts of our organisation and we will commit the

² Section 98 (1) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

necessary resources in terms of people, time and money to ensure that the Section 75 statutory duties are complied with and that the equality scheme can be implemented effectively.

Who we are and what we do - *About Housing Associations*

A housing association is an independent voluntary organisation dedicated to helping people obtain good, affordable housing which meets their needs. A significant proportion of the work they do assists the government in the delivery of much-needed public services but they are not public bodies.

In April 2004 the registered housing associations in Northern Ireland came within the jurisdiction of the Commissioner for Complaints by virtue of Article 146 of The Housing (NI) Order 2003. As a result of this, Registered Housing Associations were designated as public authorities for the purposes of Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Housing associations are regulated by the Department for Communities (DfC). They work closely with the DfC and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) to deliver housing and related services. Some also provide care and /or support services so also work with the relevant public authorities for the health sector. As a result of this situation, housing associations must adhere to a wide range of policies and procedures which have been developed and are owned by a public authority or government department. In such cases housing associations must operate the policy of another body and have little or no scope to change that policy. For example, housing associations are the main delivery vehicle for the Social Housing Development Programme but need is determined by the NIHE and the DfC develops the programme which is then managed by the Housing Executive. So whilst housing associations may bid to deliver part of that programme they have no powers to shape the programme or establish where new social housing should be built.

In undertaking their Audits of Inequalities and establishing their Action Plans, housing associations have therefore been mindful of the need to focus on measures where they have greatest ability to effect change. Where appropriate, potential inequalities identified that are outside the remit of the housing associations will be referred to the relevant public body.

While each designated housing association has produced its own Equality Scheme they have also agreed to work collectively on this major undertaking. Their representative body the Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations (NIFHA) is at present taking a co-ordinating role as part of this collaborative approach to help maximise resources, promote the sharing of best practice and minimise the administrative burden for stakeholder organisations.

About Choice

Choice is one of the largest housing associations in Northern Ireland. The high quality homes, care and support services we provide help meet the diverse needs of a wide range of customers including; older people, families, mature singles and people with complex needs.

Our focus is on delivering more homes, better services and stronger inclusive communities. We're proud that more than 10,000 customers have made us their 'provider of choice' and we're committed to building more high quality homes for those who are in need of support.

Choice combines the experiences and expertise of four great housing associations that have spent three decades building 10,000 homes and delivering friendly and personal services to customers across Northern Ireland.

Our size, scale and capacity mean that we can do much more than any other housing association. Our core values commit us to shaping new standards of excellence that redefine our sector and provide more great housing and support at a reasonable cost.

Our Promise

Our focus is on delivering more great homes, enhanced services and stronger inclusive communities.

We are a housing association that delivers much more than housing. We are in the business of transforming lives and building communities.

At Choice, we take pride in changing what our customers can expect from a modern housing association. We value our

customers as partners in our journey. Personal, friendly and trusted relationships are at the heart of our promise to deliver exceptional services that can anticipate and meet current and future needs.

Our Core Values

Our core values are the building blocks of our culture, providing common language and acceptable standards of behaviour. The values we have adopted for our brand and organisational culture are as follows:

- Trustworthy
- Customer Centred
- Dynamic

Choice is led and controlled by a Board. The Board has ultimate responsibility for directing the activity of the Association, ensuring it is well run and governed, delivering on its social ethos.

Choice currently employs over 350 staff. For the purposes of this equality scheme, Choice performs the following functions:

- Provision of a range of housing, care and support services
- Property Maintenance and Repairs
- Development of new homes
- Recruitment of Board and staff
- Contributes to Building Sustainable Communities

Chapter 2 Our arrangements for assessing our compliance with the section 75 duties (Schedule 9 4. (2) (a))

2.1 Some of our arrangements for assessing our compliance with the Section 75 statutory duties are outlined in other relevant parts of this equality scheme (refer to Appendix 4).

In addition we have the following arrangements in place for assessing our compliance:

Responsibilities and reporting

2.2 Choice is committed to the fulfilment of our Section 75 obligations in all parts of our work.

2.3 Responsibility for the effective implementation of our equality scheme lies with the Group Chief Executive. The Group Chief Executive is accountable to the Board for ensuring the development, implementation, maintenance and review of the equality scheme in accordance with Section 75 and Schedule 9 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, including any good practice or guidance that has been or may be issued by the Equality Commission.

2.4 If you have any questions or comments regarding this equality scheme, please contact the Governance & Communications team using the contact details below and we will respond to you as soon as possible:

Governance & Communications
equality@choice-housing.org
37-41 May Street
Belfast
BT1 4DN

Tel: 0300 111 2211
Email: equality@choice-housing.org
Website: www.choice-housing.org

2.5 Objectives and targets relating to the statutory duties will be integrated into our strategic and operational business plans³.

2.6 Employees' job descriptions and performance plans reflect their contributions to the discharge of the Section 75 statutory duties and implementation of the equality scheme, where relevant. The personal performance plans are subject to appraisal in the annual performance review.

2.7 Choice prepares an annual report on the progress we have made on implementing the arrangements set out in this equality scheme to discharge our Section 75 statutory duties (Section 75 annual progress report).

The Section 75 annual progress report will be sent to the Equality Commission by 31 August each year and will follow any guidance on annual reporting issued by the Equality Commission.

Progress on the delivery of Section 75 statutory duties will also be included in our annual report.

2.8 The latest Section 75 annual progress report will be made available on our website www.choice-housing.org or by contacting:

Governance & Communications
Leslie Morrell House
37-41 May Street
Belfast
BT1 4DN

Tel: 0300 111 2211
Email: enquiries@choice-housing.org
Website: www.choice-housing.org

2.9 Choice liaises closely with the Equality Commission to ensure that progress on the implementation of our equality scheme is maintained.

³ See Appendix 4 'Timetable for measures proposed' and section 2.11 of this equality scheme.

Action plan/action measures

2.10 Choice has developed an action plan to promote equality of opportunity and good relations. This action plan is set out in Appendix 6 to this equality scheme.

2.11 The action measures that make up our action plan will be relevant to our functions. They will be developed and prioritised on the basis of an audit of inequalities. The audit of inequalities will gather and analyse information across the Section 75 categories⁴ to identify the inequalities that exist for our service users and those affected by our policies⁵.

2.12 Action measures will be specific, measurable, linked to achievable outcomes, realistic and time bound. Action measures will include performance indicators and timescales for their achievement.

2.13 We will develop any action plans for a period of between one and five years in order to align them with our corporate and business planning cycles. Implementation of the action measures will be incorporated into our business planning process.

2.14 We will seek input from our stakeholders and consult on our action plan before we send it to the Equality Commission and thereafter when reviewing the plan as per 2.15 below.

2.15 We will monitor our progress on the delivery of our action measures annually and update the action plan as necessary to ensure that it remains effective and relevant to our functions and work.

2.16 Choice will inform the Commission of any changes or amendments to our action plan and will also include this information in our Section 75 annual progress report to the Commission. Our Section 75 annual progress report will incorporate information on progress we have made in implementing our action plans/action measures.

⁴ See section 1.1 of this equality scheme for a list of these categories.

⁵ See section 4.1 of this equality scheme for a definition of policies.

2.17 Once finalised, our action plan will be available on our website www.choice-housing.org or by contacting:

Governance & Communications

Leslie Morrell House
37-41 May Street
Belfast
BT1 4DN

Tel: 0300 111 2211
Email: equality@choice-housing.org
Website: www.choice-housing.org

If you require it in an alternative format please contact us using the details provided.

Chapter 3 Our arrangements for consulting

(Schedule 9 4. (2) (a)) - on matters to which a duty (S75 (1) or (2)) is likely to be relevant (including details of the persons to be consulted).

(Schedule 9 4. (2) (b)) on the likely impact of policies adopted or proposed to be adopted by us on the promotion of equality of opportunity.

3.1 We recognise the importance of consultation in all aspects of the implementation of our statutory equality duties. We have consulted on our equality scheme and action measures, and will consult on equality impact assessments and other matters relevant to the Section 75 statutory duties.

3.2 We are committed to carrying out consultation in accordance with the following principles (as contained in the Equality Commission's guidance '*Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 – A Guide for Public Authorities (April 2010)*')

3.2.1 All consultations will seek the views of those directly affected by the matter/policy, the Equality Commission, representative groups of Section 75 categories, other public authorities, voluntary and community groups, our staff and their trades unions and such other groups who have a legitimate interest in the matter, whether or not they have a direct economic or personal interest.

Initially all consultees (see Appendix 3), as a matter of course, will be notified (by email or post) of the matter/policy being consulted upon to ensure they are aware of all consultations. Thereafter, to ensure the most effective use of our and our consultees' resources, we will take a targeted approach to consultation for those consultees that may have a particular interest in the matter/policy being consulted upon and to whom the matter/policy is of particular relevance. This may include for example regional or local consultations, sectoral or thematic consultation etc.

As the representative body for housing associations, the Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations (NIFHA) has been assisting its members in the implementation of Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 by co-ordinating a joint approach to the

Statutory Equality duties. NIFHA itself is not a designated body, but as part of its support for members has taken on this co-ordination role, in particular in relation to public consultation. Their aim in managing the process in this way is to minimise the impact on consultee and/or stakeholder organisations. However, throughout each formal consultation exercise the relevant documents will also be available, in a range of formats including hard copies, directly from Choice.

3.2.2 Consultation with all stakeholders will begin as early as possible. We will engage with affected individuals and representative groups to identify how best to consult or engage with them. We will ask our consultees what their preferred consultation methods are and will give consideration to these. Methods of consultation could include:

- Face-to-face meetings
- Focus groups
- Written documents with the opportunity to comment in writing
- Questionnaires
- Information/notification by email with an opportunity to opt in/opt out of the consultation
- Internet discussions or
- Telephone consultations.

This list is not exhaustive and we may develop other additional methods of consultation more appropriate to key stakeholders and the matter being consulted upon.

3.2.3 We will consider the accessibility and format of every method of consultation we use in order to remove barriers to the consultation process. Specific consideration will be given as to how best to communicate with children and young people, people with disabilities (in particular people with learning disabilities) and minority ethnic communities. We will take account of existing and developing good practice, including the Equality Commission's guidance *Let's Talk Let's Listen – Guidance for public authorities on consulting and involving children and young people (2008)*.

Information will be made available, on request, in alternative formats⁶, in a timely manner, usually within 10 working days. We will ensure that such consultees have equal time to respond.

3.2.4 To ensure effective consultation with consultees⁷ on Section 75 matters, we will develop a programme of awareness raising on the Section 75 statutory duties and the commitments in our equality scheme by undertaking the following:

- *Meetings with tenants*
- *Meetings with staff*
- *Public consultation exercises*
- *Availability of information on website and Newsletters*

3.2.5 The consultation periods will last for a minimum of twelve weeks to allow adequate time for groups to consult amongst themselves as part of the process of forming a view. However, in exceptional circumstances when this timescale is not feasible (for example implementing EU Directives or UK wide legislation, meeting Health and Safety requirements, addressing urgent public health matters or complying with Court judgements), we may shorten timescales to eight weeks or less before the policy is implemented. We may continue consultation thereafter and will review the policy as part of our monitoring commitments⁸.

Where, under these exceptional circumstances, we must implement a policy immediately, as it is beyond our authority's control, we may consult after implementation of the policy, in order to ensure that any impacts of the policy are considered.

3.2.6 If a consultation exercise is to take place over a period when consultees are less able to respond, for example, over the summer or Christmas break, or if the policy under consideration is particularly complex, we will give consideration to the feasibility of allowing a longer period for the consultation.

3.2.7 Choice is conscious of the fact that affected individuals and representative groups may have different needs. We will take

⁶ See Chapter 6 of our equality scheme for further information on alternative formats of information we provide.

⁷ Please see Appendix 3 for a list of our consultees.

⁸ Please see below at 4.27 to 4.31 for details on monitoring.

appropriate measures to ensure full participation in any meetings that are held. We will consider for example the time of day, the appropriateness of the venue, in particular whether it can be accessed by those with disabilities, how the meeting is to be conducted, the use of appropriate language, whether a signer and/or interpreter is necessary, and whether the provision of childcare and support for other carers is required.

3.2.8 Choice makes all relevant information available to consultees in appropriate formats (as requested) to ensure meaningful consultation. This includes detailed information on the policy proposal being consulted upon and any relevant quantitative and qualitative data.

3.2.9 In making any decision with respect to a policy adopted or proposed to be adopted, we take into account any assessment and consultation carried out in relation to the policy.

3.2.10 Choice provides feedback to consultees in a timely manner. A feedback report is prepared which includes summary information on the document consulted upon, a summary of consultees' comments and a summary of our consideration of and response to consultees' input. The feedback is provided in formats suitable to consultees. (Please see also 6.3)

3.3 A list of consultees is included in this equality scheme at Appendix 3.

3.4 The consultation list is not exhaustive and is reviewed on an annual basis to ensure it remains relevant to our functions and policies.

We welcome enquiries from any person/s or organisations wishing to be added to the list of consultees. Please contact the Governance & Communications team to provide your contact details and have your areas of interest noted or have your name/details removed or amended. Please also inform us at this stage if you would like information sent to you in a particular format or language.

Chapter 4 **Our arrangements for assessing, monitoring and publishing the impact of policies**

(Schedule 9 4. (2) (b); Schedule 9 4. (2) (c);
Schedule 9 4. (2) (d); Schedule 9 9. (1);
Schedule 9 9.(2))

Our arrangements for assessing the likely impact of policies adopted or proposed to be adopted on the promotion of equality of opportunity (Schedule 9 4. (2) (b))

4.1 In the context of Section 75, ‘policy’ is very broadly defined and it covers all the ways in which we carry out or propose to carry out our functions in relation to Northern Ireland. In respect of this equality scheme, the term policy is used for any (proposed/amended/existing) strategy, policy initiative or practice and/or decision, whether written or unwritten and irrespective of the label given to it, e.g. ‘draft’, ‘pilot’, ‘high level’ or ‘sectoral’.

4.2 In making any decision with respect to a policy adopted or proposed to be adopted, we take into account any assessment and consultation carried out in relation to the policy, as required by Schedule 9 9. (2) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

4.3 Choice uses the tools of **screening** and **equality impact assessment** to assess the likely impact of a policy on the promotion of equality of opportunity and good relations. In carrying out these assessments we will relate them to the intended outcomes of the policy in question and will also follow Equality Commission guidance:

- the guidance on screening, including the screening template, as detailed in the Commission’s guidance ‘*Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 – A Guide for Public Authorities (April 2010)*’ and
- on undertaking an equality impact assessment as detailed in the Commission’s guidance ‘*Practical guidance on equality impact assessment (February 2005)*’.

Screening

4.4 The purpose of screening is to identify those policies that are likely to have an impact on equality of opportunity and/or good relations.

4.5 Screening will be completed at the earliest opportunity in the policy development/review process. For more detailed strategies or policies that are to be put in place through a series of stages, we will screen at various stages during implementation.

4.6 The lead role in the screening of a policy is taken by the policy decision maker who has the authority to make changes to that policy. However, screening will also involve other relevant staff members. Where possible we will include key stakeholders in the screening process.

4.7 The following questions are applied to all our policies as part of the screening process:

- What is the likely impact on equality of opportunity for those affected by this policy, for each of the Section 75 equality categories? (minor/major/none)
- Are there opportunities to better promote equality of opportunity for people within the Section 75 equality categories?
- To what extent is the policy likely to impact on good relations between people of a different religious belief, political opinion or racial group? (minor/major/none)
- Are there opportunities to better promote good relations between people of a different religious belief, political opinion or racial group?

4.8 In order to answer the screening questions, we gather all relevant information and data, both qualitative and quantitative. In taking this evidence into account we consider the different needs, experiences and priorities for each of the Section 75 equality categories. Any screening decision will be informed by this evidence.

4.9 Completion of screening, taking into account our consideration of the answers to all four screening questions set out in 4.7 above, will lead to one of the following three outcomes:

1. the policy has been 'screened in' for equality impact assessment
2. the policy has been 'screened out' with mitigation⁹ or an alternative policy proposed to be adopted
3. the policy has been 'screened out' without mitigation or an alternative policy proposed to be adopted.

4.10 If our screening concludes that the likely impact of a policy is 'minor' in respect of one, or more, of the equality of opportunity and/or good relations categories, we may on occasion decide to proceed with an equality impact assessment, depending on the policy. If an EQIA is not to be conducted we will nonetheless consider measures that might mitigate the policy impact as well as alternative policies that might better achieve the promotion of equality of opportunity and/or good relations.

Where we mitigate we will outline in our screening template the reasons to support this decision together with the proposed changes, amendments or alternative policy.

This screening decision will be 'signed off' by the appropriate policy lead within the organisation.

4.11 If our screening concludes that the likely impact of a policy is 'major' in respect of one, or more, of the equality of opportunity and/or good relations categories, we will normally subject the policy to an equality impact assessment. This screening decision will be 'signed off' by the appropriate policy lead within the organisation.

4.12 If our screening concludes that the likely impact of a policy is 'none', in respect of all of the equality of opportunity and/or good relations categories, we may decide to screen the policy out. If a policy is 'screened out' as having no relevance to equality of opportunity or good relations, we will give details of the reasons for

⁹ Mitigation – Where an assessment (screening in this case) reveals that a particular policy has an adverse impact on equality of opportunity and / or good relations, a housing association must consider ways of delivering the policy outcomes which have a less adverse effect on the relevant Section 75 categories.

the decision taken. This screening decision will be 'signed off' by the appropriate policy lead within the organisation.

4.13 As soon as possible following the completion of the screening process, a summary of the screening template, signed off and approved by the senior manager responsible for the policy, will be made available on our website www.choice-housing.org and on request by contacting:

Governance & Communications
Leslie Morrell House
37-41 May Street
Belfast
BT1 4DN

Tel: 0300 111 2211
Email: equality@choice-housing.org
Website: www.choice-housing.org

4.14 If a consultee, including the Equality Commission, raises a concern about a screening decision based on supporting evidence, we will review the screening decision.

4.15 Our screening reports will be published quarterly [see below at 4.20 - 4.22 and 4.23 for details].

Equality impact assessment

4.16 An equality impact assessment (EQIA) is a thorough and systematic analysis of a policy, whether that policy is formal or informal, and irrespective of the scope of that policy. The primary function of an EQIA is to determine the extent of any impact of a policy upon the Section 75 categories and to determine if the impact is an adverse one. It is also an opportunity to demonstrate the likely positive outcomes of a policy and to seek ways to more effectively promote equality of opportunity and good relations.

4.17 Once a policy is screened and screening has identified that an equality impact assessment is necessary, we will carry out the EQIA in accordance with Equality Commission guidance. The equality impact assessment will be carried out as part of the policy development process, before the policy is implemented.

4.18 Any equality impact assessment will be subject to consultation at the appropriate stage(s). (For details see above Chapter 3 “Our Arrangements for Consulting”).

Our arrangements for publishing the results of the assessments of the likely impact of policies we have adopted or propose to adopt on the promotion of equality of opportunity

(Schedule 9 4. (2) (d); Schedule 9 9. (1))

4.19 We will make publicly available the results of our assessments (screening and EQIA) of the likely impact of our policies on the promotion of equality of opportunity and good relations.

What we publish

4.20 Screening reports

These will be published quarterly. Screening reports will detail:

- All policies screened by the organisation over the three month period
- A statement of the aim(s) of the policy/policies to which the assessment relates
- Consideration given to measures which might mitigate any adverse impact
- Consideration given to alternative policies which might better achieve the promotion of equality of opportunity;
- Screening decisions, i.e:
 - whether the policy has been ‘screened in’ for equality impact assessment.
 - whether the policy has been ‘screened out’ with mitigation or an alternative policy proposed to be adopted.
 - whether the policy has been ‘screened out’ without mitigation or an alternative policy proposed to be adopted.
- Where applicable, a timetable for conducting equality impact assessments
- A link to the completed screening template(s) on our website

4.21 Screening templates

For details on the availability of our screening templates please refer to 4.13.

4.22 Equality impact assessments

EQIA reports are published once the impact assessment has been completed. These reports include:

- A statement of the aim of the policy assessed
- Information and data collected
- Details of the assessment of impact(s)
- Consideration given to measures which might mitigate any adverse impact
- Consideration given to alternative policies which might better achieve the promotion of equality of opportunity
- Consultation responses
- The decision taken
- Future monitoring plans.

How we publish the information

4.23 All information we publish is accessible and can be made available in alternative formats on request. Please see 6.3 below.

Where we publish the information

4.24 The results of our assessments (screening reports and completed templates, the results of equality impact assessment) will be made available on our website (www.choice-housing.org) and by contacting the Governance & Communications team on 028 9044 1316.

4.25 In addition to the above, screening reports (electronic link or hard copy on request if more suitable for recipients) which include all policies screened over a 3 month period are also sent directly to all consultees on a quarterly basis.

4.26 We will inform the general public about the availability of this material through communications such as press releases where appropriate.

Our arrangements for monitoring any adverse impact of policies we have adopted on equality of opportunity
(Schedule 9 4. (2) (c))

4.27 Monitoring can assist us to deliver better public services and continuous improvements. Monitoring Section 75 information involves the processing of sensitive personal data (data relating to the racial or ethnic origin of individuals, sexual orientation, political opinion, religious belief, etc). In order to carry out monitoring in a confidential and effective manner, Choice follows guidance from the Office of the Information Commissioner and the Equality Commission.

4.28 Choice monitors any adverse impact on the promotion of equality of opportunity of policies we have adopted. We are also committed to monitoring more broadly to identify opportunities to better promote equality of opportunity and good relations in line with Equality Commission guidance.

4.29 The systems we have established to monitor the impact of policies and identify opportunities to better promote equality of opportunity and good relations are:

- The collection, collation and analysis of existing relevant primary quantitative and qualitative data across all nine equality categories on an ongoing basis
- The collection, collation and analysis of existing relevant secondary sources of quantitative and qualitative data across all nine equality categories on an ongoing basis
- An audit of existing information systems within one year of approval of this equality scheme, to identify the extent of current monitoring and take action to address any gaps in order to have the necessary information on which to base decisions
- Undertaking or commissioning new data if necessary.

4.30 If over a two year period monitoring and evaluation show that a policy results in greater adverse impact than predicted, or if

opportunities arise which would allow for greater equality of opportunity to be promoted, we will ensure that the policy is revised to achieve better outcomes for relevant equality groups.

4.31 We review our EQIA monitoring information on an annual basis. Other monitoring information is reviewed annually or biannually.

Our arrangements for publishing the results of our monitoring
(Schedule 9 4. (2) (d))

4.32 Schedule 9 4. (2) (d) requires us to publish the results of the monitoring of adverse impacts of policies we have adopted. However, we are committed to monitoring more broadly and the results of our policy monitoring are published on our website.

4.33 EQIA monitoring information is published as part of our Section 75 annual progress report [see 2.7].

4.34 Summary monitoring information will be made available on our website.

4.35 All information published is accessible and can be made available in alternative formats on request. Please refer to 6.3 for details.

Chapter 5 Staff training

(Schedule 9 4.(2) (e))

Commitment to staff training

5.1 We recognise that awareness raising and training play a crucial role in the effective implementation of our Section 75 duties.

5.2 Our Group Chief Executive wishes to positively communicate the commitment of Choice to the Section 75 statutory duties, both internally and externally.

To this end we will introduce an effective communication and training programme for all staff and will ensure that our commitment to the Section 75 statutory duties is made clear in all relevant publications.

Training objectives

5.3 Choice will draw up a training plan for its staff which will aim to achieve the following objectives:

- to raise awareness of the provisions of Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, our equality scheme commitments and the particular issues likely to affect people across the range of Section 75 categories, to ensure that our staff fully understand their role in implementing the scheme.
- to provide those staff involved in the assessment of policies (screening and EQIA) with the necessary skills and knowledge to do this work effectively.
- to provide those staff who deal with complaints in relation to compliance with our equality scheme with the necessary skills and knowledge to investigate and monitor complaints effectively.
- to provide those staff involved in consultation processes with the necessary skills and knowledge to do this work effectively.
- to provide those staff involved in the implementation and monitoring of the effective implementation of the equality scheme with the necessary skills and knowledge to do this work effectively.

Awareness raising and training arrangements

5.4 The following arrangements are in place to ensure all staff and board members are aware of, and understand, the organisation's Section 75 obligations.

- We will provide access to copies of the full equality scheme for all staff; ensure that any queries or questions of clarification from staff are addressed effectively.
- Staff will receive a briefing on this equality scheme as soon as possible after approval of scheme.
- The Section 75 statutory duties form part of induction training for new staff.
- Focused training is provided for key staff who are directly engaged in taking forward the implementation of our equality scheme commitments (for example those involved in research and data collection, policy development, service design, conducting equality impact assessments, consultation, monitoring and evaluation).
- Where appropriate, training will be provided to ensure staff are aware of the issues experienced by the range of Section 75 groups.
- When appropriate and on an ongoing basis, arrangements will be made to ensure staff are kept up to date with Section 75 developments.

5.5 Training and awareness raising programmes will, where relevant, be developed in association with the appropriate Section 75 groups and our staff.

In order to share resources and expertise, Choice will, where possible, work closely with other bodies and agencies in the development and delivery of training.

Monitoring and evaluation

5.6 Choice's training programme is subject to the following monitoring and evaluation arrangements:

- We evaluate the extent to which all participants in this training programme have acquired the necessary skills and knowledge to achieve each of the above objectives.
- The extent to which training objectives have been met will be reported on as part of the Section 75 annual progress report, which will be sent to the Equality Commission.

Chapter 6 Our arrangements for ensuring and assessing public access to information and services we provide

(Schedule 9 4. (2) (f))

6.1 Choice is committed to ensuring that the information we disseminate and the services we provide are fully accessible to all parts of the community in Northern Ireland. We keep our arrangements under review to ensure that this remains the case.

6.2 Choice is aware that some groups will not have the same access to information as others.

In particular:

- People with sensory, learning, communication and mobility disabilities may require printed information in other formats.
 - Members of ethnic minority groups, whose first language is not English, may have difficulties with information provided only in English.
- Children and young people may not be able to fully access or understand information.

Access to information

6.3 To ensure equality of opportunity in accessing information, we provide information in alternative formats on request, where reasonably practicable. Where the exact request cannot be met we will ensure a reasonable alternative is provided.

Alternative formats may include Easy Read, Braille, audio formats (CD, mp3 or DAISY), large print or minority languages to meet the needs of those for whom English is not their first language.

The Association liaises with representatives of young people and disability and minority ethnic organisations and takes account of existing and developing good practice.

We will respond to requests for information in alternative formats in a timely manner, usually 10 working days.

6.4 In disseminating information through the media we will seek to advertise in the press where appropriate.

Access to services

6.5 Choice is committed to ensuring that all of our services are fully accessible to everyone in the community across the Section 75 categories. We also adhere to the relevant provisions of current anti-discrimination legislation.

Assessing public access to information and services

6.6 We monitor annually across all our functions, in relation to access to information and services, to ensure equality of opportunity and good relations are promoted.

6.7 Data is gathered through a comprehensive tenant satisfaction survey which includes a section on equality and access to information and services.

Chapter 7 Timetable for measures we propose in this equality scheme

(Schedule 9 4. (3) (b))

- 7.1 Appendix 4 outlines our timetable for all measures proposed within this equality scheme. The measures outlined in this timetable will be incorporated into our business planning processes.
- 7.2 This timetable is different from, and in addition to, our commitment to developing action plans/action measures to specifically address inequalities and further promote equality of opportunity and good relations. We have included in our equality scheme a commitment to develop an action plan. Accordingly, this commitment is listed in the timetable of measures at Appendix 4. For information on these action measures please see above at 2.11 – 2.18.

Chapter 8 Our complaints procedure

(Schedule 9 10.)

8.1 Choice is responsive to the views of members of the public. We will endeavour to resolve all complaints made to us.

8.2 Schedule 9 paragraph 10 of the Act refers to complaints. A person can make a complaint to a Housing Association if the complainant believes he or she may have been directly affected by an alleged failure of the authority to comply with its approved equality scheme.

If the complaint has not been resolved within a reasonable timescale, the complaint can be brought to the Equality Commission.

8.3 A person wishing to request a copy of the organisation's complaints procedure or make a complaint that we have failed to comply with our approved equality scheme should contact:

Customer Services Officer
Leslie Morrell House
37-41 May Street
Belfast
BT1 4DN

Tel: 0300 111 2211
Email: equality@choice-housing.org
Website: www.choice-housing.org

8.4 As set out in the organisation's complaints procedure we will acknowledge complaints on date of receipt.

8.5 Choice will carry out an internal investigation of the complaint and will respond to the complainant within 14 working days. Under certain circumstances, if the complexity of the matter requires a longer period, the period for response to the complainant may be extended to one month. In those circumstances, the complainant will be advised of the extended period and when they can expect a response.

8.6 During this process the complainant will be kept fully informed of the progress of the investigation into the complaint and of any outcomes.

8.7 In any subsequent investigation by the Equality Commission, the Association will co-operate fully, providing access in a timely manner to any relevant documentation that the Equality Commission may require.

Similarly, Choice will co-operate fully with any investigation by the Equality Commission under sub-paragraph 11 (1) (b) of Schedule 9 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

8.8 Choice will make all efforts to implement promptly and in full any recommendations arising out of any Commission investigation.

Chapter 9 Publication of our equality scheme

(Schedule 9 4. (3) (c))

9.1 Choice's equality scheme is available free of charge in print form and alternative formats by contacting:

Governance & Communications
Leslie Morrell House
37-41 May Street
Belfast
BT1 4DN

Tel: 0300 111 2211
Email: equality@choice-housing.org
Website: www.choice-housing.org

9.2 Our equality scheme will also be made available on our website at www.choice-housing.org

9.3 The following arrangements are in place for the publication in a timely manner of our equality scheme to ensure equality of access:

- We will make every effort to communicate widely the existence and content of our equality scheme. This may include press releases, prominent advertisements in the press, the internet and direct mail shots to groups representing the various categories in Section 75.
- We will email a link to our approved equality scheme to our consultees on our consultation lists. Other consultees without e-mail will be notified by letter that the scheme is available on request. We will respond to requests for the equality scheme in alternative formats in a timely manner, usually 10 working days.
- Our equality scheme is available on request in alternative formats such as Easy Read, Braille, large print, audio formats (CD, mp3, DAISY) and in minority languages to meet the needs of those not fluent in English.

9.4 For a list of our stakeholders and consultees please see Appendix 3 of the equality scheme or contact the Governance & Communications team.

Chapter 10 Review of our equality scheme

(Schedule 9 8. (3))

10.1 As required by Schedule 9 paragraph 8 (3) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 we will conduct a thorough review of this equality scheme. This review will take place within five years of submission of this equality scheme to the Equality Commission or within a shorter timescale to allow alignment with the review of other planning cycles.

The review will evaluate the effectiveness of our scheme in relation to the implementation of the Section 75 statutory duties relevant to our functions in Northern Ireland.

10.2 In undertaking this review we will follow any guidance issued by the Equality Commission. A report of this review will be made public on our website and sent to the Equality Commission.

Appendix 1 **CHOICE GROUP STRUCTURE AS AT JUNE 2017**



Appendix 2 Example groups relevant to the Section 75 categories for Northern Ireland purposes

Please note, this list is for illustration purposes only, it is not exhaustive.

Category	Example groups
Religious belief	<p>Buddhist; Catholic; Hindu; Jewish; Muslims, people of no religious belief; Protestants; Sikh; other faiths.</p> <p>For the purposes of Section 75, the term “religious belief” is the same definition as that used in the <i>Fair Employment & Treatment (NI) Order</i>¹⁰. Therefore, “religious belief” also includes any <i>perceived</i> religious belief (or perceived lack of belief) and, in employment situations only, it also covers any “<i>similar philosophical belief</i>”.</p>
Political opinion ¹¹	Nationalist generally; Unionists generally; members/supporters of other political parties.
Racial group	Black people; Chinese; Indians; Pakistanis; people of mixed ethnic background; Polish; Roma; Travellers; White people.
Men and women generally	Men (including boys); Trans-gendered people; Transsexual people; women (including girls).
Marital status	Civil partners or people in civil partnerships; divorced people; married people; separated people; single people; widowed people.
Age	Children and young people; older people.
Persons with a disability	Persons with disabilities as defined by the Disability Discrimination Act 1995.
Persons with dependants	Persons with personal responsibility for the care of a child; for the care of a person with a disability; or the care of a dependant older person.
Sexual orientation	Bisexual people; heterosexual people; gay or lesbian people.

¹⁰ See Section 98 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, which states: “*In this Act...“political opinion” and “religious belief” shall be construed in accordance with Article 2(3) and (4) of the Fair Employment & Treatment (NI) Order 1998.*”

¹¹ *ibid*

Appendix 3 List of consultees

(Schedule 9 4. (2) (a))

Equality Consultation List

Action for Hearing Loss
Age NI
Age Sector Platform
Alliance Party for Northern Ireland
Amalgamated Engineering & Electrical Union
An Munia Tober
Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council
Ards and North Down Borough Council
Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council
Association of Independent Advice Centres
Autism NI
Bahai Council for Northern Ireland
Barnardos
Belfast & District Trade Unions Council
Belfast City Council
Belfast Health & Social Care Trust
Belfast Hebrew Congregation
Belfast Islamic Centre
Brainwaves Northern Ireland
British Deaf Association (NI)
Carafriend
Carers Northern Ireland
Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council
Central Services Agency
Chartered Institute of Housing
Child Poverty Action Group (NI)
Children's Law Centre
Chinese Welfare Association
Citizens Advice Regional Office
CO3 Chief Officers Third Sector
Coalition on Sexual Orientation (CoSO)
Committee on the Administration of Justice (CAJ)
Community Development & Health Network (NI)

Community Relations Council (CRC)
Council for the Homeless (NI)
Democratic Unionist Party
Department for Communities
Derry City and Strabane District Council
Derry Well Woman
Disability Action - Belfast
Disability Action - Londonderry
Down's Syndrome Association
East Belfast Community Development Agency
Eastern Health & Social Services Board
Equality Coalition
Equality Commission for NI
Equality Forum NI
Falls Community Council
Family Planning Association (NI)
Fermanagh and Omagh District Council
Gay & Lesbian Youth NI
General Consumer Council
Gingerbread Northern Ireland
Housing Rights Service
Indian Community Centre
Irish Council of Churches
Lesbian Line
Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council
Magherafelt Women's Group
MENCAP
Methodist Church in Ireland
Mid and East Antrim Borough Council
Mid Ulster District Council Dungannon
Mind Yourself
Multi-Cultural Resource Centre
Newry, Mourne and Down District Council
NI Committee for Refugees & Asylum Seekers
NIGRA (Northern Ireland Gay Rights Association)
NIPSA
North West Community Network
North West Forum of People with Disabilities
Northern Health & Social Services Board

Northern Ireland Anti-Poverty Network
Northern Ireland Association for Mental Health
Northern Ireland Committee, Irish Congress of Trade Unions (NIC-ICTU)
Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities (NICEM)
Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA)
Northern Ireland Housing Council
Northern Ireland Housing Executive
Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC)
Northern Ireland Mixed Marriage Association
Northern Ireland Office
Northern Ireland Women's Aid Federation
Northern Ireland Women's European Platform (NIWEP)
Northern Ireland Youth Forum
NUS USI
Office of the First Minister & Deputy First Minister
Omagh Women's Area Network
POBAL
Polish Welfare Association
PRAXIS
Press for Change
Probation Board for Northern Ireland
Progressive Unionist Party
Royal National Institute for the Blind (NI)
Rural Community Network
SEEDS
Sense NI
Simon Community
Sinn Fein
Social Democratic & Labour Party
Southern Health & Social Care Trust
Staff Commission for Education & Library Boards
Supporting Communities NI
The Cedar Foundation
The Guide Dogs for the Blind Association
The Rainbow Project
The Women's Centre
Traveller Movement Northern Ireland
UCATT

Ulster Unionist Party
Western Health & Social Care Trust
Women's Forum Northern Ireland
Women's Information Group
Women's Resource & Development Agency (WRDA)
Women's Support Network
Workers Party
Youth Action
Youth Council for NI

This list is not exhaustive and reviewed at regular intervals to ensure it remains relevant. In addition to this list, the Association carries out consultation with staff, tenants and voluntary members.

Appendix 4 Timetable for measures proposed
(Schedule 9 4.(3) (b))

Measure	Lead Responsibility	Timetable
Review employees' job descriptions and appraisals to ensure they reflect their contributions to the discharge of the Section 75 statutory duties and implementation of the equality scheme, where relevant.	Group Director of Organisational Development	March 2017
Integrate objectives and targets relating to the statutory duties into strategic and operational business plans.	Chief Executive / Senior Management Team	Annual
Action Plan: Arrangements for monitoring scheme and action plan in place.	Senior Management Team	Annual
Produce Section 75 Annual Progress Report and return to Equality Commission.	Corporate Services Manager	31 August / Annual
Add copy of report to website.	Marketing & Communication Officer	Annual
Review and update Consultation list.	Corporate Services Manager	Annual
Screening timetable. Screening reports completed and made available for consultation on the Association's website.	Senior Management Team / Corporate Services Manager	Ongoing as policies are revised or introduced Quarterly

Review of monitoring information and publication of monitoring information.	Senior Management Team	Annually
Training Training on Equality Scheme. Development of overall training programme including: Focussed training, update training, evaluation of training.	Group Director of Organisational Development	April 2017 and Induction Annual
Assessing access to information and services.	Group Director of Tenant & Client Services	Annually
Communication of equality scheme.	Group Director Governance & Communications	2017
Review of equality scheme within 5 years.	Group Director of Governance & Communications	2022

Appendix 5 Glossary of terms (as adapted from ECNI's glossary of terms)

Action Plan

A plan which sets out actions a public authority will take to implement its Section 75 statutory duties. It is a mechanism for the realisation of measures to achieve equality outcomes for the section 75 equality and good relations categories.

Action measures and outcomes

Specific measures to promote equality and good relations for the relevant Section 75 and good relations categories, linked to achievable outcomes, which should be realistic and timely.

Adverse impact

Where a Section 75 category has been affected differently by a policy and the effect is less favourable, it is known as adverse impact. If a policy has an adverse impact on a Section 75 category, a public authority must consider whether or not the adverse impact is unlawfully discriminatory. In either case a public authority must take measures to redress the adverse impact, by considering mitigating measures and/ or alternative ways of delivering the policy.

Affirmation action

In general terms, affirmation action can be defined as being anything consistent with the legislation which is necessary to bring about positive change. It is a phrase used in the Fair Employment and Treatment Order (NI) 1998 to describe lawful action that is aimed at promoting equality of opportunity and fair participation in employment between members of the Protestant and Roman Catholic communities in Northern Ireland.

Article 55 Review

Under the Fair Employment and Treatment (NI) Order 1998, all registered employers must conduct periodic reviews of the composition of their workforces and of their employment practices for the purposes of determining whether members of the Protestant and Roman Catholic communities are enjoying, and are likely to continue to enjoy, fair participation in employment in each employers concern.

These reviews, which are commonly known as Article 55 Reviews, must be conducting at least once every three years.

Audit of inequalities is a systematic review and analysis of inequalities which exist for service users and those affected by a public authority's policies. An audit can be used by a public authority to inform its work in relation to the Section 75 equality and good relations duties. It can also enable public authorities to assess progress on the implementation of the Section 75 statutory duties, as it provides baseline information on existing inequalities relevant to a public authority's functions.

Consultation

In the context of Section 75, consultation is the process of asking those affected by a policy (i.e., service users, staff, and the general public) for their views on how the policy could be implemented more effectively to promote equality of opportunity across the categories. Different circumstances will call for different types of consultation. Consultations could, for example, include meetings, focus groups, surveys and questionnaires.

Differential impact

Differential impact occurs where a Section 75 group has been affected differently by a policy. This effect could either be positive, neutral or negative. A public authority must make a judgement as to whether a policy has a differential impact and then it must determine whether the impact is adverse, based on a systematic appraisal of the accumulated information.

Discrimination

The anti-discrimination laws prohibit the following forms of discrimination:

- Direct discrimination
- Indirect discrimination
- Disability discrimination
- Victimisation
- Harassment

Brief descriptions of these above terms follow:

Direct discrimination

This generally occurs where a public authority treats a person less favourably than it treats (or, would treat) another person, in the same or similar circumstances, on one or more of the statutory non-discrimination grounds. A decision or action that is directly discriminatory will normally be unlawful unless: (a) in an age

discrimination case, the decision, the decision can be objectively justified, or (b) in any other case, the public authority can rely on a statutory exception or, a *positive action exception* which permits an employer to use 'welcoming statements' or to take other lawful positive action to encourage participation by under – represented and otherwise disadvantaged groups.

Indirect discrimination

The definition of this term varies across some of the anti – discrimination laws, but indirect discrimination generally occurs where a public authority applies to all persons a particular provision, criterion or practice, but which is one that has an effect of placing people who share a particular equality characteristic (e.g. the same sex, or religious belief, or race) at a particular disadvantage compared to other people. A provision, criterion or practice that is indirectly discriminatory will normally be unlawful unless (a) it can be objectively justified, or (b) the public authority can rely on a statutory exception that permits it.

Disability discrimination.

In addition to direct discrimination and victimisation and harassment, discrimination against disabled people may also occur in two other ways: namely, (a) *disability- related discrimination*, and (b) *failure to comply with a duty to make reasonable adjustments*.

- (a) *Disability- related discrimination* generally occurs where a public authority, without lawful justification, and for a reason which relates to a disabled person's disability, treats that person less favourably than it treats (or, would treat) other people to whom that reason does not (or, would not) apply.
- (b) *Failure to comply with a duty to make reasonable adjustments*:
- (c) One of the most notable features of the disability discrimination legislation is that in prescribed circumstances it imposes a duty on employers, service providers and public authorities to take such steps as are reasonable to remove or reduce particular disadvantages experienced by disabled people in those circumstances.

Victimisation

This form of discrimination generally occurs where a public authority treats a person less favourably than it treats (or, would treat) another person, in the same or similar circumstances, because the person has previously exercised his/her rights under the anti- discrimination laws, or has assisted another person to do so. Victimisation cannot be justified and is always unlawful.

Harassment

Harassment generally occurs where a person is subjected to unwanted conduct that is related to a non- discrimination ground with the purpose or which has the effect, of violating their dignity or of creating for them an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment. Harassment cannot be justified and is always unlawful.

Economic appraisal

An economic appraisal is a systematic process for for examining alternative uses of resources, focusing on assessment of needs, objectives, options, costs benefits, risks, funding the affordability and other factors relevant to decisions.

Equality impact assessment

The mechanism underpinning Section 75, where existing and proposed policies are assessed in order to determine whether they have an adverse impact on equality of opportunity for the relevant Section 75 categories. Equality impact assessment require the analysis of the both quantitative and qualities data.

Equality of opportunity

The prevention, elimination or regulation of discrimination between people on grounds of characteristics including sex, marital status, age, disability, religious belief, political opinion, department, race and sexual orientation.

The promotion of equality of opportunity entails more than the elimination of discrimination. It requires proactive measures to be taken to secure equality of opportunity between the categories identified under Section 75.

Equality scheme

A document which outlines a public authority's arrangements for complying with its Section 75 obligations. An equality scheme must include an outline of the public authority's arrangements for

carrying out consultations, screening, equality impact assessments, monitoring, training and arrangements for ensuring access to information and services.

Good relations

Although not defined in the legislation, the Commission has agreed the following working definition of good relations: ‘the growth of relations and structures for Northern Ireland that acknowledge the religious, political and racial context of this society, and that seek to promote respect, equity and trust, and embrace diversity in all its forms.’

Mainstreaming equality

The integration of equal opportunities principles, strategies and practices into the everyday work of public authorities from the outset. In other words, mainstreaming is the process of ensuring that equality considerations are built into the policy development process from the beginning, rather than being bolted on at the end. Mainstreaming can help improve methods of working by increasing a public authority’s accountability, responsiveness to needs and relations with the public. It can bring added value at many levels.

Mitigation of adverse impact

Where an equality impact assessment reveals that a particular policy has an adverse impact on equality of opportunity, a public authority must consider ways of delivering the policy outcomes which have a less adverse effect on the relevant Section 75 categories; this is known as mitigating adverse impact.

Monitoring

Monitoring consists of continuously scrutinising and evaluating a policy to assess its impact on the Section 75 categories. Monitoring must be sensitive to the issues associated with human rights and privacy. Public authorities should seek advice from consultees and Section 75 representative groups when setting up monitoring systems.

Monitoring consists of the collection of relevant information and evaluation of policies. It is not solely about the collection of data, it can also take form of regular meetings and reporting of research meetings and reporting of research undertaken. Monitoring is not an end in itself but provides the data for the next cycle of policy screening.

Northern Ireland Act

The Northern Ireland Act, implementing the Good Friday Agreement, received Royal Assent on 19 November 1998. Section 75 of the Act created the statutory equality duties.

Policy

The formal and informal decisions a public authority makes in relation to carrying out its duties. Defined in the New Oxford English Dictionary as ‘a course or principle of action adopted or proposed by a government party, business or individual’. In the context of Section 75, the term **policies** covers all the ways in which a public authority carries out or proposes to carry out its functions relating to Northern Ireland. Policies include unwritten as well as written policies.

Positive action

This phrase is not defined in any statute, but the Equality Commission understands it to mean any lawful action that a public authority might take for the purpose of promoting equality of opportunity for all persons in relation to employment or in accessing goods, facilities or services (such as health services, housing, education, justice, policing). It may involve adopting new policies, practices, or procedures; or changing or abandoning old ones. *Positive action* is not the same as *positive discrimination*. Positive discrimination differs from positive action in that *positive action* involves the taking of lawful actions whereas *positive discrimination* involves the taking of unlawful actions. Consequently, *positive action* is by definition lawful whereas *positive discrimination* is unlawful.

Qualitative data

Qualitative data refers to the experiences of individuals from their perspective, most often with less emphasis on numbers or statistical analysis. Consultations are more likely to yield qualitative than quantitative data.

Quantitative data

Quantitative data refers to numbers, typically derived from either a population in general or samples of that population. This information is often analysed by either using descriptive statistics, which consider general profiles, distribution and trends in the data,

or inferential statistics, which are used to determine 'significance either in relationships or differences in the data.

Screening

The procedures for identifying which policies will be subject to equality impact assessment, and how these equality impact assessments will be prioritised. The purpose of screening is to identify the policies which are likely to have a minor/major impact on equality of opportunity so that greatest resources can be devoted to improving these policies. Screening requires a systematic review of existing and proposed policies.

Schedule 9

Schedule 9 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 sets out detailed provisions for the enforcement of the Section 75 statutory duties, including an outline of what should be included in an equality scheme.

Section 75 Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act provides that each public authority is required, in carrying out its functions relating to Northern Ireland, to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity between:-

- Persons of different religious belief, political opinion, racial group, age marital status and sexual orientation.
- Men and women generally;
- Persons with a disability and persons without; and
- Persons with dependants and persons without.

Without prejudice to these obligations, each public authority in carrying out its functions relating to Northern Ireland must also have regard to the desirability of promoting good relations between persons of different religious belief, political opinion or racial group.

Section 75 investigation

An investigation carried out by the Equality Commission, under Schedule 9 of the NI Act 1998, arising from the failure of a public authority to comply with the commitments set out in its approved equality scheme.

There are two types of Commission investigation, these are as follows:

1. An investigation of a complaint by an individual who claims to have been directly affected by the failure of a public authority to comply with its approved equality scheme;
2. An investigation initiated by the Commission, where it believes that a public authority may have failed to comply with its approved equality scheme.

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Appendix 6 Action plan/action measures

Introduction

In April 2004 Registered Housing Associations in Northern Ireland came within the jurisdiction of the Commissioner for Complaints by virtue of Article 146 of The Housing (NI) Order 2003. As a result of this Registered Housing Associations were designated as public authorities for the purposes of Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

A housing association is an independent voluntary organisation dedicated to helping people obtain good quality, affordable housing which meets their needs. Although a significant proportion of the work they do assists the government in the delivery of much-needed public services, they are not public bodies. All designated housing associations are members of the Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations (NIFHA).

NIFHA is the umbrella body for the voluntary housing movement in Northern Ireland. Its main role is to promote member housing associations and to provide representation and support for those members in the work that they do. NIFHA itself is not a designated body, but has taken on a co-ordination role as part of its support for members. As a result, the Federation assists its members in the implementation of Section 75 through a joint approach to the statutory equality duties.

Throughout the implementation of the equality process the Federation and its members have taken the view that by working jointly we can maximise our resources – in terms of time, knowledge, expertise, staffing or finances – and at the same time minimise the administrative impact on consultee and/or stakeholder organisations. This belief has also underpinned our work during the first phase of equality schemes and was commended by the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (ECNI) so we took a decision to maintain this collaborative approach for the second phase of equality schemes which commenced in 2010.

However, it should be noted responsibility for discharging the Statutory Equality and Good Relations Duties in the individual organisation **remains** with each designated housing association. NIFHA's role is purely a supportive one.

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Background

In 2010 the ECNI published new guidance on the implementation of Section 75¹². This guidance includes the recommendation that designated bodies:

- “include in their equality scheme a commitment to developing action plans detailing measures to promote equality of opportunity and good relations”.

As part of the process for developing Action Plans the guidance also recommended designated bodies should:

- “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;
- “develop action measures based on functions and key inequalities”.

The ECNI wrote to all designated housing associations on 1 November 2011 indicating that a formal call for a new Equality Scheme would be issued on 1 February 2012. The Commission also advised that the three month period from November to February would provide an opportunity to undertake the recommended Audit of Inequalities.

Audits of Inequalities: What the Commission says

An audit of inequalities is intended to set the framework for a public authority to address inequalities relevant to their functions. It should enable a public authority to identify potential functional areas for further or better discharge of the Section 75 statutory duties and can therefore inform key strategic actions.

The audit of inequalities is “a systematic review and analysis of inequalities which exist for service users and those affected by a public authority’s policies”. It can be used by a public authority to inform its work in relation to the promotion of the Section 75 equality and good relations duties. It can also enable public authorities to assess progress on the implementation of the Section 75 statutory duties, as it should

¹² Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, A Guide for Public Authorities, April 2010

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provide baseline information on existing inequalities relevant to a public authority's functions.

According to the ECNI "an audit of inequalities entails an analysis of information gathered to inform the development of action plans".

The Commission recognises that this is a developing process and public authorities should focus on priorities and outcomes improving over time. On the basis of this information the designated housing associations have therefore been mindful of the need to focus on measures where they have greatest ability to effect change.

Housing associations are regulated by the Department for Communities (DfC). They work closely with the DfC and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) to deliver housing and related services. Some also provide care and /or support services so they work with the relevant public authorities for the health sector too. As a result of this situation, housing associations must adhere to a wide range of policies and procedures which have been developed and are owned by a public authority or government department. In such cases associations must operate the policy of another body and have little or no scope to change that policy.

For example, associations are the main delivery vehicle for the Social Housing Development Programme but need is determined by the NIHE and the Department for Social Housing develops the programme which is then managed by the Housing Executive. So whilst housing associations may bid to deliver part of that programme they have no powers to shape the programme or establish where new social housing should be built. Similarly housing associations allocate their homes to the public but must do so using the NIHE's Housing Selection Scheme and on the basis of the points awarded by the Housing Executive. Moreover, though associations provide a range of housing and care services they cannot determine the level of public funding available for that purpose.

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Where appropriate, potential inequalities identified by housing associations which are outside their remit will be highlighted to the relevant public body.

The functions of each designated housing association will be detailed in its respective equality scheme. Taken collectively however, the main responsibilities of housing associations fall broadly into the following areas:

- provision of housing and related services to those in housing need;
- management and maintenance of its own stock; and,
- development of new stock, if appropriate.

As indicated previously even within these categories the housing associations often have to operate policies or adhere to strategies which are within the development and control of other organisations.

Overview of Housing Association Operations in Northern Ireland

Collectively, housing associations provide around 40,000 good quality, affordable homes for renting or equity sharing as well as providing a range of community services. In 2010-11 registered housing associations developed a record number of houses, with 2,418 starts, enabled almost 500 households to part-buy a home and let almost 4,000 high quality affordable homes to people in housing need. Further information about housing associations is available at www.nifha.org.

Housing associations vary greatly in size and in the scale of their operations. Some are fairly small organisations which operate in a particular community or to address a specific need whilst others conduct their business across Northern Ireland or in some cases throughout Ireland. The stock size of the individual associations can differ greatly too from large organisations with around 5,000 properties to those that manage fewer than 50 homes. Staff numbers also vary considerably from one association to another but across the sector there are around 2,500 people who work in the voluntary housing movement. Their contribution is complemented by the input of the 400 individuals who serve on housing associations Boards.

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Housing associations provide a wide range of services throughout Northern Ireland including the following types of homes and support:

- General family housing
- Older people's accommodation
- Shared housing and houses in multiple occupation
- Shared equity homes
- Supported accommodation for those with specific needs e.g. learning disabilities, addictions, mental health
- Residential care homes
- Day care provision
- Supported employment projects
- Community development activities

Collective Work to Date

In 2010 NIFHA Council agreed the designated housing associations should continue to be supported by the Federation during the development and implementation of the second phase of equality schemes. In 2011 NIFHA established a small task group comprised of representatives of the following housing associations:

- | | | |
|-----------|--------------|-----------|
| • Alpha | • Connswater | • Oaklee |
| • Apex | • Habinteg | • SHAC |
| • Clanmil | • Helm | • Trinity |

NIFHA's Corporate Services Manager worked with this Equality Task Group to steer and co-ordinate the collaborative elements of member associations' production of new equality schemes, undertaking Audits of Inequality and developing associated Action Plans. In addition, individual members of the group took responsibility for sourcing key information relevant to the equality categories.

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Members of the group also contributed to training events and practical workshop sessions held for member associations. These included:

- Workshops to identify potential inequalities by functional area, September 2011 – facilitated by Dorothy McKee
- Developing S75 Actions and revised Equality Schemes: What Social Housing Providers Need to Know, October 2011 – facilitated by ECNI representatives, Tony Steed, NIHE and Lucinda McMurrin, NIFHA
- Challenge Workshop to assess potential impacts by equality category, January 2012 – facilitated by John Kremer

These preparation and planning sessions, which helped inform our collaborative approach, were held over several months to allow time for gathering member feedback. Details of housing association participation in these sessions is shown at Annex A.

The information gathered through this work informed the decisions of the Equality Task Group which agreed that the audit should be based on a combination of the inequalities identified which related certain functions and the inequalities identified according to the nine equality categories. This enabled the incorporation of information about particular groups that we already know require positive action to address inequalities. The Group also agreed the need to include a cross-category section as some of the potential inequalities identified affected more than one equality grouping.

Material from the Commission's Statement on Key Inequalities in Northern Ireland (October 2007) proved to be a useful starting point when assessing potential inequalities within housing generally. In terms of social housing the main sources of information used in undertaking the audits of inequalities are shown at Annex B.

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Equality Action Plan

The following section sets out the actions the housing associations propose to take to address potential inequalities identified. As this is part of an ongoing process to improve equality and good relations outcomes some of the Proposed Actions will relate to measures which were already planned or are currently in place. However, we would stress the actions listed are offered as sector-wide proposals which will need to be refined (including timeframes) following the consultation process. We believe this approach will better enable the final Action Plan of each individual association to be reflective of their business as well as being informed by the feedback received during consultation.

At this stage we consider the proposed measures which are most likely to deliver tangible equality outcomes are:

- A joint project to gather comprehensive tenant profile information
- Review of communications
- Review of governance and Board renewal processes
- Our campaigns of lobbying through NIFHA such as on welfare reform or funding for support services

We would welcome your feedback on these proposals.

Please note, notwithstanding our overall commitment to implementing the statutory duties all of the proposed actions are reliant on sufficient resources being available.

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Equality Category	Potential Inequalities	Proposed Actions	Target	Lead Responsibility
Age 1.1	Few play spaces for young people / children.	Liaise with appropriate local authority to encourage the inclusion of play areas in new developments. Gather more comprehensive tenant profile information to clarify the potential impact.	Ongoing 2017-18	Group Director of Development & Assets / Group Director Tenant & Client Services
1.2	Electronic forms of communication can cause problems for older people. Digital divide as older people may not be able to use / access services which are available electronically for example through internet.	Undertake review of preferred methods of communication for tenants. Continue to facilitate training on electronic communications where appropriate – e.g. silver surfers sessions in sheltered housing schemes. Explore the use of broadband on new developments. Review digital forms of communication used by association to ensure maximum inclusivity.	2017-18 2017-18 2017-18	Group Director Governance & Communications Group Director of Development & Assets
1.3	Growing older population but accommodation to meet need not increasing therefore there is potentially less choice for older people.	Monitor demand for housing for older people at association level – overall need determined by NIHE. Continue to highlight need to the Department for Communities, Northern Ireland Housing Executive and Planning departments.	2017-18	Group Director Tenant & Client Services
1.4	Social isolation of older people.	Gather information to inform the development of suitable activities. Liaise with relevant authorities as necessary. Review tenant participation and involvement strategy.	2017-18	Group Director Tenant & Client Services
1.5	Welfare Reform.	Continue to lobby government on the impact of Welfare Reform. Monitor situation as Welfare Reform changes are introduced to determine impacts on tenants, in particular those between 25 and 35 who may be affected by the Shared Room Rate. Carry out Tenant Profiling.	2017-18	Group Director Tenant & Client Services

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Equality Category	Potential Inequalities	Proposed Actions	Target	Lead Responsibility
Dependants 2.1	Welfare Reform – single room rate will have adverse impact on single parents under 35; especially males.	Continue to lobby government on the impact of Welfare Reform. Monitor situation as Welfare Reform changes are introduced to determine impacts on tenants, in particular those between 25 and 35 who may be affected by the Shared Room Rate.	2017-18	Group Director Tenant & Client Services
2.2	Lack of play space for children.	Liaise with appropriate local authority to encourage the inclusion of play areas in new developments. Gather more comprehensive tenant profile information to clarify potential impact.	As 1.1 above	As 1.1 above
2.3	Lack of 2 bed accommodation for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Single parents ▪ Elderly/disabled people needing carers. 	Monitor demand – highlight issue to Department for Communities and Northern Ireland Housing Executive as appropriate.	Ongoing	Group Director Tenant & Client Services

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Equality Category	Potential Inequalities	Proposed Actions	Target	Lead Responsibility
Disability 3.1	Lack of suitable (Lifetime homes) accommodation highlighted in ECNI statement of Key Inequalities.	All new social housing is built to Lifetime Homes standard. Continue to work with NIHE in development of comprehensive property database to enable better matching of stock to individual need.	Ongoing	Group Director of Development & Assets / Group Director Tenant & Client Services
3.2	Communications which do not meet differing needs of services users.	Undertake review of forms of communication used by association to ensure maximum inclusivity. Gather more comprehensive tenant profile information to improve identification of preferred methods of communication.	2018	Group Director Governance & Communications/ Group Director Tenant & Client Services
3.3	Electronic communications / digital divide.	Undertake review of digital forms of communication used by association to ensure maximum inclusivity.	2017-18	Group Director Governance & Communications
3.4	People with mental ill-health may experience difficulty in accessing services and in relation to employment.	Continue to ensure compliance with legislation and keep abreast of best practice. Engage with representative groups identify / mitigate potential barriers.	Ongoing	Group Director of Tenant & Client Services / Group Director of Organisational Development
3.5	People with a learning disability may have to remain in long stay hospitals due to lack of suitable services.	Continue to liaise with relevant authorities as necessary to meet the assessed need and provide the suitable move on accommodation.	Ongoing	Group Director Tenant & Client Services

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Equality Category	Potential Inequalities	Proposed Actions	Target	Lead Responsibility
Gender 4.1	Activities at (sheltered) schemes can be geared towards one gender only.	Gather more comprehensive tenant profile information during 2017-18 to improve development of customer services. Gather baseline information on uptake of activities, if relevant. Use tenant feedback to inform the development of activities in sheltered housing schemes. Cross-sectoral sharing of case studies / good practice.	2017-18 and ongoing	Group Director Tenant & Client Services
4.2	Gender imbalances in staff at all levels across the sector.	Gather more comprehensive cross-sectoral data during 2017-18 to clarify actual situation. Consider options for mitigation of impacts identified. During 2018-19 develop strategy based on research.	2017-18	Group Director Organisational Development

Equality Category	Potential Inequalities	Proposed Actions	Target	Lead Responsibility
Marital Status 5.1	Couples in our accommodation not always housed together.	Record all instances during 2017-18 to inform action. Highlight problem to relevant authorities. Identify options for mitigating impact which are available to housing associations.	2017-18	Group Director Tenant & Client Services

Equality Category	Potential Inequalities	Proposed Actions	Target	Lead Responsibility
Politician Opinion 6.1	Possible inequalities due to perceptions of potential employees who have 'political convictions'.	Explore adoption of new guidelines from OFM/DFM on employment of individuals with conflict related convictions.	2017-18	Group Director of Organisational Development

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Equality Category	Potential Inequalities	Proposed Actions	Target	Lead Responsibility
Race 7.1	Communications and accessibility may be difficult for those whose first language is not English or who are unfamiliar with system.	Gather more comprehensive tenant profile information to help tailor services to customer needs. Undertake review of preferred methods of communication for tenants. Continue to use translation and interpretation services as appropriate. Liaise with relevant stakeholder bodies to identify best practice Cross-sectoral sharing of case studies / good practice.	2017-18	Group Director Governance & Communications / Group Director Tenant & Client Services
7.2	Electronic communications / digital divide.	Review digital forms of communication used by association to ensure maximum inclusivity.	2017-18	Group Director Governance & Communications
7.3	Lack of adequate housing and accommodation for Travellers.	Through the Social Housing Development Programme work with NIHE to deliver housing schemes which meet the needs of Travellers.	Ongoing	Group Director of Development & Assets
7.4	Literacy of Travellers.	Explore alternative options for engaging with Travellers. Share learning across sector.	As required	
7.5	People from Black and Minority Ethnic communities are vulnerable to exploitation and discrimination.	Develop improved cross-sectoral liaison with representatives of relevant stakeholder groups. Establish liaison with specific stakeholder groups as required.	Ongoing	Group Director of Tenant & Client Services

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Equality Category	Potential Inequalities	Proposed Actions	Target	Lead Responsibility
Religion 8.1	People of one community taking longer to get housed than another.	This situation is outside of the control of housing associations as offers are based on tenant preference and points allocated. Where practical take action to minimise potential chill factors – for example develop / implement strategies relating to flags, emblems and/or sectional symbols. Develop a good relations strategy. Training programmes as appropriate.	2017-18	Senior Management Team
8.2	Imbalances due to housing schemes being (or perceived as) largely made up of those from a specific religion.	Where practical take action to minimise potential chill factors – for example develop / implement strategies relating to flags, emblems and/or sectional symbols. Maintain use of Good Neighbour Agreements for all housing stock. Training programmes as appropriate.	Ongoing	Senior Management Team
8.3	Lack of TBUC schemes	Continue development of TBUC housing schemes as opportunities arise. To date one scheme has been developed, 2 are included in the 2016/17 SHDP and we are committed to delivering further TBUC schemes. Maintain use of Good Neighbour Agreements for all housing stock.	Ongoing	Group Director of Development & Assets/ Group Director of Tenant & Client Services

Equality Category	Potential Inequalities	Proposed Actions	Target	Lead Responsibility
Sexual Orientation 9.1	Attitudes to those of differing sexual orientation.	Further develop programmes of training. Work with staff to identify potential chill factors. Cross-sectoral sharing of case studies / good practice.	2017-18	Group Director of Organisational Development
9.2	Access to services.	Training and better links with LGBT community. Explore use of Advocacy service.	2017-18	Group Director of Organisational Development

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Equality Category	Potential Inequalities	Proposed Actions	Target	Lead Responsibility
Cross Category 10.1	Make up of Housing Association Boards – potentially relates to age, disability, gender religion/political opinion.	Gather more comprehensive baseline information. Review governance processes and make up of Board by April 2018. Make use of NIFHA Board Member Register as appropriate during Board renewal.	2017-18	Chief Executive
10.2	Impact of Anti-social behaviour (ASB) policies may be greater for certain groups – e.g. young males.	Monitor cases of ASB to identify trends – in particular where they may affect a specific group such as young men or people from a different racial background.	2017-18	Group Director of Tenant & Client Services
10.3	Accessibility of information and services has the potential to vary for different equality categories – whilst this has been subject to EQIA it continues to merit ongoing consideration.	Gather more comprehensive tenant profile information during 2017-18 to help tailor services to customer needs. Continue to review and monitor association approach to provision of information and services Use information from previous EQIA and subsequent monitoring to inform the introduction of improvements.	2017-18	Senior Management Team

Annex A – Participation in Equality Impact Assessment workshops

Association	Sept 2011	Nov 2011	Jan 2012
Abbeyfield (UK) NI	✓		✓
Alpha			✓
Apex	✓	✓	✓
Ark		✓	✓
Broadway	✓		✓
Clanmil	✓	✓	✓
Connswater	✓	✓	✓
Co-Ownership	✓	✓	✓
Covenanter		✓	
Filor	✓	✓	✓
Flax	✓	✓	✓
FOLD	✓	✓	✓
Gosford			
Grove	✓		✓
Habinteg	✓	✓	✓
Harmony	✓		
Hearth			✓
Helm	✓		✓
Newington	✓	✓	✓
Oaklee	✓	✓	✓
Open Door	✓	✓	✓
Rural			✓
SHAC	✓	✓	✓
South Ulster	✓	✓	✓
St Matthew's	✓	✓	✓
Triangle	✓	✓	✓
Trinity	✓	✓	✓
Ulidia	✓	✓	✓
Wesley	✓	✓	

Annex B

Research / Data considered

- ECNI Statement on Key Inequalities in Northern Ireland
- A Picture of Caring, ECNI
- Draft Older Peoples Health and Well Being Strategy 2005-2015, EHSSB
- Equality Impact Assessments conducted by Housing Associations 2005-10
- Equality Impact Assessments conducted by the Department
- Improving sexual orientation monitoring, Equality and Human Rights Commission
- Internal association information (e.g. Art 55 reviews, Tenant Profile data)
- Next Generation Equality Scheme Information Overview, NIHE
- NICORE Overview Data as at 31 March 2005 and 31 March 2010
- NI Peace Monitoring Report, Community Relations Council
- Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA)
- The Northern Ireland Housing Market: Review and Perspectives 2007 – 2010
- Through Our Eyes: Experiences of Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual People in the Workplace
- Towards an Ageing Society, HACT
- Travellers' Accommodation Needs Assessment in Northern Ireland

Please Note: Further statistical information may also be used / provided by the individual housing association.