



Sinn Féin

IRELAND

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Response to the

Draft Equality Scheme

For the

Department of the Centre

July 2000

Sinn Fein response to the draft equality scheme of the Department of the Centre

Sinn Fein is deeply disappointed with the draft equality scheme from the Department of the Centre. We expected this scheme to be more ambitious and take the lead in actively promoting equality of opportunity. However, the Office of the Centre has demonstrably failed to honour the spirit of the equality agenda and to comply with the letter of the equality duty. The draft equality scheme does not address the implementation of the statutory equality duty as it is stated in Section 75, effectively and efficiently. Sinn Fein advocates therefore a redrafting of the scheme in consultation with those organisations listed in appendix 6 of the draft scheme and addressing the following points.

Section 75, which outlines the statutory equality duty, and the related discussion in the House of Commons, state clearly that the active promotion of equality of opportunity has priority over the promotion of good relations. This is not reflected in the equality scheme. On the contrary, from the language used in the equality scheme and the priority list of impact assessments, it is clear that this scheme values the promotion of good relations over the active promotion of equality of opportunity. This is in breach of Section 75.

An equality scheme needs to set out in clear detail how it will actively promote equality of opportunity, the method for doing this, including methods for addressing the inequalities in its own organisation with regards to employment and procurement practices, with clear targets and time tables for achieving this objective. This is not included in this scheme. To state that employment and procurement practices are the responsibility of the DFP is not sufficient.

The draft scheme for consultation needs to be available in Irish. Although the guidelines of the Equality Commission are indistinct on this, the status given to the Irish language in the Good Friday Agreement, the commitment by the British government that it will promote the use of the Irish language in speech and writing in public and private life, and the demand from the sizeable Irish speaking community in the north of Ireland, means that it is appropriate to do so.

The responsibility for the implementation of the equality scheme has to lie within senior management with a named contact person, it cannot lie with an unnamed Grade 5.

Staff needs to be made aware that effective implementation of equality schemes will be part of staff appraisal and that failure to implement the equality scheme will affect their career advancement. The method of impact assessment needs to be clear, the data used for impact assessment needs to be stated, the groups to be consulted on impact assessments need to be stated and the scheme needs to specify that these groups will be consulted according to the guidelines laid down by the Equality Commission.

Screening of policies for impact assessments needs to be done in consultation with those on the list of consultees and there needs to be disclosure of data, criteria and method upon which the screening is based, again, this is omitted from the draft scheme.

The equality impact assessment of policies on the religious discrimination and unemployment differentials needs to be carried out in year 1 of the equality scheme and not in year 5 as the scheme suggests.

It has to be clearly stated in the equality scheme how the results of impact assessment will be used in policy review and development.

An equality scheme needs to contain clear monitoring systems to monitor employment and procurement practices, the uptake in services and access to information by the categories mentioned in Section 75, this equality scheme does not commit itself to do that.

The monitoring process that has to be adopted, needs to be both formative and summative, in that it needs to evaluate the strengths of policies as well as the relationship between the delivery of policy and actual outcomes.

The training for staff that is proposed in the draft scheme focuses on the avoidance of discrimination rather than on the active promotion of equality. This must be changed. Also trainers from the named categories under Section 75 need to be included in the delivery of training.

A mechanism for review of the scheme and how the results of this review will influence any aspect of the implementation of the equality duty needs to be included. Sinn Fein would like a meeting with the Department of the Centre to establish how they could have misinterpreted key elements of the equality duty. We are in particular concerned at the central role that the Department of the Centre's draft equality scheme gives to the Community Relations Council. The Community Relations Council, unlike the Equality Commission, is not an independent body and has no statutory responsibility. The presumption made in the draft equality scheme that 'good relations' is somehow equal to 'good community relations' is a further distortion of the meaning of Section 75. We are gravely concerned about these matters and will copy our views to the Chief Commissioner of the Equality Commission and the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs.