

Corporate Services Unit
Department for Social Development
Level 4 Lighthouse Building
Gasworks Business park
1 Cromac Place
Belfast
BT7 2JA

20 April 2011

Dear

Re: Department for Social Development – Equality Scheme

We welcome the development of a revised Equality Scheme and the opportunity to comment on the document. It is of note that the consultation period for the revised scheme is for 8 weeks rather than the 12 weeks period recommended in OFMDFM,¹ BERR² and ECNI³ Guidance. We request that any future consultation run for at least the 12 week period as recommended.

The document provides an overview of process but lacks detail in a number of areas. We were concerned that the Department did not include an Audit of Inequalities to accompany the draft equality scheme. Equality Commission guidance recommends that public authorities undertake an audit of inequalities.⁴ This would have helped to provide evidence as to where the Department saw the need to develop actions to address inequalities. We note a number of other Departments did include an audit as part of their equality schemes⁵ and it is regrettable that the Department has not.

It was disappointing that the scheme contained no specific references to future plans and how certain policies, legislation would be equality proofed, namely the current and upcoming changes as part of welfare reform. In particular we would welcome further information regarding how the Department plans to assess changes in social security and whether a separate EQIA will be undertaken on the Northern Ireland version of

¹ OFMDFM (2003) „A practical guide to policy making in Northern Ireland “, at section 8.5, found at: <http://www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/practical-guide-policy-making.pdf>.

² Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform, July 2008, *supra*. Criterion 2 states that ‘*Consultations should normally last for at least 12 weeks with consideration given to longer timescales where feasible and sensible.*’

³ Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 A Guide for Public Authorities, April 2010. At page 38, it states ‘[w]e recommend that the consultation period lasts for a minimum of twelve weeks’.

⁴ *Ibid* at page 48

⁵ DARD and DRD for example

Welfare Reform Bill 2011 which, subject to the Westminster process is anticipated in the autumn. We note that the Department for Work and Pensions has recently produced an EQIA for England, Scotland and Wales which may provide a useful template for Northern Ireland.

During this period of economic downturn it is important to ensure levels of fairness and equality when prioritising need among interest groups to guarantee the protection of those at greatest risk. The current economic climate highlight the relevance and importance of equality considerations and risk exacerbating further existing inequalities. We believe that the promotion and protection of the rights and well being of benefit claimants warrants considerable attention.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely

Laura Niwa

Policy Officer