

# The Consumer Council



## Public Authority Statutory Equality and Good Relations Duties Annual Progress Report

### Contact:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Section 75 of the NI Act 1998 and Equality Scheme</li></ul>	Name: Rachel Molloy Telephone: 02890251600 Email: <a href="mailto:rachel.molloy@consumercouncil.org.uk">rachel.molloy@consumercouncil.org.uk</a>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Section 49A of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 and Disability Action Plan</li></ul>	As above <input type="checkbox"/> (double click to open) Name: Telephone: Email:

Documents published relating to our Equality Scheme can be found at:

The Consumer Council Corporate Plan 2021 - 2024  
[Corporate Plan 2021 - 2024](#)

The Consumer Council Annual Report and Accounts 2021-2022 has been approved by the Board of the Consumer Council. The report will be available on the Consumer Council website in due course.

The Consumer Council Equality Scheme was updated in April 2019 and shared with the Equality Commission for review and has been approved.  
<https://www.consumercouncil.org.uk/node/442>

**Signature:**

A rectangular box containing a handwritten signature in black ink that reads "R Malley".

**This report has been prepared using a template circulated by the Equality Commission.**

**It presents our progress in fulfilling our statutory equality and good relations duties, and implementing Equality Scheme commitments and Disability Action Plans.**

**This report reflects progress made between April 2021 and March 2022**

## **PART A – Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and Equality Scheme**

### **Section 1: Equality and good relations outcomes, impacts and good practice**

- 1** In 2021-22, please provide **examples** of key policy/service delivery developments made by the public authority in this reporting period to better promote equality of opportunity and good relations; and the outcomes and improvements achieved.

*Please relate these to the implementation of your statutory equality and good relations duties and Equality Scheme where appropriate.*

The Consumer Council works to actively promote & safeguard the interests of all consumers in Northern Ireland. Having developed our new Corporate Plan in 2021, to run to 2024, our work is currently focused across five strategic aims:

- Understand consumers
- Influence policy
- Represent consumers
- Protect consumers
- Empower consumers

Our principle statutory duty is to promote and safeguard the interests of consumers and, as a result, we represent all types of consumers, irrespective of where they fall within the Section 75 categories.

In delivering our work plan, we have met with and delivered results for, groups and individuals throughout the Section 75 (S75) categories in the past year with a focus on those who may be particularly vulnerable such as the elderly, those with disabilities / clinical vulnerabilities or those in rural areas.

COVID-19 and the cost-of-living crisis continued to present extra challenges for vulnerable consumers and those in the S75 equality groups and as a result, we engaged with consumers who relied on the Consumer Council to assist in resolving complaints and to lobby on their behalf, to ensure high levels of consumer protection across a number of statutory areas.

In summary, some of the developments for 2021-2022 were:

- Retained the British Standard 18477 for Inclusive Service Provision, the best practice requirement for identifying and responding to consumer vulnerability.
- We have improved our Customer Service Excellence accreditation for the fourth year running.

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- We supported almost 9,000 consumers across Northern Ireland, returning over £388k to the consumer purse.
- Maintained a customer satisfaction score of 99.9% and a Net Promoter Score (NPS), which measures customer experience, of 99.
- Worked with both Belfast City Council & the PSNI to provide resources for consumers on scams.
- Engaged with thousands of consumers from across the Section 75 categories, throughout the year via webinars, information stands, event attendance and social media live events.
- Retained ISO 9001 and ISO 22301 certification.

- 2 Please provide **examples** of outcomes and/or the impact of **equality action plans/** measures in 2021-22 (*or append the plan with progress/examples identified*).

### Consumer Outreach

- Consumer education and outreach was undertaken through various channels, with the final few months of 2021 seeing a return to in-person events as well as virtual presentations and webinars. We engaged with hundreds of consumers, working to make connections and assist in meeting the needs of consumers across society. The following table is a summary of some of the consumers that the Consumer Council has engaged with over the past 12 months:

Event	Audience	Attendees
Alzheimer's Society	Consumers with a long-term illness	5
Ulster Farmers Union	Rural consumers	53
Action Mental Health	Consumers with a long-term illness	9
Belfast Met	Students	8
Volunteer Now Men's 50+ Health Day	Older consumers	60
Belfast Met	Students	12
Headway	Consumers with a long-term illness	12
Inspire Wellbeing	Consumers with a long-term illness	10
Belfast City Council Safe Seniors event	Older consumers	40
AMH	Consumers with a long-term illness	7
Bann Maine West	Older consumers	5
Inspire Wellbeing	Consumers with a long-term illness	11
Inspire Wellbeing	Consumers with a long-term illness	10
Inspire Wellbeing	Consumers with a long-term illness	10
Action Mental Health	Consumers with a long-term illness	11
Disability Action	Consumers with a disability	30
Inspire Wellbeing	Consumers with a long-term illness	8

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Dungannon Pensioners Club	Rural consumers	30
Fermanagh & Omagh Council	Rural consumers	17
Inspire Wellbeing	Consumers with a long-term illness	5
Tullygarley Community Centre (near Tullyglass Hotel, Ballymena)	Older consumers	9
Antrim Food Bank	Older consumers	3
Action Mental Health, Portadown	Consumers with a disability, Consumers with a long-term illness	10
Inspire Wellbeing	Consumers with a long-term illness	6
Conference for older consumers (F&O)	Older consumers	71
Boys Brigade Luncheon Club	Older consumers	25
Dungannon St Elizabeth Church	Older consumers	30
Volunteer Now Connecting Older People	Older consumers	100
SRC, Newry	Students	20
AMH, Antrim	Consumers with a long-term illness	8
AMH, Derry	Consumers with a long-term illness	20
Beesbrook Community Centre	Consumers with a long-term illness	10
		<b>665</b>

<b>Campaigns 2021/22</b>	<b>Number</b>
Family activities completed	2,926
Views of dedicated scam section of our website	2,013
Scam animation views	15,954
Online quizzes completed	3,306
Banking Protocol Animated Video views	3,070

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- Our Consumer Empowerment team attended 33 events and engaged with 665 consumers including via virtual presentations.
- We also engaged with over 2,000 consumers across 3 days at the Balmoral Show in September 2021. This is an important event in our annual calendar as it allows us the opportunity to connect with a wide variety of consumers, especially those from rural communities.
- In March 2022 we held our second annual Northern Ireland Consumer Week. This online event had a particular focus on vulnerable consumers affected by the cost-of-living crisis. The event achieved 23,000 website hits, 25,805 video views, 392,700 out of home views, 1.4 million opportunities to hear via radio, 657,500 social media reach and 437,609 addition impressions from stakeholder sharing on social media.
- Belfast City Council invited the Consumer Council to adapt the Scamwise Champion resource for older consumers living in the Borough Council. Belfast City Council paid for 15,000 copies to be distributed across the Borough.
- The PSNI paid for 6,000 scam leaflets to be disseminated at their information stand at the Balmoral Show in September 2021.
- The Consumer Council engaged with eight Food Banks and two Community Centres where we distributed 20,000 educational resources for their service users.
- We worked with Orchardville Society to develop and design an easy read version of Scamwise Champion for adults with learning disabilities to learn about scams. These were circulated through four trusts reaching 4,000 adults with learning disabilities.
- In March, the Consumer Council held a Facebook live with Ulster Bank on scams which has been viewed 600 times. This was part of our Consumer Week in March 2022.

### **Consumer Website & Communications**

- The Consumer Council website uses Reach Deck accessibility software to make it fully accessible in any browser. Reach Deck allows users to customise in a way that works for them. This includes translating content into multiple languages; having text read aloud; and changing formatting, colours and fonts to suit people with dyslexia, learning difficulties, sight impairment, reading issues, colour blindness and other forms of neurodiversity. We receive monthly reports from Reach Deck to indicate how often it is being used and which features are used the most. In 2021/22, over 4,400 users of our website used Reach Deck to access our information.

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- The Consumer Council is committed to making its website accessible, in accordance with the Public Sector Bodies (Websites and Mobile Applications) (No. 2) Accessibility Regulations 2018. Our website is partially compliant with the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines version 2.1 AA standard. This website has been built to comply with the Priority 2 (Double A) accessibility checkpoints, as established in the World Wide Web Consortium's (Wc3) Web Accessibility Initiative. The initiative promotes usability and accessibility for people with disabilities. This website also conforms to the UK government guidelines for websites. HTML5, CSS 2.0, WAI WCAG Level 2 have been set as technical standards.
- Our website is fully compatible with multiple browsers' font changing facilities. If users find text is too small or too large, they can simply adjust their browser's settings. This is compatible with a range of browsers including Internet Explorer, Mozilla Firefox, Google Chrome, Microsoft Edge, Silk, Samsung Internet and Android Webview. The webpages on our website are designed to be used with screen readers, so that visually impaired users can easily access the content and navigate the site.
- In March 2022 we developed a new section on the Consumer Council website dedicated to helping consumers impacted by the cost-of-living crisis.
- In March 2022 we held our second annual Northern Ireland Consumer Week. This online event had a particular focus on vulnerable consumers affected by the cost-of-living crisis. The event achieved 23,000 website hits, 25,805 video views, 392,700 out of home views, 1.4 million opportunities to hear via radio, 657,500 social media reach and 437,609 addition impressions from stakeholder sharing on social media.
- In March 2022 we re-launched our Scamwise Champion programme in a new Easy Read format. This is a programme we designed on behalf of the ScamwiseNI Partnership in 2019. We worked with service users from the Orchardville Society and Easy Read UK to re-design the programme in an accessible format for people with learning difficulties. The Scamwise Champion programme is designed to teach participants how to spot, avoid and report scams, in an engaging way. Over 10,000 copies of the Easy Read version were distributed to 11 organisations. A PR launch event was held in March 2022 with the PSNI, Orchardville Society and the Consumer Council in attendance. A promotional video is available on our YouTube channel to promote the programme to more potential participants.
- We offer a telephone and face-to-face translation service through Big Word Translation.
- We offer a signing service with the Royal National Institute for Deaf People (RNID), for personal consumer advice or for those attending group events.



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- We translate our documents into different languages, and other formats (e.g. Braille, large print), upon request. We do this with the help of other organisations, such as the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB).

### **Consumer Policy & Complaints Handling**

- 30 young people completed our Open College Network NI accredited training course on safer finances.
- We commissioned the Women's Support Network to carry out research to understand the experiences of women – living and working in disadvantaged and rural areas of Northern Ireland – on why they need to borrow, the types of credit they use, the impact of external factors such as the Covid pandemic, changes to social security policy and low pay as well as the personal impacts of living with debt.
- We delivered a safer finances and budgeting session to 27 consumers who are service users with Disability Action. This presentation was delivered in partnership with our consumer empowerment outreach team and focused on how to avoid scams, budgeting and ways to borrow safely.
- We delivered nine Train-the-Trainer programmes during the year to a total of 250 Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) Area Managers and Housing and Income Collection teams on the issue of illegal lending and the support available.
- We commissioned qualitative research which followed 22 low-income consumers on their food shopping journey. The research, which includes video diaries, tracks how consumers are responding to rising food prices and issues of accessibility.
- We commissioned a research company to undertake a price and availability audit of a basket of essential goods, in different food retail outlets, and in different settlement sizes. This has enabled us to see how much a single parent with two children (pre-school and primary) and a lone pensioner would need to pay to afford a weekly diet that is good, nutritious, and enjoyable food, of an appropriate quality and quantity to sustain an acceptable standard of living.
- We also undertook research to determine the cost and availability of foods suitable for those with a food intolerance, allergy or other medically restrictive diet, to see if this group has been impacted by rising prices or supply chain issues.
- In order to understand the financial resilience of Northern Ireland consumers, particularly the lowest earning households (those in the lowest income quartile), we are producing quarterly briefings based on data received from Cebr which provides insight into how income and expenditure has changed for these households quarterly, six

monthly, and annually, and provides a breakdown of the biggest areas of basic spending to identify areas of vulnerability.

- We are also working in partnership with ONS to produce a pilot Regional Consumer Prices Index (rCPI). This experimental research project will allow ONS to track Northern Ireland inflation, meaning that we can understand/report on regional disparities. The CPI measures the change in price of a representative fixed basket of over 700 goods and services and will now begin to include NI on an experimental basis. The first batch of data is expected to arrive in Autumn 2022.
- We continued to support and represent vulnerable consumers through our statutory complaints handling role by acting on their behalf to raise enquiries and complaints in the areas of energy, water, transport and post.
- We assisted almost 9,000 consumers in 2021/22, a 65% increase compared to pre-pandemic contacts in 2019/20. We investigated 6,391 enquiries and complaints and assisted 2,537 consumers by providing general advice and signposting them to other organisations. In 21/22, we returned over £390,000 to consumers through our complaints handling role.
- We have continued to assist vulnerable consumers who were struggling to pay for their electricity and gas by contacting the supplier on their behalf to request assistance and advice on energy efficiency. These consumers were also given advice on switching supplier to see if they could save money, as well as increasing consumer awareness around free debt advice and alternative forms of credit available to them from organisations such as CAP and Advice NI.
- Throughout 2021/22 we have engaged with local specialist stakeholders that support vulnerable consumers with no fixed address to explore how these marginalised consumers in Northern Ireland are impacted by reduced or no access to their post. We also commissioned research to establish the impact of lack of access to post has had on their clients, to understand the nature and extent of detriment this creates, and to identify potential solutions. The research recommended devising a pilot scheme to test a solution that would allow a personal generated address to be created for the vulnerable consumer and that would enable them to collect post at a collection point such as a post office (or at another other trusted organisation) in a major centre such as Belfast or Derry/Londonderry. Our work will continue this year (2022/23) to explore if this recommendation can be implemented in Northern Ireland so these vulnerable consumers can access their post.

## Staff & Corporate Achievements

- This year, the Consumer Council retained the British Standard 18477 Inclusive Service Provision which specifies the critical procedures to ensure inclusive services are available and accessible to all consumers equally, regardless of their personal circumstances. The Standard:
  - encourages the adoption of fair, ethical and inclusive practices;
  - demonstrates best practice for organisations in the identification and treatment of vulnerable consumers;
  - assists organisations to understand what consumers have a right to expect from them;
  - improves accessibility to services for all;
  - Increases consumer confidence.
- Developed a menopause policy to ensure we are supporting any member of our workforce who may be suffering with symptoms that are impacting on their work. As part of the development of this policy, we have identified reasonable adjustments that could be put into place to assist.
- During 2021/22 we worked towards achieving the Silver Diversity Mark award from Diversity Mark NI having previously retained our Bronze Diversity Mark accreditation. The bronze accreditation helped us to create a foundational culture of diversity, equality and inclusion which we are now building upon in our aim to achieve silver accreditation.
- We continue to retain Gold accreditation from Investors in People and work closely with them to ensure we are putting structures and processes in place to best support our employees.
- Consumer Council employees took part in a reverse advent calendar, in November 2021 and collected a non-perishable food item every day for 24 days to make up a food hamper for a local food bank. The hampers were then distributed to several food banks across Northern Ireland.
- We continue to be a JAM Card friendly organisation. This card is designed to assist service users who may have communication barriers and require more time when availing of assistance.
- The Consumer Council is a Disability Confident Committed Employer. We show our commitment by ensuring that our recruitment is inclusive and accessible, making

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reasonable adjustments during the recruitment process and supporting our existing staff members.

- Developed a Hybrid Working Policy which will be implemented later this year. This policy is part of several flexible working arrangements available at the Consumer Council and has been developed to promote flexibility and choice at work with aim of meeting both the needs of the service and our employees.
- We have an Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Working Group within the organisation. This group meets every two months to discuss training opportunities for all staff, policies, best practice and to ensure we are treating all staff and consumers fairly.
- Continue to ensure all staff members complete annual “Unconscious Bias” training on our eLearning system. This course is the equality and diversity foundation course and reminds staff about the important legislation and policies surrounding diversity and inclusion, and the significance around being sensitive to the diverse needs of both consumers and co-workers.
- The Consumer Council works with Trade Unions to develop and review HR policies; in addition it liaises with statutory bodies, including the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, and benchmarks with other employers to ensure that we continue to adhere to the principles of equality, diversity and inclusion.
- Training was undertaken on a wide range of topics that promote equality, diversity and inclusion both in the workplace and in interactions with our stakeholders, such as “Ensuring Public Sector Website Accessibility and Compliance”, “RNID Hearing Loss and Communicating”, “Creating an open and inclusive workplace culture”, “Food Poverty and Health Inequalities Webinar” and “Courageous Conversations”.
- Achieved ISO 9001 reaccreditation. ISO 9001 relates to Quality Management and demonstrates the ability to consistently provide products and services that meet customer and regulatory requirements. We also achieved ISO 22301 reaccreditation which is the Business Continuity Management System standard.
- We have maintained our Customer Service Excellence (CSE) accreditation for the fourth year. The CSE standard was developed to drive customer focused change within organisations by placing the consumer at the heart of service provision. To maintain the accreditation, we must provide evidence of development and continuous improvement within the organisation.

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- We have joined the Women in Business Northern Ireland as a corporate member which provides networking, mentoring and training opportunities for all employees, irrespective of gender.
- Our front-line staff received refresher training on supporting vulnerable consumers and were given specific training on how to assist consumers who are contemplating suicide alongside information on services that can provide support and assistance to them following a call such as this.

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**3** Has the **application of the Equality Scheme** commitments resulted in any **changes** to policy, practice, procedures and/or service delivery areas during the 2021-22 reporting period? *(tick one box only)*

Yes                       No (go to Q.4)                       Not applicable (go to Q.4)

Please provide any details and examples:

We have developed both a Menopause policy and a Hybrid Working policy to be implemented this year. We have also updated our Business Continuity policy.

**3a** With regard to the change(s) made to policies, practices or procedures and/or service delivery areas, what **difference was made, or will be made, for individuals**, i.e. the impact on those according to Section 75 category?

Please provide any details and examples:

The menopause policy has been created to support our employees at a time when menopausal symptoms can impact life both inside and outside of work.

The Hybrid Working policy has been developed to ensure staff have the flexibility to achieve a better work/life balance as we recognise that everyone has different commitments outside of work.

The Business Continuity policy was updated as we are cognisant of the need for a coordinated and effective response to a disruptive event and the impact that may have on our employees.

**3b** What aspect of the Equality Scheme prompted or led to the change(s)? *(tick all that apply)*

As a result of the organisation's screening of a policy *(please give details):*

As a result of what was identified through the EQIA and consultation exercise *(please give details):*

As a result of analysis from monitoring the impact *(please give details):*

As a result of changes to access to information and services *(please specify and give details):*

Other (*please specify and give details*):

The Menopause policy was developed to ensure equality of opportunity to those who may be experiencing symptoms of peri and post menopause who may require additional adjustments in the workplace.

The Hybrid Working policy has been created as a result of the pandemic and the move to homeworking. The Consumer Council recognise the benefits that hybrid working has provided to many of our staff, ensuring that all of our people have the flexibility to look after their commitments outside of work.

The update to the Business Continuity policy was undertaken as we recognise that the suddenness of a change to working conditions or environment may have the greatest impact on our employees who have a disability or mental impairment, and in turn, exacerbate their condition. Having a comprehensive contingency plan ensures continuity and minimal disruption.

## **Section 2: Progress on Equality Scheme commitments and action plans/measures**

### **Arrangements for assessing compliance (Model Equality Scheme Chapter 2)**

4 Were the Section 75 statutory duties integrated within job descriptions during the 2021-22 reporting period? (*tick one box only*)

- Yes, organisation wide
- Yes, some departments/jobs
- No, this is not an Equality Scheme commitment
- No, this is scheduled for later in the Equality Scheme, or has already been done
- Not applicable

Please provide any details and examples:

Our candidate booklets, which are developed for all permanent recruitment, clearly reflect our commitment to meeting our Section 75 obligations. All booklets state: *“The Consumer Council is committed to equality of opportunity in employment and welcomes applications from all suitably qualified candidates irrespective of religious belief, gender, disability, age, race, political opinion, marital status, sexual orientation or whether of not they have dependents”*.

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5 Were the Section 75 statutory duties integrated within performance plans during the 2021-22 reporting period? *(tick one box only)*

- Yes, organisation wide
- Yes, some departments/jobs
- No, this is not an Equality Scheme commitment
- No, this is scheduled for later in the Equality Scheme, or has already been done
- Not applicable

Please provide any details and examples:

All staff without exception, have equal access to opportunities in the Consumer Council, whether that is through recruitment or learning and development opportunities.

Our performance review templates offer staff the opportunity to create objectives for the coming year and list any training or development opportunities that they feel will be of benefit.

6 In the 2021-22 reporting period were **objectives/ targets/ performance measures** relating to the Section 75 statutory duties **integrated** into corporate plans, strategic planning and/or operational business plans? *(tick all that apply)*

- Yes, through the work to prepare or develop the new corporate plan
- Yes, through organisation wide annual business planning
- Yes, in some departments/jobs
- No, these are already mainstreamed through the organisation's ongoing corporate plan
- No, the organisation's planning cycle does not coincide with this 2021-22 report
- Not applicable

Please provide any details and examples:

The 2021-2024 Corporate Plan outlines our commitment to promoting equality of opportunity and good relations through acknowledging our obligation to equality screening, and if appropriate, full equality impact assessments (EQIA) as outlined in Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

The plan also confirms our support of diversity and inclusion, both in our workplace and in our service delivery: *"We are committed to promoting equality of opportunity and good relations. The policies and interventions outlined in this corporate plan are subject to equality*



*screening, and if appropriate, full equality impact assessments (EQIA) as outlined in Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. We support diversity and inclusion. We operate in an increasingly diverse society and the people who provide and use our services have diverse characteristics and different experiences, needs and aspirations. Understanding and valuing these differences can result in greater participation. It will help bring about success at an individual, team and organisational level. We are committed to creating an inclusive working environment where individual differences are valued and respected, and in which each employee is able to fulfil their potential and maximise their contribution.”*

We also have a number of projects underway as part of our Forward Work Programme, which focus on some of the most vulnerable in society, including:

- Research into impact of the energy price crisis on energy affordability for Northern Ireland consumers
- Quarterly reports into consumer affordability on the impact on discretionary incomes following the pandemic and current cost of living crisis, with analysis by age, main income source, tenure & growth
- Quarterly food focus groups to provide in-depth exploration of key and emerging issues relation to food accessibility and affordability
- Advocate for building accessibility, affordability and inclusion for Northern Ireland consumers, with a view to strengthening confidence & resilience
- To work with key stakeholders to encourage the development of a Government Fuel Poverty strategy
- Represent consumer interests, having particular regard to those in vulnerable circumstances
- Work in partnership with Translink to undertake accessibility audits of transport operators

### Equality action plans/measures

7 Within the 2021-22 reporting period, please indicate the **number** of:

Actions completed:	<input type="text" value="23"/>	Actions ongoing:	<input type="text" value="0"/>	Actions to commence:	<input type="text" value="0"/>
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Please provide any details and examples (*in addition to question 2*):

No actions ongoing or due to commence as we are updating our Equality scheme in the 22/23 financial year and will be creating new actions.

**Actions Completed:** The Consumer Council continued to carry out a significant range of actions in this reporting period, in accordance with the Equality Scheme Action Plan, including:

- Providing advice and information to consumers
- Working in partnership with the advice sector

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- Working with educational organisations to develop consumer education packages in schools, further education colleges and universities.
- Continued to meet with the North/South Consumer Group and the Consumer Protection Partnership
- Worked with energy, postal, water and transport providers to ensure the needs of consumers across Northern Ireland were met
- Promoted consumer switching to develop competitive markets
- Played a leadership role in NI consumer issues.
- Developed strategies for consumers who are disabled, ill, older people, those on low incomes and those who reside in rural areas.
- Kept up to date with regional differences between Northern Ireland consumers and those in Great Britain
- Worked with regulators on price controls to represent consumers and worked to ensure they are getting the best value for money possible
- Represented passengers with a disability or reduced mobility
- Ensured consumers have convenient access to Royal Mail's services through Post Office outlets throughout Northern Ireland
- Provided help with consumer complaints
- Worked with businesses to ensure consumers receive a fair price and maintained our electricity and gas price comparison tool for small businesses and consumers
- Protected consumers through working with regulators in the development of regulations & licences, where applicable
- Monitored the cost of living
- Worked to increase trust in Northern Ireland markets so consumers are more informed, with access to better deals
- Monitored consumer trends and emerging areas of detriment
- Analysed data to understand the impact of consumers today on the consumers of tomorrow
- Encouraged consumers to develop sustainable consumption
- Worked to ensure the capability gap between prosperous and less prosperous does not increase
- Worked with the relevant bodies (DfE, DfI, The Utility Regulator etc.) to ensure energy and water infrastructure meets the needs of future consumers

**8** Please give details of changes or amendments made to the equality action plan/measures during the 2021-22 reporting period (*points not identified in an appended plan*):

We analysed data and monitored trends to identify areas in which Northern Irish consumers may experience detriment as a result of the UK's departure from the European Union.

We continued to assist consumers as travel markets reopened, offering advice and assistance with cancelled flights and travel plans. We also conducted focus groups to

monitor consumer views on the perceived barriers to public transport, especially within the context of COVID-19.

As scams continue to evolve and become more sophisticated, we worked with various stakeholders including Ulster Bank, the PSNI and the Orchardville Society to create educational resources. Our work with the Orchardville Society included the development and design of an easy-read version of our Scamwise resource for adults with learning disabilities. This was then distributed to over 4,000 adults.

We also commenced our 'True Cost' campaign, which is raising awareness of the practical help available to Northern Ireland households that are struggling financially during the ongoing COVID-19 crisis.

9 In reviewing progress on the equality action plan/action measures during the 2021-22 reporting period, the following have been identified: *(tick all that apply)*

- Continuing action(s), to progress the next stage addressing the known inequality
- Action(s) to address the known inequality in a different way
- Action(s) to address newly identified inequalities/recently prioritised inequalities
- Measures to address a prioritised inequality have been completed

**Arrangements for consulting (Model Equality Scheme Chapter 3)**

10 Following the initial notification of consultations, a targeted approach was taken – and consultation with those for whom the issue was of particular relevance: *(tick one box only)*

- All the time                       Sometimes                       Never

11 Please provide any **details and examples of good practice** in consultation during the 2021-22 reporting period, on matters relevant (e.g. the development of a policy that has been screened in) to the need to promote equality of opportunity and/or the desirability of promoting good relations:

- We have improved our Customer Service Excellence accreditation for the fourth year running
- Engaged with thousands of consumers from across the Section 75 categories throughout the year, working to make connections and assist in meeting the needs of consumers across society, via webinars, information stands, event attendance and social media live events
- Retained the British Standard 18477 for Inclusive Service Provision, the best practice requirement for identifying and responding to consumer vulnerability

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- We held our second annual Northern Ireland Consumer Week. This years event had a particular focus on vulnerable consumers impacted by the cost-of-living crisis

**12** In the 2021-22 reporting period, given the consultation methods offered, which consultation methods were **most frequently used by consultees**: (*tick all that apply*)

- 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/out of the consultation
- Internet discussions
- Telephone consultations
- Other (*please specify*):

Please provide any details or examples of the uptake of these methods of consultation in relation to the consultees' membership of particular Section 75 categories:

With the economy opening up post COVID, we were able to interact more directly with consumers again, to gauge views, opinions and feedback for our consultees. We are looking to expand this further in 22/23.

**13** Were any awareness-raising activities for consultees undertaken, on the commitments in the Equality Scheme, during the 2021-22 reporting period? (*tick one box only*)

- Yes       No       Not applicable

Please provide any details and examples:

Ahead of the creation of our 2022-2023 Forward Work Programme, all consultees were contacted for comment via email alongside numerous social media posts across various platforms to give all stakeholders the opportunity for comment

**14** Was the consultation list reviewed during the 2021-22 reporting period? (*tick one box only*)

- Yes       No       Not applicable – no commitment to review

**Arrangements for assessing and consulting on the likely impact of policies (Model Equality Scheme Chapter 4)**

[Insert link to any web pages where screening templates and/or other reports associated with Equality Scheme commitments are published]

- 15 Please provide the **number** of policies screened during the year (*as recorded in screening reports*):

0
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- 16 Please provide the **number of assessments** that were consulted upon during 2021-22:

0	Policy consultations conducted with <b>screening</b> assessment presented.
0	Policy consultations conducted <b>with an equality impact assessment (EQIA)</b> presented.
0	Consultations for an <b>EQIA</b> alone.

- 17 Please provide details of the **main consultations** conducted on an assessment (as described above) or other matters relevant to the Section 75 duties:

We are currently liaising with the Equality Commission on the appropriate direction to conduct an assessment on a policy that exercises our compliance

- 18 Were any screening decisions (or equivalent initial assessments of relevance) reviewed following concerns raised by consultees? (*tick one box only*)

Yes                       No concerns were raised                       No                       Not applicable

Please provide any details and examples:

**Arrangements for publishing the results of assessments (Model Equality Scheme Chapter 4)**

- 19 Following decisions on a policy, were the results of any EQIAs published during the 2021-22 reporting period? (*tick one box only*)

Yes                       No                       Not applicable

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Please provide any details and examples:

See Question 17

**Arrangements for monitoring and publishing the results of monitoring (Model Equality Scheme Chapter 4)**

**20** From the Equality Scheme monitoring arrangements, was there an audit of existing information systems during the 2021-22 reporting period? *(tick one box only)*

- Yes  No, already taken place  
 No, scheduled to take place at a later date  Not applicable

Please provide any details:

**21** In analysing monitoring information gathered, was any action taken to change/review any policies? *(tick one box only)*

- Yes  No  Not applicable

Please provide any details and examples:

N/A

**22** Please provide any details or examples of where the monitoring of policies, during the 2021-22 reporting period, has shown changes to differential/adverse impacts previously assessed:

N/A

**23** Please provide any details or examples of monitoring that has contributed to the availability of equality and good relations information/data for service delivery planning or policy development:

N/A

**Staff Training (Model Equality Scheme Chapter 5)**

**24** Please report on the activities from the training plan/programme (section 5.4 of the Model Equality Scheme) undertaken during 2021-22, and the extent to which they met the training objectives in the Equality Scheme.

- Training on awareness of unconscious bias is mandated viewing for all staff on an bi-annual basis and also forms part of the new start induction pack
- Staff continue to receive training on vulnerable consumers and how we can assist
- The Equality & Diversity Policy is mandated viewing for all staff on an annual basis and also forms part of the new start induction pack
- All new starts have mandatory training on our Positive Mental Health Toolkit, with annual reviews required

**25** Please provide **any examples** of relevant training shown to have worked well, in that participants have achieved the necessary skills and knowledge to achieve the stated objectives:

Consumer Vulnerability training that is undertaken by all staff annually is has the greatest impact as it entirely resonates with the modus operandi of the organisation

**Public Access to Information and Services (Model Equality Scheme Chapter 6)**

**26** Please list **any examples** of where monitoring during 2021-22, across all functions, has resulted in action and improvement in relation **to access to information and services**:

As per last year, we use social media to compliment all of our communication campaigns and conduct outreach activities to reach a diverse range of audiences, in particular reaching out to and supporting vulnerable consumers in an adversely challenging internal and external environment

**Complaints (Model Equality Scheme Chapter 8)**

**27** How many complaints **in relation to the Equality Scheme** have been received during 2021-22?

Insert number here: 

0
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Please provide any details of each complaint raised and outcome:

N/A

### Section 3: Looking Forward

28 Please indicate when the Equality Scheme is due for review:

The scheme was updated in 2019 and approved by the Equality Commission. We had intended to update the scheme in the final quarter of 21/22, but unfortunately we were unable to do so due to staff shortages as a result of serious illness.

29 Are there areas of the Equality Scheme arrangements (screening/consultation/training) your organisation anticipates will be focused upon in the next reporting period? *(please provide details)*

- Policy Screening
- Training, to include unconscious bias, whistleblowing, consumer vulnerability and mental health toolkits

30 In relation to the advice and services that the Commission offers, what **equality and good relations priorities** are anticipated over the next reporting period? *(please tick any that apply)*

- Employment
- Goods, facilities and services
- Legislative changes
- Organisational changes/ new functions
- Nothing specific, more of the same
- Other (please state):



**PART B - Section 49A of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (as amended) and Disability Action Plans**

**1. Number of action measures for this reporting period that have been:**

**14**

Fully achieved

Partially achieved

Not achieved

**2. Please outline below details on all actions that have been fully achieved in the reporting period.**

2 (a) Please highlight what **public life measures** have been achieved to encourage disabled people to participate in public life at National, Regional and Local levels:

Level	Public Life Action Measures	Outputs <sup>i</sup>	Outcomes / Impact <sup>ii</sup>
National <sup>iii</sup>	Our second annual Northern Ireland Consumer Week	Our Consumer Week is a key event in our annual schedule and is developed with a particular focus on harder to reach audiences and consumers in vulnerable circumstances	This online event had a particular focus on vulnerable consumers affected by the cost-of-living crisis. The event achieved 23,000 website hits, 25,805 video views, 392,700 out of home views, 1.4 million opportunities to hear via radio, 657,500 social media reach and 437,609 addition impressions from stakeholder sharing on social media.

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	Influence Policy	Membership of key forums and working groups with stakeholders including government, regulators, academia, consumer advocacy bodies and industry	Advocate for building accessibility, affordability, and inclusion for Northern Ireland Consumers
	Chair Northern Ireland’s Consumer Vulnerability Working Group	Promote collaboration within industry	To positively influence the support measures available to energy, water and transport consumers in vulnerable circumstances
	Member of the JAM card community	JAM Card allows people with a hidden disability or communication barrier to tell others that they need extra time and understanding in a private and easy way	Staff are trained on communicating with particularly vulnerable consumers including those with hidden disabilities and communication barriers.
Regional <sup>iv</sup>	Event Attendance	Significant outreach activities undertaken to reach out to particularly vulnerable consumers	Over 50% of events attended this in 2021/2022 were intended for an audience with a long term illness/disability
Local <sup>v</sup>	Disability Confident Employer	Disability Confident provides employers with the knowledge, skills and confidence they need to attract, recruit, retain and develop disabled people in the workplace.	Makes clear our commitment to provide an inclusive and accessible workplace for both current and potential employees

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2(b) What **training action measures** were achieved in this reporting period?

	Training Action Measures	Outputs	Outcome / Impact
1	Staff Training	Mandatory training for all new starts and annual reviews for all staff	All staff receive annual refresher training in Consumer Vulnerability, Unconscious Bias, our Equality & Diversity policy and our Positive Mental Health Toolkit
2	Age Inclusive Network	Greater understanding of the needs of employees across all ages.	Adjustments to recruitment policy and procedures and creation of our menopause policy to ensure support for all employees who may be experiencing menopausal symptoms

2(c) What Positive attitudes **action measures** in the area of **Communications** were achieved in this reporting period?

	Communications Action Measures	Outputs	Outcome / Impact
1	Mental Health Awareness exacerbated by COVID-19	Period articles and information shared on the impact of poor mental health and how to seek help	Staff awareness on the impact of poor mental health and the signs to look out for, both personally and with colleagues.
2	British Standard 18477 for Inclusive Service Provision	The provision specifies the critical procedures to ensure inclusive services are available and accessible consumers	Retained the BS18477 for Inclusive Service Provision

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		equally, regardless of their personal circumstances	
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2 (d) What action measures were achieved to ‘**encourage others**’ to promote the two duties:

	Encourage others Action Measures	Outputs	Outcome / Impact
1	Vulnerable Consumer Training	All staff attended vulnerable consumer training	This training has been put in place to ensure all staff can demonstrate best practice in the identification and treatment of vulnerable consumers
2	Diversity Working Group	Created as part of our Diversity Mark bronze accreditation	The working group meet quarterly to discuss our equality and inclusion activities. In 21/22 we submitted our application for silver accreditation.

2 (e) Please outline **any additional action measures** that were fully achieved other than those listed in the tables above:

	Action Measures fully implemented (other than Training and specific public life measures)	Outputs	Outcomes / Impact
1	N/A		

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3. Please outline what action measures have been **partly achieved** as follows:

	Action Measures partly achieved	Milestones/ Outputs	Outcomes/Impacts	Reasons not fully achieved
1	N/A			

4. Please outline what action measures **have not been achieved** and the reasons why.

	Action Measures not met	Reasons
1	N/A	

5. What **monitoring tools** have been put in place to evaluate the degree to which actions have been effective / develop new opportunities for action?

(a) Qualitative

Diversity Mark Silver Application allowed us to develop actions as we work towards becoming a more diverse and inclusive place to work

Internal diversity survey circulated amongst staff last year to gauge awareness of our equality, diversity and inclusion policy and activities and highlight areas where greater awareness is required

(b) Quantitative

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6. As a result of monitoring progress against actions has your organisation either:

- made any **revisions** to your plan during the reporting period or
- taken any **additional steps** to meet the disability duties which were **not outlined in your original** disability action plan / any other changes?

No – our disability action plan will be updated next year alongside the update of our equality scheme

If yes please outline below:

	Revised/Additional Action Measures	Performance Indicator	Timescale
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			

7. Do you intend to make any further **revisions to your plan** in light of your organisation’s annual review of the plan? If so, please outline proposed changes?

Yes, see question 6

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<sup>i</sup> **Outputs** – defined as act of producing, amount of something produced over a period, processes undertaken to implement the action measure e.g. Undertook 10 training sessions with 100 people at customer service level.

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ii **Outcome / Impact** – what specifically and tangibly has changed in making progress towards the duties? What impact can directly be attributed to taking this action?

Indicate the results of undertaking this action e.g. Evaluation indicating a tangible shift in attitudes before and after training.

iii **National** : Situations where people can influence policy at a high impact level e.g. Public Appointments

iv **Regional**: Situations where people can influence policy decision making at a middle impact level

v **Local** : Situations where people can influence policy decision making at lower impact level e.g. one off consultations, local fora.