

Public Sector Equality & Human Rights Duty Actions Report for 2022



1. SOLAS – Who We Are

SOLAS was established in 2013 under the Further Education and Training Acts as an agency of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science.

Our mission is to fund, coordinate and monitor Further Education and Training (FET) provision in Ireland, while enabling a range of Further Education and Training programmes which supports learners to succeed in the labour market and thrive in society. Programmes include Apprenticeships, Traineeships, Skills to Advance, Skills to Compete, Adult Literacy for Life, eCollege and the European Globalisation Fund.

SOLAS also manages the National Skills Database and provide research, data and analysis for the expert group on Future Skills Needs and to inform our own work.

2. SOLAS and the Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty

SOLAS strives to proactively prevent and eliminate discrimination and inequality in the workplace, promote equality of opportunity, and protect the human rights and treatment of its staff, service users, customers, and everyone affected by its policies and procedures. It is committed to embedding human rights and equality matters across its organisational functions.

This commitment is now strengthened by a legal obligation called the **Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty**, which is contained in Section 42 of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act 2014.

The Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty places equality and human rights at the heart of how public bodies carry out their functions, with the potential to positively transform how public bodies impact on, engage and interact with their own staff, service users, policy beneficiaries and the wider public.

The Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty requires public bodies to eliminate discrimination, promote equality of opportunity, and protect human rights of service users, staff and policy beneficiaries in the implementation of all their functions. Specifically, public bodies are required to implement three steps:

- **Assess:** establish issues that affect the identified groups for the Duty and that are relevant to the functions of public sector body organisations.
- **Address:** take action to address these issues including to check plans, strategies, programmes and policies at the final draft or review stage. To ensure that actions are included and are being taken or will be taken to address issues identified by public sector bodies to adequately and appropriately address equality and human rights issues.
- **Report:** report each year on developments and achievements made in addressing these issues and in progressing implementation of the Duty.

The identified groups for the Duty are:¹

- groups covered by the nine protected grounds under equality legislation: gender (including gender identity); civil status; family status (including lone parents and carers); age; disability; sexual orientation; race (encompassing race, colour, nationality and ethnic or national origins); religion; and membership of the Traveller community; and
- groups covered by the ground of socio-economic status, who are at risk of or experiencing poverty and social exclusion, including working class people, people experiencing rural disadvantage, and ex-offenders.

3. Key functions of SOLAS relevant to the Duty and those prioritised for 2022

The Duty covers all functions of SOLAS and is a responsibility for all functional areas.

SOLAS functions that were identified and addressed in our implementation of the Assess and Address steps of the Duty during 2022, were:

1. Further Education and Training Strategy and programme development function.
 - a. Adult Literacy for Life Strategy
2. Employer function.
 - a. HR policies review
3. Corporate function.
 - a. Communications
 - b. Procurement
 - c. Providing funding through service level agreements (SLA's) and through grants.

4. Overview of developments to implement the Duty

The SOLAS implementation plan identifies a number of action areas to enable implementation of the Duty in SOLAS.

Providing Leadership:

In 2021, SOLAS began its journey to work toward implementing the Duty. A working group was formed with fifteen staff from ten units in SOLAS. The working group met five times during 2022 and functioned within an agreed terms-of-reference and with the support of Values Lab. The working group led the development of an action plan and implementation plan to support the advancement of the Duty in 2022. It has also generated a report on developments and achievements with regard to the Duty.

The Chief Executive Officer has acted as sponsor for the working group and for the implementation of the Duty across the organisation.

¹ [Implementing the Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty](#), Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, 2019.

A familiarisation session on the Duty was held with the SOLAS Board as a means of identifying how best to provide leadership on the Duty.

A briefing session on the Duty was held with specific Senior Leadership Team (SLT) Directors under whose remit Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty actions for 2022 would fall.

Building familiarisation with and capacity to implement the Duty:

Familiarisation sessions in relation to the Duty and in relation to diversity and the ten identified groups for the Duty were facilitated with staff through:

- A Brunch & Learn session for staff on the Duty.
- A familiarisation session on the Duty for the HR Forum.
- A series of awareness raising workshops facilitated for staff on diversity and the ten identified groups for the Duty.

Communication – influencing organisational culture:

Values Lab carried out a communications workshop with the SOLAS Branding and Communications team. This focused on internal and external communications, how communication work could support implementation of the Duty, and how the Duty applied to the communication function.

Work on developing a communications strategy on the Duty was initiated to set out what steps would be taken in supporting implementation of the Duty through internal communications, and what steps would be taken in complying with the Duty in our internal and external communications.

A Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty page was developed and added to our SOLAS website.

Progress of implementing the Duty was reported in our Spotlight Newsletter at key points during 2022.

The Working Group marked International Human Rights Day (10th December) by hosting a cross-organisational session and presentation on the outputs achieved under the Duty in 2022, and gave an overview for staff to enhance awareness-raising of the ten grounds that are integral to the Duty and its implementation.

5. Overview of achievements in implementing the Duty

The five key moments identified for 2022 focused on the areas of Procurement, Strategic Performance Agreements (SPA's) with Education and Training Boards (ETB's), Contracts for funding of National Organisations, the Adult Literacy for Life Strategy (ALL), and Human Resource Policies:

Procurement:

A process to review procurement policies and procedures was carried out to comply with actions set out in the Duty.

Action to implement the Address step of the Duty:

A draft framework has been approved by the Director of Finance which will introduce the Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty in all procurement contracts going forward. This will take place on an incremental and phased basis and be linked on a sliding scale to the overall value of the contract over the next few years.

Strategic Performance Agreements with ETB's:

The preparation of the template for the Strategic Performance Agreements with ETBs, including a focus on the parameters for the funding application, involved a focus on compliance with the Duty.

Action to implement the Address step of the Duty:

The following was inserted into the Strategic Performance Agreements being negotiated with ETB's:

'The ETB is committed to implementing the Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty in line with IHREC guidance.'

In the Overarching Planning and Funding Parameters Requirements for ETB's documents, two insertions were made regarding the Public Sector Duty at 3.33 and 3.75 – referencing the ETB responsibility to carry out an assessment of equality and human rights issues and addressing same.

Parameters for Funding for National Organisations:

The funding parameters issued to Agencies in the FET Sector included a focus on compliance with the Duty.

Action to implement the Address step of the Duty:

In relation to the funding of Agencies, the following was included in the Overarching Parameters and Guidelines Document for Funding Allocations by SOLAS to Agencies in the FET Sector:

'In compliance with the Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty¹, public bodies bound by the Duty are responsible for ensuring that equality and human rights obligations equivalent to the Duty are included in agreements with contractual partners. Accordingly in the Funding Allocation Request Form (Part 3-Declaration) each agency is required to confirm that it will give consideration to developing processes to meet the requirements set out in the Duty. Further information and resources regarding the obligations of public bodies with respect to the Duty are available from <https://www.ihrec.ie/our-work/public-sectorduty/>.'

Reference to the Duty was also included in the declaration.

Adult Literacy for Life Strategy:

Development of a terms of reference for any framework document for the National Programme Office to be established and the strategy to be developed for implementation of the Adult Literacy for Life Strategy, in particular, regional action plans, were a focus for compliance with the Duty.

The Director for the Adult Literacy for Life Strategy was appointed in late December 2022.

Action to implement the Address step of the Duty:

The following responsibility was inserted into the advertised job role:

'To give leadership for equality and human rights in the field of adult literacy, ensure an alignment with SOLAS equality and human rights benchmarks in planning and policy development, and promote the capacity to address equality and human rights issues in the design and delivery of adult literacy.'

Human Resource Policies:

The reviews planned of specific human resource policies during 2022 involved a focus on compliance with the Duty.

Action to implement the Address step of the Duty:

Four HR policies were reviewed – Equality & Human Rights; Recruitment and Selection; Dignity at Work (harassment, sexual harassment and bullying); and the SOLAS Code of Conduct.

6. Outputs to date:

Briefings: Board, SLT, HR Forum, Directors

Communication:

- Spotlight magazine – mentions in 5 of the 6 2022 editions.
- Website developed – Action Plan, Implementation Plan and Journey Infographic published. External communications through social media to highlight the Duty.

Education and Awareness raising:

- Engaging with Diversity Series x 6 (average attendance x 46)
- 12@12 input on PSD x 1 (March 2022)
- Brunch & Learn presentation on PSD x 1 (June 2022)

Reporting:

- Report to the Workforce and Organisational Development (WOD) Board subgroup x 1
- Mid-year Board Review input x 1
- Report on PSD to 12@12 x 1 (December 2022)

Procurement:

- No outputs for 2022 but new Duty requirements agreed for insertion in 2023 procurement processes.

Strategic Performance Agreements with ETBs:

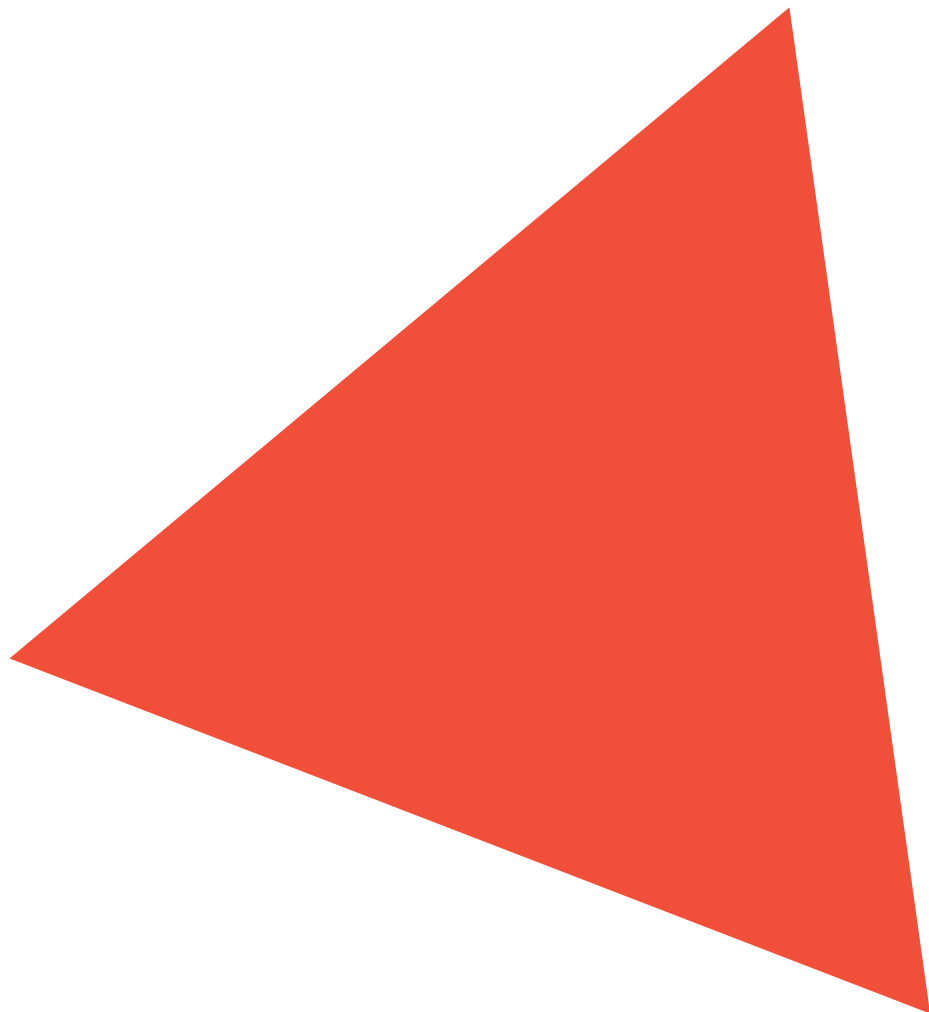
- Duty requirements inserted into 16 ETB Strategic Performance Agreements and Overarching Planning and Funding Parameters Requirements for ETB's.

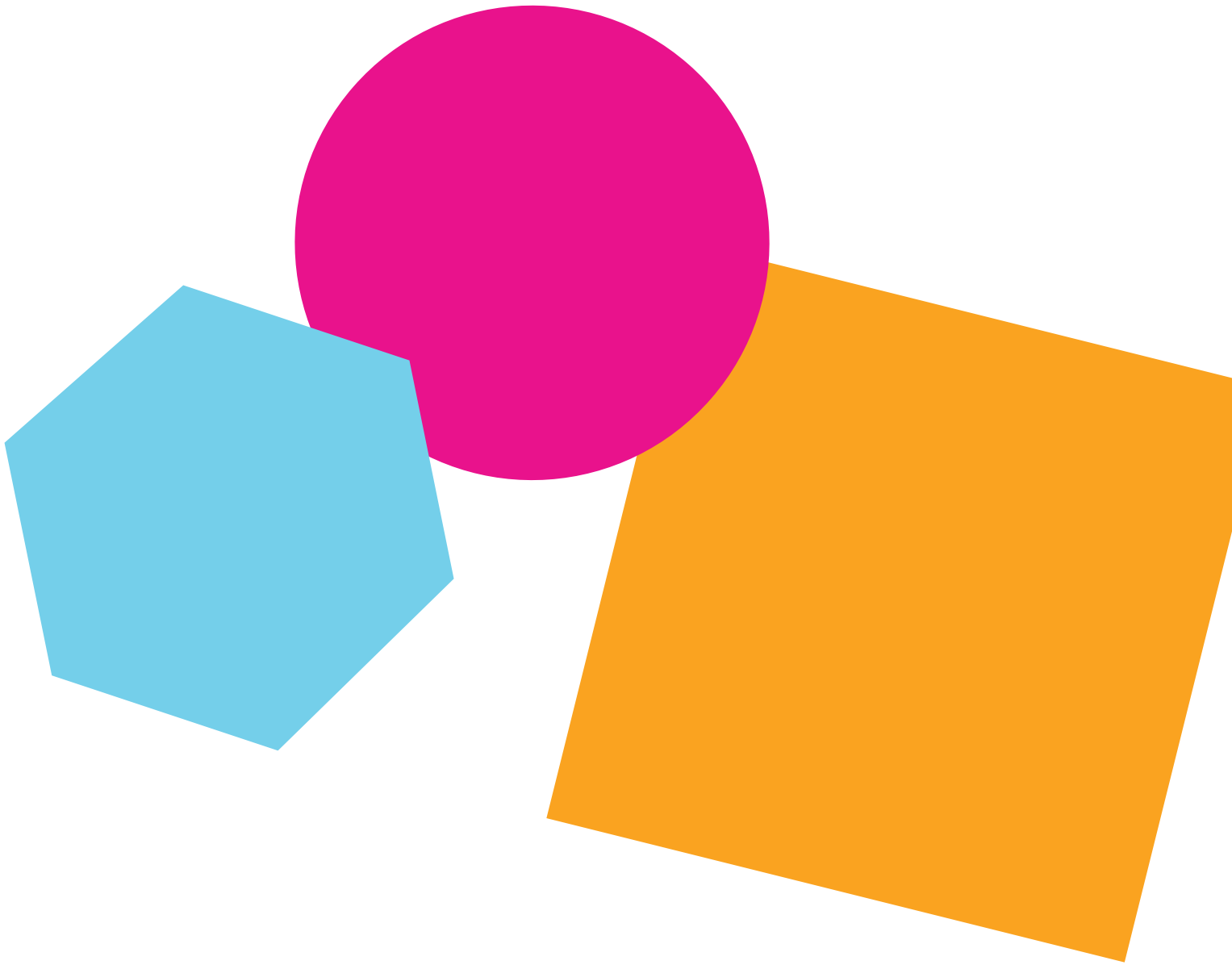
Grant Aid to National Organisations:

- Duty requirements inserted into 21 National Organisation contracts and Parameters and Guidelines Document for 2023 Funding Allocations to Agencies in the FET Sector.

HR policies:

- HR policies updated to reflect Duty obligations x 4.
- Development of outcomes will take further time but developing a process for tracking these will be an action in our 2023 Action Plan





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