

Public Sector Equality & Human Rights Duty Actions Report for 2023



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 focus across its organisational functions.

This commitment is underpinned by a legal obligation called the **Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty**, 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 the diversity of 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. To give effect to this Duty, 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 equality and human rights issues, including ensuring that plans, strategies, programmes and policies make provision to adequately and appropriately address equality and human rights issues.
- **Report:** report each year on developments in progressing implementation of the Duty and achievements made in addressing these issues.

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.

The Duty covers all functions of SOLAS and is a responsibility for all functional areas: including Further Education and Training strategies and programme development; employer; and corporate.

3. Overview of developments to drive implementation of the Duty

In 2021, SOLAS began its journey to work in implementing the Duty. A Public Sector Duty Working Group was established for this purpose. The working group developed an implementation plan for the Duty, with benchmarks for its implementation, an assessment of equality and human rights issues, and a strategy for its ongoing implementation.

Our Duty Working Group now has sixteen staff from ten units in SOLAS. The Working Group met five times during 2023 and functioned within an agreed terms-of-reference, with the support of [Values Lab](#). Two new members joined representing Procurement and the National Apprenticeship Office (NAO).

The Working Group developed and supported the implementation of an action plan for the Duty in SOLAS during 2023. The plan contained actions to further enable implementation of the Duty and actions to implement the address step of the Duty. The Working Group has developed this report on developments and achievements made with regard to the Duty on the basis of this plan.

4. Overview of developments to implement the Duty

The action plan identified actions to enable the implementation of the Duty in relation to leadership, capacity, communication and monitoring progress.

Leadership:

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

The Board, the Workforce Planning & Organisational Development sub-group of the Board (WFP&OD), and the senior management team were briefed on the ongoing implementation of the Duty.

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

Capacity:

Staff capacity in relation to the Duty was supported through:

- An update session on the Duty for the SOLAS HR Forum on implementation of the Duty.
- Completion of our Engaging with Diversity series of awareness raising workshops facilitated for staff on diversity and the ten identified groups for the Duty, with an evaluation and a process to gather key learnings from this completed.
- Standardised inputs on the Duty provided as part of the three Onboarding sessions for new staff.
- IHREC e-learning module was promoted.
- A model for addressing the Duty in SOLAS business planning processes was developed, to serve as a tool to brief those responsible for preparing the corporate plan and for those involved in business planning across the organisation.
- An introductory session on the Duty was provided to the National Apprenticeship Office (NAO).
- An introductory session on the duty was provided to the staff of Adult Literacy for Life (ALL).

Communication:

- Work was begun on developing a communication plan for the Duty to set out how best to give profile to the Duty, and to inform staff on the Duty and communicate progress made internally and externally.
- A Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty page was updated on our SOLAS website.
- Progress in implementing the Duty was reported in our Spotlight Newsletters at four key points during 2023.
- The Working Group marked International Human Rights Day (10th December) by hosting an input at the 12@12 on the Duty and our outputs for 2023.
- Action Plan for 2023, Report on Actions for 2022, Implementation Plan and Journey Infographic were published on the website.
- External communications through social media was used to highlight the Duty.

Monitoring progress:

- Outputs in relation to the action plan for implementing the Duty were tracked.
- Action on tracking outcomes from this work on the equality and human rights issues is tracked within the departments responsible. Support has been provided on this and further work will be done on this next year.

5. Overview of achievements in implementing the Duty

Key moments:

The eight key moments identified for 2023 were: the Adult Literacy for Life Strategy (ALL); Human Resource Policies; Communications Strategy; ESF+ Annual Reporting Template, the review of the FET Funding model for ETB's and the work of the National Apprenticeship Office (NAO). Two further key moments emerged: development of the corporate plan; and the community education framework.

Adult Literacy for Life Strategy:

The focus of this initiative involved developing a familiarisation on the Duty within the staff team, and tracking the work being progressed and planned to establish potential key moments for implementing the address step of the Duty. This process is ongoing and will continue into next year.

Human Resource Policies:

The reviews planned of specific human resource policies during 2023 involved a focus on compliance with the Duty.

Four HR policies were selected for review with the address step of the Duty implemented – Probation, Equal Opportunities, Performance Management and Grievance.

Communications Strategy:

The communication strategy is to be a focus for implementation of the address step of the Duty once this has been progressed. In the interim, staff responsible have been briefed on the Duty and its implementation.

ESF+ Annual Reporting Template:

The reporting template developed is already based on the Duty and this has been issued to Ireland's Education and Training Boards (ETBs). This will be a focus for further attention next year in analysing the returns.

FET Funding Model:

This key moment remains under review and awaits further developments around its potential for implementing the Duty.

National Apprenticeship Office:

The focus of this initiative involved developing a familiarisation of the Duty within the staff team, and tracking the work being progressed and planned to establish potential key moments for implementing the address step of the Duty. This process is ongoing and will continue into next year.

Corporate and Business Planning:

A tool was developed to support corporate and business planning processes to incorporate the Duty.

In preparation for the corporate plan, the assessment of equality and human rights issues was reviewed and new evidence sources availed of, in order to update the assessment.

Steps have been taken to familiarise those responsible for the corporate plan with the Duty and the tool and implementation of this is ongoing. This process will move to a focus on business planning next year.

Community Education Framework:

The Address step of the Duty was implemented in the draft of the Community Education Framework. This made use of the Values Lab template which is to be adopted as an ongoing tool for the Address step of the Duty.

Key Processes:

The three key processes identified for 2023 were: the mid-term review process of the Strategic Performance Agreements (SPAs) with ETBs; Procurement; and Grant Aid Systems.

Strategic Performance Agreements with ETBs:

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

Agreed wording in relation to the Duty was inserted into all sixteen Strategic Performance Agreements issued to ETBs.

The inclusion of a focus on the Duty in the mid-term review of the SPAs was explored but ultimately it was decided this would not be appropriate.

Procurement:

Procurement policies and procedures were reviewed for their capacity to comply with 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.

This application of this approach was tracked, and progress was noted across a range of contracts that now include a focus on the Duty.

The learning from this initial phase will inform the development of and training on a model for incorporating the Duty in an appropriate manner in the procurement process.

Duty requirements inserted in all relevant tender documents issued in 2023 (8 out of 19 tenders).

Grant aid systems:

Grant aid systems were reviewed for their capacity to comply with the Duty. Text on the Duty was included in contracts with grantees, which was reflective of the overall scale of the contract.

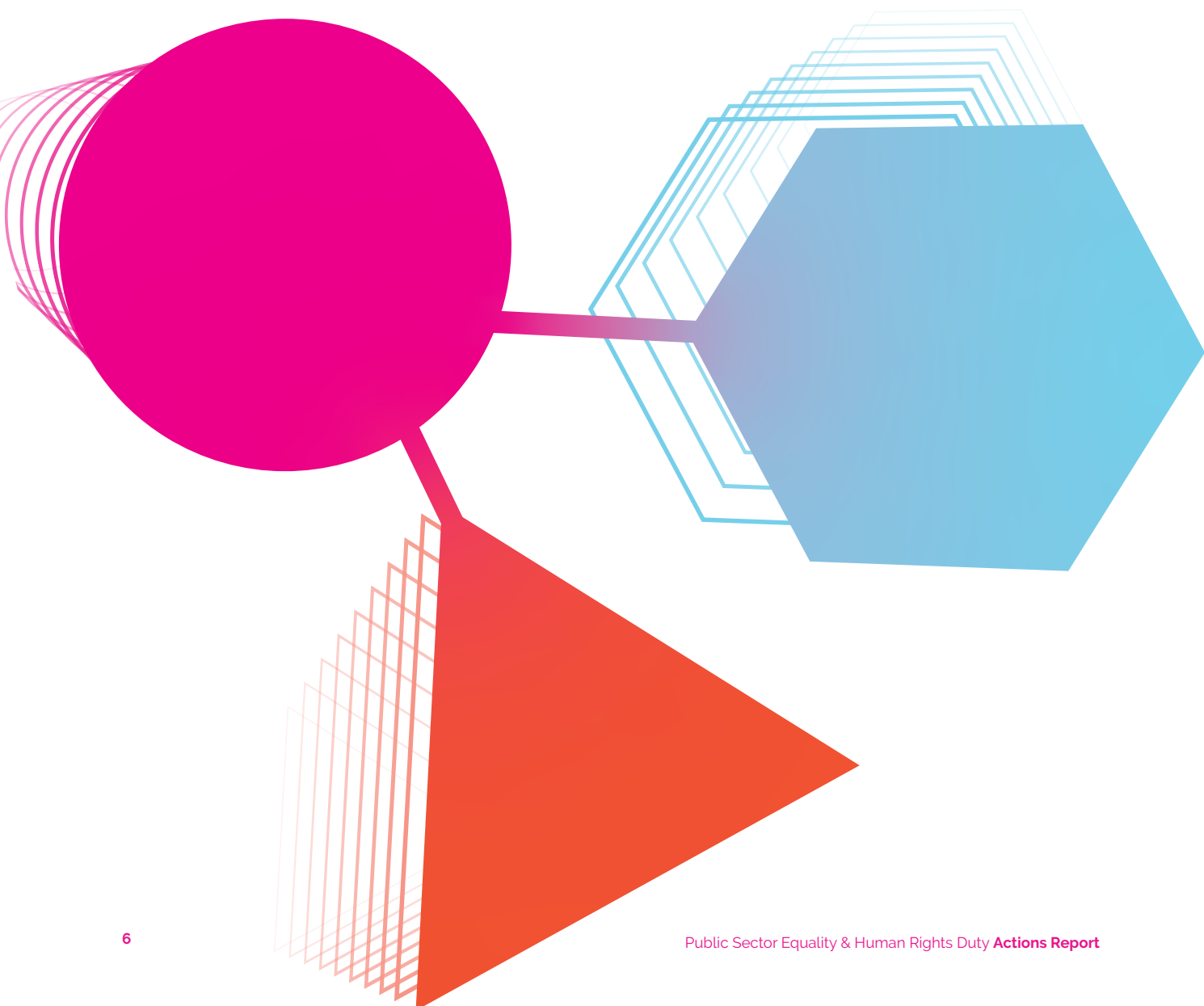
This approach has progressed with grantees and has been the subject of several queries, with valuable clarification sought and secured from the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, endorsing the approach taken.

The learning from this initial phase will inform the development of and training on a model for incorporating the Duty in an appropriate manner in grant aid systems.

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

6. Acknowledgement

SOLAS were nominated for an award at the ICD National Diversity and Inclusion Awards.



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