

**'View from the Chair' article published in the Business Newsletter, 16 Feb 2016
by Dr Michael Wardlow, Chief Commissioner, Equality Commission NI**

Equality, fairness and inclusion are key to a bright future

With political parties already squaring off for the Assembly elections in May, there is no shortage of competing views on how to improve life for the people of Northern Ireland. When the votes are counted and the dust settles there will be a new Executive with responsibility to produce a Programme for Government for the years through to the end of this decade.

There will rightly be a focus on how the Executive proposes to grow the economy, tackle problems in health and social services, combat violent crime and deal with issues of community division. In the Equality Commission, we have a particular role - to ensure that Northern Ireland is not only more prosperous and safe, but also a more equal society.

In a submission to the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister we have made clear our view that equality of opportunity and good relations must be central to all public policy and its implementation – and this is no less true at a time of reduced public spending.

In addition to identifying actions needed to address enduring inequalities in areas such as health, education, housing and participation in public life, we have made recommendations to promote greater equality in workplaces and to support greater economic participation by disadvantaged groups.

These include actions to support women's economic participation; to help people with disabilities gain employment and remain in work; to enable older people remain in work and to confront issues affecting migrant and minority ethnic workers.

Northern Ireland already has robust equality legislation which, for many years, was comparable with the best in the world but we have now dropped behind the protections available in other jurisdictions in some equality areas and these gaps have to be addressed.

We still await the extension of Age Discrimination laws to goods, facilities and services, and we remain of the view that the introduction of single equality legislation, as already

exists in other parts of the UK, would best harmonise and simplify the protections available in Northern Ireland.

There is little doubt that our equality legislation has helped ensure that employment practices here are of a very high standard. Legislation has helped in dealing with historic imbalances and under-representation for particular groups in our society, but inequalities, discriminatory behaviour, and disadvantages remain. Any programme for government which holds out to build a more progressive, dynamic and shared Northern Ireland, must include practical commitments to develop equality, fairness and inclusion as core principles.