

**‘View from the Chair’ article published in the Business Newsletter, 24 Oct 2017
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Brexit focus must retain equality during uncertainty

There is still much uncertainty and confusion surrounding the UK’s exit from the European Union, with a range of different views being put forward by Government and Opposition, within Government itself, within some political parties and, of course, between the UK and the EU.

This state of uncertainty on the legal, economic and financial arrangements for such an important change presents us as a society with concerns on a number of fronts. Here in the Equality Commission we have a particular focus on any potential impact of Brexit on Northern Ireland’s current equality legislation.

The UK Government has produced its draft European Union (Withdrawal) Bill and the Commission has just published a number of recommendations in relation to the draft Bill. It is vital that any Bill should not only ensure that there will be no regression from existing equality rights in Northern Ireland but that any future changes and developments in European law should continue to have effect here.

The current equality protections and mechanisms has proved to be beneficial to everyone in our society. They provide a solid framework as we work towards building a strong, increasingly diverse population. Clear and effective equality laws – recognised internationally to be of a high standard – have been an asset to economic investment and growth in Northern Ireland, and provide all local employers with a clear structure within which to operate. We publish good practice guidance on what are often difficult issues. The coming exit from the European Union will bring enough uncertainty around Northern Ireland’s future economic prospects without calling into question a well-established framework of equality legislation.

Unfortunately, we have already fallen behind other jurisdictions in the UK in the levels of protection afforded on some equality issues. For example, we still do not have protection against discrimination on grounds of age when accessing goods, facilities and services. In addition, a number of legal protections against disability discrimination which are in place in Great Britain – involving issues on job interviews, reasonable adjustments in schools, definitions of disability and harassment – do not apply here.

The out-workings of Brexit should not be allowed to undermine or even reverse decades of progress on equality and harmonious workplace relationships in Northern Ireland. We need our legislators to give priority to maintaining equality of opportunity and good relations at the heart of public policy - and to ensure its implementation.

- Further information about the UK’s exit from the EU is available [online](#)