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[Blog article](#) by Duane Farrell, Commissioner, Equality Commission NI

Making strides with PRIDE

Pride season is upon us again, and teams of volunteers in Belfast, Foyle and Newry are making final preparations for what will hopefully be great festivals, attended by many. Pride festivals are a great opportunity to reflect on Northern Ireland's journey over the last twenty years. My first Belfast Pride was in 1999. A few hundred people walked up Royal Avenue, to the surprise of a bemused and wary Belfast shopping public. A wide range of reactions greeted the parade that day. Some support, some embarrassment and more anger than I was expecting.

The intervening years have seen huge shifts. Belfast Pride is now one of the biggest festival days in the city, with tens of thousands of people getting involved with the main parade. The reactions from members of the public are overwhelmingly supportive and warm. Progress such as this is not only to be welcomed, but acts as a strong foundation for achieving full equality. It is right that this progress is celebrated as we embark on Pride season.

Pride, of course, is also an opportunity to reflect on the challenges which we still face to achieve equality. A significant body of research demonstrates the inequalities experienced by LGB&T people.

There are inequalities in education where young people who are attracted to the same sex are much more likely to be bullied. There is no clear understanding of the impact this has on their educational achievement, however it's reasonable to believe that any impact is not positive.

And in housing, LGB&T people experience harassment and hate crime in their own homes - the upsetting recent story of a young Belfast man who was regularly experiencing attacks upon his home and homophobic harassment outside it bears witness to this.

Further inequalities occur where same sex couples do not have equal access to civil marriage, and where marriages undertaken elsewhere in the United Kingdom or the Republic of Ireland are not recognised when people visit or move to Northern Ireland.

Achieving full equality before the law, and addressing the inequalities experienced by many different groups within our society, are key reasons why I decided to apply to become an Equality Commissioner. A more equal society in Northern Ireland benefits all sections of our society, and is at the heart of the work of the Equality Commission. The theme for Pride this year in Belfast is Demand Change, a theme with resonance for all sections of society as we strive for full equality.