

View from the Chair; Business Newsletter; Tuesday 31 March 2020 Geraldine McGahey OBE, Chief Commissioner, Equality Commission NI

Difficult times, difficult decisions

What strange and distressing times! I hope you and your loved ones are safe, fit and healthy, making the best of the current circumstances.

When I was appointed Chief Commissioner of the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland on 1 March, I had great plans for all of the things I wanted to do. This included the people I wanted to meet, and the organisations I wanted to engage with, on how we might all work together to further build an equal society – a society where everyone has the same understanding of what equality means and where equality and good relations are firmly at the heart of our decision making.

Then the Coronavirus pandemic arrived, causing the whole of our society to face unprecedented and difficult challenges, where extraordinary measures are in place to safeguard our health. No one could have foreseen the social distancing measures and cocooning of vulnerable members of society that have been introduced or indeed the economic measures that the government has deployed to effectively “mothball” our economy.

Over the next while, and who knows how long that might be, we are and will continue to be indebted to all of those within the health sector for their commitment and dedication. We have also new heroes - it was interesting to hear callers on a recent radio programme sing their praises of “white van drivers” for continuing to do their best to keep supplies moving around the country and stocking shelves in essential outlets.

Naturally, the primary focus for all of us is to keep ourselves and our loved ones safe. However, for many others there are additional financial worries; how to keep food on the table, how to pay bills, how to keep a roof over their heads or, for some, how to keep a business afloat.

I recognise that businesses and organisations across Northern Ireland are under enormous pressure - trying to do the right thing by their employees whilst ensuring that essential services continue and vital products are produced and distributed. The actions of business leaders now are vital to protect both lives and livelihoods.

For the Commission, our continuing vision is one where there is equality for all, and this is especially important in a time of crisis and emergency interventions. We too, have had to adapt to the current situation by facilitating staff working from home to safeguard their health and safety and that of our stakeholders. Our services remain open and we hope this will be of support to you as you address the compelling

issues of business survival facing employers and service providers in the current Coronavirus pandemic.

Normally at this time many organisations are required to submit their annual monitoring return. We recognize that you may need additional time to collate and submit it. We understand this and can provide advice to you to enable you to submit it as soon as it is practicable for you to do so.

I would like to stress the importance I place upon the role of business in furthering equality of opportunity for everyone in this community, including those most vulnerable at this present time. I know that an immense contribution has already been made by individual employers to develop and implement programmes to promote equality of opportunity and good relations in the workforce. Working together, I know we can ensure that when we emerge from this crisis, we will not have lost momentum, and that we will have a new enthusiasm to work together for the benefit of everyone.

Take care of each other and stay healthy.