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**Blog article by Geraldine McGahey, Chief Commissioner, Equality Commission**

## **Equality matters in extraordinary times**

Our society is facing unprecedented challenges, where extraordinary measures have been put in place by the Government to try to keep people safe and well. 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. Nor indeed the impact and potential impact on those who contract the virus and those who are working on the front line, in the health service and elsewhere to care for people and to provide essential other services.

The Coronavirus appears to have different impacts depending on individual circumstances and equality characteristics. Early evidence from experts is clear: the virus is more likely to have serious impacts on older people and those with underlying health conditions. Other equality groups may also be at increased direct or indirect risk – for example, people with a wide range of disabilities; with Special Educational Needs; those suffering from Mental Health issues; Travellers; Roma; and those here in Northern Ireland whose first language is not English. The impacts of job loss for some, of isolation for others and of home schooling of children also have real potential to be adverse impacts.

We know that policy makers are having to make some very difficult decisions in the current context. In doing so, Ministers and officials will need to weigh carefully the potential impacts of such decisions on the range of equality groups. The existing framework of equality duties, with its requirements to pay due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity and regard to the desirability of promoting good relations, should prove helpful in identifying and mitigating such impacts. They are important duties to observe. Equality matters particularly at a time of crisis and even when policies need to be developed at pace.

We are aware that the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) '[COVID-19 rapid guideline: critical care \[NG159\]](#)' is developed in the context of 'duties to have due regard to the need to eliminate unlawful discrimination, to advance equality of opportunity and to reduce health inequalities'.

We welcome the focus of such guidelines on evidence based clinical judgement which uses criteria that are not based on equality characteristics such as age, disability etc., and incorporates patient involvement and informed consent. These guidelines and ethical decision-making frameworks are geared towards delivering realistic achievable outcomes with consideration of the patient at the core. We anticipate and expect that guidelines, such as these, built on equality and human rights principles, will directly inform decisions made in policy and in front line

implementation.

Government is clear that it will need to take difficult decisions and may need to focus resources on prioritising according to the most urgent needs. It needs to ensure that it understands the impact of these decisions and takes steps to mitigate these.

Policy decisions taken now, in response to this crisis, have the potential to increase and reinforce existing inequalities; we must be very mindful of that in the days, weeks and months ahead. Equality matters for all of us.

Take care, stay safe and healthy.