

# An extraordinary year: Chief Commissioner's year in review



Geraldine McGahey, Chief Commissioner, Equality Commission for Northern Ireland discusses the impact of an unprecedented year and the potential learnings in promoting equality and challenging discrimination.

## How was your first year as Chief Commissioner?

To say that it was different to what I planned would be a gross understatement. I became Chief Commissioner of the Equality Commission on 1 March 2020 and after only three weeks in post, the pandemic hit and we moved to working from home. We were very quick to adapt and continue to provide all our advice and information services as well as employer training online.

I have been meeting online with stakeholders, with government and of

course chairing the monthly Commission meetings. I am very keen to understand different perspectives on equality and to meet people who experience inequalities in their daily lives, as well as listening to a wide range of stakeholders, from politicians to representatives of business, trade unions and voluntary and community sectors.

## What difference has the pandemic made to your work?

One of the very few positives I can take

out of the pandemic is the public discussion it has created about the inequalities affecting our society. I will continue to push for more engagement, research and better data to get to grips with inequalities accentuated during this pandemic.

Covid-19 is having an impact on everyone's life, but for many who were already suffering real inequalities, in health, education, employment and social inclusion, it is making things worse. Our everyday conversations are now peppered with how much has changed in such a short time and on the inequalities in our society so clearly exposed by the pandemic.

Covid-19 highlighted inequalities on grounds of disability, age, gender and race, in a number of areas including education.

We all know that education is fundamental to children's wellbeing and their life chances. I have been really impressed by the efforts of parents doing their best to care for and educate their children on top of the day job.

Recent research published by the Education Endowment Foundation has found that children entitled to free school meals have been disproportionately affected by last year's school closures. Children with disabilities and children from minority ethnic groups are over-represented within free school meal entitlement. The study of around 6,000 six- and seven-year-olds in England found that the gap between free school meal and non-free school meal children has widened further than expected. It also suggests that it will be made worse by school closures early in 2021.

We are aware of ongoing work within the Department of Education and the



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Education Authority and this needs to be closely monitored to ensure it is tackling the inequalities experienced by groups of children.

The Office for National Statistics reports that disabled people are disproportionately affected by the pandemic. Unfortunately, NISRA does not collect similar data but we can assume that this is mirrored here. Behind this data there are people who have lost their lives and families who have lost loved ones. The pandemic should be a catalyst for change in how we as a society treat people with disabilities.

Another area of real disadvantage that has become clear is the lack of protection against age discrimination in accessing goods, facilities and services. This is an area where there is a gap between equality legislation in Great Britain and here. I am really concerned about this, especially in the delivery of health services, and will continue to press for changes in the law.

While challenging racism has been part of the Commission's work since the very start, it has become much more prominent with the worldwide Black Lives Matter movement and the killing of George Floyd last May. Northern Ireland does have its Racial Equality Strategy, but progress by the Executive has been extremely slow and that needs to change. I've been meeting ethnic minority groups, working to keep the issues on the political agenda and pressing for more political engagement and urgent delivery on the RES.

We like to think of Northern Ireland as a welcoming society, but for many people of different races, that's not their experience. There were 881 racist

incidents and 583 racist crimes recorded by the police in the 12 months to the end of September 2020, that's 17 every week. We responded to last year's review of hate crime legislation, and look forward to our recommendations being translated into legislative reform.

We need to see leadership on this if we want to see change. All leaders in society must be careful of the language they use and must be seen to challenge discrimination in whatever form it is. A series of hate crime incidents over some months culminated just a few weeks ago in an arson attack at the Multi-Cultural Association's premises near our office in Belfast. This is where unchallenged racism leads us.

There are hopeful signs: debate on the Racial Equality Strategy and the extension of the Minority Ethnic Development Fund to September, for example. I'm looking forward to the Executive delivering on its commitments and demonstrating clear leadership in addressing racism and promoting race equality.

### **Has Brexit had any effect on the Commission's work?**

It would be impossible to look at the last year and not refer to Brexit. The UK Government has given us new powers and duties, and additional resources, to enable us and the NI Human Rights Commission to oversee the implementation of its important commitment to no reduction in certain equality and human rights as a result of Brexit. We have new functions to monitor, advise on, report on and enforce the UK's adherence to this commitment. This includes raising awareness, research and legal work and, alongside a strong partnership with the NI Human Rights Commission, work with the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission on oversight of rights and equalities issues falling within

the scope of the commitment that have an island of Ireland dimension. It is challenging and interesting work.

### **What will stay with you after this unprecedented year?**

A general over-arching point as we start to see light at the end of the Covid tunnel is the need for policy makers not to lose sight of their duties, under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act, to mainstream equality considerations in developing and implementing policies. I appreciate that for the Executive to respond quickly to the Covid-19 situation, some policies had to be made very fast. Even so, policy should be based on data and an understanding of societal needs. Equality matters in these difficult times and evidence of the differential impact on people from different equality groups needs to be understood and acted upon. Policymakers are in a position where they can really help by not making existing inequalities worse or creating new ones.

I'd like to think the pandemic has given all of us more insight into the lives of people who live every day with isolation and inequality. I believe we need to hear from people with information, real life experience or views on inequality for us as a society to reach a common understanding of what equality means.

We need to take forward the determination and flexibility that has got us this far. I am determined to push forward into my second year with the Commission with renewed focus on continuing engagement and applying the lessons of this extraordinary year to promoting equality and challenging discrimination.

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