

View from the Chair; Business Newsletter; 25 October 2022 Geraldine McGahey, Chief Commissioner, Equality Commission NI

End of the road for EU funding

We are running out of road. The impending disappearance of EU funding to Northern Ireland has the potential to seriously damage our economy and our society.

EU funding has been significant in the promotion of equality of opportunity and good relations over many decades in Northern Ireland.

It has provided vital support to many organisations working to combat poverty, promote social inclusion, support equality and address the needs of disadvantaged and vulnerable people. Many people, including those with disabilities, members of ethnic minority communities, young people and women have benefited greatly from this funding – particularly those who have found work thanks to support from groups which received EU funding.

On 14 October, permanent secretaries from relevant Northern Ireland departments met representatives from the UK's Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities. The issues are reduced replacement funding from the UK Government, a lack of clarity in relation to these new funds, a potential cliff-edge in funding for affected organisations and the failure by Stormont departments to provide match funding as they have in the past. They heard from the ESF Peer Group, consisting of 22 community organisations, that the jobs of around 1,700 people working to support vulnerable and disadvantaged people are at risk. These ESF Peer Group employees support around 17,000 people and have found work for around 12,000. The results of these deliberations are crucial for all these people.

This should concern employers here. In a situation where staff are hard to find, it's more important than ever to ensure that the workforce harnesses the talents and abilities of everyone. Northern Ireland has the lowest employment rate of disabled people in employment in the UK, at just 36%. Disabled people have a range and wealth of talent and skills to offer, just the same as people without disabilities, but who need some extra support.

We do a lot of work with organisations that help people with disabilities prepare for the world of work, apply for, get and keep jobs. These organisations provide that support not just for people seeking jobs, but also collaborate with employers to help them ensure their disabled employees can contribute fully. It's important work and much valued by those employers who use it.

The Government signed up to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2009. Article 27 of UNCRPD commits it to recognizing the right of persons with disabilities to work, on an equal basis with others; this includes ‘the right to the opportunity to gain a living by work freely chosen or accepted in a labour market and work environment that is open, inclusive and accessible to persons with disabilities’. Monitoring the implementation of the UNCRPD by Government is part of our work, along with our partners the NI Human Rights Commission.

In June 2022, the Commission published its research report into the equality impacts of the withdrawal of EU funding from Northern Ireland and a series of associated policy recommendations for Government. Amongst the recommendations we made at that time, was that there should be no reduction in funding previously made available under European Union funded programmes. And yet here we are in October with the situation still unresolved.

Since the Government’s Shared Prosperity Fund was launched at the end of April this year, there has been a lack of detail about the administration and delivery of the fund in Northern Ireland. The Equality Commission asked Government earlier this year to provide greater clarity on how the Shared Prosperity Fund will continue to support the promotion of equality of opportunity and good relations in Northern Ireland.

We also recommended that continuation funding and bridging arrangements should be provided until the Shared Prosperity Funding is operational, to avoid a financial ‘cliff-edge’ for affected organisations. Any funding processes should be simple and have transparent and objective criteria, fair processes and the ability to monitor equality outcomes.

We believe the Shared Prosperity Fund should be delivered through Northern Ireland government departments rather than through central UK structures and that equality and good relations should be at the heart of funding decisions. It is important that the Northern Ireland Executive and departments should clarify how the needs of people from different equality groups, who have been supported through European Union funding, will be supported by the Executive in the future and how they will address any potential shortfall in funding.

Northern Ireland faces many unique challenges, including those related to our past, which cannot be overcome without continued investment. Any break or loss of funding will have a devastating effect on many groups who work tirelessly to deliver services in local communities across Northern Ireland. The UK Government, the Northern Ireland Executive and its departments need to work together to help offset the impact of any future loss of funding and ensure that there is no gap between the end of European Union funding and the start of its replacement.