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PRESS RELEASE

Fire Service rescue of disabled student was final straw

Claire Taggart (20), a keen athlete and a student of Animal Management at Northern Regional College in Newtownabbey, has settled her disability discrimination case against the College. Her condition requires her to use a wheelchair and she depended on the College's lifts to access classrooms. She alleged that she was on occasion unable to get to classes due to the lifts not working. She took her case with the assistance of the Equality Commission.

Claire said: "Making sure someone like me can actually get to my classes is the most basic requirement when it comes to providing equal access for disabled students."

Claire, from Larne, is a very active young woman for whom independence is very important. Not only is she a member of the Ulster Barbarians Wheelchair Rugby Club and Ulster Boccia Club, but she represents GB in Boccia and is a contender for the 2016 Paralympic Games, having previously narrowly missed out on a gold medal in the Great Britain National Championships in December 2015.

Claire says that, as a result of lifts being out of order, she sometimes had difficulty getting to classes. "I had on occasion to make my way up and down stairs on my bottom while other students carried my wheel chair for me," she said. "As I now need a powered wheel chair, this is no longer possible. I was even told to go home because the lifts were not working."

In May 2014, Claire got stuck in a college lift and eventually had to be rescued by the Fire Service. "This brought matters to a head for me. I had some access difficulties in the past, but I never had to be rescued by a fireman before," she said. There has been good news for Claire, however, after she approached the Equality Commission. "I'm pleased that, as a result of my complaints, the College has taken measures to deal with the problems I encountered. One of the messages I'd like to get across is that a lift that doesn't work can wreck a disabled person's day – so please take care of the lifts!"

The College has apologised to Claire, made a payment of £1,000, and affirmed its commitment to equality of opportunity. It has also taken specific measures, which were agreed with Claire, to deal with problems affecting the lifts.

It has relocated CCTV to monitor student behaviour at one of the most frequently affected lifts, carried out an upgrade of the lift which had been breaking down and ensured that hydraulic cab release switches are located in an accessible position. In addition, the College has also arranged for monthly servicing of the lifts and that all lifts now have accessible emergency call buttons.

The College continues to work to make all students aware of the needs of disabled students and how important the lifts are in allowing them to fully access college facilities and enjoy college life. Equality Commission and college staff have reviewed the College's disability policy and procedures. The College is continuing mandatory staff training to promote disability awareness and equality and an understanding of disability rights. The College has purchased e-learning packages for staff on Safeguarding and on Equality and Diversity which it helped write and develop and which are bespoke to the needs of FE/HE Colleges in Northern Ireland.

Michael Wardlow, Chief Commissioner of the Equality Commission, says: "Education has a unique role to play in tackling all kinds of disadvantage in society, and equality for all – including people with disabilities - should be a core objective for every college or school. They need to ensure that students with disabilities have access to the full range of educational facilities and opportunities and see that they are provided with the necessary support to do this. Disabled students with mobility problems shouldn't be put off going to college, with all it has to offer them, just because the lifts don't work."

"Every year the Commission gets more complaints about disability than about any other sort of discrimination. The most common cause of complaint regarding access to education is the failure of institutions to make a reasonable adjustment so that a disabled person is not placed at a disadvantage in comparison with other students."

"Disability discrimination is a continuing problem and we maintain our focus on addressing it. We'll be supporting the 2016 UK-wide Disabled Access Day (12 March) with an event in Belfast on 10 March. It's part of our ['Every Customer Counts'](#) initiative, which helps businesses and service providers understand what is required of them under the law and how they can improve access for disabled people."