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PRESS RELEASE

“Talent is everywhere, opportunity is not”

“Talent is everywhere, opportunity is not’ Lord Chris Holmes said as he launched his UK Review, ‘Opening up public appointments to disabled people’, on 3 December. He neatly summed up the need for an inclusive and accessible process to put all applicants for public appointments on an equal footing,” said Dr Michael Wardlow, Chief Commissioner of the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland. Dr Wardlow was speaking ahead of an event on 13 December to look at what can be done over the next three years to improve the representation of people with disabilities in Northern Ireland’s politics and public life.

“In 2017, 2% of public appointees in Northern Ireland who reported their disability status said they were disabled. How can this be right, when more than 20% of the population here reports a long-standing health problem or disability and 40% of households have at least one person with a disability?”

The Equality Commission event at Windsor Park stadium brings together people with disabilities and their allies, including Kellie Armstrong, MLA, Chair of the All Party Group on Disability; Dr Jason Olsen, a researcher and former Fulbright scholar at the University of Ulster; June Best, MBE, blind disability campaigner and activist and Judena Leslie, Commissioner for Public Appointments. Other MLAs from the Assembly’s all Party Group on Disability are also attending.

“We need to see more disabled people enabled to bring their talents and experiences into public decision making, for example, as a board member for a public body or a school governor. We also need more people in politics as councillors and MLAs,” Dr Wardlow said.

“And we need them because their participation makes the decision-making process more inclusive and more representative. Their visibility as role models is important too, not least for other people with disabilities.

“The Commission’s own research into Key Inequalities in Participation in Public Life has identified specific barriers disabled people encounter, including physical and other accessibility issues, lack of capacity-building and wider support. We have been seeking views on what needs to be done to increase the representation of disabled people in political and public office over the past few months, and this event provides a further opportunity for people to contribute views on this (or on what needs to be done) and how the Commission can work to help remove them.

“We are expecting a lot of talent, experience, knowledge and ideas in the room and we will be gathering as much information as we can to help us use our powers, work with our partners and influence policy and practice over the next few years.”