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## **PRESS RELEASE**

### **Commission concerns that education inequalities could worsen in response to Covid-19 crisis**

The Equality Commission is concerned that the current crisis and the responses to it will further deepen existing educational inequalities, or lead to the emergence of new ones, affecting children now and throughout their lives.

It is vital that we focus on the needs of children and ensure they are not unfairly disadvantaged at school because they belong to groups protected by equality legislation.

There are a number of issues around education provision and assessment where action by the Department of Education and others in the response to COVID-19 could serve to promote equality of opportunity and avoid the emergence or widening of inequalities.

“The loss of a full term at school could have different impacts on different groups of children,” Chief Commissioner Geraldine McGahey said. “Pre-schoolers will lose out on language, learning, social and behavioural benefits. Older children, losing a full term in the classroom, and possibly returning part-time, will also lose out, but in particular we are concerned about those already experiencing inequality – that is, boys, pupils entitled to free school meals, particularly Protestants and within that, particularly Protestant boys. We also see serious impacts on children who need specialist support in education, for example children with special educational needs or disabilities or those needing language support.

“Another issue is the equality impacts of decisions made now about assessments and examinations. For children who will now not be sitting GCSE, AS or A level examinations, it will be important to consider how we can ensure that this does not impede them progressing in their education.

Ms McGahey concluded: “It is important that the Department is aware that its decisions, even where they need to be made urgently, may have different impacts on different groups of people. The Section 75 duties on public bodies to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity and regard to the desirability of promoting good relations generally still need to be complied with, even at times of crisis.

“We are all agreed, surely, that every child deserves the opportunity to fulfil his or her potential at school, and that no one should be unfairly disadvantaged because of their equality characteristics. Action now is essential, built on evidence and informed by parents, communities and wider stakeholders, to mitigate the risks to children’s futures.”