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## **PRESS RELEASE**

### **Improving access to politics and public life for disabled people**

People with hearing loss will be able to take a fuller part in public life with the installation of new videoconferencing facilities at the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Strangford MLA Kellie Armstrong has championed the cause of inclusion for deaf and those with partial hearing. She has 40% hearing, wears hearing aids in both ears and lip reads. She came to the Equality Commission for help in putting her case for these arrangements to accommodate her needs to the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission.

The Assembly Commission has recently upgraded its videoconferencing technology for use in Assembly Committee meetings. This will make it easier for MLAs and witnesses to join remotely and for deaf people to more easily participate. It has also issued guidance for witnesses appearing on remote link and for MLAs and others about how to use the new technology so that deaf people can follow proceedings.

Ms Armstrong said: "I am really pleased with these arrangements which will benefit everyone with hearing difficulties. This is a step which has proved particularly useful during the Covid-19 pandemic but will still be useful in months and years to come. I believe that it's a step forward for inclusion of deaf people and those with partial hearing and I'm grateful to the Equality Commission for its help in liaising on my behalf with the Assembly Commission to highlight particular needs of deaf people and those with partial hearing and to the Assembly Commission for incorporating these needs into its project, which had already commenced."

An Assembly Spokesperson said: "We are proud of our track record in enhancing and promoting the role of people with disabilities in public life, which is recognised through initiatives such as our Louder than Words charter mark. The videoconferencing technology will benefit a wide range of groups. For example, those who may have difficulty in travelling, those with caring responsibilities, and of course those with disabilities. This was a well advanced project, in which we were pleased to have input from an MLA with lived experience of disability to help us get it right for people with hearing impairments.

"The Assembly Commission has done significant work to develop facilities and procedures not only to respond to the challenges of Covid-19 but also to strengthen the Assembly's ability to engage with the community in the future."

Anne McKernan, Head of Legal Services at the Equality Commission, said: “This is an excellent example of making sure that someone with a disability can take part in everyday business on equal terms with everyone else. We were pleased that the Assembly Commission responded positively and promptly to Ms Armstrong’s needs, and that our advice to her in this instance helped achieve a good and lasting result.

“It’s also a encouragement for people with hearing impairment to put themselves forward for positions in public life where it’s crucial both to hear and to be heard.”