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Disabled people in danger of losing employment support services

The employment rate for disabled people in Northern Ireland is the lowest of all the UK regions, we cannot allow this gap to widen even further. We are really concerned that some of our most vulnerable and marginalised people will be left behind as the full extent of the loss of EU funding is realised”, said Geraldine McGahey, Chief Commissioner, Equality Commission for Northern Ireland.

The Equality Commission works closely with organisations across the disability sector and is concerned that the significant reduction in the amount of funding available, will impact on vital employment support services for disabled people. The Commission’s recent report looked at how EU funding benefitted equality groups here and what the loss of that funding might mean.

Applications to the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, People and Skills - Economic Inactivity Competition is now open, with £42million of funding being available over two years for Northern Ireland. However, this is significantly less than was available under the European Social Fund, which previously provided funds of £40million annually to the region.

Speaking about the looming funding crisis, Ms McGahey stressed that: “It is unlikely that the UK government will provide any additional monies to plug this huge funding gap. We must look to our already over-stretched budgets and ask local departments to consider what they can do to help protect these vital services.

“It is imperative that equality considerations are placed at the heart of public policy decisions. In times of crisis and hardship like now, it is even more important that they are front and centre of public policy and funding decision making. These considerations are a statutory requirement and must be treated as such.

“So, we call on our government departments to use their equality duties proactively, to further inform their budget decisions and to help mitigate the negative impact on disabled people seeking employment as a direct result of the loss of EU funding.

“Disabled people have skills and talents that our economy needs. Without proper funding, the disability sector will lose key workers which will directly result in disabled people losing access to vital employment support services to help them enter and remain in the labour market.

“We need intervention and collaboration from all stakeholders, otherwise it will be

disabled people, those furthest removed from the labour market, who will be most affected by this loss of funding. We must pull together, no one can be left behind”, concluded Ms McGahey.