



6 December 2023

International Day of Persons with Disabilities 2023

To mark the UN's International Day of Persons with Disabilities, the Equality Commission is reminding Government that equality for disabled people in Northern Ireland is still a work in progress.

Darren McKinstry, Head of Policy and Strategic Engagement, said: "Action is needed to deliver disability equality. Northern Ireland's last disability strategy expired in 2017 and there are longstanding calls to improve the protections that disabled people have from discrimination".

"There are several areas where our equality laws need reformed and updated. People in Northern Ireland currently have less protection against discrimination and harassment than people elsewhere in the UK."

"More than half of the discrimination complaints coming in to our advice line last year were about disability discrimination - we need comprehensive and effective actions by Government to promote positive attitudes and challenge stereotypes regarding people with disabilities, and to tackle discrimination.

"We have recently drawn attention to the position of people with disabilities who will be amongst those most seriously impacted by a range of budget cuts across government. There is also the significant loss of EU funding earlier this year to community and voluntary groups who do so much to support disabled people in finding and keeping jobs and living independently.

"Above all, we are calling for the effective development, implementation, oversight and review of a co-ordinated, cross-departmental disability strategy and action plan. Work to produce a new disability strategy has however stalled in the absence of ministers and a NI Executive.

"We have made recommendations to Government about removing barriers to information, to the environment disabled people live and work in, and to public services, housing and transport. Equality of opportunity in educational attainment, and employment for people with disabilities is still some distance off. And we need to see more people with disabilities in public life, with support, training and capacity building."

Michael Lorimer, Chair of the IMNI Disability Stakeholder Forum, said: "The rights of disabled people to work and to live independently are two examples of the

obligations on state parties under the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities, which the UK ratified in 2009. In 2016 the UNCRPD Committee concluded that there had been 'grave or systematic violations' of the rights of persons with disabilities. The UK's performance on this matter is currently being examined by the UN and we expect to hear their views soon.

"We need to see the establishment by Government of the Regional Disability Forum that was promised in the last strategy, which would advise all departments on policy and legislation. In line with General Comment Number 7 of UNCRPD, any Forum must be led by disabled people. This would put disabled people at the heart of Government decision making and would help create better, more inclusive, policies.

"We need a forum and strategy for disabled people in Northern Ireland that is rights-based, centred on the participation of disabled people and our organisations. It is only through such an approach that we can advance the rights of disabled people here, including our right to an adequate standard of living, our right to work and employment and our right to live independently in our own community."