



9 March 2023

Investigation report of complaints arising from the High Street Voucher Scheme

The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, today, published its investigation report which found that the Department for the Economy failed to comply with specific Equality Scheme commitments in relation to the equality screening of the High Street (Corona Virus, Financial Assistance) Scheme Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021(HSS), commonly known as the High Street Voucher scheme.

The investigation followed two complaints from an individual, made under Paragraph 10 of Schedule 9 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The complaints alleged that the Department had failed to comply with its own Equality Scheme commitments as it did not fully or properly consider the potential equality impacts of excluding those under the age of 18 from the Scheme.

The investigation found that the Department did not undertake its equality screening at the earliest opportunity in the policy development process. It also found that the screening form that was presented to the Minister regarding the High Street Voucher scheme included reference to a decision, stated as already made, on the eligibility criteria for age, that the scheme would only apply to those aged 18 and over. Given the significance of this criteria for the overall scheme, the Minister, therefore, could not have paid due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity when considering the policy proposal and deciding on this scheme.

Geraldine McGahey, Chief Commissioner, Equality Commission for Northern Ireland said: "Our investigation in this case identified a number of areas where the Department for the Economy failed to comply with its Equality Scheme commitments in relation to the equality screening of the High Street Scheme.

"The report outlines several recommendations for the Department to action. By implementing these recommendations, they will put equality of opportunity and good relations considerations at the centre of their policy making and service delivery processes, as they are required to do to comply with their Equality Scheme.

"We are recommending to the Department that an equality assessment is undertaken at the earliest opportunity during its policy development process. Also that they take a clear, consistent approach to this and finalise any screening documentation in a timely manner, before presenting it and all the relevant information to the decision maker for the policy concerned.

"All Departmental policy officers should implement the screening practices committed to in the Department's Equality Scheme and ensure they fully understand the purpose of equality screening. We have asked the Department to report back on its progress, in implementing the recommendations, within six months," concluded Ms McGahey.

Notes to Editor:

- [Download the full investigation report and recommendations](#) (pdf)
- The duties set out in Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 require that a public authority has to pay due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity and regard to the desirability of promoting good relations, when it carries out its functions in Northern Ireland. The Department for the Economy is a public authority for the purposes of the Section 75 duties.
- The Department for the Economy has an approved Equality Scheme. Equality Schemes are both a statement of the public authority's commitment to fulfilling the Section 75 duties and a plan for their performance.
- The investigation was undertaken in accordance with the Commission's powers and duties, as set out in Paragraphs 10 and 11 of Schedule 9 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, into the complaints alleging that the Department had failed to comply with its Equality Scheme.
- Paragraph 10 investigations look at whether a public authority, in the delivery of its functions, complies with the commitments set out in its Equality Scheme, they do not investigate the decisions taken nor the outcomes that arise from those decisions.