

**EQUALITY COMMISSION FOR NORTHERN IRELAND**

**ONE HUNDRED AND SEVENTY FIRST MEETING HELD**  
**ON WEDNESDAY 29 APRIL 2020 AT 1.30 PM**  
**BY TELECONFERENCE**

**PRESENT**

Geraldine McGahey	Chief Commissioner
Neil Anderson	Deputy Chief Commissioner
June Best	
Theresa Donaldson	
Duane Farrell	
Helen Ferguson	
Hazel Francey	
Jarlath Kearney	
Deepa Mann-Kler	
Stephen Mathews	
Carmel McKinney	
Dawn Purvis	
Katy Radford	

**APOLOGIES**

Joe McVey

**IN ATTENDANCE**

Evelyn Collins	Chief Executive
Keith Brown	Head of Corporate Services
Lisa King	Director of Research and Investigation
Jacqui McKee	Director, Advice and Compliance
Anne McKernan	Director, Legal Services
Darren McKinstry	Director, Policy and Strategic Engagement
Louise Conlon	Manager, Communications
Adriana Morvaiova	Boardroom Apprentice

**1. Introduction**

The Chief Commissioner welcomed everyone to the Commission meeting, which was taking place for the second month by teleconference call due to Government guidance on the Coronavirus pandemic.

**Minutes of the one hundred and seventieth meeting held on  
25 March 2020.**

EC/20/04/01

The minutes of the one hundred and seventieth meeting held on Wednesday 25 March 2020 were **signed** as a true and accurate record.

## **2. Matters Arising**

**Pg 3 Hate Crime Law Reform: Response to the hate crime law review consultation:** this was being finalised and would issue the following day.

**Pg 4 New Decade, New Approach-Rights, language and identity:** Any further views on the proposals would be welcome, by email to the Chief Executive. Discussion took place with senior Executive Office official after last Commission meeting, outlining the initial views expressed. No further information on timescale for the proposed legislation to be introduced. A further discussion would take place in due course.

**Pg 5 Commissioner induction:** The Chief Executive had held the first induction session with Deepa Mann-Kler and Carmel McKinney. Further sessions on the various areas of Commission's work would take place in due course.

## **3. Conflict of Interest**

Commissioner Deepa Mann-Kler noted that she was a Non-Executive Director of the Public Health Agency but the Chief Commissioner considered that this did not give rise to a conflict of interest in relation to Response to COVID 19: briefing paper (EC/20/04/02).

Carmel McKinney noted that she was Chair of the Fire and Rescue Service.

## **4. Policy Issues**

- Response to COVID 19: Briefing paper

EC/20/04/02

The Chief Executive presented this briefing paper on the Commission's response to COVID 19, outlining the key messages being used in all the Commission's communications and highlighting the range of work being undertaken across all the Commission's functions. The briefing also gave an overview of the organisational arrangements put in place by the Commission and set out a number of next steps.

Commissioners welcomed the informative briefing and commended the work done and the tone and approach taken – this was constructive, practical, expert and measured. This was considered important during this very difficult time for the whole society and when Government was working at pace in response to the pandemic.

It was noted that feedback from stakeholders had been positive particularly in relation to the recent communications on the impact on people with disabilities. The ongoing issues and public concern about access to and availability of Personal Protective Equipment and data about the impact of the virus in care homes was noted.

The Chief Commissioner had written to the First Minister and deputy First Minister to highlight the need for legislation in relation to age discrimination in goods, facilities and services. She had also written to the Minister for Health to highlight the particular impact of the virus on people with disabilities. The lack of data across all equality grounds was also noted in this correspondence and on social media.

Commissioners agreed the importance of ensuring follow up in this correspondence as necessary and to continue to push for legislative change.

There was a discussion on the longer term impacts of the pandemic on inequalities across society and the impact on the enduring and persistent key inequalities in education in particular. It was considered important that the Commission keeps these under close review and use its powers as necessary. The revised draft Business Plan which was to be considered later on the agenda addressed the need for future work in this area.

The briefing provided information on the organisational move to home working. Commissioners discussed the importance of prioritising staff wellbeing during these very difficult times. The Chief Executive explained the various steps that had been taken to address this, including an emphasis in communications, such as more frequent all staff briefings, and encouragement to engage in wellbeing initiatives as well as the availability of provisions on mental health by Inspire, which the Commission used for counselling services of staff.

The need to keep in touch with the stakeholder groups was also stressed and the Chief Executive confirmed that this was very much on the agenda. There was ongoing engagement with a range of stakeholders, including for example with representatives of people with disabilities. This would be continued and built upon going forward.

Commissioners **noted** the briefing paper and the planned next steps.

- Draft Business Plan 2020/2021 EC/20/04/03

The Chief Executive presented a draft Business Plan 2020-21 which had been revised since the January draft in light of the impact of Covid 19 pandemic. Commissioners comments were welcome. A further costed Business Plan would be considered by the Commission when the budget allocation was advised by The Executive Office.

Commissioners commended officers for the agility they had shown to revise the Business Plan in such a short space of time. It was important that the Commission is responsive to the impact of the Covid 19 pandemic, as relevant to its remit. It was also appreciated that the draft Plan outlined a lot of work and that further changes may be necessary. The Chief Executive agreed that the draft Plan outlined a significant work load and that this would be kept under review. It would also need to be further examined when the budget was confirmed.

Following discussion, Commissioners **noted** the Draft Plan which would be presented at a further meeting for approval, hopefully May, once the budget allocation had been advised.

## **5. Business Reporting**

- Financial Position 1 April 2019 - 31 March 2020 EC/20/04/04

Keith Brown, Head of Corporate Services, provided Commissioners with a report on the end of year outturn and on the budgetary position for 2020/21. He provided a summary of the initial end of year budget outturn for 2019/20 noting that it was currently showing a small underspend. He advised that these figures will be adjusted, in relation to near and post year events, and a final outturn will be provided to the Department after the annual accounts have been audited.

The finance team was preparing the Financial Statements for audit which would be presented to the next meeting of the Audit and Risk Committee on 12 May 2020 prior to submission to the auditors on 13 May 2020. The audited Annual report and Accounts would be on the Commission agenda for the June meeting.

Although the Commission's budget for the incoming year had not yet been received, the June monitoring round had been launched. The Commission had been advised to consider bids and easements based on the 2019-20

opening position. The Commission Will be making a bid for a capital allocation and some adjustments to receipts and depreciation in this monitoring round. Following a query, the Chief Executive provided a brief update on the business case for resource for Dedicated Mechanism was provided.

Commissioners praised the work undertaken to date, noting that it was particularly difficult preparing for an audit in the current environment.

Commissioners **noted** the financial position at the year-end.

- Progress Report: 1 April 2019 - 31 March 2020 EC/20/04/05

The Chief Executive presented the year end Business Plan Progress Report, outlining progress on the 13 objectives across four strategic areas. As at 31 March 2020, 12 objectives have been met and one was partly completed. She explained that this was the first year of the three year Outcome Based Accountability focussed Corporate Plan. She drew attention to a number of highlights across each functional area.

Commissioners expressed thanks to staff for all their work throughout the year and **noted** the Business Plan Progress Report for the year-end.

- Communications Report: 1 April 2019 – 31 March 2020 EC/20/04/06

The Manager, Communications, presented the Communications Report for the period 1 April 2019 – 31 March 2020, noting the highlights of the work this year.

In response to a query about the current Communications Strategy, it was explained that Commissioners considered a review of the current strategy late in 2019 and a new draft Communications Strategy would be presented to Commission for consideration over the next couple of months.

A Commissioner expressed concern that there may be a rollback on the good work done around community engagement over the last couple of years, if this is curtailed by the current situation. It was explained that thought was being given to how community engagement could be continued even if needed to be remotely.

Commissioners **noted** the Report, commending the work undertaken on communications throughout the year.

## 6. Other Matters for Commission Decision

There were no other matters for decision.

## 7. Chief Commissioner's Business

EC/20/04/07

The Chief Commissioner explained that she was keen to have a Commissioner “away day” and to start the Commissioner strategic discussion sessions, but given the current situation, it was likely to be September before an away day could be organised. She would keep this under review.

The Chief Commissioner advised that she and the Chief Executive had accepted an invitation to provide an overview of the Commission’s work to the Executive Office Assembly Committee on 13 May 2020 by teleconference.

- Committee Membership EC/20/04/07i

The Chief Commissioner asked Commissioners to contact her with their expressions of interest for participation in the various Committees. Current Commissioners were also asked to let her know if they wish to change their Committee membership.

The Chief Commissioner advised that she would ensure appropriate balance across all Committees and confirm membership at the May Commission meeting.

Commissioners **agreed** to contact the Chief Commissioner with their interest to serve on the various Committees.

- Board Effectiveness Report EC/20/04/7ii

The Chief Commissioner noted that the findings of the self-assessment survey on Board Effectiveness, undertaken by the Commission’s internal auditors Deloitte Ltd, were included in papers. The findings were very positive and would be discussed in detail in due course at the proposed away day.

## 8. Chief Executive's Report

EC/20/04/08

The Chief Executive added detail to her previously circulated report. She provided updates on engagement with the Northern Ireland Office in relation to the proposed Dedicated Mechanism, particularly around resources. She

also noted the earlier reference to the assessment under the Investors in People framework and that the IIP report is expected early in May.

The high level of staff engagement on the IIP survey was commended.

Commissioners **noted** the Chief Executive's Report.

## **9. Matters for Information**

No matters for information were considered.

## **10. Minutes of Committee Meetings**

- Minutes of the Statutory Duties Investigation Committee held on Wednesday 19 February 2020. EC/20/04/09

Commissioners noted the above minutes.

## **11. Any Other Business**

No further business.

## **12. Date of next meeting**

One hundred and seventy second Commission Meeting on Wednesday, 27 May, at 1.30 pm.

**The meeting closed at 3.15pm**