

**EQUALITY COMMISSION FOR NORTHERN IRELAND**

**ONE HUNDRED AND EIGHTIETH MEETING HELD**  
**ON WEDNESDAY 24 MARCH 2021 AT 1.30 PM**  
**BY MICROSOFT TEAMS**

**PRESENT**

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

**APOLOGIES**

Theresa Donaldson

**IN ATTENDANCE**

Evelyn Collins	Chief Executive
Keith Brown	Head of Corporate Services
Deborah Howe	Senior Policy Manager
Paul Noonan	Senior Policy Manager
Simon Hookham	Senior Research Officer
Leanne Brown	Assistant Research Officer
Lisa King	Director, Research and Investigations
Roisin Mallon	Director, Dedicated Mechanism
Anne McKernan	Director of Legal Services.
Darren McKinstry	Director, Policy and Strategic Engagement
Louise Conlon	Manager, Communications
Lai Pang	Boardroom Apprentice

## 1. Introduction

The meeting was taking place by Microsoft Teams video conference due to Government guidance on the Coronavirus pandemic. The Chief Commissioner thanked those who attended the session on risk earlier in the day noting that it had been a useful discussion.

## 2. Minutes of the one hundred and seventy ninth meeting held on 24 February 2021.

EC/21/03/01

The minutes of the one hundred and seventy ninth meeting held on Wednesday 24 February 2021 were **signed** as a true and accurate record.

## 3. Matters Arising

**Pg 4:** The revised Legal Advice and Assistance Policy was being prepared for consultation and would issue prior to the end of March.

**Pg 4:** Amendments had been made to the Article 2 Policy for Legal Advice and Assistance to reflect the decision that the Commission should decide on proposals for the use of 'own motion' powers, request for intervention and application for assistance.

## 4. Conflict of Interest

No conflicts of interest were declared.

## 5. Policy Issues

- Ad-Hoc Committee on a Bill of Rights: Counsel's Advices

EC/21/03/02

Roisin Mallon, Director, Dedicated Mechanism Unit, presented this paper, which sought Commissioners' initial views on a number of issues highlighted by Counsel in his advices, commissioned ahead of giving evidence to the Ad Hoc Assembly Committee on a Bill of Rights on 29 April 2021.

Commissioners welcomed sight of Counsel's advice, noting the importance of the Commission considering its inputs to the Bill of Rights considerations in the context of a range of other related

issues. A number of Commissioners expressed support for further consideration to be given to any principle of equality being worded in a way that would lead to substantive equality and it was agreed that it would be valuable to discuss the advices further with Counsel.

It was agreed that a time would be identified for such discussion in week commencing 12 April, so that it can inform evidence to the Ad Hoc Committee on a Bill of Rights later in April.

- Programme for Government Outcomes Framework: Draft Response  
EC/21/03/03

Deborah Howe, Senior Policy Officer, presented the draft response to the consultation on the Executive's Programme for Government: Draft Outcomes Framework. The draft response built on Commission's previous response to the draft Programme for Government in 2016. Commissioners' approval of the proposed positions and key recommendations was being sought prior to submission of a final response.

Commissioners noted that the Executive's consultation was on its draft Outcomes Framework and lacked any detail on indicators and agreed that it would be important to recommend that indicators are published. Commissioners agreed that it was important to welcome the focus on achieving outcomes given the potential that this offers to advance equality of opportunity and good relations although this framework would be meaningless unless there was a set of detailed indicators and a clear allocation of resources against each outcome.

It was also agreed that the Commission should recommend that there is greater reference to the promotion of equality and good relations throughout the Framework and that the response provided a good opportunity to highlight the importance of adequate data on equality grounds.

Following discussion, Commissioners **approved** the proposed positions and key recommendations and reaffirmed the high-level positions for the Programme for Government.

- Consultation by Department of Health on a Mental Health Strategy 2021-2031: Draft Response  
EC/21/03/04

Paul Noonan, Senior Policy Officer, presented an overview of the consultation by the Department of Health on the draft Mental Health Strategy 2021-2031 and highlighted the additional policy position recommended for inclusion in our response in respect of peri-natal provision.

Commissioners discussed the provision of mental health service for those over the age of 65 years of age, the importance of such provision including for victims of conflict-related trauma and the lack of awareness of any age cut off points relating to service provision. It was confirmed that this matter had been raised with the Commission by members of the Victims and Survivors Forum. The current draft Strategy includes a recommendation to remove this provision and the proposed draft response reiterates the Commission's view that precluding those over 65 from accessing this or other health services was not appropriate and should be removed.

Commissioners welcomed the draft Mental Health Strategy generally but agreed that the Commission's response should emphasise the need for the Strategy to be accompanied by an action plan. It was also important to highlight that the Strategy would need to be adequately resourced, noting that this, was currently lacking across mental health services in Northern Ireland. Concern was expressed that the Strategy would become a "wishlist" with no practical and much needed improvements to mental health services. It was also noted that mental health should be the responsibility of all of Government, not just the Department of Health. The tone of the response should reflect these concerns as well as welcoming the overall thrust of the draft Strategy.

Following discussion, Commissioners noted the overview of the consultation, the proposed approach and **approved** the proposed new recommendation.

## **6. Business Reporting**

## **7. Other Matters for Commission Decision**

- Draft Political Engagement Strategy EC/21/03/05

Louise Conlon, Communications Manager, presented the draft Political Engagement Strategy, setting out the proposed approach to political engagement work over the next three years. The aim of the Strategy was

to build on the work already being undertaken and ensure consistency in the approach. This was an initial draft and Commissioner's input was sought at this stage.

Commissioners agreed that the Strategy was moving in the right direction and welcomed the approach taken during its development including undertaking the MLA survey, which provided valuable information. They welcomed the link between this draft Strategy and the previously agreed Communications Strategy. Reference was made to the important leadership role the Commission has on championing equality and also the importance of being trusted as an expert voice on equality.

It was suggested that the draft Strategy's "goal" appeared overly ambitious and should be refined. It was also suggested that there should be a focus on a small number of issues particularly relevant to political representatives and their constituents, including for example the use of any available data about service provision at constituency level. Work on measuring equality generally in Northern Ireland was also referenced.

The focus at constituency level was welcome and was something that the Commission could use to build engagement with political representatives. It was also suggested that Members of Parliament might be particularly important in the current context and it was agreed to review the audience map. It was also agreed that the evaluation section needed to be reviewed.

A further version of the Strategy would be presented to a future Commission meeting for approval.

## **8. Chief Commissioner's Business**

**EC/21/03/06**

The Chief Commissioner updated on a number of engagements during the previous month including attending the Reclaim the Agenda International Women's Day event. She referenced some recent correspondence from a political representative regarding the naming of a building. The Chief Commissioner also reported on her evidence session to the Ad Hoc Committee on a Bill of Rights for NI on 18 March 2021, along with the Chief Executive and the Director of the Dedication Mechanism Unit.

Commissioners **noted** the Chief Commissioner's update.

## **9. Chief Executive's Report**

EC/21/03/07

The Chief Executive referred to her previously circulated report, noting that there is still no information on the Commission's budget allocation for 2021/22.

She also highlighted useful training provided for staff on the scope of the commitment set out in Article 2 of the Ireland/Northern Ireland Protocol and recommended that Commissioners may also find this useful. This was agreed and dates would be sought for a session on this in early May.

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

## **10. Matters for Information**

- Public Opinion Survey on Equality in Northern Ireland EC/21/03/08

Lisa King, Director, Research and Investigations, presented the results of the Public Opinion Survey on Equality in Northern Ireland, undertaken for the Commission in November 2020 by Ipsos Mori, Belfast.

Commissioners thanked Ms King for the presentation and noted the findings and proposed next steps.

## **11. Minutes of Committee Meetings**

## **12. Any Other Business**

A Commissioner noted feedback from the Trans community in relation to the census questions. The Chief Executive indicated awareness of this and a number of other issues which had been raised in respect of the Census, and that there was ongoing engagement with the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency on relevant matters.

- 13. Date of next meeting:** One hundred and eighty first Commission Meeting on **Wednesday, 28 April 2021, at 1.30 pm** via Microsoft Teams.

**The meeting ended at 4pm**