

Equality Commission

FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

Corporate Plan 2022 – 2025

April 2022

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Foreword

We are pleased to publish this Corporate Plan outlining the strategic priorities to guide our work over the period April 2022 – March 2025. As Northern Ireland’s equality body, we are aware of the vital role we have in working to secure greater equality of opportunity and in challenging discrimination.

We aim to use our powers and duties in combination to secure changes to policy, practices and procedures to combat discrimination and promote equality in Northern Ireland. We recognise the need for us to be creative and innovative about how we work, proactively identifying issues to be tackled and using our powers and duties in a coordinated, integrated way to ensure greatest impact. We also recognise the ongoing importance of exercising our powers and duties robustly and independently, while at the same time recognising the value and strength of working in partnership to secure changes.

We would like to thank all those who provided comments through the public consultation on our Draft Corporate Plan, both in writing and in meetings. We appreciate the engagement we have had through the consultation period, we have considered and amended our plan following discussion of the comments received and trust that you see this reflected in this final text.

We recognise that the Corporate Plan, as a framework, needs to be a dynamic and flexible document. It needs to reflect the context in which we work, which we recognise can change year to year. We will review the strategic priorities each year to ensure, on an annual basis, that our work reflects and takes account of new developments and any changes to the context in which we work.

Geraldine McGahey OBE
Chief Commissioner

Dr Evelyn Collins CBE
Chief Executive

Date: 4 May 2022 to TEO

1. Who we are and what we do

The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland is a non-departmental public body established by the Northern Ireland Act 1998. We are sponsored by The Executive Office, which is responsible for equality legislation in Northern Ireland and for the resources which are allocated to the Commission.

We are governed by a board of Commissioners consisting of a Chief Commissioner, a Deputy Chief Commissioner and presently [12 other Commissioners](#), appointed by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

Role and remit

Our powers and duties derive from a number of statutes enacted over the last decades. These provide protection against discrimination in employment and in the provision of goods, facilities and services on grounds of disability, race, religion and political opinion, sex and sexual orientation. On the grounds of age, protection against discrimination is available only in respect of employment.

We also have responsibilities arising from the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and Disability Discrimination Act 1995 in respect of the statutory equality and good relations duties which apply to public authorities - the s75 duties and the disability duties.

The Commission, with the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, has been designated under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Disabled Persons (UNCRPD) as the independent mechanism tasked with promoting, protecting and monitoring implementation of UNCRPD in Northern Ireland.

The European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Act 2020 gave new duties and powers to the Commission, and to the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC), effective from 1 January 2021. These enable the Commission to monitor, advise and report on, and enforce the UK Government's adherence to its commitment set out in Article 2 (1) of the Ireland/Northern Ireland Protocol to the Withdrawal Agreement. This commitment is to ensure that no diminution of rights, safeguards or equality of opportunity, as set out in that part of the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement entitled Rights, Safeguards and Equality of Opportunity, results from the UK's withdrawal from the Union, including in the area of protection against discrimination.

In general terms, our statutory remit provides that we are to:

- promote equality of opportunity and affirmative action
- work towards the elimination of unlawful discrimination and harassment
- keep relevant legislation under review
- promote good relations between persons of different racial groups and good disability practice
- oversee the effectiveness of statutory equality duties on public authorities.

How we work in practice

We use a combination of our powers to encourage and to enforce changes to policy, practices and procedures in favour of greater equality and good relations and we will continue to do so.

Work is undertaken across our main functions as set out below:

Advice and Compliance

Our Advice and Compliance staff provide advice, support and guidance to public authorities, employers and service providers on all aspects of their equality obligations and on best practice, both in respect of the anti-discrimination legislation and on the equality and good relations duties. They also work to ensure that those with responsibilities under the range of equality legislation comply with their obligations.

Legal Services

Our Legal Services staff provide information and discrimination advice to individuals with potential complaints under anti-discrimination laws. They also provide representation to individuals to whom we have provided legal assistance.

Public Policy and Strategic Engagement

Our Public Policy and Strategic Engagement staff work with departmental officials, elected representatives and wider stakeholders to raise awareness and secure advocacy and adoption of key changes to improve law and public policy. Through this, we support and challenge government to better tackle identified key inequalities, and to advance equality of opportunity and good relations. Key areas include employment, education, housing and accommodation and participation in public and political life.

Research and Investigations

Our Research and Investigations staff work to address evidence gaps to support the delivery of other Commission functions, and to help set the equality agenda through research and evidence. They undertake formal investigations and also investigations in relation to the statutory equality and good relations duties and deal with complaints that a public authority may have failed to comply with its approved Equality Scheme.

Communication and Promotion

Our Communication and Promotions staff support the Commission's corporate stakeholder engagement; and undertake our promotional and awareness raising activities as well as our public affairs and media activities.

Dedicated Mechanism

Our Dedicated Mechanism Unit staff undertake the range of new functions we have to oversee the UK Government's commitment set out in Article 2 of the Ireland/Northern Ireland Protocol to no diminution of rights. This includes monitoring and reporting on Government's compliance with the commitment, policy and research, awareness raising and enforcement.

2. Our vision and mission and our values

Our **vision** is

An equal society

Our **mission** is

Improving people's lives by promoting equality and combatting discrimination

Our **values**, set out below, seek to reflect the culture of the Commission. We recognise that how we do things is as important as what we do.

Committed – we actively challenge discrimination and inequalities and promote equality, we care about delivering high standards of public service, we are courageous, dedicated and passionate about our work

Open – we are honest, trustworthy, inclusive, accountable, approachable and responsive

Respectful – we treat people as equals and respect diversity, act fairly, appreciate and support our colleagues' efforts, care for ourselves, colleagues and others and we listen

Enterprising – we are innovative, forward-thinking, outward looking, adaptable and continuously improving how we work.

3. Context

The context for the Commission's work in the coming three-year period looks set to be shaped by the ongoing impact of the UK leaving the European Union and the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic. The increase in living costs evident now as we see the outworking of leaving the European Union and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic are likely to be further exacerbated by a potential global energy and food crisis. These are exacerbated by the situation in Ukraine and conflicts elsewhere.

A number of these factors have already dramatically altered our work over the recent period. We have taken on new responsibilities to oversee the UK Government's commitment to no diminution of rights as set out in Article 2 of the Ireland/NI Protocol and we have adapted our work to provide a timely, relevant and effective response to the challenges of COVID-19 from an equality perspective.

This work will continue into the forthcoming Corporate Plan period. We anticipate a continued focus on issues arising as a result of Brexit and the need to address potential changes to rights and changing relationships between UK and the European Union. We will be working, with NIHRC and with the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission to oversee and report on rights and equalities issues falling with the scope of the Article 2 commitment that have all island dimension.

We will also continue to highlight the potential differential impacts of COVID-19, and the policy response to it, by equality ground. We will continue to promote the use of the equality law framework, including the equality and good relations duties, to shape public policy responses in areas such as employment and education. We will also continue to call on government and public authorities to ensure they collect and analyse data by equality ground as part of a fully evidence-based approach to tackling inequalities. We want to see a clearer focus on addressing inequalities in the TEO's COVID-19 Recovery Plan, as highlighted in our comments on the draft Plan in July 2021.

We will continue to be vigilant to emerging equality issues arising from the context in which we are all working, as outlined above.

The responses to this context have the potential to not only impact on, but to reshape our society – be it in relation to food production, home heating or transport infrastructure towards more renewable sources and increased walking and cycling. Similarly, the humanitarian response to the associated refugee crisis will likely lead to increased diversity in our society and also place an increased demand on public services and

budgets. In parallel with actions to welcome and support refugees, we can potentially also expect to see an increase in negative social attitudes in some areas, and potentially increases in racism and hate crime. The potential for increasing inequalities on grounds of race, national origin and nationality is real and will need to be addressed.

So, we will continue to focus on the critical importance of diversity and race equality in Northern Ireland, following the focus of the Black Lives Matter campaign and the death of George Floyd in May 2020. There is an increase in reported race hate crime here which needs to be addressed through the introduction of updated hate crime legislation. The effective implementation of the Executive's Race Equality Strategy 2015 – 2025 is vital.

We also recognise that we will need to continue to be responsive to priorities agreed by the Northern Ireland Executive. This includes priorities arising from its consideration of the implementation of the New Decade, New Approach document of January 2020, although we appreciate that this has been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The full implications of the collapse of the Executive in February 2022, intertwined with the imminent May 2022 Assembly election, also provide an uncertain context for equality in Northern Ireland, and potentially on the ability of the Executive and Assembly to lead the Northern Ireland specific response to emerging issues.

That said, we understand that, following the Assembly election in May 2022, a new Programme for Government (PfG) will likely be agreed. Like others, we provided comments on the PfG Outcomes Framework in April 2021, highlighting the need for a focus on equality. This included highlighting, again, the need for improved equality data – essential to ensure that policies and services are effectively targeted to achieve improvements in the situation and experiences of people across the equality groups.

The need for equality law reform remains critical. The gaps in protections for people against discrimination – including in respect of age discrimination in goods, facilities and services – are unacceptable. We have been calling for law reform for many years, publishing recommendations for improvements. We will continue to highlight the differences in equality rights for people here compared to Great Britain with its Single Equality Act 2010 and to press for changes, including enhancements to our powers where necessary to secure changes.

We also wish to see the development, led by the Department of Communities, of the various social and equality strategies – gender, sexual orientation, disability and anti-poverty - reach successful

completion in year one of this corporate plan time frame. There also should be effective implementation and oversight, shaped by stakeholder involvement, over the remainder of this corporate plan and beyond. These strategies have the potential to address persistent inequalities and advance equality across the design and delivery of public policy and services.

We will also continue to highlight the link between poverty and inequalities and the need for action to address poverty and social exclusion experienced by a range of equality groups. It is clear that the lives of many people are impacted adversely by inequalities, disadvantage and discrimination and that barriers and inequalities can be exacerbated by poverty and social exclusion.

4. Strategic priorities

We have developed five strategic priorities to guide our work over the period 2022 – 2025.

These are:

- Working for a stronger legal and policy framework for equality
- Using our powers to combat discrimination and promote equality of opportunity
- Safeguarding our rights and protections in a changing Europe
- Promoting equal access to and equal opportunities for all at work
- Addressing inequalities in educational attainment and tackling bullying

Work planned under each of these priorities is set out below, focusing on how we will use our powers and duties to effect change.

Our work across these five strategic priorities areas will take account of the current and evolving context set out in the previous section, with each annual business plan over the period 2022-2025 developing and delivering on specific targeted actions to advance equality and good relations in the current and evolving context.

As a strategic enforcement body, we aim to use a combination of our powers and duties to secure changes to policy, practices and procedures in favour of greater equality and good relations.

We remain committed to partnership working to help advance equality in Northern Ireland – both with those who are in a position to effect change and those with whom we share common cause in identifying and working for the changes required. Partners include elected representatives, Departmental officials, public authorities, employers and business organisations, trade unions and organisations across the community and voluntary sector. Building on and extending partnership working is key to the delivery of our priorities.

Much of our planned work set out below covers the full range of equality grounds protected by the anti-discrimination legislation and covered by the equality and good relations duties. We will also focus on specific inequalities experienced by particular groups where it is important to do so, to ensure that those issues are highlighted and addressed.

Working for a stronger legal and policy framework for equality

- Increasing awareness, advocacy and action on the need for equality law reform through targeted communications, political engagement and partnership working - focusing on the need for a single equality act and law reform to increase protection against discrimination for individuals in areas such as race equality law; hate crime; on the grounds of age in accessing goods, facilities and services; gender pay reporting; and extending protection from religious discrimination to teachers.
- Influencing the forthcoming Programme for Government and key programmes of work, engaging with Departments, Assembly Committees and relevant public bodies to also influence the design and delivery of key social and equality strategies, including through partnerships with key stakeholders. This will include working to secure a clear focus by government on identifying and addressing inequalities as we respond to, emerge from, and are faced by the longer term implications of the COVID-19 pandemic, alongside the outworkings of BREXIT, and the emerging crisis in Ukraine.
- Encouraging high levels of public leadership on equality and good relations issues through regular/ongoing engagement with politicians and senior leaders towards securing the wider benefits of a more equal and diverse society; and reinforcing how the equality framework and public duties can help ensure an equality dimension in decision making and budget setting.
- Working to encourage the production by government of comprehensive equality data across all equality grounds to help promote equality and tackle inequality in Northern Ireland. We continue to recommend that equality data is collected, published and analysed for all key measures across the PfG; COVID-19 recovery plans; social and equality strategies; and key public policy initiatives, for example anti-bullying in schools legislation.
- Utilising any opportunities presented by the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD), and other international frameworks and related processes to lever change.

- Completing a 'Measuring Equality in Northern Ireland' project to provide an updated evidence base on equality and using the results to inform and support action for change.
- Increasing public awareness of 'cradle to grave' inequalities across equality groups.

Using our powers to combat discrimination and promote equality of opportunity

- Deploying our full range of advisory and enforcement powers in a strategic, coordinated and timely way to challenge discrimination and promote equality of opportunity and affirmative action/ action for change.
- Supporting high profile strategic casework demonstrating impacts wider than individual decisions and settlements, in employment, education and the provision of goods, facilities and services.
- Providing advice on the public sector equality duties including the disability duties to assist public authorities to implement their equality schemes and disability action plans effectively.
- Using our powers to investigate compliance by public authorities with their Equality Schemes.
- Finalising our strategic approach to use of our investigation powers and undertaking investigations in line with the strategy.
- Maintaining employer and public authority compliance with FETO monitoring and Article 55 Review requirements.
- Providing advisory support for employers and service providers to promote good practice and support employers to make changes to their policies and practices, including in responding to the impacts of COVID-19 and equality implications arising from changing recruitment and workplace practices.

Safeguarding our rights and protections in a changing Europe

- Monitoring and reporting on compliance with the Article 2 commitment by Government.
- Promoting the mainstreaming of Brexit-related equality and good relations considerations in legislative development and policymaking.
- Encouraging the effective funding of initiatives to promote equality among key groups affected by the loss of EU funding.
- Increasing understanding and awareness of the Article 2 commitment and the Commission's role and remit among key stakeholders.
- Timely and strategic use of the Commission's enforcement powers, including to ensure compliance with the no diminution commitment.
- Maintaining effective joint working with our partners NIHRC and IHREC.

Promoting equal access to and equal opportunities for all at work

- Seeking improvements in workplace equality and promoting inclusive working environments across each of the equality grounds.
- Working with key partners to shape Government strategies and promote improved public policy on employment, childcare and pay reporting; and delivering actions on employability, including on disability.
- Increasing awareness of inequalities in employment, in the context of COVID-19, amongst key decision-takers and opinion formers.
- Promote awareness of employee rights and employer responsibilities and strategically challenge discriminatory practices in recruitment, employment and harassment.

- Keeping patterns and trends under review and raising awareness of trends, given the enduring importance of FETO monitoring.

Addressing inequalities in educational attainment and tackling bullying

- Working with others, ensure the Independent Review of Education Report has a strong equality dimension.
- Securing action by the Department of Education (DE) and the Education Authority (EA), including via the response to 'A Fair Start', to identify and address inequalities in educational attainment and access, including those exacerbated by COVID-19.
- Working with stakeholders to ensure schools are supported to effectively implement and monitor the equality aspects of anti-bullying legislation.
- Promoting awareness of educational inequalities and building support for change.

5. Performance measures

This section sets out what difference we want to see in the coming three-year period, in terms of outcomes and impact of our work, how we can contribute to this and how we will measure success. We are conscious of the potential for alignment with the Programme for Government Outcomes Framework, when concluded, and will keep our performance measures under review in light of this. In advance of that, we can see that much of our work will contribute to the outcome *We have an equal and inclusive society where everyone is valued and treated with respect* as well as a number of others such as *Our children and young people have the best start in life* and *Everyone feels safe – we all respect the law and each other*.

What difference do we want to see? (impact / outcome)	How can we contribute? (How can ECNI add value / using our powers to make change happen)	Performance Measures (How will we measure our contribution?)
Working for a stronger legal and policy framework for equality		
Increased awareness of the need for updating and streamlining the equality law framework	Targeted communications, political engagement and partnership working to increase awareness, advocacy and action on need for a single equality act and law reform in key areas of race equality law, age GFS, FETO teachers' exception, gender pay reporting, hate crime	Level of awareness of the need for change amongst policy makers and key stakeholders
Legislative changes in key areas secured	Engaging with Departments, public bodies and key stakeholders to influence the PfG, COVID-19 recovery plans, and the design and delivery of key social and equality strategies	Examples of legislative change and advocacy for change, which reflect Commission recommendations
A Programme for Government and key government strategies and action plans that address inequalities, including those impacted by Covid-19	Utilising any opportunities presented by CRPD, CEDAW, CERD and other	Evidence of impact on the design and delivery of the PfG, COVID 19 recovery plan(s) and key government strategies
Effective implementation of key Equality Strategies by		Evidence of influence on reports/opinions by

<p>Departments and Public Authorities</p> <p>High levels of public leadership on Equality and Good Relations issues</p> <p>Better equality data available across equality grounds to help tackle inequality in Northern Ireland</p>	<p>international frameworks and related processes to lever change</p> <p>Using our engagement with Depts, other Public Authorities including NISRA and key stakeholders to call for all government data gathering and public surveys to ensure data can be disaggregated by equality group and to point to the key data gaps preventing the identification / tracking of key issues.</p> <p>Completing a 'Measuring Equality in Northern Ireland' project to provide updated evidence base and using the results to inform and support action for change</p> <p>Increasing awareness of 'cradle to grave' inequalities across equality groups</p>	<p>international scrutiny bodies</p> <p>Demonstrations of leadership at the highest levels of political life and public services</p> <p>Evidence of improvements in data development and addressing data gaps</p> <p>Evidence of use of statement to inform priorities, of use by others as authoritative source, and impacts on levels of public awareness of equality and need for change</p> <p>Level of awareness of enduring inequalities and of the need for change across the media and amongst key decision-takers and opinion formers</p>
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Using our powers to combat discrimination and promote equality of opportunity

<p>Unlawful discrimination challenged in Tribunals and Courts</p>	<p>High profile, strategic casework demonstrating impacts wider than individual decisions and settlements</p>	<p>Successful outcomes and 'ripple effects' from legal advice and assistance</p>
<p>High public profile for the right of individuals to live free from unlawful discrimination</p>	<p>Delivering effective communications outcomes across all media forms – traditional and online</p>	<p>Public profile of equality issues and the work of the Commission and profile amongst key target audiences</p>
<p>High levels of awareness amongst employers, public bodies and service providers of their legal responsibilities</p>	<p>Provision of comprehensive, up-to-date, accessible, relevant and timely information across multiple formats</p>	<p>Level of awareness held by employers, public authorities and service providers and levels of confidence in the Commission and its role as the statutory equality body</p>
<p>Effective compliance with public sector equality duties by public authorities</p>	<p>Use of investigation powers, in line with revised strategy</p> <p>Provision of advice on the equality duties and effective interventions to promote equality of opportunity and challenge discrimination - deploying our investigatory and other powers to best strategic effect</p>	<p>Levels of employer and public authority compliance with their statutory duties</p>
<p>Improvements to practices by employers and service providers</p>	<p>Provision of advisory support for employers and service providers to promote good practice and support employers to comply with their responsibilities and make changes to their policies and practices</p>	<p>Evidence of demonstrable impact of advice and positive outcomes across target employer groups and service providers</p>

Safeguarding our rights and protections in a changing Europe

<p>Full compliance by Government with its Article 2 commitment</p>	<p>Monitoring and reporting on compliance with the Article 2 commitment by Government</p> <p>Promoting the mainstreaming of Brexit-related equality and good relations considerations in legislative development and policymaking, including through research</p> <p>Encouraging the effective funding of initiatives to promote equality among key groups affected by the loss of EU funding</p> <p>Promoting understanding and awareness of the Art 2 commitment and the Commission's role and remit among key stakeholders</p> <p>Timely and strategic use of the Commission's enforcement powers to ensure compliance with the no diminution commitment</p> <p>Maintaining effective joint working with NIHRC and IHREC</p>	<p>Awareness, advocacy, and/or adoption of Commission's Brexit-related policy recommendations to Government and other key stakeholders</p> <p>Adoption of Commission's policy recommendations arising out of Article 2 related research and legislative scrutiny.</p> <p>Increased understanding and awareness of the Article 2 commitment and the Commission's role and remit among key stakeholders.</p> <p>Evidence of use of enforcement powers to ensure compliance with the no diminution commitment</p> <p>Effective joint working with NIHRC and IHREC</p>
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Promoting equal access to and equal opportunities for all at work

<p>Evidence of employers taking substantive action to support target groups in employment.</p>	<p>Promote and profile action by employers in target workplaces to support and retain target groups in the workplace</p>	<p>Evidence of improvements in employer practices in target areas</p>
<p>Improvements in workplace equality for target groups.</p>	<p>Support employers by providing a range of targeted advisory services to improve practices.</p> <p>Strategically challenge discriminatory practices in key areas of employment</p>	
<p>Key government strategies include actions to assist and monitor progress regarding target groups.</p>	<p>Highlight enduring inequalities in employment and the Commission's role in effecting change.</p> <p>Work for the development of the evidence base on inequalities in employment to assess the impact of key Government strategies</p>	<p>Evidence of impact on the design and delivery of key government employment, employability, childcare and pay reporting strategies</p> <p>Effective partnerships built and maintained</p>
<p>Increased awareness of enduring inequalities in employment, including impact of Covid-19.</p>	<p>Work with key partners, including government departments and representative groups, to shape key Government strategies and promote improved public policy on employment</p>	<p>Increased profile of the enduring inequalities in employment, in the context of Covid-19, amongst key decision-takers and opinion formers.</p>
<p>Workplace composition reflects labour availability at aggregate level</p>	<p>Keeping patterns and trends under review and raising awareness of the trends, given the enduring importance of FETO monitoring</p>	<p>Publication of annual monitoring reports</p>

Addressing inequalities in educational attainment and tackling bullying.		
<p>The Independent Review of Education Report contains a strong equality dimension</p> <p>Actions taken by the Department of Education (DE) and the Education Authority (EA) to identify and address inequalities in attainment and access</p> <p>Anti-bullying measures being embedded in schools, and DE monitoring and reporting on the effectiveness of the anti-bullying legislation</p>	<p>Promoting awareness of educational inequalities and building support for change, through Engagement with the Independent Review Panel</p> <p>Engagement with DE the Equality Authority to ensure an ongoing focus on identifying and addressing inequalities in attainment and access, including those exacerbated by COVID-19</p> <p>Working with stakeholders, engage with DE & EA to ensure schools are supported to implement and monitoring anti-bullying legislation</p>	<p>The Independent Review of Education report recommends targeted action to address inequalities.</p> <p>Stakeholder advocacy, and adoption and implementation of key equality recommendations by DE and others. Inequalities in attainment and access identified by ECNI are effectively identified, monitored and addressed by DE and EA.</p> <p>Education Policies such as 'A Fair Start' and wider strategies (including early years and childcare) have a strong equality dimension, including for Newcomer, Traveller and Roma populations</p> <p>Collection and reporting of bullying-related data undertaken by DE</p>

6. Delivering the Plan

Financial resources

Work on preparing a draft Budget for the three-year period 2022-25 is now delayed and the financial context against which the Plan will be delivered is uncertain at present. In our current planning assumptions, we anticipate that the COVID-19 pandemic and other external factors will have a substantial impact on public finances over the next three-year period.

Against a long-standing and substantial downward trend in financing, the last three years has seen, first, stabilisation and then a slight increase, albeit not in real terms. This is set out in the Table below. It is uncertain whether this position will be sustained and, like many public bodies, we have been asked to be prepared for future budget reductions.

Opening budget allocations	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22
Resource	5,302	5,303	5,430	5,585
(Receipts)	(346)	(346)	(346)	(346)
Capital	0	0	0	20
Depreciation	85	85	85	85
Dedicated Mechanism	0	0	300	793
Total (excl. DMU)	5,041	5,042	5,169	5,344

In October 2020, the Commission received funding from the Northern Ireland Office, via Department of Finance and The Executive Office, to establish a Dedicated Mechanism Unit (DMU) to deliver its responsibilities in relation to Article 2 of the /Ireland NI Protocol. This funding covers the period up to 31 March 2023. We will be keeping under review the level and nature of the work on an ongoing basis and advise Government of the resources required. It is clear that there will be ongoing work to oversee the Article 2 commitment and it is assumed that

arrangements will be put in place to continue to fund this work after March 2023.

The downward trend in funding over the period since 2008/09, of almost a third against our opening budget this year, has clearly had consequences for what we can deliver. In particular, the annual budget reductions have had a major impact on our staffing levels, as set out below. With recruitment of posts to fulfil our new responsibilities and the filling of a small number of vacancies this year, we will be able to report a small increase in our staffing level at the end of the current financial year for the first time in well over a decade.



We will continue to discuss the evolving financial position with our Sponsor Department and highlight the need to ensure sustainability of funding to deliver key equality commitments in New Decade: New Agenda and a new Programme for Government as well as our statutory remit and the public services we deliver arising from this

The Commission will also strive to mitigate the impact of any further reductions on its service delivery and core responsibilities.

Delivery of our work

The coming years are likely to see the continuation of significant changes in how we work. Staff in the Commission faced the challenges thrown up by the pandemic since March 2020 with flexibility, fleetness of foot, resilience and professionalism. In a difficult operating environment,

business continuity was maintained, many of our processes were adapted and new ways of working quickly developed.

We will maintain these new ways of working where helpful and, in common with many organisations, following the experiences of working from home throughout the pandemic, we plan to return to a blend of office working and home working to deliver our work and services when public health advice changes.

To support this, we have adapted our use of technology, in particular with migrating our systems to the Cloud and extensive updating of staff IT skills to fully utilise the functionality of Office 365 and MS Teams as we move to provide more of our services online.

We will also work to deliver our People Strategy 2021 - 2024, agreed this year, as a framework to guide our work as we further adapt, modernise and improve how we do things, with new ways of working building on past successes and fit to meet the challenges ahead while we continue to deliver effectively on our remit.

7. Achievements over 2019-22

Responding to the COVID-19 pandemic

A key achievement of the last three years was our response to the Covid-19 pandemic. In light of public health advice and the need to keep staff safe, we moved to working from home and to delivering the majority of Commission operations and services virtually.

The pandemic raised concerns about the exacerbation of existing inequalities and of new emerging inequalities. This moved to the centre of public and media debate and have remained there throughout. We worked to highlight this, and promote the need to address, through public policy interventions from March 2020 onwards

We amended our business plans for year 2 and 3 of the planning period to include additional actions focused on COVID-19 impacts and including COVID-19 as a cross-cutting theme running through all the business plan actions. COVID-19, and our response to it, permeated every area of our work, both its content and how it was delivered. We significantly changed our ways of working and how we delivered our services, responding effectively to changing customer requirements.

Embracing new responsibilities

We also embraced our new role to oversee, in partnership with NIHRC, the commitment made by the UK Government under the EU/UK Withdrawal Agreement, in Article 2 of the Ireland/Northern Ireland Protocol to ensure that certain equality and human rights in Northern Ireland will continue to be protected after the UK's exit from the European Union. Additional resources were secured for this role and a new team was put in place to ensure we could effectively carry out this important role.

Work carried out during the period included raising awareness of our new role, developing strong working relationships with NIHRC, IHREC and a range of key stakeholders, initiating research, monitoring legislative proposals and raising concerns where we considered a potential breach of Art 2 may occur. We also intervened in a Judicial Review case where Article 2 issues were engaged.

Strategic priority one: Employment

Disability and employability

We partnered with the Department for Communities, NIUSE and Disability Action on a programme of work on pre-employment and employment support for people with disabilities. Supported by NIUSE, we launched the *Making it Work* campaign which included a number of activities to maximise pre-employment and employment support programmes for people with disabilities. This aligned to the work being carried out by the Department of Communities and the campaign provided a valuable focus for work on employment support services for disabled people. The campaign involved case studies, resource materials, web pages and use of social and print media.

We supported an important disability discrimination case to the Court of Appeal, which upheld a decision of the Industrial Tribunal that the claimant, a graduate who lives with Aspergers Syndrome, had been discriminated against. The discrimination arose through the failure to make sufficient reasonable adjustments and appoint the claimant to a graduate training programme in its network design and engineering programme. The Court of Appeal also upheld the award of £19,266 in compensation.

Over the period, we highlighted the need for disability law reform, raised concerns about the possible loss of EU funding for disability employment programmes and the disability pay gap with policy makers and worked with employers to promote positive action and reasonable adjustments in employment.

Increased access for women in employment

We worked with NIC ICTU and the Labour Relations Agency on new *Menopause in the Workplace* guidance and associated training webinars. This was very well received and resulted in the Commission participating in a number of media activities over the period on menopause.

We highlighted through the media that one of the biggest issues in improving women's access to employment is affordable, good quality childcare.

We published our recommendations on the Gender Pay Gap Reporting Regulations and Gender Pay Strategy and worked with DfC to encourage action on developing the strategy and introducing the Regulations.

We also used our recommendations to the UN CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women) Committee to promote women's economic independence to the Women's Caucus in the Assembly.

We rolled out a series of training promoting gender equality in the workplace.

Workplaces are welcoming and inclusive

A report on our survey on Welcoming and Inclusive Workplaces was published in July 2019. We gathered information from employees and employers about their perceptions, behaviours, policies and procedures and this gave us some useful insights to inform our work with employers

We increased the number of training sessions for employers significantly as we moved everything online. This resulted in more attendees from more employers and, in a survey at the end of the 2020/21 year, 74% of attendees that year said they would revise their policies or develop new ones. For example, we ran 30 webinars on harassment and bullying attended by 565 employers. We revised and updated the guidance on bullying and harassment in conjunction with LRA.

We continued to focus on Mental Health in the workplace. This was particularly important during working from home when mental health issues at work were reported to be on the rise. We reviewed the Mental Health Charter in conjunction with our mental health partner organisations and ran webinars through the three years. In the most recent webinar, 50% of employers attending committed to developing or reviewing their mental health policies.

Strategic priority two: Education

Inequalities in attainment

We continued our work on promoting equality in education. This included publishing a *COVID-19 and Education* statement which highlighted the potential for inequalities to worsen during the pandemic. We worked with stakeholders to develop a *Family Engagement: Learning from the Pandemic* publication. This was supplemented by an engagement event and a series of podcasts over the period. We provided evidence to the DE Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement setting out the key equality issues, including the impacts of COVID-19. The final report references the Commission's work on family engagement in particular.

Freedom from prejudice and bullying

We secured a commitment in the final Children and Young People's Strategy 2019-2029 to 'continue to work to fully implement the Addressing Bullying in School (NI) Act 2016'. We have worked with the NIABF and the Department of Education to promote our recommendations on tackling bullying widely in the sector. The CCEA Relationships and Sexuality hub now includes curricular materials on LGBT issues

We worked with the Education Authority and C2k to improve the quality of equality data on bullying and had input into training for boards of governors and training of schools on equality recording requirements.

Strategic priority three: Access and participation

Participation in public and political life

We worked with The Executive Office on a possible Central Appointments Unit and arranging for training for the independent assessors who carry out recruitment of public appointees. Through the period, we partnered with the Commissioner for Public Appointments NI to promote the need for more people with disabilities and women to apply for public appointments.

Accessible services for disabled people

We used our *Every Customer Counts* initiative, Disability Action Plans and Section 75 to help larger service providers improve access and participation.

Addressing housing needs and available adapted housing for disabled people

We published our Housing and Community policy recommendations and priorities for action. One of its recommendations was the indefinite extension of mitigation on the 'bedroom tax' in line with our recommendations.

We worked to promote our recommendations to partners such as the NI Housing Executive, which reviewed streamlining of adaptations and reduction of waiting times for Disabled Facilities Grant in line with our position. We also took opportunities to promote our policy recommendations at events such as Féile and with bodies such as the Housing Rights Service, TBUC Ministerial Panel on Shared Housing and the NIHE senior manager group.

Strategic priority four: Mainstreaming and championing

Section 75

We worked to encourage the mainstreaming of equality and good relations considerations in the Programme for Government, cross-departmental delivery plans, budgets and equality frameworks. Our recommendations were promoted across Government as a result of meetings and briefings at all levels including Permanent Secretaries, Departmental Boards and the Policy Champions Network

Important and expanded engagement with senior public servants on the Section 75 duties including guidance on *Section 75 – Demonstrating Effective Leadership*, endorsed by the Head of the Civil Service. This was supplemented with training and regular day to day engagement with officials on the duties. We also developed and launched in partnership with NISRA *Section 75: using Evidence in Policy Making: A Signposting Guide*.

In respect of complaints and investigations of potential breaches of Equality Schemes by public authorities, we consulted on and published revised *Procedures for Complaints and Investigations under Paragraphs 10 and 11 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998*. We completed 4 Investigation Reports during the period.

We worked with the NI Human Rights Commission to promote and monitor the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. This included a review of PIP and put recommendations concerning the implementation of the UNCRPD Welfare Reform Inquiry to the DfC.

Legal cases

Over the three-year period, our legal team provided advice to just under 10,000 enquirers about potential discrimination. We settled 90 cases for individuals that we assisted and there were 10 Tribunal and Court decisions.

Work with employers

In response to the COVID 19 pandemic, new guidance materials were developed for employers, service providers and the public including on redundancy and coronavirus, face masks and overcoming barriers to communication, furlough, protecting pregnant employees during COVID-19, returning to work and the impacts on people with caring responsibilities, ensuring equality for disabled people post-lockdown.

Work also continued, throughout the period, to support employers to meet their obligations under the Fair Employment and Treatment Order 1998, including in respect of monitoring returns. We saw some impact of the pandemic on level of returns but continued to encourage completion and compliance with obligations.

Our advice services, including the enquiry line, continued to address employer and service provider needs. In total over the period, we dealt with almost 10,000 employer enquiries. We moved, in 2020, to providing training online and to hold webinars on a range of topics, with growth in attendance generally and positive outcomes in terms of satisfaction rates and commitments to take action as a result of the training.

Improved Communications and Engagement

Publication of an updated Communications Strategy and a Political Engagement Strategy. Improved integration of our press and social media engagement and event management with key partnership initiatives. The use of the website, social media was accelerated and increased. Website traffic increased as did our use of social media platforms. We moved our engagement programme online and continued to support existing and created new partnerships.

Working in Partnership

Improved partnership working has been a feature of this corporate plan period and we sought to listen more effectively to our stakeholders. Important and effective partnerships have been developed and nurtured. This period has seen the establishment of a Disability Forum to inform our work on UNCRPD. Important relationships were established with both the NI Union of Supported Employment and with the Dept of Communities to progress our work on disability and employment. We have worked closely with Commissioner for Public Appointments and women's sector on improving participation in public life. We have maintained and expanded our partnership working across a range of communication activities and this has expanded our reach and engagement on key issues.

Improved engagement with the representatives and we have continued to support and challenge TEO to effectively implement the commitments set out in the Race Equality Strategy, including with regards to race law reform and data collection / monitoring to inform the delivery of public policy and services.

Our [Annual Report](#) and [Annual Review](#) set out more detail on our work and performance over the period 2019 - 2021. Our Annual Report for 2021/22 will be available shortly.

