

EQUALITY COMMISSION FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

Key Point Briefing: Programme for Government (PfG) and Budget Recommendations

March 2021

- 1.1 The Equality Commission has set out below its high level recommendations in relation to the Programme for Government and Budget.
- 1.2 Equality of opportunity and good relations must be central to all public policy development and implementation, no less so at a time of reduced public spending.
- 1.3 Many key inequalities experienced by Section 75 equality groups¹ remain persistent and hard to tackle. We consider that the PfG and Budget provide a key mechanism to maximise equality of opportunity and good relations outcomes.
- 1.4 While data from Northern Ireland regarding the equality impacts of COVID-19 remains limited, information from elsewhere suggests that the COVID-19 crisis will deepen known inequalities and likely lead to the emergence of new inequalities for people now and over their lifecycle.

Recommendations

- 1.5 In addition to recommendations across a number of areas of public policy, we called on the Executive to ensure that:
 - there is a clear commitment in the PfG, underpinned by the inclusion of robust, outcome focused action measures, to identifying, addressing and monitoring the key inequalities

¹ Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 places a duty on public bodies to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity between persons of different religious belief, political opinion, racial group, age, marital status or sexual orientation; men and women; persons with a disability and persons without; and persons with dependants and persons without.

experienced by the Section 75 equality groups, as well as to promoting good relations²;

- a focus on addressing key inequalities includes identifying and mitigating any negative equality impacts, now and in the future, arising from the COVID-19 pandemic;
- the PfG makes it explicit that promoting equality of opportunity and good relations are cross-cutting themes across all Government strategies, policy development and actions;
- all relevant PfG measures are not only tracked in aggregate but also for the impact on individuals from each of the Section 75 grounds.
- there is a clear commitment in the PfG, and in associated action plans, to stakeholder involvement - not only in co-design but in the rolling monitoring and review of impacts, particularly across the Section 75 equality categories.

1.6 We further **recommend** that the PfG includes actions to:

Social Attitudes

- challenge prejudicial attitudes, behaviour and hate crime, so as to ensure that workplaces, services, public spaces and communities are free from harassment and/or discrimination across the equality grounds.

Education

- tackle prejudice-based bullying;
- address inequalities in attainment and access, with a particular focus on those experienced by Traveller, Roma and Newcomer children;
- ensure progress on a number of the recommendations '*of benefit to all children*'. In particular, to advance childcare and early-years provision to meet the diverse needs of all children; to drive attainment via collaborative approaches involving family and the wider community; and to put in place a system for learning from successful interventions.

Employment

- support women's economic participation, including through access to appropriate, accessible and affordable childcare;

² Section 75 also places a duty on public bodies to have regard to the desirability of promoting good relations between persons of different religious belief, political opinion or racial group.

- address the exploitation of migrant workers and the concentration of some minority ethnic workers in low paid employment;
- support people with disabilities to access and remain in the workplace;
- ensure the provision of training and programmes that are accessible and inclusive for all to get into or stay in work.

Access to Social Protection

- protect the most vulnerable from the adverse impact of welfare reform, particularly mindful of the impact on people with disabilities and women, minority ethnic communities (including asylum seekers and refugees);
- identify/ commit to specific measures which will mitigate the adverse impact of welfare reform, or any alternate policies which might better achieve the promotion of equality of opportunity.

Housing, Accommodation and Communities

- advance sharing in housing while ensuring objectively assessed need is met;
- address the longer social housing waiting list for Catholic households;
- improve the provision of disability related accommodation;
- tackle the under-reporting of hate incidents and crimes and increase outcome rates.

Health, Social Care and Wellbeing

- identify and remove barriers to health, social care and well-being experienced by particular Section 75 equality groups, including older people; Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual (LGB) people; Irish Travellers and other minority ethnic communities; and people with disabilities;
- ensure investment in health care so as to address the specific needs of equality groups, including the health care needs of people with disabilities; and young people's mental health needs;

Participation in Public Life and Decision making

- address identified gaps in equality data across a number of areas of public policy; and ensure that data is sufficiently disaggregated to allow for meaningful equality analysis, to better inform public policy development;
- increase diversity in government public appointments by taking actions to increase the participation of those with disabilities;

delivering on gender targets for boards and chairs; and implementing a cross-departmental strategic action plan to advance participation more generally;

- increase diversity in political representation by advancing the participation of women, and individuals from minority ethnic groups, in political life.

Reform of Equality law

- reform and strengthen equality law across a number of equality grounds, including age (as regards the provision of goods, facilities and services), race, disability, sex, fair employment, and sexual orientation;
- reform wider areas of the law that impact on Section 75 equality groups.

EU-UK Withdrawal

- act in accordance with the UK Government's obligations under Article 2 of the EU-UK Withdrawal Agreement: Protocol on Ireland / Northern Ireland, including the commitment to keep pace with any future EU changes to 'Annex 1' Directives;
- commit to ensure that equality laws keep pace, not only with 'Annex 1' EU equality laws (as required under Article 2 of the Protocol), but with all future EU laws that strengthen equality rights;
- address, and mitigate, the potential impact of any loss of EU funding on equality groups, as well as the impact on the voluntary and community sector;

Address Gaps in Equality Data

- collect comprehensive equality data to identify equality impacts and shape targeted actions to advance equality;
- address key gaps in equality data, including on the grounds of gender identity, sexual orientation, and race;
- rectify the lack of data disaggregation in relation to ethnicity, disability and gender;

Develop and Implement Equality Strategies

- ensure that effective equality/ good relations strategies and action plans are implemented and updated across the full range of anti-discrimination grounds;

Compliance with International Conventions

- address key shortfalls in Northern Ireland so as to ensure compliance with obligations in international human rights conventions, including the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD)³.

Budget proposals: Actions to meet equality / good relations requirements

- in the preparation of budget proposals, Departments and other public authorities should ensure that they are fulfilling their statutory equality and good relations duties.
- The Commission has set out in guidance how Section 75 duties and equality scheme commitments apply to the budget processes⁴. Equality scheme arrangements and tools - i.e. screening and equality impact assessment (EQIA) - provide a means for Departments and other public authorities to assess the likely impacts of the budget proposals.

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³As well as obligations in other International Conventions, such as the UN Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination (UNCERD), the UN Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCNM).

⁴ ECNI (2015) [Section 75 and Budgets: a short guide for public authorities](#)