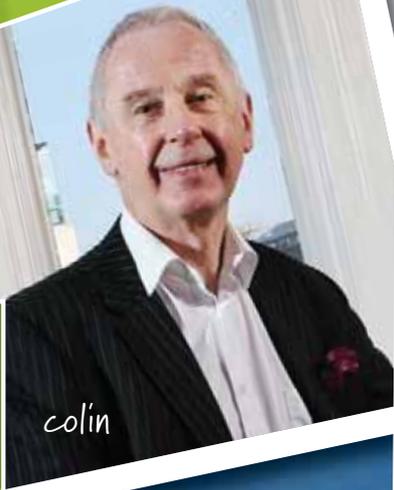


REAL PEOPLE, REAL CHANGE



colin



joanne



shannan



harry



cathy



tom



michaela



rosemary



terry



mía

TEN REAL STORIES

Equality Commission

FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

**Last year, over 3,000 people called us for advice or help about discrimination. Our employer and general advice line took another almost 22,000 calls.**

**If you need information or advice on equality issues or if you would like to find out more about the Equality Commission and its work, contact the advice line on 028 890 890**



## Foreword

### **REAL PEOPLE, REAL CHANGE**

As the Commission marks its tenth year, we wanted to look back at how we have made a difference to the lives of people in Northern Ireland. Creating an environment where positive change can and should happen is vital to our work to promote equality of opportunity and challenge inequalities.

In Real People, Real Change we celebrate the passion, energy and courage of ten of the many people who have connected with our work over the years, to ensure a better lived experience for all.

Each person featured here has their own story to tell. For some, this has meant seeking legal redress to an injustice, which takes a particular kind of courage; for others, it has been a steadfast commitment to speaking up for a better way.

Our heartfelt thanks go to our ten contributors for sharing their stories. They are both an inspiration to others and a reminder of the potential and actual impact of our work in creating a fairer and more equal society for everyone.

I trust that you will enjoy these stories.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Evelyn Collins". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a horizontal line.

**Evelyn Collins CBE  
Chief Executive**



## Michaela's story

**You can't do this to this child just because she can't walk**

**Michaela Hollywood** is a remarkable young woman.

Bright, chatty and cheerful, the 18-year-old has an incredible enthusiasm and vitality for life.

Yet, every day, even the simplest tasks which most of us take for granted are challenging for Michaela.

The Crossgar A-level student was born with the rare and complicated condition Spinal Muscular Atrophy.

The disease cruelly cut short Michaela's sister Martina's life when she was just 14.

Essentially a neuromuscular disease, it is so rare that, when they were babies, Michaela and Martina were the only two people in Ireland known to have the condition.

**Michaela Hollywood with her parents Marie and Michael**

Michaela is very matter of fact as she describes the dramatic impact it has on her everyday life.

## I wouldn't want this to happen to anyone else. I hope my case will mean no one else will experience what I have.

"I'm very prone to chest infections," she says, "SMA also kills off your nerve endings and the worst parts for me are my hands, eyelids and tongue.

"Because of my nerve endings dying in my hand, my writing is dire, I can't write for very long

which really holds me back."

Michaela also suffers from scoliosis and underwent surgery when she was very young to have rods put in her back to help her sit up straight.

She lost part of her ability to swallow after the nerves in her throat became paralysed when she was just five and has had to be fed by a tube ever since.

She was also born with no ears and is deaf, but can hear with the help of a powerful Baha hearing aid.

As her mother explains what this is, Michaela cheerfully chips in: "I'm one of the lucky ones because even deaf people can't tell that I'm deaf and most deaf people will spot another straight away."



Her mum, who is Michaela's main carer, says: "She takes everything in her stride no matter what it is. She never moans and she has been through so much. I am really, really proud of her."

While she had no bitterness or anger at the terrible blows her illness has dealt her, there is one thing which does get this amazingly upbeat teenager's back up.

Almost two years ago Michaela was refused immediate admission to the school she had chosen for studying her A-levels.

For the ambitious teenager, who is set on becoming a genetic researcher and had her future carefully mapped out, it meant that her career plans were dashed.

Michaela explains: "I was only about seven when I started to take an interest in genetics

because of my condition.

"By the time I was in secondary school, I realised that I wanted to follow a career as a genetic researcher."

With her sharp intellect, Michaela wasted no time in finding out what qualifications she would need and then carefully planned how she would go about getting them.

"I needed A-level chemistry to study genetics at Queen's and after doing my GCSEs, my parents and I researched and found a school with wheelchair access, disabled toilet facilities as well as, of course, A-level chemistry."



Michaela was delighted to achieve nine GCSE grades A to C, with a double A in Double Award Science in August 2007.

Michaela had a positive meeting at her chosen school, only for her hopes to be crushed 24 hours later.

Her mum, Marie, takes up the story: "We were told that the Board said Michaela couldn't come to the school, that there was a six month process she would have to go through before they could accept her.

"We didn't have six months; the new term was due to start in two weeks' time. I was angry and shocked and just thought immediately that it was pure discrimination."

To add insult to injury, Another girl, whose GCSE results were not as good as hers, had been offered a place at the school.



## I never wanted Michaela to have special treatment, I just wanted her to have the same opportunity as any able-bodied child

Her mum Marie said: “The only difference between Michaela and her friend was that Michaela couldn’t walk into school, she is in a wheelchair. “We went to everyone we could think of, but no one could help us.”

Said Michaela: “I was left in limbo. I didn’t want to waste a year, so I decided to go back to my old school St Mary’s, even though I couldn’t do chemistry there.”

Because chemistry was so crucial to Michaela’s career plans, her parents continued to battle for another year to try and secure for her the opportunity to study it.

Said her mum: “The Equality Commission seemed to be the only ones to hold a bit of power.

“They were brilliant. They were the only ones who were able to support us in saying, ‘you can’t

do this to this child because she can’t walk’.

“I never wanted Michaela to have special treatment I just wanted her to have the same opportunity as any able-bodied child.”

The Equality Commission supported the family in taking a successful action against the Education Board. The case was pursued under the Special Educational Needs and Disability Order 2005.

In the non-financial settlement the SEELB undertook to ensure Michaela would be taught A-level chemistry so that she could apply for University at the time she had planned for. The SEELB also expressed its regret at the injury to feelings, upset and distress caused to Michaela and also undertook to meet the Equality Commission to review its policies, practices and procedures.

The Board is also to provide disability awareness training and in particular SENDO training to its staff.

Although the upset caused a delay in Michaela’s education, resulting in her having just one year to do her A level instead of two, she remains positive and upbeat. She adds: “My mum and dad have pushed so hard to help me fulfil my ambitions and I am just so grateful to them.

“I think we would not have had the same result without the help of the Equality Commission.

“I wouldn’t want this to happen to anyone else. The terms of the settlement were encouraging in that the Board is to review its policy. I hope my case will mean no one else will experience what I have.”

**We get more calls about disability discrimination than anything else – almost 35% of calls to our enquiry line last year.**



## Cathy's story

**I really believe everybody has the right to be treated with respect**

When **Catherine Megahey** joined Action Cancer as a charity shop manager in 2002, almost straight away she found herself taking on added responsibility.

Her expertise, gained from years of management experience, was recognised by her immediate boss and Cathy was soon promoted to a role where she assisted the general running of all eight of the charity's shops.

Her future with Action Cancer looked bright, making the events which were to follow just two years later all the more shocking for Cathy.

Overnight, she went from believing she had a promising future with the charity to being out of a job.

Cathy Megahey



At the same time, she was passed over for a new post which was given to a man she had been more senior to for over two years.

“When they told me they were making me redundant I was

Cathy was turned down for the post which was instead given to a shop manager who she had managed.

She said: “For me it was complete disbelief. I remember phoning my husband and I just

### **At the end of the day, the Commission helped me to stand up for what is right and legally correct, they backed me completely**

dumbfounded,” said Cathy.

“I was told there was a new post coming up for Retail Manager which I could apply for.

“I had been standing in for the Retail Director who was on sick leave, doing her duties as well as my own for several months.

screamed down the phone, I was hysterical and I am not a hysterical type of person.

“I had never been out of work and never even been reprimanded in a job before. I was already doing most of what the new post entailed and no-one had raised any issues with my work.”

Having got over the initial shock, Cathy felt that she had been treated unfairly and decided to get advice from her solicitor, who suggested that she should contact the Equality Commission.

“When I rang the Commission I found it very easy to tell them what had happened. They were very sympathetic, but at the same time making sure I knew the reality of the situation and from the start made it clear to me that they couldn’t make any promises.

“I really believe everybody has the right to be treated with respect and I knew in my heart of hearts that I had done nothing wrong.

“I have to say I felt a bit guilty because it was a Northern Ireland cancer charity. At the

same time though I still felt very strongly that they should know it is not OK to treat people the way they had treated me.”

Initially five days were set aside by the Industrial Tribunal to deal with Cathy’s case of unfair dismissal and sex discrimination against Action Cancer.

The complexities of the case meant it eventually went on for 19 days over the period of a year, an ordeal which Cathy describes as “unimaginable”.

“I could never prepare anybody for what it is like,” she said.

“My attitude was that I had done nothing wrong and so it would just be a simple case of telling the Tribunal what happened.

“When you first go into the court room it hits you how serious it is. Some mornings I was so nervous at the thought of going to court I didn’t know whether to be sick or pass out.

“It affects the whole family, as they know what you are going through.

“The barrister from the

Commission who represented me was phenomenal. He told me at the start just to be myself and I held onto that as I gave my evidence. “

Cathy was elated when the Tribunal court found in her favour and awarded her £28,953 in damages.

The Tribunal found that Cathy was discriminated against on the grounds of her sex in the recruitment exercise for Retail Manager and that, but for the discrimination, she would probably have been appointed to that position.

They also found that she had been unfairly dismissed.

The Tribunal noted that Cathy was not appointed despite coming out on top in the marking of the first round of interviews.

The Tribunal also couldn’t understand why, in this recruitment, there was a scarcity of notes, particularly for their short-listing discussion or their post interview discussions.

It also noted that although it is good practice to have a balanced shortlisting panel, no female had been included in the short listing panel for the Action Cancer job.

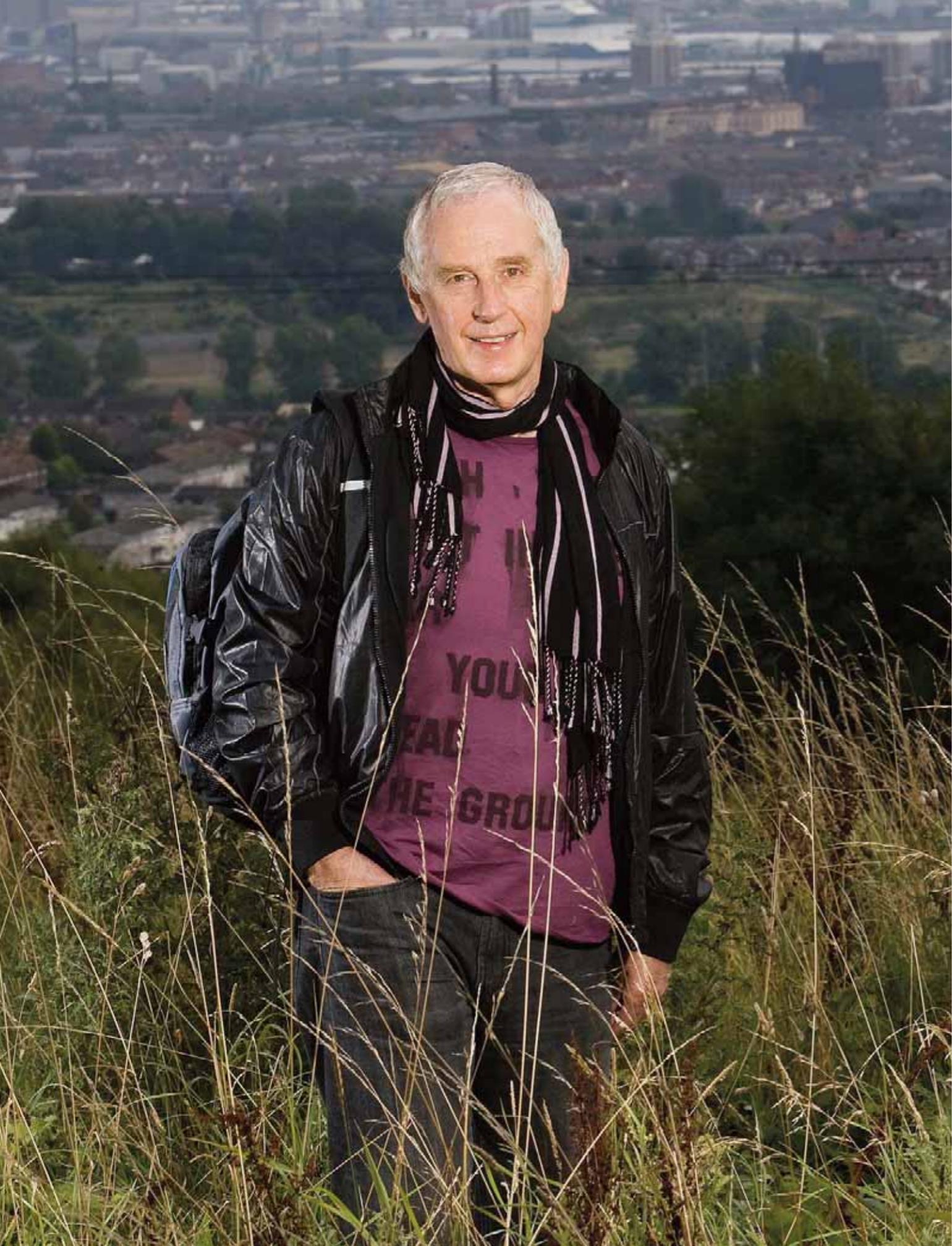
Said Cathy: “When I heard the ruling I literally jumped for joy. I felt complete elation. It was a huge amount of money but to me it represented the huge injustice that was done to me.

“My integrity is more important to me than any amount awarded.”

“It was a real ordeal. I’m working for another charity now, which was fantastically supportive of me during the Tribunal, but my confidence has taken a knock as a result of it.

“At the end of the day, the Commission helped me to stand up for what is right and legally correct, they backed me completely and I am so grateful for that.”

**Of the 966 calls about gender discrimination we took last year, 70% were about employment.**



## Seeing the human in someone

At the age of 55, solicitor **Colin Flinn** found his true sexual identity as a gay man.

Eight years on, he is recognised among the province's key decision makers and service providers, from the powerful halls of Stormont Buildings to the headquarters of the PSNI and local churches as a determined campaigner on behalf of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transsexual (LGBT) community.

Colin says: "I and others like me work hard as volunteers to change attitudes – not just the attitudes of people who can't cope with difference, but also us in the LGBT community who need to be more confident and project a positive image."

Colin Flinn

“This involves outreaching to others, such as those with disability or from an ethnic minority who have similar journeys, creating role models, promoting good and healthy values, working on personal relationships, and interacting with and integrating into wider society.”

“I have found that once people see the human in someone they get a very different view of that person.”

“Our ultimate aim is to see an active all-party grouping on sexual orientation set up in Stormont. Politicians have a vital role to play in assuring growth of equality, and nurturing dignity and respect for all in our society.”

Going back to his own

experience, Colin says his childhood was where the seeds were sown for his current role as a campaigner for the rights of minority groups.

“In 1946, the year I was born, my dad was appointed as Secretary to Down County Asylum, later Downshire Hospital. We lived in a house within the high walls of the hospital.”

“My parents were a great influence, they were both very caring and my mother was a bit of a modern day suffragette.”

Colin’s life followed a conventional path, university, becoming a lawyer and starting a family. He says: “I had no idea about my sexuality. I could look at guys’ faces and say they were very attractive, but

had no great awareness of being attracted to them.”

It was during his 20s that he first suffered depression.

The illness was to revisit him in varying degrees of severity throughout his life, up until he finally admitted to himself that he was gay, just eight years ago.

He says: “I went into the dreadful abyss of darkness and serious ill health when I twice contemplated suicide.”

“When I realised I had an attraction to men, it was like a sudden release. I got a feeling of peace and calm for the first time.”

But what followed was more torment as Colin could no longer deny his sexuality.



He said: “There was a long difficult period for me and my family and something which I still find very difficult to talk about.”

“Having been in that dark place it has motivated me to help lift other people who are now in the same place.”

And that’s exactly what Colin has been pouring his energies and time into ever since. He plays a key role in a number of voluntary groups that offer advice and guidance to individuals as well as helping

organisations like the police better understand the issues important to the LGBT community.

He has worked with the Presbyterian Church on their recent strategy to reach out to their LGBT members and would like similarly to work with other churches.

He has tirelessly promoted the rights of the LGBT community and worked closely with the Equality Commission leading up to the introduction of legislation protecting their

rights when accessing goods, facilities and services.

“The Equality Commission is like a friend, an advocate, a trusty guardian of our rights, and always approachable and always there for us.”

In his private life, Colin has found happiness and he adds:

“My ultimate goal is for every LGBT person to be able to walk hand in hand with their partner down the main street without any worry or fear. For me, this sums it all up.”

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**Having been in that dark place, it has motivated me to help lift people who are now in the same place**

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**21% of people surveyed in the 2008 Equality Awareness Survey said they felt negative towards lesbian women or gay men.**



## Building a more welcoming workplace

**Mia Cruz-McKeown** has spent her working life with one of Northern Ireland's premier food production companies, spearheading some innovative employment practices that have made her employer a model of best practice and led to her addressing a conference last year at Stormont.

Driven by the basic principle of respect for others, Mia in her role as Human Resource Manager for Avondale Foods in Lurgan has devised and implemented a range of practical measures to help all employees, regardless of race or nationality, apply for jobs on an equal footing.

**Mia  
Cruz-McKeown**

“Avondale was expanding rapidly when I joined as Human Resources Manager in 2004. It was difficult to recruit enough staff, resulting in long hours for our employees. The coming of the Eastern European nationals was such a great help as they were so



and differences of people no matter what their ethnic origin enabled the company to recruit the workers it needed to support its growth.

Said Mia: “We needed to be fair, and we wanted to be fair to the foreign workers as well as the locals, so we adapted our recruitment policies to make it fair.

“The Equality Commission has been very supportive in giving me the assistance I needed to introduce the measures which we needed to achieve this fairness. They have worked closely with me on all the new measures.”

These range from introducing picture-based interviews for recruitment to give non-English speaking applicants a fairer chance, to multi-lingual training DVDs, translated factory signage and other key documents relating to company policy as well as equal opportunity to apply for further training.

The results speak for themselves. The company has been able to grow rapidly, from a workforce of 220 in 2004 to 360 today. Currently 41% of the company’s charge hands and supervisors are from minority ethnic backgrounds, as were 38 per cent of participants in the newly launched NVQ in Food Manufacture.

Added Mia: “The assistance of the Equality Commission was vital in implementing these programmes. They also delivered in-house training for us on specific subjects and are working with us for more training this year.

**We all come from different backgrounds, there are people who are open and accepting of others and there are those who simply are not.**

flexible, their work ethic was very good and they were willing to do the job. Their arrival proved crucial to our rapid expansion.”

Avondale Foods supplies major food retailers in the UK and Republic of Ireland with a range of prepared salads, packed salads, fresh vegetable soups, croutons, dips, mayonnaise and sauces, many under the Country Kitchen brand name.

It prides itself on being a fair employer. Respecting the rights

“The Commission has developed a number of ‘Employer Networks’ as a source of information and support to employers which has been very beneficial. I’m proud of what we have achieved in just five years at Avondale.”

It’s a long way from Mia’s place of birth in the Philippines to Lurgan, so what was Mia’s journey to her position today?

“It was a twist of fate that I met my Northern Irish husband and left my family, home and career in the Philippines to start a new life here 14 years ago.

“When I first arrived in Northern Ireland, the Troubles were still going on and it was not a multi-cultural country,” Mia remembers.

Her first experiences of Northern Ireland were very largely positive. Most local people welcomed her and helped her settle into her new home, but she was aware that there are always some people who have problems accepting anyone different or new.

With a university degree in Industrial Psychological Behavioural Science and a Masters in Human Resources, Mia was determined to continue her career in Personnel.

“I am very grateful to Avondale Foods as well as my previous employers for giving me the chance. I am where I am today because of them. The way I look at my job is that I will give people the opportunity because I was given it.



“We in Avondale have come a long way in meeting the needs of our diverse new community. Unfortunately there is still racist graffiti around in Northern Ireland, which is a sad reflection of how far some people still need to come.

“We have managed to strike a balance in Avondale which offers locals and migrant workers a fair chance.

“But the work is not over yet, everyone has a responsibility to make things better.”

**Of the 454 calls about racial discrimination we took last year, 48% were about employment.**



## We just want to have a nice place to play

She is only 12 but already her name has reached Northern Ireland's corridors of power at Stormont.

**Shannan Kincaid** has called on the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to allow her the simple right to play safely in her own community.

She is one of a group of remarkable kids from Belfast's Shankill Road who have been involved in a high profile campaign to secure this fundamental right.

Living in what is one of Northern Ireland's most deprived areas, the young lobbyists have been making their voices heard in the places that matter.

**Shannan Kincaid**

They also want equal play opportunities for all of their peers through the provision of safe playgrounds which can be accessed by both able-bodied and disabled youngsters.

Ultimately, the kids also wanted their voices to be heard.

Said Shannan: “We want kids to be able to participate in government decisions that affect their lives.

“Some of the problems in our community that stop young people from playing are very simple and could easily be fixed. But they simply aren’t.

“The area is covered in broken

trying to avoid broken bottles.

“The first thing we want to do is get them fixed for our community and make sure they stay fixed.

“But for the future we are calling on the government to make sure issues like these can be fixed for all communities in Northern Ireland.”

Such sincerity from someone so young had a huge impact on a number of decision makers who attended a unique event in the Shankill, co-chaired by Shannan.

Entitled “When Kids Decide: Realising the Right to Play in the Lower Shankill”, the high

focusing everyone on the rights of the children in her community.

So impressive was her role that a short time later Shannan was honoured with two top accolades in Belfast City Council’s prestigious annual Young People of the Year Awards.

She picked up the Community Safety North Belfast Gold Award as well as the overall Outstanding Achievement Award.

A thrilled but still very grounded Shannan said: “The real prize for our group and

## We want kids to be able to participate in government decisions that affect their lives

glass which is very dangerous. Also, if we want to play in the playgrounds and parks, the lighting is broken and has been for many months.

“Children who want to play on the footpaths outside their houses need to be careful because the traffic speeds through the streets. We just want to have a safe place to play, without constantly having to watch for traffic and without

profile event came about as a direct result of the children’s campaign.

It attracted a host of influential people including main speaker, Dr Jan Van Gils, Chair of the European Child Friendly Cities Network and President of the International Council on Children’s Play.

Her passion for change cut to the very heart of what the occasion was all about,

our community will be when the City Council and other departments do what they are supposed to do.

“Unless the glass is cleaned up, unless children are involved in decisions every step of the way, these awards will only be for decoration. We need change from the government if children’s rights are going to be made real.”

Since establishing the issues



they wanted to change, the children have been working on a strategy of action with the help of the Principle in the Practice of Rights Project and their local community group, Lower Shankill Residents’ Voices. They are now expert in human rights and equality law, including the duty for public bodies under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act to ‘have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity’ in nine categories, one of which is age.

They are committed to holding organisations to account and

will monitor all of the play areas weekly, gathering evidence over the course of a year which they will then present to the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister.

In the meantime the young campaigners have written to Belfast City Council and the Housing Executive about their concerns.

Said Shannan: “We’ve already got some change with new lights at two local play areas.

“We’ve also got ramps to slow down traffic.

“It’s made me really happy that we are getting through to them and that they are cleaning things for us and making things brighter.

“We will continue our surveys until the government provides us with a proper gated play area which can be used by all children and locked at night to keep the vandals out.

“I’m just glad for the chance to be able to do something. Hopefully when I’m older I can look back and say that the playgrounds are not like they used to be.”

**Of those who know about Section 75, 79% know that public authorities are required to consult with those likely to be affected by their policies or ways of working.**  
(Equality Awareness Survey 2008)



MENTAL  
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US ALL

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## The best thing I have ever done

**Tom McGrath** has spent most of his life frustrated by not having the chance to reach his full potential.

Disadvantaged by an education system that was not geared up to meet his needs, Tom left school at the age of 15 unable to read or write.

Only relatively low grade jobs were open to the Dungannon man and with no outlet for putting his sharp mind to work, for years Tom felt unfulfilled.

All that changed when he joined the Willowbank Resource Centre in his home town.

**Tom McGrath -  
making a  
difference**

## I have finally found something I can do well, supporting disabled people who can't have a voice of their own

Having struggled with physical disability and learning difficulties Tom found a sense of self worth for the first time.

And three years ago, this new found self confidence gave him the courage to apply for the post of Equality Commissioner.

Now at the end of his term as a Commissioner, Tom says of the experience: "It is the best thing I have ever done".

To explain just how much the role has meant to him, Tom takes me right back to his school days.

"When I was at school there was no such thing as special needs education and although it's still not great now, then if you were disabled you were

left behind," he says.

"I left school at the age of 15. I couldn't read or write and I still can't."

Tom's work options were very restricted. His first job was in a local linen mill where he spent his days fetching and carrying.

Tom was determined to work and support his family but sadly his physical condition started to deteriorate and eventually he had to give up his job.

But for someone with so much still to give, being forced to do nothing and, as Tom puts it, "feel useless", inevitably started to get him down.

It was in an effort to lift his spirits and get him active again that it was suggested that he should think about joining Willowbank.

Tom explains: "Willowbank is run by the members themselves and a management team, 70 per cent of whom have disabilities and the rest is made up of local business people in the town.

"It's all very relaxed, and people here would see themselves as being part of a family."



Tom is involved in the running of the Centre, taking an active role in the Lobbying, Activism & Research Group which campaigns for improved rights and services for people with disabilities.

He also helped set up the computer course and the now thriving garden centre.

He said: "I was encouraged from the first day I set foot in this place.

"I found a sense of my own self worth. I had reared six children and had eight grand children but had no sense of my own value. It is here that I discovered another purpose in life other than my family.

"I have finally found something I can do well, supporting disabled people who can't have a voice of their own."

It was in the pursuit of this new purpose in his life that Tom applied for the job as an Equality Commissioner.

Quietly spoken, Tom pauses for thought before he speaks, and you just know when he does, it's from the heart.

Asked how he felt when he was offered the Commissioner's post, he said: "It was a great feeling, just to think that somebody actually values you after everybody telling you for years that there is nothing you can do.

"To me it was an opportunity to improve myself and help others as well."

The 16 Commissioners are appointed by the NIO to set the strategic direction of the Commission.



Tom says it was this chance to make a difference, particularly for disabled people, which meant the most to him.

A highlight was the opportunity to address policy makers in Brussels on issues for disabled people in advance of the new Transport Regulations being drawn up. These are soon to be introduced here, incorporating many of the recommendations he made.

He also worked closely on a special report by the Equality Commission on access issues in the health service for people with learning disabilities.

He sees his term as a Commissioner not only as a personal triumph but one for all disabled people.

“I have discovered strengths I didn’t think I had. For instance, five years ago there is no way I could even have considered sitting here doing this interview, never mind standing up at a European Commission conference voicing my opinion to so many successful and influential people .

“The Equality Commission helped me by putting the papers I needed to read on tape and even simple things, like a high-backed chair, can make all the difference to a disabled person.

“If someone wants to do something no-one can now say there is a barrier. I and other people like me have broken that barrier.

“I have always known I wasn’t stupid but have never been given the opportunity to prove it, until now. Being a Commissioner is the best thing I have ever done.”

**Almost one in ten (8%) people would mind working with someone with a learning or physical disability. Around one in five (17%) would mind working with someone with mental ill health. (Equality Awareness Survey 2008)**



## Ensuring that women employees are on a level playing field with their male counterparts

When **Rosemary Rafferty** started a new job as a clerical officer in her local council 32 years ago, it meant little more to her than a means of earning an income.

But thanks to an 'amazing' boss and mentor and a very forward thinking employer, Rosemary has enjoyed a successful career rising up the ranks to her current senior management role as Head of Human Resources and Training.

**Rosemary Rafferty (left) with colleague Flanna Quinn**

## This has increased confidence resulting in a better skilled workforce that is better able to provide council services as well as deliver savings



“Even back in the 80s, Omagh Council was very progressive,” she explains.

Today it is little surprise that Omagh is streets ahead of many of Northern Ireland’s councils in its approach to flexible working, especially for women.

It launched its own project on advancing women in the public sector three years ago.

Rosemary explains: “We successfully secured European funding to enable women in the workplace to take up a whole range of professional and personal development opportunities. Called the Women Redress Advancement in Public Sector (WRAPS) project, we were the lead partner, along with the South Western College and the Western Health and Social Care Trust.

The project coincided with a wider initiative from the Local Government Staff Commission, who, working with the Equality Commission, aimed to attract women into local government at all levels and to encourage those already employed to apply for higher-graded posts.

When the Women in Local Councils – Making a Difference was launched there were no female Council Chief Executives and since its inception, three have been appointed.

For Omagh Council, this perfectly complemented their WRAPS project, which has led, over a two year period, to a four fold increase in the number of women promoted in the council.

Said Rosemary: “WRAPS has made a really positive

contribution to a culture of career progression for women in the council. Three of our eight senior management team are women and we have 39 female managers in the organisation.”

Among the many positive outcomes a ‘Coaching and Mentoring’ culture is being embedded within the organisation, and, as an example of best practice staff who were trained through WRAPS are now providing training in-house themselves, saving on the Council’s training budget.

In the second year of the WRAPS project, Omagh Council supported women on a variety of accredited courses, including non-traditional areas such as construction.



One of the many employees to benefit was Flanna Quinn, a young mum of five, who works as a clerical officer in the Council’s Building Control department.

Thanks to WRAPS, Flanna is now in the second year of a Foundation Degree in Construction Engineering, a subject which she has been interested in since she was a teenager.

Said Flanna: “I’m now in my second year and really enjoying it. I have been able to cram in course work at weekends or when the children are in bed.

“It is already helping me in my job and building my confidence. It would never have been possible without WRAPS, I feel very fortunate to have been given this opportunity.”

Rosemary summed up the many benefits for the Council:

“WRAPS has created a more motivated and better skilled workforce that is better able to provide council services and customer care, as well as deliver savings as a result of efficient service delivery.

“The success of the project has also raised the profile of Omagh Council in a very positive way, both within Northern Ireland and further afield. Last year we were presented with the UK-wide Opportunity Now award for Advancing Women in Public Service.

“Crucially the project has been very important in ensuring that women employees are on a level playing field with their male counterparts.

“This is particularly important given that the RPA [Review of Public Administration] has reduced the number of councils from 26 to 11. Women have been able to gain the confidence and qualifications they need to ensure they are not disadvantaged when these

**63% of people here believe that we need more women in management positions. (Equality Awareness Survey 2008)**



## The workplace is often more welcoming than the rest of society

In the last decade Northern Ireland has made huge strides forward in stamping out segregation in the workplace.

Helping employers redress any religious balance has been the focus of one man's life's work.

**Harry McConnell** describes the journey to achieving harmonious working environments across the province as a long and difficult one.

An independent consultant in personnel and equality related issues, Harry has worked in the field for 25 years.

"When the Equality Commission was set up 10 years ago, discrimination was seen as nearly exclusively about employment," said Harry.

Harry McConnell



## companies in Northern Ireland have done a very good job in promoting diversity and achieving harmonious workplaces in difficult circumstances.

“We have come a long way since then. Religion is probably the most noticeable of all areas where progress is evident and the workplace is often more welcoming than the rest of society.

“By and large, companies in Northern Ireland have done a very good job in promoting diversity and achieving harmonious workplaces in difficult circumstances.

“It would be wonderful to get to the stage where we can openly celebrate the culture of the two communities together.

“We are quicker to join in celebrations of cultures not usually associated with Northern Ireland. It’s a paradox that we can often recognise other minority cultures that don’t threaten us but still feel uncomfortable recognising our two main traditions.”

Growing up on a farm at a time when fields were still given names – some Irish and some Ulster Scots – helped sow the seeds of Harry’s interest in diversity which has influenced his entire career.

It was with one of Northern Ireland’s biggest employers in the early 90s that Harry, as Equality Manager, first found himself tackling the issue of religious discrimination in the workplace.

At that time, NIE provided training for many apprentices in crafts each year. However young people applied at the ratio of about 85 per cent Protestant and 15 per cent Catholic - a world away from reflecting the community make up at school leaving age of about 50/50.

He explains: “There was a chill factor which was a big problem.

Not enough Catholics were applying for the jobs in the first place.

“This was an issue facing most big employers at that time. We needed to try and break down that chill factor and this was done through a variety of methods, from welcoming statements in job vacancy advertisements to what was much more effective outreach work with the community which was under-represented.”

Harry took the message on behalf of NIE directly into Catholic schools and the very heart of the community.

The results were dramatic. Within just five years the company’s application pool for craft apprenticeships from Catholics had shifted from about 15 per cent to about 50 per cent.

He also tried to tackle the gender imbalance of the company again with outreach, giving career talks to girls’ schools and providing engineers to assist in teaching science in all-girl schools. Despite considerable effort this only resulted in a few applications from girls for apprenticeships in what were still seen as traditionally male jobs.

“For us it proved much more difficult to shift prejudices about jobs for men and women than prejudices about jobs for Catholics and Protestants.

Said Harry: “The gender issue was something which cut right

across society and was shared by both the Catholic and Protestant communities.”

Since then Harry has become an expert in all areas of discrimination and continues to advise employers.

His achievements were recognised at the highest level when in 2005 he was awarded an OBE for his services to disabled people and equal opportunities.

He served as chairman of the Northern Ireland Disability Council from 1996 until 1999 and was a board member of the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland from 1999 until 2004.

Disability remains a big issue currently, as does gender, and now age and sexual orientation. Bullying in particular is emerging as an area of concern. It is a sign of the progress of society as a whole in Northern Ireland that religion and politics has now taken something of a back seat, as seen from the decreasing number of complaints made to the Commission in this area in recent years.

Concludes Harry: “Winning over people’s hearts and minds has been important. Historically, however, it has taken the strength of the law to achieve real change.”

**Only 5% of people here would mind having a person of a different religion as a work colleague.**  
(Equality Awareness Survey, 2008)



## Terry's story

**Just because you are a bit older doesn't mean you are any less hungry for success**

Co Down man **Terry McCoy** made history in 2008 when he became the first person to successfully take an age discrimination case to Tribunal in Northern Ireland.

The Newtownards carpenter and specialist wood salesman brought the case against James McGregor & Sons after he was turned down for a job with the firm.

The Tribunal ruled in favour of Terry and he was awarded £70,000 in compensation.

Terry says taking the case was one of the most difficult things he has ever done and, despite the generous compensation figure, adds: "I would still have preferred the job".

**Terry McCoy**

As the first ever legal decision in Northern Ireland under the Employment Equality (Age) Regulations (Northern Ireland) Order 2006, his victory received huge media attention, which Terry feels made it all worthwhile.

“I felt it was important to get the message out there that you cannot do this to people. I hope it got other companies to think twice before turning

with ‘youthful enthusiasm’.

“There are only a handful of companies in our business and I knew McGregor’s well and had always wanted to work for them,” he recalls.

“Their speciality was North American and tropical hardwoods of which I had an abundance of knowledge and experience.

“The ad asked that applicants ring one of the

age as himself. Then he asked me if I still had the drive and motivation to be successful in the trade.

“I didn’t think anything of it at all. I was very excited about the job. It was just what I wanted and I knew I had the experience and knowledge they needed.

“He asked me to come and see him the following week.

“At that interview he again

## I felt it was important to get the message out there that you cannot do this to people and hopefully it made a difference and got other companies to think twice

someone down for a job because of their age,” he said.

Terry was 58 and had over 35 years’ experience as a carpenter and specialist wood salesman when he applied for a sales position at the company. The advertisement said that it wanted someone

company’s directors which I did.”

Even in that first telephone conversation the issue of age cropped up.

Terry recalls: “He asked me what I had been doing and then what age I was now. He said I was around the same

brought up the age issue. I was very keen to give the guy the impression I was up for this job and couldn’t wait to get back on the road.

“He seemed quite impressed and I came out of the interview feeling fairly good. He called me the following



day and arranged a second interview with him and another director. Usually if you get a second interview it means you have a good chance and I was delighted.”

Recalls Terry: “I did most of the talking. This second director had said very little, but the director I had seen at the first interview again referred to my age and asked how I could convince them that I had the drive and motivation for the job.

“I told them I was very keen, I missed the buzz and the challenges of the day to day operation. I left the interview feeling good.”

Terry was told he would get a call the following day but nine days passed and then he was stunned to get a letter from the firm saying he had been unsuccessful.

He said: “I was really deflated, I honestly couldn’t believe it, I was so shocked. I met all the criteria and had the experience and expertise and I just didn’t understand it. I felt as if I had been flung on the scrapheap.

“I rang my daughter to tell her and we were going over why it might have happened and I told her that I had been quizzed about my age each time I had spoken to them.

“She then mentioned the new legislation on age discrimination, which I didn’t know about. She urged me to ring the Equality Commission.”

Terry rang the Commission and applied for assistance.

He said: “I didn’t want to go down that route. I would rather have had the job but it had been so unfair and felt I had to.

“The Commission gave me a lot of guidance and advice.



“When the case came up it was pretty daunting for me as I had never been in a witness box in my life and I was the first person to be called to give evidence.”

The Tribunal lasted three days.

Two months later Terry got a letter informing him that the Tribunal had decided in his favour. He was thrilled.

The Tribunal found that there was a link “between the issue of age and the concept of what has been variously referred to in the case as ‘enthusiasm’, ‘motivation’ and ‘drive’.”

The judgement concluded that “but for his age Mr McCoy would more probably than not have been selected for one of the two posts.”

The jobs went to two much younger men, even though the Tribunal found that “they did not possess such an

obvious level of experience and of demonstrable achievements.”

Adds Terry: “Afterwards I still kept thinking of the director who was the same age as me and wondered how he would feel if he was to be told he was too old for his job. It’s tough to think that anyone would be deprived of a decent job because of their age.

“I am grateful that the system was in place to allow me to take the case and appreciate the support of the Commission in doing so.

“I’m working away, thankfully. I still give it 100 per cent and I intend to keep doing that until I retire.

“Older people not only bring that enthusiasm to the job, but also very often years of experience. Just because you are a bit older doesn’t mean you are any less hungry for success.”

**In the last year, 80% of all enquiries to the Commission were on employment issues.**



## People still don't accept the difference in others

Even after 15 years of advising victims of discrimination, **Joanne Daly** is astounded by some of the stories she hears at work.

As one of a team of four Discrimination Advice Officers with the Equality Commission, Joanne's job is to guide people on their rights under the various anti-discrimination laws.

She is their first point of contact and deals with cases covering all areas of discrimination – race, gender, age, disability, sexual orientation, special educational needs, religion and political opinion.

Every day she talks to people who are distressed by their experience and Joanne is there to give practical advice to help them with their problems.

**Joanne Daly with  
Maria, Matthew  
and Michelle**



“It is unbelievable in this day and age how people still don’t accept the differences in others,” she says with real feeling.

“It is difficult to switch off and not feel for the people you are dealing with.”

As a working mum of three, Joanne is particularly upset by the still all-too-common cases of discrimination in the workplace against pregnant women and new mums.

She said: “It does hit home when you hear from women who are having a terrible time at work because they have had children.

“The Commission did everything to accommodate me

while my children were very young.

“Their flexible working and family friendly policies enabled me to be there for my children when they needed me, helped me save on child care costs and at the same time, continue my career.

“If employers would only realise it works to the benefit of both them and the employee. I know from my experience that because my employer was so accommodating and made me feel appreciated, I give my heart and soul to the job.”

No matter what the issue, or her personal feelings, Joanne’s reaction and the way in which she talks to each caller are

crucial.

Her role is at the very heart of what the Commission is all about – to promote fairness for everyone and protect people from discrimination.

She says: “It is a very important post as you are the first point of contact for the public and you really do need to have a listening ear.

“Many people are upset when they call us and it takes patience and care to respond to them and help them.

“Even the tone of your voice is important so that people feel it’s easy to approach the Commission and that we can offer help and advice.”

## Many people are upset when they call us and it takes patience and care to respond to them and help them

Joanne’s role is to listen to callers and explain the options open to them to resolve their complaints, including the legal option although many issues can be simply resolved without legal proceedings.

“Often, especially with workplace issues, people just need to know their rights and feel able to go back to their employer to talk about the problem. Sometimes just a conversation or a simple letter to the employer is all that it takes to resolve the issue,” she explains.

“Most people don’t realise that this is their first step. If the response is not satisfactory then they can come back to us and we can advise on tribunal proceedings if they are going to go down that route.

“We have to look at all aspects of a case and sometimes it is a skill in itself to get all the relevant information out of

people as they can be very emotional when they first contact us.”

It’s a responsible post which gives a real insight into how far Northern Ireland still needs to go to ensure equal rights for all, and Joanne wouldn’t change it for the world.

She concludes: “I love doing what I do. I get great satisfaction from helping people and when they come back to say thank you and tell me they got their problem resolved, it makes it all worthwhile.”



**Around 1 in 3 people here (36%) would know their rights if they were a victim of discrimination or harassment. Almost half (47%) said they would not. (Equality Awareness Survey 2008)**

