

A photograph of four young children sitting on a swing set in a park. From left to right: a boy in a grey jacket and green shirt, a girl in a pink jacket, a girl in a pink jacket and hat, and a boy in a dark blue jacket. They are all looking towards the camera. The background is a lush green park with trees and a building in the distance.

**Equality  
Commission**  
Northern Ireland

# Corporate Plan

**2025-2028**

# Building an equal and inclusive Northern Ireland together

This Plan sets out our ambitions for the next three years, as we focus on promoting equality of opportunity and actively challenging discrimination.

We are seeing a divisive and heated debate around equality and human rights across the world. We must remember that equality and human rights protections were central to the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement and are just as crucial to creating a peaceful Northern Ireland as they were back in 1998.

We must work together not only to protect these rights but to work for an acceptance of the rights of others and for good relations between neighbours as we build a Northern Ireland where everyone - no matter their age, disability, orientation, race, religion or sex - feels safe, respected and truly at home.

The Commission remains committed to tackling inequality and building good relations in this context. Our work is deeply connected to the lives of people and families across our community. Together, our efforts can drive positive, meaningful change for everyone living here. As we go forward, we want to be responsive to the changing needs of the community, always improving the services we offer.

We appreciate the feedback we received through the draft Corporate Plan consultation. As a result, we have made several changes to our Plan and will make use of other comments to inform future work.



We know the road ahead won't be easy. We recognise that this Plan needs to be dynamic and flexible, and we are committed to reviewing the strategic priorities each year. Our annual business plans will reflect and take into account new developments and changes in the wider environment as we move through the next three years.

We recognise the importance of exercising our powers with strength and independence. However, we also understand that we can't do this on our own.

Collaboration will be at the core of our efforts, working with others to bring about lasting, meaningful and positive change for everyone living in Northern Ireland.

We will work with others on the Programme for Government commitment to peace and ensuring that everyone feels the benefit of a growing economy and a safer and fairer society.

Together, we can build a more inclusive and equal Northern Ireland.

**Geraldine McGahey OBE**  
Chief Commissioner

# Our vision, mission and values

## Vision

An equal and inclusive society

## Mission

Transform people's lives by promoting equality and challenging discrimination

## Values

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### Committed

We actively challenge discrimination and inequality, and we are committed to promoting equality. We care deeply about delivering high standards of public service and take pride in being courageous, dedicated and passionate about our work.

### Open

We are honest, approachable and responsive.

### Respectful

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

### Enterprising

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



## Our guiding principles

### **People focused**

We will intervene where we can to promote equality of opportunity on issues that make a tangible difference to people's life chances.

### **Independent and expert**

Our decisions and actions will be based on evidence and analysis, continuously assessing and refining our approach to maximise our impact and improve equality of opportunity for everyone.

### **Collaborating for impact**

We drive change by building strategic partnerships with government, communities and businesses so that they will engage and intervene on the issues that make a tangible difference.

### **Striving for excellence**

We will be a high-performing, innovative and diverse team, investing in staff and continually improving to ensure maximum impact.



## Our role and remit

Our powers and responsibilities come from equality laws established over the years.

In general, we shall

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

The Equality Commission, together with the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, can promote, protect and monitor the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCPRD) in Northern Ireland.

Together with the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, we have powers and duties to monitor, advise, report on and enforce the UK Government's commitment under Article 2 (1) of the Windsor Framework.

We work to challenge discrimination and promote equality in Northern Ireland on the following equality grounds:

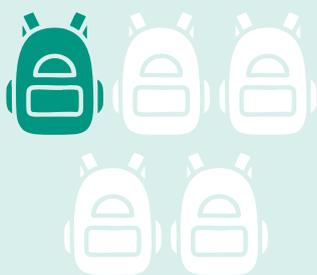
- age
- disability
- race
- religion
- political opinion
- sex and gender reassignment
- sexual orientation

## The context

The context for the three-year period of our Corporate Plan will be shaped by the Programme for Government.

It commits to addressing inequalities and ensuring that everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed in life. Importantly, it recognises that equality of opportunity and good relations are key elements required in creating a fairer and more peaceful society.

We welcome its focus on childcare, special educational needs (SEN), and safer communities. However, the promotion of equality of opportunity and good relations must be mainstreamed across priorities and strategies to better address inequalities, and delivery must be monitored for its impact across the equality groups.



**One in five pupils in Northern Ireland have SEN (Department of Education). Their attainment levels in school fall far behind those pupils who don't have SEN.**



**31% of women with dependent children worked part-time, compared with only 5% of men (ONS). Department of Education research shows a lack of access to formal childcare prevents parents increasing their hours of work.**

The Programme for Government is clear that everyone should benefit from economic growth. Our fair employment legislation and other equality laws remain vital in this context. We must continue to work together to create workplaces that are welcoming, inclusive and free from discrimination and harassment. This has been a mainstay of our previous work and it will continue to be pivotal as we move forward.



**Nearly two out of every three calls to our advice line are about potential discrimination in the workplace.**

Improving access to, and progression within, employment is a key driver of economic and social wellbeing. To deliver this we must improve the experiences of and increase inclusion of women, people with disabilities, older people and minority ethnic workers across our workplaces. Only by doing this will Northern Ireland achieve its full economic potential with improved employment opportunities for all.

Whilst socio-economic disadvantage is not explicitly covered under the equality legislation here, there is no doubt that barriers and inequalities faced by various equality groups can be intensified by poverty and social exclusion. An effective anti-poverty strategy will be a building block for change in this context.



**Only 38% of disabled people in Northern Ireland are employed (NISRA). Disabled people can encounter many challenges when accessing or remaining in employment.**

The immense challenges faced by our healthcare system is a daily topic of conversation across our society.

In the coming period, we intend to highlight the persistent and enduring health inequalities faced by people living here through a "cradle to grave" inequalities project.



**The population is aging, with 18% of residents aged 65 and over (NISRA). There is no protection from age discrimination when buying or using goods and services.**

People from across the world have chosen to come to work and live among us in increasing numbers over recent years. This presents both opportunities and challenges. The terrible events of summer 2024 highlighted that it will be a challenge to create a safe and welcoming Northern Ireland for everyone. Promotion of racial equality will be a significant focus for this Corporate Plan period, and we will be collaborating with our minority ethnic communities and policymakers to develop a revitalised racial equality strategy.

Education is key to changing attitudes and tackling prejudice and the forthcoming curriculum review will provide an opportunity to examine how we can better do this.



**The total minority ethnic population in Northern Ireland is 8.1%. Reported racist hate incidents are at their highest level since recording began.**

We need to see developments in other areas too. The Department for Communities has committed to progressing a disability strategy and an anti-poverty strategy. We wish to see similar commitments, detail and timelines regarding the strategies on gender and sexual orientation.

Our powers and duties under the Windsor Framework remain a priority for the Equality Commission.

We will continue to collaborate with the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission and the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission. Together, we will monitor and report on rights and equality issues within the scope of the Article 2 commitment that have an all-island dimension. Our focus will include matters such as the loss of EU funding, the Pay Transparency Directive and the Equality Standards Directive. Engagement with civil society will continue to be crucial in this area.

More broadly, the Commission possesses extensive powers and responsibilities under various pieces of equality legislation, including the Northern Ireland Act 1998. We intend to review how we allocate our resources and deliver these functions over the forthcoming three-year period.

Northern Ireland's existing equality law framework is no longer fit for purpose. The existing gaps in discrimination protection, including age discrimination in goods, facilities and services, are indefensible. Improving the equality protections will continue to be a focus for us.



**Protections from discrimination in Northern Ireland have fallen behind those in Great Britain, Ireland and other countries.**

We live in an ever-changing world including a rise in far-right political movements, misinformation and hate. We are clear that promoting equality of opportunity remains pivotal to improving everyone's lives. To this end, we will continue to be vigilant to emerging equality issues – including the impact of technology and increased use of artificial intelligence.

Finally, resources remain a concern. Like most organisations across the public sector, we have experienced significant cuts in our funding over the past decade. It is imperative that we have the means required to advance and promote equality of opportunity and good relations in all aspects of life for the benefit of all who live and work here.

# Planning assumptions

We made the following planning assumptions when developing this Corporate Plan:

- The economic outlook, especially regarding public finances, will likely remain challenging. However, we will be funded at an appropriate level to enable us to do our job properly.
- The Executive's Programme for Government and legislative agenda will be taken forward and provide opportunities to intervene effectively to improve people's life chances.
- We will focus our efforts on delivering our statutory responsibilities and working with others to address inequalities identified in the Executive's wellbeing framework.
- Northern Ireland will continue to transform into an open, shared and diverse community, despite the challenges ahead that will need to be overcome.
- We will regularly review our priorities, adjusting our annual business plans to reflect any new developments or changes in the planning environment.
- Change may be slow and difficult due to existing constraints, but working in partnership we can make a difference.

# Our ambitions 2025-2028

Building on the successes and lessons of previous years, we will continue to improve people's lives through the effective implementation of our statutory responsibilities.

## Over the next three years, we will:

- Make a difference to people's lives with our powers
- Drive positive change for people facing inequalities
- Strengthen equality laws to safeguard everyone in Northern Ireland
- Build a resilient, accountable and accessible organisation

## Making a difference to people's lives with our powers

**As a strategic enforcement body, we are committed to using our powers and duties to challenge discrimination and promote equality of opportunity.**

### Our approach

We will use the full range of our advisory and enforcement powers in a strategic, coordinated and timely way to challenge discrimination and promote equality of opportunity to benefit wider society.

We will review our enforcement powers, including investigatory powers, to ensure they are deployed when needed. We will monitor and report on compliance with the Article 2 commitment by Government and use our enforcement powers in this area as appropriate.

We will provide expert advice and guidance to public bodies, employers and service providers on their legal obligations and to promote good practice.

We will also consider improvements that could be made to the delivery of the equality and good relations duties. We will explore the use of gender budgeting.

### We will:

- influence the law and wider public attitudes to discrimination through well-publicised strategic casework.
- press for effective application of Section 75, contributing to more transparent and accountable public policymaking.
- support and promote the effective implementation of Section 75 duties.
- align any work to promote good relations to the "Living Peacefully" and "Equal Society" domains in the Programme for Government's Wellbeing Framework.
- monitor and challenge the UK Government's progress in meeting its Article 2 commitments.

## Driving positive change for people facing inequalities

**We have duties to promote equality of opportunity and good relations. We do this by increasing awareness of equality issues and taking action to address inequality and discrimination.**

### Our approach

Over the next three years, we will focus on shining a light on the inequalities that people are facing in their everyday lives. This will be underpinned by robust evidence and analysis and will be informed by people's lived experiences.

We will ensure that equality and good relations are priority areas in this and future Programmes for Government. We will focus on securing the delivery, resourcing and implementation of equality strategies.

We will work to ensure that public policy keeps pace as required under Article 2 and with international standards.

Recognising the importance of early intervention and education in combatting inequality, we will work to ensure effective access to education and lifelong learning which meets the needs of diverse equality groups.

### We will:

- align research efforts with the Programme for Government's Wellbeing Framework to highlight 'cradle to grave' inequalities affecting various equality groups. This includes domains such as healthier lives, better housing, and thriving children.
- encourage public policy to align with international standards and obligations, including those under Windsor Framework Article 2 and UNCRPD.
- advocate for improving the experiences of children with SEN and disabilities, both in education and beyond.
- work to influence the development and implementation of a strengthened racial equality strategy.
- encourage the introduction of a refugee integration strategy.
- work for the delivery of effective strategies for disability, gender, sexual orientation, childcare, and anti-poverty initiatives.

## Strengthening equality laws to safeguard everyone in Northern Ireland

**We have duties to keep equality laws under review and powers to advise government on ways they could be strengthened, simplified and harmonised. This includes overseeing the commitment by the UK Government to protect rights after Brexit in Northern Ireland.**

### Our approach

Over the next three years, we will focus on driving meaningful reforms in equality laws. We will keep all our equality laws under review and will work to improve and simplify protections from discrimination, with a particular focus on race, age and disability discrimination.

We will track developments in EU and NI law, monitoring and reporting on the government's compliance with its Article 2 commitments.

We will work to ensure the effective implementation of EU

pay transparency and equality standards directives and secure wider improvements, including in employment. We will also work to ensure that equality is mainstreamed into wider areas of law, with a focus on securing improvements to hate crime protections.

To achieve this, we will provide expert advice to the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly, and to wider policymakers, ensuring that people who are affected by the law changes are fully involved.

### We will:

- advocate for stronger protections against race discrimination.
- influence the strengthening of legal protections against hate crimes.
- promote improved protection from age discrimination in goods, facilities, and services.
- secure Executive commitment to enhancing protections against disability discrimination.
- support the development of a framework that increases transparency on equal pay between men and women.
- promote the adoption of the Equality Standards Directive.

## Building a resilient, accountable and accessible organisation

We are committed to building a resilient, accountable and accessible Equality Commission that can respond to emerging challenges while promoting agility and innovation.

### Our approach

We will build a more resilient organisation that is accessible, accountable and capable of meeting the needs of those we serve.

We will demonstrate a positive working environment for staff, providing opportunities for achievement, growth and recognition.

We will challenge ourselves, commit to continuous improvement, and seek external assurance and accreditation.

We have a long record of good governance and wish to maintain this.

### We will:

- demonstrate the impact of our work, making a strong case for improved funding.
- develop an accessible, agile, and continuously improving organisation that responds effectively to the needs of all stakeholders, including older people, people with disabilities, and minority ethnic communities.
- enhance digitalisation and efficiency to extend our reach and better support those who need our services.
- provide clear, user-friendly, and accessible guidance and information for all our stakeholders.

For further information and guidance, please contact:

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