

**THE TWO HUNDRED AND EIGHTEENTH MEETING OF
THE EQUALITY COMMISSION FOR NORTHERN IRELAND
HELD ON WEDNESDAY 22 JANUARY 2025 AT 1.30 PM
EQUALITY HOUSE**

Geraldine McGahey	Chief Commissioner
Neil Anderson	Deputy Chief Commissioner
Maureen Brunt	
Siobhan Cullen	
Duane Farrell	
Ellen Finlay	
Monica Fitzpatrick	
Colin Kennedy	
Nazia Latif	
Stephen Mathews	(R)
Jim McCooe	
Sheena McKinney	
John McCallister	
Preeti Yellamaty	
Lisa Caldwell	

IN ATTENDANCE

Louise Conlon	Chief Executive
Keith Brown	Head of Corporate Services
Craig Gartley	Director of Finance
Lisa King	Director, Research and Investigations
Roisin Mallon	Director, Dedicated Mechanism Unit
Jacqui McKee	Director, Advice and Compliance
Darren McKinstry	Director, Policy and Strategic Engagement
Eoin O'Neill	Director, Legal Services
Frances Fleming	Interim Director of Communications
Alden Henderson	Director, Advice and Compliance
Kathryn Barr	Senior Policy Officer

Introduction

The Chief Commissioner started by wishing everyone a happy new year and welcoming Frances Fleming as interim Director of Communications.

1. Apologies

There were no apologies received.

2. Minutes of previous meeting

The Minutes of the two hundred and seventeenth meeting held on Wednesday 27 November 2024 were agreed and signed as a true and accurate record.

EC/25/02/01

3. Matters Arising

Board Effectiveness Review: Deloitte has been appointed to undertake the board effectiveness review.

The first stage was confirmed by the Chief Commissioner, as a desktop review of key governance documents, with a confidential tailored online survey for all Commissioners and eight interviews with a selection of Commissioners, Committee Members and Senior Management.

The Board Effectiveness review is due to complete by the end of March 2025. Commissioners would shortly receive an email regarding the survey from Deloitte.

4. Conflict of Interests

There were no conflicts of interest declared.

5. Policy Issues

EC/25/02/02

[Monica Fitzpatrick declared an interest and left the meeting.]

- Conversion Practices: proposed policy positions

Darren McKinstry and Kathryn Barr, Public Policy and Strategic Engagement Directorate presented this paper. Commissioners were asked to consider proposed policy positions in respect of these practices. Attention was

drawn to the definition of conversion therapy, to the views of international human rights frameworks and the European Parliament. An overview of the position in the rest of the UK and Ireland was also noted. The paper also highlighted the various concerns raised, including clinical concerns and concerns around freedom of religion. Commissioners were asked to provide comment and approve the policy positions.

Commissioners considered the paper in detail, discussing political views on the issue, the role of faith groups, and the need for protections for vulnerable individuals. It was agreed that some of the wording could be strengthened. The importance of defining appropriate support and ensuring that any ban does not discourage professionals from providing the necessary support and help to individuals was also noted.

Commissioners agreed that it was important that the Commission took a balanced approach which protected individuals, whilst respecting freedom of religion. Although much of the considerations around balance of rights was a matter for the NI Human Right Commission, given their remit.

This feedback would be incorporated into the final policy position paper and that this would form the basis of the Commission's response to the Private Members Bill.

Commissioners **approved** the policy positions subject to the above considerations and noted the next steps.

[Monica Fitzpatrick returned to the meeting.]

- DfC Consultation on Gender Pay Gap Reporting EC/25/02/03

Darren McKinstry and Kathryn Barr presented this paper which set out positions with respect to the Dept for Communities gender pay reporting proposals published in late November 2024. In their presentation, they highlighted the differences between these proposals and the broader EU Pay Transparency Directive which must be transposed into NI legislation by June 2026. Roisin Mallon provided an update on engagement to date with the UK Government and European Commission and with other stakeholders. It was noted that existing positions from 2019 were incorporated, where relevant, into the updated document.

Commissioners agreed the importance of ensuring that the position regarding the Directive is clearly communicated as part of the consultation response. It was important that officials understand the

implications of this Directive. The importance of ensuring ongoing engagement to establish a view from the UK Government and the European Commission was a matter of urgency.

Going forward, it would be important to consider the potential role of the Commission and the potential impact on resources. There was a discussion on the proposed thresholds in the Directive and on the validity of any data if lower thresholds are required. This would be an important consideration as this work progresses.

Commissioners **approved** the draft position paper and next steps regarding consultation. Staff were asked to make best efforts to engage on this matter at EU and UK Government to secure some clarity on the matter.

- DMU Annual Report

EC/25/02/04

Roisin Mallon, Director updated the meeting on progress towards delivery of the Commission's 2022-2023 Windsor Framework Article 2 Annual Report recommendations. She highlighted the challenges and next steps to secure responses from the Secretary of State and the NI Executive Office.

Commissioners noted the lack of response from both parties and believed that best efforts needed to be made to ensure a response. It was suggested that the recommendations could be further prioritised and refined as they were currently numerous and of varying scale. It was noted that a response from both parties was required under Article 2 but further refinement of the recommendations might make for improved engagement. It was suggested that work on the next Annual Report would start shortly, thus a prioritisation and refinement of the recommendations might be timely.

6. Business Reporting

- Finance update

EC/25/02/05

Keith Brown, Head of Corporate Services, provided an update on the financial position, including the impact of additional funding and the focus on spending the budget effectively by the end of the year. He outlined a number of areas which were being focussed on, including filling some posts on a temporary basis and deploying agency staff in some areas, the board effectiveness review, rebranding and some work around our powers

and duties. It was noted that there was no indication of next year's budget currently.

Commissioners welcomed the update and raised a number of queries, including whether the situation regarding increase in employee NI contributions had been clarified and it was confirmed that the situation was still to be clarified by TEO.

Commissioners **noted** the Report.

- Business Plan Progress **EC/25/02/06**

The Chief Executive presented the progress report on the Business Plan, noting that this was an evolving format and any comments welcome. She outlined progress to date, noting a number of areas that were well progressed and highlighting a number of areas which were behind schedule and areas that were unlikely to be achieved by the year end, as a result of the impact of staffing and resource constraints.

Commissioners raised some queries and offered comment on the need to move further towards SMART targets.

Commissioners **noted** the report.

- Communications Report **EC/25/02/07**

Frances Fleming, Interim Director of Communications provided an update on communications activities, including progress against the KPI and website development.

Commissioners **noted** the report. It was suggested that this was a useful model for other Commission reports and noted the importance of keeping the use of social media channels under review.

7. Other Matters for Commission Decision **EC/25/02/08**

- Commissioner for Survivors of Institutional Childhood Abuse: Equality Scheme

Alden Henderson, Director, presented the equality scheme for the Commission on institutional childhood abuse, noting that this follows the Commissions model scheme.

Commissioners **noted** the detail of the audit and approved the Equality Scheme.

8. Chief Commissioner's Business

EC/25/02/09

The Chief Commissioner outlined a number of engagements and meetings since the November Commission. Amongst these were meetings with the Head of the NI Civil Service, the Prisoner Ombudsman and with the Independent Reviewer for Autism.

She had attended the British Irish Intergovernmental Christmas reception. She noted that there was an event, and a number of engagements planned in Westminster re Article 2, the following week.

9. Chief Executive's Report

EC/25/02/10

The Chief Executive provided an update on various ongoing projects, including the CLC JR case, staffing changes, and the potential review by the Executive Office.

Commissioners **noted** the report.

10. Matters for Information

EC/25/02/11

Commissioners noted the following responses:-

- ECNI response to the PSNI consultation – Race and Ethnicity Plan
- ECNI response to the NIPB – Policing Plan 2025-30

11. Minutes of Committee Meetings

EC/25/02/12

- Audit and Risk Assurance Committee held on Wednesday 30th October 2024.

Commissioners **noted** the minutes outlined above.

12. Any Other Business

There was no other business raised.

13. Date of next meeting: Two Hundred and Nineteenth Commission Meeting on **Wednesday, 26 February 2025, at 2pm in Equality House.** The joint board meeting with the Labour Relations Agency will precede this meeting at 12.30pm

The meeting closed at 4.15pm

Signed:



Date: 26 February 2025