

THE TWO HUNDRED AND TWENTY NINTH MEETING OF
THE EQUALITY COMMISSION FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

Wednesday 25 February 2026 at 1.30PM

Equality House

PRESENT:

Geraldine McGahey	Chief Commissioner
Neil Anderson	Deputy Chief Commissioner
Maureen Brunt (R) (part of)	
Lisa Caldwell	
Siobhan Cullen (R)	
Duane Farrell	
Ellen Finlay	
Monica Fitzpatrick	
Colin Kennedy	
Nazia Latif	
Stephen Mathews	
Jim McCooe	
John McAllister	
Harry Robinson (R)	

APOLOGIES:

Preeti Yellamaty

IN ATTENDANCE:

Louise Conlon	Chief Executive
Kathryn Barr	Senior Policy Officer (part of)
Frances Fleming	Temporary Director of Communications (part of)
Craig Gartley	Director of Finance and Corporate Services (part of)
Alden Henderson	Director of Advice and Compliance (part of)
Lisa King	Director, Policy and Research
Kelly McGinley	Communications Manager
Paul Noonan	Senior Policy Officer
Edel Quinn	Senior Policy & Research Officer (part of)

1. Introduction

The Chief Commissioner commenced the board meeting and thanked everyone for attending. She welcomed Dessie Donnelly, Rabble Collective and Dr Shannon Doherty NWMF CAJ Project Research and Campaigns Worker who would be presenting their report on Mapping Far Right Activity Online in Northern Ireland.

2. Presentation

- Presentation: Mapping Far Right Activity Online
In Northern Ireland Project Report

EC/26/02/03

Mr Donnelly and Dr Doherty presented their research report which mapped social media in Northern Ireland from August 2024 to mid-2025. This period covered the period of racist attacks in South Belfast and later in Ballymena. The presentation highlighted the role of social media in amplifying and coordinating activity, including the influence of external accounts and coordinated online behaviour.

Analysis of the research indicated that online sentiment was largely supportive of protesters' concerns, though not violence, with influential content originating predominantly outside Northern Ireland.

Commissioners discussed the sophisticated use of algorithms to promote anti-immigrant activity and how it is monetised. They discussed the impact of this online activity which brought people including many young people in Northern Ireland on to the streets and how they were being influenced by social media. They also raised issues around role of mainstream media and responsibility of wider society to counter this narrative.

The Commissioners thanked Mr Donnelly and Dr Doherty for delivering a very insightful presentation with research findings which would help inform the Commission's work going forward.

3. Conflict of Interest

No conflict of interests were declared.

4. Minutes of the two hundred and twenty eighth meeting held on Wednesday 28 January

EC/26/02/01

The above minutes were **agreed** and signed as a true and accurate record.

5. Actions from previous meeting

EC/26/02/02

The actions from the previous meeting were noted.

6. Policy Issues

- Childcare Strategy: Draft Response

EC/26/02/04

Kathryn Barr, Senior Policy Officer presented the proposed draft response to the Department of Education's consultation on the draft Executive Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) Strategy.

Whilst welcoming the draft Strategy, Commissioners noted the estimated funding required of £500million and the challenges this presents to deliver the strategy. They discussed needs of SEN pupils and need for earlier intervention.

Issues around low pay in the sector, importance of intersectionality, clear definitions of family structures broader than just mothers and fathers and the needs of older children and those with disabilities were discussed.

Commissioners acknowledged this is a ten-year strategy and that milestones need to be included throughout the duration of this strategy to ensure delivery and the need for clear cross-departmental roles and co-ordination.

Following discussion, Commissioners provided some suggestions for inclusion and **approved** the response.

[Commissioner Maureen Brunt joined the meeting online]

- Disability Strategy: Draft Response

EC/26/02/05

Paul Noonan, Policy Manager, outlined the draft response to the consultation on the NI Executive Disability Strategy, noting that the Commission would publish the response early, in advance of the consultation closing date and would circulate and engage with stakeholders.

There was a discussion on the shortfalls in this Strategy and the need for a more detailed action plan with realistic, actionable and achievable commitments. The meeting discussed the need for adequate resources to be put to the Strategy. The ongoing work on the resulting actions needed input from disabled people and mechanisms for accountability.

Commissioners agreed that whilst recognising the current public budget constraints, it was important that the short, medium and long term actions needed identified and prioritised.

Following discussion, Commissioners provided some suggestions for inclusion in response, **approved** the response and **noted** the proposed next steps.

7. Other Matters for Commission Decision

- JR in alleged failure by TEO to review and reform RRO NI

EC/26/02/06

Patricia Cosgrove, Senior Legal Officer and Laura Collins, Legal Officer updated Commissioners on the proposed next steps with regards the above Judicial Review and outlined Counsel's advice and proposed options for the Commission.

Following discussion and consideration of counsel advice, Commissioners **agreed** to monitor proceedings and consider further action if necessary.

8. Business Reporting

- Initial Draft Business Plan 2026/27
EC/26/02/07

Louise Conlon, Chief Executive, presented the Initial Draft Business Plan 26/27.

Discussion took place regarding significant budget pressures impacting delivery of statutory duties, the need to state the consequences of under-funding and clear prioritising of activities.

Issues including possibility of Age GFS legislation being introduced during this mandate and the type of complaints received and cases supported by the Commission were also discussed.

Following consideration of the Business Plan 26/27, it was **agreed** that Commissioners would submit written comments/suggestions regarding the Plan.

9. Reports from Committees

- ARAC Committee Meeting held on 11 February 2026

The Committee Chair, Neil Anderson, updated on recent business considered by the Committee at the meeting held on 11 February 2026, noting that all internal audit reports have been received with “satisfactory” assurance, recommendations accepted and are being implemented.

- ARAC Minutes of 15 October 2025

EC/26/02/08

Commissioners **noted** the oral update on the ARAC Committee and the minutes outlined above.

10. Items for Information

EC/26/02/09

- Teachers’ Exemption

Mr Alden Henderson provided an update on year one compliance of those public authorities and registered concerns impacted by the removal of the teachers’ exception from the Fair Employment and Treatment (NI) Order 1998 (FETO).

Commissioners discussed the that despite carrying out this additional function, the Commission had not received any additional funding to do so.

Commissioners **noted** the report for information.

11. Chief Commissioner’s Business

EC/26/02/10

The Chief Commissioner provided an update on a number of recent engagements since the last Commission. These included a meeting with Commissioner for Victims and Survivors Mr Joe McVey and Director of the Office of Identity and Cultural Expression Dr Katy Radford and advised that she was meeting with the Chief Executive of USEL Scott Jackson the next day to find out more about the work of USEL and to tour the factory.

The Chief Commissioner updated Commissioners on the media interest generated around the age and disability case against PwC. She also provided an update on the press release issued in relation to the introduction of Local Growth Fund and the wider impact of the loss of EU funding on employment support services for disabled people. The Chief Commissioner advised that she has now written to Rt. Hon Steve Reed MP, Steve Reed, Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government in

relation to this new funding stream on how decisions were made and the equality issues arising from this.

The Chief Commissioner advised that the NIO recruitment of new Commissioners is ongoing and that announcements should be imminent.

Commissioners **noted** the Chief Commissioner's update.

12. Chief Executive Report

EC/26/02/11

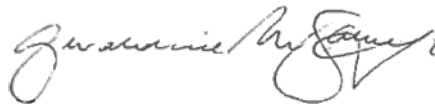
The Chief Executive presented her previously circulated report. This included an update in relation to work required by the Commission in relation to the Covid inquiry, Commission's policy positions on race and the development of a communications plan to support this and how the Commission reports on its work annually.

Commissioners **noted** the update.

13. Date of next meeting: Two hundred and thirtieth Commission Meeting on Wednesday 25 March 2026 at 1.30 pm.

Meeting concluded at 4.25pm

Signed:



Dated: 25 March 2026