

## **NI Assembly Executive Office Committee**

### **Opening Statement**

**Mr Michael Finucane, Commission Member,**

**Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission,**

**14<sup>th</sup> April 2021.**

Chair, Members, I'm delighted to be here today representing the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission.

As set out in the UK Governments Explainer document of August 2020 on Article 2 - the ECNI, NIHRC and IHREC are to work together to provide oversight of, and reporting on, rights and equalities issues falling within the scope of the Article 2 commitment that have **an island of Ireland dimension**.

It falls to the three Commissions to agree how to advance this important work, and in my remarks here I will outline how we have progressed this to date.

Late last year the three Commissions agreed that a Working Group to progress the all island work would be established - comprising the respective Chief

Commissioners, plus a Board member and the Chief Executives of each Commission.

The inaugural meeting of the Working Group was held earlier this year on the 9<sup>th</sup> of February. The main business of this first meeting was to consider and finalise a ‘Memorandum of Understanding’ to govern our joint work. This MoU has subsequently been agreed by the Boards of the three Commissions.

In this MoU - and aligned with the roles set out in the August 2020 Explainer document - the three Commissions agreed that:

- the Commissions will work together to provide oversight of, and reporting on, rights and equalities issues falling within the scope of the Article 2 commitment that have an island of Ireland dimension;
- the Commissions will report separately to the Governments of the UK and Ireland, as appropriate, on any issues that they have jointly addressed in the context of monitoring the Article 2 commitment;

- the NIHRC, ECNI and the Joint Committee of NIHRC and IHREC, as established under the Good Friday Agreement, will bring any matter of relevance to the Article 2 commitment to the attention of the Specialised Committee on the Ireland/Northern Ireland Protocol, as appropriate; and
- Any activities undertaken jointly by the three Commissions will respect existing reporting structures and statutory roles and responsibilities.

On practical working arrangements the three Commissions agreed that:

- The Working Group will normally meet four times per year to consider areas for joint working;
- The Chairing and hosting of the Working Group will rotate between the three Commissions on a yearly basis with the ECNI taking the role in the first year;

- Our joint working will be overseen at a strategic level by the respective Boards of each Commission, and any decisions will be made in line with existing governance arrangements for each Board; and
- An annual meeting of all the members of the three Commissions will be organised, to review progress and issues together.

In addition to agreeing the MoU our first Working Group meeting provided a very useful opportunity to share information on implementation of the dedicated mechanism arrangements to date across the three Commissions.

We also discussed plans for the first annual meeting of all members of the three Commissions, and have decided to schedule this to take place in the year when Board members could meet in person.

Finally we considered how to best carry out North -South civic engagement going forward. We have agreed that in the short term the three Commissions would run a cross border online event aimed at raising awareness of the dedicated mechanism, the all island scrutiny role, and to hear any concerns

regarding the impact of Brexit on rights and on equality of opportunity. [*As you have already heard from my colleagues*], officials within the three Commissions have since been progressing this with the Centre for Cross Border Studies.

**In conclusion**, over the last number of months we have put in place the practical foundations for working together to address the rights and equalities issues falling within the scope of the Article 2 commitment that have an island of Ireland dimension. Looking to the future, we will continue to build on these foundations to promote the rights and equality of all people across the island as they go about their daily lives.

Thank you.

**ENDS**