

Think Equality Act Equality
Equality Mainstreaming Conference

14 October 2014, Dublin Castle

Address by Emily Logan, Chief Commissioner (Designate)

Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (designate)

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am delighted to welcome you all here today. I am the Chief Commissioner Designate of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission; a new body that will bring together the existing Irish Human Rights Commission and the Equality Authority with the purpose of strengthening efforts to promote and protect equality and human rights in Ireland.

I wish to extend a warm welcome to Mr Aodhán O Ríordáin TD, Minister of State for Equality, New Communities and Culture. Minister, you are most welcome and we would like to thank you for taking the time to be with us this morning.

I would like to begin by acknowledging the support of the European Social Fund (ESF) through the Human Capital Investment Operational Programme. The ESF provides part-funding for the work of the Equality Mainstreaming Unit.

The Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission will have a broad mandate to protect and promote human rights and equality. Having in place an effective human rights and equality architecture in Ireland is a requirement of the Good Friday Agreement. The Commission will operate to a new level of Independence which includes amongst other things that the Commission will have its own Oireachtas vote and account to the Oireachtas for its functions. In addition, all fifteen commissioners were appointed through an open competitive process.

The Equality Authority and the Irish Human Rights Commission have played important roles in the protection and promotion of the rights of some of the most vulnerable groups in Irish society.

The theme of this year's conference is "Think Equality Act Equality". The Equality Authority has been supporting the further education and training sector in developing and implementing equality mainstreaming strategies. It has also actively supported trade unions, employers, NGOs and the Public Sector to take action on equality. Many of you here today have been involved in supporting the implementation of this important work with the goal of embedding equality practice in organisations so that workplaces are free from discrimination, value diversity and that both public and private services are inclusive of all.

The Employment Equality Acts 1998-2011 prohibit discrimination in the workplace and in vocational training. The Equal Status Acts 2000-2012 prohibit discrimination in the provision of goods and services, accommodation and educational establishments. Both Acts cover the nine grounds of gender, civil status, family status, age, disability, sexual orientation, race, religion and membership of the Traveller community. Both Acts also prohibit harassment, sexual harassment and require employers and service providers to provide reasonable accommodation for people with disabilities. The equality legislation has provided a useful framework from which to develop equality mainstreaming approaches. Equality Mainstreaming involves the systematic integration of an equality perspective into everyday work in order to change organisational cultures so that an equality perspective becomes embedded into organisational culture.

Today's conference will showcase a number of projects demonstrating that investing in equality at an institutional level contributes to real change. It achieves this by supporting organisations to put in place policies and procedures to prevent discrimination and accommodate diversity. The presentations this morning will illustrate the importance of partnership and sectoral approaches to this work e.g.

the development of anti-racism strategies for the public transport sector and promoting LGBT equality in workplaces.

In your conference pack today, you will see a new publication. *Equality in Action: Promoting Equality Mainstreaming in the Further Education and Training Sector*. This publication showcases a tailor-made programme of supports designed in consultation with providers of further education and training to embed equality at an institutional level, assisting in compliance with the equality legislation and also the implementation of the equality processes related to the requirements of the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) Quality Assurance Processes, which has been a critical driver for equality practice within the further education and training sector. We look forward to hearing from Cavan Institute on its experience of embedding equality.

The focus on institutions that are providers of further education and training is key. This is where policy gets implemented, where standards are applied and where outcomes for those experiencing inequality can be achieved. It is essential that organisations are supported to develop systems and practices that reflect equality competence so that equality is “owned” by the whole organisation.

Building a culture of equality and human rights at an institutional level requires an organisation to invest in building equality and human rights competence. It requires organisations to develop a planned and systematic approach to equality and human rights. It requires organisations to develop an equality and human rights infrastructure which includes an equality policy, training for staff and equality action planning. It requires an allocation of responsibility to a senior member of staff. It also involves embedding equality and human rights within governance and decision making within organisations.

The new IHREC legislation introduces a new positive duty on public bodies. Well what does this mean? It means a move away from the traditionally expressed equality obligations to avoid discrimination to a positive duty to promote equality

and protection of human rights. This new duty resonates very well with the work of equality mainstreaming: encouraging organisations to think proactively about policies and practices. The introduction of a positive duty will offer a real opportunity to advance and further embed equality and human rights practices within the public sector and to build a culture of human rights and equality. Today we will also hear presentations on the experience and lessons learned on applying a public sector positive duty on equality and human rights in a Scottish local authority setting. This pilot project offers us valuable insights and learning at a time when we are considering how best to operationalise Section 42 of the IHREC Act 2014. We look forward to working with our stakeholders – public sector, civil society, employers and trades unions on developing and implementing this new important human rights and equality duty.

I would like to take this opportunity to welcome and thank all the speakers who will share their experiences today. There will also be opportunity for you all to participate in this morning's seminar and we look forward to a lively debate

We are very aware that this is still a period of significant change for the further education and training sector, for workplaces and for the public sector. These changes are significant in scope and scale and pose challenges for any organisation. We are conscious that your focus, like ours, will be on restructuring and renewal over the next couple of years. In the last decade as Ombudsman for Children I developed a deeper appreciation of the need to work with civil society to advance human rights for children. We as a Commission recognise the important work done and your commitment to human rights and equality. We look forward to continuing this engagement and look for your support in building a new and strong equality and human rights body.

I would now like now to invite Minister Aodhan O'Riordán T.D, to officially open this conference.