

BLUEPRINT FOR AN EFFECTIVE COMMUNITY RESPONSE TO COVID-19

Local authorities can make use of a ready-made blueprint for an equal and effective community response to Covid-19 crisis under the Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty, which forms a key part of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act 2014, says Sinéad Gibney, newly appointed Chief Commissioner of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission.

It is clear that public servants have stepped up to the mark in an unprecedented way to protect the country's well-being in this time of national crisis. It is during such times that we realise the worth of our public services and the role of the State in safeguarding our rights, especially when we consider parts of the world that are not so fortunate.

The Ireland of today is a different place than the one that came into existence almost 100 years ago. Our institutions have evolved as the State has taken its place among the community of nations and brought many of its laws and practices in line with the highest international standards.

And while much remains to be done at every level, a new duty introduced in the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act 2014 gives direction on how to proactively anticipate and serve the diverse needs of all public service users and staff.

PUBLIC SECTOR PRIORITIES

A key part of this new law is the Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty ('the Duty'), under which all public bodies are bound to respect, protect and fulfil their equality and human rights commitments, both as employers and as service providers.

Naturally, these obligations continue to apply and indeed hold an increased priority in emergency times.

We hope that you, as leaders in public service, will implement this Duty as an essential and innovative framework to support your efforts to develop inclusive



Sinéad Gibney, Chief Commissioner of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission

and sustainable responses to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the communities you serve and your own staff.

As has been widely documented, including by the Oireachtas Special Committee on Covid-19 Response, this crisis has worsened inequalities in society.

There has been a disproportionate impact on vulnerable groups, including older people, people with disabilities, minority ethnic groups and women.

These are deep-seated challenges that require a whole of government approach, and local authorities play a vital role in

addressing and mitigating them, particularly as we now face into the prospect of living with the disease for a prolonged period.

GUIDANCE NOTE ON 'THE DUTY'

To assist you in bringing about positive change for both your workplace and communities, the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission has published a new guidance note on using the Duty for the benefit of staff and service users in these pandemic times.

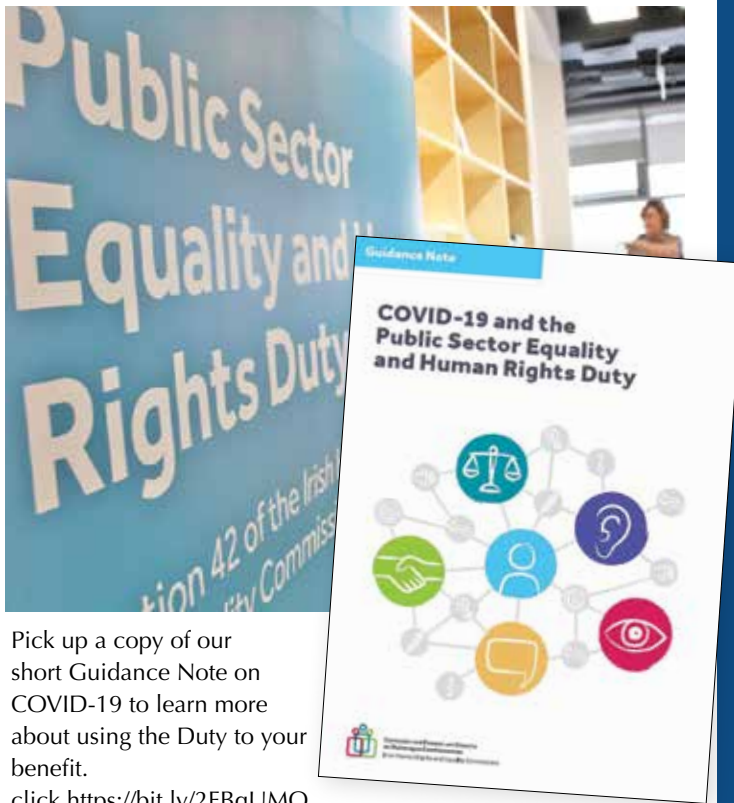
The note complements the existing and ongoing statutory obligation on public bodies, including local authorities, to conduct a human rights and equality assessment across your functions, to set it out in your strategic plan alongside actions to address those issues, and report on them yearly in your annual report.

Local authorities can use the Duty to avoid discrimination and consider the specific needs of people protected under equality legislation when implementing special measures to address Covid-19.

The tumultuous past few months have challenged us to rethink how we deliver public services while protecting the health and dignity of individuals and communities. Local authorities can be proud of this coming together and should use it to build a fully inclusive Ireland that will inspire others around the world to follow suit.

Responses shaped by equality and human rights considerations result in better outcomes for your staff and service users and are fundamentally more efficient, sustainable and effective. For more information visit

<https://www.ihrec.ie/our-work/public-sector-duty/>



Pick up a copy of our short Guidance Note on COVID-19 to learn more about using the Duty to your benefit. click <https://bit.ly/2EBqUMQ>



Tips on protecting human rights and equality in response to Covid-19

- Use the Duty to apply an equality and human rights lens in the design, planning, implementation and review of initiatives and responses, considering specific targeted measures to ensure that all persons' needs are covered and no-one is left out.
- Ensure that special measures or changes in service delivery do not discriminate across the protected grounds of gender, civil status, family status, age, sexual orientation, disability, race, religion, membership of the Traveller community; and people at risk of poverty and social exclusion.
- Put in place mechanisms to monitor the impact of decisions, policies and plans on different groups. Regularly review progress and trends for particular groups experiencing discrimination.
- Identify specific steps to make reasonable accommodation for people with disabilities. Queries on disability rights remain the prevailing reason people contact the Commission.
- Equality proof regulations and policies for their impact across the Equal Status Acts and the Employment Equality Acts, and on the broader range of human rights, civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights.
- Consult with staff and service users, civil society organisations, representatives of the equality grounds, when a decision, plan or programme is at draft stage.
- Proactively communicate information to all sections of the community, using traditional and new forms of message delivery. Use inclusive language(s) that respects diversity and avoids stigma.
- Collect disaggregated human rights and equality data on the impact of Covid-19, such as gender, age, disability, sexual orientation and ethnicity.