

Human Rights Commission

KEY:

A: Anne Marie Fleming
M: Marina McConville
C: Clare Martin
J: Jason McKeown

M: Hello, everybody, welcome to our talk today on the topic of human rights. My name is Anne Marie Fleming, an Education Officer in the Northern Ireland Assembly, and I'm here with my colleague Marina McConville, also an Education Officer in the Northern Ireland Assembly. And we're delighted today to welcome Clare Martin, Communications Director of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, and Jason McKeown, who is Communication and Public Affairs Officer. So we're going to address and discuss the topic of human rights and after Clare and Jason have delivered their talk.

Marina and I will ask some questions that have been kindly sent in by some schools. And on that note, I would like to thank Ashfield Boys in Belfast and Trinity College, Belfast. Thank you very much for your very topical questions. And we look forward to hearing the talk. So Marina and I will come off screen and will hand over now to Clare and Jason.

C: Thank you, Anne Marie and thanks Marina. And we're delighted to present today and thanks to the Assembly Education Service for providing us this opportunity and also to the schools that have engaged and sent the questions through to the commission.

So really appreciate having that engagement and that feedback from the schools. As Anne Marie said, my name is Clare Martin and I am the Director of Communications at the Commission. And I've worked at the Commission for over 12 years now and I'm with my colleague Jason. I will ask Jason to introduce himself.

J: Yeah, thank you. Hi, my name's Jason McKeown and I do communications and public affairs at the Human Rights Commission, and I'm very happy to be here to speak a bit about the work that we do.

C: Thanks, Jason. So today we're going to run through a presentation on the Commission's work, and it's a bit of a, I suppose, a little snapshot of our work, of basically where human rights come from and how they're set out in law. We've also been asked to give a presentation on poverty and human rights and really to touch on how human rights can really affect everyday life and really trying to set the scene of making rights real in society and trying to highlight how they're not just legal instruments, but human rights can really play a part in how we live our life to the full and with dignity.

And we really wanted to set out today for students. And so today, as I said, we're going to kind of give you a run through on what the commission does, how your human rights are protected in law. And also we're going to play a short video on child poverty and human rights and then we'll take some questions from Marina and Anne-Marie that have been sent through the schools. And hopefully, if anybody has any questions beyond our presentation today, they can

get in touch with us directly at the Commission and we can form any kind of go back on any queries that students or teachers might have.

So, again, thanks for the time and we'll get started with the presentation. So for everybody that isn't aware of what the Human Rights Commission does, we are a public body. So we are currently one of the non-devolved public bodies in Northern Ireland and that means we are accountable to Westminster. We lay our annual reports at Westminster and we're made up of a staff team which are there on a permanent basis. And we also are made up of part time Commissioners who are appointed by the Secretary of State for a fixed term and also a full time Chief Commissioner, also appointed by the Secretary of State for a fixed term.

The Chief Commissioner will stay with the Commission and they will lead the board of part time Commissioners and staff for that time. So in terms of our remit, we have four main functions that are set out, and they are to advise government to educate and promote and raise awareness of human rights in Northern Ireland and to investigate human rights issues. So we have powers to investigate places of detention and basically really wide ranging powers of investigation that the Commission can use.

And we also have litigation powers. And what we mean by that is really powers to take cases in our own name. If we feel there's been a violation of your rights and or a wider violation in society that the Commission needs to challenge. So that's our core functions that have been set out in law.

And really, why, in terms of why the Commissions here, we were here, we're here to promote and protect your rights. As I've mentioned, we're an independent statutory organisation and we were one of the organisations that were established on the basis of the Belfast Good Friday Agreement, which was created by the UK Parliament through the Northern Ireland Act. And as I've said, one of them, our kind of core functions, which is obviously part of our engagement with the Assembly is to advise government on compliance with human rights laws.

So that's making sure that we're playing an oversight role on any law or instrument or policy that is being put through the Assembly or Westminster. So our lawyers and our policy workers at the Commission will scrutinise laws to make sure that they're not going to discriminate against anybody in Northern Ireland and also that they won't have any detrimental effect. And how we use how I suppose carry out those roles in practice is that we can write to Ministers, we can engage with Ministers directly be that at the Northern Ireland level or at Westminster, we can give evidence to Stormont Committees or Westminster Committees and give our advice on where we think the law or policies need to be improved on.

And we can also respond to public consultations and really highlight where our laws need to be brought up a level, in our view, to ensure that there's no unfairness or no possible breaches or violations of human rights. So we try to scrutinise laws at the entry point so that there's new and potential issues down the line for people or for individuals. So that really is a really core part of the commission's work. And I'm going to pass over to my colleague Jason.

There's a slide here of us engaging again with the Ministers at West, MP at Westminster and also one of our local Ministers, too. So it's just to highlight some of our engagement work. So Jason's going to talk us through our education role and then I'll come back and discuss in a little bit more detail about where human rights law comes from and how it plays out in practice, thank-you.

J: Yes, thank you, Claire. And yes, I'm just going to run through the other kind of functions that the Commission has sort of statutory duties, and this next one is education promotion and awareness raising.

And so the Commission's obligation to promote understanding and awareness of the importance of human rights in Northern Ireland is actually set in in the Northern Ireland Act. So it's an actual law that we that this is one of our kind of functions to carry out to make sure that people in Northern Ireland are aware of their human rights and the work of the of the Commission. And so we do this kind of in a number of ways. And I'll run through for you a few here.

So just as you can see that we can do a number of things, such as we do presentations to schools and we go out and we talk about human rights and we talk about the work of the Commission. And I know that this is also on the GCSE for learning, for life and work. And so we kind of tie in with that and we can do bespoke workshops and sort of human rights training with civil service staff. And I know that we and we will give sort of deliver training to individuals in these organisations just to give them the kind of human rights perspectives or how they can integrate human rights into the into the work that they do and then develop online resources.

Again, that's tied in with our with our education work. And we produce sort of posters, videos and things like lesson ideas for teachers.

So one of the one of the big sort of promotion and awareness raising kind of platforms we use is social media and we have our website and we have Twitter and Facebook and YouTube and Instagram. And really we use these platforms to kind of highlight the work that we're doing or to highlight any issues that the Commission thinks that needs highlighted. And so we use these kind of platforms to reach out to the public or to stakeholders or we can if we're for partnering up with stakeholders, we we'll use it to highlight the work that we're doing with them.

Or as Claire mentioned, whenever where we're filling out consultation's or anything like that, we can keep people up to date with our ongoing work or anything that we've responded to or any kind of stance that we take on issues or any kind of human rights issues that we want to flag up. We kind of use these platforms to kind of hold all our information or to highlight are our videos or anything like that. And another big part of our work is, is stakeholder partnerships, so it's working with other organisations or organisations that are doing work that kind of tie in with some of the work that the Commission is doing.

And you can see there there's quite a number of different kind of organisations and logos and things like that. I can pick out one or two just to highlight how we've kind of we've kind of worked with some of these organisations. So, I mean, we have we have Women's Aid there and on the Simon Community. And we've done kind of video work with them on sort of domestic abuse and homelessness, respectively. And just to highlight issues, human rights issues related to both of those things.

And then there's a couple of things in there. There's the Belfast Pride Festival and there's Culture Night and sort of and there's also kind of Pride as well where we can use that to raise the profile of the of the Commission or just to make people aware that the that the Commission is there for people to get in touch with or is there kind of promoting or protecting human rights in Northern Ireland. And again, you see there's the schools and the Northern Ireland Civil Service as well.

So it's kind of wide ranging on a number of different kind of projects and things. But whenever we can partner with organisations that tie in to the work that we're doing or anything that we're saying, then then we're really happy to kind of work with organisations in that way. Yeah, and then just every year, the Commission produces an Annual Human Rights Statement and it's normal and normally goes out on the 10th December, which is International Human Rights Day, and we normally publish it or normally launch it up at the Long Gallery in Stormont (Parliament Buildings).

And the annual statement is kind of a stocktake of the of the previous year and it kind of shows the progress and for different rights issues that the commission has kind of highlighted. So the Commission kind of takes it's kind of like a traffic light system to kind of show the different progress of issues within human rights issues, within Northern Ireland. So just for example, to add to that, you know, so if we have marked an issue as a red issue and this is something that has that needs kind of you know, the UK government or the Northern Ireland Executive or public bodies need to need to address this issue sort of immediately, it's a red flag issue that they need to sort of get on.

And it could possibly constitute or it could turn into a human rights violation that needs to be kind of remedied. And so if it's red, then then action, immediate action is needed to be taken. And then if it's if it's Amber, then it's some steps have been taken to remedy a sort of an issue or a human rights issue but that it has not been completely remedied, but that it's kind of on its way or steps have been taken to kind of remedy any kind of human rights issue.

And then finally, if an issue is Green, that means that there has been sort of an effective response or that any kind of issues that might be flagged up before in previous versions have been have been remedied or have been kind of sort of dealt with as well. So that goes sort of every year. And we normally have kind of like a guest speaker to kind of to launch it. And I mean, the 2020 version had the Victims Commissioner for England and Wales and Dame Vera Baird QC and yeah.

So each year we kind of get a high profile sort of speaker to kind of launch and they maybe sort of give a sort of short speech on an issue or a topic that's kind of within their kind of area of work. And we kind of invite all civil society and politicians and the public and things along to kind of read and take stock of all of this. And so the next function is just investigation and powers of investigation, and I know Claire has touched upon this sort of a wee bit, and we do believe we can look into possible kind of human rights abuses and that can be entering places of detention or conducting research or things like that or producing reports.

And you can see there there's a couple of different reports up there. So there's some traveller accommodation, nursing homes, racist hate crime, and there's one into emergency health care. That was a human rights enquiry. And so we have these kind of powers to investigate kind of possible human rights abuses. So if I just take kind of our last kind of big piece of investigation work, and that is that's on traveller accommodation. So if I just like, can briefly kind of speak about.

But this this kind of looked into traveller accommodation and services through kind of like a human rights lens. So this just kind of looked at what public authorities or the government or anything like that, things that they're doing to kind of address these issues or speaking to travellers sort of directly or traveller groups directly to come forward with that kind of their kind of issues and kind of produce kind of a report and recommendations at the end of that. So

this particular one, I can say and looked at travellers services, so kind of like sites or access to access to social housing or conditions on the sites or things that got participation within the within the sort of system.

And so. It focussed a lot on two kind of rights, and that was the right to housing and the right to an adequate standard of living. And so the Commission sort of took on board or spoke to all these kind of stakeholders and travellers, groups, travellers themselves, public bodies like the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and government departments and things like that. And at the end of that, they kind of produced a number of reports where kind of issues around just, for example, some issues you find around sort of access to, you know, things like water and electricity and heating and stuff on traveller sites and things like that, or access to and, you know, social housing or things like that.

So the Commission produced a number of kind of recommendations as to how to remedy these kind of issues or how things could be moved forward so that the travellers could be more involved and in kind of remedying these issues. Or their fears or issues being addressed? And so we kind of produce those reports. And then and then we sort of we're able to kind of put that out into the open and pass them on to the public bodies and show the public and kind of highlight the issues and things like that.

And then we'll try and work kind of beyond that to see if there's any progress in implementing these recommendations or how best to kind of approach things. Yeah, and then and then finally, and just litigation, as Clare had mentioned again earlier, it's just about our ability to kind of take cases and or to give intervene and give a human rights perspective in certain cases and. So the Commission has done quite, quite a number of different sort of interventions or taking cases and things like that.

So I'll just a couple of one sort of specific example, just this one here that you can see, and I was it was around DNA retention on PSNI databases. So the Commission was approached by an individual who had had their DNA and fingerprints taken by the PSNI. And they had been they had been arrested and sort of around the late 2000s. And but they had been freed and the PSNI had accepted that they had been a peacemaker in an altercation and but they had still taken their DNA and fingerprints and the individual had wanted the PSNI to remove their DNA and fingerprints.

But the PSNI had refused because the individual back in the 1990s had been convicted of a common assault and had been prosecuted and paid a fine. And so this was the reason that the PSNI had said they were they were keeping a hold of these DNA and fingerprints, so the Commission had entered into sort of correspondence with the PSNI. And they were refusing to remove the person's DNA and fingerprints. So the Commission launched judicial review proceedings.

And this is just where you get a judge to look at how legal an action by a of public body or public authority is. And the Commission were arguing that the PSNI kind of had an unclear and inaccessible policy around how people could find out whether the PSNI held their DNA or fingerprints. And there was no clear or accessible policy as to how anyone could challenge if they thought the PSNI shouldn't have their DNA and fingerprints on their on their databases.

So the Commission had argued that that this lack of kind of like a formal policy was kind of a contravention of this person's Article 8 right to private and family life, and that's an article of the European Convention on Human Rights. And so the Commission, the Commission were

arguing that. And then they kind of entered into a sort of settlement with the with the PSNI, whereby the PSNI decided that they would destroy the individuals DNA and fingerprints and that they would then formulate a clear and accessible policy so that people could find out whether their DNA or fingerprints were being held on PSNI databases.

And then there was also kind of like a policy or clear an accessible policy as to how someone could go about challenging.

If they thought it was unfair that the PSNI had their DNA or fingerprints and then they also kind of committed to publishing this on their website so that people were able to see their policy. And so that's just one kind of there's quite a few, but that's just one kind of specific example in how that the Commission is able to kind of take its own case or take its own legal action to help an individual in this case with work with a human rights issue.

And so that's my end of things. And I'm going to hand back to Claire. Thanks.

C: Thank you, Jason. That was great, just a really helpful overview, think for all of us in terms of our work on education and our functions. And it is for us to, we do although we're very small in staff numbers at the Commission, we do try to go out and visit schools whenever we can. When restrictions ease up, we'll be doing actual visits to schools.

For now, we're doing anything virtually where we can so please teachers or pupils, you know, get in touch with us and we can arrange a visit to your school or a presentation if you do want to find out a bit more about our work. And equally with the events that Jason mentioned in terms of our annual statement, they're all public events. So we would encourage schools and yourselves to attend and engage and participate with the Commission. But I will go on now just to talk a little bit more about where human rights come from, because I think for especially in terms of pupils and students, in order to claim your rights and to challenge your rights, it is essential that you are aware of your rights and the importance that is placed upon your rights in law.

And I think just really to set out where we're coming from when we make our recommendations to government and also whenever we engage in legal proceedings where our advice is coming from. So if I set out now just a little bit of an introduction in terms of the legal frameworks of human rights. And really, quite simply, we have our human rights because we're human and their fundamental things in order to flourish and grow and society. And we see the negative and implications when our rights are taken away from us and whenever our rights are not protected in law.

Everything we do at the Commission, every recommendation we make is based upon human rights law at an international level and a local level. And we don't step outside what the law is saying and we don't advise unless it has a legal basis. And so it's just to ensure pupils that your rights are protected in law and they've been protected and set in place by governments and by politicians who have obligations to protect your rights in any law they make. So we go on to the next slide.

We can set out a little bit more detail about the legal framework of human rights. Where did they come from? So really, we have the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was an aspirational document, it's not legally enforceable, but it is really the start of the human rights language where we really start to see nations and societies forming views around protecting human life. And that came about after the atrocities of the Second World War, when nations

came together and committed that that life should be protected and there should be inherent principles and legal principles that governments and states should sign up to.

And that coming out of that came what we refer to as international treaties. And in terms of the Commission's advice to government and its engagement with bodies such as the United Nations, we will refer to the international treaties and we will make sure that any developments on international law that we are recommending that governments locally that our local executive and Westminster commit to their, basically their obligations in international law. So one of these conventions is really the core of where our human rights law comes from today.

And that was the European Convention of Human Rights. And that comes from the Council of Europe, which sits outside the EU, which obviously the UK has left the EU in terms of coming in terms of Brexit.

But that is separate from the Council of Europe, which isn't a monetary union in terms of the Council of Europe that is where the European Convention on Human Rights sits. Domestically, we have the Human Rights Act and that basically puts in to a domestic effect the Convention on Human Rights, which means that you can challenge in court, you can make sure public bodies and public authorities are upholding the Human Rights Act and are not really suppose is legally were they were basically human rights law comes from.

And it's where we will enter in terms of our advice and our challenges to government. It's where we take our guidance from. So it's just to set out that the Commission isn't and we're not making things up. They're coming from international agreements that the UK government has signed up to in terms of the international treaties and also has committed to enforcing through its laws and through the Human Rights Act.

So in terms of kind of breaking it down into a little bit more detail in terms of the Human Rights Act that applies to all public authorities in Northern Ireland, all of our public authorities must respect, protect and fulfil our human rights. We do get into a little bit more and I suppose just distilling that down a little bit in terms of public debate, because there is sometimes a lot of and I suppose, discourse around human rights and sometimes it's not necessarily accurate in terms of where human rights arguments come into play and where the balance of rights exist.

And really to set out that human rights law provides very few rights that are absolute. But that's not to say that rights can't be challenged in terms of any restrictions on rights. If in law, most rights can be restricted, but they can't be restricted for any reason other than they must, it must be lawful to restrict them and they must be done in a proportionate way. So we go on to the next slide. It really what we're trying to get across is basically your human rights must be protected by public authorities and what is a public authority, a public authority is a body that carries out a public service.

So it is your local councils it's your board of governors, it's libraries, it's the police service, it's our institutions in terms of the Executive Departments and the Commission itself is a public authority. So in law public authorities must comply with the Human Rights Act and the European Convention on Human Rights. And really, when we're talking about, as I mentioned before, there absolute rights in terms of the Human Rights Act, we have the right to life and we have the right not to be tortured, that we've not to be held in slavery or forced labour.

And we've also the right to liberty and security. And in relation to those rights there's actually only two rights that are absolute, which can't be interfered with. And that is the right not to be tortured on the right not to be held in slavery or forced labour. And these are absolute rights that in no circumstances can any public authority or state interfere with and in relation to the other rights. It's not to say that those can't be interfered with, as I've said, without good reason.

They are what we would call they can be limited or qualified. And really, it's where we get into the issue in the Commission around the balance of your rights. So, for instance, in relation to the current pandemic, your right to liberty and security. It has been limited through our restrictions and in terms of national crisis or global pandemics, it is lawful for the government and states to restrict rights in order to protect the wider public. So the rights can legally be limited, but not without good reason.

And that's where institutions like the Commission come in terms of monitoring whether those restrictions have been applied proportionately, they haven't been done excessively and they've been done legally. So a public authority or a government cannot interfere with your rights without having a lawful and a legitimate reason to do so. And we want to stress that enough you can strongly to young people that, you know, if your rights if you feel that they have been interfered with in an excessive way, then you should come to institutions like ourselves or the Children's Commissioner and challenge where you feel that your rights have been breached or violated.

So it really is just to give you an overview of where your rights may be restricted in certain circumstances. And we have another example here of, you know, freedom of expression, your freedom of expression, you are entitled to give your viewpoint. However, if you're expressing a view which is inciting hatred or violence, then lawfully, it may be appropriate for a public body to restrict that. So there are kind of clear reasons why rights can be restricted.

But again, it can't be done without very strong reasons. And now, we want to really set a little bit of context in terms of how rights, if your rights aren't protected in law and in practice, how that that can affect everyday life. And we produced a short video some time ago, which really sets out in the context of young people how your rights must be protected and your right to an adequate standard of living must be protected as well in order for you to really enjoy a fulfilling life in terms of your education.

So we're going to pause here for a second and watch this video and then we'll come back with just a little bit more context at the end.

[VIDEO PLAYS]

Did you get your homework done last night?

Yeah, what about yourself, did you get it done?

No, I didn't get all of it done, teacher was mad.

Have you got your football boots with you?

No, I don't have any at the moment.

Ah lovely one.

By the way, are you going on the school trip this year?

No my mum says I can't go.

Right see you mate.

See ya.

See you tomorrow.

See ya.

Poverty is not something most of us think about as a human rights issue. It's hard to concentrate on anything including education when you're cold and hungry. It's hard to play simple sports when you have worn out shoes. It's hard to always miss out because you can never afford it. Living in poverty takes away a child's right to live life with dignity.

Article 25 from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights says; "Everyone has the right to an adequate standard of living that includes food, clothing and shelter..."

Think Again about poverty. Think Again about human rights.

C: So great, we hope you find that video interesting. I know it raises some very key issues in terms of your rights and if you don't have the right to an adequate standard of living, how that can affect your education and your ability to really reach your full potential in society.

So if we move on to the next slide. I suppose it's just to acknowledge that poverty is an issue that is facing many homes in Northern Ireland and we had the United Nations special rapporteur in 2018 who visited Northern Ireland, and he did express concerns through his reports that poverty was deeply damaging and it was affecting lots of people in Northern Ireland. And I think the statistics speak for themselves in relation to the high levels of poverty. So I suppose in terms of human rights, if we move on to the next slide, it really sets out where you're rights are basically set out in law.

And we have Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which really sets out that everyone has the right to a standard of living, and that really includes food, clothing, housing and medical care and social services. And I'm really I suppose the role of the Commission is to ensure and provide a scrutiny service over our policies and laws that that nothing is coming into force that would, I suppose, discriminate or unfairly protect groups and society and would cause poverty.

But there's also positive obligations on public authorities and governments to make sure that they are doing all they can to protect vulnerable groups.

So it basically is an important role for government in order to ensure that any Bills and legislation that they're bringing forward complies with international standards. And also our role as a commission to monitor that and make sure the governments are keeping their standards up to date. And again, it's just to reiterate, as a child the United Nations Convention

on the Rights of the Child, that state parties, which means your government and your public bodies must recognise the right of every child to a standard of living that's adequate for your physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development.

And I suppose we wanted to highlight how we are monitoring that again and practise, we, as Jason has mentioned earlier, we produced an annual statement and which sets out really, again, any red issues around poverty. And we have recommended to the Executive that a child poverty strategy should be enforced. And in relation to that and it has not yet been completed. So the Commission will continue to monitor these areas and recommend and put pressure on our local Ministers and Executive to make sure that those strategies are in place in order to protect children's rights.

And I suppose now this is, you know, in terms of further resources for our teachers and our pupils, we have a very extensive resource on our website that we have been developing over the last few years. And we set out some more videos and some more lesson plans and again, utilise them. Get in touch with this. If you have any recommendations around any resources that you'd like us to develop, we would be more than happy to hear those.

And we would love, you know, any of your input or thoughts around how we can make our resources and any, you know, better or more engaging for pupils. So now it's time for questions, and I know that and thanks to the schools that have sent those questions through. So I think we're going to hear from Anne-Marie and Marina about the questions that have been sent through.

M: Thank you very much, Claire and Jason, for a very interesting and informative presentation and brought right up to date with reference to a Covid restrictions for, for example. We ask schools for some questions and ask the first question I'm going to ask you is what qualities and skills do you think make for a good Commissioner for the Human Rights Commission?

C: Thanks, Marina, and that is something that I put to our Chief Commissioner as well, not being a Commissioner myself, but I think really our Chief Commissioner's words were very apt and he has advised...

Basically, a genuine interest in human rights is essential, an interest to better society in Northern Ireland and also really the desire to listen to others and also listen to viewpoints that aren't necessarily the same as your own as well, because obviously we're a very diverse group of viewpoints in Northern Ireland. So those would be the kind of core skills that we would recommend and our Commissioners would recommend for anybody interested in applying to be a Commissioner of the Human Rights Commission.

M: OK, thank you very much, Clare.

And sticking with appointments or the issue of Commissioners and their appointment. We have a question that says recent appointments of Commissioners have been criticised as state centric.

Is this a problem for an organisation which is tasked with advising on legacy legislation?

C: Well, thanks again to the people that sent the question. We think it was a very well informed and insightful question into the Commission in its current appointments. So I suppose in terms of, again, of how Commissioners are appointed just to just to set that in a little bit of context

appointments are public appointments. So they're advertised in the paper and anybody can apply to be a Commissioner. The appointment process is driven by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

And they receive the applications and they will get typically a list of like any application process in terms of jobs. They will get a list of applicants who have applied for the Commission. And then that list will be decided not only by the Secretary of State, but it's also a cabinet office process as well. So the Commissioner appointments are very much a political decision by the Secretary of State, and that is done independent of the Commission as an organisation as well.

So I suppose it's just, you know, to kind of set that out. But also as a Human Rights Commission, we must comply with the United Nations Paris principles. So under those principles, our commissioners must be pluralist, pluralist and must be diverse and represent as wide a pool of people as they can be. So I think in terms of how that is done, I suppose I would encourage young people, you know, to keep in touch with the Commission and challenge the Commission if they feel and that we are not being representative or we're doing things that maybe young people or their, you know, their peers might not be happy with in terms of how we are rolling out in practice.

I suppose just to kind of illustrate our teeth at the moment and our current board of Commissioners have been challenging the state in so many ways, we through our legal cases, we're currently taking a case against the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on abortion services. We're also challenging the law on rehabilitation of offenders. And we have also challenged the law on the election law on Northern Ireland, which had previously basically had set out that if you were applying for local council elections, you had to disclose your address.

So we've been engaged in a number of challenges. But again, that is a process. And I think any young person is very, you know, should be in terms of understanding their rights and claiming their rights, challenging organisations such as the Commission and if they feel that there are any issues there.

M: Thank you very much, Claire, for that, Anne-Marie, I think you have another couple of questions I'll hand over to you.

A: Thank you very much Marina.

Thank you, Claire. Interesting presentation so far. And this question that I have, I think will represent the views of many. This question comes from a student who feels that as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, many of their rights have been violated, the biggest being education and health care, and has had a big impact on this person as it's had on many and what would the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission response be to that?

C: OK, look, I suppose it's just to obviously acknowledge what a difficult time it has been, especially for young people in Northern Ireland, and I think in terms of what the Commission's response is it is to monitor and scrutinise the laws in relation to any restrictions that are in place.

As I had mentioned previously in the presentation, it is lawful to restrict human rights in certain circumstances. So our restrictions in terms of our liberty and our ways of working at the moment have been put in place by schools and government. However, it's not OK for those restrictions to be arbitrary or to be excessive. And that really is where the commission will be

monitoring and continuing to monitor any of our processes that are being put in place by government. And we'll be making recommendations as the pandemic continues. For young people,

I think if they are concerned in relation to the balance of their rights and how their rights are being protected. I would obviously encourage young people to speak to their carer or their school in relation to claiming their rights and making sure that they're getting, you know, the appropriate level of education that they are entitled to. And I also would encourage young people to come to the Commission or the Children's Commission as well, just if they feel that there there's any issues there.

Get in touch with us. You know, we can't provide advice without an individual getting in touch with us directly. And then we can look at your issues in more detail. So that would be, I suppose, for any issues, even beyond education and any issues that a young person or their family feel where their rights haven't been protected. Our organisation can advise on that.

A: Thank you very much, Clare. And in the next question and in the course of the presentation, yourself and Jason touched on things that the Commission has been involved in and various projects and looking to the future. What lies ahead for the Human Rights Commission?

C: Well, I think it's obviously a very new way of working for everybody at the moment, and that includes the Commission at this point in time, the Commission is going through a very interesting period in relation to a new mandate which has come out of the European Union exit from the U.K. So we, along with the Equality Commission, have been tasked with monitoring and overseeing any kind of changes in relation to and the laws and policies coming out of Brexit.

And we've been given a role as a dedicated mechanism to monitor the laws and policies. And we can also challenge if there has been any violations or breaches in relation to any discrimination issues coming out of Brexit, because the UK have committed to keeping the same level of protections that were in Northern Ireland before they left the EU. So as a result of that new mandate, we are growing in size in relation to as a small organisation we will be getting and are continuing to get some new staff.

And so I think in terms of where we are at the moment, that is a very much a new area of work for us and that will be developing over the months and years ahead. And we will be working to ensure that there's no rollback on rights and have a very important role to play in relation to that.

A: Thank you very much, Clare. That brings an end to our session on questions.

C: Thank you. And thanks, everybody, for your time and listening to us today. Thanks very much.

A: Well, on behalf of Marina and myself, we would like to thank yourselves for delivering such a great talk. It was super interesting and we know that it'll be of great use. You would agree, Marina, I'm sure. Absolutely.

M: Yes. Thank you very much. Thank you very much.