



Preliminary NIHRC / ECNI Briefing on the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill

June 2022

Table of Contents

Summary of Recommendations	3
1.0 Introduction	4
2.0 Article 2 of the Ireland/Nl Protocol	5
3.0 The Protocol Bill and Article 2 of the Protocol	6
4.0 Consideration of compliance with Protocol Article 2 & engagement with the Commissions	9

Summary of Recommendations

- 3.11** The Commissions recommend that the Secretary of State brings forward amendments to the Bill to address the incomplete protection of the human rights and equality aspects of the Protocol, particularly in Clauses 20, 15 and 13, to ensure that interpretation and enforceability of Protocol Article 2 are not weakened.
- 4.2** The Commissions recommend that compliance with Protocol Article 2 be considered from the earliest stages in the development of policy and legislation.
- 4.3** The Commissions recommend that the UK Government and NI Executive ensure that Explanatory Memoranda on draft UK and NI legislative proposals that are likely to engage Protocol Article 2 set out what consideration has been given to ensuring conformity with Protocol Article 2.
- 4.4** The Commissions recommend that Members enquire what consideration was given to Protocol Article 2 in the development of the Protocol Bill, and recommend that Article 2 should be considered and complied with throughout its implementation and the development of regulations and guidance.

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC) pursuant to Section 69(1) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, reviews the adequacy and effectiveness of law and practice relating to the protection of human rights in Northern Ireland (NI).
- 1.2 The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (ECNI) is an independent public body established under the Northern Ireland Act 1998. Its powers and duties derive from a number of equality statutes providing protection against discrimination on the grounds of age, disability, race, religion and political opinion, sex and sexual orientation. Its remit also includes overseeing the statutory duties on public authorities on the promotion of equality of opportunity and good relations under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.
- 1.3 NIHRC and ECNI, pursuant to section 78A(1) and 78B(1) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 respectively, monitor the implementation of Article 2(1) of the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland (Protocol Article 2) in the EU Withdrawal Agreement.
- 1.4 The Commissions are studying the implications of the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill (the Bill), introduced on 13 June, but wish to offer preliminary advice ahead of second reading on Monday 27 June.
- 1.5 The Commissions have identified a number of concerns about the impact of the Bill on the implementation of Protocol Article 2, the commitment by the UK Government to ensure no diminution of certain rights, safeguards and equality of opportunity protections, as a result of the UK's withdrawal from the EU.
- 1.6 Protocol Article 2 is afforded a degree of protection under the Bill. It is not deemed 'excluded provision' and Clause 15 does not permit Ministers to make regulations to define it as such. While this is welcome, the Commissions are concerned that the logic of Clause 15 is not fully reflected in other Clauses of the Bill and that this will weaken the implementation of Protocol Article 2 if not addressed. Clause 20 is a particular cause for concern but Clauses 15 and 13 require consideration also.

2.0 Article 2 of the Ireland/NI Protocol

2.1 Protocol Article 2 states:

“The United Kingdom shall ensure that no diminution of rights, safeguards or equality of opportunity, as set out in that part of the 1998 Agreement entitled Rights, Safeguards and Equality of Opportunity results from its withdrawal from the Union, including in the area of protection against discrimination, as enshrined in the provisions of Union law listed in Annex 1 to this Protocol, and shall implement this paragraph through dedicated mechanisms.”

2.2 Protocol Article 2 means that the UK Government must ensure there is no diminution of rights, safeguards and equality of opportunity, as set out in the relevant chapter of the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement 1998, resulting from the UK’s withdrawal from the EU.¹

2.3 Protocol Article 2 includes a commitment to ‘keep pace’ with EU law developments falling within the six EU Equality Directives listed in Annex 1 to the Protocol.² That means that if the minimum standards in the Annex 1 Directives are updated or replaced, the UK Government must ensure that domestic legislation in Northern Ireland reflects any substantive enhancements in relevant protections.³

2.4 In addition to the six Directives, there is other relevant EU law that underpins rights set out in the relevant chapter of the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement. The UK Government has identified that these include, but are not limited to, the Victims’ Directive; the Parental Leave Directive; and the Pregnant Workers’ Directive. The UK Government has committed to ensuring that there will be no

¹ Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement 1998.

² Council Directive 2004/113/EC, ‘EU Council Directive implementing the principle of equal treatment between men and women in the access to and supply of goods and services’, 13 December 2004; Directive 2006/54/EC, ‘EU Directive on the implementation of the principle of equal opportunities and equal treatment of men and women in matters of employment and occupation’, 5 July 2006; Council Directive 2000/43/EC, ‘EU Council Directive implementing the principle of equal treatment between persons irrespective of racial or ethnic origin’, 29 June 2000; Council Directive 2000/78/EC, ‘EU Council Directive establishing a general framework for equal treatment in employment and occupation’, 27 November 2000; Directive 2010/41/EU, ‘EU Directive on the application of the principle of equal treatment between men and women engaged in an activity in a self-employed capacity and repealing Council Directive 86/613/EEC’, 7 July 2010; Council Directive 79/7/EEC, ‘EU Council Directive on the progressive implementation of the principle of equal treatment for men and women in matters of social security’, 19 December 1978.

³ Northern Ireland Office, ‘UK Government Commitment to “no diminution of rights, safeguards and equality of opportunity” in Northern Ireland: What does it mean and how will it be implemented?’, (NIO, 2020), at para 13.

diminution of protections as were contained in relevant EU law on 31 December 2020.⁴

- 2.5 The UK has incorporated the Withdrawal Agreement, including the Protocol, into domestic law through the EU (Withdrawal Agreement) Act 2020.⁵ Section 7A EU (Withdrawal) Act 2018 provides that all rights, obligations and remedies from Withdrawal Agreement, including Protocol Article 2, are recognised and available in domestic law. The Commissions have been given additional powers to oversee the UK Government’s commitment under Protocol Article 2. The Commissions are responsible for providing advice to government and monitoring, supervising, enforcing and reporting on the ongoing implementation of this commitment.⁶

3.0 The Protocol Bill and Article 2 of the Protocol

Clause 20

- 3.1 Clause 20(2)(a) of the Bill states that domestic courts and tribunals are “not bound by any principles laid down, or any decisions made, on or after the day on which this section comes into force by the European Court”. No exception is made for Protocol Article 2. This is a serious omission because of the ‘keeping pace’ obligation associated with Protocol Article 2, by virtue of Protocol Article 13 (Common Provisions).
- 3.2 Protocol Article 13(3) states that references to EU law in the Protocol are to that law “as amended or replaced”. Six equality directives related to Protocol Article 2, are listed in Annex 1 to the Protocol.⁷ The law in NI therefore has to provide

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Sections 6(2)(ca) and 24(1)(aa) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 limit the competence of the NI Assembly and Executive and proscribe making any law which is incompatible with Protocol Article 2.

⁶ Sections 78A-E, Northern Ireland Act 1998

⁷ Council Directive 2004/113/EC, ‘EU Council Directive implementing the principle of equal treatment between men and women in the access to and supply of goods and services’, 13 December 2004; Directive 2006/54/EC, ‘EU Directive on the implementation of the principle of equal opportunities and equal treatment of men and women in matters of employment and occupation’, 5 July 2006; Council Directive 2000/43/EC, ‘EU Council Directive implementing the principle of equal treatment between persons irrespective of racial or ethnic origin’, 29 June 2000; Council Directive 2000/78/EC, ‘EU Council Directive establishing a general framework for equal treatment in employment and occupation’, 27 November 2000; Directive 2010/41/EU, ‘EU Directive on the application of the principle of equal treatment between men and women engaged in an activity in a self-employed capacity and repealing Council Directive 86/613/EEC’, 7 July 2010; Council Directive 79/7/EEC, ‘EU Council Directive on the progressive implementation of the principle of equal treatment for men and women in matters of social security’, 19 December 1978.

at least the same level of protection as that provided under any of those directives; and standards must be raised as required if those Directives are amended or replaced to enhance protections.

- 3.3 Protocol Article 13(2) stipulates that provisions of the Protocol referring to EU law shall “be interpreted in conformity with the relevant case law of the Court of Justice of the EU” and distinguishes this obligation from the timebound requirement under Article 4 of the Withdrawal Agreement, such that there is an ongoing interpretive duty as regards jurisprudence relating to the Annex 1 Directives. This means that, under the Protocol, the standards set out in the six Directives must be interpreted by domestic courts to ensure at least the same level of protection as is available under CJEU interpretation.
- 3.4 Failure to make an exception for Protocol Article 2, in the text of Clause 20(2)(a), may suggest that domestic courts need not adhere to the interpretive requirement in Protocol Article 13, contrary to the Protocol and inconsistent with Clause 15 of the Bill.

Clause 13

- 3.5 Clarification is required as to whether Clause 13 impedes enforceability of Protocol Article 2. Clause 13(1) states that any provision of the Protocol or Withdrawal Agreement is excluded provision so far as it confers jurisdiction on the CJEU in relation to the Protocol or the Withdrawal Agreement whether the jurisdiction relates to excluded provision or any other matter.
- 3.6 This may be relevant to Protocol Article 2. Under Article 164 of the Withdrawal Agreement, the UK and the EU, through the Joint Committee, supervise and facilitate the implementation of the UK-EU Withdrawal Agreement. The Joint Committee can adopt decisions and make appropriate recommendations to the UK and EU. Such decisions shall be agreed by mutual consent between the parties, have the same legal effect as the Withdrawal Agreement and be binding on both parties. Where there is a dispute on the application and interpretation of the UK-EU Withdrawal Agreement that cannot be resolved through the Joint Committee, it will be subject to arbitration and any decision of the arbitration panel will be binding on both parties. Under Article 174 of the Withdrawal Agreement, where a dispute relates to specified matters, including the interpretation of EU law, an arbitration panel must ask the CJEU to provide its

interpretation and the CJEU's interpretation will be binding. To the extent that Clause 13 of the Bill would restrict the CJEU's interpretive role in disputes relevant to Protocol Article 2, the Commissions would regard this as a weakening of the non-diminution commitment.

Clause 15

- 3.7 While, as mentioned, Clause 15(3) protects Protocol Article 2 insofar as it states that Ministers may not use the powers conferred in the Clause to define Protocol Article 2 as 'excluded provision', it does not protect other aspects of the Protocol which are relevant to the implementation of Protocol Article 2.
- 3.8 Article 14(c) of the Protocol provides that the UK-EU Specialised Committee on the Protocol shall "consider any matter of relevance to Article 2 of this Protocol brought to its attention by the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, and the Joint Committee of representatives of the Human Rights Commissions of Northern Ireland and Ireland".
- 3.9 Clause 15 does not explicitly protect Protocol Article 14 from becoming excluded provision. Nor does it protect Protocol Article 15 (Joint Consultative Working Group) which is to "serve as a forum for the exchange of information and mutual consultation", also important for the effective operation of Protocol Article 2.
- 3.10 The extensive regulation-making powers granted to Ministers under the Bill, reinforces the need for clarity on the face of the Bill in respect of the matters above.
- 3.11 **The Commissions recommend that the Secretary of State brings forward amendments to the Bill to address the incomplete protection of the human rights and equality aspects of the Protocol, particularly in Clauses 20, 15 and 13, to ensure that interpretation and enforceability of Protocol Article 2 are not weakened.**

4.0 Consideration of compliance with Protocol Article 2

- 4.1 The Explanatory Notes to the Protocol Bill make no reference to any consideration given to compliance with Protocol Article 2. The Commissions have previously recommended that this should be the case regarding all relevant legislation.
- 4.2 **The Commissions recommend that compliance with Protocol Article 2 be considered from the earliest stages in the development of policy and legislation.**
- 4.3 **The Commissions recommend that the UK Government and NI Executive ensure that Explanatory Memoranda on draft UK and NI legislative proposals that are likely to engage Protocol Article 2 set out what consideration has been given to ensuring conformity with Protocol Article 2.**
- 4.4 **The Commissions recommend that Members enquire what consideration was given to Protocol Article 2 in the development of the Protocol Bill, and recommend that Article 2 should be considered and complied with throughout its implementation and the development of regulations and guidance.**

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