



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for the Office of the First Minister
and deputy First Minister

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Equality Awareness Survey 2011: Equality
Commission Briefing

13 June 2012

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mike Nesbitt (Chairperson)
Mr Chris Lyttle (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Trevor Clarke
Mr Colum Eastwood
Mr William Humphrey
Mr Danny Kinahan
Mr Alex Maskey
Mr Francie Molloy
Mr George Robinson

Witnesses:

Ms Evelyn Collins	Equality Commission for Northern Ireland
Mr Darren McKinstry	Equality Commission for Northern Ireland
Mr Michael Wardlow	Equality Commission for Northern Ireland

The Chairperson: We welcome Darren McKinstry, Evelyn Collins and Michael Wardlow. Michael, is this your first time to appear before the Committee as chief commissioner of the Equality Commission?

Mr Michael Wardlow (Equality Commission for Northern Ireland): It is indeed, and it looks as though I have to tell you why I want the job. It is like an interview. It is my first time here.

The Chairperson: Now that you have the job, why did you want it? *[Laughter.]*

Mr Wardlow: I could tell you that.

I want to say hello, explain a little of the context and talk to you about the equality awareness survey that was launched today, after which we will have a question-and-answer session. Darren will take us through some of that, and we have a handout. We were told that there was a window of about half an hour. Is that still the case, or what are we looking at?

The Chairperson: For your presentation or for the entire session?

Mr Wardlow: For the entire session.

The Chairperson: We are flexible. Are you thinking about a 10-minute presentation?

Mr Darren McKinstry (Equality Commission for Northern Ireland): I can give a presentation of around five minutes.

Mr Wardlow: It is more to do with the question-and-answer session. We do not want to cut members' questions short.

The Chairperson: We will not hold you to 30 minutes.

Mr Wardlow: As long as we know that, that is fantastic.

The Chairperson: You understand that everybody will leave. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Wardlow: I am used to that. *[Laughter.]* As you said, this is my first opportunity to appear before the Committee, so I will just say hello. I have now been in post for three months and have been told that this is still the honeymoon period, which will probably finish next Friday. It is a very different situation for me, because this is not the background from which I have come. It has been a steep learning curve, but it has been a delight to be in the organisation; I want to put that on the record. The 15 commissioners come from across Northern Ireland, and they bring a huge skills set with them. They are committed to working in the commission for a more fair and just society, and that is also the case for the 117 commission staff. I have inherited an organisation in which Bob, Evelyn and others have left a huge legacy, so I feel that it is a privilege.

The reason we asked to appear before the Committee is that we launched an equality awareness survey today. All members should have the survey summary, 'Do You Mean Me?' The full survey is a couple of hundred pages long, and we have left some copies. We do not intend to take you through the entire survey. We have come from the launch in the Titanic Building, for which 180 people had registered. For the first time, it was streamed online, with some 115 people watching it. There were lots of activities, including a Twitter feed. There was a significant media interest this morning, in both the negative and positive survey findings. We had people such as journalist Malachi O'Doherty, whom members will know; Rory Galway from Bombardier Aerospace, which, in fantastic news, has just won a big contract; Frances McCandless, the chief executive of the Charity Commission; and the police. We had a very broad group. For the first time, we opened a panel to debate from the floor, and we had the beginnings of a significant conversation.

We are here today to tell you that that is going on. It started in the press and the local media, and we are here to share some of that information. The survey is not simply a dusty tome that will end up on a shelf. We are raising a number of questions such as: do you mean me? That is about people asking themselves whether they have received, or been the victim of, discrimination or harassment, and whether they have harboured a negative thought. The more important questions are as follows: what am I going to do now, and how am I going to move ahead? This morning, we said that that is the challenge for all of us.

I will ask Darren to lead you through our little handout. We can clarify if required and then move into questions and answers. Thank you very much for your time.

Mr McKinstry: I will take around five minutes to set out some of the high-level findings. The survey covered three main areas: attitudes of people in Northern Ireland; experiences of people in Northern Ireland; and awareness of the legislation and of the Equality Commission. It was a survey of 1,000 people, and it was conducted in September 2011. We are content that it is representative of the population as a whole.

One of the first key findings is the high level of support for equality and diversity in Northern Ireland. Around 90% of people see the continued need for equality laws, which is a similar finding to those in 2008 and 2005. Around 80% of people see equality as being as important, or more important, than three years ago.

As regards attitudes towards diversity, some two thirds of people are keen to see more women in management, in the Assembly, and so on. Only around half would like to see more minority ethnic groups in the Assembly, which is a bit lower than the two thirds that I just mentioned. Although there was broad support for equality, around one third of people still feel that more needs to be done. That is another key finding for remaining vigilant.

For the first time in Northern Ireland, we asked an interesting question that we picked it up from the Scottish social attitudes survey: do you ever feel that there is sometimes a good reason to be prejudiced against groups? One third of people in Northern Ireland answered yes, which mirrors the Scottish findings. That is certainly of interest to us, but it is not out of kilter with the only other figure that we have.

Having covered attitudes to equality in general, we then looked at people's attitudes towards other groups in society. The majority of views are positive, as they were in 2008, but there are clearly negative views. Around one third of people are negative towards Travellers, around one fifth are negative towards transgender people or eastern European migrants, and around one in seven are negative towards lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) or black and minority ethnic (BME) groups. I will contrast how people's views change in different situations, which is interesting. This was the first time that we asked about transgender people. The question has not featured in many surveys, so we are pleased to have figures for that.

Those were general negative attitudes questions, which were about whether people feel positive or negative towards certain groups. However, we also asked what are called social distance questions, which are designed to try to get under the skin of people's views. We asked people how much they would mind working with people from a certain group, being their neighbour or having them as an in-law. The general pattern is that the figures go up. Although 30% of people feel negatively about Travellers, 50% of people would mind having a Traveller as a neighbour or an in-law.

There was a good degree of commonality. The top four groups in the general negative attitudes questions were also the top four in the specifics. People hold most negative attitudes towards Travellers, transgender people, LGB people and eastern European migrants. We then asked the following question: "If those are the views that you hold, who do you think is most discriminated against or treated most unfairly in Northern Ireland?" Based on the list that I gave, you might think that one of those categories would come out top in this question. However, people think that the people treated most unfairly in Northern Ireland are those aged over 70, followed by LGB people, disabled people, Catholics and eastern European migrants. So there was quite a mismatch between people's personal views and the people whom they think are treated most unfairly. The only two groups that were common to both were lesbian, gay and bisexual, and migrants; the over-70s, the disabled and Catholics did not appear at the top of the attitudinal list, which is also interesting.

We then asked people whether they had experienced unfair treatment; that question is not about perceptions. A different group again came out on top; black and minority ethnic people said that they were most likely to experience unfair treatment. One third of all people said that they had experienced unfair treatment in the past three years, which is double the 2008 measurement and quite an increase, from 16% to 33%. However, for black and minority ethnic people, the figure was around 66%, so two thirds of black and minority ethnics, half of LGB people and half of disabled people said that they had experienced unfair treatment. Interestingly, more than 70% of people aged over 70 were not likely to say that they had experienced unfair treatment. They tended towards the average of around 33% and did not appear any higher. Similarly, Catholics were no more likely than Protestants to say that they had experienced unfair treatment; they both tended towards one in three. It is interesting to compare the people whom you think may be treated unfairly with those who actually say that they are.

I will conclude with a couple of points. One quarter of people felt that they know their rights. Of those who had been discriminated against, only one in five — 20% — who felt that they had experienced unfair treatment went as far as making a complaint, which was also interesting. Those more likely to make a complaint are not those more likely to be discriminated against. People are more likely to make a complaint if they are middle-aged, highly qualified and have children. Living in the west of Northern Ireland also emerged as a factor, although not for BME people, LGB people or the disabled.

The survey findings pose a number of questions, and there are issues for the commission, the Committee and policymakers to consider. The commission was encouraged by the high level of support that it enjoyed. Between two thirds and three quarters of people supported the work of the commission across a number of questions, such as confidence in its ability to treat people equally; to be an expert source of advice; and, crucially for us, as in 2008, there was no difference in that perception by community background. The survey showed that Protestants and Catholics were equally likely to feel that the commission was doing a good job.

That is a high-level summary of some of the survey's key findings.

Mr Wardlow: We have just come from the launch of the survey, listened to the panel, and we have presented a number of facts. It is not just for us to begin to interpret and analyse the data sets, which will be available. People will be interested to know, for example, that 37% of people said that they would mind having an in-law with a mental ill health problem. That finding is next to migrants at the top of the social distance numbers. That has raised issues in the media and among the attendees at the launch. Significant questions must be answered that stretch across many representative groups.

We did not set out to ask who is the classic person who demonstrates the most negative attitudes. We have been asked that question, and it is impossible to answer because the questions are so differentiated that someone would have to consult the statistical table at the end of the survey to find out who held the strongest views on certain issues. We are saying that attitudes are hardening, but that is balanced by the fact that the majority of people are still not disposed towards having negative views. Therefore, we still have a positive view, but we need to be careful about some issues around the edges.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much. I find the data sets fascinating. I could pore over them for hours, maybe days. However, at the end of all of it, Michael, they have to say something and tell us something about Northern Ireland. What is that?

Mr Wardlow: The survey finds that one in three people experiences some form of discrimination. That tells us something about the nature of what is happening. One in four people knows their rights, so three in four people say that they do not. However, only one in five people come forward with a complaint, and it is more likely that those in vulnerable groups do not complain. We are not simply saying that we should go out and target vulnerable groups about rights awareness, because this could be a case of people saying that they know their rights, but because of the downturn in work, they do not want to raise an issue, will put up with a situation or will negotiate. We are saying that a series of issues raised questions for us at a high level that the commission wants to take forward.

We are also saying to the wider community that we want a debate around some of the figures. The police said earlier today, for example, that there has been an increase in the number of hate-related incidents against disabled groups. Is that because there are more incidents, or because Mencap and others have been working to raise their voices? People from the disabled communities are saying that it is partly about voice and partly about access for the first time and the confidence to be able to present themselves. It does not necessarily mean that those incidents are on the increase; it means that we are being more aware. This has been an attitudinal trend since 2005, 2008 and 2011. It is not a one-off. That is what we are saying. It says something to us, and we cannot avoid the conversation.

The Chairperson: It would also be interesting to know what it says about us as compared with our neighbours in the Republic, England, Scotland and Wales.

Mr Wardlow: We can do some of that.

Mr McKinstry: Where possible, we make comparisons. One of the issues is that we have updated our survey, but our comparator areas have not updated theirs. We did this in 2008, and we were able to compare it with figures from Europe and GB from that time. At present, we are still largely comparing back to those figures, but we will do that comparison. However, things have changed. Twice as many people are likely to say that they have experienced unfair treatment, and negative attitudes are generally either the same or moving upwards.

The Chairperson: The survey states that 91% of respondents agreed with the need for equality laws in Northern Ireland. That could be read as being very positive, in that nearly everyone says that we must protect people. However, it could also be read as being very negative, in that 91% of people say that our society is so sectarian, biased, partial and bigoted that we have to protect ourselves from ourselves.

Mr Wardlow: Some questions can also be read both ways. Do you mean "I have been discriminated against" or do you mean "I have been someone who has harboured those negative thoughts"? We have interrogated a number of questions.

In the main, we are saying that people want a more diverse society, as Darren said. Seventy-seven per cent of people said that they wanted equality law to be strengthened in line with GB, particularly

with regard to disability. People are not simply saying that it is for their own benefit. They realise that legislation helps to modify attitudes in certain circumstances. However, there is a bigger issue about hearts and minds — the “both/and”. We sometimes do not name that in polite conversations. We need to open up and ask how, as a society of 1.8 million people, we are going to say, “This could mean me.” It is not confined simply to one area or another; it goes right across.

For us, that raises issues about rights awareness, making complaints, knowledge and the hardening of attitudes. However, we are one voice, and there is something for you as policymakers, for people who are listening in the media and for people who feel alienated and have no voice. We need to help the vulnerable groups that do not come forward to advocate for themselves rather than have us advocate for them.

For me, the big thing is that we need people to meet more often. We need more civic engagement. Research shows consistently that when contact happens in a facilitated way, when all sides of the “in and out” groups are treated in the same way, with respect and in a safe place, people get to know the other groups, relationships develop and the fear factor goes. That is a huge meta-analysis of contact theory. It has been going on for 10 or 15 years. The theory first came forward in 1954.

We know part of the solution. This is about facilitated contact in safe places to allow people to get to know the transgendered person whom some 50% of us do not want as an in-law, probably because we have never met one, or the Traveller whom we do not want in the family, probably because we have never met one. We are saying that part of this is about engagement, and for me, it has to be part of what we do in civic society.

Ms Evelyn Collins (Equality Commission for Northern Ireland): I will go back to the original question, Chairperson. Is it rather depressing that 91% of the people who were surveyed said that they supported equality laws? I think not, and as the legislature, it is important for you to understand the level of support externally for equality legislation and, as Michael said, for strengthening it in key areas, as we outlined when we spoke to the Committee a matter of months ago and expressed the commission's concerns about a differential availability of rights in Northern Ireland and GB.

Legislation is an important statement of public policy. That was an important finding, which was indicative of support for a more equal society generally, even as we were recording how negatively people feel, in some instances, about certain groups. That is an important focus for our attention as we carry out our functions to promote equal opportunity for all in Northern Ireland. It is also important information for MLAs, policymakers more generally in Departments and those working in civic society to have to influence public policy to help to create a more equal society. As you said, it is a rich source of data. You could absolutely lose yourself in it. However, Darren highlighted the key issues that are really worthy of attention.

Mr Wardlow: The Programme for Government, which we welcomed, has an equality strand running through its centre. A number of the policy developments that you highlighted, such as the sexual orientation strategy and disability, chime with what we have been saying. In a sense, people would like that to be strengthened in some areas. If the Programme for Government delivers on those issues, it will meet the results of the survey. That is one way to do it. We are happy to engage, as are all the groups out there, because we all face this problem.

We should not, by the way, lose sight of the positives. Most people do not have negative attitudes. Religion has now moved down quite considerably among the issues that bother us. If people are asked, most will say, off the top of their head, that religion is the biggest equality issue. However, when we begin to drill down, religion does not figure to the same degree. So something is happening. Perhaps our prejudice is moving somewhere else — I do not know — but we need to investigate the issue and move forward.

Mr Kinahan: Thank you very much for your presentation and that fascinating, if worrying, information. I know that one country — I cannot remember which — has anti-hate legislation. I always think that that is a better way of looking at things, because people are not equal but all similar and different. Do you have a comment on that?

I am secretary of the all-party group on ethnic minority communities. I feel that, when we refer to mixtures of different people — Africans, Muslims — as one group, we lose their proud race or religion. I feel very uncomfortable with that, because they are all very special in their own way. Those are two very different issues.

Mr Wardlow: Let me make an observation. In a previous existence, I worked a lot with the issue of identity. The way in which you identify people dictates how you deal with them. I have often said that I am a father and a son, and I am a husband and a brother. The way in which people treat me depends on the context. We talk about the "Muslim community". What on earth is that? It does not exist as a community. Muslims in Nigeria are different from the Muslims whom I met in Uganda. There is an issue about stereotyping that puts people in a box. The police said this morning that hate crime accounts for less than 1% of all crimes in Northern Ireland. Some 0.6% of all crimes in the past year were hate crimes.

Mr Kinahan: Is that because of the way in which we define hate crime?

Mr Wardlow: No; if people perceive that a form of hatred has been displayed against them, the police come in and test it on a scale. As I understand it, that is the bar, which is quite high. Perhaps it is due to under-reporting. It could be all those things. We are simply saying that it is there.

Ms Collins: Certainly, legislation is in place in Northern Ireland that protects people specifically from hate crime across a number of categories including disability, sexual orientation and race. The police are vigilant in monitoring and policing that. I mentioned this morning that there was a recorded increase in people with a disability reporting hate crimes here, which is a worrying trend.

Mr McKinstry: I will pick up the point about grouping people together. In the survey, we asked people to self-identify who they are based on a range of categories — country of origin, ethnic group, and so on. We asked those questions individually. We pull people together into groups to make the analysis simpler to convey.

Mr Kinahan: I understand that.

Mr Eastwood: I apologise for missing most of your presentation. Given today's media coverage, and media coverage over the past number of years, if public representatives voice bigotry, how much impact does that have on people's attitudes?

Mr Wardlow: A simple answer is to put the question: do you mean me? People in leadership roles have a huge responsibility to be careful in what they say. We were challenged today. Let me tell you, there is no room for bystanders, and we all know that. Very often in this place, we have stood by and seen things happen that were never reported. This morning, a young woman from an LGB background spoke very positively. She said that, when she is not in a room, conversations change, but if there are people in the room who challenge such behaviour when she is not there, she has advocates. It is not so much about what people say because when words come out, they cannot be taken back. Apologies do not deal with the hurt. It is about being careful about what we say. In Northern Ireland, I think that we have a positive story. Today's news about Bombardier is fantastic. Some 70% of people do not harbour negative attitudes or justify them, but we need to be careful. A sign of a mature society is that we give leadership and say that there should be zero tolerance and prejudice should not be tolerated. There is a danger that the commission is asked to comment on whether we agree or disagree with the survey results. Those of us in leadership need to exercise care.

Ms Collins: It is also clear that a range of different influences shape our attitudes and how we think of each other in groups, through family, peer groups, the media, the statements of political leaders and social media. That is a big reason why we put out information every three years to demonstrate that, as Michael said, a majority of people in Northern Ireland have positive attitudes. There are groups that are particularly vulnerable to negative attitudes and discrimination. We have a role to play in dealing with that, as do others, including political leaders.

The Chairperson: Let me give a wee twist to what Colum said. Let us say that I need somebody to provide a service to me at home, and the service provider does a desperately bad job. Am I less likely to criticise such people publicly if they are eastern European migrants rather than being indigenous, because I am afraid of being accused of something?

Mr Wardlow: Let me give you a personal response. I have a close colleague who works with the disabled community, and I remember that colleague saying to me that disabled people can be as bigoted and prejudiced as others, sometimes towards their own community. I am picking that as an

example, but it made me think that I would be cautious because of the reasons that you cited. However, when we meet people and are invited to make robust and challenging conversations, it allows us to go to that place. However, I am with you: as a society, we have to advance that issue.

The Chairperson: Do you have a data set on people who feel reluctant to speak out?

Mr Wardlow: I know what you are saying. In other words, if it is one of the so-called protected groups, are we less likely to challenge? There is nothing in the data set for that, is there?

Mr McKinstry: By and large, all the groups are protected.

The Chairperson: But you know exactly where I am coming from.

Mr Wardlow: Yes.

Ms Collins: There is no evidence in the survey, Chair, that would support what you are saying.

The Chairperson: However, anecdotally and logically —

Ms Collins: I do not know. As Darren pointed out, the survey also shows that those with disabilities hold some negative attitudes towards others. That was the subject of a conversation this morning at our launch. Why is that? As I said, what influences people's attitudes varies widely. Some of it is about social contact and proximity. There are issues about the accessibility of public transport for disabled people. We know that disabled people have less access to employment and education. There is a whole range of explanations for why people hold different attitudes, but if people have a poor service, they are entitled to say so.

The Chairperson: People should be, but the question is how many hold back.

Mr Humphrey: Thank you very much for your attendance today, and congratulations on your appointment, Michael.

Mr Wardlow: Thank you very much.

Mr Humphrey: Good luck. I have had only a cursory look through the survey summary booklet, and I would like you to expand on some aspects. I know what Colum is driving at, but I do not see any mention of people having religious views, which they will have to varying degrees, so perhaps you could expand on that. I am encouraged to hear Darren say that religion has moved down the pecking order in terms of bigotry and perceptions in Northern Irish society. That is good, and as society normalises, we should all welcome that. For all of us, especially politicians, language is important, because it can inflame, and diffuse, situations. Sometimes, attention is focused on this place more than on other public bodies, but such is life, and we deal with it.

The last time you were before the Committee, Evelyn, we mentioned the religious breakdown of your workforce. I am really disappointed that there has been absolutely no change in the three-year period. It is good that people have more confidence in the Equality Commission, but I want people to have the maximum amount of confidence. There are issues in the Protestant, unionist and loyalist community that the commission is not seen as being fair and balanced. The fact that there has been no change in the religious make-up of your workforce over that time is not helpful for taking this society and your organisation to where you want to get to. What are you doing about that?

Mr Wardlow: I will come back to your last question. I will comment briefly and then ask Evelyn to give the detail. There was a question about religious views. Is there anything that we can disaggregate in that, Darren?

Mr McKinstry: Yes. Religion was another category that we collected across the survey. I mentioned the fact that there was no difference between Protestants and Catholics in their experience of discrimination. In some cases, but not very often, religion appeared as a predictor of the views that they might hold. Protestants were more likely than average to hold negative views towards transgender people and eastern European migrants. Therefore, there is some information, but it is not one of the main predictors.

Mr Humphrey: In this society, people who have religious views and are practising Christians, Muslims, Hindus or whatever have a set of values, and, in the public domain, their views are seen as extreme. In Church and religious views, some people will be more liberal and others will be more fundamentalist, and the same applies across the political spectrum. You cannot lump everybody together.

Mr Wardlow: I understand your point that people's moral viewpoints can be influenced by their faith tradition. Evelyn, do you want to respond to that?

Ms Collins: It is a fair question. Our research and survey did not ask people why they held particular attitudes, which may be for religious faith views or because they had a poor experience of someone. The research asked and explored the attitudes, but it did not go underneath to ask why. There is probably a range of explanations and influences that shape our attitudes, so the survey tells that there is some indication of some differences.

Mr Wardlow: I will mention one point about faith communities, and then Evelyn will respond. We are in the process of engaging with the leaders of all the Churches. In fact, we are due to see the Presbyterian and Methodist leaders tomorrow. We are due to see Cardinal Brady in July, and we have just seen the Church of Ireland archbishop. We engage consistently with the faith communities in the broader sense because we realise that, sometimes, faith communities sit outside the debate because they are afraid of their voice. I understand that, and I also understood it in my past life. Therefore, we are actively encouraging a conversation with faith communities so that we understand why people have certain views and why others may feel that it is a prejudicial view. We do not have that conversation, but we need it and are up for it. Although the two communities see us as equal, we recognise that, in some people with a unionist background, there may be reluctance, and we need to address that. I am absolutely aware of that.

Evelyn, will you address the commission's workforce breakdown?

Ms Collins: We discussed the workforce issue the last time we were before the Committee a few months ago. We have had no recruitment since then, so the figures remain stubbornly the same. As you can imagine, those figures are a source of continued concern and frustration to us, and they affect the impact of some of our actions. I explained previously to the Committee that the commission is the first and only employer in Northern Ireland to undertake religion-specific training, as allowed by fair employment legislation. However, we are not in a recruitment situation to see the benefits of that.

As chief executive, I am assured by the results of the survey, which show that there is no difference in community background to people's levels of confidence in us or their seeing us as a valuable source of expertise. However, that is not to say that I do not absolutely appreciate the importance of the commission and other employers being as fully representative of the community that we serve as possible.

Michael said that he has been in position for three months, and within that time, the commission has looked at the issue of under-representation. A commissioner-led working group is looking at how we can continue to try to change that situation, even in the context of reduced expenditure and recruitment. When we recruit, we want assurances that the policies and procedures operate fairly. We want to continue our engagement with unionist communities and others to ensure that we are an open house to all people in Northern Ireland. We are also looking at placements from other organisations and continuing our engagement with all political parties in Northern Ireland to ensure that there is a good level of information about what we do and how much we want to be open.

Mr Wardlow: I would like to add to that. I am aware of the issue, and although I am not operationally involved, through my commission meetings, I know that people do not take the issue lightly. We are genuinely and seriously engaged on it. In a time at which we cannot recruit, it is impossible to redress the work balance, and we are aware of that. There could be many reasons for that, including those of a historic or legacy nature, and, as you said, a feeling that we are one community rather than the other. We are looking at how that might be taken forward. As Evelyn said, it is a concern for all of us.

The issue is promotion and appointment on merit, and the public service is no different. We must appoint the person who is most suitable for the job by using the merit principle.

Mr Humphrey: I have no difficulty with that.

Mr Wardlow: We are aware of that. We are balancing that by making sure that, when get the applicants in for interview, we interrogate the whole thing to find out whether there is anything that we can do practically, strategically and operationally. I assure you that none of us takes the issue lightly.

The Chairperson: Three more members want to come in, so perhaps you would like to finish off, William.

Mr Humphrey: I will be very quick. I appreciate what you say, but the situation has prevailed for some time, and we need to move on it. You said that you need to do more to address the issue, and Evelyn said that you are continuing to try to change. I do not believe in positive discrimination. I did not believe in it for the police, and I do not approve of it in political parties. If you want to build a meritocracy, that is exactly what you do, and I have no difficulty with that. However, an issue has not been addressed, and I am pleased to hear that you are going to do something about it.

I do not want to take up any more of the Committee's time, but I would appreciate it if you could outline what you intend to do about the issue in writing.

Mr Wardlow: May I correct you on one point. We are not just starting that work. It predates me and has been ongoing since our last recruitment drive. I am coming in on the back of that work, and we will pick it up in writing to you.

Mr Humphrey: To be fair, it is new evidence to the Committee.

The Chairperson: Are you happy to drop us a note on that?

Mr Wardlow: Absolutely.

Ms Collins: We are very happy to do that. When we were last before the Committee, we were just about to look at the article 55 report. We have now done that and are happy to share the work.

Mr Molloy: Thank you for the presentation. Having filled in a few surveys and questionnaires, I am concerned that people sometimes follow a routine and that early questions can sometimes influence later questions. Some of the statistics are quite startling and surprising. It may be unfair to do so with a booklet such as this, but I have picked out one question, which is whether there is good reason to be prejudiced against a certain sector. Being human, I know that there are good reasons why people might agree with that, and you said that people are their own worst enemies because they create the conditions. The fact that 54% of respondents did not agree with that statement is heartening, despite the fact that 30% saw good reason for that prejudice. Do you have any views on questionnaires? Is there a mechanism that would ensure that we get people to think about the questions and their answers?

The survey did not allow for the consideration of Travellers. I work in an area with a large number of Travellers, and I have found that the Travelling community feels that, when migrant communities came to this country, everybody made an effort to accommodate those new people. Travellers have been here as an ethnic minority for a long time, and they felt that they had been left out. How do you rectify that situation?

Mr McKinstry: It is a fact of survey life that the order in which questions are asked will affect answers. We take a lot of care to ensure that there is no bias in the questions. As I said, the questions mirror those in other surveys, so we are building on other UK and international surveys that have a lot of expertise.

We also take the extra step of conducting the survey in people's homes; we do not do it over the telephone. A trained interviewer who is not a member of the Equality Commission's staff — the position is contracted out — spends time with respondents and can answer any questions because they are briefed on various definitions. With that method, we hope that respondents are able to clarify issues about which they are uncertain and take the time to answer a question rather than rushing to get an interviewer off the phone.

Mr Wardlow: The figure for 2010 from one of the labour departments is that there are some 80,000 Travellers and migrants in Northern Ireland — 4.5% of the population. I am not sure whether that

figure is correct. Migrants are quite visible, whereas Travellers tend not to be. People are more likely to have seen someone from an ethnic minority background from outside here, such as an accession state, than a Traveller. There is an issue about visibility, but how we make this a more cohesive, shared and integrated society and how the cohesion, sharing and integration (CSI) strategy, for example, can address some of the issues is a matter for all those groups.

The Chairperson: Do you see this research playing into the CSI strategy?

Mr Wardlow: Without getting into the background, we need to address CSI for all, not just for Protestants and Catholics. It needs to be a cohesive, shared and integrated society for all. We are trying to ask what that means. It does not mean equal and separate or that everybody gets the same. We need a robust conversation about what that looks like, which means that voices need to come from those communities rather than on their behalf. So the research absolutely plays a part.

Ms Collins: I will go back to what Michael said at the outset. The Programme for Government was agreed by the Executive, and one of its underpinning principles is equality. "Equality" is a watchword for everything that will be done in this legislative and policy term. A significant number of issues will come under this Committee's scrutiny as a result of equality policies that are led by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM). The disability strategy, for example, is out for consultation; Michael mentioned the sexual orientation strategy; there is an older people's strategy; and there is a children's strategy. We hope and trust that the research, given that it is such a rich data source, will be enormously valuable to policymakers.

Mr Clarke: In response to one of William's questions, I am heartened by your response, Michael, on the issue of religious beliefs. As Francie said, the results depend on how the questions are asked. However, we are quick to highlight prejudice in the responses. There has been an increase in the number of people expressing certain opinions, which, in your view, is going in the wrong direction. However, that view is reached without the full knowledge of why those people gave you that answer. That is where religious beliefs come into some aspects of the responses. Given that we are supposed to be a Christian society, I am a wee bit dismayed that people have not been given the opportunity to explain why they have particular opinions.

Like William, I have had time only to take a wee cursory look at your booklet. There is a report on the BBC about some of the statistics. However, one statistic is not mentioned — William has already covered the issue. The booklet states:

"Over three-quarters (77%) either agreed or strongly agreed that 'public bodies in Northern Ireland should be more representative of both the Protestant and Roman Catholic communities'. This is an increase of 7 percentage points since 2008".

That statistic is not covered, nor is there any suggestion that you have a problem with workforce imbalance in your own organisation. So you can be critical of certain aspects of the results, which make the news and are newsworthy for some. There is a focus on certain sections of the results. You are quoted as saying:

"This is a worrying insight into the population's psyche and proves that much work remains to be done".

However, there is no criticism of your own organisation. It is easy for an organisation to criticise others. Nevertheless, its own statistics and figures show that, of the population that was analysed, there was a seven percentage point increase for those who either agreed or strongly agreed that a better balance between Protestants and Catholics was needed, but the organisation that has been charged to do that has not done anything. While you were giving your presentation, I was reading through some reports and found that the situation has been going on since 2008 or 2009, which is when the balance in your organisation was first brought to light. I am disappointed that that is not covered. It is easy to be critical of others but not critical of yourself.

Mr Wardlow: Let me respond to your first point because, coming from a faith community, I think that I can. I am not sure how a faith community background could influence a person's view of someone with a mental ill health problem in a family.

Mr Clarke: You are actually doing what your survey does. You are pulling out something that I did not say.

Mr Wardlow: No, I am —

Mr Clarke: Let me finish. There is an implication there. I did not pick on any one section of the survey —

The Chairperson: Trevor, you did say —

Mr Clarke: You are trying to imply that I said something that I did not say. I am saying that, on some aspects of the survey, you could have construed a different answer if the person had been qualified, but you focused on someone with mental health problems. However, if you want to come back to the —

Mr Wardlow: I am coming back actually, if —

The Chairperson: Trevor.

Mr Clarke: That is OK.

Mr Wardlow: Sorry. What I was trying to say is that some survey results have nothing to do with a faith community background. With other results, if someone comes from a particular faith community background, it may influence his or her view — for example, on the current debate in Britain about gay marriage. We are absolutely aware that people from faith traditions have different views. We take your point about how much people's responses are influenced by their faith tradition. However, people are also influenced by their community and family backgrounds. Nevertheless, I take your point.

Your second point was about our organisation's religious make-up. We are not criticising anybody in this report. The survey was commissioned by us and conducted by someone outside the organisation. We are saying that these are facts and figures. Today's debate was about where we should go from here, and my opening comment was that it begins with us as a commission. I am not pointing the finger at anybody else. We are saying that the survey has resonance not only for us as a commission but for the wider Northern Ireland community. We are aware of the religious imbalance, and we have addressed that. From 2008-09, we were unable to recruit any new external members of staff. We have said that we are in the process of addressing that issue, which we take seriously. Lest there be an inference that somehow we are saying that it is all somebody else's fault, that could not be further from the truth.

The Chairperson: How are you addressing the issue? Do you have milestones, objectives and SMART targets? How do you get to where you need to be?

Mr Wardlow: We have a strategic plan and a business plan, which Evelyn will tell you about, which have clear targets. It is with OFMDFM at the minute. We have also set up a series of conversations with people about how we move the issue forward.

The Chairperson: Sorry — you have a plan with OFMDFM for approval.

Ms Collins: No. Sorry, Chair, are you asking about our affirmative action plan or our —

Mr Wardlow: Sorry, I misunderstood. I thought that your question was about how we were going to move the issue forward. I take that answer back.

The Chairperson: Trevor was pointing out that you have had a significant issue for several years.

Mr Clarke: It is more than that, Chairman. I accept what Michael says, although I did not hear his full comments. As usual, I suppose media outlets could be accused of picking up the bits that they find important but not the rest of the survey. Perhaps this could be redressed by Michael putting out a statement covering all points so that people could read everything that Michael has said about their starting the process. It must be recognised that there have been failings in their own organisation. It

is easy to say that you are the Equality Commission for everyone, but you are not represented yourselves. If you are saying publicly —

The Chairperson: Do you want to address that?

Mr Wardlow: It will be very straightforward. The launch was streamed live today, and it will be captured. All that I said will be there. We started by saying that the "me" in 'Do You Mean Me?' starts with me. It starts with us as a commission recognising, as we have said today, that there is a religious imbalance.

Mr Lyttle: Thank you for your presentation. Congratulations again, Michael, on your appointment. You have given us a lot of helpful data.

There are some startling facts around the unacceptable prejudices that continue to exist in Northern Ireland, which policymakers will have to take away and consider in detail. Will you speak a little more about what the Equality Commission can do and, in particular, about some of the statistics on awareness of the Equality Commission? I am willing to play as full a role as I can in helping to raise that awareness. The survey summary states:

"In 2011, 28% correctly identified the Equality Commission as the organisation with overall responsibility for promoting equality".

It also states:

"three quarters ... indicated they 'knew something' about the roles ... of the Commission".

However, as far as I am aware, those percentages are down on the 2008 figures. I am keen to know what the Equality Commission is doing, and how we as a Committee and as MLAs can work with you to raise that awareness. The most common response about services related to tribunals and investigations. What sort of enforcement or investigation work has been done or is planned about the good relations aspect of section 75?

Mr Wardlow: I will ask Darren to lead on the first question and Evelyn to pick up the second one.

Mr McKinstry: I will pick up on the numbers in the survey, which I intended to speak about earlier but did not because I cut my presentation to five minutes. We asked two main questions. First, we asked if people knew which body had overall responsibility for equality: 28% said that it is the Equality Commission. A further 11% said that it is the Equal Opportunities Commission. The 28% is similar to the figure in 2008 and is way up on the 2005 figure, which was 11%. A 2010 European survey asked whether people knew their national equality body: only 16% said that they did, so we are sitting well above that figure.

Secondly, we explained that the Equality Commission has this function and remit and asked if people had heard of the body. We went from an unprompted to a prompted question. When we explained the type of work that the commission did, 53% said that they had heard of us. It is a sample survey, so we have to allow around four or five percentage points. That figure is broadly similar to the figure in 2008 and is way ahead of the EU figure, which was 37% in 2010. I conclude from that that awareness is above the EU average and is broadly stable with the figure from three years ago.

Mr Wardlow: It is not about complacency. It is about making people aware of who we are and what we can do.

Ms Collins: Thank you for the question. Clearly, one of our functions is to undertake this type of research, disseminate it widely and ensure that it is valuable to others to use. We have a statutory remit to promote equality of opportunity, so our focus is for the Equality Commission to use the research to shape our awareness-raising work. The survey clearly tells us that there are some areas in which we need to do more awareness-raising work, challenge prejudices and work in partnership with others.

It has been a long time since I have thought that I personally, or the Equality Commission as a whole, can change the world, so we want to work with partners, including the Committee, to use the data and identify areas in which we need to work on raising awareness, including the role that the commission

can play but also more generally. As I said, influencing public policy responses to tackling inequality is an important function for us, and we are hopeful that the survey will also be helpful in that context.

On the good relations side, I found it interesting that the Equality Commission function that most people recognise is our assistance to individuals with complaints, but the media cover such stories very thoroughly. People understand fairness and unfairness, and the media pay attention to that. They pay much less attention to our advisory work with employers. The commission has looked at a survey of the employers with whom we worked over the past three years. There was a very high level of satisfaction with the services that we provide, but we do not get as much media coverage for that as we do for individual cases.

Our investigations in respect of section 75 duties are set out in schedule 9 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998; they concern breaches of schemes. Equality schemes are the way whereby public authorities demonstrate how they will conduct their equality duties, and that is our access into breaches of schemes. You will see on our website that some of our investigations have involved the way in which public authorities have conducted themselves in the context of their good relations duties. I am happy to share that information with you. Although the survey showed quite a good understanding and knowledge of equality and good relations duties, it did not surprise me that information and knowledge about cases came at the top, because many stories emanate from us in the press about people whom we have assisted with complaints.

Mr G Robinson: Who equality proofs the Equality Commission?

Ms Collins: Equality proofs?

Mr G Robinson: Yes. To whom are you answerable?

Ms Collins: As an independent public body specified in schedule 9 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998, we are answerable to OFMDFM. Like every employer in Northern Ireland, we provide our own returns to the Equality Commission and take advice from our adviser side on how we should improve workforce composition, and so on. Like every employer, we have to report, and when the commission looks at its composition in an article 55 review, we report ourselves. However, as a public body, we are ultimately answerable to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

The Chairperson: Evelyn, Darren and Michael, thank you all very much.

Mr Wardlow: I appreciate your time; thank you very much indeed.