



**EVIDENCE TO THE ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE FOR THE OFFICE OF
THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER
INQUIRY INTO BUILDING A UNITED COMMUNITY
OCTOBER 2014**

1. Introduction and summary

- 1.1. The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland welcomes the opportunity to provide evidence to the Committee's Inquiry into Building a United Community. Further details on the scope of the Commission's remit, duties and expertise are contained in Annex 1.
- 1.2. The Commission welcomes the Committee's focus on informing the Executive's approach to tackling sectarianism, racism and other forms of intolerance. It is critically important that the Executive works to secure improved relationships in Northern Ireland and to support continuing transition to a peaceful society. Addressing the issue of the relationships between people who live and work in Northern Ireland, and between their children who will shape our future, is one of the most pressing policy issues facing us¹.
- 1.3. The Commission's vision for Northern Ireland is as a shared, integrated and inclusive place, a society where difference is respected and valued, based on equality of opportunity and fairness for the entire community. We consider that all people must be valued equally and believe that everyone should be allowed the opportunity to develop to their full potential.
- 1.4. Both equality of opportunity and good relations are essential to creating a just and fair society. We recognise that equality and good relations are inter-dependent and inextricably linked. One cannot be effectively pursued without the other and neither will find its full expression in the absence of the other. It continues to be imperative to address key inequalities as well as focus attention on good relations.

¹ Response to the draft Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration, ECNI, 2010

- 1.5. The Commission's submission sets out the importance of addressing inequalities and good relations; the value of a clear, coherent legal framework; the need for adherence to institutional frameworks and conventions; the need for a clear definition of good relations in statute; the significant role of communities in policy and decision making and the importance of good relations indicators to monitor and measure progress.

It also makes recommendations relating to leadership, expression of culture, display of flags, education, housing, dealing with the past, women and peace building and law reform.

- 1.6. The Commission would welcome the opportunity to discuss these matters further should the Committee wish to invite the Commission to provide oral evidence during its Inquiry. The response covers those questions most relevant to the Commission's remit and experience and addresses the relevant points set out in the Terms of Reference in turn.

2. Perspectives on sectarianism, division and good relations

Theory and practice with regard to good relations, shared space and shared services

- 2.1. The Commission has a statutory remit in the area of good relations, derived from section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and the Race Relations Order 1997. The Fair Employment and Treatment (NI) Order also has relevance for good relations. Specifically, the Commission's remit provides that should:
 - promote good relations between people of different racial groups²;
 - promote equality of opportunity between persons of different religious beliefs and political opinions³;
 - provide advice to public authorities and others on, as well as keep under review the effectiveness of, the duties on public authorities to pay regard to the desirability of promoting good relations⁴.
- 2.2. This legislative framework, and the effective application of anti-discrimination legislation and the statutory equality and good relations duties, has made a significant contribution to creating the circumstances for change in Northern Ireland. Lessons can be drawn from this in the context of addressing good relations going forward.

Good race relations

- 2.3. The Commission considers further action by Government to be imperative to enhance relations between people of different racial groups – noting this encompasses majority and minority racial groups. This is of direct relevance to

² Race Relations Order 1997

³ Fair Employment and Treatment Order 1998

⁴ Northern Ireland Act 1998

securing better outcomes in the context of this Inquiry. Our recommendations⁵ are that the Executive, Departments and other key stakeholders, amongst other areas, take action to:

- address current gaps in rights and protections through law reform;
- tackle prejudicial attitudes and racism;
- address concerns about treatment of children on the grounds of their race in schools, whether in experiences of bullying or reflection of cultures in the curriculum;
- address issues in the workplace such as harassment and action to counter negative behaviours, potential discrimination and barriers experienced.

2.4. The Commission is making these recommendations, and others, in response to OFMDFM's consultation on *A Sense of Belonging: Delivering Social Change through a Racial Equality Strategy for Northern Ireland 2014 – 2024*.

Shared space – the experience of the workplace

2.5. The anti-discrimination legislation provides both workplace protections and employer responsibilities⁶. The Commission's guidance on Promoting a Good and Harmonious Working Environment directly addresses matters which could be raised as complaints within the context of the anti-discrimination legislation; and the work by employers towards fair participation through affirmative action agreements has had a positive impact on the balance of the workforce and integration in workplaces⁷.

2.6. The fair employment legislation has helped to change behaviour in the workplace. As a result, we no longer see workplaces bedecked with emblems associated with either community and the emblems we do see tend to be of a more subtle nature. Employers and employees behaviour is regulated by equal opportunities and anti-harassment policies and procedures and it is fair to say that, in general, workplaces have become more integrated. Employers and employees are clearly aware of the behaviour expected of them, and in most cases act accordingly⁸.

Developing policies and service planning: public authorities' duty to have regard to the desirability of promoting good relations

2.7. Public authorities must have regard to the desirability of promoting good relations when they carry out their functions, such as when developing and delivering policies and services.

2.8. In the development of policies, the Commission recommends methodologies for public authorities to use that provide an evidence base that is available to inform decisions on a policy and implementation. Through this, the public authority can

⁵ Racial Equality Policy - Priorities & Recommendations, ECNI 2014. <http://www.equalityni.org/Delivering-Equality/Equality-Themes/Racial-equality.aspx>

⁶ Fair Employment and Treatment Order 1998

⁷ *Fair Employment in Northern Ireland – A Generation on*, Osborne & Shuttleworth (Editors), Blackstaff Press 2004

⁸ Response to the draft Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration, ECNI 2010

demonstrate how it has paid the required “regard” to the desirability of promoting good relations.

- 2.9. The Committee will be aware that this duty is set out in section 75 (2) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, and public authorities must also fulfil section 75 (1) which requires them to have “due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity”. The Commission’s guidance is clear about the difference between the levels of consideration they require respectively.
- 2.10. In terms of what “due regard” and “regard” mean, it is established that the consideration must be given in advance of a final decision being made, not afterwards, and it must be done with an open mind to achieve the goals set out in statute. Hence due regard and regard are not determinants of final policy outcomes but are the processes of providing the appropriate levels of consideration.
- 2.11. A public authority’s equality scheme must set out its arrangements for assessing its compliance with section 75⁹, and therefore the evidence of public authorities’ practice of consideration of the desirability of promoting good relations when they are planning and delivering services is available through the reporting arrangements arising from these schemes¹⁰.
- 2.12. Public authorities report annually on progress with their section 75 duties¹¹. These reports present the relevant authority’s projects, initiatives and policy processes, not only to give the appropriate consideration to the desirability of promoting good relations, (and appropriate consideration to the need to promote equality of opportunity), but they also tend to include information about how the public authority is achieving improved outcomes directly on the promotion of equality of opportunity, addressing inequalities and improving relations. This self-assessment framework provides examples of progress to implement the good relations duty and what is presented can vary widely between authorities.

Consideration of best practice in bringing divided communities together

- 2.13. In consideration of international practice, the Commission continues to prioritise engagement with relevant international frameworks and conventions¹². The recommendations arising from the relevant committee, following an examination of a state party report, provide an expectation of national practice based on international standards. There are clearly a number of relevant conventions, for example the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination and the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, a multinational treaty directed to minority rights.

⁹ Schedule 9 (4) (2) (a), Northern Ireland Act 1998

¹⁰ Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 – A Guide for Public Authorities, ECNI 2010, Chapter 7

¹¹ Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 – a Guide for Public Authorities, ECNI 2010, page 36

¹² The Commission has provided evidence to the UN Committees on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. It also has a direct role outlined in Annex 1 in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

2.14. The Commission recommends that the Committee continues to support and encourage the Executive to fully participate in these reporting processes and ensure the circumstances of Northern Ireland are fully reflected in the UK state party reports. The Executive should also fully consider action in relation to the resultant recommendations from the relevant Committee¹³

2.15. The Committee will note that the Commission continues to make a full contribution to international events, projects and presentations of international best practice in bringing divided communities together¹⁴. This international engagement focuses on the advances made in the workplace in Northern Ireland, as addressing inequalities is fundamental for creating the conditions for peace.

3. What good relations means and how sectarianism and division can be addressed

What good relations means

3.1. There is no current statutory definition of good relations. The Commission provided a definition in its guide to public authorities on promoting good relations; and the guide also included a number of other definitions in use by public authorities at the time¹⁵.

3.2. There is a clear need for a definition of good relations in statute, to ensure clarity, and consistency of purpose in shaping actions and promoting good relations. The Commission considers a number of elements to be helpful in the formulation of a definition of good relations, to inform any legislation to establish powers and duties for an Equality and Good Relations Commission. This draws from what is already provided for in other statutes and is closely aligned to powers and duties originally given to the Equality and Human Rights Commission in Britain¹⁶. The Elements are:

- a high level of dignity, respect and mutual understanding;
- an absence of prejudice, hatred, hostility or harassment;
- a fair level of participation in society.

¹³ The Commission has noted the following in relation to the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages and the Fourth report of the Committee of Experts in respect of the United Kingdom:

“12. Information about Irish and Ulster Scots in the fourth periodical report is still confined to those areas which remain the sole competence of the UK Government in London. Areas which have been devolved to Northern Ireland are not included. It was explained to the Committee of Experts that the responsibility for preparing these relevant parts of the report was that of the Northern Ireland power-sharing Executive. According to the authorities it was again not possible to agree within the Executive on the relevant text to be included in the report. The Committee of Experts regrets that the periodical report does not include important information relating to one Part III and one Part II language. It reminds the UK Government that it is its duty under the Charter to submit a complete report on time and expects that the forthcoming report will comply in full with Article 15 of the Charter “. January 2014

¹⁴ For example, The Commission has hosted visiting delegations from countries such as Macedonia and Bahrain

¹⁵ Promoting Good Relations – A Guide for Public Authorities, ECNI 2007.

¹⁶ Equality Act 2006, section 10

3.3. The definition contained in the Equality Act 2010 which provides public authorities with direction on how they should fulfil their duty to have due regard to the need to foster good relations is also useful:

(a) Having due regard to the need to foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it involves having due regard, in particular, to the need to —

(b) tackle prejudice, and

(c) promote understanding.¹⁷

3.4. The Commission held a discussion session with stakeholders in June 2014 in anticipation of draft legislation to establish an Equality and Good Relations Commission. In consideration of definitions, there was support for applying the definition as has been adopted in Britain from the Equality Act 2010.

3.5. The Commission notes, however, that the *Together: Building a United Community* strategy does not propose any new or additional responsibilities on any public authorities or other organisations, apart from what is proposed to augment the powers and duties of the Commission.

3.6. The Commission has also, in anticipation of the legislation, concluded that the intention signalled in the *Together: Building a United Community* strategy to provide a definition of sectarianism in the legislation needs to be considered in relation to what conduct or legally defined actions the definition will apply to.

3.7. The Commission welcomed the commitment in the *Together: Building a United Community* strategy to a framework for delivering good relations across a wide range of grounds, going beyond issues of sectarianism. The Commission also considered that a multi-faceted approach to promoting good relations is called for, given the complex society in which we live and given changing, dynamic sets of identities; in order to promote a better future for all¹⁸.

3.8. The Commission also considers that its powers and duties on good relations, in statute, should apply to other grounds covered in the anti-discrimination legislation¹⁹.

Removal of interface barriers

3.9. The Commission recommends the following to contribute to the development of programmes to remove interface barriers:

- greater regulation of displays of flags and emblems by private individuals or groups in public spaces, or on public property (see paragraph 4.4-4.5);
- effective engagement by public authorities with affected groups and communities when planning policies or services (see paragraphs 3.10-3.11);

¹⁷ Equality Act 2010, section 149 (5)

¹⁸ Response to the draft Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration, ECNI 2010

¹⁹ Response To OFMDFM Consultation Paper, 'A Single Equality Bill For Northern Ireland', ECNI 2004

- mainstreaming consideration of both equality and good relations matters by public authorities throughout the development of options and delivery of policies (see paragraphs 2.7-2.12); and
- the direction of attention and action by public authorities in the framework of an appropriate definition of good relations (see paragraphs 3.2-3.3).

Role of communities in policy and decision making

3.10. The role of communities in policy and decision making is vital, including in respect of good relations work. Effective stakeholder engagement and consultation is an integral part of good policy making. Planning public service delivery must take the needs of everyone into account, and therefore engagement requires building confidence and cooperation, not only with and between stakeholders, but also their confidence in a process to ensure their contribution is respected, valued and taken into account. Effective engagement processes can result in communities having a greater ownership of decisions, alongside improving their capacity to ensure they are able to provide meaningful contributions.

3.11. The framework of an equality scheme provides for mainstreaming good relations considerations throughout the functions and policies of a public authority. Therefore when a public authority is considering the purpose of its policies, or developing new policies/services, it must consider whether the desirability of promoting good relations is relevant in that context. If it is, it must then be consulting with communities in relation to the duties, in advance of decision being taken. This will be to ensure that it has regard to the desirability of promoting good relations.

3.12. The framework of the equality scheme has provided a significant focus on consultation practice over the past decade, with innovative approaches to consultation reported as a result from public authorities. The Commission has enhanced its advice over time as a result of the considerable learning and best practice in consultation²⁰, for example providing a significant contribution to the Northern Ireland Civil Service Good Practice Guidelines for Effective Stakeholder Engagement Guidelines, as launched in January 2014²¹.

3.13. For example, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development undertook a consultation exercise on their draft 2020 Strategic Plan and its associated Equality Screening. It did so using a number of methods, including a teleconferencing forum to enable consultees to engage with the process from their homes or places of work²².

3.14. In addition, in respect of the role of communities, the Commission recognises that adequate resources need to be made available to support good relations activities

²⁰ The Commission's Section 75 Guide for Public Authorities (2010) makes a number of recommendations for consultation practice for public authorities (pages 38-39) which have, in the main, been adopted by authorities in their Equality Scheme arrangements.

²¹ Developed by the Policy Champions Network.

²² Good Practice Guidelines, Effective Stakeholder Engagement, NICS 2013, page 24

at a local level. Completion of the Review of Good Relations Funding Delivery announced in *Together: Building a United Community* should be an urgent priority for OFMDFM.

Good relations indicators in monitoring and measuring progress of government interventions

3.15. It is clear that to ensure a purposive approach to implementing the *Together: Building a United Community* Strategy, a measurement framework is required. In the Commission's response to the OFMDFM consultation on the Good Relations Indicators, we welcomed the production of indicators associated to the strategy and recognized the challenge of this. The following general comments were made:

- that the proposed indicators should not be seen or referred to as (a comprehensive set of) indicators of 'good relations', given the noted plans to develop additional indicators under other strategies (for example: race, sexual orientation etc).
- that the commitment in the 'United Community' Strategy to take good relations considerations forward via a range of strategies suggests a scale of work that offers the potential for developing wholly new indicators where appropriate.
- that the indicators developed in support of 'United Community', while necessarily focussed on 'community' background, should also be capable of extension to the full range of anti-discrimination grounds.
- that there are merits in considering good relations indicators along two broad spectrums – noting the benefits in considering:
 - *a continuum of indicators from attitudes to behaviours where 'attitudes' can be considered as 'lead' indicators (outcomes) for subsequent positive or negative 'behaviours' (impacts)*
 - *indicators which span aspects of 'good relations' to be achieved, as well as aspects of 'bad relations' to be overcome²³.*

3.16. At the Commission's event in June 2014 in anticipation of draft legislation from the *Together: Building a United Community* strategy, it was noted that progress should be measured over a long period of time, with participants noting that changes in society are seen over a much longer period of time than the timescales for most government policy documents. Participants also noted the difference in relation to measurements of the delivery of the *Together: Building a United Community* strategy specifically, which relates mainly to specific actions²⁴

²³ Response from the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland to the Consultation by the Office of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister on Good Relations Indicator Review 2013/ 2014, ECNI March 2014

²⁴ <http://www.equalityni.org/Delivering-Equality/Addressing-inequality/Social-attitudes-good-relations/Policy-responses/Together-Building-a-United-Community.aspx>

4. Recommendations to support and enhance policy and decision making

- 4.1. The Commission welcomed the publication of the *Together: Building a United Community* strategy in May 2013, and its presentation of a range of agreed actions for implementation. The Commission also notes that the implementation currently is focused on the seven Headline Actions. In this context the Commission proposes that the Committee considers the following recommendations which reach beyond those headline actions, to support and enhance policy and decision making.

Importance of leadership

- 4.2. The Commission considers that leadership is critical in order to secure success both in delivery by institutions and in improved outcomes for our society. Clear leadership which identifies the direction and sets the tone is critical to the successful implementation of any good relations strategy. Leaders of public authorities need to demonstrate publicly in an unequivocal manner that promoting good relations is both central to and a measure of their success. All parties must show a willingness to compromise and move forward in a spirit of partnership, mutual support and respect. The Commission recommends that the Committee considers the importance of leadership at all levels in society, particularly from the Executive and elected representatives, in making any recommendations arising from this Inquiry.

Expressions of culture

- 4.3. The Commission recognises that we live in a society where, for some, the expression of one's culture is in many ways interpreted as a statement not of inclusion, but of exclusion for the other: a threat and something to fear. This clearly needs to be addressed and the Commission recommends that ways are found to encourage people to celebrate the positive aspects of their culture, focusing on being welcoming and inclusive so that no member of society is made to feel alienated.

Display of flags

- 4.4. The Commission has recommended the greater regulation of the display of flags, both in respect of Local Government reform and in its submission to the Panel of Parties in 2013, as follows:

The greater regulation of the display of flags. Regulation, and enforcement if appropriate, should aim to ensure that displays of flags and emblems promote mutual respect among the communities, while not allowing the display of emblems to be used to maintain, heighten or reignite sectarian tensions. While such regulations would differ depending on the various scenarios in which flags are

displayed, the principles for regulation should be consistent and based on a strong equality and human rights framework.²⁵

- 4.5. Based on the evidence arising from practice by public sector organisations, the Commission made further recommendations to the Panel of Parties in relation to the display of flags and emblems by private individuals or groups in public spaces or on public property:

The Commission endorses the commitments in the Together: Building a United Community Strategy around building a culture where everyone feels safe and creating a community where all areas are open and accessible to everyone.

In making these commitments a reality and to facilitate expressions of identity in a sensitive way and in a way that will not be divisive, the Commission recommends:

- *Where the flags/emblems are associated with illegal organisations, they should be removed by the PSNI and enforcement action taken, if appropriate.*
- *A regulatory framework should be considered which clarifies the types of flags and emblems which could be displayed, the duration for such displays, the process for applications to display the flags/emblems and the sanctions if these processes are not adhered to. The types of flags that would be covered would be those used for civic occasions or celebration and the duration would allow the event to be properly marked in the community, but not so long as to allow the flags/emblems to mark out communities.*
- *Within the context of a regulatory framework, the Joint Protocol in relation to Flags Flown in Public Areas (2005) should be reviewed to create a forum for local authorities to engage with each other and with local communities to control the display of flags and emblems. The engagement would be enhanced, as clarity around appropriate displays as well as authority for their removal would be clarified. It is also noted that public authorities which have a potential role in engaging on these issues as part of the Protocol will have changed since that originally envisaged, for example with the newly created local councils (2015) and Policing and Community Safety Partnerships.*

In terms of private property, it is recommended that consideration is given to the extent to which displays of flags and emblems are increasing community tensions and discouraging the two communities from sharing public spaces and whether this is an area for action also. Such considerations should be balanced against individual rights as well as the need to prioritise the development and maintenance of shared spaces.²⁶

Education

- 4.6. A system of shared education has a central role to play in advancing a shared society. A system of sharing should be across the full range of providers and

²⁵ Submission to the Panel of Parties, ECNI October 2013

²⁶ Submission to the Panel of Parties, ECNI October 2013

provision; one which routinely teaches students together via a shared curriculum in shared classes. The Commission specifically recommends:

- a system of sharing which routinely teaches students together via a shared curriculum in shared classrooms could better provide children with shared awareness, understanding and experience of the value and range of diverse cultures, identities and backgrounds in Northern Ireland;
- in furtherance of the aims of the *Together: Building a United Community* strategy, there is potential to enhance existing mechanisms (such as the Entitlement Framework and the Common Funding Formula) using lessons learnt to date, while providing appropriate mechanisms to incentivise and advance partnership working and shared delivery.
- that promoting equality and good relations within a school should complement school ethos and reinforce the importance of promoting equality and good relations in education.
- address concerns about treatment of children on the grounds of their race in schools, whether in experiences of bullying or reflection of cultures in the curriculum.

Housing

4.7. Despite the expressed views of people in Northern Ireland²⁷, people are often still living in largely religiously/politically homogenous areas²⁸. We recognise²⁹ that people need to feel safe where they live and consider that if society is to be transformed, bold steps need to be taken to integrate communities. We recall the recognition within the Belfast Agreement of the role of mixed housing in facilitating reconciliation³⁰ and also the recognition of the importance of enabling people to exercise choice in the type of community in which they wish to reside. We have expressed our view³¹ that segregated housing in Northern Ireland is not the way forward for our society and that we view socially, ethnically, politically and religiously integrated housing as the preferred option and long term goal.³² That said, we consider that any actions must meet objectively assessed housing need, having due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity and regard to the desirability of promoting good relations.

4.8. The Commission specifically recommends:

- current policy development in social housing provision should reflect the goal that segregated housing in Northern Ireland is not the way forward for our society. The Commission views socially, ethnically, politically and religiously integrated housing as the preferred option and long term goal, and

²⁷ [ARK \(2006\) Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey 2006: This indicated that 79% of people wished to live in 'mixed' areas.](#)

²⁸ 70% of social housing tenants live in communities that are at least 90% Roman Catholic or Protestant - Shuttleworth, I.; Lloyd, C.; (2006) Are Northern Ireland's Two Communities Dividing?: Evidence from the Census of Population 1971-2001, Shared Space, Northern Ireland Community Relations Council.

²⁹ [Response to the draft Cohesion Sharing and Integration strategy](#), ECNI 2010

³⁰ [The Belfast Agreement, reached in the multi-party negotiations \(10 April 1998\) - see Section 6](#)

³¹ [Facing the Future DSD 2012](#)

³² [ECNI Response to Facing The Future 2012](#) See Executive Summary p3

- the *Together: Building a United Community* strategy should set the framework for equality and good relations work at neighbourhood level.

The legacy of the past

4.9. The Commission recognises that addressing the legacy of the past is a multi-faceted issue and there are many factors to consider. In giving consideration to this, the Commission recommends that the focus be:

- to tackle sectarianism, prejudice and hate, and the persistent and systemic separateness and lack of interconnection between the two main traditions in Northern Ireland;
- to involve and engage everyone in the process, not just those who, in the past, have suffered directly or inflicted that suffering;
- to ensure the process of reconciliation is based on equality and human rights principles; and
- to make the elimination of inequalities an essential element in post-conflict programmes³³.

Women and peace building

4.10. In the creation of new structures, women's roles in leadership and decision making must be encouraged, ensuring the participation of women in the post conflict process. The Committee should consider the opportunity of forthcoming elections to further encourage and ensure women's participation in public life positions.

4.11. Any of the Committee's recommendations on the structures and delivery mechanisms set out in the *Together: Building a United Community* strategy should reflect the need to provide opportunities for and encourage women's roles in leadership and decision making.

General recommendations

4.12. The Commission would also like the Committee to consider making recommendations to the Executive for public policy reforms which:

- address current gaps in rights and protections through law reform;
- tackle prejudicial attitudes, racism and sectarianism;
- address issues in the workplace such as harassment and action to counter negative behaviours, potential discrimination and barriers experienced.
- challenge the systemic separateness and lack of interconnection between the two main traditions, our children and young people should grow up learning how to live, play and work together in a diverse society.
- ensure inclusion underpins the ongoing and future delivery of public services which contribute to a shared and united future, through partnership, sharing and the further development of individual and community abilities.

³³ Submission to the Panel of Parties, ECNI 2013, paragraph 25.

Annex 1: The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland

1. The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (the Commission) is an independent public body established under the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The Commission is responsible for implementing the legislation on fair employment, sex discrimination and equal pay, race relations, sexual orientation, disability and age.
2. The Commission's remit also includes overseeing the statutory duties on the Department to promote equality of opportunity and good relations under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 (Section 75) and to promote positive attitudes towards disabled people and encourage participation by disabled people in public life under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995.
3. The Commission's general duties include:
 - working towards the elimination of discrimination;
 - promoting equality of opportunity and encouraging good practice;
 - promoting positive / affirmative action
 - promoting good relations between people of different racial groups;
 - overseeing the implementation and effectiveness of the statutory duty on relevant the Department;
 - keeping the legislation under review.
4. The Equality Commission, together with the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, has been designated under the United Nations Convention on the rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) as the independent mechanism tasked with promoting, protecting and monitoring implementation of the Convention in Northern Ireland.