

EQUALITY COMMISSION FOR NORTHERN IRELAND
Moving Forward: The Rights of Rainbow Families in Europe

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I am delighted to participate in your conference today. The Equality Commission is pleased to be a Project Partner and I would like to commend the work being done through the Rights on the Move Project. It is an important project, focusing on the protection of the rights of rainbow families across the European Union, and the production of the Handbook by [Cara-friend](#) to set out the legal rights and protection of rainbow families in a clear and accessible way should be of great assistance to people seeking information and guidance.

Today I want to talk briefly about the role and work of the Equality Commission for NI as it relates to sexual orientation – the Commission has a duty to work to eliminate unlawful discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation, to promote equality of opportunity and to keep the workings of the legislation under review. We have many other responsibilities too – both under a wide range of anti-discrimination legislation in NI and also in respect of statutory equality and good relations duties on public authorities here in NI, which include a duty to pay due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity between persons of different sexual orientation.



**Evelyn Collins and
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Our work on sexual orientation includes information, advice, promotion, research, policy and legal enforcement. There is much work to be done in NI to eliminate discrimination faced by LGBT people. Out of the over 3,000 queries received by the Equality Commission each year from people who believe they've experienced unfair treatment, only 2.5% concern sexual orientation and even fewer relate to gender identity. This compares to a range of 0% to 3% across European national equality bodies, according to

Equinet's recent publication on [Equality Bodies Promoting Equality and Non-Discrimination for LGBTI People](#). Last year our legal advice line received 82 enquiries on sexual orientation issues – up on the previous year's figure (72 enquiries).

Harassment at work remains the most common area of concern - we recently publicised an Industrial Tribunal decision which found in favour of a docker we had supported to bring his case of discrimination and harassment at work on the grounds of his sexual orientation – he was awarded £7,500 for harassment claim and £37,500 for his unfair dismissal claim.

We have worked hard to encourage people to contact us if they feel they have been treated unfairly due to their sexual orientation – undertaking research a few years after the sexual orientation legislation came into force on the barriers experienced by LGB people in reporting and accessing justice in cases of discrimination. This research was titled [Enabling Individuals to Access their Rights Under Equality Law](#) and was a joint project with our counterparts in Ireland (2007).

More recently, we have initiated a website and associated media channels specifically aimed at raising awareness of equality rights within the LGB community. The Sexual Orientation More Equality, or SoMe, project was launched in March 2013. It provides information on people's rights and allows them to anonymously report incidences of discrimination. Since its launch, it has had over 10,000 visitor sessions, over 35,000 Youtube views and is generating more enquiries than through the more traditional channels of contacting the Commission. I encourage everyone here to visit the website, leave a comment, and tell a friend about it.

In addition to support for individuals with rights, we provide advice and guidance to employers and service providers on their responsibilities under the law and we also work to influence public policy and service delivery – both with individual public authorities, in line with their equality duties, and the NI Executive as a whole.

To this end, we consistently recommend that NI law is amended in line with the rest of the UK and, based on the NI Executive's Programme for Government commitment, we have called for a robust, outcome focused and comprehensive Sexual Orientation Strategy. At present, the

Department with responsibility for equality policy and legislation in NI, OFMDFM, is consulting on the development of a Sexual Orientation Strategy and Action Plan that will address issues that impact on the daily lives of LGB people – with a closing date of 6 June.

We published a policy paper last autumn setting out our views on [Promoting Sexual Orientation Equality](#) and recommend that **priority areas** for strategic action by the NI Executive, Government departments and other key stakeholders are:

- **tackling prejudicial attitudes and behaviour** towards LGB individuals; specifically in relation to homophobic hate crime and violence; harassment both inside and outside the workplace and homophobic bullying in schools;
- **promoting positive attitudes** towards LGB individuals; and
- **raising awareness of the rights** of LGB people - both amongst LGB people themselves and amongst those with responsibilities under the sexual orientation equality legislation.

We have also called for strengthened legal protections including, of particular relevance to this conference, the introduction of legislation that permits same-sex marriage and provides heterosexual couples access to civil partnerships on the same basis as that available to same sex couples.

We recommend that marriages of same-sex couples in other jurisdictions are recognised as marriages in NI and vice versa. We support extending the scope of adoption legislation to allow unmarried couples, those in civil partnerships and same sex couples to apply to be considered as adoptive parents.

Finally, in this European partners event, as Chair of Equinet, the European network of equality bodies, it would be remiss of me not to draw your attention to a recent publication we have produced, [Equality Bodies Promoting Equality and Non-Discrimination for LGBTI People](#). Based on a survey across European equality bodies, the report aims to influence the policy debate on LGBTI issues at EU and national level, drawing from the experiences of equality bodies; to enhance the work of equality bodies in this area by highlighted good practice; and to encourage a deepening of the

relationship between equality bodies and LGBTI people and their organizations by communicating the mandate, work and achievements of equality bodies in promoting equality and combating discrimination against LGBTI across Europe. I encourage you all to access the Equinet website for the publication and our other work.

Equinet also works to build the capacity of equality bodies and their staff and we are holding a training session on LGBTI issues in Sweden on 17/18 June, to share good practice in working on these issues, an event hosted by the Swedish Equality Ombudsman.

I trust that you are all fully engaged with the equality body in your Member State, as equality bodies have a clear role to play in improving the situation and experience of those protected by European equality law.

In conclusion, from the Equality Commission for NI, I wish you well in your discussions today and look forward to our continuing engagement on these important issues with policy makers and with the LGB community here and across Europe.

ENDS