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by Dr Michael Wardlow, Chief Commissioner, Equality Commission NI**

Racial prejudice causes climate of fear for our fellow citizens

Northern Ireland is a very different place to the one I was born into in the 1950s. Perhaps one of the most visible changes has been that of our growing, diverse population. According to the 2011 census there were 35,000 people from minority ethnic communities in Northern Ireland at that time. That is over twice the number a decade previously. English is now a second language for 3% of our population.

Increasing diversity is often a sign of a welcoming society, one at ease with difference. Sadly, however for some this has not been the case for some, as racial harassment and discrimination remains too common an experience for many people in Northern Ireland.

Discrimination can take many forms – from being denied a job, harassed, treated unfairly or dismissed from work; to being treated unfairly or refused service by shops and businesses; or even being subject to abuse or attack in the street or in their home. All of such abuse is personal and frightening for those targeted and their families.

While recognizing that only a small minority of people behave like this, it is intolerable for any person in our community to be subjected to hostility and harassment because of their race.

Incidents like this have a disproportionate impact on members of minority ethnic communities here. Even if they are not personally attacked, are made to feel threatened and vulnerable. There are mechanisms in place to address such activity. Hate crimes, for example, are dealt with by the police and criminal courts.

There are also strong anti-discrimination laws in existence, but, as the Equality Commission's last "Do You Mean Me?" survey showed, although one in three people reported having been subject to some sort of racial harassment or unfair treatment in the previous 3 years, only one in five of them had complained formally to anyone. The Equality Commission can advise anyone who thinks they have suffered racial discrimination, and in some instances we assist people to take cases to tribunals or courts. Complaints about race discrimination remain stubbornly in the top three areas of complaints or enquiries which the Commission receive – around 300 in the last year.

We have to make sure that our laws are adequate and that all possible steps are being taken to implement them and make them effective. That needs co-ordinated action by

the Northern Ireland Executive, and a detailed action plan to ensure the full implementation of the Racial Equality Strategy.

The Equality Commission has just met with representatives of an important United Nations Committee, the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD), in Geneva, to set out some essential priorities in the work to promote racial equality and tackle racist hate crime in Northern Ireland. Our submission addressed five themes which we see as priorities for action by the Northern Ireland Executive.

1. The Executive must ensure the development of a co-ordinated, cross departmental action plan to advance racial equality.
2. It must set out a detailed timetable of law reform for the review and consultation on improved racial equality and fair employment legislation.
3. It needs to improve policy development and service delivery by analysis and monitoring of comprehensive and disaggregated data and it should outline a timetable for the implementation of comprehensive ethnic monitoring to improve public policy and service delivery in Northern Ireland.
4. It must tackle hate crime through effective actions to promote respect, challenge racism, and reduce and eliminate racial violence in Northern Ireland.
5. It must address key inequalities experienced by minority ethnic communities (particularly groups such as Travellers and Roma) and promote greater integration within our community.

Racial prejudice, and the abuse and discrimination which results from it, disrupts lives and creates a climate of fear for many of our fellow-citizens - it is a stain on our society as a whole and must be challenged and confronted.

We hope that the submissions we have made, CERD's examination and its conclusions, will lead to further practical steps to advance racial equality in Northern Ireland.