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## **Council of Europe Committee endorses need for reform of race equality laws**

### **- Blog article by Eileen Lavery, Head of Policy**

The recent Opinion from the Advisory Committee of the Council of Europe Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCNM), published on 9 March this year, is important for Northern Ireland because it sets out specific actions that the Northern Ireland Executive should be taking in order to meet its commitments under the Convention.

The Commission's three racial equality policy priorities – law reform, specific commitments to tackle racism and address key inequalities and ethnic monitoring – have been reflected, in whole or in part, in a new Council of Europe document on progress made by the central and devolved governments of the UK towards racial equality.

Firstly, we believe that reform of the race equality laws is fundamental. We recommended to the FCNM Advisory Committee that, in the absence of single equality legislation, a timetabled commitment is included in the Programme for Government to reform the racial equality and fair employment laws in line with our recommendations. Agreeing with this, the Advisory Committee said that the Assembly should adopt robust and comprehensive single equality legislation or otherwise strengthen racial equality in Northern Ireland.

Secondly, we recommended that the NI Executive use the Programme for Government, and an action plan for racial equality, to set out specific, clear and time-bound commitments to advance racial equality. The FCNM Advisory Committee agreed, calling on the Executive to ensure that its high-level policies, such as the Racial Equality Strategy, include appropriate action plans and adequate resources to tackle inequalities experienced by persons belonging to national and ethnic minorities.

Thirdly, we need better information to inform race equality policy and law. For that reason, we welcome the commitment by the Executive Office to examine where ethnic monitoring should be introduced and consult on proposals for implementation. We recommended that priority action is taken to collect, monitor and evaluate appropriate data to ensure effective policy/service development and that proposals to consult on ethnic monitoring are published without delay.

The Advisory Committee Opinion echoed this and said authorities should prioritise integrating the collection of disaggregated equality data on national and ethnic minority people into the practices of all relevant departments and agencies here. It also recognised the need to treat Gypsies, Travellers and Roma as distinct groups to reconfigure statistics and effectively tailor policy making to their needs and in consultation with their representatives.

The collection of monitoring data is not new in Northern Ireland. Monitoring of the community background of the workforce, an anonymised statistical exercise, has been operating effectively

for over twenty five years and, the Equality Commission believes, could usefully be extended to other equality categories.

Racial inequality is still an issue in many fields – hate crime, accommodation and housing, and education for example. The Opinion from the Advisory Committee is an important call to Government here to step up to the mark and focus on specific practical actions, with action plans and resources allocated, to take the first step towards a more racially fair and equal society.



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