

Racial Equality platform piece by Geraldine McGahey, Chief Commissioner, Equality Commission NI. Published in The Belfast Telegraph on 14 September 2020.

Northern Ireland needs commitment, leadership and urgent action from Government to tackle racism in all its forms.

The *Black Lives Matter* movement and the differential impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on minority ethnic groups have thrown racism into the sharpest possible focus.

The issue of racial discrimination isn't new to Northern Ireland. It can take many forms, from slogans daubed on walls to physical attacks. People tell Commission staff about their experience of harassment or unfair treatment in the workplace, of being denied a job or dismissed, or being abused or refused services.

Whilst it is for the police and the criminal courts to deal with hate crime, there is a wider responsibility - on all of us - to challenge racial prejudice and speak up when people are being abused and treated unfairly because of their race and ethnic background.

Today (Monday 14 September), a Private Members' Motion asks the Assembly to acknowledge that its Racial Equality Strategy 2015-2025 has not been fully implemented and is already outdated.

To affect real change, we need political leadership to progress the implementation of Racial Equality Strategy by ensuring that a series of concrete outcome focused actions are put in place and implemented.

From its inception, the Racial Equality Strategy 2015-2025 has lacked strong high level commitment. It did not define a timetable or resource priority actions to tackle the issues. We voiced our concern at the lack of practical measures in the Strategy which needed specific actions to implement long-term measures to tackle prejudicial attitudes, promote respect for difference, improve minority ethnic participation in public life and foster community cohesion. It needed a timetabled commitment to reform the law on racial discrimination. These issues still need to be tackled.

I have written to the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, asking them to act urgently on this and to ensure that the Executive and all departments complete the actions outlined in the existing Racial Equality Strategy, and develop them further to eliminate racism and racial discrimination, tackle prejudicial attitudes and institutional racism.

I have listened to the views of people from a broad range of black and minority ethnic groups. They want to see concrete action to progress work on racial equality. Surely we all want to take steps to ensure that everyone who lives here or visits here feels safe and valued.

Racial prejudice must be challenged by a concerted response across society – and that needs clear direction and commitment from senior political leaders. We must all work together to show dignity and respect to everyone here, of all races and from all ethnic backgrounds.