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[Blog article](#) by Kathryn McNickle, Senior Policy Officer, Equality Commission NI

International Day for Countering Hate Speech

As we approach the first ever [International Day for Countering Hate Speech](#) (18th June 2022), the Equality Commission continues to call for urgent action to tackle hate crime and hate speech here in Northern Ireland.

If we are to see a society in Northern Ireland without hate crime and speech, it is vital to see progression of updated, harmonised, consolidated and strong hate crime legislation. However, wider measures are also needed to prevent and tackle the root causes of hate in our society.

Hate crime and speech is still far too common in Northern Ireland. [PSNI statistics](#) (pdf) shows that, in the 12 months from 1st April 2021 to 31st March 2022, the number of racist, homophobic, disability and transphobic motivated crimes each recorded their highest figure since recording began in 2004/05. For instance, there were 633 racist hate crimes recorded in 2004/05 – this has risen to 931 such crimes last year. There has also been a [sharp rise in recorded homophobic crimes since 2020](#) (pdf).

Prompt action by the DoJ, criminal justice agencies, and others is needed to address these issues, and any new Executive should treat it as a priority' and 'Political leaders, the DOJ, criminal justice agencies and others in positions of influence must take further action to combat hate speech. We recommend action to challenge prejudicial attitudes; that behaviour and hate crime should be addressed in the NI Executive's Programme for Government; and public bodies and persons in positions of influence should provide strong and visible leadership. All of this should be underpinned by a holistic, co-ordinated, and collaborative approach.

Prevent and tackle hate speech

There have been very few prosecutions and convictions under the existing hate crime legislation in Northern Ireland, including relating to incitement to hatred - any new legislation needs to be accompanied by improved criminal justice responses to hate crime, and further support for victims. Raising awareness and building trust and confidence in the criminal justice system will help tackle under-reporting, as will removing barriers and improving accessibility in reporting.

Societal change is needed to prevent hate in the first place. Prejudicial attitudes and

negative stereotypes need to be tackled from a young age and throughout society, in schools, training, work and in the family. Workplaces, services, public spaces and communities should be free from harassment and discrimination across the equality grounds. Specific action is needed to confront online hate speech and abuse targeted at different equality groups, including by placing greater responsibility on Social Media Companies to remove online hate speech.

The Commission has made a range of recommendations to addresses [prejudice-based bullying in schools](#), and to promote [shared and safe housing](#). These would help prevent the harmful attitudes that can lead to hate speech.

Strengthening Legal Protections

Alongside these wider changes, it is essential to see reforms to our hate crime laws.

We welcome that some progress has been made on developing new hate crime legislation, with Judge Marrinan reporting back on his [independent review](#) in 2020, and an initial consultation held by the DOJ in Spring 2022. Passing the updated legislation should be prioritised in this mandate, and we welcome that DoJ has indicated it [accepts several recommendations](#) in line with the Commission's position on strengthening the legislation.

We are also calling for protection to be expanded to a wider range for equality groups – speech that incites hatred or discrimination towards women or men, older and younger people, transgender people and intersex people, because of their protected characteristics, should all be addressed in the law.

We recognise the need to balance rights of freedom of expression with addressing hate speech. In terms of ensuring the correct balance is struck, Government should ensure that it complies with its international human rights obligations.

Taking Action to Secure Progress

The NI Executive, the DOJ, criminal justice agencies and others in positions of influence must take further action to combat hate speech. However, each of us as a member of society also has a duty to do all we can to tackle hate. We would encourage you to support our calls for strengthened protections, and help eradicate prejudice and stereotypes in all areas of life.

You can read more about the Commission's [recommendations relating to hate crime in Northern Ireland](#).