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[Blog article](#) by **Geraldine McGahey, Chief Commissioner, Equality Commission NI**

Racism - An 'acceptable' prejudice?

In the last few weeks, I've been visiting people and organisations representing minority ethnic and migrant worker groups across Northern Ireland. Whilst I'm well across many of the issues they face, hearing their stories first hand, in their own words, has been a real eye-opener.

Racist comments on social media

I heard about how social media has increased the levels of racism directed at minority groups. And the reaction that we've had online from our communications about race equality and racism has those claims. It seems incredible to me that in 2023 people feel free to write comments online across social media like 'Aww poor thing. Let me know if she needs me to start a Go Fund Me for a one-way ticket back to where she belongs!' or 'She would be much happier in a country filled with people who look like her', or 'Who do these people think they are? Their entitlement astounds me. If they don't like it, I'm sure their own country will be happy to take them back'.

We've also been running a series of social media posts about the protection of the equality rights of everyone living or working in Northern Ireland. The first series was on the theme that your rights are protected no matter what race you are. The second series was the same messaging, but saying the rights of people with disabilities are protected, no matter what their disability. We had some hateful racist comments in response to the race equality posts, but in contrast, the disability posts attracted fewer comments and those we did get were supportive.

We know racism in Northern Ireland is a major challenge. Our last Equality Awareness Survey (2016) showed that the top five groups that people felt most negatively about were all racial groups - Travellers, Roma, asylum seekers and refugees, migrant workers and minority ethnic groups.

Race hate incidents and crimes in Northern Ireland

Depressingly, it's now 14 years since one hundred Roma families were forced to flee their homes after racist attacks, when Belfast was dubbed by the media as the 'race hate capital of Europe'.

Remember also the burning down, twice, of the Belfast Multi-Cultural Association's centre, in January 2021 and again, as soon as repairs were completed, in April 2022 – and this four days after Belfast City Council agreed to a proposal to make Belfast a 'City of Sanctuary ... a place that provides a welcome and safe place for asylum seekers, refugees and migrants and supports the conditions that will allow people from these backgrounds to feel safe, valued and included in Belfast.'

[Race hate incidents and crimes reported to the police](#) in the last year actually decreased in number, however this was against record highs in 2020-21 and 2021, so are still at the third highest level in

the data series, and in Belfast City, race hate crimes went up by 16% in the last year. Even the PSNI acknowledges it is under-reported, noting in 2019 that hate crimes could be ‘five times worse’ than official statistics.

Lack of data on minority ethnic and migrant people in Northern Ireland

In March 2022, the House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee published its report into [the experiences of minority ethnic and migrant people in Northern Ireland](#). It pointed out that in this, the least ethnically diverse part of the UK, we lack important data on minority ethnic and migrant people and our legislative framework in respect of hate crime and anti-discrimination legislation is relatively weak. The Committee found that “Despite views to the contrary, we do note that there is no evidence that the perpetrators of hate crime come from one community more than another”. It found that the common factor in racists of any stripe was social deprivation, linked with rapid social change, such as population movement and the fragmentation of traditional communities.

Equality Commission research on minority ethnic and migrant people in Northern Ireland

The research report we published in June 2023, [the impact of Brexit on minority ethnic and migrant people in Northern Ireland](#), perhaps goes some way to explaining some of what I’ve written about.

Our research showed that racism is a daily reality for many of Northern Ireland’s minority ethnic people, and for migrant workers. It showed too that life feels more difficult for them after Brexit, that settlement status is a major problem, and that they do not feel that they are a priority for government here.

The Equality Commission will work for racial equality

In response to what we’ve heard over the last few weeks, and to the findings of our own research, the Commission has decided to focus anew on working to resolve some of the issues. Reform of race equality law is already on our agenda, and we will continue to press for change and improvement in policy as well as the law – we have just responded with our recommendations to the Executive Office’s consultation on the review of the Race Equality Strategy, for example.

We are reviewing our own website and communications to see what we can do to raise awareness of their rights with minority ethnic people and migrant workers, and to make it easier for them to understand what their options are in challenging discrimination, and how we can help them do that.

We will be looking to work with partner organisations and with employers on getting these simple messages out. One of the lessons of the Fair Employment legislation was that putting the law in place is an essential first step in improving attitudes. Another was that the workplace can quite often be the place where we encounter people from different backgrounds and cultures, and what happens in the workplace will eventually have an effect in the community. So employers will be key.

The [2022 NI Life and Times Survey](#) had a very encouraging statistic. It reported that 95 % of those surveyed would willingly accept people from other minority ethnic groups as residents in their local area. There is tolerance and goodwill at large in our community, and I believe that the more we see of each other, in social settings, at work and in sport and leisure, the more we will freeze out the prejudice and hatred of the racist minority, and see a more equal Northern Ireland, based on acceptance and respect. To get there, we need concerted action throughout our society – from

individuals and civil society and with clear leadership and action from public bodies and politicians at all levels.