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PRESS RELEASE

Commission reiterates support for introduction of same sex marriage

The Equality Commission has reiterated its support for the introduction of same-sex marriage in Northern Ireland, as the Northern Ireland Assembly prepares to debate the matter again on Monday 2 November.

“The overall intention of the sexual orientation equality legislation is that people should not be treated less favourably because of their sexual orientation,” Chief Commissioner Dr. Michael Wardlow said, adding: “The Commission believes that permitting same sex marriage here is in keeping with this intention. It remains a concern for the Commission that, as the law stands, lesbian, gay and bisexual people continue to be treated less favourably in Northern Ireland than in all other parts of the United Kingdom or Ireland because of their sexual orientation.

“In supporting the introduction of legislation to permit same-sex marriage, the Commission recognises the importance of rights relating to freedom of religious belief, as enshrined in the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). To this end, we have recommended that there be safeguards within the law to ensure that no religious organisation or individual may be required to marry same-sex couples, whilst also ensuring that any religious organisations who wish to conduct these marriages can do so.

“Such an approach is not without precedent as similar tensions have been addressed elsewhere where strongly held religious beliefs are involved, for example, in the area of divorce. Many churches do not support divorce, and in order to accommodate this view, churches are not required to facilitate second marriages. The State, however, fulfills its duty to provide civil divorce to any person or couple who wish to dissolve a marriage,” Dr. Wardlow said.

“While recognising that many people have strongly held religious opinions on marriage, it is important to remember that marriage is also a civil institution and the state cannot justify preventing people from this civil institution unless there are justifiable reasons for doing so. A person’s sexual orientation is not such a reason,” Dr. Wardlow said.

The Equality Commission's position on same sex marriage is laid out in full on its [website](#)