

Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission
Strategic Plan
2016-2019

'Building a Culture of Human Rights'



NORTHERN
IRELAND
HUMAN
RIGHTS
COMMISSION

Foreword

This is the Commission's strategic plan for 2016-2019. The plan was produced following feedback on awareness of the Commission in a Millward Brown omnibus survey in November 2015, consultation with stakeholders through meetings, a questionnaire placed on our website, and discussion with and between both staff and Commissioners.

The strategic plan builds on the platform of important previous work. This includes the human rights inquiry into health care in hospital emergency departments, work with the Northern Ireland Civil Service and other public authorities to develop training programmes on the use of human right standards and concepts in decision-making and policy development, plus our work in partnership with the Northern Ireland Ombudsman to explore how human rights can be effectively utilised when dealing with statutory complaints handling procedures. We will also see through our existing strategic litigation commitments.

The strategic plan also recognises the continuing difficult funding environment within which we operate. As a result, while our core work will continue to be delivered, some of our additional initiatives will be subject to raising the necessary resources – a challenge we are committed to successfully rising to.

The Commission was created by the Belfast Agreement and it will reach its 20th anniversary during the period of this strategic plan. The Commission remains committed to seeing a Bill of Rights introduced in Northern Ireland, an issue which may be thrown into sharper relief once the UK government's plans for the replacement of the Human Rights Act with a British Bill of Rights becomes clearer.

Further, the UN has adopted guiding principles based on human rights as a foundation for design and implementation of public policies related to poverty reduction or affecting persons living in poverty. Moreover, work has been undertaken internationally to examine how issues of taxation intersect with such policies. The Commission will explore that relationship in an environment where public expenditure on economic and social issues remains right.

The three pillars are designed to be forward looking and to demonstrate the practical value of human rights in building a better society for all our people.

The Commission's work has been recognised on the international stage as being innovative and this plan seeks to augment that reputation.

Our Mission:

The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission champions and guards the rights of all those who live in Northern Ireland.

Who we Are and How we Work:

Established on the basis of the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement, we play a central role in supporting a society that, as it rebuilds following conflict, respects and upholds human rights standards and responsibilities.

Human rights values and standards need to be at the heart of our society if we are to achieve well-being, peace and justice. We are Northern Ireland's centre of excellence on human rights.

We hold government, elected representatives, statutory and other relevant organisations to account. To do this, we may work in partnership with these organisations and civil society.

We work to build strong relationships through local community engagement, to understand the issues affecting people. We shall continue with a programme of community visits and meetings throughout the life of this plan and continue to develop our communications through social media and other tools.

Our Core Activities

As the national human rights institution (NHRI) in Northern Ireland, the Commission has a range of duties and responsibilities including contributing to the monitoring of international human rights treaties in Northern Ireland. The core aspects of our daily operation are fundamental to fulfilling our mission. They are key to our compliance with the United Nations Paris Principles on the role of a national human rights institution and the Nolan principles of ethical standards in public life.

Our statutory functions include:

- ✓ Advising the Westminster government, the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly, and key agencies on legislation and compliance with human rights frameworks
- ✓ Our work to promote awareness of human rights through education, training and research
- ✓ Our international treaty monitoring work
- ✓ Our legal advice work including taking strategic legal cases
- ✓ Our engagement with other national human rights institutions in the UK

- ✓ Our work as part of the Joint Committee with the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC)

Each year, the Commission reviews progress by government and public authorities with human rights laws and standards. Our Annual Statement published in December records progress on meeting human rights standards, and our Annual 'Human Rights Lecture' gives an opportunity to promote learning and discussion. The Annual Statement strongly informs our future work priorities. The Annual Statement and lecture will continue to be key features of our work throughout the life of the 2016-2019 Strategic Plan.

In 2015, the Commission was elected the chair of the Commonwealth Forum of National Human Rights Institutions. This reflects the esteem in which the Commission is held internationally and is an important opportunity to share our own experiences, facilitate dialogue and learn from others to achieve direct benefits for the people of Northern Ireland.

The Principles that Underpin Our Work:

We promote and abide by the following core principles:

Building a Culture of Human Rights: A goal of human rights is to establish a society that embeds such rights at its heart. A culture of human rights is one where human rights values demonstrably guide society. The Commission is committed to fostering this culture in Northern Ireland. In doing so, it recognises the challenges presented in a society moving forward that has experienced a protracted and tragic conflict and where community divisions can run deep.

Legality and Independence: The Commission operates on the basis of international human rights law, in compliance with a statutory mandate and independently of the State. The Commission works for the promotion and protection of those human rights to which the United Kingdom is legally committed at the national, regional and international levels, and does so on the basis of the mandate conferred on it by law and in conformity with the UN Paris Principles.

Non-Discrimination and Equality: Human rights require that they can be enjoyed by everyone on the basis of non-discrimination and equality, a principle that is reinforced in Northern Ireland by the provisions of the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement. The Commission honours this principle, above all, by protecting the most powerless in society addressing the needs of vulnerable individuals and those who are marginalised.

The Equal Status of Civil, Political, Economic, Social and Cultural Rights: Human rights, as recognised in the international treaties, have equal

value and status and must be implemented in an integrated manner. The Commission respects this principle in its work and promotes full implementation in all engagements with the State and other partners.

Participation: Meaningful enjoyment of human rights must be based on the participation by those affected in any processes that may impact on their well-being. The Commission is committed to involving rights-holders in all relevant areas of its activities and it strives to promote broader participation across society.

Accountability: Accountability is central to human rights enforcement so decision making must be transparent. The Commission honours this requirement in its own actions. It demands similar standards in public life and calls to account all those with responsibility for the promotion and protection of human rights. The Commission promotes human rights compliant independent oversight and accountability mechanisms.

Partnership: The promotion and protection of human rights needs the commitment of all who live in Northern Ireland, mindful that rights are balanced with responsibilities. It requires the engagement of government (central, regional and local) elected representatives, statutory bodies and civil society. As a Paris Principles 'A' Status NHRI, the Commission plays a pivotal role in building and sustaining the necessary partnerships. The Commission recognises the importance of its partnerships with the other UN-accredited human rights institutions in developing human rights values.

Delivering Our Mission in 2016-2019

Our strategic priorities will be centred around three key work-streams or 'pillars'. Each of these is in an area of substantive public interest, where we believe a real and lasting impact can be made to benefit the lives of people in Northern Ireland.

Pillar One: Delivering Human Rights through Excellent Services to the Public

This work stream builds on our previous programmes to embed human rights at the heart of government, and in how the state's policies and strategies are shaped and delivered. We want to develop this work further with stakeholders to ensure human rights are applied to the *delivery* of services to the public. In this work, the Commission is committed to a participatory approach including working with and supporting government and its agencies, and also civil society and the business community. Over the next three years we will:

Actions Advise, support and build the capacity of government and public authorities to apply a human rights based approach to the design and delivery of services to the public, develop a programme to enable the application of a human rights based approach to health and social care services and statutory complaints processes; and keep under review policy and practice in prison and other places of detention.

Enhance human rights standards in business and procurement through our Business and Human Rights Forum.

Advise government on the human rights implications of potential changes to domestic human rights laws and frameworks with reference to the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement commitments to a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland and the possibility of 'A Charter of Rights for the island of Ireland'.

Outcomes The Commission can identify demonstrable improvement in the delivery of services to the public which have arisen from our work.

Pillar Two: Human Rights and Building the Future in Northern Ireland

Tolerance recognises the universal human rights and fundamental freedoms of others. A tolerant society based on mutual respect and understanding requires the enforcement by the state of human rights laws and standards, as well as public education, awareness and support. In working to build a positive future, the Commission will focus our attention on those who are marginalised due to intolerance and hate crime and continue to advise government and those agencies dealing with Northern Ireland's past. Over the next three years we will:

Actions Develop a programme of work to build the capacity of government and public authorities to respond effectively to all forms of hate crime and promote tolerance and non-discrimination

Provide advice to government on implementation of relevant strategies to address the past; and where appropriate highlight and take action on rights engaged in relation to conflict related deaths, those who are injured, and legacy inquests

Outcomes The Commission can demonstrate examples of changes to policy and practice as a result of our work.

Pillar Three: Social and Economic Rights in a Time of Change

This work recognises the importance of social and economic rights and their equivalent status with other rights. Social and economic rights include the right to an adequate standard of living, to housing and protection against destitution. In the current economic environment, this work seeks to ensure individual's social and economic rights are protected and promoted.

A human rights based approach to tackling poverty and addressing social and economic rights may also raise issues of tax justice. This emerging concept is one which the Commission will explore in its work. Over the three years we will:

Actions Protect and promote economic and social rights through exploring a human rights based approach to tax and spending policies

Undertake a human rights inquiry to examine the rights of particular groups living in poverty or at risk of destitution incorporating a tax justice dimension

Promote access to justice by undertaking research on the needs of litigants in person and working to ensure the recommendations are met by the relevant authorities

Outcomes The Commission can identify demonstrable rights based approaches to social and economic issues by government in Northern Ireland arising from our work.

Implementing this Strategic Plan

The tools at the disposal of the Commission include advice to government legislators and policy makers, and to international human rights treaty implementation bodies, strategic litigation, legal support to individual members of the public, education and training, research and investigation and work arising from our Annual Statement. All of these tools are brought to bear as appropriate, in a systematic, integrated and complementary way.

The Commission is committed to implementing its strategic plan on the basis of the principles which underpin our work. The detailed work

programmes to deliver the three pillars will be contained in the Commission's Annual Business Plan.