

# **Independent Review of the progress on the implementation of the Racial Equality Strategy 2015-25**

## **Final report**

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### **Executive Summary**

In writing this report, I had the privilege of listening to some inspiring people doing important work across Northern Ireland, mostly behind the scenes to build bridges and bonds across communities. I am very grateful to the people who have given up their time to engage with me in person, online, over the 'phone, and through our survey to share their views with me on the implementation of the Racial Equality Strategy in Northern Ireland.

I must say that these conversations helped me connect in a profound way with Northern Ireland, its history, rich diversity and the transition that it has made over the years. In my engagements, I have observed a rich tapestry of people and organisations committed to working together to make Northern Ireland a more welcoming, inclusive and equal place for all.

The energy and commitment that the civil servants at the Executive Office put into creating an equal society for all is commendable. The Racial Equality Strategy has created a real platform for collaboration by bringing stakeholders from across the sector to work together for equalities.

While this review is not the final review of this strategy, I do see it as an opportunity to pause for reflection, collate the input and views of a cross spectrum of stakeholders to help identify gaps and set a roadmap to help inform future approaches of the strategy.

I am also conscious that there has been substantial change since this strategy was approved back in 2015. There has been the continued arrival of new people to Northern Ireland, most notably as a result of the crises, initially in Syria and now Afghanistan, Ukraine and Hong Kong BN(O), together with more people seeking asylum dispersed by the Home Office or spontaneously arriving in Northern Ireland. We have also seen the impact of other changes such as the global pandemic and the UK withdrawal from the European Union.

My findings on the implementation of the Racial Equality Strategy drove me to focus on four key areas in my calls for action. The aims of the strategy have been

undermined by the lack of: an action plan; involvement of people with lived experience; and a process for ethnic monitoring; and could have been enhanced by more attention to governance. **My calls to action are:**

### **1. Action plan and budget**

- Develop an action plan with an associated budget, and then each Government Department can develop their own action plan.
- Develop an approach to help existing communities understand better the new arrivals, and to help these new arrivals better understand the existing communities.
- Establish a regular review process so that the strategy can be more agile.
- Ensure equal treatment for all new arrivals no matter where they have come from or how they arrived.
- Revive the Strategic Migration Partnership and agree a Refugee Integration Strategy that is fit for purpose and can withstand the challenges posed by recent legislation.
- Create opportunities for politicians to engage more with the strategy and the communities it aims to support.

### **2. Lived experience**

- Develop a strategy for the meaningful engagement of people with lived experience.
- Enhance volunteering opportunities and peer support groups to help realise the ambitions of the strategy.
- Invest in cultural activities and create platforms that could bring people together for meaningful dialogue and understanding.
- Establish programmes to involve groups that may not engage otherwise with initiatives due to multiple barriers including language, confidence and fear of authority.

### **3. Monitoring**

- Work with universities, public and third sector organisations to build on established good practice around the UK and internationally, to develop a process of ethnic monitoring.
- Identify international norms and guidance to help inform a system that can work for Northern Ireland and its diverse communities.

#### **4. Governance**

- Establish key principles and values for governance that would be the guiding rules for conducting business in the future.
- Consider making more funding and support available for the development of members of the Sub-group.
- Provide more provision for supporting capacity building for ethnic minority groups
- Provide greater external clarity about the role of Racial Equality Champions.
- Develop an associated communication strategy, possibly including a newsletter.

I found hope and a strong desire to improve opportunities for all amongst the participants and through the conversations I have had. Everyone I engaged with wants their communities and the wider society to thrive. I believe Northern Ireland is at an important crossroad to use the change that has taken place for a longer-term transformation of race relations and community cohesion across increasingly diverse communities. I do acknowledge that some of the drivers in this area are reserved to the UK government, but as we progress together on this vital strategy for the future of Northern Ireland, we should never lose sight of the fact that we collectively are in charge of compassion, kindness, and dignity. Together we can make a difference.

#### **1. Introduction**

I was both delighted and intrigued to be approached by the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) to conduct a review of the current implementation of the Racial Equality Strategy in Northern Ireland.

I do not see myself as an expert in racial equality, but as a leader with lived and working experience of the asylum and immigration system, having come to the United Kingdom from Afghanistan, I take huge personal pride in the importance of listening to people to understand issues before beginning to take action. I have been committed to following this approach and the important values of independence and impartiality in this review.

I am currently chief executive of the Scottish Refugee Council and have undertaken this role in a personal capacity. I have had the support of my colleague, Jonathan Ellis, whom I know very well from our work with City of Sanctuary UK.

I saw this review as a unique opportunity both to listen to the views of people in another area about the challenges and opportunities around developing racial equality, as well as having the chance to share my own experiences, having worked both in the

Midlands in England and now in Scotland. I was also conscious that we live in a world that is unequal at so many levels and of the importance of equalities and social inclusion in these contested times.

While this review is not the final review of this strategy, I do see it as an opportunity to pause for reflection, collate the input and views of a cross spectrum of stakeholders to help identify gaps and set a roadmap to help inform future approaches of the strategy. I am also conscious that a lot of the ground I have covered over the past few months had also been covered a year or so ago by the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee. So much of that report remains relevant today, and I would like to think that my report builds on this helpful document and the ambitions outlined in it.

Before I accepted this assignment, I was very keen to establish that I would be able to undertake an independent review. For me, asserting my independence was a critical factor in helping me to decide to engage in this review. I have sought the administrative support of The Executive Office (TEO) to help me with this process, but I am clear that my report has been written independently and reflects my own views having had a wide range of fascinating conversations with people across Northern Ireland.

I have had the privilege of listening to some inspiring people doing important work across Northern Ireland, mostly behind the scenes to build bridges and bonds across communities. I am very grateful to the people who have given up their time to engage with me in person, online, over the 'phone, and through our survey to share their views with me on the implementation of the Racial Equality Strategy in Northern Ireland. I am also very grateful to everyone across Northern Ireland who has worked so hard on this important issue, and would like to acknowledge all of this work undertaken before and during the first strategy, and since the implementation of the second strategy.

An equal and inclusive society cannot be created overnight, but it is a journey, and I have seen a lot of determination, commitment, skills and goodwill that exist at all levels in Northern Ireland.

I must say that these conversations helped me connect in a profound way with Northern Ireland, its history, rich diversity and the transition that it has made over the years. In my engagements, I have observed a rich tapestry of people and organisations committed to working together to make Northern Ireland a more welcoming, inclusive and equal place for all.

I would also like to try to ensure that all readers of my report have clear expectations of it from the start of reading it. So, I would like to be clear on what this report is, and what this report isn't:

### **What this report is:**

- A call to action.
- A call not to hold back the progress being made and the difference made over the course of the strategy but to unleash the potential of both the government and civil society to make Northern Ireland a fairer place for all.
- A call to turn the tide on a lack of progress – often unwittingly – by barriers in the system that are now part of our society.
- A call to acknowledge in full the change we now know is possible.
- My version of my reflections on the progress made to date on the implementation of the Racial Equality Strategy in Northern Ireland
- Focussed just on Northern Ireland
- Written by me independently
- Set up in accordance with agreed terms of reference

### **What this report isn't:**

- A full report of all of the work done on this strategy since its start
- An internationally focussed document
- Criticism of the excellent work and the progress that has been made
- A report written by TEO

## **2. Context**

The Racial Equality Strategy 2015 to 2025 was approved by Ministers and published in the December of 2015. This was the second such strategy with the first one running from 2005 to 2010; although I am unaware of any evaluation of this first strategy before the development of this successor strategy. This omission does strike me as a missed opportunity.

It established a framework for action by Government Departments and others:

- To tackle racial inequalities and open up opportunity for all;
- To eradicate, racism, and hate crime; and,
- Along with the *Together: Building a United Community* (TBUC) policy, to promote good relations, and social cohesion.

The specific outcomes of the strategy were:

- Equality of service provision.
- Elimination of prejudice, racism and hate crime.
- Increased participation, representation and belonging.

- Cultural diversity is celebrated.

There were also seven shared aims:

1. Elimination of racial inequality
2. Combating racism and hate crime
3. Equality of service provision
4. Participation
5. Social cohesion
6. Capacity building
7. Cultural identity

The strategy contained a commitment to establish a network of Racial Equality Champions across all departments in the NI Executive.

These Champions were then to work with the Racial Equality Subgroup, which comprises people working with or representing minority ethnic people and groups.

Furthermore, there was a mid-term stock take of the progress on this strategy undertaken by TEO in October 2021. As a result of this stock take, three priorities were identified:

- Deliver training and development across government.
- Public sector monitoring to provide the data and enable analysis of inequalities.
- Development of the legislative framework.

I am also conscious that there has been substantial change since this strategy was approved back in at 2015. Our world has changed in so many ways. There has been the continued arrival of new people to Northern Ireland, most notably as a result of the crises, initially in Syria and now Afghanistan, Ukraine and Hong Kong BN(O), together with more people seeking asylum dispersed by the Home Office or spontaneously arriving in Northern Ireland, as well as other people arriving such as students, business people and academics looking to live, work and study here. The demographics have and will continue to shift rapidly.

In addition to these demographic changes, we have also seen the impact of the global pandemic and the UK withdrawal from the European Union. In addition, increased globalisation means that we are ever more affected by global events. We live in a world that is in the grip of seemingly ever worse conflicts, all of which affect our lives and the bridges of solidarity across our diverse communities.

We have also seen the dramatic impact of the cost of living crisis affecting communities during the time frame of this strategy to add extra challenges to the prevailing external

context. Linked to this development, we have also seen increasing pressure on Government Departments' budgets.

Furthermore, as was pointed out to me by many of the people I met during this review, until recently there had only been a functioning government in three of the eight years of this strategy.

### **3. Methodology**

No methodology is perfect and we are not academics, but to ensure we have a fuller picture of the context and representatives' views, we adopted various approaches and our methodology for this review was as follows:

1. Background reading and preparation
2. A discussion session held with TEO to help outline expectations and timelines
3. Between 30<sup>th</sup> October and 1<sup>st</sup> November 2023 conducting in person interviews with key stakeholders
4. Up until 12<sup>th</sup> November 2023 receiving responses to surveys
5. Between 23<sup>rd</sup> October and 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2023 conducting online interviews with stakeholders
6. Review key documents and web-based research

During both the in-person and online sessions that I conducted with Jonathan Ellis, we also received administrative support from TEO to help us by taking notes of the meeting and to allow us fully to engage in the discussion. Yet all the people that we met were given the opportunity to request that TEO administrative staff did not join the meeting.

I also set up a dedicated email address for people to let us know about points that they were not able to convey in either the one-to-one sessions or in the survey.

I set out a series of framing questions to help my conversations with people about this strategy over the past few months. These questions are certainly not the only questions, but they outlined the key areas that I sought to explore during this review:

- How do you feel about the Racial Equality Strategy 2015 - 2025?
- Are you clear about the Strategy's aims and objectives?
- Are the current actions of the Strategy relevant?
- What elements of the Strategy do you think are most impactful?

- What progress on implementation do you think has been made?
- What do you think could be improved?
- Has anything held the implementation of the Strategy back?
- Are there any new gaps or things that have arisen since beginning of the Strategy?
- If you could change one thing about the Strategy, what would it be?
- How well is the Racial Equality Subgroup delivering?
- What should be the priorities going forward?
- Do you feel you have had the opportunity to share your views about the progress on implementation of the Strategy?
- Would you like to add anything that was not covered in the previous questions?

#### **4. Findings**

Before I share the details of my findings from the conversations that I had with people from across Northern Ireland, I was keen to share a few contributions that really stood out for me and helped me to frame my review of the Racial Equality Strategy.

In my first interview, when I asked my opening question of how the individual felt about this strategy, I was struck by their answer:

*“I am unsure of the impact of it on my life, and that of my children. We feel removed from the strategy as we get on with the work on the ground with the communities we work with”*

These words stayed with me during the subsequent discussions.

I was also struck by a comment that *“the beauty of difference has been missed out of this strategy.”*

Another person told me that we should be cherishing the history of migration into Northern Ireland post the peace process and the arrival of our new neighbours. They felt that the strategy was:



*“...appealing to our common humanity, understanding the history of Ireland, our island, its migrations; understanding the very successful Chinese, Jewish, Indian communities here been well established in Northern Ireland for many, many years.”*

I was also reminded of the reality for migrants living in Northern Ireland; one person told me:

*“We are a small percentage of the population; census figures show 95/97% of the population are from here. We are a minute population; our needs are immense but priority will be given to louder voices.”*

I was also concerned to hear from a representative of refugee communities that there is a lack of confidence in reporting hate crime. I am conscious that a lot of good work has recently been undertaken around reporting through the Racial Equality Subgroup, but there is clearly a big challenge on this issue. I was distressed to hear of one refugee family moving into a home on an estate and having children throwing eggs at their property. The response to their report was that they were only children. Yet there will be parents behind these children, and it must be awful to have to live in such an environment. There needs to be a much stronger understanding and implementation of hate crime reporting.

I was also concerned to hear about the lack of understanding between the established communities in Northern Ireland and the new arriving communities. I will go on to explore how important it is for the host community to understand who is arriving in their community, but also very importantly, why they are coming, particularly in cases where people are fleeing from persecution to reach a place of safety. But I also heard powerful calls from such new communities that they wanted to have a better understanding of the society that they had moved into. I heard a really strong call for an improved and more balanced approach to educating all of society including understanding about the history of Northern Ireland as well as about the new arriving communities.

The call for a balanced approach to education and awareness does need to be a central part of this vital work going forward.

Yet the fundamental challenge at the heart of this strategy was summed up by one person, who very succinctly replied to one of my questions with their own question:

*How do you integrate people into a segregated society?*

This succinct sentence does seem to sum up very powerfully a key challenge that this strategy is seeking to address.

Nonetheless there is so much potential to build on the good work that has already been undertaken in Northern Ireland on developing racial equality. The mid-term stock take has already collated the progress made to date. And I heard inspiring accounts of action that had been undertaken to enhance racial equality. In particular, I relish the comment from one person who proudly told me that:

*“This place is small enough to be imaginative, creative and innovative.”*

Coming from Scotland, I can only endorse this perspective as I believe whilst certain elements of our lives in the four Nations of the United Kingdom are reserved to Central Government, our devolved Administrations are in charge of good things; love, compassion and kindness - the key ingredients of a successful, inclusive and imaginative societies

### **Main Findings:**

I will now go on in more detail to reflect on some of the precise findings from my conversations on the implementation of the Racial Equality Strategy before then turning to a call to action that I think will help to drive this important strategy forwards.

I have grouped these findings into one of four sections:

1. Action plan and budget
2. Lived experience
3. Monitoring
4. Governance and Structure

#### **4.1 Action plan and budget**

*“The strategy itself has commendable aims but implementing is where it’s falling down due to resources allocated, lack of an executive and competing priorities not achieving what it set out to achieve 8 years into the current strategy.”*

The above quote from one of my meetings, I think very accurately summarises one of the most common themes conveyed to me in my meetings about the implementation of this strategy.

Once this strategy had been signed off by Ministers, there was then no subsequent action or delivery plan and associated budget developed. Furthermore, for five of the eight years of the current strategy, there has been no functioning Government and no Assembly convening to hold the Government accountable for the implementation of

the strategy. However, I understand in terms of staff resources TEO did allocate around 30-40 staff to work on race, asylum seekers and refugees.

The absence of such an action and delivery plan undoubtedly made things more difficult for the Racial Equality Subgroup to monitor actions or focus efforts and resources on areas that were not progressing. And this absence also failed to offer the Racial Equality Champions a real focus for action in each of their departments.

There was a view repeatedly expressed to me that little impact had been made by Government Departments. There was a need for an overall action plan and then for individual departmental delivery plans with a budget, which could then be promoted by the Champions. There was a lack of clarity on the role of the Champions, which I will explore further later, and this problem was compounded by the change in personnel over the lifetime of this strategy.

I also wonder whether the different types of actions and priorities identified in the strategy and the subsequent stock take did not help to give a sense of focus? In my reading of the strategy, I observed that there were:

- eleven proposed actions,
- seven shared aims,
- four outcomes
- and three purposes.

In addition, the midterm stock-take further prioritised two key existing priorities and expanded on another the under Strategy

Furthermore, in the absence of such an action plan and budget, the burden of delivery seems to have been placed on community voluntary organisations with the only funding available, in the view of this sector, being the Minority Ethnic Development Fund (MEDF). In my conversations about this strategy, it did sometimes strike me that all roads seem to lead to this fund. Was this ever going to be realistic? I also wonder with the perceived dominance of this one funding stream that it did somewhat inevitably create a greater sense of competition amongst community voluntary organisations that was not helpful.

I will go on to look at this funding in more detail, but also to credit some of the very helpful changes that were made to this fund over the last few years; nonetheless, this fund does seem to have created some challenges for its recipients. Chief amongst those challenges has been the problem of slow payments to recipients of this fund due to delays with budget approval, which are admittedly not within the gift of TEO. Delays in payments for agreed work does seem to have been particularly problematic for small

organisations, committed to undertaking work, but then not receiving any funding until well into the financial year.

There has also been a big issue on where leadership of racial equality should rest. Should it have been led by TEO? Or should TEO have endeavoured to mainstream this issue, so that all Departments would play a leading role and that collective responsibility and understanding about racial equality could be developed across government? Or should another separate Government Department have taken the lead?

The current children's strategy securing action across Departments was offered to me by some of the people I met as a helpful example of moving a strategy forward.

It was suggested to me that it was particularly difficult for TEO to lead on this issue, because it was the one department that required both Ministers to be in agreement, and it may be easier for a single ministerial department to ensure action. Yet, it cannot be disputed that the overarching nature of TEO put it in a strong position to present racial equality as an issue cutting across all Government Departments. I find it hard to come to a verdict, based on my conversations about where leadership should have rested, suffice to say that a clear action plan and associated budget could have done much to drive forward leadership, accountability and ultimately progress on this strategy. There is no strategy without a clear delivery plan and resource commitment.

The mid-term stock take was a very good idea to endeavour to gain greater focus for action on the strategy. It was clearly helpful at this mid-term point to collate the progress that had indeed been made on the strategy, notwithstanding my comments above. Yet, the three priority areas arising from this review were possibly, somewhat inevitably, pragmatically focused on what TEO could do themselves within Government without taking a wider focus.

Furthermore, the strategy has not been able to be agile or develop at pace with an ability to respond to external events. I will go on to explore later the idea of whether the strategy could have benefited from having a more regular review process, whereby it could have reacted to external developments such as the global pandemic, the UK withdrawal from the European Union or the impact of several pieces of UK Government asylum and immigration legislation including the Illegal Migration Act (IMA).

There has been no flexibility on the strategy, apart from the mid-term stocktake, so it could not keep pace with change. There has been a need for an annual review so that the strategy can adapt to the changing external context and still be relevant.

In the context of this strategy, there is a need to move beyond the Good Relations strategy and a need to widen its scope to include other groups in society. Yet, I do

know that there is a counterbalancing view that there is a danger of doing this because of the minority position of other groups and that their distinctive needs may then be lost.

It may be a good idea to go back to the strategy where there are some very constructive words about the need to embrace TBUC. It may also be helpful for the racial equality subgroup to do a piece of thinking itself about how this strategy could engage more effectively with Good Relations. They could also think about how it may be possible for ethnic minority organisations to be able to constructively engage with Good Relations funding and the overarching ambitions of equalities in Northern Ireland.

A number of people told me that there is a need for racial literacy in Northern Ireland beyond Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI). Following the mid-term stocktake, I know that TEO commissioned training for the Civil Service, and it will be good to see the shape of this new training.

I also know from my experience in Scotland, about the value of the Scottish model of racial literacy<sup>1</sup>, and it could be that some learning could be taken from this experience. I would like to encourage the Racial Equality Subgroup to reach out to their colleagues in other nations especially in Scotland and Wales to explore what learning could be taken from their experience and what learning they could share in return.

But I am also acutely conscious from my own personal experience that change does not happen when people are in a classroom, but when they come together, particularly for a common social purpose.

In Scotland, I have taken particular delight in the annual Burns supper where, in more recent years, I have seen Ukrainian and Afghan versions of this distinctly Scottish social event. Section 2.11 of the Racial Equality Strategy acknowledged that it is more challenging for people in Northern Ireland to have such informal encounters because the minority ethnic and migrant population is so small, but I have rejoiced in these innovative social occasions in Scotland. It would be fascinating to explore how we could look to encourage more such events in Northern Ireland as a more free-flowing and organic way to share understanding, flavours and the richness that is now part of life in Northern Ireland.

I was also told a number of times that there is a need within this strategy to take a wider global lens especially taking learning from Scotland and Wales, the European Union and international human rights. I understand also that there is a UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights document, which could provide a very useful template for developing national action plans against racial discrimination to help drive

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<sup>1</sup> <https://education.gov.scot/professional-learning/learn/programmes/building-racial-literacy/>

this strategy forward. I would be interested to know if any of the other nations have used this guidance in developing their action plans.

## **4.2 Lived experience**

*“My emphasis would be on lived experiences. Working with people from minority ethnic communities is valuable, but it doesn’t automatically grant the understanding of what it feels like to experience discrimination or to be black in Northern Ireland. Those who have not walked in these shoes will never fully comprehend the challenges. To make truly informed decisions, and effectively support marginalised communities, it’s essential to have representatives with lived experience at the decision-making table, contributing as equals in the decision-making process.”*

This powerful quote from one participant summarises one vital element, which has been somewhat neglected, and which could be a very positive force in re-energising this strategy.

There has to be better involvement of people with lived experience (LE), which is both properly funded and supported, and not just to be content to work through third party organisations. The voice of people with lived experience must be heard in a meaningful and sustainable way including co-production and co-design of delivery plans.

There is a strong feeling that minority ethnic communities have been ignored for too long, and that this strategy does present an opportunity to rectify this situation. And if there is one immediate learning from this review is that this must change now.

From my own experience, people from refugee communities often have very low expectations in reporting discrimination and hate crime. Every Monday evening, I hear harrowing stories at a Men’s Group where taxi drivers talk of harassment, hatred and racism experienced. I would encourage people to report but they often say “nothing will happen”. But this is their country and this is their police force.

As I noted in my opening comments, I think that it is so important for people with lived experience of being a new refugee or migrant into Northern Ireland to be given opportunities to talk about their experiences of hate crime and how they either have or haven’t gone about reporting such incidents. We do need to listen to the views of people with lived experience.

This process has also not strategically developed communities. There has been a need for capacity building for smaller organisations so that they can actively involve themselves in the strategy. There is a need for an asset based approach to communities. Our communities are rich and resourceful, and they have so much to offer.

We need a community development approach that is inclusive and a public health, housing and education approach that has social justice and inclusion at its heart.

It has appeared to some people that Roma and Irish Travellers have been merged into one constituency, but it is important to note that they have very different needs, and it is good therefore to see the separate thematic groups for Roma and Irish Travellers. In a similar way, it was also pointed out to me that the refugee population can be perceived as a homogenous group, when again they will have different needs, experiences and aspirations.

Refugees, migrants, Roma people, and Irish Travellers are not homogenous groups. Like all of us they have unique vulnerabilities but also skills and potential to contribute to our society.

I was also told that there is lack of understanding from politicians about Roma communities. The greater involvement of people with lived experience, could do much to change this situation.

As the good work that has already been started on this issue continues, it is so important that the perspective of people with direct lived experience is heard, over and beyond the input from the Racial Equality Subgroup, on an ongoing basis both to set the policy direction, but also to review implementation.

We need to continue to find shared spaces to celebrate the beauty of diversity but also to talk about our individual constraints and collective challenges and opportunities. In a diverse society we cannot assume knowledge of each another's needs, but we must invest in building bonds and bridges across communities and have platforms for formal and informal dialogue amongst communities.

### **4.3 Monitoring**

*“Ethnic monitoring is the litmus test of how successful this 10 year strategy has been.”*

If the above statement from one participant is correct, then the strategy has failed this test so far despite ethnic monitoring being a key part of the strategy, and being one of the three priorities in the mid-term stock take.

One participant pointed out to me that the previous strategy from 2005-10 had also emphasised the importance of ethnic monitoring with section 4.21 stating:

*“ To have a racial equality policy without ethnic monitoring has been likened to aiming for good financial management without keeping financial records.”*

What was true back in 2005, surely is still true today.

Almost everybody that I spoke to talked about the importance of ethnic monitoring in establishing a fundamental baseline for assessing the impact of the strategy. The lack of an agreed action plan to establish effective ethnic monitoring does appear to have been one of the most fundamental challenges in preventing the implementation of this strategy.

We may not be able to have a state of art ethnic monitoring in place over night but what are the lessons learnt from other places to do something different that is less costly and more in line with digital developments? Blaming costs and capacity is not going to help anyone.

Could academics be involved in creating a mechanism that works to identify and tackle ethnic inequalities in education, health and care by facilitating research, making policy recommendations and enabling long-term transformational change?

I heard particular concerns expressed about the lack of ethnic monitoring in the health service, and in particular how such an absence of monitoring is failing to highlight the severe problems caused to people who have No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF). This cannot be right and there needs to be focused monitoring to highlight any such issues happening again.

We also need to be clear about the responsibilities of TEO. They have a duty of care for all communities, and having no data could lead to major issues and potential community tensions.

You cannot resolve a societal issue such as racial equality without the data or having the bigger picture. Monitoring is the stepping stone to racial equality. It is not a luxury but a necessity.

There has been no coherent research approach on the challenges presented in racial equality across Northern Ireland. There is the potential to use local authority data and other research data. I know that academics and universities have a huge role in this. We have seen this happen in Scotland with racial equality and even refugee integration driven by civil society and academia. The 'New Scots' agenda would not have happened without our friends in academia.

#### **4.4 Governance**

*“Good governance and accountability matter”*



This powerful sentence was said to me in one of my discussions about this strategy.

The Racial Equality Sub-group was an important concept identified in the strategy as a key means to drive progress on the strategy. Despite its value, a number of the members raised challenges with me, but also identified possible ways forward

There has been no funding to develop members of the subgroup, to help them develop their potential, and to be effective members of this group.

There is a danger of silos being developed by the Sub-group with the new working groups. Yet I was also told how positive these new working groups seem to be, and there is clearly a role for the Sub-group in co-ordinating these different working groups and ensuring that there are no silos

There was also feeling expressed to me by some that members had been handpicked to join the Sub-group. Yet, a lot of time and energy has been spent by TEO in the recruitment process recently, including use of Census 2021 data, ensuring that there was good community representation. I also understand the view was taken by TEO that using the public appointments system would not be the best way to get representation from some of these communities, considering it is a recruitment process which some in the minority ethnic sector have viewed as a barrier. Nevertheless, there is still an external perception that recruitment is not transparent, and it may be that some greater transparency could be helpful in this process.

And beyond recruitment, there has also been some challenges with people being able to engage with the Sub-group. There should be more consideration about the best time to hold these meetings and it may not be during the working day. More thought should be given to encouraging expense claims both for travel, but also for childcare, and it would be helpful to review what expenses have been claimed up to this point by the Sub-group.

And there is a wider point as to whether there should be some degree of remuneration for participation on this group? Maybe not necessarily individual payment, but there might be some compensation for the organisation for the individual's time spent on the Sub-group.

I think it would be healthy for the Sub-group to explore its own governance arrangements, and to explore other possible governance options such as an independent chair and more involvement of people with lived and learnt experience.

I was also asked whether TEO does listen to Sub-group and whether the Sub-group does have the power to drive action forward. I am clear on the value that TEO does place on the Sub-group, but this is a helpful challenge and it may be good at regular intervals to go back to these two questions and the Terms of Reference for the Sub-

group to ensure that the group is being listened to, and there is a sense of urgency to drive this strategy forward.

A strategy of this scale requires political leadership and goodwill. A number of people pointed out to me that there has been a major challenge with the implementation of the strategy because there have been very few politicians involved, and a perception that it is not a priority for them at this time. The lack of a functioning government for five of the eight years of the strategy surely has not helped, but conscious though the Executive is now back in place, it would have been interesting to explore other ways of involving politicians even during these periods. Racial equality needs to be driven at a senior level, although race relations may take place at community level. Racial equality cannot be realised if the burden remains entirely on the goodwill of communities and voluntary organisations.

*“We are not sure who they are and how they work. Champions could be a catalyst to progress work here.”*

*“Champions cannot be a tick box exercise and I do not know what they do.”*

The strategy has been hampered by a lack of clarity about the role of the Racial Equality Champions in each Government Department, and their degree of authority and oversight. This is disappointing, as so many people commented to me that this was such a welcome development and had had such potential for the implementation of the strategy. Equally Champions are put in a difficult situation without relevant support, training and clarity of expectations.

There has also been a lack of clarity from outside the Civil Service about who these Champions actually are and what they are meant to do. But to be fair to the Champions, the lack of an associated action plan, with the departmental actions specified, must have made it very difficult for them to perform this role.

The lack of a functioning Strategic Migration Partnership must also be seen as being a concern with the resulting lack of accountability for delivery and use of public money. The revival of this partnership should be a priority for this strategy.

I detected a high degree of confusion around the running of the Minority Ethnic Development Fund (MEDF), both on its purpose and the requirements of the fund; yet from the TEO perspective, there was real clarity about it. There was also a perceived conflict of interest from some of the people that I spoke to for TEO in both running the Sub-group and the MEDF. There could be some benefit in ensuring that the same team is not both running the Sub-group and also administering the main source of funding for many of the members on that group.

There also appears to have been a challenge in delivering effective communications around this strategy. I'm conscious that one can never communicate enough, but I do think the different perceptions between such issues as the running of the MEDF and whether or not the public appointment system should have been used for the subgroup, tends to suggest that clearer more effective communications could have been helpful to ensure that all parties are on the same page.

The idea of a regular newsletter for the implementation of the strategy could be an excellent idea of just one action to improve external communication and understanding around the development of this strategy.

#### **4 Calls to Action**

We live in a rapidly changing and fragile world. Investing in racial equality, taking decisive action to improve equality of opportunities and nurturing relations across diverse communities are key necessities in these unprecedented times of demographic change in our society.

From the conversations I have had with people, despite the challenges, Northern Ireland, given its rich history, diverse communities and resourcefulness has the potential to be a leader in racial equality. But that is a journey to be taken together and these calls to action aim to be a shared journey for everyone to make Northern Ireland a more welcoming, inclusive and fair place for everyone looking to work, study, live or simply seek sanctuary in this beautiful nation.

My calls to action are aimed at practical things that are possible to do in Northern Ireland with collective will:

##### **1. Action plan and budget**

Building an equal society needs investment, time and meticulous planning. Everyone including Government Departments and local communities need to be able to see themselves in the strategy, monitor progress and be able to support the delivery and implementation of the strategy.

Equally, elected members must show oversight, accountability and leadership in ensuring key goals within the strategy are on track.

We may not have millions for this work but we must quantify what could be achieved within the limited capacity and resources available. What does good look like and what do we need to do to get there?

- Develop an action plan with an associated budget, and then each Government Department can develop their own action plan, which will be a key focus for their Racial Equality Champion.
- Develop an approach to help existing communities understand better the new arrivals, and to help these new arrivals better understand the existing communities.
- Establish a regular review process so that the strategy can be more agile.
- Ensure equal treatment for all new arrivals no matter where they have come from or how they arrived, making sure they all have equal access to rights and fair treatment by devolved administrations: a rights based approach and integration from day one.
- Revive the Strategic Migration Partnership and agree a Refugee Integration Strategy that is fit for purpose and could withstand the challenges posed by recent legislation. There need to be transparent on new developments. People need to know what resources are invested by the Home Office in Northern Ireland, and what gaps there are and how are those being addressed.
- Create opportunities for politicians to engage more with the strategy and to understand all the communities it aims to support.

## **2. Lived experience**

Northern Ireland is shaped by experiences of suffering but also hope, resilience, courage and renewal. The story of Northern Ireland reflects the journeys and experiences of many that now seek protection in this nation.

By involving the lived and learned experiences of communities, there is a greater potential to eradicate inequalities and create fairer and more understanding communities.

- Develop a strategy for the meaningful engagement of people with lived experience.
- Enhance volunteering opportunities and peer support groups to help realise the ambitions of the strategy.
- Invest in cultural activities and create platforms that could bring people together for meaningful dialogue and understanding.
- Establish programmes to involve groups that may not engage otherwise with initiatives due to multiple barriers including language, confidence and fear of authority.

## **3. Monitoring**

Asking tougher questions on essentially how current approaches and strategy will make Northern Ireland fairer. Not all of this is about money – much of it is about having the right approaches, cultures and values, as well as sharing power more directly.

- Work with universities, public and third sector organisations to build on established good practice around the UK and internationally, to develop a process of ethnic monitoring.
- Identify international norms and guidance to help inform a system that can work for Northern Ireland and its diverse communities.

#### **4. Governance**

- Establish key principles and values for governance that would be the guiding rules for conducting business in the future.
- Consider making more funding and support available for the development of members of the Sub-group.
- Provide more provision for supporting capacity building for ethnic minority groups
- Provide greater external clarity about the role of Racial Equality Champions.
- Develop an associated communication strategy, possibly including a newsletter, to enhance communications around the implementation of the strategy.

I have no doubt that some of these findings and calls to action will be challenged by some readers of my report. Yet I hope that these findings generate a discussion, and above all I hope that these findings help people recognise that while they may not agree with all of these points, being different from their own lived experience, these points have been the perceptions expressed by individuals, and therefore expressions of their lived and learned reality.

I hope this report in some way increases dialogue between both the majority and minority communities to better understand each other's perspectives, and to help come up with associated action plan to ensure effective racial equality across Northern Ireland and to better welcome, celebrate and nurture the beauty of difference in this society.

These calls to action are not a criticism but an opportunity and a call for action to shift racial equality in Northern Ireland at this critical time. I believe if implemented in full, my calls to action have the power to transform racial equality in Northern Ireland.

As we progress together on this vital strategy for the future of Northern Ireland, we should never lose sight of the fact that we collectively are in charge of compassion, kindness, and dignity.

## Appendix

### Other policy and practice considerations

There are also a lot of other policy and practice issues, which came up in my conversations, and which people felt should be included within this strategy. I did not want to lose sight of this list of issues, and have chosen to include it as an appendix for my report :

- The strategy should cover all social policy areas including housing, health, education and employment.
- There is no clarity on dealing with the impact of No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) within the strategy. There should also be a greater connection between the strategy and the Crisis Fund.
- There is a need for employment legislation that reflects the demographic changes and the current make-up of the diverse communities in Northern Ireland, and it was repeated to me, time and time again, that this issue is not just for Protestant and Catholic communities.
- A number of people emphasised to me, their strong feeling that there is a real importance in the Schools of Sanctuary initiative, which has accelerated across Northern Ireland. Schools play a vital part in integration with young people developing their own perspective on diversity.
- There is a need for greater awareness amongst the police of racial equality and better community understanding of police priorities.
- There is a need for greater focus on bullying and promoting the hate crime app.

*“The Refugee Integration Strategy is still in draft, and collapse of Stormont is not helping progress. Ten years ago, we were talking about the RIS, and we are still not there.”*

- There is no refugee integration strategy; although I am aware that there is a draft strategy, but this has yet to be approved. I was told people have waited 18 years

for such a strategy. Furthermore, MLAs have no access to the Home Office to be able to deal with emerging case work issues. I was also told that there is no Home Office presence in Northern Ireland, which also presents real challenges. There is an opportunity for TEO to explore how Northern Ireland could register its pledge for refugees with the Global Refugee Forum (GRF). The Office of the UNHCR Representative to the UK could advise on this. Scotland registered its own pledge in December at the GRF. It is not just about numbers but more about how Scotland would treat refugees. I think Northern Ireland could do the same to give it more of a vision on how refugees will be supported to global standards.

- A number of people highlighted to me that there are key policies missing in Northern Ireland such as on Irish Travellers, Roma people as well as refugee integration. This strategy cannot itself address these structural gaps.
- There is a need for better engagement with new arrivals into Northern Ireland and for a trauma approach to mental health for new arrivals.
- The mental health needs of second and third generation migrants were also identified to me as an issue needing further analysis.
- There has been disparity of service provision, with multi-protection schemes in operation such as with Ukraine. There should be equal treatment for all new arrivals. This is an important principle for effective integration. The most important element of the work of the racial equalities is to continue to build and nurture people's trust in equalities.
- There is a need for specific action to help Roma people to acquire settled status after Brexit. This may require a specific action to help the process of status determination for those that are rendered undocumented as a result of the UK exiting the European Union.
- Work needs to be undertaken to understand the impact resulting from Brexit and the Covid pandemic. It is also important to reflect on Black Lives Matter, and how it shaped global approaches to equality and the subsequent soul searching. I welcome the good practice in Northern Ireland and would particularly like to highlight the statement by the Racial Equality Sub-group in the light of murder of George Floyd.
- The cost of living crisis is having an impact on society as a whole, including Government budgets, but the impact is disproportionately affecting newly arrived groups. The pandemic and the cost of living crisis bring to the surface some of the inequalities and injustices faced by new migrant and refugee communities. At the same time economic pressures mean that Government

Departments' budgets to help progress equalities are squeezed. However, it is important that initiatives aimed at addressing the cost of living are for everyone and that no one is left behind in this crisis and any future crisis we may face as a society. That the duty of care for all communities, irrespective of where they have come from or how they have arrived, must be fully discharged by the Government.

- The cost of living crisis has also aggravated the context for hate crimes, particularly the damaging language of “us and them” pursued by senior politicians that has created divisions and sense of doubt amongst communities.
- There also needs to be more work around the impact of Article 2 of Windsor Framework on racial equality. The Windsor Framework recognises that EU law has provided a ‘supporting framework’ for the rights, safeguards and equality of opportunity protections in the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement 1998. In Article 2, the UK Government commits to ensuring that certain rights, safeguards and equality of opportunity protections are not diminished as a result of the UK leaving the EU.<sup>2</sup>
- With social housing there is no access for new arrivals and when they do so, I was told, it is not always safe for them. Again, this area of policy requires greater understanding.
- There is a need to do more to achieve the recognition of qualifications of migrants.
- Funding for translation services is a major concern for ethnic minority organisations.
- Finally, I was told that there is a better model for such a strategy arguably from the disability and LGBTQ sectors, which could help to inspire work on racial equality.

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<sup>2</sup> NI Human Rights Commission and Equality Commission for NI, ‘NIHRC and ECNI Working Paper: The Scope of Article 2(1) of the Ireland/Northern Ireland Protocol’ (NIHRC/ECNI, 2022).



**List of Organisations consulted through in-person engagements, online engagements and survey**

African and Caribbean Support Organisation NI

Alliance Party

ArtsEkta

Belfast City of Sanctuary

Belfast Jewish Community

Bomoko NI

British Red Cross

Chinese Welfare Association

Department of Education

Department of Finance

Equality Commission for NI

Forward South Partnership

GEMS NI

Health and Social Care NI

Inter Ethnic Forum

Law Centre NI

NI Council for Racial Equality

NI Human Rights Commission

North West Migrants Forum

Public Health Agency

Racial Equality Division, the Executive Office

South Belfast SureStart

South Tyrone Empowerment Programme