

TITLE/ORGANISATION	Racial Equality Subgroup - Single Item Agenda Meeting
VENUE:	MS Teams
DATE/TIME:	20 th June 2025 – 3.00pm
List of Attendees:	<u>Subgroup & Working Group Members</u> • Susan Russam (Chair) (GEMS NI) • Paul Noonan (ECNI) • Nisha Tandon (ArtsEkta) • Ivy Goddard (Inter Ethnic Forum) • Takura Makoni (ACSONI) • Gaelle Gormley (deputising NWMF) • Jill Robinson (Flourish NI) • Geoff Phillips (Barnardo's) • Martin McDonagh (Chair of the Travellers Thematic Group) • Katy Radford (Belfast Jewish Community) • Tara Lewis (deputising British Red Cross) • Micheal Avila (Victims Support NI & Chair of the Hate Crime, Legislation & Access to Justice Working Group) • Hannah Russell (deputising NIHRC) • Fernanda Hermosilla (deputising NIHRC) • Lori Gatsi-Barnett (deputising ASCONI) • Livingstone Thompson (Chair of the Racist Bullying Working Group) • Paul Yam (Wah Hep) • Mary Hegarty (Bryson Group) • Monika Ciok-Giertuga (North Down YMCA) • Justin Kouame (Migrant Centre NI) • Suleiman Abdulahi (HAPANI) <u>TEO</u> • Orla McStravick – Director of Race Relations & Integration • Paul Naylor – Head of Race Relations Development & Delivery • Peter McCusker – Head of Racial Equality Legislation • TEO Officials <u>Guests</u> • Michelle O'Neill, First Minister • Emma Little-Pengelly, deputy First Minister

1. Welcome and Apologies

- The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting and expressed her appreciation for everyone attending at such short notice.
- The Chair advised that the meeting had been called in response to the violent disorder in Ballymena and other areas.
- The Chair noted that her thoughts were with the victim of the alleged sexual assault and that she hoped the justice process would now be allowed to take its course.

2. First Minister and deputy First Minister Address

- The Chair advised members that, due to the serious nature of the situation in Ballymena and surrounding areas, the First Minister and deputy First Minister were in attendance.
- The Chair gave Ministers an opportunity to address the Subgroup.
- First Minister, Michelle O'Neill (FM), thanked members for the opportunity to join the meeting and expressed her sadness that recent meetings had been in relation to such awful events.
- FM stated there was no cause that could justify the recent violence and that her thoughts were with all those affected.
- FM noted that there had been early coordination and engagement with the PSNI and that they were taking a strong approach to offenders.
- FM highlighted the publication of the Refugee Integration Strategy and noted that its delivery would support the Department's work on racial equality.
- FM assured members that The Executive wishes to allay the genuine fears within the minority ethnic community and thanked the Racial Equality Subgroup for the work to support those affected.
- The deputy First Minister, Emma Little-Pengelly (dFM), spoke about the continued tension on the streets and condemned the violence that had been generated by misinformation and racism.
- dFM highlighted the need for developing prevention strategies going forward.
- dFM expressed her thanks to the Subgroup for their ongoing support and advice.
- The Chair thanked Ministers for taking the time to attend the Racial Equality Subgroup meeting and opened the meeting for member updates.

3. Member Updates

- Ivy Goddard (IG) thanked Ministers for their time and provided an update on her work with victims in Ballymena.
- IG spoke of the long-term impact the violence would have on the town, including on employers and investment. IG highlighted the lack of recent long-term investment and new housing, which affects everyone.
- IG expressed concern about how to reassure people that Ballymena is safe and that this wouldn't happen again.
- IG queried if there was interim funding available for vulnerable people without access to any other support. Officials to investigate **[AP1]**.
- Suleiman Abdulahi (SA) thanked Ministers for meeting with the group and expressed gratitude for the work done by the PSNI to contain the violence.

- SA thanked NIHE for the support they provided to a victim whose family home was burnt down. SA noted that their efficient action and attention had restored the family's faith and feeling of community and belonging.

4. Open Discussion

- Katy Radford (KR) thanked Ministers for their time and noted the importance of the arts when looking for solutions to cultural cohesion.
- Gayle Gormley (GG) spoke about the difficulties faced by minority ethnic people in Derry~Londonderry and the rise in racist incidents in the area and within schools. GG noted that children are repeating racist misinformation that they've seen on social media and highlighted the importance of schools providing stricter policies against racism.
- Paul Noonan (PN) emphasised the need for teachers to receive training on how to respond to racism within schools and for anti-racism to be embedded in the curriculum. PN noted that The Equality Commission is ready to engage on this topic.
- Michael Avila (MA) highlighted the work that Victim Support NI is providing to victims who have experienced hate crime.

[FM left the meeting.]

- Geoff Phillips (GP) highlighted concerns regarding children who have been caught up in the disorder. GP queried whether there was funding available to support children that have been affected and if there were initiatives in place to tackle the misinformation children are hearing.
- Livingstone Thompson (LT) expressed concern regarding terms like 'legitimate concerns' and how this term has been used to justify violence and racism. LT highlighted the need to show the value of migration within Northern Ireland.
- Paul Yam (PY) highlighted issues regarding the low conviction rate of hate crime and noted that, to give confidence to the communities affected, sentences need to fit the crime.
- IG noted that to date they have been able to accommodate the families that have been displaced, however, they are now at their limit. IG queried if there were safe spaces available if there were future incidents of violence **[AP2]**.
- dFM thanked everyone for moving around their diaries and making time for the meeting.

5. Points Shared Following the Meeting

- The NIHRC added the following comments after the meeting:
 - A victim-centred, trauma-focused response is required. The very practical and immediate issues that need to be addressed were raised by others throughout the course of discussion around housing and access to services, which we support. However, there is a broader point about realigning the narrative as was eloquently put by several interventions today about celebrating migration and promoting social cohesion, including through the arts. With that in mind it is sad to hear and seems to be contrary to this that several Refugee Week events have been cancelled due to fears and that people are being advised to

pre-emptively leave their homes (albeit temporarily) due to rumours of unrest. We appreciate that it is a delicate balance between enabling people to get on with their lives, ensuring safety and working with the resources that are available for protection. However, is there a rebalance that can be had that sees the protests and riots disrupted and racism put in its place, so that positive events and day-to-day lives can continue, as opposed to the other way round.

- Additionally, points were raised on challenging the myths, mistruths and hate speech that have been influencing the protests and riots. These absolutely need to be challenged and counter-acted with facts and promotion of social cohesion, community support and a human-rights based approach. However, this is an opportunity to assess the best way to get those factual messages out. Unfortunately, there are not many who will listen to a simple list of facts and figures. In addition to exposing and challenging them as the abhorrent commentary that they are, it may be useful to look at the racist and discriminatory messages themselves from a different angle and assess what is it about their delivery that is so successful in influencing people and if some of these 'successful' approaches could be utilised to counter that narrative. For example, how is the message being delivered – is it visually, in short spurts, through humour etc. Much may not be useful for this purpose, as you do not want to make a mockery of the important message being made, but there might be something of use. This should also be with the long-term aim of the facts becoming the narrative, as opposed to playing catchup. This requires a more strategic and long-term approach, with the aim of making anti-racism and promotion of human rights and equality dominant in the narrative.
- It was raised that children are being particularly affected by these issues and we very much support all of the points that were raised. We would emphasise the point around child criminal exploitation. It is welcomed that there has been a recent shift in narrative within the NI Executive on this. This is an opportunity to put that into practice. It is also an opportunity to address the inaccuracies and racist rhetoric that are fuelling the actions of children involved in the protests and riots in the long term, as opposed to criminalising the children involved, which denies wider opportunities and entrenches the hatred and racism.

ACTION POINTS/OFFICIAL RESPONSIBLE/TARGET DATE:

- **AP1** – To provide information on the funding available to those without leave to remain – TEO.
- **AP2** – To provide information on the provision of emergency accommodation – TEO.

Minutes written by:
TEO Secretariat

Date:
23 June 2025