

Racist acts are outlawed under criminal law, equality legislation exists in order to stop discrimination, and there are structures in place to protect groups and individuals.

The Belfast Agreement of 1998 refers to equality and parity of esteem for people from different social, religious and ethnic backgrounds. This has been given legal backing. Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 obliges public bodies to promote equality of opportunity between different groups of people, including 'racial groups'. They are also obliged to promote good relations between people of different religious belief, political opinion or racial group. Public bodies are obliged to have Equality Schemes and to submit their policies to Equality Impact Assessments that are open to public scrutiny.

Under the Race Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 it was already unlawful to discriminate either directly or indirectly on racial grounds, in terms of employment and training; education; provision of goods and services; and the disposal and management of premises and advertisements. The Human Rights Act 1998 gave people rights to protection under the European Convention on Human Rights. A Human Rights Commission and Equality Commission have been set up in Northern Ireland to ensure that existing legislation and practice protect and uphold human rights and equality. They also have an advisory role on these issues.

The Racial Equality Strategy for Northern Ireland 2005-2010 had 6 aims:

To eliminate racial inequality through ensuring equality of opportunity in all aspects of life

To provide equal protection and redress against racism and racist crime

To ensure equality of service provision for minority-ethnic people in accessing public services

To increase the sense of participation and belonging of people from minority-ethnic backgrounds in public, political, economic, social and cultural life.

To promote dialogue and mutual understanding between people of different faiths and cultural backgrounds

To build capacity within minority-ethnic communities

(The **Office of the First and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM)** plans to publish a new draft Racial Equality Strategy in 2012.)

A Racial Equality Forum was set up to help draw up an action plan, to implement the strategy, and to monitor and review progress. It was in abeyance for some time but has been revived following an Assembly resolution.

The Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) has trained Hate Incident and Minority Liaison Officers (HIMLOs) in each district and has published advisory leaflets in English, Polish, Lithuanian, Portuguese, Mandarin, Russian, Latvian, Slovakian and Romanian. [Access the leaflets here](#)

## **Criminal Penalties**

From 2004 judges have been given greater powers in sentencing where hostility is based on a number of categories including race. The maximum penalties for violent crime and criminal damage have been increased.

## **Unite Against Hate**

OFMDFM, the Equality Commission, Community Relations Council, Northern Ireland Office Community Safety Unit and the PSNI have initiated the Unite against Hate campaign, which was launched in September 2009, in order to challenge the prejudices that result in hate crimes. This provides opportunities for ordinary people to demonstrate their opposition to the minority who carry out all forms of hate crime, including racism. Groups such as the Irish Football Association, Gaelic Athletic Association, Belfast Festival at Queen's and Culture Night Belfast, have pledged support for the campaign. To find out more or sign a petition of support, go to [www.uniteagainsthate.org.uk](http://www.uniteagainsthate.org.uk)

### **Local Authorities**

A number of local authorities have developed anti-racism initiatives either through Good Relations of Community Safety work.

**For more definitions and information on the law read**

***[Racism is Illegal You Have Rights](#)***