

Consultation response from EMBRACE NI to

A Sense of Belonging: Delivering Social Change through a Racial Equality Strategy for Northern Ireland 2014–24 prepared by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister

EMBRACE is a group of Christians drawn from different denominations, working together to promote a positive response to people seeking asylum, migrant workers and people from minority-ethnic backgrounds in Northern Ireland. EMBRACE seeks to reflect gospel values, and equip the Church to fulfill its call to welcome the stranger, by providing information, training, and resource materials, and acting as a channel to assist those in need. Our strap line is 'Building a Welcoming Community' and we want to see a society where relationships are marked by mutual respect.

EMBRACE welcomes the draft Racial Equality Strategy (RES) and its aspiration to combat racism and racial inequalities, its recognition of the negative effect of our conflict on minority-ethnic people and the need for a holistic approach to tackling both racism and sectarianism. We do, however, feel that there are ways in which the draft strategy can and must be improved.

General Points

Strengthening the final strategy

Along with other groups in the sector we feel that the final strategy needs to be much stronger and include robust action plans for all government departments, district councils and publicly funded bodies and groups. It would also be helpful if there was an analysis of the systemic nature of racism as something that pervades our society for a complex range of historical and contemporary reasons and that we all need to work to build a community where racism no longer exists. It should never be seen as a problem caused by a 'few bad apples'.

Monitoring and evidence

The mechanism for monitoring how action plans are carried out will need to be equally strong. It is important that there is better evidence gathering in order to make it easier to monitor progress in all the areas of racial equality/inequality.

Justice and human rights

The strategy must not stand in isolation but should describe how government here has statutory obligations under international human rights treaties, conventions and United Nations recommendations in relation to the elimination of racial and other forms of discrimination, the protection of minorities and people who are forced to flee from their country of origin.

Our race-relations legislation should be brought up-to-date urgently, as outlined by the Equality Commission (www.equalityni.org/Delivering-Equality/Equality-Themes/Racial-equality.aspx), so that minority-ethnic people here have the same protection as in the rest of the UK.

The final strategy must make it clear that hate crime is not acceptable and there should be a robust action plan to ensure that the public understand that it will not be tolerated.

Measures should be taken to ensure that our criminal justice system enables more hate crimes to be prosecuted and that more convictions are accompanied by the additional tariff marking the seriousness of hate crime.

The strategy should not imply, however, that racism is caused by the words and actions of a few bad people or that some local communities can be labelled as racist. (See also above under Strengthening the final strategy.)

The positive contribution of minority-ethnic people

Churches can evidence the important role that minority-ethnic people are playing in parishes and congregations and in the caring professions and in local communities. It is important that any strategy does not reinforce the idea that minority-ethnic people are merely vulnerable potential victims of racial inequality. Their contribution to our society should be demonstrated and validated.

Additional comments:

Education

Some young people will be failed by our education system if special measures are not put in place to ensure that they are in a position to access the education that is available. It is not equitable to put children who have no experience of formal education into classes appropriate to their age but not their level of experience and skill and expect them to succeed. Children, such as those in the refugee community who have spent their early years in war zones, need special provision to ensure that their lives are not blighted and future social problems created.

Adequate resources for capacity building and the development of relationships

It is inequitable that the OFMDFM Minority Ethnic Development Fund only provides 75% of core funding while other government funding provides full costs. It is particularly hard for groups that are finding their feet here to be expected to find additional funding in a funding climate where even more long-established groups are experiencing difficulties.

Capacity building within minority communities is very important but it is equally important that there is funding for the two-way work of integration which encourages relationships between minority-ethnic people and more established communities at local level in order to reduce tension and build cohesion.

A Refugee integration strategy

We welcome the statement that there is a good case for a refugee integration strategy (p. 24). Northern Ireland is currently the only area of the UK not to have a Refugee Integration Strategy. In its early years the central aim of the EMBRACE group was to raise awareness within the Christian community about the issues faced by people seeking asylum here. We have therefore been well placed to see how people in the asylum system face the same problems as migrant and resident minority-ethnic people but with additional burdens such as pre-existing trauma, the stress and uncertainty of the asylum process and greater isolation because they are few in number, have often not chosen to come here, and are usually not allowed to work. The fact that Northern Ireland is not a UK dispersal area for asylum applicants means that statutory agencies can be unfamiliar with dealing with members of the refugee community and this can further add to their difficulties. The relatively recent formation of an informal Refugee and Asylum Forum (following an EMBRACE initiative of bringing people from the statutory and voluntary sector together to network) has revealed problems that could be solved by an integration strategy.

Inclusion strategy for Roma people and Travellers

Other groups have distinctive needs. We feel that consideration should be given to an inclusion strategy for Roma people and Travellers.

EMBRACE supports the Common Platform response to the draft RES and encourages OFMDFM to take full advantage of the expertise and goodwill within the Common Platform groups in order to help to make the final strategy as excellent as it can be.

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