



CONS 586
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Equality Commission for Northern Ireland
Equality House
7-9 Shaftesbury Square
Belfast BT2 7DP

16 February 2006

**Equality for all – continuing progress in a changing environment
Corporate Plan 2006-2009**

Dear Evelyn

We are pleased to have the opportunity to respond to the Equality Commission's draft corporate plan. We agree with the sentiments contained in the foreword such as the commitment to build the case for equality and bring the message to the entire community. However there doesn't seem to be the same commitment to the good relations duty. Similarly, the mission does not refer to the need to build a culture of good relations in order to challenge sectarianism and racism. We would also query the differentiation between equality and equality of opportunity in the mission statement, which may lead to confusion.

In reviewing the landscape, the fact that the commission dropped some cases in the past and the perceived lack of positive outcomes from the Section 75 equality duty have led to much disillusionment among the public and voluntary and community sector. We recognise that lack of resources was a factor but we would argue that the commission should act as the driver for equality and good relations. We would recommend heightened communication with the public about the benefits of a culture of equality and good relations, to move the debate on from flags and marches. Public interest will influence politicians' priorities, with potentially positive results across the work of councils, other public bodies and a future assembly. We would welcome more information about public affairs work with political representatives and about plans to engage with the voluntary and community sector and minority and vulnerable communities.

We welcome the listing of priority areas but would point to the absence of good relations to counter sectarianism and racism. The foreword states that a corporate plan is a real opportunity to allow an organisation to make clear statements of intent, to take stock and to point the way forward in a manner that is clear, concise and unambiguous but we would suggest that there are still areas that need to be clarified.

This would also indicate the need to provide guidance in language which is not in legalese eg among other things rather than inter alia.

We would also like the plan to include more actions such as production of revised guidance to reflect the findings of the five year review of equality schemes and the effectiveness review. (The plan does not mention a commitment to producing an equality scheme on the part of the commission which would represent an opportunity to model best practice.) For your information, the voluntary and community sector took part in a discussion about the terms of reference for the effectiveness review but there has been no feedback since the meeting.

We would also suggest that the plan should contain some information about memoranda of understanding between the various agencies working in the fields of human rights and good relations in order to clarify the roles of the various bodies. Further consideration of the connections between socio-economic deprivation and equality would also be helpful.

We note that the commission will include performance and impact measures in the plan to be presented to the sponsor department for approval. We suggest that there are two issues here – it is very important that the commission is, and is seen to be, independent of government, that this commitment should be reflected in the plan and that the commission should consult on the measures. We would also welcome information about proposed timeframes.

We hope you will find these comments useful and look forward to further discussion.

Yours sincerely

Anne Moore
Public Affairs Officer