

Summary of Commission Investigations for Website

August 2025

Overview

Step 1: Identify human rights issue that is 'systemic' and 'necessary' or 'expedient'. This can be by the Commission or through a request to the Commission from an individual, group or organisation. Requests can be made via email, phone or post. See below for the relevant contact details.



Step 2: Guided by the NI Act 1998, the [Board of Commissioners](#) of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission will decide whether to undertake an investigation and on what topic.



Step 3: If Commissioners decide to undertake an investigation, a Terms of Reference is developed and published.



Step 4: Seek written and oral evidence related to the investigation topic within a set timeframe, established in the terms of reference.



Step 5: The Commission publishes a report of its investigation findings.



Step 6: The Commission aims to publish a one-year follow-up report to an investigation to encourage implementation of its recommendations.

End of overview.

What is an investigation by the Northern Ireland

Human Rights Commission?

Under the Northern Ireland Act 1998, the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission has the power to investigate human rights issues that are deemed “necessary” or “expedient”. This aligns with the Commission’s function of reviewing the adequacy and effectiveness in NI of law and practice relating to the protection of human rights.

An investigation by the Commission aims to establish whether potential human rights violations have occurred and to make recommendations to public authorities on how to remedy and prevent these in the future. An investigation by the Commission will focus on issues of strategic concern.

When exercising its powers of investigation, the Commission is required to establish a terms of reference for the investigation, which sets out what the topic and parameters of the investigation are, how the investigation will be conducted (including how evidence will be gathered and from whom), and how long the investigation will take.

During an investigation, the Commission can seek written and oral evidence related to the investigation topic within a set timeframe, established in the terms of reference. Evidence related to the investigation can be sought from any person, such as public authorities, private companies, representative organisations, or individuals with lived experience. Depending on the circumstances, this evidence can be obtained voluntarily, or through a notice of requirement (which can be subject to a court order if not complied with).

Additionally, the Commission is required to publish a report of its investigation findings. This will be based on the evidence gathered during the investigation. The investigation report will likely include recommendations from the Commission on how to address any potential violations identified during the investigation.

Who decides if the Northern Ireland Human Rights

Commission starts an investigation?

Guided by the NI Act 1998, it is for the [Board of Commissioners](#) of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission to decide whether to undertake an investigation.

When can the Northern Ireland Human Rights

Commission conduct an investigation?

An investigation by the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission will focus on issues of strategic concern. Typically, the Commission will consider individual human rights issues of concern through its human rights advice clinic (contact details are [available here](#)).

That said, an investigation by the Commission does not necessarily involve a human rights issue that directly affects a large number of people. It also does not have to be a human rights issue that has wider public support. It can be an issue that affects only a small number of people, but where there has been a prolonged failure to resolve the human rights concerns involved.

An investigation by the Commission may also involve a human rights issue that is linked to a history of discrimination and stigmatisation, which can mean that it has received negative public interest. However, if addressed, it would have a significant positive effect on the small number of people affected. An investigation would also provide a reminder of public authorities' obligations and challenge the prejudicial views that exist.

Typically, the Commission can only conduct one investigation at a time, depending on available resources.

It is also usual for the Commission to publish a one-year follow-up report to an investigation to encourage implementation of its recommendations. Typically, it is only after this follow-up is completed that the Commission's resources will be freed up to consider conducting another investigation.

How will the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission decide what human rights issue to investigate?

After considering some initial research into the proposed topic and the requirements set out within the Northern Ireland Act 1998, the Board of Commissioners of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission may select a human rights issue for investigation of their own initiative.

Additionally, if you have a potential human rights issue that you would like to request that the Commission investigates, this can be forwarded to the Commission for consideration via:

- **email (info@nihrc.org)**, with 'potential issue for a Commission investigation' in the subject line of the email and identifying that this is the purpose of your request in the main body of the email;
- **phone (028 9024 3987)**, stating that you are wishing to suggest a 'potential issue for a Commission investigation'; or
- **post (Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, 4th Floor Alfred House, 19-21 Alfred Street, Belfast, BT2 8ED)**, identifying that it is 'a potential issue for a Commission investigation'.

Your request will be forwarded to the Commission's Director of Policy (Advice to Government, Research, Investigations and International Treaties) for consideration.

What restrictions are there on the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission conducting an investigation?

For the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission to consider conducting an investigation:

- the issue being considered for investigation must relate to Northern Ireland;
- the issue being considered for investigation must involve potential or actual violations of human rights;
- the issue being considered for investigation must fit within the legal obligations set out in [sections 69-69D of the Northern Ireland Act 1998](#);
- the issue being considered for investigation must not have already been sufficiently investigated by another person (e.g. civil society organisation, statutory body or expert organisation);
- the issue being considered for investigation must be manageable and focused. It should not be too broad;
- the issue being considered for investigation should be systemic and not focus on individual circumstances only. These may be more appropriately addressed through exercising the Commission's legal powers. Information on the Commission's legal powers is [available here](#);
- the Commission should be best placed and have the capabilities to conduct the proposed investigation; and
- the Commission must have the resources to conduct an investigation. An investigation is very labour intensive and requires particular expertise.

What examples of previous Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission investigations are there?

The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission previously conducted the following investigations:

- [Relationships and Sexuality Education in Post-Primary Schools in NI: A Compelling Case for Reform](#) (2023);
- [Out of Sight, Out of Mind: Travellers Accommodation in NI](#) (2018);
- [Human Rights Inquiry: Emergency Health Care](#) (2014);
- [Racist Hate Crime: Human Rights and the Criminal Justice System in NI](#) (2013); and
- [In Defence of Dignity: The Human Rights of Older People in Nursing Homes](#) (2012).