



NORTHERN  
IRELAND  
HUMAN  
RIGHTS  
COMMISSION

Strategic Plan  
2013–2016



# The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission – Mission 2013-2016

## Introduction:

The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (the Commission) has undertaken an extensive process to decide its strategic priorities for the period 2013-2016. In so doing it has reviewed every element of the organisation's past activities and current practices. It has consulted widely with stakeholders and with the Commission's staff. It has reflected deeply on the findings of the review and consultation process. On this basis the Commission has revised its mission statement, affirmed its core principles and identified three pillars on the basis of which it will work.

## How we see ourselves:

The Commission was born out of a recognition that human rights values and standards need to be at the heart of our society if we are to achieve well-being, peace and justice. Northern Ireland must continuously re-affirm its commitment to core human rights and invigorate the work of building a fair society that upholds human dignity. All of us will be measured by how best we seek to honour and respect each other's human rights, especially those of the most powerless in society. The Commission recognises the central role it is called on to play in this vital work.

## Our Mission Statement:

The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (the Commission) champions the human rights of those who live in Northern Ireland. The Commission is Northern Ireland's human rights guardian and centre of excellence. It holds to account and works in partnership with Government, elected representatives, statutory organisations and civil society.

The Commission, established on the basis of the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement, plays a central role in shaping a society that, as it emerges from conflict, respects the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by upholding human rights and responsibilities.

## Our Principles:

The Commission promotes and abides by the core principles of human rights, including:

**Legality and Independence:** The Commission operates on the basis of international human rights law, in compliance with a statutory mandate and independently of the State. The Commission works for the promotion and protection of those human rights to which the United Kingdom (UK) is legally committed at the national, regional and international levels and does so on the basis of the mandate conferred upon it by law and in full conformity with the UN Paris Principles.

**Non-discrimination and equality:** The universality of human rights requires that they can be enjoyed by all people on the basis of non-discrimination and equality, a principle that is reinforced in Northern Ireland by provisions of the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement. The Commission honours this principle, above all, by affording priority to protecting the most powerless in society addressing the needs of vulnerable individuals and those who are marginalised.

## The equal status of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights:

Human rights, as recognised in the treaties, have equal value and status and must be implemented in an integrated or "indivisible" manner. The Commission

respects this principle in its work and promotes full implementation in all engagements with the State and other partners.

**Participation:** Meaningful enjoyment of human rights must be based on participation by the holders of human rights in any processes that may impact on their well-being. The Commission is committed to involving rights-holders in all relevant areas of its activities and it strives to promote broader participation across society.

**Accountability:** The enforcement of human rights requires that “human rights duty-bearers” be held accountable. For this to happen, decision making must be transparent. The Commission honours these requirements in all its own actions. It demands similar standards in public life and calls to account all those with responsibility for the promotion and protection of human rights. The Commission supports existing independent oversight and accountability mechanisms.

**Partnership:** The promotion and protection of human rights requires the commitment of all who live in Northern Ireland, mindful that their rights are balanced by responsibilities. It demands the engagement of Government (central, regional and local), elected representatives, statutory bodies and civil society. The Commission plays a pivotal role in building and sustaining the necessary partnerships. It does so in the context of its role as a National Human Rights Institution with UN-accredited (“A Status”). The Commission also recognises the importance of its partnership with the other UN-accredited human rights institutions of these islands.

**Building a culture of human rights:** A goal of the human rights system is to establish societies that embed human rights at their heart – that reflect a “culture of human rights”. A society that honours the culture of human rights is one where human rights values explicitly guide society. The Commission is committed to the fostering this culture in Northern Ireland. In so doing it recognises the challenges presented in a society that has experienced a protracted and tragic conflict and within which community divisions run deep.

## Directing our Mission 2013-2016

### The Three Pillars:

**Pillar One:** Human Rights and Good Governance.

Human rights need to be embedded at the heart of the executive and legislature, reflected in our basic legal framework and honoured in the operation of all offices of State. The challenges in these regards include the complexity of our constitutional system, the nature of our devolved jurisdiction and the relative newness of many of the governance structures.

**Actions:** The Commission will continue to support the development of a strong indigenous framework for human rights-compliance on the part of the State. It will continue to advise Government in support of a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland. It will monitor, advise and support public servants - including local government and the Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS) - to carry out their functions in a human rights-compliant manner. In particular it will help develop capacity for rights-based commissioning and delivery of services in the health and social care sector.

**Outcomes:** The Commission will have supported the embedding of and capacities for human rights across Northern Ireland's governance structures, at all levels and including in the framework of service delivery, especially in the health and social care sector. It will have published annual statements on human rights in Northern Ireland. It will have advanced the process for a separate Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland. It will have ensured that UK-wide human rights initiatives take account of the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland and that these do not diminish existing protections or in any other way impede the distinct Northern Ireland Bill of Rights process.

**Pillar Two:** Human Rights and the Conflict.

The legacy of conflict runs deep in Northern Ireland. There remain serious gaps in accountability, justice and inter-community reconciliation. Division and sectarianism result in violence and other forms of hate crime. Lives continue to be blighted and lost.

**Actions:** The Commission will foster a human rights-based understanding of "transitional justice" in Northern Ireland and further develop its own work programme on the topic. In so doing, it will pay particular attention to the situation of victims and survivors and of former prisoners convicted of conflict related offences. The Commission will challenge racism, including sectarianism and all its manifestations and will contribute to the promotion of good community relations. The Commission will undertake pioneering work on the human right to culture (including in terms of the right to acknowledge and celebrate diverse linguistic and other senses of individual and community identity). In recognition of the relationship of peace, equality and

non-discrimination, the Commission will continue to play its role in combating discrimination including on such grounds as race, disability, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, ethnicity and age.

**Outcomes:** The Commission will have stimulated a new phase of consideration of how Northern Ireland undertakes a wide-ranging programme of transitional-justice, taking account of international good practice. In so doing, it will have ensured that significant advances are made in addressing the particular situation of victims and survivors and of former prisoners convicted of conflict related offences. It will have demonstrated how human rights need to be at the heart of good community relations. The Commission's work on the protection of the human right to culture in post-conflict societies will have been of international significance. The Commission will have contributed substantially to ensuring that a post-conflict Northern Ireland is a more equal and non-discriminatory society.

**Pillar three:** Protecting Human Rights in a Time of Austerity.

Economic recession and austerity measures have led to unemployment and budget cuts that impact deeply on the enjoyment of human rights, including the right to an adequate standard of living. While those who are already at a disadvantage suffer the most, it has to be recognised that recession impacts for the human rights of all the people of Northern Ireland.

**Actions:** The Commission will closely monitor the State's compliance with its socio-economic duties, including that of ensuring an adequate standard of living.

It will focus attention on the needs of those who are most powerless including persons with disabilities; children in the care of or detained by the state, prisoners; ethnic minorities (including Travellers) and persons in need of health and social care. It will advise government and its agencies on the achievement of these rights during a time of public spending constraint. The Commission will provide human rights capacity-building support to the State and other actors.

**Outcomes:** The Commission will have ensured that legislators and policy decision-makers address economic challenges with the understanding that human rights protection is a priority matter. It will have brought to the forefront of their attention the impact of austerity measures on the most powerless in society addressing the needs of vulnerable individuals and those who are marginalised. The Commission will support their voices to be heard and those community and voluntary organisations working on their behalf. It will have transferred skills to relevant State actors for rights-based socio-economic decision making.

### Implementing our Mission 2013-2016

The tools at the disposal of the NIHRC include advice to Government legislators and policy decision makers, support to individual member of the public, education and training, research and investigations. All of these tools are brought to bear, as appropriate, in a systematic, integrated and complementary manner.

The Commission is committed to the conducting of its mission in 2013-2016 on the basis of its revised Mission Statement, in full conformity with its Principles, and in implementation of the strategic priorities identified within each of the three pillars.

The respective work programmes are to be found in the Commission's Business Plans.

## Contact us

If you would like to know more about the work of the Commission, or any of the services we provide, please contact us.

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