

To: Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission  
Temple Court  
39 North Street  
Belfast, BT1 1NA

From: The Community Relations Council  
6 Murray Street  
Belfast  
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**Issue: Strategic Plan 2006-2009**

Firstly the Community Relations Council would like to congratulate the Commission on the enormous amount of work undertaken over the last 6 years, training sessions, publications, legal cases and government responses, especially considering their limited resources. We also like to use this opportunity to welcome the newly appointed Chief Commissioner, Monica McWilliams, along with her new team of Commissioners; their commitment will ensure the good work done during the last six years will continue. Human Rights is central to helping our communities move forward together and the Commission, alongside other statutory bodies, have in place a series of checks and balances to monitor and report on the progress we are making.

As with other responses the Community Relations Council concentrates on examining the impact of proposed strategies on community relations and good relations. Along with the Human Rights Commission, CRC is committed to the same principles of equality, diversity, tolerance and our mission is *'To lead and support change towards a peaceful, inclusive, prosperous, stable and fair society founded on the achievement of reconciliation, equality, co-operation, respect, mutual trust and good relations'*<sup>1</sup>

The Human Rights Commission rightly acknowledges that they are now operating in an ever growing field of statutory agencies, each with differing roles when it comes to promoting human rights, equality, community and good relations. The Commission also states that they will continue to work with the different partnerships to ensure the delivery of human rights for all. The Community Relations Council supports this view and believes it is essential that all bodies understand their roles and responsibilities when it comes to promoting a shared and an inclusive society. We look forward to continuing our work with the Human Rights Commission over the next number of years, especially with the area of 'building a human rights culture in Northern Ireland'. This programme of work will include developing and promoting policy and programmes to tackle sectarianism and segregation, and will require the commitment of different bodies.

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<sup>1</sup> COMMUNITY RELATIONS COUNCIL STRATEGIC PLAN 2004-2007

CRC would be particularly interested in the proposed outreach work of the Human Rights Commission planned over the next few years. Perhaps this is an area where our partnership could be strengthened to promote dialogue and understanding surrounding the human rights agenda – equality, diversity, inclusion etc. Again the Commission seeks clarification as to its particular role on issues such as ‘minority and vulnerable groups ...travellers and challenging racism...’. Under a Shared Future, the roles and responsibilities of the Community Relations Council will be enhanced and we need to ensure that the appropriate bodies are clear about what areas they are in charge of and minimise duplication.

Under the Good Friday Agreement/The Belfast Agreement, the Commission was given the specific task of advising the government on which new rights could be added to existing rights, to form a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland. This process began in 2000 and included widespread consultation with social partners, voluntary and community groups, and individuals etc. With over 300 responses received, this disclosed the magnitude of the task ahead. The final Bill will have to have the confidence and consensus of the community. Already a lot of issues have been examined and this work needs to be built upon. It is for this reason that CRC would encourage the Commission to continue to develop and build on the good work already done.

It may be difficult to make substantive progress especially within the current political climate but we urge the Commission not to lose sight of the final objective. Like “A Shared Future”, solutions are not found overnight, but the creation of a final Bill and its implementation will be another positive step for our society. With limited resources it is imperative that the Commission remains focused, and continues to develop partnerships and support for a Bill of Rights. In spite of the political stalemate the Commission can make progress and CRC will support its activities to achieving its aims and objectives.

CRC hopes to continue dialogue with the NIHRC on the issues outlined in this response and looks forward to continuing its productive working relationship.