

THE NORTHERN IRELAND FEDERATION OF HOUSING ASSOCIATIONS

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Carolyn Brown
Policy and Development Division
Equality Commission for Northern Ireland
Equality House
7-9 Shaftesbury Square
Belfast
BT2 7DP

Dear Carolyn

Re: Promoting Good Relations Consultation

I refer to the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland's (ECNI) consultation document entitled Promoting Good Relations – A Guide for Public Authorities

The Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations (NIFHA) represents 44 independent voluntary organisations, which benefit the community by providing affordable accommodation and related housing services to those in greatest housing need. Taken together, our members manage almost 30,000 units of accommodation and build over 1,500 dwellings each year throughout Northern Ireland. In the last twenty-five years housing associations have undertaken a range of projects in response to the needs of a diverse society including the provision of accommodation and services for particular groups and the promotion of good relations.

On behalf of our members, NIFHA welcomes the document and would like to add the following comments to those raised at your public consultation event:

1. Our member associations are positive about Promoting Good Relations and supportive of mixed community housing (or 'shared future housing by choice') as evidenced by Ulidia's scheme in Fermanagh, however:
 - they recognise that many people in Northern Ireland choose to live in segregated rather than integrated communities and this can have an influence their housing choice and by default the makeup of a particular association scheme;

- they are also conscious of the need to avoid putting individuals or families at risk. There are situations, (e.g. people seeking housing who are not from Northern Ireland) where a balance has to be struck by providing sufficient background information to allow the applicants to make an informed choice on whether an area will be suitable for them but steering clear of deferring to racist or sectarian prejudices.
2. It is important to appreciate that Promoting Good Relations through 'shared future housing by choice' is a complicated task and presents a number of challenges:
 - it must be achieved within the confines of the Housing Selection Scheme (which is based on need);
 - has to avoid the use of quotas as this would be inverse discrimination, and could even be seen as social engineering;
 - housing associations will not necessarily have influence over future residents in a property e.g. if the house has been sold and the association is not in a position to buy it back when the original tenant decides to move.
 3. It is essential that the focus on producing strategies such as the Good Relations Strategy mentioned in this Guide or the ECNI's request for Disability Action Plans does not dissipate the impact of what are often limited resources by focusing on documentation/process at the expense of putting important work into practice.
 4. A bank of examples of good practice in this area would be an invaluable resource for all organisations working in this area and could avoid 'reinvention of the wheel' situations. A web based version is probably the most useful method of managing this resource as it would be easier to develop and amend.
 5. The majority of case studies reported in the Guide cover large public authorities, more examples from smaller bodies would give balance to the document and also encourage organisations with limited resources (both human and financial).

I am pleased to be able to contribute to this process on behalf of the registered housing associations and would be happy to discuss the issues highlighted in greater detail if a meeting would be helpful.

Yours sincerely

LUCINDA McMURRAN
Corporate Services Manager