

Into the Light

Foreword by

Joan Harbison, Chairman

Following its establishment in August 1997, the Commission for Racial Equality for Northern Ireland (CRE for NI) became aware of how little was known about the delivery of services to members of minority ethnic communities. This deficit was being met by a number of voluntary groups including Save the Children, Barnardos and the Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities, which had established the *Out of the Shadows* steering group to manage an action research project examining the effectiveness of service provision to minority ethnic groups.

The research report, which was launched in December 1997, set the agenda for the Commission's discussions with Government Departments and Agencies responsible for public services. It has always been the Commission's intention that the response to the deficits in provision, identified in *Out of the Shadows*,¹ should be reviewed after a year to assess the progress being made to address them. Hence the *Into the Light* conference.

As it happened the timing of the conference proved fortuitous. It coincided with the Equality Commission Working Group's consultation document on the establishment of a single Equality Commission in line with the provisions of the Northern Ireland Act (1998). This Act includes a statutory obligation on all public bodies to promote equality in public sector delivery. The conference also, coincidentally, fell on the day after publication of the Macpherson Report on the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry which, for the first time, officially recognised institutionalised racism in a major public service. All of these factors raised the profile of equality of opportunity and service provision in the public consciousness.

CRE for NI believes that the papers presented to the *Into the Light* conference should influence and guide the Equality Commission in considering the kind of public services needed by members of minority ethnic communities in the same way as *Out of the Shadows* has influenced developments over the last two years. The proceedings published in this book identify the difficulties and obstacles which still impede access by minority ethnic groups, including Travellers, to services in relation to health, social services, social security, education and policing.

Irish Travellers are named in the Race Relations (NI) Order 1997. Their history, culture, traditions and nomadic way of life in the island of Ireland are specifically protected. Accommodating their nomadic lifestyle is a challenge to all settled people. Travellers have long been seriously marginalised and disadvantaged and progress in reversing this is proving painfully slow.

Likewise, many of the difficulties which other minority ethnic groups face in relation to culture and language are only very gradually being recognised and only a little progress is being made. It will require substantial political will and commitment on the part of the Equality Commission to ensure that this rather uncertain beginning becomes steadier and gains momentum, so that our society will be truly inclusive and meet the needs of those from different racial backgrounds.

The Commission is very grateful to the *Out of the Shadows* Steering Group for their co-operation in planning and organising the conference and for their commitment to driving forward the equality agenda for people from minority ethnic groups living in

¹ Mann-Kler D, *Out of the Shadows: An action Research Report into families, Racism and Exclusion in Northern Ireland*, published jointly by Barnardos, Belfast Travellers' Education and Development Group, Committee on the Administration of Justice, Chinese Welfare Association, Craigavon Asian Women & Children's Association, Indian Community Centre, Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities and Save the Children, 1997. *Out of the Shadows* was the starting point for all the conference papers and is not separately referenced for each contributor.