

Mike Nesbitt (UUP), Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

My name's Mike Nesbitt, I'm one of the 108 MLAs here at the Northern Ireland Assembly. I represent the constituency of Strangford. I'm also the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, and in that capacity, I chair the Committee of the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, or OFMDFM.

OFMDFM is one of the 12 departments in the Northern Ireland Executive, and each one has what's called a statutory committee, which monitors what they get up to. If you were looking for one word about the work of the committee of OFMDFM, I think that word is "scrutiny." And that doesn't mean that we criticise, it simply means we look at what they're doing and what they're proposing to do, and we make recommendations when we think they could do it better. Or, indeed, we praise them if we think that they're doing it well.

TBUC – Together Building a United Community

When I was young in the early 1970s, I remember one night my father put me in a car and drove me up the Craigantlet Hills in East Belfast, and we watched Belfast burning as Catholics burned Protestants out of streets, and Protestants burned Catholics out of streets. And we now live in a largely segregated society. Of course, we have segregated schools and all the rest. And politically, we don't want that. We want people to share space, and to share experiences.

And the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister have put that into a policy called TBUC: "Together Building a United Community." And the idea is that we look at things like the peace walls in Belfast and how we might get to a point, maybe, in eight or nine years' time, when they go away.

We look about how schoolchildren can share campuses. Maybe not have a single school, but maybe have three, four, five schools on the one site. We look at how we get people to come together, perhaps young people going on summer camps together and getting to know people they mightn't normally spend time with. Because if we're going to get rid of sectarianism, and we're going to have a society that everybody can take a stake in and be proud of, we need to share.

And that's the challenge which TBUC, "Together Building a United Community" addresses, and it is very important for its success that it's from the ground up. That young people like yourselves are the ones who come forward and say, "This is what we want, and this is how we can make it happen."

Age Discrimination

One of the major policies that the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister are looking at at the moment, is how to combat age discrimination. And that's in the delivery of facilities and goods and services. So, for example, sometimes a group of schoolchildren, at a break time, might go into a newsagent's and the newsagent mightn't let them in because he's afraid that if there's a dozen young people running about, somebody might put something in their pocket. And that is discriminatory to think that that might happen, that theft might occur simply because of your age.

And similarly, older people sometimes feel they're discriminated against. They might say, want an operation and the doctor might decide, "Well, because you're in your 90s and resources are limited, I'm actually going to give the operation to somebody who's in their 70s or their 60s, or their 50s." So we're looking at legislation which would outlaw age discrimination in terms of how you are treated in your day to day lives.

But because OFMDFM is a joint office between the DUP and Sinn Féin, they don't always agree on things. And they've disagreed on age discrimination to this extent: Both parties agree that they want to outlaw age discrimination against older people, but only one of them wanted to make sure there was no discrimination against under-16s. So actually, younger people, to some extent, are going to lose out in this legislation because they're not going to be covered, and, I suppose, the hope is that this legislation is a step towards the final goal of outlawing all age discrimination. But it's not the endgame, as we've said.

Racial Discrimination

Racial equality, and making sure there is no discrimination against people because of their race is a very interesting subject for me. Recently, I was in Milltown Cemetery in West Belfast, which is famous for the plot that commemorates Irish Republicans, so it's not somewhere that a Unionist goes very often. But the reason I was there was because some members of the European Parliament from Poland were in Belfast, and they wanted to visit the graves of Polish airmen who lost their lives in the Battle of Britain during the Second World War.

So we went and laid some wreaths in memory of them. And I think it's interesting that we have this history of Polish airmen coming into Northern Ireland, based on the Ards Peninsula. More flying and dying in the RAF than Northern Irish people did. And yet, today the current Polish community in Northern Ireland comes under attack from people in purely racist hate crimes. And it seems to me, the people who are committing these hate crimes have no idea of what the Polish people did in support of the United Kingdom, and the free Western world, during the Second World War, when they stood up against Hitler and Nazism. So I think it's very important that we try and educate people in the history of our relationships with people who are not of this country or this island.

And unfortunately, it is going to be essential to bring forward a strategy and some legislation to make sure that our ethnic minorities, as we call them, are protected from ethnic hatred and from hate crimes.