

BELFAST JEWISH COMMUNITY

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16th January 2019

Mr J Walsh LL.B. LL.M.
Town Solicitor
Belfast City Council
Chief Executive's Department
City Hall
Belfast
BT1 5GS

Dear John

I enclose a submission from the Belfast Jewish Community in relation to the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of antisemitism which I would be grateful if you could take into consideration when preparing your report to Council.

Kind regards

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Submission to Belfast City Council by the Belfast Jewish community regarding the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of antisemitism.

The Belfast Jewish Community calls upon Belfast City Council to show solidarity with the community in the face of rising antisemitism by indicating the Council's support for the IHRA definition of Antisemitism.

The Belfast Jewish Community in recent years has experienced attacks on property, including desecration of one of its cemeteries, daubings and attacks on the synagogue, and serious threats and abuse on social media.

National recorded instances of antisemitism have been at a record high level for the past two years – with over 100 serious instances recorded every month by the Community Security Trust, an NGO that records and monitors antisemitic incidents.

In common with other Jewish communities nationally and internationally, the Belfast Jewish Community regards the IHRA definition of antisemitism as a crucial tool in identifying and tackling antisemitism.

The Belfast Jewish Community looks to Belfast City Council to recognise the importance of the definition to the Belfast Jewish Community and in consequence to express its own support.

The Belfast Jewish Community notes the definition has been adopted in full by over 150 local authorities across the UK as well as the UK Government, Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly.

Why a definition of Antisemitism is necessary

Antisemitism has been called 'the Longest Hatred'. It can come in many shapes and forms: street racism, state-backed terrorism, lunatic conspiracy theories, sly remarks, Holocaust denial and inversion, or in supposedly intellectual and academic works which is why definitions of antisemitism are important in guiding agencies in tackling it.

The IHRA definition is nearly identical to the definition issued in 2005 by the European Union's Monitoring Centre for Racism and Xenophobia. Then the EU's leading anti-racism body, it drafted the definition because of rapidly worsening antisemitism across Europe. Their definition was for diverse European police forces, prosecutors and governments to better understand antisemitism, so their actions against it could be better assessed by European anti-racism officials and Jewish communities. Since then the situation has worsened with thousands of Jews have fled France, Belgium and other countries. They have faced suspicion, blame, exclusion, hatred, attack and murder on the supposed basis of anti-Israel hatred. In Britain, the situation is slightly better.

The examples in the definition and criticisms of Israel

The definition states that 'criticism of Israel similar to that levelled against any other country cannot be regarded as antisemitic', but points out that antisemitic language is sometimes directed at Israel. It then gives a list of behaviours that 'could, taking into account the overall context', indicate antisemitism. It is not legally binding but it can be helpful in identifying antisemitic speech or images, and is recognised by the Jewish community as the standard non-legal definition of antisemitism. Many of the examples in the definition are used to help guide agencies in determining the context of antisemitic hate crime.

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How freedom of speech is protected.

The definition is non-binding. It is used as a guide for law enforcement. Free speech on any subject to do with the Middle East remains protected. Using anti-Semitic language whilst talking about the Middle East is no excuse for antisemitism.

The IHRA definition has straightforward caveats that guard against it being misused to curtail freedom of speech. They are plainly expressed:

“Criticism of Israel similar to that levelled against any other country cannot be regarded as antisemitic.”

“Contemporary examples of antisemitism...could, taking into account the overall context, include...”

Support for the IHRA definition from Governments, local councils, political parties and other bodies.

The definition has been adopted by the Conservative Party, the Labour Party, the Liberal Democrats, the Scottish National Party and Plaid Cymru. It has also been adopted by over 160 local authorities in England, Scotland and Wales, including the Combined Authorities of Greater London, Greater Manchester, Liverpool City Region and Tees Valley. This is in addition to the devolved administrations in Scotland and Wales.

Alongside the government, the CPS have adopted the definition to assist in prosecutions of antisemitic hate crime.