

Meeting of the All Party Group (APG) on Ethnic Minority Communities

Date: Tuesday 14th of December 2010
Venue: Parliament Buildings, Stormont (Room 274)
Time: 12:30pm

Attendees

Political representatives:

Chair - Anna Lo MLA (Alliance), Billy Leonard MLA (Sinn Fein), Declan O'Loan MLA (SDLP), Steven Agnew (Green Party).

BME sector representatives:

Margaret Donaghy (Multi-Cultural Resource Centre), Patrick Yu (NICEM), Moira McCombe (NICRAS), Helena Macormac (NICEM), Joan McGovern (Barnardos Tuar Cethea), Sophie Romantsoff (NICEM), Muhammad Al-Qaryooti (Belfast Islamic Centre), Ashok Sharma (Indian Community Centre), Maria Ellis (Women of the World).

1. Apologies

Political representatives:

Dawn Purvis MLA (Independent)

BME sector representatives:

Bobby Rao (Strabane Ethnic Communities Association), Mr Sandhu (Sikh Cultural Centre, Derry), Frances Wong (Oi Yin Women's Association), Phoebe Wong (Oi Yin Women's Association), Edwin Graham (Bahai Council for NI), James Holmlund (Bahai Council for NI), Eileen Chan-Hu (Chinese Welfare Association), Ivy Ridge (Ballymena Inter Ethnic Forum).

2. Approval of the minutes of the last meeting

Minutes of the last meeting were approved.

3. Matters arising from the last meeting

- **Proposed Detention Centre in Larne:**

Michael Golden, Assistant Director of the UK Border Agency gave a brief presentation concerning the proposed detention centre in Larne

The UK Border Agency opened a new office in Drumkeen House in 2009, which is now running at full capacity. The team has been looking at alternatives to the current detention arrangements in Northern Ireland. The current system is not appropriate for those who have committed immigration offences as they have to be detained in Police cells, whilst these cells are alright that are not ideal. This also makes the removal process very slow (usually 5 days). Detention is the last resort for the UK Border Agency and it

was necessary to find a better way to detain people refusing to cooperate or return to their country voluntarily.

The UKBA were informed that planning permission was granted this morning to make the space suitable, the money is in place for them to do so. So the centre is definitely going ahead and will be fully operational by Summer or Autumn 2011.

The UKBA has acknowledged that there been some misinformation about the centre, partly generated by the BNP. The facts reported were unhelpful and inaccurate and effectively amount to scaremongering.

The centre will be a short term holding centre and not a detention centre as in Scotland or England. The centre will not be used as a dispersal centre. The centre is for adults only. No children will be detained there. The UK Border Agency believes that the centre will provide better access to legal aid and solicitors and will reduce pressure on Police cells.

Muhammad Al-Qaryooti related the case of a community member who was detained and moved to new premises every couple of days, which made it extremely difficult to have access to legal advice. The community member was originally detained under terrorism powers but the matter became an immigration issue. Michael said that he is not aware of the case and could not comment on the specifics but he is happy for the secretariat to pass on information to him.

Declan O'Loan asked if any figures around the capacity of the centre were available yet. Michael answered that there will be a maximum of 17 beds available. People will be held for 5 to 7 nights on average. There will be around 20 people held each week

Declan asked what will happen to families with children. Michael answered that detention is really the end of the line and that every other alternative would have been tried before resorting to detention. Families with children would be in touch with social workers. There are many stages before detention is enforced and every person will be offered voluntary return. If people find themselves detained, it will only be for a very short period of time. Micheal confirmed that more details would be available shortly on the process for families with children. The Immigration Minister, Damian Green will make a proposal on this approach imminently. There will be a fresh approach incorporating 4 stages. People who will be detained and removed are only people who have no legal rights within the UK.

Declan asked if there was any consultation with the local council regarding the project. Michael acknowledged that he initially hadn't appreciated that there would be significant interest in the proposed facility as it was a low key change. He acknowledged that at the end of the day the UKBA were wrong to assume there wouldn't be more interest and he apologized for that.

The UK Border Agency has been meeting with the District Policing Partnership and planning companies. The planning permission will be published very soon. Declan expressed his amazement at this lack of

foresight. He found it extraordinary that the UKBA did not think that consultation with the local population was necessary beforehand.

Declan further inquired if the facility would be for people willing to return. Michael answered that no, it would not be for any families with children or people who wanted to return.

Billy Leonard also expressed his amazement at such low key planning arrangements. He asked if there was a real need for such a centre, set aside from the planning context. There are other solutions to detention such as a bail system (which was proposed at a recent meeting with Amnesty International). Was this ever investigated by the UK Border Agency?

Michael answered that every detention situation is reviewed every 24 hours. People are already offered the possibility to apply for bail. They are always offered voluntary return too, which very few take up. The process is extremely difficult but short term holding facilities will always be better than what is available at the moment in Northern Ireland.

Ashok Sharma asked a question about the point based system and licences for people employing non-European staff. The system is very confusing and there is a real shortage of qualified chefs in Indian restaurants. Michael said that he was not in position to answer the question. Patrick Yu suggested to have a specific meeting on immigration issues at a later date as today's meeting is really about Larne's detention centre. Michael agreed that he would be willing to come back to participate in such a session, this would be organised through the secretariat of the APG.

Muhammad said that often people were led to believe if they went home they could seek help in their own country, but often this was not the reality and then they could not appeal the decision to deport them, this exposed many vulnerable people to dangerous situation.

Michael answered that there are two types of immigration detainees:

- individuals who have no basis to remain in the UK, no visas or over-stayers,
- and failed asylum seekers (who receive help and are put into contact with the Internal Office for Migration to ease their return).

No individual will ever be returned if they are a genuine refugee.

Steven asked if the number of 30 000 people detained per year in the UK was correct. Michael answered that the figure probably corresponds to the number of people returned to their home country per year.

Steven asked if there were any discussions with the Department of Justice in Northern Ireland, even though immigration is a reserved matter. Michael answered that the centre will be placed under independent scrutiny. It is not clear yet who will be inspecting it. Each centre has strict standards that need to be met.

Steven asked if the level of security in the centre would be the same as in common law prisons as Immigration detainees are not criminals. Micheal

answered that many of the specifications have been altered. Fences have been lowered and lighting has been minimised. Immigration detainees are criminals, they have been committing a crime by deception and this is a breach of the law.

Muhammad asked if there would be any prayer facilities in the centre. Michael confirmed that there would be prayer facilities and association rooms. The set up will be much better than what is currently available.

- **SEEDS Submission**

SEEDS will be invited to future meetings. The Terms of Reference of the All Party Group have been amended and groups interested in BME issues will now be able to join subject to MLAs approval after they have made a submission to the group

4. Letter from the Immigration Minister to Dawn Purvis

A letter from Damian Green MP, the Minister for Immigration at the Home Office was submitted to the group on behalf of Dawn Purvis MLA, the letter highlighted the volume of correspondence received by the UKBA. As immigration is a reserved matter, the lines of accountability are through the minister and his colleagues. The purpose of the letter was to reiterate the policy that MLAs should not forward on correspondence on immigration issues to the Minister, instead individuals should be redirected to their appropriate constituency MP. The letter also stated that the UKBA will not respond on the details of any individual cases, the detail of any individual cases will be taken in to account.

5. Report back on Racial Equality Panel Progress

- **Crisis Fund**

Anna Lo asked a supplementary question on the Crisis Fund for those with no recourse to public funds. She stated that the answer she was given was very vague, they didn't provide any definite details other than the Racial Equality Sub-group on immigration would look at it further.

- **New Racial Equality Strategy**

The Racial Equality Panel agreed on the need to have a new Strategy, based on the 6 aims of the existing one. The current document shall be re-written to reflect new priorities since the last strategy was written. It is hoped that consultation with ethnic minority groups would be organised in order to inform new and additional priorities. More details will be available after the Panel's next meeting. Ken Fraser was invited to come to the All Party Group meeting to give more details.

Patrick Yu proposed that officials from the Racial Equality Unit of the OFMDFM should be invited at each meeting. They already receive minutes

from the APG meetings so are informed of what is happening during the meetings.

6. Group presentations

- **Women of the World**

Women of the World is a registered charity based in county Fermanagh. It was created in 2001 and they will be celebrating their 10th anniversary next year. Members come from many different countries around the world. The aim of the organisation is to bring women from different backgrounds together in a safe environment and to promote cultural diversity.

Under Peace II funding, 2 years ago, Women of the World developed a training project with a team of trainers on Cultural Diversity in 30 schools. The funding has ended for this project but the organisation keeps offering cultural presentations and training. The training is called Cultural Diversity but is designed to challenge attitudes and racism, rather than merely promote cultural arts.

Maria Ellis is still the project officer and can be contacted by phone and email (her details can be obtained from the secretariat).

Women of the World currently run two other projects:

- the “Voices” project, which documents the experiences of BME individuals living in Northern Ireland.
- The “Active Families” project, which looks at health issues for BME families.

Steven mentioned the role of the local councils in anti-racism work. Muhammad stressed the need for a partnership between the counties on Cultural Diversity. There is a great need for Islam awareness trainings but very little funding for BME groups to do so.

Maria said the support of the local media has been quite helpful over the past years. Patrick stressed Steven’s point about the local councils, particularly with regard to the development of a local infrastructure to develop the local ethnic minorities’ voice. The role of the local councils is crucial after RPA especially with regard to the determination of the local services such as health, education, etc. It is essential to provide anti-racism training for the wider society, cultural arts events alone are not effective in tackling racist prejudice. The capacity of BME groups should be developed further so that they can deliver more than cultural arts events. Peace III funding should have been given to BME groups to enable this but unfortunately it wasn’t. Financial cuts are going to hit BME groups very hard.

Steven asked if Maria had any data of the number of BME people in Fermanagh. Maria answered that the local council commissioned a research few years ago, finding there were over 2000 BME people living in Fermanagh.

6. AOB

As usual there will be a rotation of office bearers in January. Dawn Purvis will be the incoming Chair and Steven Agnew will be the Vice Chair. With the local

elections in May it is likely that the last meeting of the group before the summer recess will take place in March. The group thanked Anna for her dedication in chairing the meeting over the past months.

Ashok mentioned that the Indian Community Centre has launched their exhibition on the Indian Heritage project. This is the result of two years of hard work. The project launch took place in the Ulster Hall last Thursday, over 100 people attended. The exhibition will stay in the Ulster Hall until the end of December and it will then move to the Indian Community Centre until the end of March.

Patrick Yu proposed to discuss the impact of the cuts and access to public services as an item on the agenda for January's meeting as the budget will be published by then. Patrick also confirmed that there will be a presentation from Queen's University Human Rights Centre on the project "Opting-Out of Religious Education".

There was further discussion on the need to have another point of view on detention centre than the one from the UK Border Agency as there have been some more concerns on the detention of illegal immigrants. The main actors will be asked to come to meetings again to discuss the issue.

9. Date of the next meeting

18th of January 2010