

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

Date: Tuesday 8th February 2011
Venue: Parliament Buildings, Stormont (Room 135)
Time: 12:30pm

Attendees

Political representatives:

Chair – Steven Agnew (Green Party), Anna Lo MLA (Alliance), Declan O’Loan (SDLP).

BME sector representatives:

Alfred Abolarin (ACSONI), Helena Macormac (NICEM), Sophie Romantzoff (NICEM), Ashok Sharma (Indian Community Centre), James Holmlund (Bahai Council for NI), Ivy Ridge (Ballymena Inter Ethnic Forum), Hanaa Ibrahim (Egyptian Society), Eddis Nicholl (NICEM), Joan McGovern (Barnardos Tuar Ceatha), Margaret Donaghy (MCRC), Laura Giacani (SEEDS), Eddie Kerr (SEEDS), Moira McCombe (NICRAS).

1. Apologies

Political representatives:

Dawn Purvis MLA (Independent)

BME sector representatives:

Bobby Rao (Strabane Ethnic Communities Association), Patrick Yu (NICEM), Edwin Graham (Bahai Council for NI), Derek Hanway (An Munia Tober), Paul Yam (Wah Hep Chinese Community Association).

2. Approval of the minutes of the last meeting

Minutes of the last meeting were approved.

3. Matters arising from the last meeting

Letter to the OFMDFM on immigration issues:

The letter urged OFMDFM to make representation to the Home Office Minister on behalf of the Assembly to allow MLAs to represent individuals in immigration cases and for the Home Office to process correspondence as though it were from an MP. The secretariat will circulate the letter by email to get approval from the group members.

Questions to the Minister of Education on the right to opt out from religious education:

The secretariat circulated answers to questions asked by Brian Wilson, MLA, to the Minister of Education, Caitriona Ruane.

Brian Wilson asked 4 questions to the Minister:

1. Is the Minister aware of the “Opting-out of Religious Education” report by Queen’s University, and what is her assessment of the report.

The Minister replied that the report has not been sent to her Department for comment and she has only very recently become aware of its publication. She said it is an interesting report and the Department will consider carefully its findings and recommendations.

2. What action is the Department taking to ensure that religious education in schools takes into account religions other than Christian-based faiths?

The Minister replied that the responsibility for delivering religious education tests in schools and the nature and content of that delivery is a matter for schools to determine in consultation with parents and in a way that reflects the particular ethos of the school.

In order to ensure that teaching of RE is broad and balanced and integrated with other areas of learning within the revised curriculum, a Core Syllabus for religious education was developed and introduced into schools from 2007. She stated that the Core Syllabus reflects the predominantly Christian ethos of schools while also recognising the increasing diversity of faith that is now part of society.

She noted that the revised curriculum also includes a specific focus on building tolerance and respect for difference. Within the religious education syllabus, world religions are now specifically referenced. For example, at Key Stage 3, the syllabus provides for pupils who are to be given opportunities to develop their knowledge and understanding of two world religions other than Christianity, with an emphasis on the beliefs, practices and lifestyles of their followers.

3. What alternatives are provided for pupils who opt-out of religious education in schools?

The Minister replied that if the parent of any pupil requests that their child should be wholly or partly withdrawn from religious education, it is the responsibility of the school to provide alternative provision for such pupils. The nature of the provision will naturally vary from school to school, reflecting any agreed school policies on this issue, the staffing position within the school, the number of children involved and the needs of those children. Principals, boards of governors and teachers are supported in this by the Curriculum Advisory Support Service.

4. What action the Department is taking to ensure that all schools notify parents of their right to have their children opt out of religious education.

The Minister replied religious education is a statutory part of the curriculum for all pupils from Foundation Stage to Key Stage 4. However, under article 21(5) of the Education and Libraries (NI) Order 1986, parents have the right to withdraw their child from all or part of collective worship and/or RE lessons on the grounds of conscience.

The Migration Impact Fund

Anna received a letter from the Minister of Finance, Sammy Wilson, following her question to the Assembly regarding the transfer of £0.4 billion from the Migration Impact Fund. Sammy Wilson confirmed that this transfer was due to a recalculation of the NI Executive Barnett Formula consequentials in relation to this fund. This recalculation followed the UK Coalition Government's announcement on 22nd July that the Migration Impact Fund would end on 1st October 2010.

The Minister reminded that all Barnett allocations are unhypothecated and are available for allocation in accordance with local needs and priorities.

Eddis Nicholl said that this matter should be kept on the agenda as it is a crucial one.

Steven Agnew advised groups to lobby the minister individually as it might be hard to get a political consensus on this issue and in this regard might not be the role of the APG.

The Racial Equality Sub-group on Immigration have also been working on the issue for a few months. Margaret, who is involved in the sub-group, said that the matter was brought up at the last meeting but the group agreed that given the current economic climate, getting the government to set up a crisis fund might not be feasible. Ken Fraser from the OFMDFM is currently investigating the possibility of having £45 000 drawn from the Ethnic Minority Development Fund to help migrants who are destitute. Margaret said that this option wasn't popular with the group as it would reduce the much needed core funding from ethnic minority groups.

Declan O'Loan offered to ask a question to the Assembly on what provision would be in the draft budget to assist destitute migrants.

Immigration

Michael Golden was not available to join the February meeting so his invitation was renewed for the March meeting (the last meeting before the purdah period). Stephen stated that the first presentation raised more questions than answers on some issues. Since the APG meeting in December the Immigration Minister has made a statement regarding the detention of families and children so Michael Golden will also be able to comment further on that. It would also be interesting to invite representatives from the Refugee Action group to join the discussion.

4. Group presentations

SEEDS:

Eddie Kerr and Laura Giacani gave the meeting an overview of their group's activities. SEEDS was set up as a reactive response to the change of environment in the North West before becoming a pro-active organisation in 2005, promoting inclusiveness. SEEDS opened a World Café in 2006.

23 000 people were involved in the group's activities last year.

SEEDS have their own centre and a world resource centre for many organisations such as the Punjabi cultural association and the Filipino/Malaysian group. SEEDS are involved in a lot of capacity building work.

SEEDS have set up many social and cultural programmes celebrating cultural difference. They also set up a social economy business, Café del Mundo, a housing project for homeless people and are conducting anti-racism and awareness trainings.

The organisation's main aim is inclusiveness and multiculturalism, creating a new city and encouraging the local population to take part in it. The organisation has tried to promote the idea of a global village.

In 2005, SEEDS started the project "Hands off my friend". In 2010, they launched an action campaign in 6 districts alongside a website. The project was created to respond to issues of verbal abuse and for victims of verbal abuse who are not willing to report abuses to the police. This is not only an awareness campaign but an action campaign. The budget is very limited and the organisation has been trying hard to support every person coming through the door.

SEEDS have set up a friendship club, based on the existing Belfast friendship club set up by the South Belfast Roundtable. Seeds will be using the Belfast Friendship club logo and idea to set one up in the North West. The Friendship club is based on social action, people gather, meet and chat. The club is made of 50% local people and 50% BME people. 180 members started to meet last June. The club has a facebook page.

Declan O'Loan said that Derry is maybe more progressive in this regard for mixing and sharing.

Margaret noted that, on the other hand, hate crime in the area is very high.

Eddie said that the One World Centre is not about competing but about sharing. The organisation is cooperative in nature so works very well. It is true that hate crime is very high, there was 373 incidents reported last year. This figure is not only racist hate crime, but hate crime in general. This is what SEEDS are working on: trying to challenge stereotypes and tackling and challenging ignorance.

SEEDS are working with the Rainbow Project on a protocol with the PSNI and third party reporting procedures. A 24-hour hotline is open to report hate crime as part of the "Hands of my friend" project.

SEEDS next piece of work will be to make sure the legal system responds to hate crime.

Anna asked what is the governance structure of SEEDS.

Eddie answered that the organisation was made of 50% local people and 50% BME people.

Anna asked what funding SEEDS are currently receiving.

Eddie answered that funding comes from a variety of sources: OFMDFM, Peace III, Derry City Council provides funding for anti-racism training for public services.

SEEDS also generates its own funding (40%) and work with organisations to share resources.

The organisations currently have 70/80 volunteers, working on the idea of a global village.

Anna asked how they financed their social housing provision.

Eddie replied that APEX sub-contracted Seeds to manage housing units. This accommodation is used to help people in transit or in homeless situations. The idea was to provide immediate and safe social housing for people in difficulties. SEEDS has one staff member working on that project. The units are made of different types of flats and in mixed areas.

Ashok said that the Indian Community centre in Belfast would be very happy to work with SEEDS. The Indian Community Centre can offer some help on immigration issues and can draft common programmes with the community in Derry. Indians are the oldest settlers in Northern Ireland and there needs to be more understanding between the different Indian communities (between new settlers and older ones and between the various ethnicities present in India). The Indian Community Centre has more that 360 members and publishes a monthly newsletter.

Steven Agnew asked how many staff are employed by SEEDS.

Eddie answered that there are 2 full-time staff and 2 part-time staff working alongside 80 volunteers. Seeds have 900 members from 62 different nationalities.

African Community Support Organisation of Northern Ireland (ACSONI):

Alfred Abolarin, manger of ACSONI, gave a presentation of the African Community Support Organisation of Northern Ireland.

Alfred thanked the group for the opportunity to make a presentation. ACSONI recently received funding from the European Commission for a 3-year project in partnership with the African Centre in Dublin and the African Centre in Slovenia.

ACSONI was founded in 2003 to promote the capabilities and interests of people from the African continent and have worked hard to have a structured system to address the gaps in this area.

The 2001 Census indicated that there were 3,118 individuals born in Africa living in Northern Ireland and 1,301 African people residing in Northern Ireland.

There are currently 6,000 to 8,000 people of African descent residing in Northern Ireland representing over 35 African nationality groups, including people of African Caribbean origin. The 2001 UK census stated that people described their ethnicity as Black Caribbean, Black African or Black other represented 1,148,738 people or 2% of the UK population. In 2007, this number was estimated to be around 1,448,000.

ACSONI was set up to try to help people in need, hardship or distress through sign-posting and the provision of advice and support. ACSONI also assists in building capacity, promoting African and African Caribbean arts, history, traditions, language and culture, they also organise forums, seminars, workshops and trainings.

Most of the work that has been done over the years was voluntary as it has been very difficult to secure funding.

The past activities of the organisation include the 200th Anniversary of the Abolition of Slavery, Cultural, information and Diversity event (ACIDE), funded by the PSNI and 12 sessions of development, Education and Intercultural Dialogue (DFID), 50 monthly events and seminars covering information on housing, homelessness, criminal justice, immigration, HIV Aids awareness, capacity building, employment rights etc.

The next workshop will take place in L/Derry on the 26th of February on global interdependence.

ACSONI also help in the provision of interpretation services in African languages. ACSONI has a women's group and is currently trying to organise workshops on single parenting.

ACSONI has been working on an African Living Heritage and Intercultural Dialogue event in partnership with the Equality Commission and have been involved in a research survey carried out with Queen's University to be published in March.

ACSONI will be organising a Human Rights Conference in May to commemorate the launch of 2011 as the International year for People of African Descent. ACOSNI is also organising training for trainers for African Development Educators.

The organisation has recently launched their 3 years Strategic Plan and 7 Strategic Priorities in Stormont. Those are:

- Fostering Integration and promoting understanding within and between communities.
- Building capacity of individuals to engage with mainstream services
- Promote positive images and raise awareness of the diverse African cultures and traditions.
- Promote social inclusion, community involvement, community engagement and participation.

- Provide anti-racist training and influence the media and development sector in terms of the usage of positive images.
- Provide and organise citizenship and induction trainings for new residents from the community.
- Monitor and record hate crime incidents and serve as a third-part recording and tension-monitoring centre.

Alfred asked what support in terms of recognition, practical support and resource allocation can the Afro-Community expect from the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive?

Eddis Nicholl said it is essential that the positive contribution of the African community should be highlighted and have more participation in public life.

Steven asked if many people from the African community had settled in Northern Ireland. Alfred answered that due to the immigration rules, it is very difficult for some people to stay but a very large proportion grew up in the UK and are British or Irish citizens. There is a large community of refugees from North Africa but people have been very quiet and often do not have the confidence to engage in public life. The largest communities are in Belfast, Dungannon and Derry.

Anna asked which funding is ACSONI currently receiving.

Alfred answered that they are currently funded by the European Commission but are looking for match funding.

Anna said that it is not a good time to ask for help from the Assembly as it is now coming to the end of its term, Anna suggested ACSONI should contact DCAL or the Arts Council. Anna said that if she is re-elected, she would be happy to host the launch of the research and any other youth projects that ACSONI would like to organise.

Ashok said he has been living in Northern Ireland for the past 36 years but never realised that number of African people living here was so high.

Alfred said a high number of African people identify themselves Arabs so don't appear first as Africans.

Recognition of qualifications

Eddis mentioned the issue of recognition of qualifications. In Scotland, a lot of work has been done on it as many migrants have tremendous qualifications in their home country and cannot use them here.

Moirá said that an initiative has been started by NARIC

Eddis suggested that this issue should be a priority for the APG.

Steven offered to ask a question on this issue to the DEL Minister.

The secretariat and Steven will draft a question.

6. AOB

Pre-election statement from the All Party Group

The secretariat circulated a draft of the proposed pre-election statement document for approval. Helena Macormac explained the 3 issues that the pledge covered. Firstly to seek renewed political commitment to the group as it provides a much needed voice for members of ethnic minorities to discuss issues of importance and concern with their

elected representatives. Secondly commitment to a new Racial Equality Strategy and thirdly commitment from all political parties to ensure that action will be taken to provide support for those migrants who find themselves destitute with no recourse to public funds through no fault of their own. Helena explained that the secretariat had discussed these issues with the chair and vice chair and it was felt that these were issues that all political parties could agree to. The wording of the third point was taken directly from the CSI document that already had Executive agreement. Anna said that this point should be emphasised and direct quotation marks should be used.

Helena suggested that a fourth point should be added regarding reform of the Race Relations (NI) Order 1997 (RRO). Helena said that there is currently greater protection from unlawful racial discrimination in Great Britain than in Northern Ireland. In May 2009 the NI Assembly discussed the reform of the RRO, at this debate there was unanimous cross-party support that the legislation should be amended but this has not yet happened. Anna said that she could ask a question on this before the election

There was agreement from the group that these issues should be in the statement.

Anna said she had a discussion with Ken Fraser on the Racial Equality Strategy, Ken told her that the Racial Equality Panel is meeting on the 17th of February and will look at that issue. The strategy will continue and the 6 aims will be reviewed by the panel.

Joan McGovern asked if there was any update on the CSI strategy. Anna answered that information of progress should be available on the Assembly website. The OFMDFM received 290 submissions and are analysing them but they have not given any timeline. It is unlikely that anything will happen before the elections.

Ashok said that the Indian Community Centre recently held their elections and they have a new committee with 15 executive members. He also said that the Festival of India will take place on the 24th of April, Easter Sunday.

7. Date of the next meeting

8th of March 2011, in room 135