

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

Date: Tuesday 9th March 2010
Venue: Parliament Buildings, Stormont (Room 152)
Time: 12:30pm

Attendees

Political Representatives:

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

BME Sector Representatives:

Muhammad Al-Qaryooti (Belfast Islamic Centre), Chris McAfee (NICEM), Helena Macormac (NICEM), Patrick Yu (NICEM), Frances and Phoebe Wong (World Wide Women @ North Down), Mrs Afaf Aly and M Fawzy (Egyptian Society), Derek Hanway and Mark Donahue (An Munia Tober), Moira McCombe (NICRAS), James Holmlund (Baha'i Community), Javaid Naveed (NI Pakistani Cultural Association), Bobby Rao (Strabane Ethnic Community Association), Nick Lazarescu (Romanian Association), Joan McGovern (Bernardos Tuar Ceatha), Reggie Clark (ACSONI).

Mary McDonnell and Colm McQuillan (NI Housing Executive), Eilish O'Neill (Department for Social Development).

1. Apologies

Political Representatives:

Dawn Purvis MLA (PUP).

BME Sector Representatives:

Ivy Ridge (Ballymena Inter-ethnic Forum), Eileen Chan (Chinese Welfare Association), Donald Bell and Ashok Sharma (Indian Community Centre), Margaret Boyle (Derry Travellers Support Group), Katy Radford (Belfast Jewish Community).

2. Minutes of the last meeting

The minutes of the previous meeting were agreed.

3. Matters arising from the last meeting

- Crisis fund motion and briefing paper update

Chris McAfee outlined the progress on the briefing paper and said case studies would be added to the briefing paper for the motion debate. Copies of a letter received from Minister for Finance and Personnel regarding the use of the Migration Impacts Fund in Northern Ireland was distributed to attendees of the meeting. Anna Lo informed the meeting the motion debate still required signatures from the UUP and DUP and the meeting discussed the need to

contact these parties to follow up on the motion debate. The meeting discussed the possibility of approaching officials within the OFMDFM to discuss how the Migration Impact Fund is being used in Northern Ireland.

It was agreed the secretariat and the political representatives would discuss how best to take this matter forward and Chris said the secretariat would follow up with the UUP and DUP.

- Belfast Islamic Centre new community centre

Muhammad Al Qaryooti informed the meeting the Belfast Islamic Centre had held meetings with OFMDFM and had not yet received the letter of support for their new community centre.

- Media coverage of APAG meetings

Following discussion at the previous meeting Chris outlined the broad principle that any reporting of activities of the APAG should be based on the minutes agreed by members. Billy Leonard highlighted the possibility of using media coverage as a way of raising the profile of the APAG and Declan suggested this could be linked to the groups' presentations at each meeting. It was agreed that for any reporting of discussions of the APAG meeting members would be based on the agreed minutes.

- Dormant accounts fund

Declan updated the meeting regarding the dormant accounts fund and information from the Committee for Finance and Personnel which stated that

“work has not progressed as quickly as was expected in relation to the Dormant Account priorities. It is hoped that a paper will be put to the Minister shortly for consideration”.

Anna highlighted the need to conduct an EQIA for any new process for the distribution of dormant account funds. Steven Agnew informed the meeting he was on the APAG for Children and Young People and if he received any information from this group he would pass it on.

- Human trafficking update

Steven told the group he had received a reply from Women's Aid that confirmed referrals were received via the PSNI. Steven said Women's Aid said if someone is seeking information on the issue of trafficking they can contact the Eaves and Poppy Projects, based in England. Anna highlighted the launch of the Blue Blindfold campaign that was recently launched in Northern Ireland to raise awareness regarding trafficking as part of a UK wide programme. Billy Leonard enquired as to whether there was any work done on cross border issues in trafficking and Derek highlighted the work of the human rights commissions and children's commission in both the north and south.

The meeting agreed this was a very significant issue and it was agreed to consider how the APAG could look at it in the future.

4. Briefing on Traveller Accommodation (Department for Social Development and Northern Ireland Housing Executive)

Eilish O'Neill from the Department for Social Development (DSD) outlined to the meeting the main responsibilities of this department in relation to Traveller Accommodation. Eilish said the key role of the DSD was to bring forward legislation as required and is appropriate. Eilish highlighted the work the DSD is doing on updating the guidelines on Traveller accommodation previously prepared by the Department of the Environment.

Colm McQuillan from the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) gave the meeting a briefing on its role in terms of Traveller accommodation. Colm distributed a briefing presentation to the meeting on the types of accommodation in place across Northern Ireland. Colm highlighted how the NIHE provides group housing, service sites, transit sites and emergency halting sites. Colm said there were concentrations of accommodation in Belfast, Derry and in the south of Northern Ireland in an attempt to reflect the needs in these areas.

Colm said that like other communities the needs of Travellers change over time and the NIHE needs to ensure compatibility with the families who are using accommodation.

Billy highlighted the recommendations from the Equality Commission regarding Traveller accommodation and asked about the establishment of a Travellers taskforce chaired by the Department of Social Development. Eilish responded by saying the DSD response to this was if there were any difficulties with the Consultative Forum chaired by the NI Housing Executive these should be addressed through this body rather than establishing a new group. Eilish said that the establishment of a new group was not totally ruled out by DSD.

Billy asked about the current provision of transit sites for Travellers. Colm said that in 200/09 there were 86 unauthorised encampments and in 2009/10 this fell to 5. Colm said the Housing Executive was looking at the needs of transit sites and the location of these sites, identifying the economic situation as a reason for changes in travelling and halting pattern.

Derek highlighted the introduction of the Illegal Encampments Order and said when this was introduced there was a fear that transit sites would not be provided at the same time the legislation was enacted. Derek also said there was a need for the location of sites to be appropriate. Colm agreed there was a need to take into account the location of Traveller sites but that land designated for use as a transit site could not easily be re-designated.

Mark Donahue outlined the direct impact policies have on families due to the lack of access to water, toilets and electricity for Traveller families. Mark also said the reduction in numbers of unauthorized encampments can also be explained by Travellers being moved into settled accommodation.

5. NICRAS – Issues regarding Tax Credits and Child Benefit claims

Moira outlined to the meeting the difficulties for those people who have been granted refugee status or leave to remain but their claims for tax credit and child benefit take a long time. Moira highlighted how this means some families have to live on Jobseekers Allowance or income support for six months. The meeting discussed how to address this issue and Patrick Yu and Joan McGovern suggested contacting the Law Centre to get legal opinion on how to resolve this.

6. Group Presentations

• Egyptian Society NI

Dr Fawzy, Treasurer of the Egyptian Society for Northern Ireland (ESNI), gave the meeting an overview of the group:

- Established in 2006 with approximately 10 – 15 people and now has approximately 400 members
- Objective of group is to link community together, meet and discuss and to link with the wider community. ESNI to act as a Bridge between Egyptian community and the local community.
- Group also helps members to access services such as schools and jobs and also has a magazine, 'The Bridge'.
- ESNI carries out activities such as social gatherings, meetings and trips and holds sporting activities for children and young people.
- For the future, there is still work to be done to engage with the wider community in Northern Ireland and the establishment of a cultural centre will be a key area of work for ESNI in the future.

• NI Pakistani Cultural Association

Javaid Naveed gave the meeting an overview of the NI Pakistani Cultural Association:

- Formed in 2000 and was set up to help the process for visas and passports. Registered with Pakistani embassy in London and this meant people did not have to go to London for passports and visas.
- Its office is based at Rugby Road in Belfast.
- Group has approximately 100 visitors per week on issues such as immigration advice, accessing GP services, immigration advice and national insurance numbers.
- The group also carries out work on cultural awareness and language classes and health checks for the community.
- Javaid told the meeting the Pakistani Cultural Association has approximately 500 members and the total Pakistani population in Northern Ireland is 2000 people. The Association has around a dozen visitors per day.

7. AOB

- Patrick highlighted the 2011 census as a crucial issue for the BME sector and the need to mobilise the sector for this. It was agreed to invite representatives of the census office to present at the next meeting of the APAG to brief on this.
- Bobby Rao highlighted the difficulty for Hungarian people in Northern Ireland completing their driving theory test, as translation into Hungarian is not available. The meeting discussed the need to explore this issue with the relevant agency to see what translations are available. Phoebe Wong highlighted the issue of people from the Chinese community and their full names not appearing on Driving Licenses. Anna suggested advising people to hyphenate their names to ensure all name are on licences when issued.

8. Date of the next meeting

Tuesday, 13th April 2010, 12pm for 12:30 start (lunch to be provided) Venue: Room 152, Parliament Buildings, Stormont