

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

Date: Tuesday 13th of September 2011
Venue: Parliament Buildings, Stormont (Room 29)
Time: 12:30pm

Attendees

Political representatives:

Chair – Steven Agnew MLA (Green Party), David McIlveen MLA (DUP), Fra McCann MLA (Sinn Féin), Lauren Allison (Anna Lo MLA Alliance Party), Michelle Byrne (PA Conall McDevitt MLA SDLP), David McClarty MLA (UUP).

BME sector representatives:

James Holmlund (Bahai Council for NI), Edwin Graham (Bahai Council for NI), Ivy Ridge (Ballymena Inter-Ethnic Forum), Eileen Chan-Hu (Chinese Welfare Association), Moira McCombe (NICRAS), Helena Macormac (NICEM), Sophie Romantzoff (NICEM), Ashok Sharma (Indian Community Centre), Alfred Abolarin (ACSONI), Joan McGovern (Barnardo's Tuar Ceatha), Patrick Yu (NICEM), Barry Fitzpatrick (NICEM), Hanaa Ibrahim (Egyptian Society NI), Bobby Rao (Strabane Ethnic Communities Association), Paul Yam (Wah Hep Chinese Community Association), Ramesh Chada (Indian Community Centre), Berta Rierola (NICEM volunteer), Justin Kouame (NICRAS), Joseph Ricketts (ACSONI), Reginald Clark (ACSONI), Mohammad Elfaki (Sudanese Community Association NI), Eddis Nicholl (NICEM), Amar Muhammad (Sudanese Community Association NI), Asma Al Junaid (Sudanese Community Association NI), Javaid Naveed (NI Pakistani Cultural Association/NIMFA).

1. Apologies

Political representatives:

Anna Lo (Alliance Party), Sammy Douglas (DUP),

BME sector representatives:

Katy Radford (Belfast Jewish Community), Margaret Donaghy (MCRC), Frances and Phoebe Wong (Oi Yin Chinese Women's Group), Cita Carty (North Down Filipino Association), Afaf Aly (Egyptian Society of NI), Barbara Boyle (World Wide Women @ North Down), Jiangliang Gao (Mandarin Speakers Association),

2. Approval of the minutes of the last meeting

The minutes were approved.

3. Matters arising from the last meeting

Steven noted the success of the Immigration Seminar and Discussion, which had been organised by the group and had been held prior to the meeting in the Brasserie, Parliament buildings. ACTION: the secretariat would work on a letter to the UKBA containing follow-up issues arising from the event.

Response to letter from the Chair to the OFMDFM

The secretariat circulated the letter to the OFMDFM regarding 3 key issues; the Ethnic Minority Development Fund, the new Racial Equality Strategy and plans for the DSD's Social Protection Fund, this was drafted following the June meeting alongside the OFMDFM response in early August. Complimentary

Ashok Sharma reiterated that funding was a real issue for groups. The Indian Community Centre is the only centre representing the Indian culture in Northern Ireland and lack of funding is threatening the centre. Ashok asked what else could be done to move this issue forward.

Patrick Yu had met with the First Minister's adviser. The adviser expressed concern that 75% of the groups that have received core funding are not BME groups, they are local groups with BME projects. This means that capacity building for BME groups has been very poor. BME groups cannot access other pots of money for core funding whereas local groups can.

There are 2 strands in the EMDF: core funding and project funding. Project funding has been limited to £15,000. Patrick stressed the importance for BME groups to develop good governance in order to increase the funding opportunities.

Issues concerning CSI and the Racial Equality Strategy will also be discussed, Patrick explained that it had been confirmed that the new Racial Equality Strategy would be a stand alone document. The new strategy will not be dependant on the publication and implementation of the final Cohesion, Sharing and Integration strategy in order for it to be successful. This is in contrast to the previous Race Strategy which required the shared future document to be in place in order for action to happen.

The Racial Equality Panel is currently working on redrafting the Racial Equality Strategy. Patrick emphasised that it is crucial to have a budget lines and action plans attached to the strategy, without this, the departments will not take any action.

Steven Agnew said that a question could be put to the Assembly regarding the funding issue.

ACTION: secretariat to work with Steven to draft this.

Alfred Abolarin commented on the funding evaluation process which groups went through over the summer. He asked when if the results from the evaluation were available. Core funding from the OFMDFM does not cover all running costs for organisations and groups often need money from somewhere else to cover costs. There was uncertainty as to when exactly NISRA would be publishing results of the survey.

Paul Yam explained that this evaluation might bring a chance to input in the process and make changes.

ACTION: It was agreed that once the NISRA published the results they would be invited to present the results to the group and answer questions.

Future Groups Presentations

The secretariat circulated a draft timetable for groups' presentation for the term. If groups have any questions or issues or if groups would like to be added/taken off the list, they can contact Helena, helena@nicem.org.uk or Sophie, sophie@nicem.org.uk.

4. Concluding Observations of the UK's 18th -20th Periodical Report from the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination

The concluding observations of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination following the consideration of reports submitted by UK government in August 2011 were circulated.

Patrick explained that it included an unprecedented number of observations and criticisms running to 8 pages and gave recommendations concerning areas where the Committee has asserted that the UK government has failed to implement its obligations. Overall, Northern Ireland has generated less attention than England. One of the main issues addressed concerned the recent riots in England. Other prominent issues included the Dale Farm eviction, discriminatory anti-terrorism measures and caste discrimination.

Patrick stated that the Northern Ireland issues were overshadowed by the issue of sectarianism, there was press coverage at the time was dominated by the difference of stance between NICEM and the NI Human Rights Commission, The Human Rights Commission have argued that sectarianism should be treated as a form of racism. Paragraph 20 of the concluding observations make reference to this issue.

NICEM believes that there are many international forums in which sectarianism is discussed, bringing the issues to CERD will lead to the exclusion of many issues of racism which cannot be raised elsewhere. The focus on this debate took away from many more important issues. Patrick explained that international laws cover many vulnerable groups but due to the complexity and lack of consensus on the issue, there is nothing in place which covers religion.

Whilst issues on the interpretation of Article 1 of CERD and the inter-sectionality between religion and race cannot be denied, the NI Human Rights Commission did not discuss the issue with any NGOs before their submission was compiled. It was unfortunate that this issue dominated coverage of NI as many important issues brought up by the NI NGOs delegation such as hate crime and the rights of migrant workers did not receive the attention they deserved.

Patrick said that in engaging with this debate the group should consider what are the implications for BME groups if sectarianism is subsumed under racism? If there is insufficient protection for the majority communities regarding sectarianism then we need to research what the problems are and lobby for change on those issues rather than subsuming it all under the term racism. There are more pressing and pertinent issues for discussion such as the Bill of Rights for NI and the lower standard of equality and anti-discrimination legislation which exists in NI in contrast to GB.

Paragraph 19 Recommends a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland and the introduction of a Single Equality Bill for NI (or the extension of the current GB 2010 Act) to be put in place. The committee was very worried about the difference of levels of legal protection enjoyed by the different regions of the UK in particular less protection on racial discrimination in NI. The UK government was asked to make sure there are no discrepancies of equality legislation between the regions. We should lobby government using these recommendations to highlight the need for change.

Other areas of note include Paragraph 37 and 38 which address the issues of Travellers and Dale Farm. The observations also address issues of immigration control, which can have a direct benefit for us in Northern Ireland.

Paul thanked Patrick for his work for the Northern Ireland delegation's visit to CERD. He stated that in Northern Ireland that sectarianism and racism are two different issues but they have to be addressed together. He said that it is important that the NI Human Rights Commission works with NGOs, it's important that we all try to work together. The Bill of Rights is a crucial issue that needs a lot of lobbying and we need unity.

Steven explained that the Bill of Rights is currently far down the list of priorities for the NI Assembly, he said there was a danger in introducing a weak Bill of Rights which would water down protections rather than enhanced them.

Patrick agreed that sectarianism and racism have to be addresses together but we have to be careful. Such issues concern international protection. It is the responsibility of the NI government, through the CSI framework, to introduce a plan to protect rights. This is an issue to be debated at the local level. There is an obligation to introduce Human Rights protections into CSI.

Paul suggested that BME groups should meet with the Human Rights Commission. Patrick said he would be seeking a meeting with the Chief Commissioner once he is in post. Patrick has emailed the concluding observations to all Departments and NICEM would be pursuing follow up with government departments and agencies.

Edwin said it is useful to have a group discussion on the issue of religion and race. It is not a new debate, minority faiths have often been forgotten amidst the 2 communities debate. Other groups within the Interfaith forum have also experienced this. Ashok agreed with Edwin and said that for many years sectarianism has been the only area of focus, he stated we have to be very careful that ethnic minorities and minority religions do not disappear from the agenda.

David McIlveen said that it was a pet hate of his to hear people talking about "both sides of the community" when clearly NI society is much more diverse. He said it was a danger that sometimes groups promoting inclusions in fact result in excluding people, we should be having discussions with agencies such as the HR commission, such discussions benefit NI people as they show that we've moved beyond old debates.

Justin Kouame said that NI has changed a lot, there are many communities living in NI. Racism must be addressed. The members of NICRAS are scared of reporting racial harassment to the police. When they report incidents, they are automatically treated as the suspects rather than the victims. The racial side of these crimes must be acknowledged so it can be tackled effectively.

Bobby Rao said that his group is based in the North West and in a rural area. There are currently over 30 nationalities living in Strabane. The group has made a big difference by bringing the two communities together. Ethnic minorities are key in the peace process. The group has put a lot of effort in education and work in schools.

Paul proposed to invite the Human Rights Commission to an APG meeting.

Fra McCann supported the idea of presentations. This group has a remit to ask people to come and discuss issues with them. The secretariat stated that the Human Rights commission and the Equality commission had given presentations at several APG meetings, along with other Departments and Agencies, such presentations can be organised for future meetings.

Eileen welcomed Patrick's arguments regarding sectarianism and racism. Eileen explained the debate should be opened up to other groups and networks. The Racial Equality panel is currently looking at a new strategy, we need to have a coordinated approach.

ACTION: Patrick proposed to convene a separate meeting to address this issue, as was done with the Immigration seminar. NICEM will also meet with the HR commission, if there is a specific reason or issue on which the HR commission is involved with then they can also be invited.

Steven agreed that the seminar on immigration gave us the extra time needed to discuss issues and that it would be useful to organize future seminars. David said it would be useful to engage with the Justice Committee to address hate crime issues.

5. "The next Stephen Lawrence" follow-up report in to the criminal justice system.

Dr Robbie McVeigh

Dr Robbie McVeigh sent his apologies, as he was unable to attend the meeting, the scoping paper of his report was circulated.

Patrick gave a brief overview of the themes of the work. This new piece of research is a follow-up to the "Next Stephen Lawrence" which was a report by NICEM, published in 2006, which looked at Racist violence and the Criminal Justice System in NI. The focus of this new research has been extended to all the criminal justice system agencies (the previous report was mainly focused on the PSNI). As justice is now a devolved matter, the new research is timely.

The work done by the Criminal Justice Inspectorate helps to reinforce concerns raised in the the NICEM research in 2006, despite this there has been a lack of improvement in the system. Dr. Robbie McVeigh has been working on a similar research in Scotland. In the next few months, to complete the research, he will try to interview as many people as possible. The final research should be published by December.

Steven said the group would encourage as many people as possible to take part.

6. Group Presentation

Northern Ireland Community of Refugees and Asylum Seekers

NICRAS was set up in 2002, as the first and only Refugee and Asylum Seeker led organisation in Northern Ireland. NICRAS is managed by an elected committee. To be part of the committee you have to be or have been claiming asylum. The group recently moved to new premises: 143a University Street, Belfast.

NICRAS provides advice and support services and a drop-in service. The services are very busy, with 30 people coming to NICRAS in one single day last week.

The group is offering support to destitute individuals and families. NICRAS works in partnership with the Red Cross, who share the same building.

The group is currently applying for funding for English classes for Asylum Seekers, as Northern Ireland is the only region in the UK not providing free English classes for Asylum Seekers.

NICRAS also provides advice on a range of welfare and accommodation issues (for example they have helped in getting money for people's deposits for example).

As NICRAS is a small organisation it can react and respond very quickly to the needs of the community. The chair of NICRAS, Justin Kouame, is also trained as an adviser by the Citizen's Advice Bureau.

NICRAS also organise activities and events, with one full-time staff working on the programme. The group supports a male and a female football team, in partnership with the IFA they organised an anti-racism football tournament in the summer.

There have been some difficulties in the team as some destitute asylum seekers have been moving from hostel to hostel. NICRAS also runs a youth programme with Children in Need but couldn't secure funds for it this year. NICRAS has been recently working with the Corrymeela

NICRAS has been relying on NICEM for the work in the area of policy as when the organisation applied for its charity status it was refused on the grounds of lobbying activities. NICRAS is also trying to reach individuals and families outside of Belfast.

Ashok said that the Indian Community Centre would be delighted to lend their space to NICRAS to celebrate their tenth anniversary.

Eddis Nicholl congratulated NICRAS on their partnership project with the Corrymeela. The project is a great success and the video that was put together was very good.

Moirá explained that integration is a two way process, we all have to change.

Justin explained the work of the Inclusive Neighbourhood Partnership project. When a new person comes to Northern Ireland, they try to give them an understanding of the various aspects of life here. They also help the local community to de-mystify what they read in the newspapers or see on TV in order to have a real understanding of the reality for asylum seekers. The media often portray a very wrong picture of asylum seekers.

Paul asked if NICRAS provides any immigration advice.

Moirá replied that they are not qualified to give certain advice but they can help people to get legal representation.

Paul asked if NICRAS was linked to the UKBA. Moirá said they were not.

7. AOB

None.

8. Date of next meeting

11th of October 2011

12:00 for 12.30 start in room 29