

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

Date: Tuesday 14th of June 2011

Venue: Parliament Buildings, Stormont (Room 135)

Time: 12:30pm

Attendees

Political representatives:

Chair – Steven Agnew MLA (Green Party) Anna Lo MLA (Alliance Party), Eoin Bradley (PA Colum Eastwood MLA SDLP), Michelle Byrne (PA Conall McDevitt MLA SDLP), Chris Lyttle MLA (Alliance Party), David McIlveen MLA (DUP), Fra McCann MLA (Sinn Fein).

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), Dr. Khan (Belfast Islamic Centre), 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), Eoin Rooney (NICEM), Mohammad Al-Qaryooti (Belfast Islamic Centre), Hanaa Ibrahim (Egyptian Society NI).

1. Apologies

Political representatives:

Colum Eastwood MLA (SDLP), Alex Maskey MLA (Sinn Fein), David McClarty MLA (Independent), Conall McDevitt MLA (SDLP), Danny Kinahan MLA (UUP).

BME sector representatives:

Bobby Rao (Strabane Ethnic Communities Association), Eddis Nicholl (NICEM), Margaret Donaghy (MCRC), Eddie Kerr (SEEDS), Cita Carty (North Down Filipino Association), Afaf Aly (Egyptian Society of NI), Maciek Bator (Polish Association NI)

2. Approval of the minutes of the last meeting

The minutes were approved. Eileen Chan-Hu requested that she be added to the list of apologies.

3. Matters arising from the last meeting

Letter received from Alex Attwood regarding the Social Protection Fund

Helena Macormac reminded the group that a letter was sent from the previous chair of the group, Dawn Purvis, to Alex Atwood, the former Minister for DSD asking what the plans were for the proposed Social Protection Fund with regard to assisting migrants who find themselves destitute through no fault of their own and are unable to access public funds.

During purdah, a response to the letter was received, it stated that the Department were unable to clarify if the Social Protection Fund could provide such assistance and suggested that the group should contact OFMDFM. Following Minister Attwood's response, the secretariat and the Chair of

the All Party group drafted a letter to the OFMDFM asking for confirmation of when the new Racial Equality Strategy will be published and also what were the departments plan for providing assistance to destitute migrants.

Patrick Yu explained that the Racial Equality panel met last May and that disappointingly there has been no movement on the revised Racial Equality strategy. The revised strategy and accompanying action plans and budget should have been ready by the end of the last financial year for the money to be released.

Patrick explained that the issue of the crisis fund has been discussed by the Racial Equality sub-group on Immigration. There was a proposal for funding from this group but the OFMDFM lost the budget bid. As the result, the OFMDFM proposed using money from the Ethnic Minority Development Fund but this is not a viable alternative as it is not the purpose of that fund. It would be more appropriate to come from the Social Protection Fund as support by the previous DSD Minister. Since there has been a change of DSD minister with the elections, it would be useful to contact the new Minister. The sum required for such a fund is very minimal so in theory should not be to be a problem.

Joan McGovern said she wasn't aware that the OFMDFM were going to use the Ethnic Minority Development Fund (EMDF) to finance the crisis fund. Many groups are highly dependant on the EMDF and it would be inappropriate to use that fund for a use other than developing the capacity of ethnic minority communities. Many groups are still waiting on their funding confirmation letter after months of delay. The situation is critical. This fund is essential to support Ethnic Minority groups on the ground.

Steven Agnew asked the secretariat to amend the draft letter to emphasise the issues related to the Ethnic Minority Development Fund. ACTION: The secretariat will amend the letter and circulate the updated draft to the members for approval.

Immigration Seminar in the Long Gallery

In December 2010 Michael Golden, Assistant Director in Northern Ireland of the UK Border Agency (UKBA) spoke to the group about the proposed new immigration detention centre in Larne. Members of the APG had wanted to discuss other issues of immigration at the December meeting but as Michael was there for a limited time and for a specific purpose it was agreed he would come to another meeting to discuss issues more broadly. Prior to the meeting the group had discussed the possibility of holding a seminar organised by the APG secretariat on the issue of immigration, other groups such as the Refugee Action Group, the Law Centre and other members of the Immigration sub group would also be invited to participate.

Helena contacted Michael Golden who agreed to take part in the seminar along with other UKBA colleagues, they requested in advance to know broadly the areas that would be discussed in the seminar. The UKBA had not yet given a possible date but it was suggested that the morning of the 13th September, just before the next APG meeting would be a good time. ACTION: the secretariat will email APG members and participants to ask what specific issues of immigration they would like to discuss, the seminar will then be structured around these issues.

Ashok Sharma mentioned that this seminar would be very beneficial as there have been many changes to the immigration laws recently and this has created a lot of confusion for people.

Eileen Chan-Hu mentioned that a Strategic Migration Partnership has recently been set up in Northern Ireland. It would be useful to find out more information about this as it could be of relevance to the seminar.

Eileen also asked if the Diaspora Communities event which was due to take place in March would be reorganised. Helena answered that the event was organised by an external organisation and was cancelled due to poor registration but the secretariat can contact them to see if they were planning another event.

4. Annual General Meeting

Steven welcomed the new members of the All Party Group. He explained the All Party group operate a 6-monthly rotation of Officer Bearers. As Dawn Purvis (Independent) chaired the last 6 months, Steven Agnew (Green Party) will chair the meetings until December and David McIlveen (DUP) will chair from January 2012 onwards. The members and Office Bearers of the Group for the next 6 months would be as follows;

Chairperson: Steven Agnew (Green Party)

Vice-Chairperson: David McIlveen (DUP)

Secretary: Fra McCann (Sinn Féin)

Treasurer: Danny Kinahan (UUP)

Group members;

Anna Lo (Alliance)

Alex Maskey (Sinn Féin)

Colum Eastwood (SDLP)

Conall McDevitt (SDLP)

Sammy Douglas (DUP)

David McClarty (Independent)

Chris Lyttle (Alliance)

Steven mentioned that the group does not have any financial benefits. The Yearly Review was circulated at the previous meeting in March with no amendments. This would shortly be published on the website. Steven concluded the Annual General Meeting.

5. Findings from NICEM Education Research

Eoin Rooney, research officer at NICEM explained that NICEM will be launching a new policy paper on the needs and experiences of BME pupils in post-primary education in Northern Ireland. The paper will be launched at the Indian Community Centre on the 30th of June from 17.30.

The policy paper and its recommendations are designed at improving the experiences of post-primary school pupils.

The main findings include:

- A great diversity of experiences, due to the schools autonomy. Schools are responding to the needs of their pupils very differently. NICEM recommends a more levelled approach; all schools should be delivering quality services.

- Under-performance (that should be linked to issues of autonomy and accountability): There is a problem with the categorisation of pupils both in terms of language ("newcomers" needing English as an Additional Language support) and ethnicity (based on skin colour). Those categorisations are inadequate.
- Racial Bullying: 42% of the respondents have been subjected to racial bullying. Schools are free to respond to those issues in whatever way they find suitable. They do not have to acknowledge any cause for the bullying which is a real problem. There is no tracking of progress or actions taken.
- Academic attainment: No data is available on academic attainment of "newcomer" pupils, only on ethnic background, which again poses the issue of the skin colour categories that include many minority ethnic pupils under "white".
BME pupils are at the top end and bottom end of the attainment spectrum. There is a clear need for more research on under-attainment. Some adjustments are made for exams in some areas, for example readers can be provided, but nothing is available for EAL pupils..
- The research shows that it is difficult for newcomers to enter Grammar Schools.
- Curriculum: there are many issues with the Religious Education syllabus and the possibility of opting-out of RE classes.

Muhammad said that opting-out of Religious Education is not ideal and there should be a change in the syllabus to encompass everybody. How could this be achieved? Eoin explained that an independent body is needed to examine the syllabus.

Ashok said that the Department and other education agencies should contact community groups more to have their feedback on the needs and experiences of BME pupils.

Eoin said that the research is still a draft and that anybody wishing to comment on it would be very welcome to do so.

Ashok said the Indian Community Centre have been involved in this research and provided some case studies. Michelle Byrne said it is very worrying that the nature of bullying is not recorded anywhere as it makes it even more difficult to respond adequately to the issue.

Eoin said that he does know of good will from many teachers to tackle racial bullying issues but nothing has been put in place to help them do so. Schools need more guidance and a proper monitoring system.

Patrick mentioned that the 4 main churches make all decisions regarding the development of the curriculum of Religious Education in Northern Ireland. The current curriculum is in violation of Equality and Human Rights law by not developing a more inclusive and representative syllabus. The Education and Library Boards are required to supervise the delivery of Religious Education at the local level but there is uncertainty as to what will happen when all the boards merge into one body.

David McIlveen asked if there are plans for research into the area of further and higher education. He raised concern at the Universities and Colleges Student Unions' decision not to use the European Union Monitoring Centre's 'working definition' of anti-Semitism

Patrick replied that NICEM's current funding ends at the end of the financial year so future research cannot be planned with certainty but education will remain a priority. It would be useful to do further research in to the issue of vocational training, such training is essential for those who leave school with no qualifications.

Moira McCombe said that the construction industry is difficult to get in to. Training tends to be included with difficult to obtain work placements. Another issue is that older people are left aside as the industry tends to train only young people.

Edwin Graham emphasised that Religious Education is the only subject not open to inspection. To request an inspection, the board of governors must give permission. Queen's University is working on a collaborative research project with Scotland on the practices and outcomes of religious Education. In other parts of the UK, the syllabus is wider and much more inclusive.

Eileen said the term "newcomer" is not appropriate for many cases. The term encompasses people whose parents don't speak English without giving any time frame. After 40 years living in a country can a person still be classed as a newcomer?

Mohammad said that the Belfast Islamic Centre responded to a consultation on the food in schools policy with NICEM and the Indian Community Centre. A different approach to food in schools would make such a difference to pupils' lives.

Ashok said that he would encourage schools to visit the Indian Community Centre and talk to the members. 65 schools have visited the Indian Community Centre in the last year.

6. Group Presentation

Groups presentations will resume in September.

7. AOB

Steven mentioned the DEL consultation on the NEET's strategy "Pathways to Success". He said that the document looks at barriers to education employment and training but has very little reference to ethnic minorities. The deadline for the consultation is the 30th June. Further details can be obtained from the DEL website.

A summary of NICEM's response to the DEL's Agency Worker Regulations consultation was circulated. Barry Fitzpatrick explained that the regulations do not cover all workers and there is no mechanism to enforce workers rights when the agency is located abroad. The devolved assembly should be making decisions on this issue. The law is very inadequate.

Anna Lo asked what the differences are between the situation here and the rest of the UK. Barry answered that the issue for the Assembly is not only to implement what is being done in the rest of the UK but also to take a real lead and apply the law in accordance with obligations designed to protect those most vulnerable. It is a problem that the local Assembly does not treat such issues as a devolved matter and instead simply follows the legislation in Great Britain.

Moira explained that as Northern Ireland is the only region of the UK with a land border, issues have a very different impact. Patrick said that it is the same for many laws in Northern Ireland; the same standards are not applied from the rest of the UK to Northern Ireland. We need clear political will and leadership on such issues.

Moira mentioned the launching of Refugee Week 2011, organised by NICRAS in partnership with other organisations. The programme is available on the NICRAS website.

Joan said that part of the Refugee Week, Barnardo's will be launching their new Research report on "Supporting Refugees and Asylum Seekers families" on the 23rd of June. Invitations have been sent to members of the APG by email.

Alfred thanked all the people who attended the Africa Week events and the conference organised by ACSONI. The week was very successful.

Eileen mentioned the new report published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation on Forced Labour. Eileen also said that the Dragon Boat race is taking place at the Belfast Boat Club this weekend, Eileen will send an invitation to the secretariat to be circulated to the APG.

Ashok said this year's Festival of India should take place in Custom House Square on the 7th of August, from 13.00 to 17.00. It has been difficult this year to get a venue and a date from the City Council. Eileen advised Ashok to join the festival Forum, organised by the Council.

Patrick mentioned NICEM's annual Human Rights and Equality Conference taking place on the 1st of July. Invitations have been sent to members of the APG.

Moira asked if any updates have been given regarding the Ethnic Minority development Fund. The delay in the release of money is causing real issues for groups and NICRAS are currently in a very difficult situation.

Patrick explained he has been chasing the OFMDFM in person, on the phone and by email but hasn't received any verbal confirmation yet.

Moira has been writing to them as well. Groups funded through the CRC have already got their funding.

Joan has been chasing them as well and was told that no decisions will be made until the end of September, which is really worrying as some groups depend on that funding.

Alfred said that the OFMDFM should at least update Ethnic Minority groups on the situation.

Anna confirmed that the money had already been allocated for it, it seems that the issue comes from the administration of it.

Steven suggested writing to the OFMDFM. The secretariat will draft a letter this week and circulate it to the group for approval.

8. Date of next meeting

13th of September 2011

12.00pm