

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

Date: Tuesday 8th March 2011

Venue: Parliament Buildings, Stormont (Room 135)

Time: 12:30pm

Attendees

Political representatives:

Chair – Steven Agnew (Green Party) Anna Lo MLA (Alliance Party)

BME sector representatives:

Helena Macormac (NICEM), Sophie Romantsoff (NICEM), Taghreed Galal (Belfast Islamic Centre), Nevine ElBoussiely (NI Muslim Family Association), Shiv Sama (Indian Community Centre), Sary Sama (Indian Community Centre), Reginald Clark (ACSONI), Alfred Abolarin (ACSONI), Frances Wong (Oi Yin Women's Group), Phoebe Wong (Oi Yin Women's Group), Cita Carty (World Wide Women @ North Down), Jennifer Collins (Barnardo's Tuar Ceatha), Patrick Yu (NICEM), Barry Fitzpatrick (NICEM), Mohammad Al-Qaryooti (Belfast Islamic Centre), Afaf Ali (Egyptian Society NI), Mohammad Ali (Egyptian Society NI).

1. Apologies

Political representatives:

Dawn Purvis MLA (Independent), Anna Lo MLA (Alliance Party), Declan O'Loan MLA (SDLP).

Steven mentioned that due to priorities around the budget, few Assembly members had to send their apologies for the meeting.

BME sector representatives:

Bobby Rao (Strabane Ethnic Communities Association), Ashok Sharma (Indian Community Centre), James Holmlund (Bahai Council for NI), Hanaa Ibrahim (Egyptian Society), Eddis Nicholl (NICEM), Joan McGovern (Barnardos Tuar Ceatha), Margaret Donaghy (MCRC), Eddie Kerr (SEEDS), Moira McCombe (NICRAS), Katy Radford (Belfast Jewish Centre), Mark Donahue (An Munia Tober), Monica Yang (Mandarin Speakers Association).

2. Approval of the minutes of the last meeting

The minutes were approved

3. Matters arising from the last meeting

Racial Equality Strategy

Dawn Purvis asked a question to the OFMDFM, on behalf of the APG, regarding a timetable for the new Racial Equality Strategy (AQW 4289/11). It was answered that they would hope to publish the draft of the Strategy towards the end of 2011, with a view to a draft of the draft going to the Committee in March or April 2012 and to the executive in April or May 2012 for final approval

Patrick Yu explained that the answer from the OFMDFM reflected the agenda of the last Racial Equality panel on the 17th of February 2011. He raised the concerns that if followed the

proposed timetable (submitted to OFMDFM Committee in March/April and the Executive in April/May) the approved one by the Executive will not have any budget until 2013 financial year. It is necessary to have the revised strategy process finish before March 2012 and the revised strategy also has a budget attached to it

ACTION POINT: the APG should write a letter to the OFMDFM asking them to amend the strategy quickly and attach a budget to it to allow resources available to implement the Action Plan by each department and their next step agencies.. The secretariat will draft this.

Assembly questions asked by Brian Wilson

As agreed at the previous meeting, Brian Wilson MLA asked a series of questions to the assembly;

1. AQW4549/11; To ask OFMDFM what progress has been made regarding a review of the Race Relations Order. It was answered that the legislation had been amended partially, it was intended that it should be extended further to comply with European law regarding rates of pay for seafarers.
2. AQW4550/11; To ask OFMDFM what plans they have to support the ACSONI. They answered that ACSONI's application to the Ethnic Minority Development Fund was currently under consideration
3. AQW4549/11; To ask OFMDFM what was the timeline and publication of the CSI Programme for Government. It was answered that the draft report on analysis of the consultation responses was completed in early January and that responses to the consultation along with the analysis would be published on the website in due course.
4. AQW4558/11 To ask the Minister for Employment and Learning what steps were being taken to ensure the qualifications of immigrant workers are given due recognition by employers. It was answered that such work was done through the United Kingdom National Academic Recognition Information Centre (UK NARIC) and that a pilot had started in December by the Department in Dungannon to provide qualification equivalences, this pilot would be reviewed after 3 months.

Steven acknowledged that even if the answers to the questions are not fully satisfactory it is always beneficial to ask them anyway in order to keep issues on the agenda of Ministers.

Proposed follow-up questions to be tabled before the Purdah period

The secretariat drafted follow-up questions which covered a number of issues that had been on the agenda of the group in previous months;

1. As a follow up to AQW 4558/11

To ask the Minister for DEL how successful the 3 month pilot (launched in December 2010) by the Departments Employment Service in its Dungannon and EURES offices to provide qualifications equivalences to migrants more locally has been, how many people have used this service and long does it take for a service user to receive a result?

2. As a follow up to AQW 4550/11

To ask the First Minister and Deputy Minister when do they intend to publish the responses to the Cohesion, Sharing and Integration Consultation and their accompanying analysis?

3. As a follow up to AQW 4549/11

To ask the First Minister and Deputy First Minister when will the Race Relations (NI) Order 1997 be amended to include the full extent of recommendations agreed upon in the Assembly Debate on Tuesday 26 May 2009

The QUB research team had also formulated 4 follow up questions in response to answers from Catriona Ruane to questions asked by Brian Wilson (See February 2011 minutes for details of these questions) The proposed questions regarded Opt-outs and the right to freedom of religion, Opt-out awareness, the right of the student to opt out, inspection and inclusiveness in Religious Education. (see additional document for full text)

The group agreed that it was very valuable to ask such questions, follow up is important in order to keep the issue in the minds of the politicians even if the answers are not that comprehensive. Steven explained that today was the final day for questions and as each MLA was only allowed to ask 5 questions per day he would contact other MLAs to ensure all questions were asked. be submitted to the assembly on the day, as it is the deadline to submit questions before the assembly breaks.

Alfred Abolarin asked if documents could be circulated to the group before the meetings as it is difficult to keep up with what is happening.

Steven replied that documents are always circulated prior to the meetings but the circumstances are exceptional this time as some documents were only finalised minutes before the meeting. As it is the last meeting before the purdah period, there was a lot of work to be done over the past month in preparation for today's meeting. Moreover these issues are not new as it coming from the previous meetings.

Progress with the APG election statement

Helena Macormac reported on the work that has been done to get support from all the political parties on the APG election statement. The SDLP, the UUP, the Green Party, the Alliance and Dawn Purvis have all agreed to support the statement. The DUP confirmed their want to remain members of the group and will nominate representatives after the election. However, they need to consult with the party regarding the 3 other points, the decision is with the chief WIP at the moment. Sinn Féin have not yet responded, the policy officer and other party members have been contacted but it was noted that it has been a busy time for them with recent elections in the South.

4. Yearly review of the All Party Group 2010-2011

The secretariat circulated draft of the yearly review of the All Party Group. People can send their comments and corrections to the secretariat before the end of March. The draft report will be sent out with the minutes and people will have a week to respond with comments.

5. Letter to Alex Attwood regarding the crisis fund

A letter was drafted by the secretariat to Minister Attwood at the suggestion of Dawn Purvis. The letter asked the Minister if there would be money ring fenced to assist vulnerable migrants in the £20m Social Protection fund which was proposed under the draft budget.

Patrick Yu explained that it was necessary to approach the Department for Social Development on this issue as there was no budget for a crisis fund mentioned explicitly in the

draft budget. DSD are responsible for one of the two funds regarding this issue: the Social Protection Fund and the Social Investment Fund (under OFMDFM).

5. The 2011 Census

The issue had been raised previously at the December meeting and the representatives of the census office had been guests at the APG the previous year.

Questionnaires should arrive at people's homes very soon. The census day will be on the 27th of March.

The community groups need to get their communities to fill in the census.

If the numbers are not reflective of the reality, this will greatly affect service provision for BME communities, as the data will be used to plan budgets and funding. We need to make sure that as many people as possible fill in the census forms. Interpreters will be provided and BME individuals have been employed to help, although forms will only be available in English.

Steven Agnew also raised the issue of registration to the electoral list. Government and politicians need to make an effort to ensure that everybody is included. The deadline for registration for the next election is the 14th April.

Patrick Yu noted that this election several people from BME backgrounds will stand for election. Patrick said that the latest statistics show that the Polish are the largest BME community registered on the electoral list.

NICEM has drafted a manifesto and circulated it to the group. One of the issues raised in the manifesto is about voting. NICEM plans to organise an election debate and generate a positive discussion on policy. It will be a good opportunity to raise BME issues.

7. Diaspora Communities Consultation in Northern Ireland

Patrick Yu circulated an email received from Mike Waldron from BUILD, a UK based charity promoting international linking, learning and partnerships and a coalition of 45 international development agencies. BUILD will be running a series of regional consultations in support of their 3 years project "Building UK Diaspora International Partnerships".

Their next consultation will take place in Belfast on the 30th of March, at the VSB offices (34 Shaftesbury Square, Belfast BT2 7DB), from 12.00 to 16.00.

NICEM will forward more details on the event shortly.

8. Group presentations

World Wide Women @ North Down

Cita Carty, Chairperson of the World Wide Women @ North Down presented the activities of the group, based in Bangor.

The group was created following a piece of research undertaken by Frances Wong between 1998 and 2003 and was formally constituted in 2004.

The group is constituted of women from different nationalities (Bangladeshi, Brazilian, Chinese, Georgian, Indian, Korean, Malaysian, Polish, Yemenese etc.) and was set up to: - help women in need by liaising local service providers

- to discuss their issues both from work and at home in a relaxing environment
- to respect and support each other, to have their own space
- to provide language support (interpretation, translation of medical appointments, letters, correspondence, police and public services)
- to empower women to go towards education for self help
- to raise awareness of their rights and equality

- to encourage women to integrate socially for the wellbeing of the community

The group organises activities such as arts and crafts (flower arranging, jewellery making, card making, T-shirt painting, Christmas decorations making), barbecues, drama and inter-cultural activities; and have been involved in festivals such as the Chinese New Year, Dragon Boat festival, Ethiopian New Year, German Beer festival, International Women's Day, Moon and Mid-Autumn festival, Spring Lantern Festival, St Patrick's Day.

The group have also organised visits to the police station, the town hall, the Stormont Assembly and Belfast City hall. They have also organised karaoke, residentials, sports and training activities, dancing lessons, they have also engaged women in social discussion as an active way of learning.

In 2008, the group was awarded £9,400 from the Awards for All funding strand. The group had their AGM in mid 2010 and the new elected Committee members are in place. At present, the committee is finding it stressful, as funding is difficult to obtain due to budget cuts taking place in various fund providers. The group have produced a 3 years Strategy Plan that will be launched in the near future.

Steven Agnew asked if World Wide Women @ North Down have had an input in the YMCA research on the experiences of BME communities living in Bangor town centre. Cita replied that they haven't been contacted to contribute to the research.

Alfred asked if there are any members from Caribbean backgrounds.

Frances replied that there is no restriction of nationalities or ethnicities in the group and all women are welcome. Frances has spent a lot of time talking to people and realised that despite the different backgrounds, issues were the same.

Helena Macormac asked if there was a date set for the launch of their 3 years strategic plan. Cita answered that no date was set yet but it should happen in the next few months.

9. AOB

The situation in the Middle-East and North Africa and its impact on communities living in Northern Ireland:

Steven said that on behalf of The All Party Group he wanted to express empathy for anyone who may have loved ones who were caught up in any violence in any of the areas affected.

The group invited members of the Egyptian community in Northern Ireland to share their testimonies on the human impact of the conflict. Nevine El Boussiely, from the NI Muslim Family Association, speaking as an Egyptian individual explained that the revolution in Egypt has been peaceful, supported and protected by the army. Young people initiated it and were then joined by older people, grand parents, people in wheelchairs and everyone, regardless of their loyalty or religion. People were together, had mass together and were protecting each other during the different religious services. There was real partnership between Christians and Muslims. Tahrir Square has become the symbol of this revolution and is now as famous as the pyramids.

The Egyptian community and supporters had gathered in front of Belfast City Hall for peaceful protests and the community would like to thank all the people who joined and supported them.

On Sunday the 13th of February, the Egyptian community gathered in Queen's University to pay respect to all the people who sacrificed their lives for the peace and democracy. It is now going to be a difficult transition period and the Egyptian community wishes the best to the new government to restore peace and democracy.

Alfred expressed his joy at hearing such a positive testimony, especially with the current crisis in Lybia. Alfred asked if the APG or NICEM could raise awareness on the Human Rights violation issues that take place in Lybia at the moment.

Steven said that unfortunately this is the last meeting of the APG before the new assembly is in place but can be put on the agenda for the next term.

Patrick Yu asked if ACSONI was aware of any Libyan community in Northern Ireland. Alfred answered that the chair of ACSONI is from Libya and a group have been meeting in front of the City Hall in support for the past two weeks. Alfred said that something should be done not only for Libya but in support for all the people that have been protesting in the Middle-East and North Africa.

Patrick suggested the APG could issue a statement.

Alfred mentioned the work of the Red Cross and said that it is important to show support to the people living in Northern Ireland saying we condemn violence and raise awareness. Reginald Clark said that it is delicate to balance the need to show support and the importance of respecting the sovereignty of those countries and not interfering in domestic affairs as was done for so many years by the British state. The situation is very complex. Even if those revolutions are happening far from here, they have an effect on us here and it is essential to show support.

Muhammad said that one of the major current difficulties for people living in Northern Ireland is their visa situation. Some people are reaching the end of their visa period and cannot currently return to their country of origin.

Patrick said that the humanitarian crisis that is currently taking place at the borders is a major challenge and the United Nations have pledged financial assistance and support to the people on the ground.

Steven said that the secretariat have been trying for the past 2 months to get the UKBA to come back to a meeting to answer additional questions on immigration. Whilst they have been unable to attend recent meetings for a variety of meetings, they said they are happy to try and schedule something after the election.

Patrick suggested organising a seminar rather than inviting the UKBA to a meeting as it will leave more time and opportunities for discussion with other representatives.

Afaf Ali said the Egyptian Society will launch two campaigns at the end of April and June to help the Egyptian economy, they will also organize a trip to Egypt.

Cycling Helmets Proposed Bill

The Chair and the secretariat received a letter from Liz Fawcett from CTC on the impact of the proposed bill on cycling helmets on ethnic minorities.

The Environment Committee will be in charge of examining the bill and further discussion can take place on the issue once more concrete plans are defined, any comments should be sent this committee

Muhammad mentioned DCAL consultation on the Cultural Awareness Strategy, he said that it does not approach any minority languages other than the ones from the two main communities.

The closing date for the consultation is the 20th of March.

Department of Justice consultations

Phoebe Wong mentioned that they have been receiving consultation papers from the Department of Justice but it is very difficult to answer them. It was suggested that they could get in contact with NICEM for guidance once they know what the consultations are about.

10. Date of the next meeting

No date has been set yet. The secretariat will arrange a date once the new assembly is elected and political representatives of each party nominated.

It was suggested that the group could meet before September by using the Shadow Race Forum and invite politicians to attend (subject to agreement by the Shadow Forum), to keep the momentum going on issues such as the Racial Equality Strategy, which should be published by the OFMDFM around May time.