

## **All Party Group on Ethnic Minority Communities Meeting**

**Date:** Tuesday, 9<sup>th</sup> December 2014

**Venue:** Room 29, Parliament Buildings, Stormont

**Time:** 3pm for a prompt 3:30pm start (tea and coffee served from 3pm)

### **In Attendance:**

Political Representatives:

Anna Lo (Chair – Alliance)

### **BME Sector Representatives:**

Patrick Yu (NICEM)

Luke Kelly (NICEM)

Paul McGlinchey (NICEM)

Luke Butterly (NICRAS)

Kristyene Boreland (BME Women's Network)

Frances Wong (Oi Yin)

Eddis Nicholl (NICRAS)

Dr. Abdelrahman (SCANI)

Dierdre McBride (CRC)

Ashock Sharma (ICC)

Maria Laurengo (BME Women's Network)

Justin Kouame (NICRAS)

### **1. Apologies**

Danny Kinahan MLA,

Edwin Graham

Nia McConnell

Nick Cassidy

Wei Gong MSA

Anita Prince UKBA

Malcolm Wood, UKBA

Phoebe Wong

William Olphert, CWA

**2. Approval of minutes of the last meeting (18/11/14)** – Minutes approved  
Dissolution of WWWND 28<sup>th</sup> November should be noted

### **3. Matters arising from the last meeting**

#### **(i) APG proposed motion debate on Racial Equality Strategy**

Anna Lo (AL) We are still awaiting confirmation from DUP members whether they would agree with the wording and the proposal to put forward a motion.

Have tried contacting David McIlveen MLA and Patrick has tried contacting Jimmy Spratt MLA from OFMDFM committee with no success. Rather than delay further, we request Bronwyn from Sinn Fein to bring it forward and request APG politicians from other parties to support

**ACTION POINT** – Will suggest to Bronwyn McGahan MLA that Sinn Fein bring forward the motion and invite other parties to support it

## **(ii) AQW to OFMDFM on “Vote! You are at Home” Campaign**

AL – Concerned about wording. Forwarded to the Alliance Party. Similar to Patrick’s initial wording but mildly turned down. Notes that Bronwyn mentioned that PCSPs recruiting independent members – should be issued to APG mailing list.

Patrick Yu (PY) – NICEM has forwarded this message

AL - Information and contact details from BBC Children in Need should be disseminated. Has already disseminated details to Salvation Army Youth Project.

PY – Has forwarded details amongst member groups

AL – have approached Justice Minister to see if funding could be allocated to address BME domestic violence issues – challenges may be faced due to budgetary constraints, could independent funding be sourced?

PY – Notes that this area is not generally a priority for many independent funders, but attempts would be made **ACTION POINT**

AL - For example, funding arm of JRF, National Lottery or Comic Relief to look into domestic violence. Possibly contact Women’s Aid over research on ethnic minorities vulnerability to domestic violence.

Maria Laurencu (ML) – could possibly contact QUB/UU PhD students to conduct research on this area

PY – due to the sensitivity and complexity of this research, it would have to be conducted by a qualified researcher, rather than a PhD student

Eddis Nicholl (EN) - Southall Black Sisters have expressed interest in conducting research in this area, but funding would still need to be located

## **4. Presentation from the Common Platform on Racial Equality Strategy**

Dierdre MacBride (DM) and Ashock Sharma (AS)

DM:

- Common Platform (CP) has developed 12 common principles to consolidate diverse views and input – launched at Stormont on the 9<sup>th</sup> of September
- The CP has been approved by 76 organisations and over 50 individuals from a broad range of backgrounds (regional representation, community regeneration, BME groups, issues around integration, trade unions)
- Welcomes the release of the Racial Equality Strategy, but it must be robust and have a clear evidence base so that it may last for 10 years

- 5 Executive Parties sponsored release and invitations to support the CP have been issued to all MLAs and Belfast City councilors
- The CP has met with Jennifer McCann MLA and senior officials at OFMDFM in the previous week. This meeting suggested that there was room for engagement as regards the Racial Equality Strategy, with a co-design approach being taken. It is important that there is not a one-off engagement on the Strategy, but rather there is involvement throughout its development.
- Continued engagement is particularly important because the previous Strategy fell down on implementation
- It was also suggested that the Strategy could be delivered before the end of the financial year.
- CP has agreed a meeting with David Ford MLA in the 3<sup>rd</sup> week of January – in the meantime, a workshop with a Department of Justice has been conducted to contribute to the development of a hate crime action plan
- OFMDFM Committee is prepared to receive an oral briefing from NICEM and CP

AS:

- Meeting on 9<sup>th</sup> September very powerful
- We need more consensus now than ever before, due to the increasing number and diversity of BME communities
- Role of Local Authorities in promoting integration (e.g. Dewali, Mela) and tackling inequalities – to date, their role has been underperformed. Local government should provide a key input in community planning and cohesion.
- There must be a strong implementation plan for robust collection of data on BME communities
- Need to establish a baseline on racial inequalities in NI
- OFMDFM guidance on ethnic monitoring should be compulsory
- Race Relations (NI) Order needs to be reformed

AL – Does the CP support Racial Equality Champions?

DM – The CP discusses the importance of ensuring accountability, but it does not expressly support Racial Equality Champions. An evidence-base is another key component of a functioning Strategy – relevant research and data must be

considered, the 2011 Census as a minimum. Specific groups' experiences must be illuminated and targeted. Departments need for key accountability mechanism

AL - Is the CP still in contact with all these people and organisations?

DM - All these organisations and individuals have been invited to the CP's January meeting. Registration is open and people may sign up on the Community Relations Council

AL - Requests that she be added to the list of individuals who have signed up to the CP

## **5. Presentation from the Northern Ireland Community for Refugees and Asylum Seekers (NICRAS)**

Justin Koame (JK):

- NICEM helped found NICRAS in 2002, with the organisation becoming independent in 2007
- Last 18 months – we started consultation and stakeholder engagement and funders for strategic planning. Clear message from members to focus on community development.
- NICRAS also tries to address poverty (such as through the provision of food donated from the Red Cross and other organisations)
- As a future priority, NICRAS aims to be a place for social connection
- NICRAS also engages in community development work, helping to establish the Sudanese Association NI, Somali Association NI etc.
- Secured two new advisors through OFMDFM funding
- This is the only asylum seeker and refugee led organisation in NI
- NICRAS provides English classes twice a week
- Also provides advice services and a youth group, with its 'Come into my Community' project winning an award by the Belfast City Council on 15<sup>th</sup> December
- Fundraising event in Newtonbreda Presbyterian Church raised £1077
- NICRAS currently has 423 members, with 297 children (under 18)
- request from UNHCR member
- Review with independent consultant
- Human resources review

- Financial transaction review
- New strategic plan – not provided funding from OFMDFM
- Welcome to Luke and Melanie who have joined NICRAS as advice workers

Luke Butterly, NICRAS (LB):

- Advice team at NICRAS - advise, represent, advocate and support members overcome barriers and exclusion in NI.
- Some of these barriers are legal, staffing agency not aware of rights and entitlements – give opportunity for members to challenge the issue themselves. If a particular issue is identified frequently, it is highlighted as a policy priority
- Destitution is one of the main problems encountered by NICRAS – particularly affects asylum seekers who were on NASS payments or those who have exhausted their appeal claims and not in receipt of NASS and lack recourse to public funds
- The limitation of NASS payments means that asylum seekers are living below the poverty line – curtails integration and education. Legal barriers like right to work not devolved, so Stormont cannot be influenced to change this. However on issues like education, we have made some advances
- Due to asylum seekers having no recourse to public funds, many must rely on charities (such as food banks and faith-based organisations). While this assistance is appreciated, a better long-term solution to destitution must be found.
- Another large issue is – once someone is granted refugee status, they have only 28 days before their NASS payments stop, which is not enough time to obtain a national insurance number to become eligible to work or claim benefits. Consequently, individuals granted status face a period with no income at all.
- Thus, once 28 days is complete, the person is officially homeless. Required to stay with friends or live in homeless hostel such as Simon Community
- Not just an issue in NI. Issue throughout the UK. The Red Cross in UK have argued that 28 days is far too short, with 40 days to 2 months being a more realistic timescale for obtaining the relevant documentation and entitlements. The clock should only start when someone has their national insurance number.

- Crisis funding goes to refugees in the transition period – not the appropriate mechanism to provide basic financial assistance to those with rights and entitlements
- Statutory bodies – real lack of knowledge on what people are entitled to. Constant back and forth with public authorities. Staff awareness levels very limited. Not the place for NICRAS as a small organisation to train staff in public authorities on the rights and entitlements of asylum seekers and refugees and provide equality and diversity training.
- Education key priority for NICRAS– need for free English language classes. Disparity with GB. English language classes are several hundred pounds here whereas in GB, ESOL are regarded as “essential skills”. Thanks to lobbying from NICRAS, we have secured free ESOL for asylum seekers. Main difficulties surround the lack of expenses to cover transportation costs/public transport. NASS payments are £36 for a single adult and extra £5 (i.e. £41) for each child. Compared with £72 for Job Seekers Allowance, which is deemed to cover the minimum essential living costs.

JK – Also the problem of institutional racism, with NICRAS having to accompany individuals to the Benefits Office in order to secure what they are entitled to. A NICEM intern is currently working with NICRAS to produce a paper on the experiences of asylum seekers facing destitution in NI.

AL – clearly agency staff need training – are asylum seekers entitled to essential skills education?

LB – yes, but whereas essential skills in Great Britain includes ESOL, here it does not – however, NICRAS lobbying has secured a concession for free ESOL classes. However, other expenses – such as travel and textbooks – still present a barrier

JK – there has been some discussion over changing the location of language classes from Titanic Quarter to city centre

ML - £36 per individual or per family?

LB – for an adult individual

JK - £5 more for each child – notes the stresses of the card-based system for asylum seekers, with difficulty in accessing halal foods etc., coupled with the fact that the card sometimes doesn't work and any remaining money on the card at the end of the week does not carry over to the next week

Paul McGlinchey (PM) – there has been a court ruling on the disparity between Job Seekers' Allowance and NASS?

JK – this has been overruled by the Home Secretary

AL – is anyone championing the cause for change to this 28 day issue?

PY - number of legal challenges – however, courts have tolerated a very low level of subsistence. House of Commons report December 2014– approx. 4million people in GB relying on food banks

AL – how can one be expected to keep themselves and a child on £40 a week?

PY – the Government is pushing people to go to churches and other sources of money

JK – this also ties in with trafficking – people are being pushed into the sex trade etc. out of desperation

AS – how many asylum seekers are there in NI?

JK – we do not know, as the Home Office refuses to disaggregate this data.  
However, we have over 400 members.

AS – is there any data on the rate of rejection and approval of asylum seekers?

JK – personally, I have been here since 2007 and am still in the process of seeking asylum – ultimately, the decision-making process can take anything from 6 months to 10 years – extremely inconsistent

AS – I know of one individual who had to wait 9 years

Kristyene Boreland (KB) – this is clearly an obstacle to integration

PY – the Home Office argues that integration only starts when an individual gains refugee status

AL – is there anything we can do on a policy level?

PY – we can work with UK groups through immigration legislation

AL – is there any news on the OFMDFM crisis fund?

PM – it seems that the fund is likely to emerge soon

AL – we can write to OFMDFM about the fund **ACTION POINT**

DM – Introduction of a refugee and asylum seeker strategy through the Racial Equality Strategy could raise the profile of this issue

JK – NICRAS organised an event last year that emphasised this proposal

AL – the All-Party Group can circulate any requests from NICRAS **ACTION POINT**

Eddis Nicholl (EN) – there is little appreciation for the expertise in NICRAS and its ability to be a voice for asylum seekers – the organisation is well-equipped to do training, although other organisations often perform this training without even consulting asylum seekers

LB - Need to build the capacity of independent advice services to address the needs of asylum seekers and refugees. NICRAS have limited capacity.

## **6. AOB**

## **7. Date of next meeting**

Tuesday, 20 January 2015