

**All Party Group on Ethnic Minority Communities**

**Date:** Tuesday 19th May 2015.

**Time:** 15.30

**Venue:** Room 115, Parliament Buildings, Stormont

**In attendance:**

*Political Representatives:*

Anna Lo MLA (Alliance Party)

*Speakers*

David Gault (Board of Governors - Fane Street Primary School)

*Community Representatives*

Nick Cassidy (Omagh Ethnic Community Support Group)

James Holmlund (Baha'i Council for Northern Ireland)

Edwin Graham (Baha'i Council for Northern Ireland)

Rafitz Khamis (Belfast Islamic Centre)

Maria Lourenco (African and Caribbean Support Organisation Northern Ireland)

Bharat Sharma (Indian Community Centre)

Joseph Ricketts (African and Caribbean Support Organisation Northern Ireland)

William Olphert (Chinese Welfare Association)

Luke Kelly (Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities)

Justin Kouame (Northern Ireland Community for Refugees and Asylum Seekers)

Kristyene Boreland (Black and Minority Ethnic Women's Network)

Dr. Abdelrahman (Sudanese Community Association Northern Ireland)

Patrick Yu (Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities)

Asma Aljunaid (African and Caribbean Support Organisation Northern Ireland)

**1. Apologies:**

David McNarry MLA (UKIP)

Claire Sugden MLA (Independent)

Danny Kinahan MP (UUP)

David McIlveen (DUP)

Bobby Rao (Strabane Ethnic Community Association)

**2. Approval of the minutes of the last meeting**

Minutes approved.

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

- (i) Letter to First Minister and Deputy First Minister on Ethnic Minority Development Fund**

Patrick Yu (PY): We sent out this letter, but there has been no reply.

Anna Lo (AL): I rang the Race Unit, contacted Lindsay Farrow yesterday requesting an update and a list of the successful applicants for the Minority Ethnic Development Fund (MEDF). I just got an e-mail from her at 14:36 today, saying that all applicants were informed on Friday, but she cannot share a list of successful applicants until all internal governance and administrative processes have been completed. She said that for unsuccessful applicants, there is a process for providing feedback underway. Feedback is being provided this week to those who have requested it. Should applicants remain unsatisfied after receiving feedback, there is an appeals process. I thanked her and again requested a list of successful applicants.

PY: I think the issue is that they haven't settled their contracts yet. Once this is done, they will be able to provide a list. Perhaps around June/July time.

Bharat Sharma (BS): Can I ask, what is the MEDF's size?

AL: £1.1 million.

BS: What is the total BME population combined in NI?

PY: If you use the Census figure, you are talking about 70-80,000.

BS: What is the total NI development fund that they get from Westminster? I'm asking because this £1.1 million for 80,000 compared to that given for the other 1.7 million living in NI. Are we being fairly provided for?

AL: I think so.

William Olphert (WO): Anna, as an MLA, are we in danger with the Welfare situation not being resolved?

AL: There is going to be a debate next Tuesday, which will be make or break. If you are an optimist, you would say that Sinn Fein will find a way to get around the issue. But if you are a pessimist, you may say that Stormont will collapse next Tuesday.

WO: Where does that leave us?

AL: That will leave us with direct rule.

WO: Will that affect the MEDF funding?

AL: It will be administered by a direct rule Minister and run by civil servants.

PY: At the moment, it is difficult for us to negotiate a bigger amount for funding. Everyone is being cut, we are lucky. Another thing, it is my impression that only 3 or 4 recipients under the fund are actually BME led, with the rest being general organisations that are claiming to provide BME services. This is why I want to see a list of recipients.

Nick Cassidy (NC): If I could make a point on the numbers of ethnic minorities. It is important to consider how you define an ethnic minority – the vast majority of our

members come from the EU and would describe themselves as ethnic minorities. Considering this definition, the number would be much higher.

PY: Yes, the Census figure is extremely conservative.

WO: Is it possible that you can be a BME and be defined as Irish and British?

PY: They have two sets of questions: the first set is ethnicity, which is useless due to its aggregation of 'white' ethnicities – and the second is those born outside NI, which only refers to the first generation. To even approach a figure, you must gather information across several questions in the Census. Also, as funding is distributed according to population, trusts use the Census data broken down by council area to protect their allocations.

**(ii) Common Platform Event Report on Racial Equality Strategy  
(enclosed for information)**

**4. Fane Street School presentation on proposed merger**

(Anna Lo passes David Gault a letter she has written to Education Minister John O'Dowd regarding this issue.)

David Gault (DG): Thank you for having me along today. I think Patrick has included some documents, there is a document dated 30/04. That was a presentation that was given by the Education Authority at each of the schools as to their reasons why they think that the three schools should be amalgamated. The stage we're at is a pre-consultation stage ending 29<sup>th</sup> of May. Education Authority officers will then draft development proposals. The proposals they're suggesting at the moment are to close (the three schools) and another one to create a new South Belfast primary school entity. At the moment there is no one site that could hold all of the children. They are saying that initially they would want to run a primary school from two of the existing sites. They have no preference at the moment as to which of the two sites they would want to use. That question is part of the consultation. That is a step towards going to a Minister to request a new building on a clean site. We have been going through this problem for the past number of years. A new school would mean capital spending and this building (Stormont) does not have any capital to spend. So the situation of a split-site school could persist for 10-15 years, which would be detrimental – having one principal trying to run two sites et cetera. Another issue (indicates handout) in Fane Street - we have risen over the years, from 2010 we had 166 pupils to today we have 242 (rather than 203), but our English as an Additional Language enrolment, if you look at the numbers there has risen from 65 in 2010 to 154 currently. Which means that it's 64% of the school population. So the rise in our numbers has largely been newcomer families. We are aware that Blythefield has never had 140 pupils, which they say is the minimum for an urban school over the past 10 years. Blythefield currently has 78 pupils and no newcomers. Donegall Road. has a small number of newcomers. But the areas of Blythefield and Donegall Road are not welcoming for newcomer families. On the next page, I have a breakdown of the nationalities: 96 Northern Irish pupils, 11 Polish, 27 Romanian, 26 Saudi and 44 Somali. We have a number of other nations there, with single figures – in total we have children from 22 countries. We have 25 languages that are the spoken languages. If we look at the

religious breakdown, we have 88 Muslim children, we have every type of – there're five Hindu children there, we have people who put down no religion/none on the forms and we also have 17 Roman Catholic children. If you count the number of Presbyterian and Methodists together, we come to 17.

AL: That few Protestants?

DG – Just of those two denominations. We have a number of Romani families, too. We have a special needs coordinator who does 5 hours a day. We have part-time newcomer teachers who do mornings and provide English classes to newcomer children – one beginner level and one progressive, with mixed aged groups depending on the children. The children are withdrawn every morning to their English groups. We review their ability every number of weeks depending on their need. It means that the children- if you have a P3 class of 18, 6 of whom are out for English in the morning, it leaves a class with 12 children. This gives the non-newcomer children more teacher attention, so it's to the benefit of everyone, not just newcomers. We came to this position in Fane Street not by accident; it's been through a lot of hard work by the board and the staff. It would be a shame to lose that level of expertise in a merger and in a merger situation we could lose some staff whom are dedicated and brilliant staff at the moment. It may mean in a merger that you amalgamate staff across and you have staff coming who do not have that expertise. This is concerning to us. I've put down the main strengths of Fane Street: good pastoral care, close-knit team and always been within our budget as a Board of Governors. Currently we have 216 P1-P7 and 26 Nursery School pupils. At the time of the Census we had 203 instead of the 216 and that is the rate at which we get paid. So over the past number of years we've been teaching children for free because of that system. There is a reaction to newcomer parents walking children to school. We're not saying that a new school could be 100% welcoming, but it is getting to and from the school. We do not want to see an Ardoyne situation. It would leave no parental choice in the area, if there is only one school. At the moment there is no guarantee of a site for a new building, or for a new building at all. There is over a mile between the schools, no matter what way you cut it. It could lead to families leaving the area, especially newcomer families. One of my concerns is that the newcomer- these (pre-consultation) documentations go out to community groups. There are established community groups in the Sandy Row and Donegall Road who will have their say, but the newcomer families aren't a part of community groups who will speak for them. Whenever the documentations were made available in all the languages and given to parents, some of the newcomer parents were not well-educated themselves and this presented its own problem. We have a history in the school of making decisions for the children rather than for statistics.

## **5. Q&A on presentation**

AL: The problem is, David - from the guidance from the Education Authority - is that in order for them to have the go ahead to build the building, they have to have to development plan-

DG: We understand that one, but to go- it's nice for you to draw up a plan and make up proposals for the Department when you know there isn't the money in the Department to ever deliver it.

AL: Please read the last two paragraphs on my letter sent to Mr O'Dowd. As you know, I sent a letter previously after talking to Hillary about the number of children and concerns about racist bullying, so this is the second one I'm sending. But have a read of that letter and see what you think, which is my suggestion to the Minister.

(David Gault reads the letter)

DG: Yes, the- there is an issue of a pot- if there is going to be a new build, where that build will be and how accessible it would be to each of the community groups. Currently we do have children from what would be the village area coming to Fane Street from welcoming families who want to engage with the multicultural atmosphere of the school.

AL: David, what I suggest to the Minister is to consider circumventing the development. Just look for a build first and then amalgamate, leaving the 3 schools as they are for the moment.

DG: Our view as a Board of Governors is that for some reason Blythefield was never closed over the past ten years when it should've been, with only 77/78 pupils. It has always been over budget and so on. The other issue we have is that they claim so many unfilled school seats in each of the schools and they claim that we have 292 unfilled seats. The number they have taken is inaccurate, based on a figure that would be physically unattainable. We are in fact oversubscribed. Paula Bradshaw has written us a letter asking for us to take another nursery class. We have room to hold another class, but have only been permitted to take another 4 pupils. Considering the pupils we have from BME and socially deprived groups, it is important that they get a full day nursery rather than half, so we shouldn't have to cut this in order to cover more pupils. We have 70 pupils on free school meals, so there are social issues there as well.

AL: I think the other schools would be of the same mind, particularly Donegall Road, whose Governors I met with last week. Don't bother with a split/amalgamation until we know where and when there is to be a new school.

DG: We would share that view.

AL: And I think they share your concern about their pupils going through the Village area to go to school.

DG: It doesn't work and one of the suggestions, although I think everybody from each of the Boards of Governors was against it, was two schools – one Key Stage 1 and one Key Stage 2. The idea of splitting up families with multiple children this way is not feasible. So if there are to be two sites, it has to be P1-P7 in both. If there are to be two sites, one must be Fane Street. We have a nursery unit, which neither of the others have. The state of the buildings in Fane Street is high and well-maintained and we have the expertise for newcomer pupils.

AL: Then I would suggest the All-Party Group write a letter to the Minister to set out your points, particularly about how well catered-for the BME pupils are and the

concerns of if they are going to have to move over to Donegall Road or Sandy Row, there could be racist bullying.

BS: What is the security situation for BME children? They're not welcoming in either area?

DG: There has been more race-related attacks in South Belfast area- is it up 30%?

BS: Has any of the children going to your school ever had security issues?

DG: Some of the parents have moved from Donegall Road to Fane Street deliberately. They have also moved from a number of other primary schools in Belfast. Word has gotten out that they are welcome here. We also have had at least one family who have left Fane Street and said that their issue was bullying within the school.

PY: There is some information we need to know before we determine our action. Firstly, now we are in pre-consultation, which is not purely according to S75, so they are tactically seeking to gain agreement on the main issues outside of this oversight mechanism, which would apply in a proper consultation. I talked to Michael and Carol both yesterday and this morning, I asked them if they had any information in relation to the school bullying record because previously this was kept by the Library Board, but there is nothing there since it became independent. Secondly, during the process, did you uncover any socio-economic issues regarding the move – families having to walk, because they can't afford transport, for example? Thirdly, what about the ability of newcomer families to participate in the consultation? Also, did you do any risk/security assessment? I have confirmed with the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland that this is not the first time that this process has been used to close a school. They have modified it somewhat since losing a judicial review following a similar procedure, so that is why they have added the pre-consultation stage.

DG: The stage we're at is the pre-consultation and then that goes back to the Education Authority?

PY: Yes.

DG: After this, the officers will formalise their development plans and put them before the Education Authority Board in June. After which it will be open for public consultation.

PY: I think you need the Minister's support before it goes out as a consultation document.

DG: The Minister was unwilling to speak to us.

PY: This is because it is still under the pre-consultation process – the Minister cannot comment during this time.

AL: Even though it is called pre-consultation, they still have the ideas on paper and ask you to support it.

PY: The paper is so thin – very vague, no plans for where the building will be, where resources will be obtained et cetera. There are only three options: maintain the status quo, merger the three and separate three premise, or an open option - which is unfair for BME parents, who may not be able to cohesively formulate an option of their own. We should propose an option three, where they merge Blythefield and Donegall Road., keeping Fane Sreet. independent. If they still insist, then we will need to take more drastic action, consulting the Minister and the Committee.

AL: What do you think?

DG: My own view is that the development proposals will go ahead. The time that we can stop them really is September and October. Although we've raised objections et cetera to the Education Authority, I'm not sure that they will do anything other than carry out what they have planned. So I cannot see- I see the time for stopping this is at the two-month consultation and the Minister. I do not see the Education Authority Board stopping this. The good thing we have heard from- BELB in the past has put forward development proposals through to the Minister and have got one of three decision: implement totally, no never, or go and revise your proposals. So just because the Minister gets a proposal, does not mean that he will accept it.

AL: Would you think that Patrick's idea of one amalgamated school for Donegall Road and Sandy Row and leaving you the way you are...?

DG: Two schools in the area would be ideal, because you would have two schools from up to around 300 pupils. And this would leave choice.

AL: But when I talked to you at the time of meeting, you seemed intimidated at the idea of a state of the art new school taking pupils?

DG: If there's a new build, that may take some of our pupils away and it would possibly leave us as the school for BME pupils and very few Northern Irish pupils. At the moment we have that mix and it would be a shame to lose.

AL: So you want all the Blythefield children to move to Donegall Road?

DG: Well, there's no site.

AL: Although, they argued there could be a site across the road for them.

DG: It's been earmarked for social housing.

AL: Not that one, but a warehouse across the road from them?

DG: Well, that is possible. For years we looked at a site near the hospital, but it's gone now. A psychiatric hospital has now been built there. The railway line does seem to be a divide for newcomer families – they are allowed to live up to that line, but there is trouble if they cross it.

AL: I'm just thinking of a response from the All-Party Group. A letter from this Committee will carry some weight.

PY: But you also should respond to the consultation paper as well.

DG: Thank you very much for listening to me.

AL: What would you support?

DG: I think Patrick's suggestion of some amalgamation of- well, my suggestion would be just close Blythefield and let it take its natural course. And the question is why Blythefield hasn't been closed in the past 10 years.

AL: David, it is a difficult political decision that a Sinn Fein Minister will find hard to make.

PY: I think we are aware that the school is also organising the consultation with interpreters. I still don't see sufficient understanding – I suggest, in the June period we will have more time, perhaps provide a more detailed breakdown of what groups are attending your schools. This could build a persuasive argument regarding the experience that may be lost.

DG: At the moment, the Education Authority is dangling the carrot of a new build and nice premises, which I think is unfair.

AL: The location is so important for all the parents.

DG: Location is important, but there is a misconception that a new build will mean a better education and if Fane Street is not fit for purpose after 10 years, then please go and knock down all schools more than 50 years old (!)

AL: There are too many question marks over this issue for everyone to buy-in to the promise of a new build.

DG leaves.

JK: Your letter that you gave to David – on this pre-consultation paper, on page three they say for them to get the money, they need to have amalgamation first before they can build?

AL: Yes, they're trying to force their hand.

PY: Which is why I said to the Department representatives this morning that they are putting the cart before the horse, they can't guarantee this funding.

AL: When you count the numbers, 250+ in two and only 78 in the third-

JK: And been going down the whole time...

AL: Naturally, the two bigger sites will want to stay open. Trying to get these schools to agree on a site and get planning permission et cetera could take forever.



Rafitz Khamis (RK): 88 pupils in Fane Street are Muslims and it will affect them – most of them maybe don't have transport to go to a further site and they need facilities to understand the issue as a whole. What concerns Muslims I represent is the way that it's been done is like putting it on hindsight – we don't know the whole issue; it comes to pre-consultation and the parents, they haven't known the issue very well and mightn't still in two months' time. I think what they need to be doing is ensure that risk/security and statistics are laid out to us before it's been carried out. We enjoy the harmonious racial community in Fane Street and I can see myself that it is a good school and the first choice of many BME families in the area. It would be costly to Belfast, really, because of the surge in racial attacks. Not an effective cost-saving exercise.

WO: Some of the things we forget about in dealing with racial equality is that a lot of myths are drummed in at an early age. So I would say that Fane Street is a good practice model of what can happen in an inner city school.

BS: Especially in light of Northern Ireland's traditional education system - sectarian division.

AL: Anybody here have children in the school? Do you?

BS: Myself? No. My family lives in Glengormley.

PY: I don't think the people at this table do have children in this school. I think the people here are representing communities at this school. We have a different role to play. If you see the consultation paper, it's not just for principal, pupils et cetera, it's also open for experienced teachers who may be affected, trade unions and 'others' – we fit into others. So I encourage everyone here to make a response, to ensure that we make sufficient support for an 'option 3'.

WO: Is that consultation live?

PY: This is a consultation on the consultation.

WO: Yes, I see.

PY: I will go to the Department website and get the documentation and send it to everyone **ACTION POINT**

Edwin Graham (EG): I'll just say something on behalf of the Baha'i community. Several Baha'i families are in the area, with children attending the school. The Baha'i community in that area has a very active programme of children's activities and these would be attended by a number of BME children and they run that on a Friday night, very popular. My daughter's very actively involved and my granddaughter will likely be enrolled in Fane Street and my perception is that the population of BME families is increasing all the time in that area and I would expect that enrolment at Fane Street will dramatically increase during that time. These figures are, in fact, an underrepresentation.

AL: If the school were to be located on the Donegall Road, it would be a particularly big concern. It is not welcoming to BME pupils.

PY: We should consider another angle. There are two schools in the village area. They are in two different Parliamentary constituencies. This is why we should propose option 3 – close Blythefield and let the children move to one or the other of the two that remain. Were there to be only one school, the parents would have no choice. This is also a class issue – they want to amalgamate all of the working class schools together, without considering race relations issues. We should encourage more BME parents to join the school and as it grows it could gain more resources.

AL: Although there is another school of thought - you don't want a school that only has BME children and local parents don't want to send their children there. You want a good mix. All schools should cater for ethnic minorities.

PY: Donegall Road Primary had a substantial number of BME pupils once, which prevented it from being closed previously.

AL: Although they don't have many now.

PY: Everyone in the boundary is being affected. We should try to gain support from across the community, this would be more persuasive.

AL: Part of the issue with the amalgamation is that the Department wants to save money.

Joseph Ricketts (JR): From the presentation, it seems like a good model for integrated education in terms of ethnic minorities and the religious breakdown. So, maybe they could look at that element, in terms of being a model for integrated education in the area. But also, if they are going to amalgamate with Blythefield, it would be interesting to see what the breakdown would be afterwards. It would lose this element upon amalgamation.

WO: Just to clarify, option 3 is our preferred option?

AL and PY: Yes.

James Holmlund (JH): I assume that the Board of Governors of Fane Street are not at the state where anyone on the Board would be from a BME background?

PY: We need to make sure that there are BME parents in every single school. Boards of Governors are generally drawn from churches et cetera, I believe?

AL: They have to be a member of a Board of a State School

PY: The All-Party Group should make a further intervention, asking officials from the Department of Education to ask them about the criteria for selecting people to join these Boards **ACTION POINT**

AL: So you will send a draft response for community members to contribute through?

PY: Yes. **ACTION POINT**

## **6. AOB**

PY: Maybe JR and ML could mention Africa Week this week?

JR: Yes, Africa Week occurs every year in the week from the 25<sup>th</sup> of May. There are several activities taking place in Bangor. An open event at Bangor museum and all are welcome, families et cetera.

AL: Have you got a programme?

JR: Yes (programme distributed)

Maria Lourenco (ML): That will be the main event on Monday. Wednesday there will be an event here regarding FGM.

JR: We are interested in inviting members of the All-Party Group to that seminar on Wednesday. We would like to see more movement from the Executive on this issue and to come in line with the rest of the UK and Ireland on this issue. The event is in the Long Gallery. Such an issue needs to be addressed sensitively, but also we must raise awareness of the law amongst different communities. The Children's Commissioner and the Department of Justice will be attending. Also, for community groups whose families may not be able to drive, we will have a bus leaving from Belfast in front of ACSONI's office to drop people down to the venue.

ML: There are invitations for everybody on the table.

PY: We also encourage people to attend the BME Women Network's first AGM on the 6<sup>th</sup> of June, a Saturday.

JK: Refugee week is 15<sup>th</sup>-21<sup>st</sup> June and in this year 20<sup>th</sup> June is World Refugee Year, NICRAS will circulate a programme closer to the date.

WO: Dragon Boat Racing Event is also on 21<sup>st</sup> of June - maximum of 17 on a team.

PY: In the next meeting, we will have the Department of Justice and the Department of Health, Social Security and Public Safety, who will come to talk about the new domestic and sexual violence strategy. It was scheduled this month, but everything has been delayed due to their developing a new strategy.

JR: Also in June, there is a health awareness month on sickle cell awareness. There is a group coming from Ireland to join us here in Belfast on the 20<sup>th</sup> of June to raise awareness.

## **Date of next meeting**

Tuesday, 16<sup>th</sup> June 2015, Room 115