

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

Date: Tuesday 13th of March 2012

Venue: Parliament Buildings, Stormont (Senate Chambers)

Time: 12:30pm

Attendees

Political representatives:

David McIlveen MLA (DUP), Fra McCann MLA (Sinn Fein), Danny Kinahan MLA (UUP) Michelle Byrne (on behalf of Conall McDevitt).

BME sector representatives:

Alfred Abolarin (ACSONI), Katy Radford (Belfast Jewish Community), Eddis Nicholl (NICEM), Muhammad Al-Qaryooti (Belfast Islamic Centre), Patrick Yu (NICEM), Hanaa Ibrahim (The Egyptian Society NI), Justin Kouame (NICRAS), Paul Yam (Wah Hep Chinese Association), Kristyene Boreland and Angela Nakazava (World Wide Women @ North Down), Laura Baxter and Ivanley Noisette (NICEM interns), Ivy Ridge (Ballymena Inter-Ethnic Forum), Eileen Chan-Hu (Chinese Welfare Association), Lilian Veleem (Bryson One Stop Service for Asylum Seekers), James Holmlund (Bahai Council for NI), Joan McGovern (Barnardo's Tuar Ceatha), Elly Odhiambo (Kenyan Association NI), Jason Braga and Jet Tirol (Alliance of Filipino Communities in NI), Mazhar Khan (Belfast Islamic Centre).

1. Apologies

Political representatives:

Anna Lo MLA (Alliance Party), Lauren Allison (on behalf of Anna Lo MLA), Steven Agnew MLA (Green Party).

BME sector representatives:

Bobby Rao (Strabane Ethnic Community Association), Cita Carty (North Down Filipino Community), Mr Sandhu (NI Sikh Association), Frankie Ho (Chinese Chamber of Commerce), Edwin Graham (Bahai Council for NI).

2. Approval of the minutes of the last meeting

The minutes were approved.

3. Matters arising from the last meeting

Reissued letter to Mike Golden, follow-up on the immigration seminar

A letter to Mike Golden has been reissued by David McIlveen's office. A response was finally received acknowledging the letter and assuring of a full reply to the questions by the 16th of March. David will report back on it at the next meeting.

All Party Group questionnaire

The questionnaire has been circulated to the group by post and email. Filled-in questionnaires should be returned to Helena or Sophie at NICEM.

Request of the OFMDFM officials to attend meetings as observers on a regular basis

David McIlveen explained that a request has been received from the OFMDFM officials to attend the All Party Group meetings on a regular basis as observers. David asked the group whether or not they would agree to this request.

Michelle Byrne said that it would maybe be more beneficial to ask the OFMDFM to report to the group on a regular basis instead than just be present as observers. Ivy Ridge said that it is beneficial to have the OFMDFM in the room with us as we can ask them questions directly, instead of contacting their office and receiving no response back.

Katy Radford said that the OFMDFM budget is already very stretched, it almost seems a waste of human resources to attend the All Party Group meetings when they already have access to all the minutes from the meetings.

David raised the issue of preserving the All Party Group as a safe place for members to discuss delicate matters. This could be taken away by the presence of outside observers from the Departments. Justin Kouame agreed with this and asked what would be the purpose of the OFMDFM to come to the meetings.

Paul Yam also agreed that having observers at every meeting might make people feel uncomfortable and restrain them to speak freely. Paul said the group needs clarification to the purpose of their attendance. David explained that they would only come as observers and would not contribute to the matters discussed. Paul said that 2 representatives from the OFMDFM came to the last meeting and this was very positive because all the groups faced the same funding issue and they responded well to our concerns.

The group voted on the issue and rejected the request from the OFMDFM unanimously.

It was discussed that regular reports on the work of the OFMDFM on BME issues would be very helpful. Patrick Yu said that we could invite representatives from the OFMDFM to come and contribute to meetings when certain specific issues come up.

4. Discussion and endorsement of the recommendations of the Filipino research report

Jet Tirol and Jason Braga from the Alliance of Filipino Communities in NI were present to explain the importance of endorsing the recommendations from the report and ask for a motion debate. Jason and Jet apologised for not being able to be regularly attending the APG meetings due to professional commitments but explained that they strongly support and appreciate the work of the group.

Copies of the recommendations were distributed to the attendees and Jet and Jason stressed some of the issues such as the cases of agency workers employed by overseas agencies. Jason and Jet would like the All Party Group to endorse the recommendations and put forward a motion debate.

Paul congratulated the Filipino community for their work on the report and their efforts in helping the Filipino community, which can be very marginalised. Paul recommended endorsing the recommendations from the report. Justin also supported the recommendations and explained that if implemented the recommendations could go beyond the Filipino community and help other communities too.

David agreed and said that some of the issues and challenges are common to other communities. David said that the launch of the report was very successful. It took place in the Long Gallery in an evening and the room was absolutely full, with a large presence from the Filipino community.

Jason also said that the issue of Filipino agency workers reflects a similar issue for Indian agency workers in the catering industry.

5. All Party Group Terms of Reference on membership

The issue of the Terms of Reference of the APG resurfaced with the request from the Ards Intercultural Forum to join the group.

Jim Holmlund asked for clarification on the status of this group. Patrick confirmed they are a forum containing a mix of members from statutory agencies and NGO groups, their BME members are welcome to join the group but the likes of ACSONI are already members of both .

Patrick explained that all the relevant documents can be found on NICEM's website under the "All Party Group" section. Every year, the secretariat drafts an annual review with the exhaustive list of members and their frequency of attendance. Officially, in line with rules set by the Assembly, only the elected representatives are members of the group and the community organisations are invitees. Jim said that the Terms of Reference seemed very wide as it includes any "group with an interest in BME issues". Patrick explained that this extension was been added to the original Terms of Reference when SEEDS requested to become members of the APG last year, it will be applied on a case by case basis with any final decisions resting with the members.

David said that this APG is one of the largest and probably the most sophisticated of All Party Groups in the Assembly. There might be a downside to its success as it makes it harder to manage. David proposed a topic for discussion for the May's meeting on the possible need for a sub-group that could meet separately to discuss particular issues. This would ensure that the other members could get the most out of each meeting, as it is important that all the voices are heard. It would be good to restructure this group a little to make it move forward efficiently.

6. Collaboration with the APG in Scotland

The secretariat received an invitation from the Parliamentary Group on Equalities and Racism (which is equivalent to our APG on EMC) to meet in Edinburgh. The invitation only extended to the elected representatives of the group and the provisional date for the meeting is the 14th of June. The secretariat will be able to provide more information on it at the next meeting.

7. Group Presentations

The Kenyan Association NI

Elly Odhiambo gave a short presentation of the Kenyan Association NI, which was set up in 2009 following the presidential elections in Kenya.

Kenyan individuals and families living in Northern Ireland felt the need to meet up and discuss issues. The group is very fluid and informal, different ethnicities are represented and members come and go. The aim of the group is really to create the opportunity for people to meet and make a positive contribution and presence between themselves.

The crisis that is taking place in Kenya and Somalia has an impact on the relationships between people living in Northern Ireland. One of the aims of the Kenyan Association is to help the Kenyan community work sensitively and keep cohesion in the community.

The issues and challenges facing the Kenyan community in Northern Ireland are similar to what other communities might face but there are also unique experiences.

The Kenyan Association has not been receiving any funding to commission formal projects and researches but the group is standing strong nevertheless and the little resources available are put towards the community meetings.

Elly explained that smaller groups generate less interest from politicians and potential funders due to the size of the community, which is why the Kenyan Association is not looking for formal sponsors. The group has also strong and positive links with other community groups.

David said that the Kenyan Association NI had the full support of the All Party Group and would help in any way possible.

Worldwide Women @ North Down

Kristyene Boreland and Angela Nakazava gave a short presentation of their group and thanked the Chair and the secretariat for giving them the opportunity to share their experience. The World Wide Women @ North Down are an internationally diverse community group for all women wanting to meet for fun, friendship and networking. The group was initially set up in 2003 as a steering group and was then formally constituted in January 2004, to promote the advancement of social welfare of women of minority ethnic background. The aims were to explore and practice English language, share and explore the various cultures, meet and network with other groups and engage with policy makers and statutory bodies.

The group currently has 42 members from different origins (Belarus, Belgium, China, England, Germany, Ireland, Lithuania, Malaysia, Mexico, Nigeria, Poland, Russia, Singapore, South Africa, Thailand, the Philippines, USA and Zimbabwe).

The group meets every last Friday of the month at the George Green Community Centre in Bangor. World Wide Women @ North Down have been organising small festivals, charity events, arts and crafts courses and activities, health and safety, cookery and Food and Hygiene trainings, language and skills development training, music and dance events, trips and recitals to discover various cultures.

The organisation has received small grants for various events (the last one for International Women's Day) but they are in great need for funding to cover the administration costs of running the organisation. The group is currently joining up forces with other BME groups in the area such as the Polish group, Malawi group, Filipino group and Oi Yin Chinese Women's group to offer more signposting and be able to secure larger funding.

Jim Holmlund thanked Angela and Kristyene for their presentation and made the observation that women in NI have always been at the forefront of securing good community relations.

Paul asked if all the members are currently working in a voluntary capacity. Kristyene answered positively and said it takes a lot of drive and passion to keep the group moving.

8. AOB

Katy Radford invited the group on behalf of the Jewish Community to the screening of the film: "How to re-establish a vodka empire", that will take place in the QFT on the 21st and 22nd of March at 18:30.

Paul mentioned the consultation on the Programme for Government and asked what other members thought about it. NICEM had circulated their response to the groups for information. David said that the Programme for Government had officially been endorsed the previous day and further changes to it will not be possible.

Paul said that this was an important issue and that the All Party Group should have had a discussion on it. The group should discuss other important consultations coming out and get an opportunity to contribute. Patrick said that the agenda for the All Party group meetings is open to all every month and he encouraged everybody to submit items they want discussed as often as possible. He also reiterated that the submission to the Programme for Government that was circulated from NICEM as the organisation's own piece of work and was only circulated to the APG for information.

Lilian Vellem said that Ken Fraser from the OFMDFM has been emailing groups to say that interim measures would be put in place regarding the Ethnic Minority Development Fund. Are there any updates on this? David replied that he was not aware of any further updates, discussions are still taking place but hopefully things are moving in the right direction.

Eileen confirmed that CWA also received an email but that it only gave the 30th of March as a provisional date for more concrete information. These delays and uncertainties around the MEDF caused a lot of stress for groups. It has been very difficult.

There are also some issues with the Community Relations Council and the SEUPB on Peace III funding and BME groups are really struggling as a result. Groups really need to gather and push this now, as many groups might simply be wiped out before the next APG meeting.

Alfred raised 2 issues on the APG questionnaire. The first one on the proposed seminar on "What can my politician do for me". ACSONI had organized a similar event last year on BME individuals' engagement with the politicians and is worried that this will turn to be the same event rebranded under another name.

The second issue he wanted to raise concerns the groups' presentations during the APG meetings. ACSONI is an umbrella for 12 smaller organisations and Alfred asked if those groups could also be included in the presentations rota.

Ivy Ridge raised concerns on the OFMDFM MEDF and reiterated the difficult position groups are in at the moment. David said that more pressure could be put on the OFMDFM but that the final decision is in the hands of department officials. The real problem is how the money will be distributed and transferred. The money is ready and available but the mechanism to transfer it is complex and all the steps have to be accounted for.

Dr Khan raised concerns about the organisations' staff that are employed under this fund. What options are available? What about the notices to be given to staff? We should really be given a timeframe from the OFMDFM.

Patrick agreed that this is a very important issue. It seems that officials do not understand the legal requirements faced by community groups. Redundancy notices must be sent in a certain timeframe. An option for staff is to take unpaid leave instead of redundancy.

Fra McCann said that “protective notices” are usually issued. The situation really illustrates the need for longer-term funding rounds (3 or 4 years).

Eileen explained that groups could get overdrafts from the banks if they had certified letter of funding but this time groups are left with nothing.

Michelle asked how useful would a letter of comfort be? David explained that in the current economic climate, it wouldn't be very useful.

Ivy asked if any updates were given regarding a potential extension of the existing funding to cover for the transition period. Patrick said that most Departments have slippage money or unspent money but ministers would have to approve of the use of it.

David confirmed that every penny has to be accounted for. Public expenses have to go through very strict processes and procedures, which considerably slows things down, but is necessary for accountability purposes.

Eileen said that the Public Health Agency have put procedures in place to ensure minimum disruption of services in periods of funding transitions. This could be looked at.

Michelle said there would be no meeting of the APG in April but maybe the OFMDFM could report to us on the EMDF anyway.

Mohammed Al-Qaryooti said that a public lecture on the role of women in Islam would take place at the Belfast Islamic Centre on the 27th of March. Everybody is welcome.

9. Date of next meeting

8th of May 2012