



NORTHERN
IRELAND
HUMAN
RIGHTS
COMMISSION

MINUTES OF THE 75TH COMMISSION MEETING

HELD ON FRIDAY 18 MARCH 2005 AT 1PM AT
THE NORTHERN IRELAND HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION,
TEMPLE COURT, 39 NORTH ST, BELFAST, BT1 1NA

Present: Christine Eames (Acting Chairperson)
Kevin McLaughlin

In attendance: Paddy Sloan, Chief Executive
Don Leeson, Head of Corporate Services
Ciarán Ó Maoláin, Head of Legal Services, Research
and Policy
Peter O'Neill, Head of Information, Education and
Development
Angela Stevens, Caseworker (agenda item 8 only)

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1. Standing Orders

- 1.1 The terms of office for the Chief Commissioner and three Commissioners ended on 28 February 2005 and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has not yet made new appointments. The NIO has advised that the Commission can still function with two Commissioners. Therefore, the Standing Orders for Commission meetings have, as an interim measure pending the appointments of a new Chief Commissioner and Commissioners, been revised so that it is quorate with two Commissioners.

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2. Minutes of the 74th meeting (HRC 75.1)

2.1 The minutes of the 74th Commission meeting were agreed as an accurate record.

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3. Matters arising

3.1 There were no matters arising.

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4. Report from the Chief Executive (HRC 75.2)

4.1 Dame Rennie Fritchie, the Commissioner for Public Appointments, replied on 10 March 2005 to a letter from the Commission about its concerns over the handling of the appointment of new Commissioners. She considers the concerns to be very important and will seek a meeting with the Permanent Secretary of the NIO to discuss them.

4.2 The 61st session of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights and the 16th session of the UN International Coordinating Committee of National Institutions for the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights (ICC) will be held in Geneva on 13–15 April 2005. The agenda allows an opportunity for National Human Rights Institutions to speak on key concerns. The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission has represented the UK and spoken under this agenda item at each meeting since its establishment. It was agreed that the Commission should attend and speak at these forthcoming meetings – in the absence of a new Chief Commissioner, Christine Eames or the Chief Executive, with appropriate staff support, will attend the meetings. A draft presentation will be prepared for clearance at the next Commission meeting.

4.3 Negotiations on the Commission's behalf by the cost drawer with a firm of solicitors, whose invoices are disputed, are nearing conclusion and a settlement has been proposed. Commissioners agreed to the amount to be offered to the solicitors, proposed by the cost drawer to resolve the matter.

- 4.4 The Commission will be reviewing its policy in respect of internships during the coming months to ensure that it meets the needs of the Commission and provides equality of opportunity for people wishing to gain work experience. Pending that review, it is unlikely that any new interns will be accepted.
- 4.5 The Chief Executive has met with Professor Colin Harvey, Director of Queen's University Human Rights Centre, to discuss a more structured relationship between the Centre and the Commission. Amongst other areas of possible shared work and interest, this may include internships with the Commission for students. Discussions are planned with NUI Galway's Human Rights Centre to consider a similar relationship with them. The revised policy on internships will reflect the outcome of these discussions and will be put to Commissioners for approval in due course.

5. Staff, Committee and Working Group Reports

- 5.1 Corporate Services (HRC 75.3):
- 5.1.1 The body of the report was noted.
- 5.1.2 Cathy McGrann, who had been filling the Assistant Caseworker post on temporary basis, has left the Commission. Commissioners recorded their appreciation for Cathy's work. The Assistant Caseworker post has been re-graded to that of Caseworker and interviews for the post, which was advertised in February, are scheduled for 5 April 2005.
- 5.1.3 The Commission has not yet signed the lease to take possession of the whole of Temple Court – further building work is being undertaken by the landlord to address concerns raised by the Commission. In the meantime, the landlord has agreed to allow the Commission to occupy the first floor offices pending completion of the further work and formal signing of the lease. Detailed planning for the move, which is expected to take place in June 2005, is now underway. Work to be done prior to the move includes ensuring that the Commission's insurance cover is extended to cover the whole building.

5.2 Information, Education and Development (HRC 75.4):

5.2.1 The body of the report was noted.

5.2.2 Commissioners agreed to a proposal for the Commission, along with the Irish Human Rights Commission and Amnesty International, to co-host a conference on Human Rights Education in the Post Primary Sector on the island of Ireland on 17 May 2005 in Dublin. It was agreed that the Minister for Education, Barry Gardiner MP, and his counterpart in the Republic of Ireland, should be invited to jointly open the event. Costs will be borne by the Irish Human Rights Commission.

5.2.3 Commissioners agreed that the Commission should issue a press release to mark International Day against Racism on 21 March 2005.

5.3 Legal Services, Research and Policy (HRC 75.5):

5.3.1 The body of the report was noted.

5.3.2 Commissioners agreed to proposals to respond to a number of consultation documents.

5.4 Casework (HRC 75.5a):

5.4.1 The minutes of the meeting of 25 January 2005 were agreed as an accurate record.

6. Annual accounts for 2001–02 and 2002–03

6.1 Commissioners approved the Commission's financial statements for 2001–02 and 2002–03. These will be sent to the Comptroller and Auditor General for scrutiny and submission to Parliament.

- 6.2 The Northern Ireland Audit Office's review of the Commission's financial statements for 2003–04 is expected to be completed shortly and these will be presented to Commissioners for approval in due course. Commissioners passed on their appreciation to Don Leeson and Lorraine Hamill for their work in supporting the auditors and in preparing the financial statements.

7. Any other business

- 7.1 Christine Eames and Kevin McLaughlin passed on their appreciation to all staff for their work during the hiatus in appointing a new Chief Commissioner and Commissioners.
- 7.2 Correspondence from the Children's Law Centre, Sinn Fein and Dame Rennie Fritchie at the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments was noted and responses agreed.
- 7.3 Applications from two members of staff for support to undertake academic study were considered. In light of the demands on the Commission's training budget, it was agreed to provide support to both applicants, one at 100% and one at 50% according to the Commission's current policy. It was agreed that this policy would be reviewed in more detail by the Audit and Risk Management Committee, which will be established when the new Chief Commissioner and Commissioner appointments are made.
- 7.4 An article by Lord Laird, critical of the Commission and published recently in the Newsletter, was discussed. Commissioners decided not to respond publicly to the article, although concern was expressed at both its tone and content.

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**3:15pm Don Leeson and Peter O'Neill left the meeting;
Angela Stevens, the Caseworker, joined the meeting**

8. Casework

- 8.1 As a result of the reduced number of Commissioners, it was agreed that casework applications for support would be considered by the full Commission until a working Casework Committee can be re-established, which will be a priority when the new Chief Commissioner and Commissioners have been appointed.
- 8.2 Angela Stevens, the Caseworker, took Commissioners through applications and recorded decisions.

The meeting closed at **3.30pm.**

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Date: 25 April 2005