



NORTHERN
IRELAND
HUMAN
RIGHTS
COMMISSION

MINUTES OF THE 76TH COMMISSION MEETING

**HELD ON MONDAY 25 APRIL 2005 AT 10AM AT
THE NORTHERN IRELAND HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION,
TEMPLE COURT, 39 NORTH ST, BELFAST, BT1 1NA**

Present: Kevin McLaughlin (Acting Chairperson)
Christine Eames

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

1. Minutes of the 75th meeting (HRC 76.1)

1.1 The minutes of the 75th Commission meeting were agreed as an accurate record.

2. Matters arising

2.1 Commissioners agreed that the Standing Orders, as published on the Commission's website, should be annotated to indicate that Commission and Committee meetings are, pending the appointment of a new Chief Commissioner and Commissioners, temporarily quorate with two members (paragraph 1.1 of the minutes of the last meeting refers).

- 2.2 Following a letter from the Commission about its concerns over the handling of the appointment of new Commissioners, Dame Rennie Fritchie, the Commissioner for Public Appointments, has arranged to meet with Sir Joe Pilling, Permanent Secretary of the NIO, to discuss the matter (paragraph 4.1 of the minutes of the last meeting refers).
- 2.3 The joint conference with the Irish Human Rights Commission and Amnesty International on Human Rights Education in the Post Primary Sector on the island of Ireland scheduled for 17 May 2005 in Dublin has been put back until September 2005 (paragraph 5.2.2 of the minutes of the last meeting refers).

3. Report from the Chief Executive (HRC 76.2)

- 3.1 The NIO has informed the Commission that appointments of the new Chief Commissioner and Commissioners was on hold pending the General Election on 5 May 2005. Depending on the outcome of the Election, the NIO hoped that the appointment would be made before the end of May 2005. It was agreed that Commissioners should seek a meeting with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland as soon as possible after the Election to discuss their concerns at the delay in the appointments process and press for early decisions. A draft letter will be prepared for clearance at the next Commission meeting.
- 3.2 Given that a new Chief Commissioner and Commissioners, when appointed, may be unlikely to take-up their posts for several months, it was agreed that the Casework Committee should be reconstituted as a separate body with the two current Commissioners as members. The Committee will consider at its next meeting on 28 April 2005 whether it needs to be augmented with an external non-voting member(s) to provide additional expertise.
- 3.3 Following negotiations on the Commission's behalf by the cost drawer with a firm of solicitors, whose invoices are disputed, Commissioners agreed to the final amount to be paid to settle the matter. The NIO has given its approval for the expenditure.

- 3.4 The Joint Committee of Representatives of the two Human Rights Commissions on the Island of Ireland (the Joint Committee) last met in December 2004. The Joint Committee's next meeting, which was scheduled for March 2005, was postponed pending the appointment of the new Chief Commissioner and Commissioners. It was agreed to seek to schedule a meeting of the Joint Committee in September 2005 by which time it is hoped that the new appointees will be in post.
- 3.5 In advance of the Joint Committee meeting, it was agreed that the current Commissioners will seek a meeting with some of the Irish Human Rights Commissioners to review the work to date of the Joint Committee and, where appropriate, make recommendations to improve its effectiveness. The Chief Executive will prepare a discussion paper with her counterpart in the Irish Human Rights Commission for the review meeting.
- 3.6 'The House' magazine runs a programme of briefings aimed at providing a forum for practitioners to debate key issues with leading figures from within Parliament, devolved administrations and local government. The Commission has been invited to speak at an event the magazine is holding in Belfast on 25 May on the proposed Single Equality Bill. It was agreed to accept the invitation.
- 3.7 The Commission has also been invited to speak at a conference being hosted by Queens University Belfast on 10 June 2005 on the effectiveness of national human rights institutions. It was agreed to accept the invitation. The Chief Executive, if the new Chief Commissioner is not yet in post, will speak at the event.

4. Staff, Committee and Working Group Reports

4.1 Corporate Services (HRC 76.3):

4.1.1 The body of the report was noted.

4.1.2 Following interviews for the vacant Caseworker post on 5 April 2005, an appointment has been made. The successful candidate starts on 1 June 2005 on a job share basis. Options for filling the remaining part of the post are being considered.

- 4.1.3 At their meeting on 14 February 2005 Commissioners approved a proposal to extend the hours of the Cleaner to cover the cleaning of the whole of Temple Court and other duties. This new contract came into effect on 18 April 2005.
- 4.1.4 Commission staff are planning the move into the first floor of Temple Court to take place over the weekend of 28/29 May 2005. Building work being undertaken by the landlord to address concerns raised by the Commission is nearing completion and we should be in a position to sign the lease to take possession of the whole of Temple Court shortly.
- 4.1.5 The Comptroller and Auditor General has approved the Commission's accounts for 2000–01, 2001–02 and 2002–03, without qualification. The audit of the 2003–04 accounts should be complete shortly. Work has begun to prepare our accounts for 2004–05, which will be audited during the summer and published with the Commission's Annual Report in the autumn.

4.2 Information, Education and Development (HRC 76.4):

- 4.2.1 The body of the report was noted.
- 4.2.2 The Commission's first regular email bulletin on human rights issues, aimed at practitioners and stakeholders, has been distributed and we have received positive feedback on it.
- 4.2.3 The Commission has published guides on Articles 2 and 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which have also been positively received. An event to formally launch the guides is being considered.
- 4.2.4 A number of other areas of work are under development pending the appointment of the new Chief Commissioner and Commissioners. This includes a communications strategy and style guide for in-house documents. A language policy will also be developed in due course.

4.3 Legal Services, Research and Policy (HRC 76.5):

- 4.3.1 The body of the report was noted.
- 4.3.2 Pending the new Caseworker taking up post, there is currently a delay in responding to legal inquiries.
- 4.3.3 The Commission is observing proceedings at the inquiry into the killing of Rosemary Nelson, which began on 19 April 2005. The Commission will be offering advice and guidance to the inquiry as it progresses.
- 4.3.4 The Commission will meet with the Prison Service on 10 May 2005 to discuss access to the Hydebank Wood women's prison.
- 4.3.5 The Department of Education has informed the Commission that recommendations we made in respect of the Special Educational Needs and Disability Order concerning the views of disabled children being taken into consideration in decisions about their education have been accepted.
- 4.3.6 Commissioners agreed to proposals to respond to a number of consultation documents.

5. Correspondence (HRC 76.6)

- 5.1 Correspondence to the Chief Commissioner and Chief Executive from a member of the public, NICEM, PSNI, Department of Education, Roy Beggs MLA and the Equality Commission was noted and responses agreed.

6. Report on 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

- 6.1 The Chief Executive's report on her attendance at 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) in Geneva on 13–15 April 2005 was noted. Her speech to the UN Commission was given positive coverage in an editorial in the Irish News.
- 6.2 It was decided at the event that, from next year, national human rights institutions (NHRI) would be able to contribute to all agenda items – previously their contribution was confined to one dedicated agenda item. This will have resource implications for us which will need to be considered should the Commission wish to contribute further.
- 6.3 The Commission will also need to consider its accreditation with the UN as a 'sub-regional' NHRI, whereas only 'national' NHRIs will have full rights of access. Whilst only one NHRI can contribute on behalf of a country at any one time, several organisations within a country can be accredited as 'national' NHRIs. The Commission's status will be even more important once the Commission for Equality and Human Rights is formed in Great Britain and when the proposed Human Rights Commission for Scotland is established.

7. Casework papers (HRC 76.8)

- 7.1 The minutes of the meeting of 17 February 2005 were noted.

8. Any other business

- 8.1 It was agreed that initial development work on a draft Strategic Plan for the Commission for 2006–09 should begin for discussion with Commissioners over the summer and consultation with stakeholders in the autumn.
- 8.2 It was agreed that work on the Commission’s Annual Report for 2004–05 should begin. It is hoped that the Annual Report will be submitted to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland in September 2005, although this will be dependent on clearance of the Commission’s accounts by the Northern Ireland Audit Office, which need to be incorporated within it.

The meeting closed at 1.30pm.

Approved: _____

Date: _____

12 May 2005