



NORTHERN
IRELAND
HUMAN
RIGHTS
COMMISSION

MINUTES OF THE 77TH COMMISSION MEETING

**HELD ON THURSDAY 12 MAY 2005 AT 11:30AM 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

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1. Minutes of the 76th meeting (HRC 77.1)

- 1.1 The minutes of the 76th Commission meeting were agreed as an accurate record.

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2. Matters arising

- 2.1 Following the General Election, Commissioners wrote on 10 May 2005 to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland seeking a meeting to discuss their concerns at the delay in appointing the new Chief Commissioner and Commissioners and to press for early decisions (paragraph 3.1 of the minutes of the last meeting refers). Receipt of the letter was acknowledged by the Secretary of State's office on 11 May 2005 and a substantive reply will follow in due course.

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- 2.2 Paddy Sloan and the Chief Executive of the Irish Human Rights Commission (IHRC) will prepare a paper for discussion by Commissioners representing both Commissions on the work to date of the Joint Committee and, where appropriate, make recommendations for improving its effectiveness (paragraph 3.5 of the minutes of the last meeting refers).
- 2.3 The team leading the inquiry into the killing of Rosemary Nelson has written to thank the Commission for its comments on the terms of reference for the inquiry (paragraph 4.3.3 of the minutes of the last meeting refers).
- 2.4 The Commission had a useful discussion on 10 May 2005 with Robin Masefield, the Director General of the Prison Service of Northern Ireland, and his senior colleagues on a range of issues (paragraph 4.3.4 of the minutes of the last meeting refers). The two organisations will meet again once the new Chief Commissioner has been appointed. In the meantime, the Prison Service will allow the Commission access to 'separated prisoners' and staff in Maghaberry prison to discuss conditions.

3. Report from the Chief Executive (HRC 77.2)

- 3.1 The Commission has written to all of the MPs elected in Northern Ireland to bring to their attention the work of the Commission. A similar letter will be sent to elected members of the district councils.
- 3.2 The Management Team held an extended meeting on 5 May 2005 to discuss a range of issues, including the development of the Commission's Strategic Plan for 2006–09 and induction arrangements for the new Commissioners. A follow-up meeting will be held on 19 May 2005 to complete the discussions.
- 3.3 Depending on their training needs, a supplementary bid for funding might need to be made to the NIO for the induction programme for new Commissioners. Further resources may also be required to implement a development programme for staff following a training needs analysis conducted in 2004. Proposals for a training programme for Commissioners and staff will be put to Commissioners for consideration in the summer.

- 3.4 The Commission held a seminar, organised and facilitated by Virginia McVea, on 27 April 2005 on the 'Deaths in Hospital' report. This was the second in a series of events on this issue, which this time focused on matters concerning bereaved families and their legal representatives.
- 3.5 The Joint Equality and Human Rights Group (JEHRG), a forum for the chief executives of the various commissions in the UK and Ireland, met in Belfast on 6 May 2005 to consider a number of issues. The Group intends to arrange a seminar on 'good relations' across the human rights and equality agenda. In the meantime, JEHRG representatives from Scotland, Wales, Ireland and Northern Ireland will meet on 6/7 June 2005 in Edinburgh to review proposed joint equality legislation and consider the potential impact of the forthcoming Commission for Equality and Human Rights in Great Britain.
- 3.6 The Commission featured in a United Nations press release on 'untold' success stories, in which the work of National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs) was profiled. Specific reference was made on the work of the Commission.
- 3.7 The British Council is evaluating the programme of events it organised for NHRIs in the Commonwealth over the past three years, which culminated in a workshop held at Temple Court in January/February 2005. The report will make recommendations for future developmental activities.

4. Correspondence (HRC 77.3)

- 4.1 Correspondence to/from the Chief Commissioner and Chief Executive to/from the Prison Service of Northern Ireland, PSNI, Department of Education, Roy Beggs MLA, Caitriona Ruane MLA, Campbell College and Northern Ireland MPs was noted and agreed.

5. Commission Style Guide (HRC 77.4)

- 5.1 A comprehensive style guide for Commission staff for internally generated documents, based on best practice, was reviewed by Commissioners for use as a working document. The guide includes a 'house' font size (Verdana 12) and guidance on acceptable terminology. The guide will be discussed further with staff with a view to using on a trial basis and brought back for formal ratification in due course when new Commissioners are appointed.

- 5.2 An inclusive language policy is being developed and will be presented to Commissioners for consideration in due course.

6. Staff, Committee and Working Group Reports

6.1 Corporate Services (HRC 77.6)

- 6.1.1 The body of the report was noted.
- 6.1.2 The Commission has sought approval from the NIO to use its 'end year flexibility' facility to carry forward budgets unspent from previous financial years. These funds relate to spending commitments on casework and other areas. A decision is expected before the end of May 2005.
- 6.1.3 Internal auditors have been appointed. They will prepare a Strategic Audit Plan, which will review the Commission's financial management and corporate governance arrangements over a three-year period. The first phase of this audit will take place in autumn 2005. Given that the Commission's last internal audit took place in February 2004, the auditors are content that a further audit of the financial management arrangements during 2004–05 is not necessary to underpin the production of the year's accounts, which are currently being prepared.
- 6.1.4 Following satisfactory completion of building work by the landlord, the lease giving the Commission possession of the whole of Temple Court has been signed. The move of Commission staff into the first floor of Temple Court will take place over the weekend of 28/29 May 2005.

6.2 Information, Education and Development (HRC 77.7)

- 6.2.1 The body of the report was noted.

- 6.2.2 Commissioners agreed a proposal to organise an awareness-raising week of action on human rights issues during the week commencing 5 December 2005, culminating with a reception on 10 December to mark International Human Rights Day. The week of activities might include a two-day, residential conference, possibly in Armagh. Work will now be undertaken to develop a detailed programme of events and activities, which will be presented to Commissioners for discussion in due course.
- 6.2.3 It was also agreed that the Commission, in partnership with the Equality Commission and, possibly, the IHRC, Equality Authority and National Disability Authority in the Republic of Ireland, should organise a seminar to brief disability groups on developments with the proposed UN Convention on Disability. Given that further discussions on the draft Convention are planned to take place at the UN in August 2005, this seminar might be held during the week of activities leading up to International Human Rights Day on 10 December 2005, or shortly before then to mark the International Day of Disabled People on 3 December.
- 6.2.4 The Commission has received funding from the Arts Council to develop a competition for artists around the theme of human rights. The project is still in the development phase, although it is hoped to announce the winners of the competition as part of the week of human rights awareness-raising activities in December 2005.

6.3 **Legal Services, Research and Policy (HRC 77.8)**

- 6.3.1 The body of the report was noted.
- 6.3.2 The Caseworker is currently reviewing the Commission's Casework Strategy. This will benchmark our current approach with practices used by other similar organisations and make recommendations for change as appropriate, which will be presented to Commissioners for consideration in due course.

6.3.3 The Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) will take over responsibility for promoting and monitoring the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. In order to help facilitate this, Ciarán Ó Maoláin will accompany a senior member of NICCY staff to the UN in Geneva on 24 May 2005 for a familiarisation visit, which is being funded by NICCY.

6.3.4 The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has invited NHRIs to comment on progress being made by countries in developing National Action Plans Against Racism. It was agreed that the Commission should accept this invitation – a draft response will be developed for discussion and approval by Commissioners.

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

6.4 **Casework Committee minutes (HRC 77.9)**

6.3.1 The minutes of the meeting of 18 March 2005 were noted.

7. Any other business

7.1 Kevin McLaughlin represents the Commission on a 'Promoting Social Inclusion' (PSI) working group on disability. As part of this, the working group will shortly be meeting with the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) about the design of a questionnaire they are developing to collect statistics on disability. He will provide feedback on these discussions, as well as an update on the PSI project more generally, to the next Commission meeting.

8. Next meeting

8.1 The next meeting of the Commission will be held on 21 June 2005 at 1pm in Temple Court.

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The meeting closed at **1.15pm.**

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Date: 21 June 2005