



NORTHERN
IRELAND
HUMAN
RIGHTS
COMMISSION

MINUTES OF THE 78TH COMMISSION MEETING

HELD ON THURSDAY 21 June 2005 AT 2PM AT
THE NORTHERN IRELAND HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION,
TEMPLE COURT, 39 NORTH ST, BELFAST, BT1 1NA

Present: Kevin McLaughlin (Acting Chairperson)
Christine Eames (by telephone)

In attendance: Paddy Sloan, Chief Executive
Don Leeson, Head of Corporate Services
Ciarán Ó Maoláin, Head of Legal Services, Policy and
Research
Peter O'Neill, Head of Information, Education and
Development

1. Minutes of the 77th meeting (HRC 78.1)

- 1.1 The minutes of the 77th Commission meeting were agreed as an accurate record.

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2. Matters arising

- 2.1 Commissioners welcomed the appointment of Monica McWilliams as the new Chief Commissioner, and of all the new Commissioners, whose appointments were announced on 16 June 2005. Commissioners wished Monica well in her new job and look forward to working with her and the new Commissioners when they take up their appointments in September 2005.

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- 2.2 The Chief Executive will discuss preparation of a paper on the work to date of the Joint Committee of the Northern Ireland and Irish Human Rights Commissions with the Chief Executive of the IHRC in Dublin on 23 June 2005 (paragraph 2.2 of the minutes of the last meeting refers). This paper will then be discussed at the first Joint Committee meeting involving the new Commissioners, which will be scheduled for autumn 2005.
- 2.3 The next meeting of the 'Promoting Social Inclusion' (PSI) working group on disability, on which Kevin McLaughlin represents the Commission, has been rescheduled to 28 June 2005. Kevin will give feedback on the working group's discussions, as well as an update on the PSI project more generally, to the next Commission meeting (paragraph 7.1 of the minutes of the last meeting refers).

3. Report from the Chief Executive (HRC 78.2)

- 3.1 The announcement of the appointment of the new Chief Commissioner and Commissioners led to significant media interest, with the Chief Commissioner designate giving a number of television, radio and newspaper interviews.
- 3.2 The incoming Chief Commissioner hoped to meet as many of the Commissioners as possible before she takes up her appointment and has arranged an informal meeting on 27 June 2005. Planning is underway for a residential event for Commissioners shortly after they begin work in September 2005.
- 3.3 All new Commissioners have been sent an induction pack, and a programme of introductory briefings and visits is being put in place for autumn 2005.
- 3.4 The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland would like to meet Commissioners once the new appointees have taken up their appointments in the autumn. In the meantime, David Hanson MP, the Minister with responsibility for human rights, had written on 24 May 2005 to the current Commissioners to thank them for their work during the transition period. He has accepted the Commissioners' request for a meeting to discuss the work of the Commission.

- 3.5 The Chief Executive addressed a conference on the effectiveness of national human rights institutions organised by Queens University on 10 June 2005. This conference, in part, focused on the evaluation report on the work of the Commission. A co-author of that report, Dr Rachel Murray, has agreed to discuss her conclusions with the Commission before using the report in future publications.
- 3.6 The Chief Executive and Head of Corporate Services met with an official from the NIO who was advising the NIO's sponsored non-departmental public bodies on security matters. This review meeting concluded that the Commission is taking the right approach to minimising risks to its people, property, information and premises.
- 3.7 A meeting involving the Commission, the Northern Ireland Commission for Children and Young People and the Equality Commission to discuss the response of statutory bodies to the needs of Travellers has been arranged for 23 June 2005. The Chief Executive will report back on developments to the next Commission meeting.

4. Correspondence (HRC 78.3)

- 4.1 Gerry Adams MP has written to ask the Commission to work with the IHRC to look into the high prevalence of suicide on the island of Ireland. It was agreed that this was an important matter and should be raised at the next Joint Committee meeting. Such a review is timely given the announcement by Shaun Woodward, the Minister for Health, on 21 June 2005 to establish a task force to address the prevention of suicide by young people.
- 4.2 The Omagh Support and Self-Help Group has written to the Commission to inquire whether we were yet able to support its call for a cross-border public enquiry into the Omagh bombing on 15 August 1998. The Commission has been in discussion with the IHRC on this matter. A full briefing will be prepared for the new Chief Commissioner and Commissioners to facilitate their early consideration of the Omagh Support and Self-Help Group's campaign.
- 4.3 The Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland has invited the Commission to attend a briefing on parades on 28 June 2005. It was agreed that the Commission should be represented.

- 4.4 Correspondence between the Chief Executive and the Chinese Welfare Association and with the Northern Ireland Housing Executive was noted.

5. Prisons – update report (HRC 78.4)

- 5.1 Representatives of the Commission visited Maghaberry prison on 17 May 2005 with the intention of focusing on the conditions of separated prisoners. Whilst the visit was useful, there had been limited access to the separated prisoners, and it was agreed that a follow-up visit should be planned during the summer, involving both current Commissioners.
- 5.2 The revised edition of the report 'The Hurt Inside' on the conditions of women prisoners will be printed shortly.
- 5.3 Research is currently underway as part of the Commission's follow-up study into the care of children and young people in the Rathgael Juvenile Justice Centre.
- 5.4 A meeting will be arranged between the Commission and the new Prisoner Ombudsman in the autumn.

6. Identity cards (HRC 78.5)

- 6.1 The Commission has not established a final position on Government proposals for the introduction of biometric identity cards and an accompanying national identity register. A briefing paper was considered and further information will be discussed in due course.
- 6.2 It was agreed that the Commission needs to develop an initial view prior to that discussion. This policy perspective will be developed further and discussed at the next Commission meeting.

7. Draft Public Affairs Strategy (HRC 78.6)

- 7.1 The Commission's Business Plan for 2005–06 includes undertakings to identify and implement a strategy for lobbying government at Westminster and, where appropriate, Stormont, regarding legislation and policy, and to work with political parties to devise operational proposals for a Roundtable on the Bill of Rights proposals.

- 7.2 Commissioners discussed and agreed a number of recommendations and resources to develop a public affairs strategy. This should increase the Commission's profile and influence with key politicians and opinion formers, both locally and more widely, in respect of human rights issues. The timetable for some of these actions would necessarily have to wait for the new Chief Commissioner and Commissioners taking up their appointments.
- 7.3 A proposed strategy for bringing to a conclusion the Commission's work on providing advice to the government on a Bill of Rights was discussed. It was recognised that this work needed to be considered by the new Chief Commissioner and Commissioners. It was decided that a timetable on this work should not be established at this stage, but that a Bill of Rights will be a priority for the Commission once the new Chief Commissioner and Commissioners are in post.

8. Internal communications audit (HRC 78.7)

- 8.1 The results of the Commission's survey on internal communications were discussed. The survey results and subsequent recommendations for action were derived from questionnaires and focus group discussions with staff.
- 8.2 A number of recommendations to improve communications were agreed, including a proposal to publish a printed journal on human rights issues and the work of the Commission.
- 8.3 It was also agreed that a follow-up survey should be conducted next year.

9. Commission accounts 2003–04 and 2004–05 (HRC 78.8)

- 9.1 It had been the intention to table the Commission's financial statements for 2003–04 and 2004–05 for approval by Commissioners. However, changes in accounting policy in respect of disclosure of pension liabilities and casework commitments had delayed their production. Therefore, it was agreed to convene a special Commission meeting on 4 July 2005 to consider the financial statements.

Note: The 78th Commission meeting was subsequently reconvened on 4 July 2005 and Commissioners approved the financial statements for 2003–04 for final audit and subsequent publication, and those of 2004–05 for submission to the Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG).

Subsequent advice from the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) required an amendment to the accounts in respect of pension disclosures. A further meeting of Commissioners was convened on 28 July 2005 to review the final revisions. The 2004–05 accounts were discussed and approved for submission to the C&AG.

It was agreed that the Chief Executive would prepare a briefing for Commissioners on the process of pension disclosures and NIAO advice.

10. Staff, Committee and Working Group Reports

10.1 Corporate Services (HRC 78.9)

10.1.1 The body of the report was noted.

10.1.2 Commissioners approved a number of proposals in respect of personnel matters, including increases in the hours of two part-time members of staff, the extension of the career break of another member of staff, and the recruitment of an Investigations Worker to cover maternity leave, which is expected to begin in September 2005.

10.1.3 The Commission has carried forward an underspend from last financial year. This funding is committed in respect of ongoing casework support and costs associated with the accommodation changes in Temple Court, which had slipped from the last financial year. The NIO is considering the position and will inform the Commission of its approval or otherwise to carryover these funds in due course.

10.1.4 Commissioners approved expenditure proposals in respect of the Commission's reference library, including the award of a contract to a librarian to catalogue the library, the purchase of a computerised Library Management System and additional shelving.

10.2 **Information, Education and Development (HRC 78.10)**

10.2.1 The body of the report was noted.

10.2.2 Commissioners approved the reprint of the Commission's recently published guides to Articles 2 and 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which have been well received and are still in significant demand.

10.3 **Legal Services, Research and Policy (HRC 78.11)**

10.3.1 The body of the report was noted.

10.3.2 Following the appointment of a second Caseworker, the backlog of legal inquiries is reducing.

10.3.3 Work on developing the Migrant Workers' Handbook is progressing well and a second draft is close to completion.

10.3.4 Following a recent visit to the United Nations in Geneva, and attendance at a meeting of the Joint Equality and Human Rights Group in Edinburgh, contacts have been developed with the Norwegian Children's Ombudsman and Scottish Children's Commissioner respectively.

10.3.5 Commissioners approved a draft response to the Criminal Justice (Northern Ireland) Order 2005.

10.3.6 The United Nations Association (Northern Ireland) and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) held an event on 13 June 2005 to stimulate public debate on proposals for reform of the United Nations. It was agreed that the Commission will make a submission on this issue.

10.3.7 The Department of Foreign Affairs in the Republic of Ireland held an event in Dublin on 11 June 2005, which focussed, amongst other things, on foreign policy in human rights and humanitarian areas. It was agreed that the Commission will consider its own position in this area and, if appropriate, provide advice to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and share it with the Irish Human Rights Commission.

10.3.8 Commissioners agreed to proposals to respond to a number of consultation documents listed in the report.

10.4 Casework Committee minutes (HRC 78.12)

10.4.1 The minutes of the Casework Committee meeting held on 28 April 2005, and those of an Emergency Casework Committee held on 12 May 2005, were noted.

11. Any other business

11.1 A residents' group has contacted the Commission about concerns in respect of a Parades Commission determination. It was noted that, in advance of having a full complement of Commissioners, the Commission needed to agree its approach to dealing with such inquiries over the summer period. A paper on a possible approach, drawing on the work to date of the Commission's Conflict Intervention Group, would be prepared for consideration at the next meeting.

11.2 Commission representatives met with Keir Starmer and Jane Gordon on 21 June 2005 to discuss their report on policing and human rights. A formal response would be prepared for consideration by Commissioners in due course.

12. Next meeting

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12.1 The next meeting of the Commission will be held on 8 August 2005 at 10.30am in Temple Court.

12.2 A special meeting will be held on 4 July 2005 to consider the Commission's financial statements for 2004–05.

The meeting closed at 4:30pm.

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Date: 8 August 2005