



NORTHERN
IRELAND
HUMAN
RIGHTS
COMMISSION

MINUTES OF THE 80TH COMMISSION MEETING

HELD ON FRIDAY 16 SEPTEMBER 2005 AT 10:30AM AT
THE NORTHERN IRELAND HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION,
TEMPLE COURT, 39 NORTH ST, BELFAST, BT1 1NA

Present: Monica McWilliams, Chief Commissioner
Jonathan Bell
Tom Duncan
Christine Eames
Colin Harvey
Alan Henry
Ann Hope
Kevin McLaughlin
Eamonn O'Neill
Geraldine Rice

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

Commissioners noted with sadness the death of former Commissioner Tom Donnelly on 1 September 2005 and commemorated his life.

1. Minutes of the 79th meeting (HRC 80.1)

- 1.1 The minutes of the 79th Commission meeting were agreed as an accurate record.

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2. Matters arising

- 2.1 There were no matters arising.

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3. Report from the Chief Commissioner

- 3.1 This was the first Commission meeting since Monica McWilliams had taken office as Chief Commissioner and Jonathan Bell, Tom Duncan, Colin Harvey, Alan Henry, Ann Hope, Eamonn O'Neill and Geraldine Rice their appointments as Commissioners on 1 September 2005. The Chief Commissioner recorded her appreciation, and that of the new Commissioners, for the work of Christine Eames, Kevin McLaughlin and the staff during the interim period since the appointments of previous Commissioners ended on 28 February 2005.
- 3.2 The Chief Commissioner reported that she had received on behalf of Commissioners many messages of support from, among others, former Chief Commissioner Brice Dickson and former Commissioners Margaret–Ann Dinsmore and Harold Good, and from across the political spectrum for their forthcoming work.
- 3.3 The Chief Commissioner tabled a report on the meetings that she had held with stakeholders since joining the Commission. She also reported on her meeting with Peter Hain MP, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, on 19 July 2005 and noted his intention to visit the Commission to meet Commissioners and staff during the coming months. It was also noted that David Hanson MP, Minister of State for Northern Ireland, hoped to visit the Commission during the autumn, possibly to coincide with the launch of a consultation document on revised powers for the Commission.
- 3.4 Commissioners noted that the next meeting of the Joint Committee of the Northern Ireland and Irish Human Rights Commissions is scheduled to take place on 19 October 2005 in Dublin.

4. Induction programme for Commissioners (HRC 80.2)

- 4.1 Commissioners expressed their appreciation to the staff involved in preparing briefings on a range of human rights issues, which were circulated earlier in the month.

- 4.2 Commissioners approved a proposed programme for their induction on the work of the Commission. This includes seminars on key human rights issues to be prepared and delivered by staff. Dates for these events will be agreed in due course.
- 4.3 Commissioners agreed to hold a residential event, with external facilitation, on 25/26 October 2005 to consider a range of issues concerning ways of working and allocating specific roles and responsibilities in respect of Commission business.
- 4.4 Commissioners noted that attendance at training on their role and responsibilities in respect of the corporate governance of the Commission, provisionally scheduled for 9 November 2005, is mandatory.

5. Standing Orders for Commission meetings (HRC 80.3)

- 5.1 Commissioners discussed proposed amendments to the Standing Orders for Commission meetings. The amendments were agreed in principle, subject to suggestions on minor textual changes, which Commissioners were invited to make outside the meeting.
- 5.2 The draft amended Standing Orders will be considered again in light of any suggested textual changes. In the meantime, it was noted that the pre-existing Standing Orders remain in effect until the amendments are formally approved at a subsequent Commission meeting.
- 5.3 Commissioners will discuss the structure of sub-committees and working groups needed to progress Commission business at the residential event on 25/26 October 2005. As an interim measure, it was agreed that the constitution and membership of the Casework Committee will remain unchanged.

6. Strategic Planning Process (HRC 80.4)

- 6.1 Commissioners noted that the process for developing and approving the Commission's Strategic Plan for 2006–09 has been truncated because of the delay in appointing the new Chief Commissioner and Commissioners. Nevertheless, it was agreed that consultation with stakeholders should be as full as possible and that the Strategic Plan should be agreed and submitted to the NIO for approval in March 2006. A process for achieving this was agreed.

- 6.2 Commissioners noted papers on staff discussions on possible content of the Strategic Plan. A consultation document on the draft Plan will be discussed at the next Commission meeting.

7. Taking Forward a Bill of Rights (HRC 80.5)

- 7.1 Commissioners agreed that taking forward work to conclude the Commission's advice to government on a Bill of Rights should be a priority. However, it was recognised that, with a new Chief Commissioner and Commissioners in place, time is needed to reflect on the substantial amount of work carried out on this issue to date.
- 7.2 Commissioners are keen to hear from interested parties on what advice they should provide to government on a Bill of Rights. To this end, Commissioners agreed that a conference on a Bill of Rights, to coincide with a week of events leading up to International Human Rights Day on 10 December 2005, should be organised on 7/8 December to hear from stakeholders on how to take the project forward, and to provide feedback to those who have previously contributed to the process.
- 7.3 It was agreed that the internal handover document, 'Taking Forward a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland', should be considered as work in progress.

8. Report from the Chief Executive (HRC 80.6)

- 8.1 Commissioners noted the Chief Executive's report.
- 8.2 Commissioners noted that terms and conditions in respect of their appointments are being prepared by NIO officials and will be issued to them in due course.
- 8.3 Commissioners noted the Commission's annual progress report to the Equality Commission on implementation of its equality and good relations duties under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.
- 8.4 The Chief Executive reported on her attendance at a meeting of the British/Irish Association on 9–11 September 2005 in Cambridge where she had represented the Commission.

- 8.5 Commissioners noted a request for their consideration of a list of forthcoming meetings and events, and that their point of contact with staff is via the Chief Executive.

Commissioners broke for lunch at 1pm.

The meeting resumed at 2pm.

9. Staff, Committee and Working Group Reports

9.1 Corporate Services (HRC 80.7)

- 9.1.1 The body of the report was noted.
- 9.1.2 Commissioners approved a number of personnel changes within the Corporate Services Team. A proposal to accept a request from a full-time Administrative Officer to reduce her hours from January 2006, and transfer to take over the part-time post of an Administrative Officer who is leaving the Commission at the end of September 2005, was agreed. It was also agreed, as an interim measure, that a temporary Administrative Officer, currently working part-time, should increase her hours from 19 September 2005 to cover the vacant post pending the transfer and consequent recruitment exercise.
- 9.1.3 Commissioners were informed of the appointment of a temporary Investigations Worker to provide cover for maternity leave. The new Investigations Worker will begin work on 24 October 2005.
- 9.1.4 Commissioners noted that approval by the NIO for the Commission to carry forward unspent grant-in-aid using its end year flexibility arrangements was still pending. The Treasury has asked to be consulted this year before any such agreement is given to non-departmental public bodies. Commissioners expressed their concern at the uncertainty caused by this delay and the risk to the Commission in achieving its business plan if approval is not forthcoming.

9.2 Information, Education and Development (HRC 80.8)

- 9.2.1 The body of the report was noted.

- 9.2.2 Commissioners noted the number of forthcoming conferences and events that are open to them to attend. It was agreed that guidance will be provided to Commissioners on the conferences and events where their attendance would be particularly important.
- 9.2.3 Commissioners noted the Commission's communications management protocol and procedures.
- 9.3 **Legal Services, Research and Policy (HRC 80.9)**
 - 9.3.1 The body of the report was noted.
 - 9.3.2 The Commission receives a large number of consultation documents each year, many of which do not concern matters of human rights or are of no direct relevance to its strategic priorities. Commissioners agreed that the Head of Legal Services, Research and Policy, in conjunction with the Chief Commissioner and/or Chief Executive, may decide which consultation documents should be responded to by the Commission.
 - 9.3.3 It was further agreed that, pending consideration at the Commissioners' residential event on 25/26 October 2005 of a mechanism for approving policy responses by the Commission, all Commissioners will have an opportunity to comment on draft responses in the interim.
 - 9.3.4 Commissioners approved funding for a contract for further research into the conditions of women prisoners in Ash House, Hydebank Wood.
 - 9.3.5 Commissioners noted the intention to table at their next meeting a number of proposals concerning investigations.
- 9.4 **Casework Committee minutes (HRC 80.10)**
 - 9.4.1 The minutes of the Casework Committee meeting held on 19 July 2005 were noted.

10. Any other business

- 10.1 Commissioners agreed that a press release should be issued to mark their first meeting, which will highlight the Commission's particular priorities over the coming months in taking forward work on the Bill of Rights and developing its Strategic Plan for 2006–09.

11. Next meeting

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- 11.1 The next meeting of the Commission will be held on 17 October 2005 at 10am in Temple Court.
- 11.2 Dates for Commission meetings for the forthcoming 12 months will be agreed at the next meeting.

The meeting closed at 2:30pm.

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Approved: _____

Date: 17 October 2005