



NORTHERN
IRELAND
HUMAN
RIGHTS
COMMISSION

MINUTES OF THE 84TH COMMISSION MEETING

HELD ON MONDAY 16 JANUARY 2006 AT 10:00am 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
Eamonn O'Neill
Geraldine Rice

Apologies: Kevin McLaughlin (due to ill health)

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 83rd meeting (HRC 84.1)

- 1.1 The minutes of the 83rd Commission meeting were agreed as an accurate record, subject to a minor revision.

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2. Matters arising

- 2.1 Commissioners congratulated Christine Eames on her OBE, which was awarded to her in the News Year's Honours List for services to the community in Northern Ireland.
- 2.2 Commissioners noted a sculpture on display in the reception area of Temple Court. The sculpture, entitled 'Building Blocks to Children's Rights', has been created by Youth@CLC to promote the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- 2.3 Commissioners noted that the Commission's Annual Report for 2004–05 was laid before Parliament on 19 December 2005 (paragraph 8.3 of the minutes of the last Commission meeting refers). Copies of the Annual Report have been circulated widely.
- 2.4 The Chief Commissioner reported on discussions with a newspaper editor about coverage of a woman prisoner and the impact it was having on her children (paragraph 10.1 of the minutes of the last Commission meeting refers). The Chief Commissioner has also responded to the chaplains at HM Prison Hydebank Wood who had written to the Commission to raise their concerns at the media coverage.
- 2.2 The Chief Commissioner has reviewed the contents of a recently published book about the events at the Holy Cross primary school in 2001 and plans to meet with the author in due course (paragraph 10.2 of the minutes of the last meeting refers).

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3. Report from the Chief Commissioner (HRC 84.2)

- 3.1 Commissioners noted the Chief Commissioner's report.
- 3.2 The Chief Commissioner reported on her visit to view the medium secure mental health unit at the Knockbracken Healthcare Park. It was agreed that the facility should be included in a programme of visits by Commissioners to places of detention, which is being arranged.

- 3.3 The Chief Commissioner, Jonathan Bell, Colin Harvey, Alan Henry, Ann Hope, Geraldine Rice and the Chief Executive met with the Policing Board's Human Rights Committee on 13 January 2006 to discuss a range of issues, including the Commission's draft Strategic Plan for 2006–09, Government's consultation on enhanced powers for the Commission and areas of mutual interest. The meeting will be followed-up, possibly by a presentation by representatives of the Human Rights Committee to the Commission on their work.
- 3.4 The Chief Commissioner reported on a number of meetings with other stakeholders, including the Human Rights Consortium, the Committee on the Administration of Justice (CAJ) and the Northern Ireland Committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (NIC–ICTU).
- 3.5 The Commission's programme of meetings with the political parties in Northern Ireland is continuing. The Chief Commissioner, Jonathan Bell, Colin Harvey, Ann Hope and the Head of Information, Education and Development met with representatives of the Alliance Party on 13 January 2006.
- 3.6 The inaugural meeting of the working group of Commissioners, which has been established to take forward the Commission's work in preparing advice to Government on a Bill of Rights, is scheduled for 30 January 2006.
- 3.7 The Commission is considering organising an extended residential event to consider proposals for a Bill of Rights. The provisional dates for this have been changed to 29 April to 6 May 2006 to avoid a clash with other events.
- 3.8 Commissioners noted that the NIO has written to political parties about taking forward work on a roundtable to discuss a Bill of Rights.

4. Reports from Commissioners

- 4.1 Eamonn O'Neill reported on his participation in a conference on housing rights organised by Shelter on 12 January 2006.

5. Report from the Chief Executive (HRC 84.3)

- 5.1 Commissioners noted the Chief Executive's report.

- 5.2 The consultation period on the Commission's draft Strategic Plan for 2006–09 ends on 31 January 2006. As part of the consultation process, the Commission plans to hold focus groups for stakeholders on 24 January in Newry to be chaired by Tom Duncan, 26 January in Derry/Londonderry to be chaired by Ann Hope and 31 January in Belfast to be chaired by the Chief Commissioner.
- 5.3 Representatives of the political parties will be invited to a meeting to discuss the draft Plan on 30 January 2006.
- 5.4 The outcome of the consultation exercise on the draft Plan will be considered at the Management Team residential meeting, which is scheduled for 1/2 February, and then by Commissioners at the inaugural Policy Committee meeting on 13 February 2006.
- 5.5 The Commission is in the process of reviewing its Equality Scheme. Alan Henry, Ann Hope and Eamonn O'Neill agreed to join a working group with staff to review its Equality Scheme and to set out how the Commission will meet its statutory equality duties under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 from 2007 onwards.
- 5.6 Commissioners noted that Dermot Ahern, the Irish Foreign Minister, is interested in visiting the Commission. A date is for his visit being arranged.
- 5.7 The Chief Executive sought feedback from Commissioners on the appropriateness of the paperwork and support provided by staff. Following discussion, it was agreed that the format and nature of consultation responses, and the process for developing them, should be an agenda item at the Policy Committee meeting scheduled for 13 February 2006.

The meeting was suspended at 12:00 for a presentation by Professor Chris McCrudden and lunch.

The meeting resumed at 14:00.

Alan Henry joined the meeting.

6. Staff, Committee and Working Group Reports

6.1 Corporate Services (HRC 84.4)

- 6.1.1 Commissioners noted the Corporate Services report.
- 6.1.2 The first phase of the induction programme for Commissioners is largely complete. Further consideration will be given in due course to a briefing seminar on a number of outstanding corporate governance issues once the current peak in workload has subsided.

6.2 Pay Working Group minutes (HRC 84.5)

- 6.2.1 The minutes of the inaugural meeting of the Pay Working Group held on 9 December 2005 were noted.

6.3 Information, Education and Development (HRC 84.6)

- 6.3.1 Commissioners noted the Information, Education and Development report.
- 6.3.2 Commissioners noted the positive feedback received from events organised by the Commission in the week leading up to and including International Human Rights Day on 10 December 2005. It was agreed that a similar approach, with a 'Human Rights Week', should be adopted for 2006, possibly with a focus on faith groups.
- 6.3.3 The Commission's activities during December and early January generated significant media coverage, particularly during Human Rights Week and following the Government's decision to withdraw the Northern Ireland (Offences) Bill. This coverage has contributed to increases in inquiries made to the Commission and 'hits' on its website.
- 6.3.4 Commissioners noted that the second stage of the Commission's stakeholder review process will take place on 23 January 2006 with an externally facilitated workshop.
- 6.3.5 Commissioners noted the extension of a contract to a librarian who is cataloguing the Commission's reference library.

- 6.3.6 Commissioners agreed expenditure plans for the design and production of exhibition stands on human rights issues, which will be made available to schools, colleges and groups as part of the Commission's education and outreach work.
- 6.3.7 Commissioners agreed that the Commission should endorse a proposal by the Institute for Conflict Research for funding from the Mitchell Fund to support work in integrating human rights, peace building and reconciliation.
- 6.3.8 Commissioners noted the Head of Information, Education and Development's intention to report quarterly to the Public Affairs Committee on the quantity and tone of media coverage of the Commission.

Geraldine Rice left the meeting at 2:15pm.

6.4 Legal Services, Research and Policy (HRC 84.7)

- 6.4.1 Commissioners noted the Legal Services, Research and Policy report.
- 6.4.2 Commissioners noted the intention to organise a conference to highlight the Commission's work on deaths in hospitals. Jonathan Bell, Christine Eames and Alan Henry agreed to help to support the development of proposals for the conference.
- 6.4.3 The inaugural meeting of the Commission's working group on places of detention is scheduled for 15 February 2006. The working group will comprise the Chief Commissioner, Tom Duncan, Colin Harvey, Alan Henry, Geraldine Rice and Eamonn O'Neill.
- 6.4.4 Commissioners noted the Commission's visit to immigration detainees being held in Crumlin Road prison on 12 January 2006.
- 6.4.5 Commissioners noted the Chief Commissioner's letter of 23 December 2005 to Peter Hain MP, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, to seek information on what steps are being taken to establish whether Belfast International Airport or RAF Aldergrove is being used for 'extraordinary rendition' by the United States' authorities, and on whether crimes of torture or other offences have occurred.

- 6.4.6 Commissioners noted that the Commission will be represented by the Chief Commissioner and a staff member at the regular human rights forum convened by the Department of Constitutional Affairs in London.
- 6.4.7 Commissioners discussed a number of draft responses to consultation documents and a draft letter to an organisation with concerns about the potential impact of the curriculum on teachers and pupils with particular religious views. The responses will be reviewed in the light of the discussions.

6.5 Casework Committee minutes (HRC 84.8)

- 6.5.1 The minutes of the Casework Committee meeting held on 23 November 2005 were noted.

7. Response to Government proposals to change the powers of the Commission (HRC 84.9)

- 7.1 Commissioners discussed the Commission's draft response to consultation by Government to change the powers of the Commission. The response will be revised in the light of the discussions for approval by Commissioners and distributed to stakeholders to help inform their responses. It will be disseminated in draft form at this stage, for further ratification by Commissioners prior to submission to the NIO before the closing date of 8 February 2006.

Eamonn O'Neill left the meeting at 4pm.

8. Joint Committee meeting with the Irish Human Rights Commission on 18 January 2006 (HRC 84.10)

- 8.1 The next meeting of the Joint Committee with the Irish Human Rights Commission is scheduled for 18 January 2006 in Temple Court, which will be followed by visits by representatives of both Commissions to Stanmillis Primary School and Victoria College to view their work on human rights education.
- 8.2 Commissioners agreed recommendations for the future operation of the Joint Committee proposed by a working group of representatives of both Commissions, which met on 12 December 2005. The recommendations will be discussed further at the Joint Committee meeting on 18 January 2006.

- 8.3 Individual Commissioners volunteered to join the various sub-committees proposed, subject to confirmation at the Joint Committee meeting.

9. Meeting with representatives of the Omagh Support and Self-Help Group on 20 January 2006 (HRC 84.11)

- 9.1 The Commission will meet representatives of the Omagh Support and Self-Help Group on 20 January 2006 to discuss the group's call for the Commission's public endorsement of a cross-border public inquiry into the Omagh bombing on 15 August 1998. The Commission will be represented by the Chief Commissioner, Tom Duncan, Christine Eames and Eamonn O'Neill.
- 9.2 The response of the Irish Human Rights Commission to a similar request by the Group will be discussed at the Joint Committee meeting on 18 January 2006.

10. Update on Review of Mental Health and Learning Disability

- 10.1 This agenda item was postponed for discussion at the Policy Committee meeting on 13 February 2006.

11. Any other business

- 11.1 It was agreed that details of international conferences and events to which the Commission is invited to will be circulated regularly to Commissioners.
- 11.2 Commissioners noted that the Chief Commissioner will be observing elections in Palestine during the week commencing 23 January 2006. The visit is being funded externally. The Chief Commissioner hopes to use the occasion to visit human rights organisations in Palestine and will report back to Commissioners in due course.
- 11.3 Materials produced by the CAJ were made available to those Commissioners not present at the recent meeting.

12. Next meetings

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- 11.1 The inaugural meeting of the Policy Committee, comprising all Commissioners, takes place on 13 February 2006 in Temple Court, Belfast.
- 11.2 The next business meeting of the Commission will be held on 13 March 2006 in Enniskillen.

The meeting closed at 4:45pm.

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Date: 13 March 2006