

1. Minutes of the 15th meeting

- 1.1 The minutes of the 15th Commission meeting held on 19 October 2005 in Dublin 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. Role and future of the Joint Committee

- 3.1 The Joint Committee considered recommendations for its future operation, made by a working group, comprising representatives of the two Commissions, which met on 12 December 2005 in Belfast.
- 3.2 It was agreed that membership of the Joint Committee will continue to comprise all members of the Irish Human Rights Commission and of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission.
- 3.3 It was agreed that Joint Committee meetings will continue to be held quarterly, alternating between Belfast and Dublin, with the host Commission providing secretariat support.
- 3.4 It was agreed to establish three sub-committees to help take forward the work of the Joint Committee: a sub-committee looking at a Charter of Rights for the island of Ireland, one looking at racism and immigration issues, and another to identify research priorities and for general purposes. Each sub-committee will consider its own title, terms of reference and programme of work for ratification at the next appropriate Joint Committee meeting.
- 3.5 It was agreed that the sub-committee on a Charter of Rights will be convened by Colin Harvey. Jonathan Bell will also represent the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission. Representatives from the Irish Human Rights Commission to join the sub-committee will be identified in due course.
- 3.6 It was agreed that the sub-committee on racism and immigration issues will be convened by Michael Farrell. Ann Hope and Geraldine Rice will represent the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission. The members the Irish Human Rights Commission's Committee on Racism will be its representatives on the sub-committee.

- 3.7 The Joint Committee noted a potential conflict of interest in respect of Geraldine Rice, who is a board member of a housing association, which provides accommodation for Travellers. The appropriate handling of any conflict of interest will be considered by the sub-committee as necessary.
- 3.8 It was agreed that the sub-committee on research and general purposes will be co-convened by Tom Duncan and a representative from the Irish Human Rights Commission. Monica McWilliams and Christine Eames will also represent the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission. Representatives from the Irish Human Rights Commission to join the sub-committee will be identified in due course.
- 3.9 Each sub-committee will consider the extent and nature of the staffing resource needed to support their programmes of work and report back to the Joint Committee. It was agreed to try to identify the resources needed by the sub-committees by mid-2006. In the meantime, each Commission will explore resourcing Joint Committee work with their respective governments.

4. Standing Orders of the Joint Committee

- 4.1 The Joint Committee discussed draft Standing Orders, which were drawn from those adopted by each Commission. It was agreed that the Joint Committee will be quorate with seven members, with at least three Commissioners from each Commission.
- 4.2 It was agreed that, if a matter arises at a Joint Committee or sub-committee meeting in which a Commissioner or any other person present at the meeting has a financial or professional interest, that interest will be declared and recorded in the minutes of the meeting. Normally, the person in question will take no further part in the discussion of that matter and, where appropriate, leave the room.
- 4.3 It was requested that, as Joint Committee meetings are held quarterly, draft minutes of meetings should be issued as soon as they have been prepared, so that the record of decisions and actions is current. Full papers will be issued one week in advance of Joint Committee meetings.

- 4.4 It was agreed that the composition of sub-committees should have regard to gender balance. It was also agreed that minutes of sub-committee meetings require ratification at the next appropriate Joint Committee.
- 4.5 The draft Standing Orders will be revised in the light of the Joint Committee's discussions and considered for approval at the next meeting.

5. The Omagh Support and Self-Help Group's call for a cross-border public inquiry into the Omagh bomb on 15 August 1998

- 5.1 The Joint Committee discussed the approach made by the Omagh Support and Self-Help Group to both Commissions to support its call for a cross-border public inquiry into the Omagh bomb on 15 August 1998. Michael Farrell declared a professional interest in the matter and withdrew from the meeting.

Michael Farrell left the meeting.

- 5.2 The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission has met with the group to discuss the matter previously, and will meet with them again on 20 January 2006 to discuss its current position in respect of such an inquiry.
- 5.3 The President of the Irish Human Rights Commission has met with the Group in Omagh and invited them to Dublin to meet Commissioners. To date, the Group has not taken up this invitation and, therefore, Irish Human Rights Commissioners are not in a position to respond to their request for support. It was agreed that the Irish Commission will re-issue its invitation to meet with the Group.
- 5.4 The Joint Committee will revisit this issue once both Commissions have met with representatives of the Omagh Support and Self-Help Group.

Michael Farrell rejoined the meeting.

6. Activity reports

- 6.1 Each Commission gave an update on their respective activities over the past three months.
- 6.2 The Joint Committee noted that each Commission has raised concerns with their respective governments at the use of airports in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland for purposes of 'extraordinary rendition' by United States' authorities.

7. Any other business

- 7.1 The Joint Committee noted a request by Sinn Fein for the Commissions to conduct research into suicide by young people in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. It was agreed to remit this request to the research sub-committee for consideration.
- 7.2 The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission has been invited to visit the women's prison in Mountjoy, Dublin. It was suggested that there might be merit in a joint visit by both Commissions. The Irish Human Rights Commission will consider this at its next plenary meeting.
- 7.3 On 19 January 2006, the Joint Equality and Human Rights Group of such bodies in the UK and the Republic of Ireland will discuss the development of a Commission for Equality and Human Rights in Great Britain and a Scottish Human Rights Commissioner, which might affect the designation at the United Nations of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission. A report on these discussions will be made to the next Joint Committee meeting.

8. Date and location of next Joint Committee

- 8.1 The next Joint Committee meeting will be on 26 April 2006 in Dublin.