



Trevor Lunn MLA
Chairperson to the Ad Hoc Committee on Conformity with Equality Requirements,
Welfare Reform Bill
Northern Ireland Assembly
Room 427
Parliament Buildings
Ballymiscaw
Stormont
Belfast
BT4 3XX

28 January 2013

Dear Trevor

RE: Formal Complaint by NICEM

The Equality Coalition is a broad alliance of non-governmental organisations whose members cover all the categories listed in section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, as well as other equality strands. It was founded in 1996 and was instrumental in putting equality at the forefront of the agenda at that time, specifically in relation to the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement and ultimately the public sector duty. The formulation of an Ad Hoc Assembly Committee to scrutinise the equality compliance of bills was also a key safeguard introduced following the Agreement and we are conscious this is the first time this mechanism has been used.

The Equality Coalition now has over 80 members, many of which are umbrella organisations. It is co-convened by the Committee on the Administration of Justice (CAJ) and UNISON. The Equality Coalition continues to provide a forum for unity between all sectors when working for equality, through recognising multiple identities, mutual support between members and respect for the diversity of its members' work and views. As you will be aware the Coalition submitted written evidence to the Committee highlighting deficiencies in the Equality Impact Assessment process taken forward by the Department in relation to the Bill.

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We are now writing as a Coalition to specifically to endorse a complaint made by one of our member groups, the Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities (NICEM), and to raise concerns about the manner in which it has been dealt with.

As you will be aware NICEM gave oral evidence to the Committee on the 4 December 2012 and formally lodged a complaint in writing on the 14 December, this is attached for handiness. NICEM had raised concerns about aspects of the way their evidence had been recorded, this is now being addressed by Hansard.

NICEM's main concern however related to the totally inappropriate and disrespectful treatment of their representatives by some MLAs on the Committee. NICEM had been invited to give expert evidence to the Committee but their representatives were met with conduct which included members laughing at the witnesses on two occasions as well as directly arguing with them. This clearly went well beyond the robust engagement witnesses expect with a Committee, to undignified behaviour from some MLAs.

The Coalition would like to echo these concerns it is clearly inappropriate for any Committee members to effectively sneer at the representatives of minority communities who have been invited to give evidence to them. Such conduct is a matter of serious concern and we would have expected a robust response to NICEM's complaint. We note the complaint was considered in private and there is little mention of it on the public record, beyond a member complaining that it should have been dealt with in public session (Minutes of Proceedings, 7 January).

Whilst it is welcome that in your formal correspondence in response to NICEM's complaint of the 9 January 2013 you indicate that the their evidence was valued and 'no disrespect was intended' the Equality Coalition would have expected a more robust response in relation to this matter and would urge further action is taken to provide an effective remedy to the complaint. We have copied this to Committee members.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "D Holder".

Daniel Holder
CAJ

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Patricia McKeown".

Patricia McKeown
UNISON

Co-Conveners of the Equality Coalition

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