

Chief Executive's Department



Our ref.: PMcN/as

Being dealt with by:

Your ref.:

Ext.:

Date:

12 March 2004

Mr Vincent Gribbin
Equality Directorate Research Branch
OFMDFM
Room E317
Castle Buildings
Stormont
BELFAST BT4 3SJ

Dear Mr Gribbin

FLAGS AND EMBLEMS POLICY RESEARCH

Thank you for your e-mail of 2 March inviting me to a presentation by Dr Bryan on the above research at a meeting in Stormont Castle on Friday 26 March.

I would very much like to have attended the meeting but unfortunately on that morning I will be present at a Special meeting of the Policy and Resources Committee at Belfast City Council which will be considering the Council's Equality Impact Assessment on the Flying of the Union Flag and the Council's future policy in this regard.

The problem this gives me is that most of the other Council officers who could substitute for me will also be involved in that meeting. I would very much like to have someone at the meeting and I have asked Robert Wilson, the Assistant Chief Executive, to liaise with you to nominate an attendee on behalf of the Council.

I would however like to take the opportunity to make a number of observations about the report. Firstly, I am greatly concerned that at paragraph 6.24 of the report the following is stated: "On the other hand a range of government agencies and the local authorities often do not act as flags are placed around lamp-posts and kerb stones are painted and murals are put up. We have been told of a number of examples of this in Belfast some involving Belfast City Council work places. By their inaction it could be argued that agencies and local authorities are in contravention of Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998".

Peter McNaney LLB

CHIEF EXECUTIVE

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I would have to point out that the Council has in place a monitoring regime which means that all Council work places are inspected by management and trade unions twice a year to ensure that the Council's neutrality in the work place policy is complied with. On a number of occasions when community tensions have run high flags have been erected principally on lamp-posts which overhang or are alongside Council work places. However, in all cases effective and concerted action has been taken to have such flags removed. I am unaware of any case where such action has not been taken. I would therefore be obliged if you would bring this matter to the attention of Dr Bryan and ask him to remove the clear implication made in this paragraph that Belfast City Council may be in possible contravention of Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act. If Dr Bryan wishes to give us chapter and verse on specific incidents we will be happy to demonstrate the action that has been taken.

In general terms I am slightly concerned about the general nature of the report. From my involvement with the Community Action Group when it was chaired by Minister Browne the point was clearly made that not all displays of flags take place on estates or areas which are predominantly populated by one community or another. The point was made that in many cases flags are displayed on arterial routes or main roads such as the Knock dual carriageway. The fact that the report does not differentiate between different types of flag display means that no consideration is given to whether or not it is appropriate to have a differential and phased approach to tackling the problem of the display of flags. I am of the firm personal view that unless responsibility is given to specific public agencies to deal with the issue of flags and their unauthorised display the matter will continue to fall between the two stools of lack of specific responsibility and lack of will. If the issue of the display of flags and murals and symbols of community division can be successfully tackled in the work place there is no reason why it cannot be dealt with in an incremental and progressive way starting with concerted actions on main arterial routes and roads.

The point is well made in the study itself that when local authorities were given a legal duty to carry out Equality Impact Assessments and comply with Section 75 to produce Equality Schemes, all of them complied. There is clearly a need for legislation and in the interim period there is a need for a memorandum of understanding between statutory bodies and central government on how the issue of certain types of flags should be dealt with.

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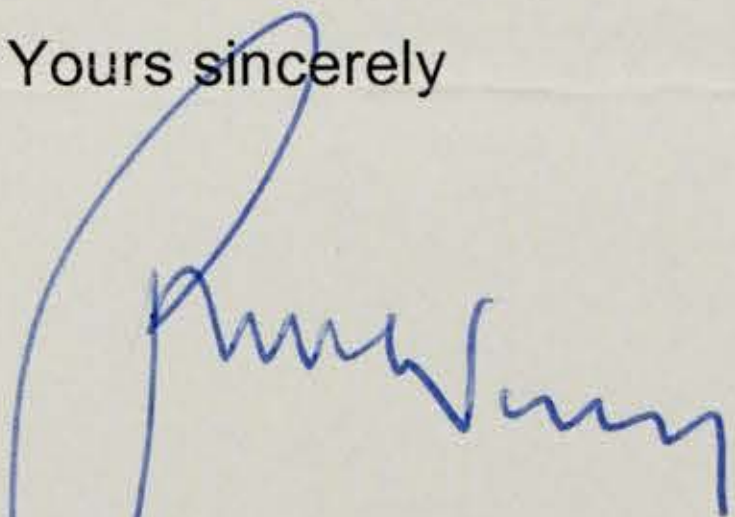
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Finally I would like to report that another example of success that could validly be represented in the report is the lower Shankill Road initiative which resulted in 21 murals and 7,000 metres of kerb stone painting being removed. In fact the partnership initiative which allowed this work to happen was recently awarded the Partnership Award at the Tidy Britain National Awards and the comments of its Chief Executive make it clear that the results of the action can have significant consequences. He said: *"I cannot over emphasise just what an impact the Greater Shankill clean up has made in Belfast and throughout the UK. This graffiti wasn't just damaging the environment, it was also a legacy of the past and its removal is a poignant symbol of hope. What has been achieved has been truly inspirational and has inspired people looking after neighbourhoods in the UK that are struggling to come to terms with violent crime, poverty and division. Graffiti and litter may seem trivial to some but when people work together to make their environment a more pleasant place to live in, it breaks down barriers and creates a powerful unity"*.

This project involves the Council, the Housing Executive, the Roads Service, the NIO and the community and it may be that it should be cited as an example of good practice within the report.

I would be most obliged if you could bring my comments regarding paragraph 6.24 to Dr Bryan's attention and inform me whether he is prepared to amend the present wording of his report.

Yours sincerely



PETER McNANEY
Chief Executive

cc. Mary Gribbin