

Review of Race Equality Work Response of the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities

The Scottish Council of Jewish Communities is the representative body of all the Jewish communities in Scotland comprising Glasgow, Edinburgh, Aberdeen and Dundee as well as the more loosely linked groups of the Jewish Network of Argyll and the Highlands, and of students studying in Scottish Universities and Colleges.

We welcome this review and appraisal of the Scottish Executive's support for race equality activity, and fully support the need to 'ensure that it is focused on the right priorities and is delivered by the most effective means'.

Religious Equality

Limited definitions are not always helpful, and the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities is concerned that, although religious equality and race equality are equally important, the former generally receives far less recognition than the latter and that fewer resources are made available to support it. In addition, where reference is made to religious equality, this is almost always in the area of sectarianism, which is strictly an intra-Christian phenomenon, whilst anti-semitism and Islamophobia are rarely mentioned. In this connection, we would like to draw the attention of the Scottish Executive to the Home Secretary's recently expressed concern at reports of a large rise in anti-semitism, and to his recent discussions with the Board of Deputies of British Jews on this subject.

We welcome the Prime Minister's recent proposal to introduce new laws to combat religious discrimination in relation to the provision of goods, facilities, services and premises and hope that the Scottish Executive will support the UK government in this initiative.

Recognising Minorities

The Scottish Council of Jewish Communities is very concerned at the apparent invisibility of some religious and ethnic minorities. Our community is, for the most part, white – as, amongst others, are the Kosovan, Gypsy Traveller and Polish communities. The words 'white' and 'black' are frequently and inaccurately used as if they were synonymous with 'majority' and 'minority'. Members of non-black minority communities may feel excluded by these terms, and, therefore, additionally discriminated against as not even being recognised as a minority community within Scotland. They are white, but are nonetheless members of a minority. They are not black, but are not part of the majority community. The current terminology excludes white minorities from both the minority and majority communities in Scotland. In addition, the categories currently used to compile population statistics result in white minorities being unrecognised, and as a result their experiences of discrimination are frequently not addressed as effectively as are those of other, more visible minorities. We recommend that the Scottish Executive should take particular note of this and put forward proposals for ensuring that this does not happen in future.

Mainstreaming Race and Religious Equality

The Scottish Council of Jewish Communities is concerned to emphasise that race and religious equality are not issues to be considered in isolation and they should be regarded as 'everybody's business' not as the preserve of the company diversity or equality officer. By extension we would point out that race and religious equality should not be left to the Scottish Executive Equality Unit, but should also be major concerns of the Justice, Development, Finance, Health etc departments. It is not enough for one department to audit policy and practice throughout an organisation, responsibility for race and religious equality must be borne in mind by all departments at all times. As long as race and religious equality are

considered the preserve of a particular department or of a particular member of staff it is not realistic to expect a major change in society's attitude to minority communities, and to equality issues.

Security of Communities

Many minority communities may feel isolated and vulnerable, and it is important to address this issue if they are to achieve the confidence to move forward on race and religious equality issues. We recommend that the Scottish Executive should support communities to implement changes at grassroots level that will result in improved security. These may include the provision of capital funding for security improvements to communal buildings as well as the facilitation of dialogue between communities and the local police, council and other local groups.

The Scottish Council of Jewish Communities believes that personal and communal safety are vital if race equality is to be a viable proposition. Feelings of insecurity may arise in a variety of different situations, and we would cite the situation of the Scottish Jewish community as an example. The majority of the Jewish community is concentrated in East Renfrewshire where there are a number of synagogues, one of which is the largest place of worship of any religion in the area. This means that the Jewish community is highly visible and there are concerns that this might make it a potential target. There are also a number of small Jewish communities around Scotland. Whilst being locally visible these do not have extensive communal organisations or support networks, and it is our experience that they may on occasion feel very vulnerable. In addition there are scattered groups and individual people across Scotland living outwith any established Jewish community. Many of these are inclined to 'keep their heads down' and may not tell people that they are Jewish because they fear an adverse reaction.

Education

We believe that education, both in schools and in later life, is an important tool for developing a society underpinned by race and religious equality and that race and religious equality must figure in training for people in all fields and at all levels, from senior management to the shop floor.

It is, however, essential that all teaching materials are accurate and appropriate for the students for whom they are intended. We would emphasise that all teaching materials must be referred to the relevant community for checking. When this does not take place errors may frequently be incorporated and these may result in a negative impression of the community concerned. In addition such errors cast doubt on the reliability of other material from the same source.

For example, the Young Scot 'One Scotland Many Cultures' website section on Judaism includes the statement that:

the Sabbath starts on Friday evening when the sun goes down and lasts until the same time on the Sunday night. That's two full days.

(As you will be aware, the Jewish Sabbath, which does begin on Friday evening, ends on Saturday night – a period of one full day.)

The Role of the Scottish Executive

Legislative support

The Scottish Council of Jewish Communities urge the Scottish Parliament and Scottish Executive to provide clear leadership in this area. Legislation has two roles: it provides the means by which certain behaviour can be punished and it also provides moral leadership. This latter is very important, and we would recommend that the Scottish Executive to

consider this as well as the criminal and punitive aspects of law when Bills are being drafted. We welcome the Scottish Executive's initiative in 'Tackling Religious Hatred' and are encouraged by the message given by the aggravated offences legislation as well as by its successful use by the police and courts.

Dialogue between the Scottish Executive and communities

We appreciate the Scottish Executive's commitment to consult with minority communities. We would, however, emphasise that in order for the Scottish Executive to gain an accurate understanding of the needs of diverse communities it must ensure it is consulting with the right people and with all of the relevant people. We recognise that this is not an easy matter, but stress its importance if the result of consultation is to be of value in policy-making. For this to occur the Scottish Executive must engage with groups that are genuinely representative of their communities, those chosen by each community itself to represent it, not selected by the Scottish Executive or any other outside body. We suggest that the Scottish Executive supports such umbrella groups where they already exist, and that it should encourage the establishment of such groups in communities which are not adequately represented at the present time.

We recognise the importance of accurate and up-to-date information, and support existing mechanisms that provide for regular briefings from the Scottish Executive on issues of concern to the Jewish community. We also stress the value of mechanisms which enable the Jewish community to inform and brief the Scottish Executive.

Facilitating dialogue between communities

The Scottish Council of Jewish Communities is committed to engaging in dialogue with other communities, believing strongly that better communication leads to greater understanding and mutual support. We note that the Home Secretary has recently offered to help in facilitating better co-operation between the Jewish and Muslim communities, and urge the Scottish Executive to do likewise.

Capacity Building

If there is to be an inclusive, tolerant, diverse and mutually supportive society in Scotland, the Scottish Executive must play a major role in supporting, developing and implementing appropriate policies and practices. Many communities do not currently have the resources, including personnel, to engage adequately, and the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities would urge the Scottish Executive to support capacity-building measures to enable them to play their full part. Without such measures policies and initiatives merely pay lip-service to race and religious equality. Real equality depends of the ability of communities to participate fully in the political and social process.

Funding

Many minority communities have limited access to funding opportunities, and thus find it difficult if not impossible to participate fully in new and existing initiatives. It is important that this barrier should be removed, and we recommend that the Scottish Executive should make appropriate funding available and that they should also publicise this in ways that reach the communities concerned.

Summary

The Scottish Council of Jewish Communities welcomes and supports the Scottish Executive's stance on mainstreaming equality. It is, however, concerned that both race and religious equality should be given equal priority by the Scottish Executive, and that the presence in Scotland of anti-semitism should be acknowledged publicly as well as in private discussions.

The Scottish Executive is sometimes viewed as a gatekeeper by small groups struggling to understand layers of bureaucracy, and we are concerned that all initiatives and interventions should be made as simple and straightforward as possible.

The Scottish Council of Jewish Communities recommends that the issues of discrimination and inequality should be tackled from a variety of angles simultaneously. These should include legislative measures as well as education in schools and in Scottish society more generally, and support for individual communities and local initiatives.