

Written evidence submitted by the Strabane Ethnic Community Association (SECA) (MEM0024) in relation to 'The Experience of Minority Ethnic and Migrant People in Northern Ireland' inquiry.

My name is Kamini Rao and I am the current Project Coordinator for Strabane Ethnic Community Association (SECA). The launch of SECA took place at the Fir Trees Hotel, Strabane in April 2004 and was officially opened by Mr. John Hume MEP.

The aim of the Association is to identify and responds to the needs of the minority ethnic communities and to raise awareness and understanding within the local community as Northern Ireland slowly but surely becomes a more multi-cultured society.

Guest speaker John Hume said: "The existence of this association is important to you and your families. Preserving your cultures of origin is a completely legitimate and positive aim. Ensuring your voice is heard in society is vital. You all have a role to play in furthering mutual understandings in the wider society and the wider world."

Since the launch of SECA in 2004 its membership has grown very rapidly. With over 400 members and 25 different nationalities as Strabane is becoming more diverse every year. SECA opened a new center in 2014 which is situated in the heart of Strabane town. The new centre has a large meeting room, a small computer suite, a youth hub and a dance room. This center is used by other members of the Strabane community.

In 2011 SECA was the first Ethnic group to receive charity status in the North West under the new charity laws from Northern Ireland Charity Commission.

SECA has been delivering 10 week English Language classes, ICT courses, First Aid, Food Safety and many more courses to migrant workers. Courses like these will further the communications skills of the successful pupils here, therefore allowing them to apply for a wider range of jobs and help them become part of the society here in the town.

SECA cultural events have become very popular. Our main events are our Multi Cultural Food, Music, Art and Entertainment Night where SECA members showcase food from different countries which is then followed by music and dancing from different cultures. Our other main cultural event is our 3 Day Diwali Festival. SECA begin this project by delivering a 6 week programme about Diwali in 6 local schools (over 250 pupils) where at the end they come together to showcase their interpretation of Diwali. Day 2 is Diwali workshops in Henna, Sari Tying and Rangoli Art. Day 3 is the main event where Indian food is served, there is Indian entertainment and an Indian fashion show. Both events have been ongoing for more than 10 years and are much anticipated every year.

Bobby Rao MBE was the Project Coordinator of SECA from 2004-2015. He was one of the main founders and the driving force behind the success of SECA. Like the others that helped form SECA Bobby was on the receiving end of racial abuse and thought that something had to be done so that no one else would have to experience racism the way they did. He was a great advocate for raising awareness of racism and cultural diversity in the community and through sport.

I was fortunate to take on the role of Project Coordinator in 2015, I am trying to take SECA in a direction where it not only focuses on community development and continuously supporting ethnic minorities but offering also offering immigration support instead of directing them to another service.

Northern Ireland is slowly but surely become more and more diverse every day, I am fortunate enough to live a town where they are accepting and embracing of different ethnicities and cultures. However, that is not to say that ethnic minorities living in Strabane have faced challenges because they have, I believe and seen firsthand since Brexit and the pandemic that these challenges have become tougher.

I have always found that members of SECA have found it difficult to gain access to services such as registering with the local GP, applying for a bank account, applying for a National Insurance number and applying for benefits. This was mainly due to a language barrier. I believe that public services like these should have an on hand translating service so that they accommodate all walks of life.

I have worked with many families and individuals in applying for the EU Settlement Scheme, some cases have been very straight forward and some cases have not. I cannot fault the system itself, it was very straight forward and easy to use. SECA itself completed over 300 applications and most were successful.

Since the pandemic SECA was closed for most of the year but we were still trying to work with people in trying to complete their settlement scheme applications via zoom and telephone. With community centers only allowed to open recently we have had a surge of people looking for help so that is our main focus at the minute.

The downfall of the EU Settlement Scheme is that there was not enough support for groups like mine to help support ethnic minorities. Northern Ireland, to me, was completely forgot about when the scheme first launched, for example in the whole of Northern Ireland there was not one resolution center for us to call if we needed guidance. Myself I had to do my own research and take it from there.

In terms of equality legislation, I believe that our political leaders need to be more involved with this, and not just when it is election time. How can us as community leaders open the minds of local people and try and change their opinion if we do not have the backing of the people that rule our country.

SECA and myself will continue to work tirelessly to make sure that all our members old and new are gaining correct access to services and that we are raising awareness on cultural diversity, hate crime, and anti-racism.

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