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PRESS RELEASE

Race case supported by Commission settled with Home Office

In the past few weeks the Home Office has paid a black woman £2,000 in settlement of a claim she made where she alleged racial discrimination arising from the actions of an immigration officer at Belfast City Airport. The case was settled without admission of liability and with the support of the Equality Commission.

The woman was leaving her mother-in-law off at George Best Belfast City Airport when she was stopped and asked for a passport or ID. She had her two children with her and they all had to stand by in a public place while an immigration officer radioed to check her immigration status. She is black and has lived and worked in England for 14 years before moving to Northern Ireland to take up a professional role in 2014. She holds a British passport.

On the day of the incident, the woman's mother in law was taking a flight from the City Airport. She and her children, having dropped her mother in law off, were waiting for the friend who had driven them to the airport to return with a car to pick them up.

The woman was approached by an immigration officer who asked to see her passport or ID. She says that the officer said to her that she 'looked foreign and not from here'. She told the officer she was British, explained she was not travelling, showed her driver's licence, and explained that she was there to drop off her mother in law.

The officer asked for details about her mother in law and the friend who had driven them to the airport, and then checked her immigration status over a radio link. This took place as she and her children stood in the airport concourse near a coffee shop in full view of other people. She was eventually told that everything was OK and she had nothing to worry about.

The woman says: "I thought then, and I still think now, that I was stopped because I am black. I wasn't travelling, or passing through an immigration point, and I am a British citizen. I was doing what many other people do without incident, dropping off my relative for her flight. One of my children has asked me if we now have to carry our passports everywhere with us. I've worked in the UK for 16 years, the most recent two of them in

Northern Ireland, and I was really upset by this incident and the way it was handled by the Immigration Service. It has had a negative and unsettling effect on my family as well as on me. I am grateful for the support we received from the Equality Commission and I hope this case helps ensure that the same thing doesn't happen to somebody else."

"I find this case extremely disturbing. In effect it has left a woman feeling she has been singled out and had her identity questioned in full public gaze," Dr Michael Wardlow, Chief Commissioner of the Equality Commission, said. "And if a person feels, as this woman did, that they are singled out because of their skin colour, it can be particularly upsetting and humiliating - as it was for our complainant and her children, who witnessed the event.

"Our complainant makes a valuable contribution to Northern Ireland society and it is quite simply unacceptable that she feels she was challenged in a public place only because of the colour of her skin. It is simply unacceptable that people continue to be stereotyped by virtue of their race, gender or any other similar personal characteristic. It is vital that we challenge such simplistic stereotyping of people."

Dr Wardlow concludes: "The irony of this case is that this woman doesn't feel she can be publicly identified because of the fear of negativity or intimidation. She accepts however, that as the issue raises matters of national concern it needs to be made public. The Equality Commission will give advice to anyone who feels they may have been treated unfairly and we can assist people to challenge discrimination in the courts and tribunals."

The Home Office, in settling the claim without admitting liability, has apologised to the woman for any offence caused. It has also recognised the hurt, distress and offence caused to her by subjecting her to questioning in these circumstances and in the manner of investigation of her complaints. It has affirmed its commitment to equality of opportunity and has undertaken to ensure its practices and procedures conform with the Race Relations Order.