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Law could hamper rights investigations

Northern Ireland's Human Rights Commission could be prevented from properly investigating alleged abuses under legislation affecting its powers, it has been claimed.

By: Press Association

Chief Human Rights Commissioner Monica McWilliams was furious after it emerged the latest draft of the government's Justice and Security Bill would prevent the body from investigating cases before August 1 2007.

However the commission was also concerned the legislation would stymie future investigations into alleged abuses which surface in the future if the documentation relating to the cases dated before August 1.

Mrs McWilliams said: "The commission is shocked by what the government is proposing.

"They have decided we should only deal with the future. We will not be able to investigate human rights issues to do with the past.

"What this effectively means is that we would not be able to look into human rights issues relating to collusion.

"What is even more alarming is that it will also affect future investigations. We would not be able to compel documentation on a future case if it dated before August 1.

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"It would mean, for example, if we wanted to probe the detention of 100 patients with learning disabilities in Muckamore Abbey Hospital, we would not be able to access any relevant material because it would be dated before August 1."

Under the Bill, the commission is set to acquire new powers to compel evidence, witnesses and access areas of detention. However they will only be able to use them in investigations relating to issues dating from August 1.


The Northern Ireland Office tonight confirmed the legislation, which is currently at its Report Stage in Westminster, set August 1 as the point from which all official papers would be made available.

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