

Bill of Rights

Forum

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THE BILL OF RIGHTS FORUM: OPENING UP TO THE PEOPLE OF NORTHERN IRELAND

The Bill of Rights Forum has started the work of reaching out and listening to groups and individuals in Northern Ireland, the Forum's Chair, Chris Sidoti, said in Belfast today. Mr Sidoti welcomed the decision of the Secretary of State, the Rt Hon Shaun Woodward MP, to allocate a further £100,000 to the Forum to permit it to extend its outreach programme.

"The additional support from the Secretary of State will make it possible for the Forum to engage groups that previously found it difficult to contribute to thinking on the Bill of Rights. The Forum will employ two full time outreach workers to encourage and coordinate community engagement in and contribution to its work," Mr Sidoti said. "The Forum will also be able to organise a number of events with community groups to provide opportunities for better contribution."

"The work of outreach has already begun. This week I've been able to get out and meet people more than previously," he said.

"I have met with organisations working with victims of the Troubles and with lesbian and gay young people. I've been able to hear directly from these victims and young people themselves. I have been impressed by their honesty and openness in recounting their experiences and discussing the multiple forms of discrimination and human rights violation they face. I was equally impressed by their clarity in articulating what they want from a Bill of Rights.

"I also spent most of Thursday at a conference organised by the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland for the many groups it has funded for work towards the Bill of Rights. Meetings like this, which enable people and organisations to come together to discuss the Bill of Rights process, are exactly what the Forum wants – opportunities

to hear what the people of Northern Ireland really want from a Bill of Rights.”

“These conversations go to the very heart and purpose of our work in developing a Bill of Rights. While guaranteeing rights and offering protection, the Bill of Rights can also be a significant step in Northern Ireland’s healing process.

“Again, I invite people interested in the Bill of Rights to get in touch with us, especially through our website www.billofrightsforum.org.”

The sixth meeting of the Forum will be held at the Interpoint Centre, Belfast on Friday 7 September from 9.30am till 1:00pm.

The Forum Secretariat can be contacted by e-mail (info@billofrightsforum.org), phone or fax (028 9054 4922), SMS (07812 351039), or mail (1st Floor, Interpoint, 20-24 York Street, Belfast BT15 1AQ).

Notes to Editors

Chris Sidoti

Since 2003 Chris has been director of the International Service for Human Rights, a non-government organisation, based in Geneva, Switzerland, that works closely with the United Nations human rights system. A human rights lawyer, activist and teacher, he has been Australian Human Rights Commissioner (1995-2000), Australian Law Reform Commissioner (1992-1995), and Foundation Director of the Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (1987-1992). He has also worked in non-government organisations, including the Human Rights Council of Australia and the Australian Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace. While based in Australia until 2003, he worked extensively in the Asia Pacific region undertaking human rights training, policy and advisory work in many countries. He is a visiting professor at the University of Western Sydney and Griffith University in Australia.

Bill of Rights Forum

Establishment of the Forum, and the timeframe for it to convene its inaugural meeting was announced following discussions at St Andrews. Following a recent consultation on the Forum, the Government announced its final plans for the Forum on 12 December.

The DUP, Sinn Fein, UUP and SDLP each have 3 seats on the Forum and the Alliance Party has 2 seats.

Civic Society is represented by Employers, Trade Unions, and Churches which each have 2 seats, as well as 1 representative from each of the following sectors: children and young people; people with disabilities; ethnic minorities; older people; people of different

sexual orientations; women; the human rights sector; and the community / voluntary sector as a whole.

The Forum has six working groups looking at:

Children and young people and women

Criminal justice and victims

Economic and social rights, including relevant equality issues

Culture and identity and language

Civil and political rights, including relevant equality issues

Preamble, enforceability and implementation

The Forum is expected to complete its work by the end of March 2008, extended from December 2007 at the request of the Forum Chair.

The Secretary to the Forum is Gillian Preece, and the Secretariat is based at 1st Floor, Interpoint, 20-24 York Street, Belfast, BT15 1AQ, 028 9054 4922, info@billofrightsforum.org