



NORTHERN IRELAND OFFICE

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BILL OF RIGHTS
FORUM

28 JAN 2008

RECEIVED

THE SECRETARY OF STATE

Bob Chiu,

28 January 2008

BILL OF RIGHTS FORUM: PROGRESS UPDATE

Thank you for your letter of 17 December providing a helpful update on the progress of the Bill of Rights Forum.

I appreciate the ongoing work of members of the Forum and its working groups, particularly in light of the time commitments involved. Whilst Government will refrain from reaching a view on the issue of a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland until I receive advice from the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, I note with interest the diversity of opinion that is being voiced within the Forum. The fact that members continue to engage, despite the challenges that such diversity brings, is testament to the commitment of members to ensuring that the groups that they represent continue to have their voices heard at all stages of the Bill of Rights process.

As members will be aware, the Forum was set up by Government as the first step to re-launching the process of exploring the potential for a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland. It was not envisaged then, nor is it envisaged now, that the Forum would be engaged in a significant public consultation exercise. That said, I appreciated the strong arguments that you made for some limited outreach to target groups, and was therefore willing to provide an additional £100,000 for this to take place.

I do agree that further public consultation would be required before a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland could be taken forward. I am therefore happy to put on record Government's own commitment to carry out a full consultation process on any potential legislation. As part of this, I would wish to engage directly with those

represented on the Forum, before a final decision is made on the scope and shape of any legislation.

May I wish you every success with the important ongoing work of the Forum. Bearing in mind the impending deadline of 31 March, I would appreciate an early update following your meeting of 1 February on the progress that is being made towards finalising the recommendations that will be forwarded to the Human Rights Commission.

Yours,
Shaun

**RT HON SHAUN WOODWARD MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND**

Chris Sidoti