

Public outreach paper for the
Northern Ireland Bill of Rights Forum

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[This paper, prepared by the chair, is the revised draft of a strategy paper on public outreach. It has been prepared following discussions at the third (11 May 2007), fourth (29 June 2007) and fifth (27 July 2007) meetings of the Forum and submissions by Forum members suggesting how best to engage with the sectors and communities they represent.

Although a wide range of views are held by Forum members as to whether and, if so, how the Forum should be undertaking a programme of public engagement, a basic strategy was decided by consensus at the Forum's fifth meeting. Three Forum members (Father Tim Bartlett, Dermot Nesbitt, and Neil Faris) wished to have their dissent recorded while not blocking the consensus.]

Introduction

The Northern Ireland Bill of Rights Forum is the latest step in a process to develop a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland that began with the 1998 Good Friday (Belfast) Agreement. A great deal of work has already been done, including by non-government organisations, academics and the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC). The Forum's work, therefore, is not the first step, and it will not be the last step.

The Forum must present its recommendations to the NIHRC which must then develop its own views to advise the United Kingdom Government, and then the UK Government, no doubt after seeking advice from the Northern Ireland Government and Assembly, will prepare its policy for submission to the

Westminster Parliament and debate there. The Forum's work is but one part in the broader Bill of Rights project in Northern Ireland. Its outreach strategy needs to take account of what has already occurred and what will occur after it has completed its work.

What has already been done?

In 2001 and 2002 the NIHRC undertook an extensive consultation process which also involved major non-government organisations. It produced a great variety of materials about a Bill of Rights and presented options and proposals for public discussion. It convened public consultative meetings and focus and interest groups. It received almost 400 written submissions. Non-government organisations participated heavily in this process, producing educational and consultative materials of their own, developing recommendations and making submissions.

All of the submissions, records and reports of the NIHRC consultations are available to the Forum for its work. The Forum's public outreach will take these as its starting point, building on what is there and identifying gaps that it needs to address.

The need for outreach

The last public consultation on a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland was completed five years ago. The project has not been taken forward at a political level since then and there has been a significant loss of momentum, energy and interest. Public awareness is much reduced. In addition there have been changes since then in Northern Ireland society that will require further community consultation and participation.

Some political parties and many civic society organisations represented on the Forum have argued that public ownership of the Bill of Rights is essential to the successful completion of the Forum's terms of reference. Other members of the Forum have not seen this as its principal responsibility. The Forum, by

consensus, has decided that there is a need for Forum outreach that targets groups not involved in the earlier consultation and that builds new momentum for a Bill of Rights in Northern Ireland.

The Forum's agreed outreach strategy

The ultimate objective of the Forum's work is to ensure that any Northern Ireland Bill of Rights is especially relevant to and effective for those most in need of legal protection of their rights. Public outreach assists this objective by enabling people in Northern Ireland to participate in shaping the advice the Forum is to provide to the NIHRC. The Forum's outreach strategy will not duplicate the work already undertaken by the NIHRC but supplement it where necessary.

The Forum's outreach strategy aims to

- Raise awareness about a Bill of Rights
- Provide information about the Forum and its work
- Conduct consultations to assist the Forum in developing its advice to the NIHRC, prioritising consultations with identified groups not previously or sufficiently involved in previous Bill of Rights discussions and
- Build support for the Forum's proposals.

The strategy consists of targeted focused outreach to identified sectors, more general outreach to identified communities or parts of communities, and a media strategy with components for each segment of the media.

Raising Awareness

The purpose of this objective is to increase public awareness of human rights generally, the Bill of Rights proposal in particular and the Forum's role in developing a Northern Ireland Bill of Rights. It aims also to encourage confidence and participation of the people of Northern Ireland in the Forum's work.

A well focused media engagement strategy, highlighting specific aspects of the Forum's work at appropriate times, is likely to be the most effective means of achieving the objective, within reasonable resource constraints. The Forum will develop and implement a strategy that seeks to maximise coverage of its work in the media.

The approach of this aspect of the Forum's strategy is a carefully focused awareness raising programme targeted towards specific groups as part of a broader consultation process.

In addition, the Forum's website (www.billofrightsforum.org) is a principal means of communication between the Forum and the outside world. It will be fully accessible for people with disabilities. It will contain all the materials relevant to the Forum's work, including

- terms of reference
- membership, including individual members and organisations represented
- secretariat, including names, background and roles
- reports of all meetings of the Forum
- reports of all public and sectoral meetings organised by or for the Forum
- Forum policy, process and strategy papers
- Forum media releases
- background papers and documents, including the compilation of Bills of Rights
- summary reports produced by the Forum's working groups
- links to the websites of all organisations represented on the Forum, university human rights centres, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and databanks, including international and regional human rights instruments
- submissions
- space to contribute to the working groups' discussions and other opportunities for feedback, contribution and other comment to or on the Forum's work.

Providing information

This objective recognises the need to make people aware of the Forum and its work. The focused media engagement strategy discussed above will contribute to this objective. In addition, the Forum will undertake a more targeted approach.

- Brochure

The Forum is publishing a short, easy to read brochure introducing the notion of a Bill of Rights and the Forum in relation to it, indicating where further information can be obtained and providing contact details. It invites submissions and comments, advising how they can be made.

With an initial print run of 15,000 copies, the brochure will be distributed to all identified relevant groups and individuals, at meetings discussing human rights generally or the Bill of Rights in particular, and through organisations represented on the Forum. It will be available in as many relevant formats as resources permit.

- Website

The Forum's website and its extensive inclusion of key documents have already been discussed.

- Other resources

The Forum will also promote information resources and materials on a Bill of Rights produced by other organisations in Northern Ireland. It is especially aware of excellent resources produced by the NIHRC, the Committee on the Administration of Justice and the Human Rights Consortium. It will promote these materials through its website and through distribution, where available, at events attended by Forum members and secretariat staff.

Consultation

Consultation aims to obtain and record the experiences and opinions of an increasingly diverse population in relation to human rights, and to enable the Forum to listen to, and give due consideration to, those opinions.

Northern Ireland has changed significantly since the signing of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, and since the consultations undertaken by the NIHRC. While arguments for broader community consultation are valid, the Forum has decided, given its timeframe and available resources, specifically to target sectors and groups not previously or sufficiently involved in earlier consultations and those groups that are traditionally harder to reach. This strategy is complemented by the issue of a general invitation to the collective Northern Ireland community to participate in the Forum's work through the Forum's website.

In formulating its outreach strategy the Forum identified the following priority groups:

- carers
- children and young people
- LGBT people
- linguistic minorities (users of languages other than English)
- low socio-economic groups and areas (new TSN), and
- new immigrant communities
- older people
- people with disability
- travellers
- rural and remote communities
- unionist communities (e.g. Loyal Orders, evangelical churches)
- victims of the troubles
- women

The Forum also encourages specific activities related to the Bill of Rights in schools and universities, trade unions, churches, clubs and other forums.

Building support

The Forum is convinced of the need for public support for the Bill of Rights if it is to be successful. Public ownership of the Forum's recommendations are an essential precursor to the political will and community commitment required to implement a Bill of Rights.

However, the Forum considers that it would be premature to undertake a major advertising/promotional campaign in advance of an agreed text or collection of recommendations. The Forum will conduct its Bill of Rights work through its programme of focused consultation and information.

In developing its recommendations, the Forum will also consider and advise on the need for a major advertising/promotional campaign on the Bill of Rights to take its proposals forward. It will bear in mind the need to identify other actors better placed, or more appropriately or better resourced, to take the lead on this.

Implementation of this strategy

Although different outreach activities will be directed primarily towards either awareness raising or consultation, all the Forum's outreach activities will have both components built into them. Activities that focus most on awareness raising will also invite submissions and comment. Activities that are principally directed towards obtaining views will also have an educational dimension.

The Forum will implement this strategy in the following ways:

Outreach workers

The Forum will engage two outreach workers, who will be based in the Secretariat. The outreach workers will liaise with Forum members in designing and delivering the outreach programme, and will also assist in targeting previously unreached groups.

Work with organisations close to priority and targeted groups

Because the Forum wants and needs the views of groups that were not fully involved in the NIHRC consultations, it will work with organisations close to those groups in facilitating or participating in focused discussions on a Bill of Rights. The Forum's outreach workers will coordinate this collaboration.

The Forum welcomes the Bill of Rights project of the Community Foundation of Northern Ireland which provides a programme of training and support for 20 local community groups to enable action on a Bill of Rights and a £220,000 fund for small grants for projects to develop learning on the Bill of Rights. The Forum will work with groups associated with these programmes to encourage them to contribute to the development of the Bill of Rights.

The Forum also endorses the work of the Human Rights Consortium that has worked consistently in recent years to keep this process going and to promote informed debate on a Bill of Rights. It will seek to continue its collaboration with the Consortium.

Meetings and conventions on the Bill of Rights

Forum members and secretariat staff will participate in public and other relevant meetings and activities arranged by groups interested in the Bill of Rights, including trade unions, professional associations and community organisations and foundations. The Forum welcomes invitations and will accept as many as its members and staff can accommodate.

Use of existing networks

The Forum's members and the organisations they represent are important means for outreach for the Forum's work. The Forum brings together all the principal political parties and the key organisations of civic society with an interest in a Bill of Rights. That is why they were invited to appoint representatives to the Forum.

The Forum seeks to make use of the meetings and processes of organisations represented on it and of other organisations with good networks and an interest in the Bill of Rights. Many organisations have good consultative processes for their members or users and the Forum seeks access to them to promote the Bill of Rights work and to invite comments and advice.

Funding outreach

The Forum has received proposals from some sectors and parties for financial support for specific outreach initiatives. A task assigned to the Forum's outreach workers will be to ensure consistency of approach and to avoid duplication of work already being undertaken. The Forum will provide small amounts of funding for outreach initiatives that implement this strategy.

Use of the media

The Forum is also making use of the public media. It will continue to engage media in major cities, local media and specialist or sectoral media.

While use of the media is usually directed more towards information provision than information collection, Forum media engagement will always indicate how members of the public can contribute to the Forum's work. It will generally be conducted by means of media releases, interviews, and news and current affairs stories. Opportunities to present the Forum's work on

talkback radio will be sought wherever possible. One aspect of the Forum's work in the media will be ensuring accurate reporting of human rights and of the Forum and its work. Overseeing a focused media engagement strategy will be a further responsibility of the outreach workers.

All members of the Forum are encouraged to discuss human rights questions and the Bill of Rights proposal in particular whenever possible in the public media, both to raise awareness of the Forum's work and to encourage debate on it. They will contribute to building a high media profile for human rights.

Incorporating community contributions

The collection of information and views from the community through outreach places particular demands on the Forum and its secretariat. The success of its work depends on a transparent process that takes account of contributions to the Forum and explains the basis for all decisions taken. Submissions and contributions at meetings and in other venues can be made in a variety of formats, including writing, audio and visual cassette, and Braille.

There will be specific arrangements to ensure that information is accurately reported and analysed. All submissions and comments received and reports of all meetings will be made available to all Forum members and posted on the Forum's website. All comments in the public media will also be recorded wherever possible and incorporated in the Forum's databank. Reports, submissions and comments will also be referred to the relevant working groups of the Forum so that they can be taken into account in their work. They will be analysed carefully to ensure an accurate reflection of the views themselves and of the extent of support for them within the community.

Each working group will prepare a summary report for the Forum, which will be posted on the website, on the views expressed in

consultations relevant to the group's issues and on how the working group responded to those views.

Outreach resources

As mentioned above, the Forum has dedicated resources to outreach in the following ways

- Establishing and maintaining a website
- Producing a brochure
- Accepting invitations to attend and participate in public and other meetings and activities, and
- Responding to media inquiries and invitations.

Further, as previously stated, a bid has been submitted for the funding of a further two members of staff at the Secretariat. These new staff members will

- Take responsibility for overseeing the outreach programme and the focused media engagement strategy, and
- Designate funding to assist organisations undertaking focused consultations in their own sectors.