

Submission should be sent to:

Bill of Rights Forum
Interpoint Centre
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Introduction:

The Villages Together is a rurally based community support organisation based in Bready, between Strabane and Londonderry. The group supports over 20 community and voluntary groups in the area, delivering a variety of projects and programmes throughout this diverse rural area.

The group is interested in preserving this rural community and its people whilst also providing opportunities for local people to engage and learn from the wider community in the Strabane district and beyond.

As part of the Bill of Rights process The Villages Together completed a community audit with a rights based focus. Most respondents indicated a need for greater access to services in the rural area, covering a wide range of social, economic and cultural issues.

The community audit asked people to consider what they considered to be the most important Rights to be included in the Northern Ireland Bill of Rights, the results found that the following two rights were considered the most important by a majority of respondents to the survey –

1. The Right to Life
2. Equality

As part of the submission process local support workers were also interviewed for a detailed insight into the issues and needs as they saw them in this area.

The following document reflects the information from both the audit and the interviews.

1. Children and Young People

1.1 What are your issues/needs in relation to children and young people?

There should be greater commitment at statutory level to provide greater access to services. No information reaches our rural areas about availability to mental health support structures, youth provision, health and wellbeing or to advice and counselling availability. A joined up approach from all key players is urgently required.

1.2 What is particular about the Northern Ireland context in relation to children and young people?

In this local area there are many issues affecting young males in particular. This includes being able to access employment and employment in an area where they are perceived to be from the "other" religion. They are excluded from accessing greater and more varied social activities, as it is unsafe for them to socialise in certain areas. There is a pervading sense amongst young males that they are continued victims of sectarian abuse which leaves them open to abuse by paramilitaries and those pertaining to come from these organisations.

Young people are inclined to stay more in their own areas and not venture into unknown territory in the urban centres.

1.3 What are the barriers to protecting the rights of children and young people?

Greater government resource commitment is required if rural areas are to receive the vital infrastructure it requires. Lack of commitment from the various departments involved needs to be addressed and greater attention paid to the crucial role played by community groups and facilities in providing much needed activities for young people.

Disinterest in multi agency approaches to deal with the myriad of problems facing young people also needs to be addressed by a sea change in operating policy.

1.4 What rights do you think are needed in this area?

- Rights of young people not to be mistreated by adults, particularly with regard to paramilitary activity.
- Rights of young people to be protected from drugs and alcohol.
- Rights to an appropriate education and training system.
- Rights to access appropriate healthcare provision.

2. Women

2.1 What are your issues/needs in relation to women?

Equality of opportunity has been identified as the main issue.

2.2 What is particular about the Northern Ireland context in relation to women?

Women are still treated as subordinate beings, this is reflected in the numbers of women in top level political structures, civil service departments, statutory bodies and businesses throughout Northern Ireland.

2.3 What are the barriers to protecting the rights of women?

Consultation in this community indicates that women themselves lack in capacity to participate in a fuller level within NI society. This is reflected within political structures which are not welcoming to women, beyond this it is still difficult for women to play an active role in business or at top levels in any bodies in this country.

2.4 What rights do you think are needed in this area?

- The rights of women to equality in all aspects of life.
- The right to access support and training to enable women to play a fuller role in the development of this country.

3. Economic and social rights, including relevant equality issues

5.1 What are your issues/needs in the social and economic spheres including housing, health, education, employment, social security, environment?

Lack of equality, particularly with lower levels of accessibility in all spheres of economic and social rights.

The lack of rural proofing at policy and strategy level has a negative impact upon rural areas. More support is required to help redress this imbalance.

5.2 What is particular about the Northern Ireland context in relation to social and economic issues?

Urban centres have had a louder voice but rural areas are urgently facing sustainability issues, particularly as demographics change within rural communities. Traditional employment patterns are changing and the needs of rural communities are growing more complex. Social and economic issues need greater attention if rural communities are to retain their indigenous populations in a post conflict society.

5.3 What are the barriers to protecting rights in the economic and social spheres?

Politically Northern Ireland still has some way to go before it is in a position to look after the needs of rural communities and protect the needs of people that live there. Party political games need to end with a focus on real political issues that affect rural communities. A voice for all rural communities is required which the relevant departments will listen to, RCN and RDC provide excellent support structures but more political weight needs to be given to rural issues.

5.4 What rights do you think are needed in this area?

- The right to equal access to ALL services.
- Rural proofing required when ALL policy decisions are made.

In particular equal access to the following –

Transport
Health
Housing
Employment
Benefits

4. Culture and identity and language

6.1 What are your issues/needs in relation to culture, identity and language?

There is still discrimination in minority areas where expression of culture and identity are not freely expressed. Areas which have strong Orange or Ulster Scots identity are discriminated against in many rural communities where they are in a minority. Additionally Protestants, especially the young are not given much reason to feel proud of their identity, never mind being able to express it. A programme needs to be introduced to encourage young people to feel proud of their identity and culture.

6.2 What is particular about the Northern Ireland context in relation to culture, identity and language?

Language is heavily politicised in Northern Ireland and is often used as a tool to alienate the “other” culture. This politicisation process needs to be addressed in order that further marginalisation does not occur.

The Protestant community in Northern Ireland is under pressure to maintain positivity in the face of the new future and support is required to enable forward change.

6.3 What are the barriers in relation to protection of rights relevant to culture, identity and language?

A disengaged Protestant community needs more support, there are very real barriers to participation as this section of the community

needs to be kept on board. At present many Protestants remove themselves from discussions which they perceive to be an attack on Protestant culture and identity.

What rights do you think are needed in this area?

- Equality of right to a culture and identity which is not open to dilution and derision.

5. Civil and Political Rights including relevant equality issues

7.1 What are your issues/needs in relation to civil and political rights, including right to life, freedom from serious ill treatment, right to liberty, fair trial rights, right to respect for private and family life, freedom of association, freedom of expression, freedom of thought, conscience and religion, right to marry and found a family, freedom from discrimination?

Equality is essential. There is a new generation of young people growing up in this community who feel disenfranchised and discriminated against in a community of a Catholic majority. A young Protestant from this rural community visiting Strabane or Londonderry cannot feel safe wearing a particular football shirt for fear of retribution; the same is true for school uniforms.

Young Protestant people continue to leave this area as soon as they can as they see no equality or freedom of expression for their community.

Something needs to be done to stem the flow of people away from this area because of this lack of freedom of expression and prevalence of discrimination.

7.2 What is particular about the Northern Ireland context in relation to the issues?

The existence of so much discrimination in such a small country means that problems seem magnified and people have an obsession with the successes of the perceived other.

7.3 What are the barriers to protecting these civil and political rights?

Past history does not bode well for the future with many people telling conflicting stories and conflicting histories. In some areas stories are not being heard which means that there is reduced hope for a fair and equitable future.

Civil rights are still seen as something which belong to the Nationalist community with many Protestant communities not even feeling that they can be part of a rights based process,

7.4 What further rights, in addition to those listed above in 7.1, do you think are needed in this area?

Some positive discrimination is required so that rural Protestants in particular feel that they too have ownership of the Bill of Rights as it moves into the future.