

PS Ministers
Stormont Castle
Stormont Estate
Belfast
BT4 3TT

c/o Human Rights Consortium
Community House
6A Albert Street
Belfast
BT12 4HQ

10 December 2021

Dear First and Deputy First Minister,

We write to express our grave concerns about the status of the Ad-Hoc Committee on a Bill of Rights, the appointment of the Panel of Experts to assist in its work and the broader commitment to progress a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland as expressed in both the New Decade, New Approach Agreement and the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement.

On the 25th of November the Ad-Hoc Committee for a Bill of Rights suspended its work due to two issues: failure to appoint the Panel of Experts and reported lack of support from one of the parties on the committee for a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland.

We believe that the failure to appoint a Panel of Experts to support the Committee is a violation of the commitment made to this process in the New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) agreement and are concerned that the absence of such support has been detrimental to that process. We are also dismayed at reports that the failure to appoint the Panel of Experts may be due to opposition within the Executive Office (TEO) to appoint Professor Colin Harvey as a result of his personal engagement in discussions around constitutional change.

The lack of transparency around the appointment of the Panel of Experts is a barrier to accountability in this process and erodes public confidence in the ability of TEO to make such appointments objectively and impartially. Professor Harvey is a human rights expert of the highest academic calibre with unsurpassed expertise on the Bill of Rights. As organisations who have worked with him across many years we can attest to his expertise and commitment to developing a Bill of Rights to benefit all sections of society in Northern Ireland.

We call on you to provide an explanation of your failure to meet this obligation under NDNA and to fundamentally review the transparency and independence of this and similar appointment processes.

The apparent failure within the Committee to agree progress on the Bill of Rights is an unacceptable and incomprehensible development given the process to date. Since March 2020, the Committee has spent hundreds of hours hearing detailed evidence from grass roots community activists, civil society organisations, elected representatives and academic and legal

experts both domestically and internationally. The vast majority of that evidence has clearly shown that a Bill of Rights with new strong human rights protections, including in the sphere of social and economic rights, was not just practically achievable but urgently required and of benefit across the community. This evidence was reinforced by the Committee's public survey of almost 2,400 individuals and organisations which found that 80% of respondents across all communities were in favour of a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland and that 82% felt it should contain a spectrum of rights reflective of international standards. Finally, public opinion polling jointly commissioned by the Human Rights Consortium with Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University and submitted to the Committee, shows that across all of the five main political parties represented on the Ad-Hoc Committee there is widespread support among their voters (73%+) for the inclusion of a range of social and economic rights within a Bill of Rights and for those same rights to be enforceable by law (79%+).

The apparent inability of all parties to agree a meaningful and justiciable Bill of Rights is therefore at odds with all evidence and public opinion. The lack of local political consensus has been used for many years as a block on the delivery of a Bill of Rights. No such requirement was ever envisaged within the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. As representatives of local civil society, we can no longer accept such a veto being exercised over legislation for badly needed and long-awaited human rights protections for people in Northern Ireland.

We will now call on the governments of United Kingdom and Ireland, as joint parties to the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, to build on the work to date of the Committee, civil society organisations which have engaged in the process, and the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, and to guarantee delivery of the Bill of Rights via Westminster legislation.

Sincerely,

1. Human Rights Consortium
2. Amnesty International UK
3. Committee on the Administration of Justice (CAJ)
4. North-West Forum of People with Disabilities
5. Children's Law Centre
6. Disability Action
7. Belfast Feminist Network
8. Cara Friend
9. Rural Community Network
10. Here NI
11. Northern Ireland Women's European Platform (NIWEP)
12. Community Dialogue
13. The Rainbow Project
14. NICVA
15. NUS-USI
16. Northern Ireland Anti-Poverty Network (NIAPN)
17. Migrant Centre NI

18. Age NI
19. PPR
20. Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance (NIPSA)
21. Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA)
22. NIACRO
23. Women's Aid Federation NI
24. UNISON
25. Public Interest Litigation Support (PILS)
26. Northern Ireland Council for Racial Equality (NICRE)
27. Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU)
28. Shankill Women's Centre
29. Greater North Belfast Women's Network
30. MindWise
31. Friends of the Earth
32. RNIB
33. Community Organisations of South Tyrone & Areas (COSTA)
34. Carers Northern Ireland
35. Unite Community Climate Justice Branch
36. Ecojustice Legal Action Centre
37. Ecojustice Ireland Community Interest Company
38. Star Neighbourhood Centre
39. Advice NI
40. North West Community Network
41. Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network (NIRWN)
42. My Way Access
43. Northern Ireland Youth Forum (NIYF)
44. Unite the union
45. HAPANI (Horn of Africa People's Aid NI)
46. Community Relations Forum
47. Community Foundation Northern Ireland (CFNI)
48. Resolve Restorative Practices
49. Queerspace
50. Coalition of Disabled People's Voices NI
51. Northern Ireland Union of Supported Employment

Cc:

- Brandon Lewis MP, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland
- Simon Coveney TD, Minister for Foreign Affairs
- Jeffrey Donaldson MP, Democratic Unionist Party
- Doug Beattie MLA, Ulster Unionist Party
- Colum Eastwood MP, Social Democratic and Labour Party
- Naomi Long MLA, Alliance Party
- Mary Lou McDonald TD, Sinn Fein