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From: Community Relations Council
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Issues: Consultation on a Forum on a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland

The Community Relations Council (CRC) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the above consultation. The debate surrounding the Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland has been a lengthy process and we are pleased that government has decided to establish the forum – it is long overdue. Like many other stakeholders involved in Human Rights we have an interest in the development of a Bill that reflects the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland, and believe that the Bill should represent the diversity that exists within our society – it should incorporate many social and economic rights such as housing and education. CRC's main interest in developing a Bill of rights is that Northern Ireland is a society in transition. It is hoped by all those involved in this important work that the process of raising awareness and increasing participation from all sections within our society 'can allow all sections of our divided society to come together and voice their view about what rights need to be protected in their post conflict lives'.¹

The Council supports the work already undertaken by the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC), the Human Rights Consortium (HRC) and other key stakeholders in the Bill of Rights debate. The HRC developed a set of roundtable principles (attached) that should govern the development of a Bill of Rights and Council endorses these principles as a framework for taking this process forward, and ask that government place these principles as the core of all discussions and negotiations for a Bill of Rights.

There are a number of subsequent issues for CRC with regards to this consultation:

- The consultation period for this particular part of the Bill of Rights process is inadequate. Serious consideration needs to be given as to who represents civic

¹ FAQ, Bill of Rights, HRC. 2006.

society on the Forum, and we are concerned that due to the shortness of the consultation period adequate time for these decisions will not be permitted.

- The first meeting is due to take place on 11th December. It will be difficult to decide an appropriate chairperson, who is an expert in both international rights, human rights and also knowledgeable about society in Northern Ireland. Furthermore, will they be available at such short notice?
- We are pleased that the chairperson will be independent, and would like further clarification as to how they will be chosen i.e. via a panel, do the forum members have access to this information beforehand and do they have any role in the decision making process.
- It is stated that recommendations have to be presented to the government by September 2007. Again, CRC is concerned over this tight timescale. The debate as to what a Bill of Rights should include has been a lengthy process, and the level of public awareness and participation has increased over the past few years. It would be a disappointing if further public engagement was rushed or even pushed to the side. It is necessary that all stakeholders in our society, voluntary and community groups, and individuals have an opportunity to continue to input at the various discussions. It would be impossible to carry out the relevant and appropriate level of consultation with our community within this timeframe and we propose the extension of this timeframe to allow suitable consultation with wider society.
- Remit of the Forum. Council views the role of the Forum as an independent body of human rights experts who will consult with civic society, discuss and negotiate the key rights to be included in a Bill of Rights. The independent nature of the forum is crucial to deliver a credible and well negotiated Bill of Rights.
- Membership. We have already stated the limiting effects of the short consultation period in allowing proper discussion to take place as to who should be represented on the roundtable. The Forum must include representatives from civic society who are Human Rights experts and who are knowledgeable about the social and economic rights of our diverse society. Furthermore it is important to acknowledge the work already carried out by the HRC and other stakeholders in this sector in opening the debate to wider society; it is only right that their commitment and hard work is recognised and they are allocated a position on the Forum. The Community Relations Council would like to be considered as a member of the Forum, and looks forward to working with our partners on this important development for Northern Ireland, whether as a key partner or as an interested constituent in the public debates.

Yours sincerely

Duncan Morrow
Chief Executive
Community Relations Council