

SOUTHERN HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES COUNCIL



Response to

**MAKING A BILL OF RIGHTS FOR NORTHERN
IRELAND**

JANUARY 2002

C M Hart

The Southern Health and Social Services Council welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission's consultation document, "Making a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland".

General Comments

- While the Council welcomes the idea of the Bill of Human Rights for Northern Ireland, and accepts many of rights proposed in the Commission's document, it is anxious that the existence of such a Bill will have practical and tangible benefits for the population.
- Many of the proposals in the Bill will require a legislative framework and appropriate resources if they are to be more than aspirations.
- The Council feels strongly that the language and format of the Bill should be accessible and easily understood by the population – it should not fall victim to "legalise".

The Proposed Rights

➤ **Equality and Non-Discrimination (Chapter Four)**

The Council supports the principle of equality and non-discrimination. The Commission's proposals have given rise to the following questions, however:

- (a) Are these matters not already covered by existing equality legislation, and the proposed Single Equality Bill?
- (b) What will be the relationship between the existing/proposed legislation and the Bill of Rights?

➤ **The Rights of Women (Chapter Five)**

While the Council welcomes recognition of the special circumstances of women, and the need for their rights to be protected, it feels that by including a separate chapter on women's rights the document fails to recognise that there are areas in which men have suffered

disadvantage and may require protection - most notably in relation to access to their children where the relationship with the other parent has broken down. For this reason the Council feels that the rights outlined in this chapter should be incorporated into the main text of the Bill of Rights and not provided for in a separate chapter.

➤ **The Rights of Children (Chapter Ten)**

The Council supports strengthening the rights of children. How does the Commission view the role of the Children's Commissioner in relation to the proposed rights?

The Council feels that parents/guardians should have a right to know if certain categories of offenders (sex offenders and drug dealers) are living in the area in order to allow them to protect their children more effectively.

➤ **Language Rights (Chapter Thirteen)**

The Council endorses the proposals in this chapter. Emphasis should be placed on providing resources and training to introduce or enhance interpretation services for those who use sign language or whose first language is not English.

➤ **Social, Economic and Environmental Rights (Chapter Fourteen)**

The Council strongly endorses the right to health care – but feels that this must be backed up by implementation measures and resources to ensure it is more than an aspiration.

Additional Points

- ❖ The Council feels that the Bill should contain a chapter on the Right to Information – while recognising that this right may conflict with other rights (e.g. The rights of ex-prisoners v. the rights of parents or employers).

- ❖ The Council feels that the Bill should recognise that along with rights come responsibilities.

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