

## **Bill of Rights Forum Public Outreach Strategy**

### **Submission from the Committee on the Administration of Justice (CAJ)**

**21<sup>st</sup> May 2007**

The Committee on the Administration of Justice (CAJ) has long believed that the Bill of Rights Forum is an extremely important initiative which, if properly chaired, constituted and given sufficient scope and resources to operate, has great potential to enable people in Northern Ireland to discuss and debate the rights that they want to see protected in a Bill of Rights.

The proposal to convene a Bill of Rights Forum did not develop in a vacuum – it came from a recognition that the process up until that point had not sufficiently engaged political parties, and the delays in the process had resulted in a loss of momentum and engagement from wider civil society. It was also clear that the task was proving too big and too difficult for the NI Human Rights Commission for a variety of reasons both, inside and outside its control.

From the perspective of CAJ and its colleagues in the Human Rights Consortium, the potential of the Forum in broadening out debate, and reaching agreement between political parties and civil society was and still is seen as pivotal in developing the groundswell of support and ownership necessary to guide these proposals through a Westminster parliament.

In addition, a Bill of Rights must be a living document – its content and meaning must be widely known and owned if it is to be of any use or benefit to those who need it most. Rights are too often seen as either politically contentious or legal and technical, when in reality they have the potential to have a profound impact on the lives of the most vulnerable and marginalised in our society, whatever their politics. Making rights relevant to those who need them most is in our view a prerequisite to the success of any Bill of Rights, and as such this must be one of the key objectives of the Forum's work.

The development of Bills of Rights in other countries has clearly demonstrated that the process of debating the rights is almost as important as the end product. It is therefore crucial that we get this process right. To this end, CAJ endorses the principles developed by the Human Rights Consortium as providing a sound basis against which this Forum and its work should be judged.

In particular we believe this Forum should be open, transparent, inclusive and accessible in all it does. It should not allow discussion of a Bill of Rights to happen around a table in Belfast, but rather should bring the debate about rights out and about as widely as possible.

As a member of the Human Rights Consortium, we have had an opportunity to view their response to the draft public outreach strategy, and endorse the points they make. Below are additional comments in relation to the specific questions asked.

***What public outreach does the Forum need to undertake to complete its terms of reference in advising the Human Rights Commission on a Bill of Rights?***

***Why is an outreach strategy necessary for the work of the Forum?***

As is clear from our comments above, we believe that the process of debate and the development of ownership of a Bill of Rights is almost as important as the end product. Other Forum members have also emphasised the need for community buy-in. To ensure that this is done in the most effective way possible, a comprehensive outreach strategy is necessary.

The actual design of a public outreach strategy is not something CAJ feels especially qualified or equipped to do. Likewise we imagine other Forum members (and possibly the secretariat) may feel they do not have the necessary expertise in this particular field. We would therefore suggest that the Forum urgently commission a PR or Communications company to draw up a professional outreach strategy based on the submissions made by Forum members and their own expertise in this area. Their proposals could then be presented to and amended/agreed by the Forum at the next meeting.

***To what extent do these possible objectives [as outlined in the discussion paper] match the needs of the Forum? What other objectives could underpin the Forum's public outreach?***

As outlined above, CAJ believes that making rights relevant to those who need them most is a prerequisite to the success of any Bill of Rights, and as such this must be one of the key objectives of the Forum's work and thus of any outreach strategy. Increasing awareness of the Forum and its role will be of little interest to the general public – whereas increasing awareness of a Bill of Rights and its application to people's lives is likely to be more interesting and relevant. We believe that the creation of such ownership of human rights is a necessary first step and that without it, the interest or participation of the wider public in the process is likely to be extremely limited – as a result of which any public outreach strategy could well fail.

***To what extent do these possible principles correspond to the wishes of the Forum members? What other principles could underpin the Forum's public outreach?***

The principles of openness and accountability could be added to those outlined in the discussion paper to reflect both the Forum's wish to be open and conduct its business in public to the extent possible, and the fact that its members are representatives who are accountable to their constituents, members, sectors and indeed the public at large.

***Who should be the specific priority targets of an outreach strategy?***

CAJ would propose amending this slightly as follows:

- the public generally, with particular emphasis on those particular groups or members of the public who have not been involved in the Bill of Rights process to date or who do not already feel involved – poor people and those alienated from the political process or otherwise marginalised
- specific community sectors that have specific needs or experiences in relation to human rights – population sectors represented on the Forum, including women, children and young people, ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people, aged persons, and groups not represented on the Forum
- the local media, including newspapers, television and radio as a means of accessing the above groups and individuals.

***What type, or types, of outreach are essential to the success of the Forum's work? What types are desirable? What are the priorities for outreach, if it is not possible to do everything that may be desirable? Are there particular points in the process when one type of outreach or another will be necessary or at least highly desirable?***

We believe all three types of outreach as articulated in the discussion paper are essential for the Forum to conduct its task. In particular, raising awareness of human rights, the Bill of Rights and the work of the Forum is a necessary first step before consultation per se can be undertaken. Only then can the public feel empowered to make informed and meaningful contributions to the consultation. The building of ownership then runs through both stages.

***How is information best recorded and reported? What system or method of analysis is most appropriate and most useful for the Forum's work? How can the Forum ensure that information and views collected through outreach inform its work?***

How the information is recorded, reported and fed in to the deliberations of the Forum is the critical aspect of any outreach strategy. One of the common criticisms of the reports produced by the previous Human Rights Commission was that they failed to reflect the submissions and inputs made during the consultation process. It is absolutely essential that the Forum does not fall foul of the same accusation, but instead makes every effort to ensure that its deliberations and recommendations are informed by the information received. Only then can we ensure that a product is developed that truly reflects the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland, as defined by the people living here.

We would suggest that if the idea of a PR or Communications company being engaged to develop a public outreach strategy is adopted, they could be tasked with

researching other such public consultations with a view to making recommendations on how this could best be done. For example, leaving aside different party political positions on the Patten debate on policing, the process that the Patten Commission adopted could well provide a model for how to effectively engage the public in debate, and how this information is recorded and processed.

However, even at this early stage and in advance of any decisions about this, it would appear to us that a key issue for the Forum will be resources. We would argue that the current secretariat is too small to deal with this task, and that funding should be set aside to employ additional staff.

### ***What should be on the Forum's website? How can it be promoted?***

Again this is not an area about which CAJ feels particularly knowledgeable and would therefore suggest that expert advice is sought on the most effective use of a website as part of an overall outreach and communications strategy.

### ***How can the brochure be widely distributed? In what quantities?***

In the early stages of the original consultation process, the Human Rights Consortium argued that information about the Bill of Rights should be delivered to every household in Northern Ireland, but the NIHRC at the time did not have adequate resources to undertake this task. CAJ would suggest that the resources should now be found, as it would seem that this would be an ideal and easy way to reach a large percentage of Northern Ireland's population.

Other important issues in Northern Ireland have been worthy of "door drops" – we would argue that informing people of this unique opportunity to contribute to a debate about what rights and values they want to see protected in a Bill of Rights that will contribute to a more shared and peaceful future in Northern is equally worthy of this effort.

### ***What arrangements for Forum public meetings should be made? Where should public meetings be organised? To whom should they be directed? How can they be conducted and used most effectively? At what points in the Forum's process? Who should participate in them to represent the Forum?***

In light of the discussion at the last Forum meeting – in which members were all in agreement that the Forum should agree what needs to be done and seek resources accordingly – we would argue that the statement here that the Forum is able to organise a limited number of public meetings is precipitate, rather we should hold as many public meetings as we feel are necessary to complete our task. Clearly, however, the purpose of these meetings, who should attend, what their role should be and how the meetings should be conducted needs to be clearly set out and agreed as part of the overall strategy. As suggested above, we believe that the lessons from

other such processes could usefully be fed in here (e.g. a mixture of venues, and of dates and times, clear agenda and proper report backs etc).

***Which organisations represented on the Forum, and which other organisations, have relevant information and consultation processes that the Forum can seek to use?***

All the organisations represented on the Forum clearly have relevant information and consultation processes that the Forum can seek to use – this is arguably why they were appointed to the Forum. Equally, however, they should not be seen as the only organisations with such information and networks. Gaps in the membership of the Forum have already been identified, e.g. victims groups, minority faith groups etc who must be included in any outreach strategy.

For CAJ, we have a monthly newsletter, and e-bulletin, a website and extensive mailing lists that we are currently using to distribute our Bill of Rights Information Pack that could be of use.

***What should be the key components of a Forum media strategy? Which forms of media and media outlets are most effective to communicate with the general public in Northern Ireland, and which with specific groups?***

Again, CAJ would argue that the particular skills and advice of a company experienced in working with the media should be sought to inform any Forum media strategy. Our own experience – and that of the Human Rights Consortium – is that it has been extremely difficult to generate interest within the media about this debate. Indeed, the press releases issued to date by the Forum have also received extremely limited coverage, so the strategy suggested here of media releases, interviews etc may prove ineffective or indeed inefficient if they do not deliver media coverage. Any advice that we have sought in this regard has seemed to suggest that the media are likely to be more interested in “human interest” stories, and in how a Bill of Rights can make a real difference to people’s lives. Such professional advice may therefore prove extremely useful in ensuring that the best use is made of the Forum’s time and resources in engaging with the media in a way that complements/contributes to a wider public outreach strategy.

We would also contend that the Forum should not at this stage rule out an extensive advertising campaign on the basis of lack of funding – as noted above, we should seek resources accordingly if and when we decide such a campaign is necessary to our work.

***How can the Forum make full use of the activities of organisations represented on it, and of other organisations, to provide information, to collect views and to build ownership? What can member organisations***

***do to assist the Forum’s work? What other organisations should be approached to explore possibilities of collaboration? How can Forum members themselves contribute to outreach activities most effectively? How can they be assisted to feed back to the Forum as a whole the information and views they receive from their organisational members and networks?***

While we agree that best use needs to be made of existing organisations and networks on the Forum, we are mindful of the concern raised already by several Forum members that they currently lack the resources to undertake additional work in relation to the Bill of Rights. The suggestion here that *many* have grants from public or philanthropic donors to enable this work is incorrect, and we are not sure how this impression was given? We do not doubt that Forum members will nonetheless dedicate themselves fully to this task, and civil society representatives in particular will endeavour to facilitate participation of their members and networks in the process to the extent possible. However, the burden of resourcing this should not be placed back on the shoulders of already under-resourced sectors and groups, but rather government should ensure that adequate support and funding –as promised in the Joint Declaration – is available to the Forum and its members.

***How can existing resources be mobilised and used most effectively in an outreach program? What other resources are required for a basic outreach strategy? Where might those additional resources be sourced?***

As above, this constant reiteration of current/existing/limited resources is unhelpful. The Joint Declaration said adequate resources would be provided by government. As agreed by Forum members at the last meeting, the Forum should define a programme of action and then seek the necessary funding. The resources available at present should not therefore be seen as limited, but rather resources should be sought from government to ensure that a comprehensive public outreach strategy can be designed and implemented.

In conclusion, our statement at the inaugural Forum meeting recalled the words of Eleanor Roosevelt in speaking of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

*“Where, after all, do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home – so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any maps of the world. Yet they are the world of the individual person; the neighbourhood he lives in; the school or college he attends; the factory, farm, or office where he works. Such are the places where every man, woman and child seeks equal justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity without discrimination. Unless these rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere. Without concerted citizen action to uphold them close to home, we shall look in vain for progress in the larger world.”*

We repeat now our conclusion at that meeting – that this process should encourage and facilitate participation by as many people as possible. Only then, can we say we have done this job to the best of our ability.