



Northern Ireland Assembly

AD HOC COMMITTEE ON A BILL OF RIGHTS

MINUTES OF PROCEEDINGS

Thursday 4 March 2021
Virtual Meeting, StarLeaf

Present, via StarLeaf: Emma Sheerin MLA (Chairperson)
Mike Nesbitt MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
Paula Bradshaw MLA
Mark Durkan MLA
Michelle McIlveen MLA
Carál Ní Chuilín MLA

Apologies: None

In Attendance: Caroline Perry (Assembly Clerk)
Gareth Cross (Clerical Officer)
David McClure (Assistant Assembly Clerk)
Gavin Ervine (Assistant Assembly Clerk)

The meeting commenced in open session at 2.02 pm.

1. Apologies

As noted above.

2. Briefing by the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission: Advice on a Bill of Rights to the Secretary of State for NI in 2008

Dr David Russell, Chief Executive of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC), and Rhyannon Blythe, Senior Legal and Research Officer of the NIHRC, joined the meeting via StarLeaf at 2:04pm.

Their briefing noted that the NIHRC stands over its recommendations from the 2008 advice and believes that they should form the starting point for the Committee's deliberations. A Northern Ireland bill of rights could fill the current gaps in the human rights architecture that have been created since the UK has left the EU.

They commented that the 2008 advice was not maximalist in approach, and that efforts were made to ensure retention of the existing balance of power. They urged the Committee to avoid interpreting the '*particular circumstances*' of Northern Ireland, to be mindful of the future in developing proposals and noted that the more specific a bill of rights is: the less flexible it will be. Furthermore, they commented there is nothing the Committee can recommend that is not already in UK law.

The oral evidence was followed by a question and answer session.

The Chairperson thanked Dr David Russell and Rhyannon Blythe for their evidence.

The briefing session was reported by Hansard.

Mark Durkan joined the meeting at 2:36pm.

3. Briefing by Here NI: Perspective on a Bill of Rights

Danielle Roberts, Policy Development Officer for Here NI, joined the meeting via StarLeaf at 2:54 pm.

Her briefing outlined that a bill of rights was a key element of the Belfast Agreement, and that any bill of rights must be representative of all communities in Northern Ireland. Here NI believes that a bill of rights should incorporate international obligations, including on social and economic rights, and Danielle referred to developments in Scotland and Wales in this regard. Symbolically, a bill of rights would signal a shift to a rights-based approach in policy making. She commented that a bill of rights is important for lesbian and bisexual women and called for a bill of rights that is aspirational in focus and enforceable in reality.

The oral evidence was followed by a question and answer session.

The Chairperson thanked Danielle Roberts for her evidence.

The briefing session was reported by Hansard.

Mark Durkan left the meeting at 3:06pm.

4. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson gave formal notice of a proposal to rescind the Committee's decision to conclude taking evidence on 29 April and instead to conclude on 6 May 2021. This proposal will be considered at next week's meeting.

5. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Ad Hoc Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on Thursday 25 February 2021.

6. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

7. Correspondence

Members noted correspondence from the Irish Congress of Trade Unions and agreed to invite the organisation to give evidence.

8. Forward Work Programme

The Chairperson referred Members to the draft Forward Work Programme.

Agreed: Members agreed the Forward Work Programme.

9. Any other business

There was no other business.

10. Date, Time and Place of the next meeting

The next meeting will be on Thursday 11 March 2021 at 2.00 pm when the Committee will hear from the NI Youth Forum and Professor Monica Williams, former Chief Commissioner of NIHRC.

The meeting adjourned at 3.45 pm.

Ms Emma Sheerin MLA
Chairperson, Ad Hoc Committee