

Dear Member of Committee

I fully endorse the views of Northern Ireland Human Rights Consortium in their support for the introduction of a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland and commend their stated views to your committee. I do so as a retired teacher, a member of National Trust, the Woodland Trust, Friends of the Earth Northern Ireland, North-West Animal Welfare Group,, and someone who has been engaged in/ commenting on planning issues over the last 50 years.

Over that period, I have concluded that much of our society is dysfunctional, undemocratic, partisan and heavily tilted towards the 'big boys' of our society, with David so often losing out to Goliath that he gives up from sheer exhaustion and leaves the field entirely to that big boy and his pals.

We have become an 'economy first' society, brutalised in our attitudes to animals where e.g. pigs which are highly- intelligent, sentient beings can be produced factory- style as commodities with their welfare largely ignored even by Department of Agriculture Vets who , in a formal meeting with our committee, refused to commit to implementing industry 'best practice' by ensuring that enrichment materials were provided for intensively reared animals. If our vets can't support the welfare of animals, then God-help the rest of us!!!

I seek a society where such issues, and others of concern to reasonable citizens, can be aired . We need a fully participative democracy where the individual citizen is not 'done to' but 'done with'. Referring back to our Vets meeting, we met no engagement of minds, no reasonable discussion , but rather a stone wall of resistance. When people meet stone walls, it encourages them to throw stones or worse.... So what I am advocating is a society where the individual can have a voice, inside a framework for discussion, and thus, whatever the outcome of the discussions, can take ownership of the decisions democratically made.

From my teaching experience, the engagement of pupils in drawing up the rules meant that **their rules tended to be kept** and that led in turn to a more peaceful school society. There has to be openness in who controls what, and that includes rule making and scrutiny of finances.

A Bill of Rights would be a vital component in building an equitable, fair and just Northern Ireland where the views of all are included and valued in the decision -making processes. i.e. a society that we can all buy- into and respect.

The Planning Process is not fit for purpose. Developers are supported and encouraged and the views of local people are ignored or by-passed.

In the last week, I have heard of three cases where the Judicial Review process has failed communities with genuine grievances. Truth and indisputable factual evidence have been ignored by Planners, and developers ,who can afford expensive legal support, have triumphed.

In another PAC case, the; third party; in a battle between a Council and Venture Capital Trust, has been ignored in the decision made. Yet the small rural community affected by that decision have been left with a huge legal bill, and an environmental situation in which none of us would want to live.

I am currently involved in a case where i assert 'unlawful' decision- making. All i can do is make a formal complaint, which I have done, and await a response, but I have no Right of Appeal against the decision made short of going to a judicial review which would cost many thousands of pounds.

From all of the above, and many others in am engeged with, it is clear that there is an inequality between the decision made and those who disagree with that decision. There must be an Equal Right of Appeal. This would encourage better decision-making by Planning Officers who would seek to avoid litigation where their work would be open to scrutiny. Developers would be less likely to proceed against local objection if they knew there would be equal representation in law.

There needs to be a Public Consultation on the processes of Planning Service. A fully participative, iterative and responsive process should be the foundation of a democratic planning system in which an equal right of appeal is built in.

Rights of Nature

The 'Going for Growth' strategy and the 'Moy Park Protocol', backed by an influential lobby of grain importers, have encouraged the massive development of intensive agriculture. what has been an economic success but is an environmental disaster. Our fields are rank with pig slurry and chicken waste. Our rivers are polluted by run-off from the fields in a region noted for its rainfall. Our fish stocks are fading and the very air we breathe is contaminated by particulates. What is even more worrying is the use of antibiotics to keep these poor confined creatures alive, and their faeces contain a residue of antibiotics which go into our soil, into the produce from the fields and into the stomachs of the population. The Public Health Agency in Engla considers antibiotic resistance a greater threat to public health than Covid; it is the subject of massive research at the moment, and yet we flout the evidence and continue to 'go for growth. What folly!! Our bill of rights must incorporate the rights of nature to thrive, regenerate, and be restored. Our flora, fauna and our Natura 2000 sites must be protected to create/maintain a healthy environment for future generations.

In this our statutory bodies are ineffective- so often, in the name of scrutiny, diligently carrying out a tick-box exercise, creating a mass of paperwork and all to little or no effect. Yes we have lots of environmental legislation, yes we have lots of Civil Servants interpreting that legislation, but no joined up thinking, no addressing of the cumulate effects of a, b and c. And there is cross-border collaboration to consider. The natural world does not recognise borders.

For the health of our people, our communities, our natural environment , a Bill of rights should incorporate the Aarhus principles of

- * **the right to access to information**
- * **the right to participation**
- ***the right to access to justice.**

The individual needs access to professional advice and guidance which the 'big boys' can easily afford . So an Aarhus Centre should be established in Northern ireland where the 'small man' can seek and obtain interpretation of all the above. Only by such provision can we achieve the equitable society that all decent people crave.

Yours sincerely

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