

Bill of Rights Focus Groups with Schools

Executive Summary

Introduction and methodology

The *New Decade, New Approach* deal, which paved the way for the Assembly and the other institutions to be restored in January 2020, called for an Ad Hoc Assembly Committee to consider the creation of a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland.

It said that a bill of rights should be in line with the intentions written in the 1998 Belfast Agreement (the Good Friday Agreement), in that it should have more rights than those we already have through the European Convention on Human Rights. The European Convention on Human Rights includes the right to life, the right to be free and safe, the right to a fair trial, the right to get married and the right to vote.

These extra rights should reflect the '*particular circumstances*' of Northern Ireland, and the '*principles of mutual respect for the identity and ethos of both communities and parity of esteem*' - valuing both main communities in Northern Ireland equally.

Between November 2020 and April 2021, the Northern Ireland Assembly Education Service conducted 15 virtual focus groups with 14 schools (please see table below) and with Springboard, an organisation which offers services to young people aged 16-24 within the Greater Belfast area.

Schools were provided with an introductory guide which explained what the Ad Hoc Committee on a Bill of Rights is looking at and what a focus group would involve. Schools were directed to relevant online resources, however, while many participants did some research in advance of the focus group, it was not essential for schools taking part to do any additional work. Irish-medium schools received the introductory guide in Irish and the focus group questions and responses were also in Irish and translated for the purpose of this paper.

School Type	School	Constituency
Primary (controlled)	Groggan PS	South Antrim
	Strandtown PS	East Belfast
Primary (maintained)	Glenann PS	North Antrim
	St Nicholas' PS	East Antrim

Post Primary (controlled)	Magherafelt High School Killicomaine Junior High	Mid Ulster Upper Bann
Post Primary (maintained)	Lismore Comprehensive Trinity College	Upper Bann North Belfast
Grammar	Banbridge Academy Sacred Heart Newry GS	Upper Bann Newry and Armagh
Irish-Medium	Coláiste Feirste Gaelscoil an tSeanchaí	West Belfast Mid Ulster
Integrated	Drumragh Integrated	West Tyrone
Special	Killard House	North Down

The Education Service would like to thank the young people involved in the research for their valuable contributions. Sincere thanks also to the teachers/group leader for arranging the virtual focus groups especially as there was an unprecedented level of disruption this academic year due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Views on a bill of rights for Northern Ireland

The focus group explored views on a bill of rights for Northern Ireland. The young people shared their thoughts as to whether there should be a bill of rights here, any particular groups they believe need additional protection, and what rights should or shouldn't be included in a bill of rights for Northern Ireland. Views were also sought on values or ideas for society here.

Summary of focus group discussions

Views on human rights in Northern Ireland

- 1 To what extent do you agree that everyone in Northern Ireland is treated in the same way, equally and fairly (i.e. that they enjoy the same basic human rights)?**

While some young people felt Northern Ireland has improved in terms of how people are treated equally when compared to the 70s and 80s, the majority felt that there were still many groups who are not treated equally and fairly.

	Mentioned in 10+ focus groups	Mentioned in 5-9 focus groups	Mentioned in 1-4 focus groups
Who is not treated in the same way, equally and fairly in your view	Black and Minority ethnic groups LGBT groups People with a disability	People from various religious backgrounds People who are poor Older people	Young people Women Irish-Speaking Community

1. Protections

	Mentioned in 10+ focus groups	Mentioned in 5-9 focus groups	Mentioned in 1-4 focus groups
In your view, do any groups need more protection for their human rights?	Black & minority ethnic groups LGBT groups People with a disability	Older people People with mental health issues People from various religious backgrounds	Men Women Irish speakers The unborn PSNI Emergency & healthcare workers

2. Circumstances of Northern Ireland

	Mentioned in 10+ focus groups	Mentioned in 5-9 focus groups	Mentioned in 1-4 focus groups
In what ways, if any, do you think Northern Ireland might be different to other places?	The Troubles Segregated: housing, education, religious	Identity very important (being Irish or British, flag, language) Poor Mental Health	More fun and banter here Assembly structure FM and dFM Politicians argue a lot

3. Values

	Mentioned in 8+ focus groups	Mentioned in 4-7 focus groups	Mentioned in 1-4 focus groups
What, if any, values do you think are important for Northern Ireland?	Mutual respect Peace Acceptance of difference Equality for everyone	Freedom of expression Compassion	Tolerance Kindness Positivity

5.

	All Focus Groups
To what extent, if at all, do you agree that a bill of rights for Northern Ireland should set out these values or ideas?	Agree it is important

Views on a Bill of Rights

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	All Focus Groups
How important, if at all, do you think a bill of rights is for Northern Ireland?	Agree it is important

7.

	Mentioned in 5+ Focus groups	Mentioned in 3-4 Focus groups	Mentioned in 1-2
What rights, if any, would you like to see protected in a bill of rights?	Right to healthcare Right to a house and good food	Protect Black and ethnic minority groups	Female reproductive rights

	Protect the environment Right to feel safe	Protect LGBT community Freedom of expression Freedom of religious expression Freedom of cultural expression	Protect the Belfast/GF Agreement Protect language rights
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Conclusion

Common themes emerged from the focus groups discussions. While there is broad agreement for a bill of rights, there is a wide range of views as to what rights the young people would like to see protected.

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Introduction

The *New Decade, New Approach* deal, which paved the way for the Assembly and the other institutions to be restored in January 2020, called for an Ad Hoc Assembly Committee to consider the creation of a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland.

It said that a bill of rights should be in line with the intentions written in the 1998 Belfast Agreement (the Good Friday Agreement), in that it should have more rights than those we already have through the European Convention on Human Rights. The European Convention on Human Rights includes the right to life, the right to be free and safe, the right to a fair trial, the right to get married and the right to vote.

These extra rights should reflect the '*particular circumstances*' of Northern Ireland, and the '*principles of mutual respect for the identity and ethos of both communities and parity of esteem*' - valuing both main communities in Northern Ireland equally.

Human rights are freedoms and protections belonging to everyone – so that everyone is treated in the same way.

Examples of human rights include the right to live in safety, the right to go where we want, the right to own our own things, the right to vote and the right to believe in whatever we like.

A bill of rights contains human rights protections for everyone – it is a list of the laws a country agrees to make to protect all the people who live there.

It can also contain guiding principles or ideas about what we would like to achieve for society here, or ideas about what Northern Ireland could be like. This could be based on values or beliefs about what is important for Northern Ireland now and in the future.

Methodology

The Education Service conducted a total of 15 focus groups with primary and post-primary pupils and young people. Due to public health restrictions (COVID-19 pandemic), the Education Service arranged a series of virtual focus groups, with a range of schools, to ensure an appropriate balance of school management types (as far as possible). Table 1 outlines the schools involved:

Maintained Primary and Post-Primary	Controlled Primary and Post-Primary	Voluntary grammar	Controlled grammar	Integrated	Irish-medium	Special	EOTAS ¹	Total
4	4	1	1	1	2	1	1	15

Each group included between 3 and twelve participants (most of the groups contained 5). The duration of each focus group was 30 minutes, and participants

¹ Education Other than at School providers

discussed their thoughts and views on a bill of rights. Text boxes throughout the Paper present quotations from focus group participants.

Schools were provided with an introductory guide which explained what the Ad Hoc Committee on a Bill of Rights is looking at and what a focus group would involve. Schools were directed to relevant online resources, however, while many participants did some research in advance of the focus group, it was not essential for schools taking part to do any additional work. Irish-medium schools received the introductory guide in Irish and the focus group questions and responses were also in Irish and translated for the purpose of this paper

The Education Service wishes to acknowledge the effort and time teachers/group leader and young people gave to set up and participate in the virtual focus groups. The disruption to life as a result of the global health pandemic did not diminish the willingness and enthusiasm of the participants to discuss their views on a bill of rights.

Views on human rights in Northern Ireland

- 1 To what extent do you agree that everyone in Northern Ireland is treated in the same way, equally and fairly (i.e. that they enjoy the same basic human rights)?

While some young people felt Northern Ireland has improved in terms of how people are treated equally when compared to the 70s and 80s, the majority felt that there were still many groups who are not treated equally and fairly.

	Mentioned in 10+ focus groups	Mentioned in 5-9 focus groups	Mentioned in 1-4 focus groups
Who is not treated in the same way, equally and fairly in your view	Black and Minority ethnic groups LGBT groups People with a disability	People from various religious backgrounds People who are poor Older people	Young people Women Irish Speaking Community

A common theme across all the focus groups related to participants concerns about race discrimination. Many of the participants felt that LGBT groups and people with disabilities were often treated unfairly and in an unequal way in society.

People are sometimes treated unfairly by other people in Northern Ireland because of their skin colour or nationality – P7 pupil

Some focus groups also felt people with limited financial resources were unable to access the same things (education and healthcare) as those with better financial means. There also was also considerable discussion around unfair treatment of older people and younger people and their right to education.

Young people not treated the same when it comes to education – the academic selection leads to class division – paying for tutoring – Post 16 person

Children with disabilities have to travel further to attend school – P7 pupil

2. Protections

	Mentioned in 10+ focus groups	Mentioned in 5-9 focus groups	Mentioned in 1-4 focus groups
In your view, do any groups need more protection for their human rights?	Black & minority ethnic groups LGBT groups People with a disability	Older people People with mental health issues People from various religious backgrounds	Men Women Irish speakers The unborn PSNI Emergency & healthcare workers

Again, a lot of the participants felt that ethnic minorities, LGBT groups and people with a disability need extra protection for their human rights.

Many also mentioned how vulnerable they felt older people are in addition to those with mental health issues.

Some groups mentioned how women were still not equal in society but it was also felt that men are the majority in the suicide statistics.

There are a lot of hate crimes here because of racism and homophobia - post 16 person

I feel it was difficult to be Asian in this pandemic – I know some people said because Covid started in china – they made a lot of racist comments- post 16 person

There are big issues for women when it comes to domestic violence-post 16

3. Circumstances of Northern Ireland

	Mentioned in 10+ focus groups	Mentioned in 5-9 focus groups	Mentioned in 1-4 focus groups
In what ways, if any, do you think Northern Ireland might be different to other places?	The Troubles Segregated: housing, education, religious	Identity very important (being Irish or British, flag, language Poor Mental Health	More fun and banter here Assembly structure FM and dFM Politicians argue a lot

When asked how might Northern Ireland be different to other places and what might this mean in terms of the protections needed, mostly all groups mentioned the past and the segregated nature of many areas in Northern Ireland.

There was a lot of discussion of how identity is important to a lot of people in Northern Ireland – issues like nationality, language, flags and emblems. Young people discussed how perceived threats to identity can disrupt peace. There was also a discussion about how the structure of government with First Minister and deputy First Minister represents the two largest communities.

We have had the Troubles when there was lot of violence and bombs – P7

Some people here call themselves Irish and other people say they are British- P7

Our housing is very segregated- sometimes this is marked out by flags – post 16

Lots of people are addicted to drugs and alcohol and the suicide rate is very high – lots of mental health issues –post 16

4. Values

	Mentioned in 8+ focus groups	Mentioned in 4-7 focus groups	Mentioned in 1-4 focus groups
What, if any, values do you think are important for Northern Ireland?	Mutual respect Peace Acceptance of difference Equality for everyone	Freedom of expression Compassion	Tolerance Kindness Positivity

Given a strong awareness of the conflict and The Troubles, the value of having peace was mentioned in practically all focus group discussions.

Mutual respect and accepting difference were common themes also mentioned as young people felt that life in Northern Ireland would be better if everyone adhered to these values.

We need to value peace more – the past was terrible we don't want to go back there - post 16

I think we need to not just tolerate as that means we are putting up with itwe need to respect and accept difference -post 16

I think that we should respect each other more – even if somebody says something different- P7

5. Bill of Rights

There was widespread support for a bill of rights in all of the focus groups. Some participants did express concern that creation of a bill of rights could cause friction and arguments among politicians but that overall extra protections for certain groups would be a good thing. All of the participants felt the values they discussed should underpin a bill of rights.

We agree that a bill of rights for Northern Ireland should set out these values- P7

Everyone would feel safer- P7

Northern Ireland would be a better place and there would be more happiness – P7

It is a good idea in theory but I think if we have one, it will cause more arguments among our politicians- post 16

6. Content of a bill of rights

	Mentioned in 5+ Focus groups	Mentioned in 3-4 Focus groups	Mentioned in 1-2 Focus groups
What rights, if any, would you like to see protected in a bill of rights?	Right to healthcare Right to a house and good food Protect the environment Right to feel safe	Protect Black and ethnic minority groups Protect LGBT community Freedom of expression Freedom of religious expression Freedom of cultural expression	Female reproductive rights Protect the Belfast/GF Agreement Protect language rights

The Covid-19 health pandemic has brought the health service into sharp focus and practically all focus groups stated the importance of being able to access health care for physical and mental health issues. Concern was also expressed regarding private health care and how this could impact on those on low income.

There was also a focus on the importance of dealing with pollution and protecting the environment. Many participants mentioned the climate crisis.

I think we need to protect the environment...over lockdown we put a bird table in our garden and now lots of birds come – P7

Northern Ireland is made up of many different groups – they should all be protected like young people, the elderly, LGBTQ and the right to be religious should be protected – post 16

I think we need to protect our health service – it is under a lot of pressure – it is very difficult to see a doctor – post 16

Every child should have enough food. The government should ensure this. It should not be up to celebrities like Marcus Rashford. Children should not live in poverty

Conclusion

This paper has presented the themes and views discussed in focus groups with young people in relation to a bill of rights for Northern Ireland. The findings suggest that there is support for the creation of a bill of rights but concerns that this may lead to more disagreement among politicians. There was a recognition that peace in Northern Ireland is very precious and nobody wanted conflict to return. While there were many differing views on what a bill of rights should look like, there were common themes mentioned in relation to specific groups and areas that young people felt needed additional protection given the specific nature of Northern Ireland.