

RESPONSE FROM THE COUNCIL FOR CATHOLIC MAINTAINED SCHOOLS (CCMS) TO ' PROGRESSING A BILL OF RIGHTS FOR NORTHERN IRELAND '.

As the largest employer of teachers in Northern Ireland, providing a service of advice and support to over 500 schools in the nursery, primary and post-primary sectors, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) is fully aware that, despite being the most vulnerable members of our society, children and young people lack adequate protection in many aspects of their lives. For that reason, the Council views positively the proposals for a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland, representing as it does a unique opportunity to ensure once and for all that children and young people are fully protected.

Council is of the opinion that the proposed Bill of Rights must clearly and unequivocally protect the rights of children. The Commission appears to be of the view that it is possible to protect the rights of children and young people by collapsing the relevant 29 clauses from the 2001 consultation paper to 11 in the 2004 paper. Council feels that this situation is satisfactory but only if it is taken as read that all the protections enshrined in the UN Convention are also afforded in law to children in N.Ireland.

Along with many of our partners, there is a fear that the reduction in the number of clauses relating specifically to Children and Young People could be viewed as a reduction in the protection afforded to that group within society. It would appear that fundamental rights which are unique to children such as the child's right to play and leisure, have been removed without explanation. Council suggests that such a situation should be reviewed.

Children and young people constitute over a quarter of the population in Northern Ireland. They have been particularly adversely affected by the conflict and violence in our society. It is important therefore that we ensure a better future for our children and young people. Council believes that a Bill of Rights along with the increased prioritisation of children's issues can contribute to that positive future. The establishment of the Children and Young People's Unit, the Office of Commissioner for Children and Young People and the Children's Fund are all welcome developments. A Bill of Rights which gives maximum protection to the rights of children will also be welcome. Council suggests that the Commission satisfies itself fully that a future Bill of Rights guarantees that maximum protection.

In view of the Council's particular interest in education and school based issues, it welcomes in particular those aspects of the proposals which impinge directly on schools. The Right to Dignity and Physical Integrity, Section 6 (4) will afford protection for children against bullying in school and will strengthen the hand of school authorities in dealing with such issues. Language Rights are welcome as they respect the increased diversity of our society. Education Rights, section 13 (2) and (5) again reflect a growing recognition of the need to respect diversity and promote inclusion in society, an aspect of the Council's philosophy which continually permeates the life of our schools.

In developing a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission must ensure provision of the necessary protection for Children and Young People. Such provision must not fall short of international children's rights standards.

Malachy Crudden
Education Adviser
Council for Catholic Maintained Schools