

# Women's Policy Group NI

10<sup>th</sup> November 2020,

## Urgent Request for Extension to Deadline - Bill of Rights NI Public Consultation

Members of the Ad Hoc Committee on a Bill of Rights,

We are writing as members of the [Women's Policy Group Northern Ireland](#) in relation to the launch of the Bill of Rights Public Consultation recently launched by the Ad Hoc Committee on a Bill of Rights. Many of our organisations have been campaigning for a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland for decades, and we very much welcome the opportunity to provide the views of the women in Northern Ireland on what they think should or should not be included in a Bill of Rights. This is of particular importance to us given the potential impact and threat of current issues such as COVID-19 and Brexit on human rights protections in Northern Ireland.

However, we are concerned with the decision to only open this consultation for six weeks and would like to request that the Ad Hoc Committee urgently considers our request to extend this process. We are aware that the Ad Hoc Committee will be meeting on Thursday 12<sup>th</sup> November and would request that all members consider our request ahead of this meeting.

In the context of the current health pandemic, and the many other additional pressures that exist at this time of year, the women's sector in Northern Ireland is trying to respond appropriately to the needs of the women we represent. As the broader women's sector is currently working at such high capacity in dealing with the crisis and other pressures, we do not feel that six weeks is a long enough time frame to enable us to adequately gather the much-needed views of the women of Northern Ireland for this public consultation.

Other public consultations throughout this year, for example the Department of Justice Independent Review of Hate Crime Legislation in Northern Ireland and the Department of Communities Second Independent Review of the Personal Independence Payment (PIP) Assessment Process in Northern Ireland, extended the consultation periods significantly to enable the voluntary and community sector to respond appropriately in this current climate.

Further, in line with good-practice recommendations in 'Women at the Heart of Public Consultations: A Guide for Public Authorities and Women's Organisations'<sup>1</sup> we would ask that the

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<sup>1</sup> WRDA (2018), 'Putting Women at the Heart of Public Consultations', [https://wrda.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/WRDA\\_WomenAtTheHeartOfPublicConsultation.pdf](https://wrda.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/WRDA_WomenAtTheHeartOfPublicConsultation.pdf)

committee considers the barriers to women's ability to participate in this consultation process in such a short time frame; both due to pre-existing barriers and current additional barriers due to the pandemic.

Therefore, the Women's Policy Group NI request that the Ad Hoc Committee on a Bill of Rights extends the deadline for the public consultation to at least 12 weeks (to Friday 29<sup>th</sup> January 2021) to 16 weeks (Friday 26<sup>th</sup> February 2021) from the launch date, to enable the wider voluntary and community sector a much greater ability to gather the views of the groups we represent.

UK Codes of Practice state that public consultations should normally last for 12 weeks with consideration given to longer timescales where feasible and sensible.<sup>2</sup> In addition, NI Direct Consultation Guidelines also recommend that when a government consults, it must 'build a realistic timeframe for the consultation, allowing plenty of time for each stage of the process'<sup>3</sup>. With the additional barriers to engaging with stakeholders due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the upcoming Christmas period, we would argue that a longer consultation period would be sensible. We also note that the report on the public consultation is not expected to be published until early 2022<sup>4</sup>, which should make this request feasible.

We would greatly appreciate if you would accept our request on this matter. For questions or further correspondence on this matter, please contact Rachel Powell, Women's Sector Lobbyist, [rachel.powell@wrda.net](mailto:rachel.powell@wrda.net).

Kind regards,

**Women's Policy Group NI**  
**Women's Resource and Development Agency**  
**Women's Support Network**  
**Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network**  
**Raise Your Voice**  
**Transgender NI**  
**Reclaim the Agenda**  
**HERE NI**  
**Northern Ireland Women's European Platform**  
**Norther Ireland Public Service Alliance**  
**Irish Congress of Trade Unions**  
**50:50 NI**  
**Action for Children Northern Ireland**  
**Human Rights Consortium**

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<sup>2</sup> HM Government Code of Practice on Consultation:

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/100807/file47158.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/100807/file47158.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> NI Direct Consultation Guidelines: <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/public-consultations>

<sup>4</sup> Northern Ireland Assembly Press Release: <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/news-and-media/press-releases/session-2020-2021/committee-launches-bill-of-rights-consultation/>