



A Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland: Polling Results



**QUEEN'S
UNIVERSITY
BELFAST**



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Foreword

The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement created a reasonable expectation that there would be a Bill of Rights that builds on the European Convention on Human Rights. The Human Rights Act 1998 was therefore the first step in a constitutional journey that would result in a more comprehensive human rights framework for Northern Ireland. That was the theory. In practice a Bill of Rights has still not been enacted, and rights-based hopes have repeatedly been dashed. Gains that have been made since 1998 resulted from intense struggles for legal recognition led by courageous activism, but the ultimate prize of a Bill of Rights eludes Northern Ireland.

After an exhaustive process that was launched in March 2000, the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission submitted its advice on a Bill of Rights on 10 December 2008. It went too far for some and did not go far enough for others. There has been a political stalemate since then. The UK Government has refused to legislate, pointing primarily to party-political disagreement. A measure of momentum has now been restored as a result of the establishment of the Northern Ireland Assembly Ad Hoc Committee on a Bill of Rights. The Committee has been consulting and taking evidence and is due to report in early 2022. It is vital that this now becomes the final phase of delivery of this human rights project, and that a credible way forward is found. The people of Northern Ireland have waited too long, and the region needs a Bill of Rights that merits the title. What does that require? It means delivering an ambitious text that is reflective of the region's particular circumstances and informed by international best practice. Northern Ireland should be leading the way on human rights and equality not aiming for an unimaginative lowest common denominator approach. That means, for example, the inclusion of socio-economic rights, strong equality provisions and robust implementation and enforcement mechanisms, among other things.

Brexit has altered the context for the discussion. The Ireland/Northern Ireland Protocol contains a significant rights and equality guarantee, and there is much focus at present on what it requires. What is apparent is that the post-Brexit rights and equality landscape in Northern Ireland is becoming an incoherent mess, with the existing piecemeal and ad hoc approach continuing to cause confusion and uncertainty. That makes the case for advancing an effective and overarching Bill of Rights even stronger.

Throughout the process the level of cross-community support has been plain. It has always been clear that people here want a Bill of Rights. The scale of participation during key stages has also been remarkable. This report comes at the conclusion of a joint Ulster University and Queen's University Belfast project funded by Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, that has provided a draft model Bill of Rights (based on the Commission's advice) as well as a range of research outputs. This polling was designed and commissioned collaboratively by Ulster University, Queen's University Belfast and the Human Rights Consortium as the final output of this funded project. The polling is a welcome addition to the evidence base and confirms, once again what the public have been saying for years, that people want access to a full range of enforceable rights. We are very grateful to the range of civil society voices who have contributed commentary in this report on the importance of the specific rights the public believe should be included in a Bill of Rights. Levels of support for socio-economic rights are overwhelming and it is clear that the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated to people the centrality of, for example, the right to health.

Given the extent of public backing for change, it is vital that progress is made. This new evidence complements existing work by supporting the collective efforts of all those who know that the time is right to deliver on the promise of a rights-based society in this region.

Professor Colin Harvey, Queen's University Belfast
Dr Anne Smith, Ulster University
Kevin Hanratty, Human Rights Consortium

Contents

Covid-19	Q1)	Covid-19 and the right to health	9
Enforceability	Q2	Enforceability in a Bill of Rights	13
Wider Context	Q3)	Experience of Brexit	17
	Q4)	Experience of the Covid-19 pandemic	21
	Q5)	Experience of the ability of our local political parties to work together	25
	Q6)	Experience of conversations concerning a border poll and the future of Northern Ireland	29
Specific Rights	Q7)	Importance of inclusion in a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland: right to education	33
	Q8)	Importance of inclusion in a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland: right to an adequate standard of mental and physical health	37
	Q9)	Importance of inclusion in a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland: right to an adequate standard of living	41
	Q10	Importance of inclusion in a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland: right to adequate accommodation	47
	Q11)	Importance of inclusion in a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland: right to food	51
	Q12)	Importance of inclusion in a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland: right to work	55
	Q13)	Importance of inclusion in a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland: right to a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment	59

Methodology and Sample

- Questions were included as part of the Cognisense Ltd. online Omnibus survey.
- Fieldwork was conducted between 14th and 23rd February 2021.
- A total of 1032 adults (16+) were interviewed, with results weighted to be representative of the Northern Ireland population in terms of age, sex, socio-economic group and area.
- All research was carried out in accordance with the Market Research Society's ethical Code of Conduct.

Summary of findings

The polling found significant support for the inclusion of a range of rights in a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland. This support is substantial across all communities and sectors of society and the polling provides evidence that significant societal factors have continued to sustain and increase support for a Bill of Rights.

Some of the main findings include:

Following their experience of the Covid-19 pandemic, more than four in five (83%) felt that it was important that the right to an adequate standard of physical and mental health be protected in law through a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland.

Nearly four in five (78%) believed that it was important that there should be a mechanism in place to ensure that any rights contained in the Bill of Rights should be enforceable by law.

Around a third indicated that their experiences of the following had increased their belief that their rights would be better protected through a specific Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland: Brexit (33%); the Covid-19 pandemic (34%); conversations concerning a border poll and the future of Northern Ireland (36%).

A significant majority considered it important for a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland to include the following: the right to education (88%); the right to an adequate standard of mental and physical health (88%); the right to adequate accommodation (84%); the right to an adequate standard of living (84%); the right to food (86%); the right to work (83%); the right to a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment (87%).



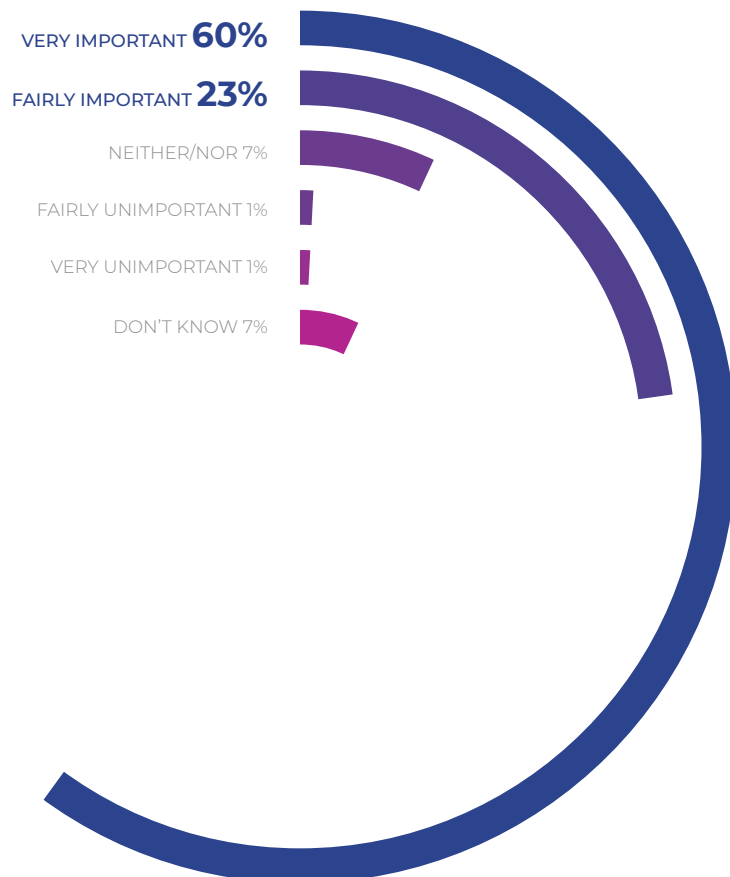
Question 1

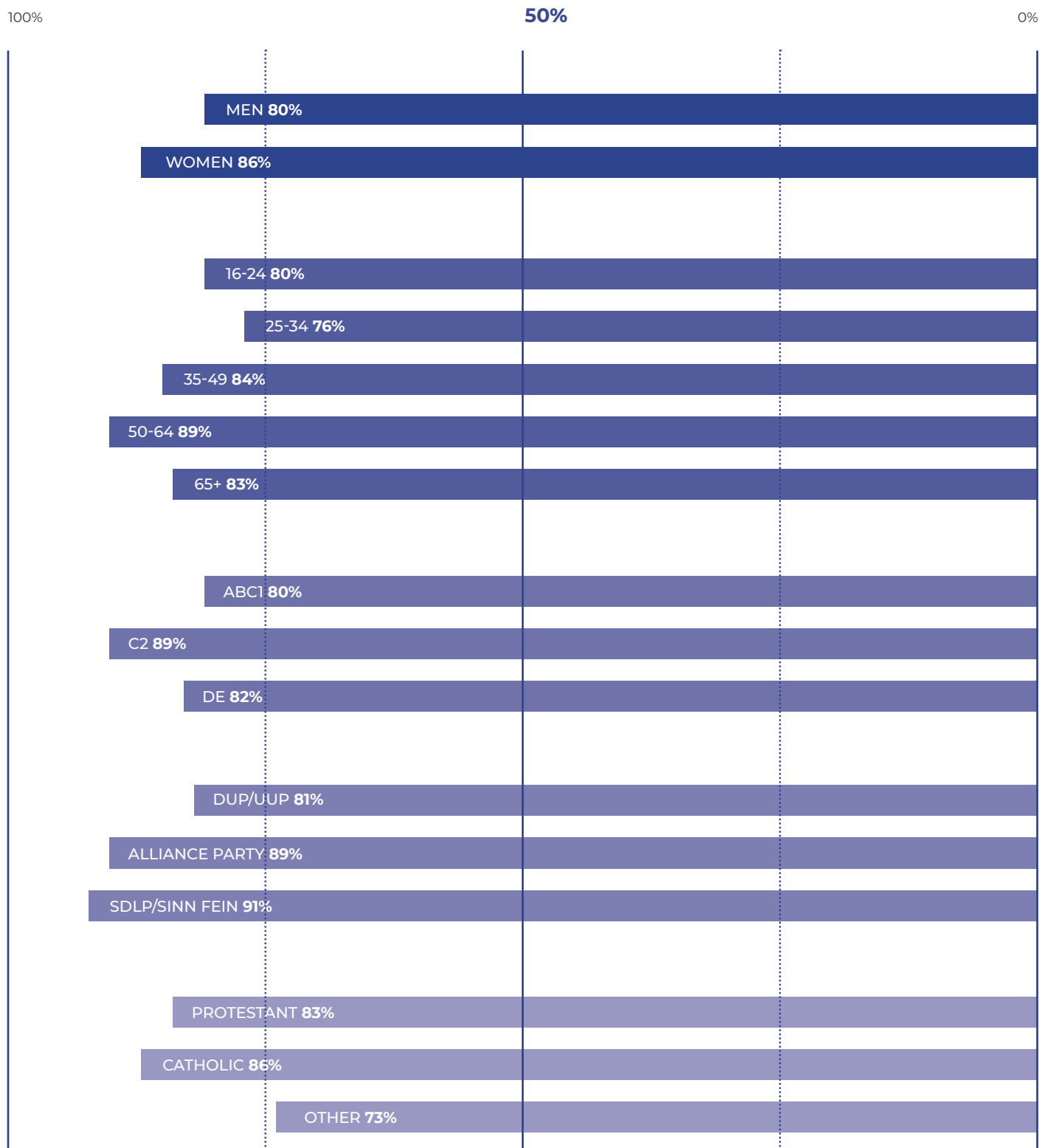
Following your experience of the Covid-19 pandemic, how important or unimportant do you think it is for the right to an adequate standard of physical and mental health to be protected in law through a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland?

By “**right to an adequate standard of physical and mental health**” we mean a right to the enjoyment of a variety of facilities, goods, services and conditions necessary for the realization of the highest attainable standard of health.

83%

Following their experience of the pandemic, more than four-fifths (83%) of the sample felt that it was important that the right to an adequate standard of physical and mental health be protected in law through a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland, with three in five considering this very important.





Base: all respondents (n=1032)

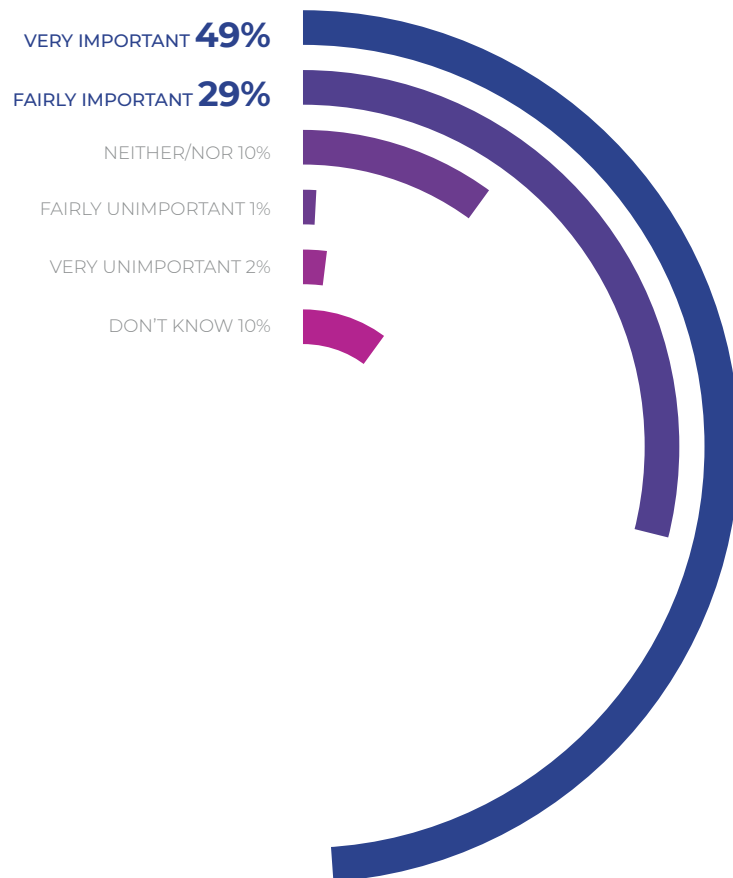
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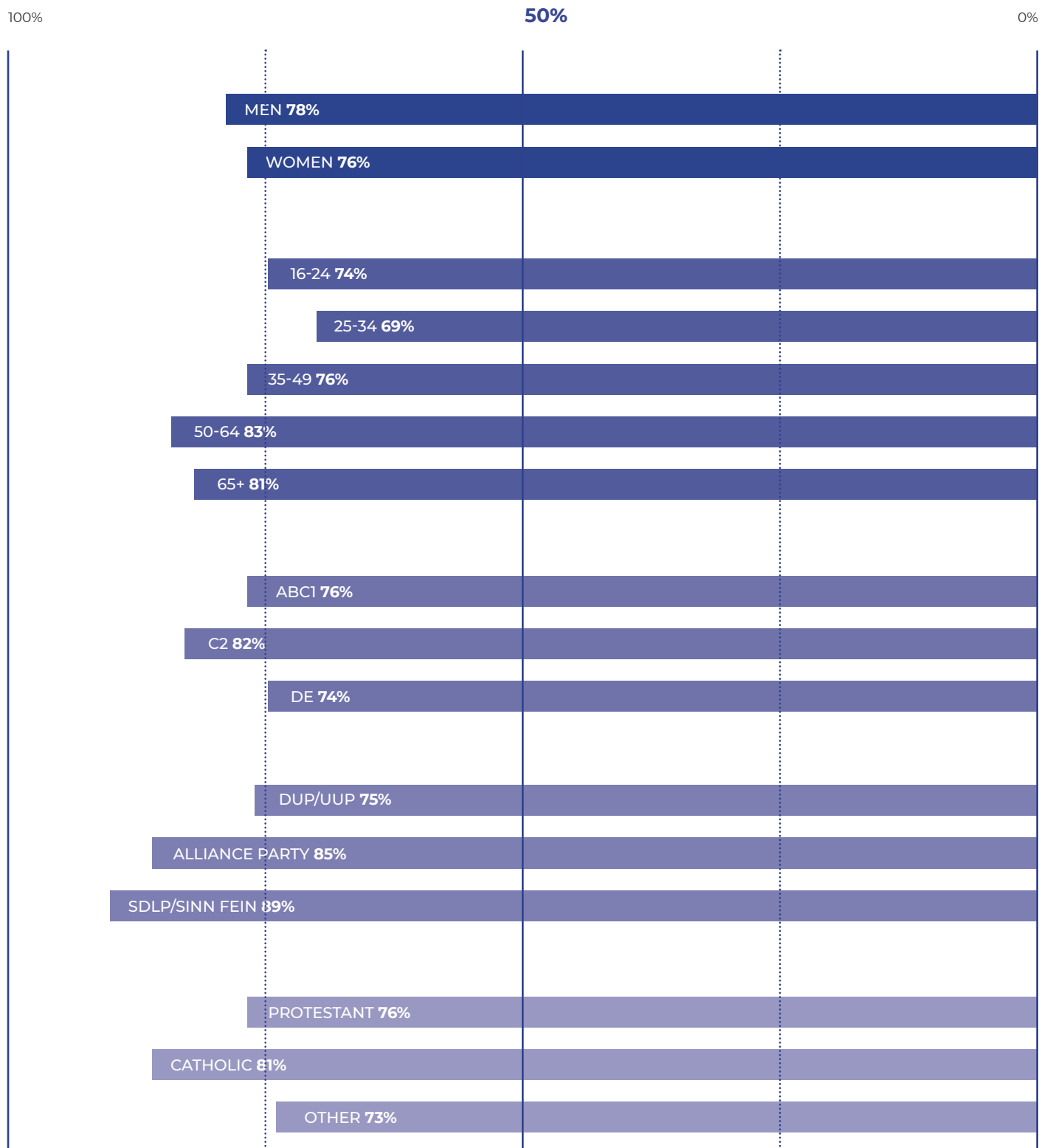


Question 2 **How important or unimportant do you think it is to have a mechanism in place that ensures that any rights in a Bill of Rights are enforceable by law?**

78%

Nearly four-fifths (78%) of the sample indicated that it is important that there is a mechanism in place to ensure that any rights contained in a Bill of Rights should be enforceable by law.





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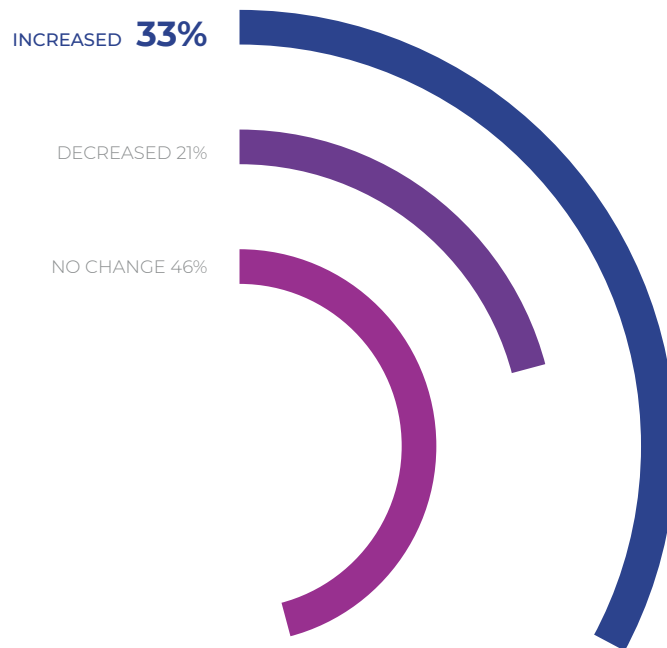
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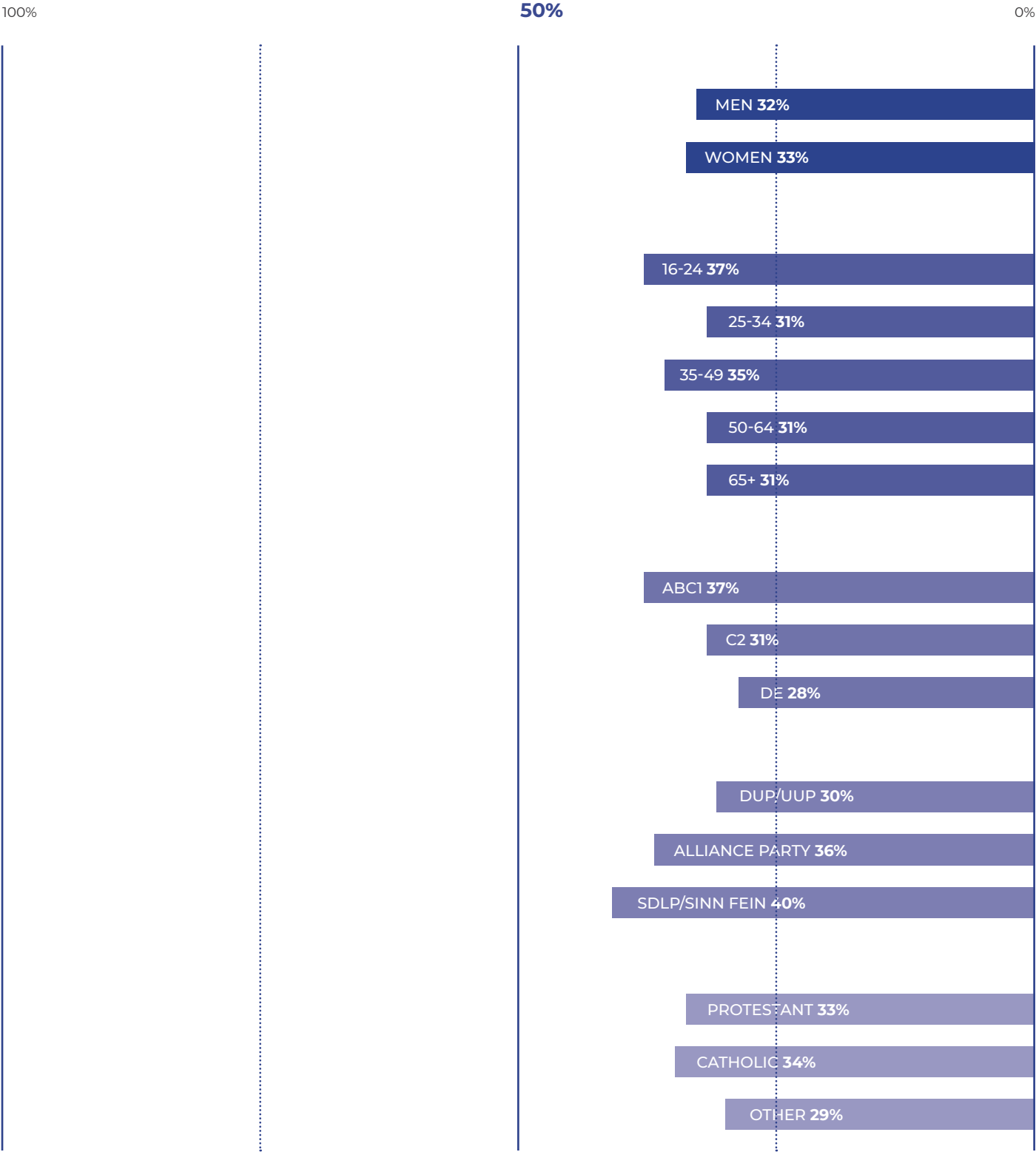


Question 3 **Has your experience of Brexit increased or decreased your belief that your rights would be better protected through a specific Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland?**

33%

A third of the sample indicated that their experience of Brexit had increased their belief that their rights would be better protected through a specific Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland.





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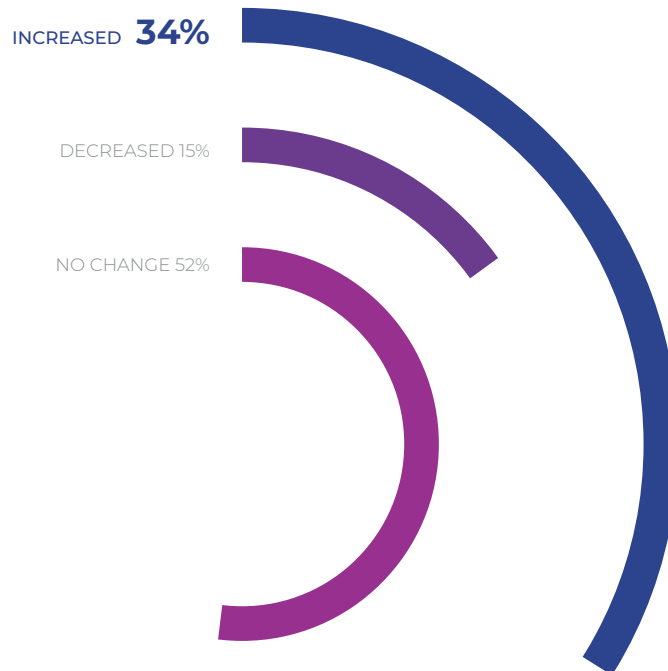
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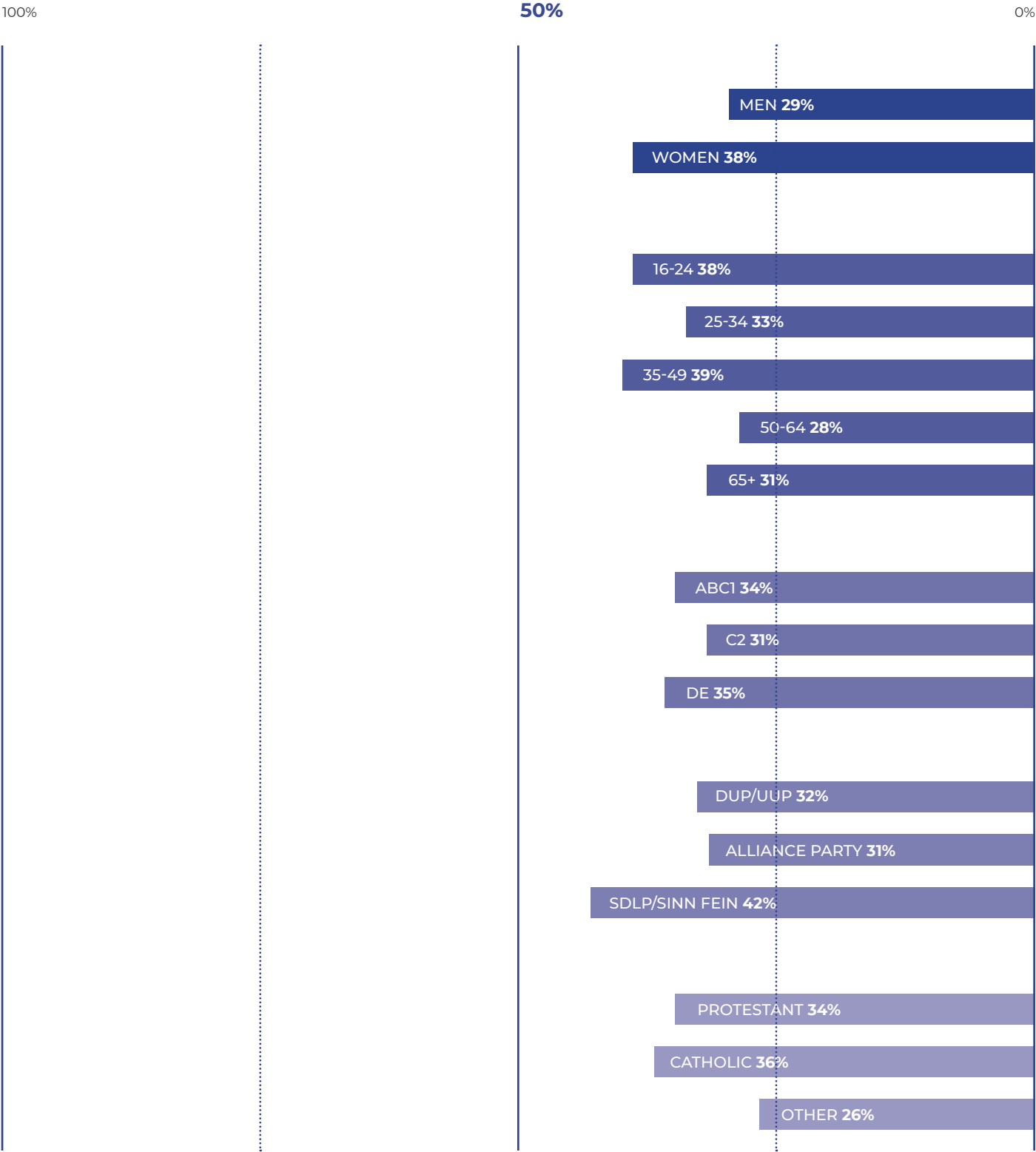


Question 4 **Has your experience of the Covid-19 pandemic increased or decreased your belief that your rights would be better protected through a specific Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland?**

34%

Around a third (34%) of the sample indicated that their experience of the Covid-19 pandemic had increased their belief that their rights would be better protected through a specific Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland.





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Question 5

Has your experience of the ability of our local political parties to work together increased or decreased your belief that your rights would be better protected through a specific Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland?

28%

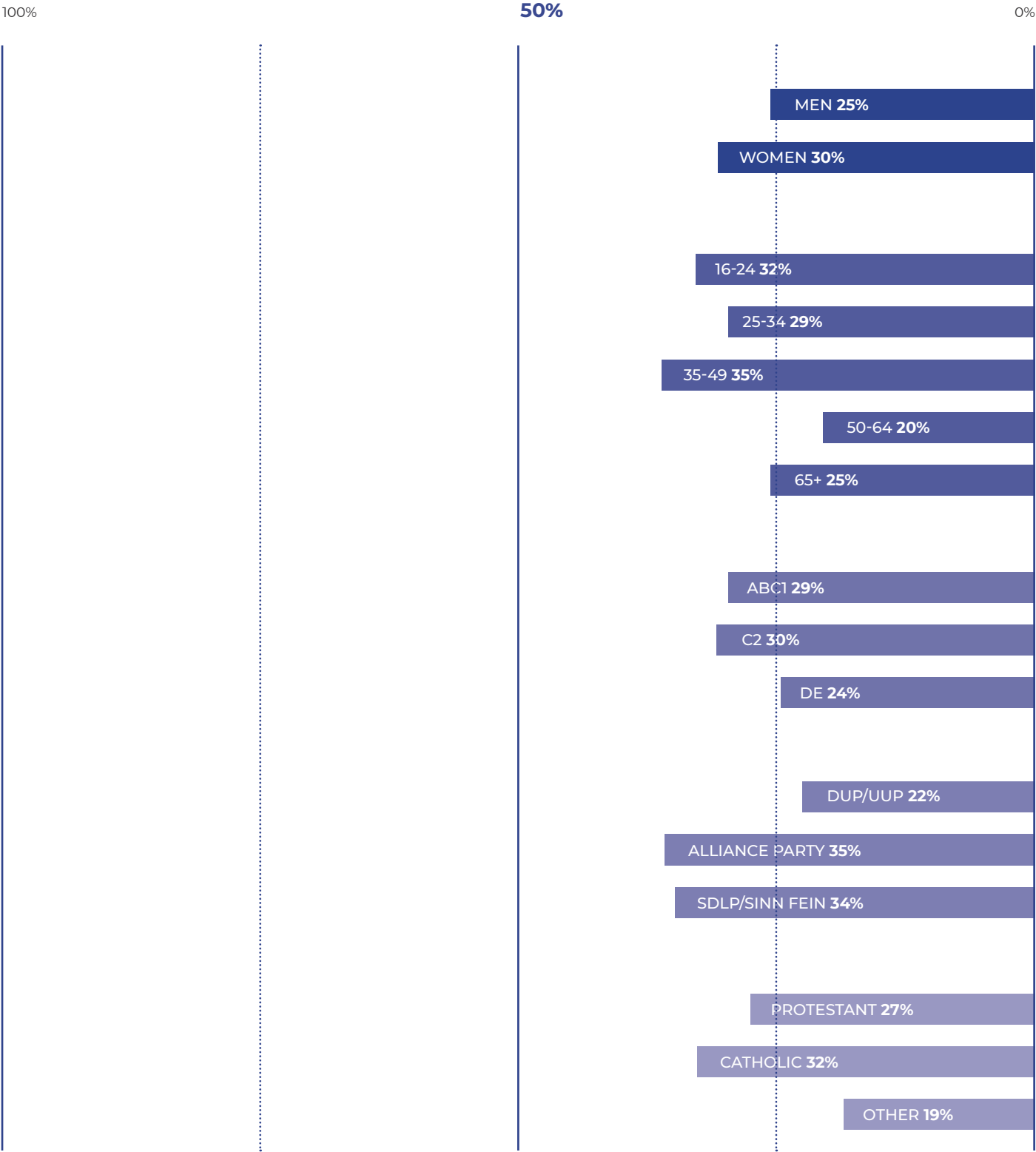
Just over a quarter of the sample (28%) indicated that their experience of the ability of our local political parties to work together had increased their belief that their rights would be better protected through a specific Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland. A quarter stated that their experience in this regard had decreased this belief, whilst for nearly half (48%) there was no change in their belief.

INCREASED **28%**

DECREASED 25%

NO CHANGE 48%

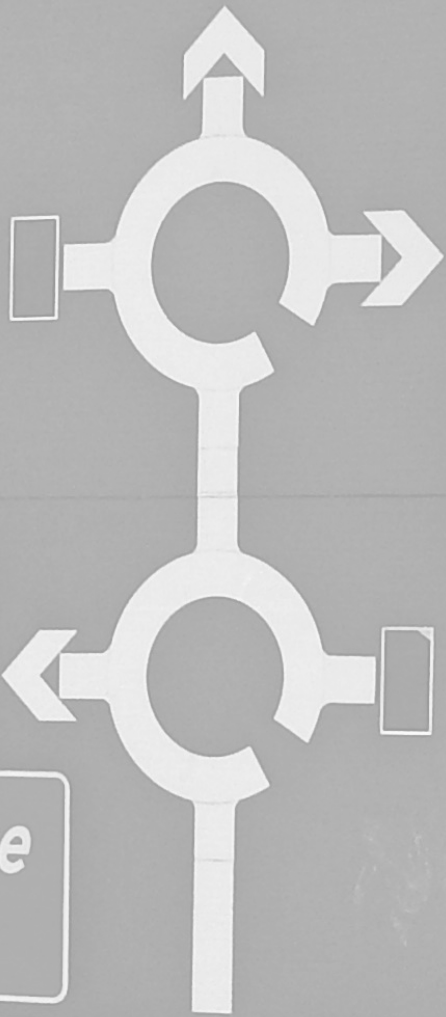




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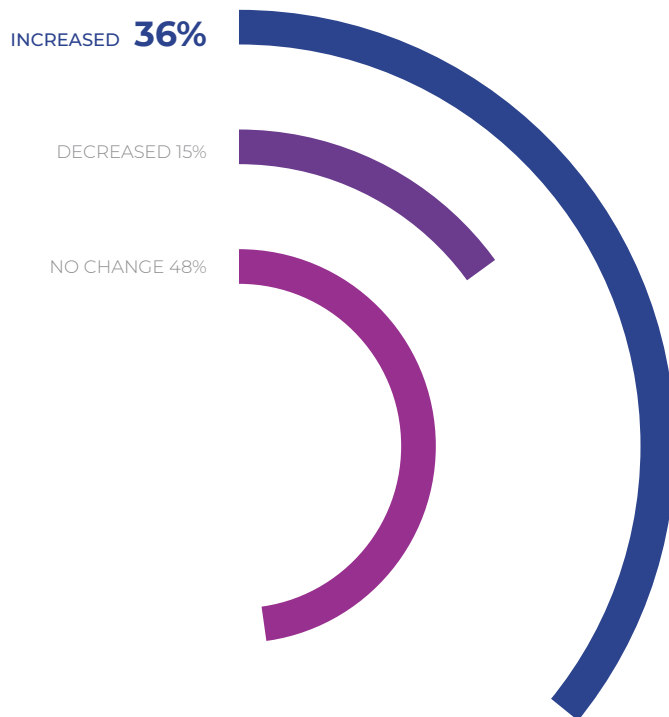
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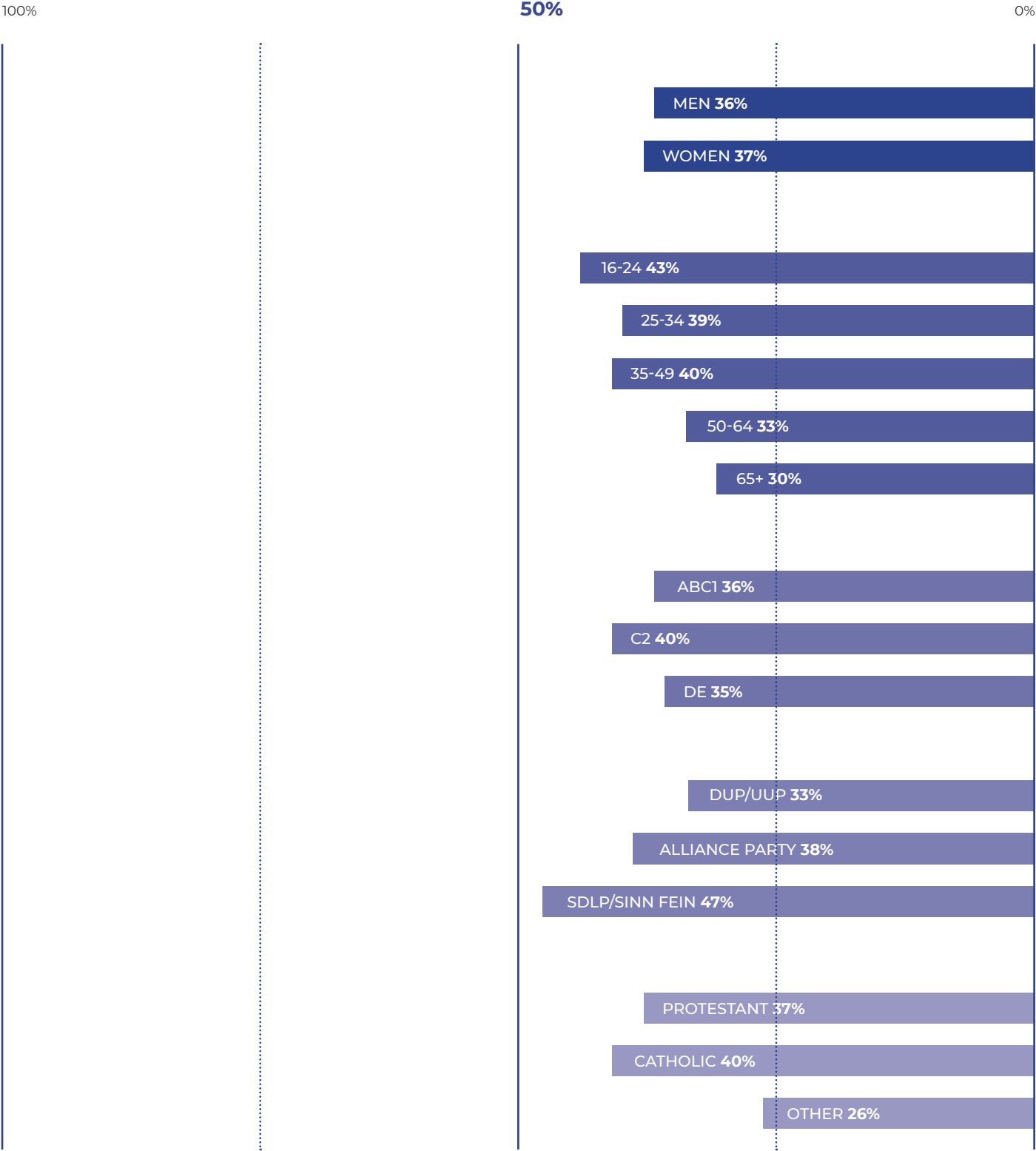
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Question 6 **Has your experience of conversations concerning a border poll and the future of Northern Ireland in respect to whether we remain part of the United Kingdom or become part of a United Ireland increased or decreased your belief that your rights would be better protected through a specific Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland?**

36%

More than a third (36%) of the sample indicated that their experience of conversations concerning a border poll and the future of Northern Ireland in respect to whether we remain part of the United Kingdom or become part of a United Ireland had increased their belief that their rights would be better protected through a specific Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland.





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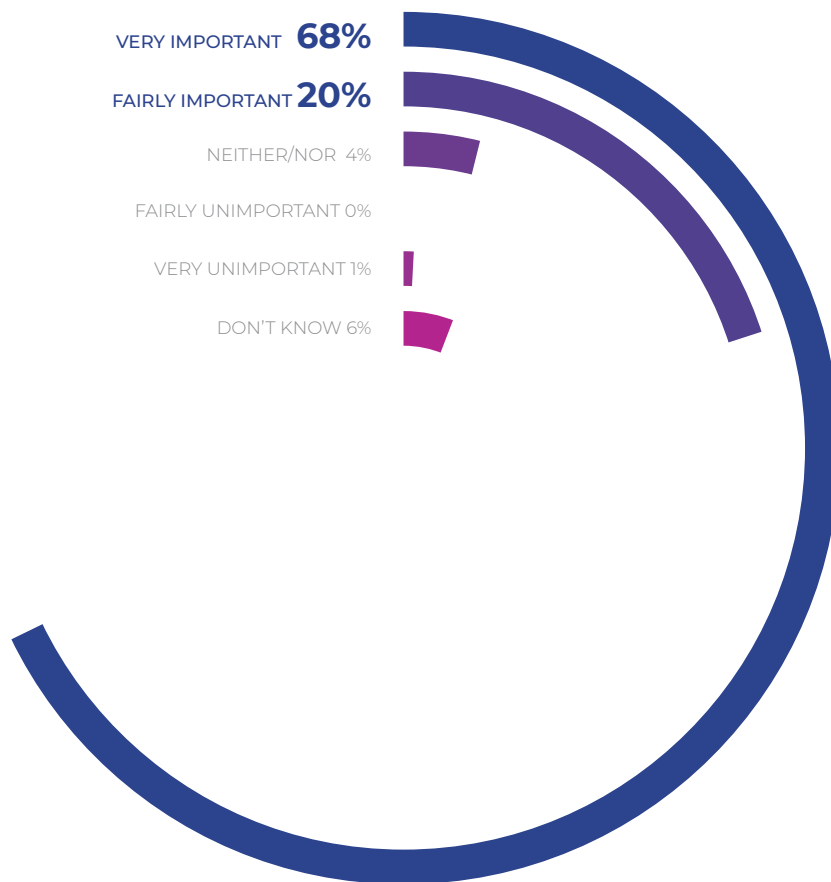


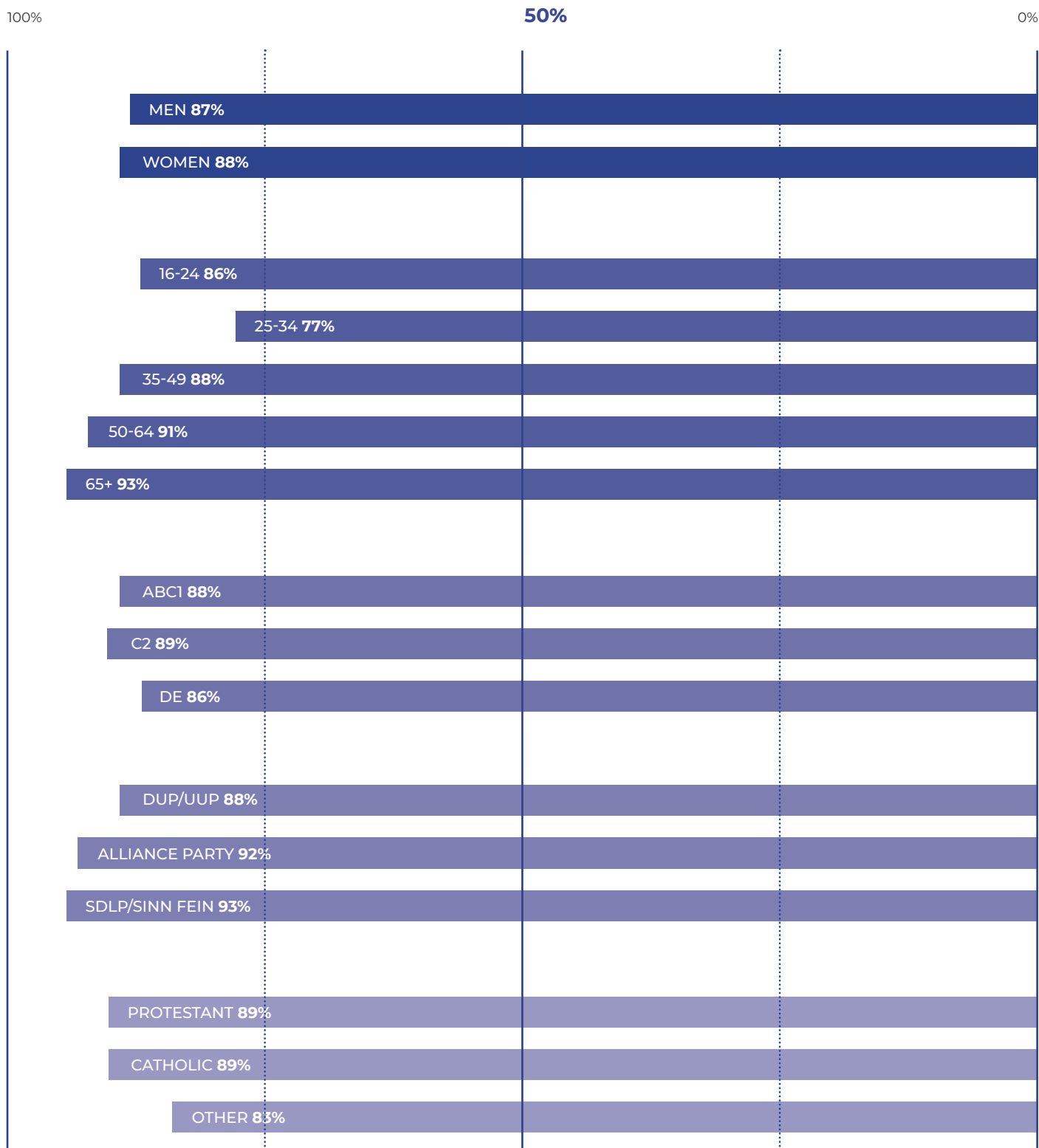
Question 7

How important or unimportant do you think it is for the right to education to be included in a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland?

88%

Almost nine in ten (88%) felt that it was important for the right to education to be included in a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland, with more than two-thirds (68%) believing it to be very important.





Base: all respondents (n=1032)

AB Higher & intermediate managerial, administrative, professional occupations
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Children's Law Centre

It is no surprise to the Children's Law Centre (CLC) that 88% of people believe that the right to education should be included in a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland. Deficits in education impact on all areas of life. CLC has exposed on numerous occasions, through our specialist legal advice, casework and policy engagement, in particular around SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disability), that the most vulnerable groups of children have faced the most entrenched, system-wide barriers to their right to an effective education. In 2020/21, almost 68,000 children in Northern Ireland are registered as having SEN, almost 19.3% of the entire school population. Failures to take a children's rights-based approach is at the heart of grave, systemic failings within the education system, which no right-thinking society would endorse.

Our casework has included children with SEND on part-time timetables or routinely, informally excluded from education; children without a school place; vulnerable non-verbal children who have, potentially unlawfully, been mechanically, physically and chemically restrained at school; and children placed in seclusion or isolation or otherwise segregated from peers.

Longstanding systemic barriers to special education support have been exposed by a series of shocking reports on the operation of the Education Authority, particularly regarding SEND provision, with an independent review now pending. Our Courts had identified some of these failings due to CLC legal action but the system continued to deteriorate, utterly failing those it was meant to serve.

The impacts of the pandemic have laid bare the fact that Northern Ireland is in a state of regression on human rights. A Bill of Rights will enable our society to step forward to ensure equality of access to effective education for all children, regardless of background or status by strengthening available legal rights, injecting progression in rights and bringing the child's educational rights in Northern Ireland into a position of priority, reflecting the views and wishes of the public.

It is clear to CLC that the solution to these grave systemic rights violations lies in full domestic implementation of a right to education as part of a Bill of Rights which will enable equal access to education for all children and recognise the full potential of every child in line with Articles 28 and 29 of the UNCRC.

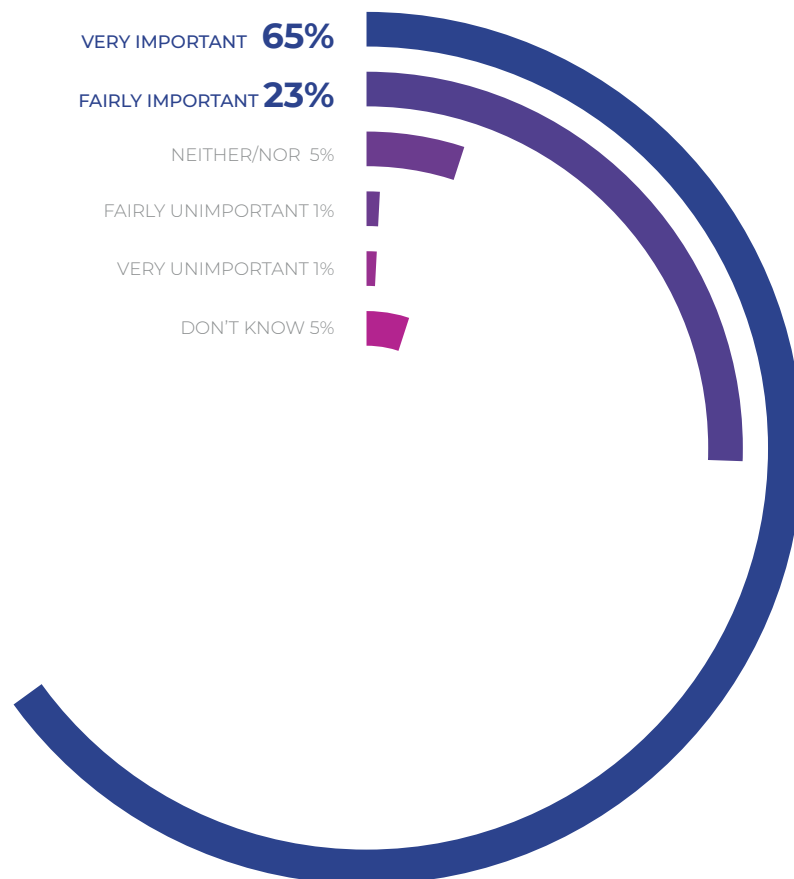
Within a Bill of Rights, it is essential that we have a positive obligation that all children have the right to inclusive and effective education, which strengthens the current ECHR provision that "no child shall be denied the right to education". A Bill of Rights is capable of delivering equal protection for all children in education, ensuring full inclusion within education; enabling the child's participation in decisions affecting them; and requiring that the best interests of the child are a primary consideration in all decisions regarding education.

A Bill of Rights can provide access to justice and redress for our most vulnerable citizens at times of greatest need. It can enable their voices to be heard when public systems fail to vindicate the child's right to equal access to an effective education.

Question 8 **How important or unimportant do you think it is for the right to an adequate standard of Mental and Physical Health to be included in a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland?**

88%

Nearly nine in ten (88%) felt that it was important for a right to an adequate standard of mental and physical health be included in a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland, with about two-thirds (65%) feeling it was very important.





Disability Action

At Disability Action NI we have been calling for the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with a Disability (UNCRPD) into domestic law for many years. This polling result is yet another example of why and how this matter is so crucial to all people, and in particular, disabled people, in Northern Ireland. Article 25 of the UNCRPD requires of all State Parties who have ratified the Convention, as the UK did in 2009, to ensure that all “disabled people will be provided with the same range, quality and standard of health care and programmes as provided to all other persons” within society.

Unfortunately, in Northern Ireland disabled people have not experienced this. This can be seen in a number of ways, be it in the outrageous abuses that have occurred in care home settings here, the treatment of people with a learning disability, and, in particular of late, during the Covid-19 pandemic.

During the pandemic it was found that many disabled people were having Do Not Resuscitate orders placed on their hospital notes without their knowledge or consent, or the knowledge or consent of their families.

This occurred when a person with the same level of health but without a disability would not have had such an order placed on their notes. This disgraceful practice clearly identifies disabled people as somehow being “less than” other members of our society and is obviously unacceptable.

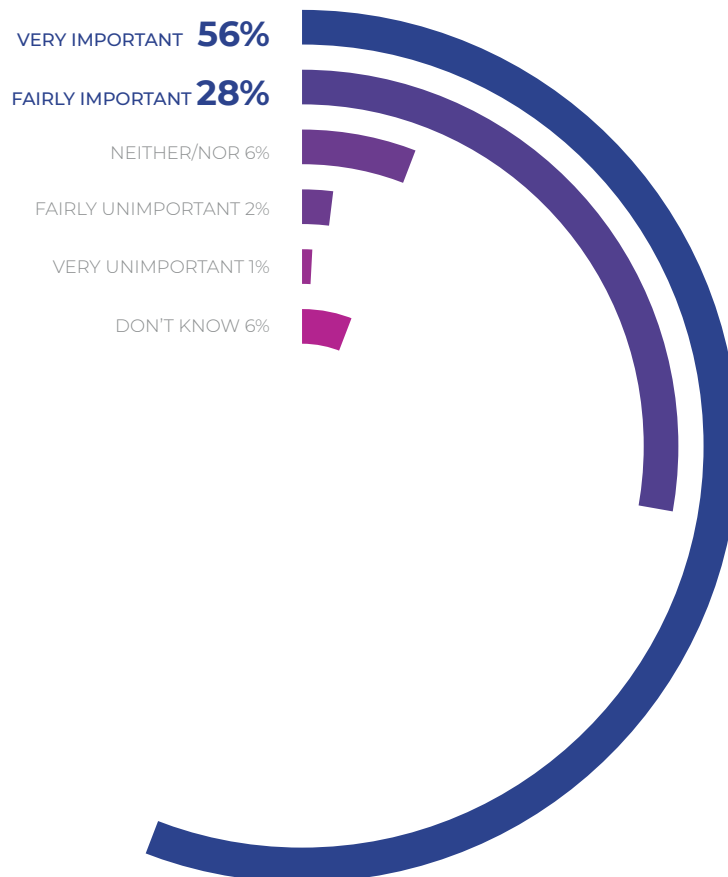
As a result, therefore, we welcome this polling data and feel very strongly that it is a matter that deserves the fullest protection available to all of society. This is particularly true in respect of some of the most vulnerable people within our society, many of whom have a disability. Our health is one of the most important characteristics we can possess. It is vital that disabled people in Northern Ireland receive the same level of protection in this regard as all other members of our society. It is our view that this polling shows a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland is the best way to achieve and protect it.

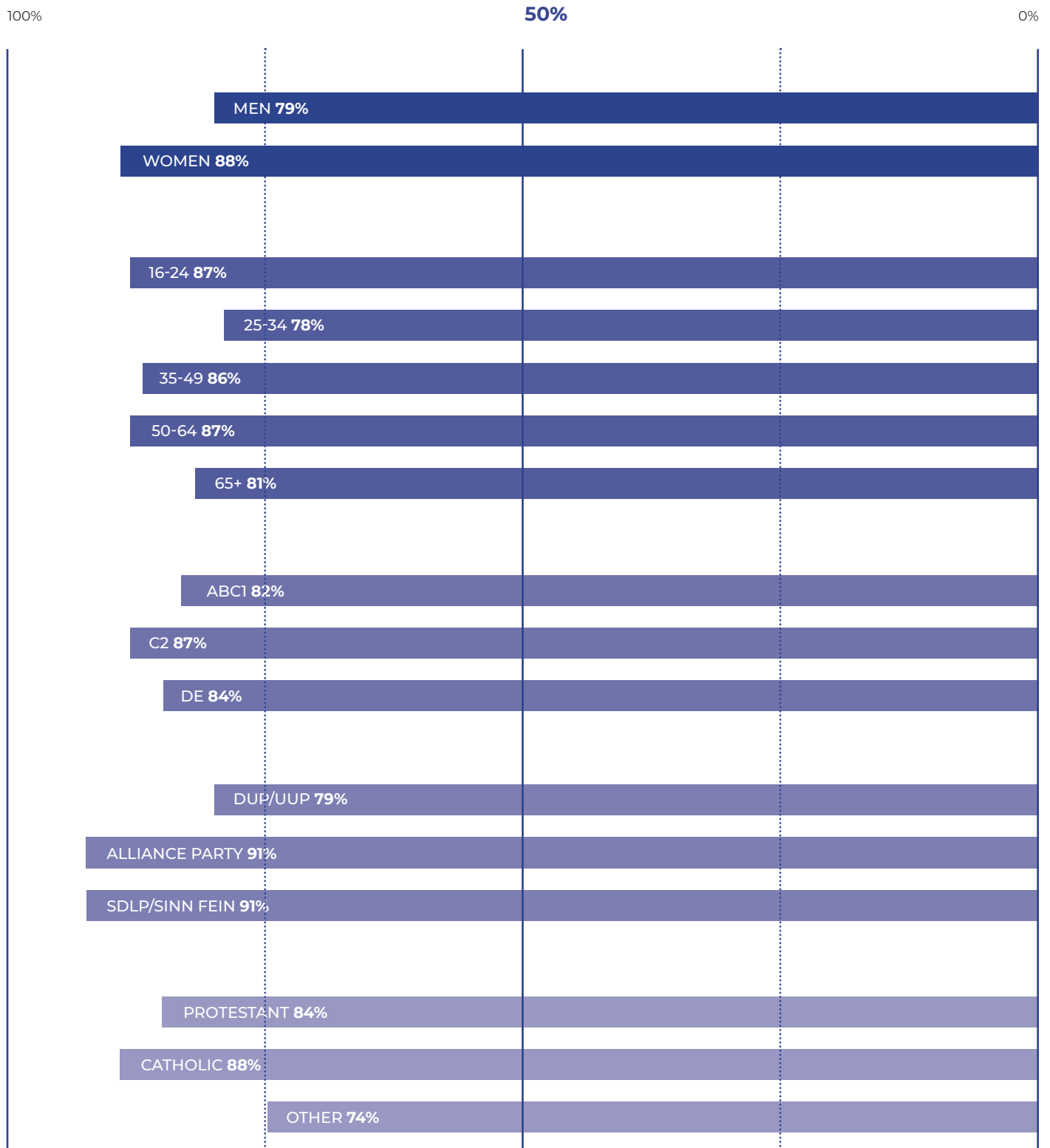
To those who say a Bill of Rights is not needed in Northern Ireland, we say that this polling data shows how important such a Bill of Rights is to our citizens. The effects on all of society, and in particular disabled people, of the pandemic, and at times the lack of protection of the health of disabled people in Northern Ireland, provides compelling evidence for the need for a Bill of Rights in Northern Ireland.

Question 9 **How important or unimportant do you think it is for the right to adequate accommodation to be included in a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland?**

84%

More than four in five (84%) felt that it was important for a right to adequate accommodation to be included in a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland, with approaching three in five (56%) considering it very important.





Base: all respondents (n=1032)

- AB Higher & intermediate managerial, administrative, professional occupations
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Housing Rights

Housing Rights is the leading provider of independent housing advice in Northern Ireland. Every day we work hard to prevent homelessness and each year our advisers help around 12,000 people with around 40,000 housing issues.

In the context of our work, we often see the devastating impact of poor housing and homelessness on people's lives. It is therefore unsurprising that there is such strong public support for the inclusion of specific protections around housing in a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland.

Unfortunately, during the Covid 19 pandemic when many of us have spent even more time at home concerns about housing have increased further.

By the end of 2020 there were 42,665 people on the social housing waiting list, this figure was 10% higher than it had been at the beginning of the pandemic, in March of the same year. At Housing Rights, the demand for our help has also increased. We have seen a particular impact on people who rent their home from a private landlord. Indeed, in the first few weeks of the pandemic, private renters made up almost three quarters of the COVID-19 related calls we received to our helpline.

Our work tells us that across Northern Ireland, regardless of the housing tenure that people live in, people are experiencing difficulties finding and keeping a home which meets human rights standards.

Our work also tells us that people experience difficulties accessing and sustaining accommodation, which is affordable, suitable to their needs and of decent quality. For this reason, Housing Rights has been working with colleagues across the housing sector since 2016 to have a specific housing outcome included in the NI Executive's Programme for Government.

Chief amongst the concerns of those contacting Housing Rights for advice is the issue of affordability. For low-income households who rely on government support with their housing costs particularly, 'welfare reform' has made things even harder.

Our work reaffirms for us the integral nature of housing as an underlying determinant of people's wellbeing. We have never been more convinced of the urgent need to ensure everyone in Northern Ireland has access to a good quality, affordable and sustainable home that is appropriate for their needs.

“I sincerely believe a right to a home, one where someone can live free from harm, one where someone can live securely needs to be included in our Bill of Rights, it is the most basic necessity for anyone to be able to flourish and thrive and I am an example of that.”

My name is Sean Kane. I was homeless on and off for just over 16 years of my life until I was finally housed through the help of PPR in 2019 on 172 housing points. I mention this because the points system is an integral part of obtaining a home here in Northern Ireland and all too often people are unaware of how to navigate this complex system or successfully articulate for the correct points.

I have been street homeless in the past but spent a lot of my time in and out of different hostels across Belfast. One of the last hostels I stayed at was on the Falls Road, Belfast. Below is a brief description of the conditions I have subjected to whilst there.

In May 2019, I had to leave that hostel and stay at a night shelter in the city because I was threatened at knife point by another resident and my mental health began to deteriorate, this in turn had an impact on my physical health and I found myself having to seek professional help from a psychiatrist. I suffer from depression, anxiety and Kallmann's syndrome which affects my ability to express myself in ways which most people would find 'normal'.

I raised numerous issues regarding the hostel with staff which only causes my health to deteriorate further. On a number of occasions, I complained about the health risks associated with overflowing rubbish bins outside my room and rodent infestations. I lobbied my local MLA to act on my behalf and contacted Belfast City Councils environmental health department over the issue. I raised my frustrations and fears for my health with staff and I was subsequently asked to leave the hostel the following day.

I was offered an alternative bed in Lisburn which would detach me from the support of my GP and counsellor at this critical time in my mental health crisis. Because I was unable to move to Lisburn I was again, street homeless and approached PPR for help regarding the issue. It was a short while later I received an offer of a home for the first time in my 16 years of homelessness.

I was housed I believe because I used the PPR model of a human rights-based approach, for the first time I was aware that it was a right to have safe, secure and affordable home, that I was worthy of such a thing and that despite always being told it was 'my own doing' homelessness wasn't something I set out to actively chose.

The fact that I have a key to my own front door, that I am housed in an area where I can easily access my family support network as well as my GP, dentist, councillor means I now feel much more of a person. Since obtaining my own home I have been able to apply for jobs and even small things like my own Wi-Fi – things people take for granted but I wasn't able to have in temporary accommodation.

I continue to work across various human rights campaigns including one for housing and mental health however, much more importantly I have learned so much in my homelessness journey and I now volunteer as a mentor for the Council of the Homeless as a mentor for others who are currently in the situation I was in. I also volunteer with Hope Harbour in helping street homeless people around Belfast.

I sincerely believe a right to a home, one where someone can live free from harm, one where someone can live securely needs to be included in our Bill of Rights, it is the most basic necessity for anyone to be able to flourish and thrive and I am an example of that.

Sean Kane

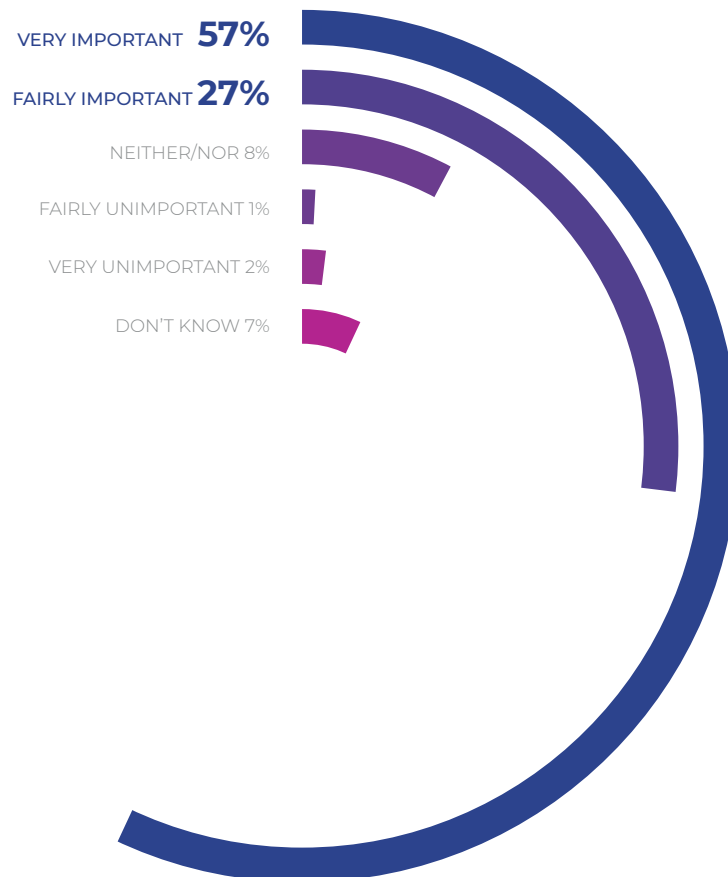


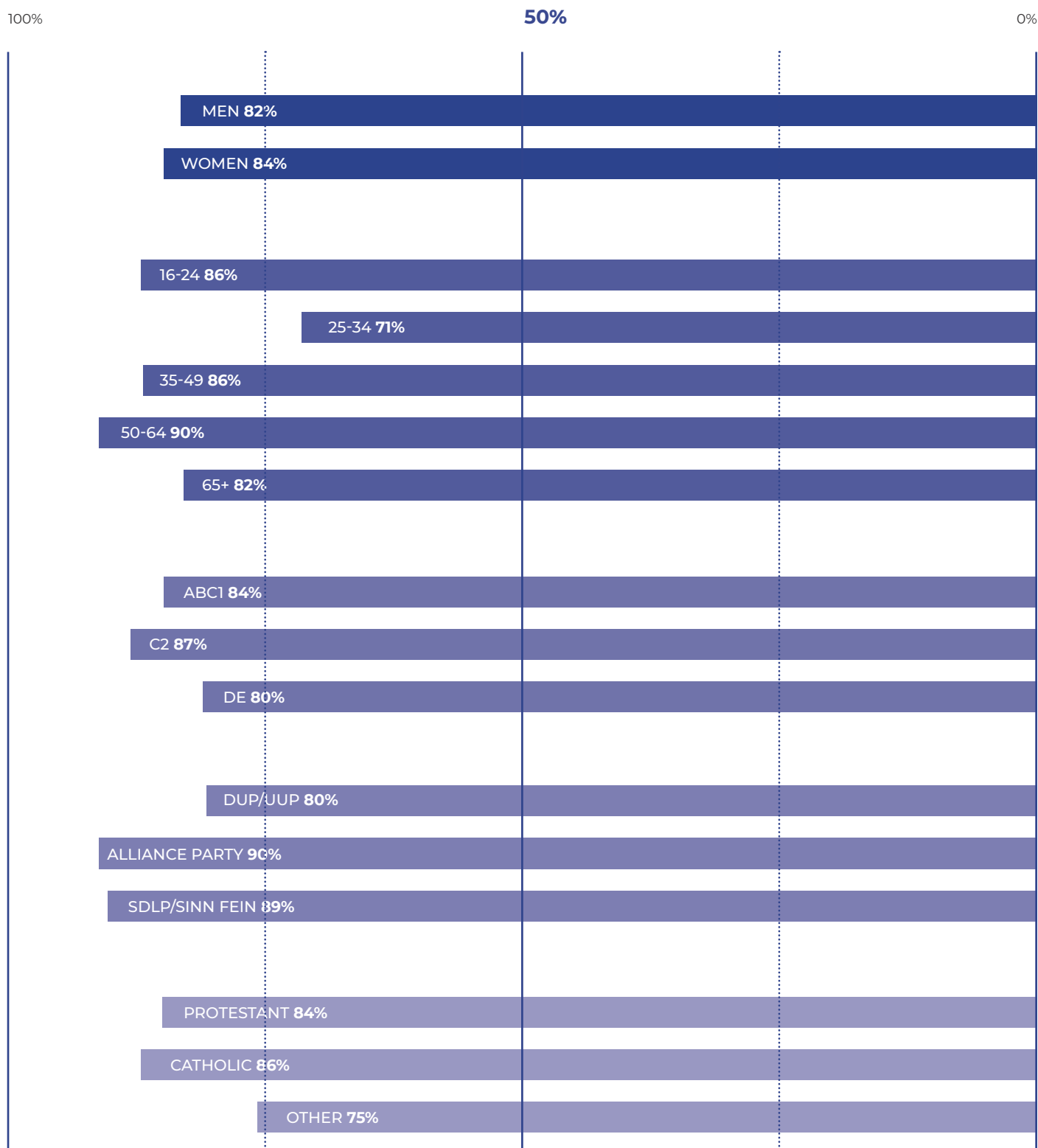
Question 10

How important or unimportant do you think it is for the right to an Adequate standard of living to be included in a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland?

84%

Over four-fifths (84%) felt that it was important for the right to an adequate standard of living to be included in a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland, with around three in five (57%) stating that it was very important.





Base: all respondents (n=1032)

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Law Centre NI

Everyone wants an adequate standard of living to be able to live their lives and raise their families with dignity and opportunity. Last year, one food bank alone in NI distributed 78,000 food parcels, an increase of 75% on the previous year, with 31,000 going to children (Trussell Trust: 2020). Pre-pandemic, 300,000 people were living in absolute poverty, 92,000 of whom were children [DfC: 2018/19]. Poverty is not confined to people who are out of work. Low wages and insecure employment, especially for young people, pushes people into 'in-work' poverty and the pandemic has exacerbated and highlighted many of the fissures in the systems of support.

Ultimately, the social security system is meant to provide the reassurance of a safety net when it is needed. The deficiencies in the social security system brought about from the last decade of 'welfare reform' - from the 5-week wait for benefit to the 'two-child rule' that limits support to the first two children in a family - mean that people don't always have the reassurance of a safety net that gives them a secure platform to live with dignity when they need support.

The welfare reform mitigations package that was agreed five years ago has protected many people against the harshest elements of the changes but they don't plug all the gaps. For example, for families who find themselves needing to claim Universal Credit whose third child was born after April 2017, are affected by the 'two child rule', losing, on average, £2,780 to support their child each year. New loopholes in the system are emerging as Covid has pushed more people to rely on the social security system. Over 1000 households in NI are not getting the protection of the 'benefit cap' mitigation, losing out on £200 per month. More than 200 households have now lost the protection of the 'bedroom tax' and housing arrears are building up in the private rented sector because of shortfalls between rent and housing benefit averaging £77 per month. The labyrinth-like nature of the social security system exacerbates the problems.

The 104 civil society organisations that make up the Cliff Edge Coalition have campaigned to put the existing mitigations on a secure and permanent legal footing; to plug the loopholes and to safeguard supports for all children in families with more than two children. These are the minimum steps that need now to be urgently progressed to protect people.

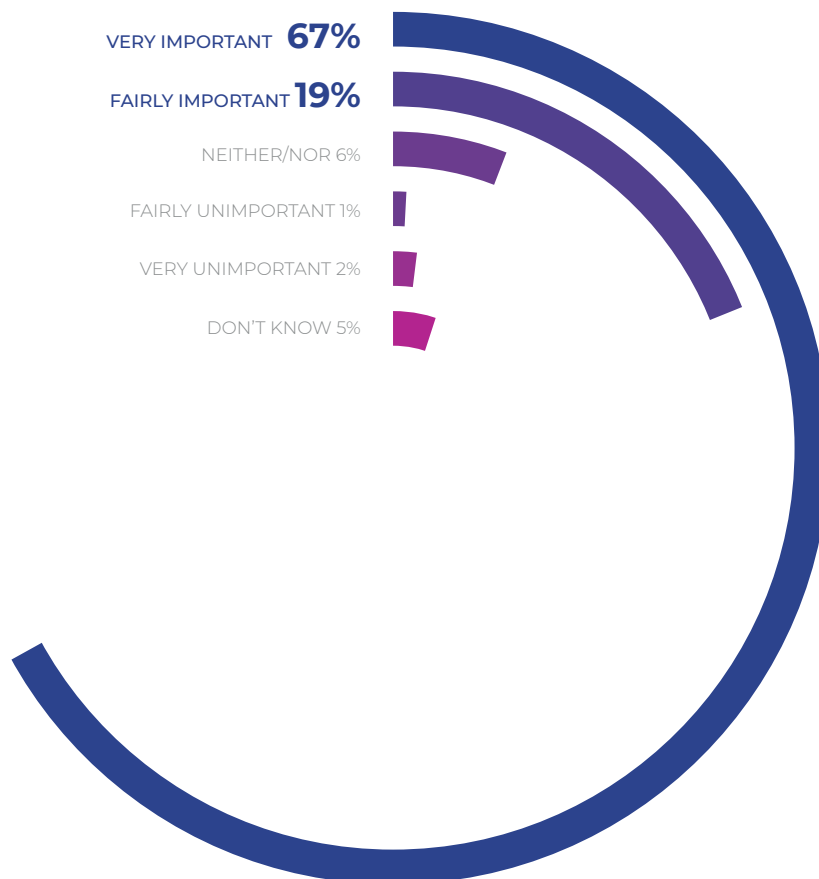
Others may find themselves falling outside the social security system altogether. Tighter restrictions on eligibility for benefit have made it harder to get support and the No Recourse to Public Funds rule means that growing numbers of people fall who outside the scope of protection, face destitution and are forced to rely on charitable help.

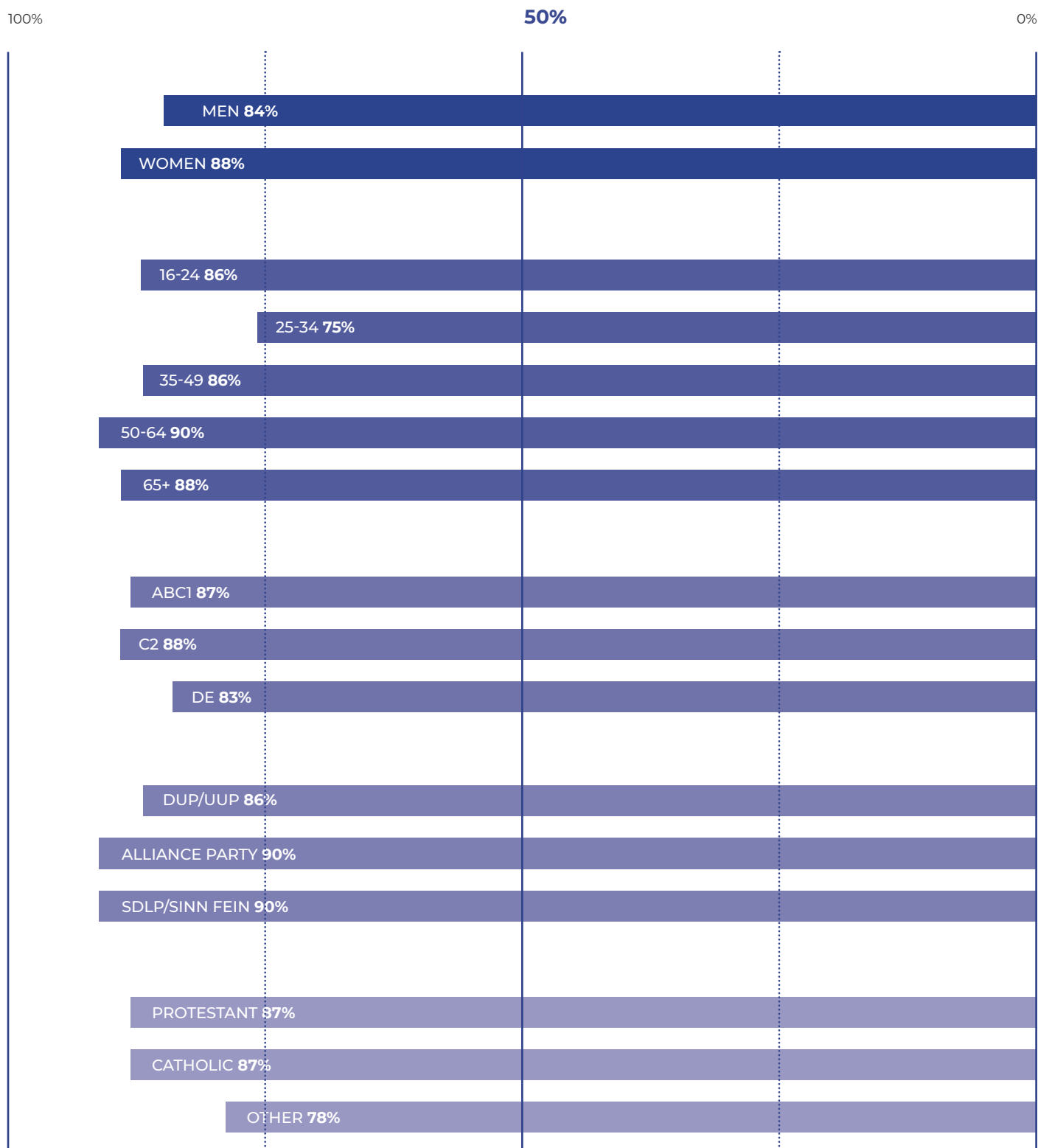
This is the context in which 84% of people polled feel it is important that the right to an adequate standard of living is included in a Bill of Rights in NI. In Scotland, the principle of dignity is embedded as a foundational principle of its social security system. That language matters. Enshrining economic and social rights protections in a NI Bill of Rights matters. It creates a benchmark and a framework for measuring and transforming our progress to ensure that everyone has an adequate standard of living; holding us collectively accountable for ending poverty. It navigates the policy makers and ultimately, the judges, in the direction of what is called for to uphold everyone's dignity. More than that, the inclusion of economic and social rights, including an adequate standard of living, reflects what we say matters for all of us so that no one is left out and no one is left behind.

Question 11 **How important or unimportant do you think it is for the right to Food to be included in a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland?**

86%

Close to nine in ten (86%) believed it important for a right to food to be included in a Bill of rights for Northern Ireland, with just over two-thirds (67%) feeling that it was very important.





Base: all respondents (n=1032)

AB Higher & intermediate managerial, administrative, professional occupations
 C1 Supervisory, clerical & junior managerial, administrative, professional occupations
 C2 Skilled manual occupations
 DE Semi-skilled & unskilled manual occupations, Unemployed and lowest grade occupations

The Larder Foodbank

Every year The Larder foodbank provides food, support and hope to thousands of vulnerable people in inner East Belfast. The Larder is run by The St Christopher's Community at St Christopher's Church, Mersey Street.

The Larder used to exist to provide emergency food for occasions like an unexpected bill putting someone in the red or to help a person whilst they get out of debt.

Now however, we are increasingly providing food because our welfare system is failing to cover 'the cost of living' due to cuts made in the name of austerity. Since January 75% of those using The Larder are in need of our help on an ongoing basis, meaning their circumstances are not due to change and so their struggle is indefinite.

It was recently reported there are now more Food Banks in the UK than there are McDonalds. For us, this is not so much an illustration of a community pulling together as it is a symptom of a society that is failing its own. No-one should have to rely on 'emergency food' indefinitely, but without serious welfare reform, this is the lived reality of many people. As furlough schemes come to a close, we believe that we will see many more in need of intervention as their cupboards grow bare.

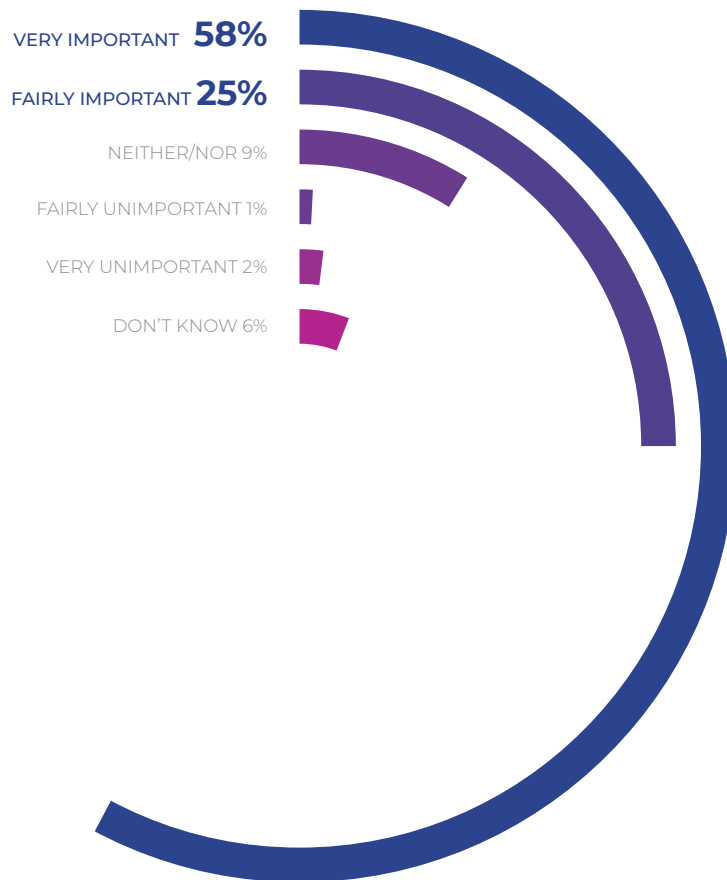
This recent poll result makes it abundantly clear that we can put a price on our luxuries, but not that which we need to stay alive. Access to food is a fundamental human right and the fact that a phrase like the 'cost of living' is commonplace is an illustration of just how much we need to realign reality with what we know to be true: that hunger is a human rights issue. And to allow an increasing amount of our community to go without eating, is indicative of a society that has failed to function.

The polling result shows that the public understand how crucial this right is, now it's time to realise the right to food for people across Northern Ireland, it's time for our Bill of Rights.

Question 12 **How important or unimportant do you think it is for the right to work to be included in a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland?**

83%

More than four in five (83%) felt that it was important for a right to work to be included in a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland, with almost three in five (58%) considering it very important.





Base: all respondents (n=1032)

AB Higher & intermediate managerial, administrative, professional occupations
 C1 Supervisory, clerical & junior managerial, administrative, professional occupations
 C2 Skilled manual occupations
 DE Semi-skilled & unskilled manual occupations, Unemployed and lowest grade occupations

NIC ICTU (Irish Congress of Trade Unions - Northern Ireland Committee)

It is welcome, but not surprising to the trade union movement, that the majority of people believe that the right to work should be included within a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland.

Over the past 23 years, the trade union movement's support for the full implementation of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, including the Bill of Rights and the Charter of Rights for the island of Ireland, has been unwavering.

The Irish Congress of Trade Unions, representing 200,000 members across Northern Ireland, has consistently made robust arguments in respect of trade union and social and economic rights being vital components of the Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland. We agreed with the recommendations delivered by the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission in 2008 that a Bill of Rights should include provisions on the right to work and that the work should be decent with just and favourable conditions, irrespective of the status of a worker.

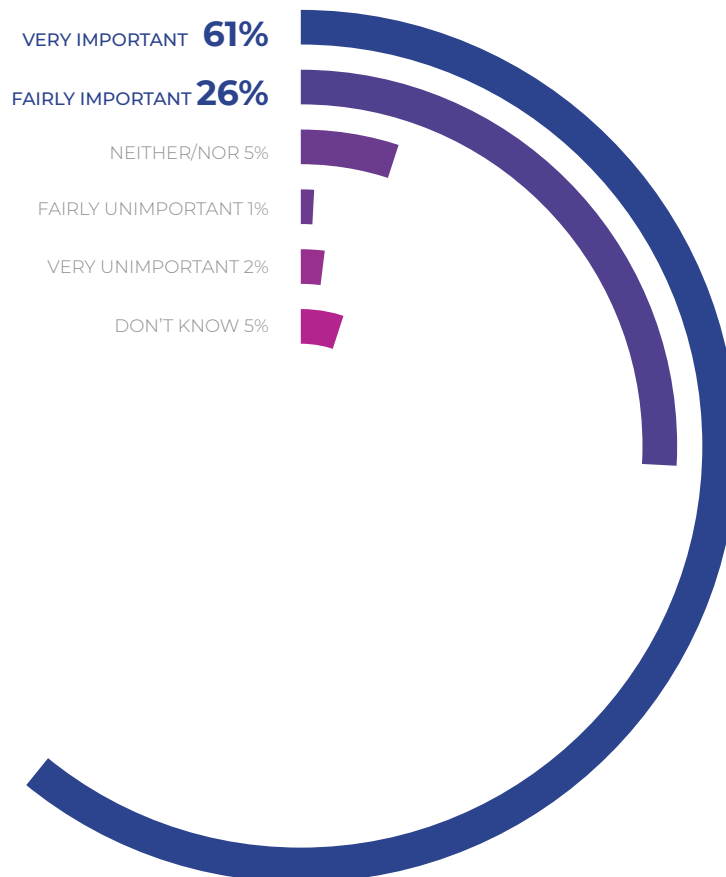
In 2021, one in four workers in Northern Ireland earn below the Real Living Wage (as set by the Living Wage Foundation) and precarious forms of work, particularly affecting young people and women, are on the rise. Covid-19 continues to have a major social and economic impact on workers, their families and their communities across Northern Ireland and has disproportionately impacted on the poorest and most deprived communities. High levels of confirmed redundancies have already occurred, and the economic inactivity rate has increased, as has demand for working age benefits.

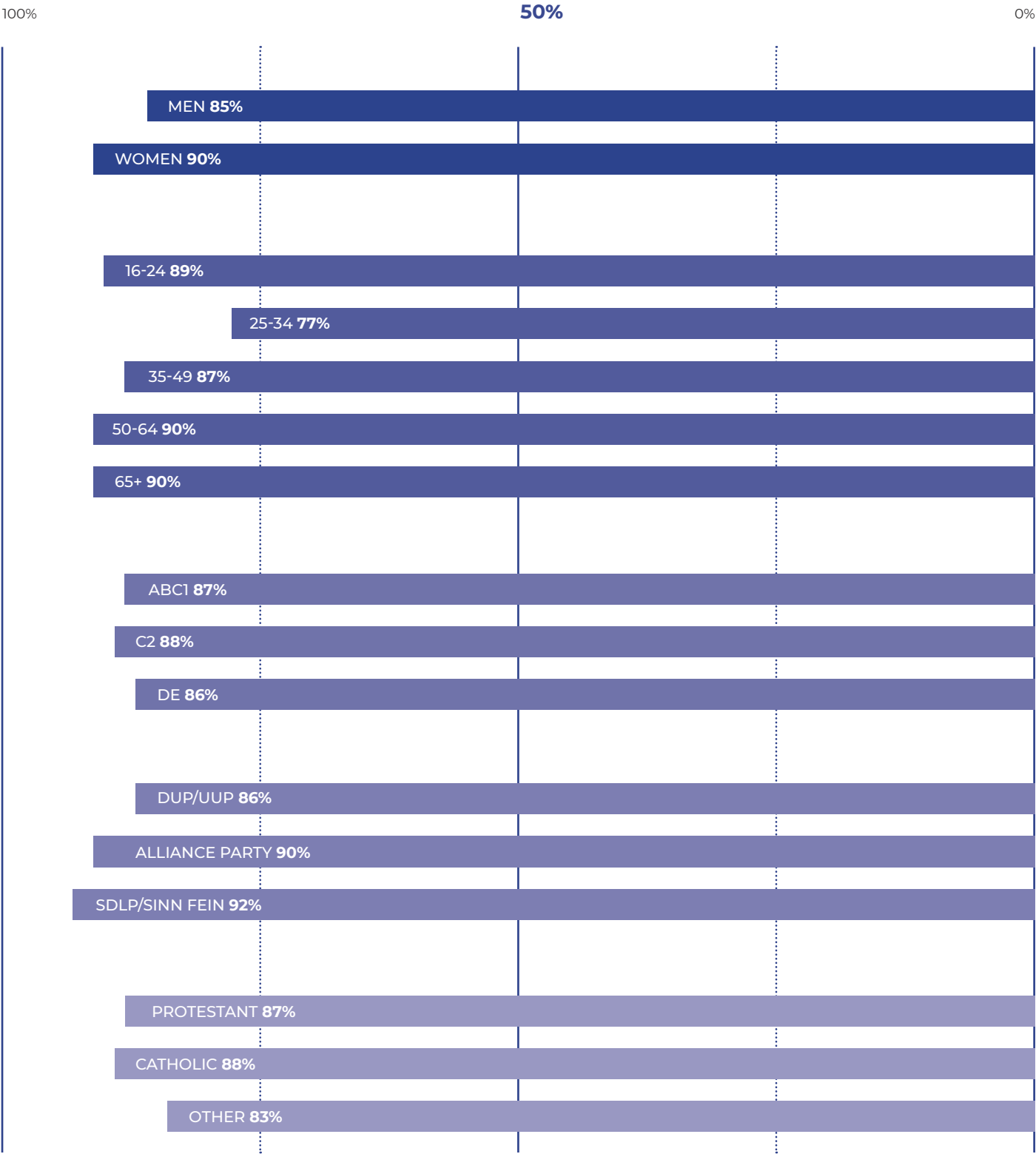
Given the devastating impact of COVID, the realisation of Brexit and the UK Government's threats to worker's rights and important equality and human rights protections, the enshrining of socio-economic rights including a right to work within a Bill of Rights is necessary, timely and more important than ever.

Question 13 **How important or unimportant do you think it is for the right to a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment to be included in a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland?**

87%

Approaching nine in ten (87%) felt that it was important for a right to a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment to be included in a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland, with just over three in five (61%) feeling that it was very important.





Base: all respondents (n=1032)

- AB Higher & intermediate managerial, administrative, professional occupations
- C1 Supervisory, clerical & junior managerial, administrative, professional occupations
- C2 Skilled manual occupations
- DE Semi-skilled & unskilled manual occupations, Unemployed and lowest grade occupations

Friends of the Earth

It's heartening to see so many people support the inclusion of a right to a safe environment in a Northern Ireland Bill of Rights.

Since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, we've had 20 years of lost opportunities. The car first transport policy has seen the destruction of important sites and threatened others, locking us further into car dependency, and leaving many vulnerable communities with unacceptably poor air quality. The pattern of scattered development in the countryside has led to a proliferation of septic tanks, polluted rivers and lakes, and the loss of valuable agricultural land. Our obligation to tackle climate change has been repeatedly neglected in favour of a fixation on natural gas and incineration, rejection of the Green New Deal, blocking attempts to introduce a Climate Change Act, and scrapping energy efficiency schemes.

We don't have to be prisoners to our past though. We have an opportunity in this convergence of crises, accelerating climate breakdown, ecological decline, and a global pandemic, to reimagine our future, to build back better. We don't have to settle for a return to what was a dysfunctional normality. For the sake of healthy communities, and a healthy environment, the system needs to be overhauled to give communities direct control and protect the natural world for its own sake.

We can build a better Northern Ireland: one where people are valued for the contribution they make to society, not the profits they generate for shareholders; one where the intrinsic value of nature is recognised, not just its commercial value; one where people have a healthy work/life balance and can enjoy spending quality time with friends and family, can indulge their creativity, and can contribute to their community.

From Algeria to Việt Nam, more than 100 States around the world have a constitutionally recognised and protected right to a healthy environment. By incorporation of the human right to a healthy environment into domestic legislation, governments become directly accountable to their rights-holders for their contributions to protecting or undermining the health of the environment. A Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland which guarantees this right would place a legal duty on the government to defend and implement that right by implementing policies that ensure safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environmental conditions, not only for the protection of the people of today, but also, for future generations to come.

These are undoubtedly difficult times, but they are also times of hope and opportunity. We can shape the future we want, collectively – a life affirming future with a life sustaining economy, a functioning participative democracy, and a healthy planet. A Bill of Rights with environmental rights included could help to create a future that works for both people and planet.

Key Rights findings

Covid-19 & Health

83%

Accommodation

84%

Enforceability

78%

Standard of Living

84%

Education

88%

Work

83%

Health

88%

Environment

87%

Food

86%

Notes

