

HUMAN RIGHTS CONSORTIUM STATEMENT:

I want to thank the Committee members and staff for taking the time to engage with us today. My name is Olivia Potter-Hughes, and I work for the Human Rights Consortium, a coalition of NGOs, trade unions, and grassroots community groups from across Northern Ireland campaigning for a human rights-based society.

A key part of this is the commitment to a Northern Ireland Bill of Rights, as set out in the Belfast/Good Friday Peace Agreement over a quarter of a century ago. Despite majority public and political support, the UK Government continues to block progress by insisting on complete party-political consensus, effectively placing a veto on advancing the protection of fundamental rights.

In the absence of a Bill of Rights, we have witnessed the absolute failure of the Stormont institutions to integrate protections or progress our domestic human rights landscape. The Executive and Assembly have been re-established in the context of massive challenges and inequalities faced by people in Northern Ireland, with unprecedented pressures on public services and the most vulnerable members of our society continuing to be at risk of deprivation and destitution.

Poverty continues to rise, with nearly one in five children living in absolute poverty and food bank usage increasing by 11% over the past year. The housing crisis has escalated, leaving over 35,000 households in urgent need, and public sector strikes and budget cuts have severely impacted access to essential services.

Employment rights remain a concern. The gender pay gap persists, disproportionately affecting women in the private sector, while migrant and disabled workers struggle with inadequate legal protections. One in five workers in Northern Ireland earns below the real living wage, and precarious employment remains widespread.

Women's rights have also suffered setbacks. Northern Ireland has lacked a Gender Equality Strategy for eight years, leaving gender-based discrimination, workplace inequality, and domestic violence under-addressed. Abortion services, though legal, remain difficult to access, forcing many to travel to England for healthcare.

The education system is in crisis, with chronic underfunding and structural segregation continuing to limit opportunities. Special educational needs services are overwhelmed, leaving many vulnerable children without adequate support. Additionally, 93% of children still attend schools segregated along religious lines, perpetuating divisions within our society.

We are still without a Single Equality Act, leaving significant gaps in anti-discrimination protections, ongoing threats to the Human Rights Act and uncertainties surrounding the UK's commitment to the Windsor Framework create additional risks for rights in Northern Ireland.

Economic, social, and cultural rights are not optional, they are fundamental to dignity, equality, and justice for all. We therefore urge the Committee to once again recommend that the UK Government fulfils its obligations by legislating for a Bill of Rights, and for the NI Executive to prioritise a comprehensive Anti-Poverty Strategy, fair pay protections, and urgent reforms in housing, healthcare, and education.

Thank you for your time.