



ACCOUNTABILITY
EQUALITY
PARTICIPATION



**Participation and the
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Mr J Kennedy III
U.S. Special Envoy to Northern Ireland for Economic Affairs

Tuesday 11th April 2023

Briefing on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in Northern Ireland on the occasion of the visit of the President of the United States of America, Joe Biden, to Northern Ireland for the 25th anniversary of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement

Dear Mr Kennedy III,

Participation and the Practice of Rights (PPR) was established in Belfast and Dublin by Inez McCormack in 2006. Our purpose, then and ever since, has been to support marginalised groups to use a human rights based approach to organise for positive change in their communities.

Inez was a key contributor to the peace process and the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement negotiations and her role in securing the equality and human rights standards in the Agreement has recently been recognised by both the former President of Ireland, Mary Robinson, and the current President of Ireland, Michael D Higgins, in ongoing anniversary events.

PPR was the result of conversations between Inez and others who helped to secure the human rights and equality commitments of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, yet had concerns as to how these would be made real in the communities most impacted by conflict and economic deprivation. The interventions and financial investments from Irish American Charles Feeney, through Atlantic Philanthropies, established PPR and nourished other human rights NGOs and community initiatives which have been critical to bedding down the peace process.

Inez, who came from a wealthy Protestant background and dedicated her life to tackling inequality, had previously been very successful in securing financial and political investment from the USA during her time as the first female president of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) and in her role as a signatory to the MacBride Principles. She recognised the potential of harnessing the power of US companies to address the historic discrimination in employment against Catholics in Northern Ireland, by targeting funds towards local companies who embraced equal opportunities. In this area there has been enormous progress to address inequality and discrimination.

The peace process has completely transformed the Island of Ireland and the relationships between Ireland, Britain and the European Union. In the simplest of terms, people are alive today who would not have been, had there not been a commitment to a process of peace-building and reconciliation based on international human rights principles by all actors, including civil society, the protagonists to the conflict and political and industry leaders in Ireland, Britain, Europe and the United States of America. The influence of the USA has been enormous and it can continue to have a transformative impact in safeguarding equality and human rights principles over the coming years.

As is widely known, it has not been a peace process without setbacks. The dividends of peace have not always been shared out fairly. The current political impasse, the impact of Brexit and uncertainty around the future are felt across these islands, and nowhere more so than amongst marginalised groups, who continue to experience patterns of inequality and lack of investment. Over the course of our existence, PPR has supported marginalised groups in Belfast, Derry, Dublin, Galway, Cork, Kerry and Edinburgh to help shape government policy and secure public and private investment to address issues of mental health, housing, asylum, education, women's rights, digital rights and more.

Today PPR works across three core issues with directly impacted groups: housing, mental health and immigration. We discuss each of these below.

Housing

The housing crisis across Ireland is acute, and in Northern Ireland where discrimination in housing policy was a key driver of the conflict, inequalities along religious and socio-political identities remain. Analysis of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's most recent statistics (for the year ending March 2022) shows, for instance, that the areas of Belfast with the greatest shortfall

in social housing are predominately Catholic areas of north and west Belfast.¹ Local homelessness and housing stress are overwhelmingly concentrated in these same areas, which are home to 90% of west Belfast's 2,854 homeless households and 81% of north Belfast's 1,951 homeless households.²

PPR has not stood still on these issues. Take Back the City, supported by PPR, is a coalition of families in housing need supported by an international group of architects, planners, developers, technology and sustainability specialists, who have identified land and investment opportunities to help address the housing crisis, including in the interface areas of north and west Belfast. By gathering data on housing need, public land, public investment and potential climate impact, we have created a unique interactive mapping tool which assists the user in understanding the complexities of our housing crisis.³

The Mackie's site in Belfast is 25 acres of public land owned by the Department for Communities in the one of the areas of greatest poverty and housing need in Northern Ireland. Its potential to unite communities, tackle segregation and deliver prosperity is unmatched in Belfast -- a city which, despite the peace process, remains largely segregated, divided by security walls and plagued by the impact of religious inequality in housing provision.

Take Back the City has recently launched an international urban design competition to showcase the potential of the site for homes, biodiverse spaces and communities.⁴ More than 4,000 people have participated in consultation events on these designs.

Mental Health

Rates of mental ill-health in Northern Ireland are 25% higher than in England. The impact of conflict, intergenerational trauma and poverty have compounded the crisis. More people have died by suicide during the 25 years of the peace process than were killed during the preceding 25 years of violent conflict, and the crisis is most acute in the communities which suffered the most, yet have benefited the least from investment during the peace process.

Despite years of human rights campaigning, led by mental health service users

¹ <https://www.nlb.ie/investigations/FOI/2022-08-housing-need-in-belfast-a-closer-look-at-whats-changing-and-what-isnt>

² <https://www.nlb.ie/investigations/FOI/2022-06-a-grim-milestone-in-disturbing-increases-on-previous-years-over-4-400-belfast-children-now-recognised-as-homeless>

³ <https://takebackthecity.ie>

⁴ <https://takebackthecity.ie/competition>

and families bereaved by suicide, the crisis has been consistently getting worse; the latest official figures on regional mental health inequalities underline how government continues to ignore the well-known causal links between inequality, trauma and mental health.⁵

Drug-related deaths, which have more than doubled in the past ten years, are five times higher in working class versus wealthy areas, suicide rates are double, while prescribing rates for antidepressants are 66% higher in poor areas. By and large these are the same areas and communities most heavily impacted by the conflict, with high levels of unaddressed intergenerational trauma.

However, rather than being addressed, trauma is being medicated, despite scientific evidence showing that 'there is no pill for trauma'. The public spend on antidepressants has increased by approximately 5% annually, while the investment in therapeutic interventions such as counselling is shrinking significantly. For these communities, the medicalisation and individualisation of the causes of trauma means that in the 25 years since the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, the mental health crisis has only deepened.

Reflecting the global move towards community-led responses to mental health, local communities are coming together, in collaboration with mental health professionals, to develop a #NewScript for Mental Health collectively, based on trauma-informed and human rights principles. Twenty-five years post the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, all communities coming together, to develop a common vision for a better approach to mental health, is healing, hopeful and transformative.

Asylum

It will come as no surprise to Irish Americans that Ireland is an island which has always had open arms for refugees. Over 50,000 people recently attended a demonstration in Dublin in support of asylum seekers and refugees; this was organised in response to the small, yet alarming, protests by far-right groups outside temporary accommodation for asylum seekers in direct provision centres in the Republic of Ireland and in contingency accommodation centres in Northern Ireland.

As is well understood in the USA, for generations, from before the time of An Górrta Mór, people have fled Ireland to seek refuge in countries across the

⁵ [Health Inequalities Annual Report 2023 | Department of Health \(health-ni.gov.uk\)](#)

world and the USA has been the main recipient of generations of people migrating from Ireland across the Atlantic Ocean. However, this tradition of welcome is not supported by increasingly regressive and hostile policies by the UK Government.

According to the most recently published Home Office statistics⁶, at the end of December 2022 there were 3,103 asylum seekers and dependants in Northern Ireland; the UK Home Office informed PPR by Freedom of Information response that of these, 1,170 were living in 'contingency accommodation' across 22 NI hotels.

Asylum accommodation has become a big business. The Economist magazine reported in February 2023 that the UK government was spending £6.8m (US\$8.4m) a day on contingency accommodation in hotels for this group.⁷ The BBC for its part highlighted the assertion by Mears Group - the private company hired by the Home Office to manage asylum accommodation in NI, Scotland and northeast England - that the 22% increase in its annual revenue in 2021 was 'largely driven' by contingency hotel accommodation.⁸ These spaces, which are not designed for long-term living, are detrimental to the physical and mental health of the people who live there. They have limited places to cook, gather or play, and constrain the ability of asylum seekers to integrate into their new communities.

The Kind Economy network, supported by PPR, is a coalition of community groups, businesses, asylum seekers and local families who are working together to provide support for asylum seekers and refugees from around the world in the face of the UK Home Office's 'hostile environment' policy and work ban. This policy has recently seen the introduction of the Illegal Migration Bill in the UK House of Commons, which nullifies completely the process of asylum in the UK, and disregards the concrete legal standards set out in the European Convention on Human Rights; the same standards which the UK Government agreed to honour through the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement.

If you or your representatives would like to know more about the current human rights campaigns inspired by the work of Inez McCormack, and the relationship between marginalised groups and local and devolved government, we would be very willing to provide further information or arrange


⁶ See Tables Asy_D09 and D11 <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/asylum-and-resettlement-datasets>

⁷ <https://www.economist.com/britain/2023/02/16/britons-take-against-asylum-hotels>

⁸ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-64991234>

engagements during your visit to mark the anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement or at another time which is convenient to you in your role as U.S. Special Envoy.

Kind regards,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Chloë Trew". The signature is written in a light, greyish color.

Chloë Trew
Director, Participation and the Practice of Rights