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Our Ref: Lni/11-04/KH/ld

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Single Equality Bill Team
OFM/DFM
Room E3.18
FREEPOST Nat 17679
BELFAST
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Dear Sir/Madam

Re: Single Equality Bill Northern Ireland

Please find enclosed the Lifestart Foundation's response to the Single Equality Bill Northern Ireland.

Yours faithfully

PP *Loretto Douglas*
Karen Herriott
Cross-Border Regional Officer

Enc.

A Single Equality Bill for Northern Ireland

The Lifestart Foundation welcomes this forthcoming Bill and looks forward to its full implementation in parallel development with current EU Directives and with the present Draft Programme for Government, Northern Ireland.

The following are some of the pertinent points that Lifestart consider to be of paramount importance for the effective deliberation and implementation of the Bill and which will enable all the citizens of Northern Ireland to realise their full potential and to facilitate their full and fair participation in Society.

Chapter Three – Grounds

Section 3.3

Lifestart supports the extension of the present grounds to include marital and family status.

As the Bill sets out as one of its principles, promotion of opportunity, this promotion of opportunity begins for the child at the very earliest stages particularly from 0 to 5 years old. By supporting the role of the parent as the primary carer and educator, the holistic development of the child is enabled and thereby the promotion of opportunity for the child to fully participate in Society. This would also acknowledge the fundamental place of the family in Society and as such underpin the protection which should be afforded to it.

Section 3.4

The ground should reflect the definition as included in the Republic of Ireland's Employment Equality Act which defines "marital status" as "single, married, separated, divorced or widowed" and family status as, "responsibility as a parent or in loco parentis in relation to a person who has not attained 18 years of age; or as a parent or the primary resident carer in relation to a person with a disability which gives rise to the need for continuing, regular or frequent care and support".

Section 3.8

The ground of Socio-economic status should also be included in the Bill. One clear way to address inequality in Society is through the equal distribution of resources. Although the New Targeting Social Need has the commitment of the Government to address the causes of poverty and social exclusion, the Single Equality Bill could also provide the means of redress where that poverty leads to direct or indirect discrimination.

Poverty can be defined as firstly, people being excluded and marginalised from participating in activities which are considered the norm for other people in Society and secondly is inclusive of a social, educational or cultural poverty. It is necessary to acknowledge the linkages that exist between poverty and inequality and put in place mechanisms such as poverty proofing which will address it. Poverty proofing helps to identify these inequalities and gives a methodology by which they can be addressed such as the compilation of a data base that applies poverty proofing, the training of staff to use such proofing and more direct work with population groupings affected by inequalities. When referring to poverty proofing, we say that it is a process by which government departments, local authorities and State agencies assess policies and programmes at design and review stages in relation to the likely impact that they will have on or have had on poverty and on inequalities. This in turn would minimise the incidence and extent of poverty and thus lead to a greater participation and input into the policy process. This would ultimately allow for a greater equality of opportunity overall.

Chapter 7 – Goods, Facilities and Services

We support the equal opportunity of access to appropriate educational and support services and facilities for both children and parents. Investment in early childhood education can lead to equitable outcomes for all children but particularly for those from a disadvantaged background. Also by supporting the child in the earliest years, facilitates their full participation within the school culture and on to later education and work. Research has indicated that those children in receipt of appropriate developmental and educational supports either in the home or centre based, are more responsive to developing within the school culture.

Equality of access to education from birth to pre-school to primary, secondary and on to third level should be a primary focus in the provision of services. The

question to be addressed is how the provisions within the Single Equality Bill can enable this to take place?

In accordance with Article 27 of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child, which states, 'The child has the right to an adequate standard of living ; parents have the primary responsibility to provide this, and the State has a duty to assist parents, where necessary, in fulfilling this right.'

Economic equality also can include access to public services. Investment in this area is of economic concern and also a public policy concern. Addressing these areas where discrimination occurs, will allow a greater cohesion within communities where they are actively supported to help each other.

Other Comments

Regarding Complaints Procedures:

Free Legal Aid should be accessible for those who wish to bring a complaint regarding discrimination and a person wishing to bring a complaint, should not be precluded from doing so because of financial constraints. Perhaps one option would be, an application fee when bringing a case and then the refunding of the fee, where a case has been found to answer.

Regarding Childcare Provision:

In Nordic countries there is a consensus that children should not be in services before they are one year old. Parents have a right to rear their child especially in the first critical year of life. These countries offer a great deal of support to parents so that they can stay at home to take care of their child, particularly in relation to paid parental leave. Although the childcare provision has greatly improved recently, there is inadequate support both financially and practically for the parent (s) who decides to stay at home to take care of their child and in a sense these parents are discriminated against. We believe that the addition of 'parental leave' should be included as a ground in the forthcoming Single Equality Bill.

You or Your Organisation

- 1 Responding on behalf of organisation,' Lifestart Foundation', 11A Bishop Street, Derry/L'Derry.
- 2 'Lifestart', is a charitable organisation with recognised charitable status.

Lifestart is a home visitation, educational and promotional programme which seeks, 'to enable parents to make informed, relevant decisions about the upbringing of their own children, and to empower them to give effect to these decisions.' (Lifestart 1993) Lifestart is a promotional organisation which is directed to primary prevention by supporting parents and children, so that appropriate development can occur and the cycle of disadvantage can be addressed. The organisation is situated within a community structure and context and contributes to the development of all sectors of the community. The Lifestart programme is a curriculum which consists of age appropriate information on all aspects of a child's development, a deliberative process of family visitation and it follows procedures whereby parents are encouraged and enabled to evaluate their attitudes and practices.

- 3 The number of people employed in the organisation lie between, 50 and 249.
- 4 The sector which best describes the organisation is, education / training.
- 5 Our prime interest is in respect of , 'parenting and early childhood.'