



London Communities Human Rights Programme

THE VALUE OF USING HUMAN RIGHTS

justfair

The British Institute
of Human Rights



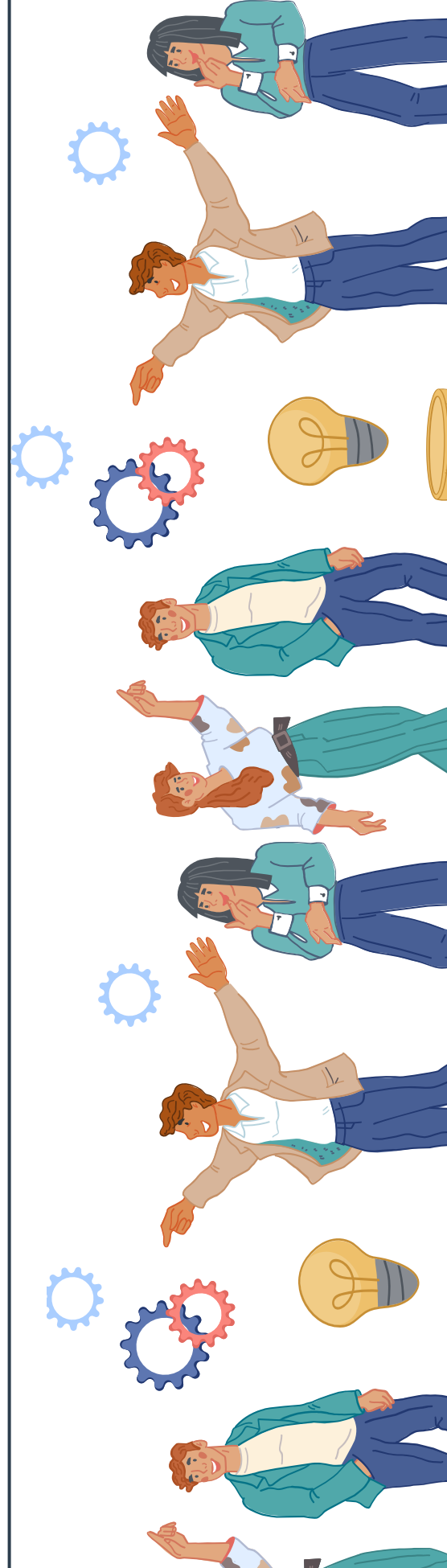
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INTRODUCTION

“Where, after all, do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home – so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any maps of the world ... Such are the places where every man, woman and child seeks equal justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity without discrimination. Unless these rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere.” – Eleanor Roosevelt

This resource introduces human rights framing – the process of putting human rights at the centre of our campaigns and everyday conversations and calling for them to be at the forefront of policy and practice. It shows how understanding human rights not just as legal concepts, but as tools we can use in our communities, as activists and within our organisations to strengthen our campaigns can help to change harmful narratives, alleviate suffering, and help to hold the UK Government and public authorities to account on their human rights obligations – local, regional, and international.

It is designed to help civil society activists in the UK understand the value of human rights framing and help them through the process of bringing human rights into their work.



HUMAN RIGHTS FRAMING

Bringing human rights into your conversations and campaigns can be powerful. It can:

- **Reframe the conversation** – The way we talk about issues like inequality, food insecurity, and education is important, because it influences how people feel about them and so policy decisions. All too often, the everyday realities of how these issues impact people: such as a family living with black mould in their social housing, and the effects on their health or wellbeing, are ignored or glossed over because the blame is wrongly placed on them as individuals, rather than the providers. By presenting the issue as a rights violation and taking a human rights framing, we can offer tools to help people to look at the problem differently – to show how wider injustices like poor housing impact on people in their communities. Human rights framing can highlight stories for public debate in a way that encourages solution, not shame – building support for our values and principles: that we all deserve to live a life of dignity and freedom.
- **Unleash power within communities** – Often those at the sharp end of rights violations are not alone in their experience. There may be many people within their community having the same issues, but possible misplaced feelings of embarrassment can sometimes stop us talking about the problems we face. When we reframe the conversation, and become more confident in speaking out, it can also help us discover that others might have similar experiences, and we then have the potential to work together on positive social change, from a human rights perspective.
- **Provide a roadmap** – Human rights give us a framework through which we can advocate for a better world. By claiming our rights and understanding the law we can better call on duty bearers to uphold their responsibilities and show them how to get there. Human rights also give those in public power a guide to how they can make rights respecting decisions, supporting public officials to provide better services for people they serve.
- **Create lasting change** – In the face of poverty and inequalities, working for social change can feel like an uphill battle. When we talk about rights, we have the benchmark for how everyone must be treated. This standard, which is set out in law, is not optional. If rights are breached this must be remedied and prevented from happening again. This shifts the focus from ‘sticking plasters’ to long-term solutions. To use the black mould example above, [in Leith in Scotland](#), we saw human rights framing turn this issue from a problem an individual person was facing into a campaign that resulted in improvements for people across 3 blocks of flats.

PEOPLE USING HUMAN RIGHTS LAW AS A POWERFUL TOOL IN EVERYDAY SCENARIOS – RIGHTS AND DUTIES

When people are supported and empowered to know and claim their rights, we often see positive changes in communities. Below are some stories of human rights change from BIHR.



MOIRA'S STORY

Moira had experienced severe tinnitus and deafness in one ear for three years. This caused an incessant loud noise in her head which was having a significant impact on her mental health. Moira's consultant thought that she could benefit from a cochlear implant and was willing to perform the operation, but the local clinical commissioning group (CCG) repeatedly refused to fund it. Moira and her family were really upset by the situation. Moira felt that her life was no longer worth living, and at one stage attempted to take her own life. Moira told her GP that it would be inhuman to leave her suffering when treatment was available, and this risked breaching her right to not be subjected to inhuman and degrading treatment (in Article 3 of the Human Rights Act). The GP eventually managed to secure funding for her treatment from an alternative source.



WISH ADVOCACY'S STORY

Following a session with BIHR about human rights, an advocate at Wish (a user-led charity providing independent advocacy to women with mental health needs) decided to produce a leaflet for women detained in a mental health hospital about their right to take part in an upcoming general election. The advocate produced a leaflet about the rights of the women on the ward (detained under Section 3 of the Mental Health Act) to take part in elections, protected by Article 3, Protocol 1 of the Human Rights Act. The hospital staff were supportive of this information being circulated and as a result several of the women decided to register to vote.



ROBERT'S STORY

Robert is a disabled gay man who receives support from the local authority. His support team had a policy of assisting the people they worked with to participate in social activities when they wanted to. Robert asked if a support worker could accompany him to a gay pub.

His request was denied even though other heterosexual service users were regularly supported to attend pubs and clubs of their choice. During a BIHR training session, Robert's advocate realised that Robert could challenge the decision by invoking his right to respect for private life (Article 8) and his right not to be discriminated against on grounds of his sexual orientation. Robert and his advocate raised this with the local council as a potential breach of his human rights. The council relooked at the decision, made support available for Robert so he could also enjoy the social activities that mattered to him.



MOHAMMED AND HAMIDA'S STORY

Mohammed and Hamida, a learning-disabled couple, were living in a residential assessment centre so their parenting skills could be assessed by the local social services department. CCTV cameras were installed, including in their bedroom.

Social workers explained that the cameras were there to observe them performing their parental duties and for the protection of their baby. The couple were especially distressed by use of the CCTV cameras in their bedroom during the night. With the help of a visiting neighbour, the couple successfully invoked their right to respect for private life (Article 8), explaining that they did not want to be continuously monitored and requested there must be lesser restrictive options to assessing their parental skills. As a result, the social services team agreed to switch off the cameras during the night so that Mohammed and Hamida could enjoy their evenings together in privacy.



YOLANDE'S STORY

Yolande and her children were fleeing domestic violence, and her husband's attempts to track them down as they moved from town to town across the UK. They were referred to social services in their borough, but social workers told Yolande that the constant moving of her children meant she was an unfit parent and that she had made the family intentionally homeless. They said that they had no choice but to place her children in foster care. A support worker helped Yolande to challenge social services' decision as it failed to respect her and her children's right to family life (in Article 8 of the Human Rights Act). Social services reconsidered the issue, taking the family's human rights into account, and agreed the family would remain together, and that social services would help cover some of the essential costs of securing private rented accommodation.



SIOBHAN'S STORY

Siobhan was a patient in a mental health hospital in London. She had a history of self-harm and had attempted to take her own life in the past. Siobhan was under 24-hour observation and was very distressed that she was not allowed to close the door to her room or use the bathroom on her own.

Siobhan's mental health advocate had previously worked with BIHR on an advocacy project, the advocate supported Siobhan to ask the treatment team to explain why this decision of observation was made and how long it would last.

Siobhan raised that although the observations were in place to protect life (which is in Article 2 of the Human Rights Act), it was interfering with Siobhan's right to private life and her right to liberty (in Articles 8 and 5 of the Act). Siobhan felt she knew how to apply the language of the Human Rights Act to her situation and talk honestly to the hospital about less intrusive measures that could still keep her safe. Being given the opportunity to express her feelings and be part of the conversation about how her treatment could be changed, gave Siobhan much-needed comfort.

All of these stories are from BIHR's direct work, you can read them and lots more stories of human rights advocacy here.

"Together with Scottish Recovery Consortium, our aim was to empower these individuals to know not only about their human rights but also the human rights of the people in recovery they work with, across Scotland. At BIHR we believe that knowledge is power- if you don't know what your human rights are, how can you possibly challenge duty bearers when they fail to uphold your rights? These participants are now Rights in Recovery Leads, they are human rights change-makers. Not only are they using human rights in their everyday work, but they are also taking positive action to protect our Human Rights Act"

- Quote from BIHR staff member running a human rights change programme for people in recovery from substance misuse, 2022

PEOPLE USING HUMAN RIGHTS IN CAMPAIGNING TO CREATE POSITIVE CHANGE: ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL RIGHTS



INTERNET 4 ALL

[Participation & Practice of Rights \(PPR\)](#), based in Northern Ireland, is a small human rights organisation with a big vision: to turn international human rights standards into grassroots tools for economic, social and environmental change. At all times and at all levels they ensure their work supports and involves communities who have been marginalised by laws, policies, public authorities or private interests.

During the pandemic PPR launched their '[Internet 4 All](#)' campaign – which crucially argued that because of the necessity of the internet to our lives, it is as fundamental as other rights, like that of free movement, particularly during a pandemic.

“One thing which has become evident during these troubling times is the absolute necessity of internet connectivity. To adhere to social distancing, an accessible and reliable internet connection is required to keep informed of guidance on how to stay safe, access public services, receive and spend money, communicate with family and friends, meet new people, care for the elderly, access mental health care, learn, collaborate, work, entertain and play.”

Framing their campaign in this way added the additional layer of human rights law to an already compelling moral and practical argument.

In the campaign, PPR were careful to spotlight those who are particularly discriminated against by barriers to internet access, including people experiencing homelessness living in hostels, those seeking asylum living in direct provision centres and Travellers on halting sites.

While invoking international legal standards, the campaign called for immediately realisable goals that would make practical differences in people's everyday lives including:

- Open Wi-Fi in publicly funded facilities such as shelters for people experiencing homelessness and care homes,
- Internet service providers across Ireland should open all their Wi-Fi hotspots to the public where the infrastructure exists.

Through [a video people could share](#) and [a petition people could sign](#), the campaign gave members of the public ways to participate and get the word out and make their voices heard.

In total the campaign surveyed 140 young people, and young people representing the group who presented the findings to the then Minister for Communities in September 2020.

By December 2020 the Minister had written to all hostels supporting people experiencing homelessness requesting them to make Wi-Fi available to all residents.

They had the support of Mick Conlon (Olympic boxing champion) who raised awareness of the issue and gave £10k to community group [Springboard](#) which provided much needed devices and data to young people partaking in their programmes. In addition, [Jangala](#), a charity focused on enabling internet access for people in need of humanitarian aid, also provided devices and practical support asylum seekers and refugees to get online in the pandemic.

The young people launched the campaign report with a statement of support from the Minister and the support of over 100 other UK organisations.

This campaign highlights that adding a human rights framing to campaigns not only gives additional legal force but encourages us to think about who is impacted, how others can participate in righting a wrong, and what changes could make a practical difference in the lives of those affected. This would not be possible without ensuring those impacted by rights violations are at the centre of this work.

TALKING ABOUT HUMAN RIGHTS: THE IMPORTANCE

We all have the right to a decent and dignified life. This means having enough to eat, clothing, a decent home, a chance to go to school and learn, help to be as healthy as we can be, have a good job, and be treated well, with dignity no matter our age, ability, or any other characteristic. These are our human rights, but talking about them as such can feel challenging.

We encourage organisations and activists to claim ‘the right to talk about rights’, to use a human rights framing when talking about the issues that matter to communities. .. This doesn’t (necessarily) mean quoting case law, but using the language of rights, bringing more people towards your work by offering hope of a better future – and the evidence-led solutions that will get us there.

Check out the messaging guide below (developed by Just Fair and [Equally Ours](#)) for some helpful ideas for how to talk about rights. Remember this is only guide, please feel free to use and reconfigure these messages in a way that works for you.

i. Root messages in compassionate values such as equality, social justice and self-direction.

Human rights touch every single one of our lives, and are tools that unify people around values, across party lines. Don’t rely on facts and statistics alone.



Example messaging:

‘We all want the freedom to live a good life in a society where we look after one another [or look out for one another]. This is our right.’

Or

‘We can all agree that a good life is one where we all have what we need to thrive. Things like a decent wage, enough to eat, a healthy environment, the opportunity to learn, a place we can call a home. These are our rights.’

ii. Tell a different, positive story about rights.

We all have limited time and resources, don't waste them try to refute harmful/incorrect messages, as this just reinforces it in people's minds. Instead, we recommend using your time and resources to tell a different and positive story about human rights than people are used to hearing. Replace the negative messages with positive content that is relatable.



Example messaging:

'These rights of everyday life belong to every one of us. We should all have a chance to go to school and learn, help to be as healthy as we can be, and to be treated well and with dignity no matter our age, ability, or any other characteristic.'

iii. Position rights as a solution to the very real and pressing issues we face.

Our rights belong to all of us. They're not just a niche legal issue, they are also pragmatic and active tools that people can use to both live decent and dignified lives, and to stand up for what's right. The sense of agency this framing gives people is very important. Don't position rights solely in the context of legal language and institutions, and don't position them as idealistic or passive.



Example messaging:

'We all have a right to (insert specific right), so we can all lead a decent life, and the UK Government and public bodies have a duty to uphold this right for us.'

iv. Show how they matter to us all.

Solidarity promotes a sense of common humanity and shared purpose, which makes it harder to 'other' the needs of people and communities disproportionately impacted by rights violations. While it's important at times to highlight the disproportionate impact of rights violations on some people and communities, don't focus exclusively on particular groups or individuals as that could lead to both 'othering' and people feeling like these rights are distant from their lives.



Example messaging:

'These rights are essential to us all. But without full protection, many of us struggle to make ends meet. And the reality is that when things go wrong, those of us who already face the most barriers struggle even more.'

Or

'These rights are essential to us all. But some people and communities are affected more than others when things go wrong.'

v. Use plain language and bring rights to life.

Where possible use plain language and simple, relatable explanations. For example, use 'our rights of everyday life' or 'our everyday rights' instead of 'economic, social and cultural rights.' Avoid using technical language or concepts like 'incorporation'. These rights are about people's lives, not a dry and abstract concept. Bring these rights to life by using concrete and relatable examples, like food and water, respect for who you are as a person, a decent education, a home, and to enjoy your family life.



Example messaging:

'Enough to eat, a home and a good job, enjoying your family life in peace, being respected for who you are, and a chance to go to school and learn - these essential ingredients to a decent life are out human rights.'

vi. Talk about what rights make possible.

Talk about what rights make possible, show them as an enabler not an impediment. Be positive and hopeful because hope is a greater motivator than fear and focus on your vision for what a future where rights are respected, protected and fulfilled could mean. Try to avoid focusing on rights as a means to tackling violations alone; and try to avoid using 'horrors and harms' messaging as this leads to despondency and fatalism, not motivation and action.



Example messaging:

'Our rights allow us to thrive. They're the things we need for a good life, and to live well together [or for a just and fair society]. By guaranteeing these rights in our laws across the UK, we can all have a genuine living wage, enough to eat, to be treated fairly and a place we can call home.'

vii. Be concrete about your solutions.

Be concrete about your solutions and give examples of where your vision happened/is happening/is starting to happen to make your vision feel realistic and achievable (and even inevitable). Avoid being vague, if people don't understand how your vision will be achieved in practice, they may consider it 'pie in the sky' and default to despondency/fatalistic thinking.

Example messaging:

'There are two ways we can all live lives of freedom and dignity. By making sure the UK Government and public bodies meet their existing international, regional and local legal obligations to uphold our rights in practice, and that we all have the know-how and confidence to challenge them when they don't. And by pushing for all our rights to be guaranteed in our laws across the UK. Something that's already starting to happen in Scotland, through the Scottish Human Rights Bill.'

FINAL THOUGHTS

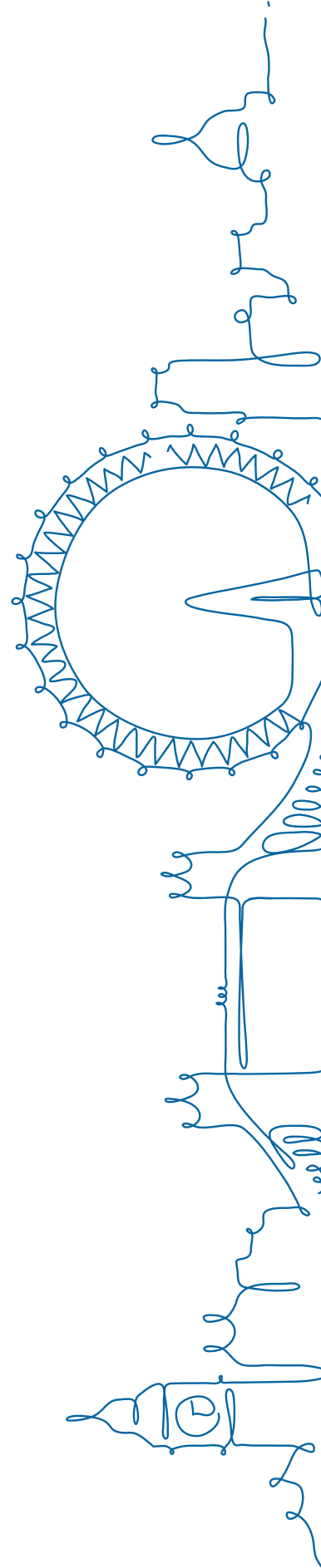
Human rights belong to all of us, at every stage of life and in every identity, we hold - whether child, employee, partner, parent, friend, or patient. Built on values of fairness, respect, equality and dignity, they are powerful legal tools that can help us build the world we wish to see.

But they're also conversation starters, a way to get a message across, a new way of looking at an old problem. We hope that this resource has shown you that when you talk about rights, you empower others to do the same. And when we all speak up, we can see positive change in our communities.

Human rights are not a magic wand, but they can form part of your campaigning toolkit.

If you want further support building this toolkit, visit [Just Fair](#) and [BIHR's](#) websites. You can also learn more about rights and where they come from, and what taking a rights-based approach means, in the other sections of this resource pack:

- What are human rights
- Stories of a human rights-based approach



FURTHER READING

Community Programme 2022-2025

The British Institute of Human Rights' programme strengthening the ability of organisations to use human rights in their social justice work

The Route to a Better UK

Just Fair's 5 Principles of Economic, Social and Cultural Justice in the UK

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