

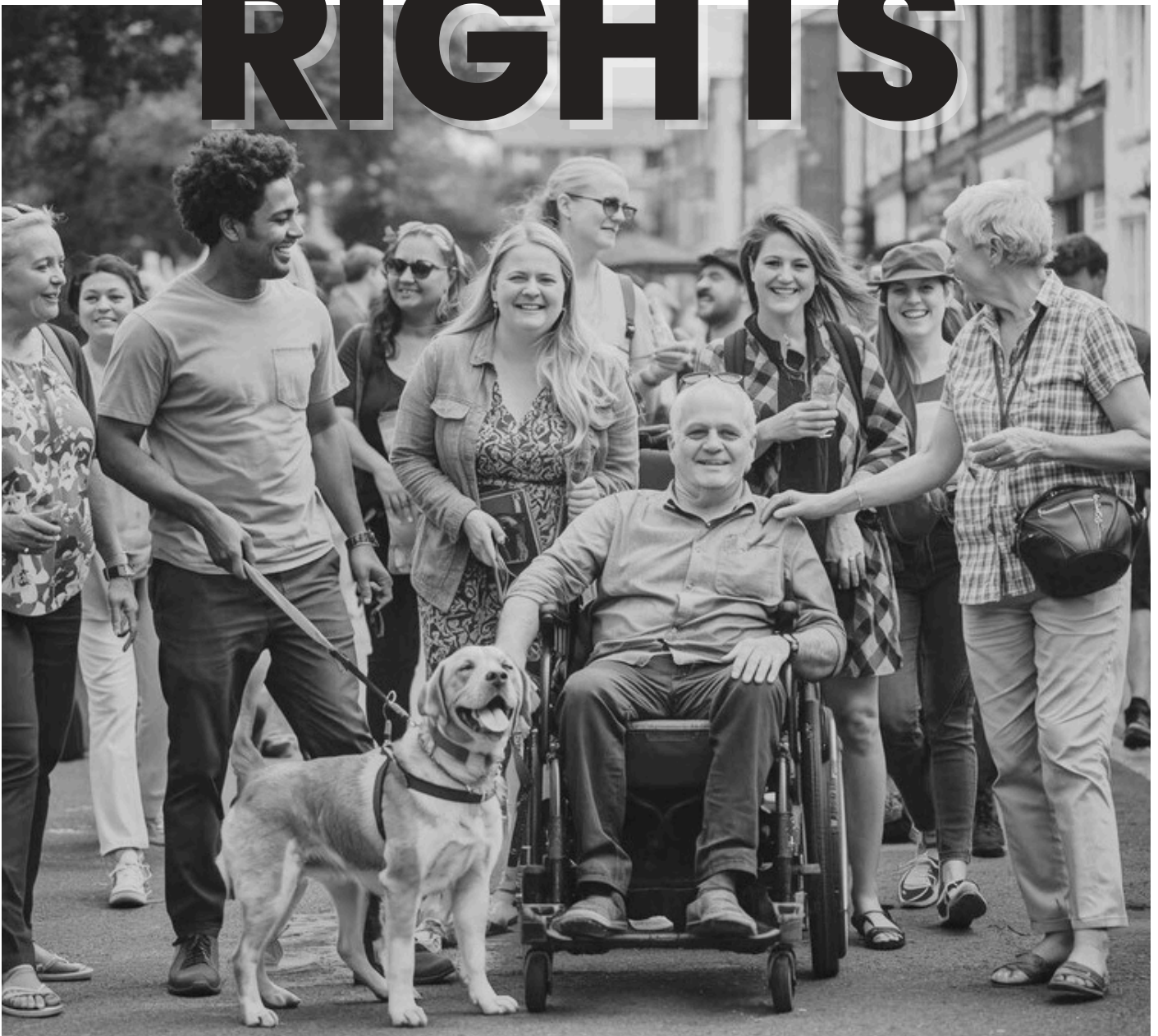
THE ECHR 75TH ANNIVERSARY ZINE

WHY OUR HUMAN RIGHTS
LAWS MATTER

THE EUROPEAN
CONVENTION ON HUMAN
RIGHTS EXPLAINED

REAL-LIFE STORIES OF
HUMAN RIGHTS IN ACTION

HUMAN RIGHTS



NOVEMBER 2025

The British Institute
of Human Rights 

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“75 YEARS ON, THE PROMISE OF HUMAN RIGHTS STILL BELONGS TO ALL OF US, AND IT’S OURS TO KEEP ALIVE.”

Welcome from the Editor

75 years ago, out of the wreckage of war, people across Europe – communities, lawyers, campaigners, and governments – came together to make a promise: that every person matters, and that power must always be accountable to the people it serves. From that promise came the European Convention on Human Rights, and later the Human Rights Act, laws that belong not to governments, but to each and every one of us.

This Zine is a celebration of that shared promise. It tells the stories that too often go unheard. Young people finding freedom in restrictive hospital wards. Refugees rebuilding their lives. Communities in Scotland finding hope after years of indignity. Families holding the state to account for racial injustice. The people of Northern Ireland holding on to peace. And much more.

There can be no doubt we live in divided and worrying times. Yet it is exactly in moments like these that human rights matter most. When compassion is tested, and trust is fragile, fairness and justice must be defended not as an ideal, but as a daily practice, and that’s what universal, legally grounded human rights give us.

As we mark 75 years of the ECHR and 25 of our HRA, we celebrate what they’ve made possible, and must commit, together, to keeping their spirit alive in every act of everyday justice.

Sanchita Hazari

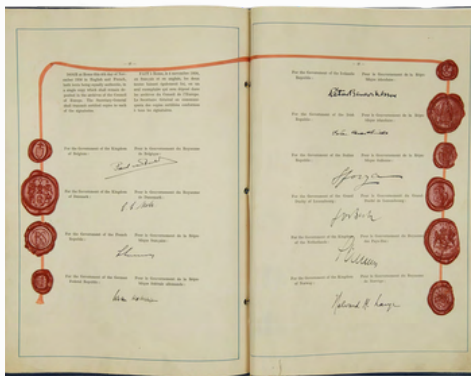
CEO, The British Institute of Human Rights

75 YEARS OF THE ECHR & HRA SHAPING OUR EVERYDAY LIVES

As we mark 75 years of the European Convention on Human Rights, this isn't just a moment to look back, it's also about recognising that human rights shape our present – quietly, powerfully, every day. Whether it's a hospital policy, a housing decision, or a police encounter, your human rights are always with you.



BIHR community human rights training event with Cwm Taf People First © British Institute of Human Rights



The original signed European Convention on Human Rights © ECHR-CEDH Council of Europe



The Hall of Knights at the Europa Congress in The Hague, May 1948 © Wikimedia Commons

A Human Rights Trailblazer

Seventy-five years ago, fresh from the devastation of a world war, leaders and communities across Europe came together to make a promise: never again. The result was the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), a powerful international law designed to protect everyone's basic rights across the continent, from freedom of expression to the right

to a fair trial.

And here's something many people don't realise: the UK helped write it. British figures like former Prime Minister Winston Churchill and Home Secretary David Maxwell Fyfe were central to shaping the Convention, pushing for a system where governments could be held to account if they crossed the line. This wasn't just about law, it was about building a fairer, safer society,



BIHR London Human Rights Fest Community Learning Day © British Institute of Human Rights

championed not just by countries but social movements across the continent.

Bringing Rights Home: The Human Rights Act

In the decades that followed, if someone in the UK needed a court to review whether their rights had been violated, the case could only go to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, because we had not made access to the rights possible here at home. That could take years, often five years or more, and require funding.

OUR CONVENTION RIGHTS, BROUGHT INTO THE UK IN THE HUMAN RIGHTS ACT AREN'T SIMPLY ABOUT COURTROOMS, THEY ARE FOR PATIENTS, PARENTS, CARERS, TENANTS, STUDENTS; FOR ALL OF US.

In 1998, that changed. Parliament passed the Human Rights Act (HRA), taking the ECHR rights and making them part of everyday UK law. That meant people could rely on their rights here at home, in their local courts, hospitals, schools and councils. The HRA passed through parliament with cross-party backing, a time of collective commitment to human rights across the political spectrum.

So What Does This Actually Mean?

The Human Rights Act isn't just about big court cases or abstract principles — it's built into the everyday decisions that shape our lives. It places a clear legal duty on all public bodies – from central government ministers to local councils, NHS staff, schools, police and even your GP – to respect, protect and fulfil human rights in everything they do. This applies when

Quick Facts: The HRA in Action

- **Introduced:** By parliament in 1998, law came into effect from 2000.
- **Purpose:** To make ECHR rights directly accessible to people at home.
- **Impact:** Allows people to use their rights to challenge decisions by public bodies, without needing to go to Strasbourg.

policies are made, when services are delivered, and when individual decisions are taken about people's lives.

In healthcare, patients and families have used the HRA to challenge 'do not resuscitate' orders that were placed on disabled people without their consent. In care homes, the right to family life helped people be with loved ones during strict visiting restrictions. For people with mental health needs the law has enabled challenges of restraints and solitary confinement-like conditions in hospital. None of these were big court cases. Rather this is the everyday work of people using the language of rights to ask more powerful questions, challenge decisions, and do things differently, for the better.

Of course, these duties aren't always well known or consistently met, and rights aren't always upheld in practice. That's a question of implementation, not of whether the law itself matters. The Human Rights Act provides the framework and the tools. The challenge is making sure they're used as intended, so that rights are built into everyday decision-making rather than left on the sidelines.

Fewer Cases Abroad, More Justice at Home

Before the HRA, hundreds of UK cases ended up at the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg. Since the Human Rights Act, that number has dropped dramatically. Why?

Because people can sort things here. Public bodies have to respect human rights from the start, and individuals can

challenge decisions early, before they escalate.

In 2023, for example, the European Court of Human Rights made only one finding against the UK - a huge drop compared to decades past. That's a sign that the system here is working better.

Quick Facts: The UK at the European Court of Human Rights

- Joined: 1953 (one of the first signatories to the ECHR)
- Total UK judgments (1959–2021): 563
- Judgments finding a UK violation: 327
- Cases against the UK are declining: In 2023, only 61 new applications were made to the Court.
- Only 1 violation found in 2023, a major drop compared to earlier decades.
- Why fewer cases now? The Human Rights Act 1998 means people can raise human rights issues in UK courts, so fewer cases need to go to Strasbourg.
- UK's record today: Among the lowest numbers of violations in the Council of Europe.

Why This Matters Now

As debates about the future of the ECHR and the Human Rights Act continue, it's worth remembering what they actually give us: a safety net of basic rights for everyone. A way to challenge unfairness, not just in courts, but in daily decisions that affect our health, families, and dignity. A shared promise, rooted in the UK's own history, that everyone matters.

The ECHR isn't just a legal document sitting in Strasbourg. It's part of the fabric of how we expect to be treated — at work, in hospitals, by councils, by the police, by the state. ✓

The Quiet Architecture of Peace: 75 Years of the ECHR in Northern Ireland

KEVIN HANRATTY
HUMAN RIGHTS CONSORTIUM

In 1998, I was a 20-year-old undergraduate at Queen's University. Like many others my age, I was both excited and anxious about the possibility that the local peace talks might finally deliver a settlement to permanently end the violence that had defined our childhoods.

After the initial euphoria of the multi-party talks reaching agreement on 10 April, every household in Northern Ireland received a copy of the Belfast Agreement, quickly and understandably dubbed the Good Friday Agreement. As our family read through the document, its now-iconic cover showing a silhouetted family against a sunset, one line from the opening pages struck me:



“ *The tragedies of the past have left a deep and profoundly regrettable legacy of suffering. We must never forget those who have died or been injured, and their families. But we can best honour them through a fresh start, in which we firmly dedicate ourselves to the achievement of reconciliation, tolerance, and mutual trust, and to the protection and vindication of the human rights of all.* ”

Among the many choices that shaped the Agreement, the decision to place human rights

protections at the heart of our post-conflict society was perhaps the most visionary.

While most people associate the Good Friday Agreement with the end of violence and the creation of power-sharing institutions at Stormont, these visible outcomes were made possible by a quieter, foundational architecture, one built on human rights. Chief among these was the incorporation of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR).

The ECHR, born from Europe's determination to prevent the horrors of war and authoritarianism from recurring, became especially relevant during the Troubles. With widespread rights violations and deep mistrust in domestic institutions, the Convention offered a route to justice and became a beacon for those seeking accountability.

But it was during the peace process that the ECHR truly came into its own. The Agreement didn't just create new political structures, it embedded safeguards to ensure they would function fairly and inclusively. Incorporating the ECHR into domestic law through the Human Rights Act 1998 was one of the most significant confidence-building measures of the entire process.

This wasn't symbolic. It was a direct response to the fears held by both communities. Unionists worried about power being shared with nationalists, some of whom had links to paramilitary groups and little loyalty to the UK. Nationalists, meanwhile, were wary of unionism regaining control locally, given the discrimination and abuses they had endured under the old Stormont regime.

The Agreement recognised these concerns and built in what it called "safeguards" to ensure the institutions would work effectively. The first of these safeguards was the ECHR. Its incorporation gave people a sense of security, that no matter the compromises

made for peace, their rights would not be sacrificed. It reassured citizens that power, once feared, would now be constrained by law.

In the 25 years since, progress on expanding rights through a promised Bill of Rights has stalled. The Assembly and Executive remain divided on issues of rights and equality, with no major human rights legislation passed to date. Yet the ECHR and Human Rights Act have endured. They remain as relevant and necessary today as they were in 1998. As the quiet architecture propping up our peace.

When I voted in the 1998 referendum to approve the Good Friday Agreement, I like so many others, voted for change. For progress rooted in the rule of law, and an end to the lawlessness and murder that had scarred our lives. At 20, we believed we were helping to build something monumental, noble in its ambition and epic in its scale. None of us could have imagined that such a hard-won achievement might one day be considered expendable. The hopes and fears of our generation rested heavily on commitments like the ECHR. To remove it now would betray that trust, and that vote. Those 20-year-olds, and many more beyond, still hold fast to the vision of a fairer, more just and equal society. We still believe in the promise to "protect and vindicate the human rights of all", not just some. ✍



Let us not dishonour the legacy of suffering that made peace possible. Let us honour the ECHR and the peace it helped secure, by protecting it, cherishing it, and celebrating its enduring role in our shared future.

HUMAN RIGHTS LAW FOR ALL

Mobilising Communities for Justice



Laura Dalton is the Programme Lead for Anchors and Special Initiatives at the AB

Charitable Trust, an independent grant-making organisation founded in 1990 to champion human dignity and support the most marginalised and excluded groups in the UK.

Why does our Human Rights Act and ECHR protections matter? Reflecting on the current moment, this feels like the wrong question to ask. I work for a funder dedicated to protecting and promoting human rights and human dignity. A belief in human rights

underpinned the founding of the organisation and continues to guide our work. On an individual level it has been a thread throughout my career. So, it might seem strange to suggest this question didn't feel like the right question.

The fact is that recently I have been grappling with what it means to work for a human rights funder, and to hold onto these beliefs around human rights. We live in highly polarised times, and large parts of the public – and the communities our funding aims to reach – don't see the importance or relevance of human rights in their day-to-day lives ([Britons split on whether human rights abuse in the UK is a problem | Ipsos](#)). While designed to unify (every human being is born free and equal in dignity and rights), they can be seen to enhance division – a tool for some and not others.

Against this backdrop, I think we need to pay more attention to work which sits outside the legal framework. We have been living through significant

instability as a country – communities across the UK are feeling the repercussions of austerity and increased costs of living. [More In Common](#) research points to feelings of a ‘decline of associational life’, at a time when the online space has been amplified. We are becoming more divided and polarised. This is evident in [Hope Not Hate’s research](#) around what makes a resilient town.

Within this context, what role do human rights have? For many, human rights feel far removed from their day-to-day reality. They can be perceived as an elitist framework – something abstract, technical, or inaccessible – rather than a living tool that can make a difference in people’s everyday struggles for housing, healthcare, or education. Philanthropy itself is not immune to these criticisms – as a London-based funder focused on human rights, we can also be seen as being in a bubble and not in tune with the realities of people’s lives outside London.

At a time where we can see rising and emboldened hatred and discrimination, how can we get to a place where communities have meaningful tools to come together against division, and demand better of the state? How do we mobilise communities to recognise and push back against scapegoating and turn attention to the real drivers of

injustice? How can this work be resourced in a localised way to have impact nationally? And what is the role of rights – or human rights specifically – within this context?

Human rights by design are a safeguard against state power. They are a mechanism to hold the state to account, but also a tool to push for better. They are a legal means through which people can achieve justice – a way for ordinary people to be safeguarded against injustice. Human rights, alongside a healthy and functioning democracy and meaningful access to justice, are essential foundations for communities that are not just surviving but have the potential to thrive.

But human rights law cannot reach its full potential if it remains primarily a tool for elites, experts, or institutions. Human rights don’t exist in isolation, and we cannot continue with a top-down approach based on the assumption that rights are self-evident or automatically understood. Human rights only fulfil their promise when they are accessible and usable by everyone – when they have tangible impact in our everyday lives. Rights are universal, and they should be universally accessible, universally held, and universally enforceable. They matter when we practice and democratise them – when people can see, feel, and use the rights they have in their everyday lives, across every community in the UK. ✓



As a funder, we should be supporting communities to mobilise, to use their rights, to demand better – not just for a few, but for all. But this can’t happen in isolation. Human rights must be interconnected with movements for justice, built into the culture of local organising and practice. They must sit alongside community investment and be a part of broader movements for social justice.

WOVEN TOGETHER BY RIGHTS

16 human rights,
stitched into
the fabric of
our shared
society.



From our homes to
our hospitals, from
our courts, our
councils to our
classrooms -
our human rights
shape who we are.

**Golden threads that hold us together.
Pull one loose, and the fabric begins to fray.
Find out more bihr.org.uk/get-informed.**

YOU CAN'T PUT THE GENIE BACK IN THE BOTTLE

An interview with Imran Khan KC, leading state accountability and racial justice lawyer, and Chair of BIHR, on 75 years of the ECHR and transformative power of human rights.



As the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) marks its 75th anniversary, it's a moment to reflect not only on its legal history but also on its real-world impact. For Imran Khan KC, one of the UK's leading human rights lawyers and racial justice advocates, the ECHR and the Human Rights Act (HRA) have been transformative, embedding fairness, accountability, and racial justice into the heart of the legal system.

In this interview, Khan reflects on why human rights protections matter to everyone in the UK, how they've reshaped justice for families, forced authorities to confront racism, and why their legacy is now part of British society...

From Limitations to Positive Rights

Khan remembers life before the HRA. "We knew what we couldn't do, rather than being able to positively assert rights," he explains. Early in his career, he worked on

inquests – often pro bono – for families who had lost loved ones in hospitals, police custody, and prisons. "Before the HRA, you couldn't point to a positive law setting out your rights."

The HRA changed that. Bringing the ECHR into UK law, he says, was "a complete transformation. At the most critical moment, when a person's life has been lost, you can now say you have the right to know what happened, who caused it, and how to prevent it. The law now tells us what our rights are; it's a positive assertion."

Transforming Grief into Accountability

When families lose a loved one in state custody, justice often begins where criminal law ends. For the family of teenage

Zahid Mubarek, murdered by a racist cellmate in 2000, the Convention right to life, made accessible under the HRA, was crucial.

“They needed to know why their child was not kept safe,” Khan recalls. The HRA meant the state had a duty to protect. “Those few words allowed us to call for a public inquiry; to not only find out what happened but to prevent future harm to others in state care.”

Their case reached the highest court. Lord Bingham emphasised that families must be told what went wrong, and society must learn to prevent recurrence. “The Human Rights Act is about more than individual rights; it’s about making society better for the future. You can’t pick and choose which rights you want—it’s a package, and you’ve got to take it all.”

Case Spotlight: Zahid Mubarek

19-year-old Zahid Mubarek’s family relied on the HRA to secure a public inquiry into systemic failings in the prison service, establishing a landmark precedent for racial justice and state accountability.

Universal Values, British Ideals

“Why would anybody not support values that are good for everyone?” Khan asks. “These are universal ideals. People need to understand that these are rights we all have.”

Stephen Lawrence, an 18-year-old Black teenager, was tragically murdered in a racially motivated attack in 1993 while waiting for a bus in South London. His case saw significant failings including police incompetence, systemic racism,

mishandling of evidence, and a failure to pursue justice effectively, which ultimately delayed accountability for his murder. Because this was before the HRA was enacted, his family had to rely on political will to secure an inquiry.

For Khan, taking on the Lawrence family’s case was a seminal moment starkly highlighting the profound lack of accountability in our state systems and the urgent need for legal tools to hold those in power accountable for their actions. Khan highlights the significance of the Macpherson Report and the Lawrence Inquiry, both of which exposed systemic racism within the police force and prompted vital reforms.

Bringing the ECHR into UK law has since allowed families to demand justice as a matter of right, embedding accountability into the legal system. “The ECHR and HRA are a force for good. If there’s anything British, it’s fairness and justice, and the human rights that the ECHR encapsulates reflect that ethos.”

Moments of Change

Khan highlights the stark difference human rights make. Loraine Whiting died before the HRA, with police failing to protect her from abuse; her family had no legal recourse and were even pursued for costs. Compare that with the Mubarek family who could raise a legal right to accountability. But as his work with the Lawrence family so starkly revealed, “before the HRA, we had to go begging bowl in hand, to the Home Secretary. There was no right to life empowering us to demand accountability as a matter of law.”

This won't be easily unravelled

"You can't put the genie back in the bottle. The transformation is out there, it's part of our fabric," Khan says. Taking away established rights, he warns, would be deeply painful. "As my clients often remind me, losing something is much more painful than never having had it. With human rights, we've had it; and it's going to be bloody painful when it's gone."

Since the Second World War, human rights have become intertwined with British society, shaping our today and the future. "You can't remove British values from ECHR values and universal values. Our outlook has changed. We now speak a language imbued with human rights – and that can't just be taken away." ✍



The European Court of Human Rights
© ECHR – CEDH Council of Europe

5 POWERFUL CASES

FROM THE EUROPEAN COURT OF HUMAN RIGHTS DELIVERING JUSTICE, DIGNITY & EQUALITY FOR PEOPLE ACROSS THE UK

The European Convention on Human Rights' (ECHR) impact is felt in lives everyday here in the UK. Time and again, it's given people from all walks of life the power to challenge injustice and hold the Government of the day to account.

From children failed by social services to people with mental health needs, families fighting for fair treatment to journalists determined to uncover the truth; the ECHR has been a quiet but powerful force for good in the UK.

Read on for five landmark cases that show exactly why this legal safety net is worth celebrating and championing.

Protecting Children from Neglect



Five-year-old Zara (Z) and her siblings endured years of neglect and abuse. It began with a referral to social services after teachers raised concerns about her stealing food. Over the next four and a half years, police repeatedly found their rooms filthy with urine-soaked mattresses. The children were eating from school bins and turning up with bruises.

Eventually, they were placed in emergency foster care after their mother threatened to “batter” them. But when their case went to the UK courts, it failed. At the time (before the Human Rights Act), local authorities couldn’t be held liable in negligence for child welfare decisions.

Their only hope for accountability was the European Court of Human Rights. The Court ruled that the UK’s failure to act

violated Article 3 of the Convention, which prohibits inhuman or degrading treatment. This judgment transformed child protection in the UK, making clear the state has a positive duty to protect vulnerable children.

Upholding Dignity for People with Mental Health Needs



Martin (MS) was a young man with serious mental health challenges. After a crisis episode, he assaulted his aunt and was taken to a police station. Doctors quickly assessed that he was not fit to be interviewed and needed hospital admission for his own safety and that of others. But instead of being transferred to a medical facility, Martin was left in a police cell.

What was meant to be temporary turned into four days, exceeding the statutory 72-hour limit. During this time, Martin received no medical care.

He was so distressed that he was rocking, banging his head, screaming, and covering himself in food and faeces.

The European Court of Human Rights ruled that this breached Article 3, Martin’s right to not be treated in inhuman and degrading ways. The Court made it clear that mental health is not an afterthought; people in crisis must be treated with dignity, not neglect. This case has since become a powerful tool in work across the UK to push for better mental health crisis responses and genuine places of safety.

Defending Press Freedom



In the 1960s, the drug thalidomide was prescribed to pregnant women, resulting in hundreds of babies born with severe limb deformities and disabilities. Families were left searching for answers. A decade later, legal

battles dragged on while the pharmaceutical company quietly settled cases out of the spotlight.

The Sunday Times uncovered evidence suggesting the company had known more than it admitted. When the paper prepared to publish, the UK government secured an injunction to block the story, claiming it could prejudice ongoing cases. The journalists refused to back down, arguing the public had a right to know what they'd discovered.

The case went to the European Court of Human Rights. Judges ruled the injunction breached Article 10, our right to freedom of expression. This was a watershed moment for press freedom in the UK, protecting the public's right to know and holding power to account. Without the ECHR, one of Britain's biggest public health scandals might never have come fully to light.

Challenging Unfair Bedroom Tax

Anna (A) survived years of domestic violence, eventually finding safety with her child. They lived in



a "sanctuary scheme". property, a home specially adapted with reinforced doors, a panic space, and security measures so she could remain safe rather than relocate. But when the Government introduced the "bedroom tax", Anna was told she'd have to pay extra because she had a "spare" bedroom. In reality, this room wasn't spare at all, it was part of the safety plan agreed with the police and her local authority to keep her and her child safe if needed.

Anna challenged the decision through the UK courts and eventually had to go to the European Court of Human Rights. The Court decided that Anna's rights to non-discrimination (Article 14) and protection of property (Article 1 of Protocol 1) had been breached. The bedroom tax policy failed to properly protect women affected by domestic violence, who were disproportionately impacted by the rules.

This was a landmark win for survivors' rights. Following the case the UK Government recognised that a one-size-fits-all policy can have discriminatory impacts. The rules to the bedroom tax policy were changed to ensure survivors like Anna were not penalised.

Respecting Families in Medical Decisions



12-year-old David, who had significant learning disabilities and serious health conditions, became critically ill. Doctors decided to give him diamorphine, a powerful painkiller, and to withhold further life-sustaining treatment. His mother, Carol, fiercely disagreed; she wanted every possible step taken to keep her son alive.

Despite her objections, doctors went ahead. Carol sought an urgent order from the UK courts to stop the treatment, but by the time a response came, the

intervention had already happened. Refusing to accept that her voice could be ignored in such a life-or-death decision, Carol took the case to the European Court of Human Rights. She argued that David's Article 8 right to respect for private and family life had been breached.

The Court agreed. It ruled that the hospital should have sought legal authorisation before overriding the mother's wishes, and that failing to do so breached their rights. This case reinforced the importance of families being heard in critical care situations, and how the UK medical community should approach such decisions.

Why These Cases Still Matter

These stories aren't relics of the past. They show the real impact of the ECHR on people's lives here in the UK — protecting children, defending disabled people's rights, safeguarding families, and holding power to account.

The Convention sets standards for government action and provides people with a vital route to justice when national systems fall short. And

sometimes, its impact is literally lifesaving: in 2022, the ECtHR intervened to protect Shaun Pinner and Aiden Aslin, two British citizens in Ukraine facing the death penalty.

As debates about the UK's relationship with the ECHR continue, these cases remind us what's at stake. For 75 years, the ECHR has safeguarded rights, strengthened accountability, and helped make the UK a fairer place. ✓

The Legal Cases:

- [Z v UK \(2001\)](#) | A landmark for child protection
- [MS v UK \(2012\)](#) | Dignity in mental health care
- [Sunday Times v UK \(1979\)](#) | Defending press freedom
- [A v UK \(2019\)](#) | Challenging unfair bedroom tax
- [Glass v UK \(2004\)](#) | Respecting families in medical decisions
- [Pinner & Aslin v Russia and UK \(2022\)](#) | Life-saving measures for Britons abroad.

Human Rights. Made Clear.

Want to understand your rights in everyday life?

Head to Get Informed at bihr.org.uk/get-informed

Quick, clear guides on the Human Rights Act, European Convention on Human Rights.

Real stories. Accessible information. Practical resources.

KNOW YOUR RIGHTS. USE YOUR RIGHTS.

bihr.org.uk/get-informed

Illuminating Public Services with Human Rights: A Guiding Light

We all have a set of rights protected by law – like the right to life, freedom from torture, and the right to privacy. These rights apply to everyone in the UK, no matter who they are. Public authorities, like the NHS, the police, and local councils, have a legal duty to respect and protect these rights in everything they do.

NHS staff member

Human rights aren't just for courts or lawyers – they're for everyday life and for helping make sure we treat people fairly and respectfully, whether we're at work, at home, or out in the community.

NHS staff member

Join us in championing human rights here at home. Together, we can transform public services, ensuring that every person's human rights are upheld and celebrated.
bihr.org.uk/human-rights-training

Real quotes from BIHR's work with public services

THE HIDDEN CURRICULUM:

Discovering Freedom and Dignity in Mental Health Care



Illustration by Hanna Gawron



Hanna Gawron is a lived experience expert with BIHR. She has developed and delivered human rights training for NHS staff working in child and adolescent mental health services, drawing on her own experiences of mental health treatment and her work as an assistant psychologist. A recent Neuroscience and Psychology graduate, Hanna currently works in a school's Special Educational Needs and Disabilities department and hopes to pursue a career in clinical psychology. Outside of work, she is also a competitive synchronised figure skater.

When you're in hospital for your mental health, it can feel like your world shrinks; your choices, your freedom, even your sense of who you are. At the time, I didn't realise the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) quietly protected those small but vital pieces of humanity: my right to learn, express myself, and make decisions about my future.

I'm Hanna, and I recently completed my degree in Neuroscience and Psychology. Along the way, I worked in a frontline mental health service, carried out psychological research, and now hope to pursue a career in clinical psychology. It may therefore come as a surprise to read that I spent many of my teenage years in and out of hospital, therapy, and community treatment because of my mental health. Although my journey had its ups and downs, the protection of my rights, particularly my rights to education, liberty, and freedom of expression, meant that my time in hospital wasn't purely about being contained or 'fixed', but became a time of real growth and self-discovery.

These experiences gave me immense confidence that the ECHR plays a vital role in respecting individuals' rights, autonomy and dignity – especially at times when it may feel as though these have been taken away.

Spending time in an adolescent mental health unit brings many challenges. While there are memories I've chosen to block out, the positive individuals who showed genuine care have stayed with me. Yet, I didn't always want to leave. I was caught in limbo – hating where I was but fearing a return to “normal” life.

Before my admission, school had already started to feel foreign to me. I didn't share the other kids' desire to mingle and chat during break and lunch. The environment felt wrong – noisy, unpredictable, exhausting – and I struggled to focus during lessons. By the time I was admitted, I was utterly drained by trying to fit in and keep up. School, which should have been a place of learning and connection, had become a source of anxiety and isolation.

This is where my right to education truly mattered.

Learning whilst in hospital played a crucial role in getting me where I am today, and made returning to mainstream school that bit less overwhelming. Even on days when I didn't have the capacity to study, having a school environment nearby provided a sense of purpose and normality.



Our human rights are not a luxury but a necessity protected by law. They are what allowed me to go from being detained under the Mental Health Act to completing a degree and looking forward to a career I'm passionate about. My story is just one example of how these protections change lives every day. Human rights aren't abstract laws, they are what turn dignity, choice, and opportunity into reality for us all.

It offered structure, connection, and a reminder that there was more ahead than the hospital walls allowed me to imagine. Although I fell behind and ended up taking my A-levels later than my peers, learning helped me feel that the world wasn't moving on without me. When I couldn't attend the hospital school, teachers often came to the ward to work with me. While I wasn't always up for it, both ward and school staff gently but consistently encouraged engagement during school hours, helping keep some routine in a time that often felt unpredictable. They treated us like any other teenagers, offering not just lessons but moments of purpose, progress, and hope for the future.

During my admission, I was also diagnosed with ADHD and autism, which finally put so many of my earlier struggles into perspective. It meant that when the time came to return to school, I was offered more tailored support, and crucially, I began to understand myself better. My hospital and main schools worked closely together, planning my transition and keeping me connected with lessons. My SENDCo (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Coordinator) arranged a gradual reintegration with quiet spaces, regular check-ins, and flexibility to help me succeed. I was even allowed to restart sixth form two years after my original peer group, giving me a much-needed reset and the opportunity to change my A-level subjects. It wasn't a typical path, but it was my choice and that respect for autonomy made all the difference. ✓



A PLACE TO CALL HOME

Human rights are protecting people's housing in Scotland

Home means safety. Stability. A place to breathe. But for some renters, that security can vanish overnight when eviction looms. In this article, Amy McGilp from Legal Services Agency (LSA) in Scotland shares how the charity is using the European Convention on Human Rights, through the UK's Human Rights Act, to challenge unfair evictions – keeping families in their homes and preventing homelessness ...



The HRA has made it possible for LSA to challenge evictions on human rights grounds – helping individuals and families remain in their homes and avoid becoming homeless. In Scotland, registered social landlords can usually only evict a tenant if they can prove to the court that doing so would be reasonable.

However, tenants who are convicted of criminal offences face much greater difficulty challenging an eviction, due to the “streamlined” eviction process. This process removes the court’s duty to consider the reasonableness of the eviction. If the eviction ground is proven, the law says the court must evict, no matter what or when the offence was, no matter the impact on the person, their children or family.

But human rights law provides a vital safeguard in the form of Article 8 of the ECHR – which protects the right to respect for private and family life. It means decision-makers and the courts must look beyond the black-and-white, and ask would this eviction be disproportionate? What impact will it have on this person, their children, their family, balanced against the landlord’s reasons for seeking it.

At LSA, we’ve used these protections to stop evictions that would have pushed families into homelessness. In one case, a single mother with young children faced losing her home under the streamlined procedure. We argued that eviction would be a disproportionate interference with her and her children’s right to family life. Before the case even reached the courtroom, our team successfully negotiated with the landlord to offer a Short Scottish Secure Tenancy, with the assurance it would revert to a Scottish Secure Tenancy after 12 months. That agreement meant the family could stay together in their home.

This case – and many others we help at LSA – are very human reminders of the positive, real-world impact of the HRA and ECHR in housing. Our human rights laws help ensure fair and compassionate outcomes that secure families’ homes. ✓

HUMAN RIGHTS ARE ABOUT WHO WE ARE

AN INTERVIEW WITH ENVER SOLOMON



Enver joined the Refugee Council as Chief Executive in December 2020, following nearly three years as CEO of [Just for Kids Law](#). Prior to working in the voluntary sector he was a BBC journalist for ten years. Enver is proud to be the first CEO in the organisation's 70 year history who is from a black and minority ethnic background. He enjoys cycling, camping and generally getting out into the British countryside. Enver was named [Charity CEO of the year at the Charity Times Awards 2023](#).

Why is it essential for everyone in the UK to understand and engage with the ECHR and HRA?

Well, I think it's easily forgotten that these are actually about how we treat people — how we treat people fairly, with dignity, and ensure they're safe and that their humanity, if you like, is respected. I think these are values that go to the heart of who we are as a nation.

We have a reputation as being a nation that's tolerant, that treats people with dignity, that doesn't ride roughshod over people's rights, and that respects each other. This is no different for those who come to our country as refugees fleeing horrendous wars and persecution, such as the brutal civil war in Sudan today.

It means that when they come knocking on our door asking for safety — as we've done for generations — we listen to them,

respect their experience, understand what they've been through, and give them the opportunity of a fair hearing. That right to have their case heard is the same as any of us would expect if we were stopped by the police tomorrow — to be listened to, to have our rights, and to have what we've got to say, heard. It's no different for someone who's coming here seeking safety from a war-ravaged country or from persecution and torture.

Can you share a story that shows the transformative power of the ECHR and/or HRA?

This is Olena's story. She fled Ukraine with her young daughter in 2022, seeking safety in the UK after Russia's invasion. We allowed her to come; we gave her safety; we respected her right to be free of war, to be free of the potential risk of torture and what's known as inhumane treatment.

We welcomed her into the UK, and she did something quite remarkable. On a project that we run at the Refugee Council with the NHS called “Building Bridges”, Olena went on to retrain as a doctor. She was already a trained medic in Ukraine, but she had to requalify in the UK, and she went on to contribute as a medic in the NHS, and is doing that today.

The Human Rights Act guarantees the right to safety, dignity and the opportunity to rebuild your life. Olena’s journey reflects that. With support, she improved her English, secured a role in clinical research and has now returned to frontline medicine. Human rights laws are the reason people like Olena can find safety, rebuild their careers and contribute to our NHS.

“The Human Rights Act guarantees the right to safety, dignity and the opportunity to rebuild your life.”

What is something you think everyone should know or understand about the ECHR or HRA?

I think it's really important for everyone to know that these are laws that protect us all. I've worked in my career with children who've been stopped and searched by the police. What these laws do is mean that those children can be protected – that the police can't simply throw them into a police station, lock them up, and throw away the key.

I've worked with disabled people, and what these laws mean is that disabled people have access to the things we might take for granted for example, having adjustments in the workplace.

On a very practical level, it means things like the horrendous Hillsborough incident, the victims involved in that had their rights protected. These laws are woven into who we are as a country. In my own work at the Refugee Council, it's very much about: if someone comes knocking on our door as a refugee, we listen to them, we give them a fair hearing. That principle of fairness and respecting another person's experience is at the heart of who we are as a country.

“These laws are about Britain. They're about our values, our principles, and they reflect that in what they put into law to ensure that we tolerate and respect each other.”

What message of hope for the future of human rights protections in the UK do you want to share?

I think it's important to send a message that this is about who we are. This is about how we treat each other. The values of fairness, dignity and compassion that underpin the HRA and the ECHR are deeply rooted in British society. They are reflected in the way communities welcome refugees and support people rebuilding their lives. It's about us as neighbours, communities coming together.

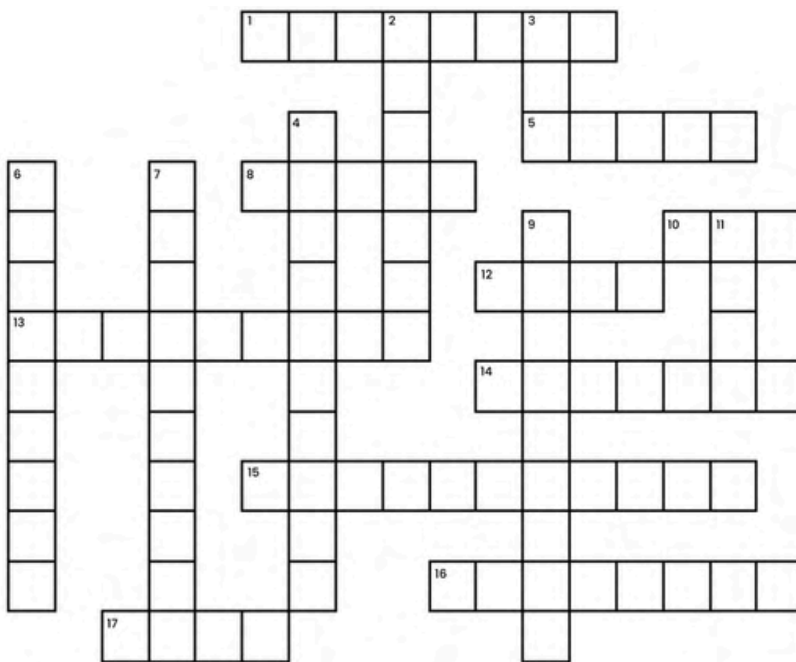
We saw this after the horrendous violence a year ago, when a hotel housing people seeking asylum – where my team worked at the Refugee Council – was firebombed and those individuals in that hotel were almost burned alive. But they had the right to safety. They had the right not to be burned down, not to be burned alive in a hotel and the police rightly protected them.

That is all rooted in human rights principles and human rights protections. The day after what happened at the Rotherham hotel, we saw local people come out from all kinds of backgrounds to clear up, to show their solidarity, to stand up for respecting the rights of those people in the hotel who came to this country seeking asylum.

It's a very powerful story of hope and shows that these rights mean that as communities, we're stronger. As communities, we show solidarity for each other. And as communities, we can do more to protect each other and look after each other. ✓

“
We know the challenges are real but we also know that change is possible. Every time a refugee doctor joins the NHS, every time a child finds safety and support, every time someone is granted asylum and begins to heal, we see the power of human rights in action. The future of these protections depends on all of us. Human rights are not just legal principles, they reflect the kind of country we want to be.”

CROSSWORD



ACROSS

1. Global conflict preceding ECHR, Second _ _ (5,3)
5. Sunday _ newspaper that sought to defend press freedom by taking case to the European Court of Human Rights (5)
8. Parent & _ Alliance, for whom the ECHR and HRA are a shield (5)
10. Abbrev. for each human right, i.e. not section 2, but _ 2 (3)
12. Charity which brought this publication to you (abbrev.) (4)
13. What Charli wants us all to have about human rights (9)
14. The number of ECHR rights brought into UK law in the HRA (7)
- 15 Across (and 9 Down). Sir Nicolas describes 75 years of the ECHR as a moment for _ and _ (11 and 9)
16. The community Tom supports (8)
17. The _ Act which needed to be interpreted compatibly with the HRA in Juan's case (4)

DOWN

2. The right protected by Article 5 (7)
3. The Human Rights _ which brings the ECHR into UK law (3)
4. The UK institution that made the HRA law (10)
6. The right to _ which was so important for Hanna (9)
7. Second of the 3 part test to restrict non-absolute human rights: lawful, _, proportionate (10) (15 Across) and 9. Down. Sir Nicolas describes 75 years of the ECHR as a moment for _ and _ (11 and 9)
11. The _ of law, key to the protection of rights in a democracy (4)

FOR YOUR ANSWERS?
 CLICK ON THIS LINK
 OR SCAN THE QR CODE:





THREE HUMAN RIGHTS ACT CASES THAT CHANGED LIVES

AND OUR SOCIETY FOR THE BETTER

How three moments in the courtroom rippled through hospitals, homes, and police stations — shaping the way we all live, love, and are protected today.

We often think of “human rights” as something distant, a courtroom in Strasbourg, a politician’s soundbite, a debate that doesn’t touch us personally. But the Human Rights Act (HRA) is woven through our daily lives: in hospitals, homes, and even taxis. Three landmark, often little known, cases show just how close to home our rights really are.

In quiet hospital corridors, not just in headlines

When 24-year-old Melanie Rabone was offered home leave from a psychiatric hospital ward, her parents were worried. She’d been admitted after attempting to end her life and was still considered at high risk. Her parents urged staff not to let her go, but as Melanie was a voluntary patient, staff let her leave and did not use their powers to hold her for her own safety. Two days later, Melanie sadly took her own life.

The question her family asked: should the hospital have done more to protect her? The UK’s Supreme Court said yes.

Even though Melanie was a voluntary patient – not detained under the Mental Health Act – the hospital still had a positive duty to protect her Article 2

right to life under the Human Rights Act. A duty which kicks in when there is a known, real and immediate risk to someone’s life.

This judgment changed how healthcare services across the country think about their responsibilities. It confirmed that human rights don’t stop at the hospital door or depend on legal status. They apply wherever professionals have power over people’s safety and wellbeing. A powerful reminder that compassion and accountability are human rights values in action across health and care.

Respecting equality and where we call home

When Juan’s partner, Hugh, passed away, he faced the unthinkable: losing the flat they had shared for years.

Under the Rent Act 1977, only a “spouse” could take over a statutory tenancy after a partner’s death. And in the early 2000s, “spouse” still meant heterosexual.

Juan’s landlord, Mr. Ghaidan, argued that the law was clear: as a same-sex partner, Juan had no right to stay. But the (now) Supreme Court saw it differently. Using Section 3 of the Human Rights Act, they looked at what “spouse” means when looking through the lens of human rights. They considered Articles 8 and 14 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which are made part of our law in the HRA, and protect the rights to home, family life, and freedom from discrimination. Equality, they said, must mean equality.

For Juan, it meant keeping his home, and what he’d built and shared with Hugh. Human rights don’t only appear in grand courtrooms, they show up in our tenancies, our families, our sense of home.

For the rest of us, the ruling quietly showed how the law recognises same-sex relationships — years before equal marriage — and how the Human Rights Act can make existing laws fairer without rewriting them from scratch.

Empowering victims to challenge police failings

You might recall the infamous “black cab rapist” case involving John Worboys, a London taxi driver convicted of multiple sexual assaults and suspected of over 100 attacks. Two of his victims, known as DSD and NBV, didn’t stop at seeking justice against him; they took on the Metropolitan Police failures to properly investigate their reports.

DSD and NBV argued that the police’s negligence was not merely a mistake to overlook but a violation of their Article 3 right under the Human Rights Act (HRA) to be free from inhuman or degrading treatment. The Supreme Court agreed, declaring that the state has a duty to conduct effective investigations into serious crimes.

This landmark ruling was seminal because it fundamentally reshaped the relationship between victims of crime and law enforcement in the UK. Prior to this case, the ability to sue the police for inadequate handling of investigations was limited. Victims often found themselves without the ability to challenge police failings, leaving many unaddressed.

However, this decision established that victims possess human rights that extend beyond mere criminal law protections. It empowered people to hold police accountable, leading to significant changes in police procedures, training, and accountability measures. The ruling sent a clear message: victims are entitled to dignity and effective action when confronting serious crimes.

The Bigger Picture

From hospital wards to housing contracts to police stations, the Human Rights Act is about ordinary people holding power to account. These cases remind us that rights aren’t theoretical; they’re the daily guardrails of justice, fairness, dignity, and safety. ✍

- [Rabone v Pennine Care NHS Foundation Trust \(2012\)](#)
- [Ghaidan v Godin-Mendoza \(2004\)](#)
- [DSD & NBV v Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis \(2018\)](#)

Q&A

WITH CHARLI CLEMENT

Charli Clement is a lived experience advocate working to improve understanding of human rights within psychiatric and community care, especially for autistic people. Through their work, they've seen how the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) and the Human Rights Act (HRA) can transform not only systems, but also individual lives. In this conversation, Charli shares how awareness, education, and curiosity about our rights can make all the difference.



Why should people in the UK care about the European Convention & Human Rights Act?

Most people don't understand that human rights belong to everyone and that they're universal, largely because they're not widely taught. I didn't realise how much they affected my own life and the situations I'd been through until I started working with the charity, BIHR.

Everyone needs the language and knowledge to hold that power within themselves and that applies to everyone in every system. Whether you're accessing a service or you're the public body delivering it,



everyone engages with systems at some point — in healthcare, education, or elsewhere. Having that understanding helps you speak up when something goes wrong, either for yourself or for someone else. Often, certain rights are prioritised by systems even though they're meant to be weighted equally. There's a lot of emphasis on liberty or life, but rights like private and family life, education, or possessions are also just as impactful. They can have just as huge an effect on your life as those that are seen as "bigger" or more important. People need that understanding to truly engage with the systems they're under.

"EVERYONE NEEDS THE LANGUAGE AND KNOWLEDGE TO HOLD THAT POWER WITHIN THEMSELVES."



How have the ECHR & HRA shaped your lived experience work with public services?

A lot of my work is in the psychiatric system and in community care for autistic people, where much of the discrimination and rights breaches we face are linked with ableism and how we're perceived by society. Needing different forms of regulation or communicating differently is often seen as non-compliant or even violent, for example.

In the spaces where I teach — whether in workshops or directly within care, education, or treatment reviews — it's all about helping staff understand that hospital policy isn't the final word if it's breaching human rights. Giving staff the language and knowledge to challenge things internally, as well as empowering service users to understand their rights, is vital.

It's often the smaller things that make the biggest difference. Of course, when there are huge rights breaches, that's extremely serious. But there are also these "paper cuts" of rights breaches — small things that hurt deeply and have a real impact, even if they don't seem major. Those still matter, and they can be deeply traumatic.



What's one thing you wish everyone understood about the ECHR and HRA?

One of the biggest things is understanding the difference between absolute and non-absolute rights. Some rights can never be restricted, but others can — and people sometimes assume that means they have permission to

restrict them. That's not how it works. Restrictions must meet the three-stage test: they have to be lawful, legitimate, and proportionate. All three — not just one or two. People often think, "The law says I can do that," and assume that's enough. But even if it's lawful, it still has to serve a legitimate aim and be proportionate to the person's circumstances.

Proportionality must be individual. Blanket rules are not rights-respecting because they ignore individual needs. I understand that systems are under pressure but applying blanket rules because it's easier or cheaper is never acceptable. Money or staffing is not a justification for restricting everyone's rights.

"MONEY OR STAFFING IS NEVER A JUSTIFICATION FOR RESTRICTING EVERYONE'S RIGHTS."



Have you witnessed a powerful shift in someone's views about the role of human rights law?

Across the programmes we've co-delivered to CAMHS unit staff, we've seen a lot of lightbulb moments. We often get feedback afterwards saying something has changed on a ward — for example, around "no mobile phone" policies, which breach Article 8, the right to private and family life.

Some might see that as a small shift, but for people affected on that ward, it's huge. I experienced that restriction myself, and it was deeply traumatic. So even though it's not a law change or a court case, it still has a profound individual impact.

What we often see is staff beginning to shift their perspective from simply upholding policy to recognising that restriction isn't always the way to support someone's mental health. When they hear from people with lived experience, framed through the lens of human rights, it gives them a new understanding. Change might be gradual, but more and more people are gaining the language and knowledge to reduce harm in difficult situations.

"THEIR PERSPECTIVE SHIFTS FROM SIMPLY UPHOLDING POLICY TO RECOGNISING THAT RESTRICTION ISN'T ALWAYS THE WAY TO SUPPORT SOMEONE'S MENTAL HEALTH."




I want that curiosity to extend to everyone – the general public, but also people in Parliament who make these decisions. Before calling for cuts or changes, I want them to genuinely understand what human rights do for them and why we fought so hard for them.



What would you say to encourage others about the future of human rights in the UK

I want people to be curious about their rights. Even if you're not under the direct authority of a public body – like being in hospital or residential care – you still navigate situations involving your rights all the time, whether it's in healthcare or elsewhere. Curiosity and learning go a long way toward protecting yourself, your family, and your community. ✍



As a fifteen year old in this country, the Human Rights Act has allowed me to grow up free, something that people all over the world don't get currently, we're lucky at the minute, we can't lose that.

YOUNG PERSON SHARED WITH BIHR



“HUMAN RIGHTS ARE OUR SHIELD”

Reflections with Lucy Fullard on Human Rights Empowering Families

For thousands of families across the UK – particularly parents and carers of disabled children – human rights are not abstract principles. They are essential tools for dignity, safety, and justice in everyday life.

Lucy Fullard, a parent carer and founder of the Parent & Carer Alliance in Gloucestershire, has spent years working with families navigating a system that too often ignores, dismisses, or even harms them. In this conversation, Lucy reflects on the transformative power of the European Convention on Human Rights’ protections, brought into UK law via the Human Rights Act, and what this means for parent carers, and why understanding these rights is crucial for creating meaningful change.

“Human rights turn conversations into action.”

Lucy begins by explaining why it’s so important that everyone – especially parents and carers – understand and

engage with their human rights. “Within our community, professional bodies often appear tone deaf to conversations about time scales and legal duties,” she says. “But when you mention the Human Rights Act, there’s suddenly a sense of urgency. It elevates conversations into action.

And in our experience, the impact of inaction becomes clear when you use human rights language.”

For Lucy, framing concerns and poor decision-making by officials through the lens of human rights doesn’t just change how families advocate, it changes how authorities respond.

A turning point: when human rights changed everything

Lucy shares a powerful example from the early days of the Parent & Carer Alliance, which was formed in 2018.

“We were hearing from so many families whose children had complex needs.

Shockingly, some were being accused of fabricating their children's illnesses," Lucy recalls. "We gathered these reports and published a local report that was picked up by BBC Breakfast and Radio 5 Live. Even then, the local authority wasn't listening to the pain and distress their actions were causing."

The group brought in a human rights lawyer to run a conference, explaining how the HRA applied to parent carers in these situations.

"Very, very quickly, the local authority changed its actions. We were even invited to redesign the processes families were put through," Lucy says. "It opened up the potential of a new tool in the toolbox to challenge practices that were causing real harm."



Advocacy support meeting © Parent & Carer Alliance CIC

Reframing harm as a legal wrong

Many families, Lucy explains, have become so used to being ignored that they assume the law won't help them either.

"People feel that their legal rights and timelines don't matter because they're ignored so often. When you mention the Human Rights Act, they believe that won't help them either. But that's just not the case," she says.

"The Human Rights Act belongs to all of us. As parent carers, we need it to be our shield. When parents are ignored, dismissed, or blamed instead of supported; that's not just poor practice. That's a violation of human dignity. The Human Rights Act reframes that silence as a legal wrong, not just an emotional wound that carers have to carry around."

This shift - from emotional plea to legal right - can be transformative, both for individuals and communities.

And in our experience, the impact of inaction becomes clear when you use human rights language."

For Lucy, framing concerns and poor decision-making by officials through the lens of human rights doesn't just change how families advocate, it changes how authorities respond.

One father, one letter, one huge transformation

Lucy recalls a particularly powerful moment working with a father who felt utterly powerless within the system. Through their partnership with the British Institute of Human Rights, the Parent & Carer Alliance created a Human Rights Guide for Parent Carers, including template letters and escalation tools to help families advocate for themselves.

"This dad looked completely lost. He didn't believe sending a letter would make any difference," Lucy remembers. "We supported him to use one of our human rights letters. Honestly, I don't think he expected much. But he sent it."

The outcome was significant. Not only

did the issue, which had dragged on for years, finally shift, but the father also shared his experience on the community's Facebook page.

"That moment wasn't just a win for him," Lucy explains. "It showed the entire community why these tools matter. The more these successes are shared, the more our community can be empowered."

A Better Future Is Possible

Amid the challenges, Lucy remains hopeful.

"Our hope is to continue working with the British Institute of Human Rights. We're starting from scratch - helping families understand their rights, especially those who have been made so vulnerable. Right now, 98% of our community report trauma due to their

interactions with the services that are meant to support them. That cannot continue."

"By empowering people with knowledge of their rights and supporting them to put those rights into practice, we can change that. We can work together to create the change we want to see. For the families behind us, their lives can be better."

Lucy's words are a reminder that the Human Rights Act and the European Convention on Human Rights are not distant legal frameworks; they are living protections. For parent carers, they can mean the difference between silence and action, despair and hope. ✓

— “ “ —
"Human rights are our shield," Lucy says. "And we all deserve to be protected."

STAND UP FOR HUMAN RIGHTS WITH BIHR

The British Institute of Human Rights 

Every day, across the UK, ordinary people face extraordinary challenges: accessing essential care, securing safe housing, protecting their dignity, or simply being heard. At the British Institute of Human Rights we work alongside communities, services, and policymakers to ensure human rights aren't just words on paper, but protections people can rely on.

BUT WE CAN'T DO IT ALONE

A donation today helps us:

- Empower people to understand and use their human rights
- Train frontline workers to deliver fair, respectful services
- Challenge systems that leave people unheard or unsupported
- Create real change in policy and practice across the UK

EVERYONE'S HUMAN RIGHTS MATTER. DONATE TODAY

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COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS: “HUMAN RIGHTS ARE THE ABSOLUTE BASICS THAT WE NEED IN LIFE TO LIVE IN COMFORT AND SAFETY.”

Tom Bennett works at Scottish Recovery Consortium, where he leads their work to develop awareness and understanding of human rights and rights-based approach across Scotland’s lived experience recovery organisations. His keen interest in recovery and human rights, has grown from his career as a Cognitive Behavioural Addiction Therapist in residential rehabilitation, and several years working in Recovery Community Development.

In this Community Conversation Tom chats with fellow Glaswegian, Carlyn Miller, BIHR’s Head of Policy and Programmes ...

Carlyn: Tom, can you tell us about why it’s important for communities to get to grips with the European Convention on Human Rights, and out domestic law the Human Rights Act?

Tom: Well, I think it’s just so important, they offer us the fundamental protections we need to hold those in power – the Government included – to account. These laws give us the essential protections to live a life of dignity and safety, and to be able to live with the minimum requirements of respect. These are the absolute basics we need in life to live in comfort and security. When we don’t know or don’t have an understanding or awareness of our human rights, things can go wrong. We might complain and say, “Oh, this isn’t good enough,” but it’s so much harder to hold organisations to account. When we use human rights language, we can pull the levers of accountability much more effectively. Knowing and understanding our legally protected human rights can really bring about important changes to the way people access support and how they are treated.

“When we use human rights language, we can pull the levers of accountability much more effectively.”

Carlyn: Thanks Tom, building on that do you have a story you can share with our readers on what this transformation using human rights looks like in your community?

Tom: Well, I work with organisations that we call “lived experience recovery organisations”, ones that provide fundamental support for individuals affected by substance use. Knowledge and understanding of the ECHR and HRA within these organisations really empower individuals (and those working within them) to feel like human beings again, where for so long they haven’t, because of the stigma they’ve experienced in their lives. Unfortunately, they often receive substandard care – whether through conscious or subconscious stigma from decision-makers – in treatment planning and in decisions about the resources available to support someone. So, when people start using their knowledge and understanding of the Human Rights Act to challenge the level of care and availability of support, it’s transformative and can bring about real change very quickly.

We’ve seen this in places of

detention and in community support settings where people have been effectively denied appropriate care. When individuals have written polite, friendly letters to service providers, or had informal chats raising concerns about whether duty-bearers are fulfilling their legal duties under the Human Rights Act, change can happen very rapidly indeed. Crucially, this has a positive impact on individuals’ self-confidence and self-esteem, and, as I said earlier, their sense of humanity and belonging in society. I hear stories on a weekly basis of people using human rights law to great effect. For the recovery community, it’s such an important thing to know and understand.

Carlyn: So what is it that everyone needs to know?

Tom: If I could convey one message to everyone at the click of a button, it would be that they have the same human rights as anyone else – no matter their social status, background, or how much money they have.

One of the most common misconceptions I come across is that people whose lives have been affected by substance use or addiction believe they have fewer human rights than others. They come to that conclusion because of how they’ve been treated or denied support. If I could let everyone know that their human rights are not affected by mental health issues, or by turning to substances because of those issues, that would be an incredible message to get across.

When I speak to organisations and communities about the universality of human rights, and the fact that they are just as worthy as anyone else, you can see the change in their faces – the expression, belief, and confidence that comes from that understanding. I’m often challenged on this; people say, “Well, it doesn’t feel like that.” But from a legal point of view, and from the point of view of the duties that public bodies have, their rights are absolutely the same as anyone else’s.

If we all had that awareness, it would really help bring about change, encouraging people to think more often about the legal protections they have under the ECHR and the Human Rights Act.

Carlyn: In your work have you seen people's perspectives on human rights shift?

Tom: Yes. When I'm speaking with groups and communities, I see that quite regularly. In the work I've done with BIHR we've collected many stories where people in recovery communities have learned about their human rights and then used that language to improve things for others.

I remember one participant on our programme who wasn't initially full of belief or confidence in the power of this work. He was visiting a person in police custody – a place of detention – who had been denied medical attention and was experiencing severe opiate withdrawal. The participant spoke to the custody sergeant and raised his concern that the lack of medical attention might not be in line with the person's human rights protections. That person had been in the cell for two or three days, and he was seen by a doctor almost immediately afterwards. That experience completely shifted the participant's confidence and belief in the impact of human rights knowledge. He went from being unconvinced to being completely convinced. He's since moved into a new professional role as an independent advocacy worker, using human rights language daily in his work. Once he saw how effectively he could bring about real change – and quickly – it had a profound impact on him and on the direction of his career.

Carlyn: Thanks Tom, it's so important to hold on to those moments of real change; on that theme, what's your message of hope for the future?

Tom: Absolutely there is a better future available. I truly believe in a future where everyone can live a life without worrying about their safety or being degraded and met with indignity by the very services designed to support them.

As a population, if we become informed and empowered to claim our human rights, it will make a powerful case for change, and public bodies will have no choice but to improve their level of support to comply with their legal duties.

If we all knew and used our human rights protections – and this isn't something public bodies or the state should fear – we'd see a huge difference. For instance, in Scotland, our drug and alcohol death crisis shows the devastating effects of what happens when people aren't treated properly or lack the basic necessities of life. Families and children are living in poverty without the safety of wind and watertight homes, without the basics they need to grow and flourish.

We want to see people who need support at a time of crisis being treated well. We know that when the right conditions are in place for recovery, people do recover. There's overwhelming evidence of that. But when people are trapped in situations of poor support, precarity, and risk, they can't grow, recover, or flourish – and remain stuck in systems that are costly to maintain. ✓

— “ —

If we start looking after people properly, using human rights as our foundation, we'll create a better, healthier, and more sustainable society. It will require effort, commitment, energy, and initial resourcing, but it will absolutely be worth it.

Human Rights

THE CONVERSATION STARTS HERE

What do Brits really think about the ECHR - and why it matters for us all.

HALF of Brits believe the UK should stay in the European Convention on Human Rights. There is room to grow people's ECHR knowledge.

WHY IT MATTERS: The ECHR safeguards freedoms we often just assume will be there, from the right to a fair trial to protection from torture, shaping not just law, but everyday life.

THE DEBATE IS REAL: People highlighted how ECHR withdrawal risks our international standing, security cooperation, citizens' rights and our everyday protections from arbitrary power.

KNOWLEDGE IS POWER: Understanding the ECHR isn't just for politicians - it's for every person in the UK who cares about the future of our human rights.

ENGAGE. LEARN. SHAPE THE FUTURE

Discover more about what Britons think about the ECHR at [YouGov](#)

Almost half of Britons (46%) believe the UK should remain a member of the ECHR, while less than a third (29%) support withdrawal. A further 24% are unsure.

A REASON FOR CELEBRATION AND FOR VIGILANCE



Anniversaries are important and are an occasion for celebration. There is special reason for celebration where the subject has been the protection of the fundamental rights of individuals throughout the continent of Europe.

As a former judge of the Europe Court of Human Rights for some 14 years, I have witnessed the remarkable change and improvement that has been brought about in the European human rights landscape by the judgments of the Court, established to apply and give effect to its terms. In every area of human rights the Court has made the Convention what was always intended to be – an effective and living instrument

which, to use the words of Lord Bingham, ensures the contemporary protection of the rights guaranteed some 75 years ago.

The examples of such cases are boundless – from the bringing to an end of the death penalty in every member state of the Council of Europe; from the requirement of effective independence of judicial control of all forms of detention to the requirement of effective access to domestic courts and tribunals; from the outlawing of acts of torture and inhuman and degrading treatment through to the securing of personal data against intrusive surveillance by the State; from the strong protection of freedom of expression to the outlawing of all unjustified forms of discrimination, whether on grounds of race, sex, ethnic origin or sexual orientation.

The effect of the Convention in the United Kingdom has been no less profound than in other States of Europe. Under each Article of the Convention – the right to life, liberty, private and family life, free expression and religion – national courts have not only been exemplary in bringing Convention rights home under the Human Rights Act but have moulded and developed them to make them more relevant to our community and an integral part of our national heritage. The effective implementation of the Convention rights at national level has led to a dramatic and welcome decline in the number of individuals who have had to take the arduous road to Strasbourg



and an equally welcome reduction in the number of cases in which the European Court has found a violation of any kind against the United Kingdom.

Quite apart from cases which have required litigation, the Convention, as incorporated in the 1998 Act, has had a lasting and beneficial impact outside the courtroom, creating as it has a genuine culture of respect for human rights. Individuals and community groups have been empowered to assert their Convention rights, as a result of information and support provided by BIHR. Of equal importance, as a result of training on the requirements of the Convention provided by the Institute, police, health authorities and other public bodies have changed policies and practices to better uphold the Convention rights guaranteed.

Despite this positive history, it is a matter of sadness that in this country voices continue to be raised for the United Kingdom to withdraw from the Convention to whose development our courts have made an important contribution in bringing those rights home. ✍

“ While celebrating the birthday of the Convention, it is right also to sound the alarm against any withdrawal from the Convention system or any watering down of the rights guaranteed. This would not only make poorer the system in which the United Kingdom has for long played such a central role. It would also make the United Kingdom itself incontestably poorer.

75 years of the **European Convention on Human Rights**.
25 years brought home in our **Human Rights Act**.
Protecting fairness, dignity, and justice for **everyone**.
Everyday.

Thank you to everyone who contributed stories, research, and reflections to this anniversary magazine.

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