



UK Mission to the  
United Nations  
in Geneva

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Note No 129

The Permanent Mission of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland presents its compliments to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, and has the honour to transmit the attached submission in response to the request for information dated 25 January 2019.

The Permanent Mission of the United Kingdom avails itself of this opportunity to renew to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, the assurances of its highest consideration.

25 March 2019



Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights

**Submission of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to the call by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights for information on steps taken to prevent, address, investigate and report on acts of intimidation and reprisals, received 25 January 2019**

The United Kingdom strongly supports participation with international bodies of civil society organisations. Civil society organisations provide a legitimate channel for citizens to express their concerns about their government. Open societies allow people to engage in public life, maximise their own potential, challenge the status quo, and find new ways to contribute to creating prosperity and a rich cultural life. Freedom of expression and the media are essential qualities of any functioning democracy; people must be allowed to discuss and debate issues freely, to challenge their governments, and to make informed decisions. We deplore attempts to restrict freedom of expression, be it in online or offline, that deny people the opportunity to freely express their opinions.

Suppressing the ability of civil society and individuals to operate freely and safely serves to alienate, frustrate, and increase social tensions. The UK is committed to creating an environment free of the risk of intimidation, harassment, or physical and mental harm. We have supported UN resolutions on reprisals, and made clear our support for Assistant Secretary General Gilmour's work to mitigate the risks of reprisals for those co-operating with the UN. At the UN NGO Committee meeting in January, we advocated the importance of civil society organisations being able to operate effectively in a way that does not impede their work. We strongly support the full participation of civil society in the UN's work, and have robustly voiced our opposition at attempts to block open participation of civil society by some States.

The UK has strong legislation in place that protects the right to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly, which includes a person's participation with international bodies of civil society organisations. The UK is party to the European Convention on Human Rights, which requires Contracting Parties to secure to everyone within their jurisdiction certain rights and freedoms, including the right to freedom of expression (Article 10), and the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of association (Article 11). The ECHR is given further effect in UK law by the Human Rights Act 1998.

The UK supports human rights defenders and civil society by advocating for strong language in UN resolutions in order to create higher international standards. The UK co-sponsored the UN resolution on Human Rights Defenders in 2017, as well as the new resolution on Freedom of Peaceful Association and Assembly in 2018. At the UN High Level Meeting on Human Rights Defenders in December 2018, we called on those present to allow civil society the space to engage with and, where needed, challenge governments without fear of reprisal. In 2017, the UK also updated the Guidelines on Working with Human Rights Defenders, which advises our network of embassies and high commissions on how best to support human rights defenders in their work.

The UK is committed to protecting and respecting human rights. We have a longstanding tradition of ensuring rights and liberties are protected domestically and fulfilling our international human rights obligations. The Common Core document submitted to the UN in

2014 sets out the UK's general framework for promoting and protecting human rights, including the international and regional instruments which we are party to. The Common Core document can be found here:

[https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/\\_layouts/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=HRI%2fCORE%2fGBR%2f2014&Lang=en](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=HRI%2fCORE%2fGBR%2f2014&Lang=en)

The UK is committed to ensuring the prevention of acts of intimidation and harassment. UK law provides general criminal and civil protection in relation to acts in the UK, which would constitute intimidation or reprisals. For example, the Protection from Harassment Act 1997 which applies in England, Wales and Scotland, is one of the ways in which UK law protects against intimidation and harassment.

Through our membership of the Community of Democracies, we funded a publication in 2018 that set out 'Best Practice in Community of Democracies' member states engagement with, and protection of, civil society'.<sup>1</sup> The aim was to discuss the role of civil society and its function in democratic societies, in the hope of encouraging others to engage actively with civil society also, creating a safe and open space for them to operate without reprisal.

In August 2018, the UK government published its Civil Society Strategy for England, setting out how the Government will work with and support civil society to build a country that works for everyone. More information can be found here:

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/732765/Civil\\_Society\\_Strategy\\_-\\_building\\_a\\_future\\_that\\_works\\_for\\_everyone.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/732765/Civil_Society_Strategy_-_building_a_future_that_works_for_everyone.pdf)

The UK's Civil Society Strategy sets out the value that the Government places on civil society participating in policy making and public debate at a national level, pointing out that 'Civil society organisations have successfully campaigned for changes in the law and national policy, and at local level supporting access to services and challenging public sector organisations to improve'. The Strategy indicates steps that government will take to help protect and strengthen this role in the future.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://community-democracies.org/?docs=best-practice-in-community-of-democracies-member-states-engagement-with-and-protection-of-civil-society>