



REVIEW OF THE CIVIC FORUM

NILGA Briefing

What is the Civic Forum?

The Civic Forum is a consultative mechanism on social, economic and cultural issues created within the Belfast Agreement. Members are drawn from 10 sectors of civic life, namely: Voluntary & Community, Business, Trade Unions, Churches, Arts & Sports, Culture, Agriculture & Fisheries, Community Relations, Education and Victim groups.

Mission:

The Civic Forum will exercise effective community leadership and directly influence the building of a peaceful, prosperous, just, cohesive, healthy and plural society.

What is the relationship between the Civic Forum and the Assembly?

Section 56 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 provides for the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to make arrangements for obtaining views of the Civic Forum on social, economic and cultural matters. These arrangements must be approved by the Assembly.

Why is the Civic Forum being reviewed now?

1. It was always intended that a review would be carried out.
2. Devolved institutions were suspended in 2002 and the Civic Forum was unable to continue its activities.
3. Original membership has now lapsed.
4. Civic society in NI has changed considerably since the Forum first met in October 2000.

What will be reviewed?

The effectiveness and appropriateness of current structure, operation and membership of the Civic Forum will be reviewed.

It is intended that experiences elsewhere will be drawn upon in determining the most appropriate mechanism for engaging with civic society.

It is important to assess whether the Civic Forum is the most appropriate mechanism for engaging with and obtaining the views of civic society on social, economic and cultural matters and in ensuring accountable and inclusive participation by civic society. Clear recommendations should be made on how this mechanism would operate in practice including governance, legal and financial matters and secretariat arrangements that would best support it.

Please note that all contributions have been requested to be submitted by **Friday 29 August 2008**. The Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister have advised that it may not be feasible to take late contributions into consideration in the subsequent preparation of the review's recommendations.

Key Questions identified by OFMDFM

Question 1: What do you consider would be the best way for Government to engage with and consult civic society?

Whilst the merits of a Civic Forum are appreciated, a number of factors could be improved upon to ensure the full engagement of civic society, which are evident in examples of Civic Fora in other regions.

Scotland

The Scottish Civic Forum exists to ensure partnership between Parliament and its people. Whilst it is a gateway between Scottish government and civic organizations, it, unlike NI, also includes individuals. The Forum debates policy affecting Scottish society, shares information regarding current legislation going through Parliament and aims to educate people so that they are able to get involved in decisions made by government that affect their lives. The Forum also looks at how Scottish Parliament is working and suggests ways in which government might become more democratic and in any way possible, try to reach those people whose voices are not being heard.

The Scottish Civic Forum does this in 3 main ways:

1. By sharing information:
 - A free monthly newsletter is distributed to all subscribers, either via e-mail or by post.
 - Briefing papers on up and coming legislation are produced for 'the people', in order for them to understand the implications of any legislation should it be introduced and essentially allow Scottish people to make informed decisions about their Parliament.
2. By organising events:
 - The Scottish Civic Forum facilitates meetings on government consultation, giving people the opportunity to have their say on legislation being considered in Parliament.
 - A safe place is provided, enabling all concerned to have their say.
 - Events are free and provide crèches, lip-speakers and interpreters on request.
3. Regional Co-ordinators
 - Regional Co-ordinators organise events on government consultations in their local area, allowing local people to input into national government decisions at a local level.

The Scottish model seems to be much more proactive in involving wider society and thus ensures that there is much higher level of civic engagement.

Due to the wide consultative processes that already exist in Northern Ireland, some would argue that there is no real need for a further Civic Forum in which to consult civic society. However if the Civic Forum were prepared to not only debate matters but also be the agents providing information and facilitating consultation with wider civic society, they may find that they have more credibility and standing within the Assembly/ Executive.

London

Within the London Civic Forum, they strive to experiment with 'new and imaginative ways of working'.

A criticism of the Civic Forum for Northern Ireland has been that it has not provided any original ideas or suggestions which have been used by the Executive and thus it would be noteworthy for the Forum to bear this in mind.

Question 2: What do you consider were the main strengths and achievements of the (1999-2002) Civic Forum as originally constituted?

It has been reported that representatives of the Civic Forum do not see themselves in competition with the elected Assembly, but more assisting with their development by providing expert advice and feedback from the community. In the initial conception of the Civic Forum, the Woman's Coalition viewed the Civic Forum as "the guardian of the Agreement, ensuring that its radical policies will be put into effect".

In a debate in the NI Assembly on 25th June 2007, Martin McGuinness (SF) declared that there was cross-party support for a review of the mechanisms for civic society to promote its views and asserted that the Civic Forum is a useful tool for giving a voice to people who previously did not have the opportunity to engage with others on important discussions about issues vital to the community.

Unfortunately, the website for the Civic Forum is limited for information and is not in any way up to date. Whilst we appreciate that there may be many strengths and achievements of the Civic Forum as originally constituted, this is not widely documented or advertised.

Question 3: What, in your opinion, were the main weaknesses of the original Civic Forum and how might they be remedied?

Blame for failure of Civic Forum has been laid at many doors: politicians, members of Civic Forum, various sectors which made up Civic Forum, Civil Service. It is also reported that civic society in general was 'ambivalent' about the implementation of the Civic Forum.

There seems to have been confusion surrounding the vision for the Civic Forum re: how to select members and what 'model' it should adopt.

Democratic Dialogue discussions came to conclusion that any Civic Forum should aim to embody principles of negotiated governance; providing the Executive with information from people actually affected by policies they are discussing/ drafting. However, politicians did not buy into (or become involved in) these discussions.

Ultimately, when suspension was affected in 2002, the Civic Forum ceased functioning. Funding was pulled and it was effectively unable to operate in the absence of the devolved institutions. Since North-South bodies and the Assembly were given maintenance funding throughout the suspension, some members of the Forum argued for equal status, but nothing ever came to fruition.

Whilst Civic Forum was running it was compromised by the consultation process, as it almost negated the need for such a body.

*"While the Forum had its own internal divisions, the politicians may have been suspicious and the civil service awkward, the forum ultimately failed because civil society found other ways of fulfilling the role which they had assigned to it and which did not involve their interests being mediated through a body which they did not control."*¹

¹ Farrington, Christopher, *Models of Civil Society and their implications for the Northern Ireland Peace Process*. Website accessed 26th June 2008. URL: <http://www.qub.ac.uk/csec/docs/Farrington%20paper.pdf>

One of the legacies of Direct Rule has been that civil society has developed sophisticated public policy experience which the political parties have not, i.e. the large NGO/voluntary sector in NI.

At a debate in the NI Assembly on 25th June 2007, Stephen Moutray (DUP) stated that, “... *from its inception, the Civic Forum has suffered from severe absenteeism and that for its entire existence, its deliberations have never produced a single, solitary original suggestion that the Executive have taken up*”. Moutray went on to ask the Deputy First Minister if he does “*not agree that the Civic Forum has been an utter waste of time, money and resources and that its existence can no longer be justified.*”

When reviewing the Civic Forum, a clear vision of the Civic Forum’s role and functions, as well as agreement on from which sectors/ backgrounds the members should be drawn, needs to be well established prior to an initial meeting. A consensus regarding the vision for the Civic Forum needs to be achieved between the Assembly, OFMDFM and Civic Forum sectors/ members.

The Civic Forum should enjoy equal status and regard to that of other institutions originated from the Good Friday Agreement. Whilst we appreciate that the Civic Forum will not and cannot have legislative/ political powers, it must be taken seriously by the institutions of government in order to be in any way effective.

Finally, following criticism from Stephen Moutray (DUP), it may be important to emphasise to the members of the Civic Forum the need for a pro-active, productive and when possible, original approach to issues of local government.

Question 4: To what extent do you think the sectors included in the original Civic Forum remain representative of civic society? Who do you think should be represented on a new Forum and what should be the balance between different sectors?

Sectors included in the original Civic Forum are as follows: Voluntary & Community, Business, Trade Unions, Churches, Arts & Sports, Culture, Agriculture & Fisheries, Community Relations, Education and Victim groups. When selecting members from each of the sectors, it may be useful to keep in mind that the Civic Forum should also be reflective of those persons/ groups of persons outlined in Section 75 of the Good Friday Agreement and should contain a mixture of people of various different religious beliefs, political opinion, racial groups, age, marital status (and those with/without dependants), sexual orientation and ability.

Those generally under-represented in mainstream politics (i.e.) women and young people should be encouraged to participate in the Civic Forum.

Finally, it may be positive step to try to involve those that have been disenfranchised from civic society and are not members of any of the sectors listed above. Processes within the Civic Forum may therefore encourage those persons to get involved in civic life in general and thus make representation much more genuine.

Question 5: Do you consider that an alternative model of social partnership might provide a suitable example for a new Forum? If so, what type of model would you propose and why?

It would be useful for the review team to examine the models of more successful Civic Forum in existence in other jurisdictions, and to learn from the successes and failures of these organisations.

Question 6: What should be the role and remit of the new Forum? What types of issues might form the basis of its work programme and how should they be prioritised?

The role and the remit of the new Forum must be clear succinct and agreed by all relevant agents/ bodies/ institution. When NI Assembly is debating on an issue that has a specific public interest, it would be relevant to invite the Civic Forum to debate the same issue. There should also be room within the Civic Forum to allow members to suggest a topic/ issue of debate themselves. In addition, there should be a mechanism to allow individuals or organisations who are not formal members of the Civic Forum, to raise issues for consideration by the Forum.

Question 7: What should be the relationship between a new Forum and the First Minister and deputy First Minister, and the Assembly?

As it stands, the Civic Forum is funded by the OFMDFM and all arrangements must be approved by the Assembly. In Scotland, their Civic Forum is independent of their Parliament.

There appears to be some merit in an independent Civic Forum and it could possibly be a positive step to allow full, meaningful engagement of citizens in civic life. However, since the Civic Forum is funded by OFMDFM, this may not be possible. In any case, it may be advantageous that politicians provide support and due regard for the Civic Forum in their decision making.

Question 8: What suggestions would you make for the organisation of a new Forum in terms of:

- **Membership - including numbers, sectoral representation, processes for selecting members and filling vacancies, term of office and expenses/remuneration;**
- **Chairperson - including appointment process, role and remit, and expenses/remuneration.**
- **Structure and operation – including format and frequency of meetings, staffing, accommodation, budget and legal status.**

We would draw your attention to our answer to Question 4 regarding sectoral representation of the Civic Forum.

We do not wish to comment any further on this matter.

Question 9: How might a new Forum interact with other consultative fora within Northern Ireland to avoid duplication?

It is important that the new Forum and other consultative fora within Northern Ireland to have knowledge and awareness of one another.

It may be helpful to appoint a key point of contact within each forum, for example, the chair of each committee/ forum to liaise amongst one another, whereby they give regular updates to re: current, ongoing and future work to avoid duplication.

Furthermore, should more than one consultative fora decide that they both want to pursue a particular issue, steps should be taken to allow them to work collaboratively on same.

Question 10: How should a new Forum interact with bodies representative of civic society outside Northern Ireland?

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Pat Connolly - 29/11

The new Forum should use any existing contacts and strive to make contacts within other Civic Forums or similar as soon as possible. It is important that this is done so that the Civic Forum for Northern Ireland can learn from the past experiences of more established Forums, share information and best practice.

The easiest and most cost efficient way to interact with bodies' representative of civic society outside Northern Ireland would be online; either through an online community or via email.

It might also be useful to invite representatives from other bodies to participate in the Review, and advise on models of best practice and any potential pitfalls for a Civic Forum

Forum: (not a forum)
(not a forum)