



## **Response to the Review of the Civic Forum August 2008**

### **1 Background**

Age Concern Northern Ireland (ACNI) is a major voluntary organisation committed through campaigning and service provision to promoting the rights of all older people as active, involved and equal citizens. We act as a Northern Ireland-wide campaigning body and support a network of local Age Concern Groups operating throughout Northern Ireland.

We offer policy advice on a range of issues which impact on the lives of older people. These policies are based on:

- The expressed views of older people throughout Northern Ireland based on on-going contact and research;
- A knowledge of older people and an ageing society.
- An advice and information service dealing with approximately 6000 calls a year.

In writing this response, we have worked with partners in the age sector, including Help the Aged and the Age Sector Platform.

### **2 Timing of Consultation**

ACNI is disappointed that the review is taking place over the summer months and traditional holiday period in Northern Ireland. This is a particularly bad time for our sector as our local groups and many of the older people's groups we work with do not meet during the summer months, making it more difficult to get their views on the review.

ACNI recommends that any important policies or reviews by government should not take place over holiday periods, or if they do, the consultation period should be extended to enable organisations prepare more detailed and considered responses. In this case, it would have been beneficial to extend the timeframe for comments to late September to enable broader discussion on this important matter.

### **3 Format of Response**

ACNI recognises that the department has outlined a number of specific questions for consideration in the review. At this stage we have concentrated on outlining how a civic forum or similar body can benefit the people of Northern Ireland and also make a number of comments on the previous civic forum. However, we do believe that careful consideration of the operation, resources and powers of the new body is vital to ensure a newly constructed forum is effective and valuable to both government and wider society. As a sector, we are committed to working with OFMDFM officials and other partners to determine the roles, operation and responsibilities of a new forum to ensure it maximises its potential.

### **4 Overall View**

ACNI is in favour of the establishment of some form of social partnership body that can provide advice to government on social, economic and cultural matters as laid down in the Northern Ireland Act (1998).

As a society emerging from decades of conflict it is important that the political process is strengthened through social dialogue. We believe that an independent, accountable, representative and effective civic body can play an important supportive role to the NI Assembly and Executive. This body could help support and inform policy makers on decisions on strategic issues that affect the lives of people across Northern Ireland.

## **5 Impact on Programme for Government**

One of the key principles outlined in the Programme for Government 2008-11 is to “work in partnership as an Executive, and across the public, private and voluntary sectors, to harness the ideas, energy and commitment of all the sectors.”

This outlines the important role that wider society has in ensuring that the aims and targets in the programme for government are met and this acknowledgement is to be welcomed. With this in mind, it is our view that a revised and reconstituted civic forum can play a central role in connecting government to wider society and this body can play a key role in promoting inclusion and developing the modern, high quality and efficient public services needed to increase the quality of life for all our citizens.

The establishment of a social partnership-type body to support and advise government is not unusual and far from unique to Northern Ireland. Many countries throughout Europe have established similar type bodies, albeit with varying remits, to good effect. No social partnership from another country should be parachuted into Northern Ireland, but instead work should focus on establishing a body that best meets local needs. If this is done it could prove to be a vital tool in helping the Executive meet its targets, not as something competing with or displacing the powers of the Executive or Assembly.

It is important that the role and responsibilities of a new social partnership body are clear. This new body should not replace or overlap with the power of political representatives but could provide important input on strategic issues facing Northern Ireland in the years to come. It should not be a lobbying organisation but serve as a forum for discussion, advice and reporting to government. Members’ role would be to outline and represent experiences and viewpoints not people.

## **6 Previous Civic Forum (1999-2002)**

A common theme emerging from discussions within the Age Sector and with other social partners is that while there was a lot of good work conducted during the lifespan of the previous forum, its effectiveness was hampered by elements of its constitution and operation. For example, it is generally agreed that the membership of the previous forum was too large and unwieldy and this restricted the opportunity for detailed debate at times. Another difficulty identified by representatives of the previous civic forum was uncertainty about its role among wider society and who the members were there to represent, ie their organisations or their sector? Therefore, it is vital that a new body has strong reporting and communication measures in place so that representatives can report back on the business of the forum and that appropriate mechanisms are introduced so the wider community understands the work and value of the forum.

## **7 Composition**

It is important that detailed analysis is conducted on what the membership of a newly formed body would look like if it was agreed that the new body be streamlined. While it is important that such a body is able to operate in an effective and efficient manner, it is also important that it is inclusive and enables a broad range of views across society to be heard.

In terms of age representation on a new body, we believe as a sector that it is now more important than ever for government to hear the views of older people when developing policies and planning services for now and the future. Last year, there were over 334,000 people aged over 60 in Northern Ireland<sup>1</sup>. That number is expected to increase to 416,000 by 2031<sup>2</sup>. In other words almost one in four of the population will be aged sixty or over (23 per cent) in just over twenty years time compared to one in six currently (16%). Our ageing population is a

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<sup>1</sup> Government Actuary Department

<sup>2</sup> Help the Aged NI, Impact Report 2007

good news story but it also brings new challenges for government and service providers, and this is why engagement with older people is key to policy development in the coming years.

## **8 Conclusion**

In conclusion, ACNI supports the establishment of some form of social partnership body that can provide advice to government on social, economic and cultural matters as laid down in the Northern Ireland Act (1998).

As a growing section of society, older people must be represented on such a body so that the expertise and experience that exists within this sector is fully harnessed to develop better services and quality of life for this and future generations.

As a society we are still laying down the foundations for a sustainable, prosperous and peaceful future and we believe that providing a solid forum for social dialogue to support government would be a positive development.

The detail of such a body needs further consideration to ensure it is independent, accountable, representative, value for money and effective. The age sector is committed to working with OFMDFM and others to ensure such a body be established to support and inform policy and decision makers so that all the people of Northern Ireland can receive a better quality of life now and in the future.