

# **Age Sector Platform (ASP)**

Response to the Office of the First Minister and  
Deputy First Minister



Review of the Civic Forum

August 2008

## **1 Background**

Age Sector Platform (ASP) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the review by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister on the Civic Forum. Age Sector Platform was established in December 2007 as a company limited by guarantee to campaign and lobby for older people in Northern Ireland. The organisation has emerged from the Age Sector Reference Group (ASRG) which had been in operation for seven years supported by Help the Aged in Northern Ireland and Age Concern Northern Ireland. Age Sector Platform has a membership base of 25 older people's organisations and networks which represent approximately 200,000 older people across Northern Ireland.

## **2 Timing of Consultation**

Age Sector Platform 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 the vast majority of groups who are members of Age Sector Platform do not meet during the summer months, making it more difficult to get their opinions on the review.

Age Sector Platform 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 to 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**

Age Sector Platform 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 Opinion**

Age Sector Platform 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 opinion 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. Furthermore, as the role of the forum is to provide a mechanism for participative democracy, this should be reflected in the process of electing a Chairperson. The Chairperson should be democratically elected by members of the forum, from within the forum membership.

## **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 opinions 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 opinions of older people when developing policies and planning services for now and the future. It is estimated that the number of people over 60 living in Northern Ireland will increase from 279,600 in 2005 to 416,000 by 2031<sup>1</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 good news story but it also brings new challenges for government and service

---

<sup>1</sup> Help the Aged NI, Impact Report 2007

providers, and this is why engagement with older people is key to policy development in the coming years.

## **8 Conclusion**

In conclusion, Age Sector Platform 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.

## **Age Sector Platform Members**

- Age Concern, Northern Ireland
- Amicus Retired Members
- AT&GWU Retired Members Association
- Carers NI
- Castlereagh Lifestyle Forum
- Civil Service Pensioners' Alliance (CSPA)
- Communications Workers Union (NI Regional Retired Members)
- East Belfast Seniors Forum
- Engage with Age
- GMB Retired Members
- Help the Aged, Northern Ireland
- Heyday
- Indian Community Centre 50+ Club
- National Federation of Post Offices & BT Pensioners
- Newry and Mourne Senior Citizens' Consortium
- Newtownabbey Senior Citizens' Forum
- NIC ICTU Retired Workers Committee
- North Belfast Senior Citizens Forum
- Northern Ireland Pensioners Convention
- Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance (NIPSA) Retired Members Association
- Older Women's Network
- Public Commercial Services Union (Associate and Retired Members)
- Sperrin and Lakeland Senior Citizens' Consortium
- University of the Third Age
- West Belfast Senior Citizens' Forum

## **Executive Committee**

- Mr Bill Carson, Chairman
- Mrs Phil Evans, Vice-Chair
- Mr Michael Monaghan, Secretary
- Mr Olaf Hvattum, Treasurer
- Ms Elaine Campbell
- Mr Francis Hughes
- Mrs Margaret Galloway
- Ms Meg Holmes
- Mr Paddy Joe McClean
- Ms Patricia Donald
- Mr Seamus Lynch

**Any enquiry concerning this response should be made to:**

**Eddie Lynch**  
**Project Manager**  
**Age Sector Platform**  
Merrion Business Centre  
58 Howard Street  
Belfast  
BT1 6PJ  
Tel: 028 9031 2089  
email: [eddie.lynch@agesectorplatform.org](mailto:eddie.lynch@agesectorplatform.org)