

CONSULTATION RESPONSE
Review of the Civic Forum

To: Civic Forum Review Team
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SUBMISSION TO THE REVIEW OF THE CIVIC FORUM

0.1 The Alliance Party welcomes the opportunity to respond to the consultation on the future of the Civic Forum.

0.2 The Alliance Party's response is based on three main themes emphasised in the party's response to the NI Executive's *Programme for Government* in January 2008:

- *tackling segregation/exclusion*, including the need to engage effectively with wider society to underpin the structures of democratic governance and to create a more united community;
- *re-balancing the economy*, including engaging effectively the expertise of the business, voluntary and community sector to reenergise our economy and tackle poverty and social exclusion; and
- *delivering sustainability*, including finding means of engagement which avoid duplication, are efficient and effective, and which will have the support and respect of the wider community.

0.3 At the time of the Good Friday Agreement, the engagement of wider civic society was recognised as an important part not only of reaching a political settlement but also of creating a more stable and normal society.

0.4 The engagement of those drawn from beyond the boundaries of the political arena, who have a diverse range of expertise and experience which can be harnessed for the wider good, continues to be of value; however, Alliance is not wedded to any particular model or formula to facilitate such engagement.

0.5 The Civic Forum cannot easily be judged in terms of its past effectiveness based on the intervening period as it was, to a large degree, hostage to the political process during this time. Each suspension of the Assembly also forced the Forum into suspension, creating long periods of inactivity and drift. Whilst this is necessary to maintain democratic primacy, it clearly limited the ability of the Civic Forum to deliver a substantial body of work against which to be judged.

0.6 Furthermore, many of those engaged with the Civic Forum would contend that the work which was undertaken and, indeed, the role of the Forum and its membership, were not communicated effectively to the public during that time.

0.7 Since the latest round of devolution there has been considerable uncertainty about the future of the Forum and it has remained effectively in suspension pending the outcome of this review.

0.8 If the Civic Forum is to continue in anything like its current form, then a specific role and remit must be more clearly identified than was previously the case. Not only is clarity important in terms of justifying to the public the expenditure associated with the Forum and its secretariat but also in terms of justifying to individual members of the Forum the time commitment which they would be required to give.

0.9 In a context where the Assembly Committee structures have been quite successful at engaging civic society around issues and where All-Party Assembly Groups have also performed an, albeit less formal, liaison role between Assembly Members and civic society on various themes, clarifying a specific role for the Civic Forum is increasingly difficult.

0.10 In addition, since devolution, there has been a growth in emphasis within the community, voluntary and business sector on pro-active liaison with Members of the Assembly, Assembly Committees and All Party Groups on matters of policy, in addition to the regular contact between Assembly Members and their constituents.

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0.11 Also, since 1998, a number of issue-based champion/commissioner posts have been or are in the process of being created, with a specific role in informing, advising and commenting upon Government policy development and practice and liaising with the public.

0.12 The opportunities for the public to engage directly in consultation process and, perhaps more importantly, the level of awareness of these processes would also appear to have risen during this time.

0.13 In such a crowded field, there is a serious risk of duplication of effort at best and conflict at worst, unless a very specific role is identified beyond that of general advice to the Assembly and Executive.

0.14 There may be a role for the Civic Forum in addressing, in a less adversarial setting, some of the more thorny issues facing not just the Assembly but also wider society; however, whilst there are some good examples of where this has been very effective in delivering measurable progress (Good Relations Steering Panel in Belfast City Council), there are other examples where it has not (Bill of Rights Forum). The success or failure would appear to be very heavily dependent on having a clearly defined role and the quality of the relationship between such fora and the bodies which they advise.

0.15 In terms of the make-up of the any future Forum, much will depend on the role envisaged for it. Any Forum should be as broad-based as possible. This could be achieved with a composition which comprises both nominees from the various sectors of civic society and also other seats to be filled by an open application process, provided that the arrangements ensure that the same criteria are met by all members.

0.16 Alliance would have concerns that any appearance of political patronage, particularly associated with those nominated by OFMdFM, could have a negative impact on the dynamics of the Forum and potentially undermine public confidence not only in the independence of the individuals concerned but also in the forum as a whole. For this reason, there should be an open and transparent process for all.

0.17 In conclusion, Alliance recognises and values the contribution which civic society continues to make towards developing Northern Ireland as a stable, productive and integrated community; therefore, in our view, it is vital that the mechanism for engagement between civic society and the political structures is significantly reformed and much more clearly defined, to ensure that this potential is captured in the most effective and efficient way in light of development since 1998 and the financial pressures which exist with the current budget.

Naomi Long MLA (OFMdFM Spokesperson)

10 September 2008