

Review of the Civic Forum

Submission by Avery Bowser

1. I was a member of the Civic Forum from its inception until the role was formally terminated by OFMDFM. I was a Voluntary and Community Sector representative and I was selected by the sector to represent the interests of Families and Children.
2. The following are my own views as a former member of the Civic Forum. They have been influenced by Civic Forum colleagues, some of the submissions already made, the changed political environment and by my own experience of the Civic Forum.
3. With my colleagues Kevin Cooper and Bill Jeffrey I helped co-ordinate activity by Civic Forum members following the suspension of the Assembly in 2002 and helped write the Review submission signed by 28 members and dated 24 March 2004. This document has already been made available to the Review team and I still support the overwhelming majority of its content. The document is rooted in the experience of members who put a lot of hours into the Forum and who were key to ensuring that there was product. It provides a sound basis for setting up and organising a new Civic Forum.
4. The area where I would differ from the members' document is in numbers and make-up of the Civic Forum. The figure of 40 was the one around which a consensus could be achieved. I personally favoured a figure nearer to 30 for the same reason that John Simpson has suggested this at point 21 of his submission – anything else is simply too large to be effective and generate the necessary sense of team across the sectoral groups. In the current economic climate it also sends out the right message in terms of being leaner – something all the elected chambers in Northern Ireland could bear in mind when starting their next lecture on efficiency and waste.
5. I also think there should be three sectors following traditional social partnership lines – business, trade union and voluntary/community. These should be equal groups of ten.
6. Business should include those involved in food production (agriculture, fisheries) split 7:3 respectively. This would signal the importance of food production in Northern Ireland and ensure a rural perspective.
7. I think there is a lot of merit in the membership issue raised by the Law Society and the Royal College of Nursing. The Trade Union sector could be

reconfigured in a similar way to the Business/Food Production sector with the addition of Professional Associations. Again I would suggest a 7:3 split respectively. This would ensure equal business and trade union representation. In the Trade Union/Professional Association sector it would leave sufficient opportunity for professional associations.

8. The sub-sectoring of the Voluntary and Community sector was not a success and was ridiculed with some justification. Insistence on the use of this approach by OFMDFM and the Assembly provided evidence that many were designing the Civic Forum to fail. The danger for the Voluntary and Community sector from this approach is that they are seen to be the sector who must deliver Section 75 when this needs to be seen in action across the membership selection for the whole Forum. Having said that I think there are three areas where there a sub-sector tag should be attached in the selection process. The first is environment. I think this is vital to act as a counter-balance to farming and business interests in relation to the environment. There should also be a place for someone with explicit rural credentials, again as a counter-balance to the particular rural focus of farming interests. The only Section 75 category where I would break with my views is children. One member from this sector should have the credentials to speak with authority on issues relating to children. This recognises that out of all the Section 75 categories it is only children who will not be Civic Forum members. As I have already said, the selection process for all sectors should ensure that there are opportunities for all Section 75 groups and a wide age range. My proposal would in effect sub-designate three of the voluntary and community sector members. These three members would require specific support mechanisms from their own sub-sector as well as the sector as a whole.
9. Given the work of a Civic Forum it is always going to be difficult to find young people with the skills and experience to cope with the work programme. Insisting on a quota of young people under 25 runs the risk of tokenism. A newly constituted Civic Forum should forge strong links with other fora for young people including regional organisations, shadow councils and school councils. The Civic Forum could use these links and the Participation Network to ensure that its agenda, project selection and actual work are influenced by children and young people.
10. Some sectors made a fundamental mistake in their selections by choosing very senior people in organisations, in some cases the head of organisations. People at this level are frankly too busy to contribute regularly to something like a Civic Forum and are usually already plugged into other fora. In the Civic Forum there was very often a whiff of the worst defects of public appointments where the appointment was seen as a reward. An organisation like the Civic Forum is likely to function more effectively with mid-level people and those who are time rich. This also goes to the purpose

of a Civic Forum which should be about developing new civic leaders not giving seats to those currently in leadership roles. In this context participation by Civic Forum members in Kennedy School of Government Programmes made perfect sense. An outcome from Civic Forum membership should be former members enhancing their own civic leadership skills and taking those back into their own organisation/sector and consider taking on new roles, either elected or by appointment.

11. All appointments to the Civic Forum should fall under the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments in Northern Ireland and should be subjected to rigorous monitoring.
12. The Law Society is quite correct in their submission to emphasise the need to include justice matters (point 6.2) in the Civic Forum's work programme once devolution of justice has taken place.
13. In their submission, the Institute of Directors emphasise that the Civic Forum would require 'wholehearted support from the main political parties'. Their analysis that this was not present previously is correct and it was the principal reason why the Civic Forum did not achieve its potential. If that support is not present currently then this Review should proceed no further – I would not want to see anyone have to go through what we went through as a group. That said it is to the credit of many Forum members that a significant body of work was produced despite serious internal and external obstacles. Under the circumstances we provided considerable value for money and I must reject the ill informed cant in NILGA's submission that suggests there were no original ideas and no legacy. That is a bit rich from Northern Ireland councillors who are obviously unaware of the influence in government of our reports on poverty, educational disadvantage and sustainable development – all the more odd considering how many are current and former MLAs.
14. If the political support and will does exist then in the current economic climate we have to consider if a Civic Forum is a luxury we can't afford. In the absence of political support the money would be better spent on nurses or child care social workers, both of which are facing cuts. However, the sums spent on a smaller and leaner Forum would be relatively modest and there is still a strong case for a formal, civic discussion space outside the bear pit of Stormont, which still simmers and struggles with the sectarianism that has given birth to the peculiarities of our political settlement. Mark Durkan called it right when he saw the Civic Forum as the 'thought outriders' of the Assembly. A secure democratic settlement should have nothing to fear and everything to gain from this type of civic space and the insecure and fragile one we have probably needs it even more. When I was appointed to the Civic Forum I began working on a poem which I completed and read for the first time while at the Kennedy School of Government Executive

Programme in March 2001. It summed up what I felt about where we have come from as a society and what I thought we had to offer through the Civic Forum. I think that need and that hope are still relevant despite recent political progress and I offer the poem as a close to my submission.

Avery Bowser

25 August 2008

Could this be us?

Tell me your story of
Freedom through death,
Torture making safe;
Annihilation releasing
The tension of hope.

And I will tell you
In non-fiction
Of a bloody delta
In a northern corner
The cul-de-sac on the roundabout of reason.

Where words are unmade
Meaning loses its fulcrum
And metaphor crumbles
Like childhood castles
On a babbling tide.

Unable to be a people
A nation or two
In our imagination
Could we be a commonwealth?

Avery Bowser, March 2001