

Civic Forum Review Response from CARE

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

There is no single way for Government to engage and consult with civic society. Beyond the standard approach of consultation processes and a willingness on the part of policy makers to meet with representatives from civic society it is important for government to ensure that a broad range of stakeholders have an opportunity to engage in policy development. The Civic Forum provides an opportunity for such an engagement. A key element in Government's engagement with civic society is allowing a wide range of people to have access to and engage in the policy development process. The Civic Forum provides a focal point for such an engagement.

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

It is difficult to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the original civic forum given its short life-span. However, the development of working groups and the creation of a 'mission' demonstrate the potential of the forum if it develops a clear sense of purpose and the necessary time to create an agreed working programme.

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

The original forum did not have sufficient time to develop. It is important that any fresh attempt to create a civic forum is given a clear mandate and sufficient time to develop a programme of work and specific goals within that programme.

The long-term effectiveness of the Civic Forum is tied to the way it is perceived by government. It is important that both the OFMDFM and executive see the opportunities presented by the Civic Forum and recognise the role it can play in developing ties between government and civic society and the contribution it can make to policy development.

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?

The sectors identified for the original Civic Forum remain broadly representative of civic society in Northern Ireland. The key challenge for any future Civic Forum is identifying people from within those sectors who best represent the range of interests and perspectives within each sector. As with previous attempts to set up a Civic Forum it is important that representatives for each sector are chosen from a broad range of groups within sectors.

CARE is particularly keen to see a wide range of church representatives involved in the Civic Forum and hopes that future membership of the Forum reflects the diversity of 'Church' in contemporary Northern Irish life. It is particularly important to stress the social capital provided by Church and para-church projects in local communities and the experience and expertise that such projects possess. Churches and para-church organisations across Northern Ireland are operating projects that touch on a wide range of issues including many that are outside the boundaries of narrow categories like 'religion' or 'Church'.

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?

N/A

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 Civic Forum represents a potential focal point for resources from within civil society and it would be helpful if Government departments were able to draw on the expertise and experience of members of the Civic Forum as departments set priorities, develop policy and anticipate future challenges for Northern Irish society. The advantage of a civic forum is that it provides an opportunity for policy makers to engage with representatives from civic society in the early stages of policy formation. This is significant as it is often felt that the standard methods of consultation happen too late in the policy formation process. The Civic Forum could facilitate an engagement between a wide range of stakeholders and government departments. It would also be potentially useful if the Civic Forum could engage with Government departments on specific issues where the membership of the Forum felt it had the experience and expertise to make a valuable contribution. The Civic Forum could provide an effective way to 'sharpen' consultative mechanisms and enhance the process whereby departments create strategic priorities.

It was originally envisaged that the Civic Forum would focus on social, economic and cultural issues. CARE believes that this broad focus remains appropriate. As the forum develops we would expect its membership to decide where emphasis should be placed within these broad categories.

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

The relationship between the Forum and OFMDFM should follow the guidance laid out in the Section 56 of The Northern Ireland Act 1998.

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.**

A membership of 60 remains appropriate. The expenses of members should be covered. Efforts should be made to have a broad representation within each sector and members should be selected according to experience and expertise.

If the Civic Forum is to be an effective mechanism within Northern Irish political and civic life it is important that it meets regularly during the months when the Assembly is in session. Whether it meets in plenary or in smaller sector specific working groups would depend on the mission and programme of work that the membership of the Forum sets.

The Civic Forum should be understood as a consultative body that makes recommendations to government and government departments in Northern Ireland, its legal status should reflect this.

The Civic Forum should aim for the highest possible standards of transparency in its organisation, proceedings and expenses. By using the internet to distribute information about its activities the Civic Forum can engage with those people in civic society it seeks to represent.

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

It is important to create a specific goal and programme of work for the Civic Forum that compliments and enhances current consultative mechanisms. If this is made clear

it should be possible to avoid any duplication. One of the key goals of the Forum should be to compliment current consultative mechanisms.

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

Clearly the priority of the Civic Forum should be issues pertaining to government in Northern Ireland. However, it may be deemed appropriate for the Northern Ireland Civic Forum to meet with representative bodies from other jurisdictions to explore questions of developing civic society and learn from examples of best practice. It would be for the forum to decide whether this was necessary.

Further information available from:

Stuart Noble
Parliamentary & Development Officer
CARE in Northern Ireland

CARE in Northern Ireland
Suite 271, Thomas House | 47 Botanic Ave | Belfast | BT7 1JJ