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## **CBI Response to the Review of the Civic Forum**

### **Introduction**

- 1 CBI Northern Ireland welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the OFMDFM's comprehensive review of the Civic Forum. We understand the goal of the review is to 'propose the most appropriate mechanism and arrangements for engaging with and obtaining views of civic society on social, economic and cultural matters'. We are surprised that 'environmental matters' are not included as well!
- 2 We have produced brief responses to the array of questions set out in the consultation paper. While the consultation paper focuses on the process of engagement it does not identify what the outcome of this engagement is – is it to enhance policy making and decision taking, or is it to improve communications with civic society? A better understanding of what outcome is being sought would be helpful. What the document also lacks is any assessment of existing mechanisms of engagement between government and civic society nor the value of such mechanisms.
- 3 The starting point for CBI is that we need to be convinced that there is value from investing public funds in such a forum, particularly in light of a tight public expenditure environment which is likely to exist in the coming years. We are opposed in principle to setting up and funding any ill-defined public body which risks degenerating into a talking shop. While the establishment of a working Assembly and Executive are fundamental to our long-term economic success, we could fall into the trap of being 'over-governed'. Northern Ireland governance needs to be lean and agile if we are to succeed in an intensely competitive global economy, and not hampered by bureaucracy and endless consultation. The CBI is broadly happy with the level and quality of engagement and access to government, particularly since devolution in May 2007. Should proposals for a civic forum be taken forward it is essential that two key requirements are met:
  - There is a clear purpose and role for the forum
  - The value of this forum should be clearly established

### **Key questions set out in the consultation**

#### **Q1 The best way for Government to engage with and consult civic society**



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- 4 From a business and economic prospective there are already a range of mechanisms in place. Strategically the Programme for Government (and related documents) is the most important policy document developed by the Executive and supported by the Assembly. From a CBI perspective there were good opportunities to engage with government in advance of the publication of the draft Programme for Government document and sufficient time provided to analyse and respond to this document. Indeed since devolution in May 2007 there has been a very open and constructive engagement with the Executive, and Assembly on economic matters which we expect to continue.
- 5 The CBI believes the most valuable engagement with government on policy matters remains on a one to one basis. We have supported collective engagement through the social partners (business, trade unions, agriculture and community/voluntary sector) and believe that on some key policy areas consensus can be achieved eg the work of Concordia has demonstrated effective policy development by social partners. In this case there has been value in building understanding on the different policy perspectives of each of the social partners. We do not believe significant widening of this group will add particular value, while there is a significant risk that the value of such engagement will reduce with such a diverse range of participants, many with different interests and goals.
- 6 It is vital that government continues to engage as it currently does directly with key stakeholders and civic society generally. There may be some challenging or difficult policy areas where more collective engagement is desirable but this does not necessarily mean some major new structure is required to enable such engagement to take place. There is often value in bringing together social partner organisations in helping to understand the wider society perspectives and issues and ensuring there are effective communication mechanisms to facilitate the understanding of sectoral perspectives. The business community itself has an important role to play in ‘evangelising’ the critical role of developing a prosperous economy for everyone’s benefit.

#### **Q2/Q3 The main strengths/weaknesses of the 1999-2002 civic forum**

- 7 The CBI were part of the business community tasked with putting forward representatives to the last civic forum, so through our representatives we have direct feedback. We cannot identify any main strengths in the previous Civic Forum. We are not aware of any outcomes or recommendations which have been implemented which enhanced the competitiveness of the Northern Ireland economy, though given the circumstances this is perhaps not surprising. There may have been some value to participants in enhancing their understanding of issues and policy challenges, while some useful policy papers on life-long learning and an anti-poverty strategy were developed.
- 8 The main weaknesses of the Civic Forum are set out below:

- Value and role of the forum not clear
- There appeared to be an inability to create consensus, partly due to the size and vested interests of individual members of the forum, many of whom appeared to have their own agendas – any consensus achieved was at lowest common denominator
- There was an excessive focus on structures, accountability and control
- There did not appear to be any timescales/milestones in place
- It was insufficiently resourced and government
- It was a struggle to produce in-depth and fully researched policy positions, though two pieces of work referred to in Para 7 were developed with external assistance
- Formal consultation by the OFMDFM with the forum was extremely limited
- There was at most luke-warm political support for the forum
- The forum became time consuming for participants (which appeared to suit some sectors, but not others, especially from business) and in many respects it just became a ‘talking shop’
- Concerns were expressed about duplication with other bodies and lack of distinctiveness

**Q4 How representative of civic society are the original sectors in the Civic Forum?**

- 9 In terms of civic society the representation was quite extensive. However the major gap appears to be the lack of mention in the terms of reference to environmental issues – this appears to be a major oversight. From a business perspective such a large and diverse forum resulted in the ‘business voice’ becoming a small minority, and failing to reflect the value and contribution of business to society in Northern Ireland.

**Q5 Do you consider that an alternative model of social partnership might provide a suitable example for a new Forum?**

- 10 We do not believe such a large and diverse forum as previously set up is an effective model of social partnership. We have suggested that a smaller grouping, much more closely linked with ‘social partnership’ organisations (which are well defined) may have some value. We also support the Economic Development Forum which has provided a useful forum for key stakeholders in the economy to discuss and debate key policy issues impacting on economic growth (albeit that it has grown to a scale which risks limiting its effectiveness).

**Q6 What should be the role and remit of the new Forum and what sort of issues might form the basis of the work programme?**

- 11 There is little enthusiasm in the business community for a civic forum similar in structure, role or membership to the previous organisation.
- 12 If the Executive decides to proceed with a new forum we suggest that there might be two options to consider which may add some value:

- a forum could be established to address the ‘difficult issues’, perhaps as envisaged at the time of the Good Friday Agreement, and in keeping with the context of the GFA that Northern Ireland will have to face up to particularly challenging and potential divisive issues. Key issues would be identified by the FM and DFM which would be given to the forum to analyse, research and seek to build a consensus (perhaps based on the preferendum approach) as to the best way forward. A key aspect of this forum would be to engage effectively with the wider public. This would appear to be the more obvious positioning of such a forum as originally envisaged.
- Alternatively, there may be some merit in considering a consultative forum established with a focus around the development of the Programme for Government – an opportunity for social partners to discuss emerging priorities and help improve communications on strategic priorities. The forum would only meet on a very limited number of occasions. Its role would be to review progress of the PfG via the goals/targets set, consider the wider context, develop ideas to help accelerate progress towards the goals set, and to provide advice and comment on both short-term priorities/actions as well as identify and comment on longer term challenges. A key output of this engagement is the widening and deepening of knowledge and understanding on key policy issues of those involved in the forum (and through their linkages back to other stakeholder groupings)

Any forum should have a core membership of no more than 25, but with the opportunity to involve wider interests through specific work streams, particularly relating to the first option. The forum must be given a clear remit and focus and its role must be meaningful in terms of adding value to decision making in Northern Ireland.

The forum’s role is not to act as a second chamber to the Northern Ireland Assembly. It should however have a clear relationship set out with the First and Deputy First Ministers, the Executive and the Assembly. A forum established along the lines of the first option will need to be adequately resourced with a modest budget for research.

**Q7 What should the relationship between a new Forum and the FM/dFM and the Assembly?**

- 13 Any new forum will only be successful if it is valued by the FM and dFM. As we suggest above a much narrower and focused Forum might be able to demonstrate that such value can be created.

**Q8 What suggestions for the new Forum**

- 14 We have set out our views on how a new forum might contribute, and add some value, to the process of government in Northern Ireland in Paragraph 12 above.

**Q9 Interaction with other consultative fora to avoid duplication?**

15 It is essential that duplication is avoided. It is disappointing that the consultation paper did not provide an overview of other fora.

**Q10 Interaction with civic society outside Northern Ireland**

16 This cannot be ascertained until the precise role and focus of the forum has been agreed.

CBI Northern Ireland  
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