



**Response to OFMDFM
Consultation on Review of the
Civic Forum**

August 2008

INTRODUCTION

Children in Northern Ireland (CiNI) is the umbrella body for the children's sector in Northern Ireland. CiNI provides information, policy, training and participation services to support 124 member organisations in their direct work with and for children and young people. CiNI's membership is open to colleagues in the statutory children's sector as we recognise that the best outcomes for children are increasingly achieved working in partnership with all those who are committed to improving the lives of children and young people in Northern Ireland. CiNI also provides secretariat support to the All Party Assembly Group on Children and Young People.

CiNI welcomes this opportunity to respond to OFMDFM's review of the Civic Forum.

GENERAL COMMENTS

CiNI would be supportive of the concept of a Civic Forum for Northern Ireland. We regard this review process as a significant opportunity to consider how the concept worked initially and identify the concerns that existed with a view to constructively addressing these so that lessons can be learned moving forward.

It was important that the Agreement in 1998 recognised the desirability of having some mechanism to facilitate politicians in hearing the views and advice of civil society. This continues to be highly relevant and potentially an extremely valuable resource to good governance in Northern Ireland. In this regard we would endorse the response of NICVA and would echo the view that the concept of a Civic Forum would in no way challenge the direct relationships between politicians and their electorate; instead it offers the opportunity for a more deliberative forum in which different actors in civil society can collectively address difficult issues of relevance to Northern Ireland, which is complementary to, and can potentially enhance, the role and decisions of elected politicians.

INVOLVEMENT AND ENGAGEMENT OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

CiNI notes and shares the real concerns expressed regarding the involvement and engagement of children and young people in the original Civic Forum, when its membership included only one young person under 20 years of age.

Some six years later and with a return to devolved government children and young people continue to have limited real and meaningful opportunities to give their views and advice to government on issues that affect them including social, economic and cultural issues.

However we do welcome the efforts that the Government is now making to address its obligations under article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) which at 12 (1) provides both for children's right to express their views on all matters concerning them and have their views given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity; and at 12 (2) provides for the right of the child to participate effectively, directly or indirectly, in legal or administrative proceedings and decision making processes concerning them. We also welcome the commitment made by all Government departments, in signing up to the 10 Year Children and Young People's Strategy, to

*'develop a culture of involving children and young people in decisions which affect their lives'*¹.

In signing up to the principles and provisions of the UNCRC, the Government recognises children and young people as rights holders, and this invariably includes recognition of children and young people as holders of civil and political rights, which is consistent with the right of children and young people to be politically aware and active in preparation for full participation in society as responsible adults.

If the Government is genuinely committed to delivering on article 12 of the UNCRC and the pledge it has made to develop a participative culture that involves children and young people, then the review of the Civic Forum presents an important and unique opportunity to take firm action to listen to the views of children and young people, who constitute over a quarter of our population, and ensure that they, alongside the other representatives of civil society, have the opportunity to advise Government on social, economic and cultural matters. **CiNI would ask OFMDFM how it has involved and consulted children and young people in this current review of the Civic Forum in line with its obligations under article 12 of the UNCRC and section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998?**

Research carried out by the NI Commissioner for Children and Young People in 2004 noted that young people had recommended that the membership of the then Civic Forum should include more young people. The research carried out by QUB, noting the positive contribution which young people could make to the Civic Forum, recommended that the issue of youth representation on and meaningful participation in the Forum should be given further serious consideration². CiNI welcomes and endorses this recommendation. We would also highlight that the membership of any mechanism for civic engagement must be embracing of the section 75 equality categories.

Acknowledging that we may now be seeing the beginning of a real recognition of the need to promote the involvement of young people in the political process/governance of Northern Ireland, we welcome DENI's ongoing development of a cross government NI Network for Youth. DENI commissioned the Youth Council NI to chair a cross-sectoral working group which was to advise the Department on the development of a Network³. A pre-consultation took place in July-September 2007 and a summary of responses to the pre-consultation has been made available. The process has been informed by an advisory panel of young people. On 1st September 2008 DENI is set to launch for public consultation a series of proposals for a NI Network for Youth.

Provided that this Network grows from, rather than replicates existing participative structures for children and young people; is representative and inclusive of all children and young people; and, includes appropriate outreach to involve and engage the most marginalised and disadvantaged children and young people, we would suggest that potentially this could be a useful Network which any future mechanism for civic engagement could learn from and/or link to.

¹ OFMDFM (2006) Our Children and Young People – Our Pledge A Ten Year Strategy for Children and Young People in Northern Ireland 2006-2016

² NICCY (2004) Children's Rights in Northern Ireland 2004, p.40

³ http://www.ycni.org/ycni_projects/NINFY/ninfy_introduction.html

On many occasions children and young people's experiences of representation on adult-dominated forums has been that it is a tokenistic exercise, with little genuine commitment to listening to and responding to their views. It will be essential that any future mechanism takes steps to avoid tokenism, ensures that the representation of children and young people broadly reflects the life and experiences of children and young people in Northern Ireland. Their representation must be balanced and equitable in respect of the representation of other sections of civic society. Alongside this we would also suggest that strong links should be established with existing participative structures and a concerted effort must be made to reach out and pro-actively involve those children and young people who are disenfranchised and unlikely to have links to formal participative structures.

CiNI would also highlight that involving and engaging children and young people will require a commitment of resources in terms of skilled staff to facilitate children and young people to get involved. There are a wide range of expert organisations in the sector that facilitate, support and enable the involvement an engagement of children and young people (see below). However we do recognise that much time and resources went into the previous Civic Forum and it must be recognised that children's voluntary and community groups are facing major resource constraints at present and would find it difficult to release resources to a statutory institution, unaided, over a sustained period of time. As suggested by NICVA we would agree that consideration needs to be given to reimbursing members' organisations in some way, if there is to be a genuine level playing field of participation in any new mechanism.

If the Civic Forum is to play a key role in the governance structures of Northern Ireland we would suggest that as part of a comprehensive induction and training programme for new members that they should avail of the support and services of the OFMDFM supported Participation Network⁴. The Participation Network works with Government departments and statutory agencies in Northern Ireland to develop their capacity to fulfil their duties to effectively engage and involve children and young people in decision making. It could support members of the Civic Forum to effectively engage and involve children and young people in giving advice to government on issues affecting their lives. The Participation Network website also contains information on organisations that have expertise in consulting and engaging children and young people.

CONCLUSION

CiNI looks forward to hearing from OFMDFM in due course with a response to the issues raised above and is happy to engage further with OFMDFM on the review process and next steps.

⁴ <http://www.ci-ni.org.uk/theparticipationnetwork/>