



***Promoting a peaceful and fair society  
based on reconciliation and mutual trust***

Community Relations Council Response  
to  
Review of the Northern Ireland  
Civic Forum  
by  
The Office of the First Minister and  
Deputy First Minister

September 2008

## Community Relations Council

The Community Relations Council (CRC) was formed in January 1990 as an independent company and registered charity to lead and support change in Northern Ireland towards reconciliation, tolerance and mutual trust. It originated in 1986 as a proposal of a research report commissioned by the NI Standing Advisory Committee on Human Rights.

By promoting better practice through constructive and relevant dialogue between different groups and sectors in society, CRC is the lead advocate body on the achievement and maintenance of good community relations.

CRC's vision is for *A peaceful, inclusive, prosperous, stable and fair society founded on the achievement of reconciliation, equality, co-operation, respect, mutual trust and good relations.*

CRC leads and supports change to achieve this vision by –

- identifying and developing new and effective approaches to peace-building and reconciliation in partnership with people, organisations and government
- promoting the adoption of good relations policies and practice at local, community and institutional level
- assisting communities and institutions in working through and beyond the legacies of the Troubles
- managing the grant making and other services of CRC in an effective, efficient and economical way
- ensuring that CRC members and staff have sufficient capacity to deliver the corporate objectives.

The Council's work is founded on the following principles:

**Equity and Equality:** CRC is committed to fair treatment for all, through open access to resources, structures and decision-making processes at all levels of society, as an essential basis for good community relations.

**Human Rights:** The Council is committed to upholding the human rights of all as a fundamental basis for good community relations.

**Diversity:** The Council is committed to the promotion of inter-cultural respect and freedom of expression and movement (whether expressed through religious, ethnic or political background) and supports the peaceful expression of variety and difference.

**Interdependence:** CRC recognises and affirms the interconnectedness of the personal and community experiences of all those living and working in Northern Ireland. The Council exists to promote good relations based on trust, respect and inclusion.

**Non-violence:** The Council recognises non-violence as an essential condition for the growth of trust, dialogue and conflict transformation.

**Openness, Transparency and Accountability:** As a provider of public services, the Council will uphold this principle in all its work.

## Introduction

In this paper CRC sets out a series of recommendations to provide a partial response to this consultation on the Review of the Northern Ireland Civic Forum by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister

CRC welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation which seeks to carry out a full review and examine the effectiveness and appropriateness of the current structure, operation, composition and membership of the Civic Forum.

Section 56 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 requires the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to obtain the views of the Civic Forum referred to in the Belfast Agreement. Strand One, paragraph 34 provided for the establishment of a Civic Forum, comprising representatives of the business, trade union and voluntary sectors, to act as a consultative mechanism on social economic and culture issues.

*"The Civic Forum was originally established as a consultative mechanism on social, economic and cultural issues as they were perceived at that time. Civic society in Northern Ireland has changed enormously since the Forum was first established and the deputy First Minister and I want to determine what are the best arrangements for engaging with civic society in that changed environment."*  
**Dr Paisley<sup>1</sup>**

In this response CRC is commenting on the Civic Forum specifically as this is currently the only option under review at this stage. If the NI Assembly determine that this is not the best arrangement for engaging with civic society we would welcome the opportunity to engage in a full consultation on its preferred option.

## Background

CRC was supportive of the idea of a Civic Forum, and involved with the nominating process in the original Forum. CRC feels that a new Forum has the potential to be part of the institutional arrangement linked to the creation of the devolved Government. A forum can play an important advisory role in which members of civil society, in particular marginalized groups can have a voice within Government.

The original Forum faced challenges for which its own review was set up to look at. However the forum was suspended along with the devolved Government before there was an opportunity to address these challenges. The lessons that were learned from this Forum are very useful in looking for the best form of engaging with civic society and we hope that they will be incorporated within these consultation proceedings.

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<sup>1</sup> Statement made at announcement on review of the civic forum, 29 May 2008

## **Rational**

CRC believe the concept of a Civic Forum is a good idea in theory. In order for the Forum to work in practice the right process, structures and remit should be in place.

A Civic Forum could assist in intergovernmental co-operation through cooperative working with social partners who must be independent of government, non party political and that have the support of communities at local level. Such a Civic Forum could be in a pivotal position in respect of influencing positive ways forward in conflict transformation and reconciliation approaches.

The Civic Forum should include representatives who are knowledgeable about community and race relations issues, experienced in developing and delivering good relations programmes and have a strong network of contacts throughout the sectors and region including key practitioners for delivery. Furthermore, these representatives should be able to draw on a vast body of research and training materials to help inform their responses to the Assembly. The Civic Forum would be able to assist a fledging Assembly to reach into communities in a structured and meaningful way and via an independent structure and process which will be seen to be politically unaligned.

A new regional Civic Forum should be creating a valuable point of dialogue with the FM and DFM and their office plus across departments to address cross cutting good relations issues such as shared housing, integrating education, employment, youth, shared space, race relations etc.

It is important for the Civic Forum to have certain provisions in place to avoid the same difficulties the original Forum faced in terms of an unclear concept and role. The Forums' structure and process for delivery needs to be strong with a new Forum especially in chairing and accountability. As there have been significant changes in NI society since the inception of the original Forum (such as the increase in the number of ethnic minority people living and working here) the Forum's structure would need to be updated.

An effective Forum would require political support and buy in for it to function and have proper resources in order for it to work more effectively. It is also important that this time around, work is initiated to increase its public profile and also change the negative perceptions that occurred with the previous Forum.

## **Role and Remit**

The work of the Civic Forum should have a vision, aims and objectives and expected outcomes. This should include a number of overarching principles and benchmark its work against the Programme for Government commitment to the cross-cutting theme of:

*'A shared and better future for all: equality, fairness, inclusion and the promotion of good relations will be watchwords for all of our policies and programmes across Government. Much has already been achieved and we are committed to working towards a shared and better future for all PFG identifies sectarianism and racism as serious issues for ongoing and sustained policy focus.'*

The Forum must be enabled to draw on its own and others experience, expertise and body of knowledge.

*"The role of the Forum may be wide-ranging but, critically, it should be aware that it exists to assist and serve the institutions of Government, particularly in the making of legislation and developing policies.... The Forum cannot be more than advisory. It has no executive status, it has no power of veto, its' influence rests on the ability to influence the decisions of Government whether through the Executive, individual Ministers, or the Assembly." John Simpson<sup>2</sup>*

The Civic Forum should be able to commission research and also be supported to carry out consultation on agreed key issues flowing from the Assembly and also issues that it has identified as key or emerging themes to help inform the Assembly on current issues working as an early warning/advice function. Furthermore, the Civic Forum should be supported to host conferences and seminars as a means to keep people informed of its work and to provide the opportunity for them to feed into this work.

Partnership and interagency working is crucial on the ground so it must also be crucial at high policy level.

The remit of the Forum needs to be decided upon in the initial stages.

*"The remit should link the work of the Forum to advice on contemporary questions under scrutiny by Government... The main baseline for the Forum might be taken from the Programme for Government as adopted by the Assembly... The work of the Forum will emphasise its advisory role and should avoid and implication (possibly only implicit) that it can be regarded as a second tier of regional governance." John Simpson*

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.ofmndfmi.gov.uk/john\\_simpson\\_response-2.pdf](http://www.ofmndfmi.gov.uk/john_simpson_response-2.pdf)

*“It is recognised in all developed democracies that the task of governance is a larger one than can be accomplished by governments alone. Complex social, economic and environmental problems require the widest possible range of experiences and expertise to be brought to bear in the search for solutions. In this way a Civic Forum could provide support to the relatively new political structures in Northern Ireland.”(NICVA)*

CRC is of the opinion that the Civic Forum could be of immense importance in respect of influencing positive ways forward in conflict transformation and reconciliation approaches.

### **Options for a Civic Forum.**

CRC is currently aware of two different Civic Forum models for consideration. We are not highlighting one option as the most suitable preferring to set out these two models to assist discussion:

- Revamped Civic Forum with a new name e.g. Civic Partners Advisory Forum to the Assembly. Civic society Forums already exist to input into London, Welsh and Scottish government. A comparable idea could be set up which is similar to these and still reflecting this region’s unique past, growing diverse society and its urban and rural character.
- A Forum which follows the model of the National Economic and Social Council (NESC) in the Republic of Ireland. NICVA have put forward this idea as a possible option for future arrangements here.

*“NESC has been in existence since 1973 and has undertaken strategic, long-term analysis of Ireland’s position and problems. It has produced studies on the economic and social implications of demographic change, education, health, social services, energy, welfare, agriculture, rural development, housing and the labour market. The Council has also undertaken detailed sectoral studies on housing, agriculture and rural development, health, forestry, transport, tourism, regional policy and local development.”*

### **Organisation of a Forum**

#### **Membership**

It is important that the criteria of a new Forum be defined at an early stage. There were problems with the large number of members in the original Forum (60 members) so it might be best to consider a new Forum with a smaller membership. John Simpson sets out 3 models for membership:

- *“To draw from a representative group involved at active level in local government: a political model*

- *To reflect a mixed non-expert group of people with active participation in a range of social, community, environmental and economic question: a model based on non-professional (or non-expert) individuals*
- *To assemble a group of people with expertise, or representative of expert organisations: a model calling on expertise or professional representation.”*

## **Chairperson**

One option for the appointment of a Chair and deputy is that the forum could elect its own. This would be designed to give it greater independence. However with the previous Forum the Executive choose the Chair and deputy with the idea that this would reinforce the legitimacy of these positions.

## **Structure and Operation**

Resources for Civic Forum and its members must be discussed, agreed and resourced. It should have paid posts with some resources for consultation, comprehensive research and seminars.

### **Interacting with other consultative groups**

A review of all structures should be undertaken. This should include mapping what other consultative groups exist and areas of duplication eg the Good Relations Forum is a relatively newly established group made up of social partners and Government representatives and feeds into Government’s Good Relations Steering Panel which consists of Departmental Permanent Secretaries. However, rather than being seen as duplicating the work of the Good Relations Forum, the Civic Forum should work with issue based groups to ensure there is no duplication of services eg if the Forum is addressing social and economic issues it could incorporate the role of the Economic Development Forum

*“Should such a body be formed to deal with economic and social issues, it could assume the current role of the Economic Development Forum. This would give more coherence both to structures and to the consideration of social and economic issues as being inextricably linked, rather than as separate agendas”*  
NICVA

## **Interaction with bodies’ representative of civic society outside NI**

- Need to engage with ROI, UK, EU and other bodies which influence regional policy. It should also be noted at this point that a proposal for a North/South Consultative Forum but until such times as this proposal for the Consultative and Civic Forums are finalised then it is difficult to comment on the relationship between the two.

- This will include being aware of and, where appropriate, advising Assembly on its responses to EU and other policies which have direct impact of the region

## **Conclusion**

CRC supports the need for open, accountable and meaningful engagement between OFMDFM and civic society.

OFMDFM already benefits from its engagement with social partners and vice versa and this could be further enhanced through the formal establishment of a strong and meaningful Civic Forum.

CRC is particularly interested in how it could engage in this process to promote and assist in the development and delivery of conflict transformation and reconciliation policy and programmes.