



The Cresco Trust Ltd

20 Pump Street,
Derry-Londonderry,
Northern Ireland, UK
BT48 6JG

Tel: **028 7126 9400**

Fax: **028 7130 8077**

Email: **info@crescotrust.com**

Web: **www.crescotrust.com**

Civic Forum Review Team
5th Floor
Lesley House
25 Wellington Place
Belfast
BT1 6GD

18 August 2008

To Whom It May Concern

Re: Review of the Civic Forum

As a social enterprise committed to giving a voice to those most marginalised within our society, The Cresco Trust welcomes this opportunity to respond to the review of the Civic Forum led by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister.

The Cresco Trust, established in 2003, is committed to enhancing the skills, through non-traditional learning methods, of those disadvantaged within the labour market. We do this through the delivery of funded projects, social enterprise activity and research. The Cresco family includes a *Ben & Jerry's* Partnership (Castle Court, Belfast), Mission Hall Quilts (Fountain Street, Derry/Londonderry) and Cresco Consultancy (Pump Street, Derry/Londonderry). Our activities are strongly focused around empowering the individual to grow towards greater civic engagement.

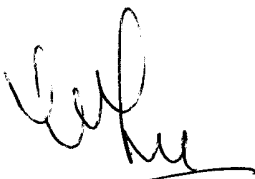
Given our mission, we are concerned that the Civic Forum did not truly represent grassroots democracy and that any re-constituted civic forum may fail to do so again. In our opinion, a mechanism which relies on representatives to sit on a consultative body (as was the case in the previous embodiment of the Civic Forum) runs the risk of contributing to the development of a two-tier democracy where the consultative body is in danger of serving sectional interests as opposed to those of the entire citizenry. We believe that the last embodiment of the Civic Forum lacked legitimacy in the eyes of elected representatives. We likewise struggle to appreciate how any future body constituted of non-elected representatives with no mandate can be truly democratic and representative of the population as a whole.

Organisations within the Third sector, including The Cresco Trust, are often called upon to actively engage with representative democracy in conducting their work and are already extensively consulted by the statutory sector. We do not believe that another consultative mechanism with representatives from the community and voluntary sector (amongst others) is required to conduct this work. Each organisation/sector has the ability to make their opinions known through existing conventional routes, e.g. constituency surgeries and responding to public consultations, although these mechanisms can always be improved.

We do, however, firmly advocate the need to give a voice to those who traditionally have tended not to engage with representative democracy, e.g. women, young people, the long-term unemployed, those drawn from areas of multiple deprivation, lone parents and those with low/no qualifications. We propose that any resources directed to a mechanism to enhance civic engagement should include these groups as *individuals in their own right* and not merely community groups purporting to represent views on their behalf. We are not advocating a mechanism aimed *solely* at these hard to reach groups but rather mechanisms which include these individuals as well as other individual citizens drawn from a representative sample of the general population. We believe that all citizens should have the skills to participate in the democratic process and should be empowered to do so.

Given the plethora of methods aimed at enhancing participatory democracy (for example, citizens' juries, 21st century town meetings and deliberative polling to name but a few), we believe that resources might be better directed into testing other mechanisms for engaging the disenfranchised on an individual level rather than assuming a revived civic forum is the most appropriate structure at this juncture in Northern Ireland. We are happy to provide further information on the range of methods available and their efficacy in contributing to a more vibrant and inclusive democratic process.

Yours faithfully



Margaret Lee

Chief Executive