



OFMDFM'S REVIEW OF THE NI CIVIC FORUM

Disability Action's Response July 2008

Any enquiry concerning this document should be made to
Monica Wilson
Chief Executive
Disability Action
Portside Business Park
189 Airport Road West
Belfast
BT3 9ED

Tel: 028 90 297880 Fax 028 90 297881

Textphone: 028 90 297882

Website:

Email:

INTRODUCTION

- 1 Disability Action is a pioneering Northern Ireland charity working with and for people with disabilities. We work with our members to provide information, training, transport awareness programmes and representation for people regardless of their disability; whether that is physical, mental, sensory, hidden or learning disability.
- 2 More than one in five (300,000) people in Northern Ireland has a disability and over one quarter of all families here are directly affected by disability issues.
- 3 As a campaigning body, we work to bring about positive change to the social, economic and cultural life of people with disabilities and consequently our entire community. In pursuit of our aims we serve 45,000 people each year.
- 4 Our network of services is provided via our Headquarters in Belfast and in three regional offices in Carrickfergus, Derry and Dungannon.
- 5 Disability Action welcomes the opportunity to respond to this draft and to aid our response has put the relevant page/paragraph of the draft in brackets at the end of our comments.

SPECIFIC COMMENTARY

- 6 Disability Action is disappointed the contact details for the Review Team do not include a textphone or dedicated SMS number through which deaf people can access them in the same way as hearing people. This is of particular concern as OFMDFM has specific responsibility for equality (Cover Letter)
- 7 The same comments apply to the review document itself and to the fact that there is no reference to the availability of the documentation in alternative formats and languages; we will ask the Equality Commission to note this deviation from OFMDFM's Equality Scheme commitments. (Cover page of document)
- 8 Disability Action would ask for information on how the OFMDFM's website conforms to European Guidance on Website Accessibility for disabled people again, to support equal access to these important materials (paragraph: 2.5)

9 In relation to the key questions posed by OFMDFM, Disability Action would make the following response:

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

Disability Action believes that apart from the methodology outlined in Paragraph 3.2, Government should ensure that it consults those significantly and directly involved in civic society, Government should therefore consult with excluded groups including; people with disabilities, older people, carers , people living on benefits, children and young people and others who have limited or no influence on government policy.

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

- The Forum gave a focus to economic, social and cultural debates which would otherwise not have been included in the political agenda current at that time.
- It provided a mechanism to assist the transition to democratic processes.
- It produced a number of significant publications and undertook key pieces of research in sub-committee sessions.

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

- The Forum had too many participants; it is extremely difficult for 60 people to work in plenary.
- The recruitment process was not clearly outlined by Government consequently recruitment was dealt with very differently by the various sectors of membership with methods ranging from selection to election.
- Government, for example, named 4 organisations within the voluntary / community sector to oversee the process, without asking them in advance.

- The Forum seemed to be unclear on issues of responsibility and in particular accountability again with a range of views within and among sectors.
- The process of sectoral decision making and additionally reaching overall Forum agreement seemed difficult.
- The administration seemed lengthy and complex and the secretariat was not independent of Government.

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 original remain generally representative of civic society. On any new Forum, section 75 groups, those living in poverty and rural communities (excluding farmers who are already included) should be added. The representation should be balanced with no one sector being dominant.

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?

Disability Action believes that the Irish National Economic and Social Council should be considered in this regard.

Question 6: What should be the role and the remit of the new Forum? What types of issues might form the basis of its work programme and how should they be prioritised?

The Forum should be responsible for the analysis of strategic economic cultural and social policy, for the production of reports and other research. It should also be responsible for detailed regional, sub-regional and sectoral research and development work. The Forum should prioritise its own work plan in consultation with the First and Deputy First Minister.

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

The Forum should report to the First and Deputy First Ministers and advise them on issues of concern. The Forum should also provide evidence and advice on specific topics to Ministers and Assembly Committees. The Forum should ensure that its work is complementary to that of Executive, the Assembly and its Committees and in particular should guard against duplication.

Question 8: What suggestions would you make for the organisation of a new Forum in terms of: membership, chairperson, structure and operation.

The new Forum should have a significantly smaller number in membership than its predecessor but yet be representative. Its interactions and links with the Executive and the Assembly should be clearly stated and should allay the fears of political parties that it will be a non – elected body challenging the legislative function of the Assembly.

- The Chair should be appointed by the First and Deputy First Ministers after a public recruitment exercise.
- The recruitment process for members should be developed, agreed and published before the start of the process.
- Members should serve 3 years in the inaugural Forum and thereafter there should be a 30% retirement process.
- An independent Secretariat should be established.
- Legal status, staffing and accommodation issues need to be assessed and subjected to an options appraisal and all elements of this process should be subject to an equality and human rights assessment.
- Membership should be equality proofed.

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

Through the use of memoranda of understanding and by careful management. Duplication with the work of other consultative fora should be avoided.

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

Through the use of memoranda of understanding as above.

CONCLUSION

- 10 Disability Action has welcomed the opportunity to respond to this important consultation.