

Response to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister's consultation on the Review of the Civic Forum

September 2008

Introduction

1. The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland ('the Commission') is an independent public body established under the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The Commission is responsible for implementing the legislation on age, fair employment and treatment, sex discrimination and equal pay, race relations, sexual orientation and disability. The Commission's remit also includes overseeing the statutory duties on public authorities to promote equality of opportunity and good relations under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and the disability duties under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995.
2. The Commission welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister's consultation on the Review of the Civic Forum. Northern Ireland is, with the Assembly, the Review of Public Administration and significant investment, at the beginning of a process of change which offers enormous potential for change but is also a once in a generation opportunity which must be captured.
3. The Commission will advise and assist the Department to ensure that equality of opportunity and good relations are at the heart of this change in our society and are embedded in the institutions which emerge from it and in the public services provided.

Overarching principles

4. Leadership is the fundamental key to shaping our new society and all its institutions. It is a prerequisite for all public bodies and for all who hold significant public positions of any kind.
5. The Agreement sets out a comprehensive and integrated set of measures in order to capture, foster and let flourish the leadership alive across society in Northern Ireland. The suite

of measures should protect the integrity of elected democracy but also embrace participative democracy.

6. A Civic Forum based on these principles can harness expertise from across civil society in working for the public good. This way of working can be seen in the operation of Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act, 1998, where people affected are included in the development and operation of public policy and practice relating to them.

Specific notes

7. The Civic Forum should be clear in its role, remit and ways of working. A crucial requirement for this is establishing clear terms of reference. From these will be determined
 - the best, open and transparent, means of selection of members
 - the most effective ways of working, ensuring that all barriers to participation by civil society are removed
 - developmental mechanisms for monitoring and evaluation.
8. There are a number of useful models on these islands and beyond which if not already considered could provide helpful models. These include models such as the comité des sages mechanism in the European Union. The Equality Commission carried out significant exploratory work in the parallel area of consultative councils and we would be glad to share relevant findings with the review team.
9. The means of ensuring that equality of opportunity and good relations are at the heart of the Civic Forum is by careful equality impact assessment (EQIA) of the review and consideration of the equality impact thereafter. Using the EQIA process will allow the direction of skills and expertise into the best actions to harness the energy of the Civic Forum to work towards public good.

Conclusion

10. The Commission looks forward to providing further advice as the review is completed and work is undertaken to set up new means of engagement. Specifically we will be pleased to provide any guidance required on robust EQIA.
11. The Commission welcomes OFMdfM's work in establishing new institutions and mechanisms with equality of opportunity and good relations at their heart.

Equality Commission NI
September 2008