

evangelical alliance
uniting to change society



Evangelical Alliance
Northern Ireland
Submission to
Review of the NI Civic Forum
August 2008

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The Evangelical Alliance,¹ formed in 1846, is the largest body serving evangelical Christians in the UK and has a membership which includes denominations, churches, organisations and individuals. The mission of the Evangelical Alliance is to unite evangelicals to present Christ credibly as good news for spiritual and social transformation. There are around two million evangelical Christians in the UK.² The office in Northern Ireland was established in 1987 and employs four full time and two part time members of staff.
- 1.2 EANI is accountable to a Council of around 20 local evangelical leaders (from within churches, para-church organisations and wider civic society) while the National Director reports regularly to a smaller Executive and to the EAUK Directorate.
- 1.3 As an organisation which seeks to represent the views of its members to politicians, policy makers and wider society Evangelical Alliance welcomes this opportunity to contribute to the review of the Northern Ireland Civic Forum and the wider discussion of how Government should best engage with and consult civic society.

2. NI Civic Forum

- 2.1 EANI recognises that the Northern Ireland Civic Forum was initially established during one of the most significant periods of political change witnessed in the recent history of Northern Ireland. As such it reflects a particular point in time following the creation of devolved structures unique to Northern Ireland, designed to encourage greater participation from a wide spectrum of civic society.
- 2.2 Engaging and consulting with civic society is a laudable aim for any Government. However we acknowledge that this is seldom a straightforward process with many different interest groups and voices to be heard, with many diverging views. Finding the most effective way to not only hear but channel those views is a key challenge as was

¹ www.eauk.org

² Statistics from Tearfund's *Churchgoing in the UK*, April 2007

witnessed most recently through the Bill of Rights Forum³.

3. Engaging with and consulting civic society

- 3.1 While Government has continued to engage with civic society following the effective suspension of the Northern Ireland Civic Forum through consultations on policy and special interest focus groups, the period of Direct Rule was detrimental to wider civic participation. The restoration of the Northern Ireland Assembly has made access to political representatives easier and Government more accountable.
- 3.2 However engaging with and consulting civic society on various policies and legislation has continued on a piecemeal basis which is not uniform across Government, for example on the length of time for a consultation period. At other times policies are agreed and legislation passed despite significant opposition expressed during a consultation process. This can lead to a perception of 'window-dressing' rather than meaningful engagement and can act as a disincentive to participation by civic society.

4. Strengths & Achievements of NI Civic Forum (1999 - 2002)

- 4.1 The original Civic Forum brought together a diverse group of civic society who had perhaps not been in the same room before. This achievement in itself should not be underestimated.
- 4.2 As originally constituted the Civic Forum provided an opportunity for the Assembly and policy makers to engage with representatives of civic society from a diverse range of socio-economic, political and religious backgrounds. Encouraging engagement on policy from a community/civic society perspective is an important aspect of policy making.

5. Main Weakness of the Original Civic Forum

- 5.1 While it is commendable that each sector had its own process for nominating representatives to the Forum there was a significant weakness in the process. Specifically those who were on nominating panels were not precluded from actually applying to be the

³ <http://www.billofrightsforum.org/>

sectoral representative. If such a format is again utilised in the future this loophole will have to be closed.

- 5.2 A lack of political 'buy-in' was also a significant weakness of the original Forum and demonstrates the importance of ensuring that all political parties are on board should a new Forum be constituted.

6. Representation on the Forum

- 6.1 The sectors included in the original Civic Forum were representative of society at that particular time. The establishment of a Commissioner for Children and Young People and proposals for an Older Persons Advocate in the interim period indicate how various sectors of civic society are seeking representation and advocacy. Representatives of the growing minority ethnic communities in Northern Ireland should be included in any reconstituted Forum.

7. Models for a new Forum

- 7.1 An alternative model for a new Civic Forum would be for it to become a 'one-stop-shop' for engaging with and consulting civic society. Currently there are number of different fora and mechanisms for engagement which can prove to be quite unwieldy and often it can be difficult to ensure that the right information is targeted at the right people.
- 7.2 A Civic Forum could become a hub for all Government engagement with civic society based on a sectoral approach. Each sector could have its own sub-group with as broad a remit as possible and from within each sub-group representatives would be nominated to sit on a central Forum.
- 7.3 Major policy proposals could be presented at the central Forum with information and consultation fed back through the various sectoral sub-groups. If a policy item was specific to only one sector officials and policy makers would need only to engage with that sector.
- 7.4 This 'one-stop-shop' proposal could in effect replace other panels and advisory groups that are currently in existence across Departments seeking to effectively engage with and consult with civic society.

7.5 Obviously this would have significant resource implications which may not be practical at this time.

8. Role & Remit of a new Forum

8.1 As suggested above a new Forum should be a 'one-stop-shop' for the Northern Ireland Assembly and Government officials to engage with and consult civic society.

8.2 It should have the opportunity to be pro-active by suggesting areas of research or highlighting particularly issues within the local community as areas of concern to the Northern Ireland Assembly, alongside a reactive role responding to policy and legislation.

9. Organisation of a new Forum

9.1 As suggested above membership of the Forum as a whole could be based on a self-selecting sectoral basis. Those organisations wishing to demonstrate their willingness to participate in wider civic society would apply to join a specific sector based on criteria applicable to that sector.

9.2 Each sector could then nominate representatives to be part of a plenary or central Forum structure where discussion and debate between sectors on different policy issues could then take place.

9.3 The Forum would have a secretariat with staff attached to the different sectors for development and support, although it would not be necessary to have a separate member of staff for each one.

9.4 We recognise that to organise a new Forum in this way will have significant resource implications and may not be practical at this time.

10. Interaction with other consultative fora in Northern Ireland

10.1 In the absence of a functioning Civic Forum over the past 5 years or more other consultative fora and advisory panels have emerged across Government. To avoid duplication, a 'one-stop-shop' approach could incorporate existing fora where appropriate.

11. Interaction with bodies representative of civic society outside Northern Ireland

11.1 In the interest of sharing good practice and learning it would be important to interact with bodies representative of civic society outside Northern Ireland. This could be done on an issue basis or by sectoral group.

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