

## **Review of the Civic Forum**

Response to the consultation paper  
from John Simpson  
(July 2008)

### **Introduction**

1. The concept of a Civic Forum was adopted as part of the institutional arrangements linked to the creation of devolved Government in Northern Ireland. The earlier period of its operation was relatively short and ended with the suspension of the devolved institutions, from 1999 to 2002. The purpose of the Civic Forum was not widely understood and its deliberations attracted only limited attention in the wider community.
2. The Civic Forum had only a limited public profile. Whether this was a policy decision or a reflection of disinterest is not clear.
3. The term Civic Forum does not immediately have a resonance in Northern Ireland. There is less use of this terminology, or the alternative terminology, Civil Society, in political and community debate than is found in some of the other EU countries. In a review of the role of the Civic Forum, if an institution of this kind is to be sustained, then the remit and name need to have a more immediate relevance to the target audience.
4. To illustrate this tension, the suggestion might be made that a Community Forum would be more appropriate. In fact that suggestion would resonant well with the (so-called) Third Sector. In turn, that orientation would move the forum into a narrower focus (although still a wide ranging one) than was intended with the Civic Forum. The original intention was to have a more widely representative forum that would be representative of the Third Sector and the business sectors as well as employees and their representative groups.
5. Even this tentative discussion confirms that the most critical requirement is that there should be clarity in setting the agenda for the Forum and tailoring that agenda with the appropriate expertise to respond.
6. The original Forum did not convey (possibly because it did not have time) a clarity of purpose.
7. In the comments which follow I have been influenced by personal experience of:
  - Membership, and office holding, in the European Economic and Social Committee

- Membership, and office holding, in the Irish National Economic and Social Committee
  - Employment relating to the (then) Northern Ireland Economic Council
8. The ambitions for the NI Forum seem to have been strongly influenced by the knowledge and experience of the EU EESC. However, there may have been an inadequate appreciation of the complexity of the role and impact of the EESC.
  9. 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 within the remit of the devolved Government.
  10. 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.
  11. The advice of the Forum must be contemporary and from well informed argument. This advice must be prepared quickly enough to be available to influence the making of key decisions.
  12. The remit of the Forum should be clearly stated. That should then influence the membership of the Forum and, in part, set timetables and procedural constraints. The remit of the Forum should be assessed taking account of any possible duplication with other arrangements or the need to amend the remit of other institutions.

### **The remit**

13. The remit should link the work of the Forum to advice on contemporary questions under scrutiny by Government. Normally this would include advice and recommendations on legislation and the broad principles of policy implementation. The main baseline for the Forum might be taken from the Programme for Government as adopted by the Assembly.
14. The remit should allow the Executive or the Assembly to request an opinion from the Forum when they deemed it useful (but not to make this a compulsory obligation on either the Executive or Assembly). In parallel, the Forum should be free to take its own initiative to offer advice, even without a formal request.
15. The Forum should be restrained to conducting work only on subjects that fall within the remit of the NI Government.
16. The work of the Forum will emphasise its advisory role and should avoid any implication (possibly only implicit) that it can be regarded as a second tier of

regional governance. The standing of the Forum must rest on the quality and relevance of its advice. There is no inference that the advice will necessarily be accepted.

## **Membership**

17. Membership of the Forum has the potential to be controversial. Criteria for membership should be determined at an early stage.
18. To illustrate the options, the Forum might be structured:
  - either
  - to draw from a representative group involved at active levels in local government: a political model
  - or
  - to reflect a mixed non-expert group of people with active participation in a range of social, community, environmental and economic questions: a model based on non-professional (or non-expert) individuals
  - or
  - to assemble a group of people with expertise, or representative of expert organisations: a model calling on expertise or professional representation
19. Given the interaction of the Forum with Ministers, MLAs, and senior officials, the balance of advantage and argument points to acceptance of the third model.
20. The political model is not supported because it draws on the same constituency as is represented by MLAs. The professional model is commended since this offers the prospect of an ability to monitor Government actions with a degree of expertise.
21. The former Forum was too large to be effective as a working group. Ideally, the new Forum should have no more than 30 members, with organisational representatives having the ability to nominate alternates.
22. If the Forum is reconstituted, Government should re-examine the rationale for the continuation of the Economic Development Forum. This should be assessed alongside the case for a NI Competitiveness Forum, as suggested by Varney.

## **Organisation**

23. The organisational structure should be, on core questions, determined before the Forum is re-established.
24. The Forum should have access to Ministers and Committee Chairs but, in formal reporting, should respond to the OFMDFM.

25. To give the Forum greater independence, it should elect its own Chair and deputy Chair but for a defined, non-renewable period of 2-3 years. The support staff might be seconded from the Assembly secretariat (but not the civil service) for defined periods with right of return to the Assembly.
26. Members of the Forum should be modestly remunerated on a session attended fee basis, plus necessary expenses.
27. The Forum should be encouraged to make contact with other civic organisations and, where relevant, invite discussion or submissions. For wider consultations, the onus should lie with the Forum but with it holding discretion on the range and methods of contact.
28. A modest addition to the Budget for the Forum should envisage the extra expense of several meetings each year away from Belfast, including Dublin, London, Brussels (to link with EU institutions) and Paris (to embrace OECD contacts).

JS

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