

Review of the Civic Forum 2008

Submission by Kevin Cooper former member

Personal background in relation to Civic Forum:

1. Before my selection as a Civic Forum member I took part in the consultation process on the convening of the Civic Forum for Northern Ireland. Manus Maguire and myself jointly wrote a submission on behalf of Belfast and District Trade Union Council on the formation of a Civic Forum for Northern Ireland. I also took part on behalf of the National Union of Journalists in the consultation process by the Irish Congress of Trade Unions.
2. I was nominated by the National Union of Journalists for consideration by the Irish Congress of Trade Unions to be one of seven Civic Forum Trade Union members. These representatives were selected by the Northern Ireland Committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions and the names sent to the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister for appointment.
3. At the first meeting of the Civic Forum I was elected as convener of the trade union group. The trade union group met on a regular basis with Peter Bunting of Irish Congress of Trade Unions to discuss progress and policy issues in relation to the Civic Forum. We also took part in a number of meetings with our business colleagues and their sector representatives.
4. I was a member of a number of the sub committees of the Civic Forum and attended all the plenary meetings of the Civic Forum. I also took part in meetings with members from other civic society representatives from other jurisdictions across these islands.
5. At the time of suspension Avery Bowser, Bill Jeffrey and I helped co-ordinate a number of meetings with political parties, the then Minister Des Browne and representatives of civic society with Civic Forum members on the importance of continuity for the Civic Forum at that time. We convened a Civic Forum members' meeting to report back on progress.
6. Avery, Bill and myself co-ordinated consultation on the review of the Good Friday Agreement with Civic Forum members and helped write the Review submission signed by 28 members and dated 24 March 2004 as part of the review of the Good Friday Agreement.

Civic Forum work:

7. The Civic Forum completed a number of policy documents: Anti-poverty, Lifelong Learning, Sustainable Development, Human

Rights Bill for Northern Ireland, Victims, two Programmes for Government and four editions of a Civic Forum newsletter.

8. The Civic Forum workshops and meetings discussed key issues such as: sectarianism, the arts, the environment, foot-and-mouth, disability, interface communities and the Holy Cross situation - all issues relevant to our communities.
9. The Civic Forum set up committees and project teams which met regularly around Northern Ireland. Civic Forum members also received and accepted invitations to attend conferences, seminars and meetings with a range of bodies, which were considered important to its work.
10. This work was completed in less than two years by part-time voluntary commitment. In the two years that the Civic Forum was operational its members contributed enthusiastically and gave time commitments well above that originally expected.
11. The first six months of the Civic Forum was taken up by meetings of members in consultation with OFMDFM civil servants on the best structure and operational mode for a Civic Forum. This process would have been better informed had the cross party document from the Committee of the Centre been passed on to Civic Forum members to inform early thinking.
12. Two years of operations have shown what worked and what needs to be changed to improve the effectiveness of the Civic Forum.

The Civic Forum in policy-making and good governance:

13. The people of Ireland north and south voted for the Good Friday Agreement through the referendum and I believe their wishes should be implemented in full. The Civic Forum is part of the Good Friday Agreement and was not removed by the political parties or the two governments during the St Andrews negotiation. I believe that as a society emerging from conflict Civic Society has to play its role in helping to build a stable, inclusive, transparent, democratic and accountable system of good governance and ensure that no section of this society is excluded from decision-making and policy-making ever again.
14. We need to deepen the links and dialogue with all communities throughout Northern Ireland and between similar institutions throughout these islands to ensure greater understanding and co-operation leading to better relationships and mutual respect.
15. I believe the social partners in Civic Society can only gain by looking beyond their individual interests in helping to build these relationships. A stable, cohesive and peaceful society can only benefit everyone. Civic Society must play its part.

16. We must begin to see proper funding of the institutions of the Good Friday Agreement as an investment in our future. The Civic Forum needs be given sufficient resources and staff so it can achieve meaningful engagement with its sectors, wider society, East-West and North-South relationships and good research for better policy making as part of the investment in all our futures.

Structural changes:

17. The Review submission signed by 28 members and dated 24 March 2004 deals with some of the structural problems and with members' experience by consultation and consensus and therefore continues to be valuable.

18. Civic Forum should continue to have the authority to set up special project teams to look at across-cutting policy concerns of key interest to society.

19. The work of the Civic Forum should include environmental issues and sustainable development. Consideration should also be given to including criminal-justice matters as recommended by the Law Society if these are devolved.

20. I continue to believe that a reconvened Civic Forum should be smaller in number and should have four equal sectors. The three traditional social partners being trade union, business and voluntary/community but with a 4th sector taking account of our special circumstances as a society emerging from conflict. This sector should include faith communities, victim representatives, indigenous language representatives, cultural, arts, sport and leisure and educational representatives and community relations. Overall Civic Forum numbers should be not less than 40.

21. The business sectors should include agriculture, food and retail and fisheries. In light of all the representations consideration should be given to including professional bodies (non ICTU affiliates) with three reserve seats in the trade union sector. There should be a reserve seat for children's organisation representative, also disabilities and those who represent older people should be considered for the voluntary and community sector.

22. The selection process needs to be mindful of section 75 of the equality legislation. It also needs to take into account geographical and urban/rural balance to be truly representative.

23. It should be made clear from the outset that Civic Forum members are there to represent the broader sectors interests, not individual organisations and not individual views. This should not stop individual members offering a personal interpretation having taking into account

those wider views. With the clear understanding when the full Civic Forum discusses matters it is important to be able to reach consensus and for members to seek a collective outcome having taken into account the wider debate.

24. The Executive and Northern Ireland Assembly need to make a firm commitment to all the institutions of the Good Friday Agreement. To this end clearer communication mechanisms with the new Civic Forum between the Executive and the Assembly committees is essential.
25. There needs to be clearer accountability, reporting structures and communication with the sectors. Full authority should be given to the Civic Forum in relation to staff, budget. The Civic Forum would account for it on an annual basis in the same way as to other institutions of the Good Friday Agreement.
26. This Civic Forum should have authority over the chair. It is more important that the chair has the confidence of the Civic Forum membership than that of the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister.
27. There needs to be a permanent home for the Civic Forum, which the public can clearly identify as the Forum's own Office and Facilities.
28. The work and commitment of Forum members should be acknowledged with attendance or work allowances.

North-South, East-West and Europe

29. Any North-South consultative Forum should have a direct relationship and involvement with the Civic Forum and the equivalent Forum in the Republic of Ireland.
30. A mechanism for dialogue and joint projects with the similar institutions throughout these islands should be considered.
31. There should be a mechanism of dialogue with Northern Ireland representatives on the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions of the European Union and the Civic Forum.

Kevin Cooper