

NI Review of Civic Forum – Mary Casey Board Member NWCN Response

A Civic Forum is one way of ensuring that elected representatives and functional bodies gain access to the widest range of views and expertise from within society to better inform decision-making and good governance. In Northern Ireland the Civic Forum, one of the last institutions to be set up under the ‘Good Friday Agreement’ as a consultative body on social, cultural and economic issues published a wide range of reports. The Northern Ireland Act 1998 required the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to make arrangements for obtaining from the Forum its views on social, economic and cultural matters. The current NI Review is about identifying arrangements and mechanisms for engaging with and obtaining the views of civic society. It offers the potential to ‘help shape how government engages with civic society’ (‘Scope’)

Context:

Northern Ireland is on the North West periphery of Europe and the United Kingdom. The Northern Ireland Civic Forum offers the opportunity to develop East-West and North-South relationships which will benefit the social, economic and cultural status of the province. The principle of subsidiarity defined in Article 5 of the Treaty establishing the European Union intended that decisions would be taken as closely as possible to the citizen.

In today’s globalised society our devolved NI Government has a significant essential role to play in policymaking and how it does this in order to create and develop strategies for the social and economic wellbeing of our society and our province. Policymaking delivery in partnership, learning from practitioners and learned experiences locally and internationally has been ongoing for some years now within Northern Ireland and the demands for openness and a willingness to listen and to learn and to build relationships by Government and its functional bodies is increasing. Government and functional bodies need help in order to issue good policy as identified by the citizen. Decentralisation and Partnership can offer what this province needs.

Communication is essential to engagement at all levels, the local, regional, global. It is also essential to the work of engaging and empowering communities. It is important because it is about what is sent and what is received. The traditional business view of organisations is that information is fed down and up along formal channels (vertical). Centralisation and control of decision-making in this case is strong. In recent years decentralisation was identified and adopted by many businesses and organisations because it offered much more potential to gain better knowledge of the customer, empowered the individual and freed up senior management time. Communication is not complete until feedback is received.

The North West Community Network representing some 600 community groups works to achieve a genuinely participative democracy and acts as a facilitator of community consultation in all areas of the North West peripheral cross border region of Ulster. The current Network secretariat and Board membership are ideally placed to develop with others a local and regional role and presence within a Northern Ireland Civic Forum.

28 August 2008

