

The Civic Forum in the context of the Review of the Agreement



Civic Forum members' perspective

24/03/04

STRAND ONE

DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Relations with other institutions

34. A consultative Civic Forum will be established. It will comprise representatives of the business, trade union and voluntary sectors, and such other sectors as agreed by the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. It will act as a consultative mechanism on social, economic and cultural issues. The First Minister and the Deputy First Minister will by agreement provide administrative support for the Civic Forum and establish guidelines for the selection of representatives to the Civic Forum.

STRAND TWO

NORTH/SOUTH MINISTERIAL COUNCIL

19. Consideration to be given to the establishment of an independent consultative forum appointed by the two Administrations, representative of civil society, comprising the social partners and other members with expertise in social, cultural, economic and other issues.

Background

The Civic Forum was one of the last institutions to be set up under the Agreement. Despite this delay, it accomplished a substantial body of work within a short period.

Work done

It has published reports on a range of key social, cultural and economic issues including: an Anti-poverty report, a Lifelong Learning report, a comprehensive submission on Sustainable Development, a submission on Human Rights to the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, a submission on Victims to the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, two full responses to the Programme for Government and four editions of a Civic Forum newsletter.

Issues discussed

The Civic Forum has conducted a number of workshops and meetings which 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.

This is an impressive range of work completed in less than two years through 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.

Visits made

To facilitate the work the Civic Forum set up a number of committees and project teams which met regularly in various locations. 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.

First six months

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.

Two years of operations have shown what worked well and what needs to be changed to improve the effectiveness of the Civic Forum. As the Civic Forum remains in suspension this document represents the views of some Civic Forum members who remain in contact and as such is a set of proposals to inform the way forward for Civic Forum in the context of the Review of the Agreement.

Recommendations

1. Make-up

To be effective the Civic Forum needs to better reflect the traditional social partnership model. To this end the membership of the Forum should be not less than 40, divided into four equal groups: business/agriculture and fisheries, voluntary and community, trade union and the last group Other Civic Society (representing faith communities, education, the arts and other bodies which do not fall into a constituency of the other three).

2. Relationship with sectors

The nominations for the Civic Forum should be done through these four sectors and there should be a permanent and ongoing relationship with the four nominating sectors. If social partnership is to be meaningful the Civic Forum members need to have this relationship with their sectors reflecting their views and informing their sectors of policy discussions and other sectoral views.

3. Sectors

To help cohesive, informed and accountable representation, each of the four sector groups should meet regularly. These meetings could include representatives of the nominating bodies to broaden the discussion, in the way both trade union and business sectors operate. To ensure effective operation of this policy each sector would be allowed a small administration staff to run their sectoral business and research. This would lead to a more disciplined and more wide-ranging reflection of sectoral policy and opinions, building confidence in the work of the Civic Forum and its membership.

4. Control and authority

The control and content of all published material in the name of the Civic Forum either electronic or printed should be under the authority of Civic Forum members alone. The Civic Forum experienced problems with its website; there is less on the Web site now than two years ago. It was the intention of Civic Forum members to publish all documents and have them available on the website along with minutes of meetings, press statements and other relevant material. If the Civic Forum was to be seen to be effective it had to have the ability to communicate both publicly and internally in an effective manner but despite members' efforts this was never achieved. Within the first six months of operation the Civic Forum had prioritised the appointment of a communications officer to help with all these tasks but the appointment was not made. This was one area where the ability to advertise, appoint and direct its own staff would have been of benefit.

5. Effectiveness and independence

The effectiveness and independence of the Civic Forum could also be improved by making it free standing similar to the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, Police Ombudsman Office or the Equality Commission. This would allow it to employ its own staff on Civil Service grades and manage its own finances within annual budgets approved by the Executive

and Northern Ireland Assembly. This would free it up from the day-to-day involvement of the Civil Service, allow it to manage its staff and spend its budget within pre-set agreed criteria.

6. Permanent home

The Civic Forum needs a permanent home with a chamber for plenary meetings, committee rooms, library facilities and offices for the sectoral and Civic Forum administrations. The safety of all Civic Forum members needs to be taken into account when locating and securing the premises. The premises also need to be accessible to all communities and members of the public. (Similar to the premises in York Street, which were used for the political Forum during the talks) It could maintain a permanent presence throughout Northern Ireland by entering partnership arrangements with bodies from its nominating sectors. The Civic Forum's plenary chamber, committee rooms and other facilities could be made available to communities, groups and social partners for an agreed fee which would help defray costs and improve social engagement. If the offices had ground floor access in a busy commercial area a public cafe run commercially could provide an area where Civic Forum members and public could meet in civic space.

7. Reporting mechanisms

It is important to improve the relationship and reporting mechanisms between the Civic Forum and elected MLAs in the Northern Ireland Assembly. This can be done in four main ways:

- A. There should be a formal reporting mechanism with the Committee of the Centre as this committee is made up from all political parties. (Quarterly pre-arranged joint meetings would be one way)
- B. There should be a formal reporting mechanism to the Executive through bi-monthly meetings with the First and Deputy First Ministers.
- C. Day-to-day contact should be from the staff and/or chair and vice chairs of the Civic Forum and senior civil servants of the Office of the First and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM)
- D. Meetings should take place with Assembly Committees, as and when policy matters are relevant.

8. Increase public awareness

To ensure continuity and increase public awareness the Civic Forum plenary should be held in one location on its own premises. To ensure regional engagement and local involvement the Civic Forum committees should meet on a rotational basis throughout the six counties of Northern Ireland.

9. Expenses and allowances

Expenses and allowances should be made available in the manner suggested by the cross-party document. All finances should be transparent and publicly available. Civic Forum members should not be expected to participate at their own expense. There should be fairness in the ability to participate and where members or their organisations are financially disadvantaged they should be allowed to claim attendance allowances. The chairs and vice chairs of the Civic Forum and its committees should be given agreed allowances for the

additional workload. It proved divisive to pay a financial allowance to the chair of the Civic Forum while allowing no other member the ability to claim financial loss or to be given an allowance.

10. Accountable

If the Civic Forum is to stand for openness, transparency and accountability all of its members must be accountable to plenary. To ensure that the chair enjoys the confidence of the membership of the Civic Forum this position should be elected from within its membership and be accountable to that membership. This was the recommendation of the cross party document and was the case for all other positions, other than the chair. If the Civic Forum is to be effective it must have the ability to direct and manage its staff in the same fashion as other institutions of the Agreement.

11. Nomination and re-nomination

Nomination and re-nomination to the Civic Forum should be a matter for the nominating sectors within equality guidelines. Equality guidelines would include community/religious, gender, age, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, socially excluded, geographic and urban/rural mix, which each sector would have to apply when nominating. Difficulty was experienced both with the nomination process and the re-nominating of vacancies. Some sectors experienced delays of up to a year in trying to fill vacancies; other sectors were told not to fill vacancies. Some members after they were selected and nominated found the body that was set up to nominate no longer existed and therefore they had no sector to report to and take advice from; this should not be allowed.

12. Rotation of membership

The process of nomination or rotation of Civic Forum membership has not been addressed. For continuity and experience, replacing Civic Forum members, a third at a time on an annual basis (every member still given a three-year term of office) across all sectors would be one way of doing it, the three-year period of office to run from the date of acceptance of nomination.

13. North/South and East/West

A North/South Consultative Forum depends on a functioning and effective Civic Forum in Northern Ireland. We believe that the proposals contained in this document will greatly assist the development of the All-Ireland Consultative Forum, which had only just begun at the time of suspension. With the development of devolution in Scotland and Wales and regional government in England contact and discussion had taken place with the Scottish and London Civic Fora. Civic Fora throughout Britain and Ireland had been in contact and exploring ways of working together so a fully operational Civic Forum has a contribution to make to East-West relationships as well as to peace and stability in the island of Ireland.

14. Europe

This process could also feed into the European context through the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions of the European Union.

Conclusion

As a society emerging from conflict it is important to deepen the political process through social dialogue. We believe that an independent, effective, transparent and accountable Civic Forum would make a significant contribution to peace, reconciliation and political progress.

24 Civic Forum members added their name to the document by 24/03/04 it is now 28.

28 Civic Forum members in support of these proposals:

Kevin Cooper, Avery Bowser, Bill Jeffrey, Eithne McNulty, Elizabeth Bicker, George Glenn, James Orr, Alan McBride, Jeannette Chapman, Emma McDowell, Margaret Gregg, Ryan Williams, Gordon Woods, Mick O'Reilly, Louise Warde Hunter, Donncha Mac Niallais, Avril Watson, Brian Symington, Patricia MacBride, Kevin McLaughlin, Brian Dougherty, Carmel McKinney, Rosemary Ruddy, Annabel Weldon, Daphne Gilmour, Eamonn Keenan, Brian O'Reilly, Roisin McGlone.