

## **Response by Newry & Mourne District Council to the OFMDFM Review of the Northern Ireland Civic Forum**

Newry and Mourne District Council's response is as follows:

### **1. What do you consider to be the best way for Government to engage with and consult civic society?**

Response:

Newry and Mourne District Council is itself committed to encouraging, hosting and facilitating civic dialogue on current and future issues which will impact upon individuals and groups within society. However, we recognise that there is no one means of effective engagement and consultation with civic society.

Consideration should be given to which method of consultation is most appropriate in the circumstances. Government must ensure that it consults with those who are involved in civic society and who are directly affected by the policy issues under consideration.

### **2. What do you consider were the main strengths and achievements of the (1999-2002) Civic Forum as originally constituted?**

Response:

Newry and Mourne District Council notes that, through the establishment of standing committees and working groups with responsibility for specific issues, the Forum did provide a focus on discussion on social, economic and cultural issues.

### **3. What, in your opinion, were the main weaknesses of the original Civic Forum and how might they be remedied?**

Response:

Having 60 members covering ten sectors had potential to create a cumbersome body when operating in plenary session. This was reflected in the fact that the Civic Forum met 12 times in plenary session between 9 October 2000 and 14 October 2002.

In addition, while the Forum did produce publications and undertook research, there seemed to be a generally limited understanding within the general public as to the purpose and role which the Forum was seeking to fulfil. This in turn had potential to undermine the principle that the Forum was fulfilling a participative democracy role.

**4. To what extent do you think the sectors included in the original civic forum remain representative of civic society? Who do you think should be represented on a new Forum and what should be the balance between different sectors?**

Response:

The original Forum may be deemed to have been broadly representative of civic society.

In the development of a new Civic Forum, Government should be mindful to ensure that the membership continues to be not only a representative, but also a cross-section of society with a geographic spread. Government should also take cognisance of the nine Section 75 groups and ensure that no one sector is dominant within the new process.

**5. Do you consider that an alternative model of social partnership might provide a suitable example of a new Forum? If so, what type of model would you propose and why?**

Response:

The effectiveness of the Civic Forum as a 'social partnership' will be dictated by the representativeness of its membership, their level of commitment and the level of the discussion and engagement of issues impacting civic society. This must be addressed at the time of recruitment and within the operational terms of reference.

**6. What should be the role and remit of the new Forum? What types of issues might form the basis of its work programme and how should they be prioritised?**

Response:

If it is to truly play a role as a mechanism for participative democracy, the focus and priority of the new Forum's work should be underpinned and centred upon the Programme for Government.

The new Forum should have a role in researching, analysing and advising on the strategic context of social, economic and social policy.

**7. What should be the relationship between a new Forum and the First Minister and deputy First Minister, and the Assembly?**

Response:

As many new Commissions, whereby civic society can challenge Government, have been created, the new Civic Forum should ensure it provides added value and is complementary to the work of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, and the Northern Ireland Assembly.

In this respect, the new Forum must have accessible channels of communication to the First Minister and deputy First Minister, and the Northern Ireland Assembly, to provide advice on specific issues directly impacting civic society.

**8. What suggestions would you make for the organisation of a new Forum in terms of membership, chairperson, structure and operation?**

Response:

Newry and Mourne District Council believes the recruitment process and operational terms of reference should be equality screened to embed equality principles to ensure openness and transparency.

As referred to in our response to question 4, Government should be mindful to ensure that the membership continues to be not only a representative, but also a cross-section of society with a geographic spread. Government should also take cognisance of the nine Section 75 groups and ensure that no one sector is dominant within the new process.

**9. How might a new Forum interact with other consultative fora within Northern Ireland?**

Response:

The new Forum's operational Terms of Reference, strategic action plan and any Memorandum of Understanding must address actions which avoid duplication of resources and actions. This must involve developing good communication and maintaining sustainable relations with other consultative fora within Northern Ireland.

**10. How should a new Forum interact with bodies representative of civic society outside Northern Ireland?**

Response:

It will be important to identify other models of best practice outside Northern Ireland which can help increase understanding of specific issues which impact upon individuals and groups within civic society. As in the answer to question 9,

this will require the new Forum to develop a Memorandum of Understanding with identified bodies.