



REVIEW OF THE NI CIVIC FORUM

Comments by

Northern Ireland Environment Link

29 August 2008

Northern Ireland Environment Link is the networking and forum body for non-statutory organisations concerned with the environment of Northern Ireland. Its 51 Full Members represent over 85,000 individuals, 262 subsidiary groups, have an annual turnover of £100 million and manage over 314,000 acres of land. Members are involved in environmental issues of all types and at all levels from the local community to the global environment.

These comments are agreed by Members, but some members may be providing independent comments as well. If you would like to discuss these comments we would be delighted to do so.

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1. Welcome for the Review of the NI Civic Forum

Northern Ireland Environment Link (NIEL) welcomes the Review of the NI Civic Forum and the opportunity to make comments. We believe that the review represents an opportunity to make recommendations on the most appropriate mechanism and arrangements for government to engage with and obtain the views of civic society on not only social, economic and cultural matters but also in relation to environmental issues.

2. Key Questions

Question 1: What do you consider would be the best way for Government to engage with and consult civic society?

NIEL believes that the best way for government to engage with and consult civic society is to take a regional and cross-sectoral approach. The re-creation of the Civic Forum may help achieve this. Such a Forum could reflect the views of society from across Northern Ireland, represent a variety of experiences and could provide independent support and scrutiny to government. The need for such a regional body is evident by the fact that many social, economic, cultural and environmental issues do not exist in isolation or merely within specific geographic locations: the Northern Ireland response to climate change (both mitigation and adaptation), for example, will require consistency of effort and strategic thinking across all sectors and interests. As a deliberative body with expertise from many areas (including strong environmental representation) the Civic Forum should strive to inform decision making and help deliver more co-ordinated and consistent government policies.

NIEL believes that the Civic Forum should complement the role of Community Planning. Local councils will co-ordinate the preparation of a Community Plan involving all public service agencies, the voluntary and community sector, and other social partners in order to:

- identify community needs across the council area;
- undertake public and community consultation;
- agree priorities for action and improvement;
- monitor and evaluate implementation; and
- report on progress to the public.

Where possible it may be useful if some of the representatives nominated to oversee the design and implementation of these Community Plans either sit on the Civic Forum or have formal opportunities whereby they can provide valuable local input into the deliberations. The Civic Forum could also be given a remit to oversee the work of the Community Planning Partnerships to ensure consistency of performance and ambition with regard to important issues such as climate change and biodiversity. The Civic Forum should take a long term view in order to deliver sustainability: for example, on issues such as climate change short term economic gains should not take precedence over longer term carbon reductions.

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

The 'original' Civic Forum was useful experiment in participatory democracy and created a useful mechanism for greater interaction between citizens and government bodies. The Forum was also involved in a number of important pieces of work and brought its cross-sectoral expertise to bear in a range of areas including Sustainable

Development.

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

There is a perception that the Civic Forum was not widely supported in Northern Ireland society. This was possibly due to a combination of factors; such as the lack of apparent clarity in relation to the role of the forum members and the unrealistic expectations of the people they represented. As well as the requirement for greater clarity of the role of the Forum for members and the general public alike, there is also the need to ensure that the Forum's voice is heard across government. The original Forum was also under-resourced. This will need to be addressed if the new body is to be effective.

Question 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?

The original Forum comprised representatives of ten sectors of civic society, including the business, trade union and voluntary sectors and was established to act as a consultative mechanism on social, economic and cultural issues. Given the cross-sectoral nature of the Forum and the status of Sustainability as a cross-cutting issue within the Northern Ireland Programme for Government, NIEL believes that the Forum should also comment on environmental issues in addition to the social, economic and cultural issues outlined above. Any new Forum should therefore have significant representation from the environmental sector in order that it may comment and contribute to the design and implementation of all policies impacting on the environment. NIEL believes that a core function of the Civic Forum should be to promote sustainable development, including robust environmental protection and habitat enhancement.

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

Our key concern is that there is adequate environmental representation and knowledge on the Forum. Several other European countries have adopted participative governance models which should be adapted to suit the needs of Northern Ireland. As highlighted earlier the Forum should contain significant representation from the Northern Ireland environmental sector.

Question 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?

NIEL believes that the Forum should design their own work programme in consultation with OFMDFM. Environmental sustainability and enhancement should be a priority work area for the Forum. The Programme for Government (PfG) clearly establishes 'Sustainability' as one of its two cross-cutting themes, stating that building a sustainable future will be a key requirement for our economic, social and environmental policies. The document also lists one of its five priorities as the protection and enhancement of our environment and natural resources. However, many of the specific proposals within the PfG have been drafted with the intention of delivering only economic growth. We believe this will be severely detrimental to Northern Ireland's sustainability and the Civic Forum should look to address this failure. Northern Ireland society is currently living at a level of three times its environmental means, the remit of the Forum should therefore include providing support to government in achieving and adhering to these environmental and sustainability principles.

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

NIEL believes that the relationship between a new Forum, the First and deputy First

Minister, and the Assembly should be built upon mutual trust and co-operation. There should be a process of true engagement and two-way communication between the Forum, government departments and political representatives. The results of the work undertaken by the Forum must avoid being left in isolation. OFMDFM should therefore have a duty to acknowledge and respond to recommendations made by the Forum and ensure that the Assembly is aware of the Forum's viewpoint in relation to the matters in which it has been consulted.

Question 8: What suggestions would you make for the organisation of a new Forum in terms of:

- **Membership - including numbers, sectoral representation, processes for selecting members and filling vacancies, term of office and expenses/remuneration;**
- **Chairperson - including appointment process, role and remit, and expenses/ remuneration.**
- **Structure and operation – including format and frequency of meetings, staffing, accommodation, budget and legal status.**

As stated earlier, NIEL believes that there should be a significant representation from the Northern Ireland environment sector on the Forum. Furthermore, as most of the members of the Forum are likely to have other 'full-time' positions, reasonable remuneration and expenses should be provided to their employers in order that organisations are not disadvantaged by having personnel serve on the Forum.

Question 9: How might a new Forum interact with other consultative fora within Northern Ireland to avoid duplication?

NIEL believes that it is essential that the Forum interact with other consultative fora such as the Sustainable Development Stakeholder Forum in order to avoid duplication. In order to do so it would be important to map and assess the range of consultative fora currently operating within Northern Ireland so that their expertise may be utilised by the Forum and to establish any information or expertise gaps that need to be filled.

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

In undertaking its duties a new Forum should be able to seek the views and experiences of other civic society organisations from other regions of the UK, Europe and beyond. The two-way sharing of expertise, knowledge and experience with other regions and bodies should inform the work of the Forum.

We thank you for the opportunity to make these comments. We hope that you find them helpful and that they will be taken into account in your decision. If you would like to discuss them further please do contact us.