



# **NIACRO'S Response to Consultation on Review of the Civic Forum**

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# **RESPONSE TO CONSULTATION ON REVIEW OF THE CIVIC FORUM**

## **1.0 Background to NIACRO**

- 1.1 NIACRO, the Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders, is a voluntary organisation, working for more than 35 years to reduce crime and its impact on people and communities. NIACRO provides services under the headings of: promoting safer communities; working with children and young people who offend; providing services to families and children of offenders; supporting offenders and ex-prisoners in the community; working with prisoners.
- 1.2 NIACRO has links with, receives funding from, and/or works in partnership with all the main criminal justice agencies in Northern Ireland.

## **2.0 Comments**

- 2.1 NIACRO welcomes the opportunity to respond to “The Review of the Civic Forum”. We have always been supportive of the concept of a Civic Forum for Northern Ireland and supported a number of staff who were selected to represent the sector.
- 2.2 These representatives put a great deal of time into the work of the Forum and were instrumental in its major pieces of work on social inclusion, lifelong learning and sustainable development. However, there were concerns about the structure, operation and resourcing of the Civic Forum while it was in operation.
- 2.3 When the Forum was suspended in 2002, a review had just begun. It was hoped that this would bring to light some of the problems. One piece of work, completed prior to suspension, made important recommendations about accountability and chairing. These and other issues need to be considered in the current review.

## **3.0 Context for a Civic Forum**

- 3.1 The Agreement recognised that it was desirable to have some sort of a mechanism to facilitate politicians in hearing the views and advice of civil society. NIACRO believes that such a role is still appropriate today.
- 3.2 Voluntary and community organisations are keen to contribute to the governance of Northern Ireland through their substantial experience and knowledge. The Civic Forum would be one way of harnessing this expertise.

- 3.3 It is important to recognise the time and resources which went into the previous Forum on a voluntary basis. Voluntary and community groups are facing a time of major resource constraints and it would be difficult for many organisations to be able to release resources to a statutory institution, unaided, over a sustained period of time. Consideration therefore needs to be given to reimbursing members' organisations in some way, if there is to be a genuine level playing field of participation in a new body.

#### **4.0 Role of a Civic Forum**

- 4.1 Any new Civic Forum, before it begins to operate, should have a very clear remit and focus as to its role and tasks and this should not duplicate the functions of other bodies. This must be meaningful and add something of value to the governance and quality of decision making in Northern Ireland.
- 4.2 The Civic Forum should not be a lobbying body. Many sectors already have well established relationships and communication channels with the Assembly and Executive. The Civic Forum should not attempt to encompass this and neither should it act as a consultation clearing house, as established methods for consultation with individual organisations already exist. Instead, it should be a deliberative body which tackles difficult social and economic issues and makes a particular contribution in areas where it is problematic to have an open debate in the political sphere. It should be used to gather evidence and information and in this way act as a conduit to the political structures.
- 4.3 It is recognised in all developed democracies that the task of governance is a larger one than can be accomplished by governments alone. Complex social, economic and environmental problems require the widest possible range of experiences and expertise to be brought to bear in the search for solutions. Many other parts of Europe have adopted participative governance models, focusing on social partnership structures which play an important role in social and economic progress. Examples can be found in Ireland (see below), Austria, Denmark, the Netherlands, Germany, Sweden and Italy. The Civic Forum has a role to play in the governance of Northern Ireland by embodying a model of participative democracy, which offers a process for enriching, not diminishing, traditional representative democracy.

#### **5.0 Recommendations**

- 5.1 NIACRO is strongly in favour of the Civic Forum being constituted as a social partnership body which can give advice to government on social, economic and cultural matters as laid down in the Northern Ireland Act. NIACRO believes that social partnership (between voluntary and community sector, business, trade unions, rural interests and government) has a key role to play in the future governance of

Northern Ireland. As a mechanism it extends participative democracy and can offer a range of additional voices to contribute to the process of making better decisions at a political level. The Civic Forum should embody this potential and as such, NIACRO would suggest that it could be structured as a proper social partnership forum.

- 5.2 The National Economic and Social Council in the Republic of Ireland is one possible model for our future arrangements here. NESC has been in existence since 1973 and has undertaken strategic, long-term analysis of Ireland's position and problems. It has produced studies on the economic and social implications of demographic change, education, health, social services, energy, welfare, agriculture, rural development, housing and the labour market. The Council has also undertaken detailed sectoral studies on housing, agriculture and rural development, health, forestry, transport, tourism, regional policy and local development.
- 5.3 A Civic Forum reconstituted along the lines of the National Economic and Social Council has the potential to take a broad view of the issues facing Northern Ireland, provide advice and evidence to government on these issues and thus enhance the decision making processes of governance. In addition, should such a body be formed to deal with economic and social issues, it could assume the current role of the Economic Development Forum. This would give more coherence both to structures and to the consideration of social and economic issues as being inextricably linked, rather than as separate agendas.
- 5.4 The new body, before it begins to operate, should have clear relationships set down with the First and Deputy First Ministers, the NI Executive and the Assembly to ensure that any advice and evidence it puts forward will be understood and considered appropriately.
- 5.5 It should have a clear vision, plan and the capacity to fulfil this. It must be adequately resourced to carry out its agreed remit, including having an appropriate research capacity.

## **6.0 Additional issues**

- 6.1 The consultation document on the Review of the Civic Forum does not mention the provision under Strand 2 of the Agreement (Section 19) for the establishment of an independent consultative forum 'representative of civil society' on a north-south basis. This body should be an integral part of the Civic Forum architecture, linking with an existing social partner body in the Republic of Ireland, and not a separate add-on or afterthought. Consequently its remit should be 'designed in' when the Civic Forum is itself under consideration.