



29 August 2008

To Whom It Concerns

NWCN Response To "Civic Forum Review"

North-West Community Network is a community development, membership-led organisation that provides support to the Community & Voluntary sector in the North-West by way of advocacy and representation at various levels, support in terms of dissemination of public policy information and interpretation and a focal point for the sector in the area.

North-West Community Network welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the consultation process in relation to the Civic Forum Review.

The Network also appreciates the comprehensive circulation of the supporting materials around this consultation process. On this occasion, the Network has elected to loosely follow the format of this questionnaire though many of the points to be made are cross-cutting and pertinent to more than one area.

The basis for the Network's response is ongoing dialogue with its membership and the wider contingent of Community & Voluntary sector groups in the North-West.

It is also appropriate at this point to assert that this response is constructed from a Community Development perspective, having perceived within the proposals the scope to build in greater attention to and practice around equality, participation and inclusion.

Once the consultation period has closed, it is important that contributors have a sense that their views have been taken on board. On this note, it would be very useful, as has happened in some past consultations, if the Civic Forum Review Team were to outline the impact that consultation responses have made and/or outline where particular responses have not been factored in to any changes to the proposals.

With Regards

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NWCN Response to NI Civic Forum Review, August 2008

The representatives within the previous incarnation of the NI Civic Forum 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.

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.

The Good Friday 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. NWCN believes that such a role is still appropriate today. This in no way challenges the direct relationships between politicians and their electorate; instead it offers the opportunity for a more deliberative forum in which different actors in civil society can collectively address difficult issues of relevance to Northern Ireland, which is complementary to, and can potentially enhance, the role and decisions of elected politicians.

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.

A changed political context now exists in which a Civic Forum could function. We understand that there are differing levels of enthusiasm within political parties for a Civic Forum.

The role of the previous Civic Forum was not widely understood by the NI public. We would recommend that a greater effort should be made to acquaint the public and the media with the purpose of a future Forum.

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.

Any new Civic Forum 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.

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.

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, 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.

In this way a Civic Forum could provide support to the relatively new political structures in Northern Ireland, as devolved institutions bed down and evolve. It should not function as a second chamber to the Assembly. Deliberation on the Programme for Government could be a key role for the Forum, identifying new, emerging issues and debating priorities. In this way it could add additional depth to the political discussions and help to ensure that the best possible decisions are being made, with as many experiences and as much evidence as possible brought to the table. In addition, the Forum could be given a remit to look ahead over a longer period of time to identify emerging issues and commission research on potential impacts. This would provide a useful framework for future policy decision making. The Forum should both react to requests from the Assembly and have the power to initiate its own work proactively.

One benefit of a Civic Forum, as was beginning to be demonstrated by the first Forum, is the joined up, cross-cutting approach it could take to complex social and economic issues. It is widely recognised that the structures of government make joining up difficult and a body that can work without the silos of government departments could add real values and fresh perspectives to challenges facing Northern Ireland such as, for example, poverty, dealing with a post-conflict society through issues such as sectarianism, mental health and working with young people, building a competitive economy, inward migration, sustainable development and interfaces.

While a Civic Forum could usefully provide a challenge function to the Executive on issues of policy formation and implementation, it should not duplicate any of the roles of Assembly committees in this regard.

NWCN 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. NWCN 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, NWCN would suggest that it could be structured as a proper social partnership forum.

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 a range of 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.

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.

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.

The Civic Forum should have a membership of upwards of 30 people with regard to future changes under RPA to capture geographical interests, though this needs to occur alongside the facilitation of views from communities of interest.

Provision should be made to connect with communities across Northern Ireland and appropriate mechanisms for engaging in key locations such as the North-West and West of the Bann in general are vital.

The Civic Forum should embody the requirements of equality and inclusion and its membership should reflect this. Section 75 and EQIA procedures already exist to support this and the wider promotion of adherence to these tools could be an important role of a new Civic Forum.

Expectations about the purpose and outcomes of a Civic Forum need to be managed, both as far as the public, stakeholders and political structures are concerned. Social partner nominating bodies should be supported in establishing clear feedback mechanisms for Civic Forum members to their wider memberships and it must be very clear that Civic Forum members are not functioning as individuals. However, neither should they function strictly as delegates, but should have some freedom to debate and negotiate, having been informed by the views of their sector and being able to feed back to them. This in itself would involve considerable time and resources. The Civic Forum cannot derive legitimacy from being a representative sample of Northern Ireland's citizens, as this would be virtually impossible and would place it in a challenging position to the representativeness of the Assembly, instead it should derive legitimacy from providing a means of participation in governance from a wide spectrum of interests in civil society.

NWCN recognises the value of learning from the positions and experience of other sectors and of robust debate and deliberation to reach consensus and increase understanding of complex issues. We believe that a new Civic Forum should seek to learn these lessons and that they would add value to the governance of Northern Ireland.