

Pobal

POBAL's submission to the Review of the Civic Forum

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POBAL – The umbrella organisation for the Irish language community in NI.

1.0 Background

POBAL's Mission Statement

“Driving the positive development of the Irish language forward into a new, shared society.”

- Putting the rights of Irish speakers on the agenda
- fostering new collaborative approaches between the Irish language community and statutory, voluntary and government agencies
- Enhancing the Irish language community by local planning, facilitation and initiatives
- Fostering cooperation between Irish language groups on the ground, in cities, in towns and in townlands
- providing a democratic and representative forum for discussion among Irish language groups

Main areas of Work

POBAL was established in January 1998. POBAL is a representative partnership that provides strategic direction and a democratic forum for the groups that have created the thriving range of social, economic, artistic and educational projects for the Irish speaking community in the North of Ireland. POBAL exists to promote the needs of the Irish language community and our membership. There are two aspects to our work: advocacy (Irish Language Act NI, monitoring the implementation of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, including government policies and strategies) and strategic support for our membership. Furthermore, we organise an Arts' Road Show every year and we are currently conducting research on the Special Needs of Bilingual Children; this research is funded by the Department of Education.

Main Activities 2007-8

- Coordination and pioneership of every aspect of work on the Irish Language Act NI.
- Proposals were prepared in respect of stronger ratification of Part III of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages with regard to Irish.

- A new initiative, 'Tá', was launched to give a wide range of people an opportunity to support Irish.

2.0 The Civic Forum

Before the voluntary sector appointed Janet Muller as the Irish language representative to the Civic Forum, POBAL had been active in the electioneering/selection process in this sector. It was a difficult and complicated process that created difficulties for the sector itself. It is important that a clearer, more transparent process be used in future.

A lot of good work was done while the first Forum was functioning. It was clear, however, that some had a lack of confidence in the ability of the Forum to function free from political constraints. Dissatisfaction was also expressed from time to time about the behaviour of the chairperson. It is, of course, possible that the members' concerns were without justification. Nonetheless, such issues illustrate that the Forum must be completely independent and free from the interference of politicians and civil servants who do not support the concept of the Forum and its activities.

POBAL believes that the Review of the Civic Forum must recommend the re-establishment of the Forum. The legislation under which the Forum was established is still in effect; while the Assembly was suspended and since it was re-established in May 2007, it has become clear just how important it is for civic society to have an input into the development of peace and the building of a new society.

The Civic Forum can complement the political process. It should not stand in place of the Assembly, and it should not lobby the political parties either, but it should give a voice to the community and the civic partners: the voluntary sector, the trade unions, the business sector etc. As well as these easily identifiable groups, it is obvious that Irish language representatives should also be included as representatives of the groups recognised under Section 75.

I refer to NICVA's recommendation that the National Economic and Social Council of Ireland should be an example to the new Civic Forum; we believe that all-Ireland links should be developed between the Council and the new Forum.

While the Forum was functioning, specific measures were taken to facilitate the use of Irish in the Civic Forum. Simultaneous translation was provided at each mass meeting of the Forum and a language policy was accepted, based on best practice and the responsibilities of state and public agencies under Part III of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. Now, seven years after the establishment of the Forum, it must be recognised that the Irish language community has grown significantly. Consequently, when the Forum is re-established there will be a need to build on the Irish language policy.

With regard to the role of the Forum, it is able to take an integrated approach with regard to language, cultural, economic and social issues and issues that cross government departments. The Forum could encourage 'bright blue ideas'. Furthermore, the Forum should be able to take a longer overview than a

‘governmental period’ on controversial questions or questions that require more long term planning, for example: the environment, development of the Irish speaking community.

The Forum should not be in competition with the Assembly, nor play the role of the Opposition. It is important to recognise, however, that there needs to be a way of breathing fresh air into this society and a means of escaping from the narrow interests of the political parties. Nothing should hinder the Forum from playing a challenging, pioneering role.

3.0 Conclusion

The Civic Forum must be re-established to give a voice to society about the development of the north in the all-island context and in the context of the east-west relationship.