



**Church House  
Wellington Street  
Belfast**

**PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN IRELAND**

**CHURCH & SOCIETY COMMITTEE**

**RESPONSE TO REVIEW OF CIVIC FORUM**

1. The Presbyterian Church in Ireland is grateful, through its Church and Society Committee, to be afforded the opportunity of responding to the Review of the Civic Forum. As a committee we have particular interest in society – its relationships, structures, and informing values. We are, therefore, concerned to develop a strong, articulate and effective Civic Society which engages debate about those matters which inhibit or enable human flourishing. The Committee believes that a health Civic Society contributes to the health of all its citizens.

**COMMENTS**

2. Each sector in society has structures and procedures for consultation and discussion. The Presbyterian Church in Ireland, for example, relates to other denominations through the Irish Council of Churches, a variety of 'para-church' organisations, and through other structures dialogue as decided by the Church.
3. We believe that there is debate and discussion within other sectors but that there is a need for structured and effective cross-sectoral debate and discussion which could be provided by a Civic Forum.
4. We believe that debate and discussion, while valuable in itself, needs an avenue to impact the decision-making process. In this way a Civic Forum can develop an authoritative voice, representing the variety of sectors which together are the building blocks of society. This is important in light of past criticism of the Civic Forum, namely that it achieved little if anything.
5. Northern Ireland society still feels the impacts of the years of conflict. We are concerned that much discussion in the political realm still adheres to the old lines of conflict. It is essential, therefore, that a space be created for thinking to emerge which is not constrained or determined by the old fault lines, we believe that with an appropriate structure a Civic Forum could help to achieve this.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

6. We recommend that a Civic Forum should:
  - Meet twice/three times each year for cross-sectoral encounter and new thinking

- Be structured to enable fresh thinking
- Consist of a smaller number of people than before, perhaps 7 or 9 rather than 60
- Be similar to a commission in that it would be served by a staff and have a clear remit
- The remit of the Forum should be to identify key issues in society and to proceed to address them or to challenge and engage others to address them. These issues would include, for example, sectarianism, the failure of education in loyalist communities. In other words, the Forum would become an initiator of processes in civil and political life. The remit, while given in the first place, should be adapted by the Forum and should be focussed in order to demonstrate achievement
- Should have broad societal issues as its concerns, not simply the social, economic and cultural issues which may be referred to it by OFMDFM, this function being retained
- Should not undermine the democratic process but should, from time to time, engage political representatives but should also have some commitment from the politicians to engage with what emerges from the work of the Forum. An explicit commitment from the Executive would be important
- Should consider its 'cost-effectiveness' e.g. by not doing work which is already being done elsewhere
- Should have relationships with civic fora outside Northern Ireland for sharing and receiving learning

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