



THE *Progressive* UNIONIST PARTY

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PUP response to Review of the Civic Forum August 2008

Intro/Comments

The Progressive Unionist Party welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation. The Civic Forum is an element of the Good Friday Agreement we have been particularly supportive of and were also keen proponents of during negotiations leading to the Agreement.

The Good Friday Agreement made it clear that there should be a mechanism to facilitate the involvement of and provide an avenue for the views and opinions of civic society. The Progressive Unionist Party feel this remains as important today as it was then. A system of civic involvement if structured correctly can only enhance the role and performance of our elected representatives.

At this point it is important to say that those nominated to the Civic Forum invested substantial time and effort into the concept and while there were issues around the operation of the first forum, their work is to be commended. The forum failed to meet expectations through no fault of its membership.

Those elements of society who would be involved in a new civic forum (the community and voluntary sector, business, trade unions etc) are keen to contribute what they can to the governance of Northern Ireland and indeed they continued to offer their services and time for the betterment of Northern Ireland whether there were functioning local institutions or not. It could be argued that it is these groups that drove Northern Ireland forward through times of political insecurity. The Civic Forum would be one way of both continuing this positive contribution and harnessing their enthusiasm and expertise.

The Original Forum and lessons learnt

The difficult start for the original Civic Forum and the stop start nature of political institutions in Northern Ireland made the work of the forum impossible and equally stifled public debate on its merits and potential functions. These problems have carried through to

this review itself, wide spread public debate on how any future Civic Forum should work, is the only way to establish it as an integral part of Northern Ireland's system of governance and public consciousness.

It is the view of the Progressive Unionist Party that substantial work will have to be done to ensure not only that public debate around the Civic Forum takes place but also that any new Civic Forum has as one of its primary drivers – direct public engagement at a local community level. Circumstances meant the 'concept' of a Civic Forum was not adopted or fully understood by the general public - therefore it is likely that public education of the potential roles and abilities of the Civic Forum will be necessary to create the capacity for wide spread engagement and debate with and about the forum.

Political will is vital to the success of any future forum, during the lifetime of the Civic Forum there was inconsistent political will, ranging from outright support to direct opposition, for any Civic Forum to carry out its functions and effectively carry out its workload, political support is essential.

The Theory

Any new Civic Forum's relationship with the Northern Ireland Assembly should be clearly defined, while not duplicating any functions of the Assembly, the Civic Forum should have two way communication and relationships with the Assembly. While having issues referred to them by OFMDFM and the Assembly, they should also have the ability to create their own agenda and forward work plan and the resources to follow them through, including any research resources required.

The Civic Forum can play a valuable role in advising the Northern Ireland Assembly on social, economic and cultural issues, similarly the Forum may also be useful in gathering evidence, information and public opinion on issues relevant to the Assembly's forward work plan.

The Forum should be a mechanism for tackling difficult social and economic issues as they arise and will have the advantage of being apolitical when debating and addressing them. The Civic Forum can insure that important issues such as poverty, sectarianism, dealing with the past etc...stay on the radar even when they are politically difficult or unpopular.

In Practice

Given the experiences of the original Civic Forum, careful consideration should be given to the size of the forum vs the need to be representative in its formation. Legitimate arguments have been made to suggest the size of the first forum made it cumbersome and difficult to manage, therefore a smaller forum may be more desirable provided that careful consideration is given to the balance, makeup and inclusivity of the membership.

Any new civic forum should select their own chair, office bearers and spokespersons.

Once in place the Civic Forum should decide its own relationship with similar bodies outside Northern Ireland, however we would hope they would communicate and gain experience of best practice as widely as possible.

Consideration should be given to remuneration of general membership, Chair/s etc, given the nature of the forum it is likely members will already have substantial workloads and the remuneration arrangements should make this as manageable as possible.

During the previous Civic Forum community and voluntary groups invested considerable time and resources into the forum. This is not a sustainable model given the already tight finances and limited resources of community and voluntary groups. They should not be asked to contribute as much to any new forum uncompensated.

It has been suggested that from past experience allowing 'alternates' may help ensure continuity.

The PUP would see a key role for the Civic Forum in the formation and analysis of the Programme for Government, with direct access to grassroots and fully engaged within the community and voluntary sector as well as within the business sphere, the Civic Forum will have valuable insight into emerging issues and what future priorities should/need to be.

Conclusion

The Progressive Unionist Party are keen for the Civic Forum to be reconstituted and for it to meet expectations and potential, while this will not be easy, it is our view that a Civic Forum can bring benefits to the community and voluntary sector, business, elected representatives and the general public therefore it is imperative we make it work.