

**Royal College of Nursing Northern Ireland**  
**Response to an OFMDFM consultation on the review of the**  
**Northern Ireland Civic Forum**

**Introduction**

- 1 The Royal College of Nursing [RCN] represents nurses and nursing, promotes excellence in practice and shapes health policy. The membership of RCN Northern Ireland comprises registered nurses, health care assistants and nursing students.

**Opening remarks**

- 2 RCN Northern Ireland welcomes the opportunity to help inform the review of the Civic Forum. As requested, our submission seeks to address the 10 key questions set out in section five of the review document.

**Executive summary**

- 3 The key points of the RCN Northern Ireland submission are as follows:
  - we do not believe that there is sufficient compelling evidence to support the case for the re-establishment of the Civic Forum
  - the most appropriate way for individuals, communities and organisations to participate in the process of government in Northern Ireland, as in any democratic society, is through engaging directly and proactively with accessible and accountable politicians, civil servants and political parties
  - during the six years since the suspension of the Civic Forum, individuals and organisations in Northern Ireland have developed their own political influencing relationships and strategies for responding to consultations
  - the attention of OFMDFM could be more appropriately and productively focused upon increasing levels of understanding and popular participation within mainstream political life in Northern Ireland, particularly amongst young people, minorities and disadvantaged groups
  - in the context of the Review of Public Administration and the Comprehensive Spending Review, the recreation of the Civic Forum does not fit with the drive for more efficient and effective public administration in Northern Ireland.

**What do you consider would be the best way for Government to engage with and consult civic society?**

- 4 RCN Northern Ireland believes that, in a fully-functioning democratic society, the most important way for individuals, communities and organisations to participate in the process of government is through engaging directly and proactively with accessible and accountable politicians, civil servants and political parties. This participation can take many different forms, from the simple act of voting through to responding to consultations, organised lobbying and more formal political activity. There is no need to construct a separate mechanism outside normal political channels in order to secure popular participation in the democratic process.
- 5 During the six years since the suspension of the Civic Forum, individuals and organisations in Northern Ireland have developed their own political influencing relationships and strategies for responding to consultations. The original purpose of the Civic Forum is now, therefore, redundant.
- 6 The attention of OFMDFM would be more appropriately and productively focused upon increasing levels of understanding and popular participation within mainstream political life in Northern Ireland, particularly amongst young people, minorities and disadvantaged groups
- 7 In the context of the Review of Public Administration and the Comprehensive Spending Review, the recreation of the Civic Forum does not fit with the drive for more efficient and effective public administration in Northern Ireland.

**What do you consider were the main strengths and achievements of the (1999) Civic Forum as originally constituted?**

- 8 RCN Northern Ireland accepts that the Civic Forum was a product of its time, when devolved government was in its inception and different ways to facilitate popular engagement with political institutions were, perhaps, worth exploring in this context. Those who participated in the work of the Civic Forum did so in good faith and with the best of intentions but it difficult now, six years later, to identify any meaningful and durable legacy of the Civic Forum.

**What, in your opinion, were the main weaknesses of the original Civic Forum and how might they be remedied?**

- 9 The Civic Forum purported to represent civic society but its composition served rather to undermine this objective, reflecting instead an amalgam of organised sectional interests. In effect, it gave a voice to those who already have a voice. Its role was often unclear and subject to interpretation, as the contrasting definitions cited at paragraphs 1.3 and 1.6 of the current consultation paper illustrate. Effective community leadership derives from democratically-elected and accountable politicians, rather than from appointed sectional interest groups.

- 10 RCN Northern Ireland was excluded from participation in the trades union sector of the Civic Forum because it is not affiliated to the Irish Congress of Trades Unions. Denying membership to the union representing the largest percentage of the largest professional group within health care in Northern Ireland on the grounds of a technicality did not help to inspire the confidence of our members in the Civic Forum. Its also highlights the danger that attempts to promote inclusion can actually have the opposite effect when they are not properly thought through.
- 11 The Civic Forum's mutually dependent relationship with OFMDFM was often a further source of distraction. Sectional interests naturally wish to engage with the government department(s) with whom they would normally do business. In the case of the RCN, this would be the DHSSPS, just as farming interest groups would seek primarily to engage with DARD, or businesses with DETI, for example. Because the Civic Forum's agenda was determined by OFMDFM rather than the Executive as a whole, it was often largely irrelevant to its own membership.

**To what extent do you think the sectors included in the original Civic Forum remain representative of civic society? Who do you think should be represented on a new Forum and what should be the balance between different sectors?**

- 12 Please refer to paragraph 6 above in response to the first part of this question. RCN Northern Ireland does not support the reconstitution of the Civic Forum and therefore regards the second part of the question as inapplicable.

**Do you consider that an alternative model of social partnership might provide a suitable example for a new Forum? If so, what type of model would you propose and why?**

- 13 RCN Northern Ireland does not support the reconstitution of the Civic Forum and therefore regards this question as inapplicable.

**What should be the role and remit of the new Forum? What types of issues might form the basis of its work programme and how should they be prioritised?**

- 14 RCN Northern Ireland does not support the reconstitution of the Civic Forum and therefore regards this question as inapplicable.

**What should be the relationship between a new Forum and the First Minister and deputy First Minister, and the Assembly?**

- 15 RCN Northern Ireland does not support the reconstitution of the Civic Forum and therefore regards this question as inapplicable.

**What suggestions would you make for the organisation of a new Forum?**

- 16 RCN Northern Ireland does not support the reconstitution of the Civic Forum and therefore regards this question as inapplicable.

**How might a new Forum interact with other consultative fora within Northern Ireland to avoid duplication?**

- 17 RCN Northern Ireland does not support the reconstitution of the Civic Forum and therefore regards this question as inapplicable.

**How should a new Forum interact with bodies representative of civic society outside Northern Ireland?**

- 18 RCN Northern Ireland does not support the reconstitution of the Civic Forum and therefore regards this question as inapplicable.

**Further information**

- 19 For further information about the work of the RCN in support of nurses and patient services in Northern Ireland, please contact Dr John Knape, RCN Northern Ireland Head of Communications and Policy, at [john.knape@rcn.org.uk](mailto:john.knape@rcn.org.uk) or by telephone on 028 90 384 600.

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