

## **Civic Forum Review RCN Submission**

### **1. Background**

1.1 **Rural Community Network** [RCN] is a regional voluntary organisation established by community groups from rural areas in 1991 to articulate the voice of rural communities on issues relating to poverty, disadvantage and equality. We are part of the wider **Rural Community Development Networking Infrastructure** (RCDNI) with the twelve **Rural Support Networks** (RSN) covering the whole of rural Northern Ireland.

1.2 As the regional rural voluntary organisation for rural communities, RCN focuses its work in two core areas:

- Building excellence in rural community development as an agent for change through consultation, training, mentoring, support and networking
- Articulating a rural voice which is inclusive, confident and effective through community action and issue based research with the twelve sub-regional Rural Support Networks.

### **2. Civic Forum Review**

RCN welcomes the opportunity to comment on the review of the Civic Forum. We were one of four voluntary and community organisations charged with the responsibility of devising a selection process for the voluntary and community representatives that sat on the original Civic Forum.

We are concerned that not a lot of reflection on the learning from the original Civic Forum has been provided by OFMDFM to inform this consultation process. OFMDFM's web based questionnaire and the timing of the consultation process means that the response rate from interested organisations is likely to be low.

### **3. RCN's View**

We believe that engagement between civic society and government is an essential part of building a healthy democracy. The fundamental role and remit of the Civic Forum or any other similar body must be clearly defined from the outset. Only when this has been done can we realistically offer opinions on the spread of representation, its structure, operation and membership.

The original Civic Forum suffered from a lack of clarity of role which, in our opinion led to a diverse and in some instances unrealistic range of expectations over what the Forum could achieve. This lack of clarity was to be found within the community and voluntary sector and amongst the other sectors represented on the Forum. If the Civic Forum is to be revived or a similar body set up this fundamental issue must be addressed. The roles and

the function of the body need to be clear from the outset. In our view the Civic Forum was not designed to be nor should be used as a lobbying space by the community and voluntary sector or any other sector. In its original form the forum had neither the power nor the function to bring about change. If this is to be the case in the future then this needs to be made clear from the outset. Its relationship to the other structures of government needs to be clearly defined to allay the fears of MLAs and political parties that any Forum or social partnership structure may be a challenge to their legislative function.

Representation on any social partnership model will always be a hotly debated issue. Whilst a long and complicated process was undertaken by the community and voluntary sector to seek nominations for the eighteen representatives there remained issues over the representation of the sector. The selection process was felt to be too complex and long winded and led to much frustration within the sector. The length of the process also made replacing members nearly impossible. Consistency is key to the success of the Forum and as such the process of selection was fundamentally flawed.

If the Civic Forum is to proceed then the community and voluntary sector organisations are best placed to identify the process by which representatives are selected and to develop a mechanism to support the individuals. This needs to be properly resourced. Representatives selected as well as the organisations need to have realistic and well founded expectations of both the role and time commitment. There is a need to identify from the outset what training and support representatives need to fulfil their role on the Forum. Considerations must be given to representation across all of the section 75 categories.

Resourcing was a major issue for the original Civic Forum. As one of the organisations involved in the selection process RCN had developed clear values and principles and job descriptions for forum members. This and other mechanisms however were simply not funded or resourced in the first Civic Forum. It was therefore difficult to fulfil the important function of information exchange between the forum and grass roots, groups and organisations. We feel strongly therefore that if the Civic Forum is to be revived and is to be representative and accountable then this function of information exchange needs to be well resourced.

The issue of membership is one which again can only be considered when the function of the Forum and the roles and responsibilities of members have been clarified. If the Civic Forum is to proceed then the Forum members could devise a mechanism which facilitates the election of the chair. It may also be useful to rotate the chair.

One of the positive features of the original Forum was its ability to provide an educational space to explore the relationship between policy and civic society. If the Civic Forum is to be re-established then this process may be a useful mechanism to mature the democratic process and broaden the political process. If the main sectors and interests are represented on a re-invented Civic Forum then this dedicated space could continue to have the important

function of carrying out research on the issues affecting people at grass roots. This however needs to be well resourced and a commitment is needed from government and procedures put in place to ensure that consideration is given to the findings. These must be in turn acted upon and followed thru.

#### **4. Possible Alternatives to a Civic Forum**

We would suggest that a better model of engagement between civil society and government would be a mechanism whereby individuals, organisations and civil society body/social partnership body could contribute to and assess the progress of the Programme for Government. This would allow civil society to interact more closely with policy makers with a better opportunity for shared learning and more informed and relevant policy being produced as a result.

The social partnership model in the South as embodied by the National Economic and Social Council (NESC) could act as a template for a more meaningful contribution of civil society into the program. In the current political context building cohesion and social inclusion should be an underpinning value in the development of any model of social partnership.

The Scottish Civic Forum also presents a useful model of civic engagement. We must however take some learning from the fact that this forum is now perceived as less effective since its funding has been stopped. This experience highlights the need for political support in terms of commitment and resources.

Stormont departmental committees could also become a key feature of engagement with civil society in Northern Ireland. This is already happening on an ad-hoc basis as many committees have asked for evidence from civil society organisations to inform their work. Committees are already constituted to hold ministers to account and are cross party. Their engagement with civil society could provide a good interface between policy makers and civil society organisations with expertise/alternative views to bring to the table. We would suggest that Assembly committee meetings move around Northern Ireland to bring democracy closer to the people (DOE committee has met in Armagh, DSD committee met in NICVA). In the past year RCN and the RSN's have facilitated the meaningful engagement between the Northern Ireland Assembly and rural people. In the 'Understanding the Assembly' event MLA's from the main parties and the Assembly Deputy Clerk informed rural people on how best to engage with and influence their work and the work of the Assembly as a whole. Through RCN and the RSN's rural people have relayed their experiences to the Ad Hoc Post Office Committee, Child poverty enquiry and the inquiry into the Prevention of Suicide and Self harm. This is just a sample of how local people, groups and organisations and the assembly can engage in a meaningful way. The consultative process is most effective when it is two way. This goes beyond the role of the original Forum which provided evidence and give consideration to issues. We feel however investment and commitment to a dialogue process would represent the fact that the political process is maturing and is accessible to all citizens.

The community planning process is another possible alternative. This should be a mechanism which facilitates civic engagement through which local people can partner with service providers and politicians to influence how services are delivered. Whilst the focus for community planning will be localised (eleven RPA council areas) there is no reason why this model, if it works, could be scaled up to a regional organisation.

In Summary RCN recommends the following:

- The fundamental role and remit of the Civic Forum must be defined to allow proper consideration of membership, structure, operation and representation.
- If the Civic Forum is to proceed then the community and voluntary sector are best placed to both identify the process of selecting representatives and to develop a mechanism to support them in their role. This must be resourced.
- The function of information exchange between the Forum and grass roots, groups and organisations must also be resourced if the Civic Forum is to be re-established and accountable.
- If a Civic Forum is to get up and running people will need to be convinced that it will be more than a talking shop and will make a real difference to their quality of life.
- One of the useful functions of the original Civic Forum which could be developed if it is to be re-established was that it provided a space for learning on civic engagement.
- Possible alternatives to the Civic Forum would be mechanisms through which civil society could input into and assess the progress of the Programme for Government based on the Social Partnership Model (NESC, Scottish Civic Forum)
- Existing mechanisms such as Stormont Departmental Committees could move from a purely extractive function to actually facilitate dialogue and hear the issues affecting people in a two way dialogue process that would strengthen their role.
- The community planning process also presents an opportunity to further the democratic process, although initially accessible to local it may be applicable regionally.