



**Response of the Social Democratic and Labour Party  
to the Consultation on the Review of the Civic Forum**

# **Social Democratic and Labour Party**

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### **1.0 Introductory Comments**

- 1.2 The SDLP welcomes this opportunity to respond to this consultation. The SDLP has long advocated the value of a Civic Forum to engage in debate and to provide expert advice to the Assembly and the Executive.
- 1.3 The Good Friday Agreement recognises the value of a mechanism to facilitate politicians in hearing the views and advice of civil society and that a Civic Forum can create a wide pool of knowledge and experience that can additionally inform the decisions of politicians.
- 1.4 The SDLP regrets that the consultation does not include section 19 of Strand Two of the Good Friday Agreement which called for the establishment of an independent consultative forum 'representative of civil society' on a North-South basis. The SDLP believes that this body could only add value to the Civic Forum structure by sharing expertise and learning from the experiences of civil society south of the border. The SDLP believes that account of this body should be taken during the course of the consideration of the Civic Forum.

### **2.0 Composition and Structure of the Civic Forum**

- 2.1 The SDLP believes that a streamlined and more efficient model for the Civic Forum would provide a more coherent and focussed voice while still remaining representative of civil society.
- 2.2 The Civic Forum should consist of no more than 30 members and the membership should be representative of civil society. The membership should also have strong regard for the requirements of equality and inclusion.
- 2.3 The SDLP has noted that participative democracy has a key role in many European countries. These countries have realised that drawing on a wide pool of knowledge can greatly help in the solutions to complex social and economic problems.
- 2.4 The SDLP believes that the model of the National Economic and Social Council in the south would be a good basis for the Civic Forum in the north. The NESC has frequently advised the Irish Government by commissioning detailed research into housing, transport and tourism

etc. and the SDLP believes that a similar body in the north would be invaluable to the Assembly.

- 2.5 The SDLP believes that a new streamlined Civic Forum, using the model of the National Economic and Social Council could deliberate over complex issues and advise government on social and economic policy and enrich the decision-making process.

### 3.0 Role of the Civic Forum

- 3.1 The Civic Forum should have a clearly defined role. It should be a body which takes on complex deliberation and produces evidence-based advice to government on social and economic issues.
- 3.2 The SDLP believes that the Civic Forum should also have the capacity to conduct well-resourced research into areas which it deems necessary to give the best possible advice to the Assembly and to government.
- 3.2 It is important that the Civic Forum should not be viewed as a body designed to scrutinise government, it has not the authority of the Assembly or the Assembly committees however, as long as the role of the Civic Forum is clearly defined, it will not pose a threat to representative democracy.

### 4.0 Recommendations

- 4.1 The SDLP is in favour of the re-constitution of a Civic Forum based on a social partnership model which can provide expert advice to government on social and economic issues.
- 4.2 The SDLP believes that the participation of the business, churches, trade unions, agriculture and community / voluntary sector can have a positive role in the government of Northern Ireland and help towards the creation of a more inclusive and shared society.
- 4.3 The SDLP also believes the Civic Forum must be adequately resourced and funded. It must have a clear vision and clear objectives.