

## **Review of the Civic Forum Response to the Consultation Document August 2008**

The Volunteer Development Agency welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Review of the Civic Forum consultation document. The Volunteer Development Agency (the Agency) was initiated in 1991 and formally established in 1993 and is the leading organisation in Northern Ireland for the promotion and development of volunteering. We are a membership organisation with members from the voluntary and community and statutory sectors. The Agency provides training, information and support to volunteer-involving organisations across all sectors on issues of good practice and policy regarding volunteering, volunteer management, child protection and voluntary management committees/governance. It also plays a key role in administering grants related to volunteering for the Department for Social Development and the Department of Education.

The Volunteer Development Agency would like to make the following key points:

- We believe that many people in Northern Ireland are contributing time to our community life though being active in volunteering with voluntary and community, sports, faith based and statutory bodies. These sections of civil society have a great deal to offer and expertise to bring to bear on the governance of Northern Ireland. The Civic Forum may provide one mechanism for engaging some of these active citizens in our governance.
- While in principle we support the idea of a Civic Forum we do so with a number of caveats. These are:
  - ❖ that any such body should be of a manageable size and with workable efficient structures;
  - ❖ that it should be supported across the political spectrum;
  - ❖ that its role should be clearly defined and understood and should not duplicate the function of other bodies;
  - ❖ that it should be adequately resourced to carry out its function; and
  - ❖ that there should be good communication structures in place to give feedback on discussions.
- There is a place for a Civic Forum type body to help to provide informed discussion on key issues, to look at emerging trends and to provide for more detailed information on particular issues by commissioning specific studies to underpin debate. A body fulfilling this kind of strategic role could provide value to the process of government by taking time to look at key issues in more depth and over a longer period of time than is always possible within the current structures. This could generate more informed debate and potentially better decision making for all of us.

Volunteer Development Agency  
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Contact: Denise Hayward, Assistant Director email: [denise@volunteering-ni.org](mailto:denise@volunteering-ni.org)