

Review of the NI Civic Forum : A response by the Youth Council for NI August 2008

1. The Youth Council for Northern Ireland (YCNI) is a non departmental public body, established in 1990 by the Youth Service (NI) Order, with a statutory mandate to advise on the development of youth work and youth work services. Please note that due to the holiday period, this submission could not be ratified by Council's governing body, and so represents a staff position. For any queries on this submission, please contact the YCNI Policy and Research Officer – charvey@ycni.org
2. The Youth Council has a longstanding interest in participative structures, and indeed when the original Civic Forum consultation was released a decade ago YCNI held a seminar for youth service stakeholders and submitted a collective view on the proposals. However many of the issues which were pertinent ten years ago have been overtaken by the changing socio-political landscape, and so Council believes that a revised Civic Forum should be substantively different from the original structure in terms of its format, governance, composition, and possibly title.
3. In our previous submission, Council proposed that the Forum members should be representative of the diversity of civic society, and in particular we proposed that a quota of members should be aged under 25. Whilst we maintain this position, Council would like to bring a new initiative to the attention of the review team. Last year the Department of Education tasked YCNI to chair a cross-sectoral working group, which would advise the Department on a 'Network for Youth'. The purpose of the Network would be *'to strengthen the direct voice of young people in all aspects of government provision'*. To this end, a pre-consultation phase took place in September 2007, and a full consultation is due to run from 1 Sept to 30

Nov 2008. This consultation puts forward a range of options for a Network for Youth, including the notion of a youth-led regional body connected to local branches, a co-ordinating body which would act as a 'network of networks' and a Youth Assembly which would reflect the parliamentary model. The consultation also seeks ideas on effective mechanisms to engage with younger children, and on how to ensure that there is a participative 'system' rather than a stand-alone regional mechanism.

4. We bring this to the attention of the review team as there are some similarities between the rationales for a Network for Youth and for a Civic Forum. We do not, however, believe that a parallel or shadow 'youth Civic Forum' would be the most appropriate means to engage with those under 25, as this could detract from the potential scope of a Network for Youth. We propose, however, that there could be a formalised relationship between the Network for Youth and Civic Forum (in whatever shape these respective mechanisms may emerge).

5. Many of the issues raised and questions posed by the Civic Forum review team are similar to those which have been debated and studied by the Network for Youth working group over the past year. In particular, we believe that the essential first stage is to scope the range and remit of existing participative and consultative fora, and also the emerging consultative structures which have been proposed under the Review of Public Administration. The development of a regional structure or mechanism which operates in isolation to existing mechanisms can, we believe, circumvent and disempower lower-tier structures. A very wide range of consultative and advocacy mechanisms now exist which were not in place at the conception of the original Civic Forum. For example various groupings have emerged in light of the S75 obligations, in addition to the advocacy and watchdog remits of the various new commissioners (eg Commissioner for Children and Young People, commissioners for victims, Human Rights). Added to these, the outworkings of the Review of

Public Administration will see the creation of Community Planning mechanisms and of structures such as an Education Advisory Forum. Council believes it is essential to situate any new regional forum within a system which will connect with these local or thematic structures, and will not operate as a stand-alone structure. To avoid duplication of effort, it would also be important that the Civic Forum places its focus on broad cross-cutting, cross-departmental themes, as opposed to specific policies or localised issues.

6. The Civic Forum review team has already stated that any new mechanism must be 'accountable' which would seem to imply that the focus of the consultation is on representative models rather than participative options. Based on the experiences of the Network for Youth pre-consultation, we propose that a participative or 'open' model should not be ruled out at this early stage. Representative and accountable models tend to be composed of 'experts', bringing the challenges of ensuring equity of representation and transparent nomination procedures etc. Anecdotal evidence suggests that some of the previous Civic Forum members faced difficulties in ensuring accountability, if only due to the practical constraints of limited time and resources in interfacing with their nominating sectors. In this context, we believe that the alternative models of participative and person-based fora merit some exploration – be these through large-scale citizens juries or a rotating 'public panel' etc. Whilst the organisation of these is perhaps more problematic than the representative option, we believe it at least merits consideration as an alternative to the expert-led 'think-tank' model.

7. In its previous submission to the consultation for a Civic Forum, the Youth Council had suggested that '...the success or otherwise of the Civic Forum will largely depend on the sincerity of support for the Civic Forum emanating from all Assembly members'. Given the experience of the previous NI Civic Forum, and also the defunct Scottish Civic Forum, we

would reiterate this sentiment. Without full political support and commitment, the chances of positive outcomes are very much reduced.

8. Linked to the above comment, we perceive one of the barriers to a consultative forum to be the agenda-setting procedure. Whilst we agree that the forum should neither be a lobbying body nor a quasi-opposition party, the degree of reactivity within the previous forum was anecdotally cited as one of the weaknesses within the model. Therefore we believe that the method in which the agenda can be set needs closer scrutiny, and also that the Assembly should be required to make formal responses to the forum, including providing reasons for rejecting any specific proposals.

To recap on the key issues raised in this response, we believe:

- It would not be appropriate to resurrect the Civic Forum in its former structure
- Membership of a consultative model should reflect the diversity of the population
- Development of the forum needs to take account of existing and emerging participative structures (including the Network for Youth)
- The forum should focus on broad cross-cutting themes, and should avoid duplicating the work of existing and emerging consultative structures
- Consideration of the options should include participative models as well as the traditional expert-led options
- Political support will be essential. There should be clarity in the relationship between Assembly and the forum, including a more interactive

procedure to set the agenda for the forum , and accountability from the Assembly in terms of whether and how the forum has influenced political decision-making.