

A submission was made by the Social Justice and Theology (NI) Working Group in response to the NI Civic Forum Review in August 2008

QUESTION 1: What do you consider would be the best way for Government to engage with and consult civic society?

Other, more direct forms of consultation seem to be more effective in informing policy and legislative development in Northern Ireland and the Civic Forum seems to be largely redundant in this role.

Question 2: What do you consider were the main strengths and achievements of the 1999-2002 Civic Forum as originally constituted?

During this period the Forum provided benefit in bringing people together and developing experience of public dialogue. This was a useful contribution.

Question 3: What, in your opinion, were the main weaknesses of the original Civic Forum and how might they be remedied?

- Lack of clarity in the remit and terms of reference.
- Absence of co-ordination between the work given to the Forum and the work of government. Too often, the Forum was considering issues that were already the subject of confirmed policy decisions within government departments.
- Duplication between areas identified in the Civic Forum terms of reference and existing groups, particularly on economic issues and social issues.
- Imbalance between too many single interest lobby groups represented and too few broad interest groups (Churches, Trade Unions, Employers groups etc).

Remedy

- Clarify terms of reference
- Clarify the purpose of the Forum.
- Do not use the Civic Forum as a form of consultation on legislation.
- Remove areas of duplication that already work effectively through other groups.
- Give consideration to what effective contribution is possible in the area of culture.
- Give consideration to using the Forum as a ‘think tank’, rather than a mechanism for consultation.
- Focus work towards the creation and retention of social capital – economic development, cultural development, skills development and integration at community level, stimulation and retention of applied intellectual capital
- Give consideration to how ideas generated might be communicated to the public, as well as to government.

Question Four: 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?

Some consideration is required of the role of single interest groups in the Civic Forum. These are essentially lobby groups and perhaps they should be given access via

sectoral bodies rather than treating each group as having the same right of access as much larger sectoral groups. For example, employers groups have a certain number of representatives, as do trade unions and Churches. Not every Church or denomination has a place, umbrella bodies such as the ICC nominate from their membership. Perhaps a body such as NICVA would become the nominating body sending a certain number of representatives to work, not on their own behalf, but on behalf of the sector.

Question 5: 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?

Yes.

The Committee would favour a model focused on developing ideas to build social and economic capital in Northern Ireland.

This model is suggested as it offers something of potential value to Northern Ireland and which is not embraced within the remit of any existing body. The old model duplicates too many areas of work that are already embraced by an abundance of consultative and advisory groups, NGOs and of government departments. A body that helps our community to become self-sustaining and innovative would be something new that might add value.

Question 6: 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?

If the role of the new Forum was to be conceived as catching and grounding ideas with the objective of building social and economic capital for Northern Ireland, its primary activity would be networking, evaluating and communicating information. It would assist in connecting economic enterprises and the community with our intellectual resources, and in indentifying ideas and projects that might make a positive contribution and drawing them to the attention of those in a position to encourage and facilitate the ideas. These enabling bodies might be government departments, policy makers or legislators, funding agencies or even project champions or mentors. Incorporating recent graduates as well as experienced managers into the support staff for a Civic Forum, would enhance the innovative potential of this approach as well as making it more cost effective.

Question 7: What should be the relationship between a new Forum and the First Minister and deputy First Minister, and the Assembly?

Accountability in terms of funding.

OFMDFM or Assembly to review objectives relative to attainment on a regular basis. Clearly established channels for flow of information for consideration by government departments and by Assembly where legislation or policy decisions might be needed. Perhaps the Assembly should be represented in the Forum to facilitate communication?

Question 8: What suggestions would you make for the organisation of a new Forum in terms of:

Membership – including numbers, sectoral representation, processes for selecting members and filling vacancies, term of office and expenses/remuneration

Depending on how the Forum is modelled, but assuming sectoral representation, the Church would feel two representatives are appropriate, preferably nominated via the ICC and IICM, with vacancies filled via the same mechanism.

If a more focused remit according to the model proposed in this document was followed, a central smaller executive might be formed serving for no more than three years at a time, which would pull together panels to consider specific projects and make recommendations, with a one year limit to produce such recommendations, although the executive might reconvene a panel to undertake additional phases of work where progress is demonstrated.

Chairperson – including appointment process, role and remit and expenses/remuneration.

A formal interview process for appointment as Chair, with expenses and remuneration appropriate to the remit and commitment required.

Structure and operation including format and frequency of meetings, staffing , accommodation, budget and legal status.

Executive – four meetings per annum

Panels – not more than five formal meetings within the year. Perhaps e-mail working if more input required.

Staffing – small and flexible staffing, combining senior management expertise and recent graduates as project workers.

Accommodation – office for staff and rent venues for meetings.

Budget – start small and grow as contribution is demonstrated.

Legal status – perhaps something appropriate to a panel of experts, rather than giving prescriptive powers to their recommendations?

Question 9: How might a new Forum interact with other consultative for a within Northern Ireland to avoid duplication?

A Forum focused on identifying potentially innovative concepts with a view to building social or economic capital, would liaise with a range of groups and bring appropriate bodies together rather than duplicate the work required within those bodies.

Question 10: How should a new Forum interact with bodies representative of civic society outside Northern Ireland.

Perhaps on the basis of garnering and sharing useful ideas using the same model of channelling information. However, this form of interaction can be expensive without generating benefit and some objective management of this would be necessary.