

SUBMISSION ON THE CIVIC FORUM
on behalf of
NORTHERN IRELAND VOLUNTARY TRUST

1. The Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust welcomes the imaginative inclusion of a consultative Civic Forum in para 34 of the Belfast Agreement. This proposal allows for a structure that will be complementary to the work of the Northern Ireland Assembly and that has the potential to both broaden and deepen the sense of ownership of the spirit and ethos of the Belfast Agreement.
2. The Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust feels that the implementation of the Civic Forum proposal must be informed by the principals contained in the Belfast Agreement.
 - * The right to equal opportunity in all social and economic activity, regardless of class, creed, disability gender or ethnicity;
 - * The right of women to full and equal political participation;
 - * The right of free political thought
(Para 1 - Rights, Safeguards and Equality of Opportunity - Belfast Agreement)

These rights, in addition to the others listed I the Agreement, and affirmed by political parties, must form a touchstone for the composition and operation of the Civic Forum.

Role of the Forum

3. It is recognised that as a consultative body, the Forum will have no legislative, executive or administrative powers, however given its proposed composition N.I.V.T. does feel that the Forum can bring an added value dimension to the consideration of economic, social and cultural policies, on a thematic basis. The Civic Forum can have a role in identifying long-term social, economic and cultural issues and drawing out strategic policy options for consideration by the Assembly.
4. The Civic Forum must also have a role in contributing to the development of a consensual political culture which can embed the ethos of the Belfast Agreement. The Forum members can drawn on past experience of social and community partnership in operating to make an effective contribution to this endeavour.

Remit of the Civic Forum

5. It is important that the role and remit of the Civic Forum are clearly established in order to underline and maximise its complementary nature vis-à-vis the Northern Ireland Assembly. It is the view of the Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust that in order to complement the work of the Assembly, the Forum will -
 - (a) Act as a consultative mechanism on social, economic and cultural issues for the Assembly, both on the basis of specific issues referred to the Forum by the Assembly, and with regard to longer-term social, economic and cultural issues regarded by the Forum members as being of major strategic importance.
 - (b) The Civic Forum will be charged in particular to act in a deliberative capacity with regard to policies for sustained economic growth in Northern Ireland and for promoting social inclusion, including community development; the advancement of women in public life and the development of respect, understanding and tolerance in relation to linguistic and symbolic diversity.
 - (c) Maintain and develop a close working relationship with organisations and groups in the wider civil society.
 - (d) Liaise with any independent Consultative Forum that might be appointed on a North/South Ministerial Council (Belfast Agreement).
6. The successful operation of this remit will require a close working relationship with the Assembly and the Executive. An all-Party Sub-Committee of the Assembly might be set up to liaise with the Civic Forum. The Forum should receive formal responses to its consultative reports from Ministers, including reasons for the rejection of any recommendations which are not accepted.

Composition

7. It is suggested that the Civic Forum should consist of 54 members - half the size of the Assembly, but a broad enough base to allow for the representation of a number of sectoral interests within society in Northern Ireland. It is accepted however that the role of the Civic Forum should place an emphasis on the achievement of an inter-sectoral consensus around issues of common concern.
8. The Belfast Agreement states that the Civic Forum 'will comprise representatives of the business, trade union and voluntary sectors, and such other sectors as agreed by the First Minister, and Deputy First Minister'. The

Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust support the non party political nature of the Civic Forum. The Trust would also support the addition of the following sectors -

- * Community Groups
- * Women's Groups
- * Youth Groups
- * Ethnic Minority Groups
- * Groups representing the Elderly
- * Groups representing people with Disabilities
- * Cultural Groups
- * Environmental Groups
- * Agricultural Industry Groups

It is felt that the range of sectors listed in both the Agreement - and above - should reflect the interests of the many groups in society traditionally excluded from policy-making.

9. It is accepted that the Forum will find only a proportion of the expertise and views relevant to specific issues and areas of work within its own membership. It is suggested that the Forum should have the power to call on other individuals (e.g. academics) or organisations (e.g. Churches etc.) to offer views as appropriate.
10. Unlike the Assembly, the Civic Forum cannot be a representative body as it is not directly elected, thus its composition must be informed by the ability to bring to bear sectoral expertise on relevant social, economic and cultural issues.

Selection of Membership

11. It is important that the method of selection of the membership of the Civic Forum is consistent with the ethos and role of the Forum. To this end there must be an overall balance achieved among the membership in terms of
 - * Gender
 - * Religious background/community identity
 - * Age
 - * Socio-economic background
 - * Geographic representation

from across Northern Ireland.

12. The Trust feels that it is important that there is an open nomination system for membership of the Civic Forum, with nominations being made by groups/organisations within each of the designated sectors. Agreed criteria for selection should be established, with a Selection Panel being made up of two representatives from the Trade Union, Business and Voluntary Sectors.
13. While not representative in nature, the Civic Forum membership should have a duty of accountability to their respective nominated sector. Guidelines for taking sectoral opinions and reporting back should be agreed.
14. The proceedings of the Civic Forum should be public and transparent.

Support for the Forum

15. The Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust feels that it is important that the Civic Forum should be adequately resourced by the First Minister and Deputy First Minister. The secretariat should be drawn from the civil service, but with a proactive policy of secondment from the sectors that comprise the Forum. The Civic Forum should also be resourced to arrange appropriate broader consultations around specific issues or to undertake relevant research. The Forum should also be encouraged however, to work in a collaborative manner with existing specialist and research organisations (e.g. N. Ireland Economic Council; Centre for Research on Women; etc.)
16. A clear communications strategy should be developed in order to keep the public informed about the work of the Forum and to provide information on how to influence its work.