

Submission from the Community Relations Council to the First Minister and Deputy First Minister on the 'The Civic Forum'.

Introduction

In its response to the Belfast Agreement the Community Relations Council welcomed the concept of the Civic Forum on social, economic and cultural issues. The Council expressed particular interest in how the Forum would be established, and how the issues of community relations and cultural diversity can be part of the remit of the Forum.

Role of the Forum

Any forum in Northern Ireland if it is to meet the needs of our community must be able to recognise and deal with the effects of sectarian or communal division. There are numerous examples of fora elected and unelected in Northern Ireland which have not been able to discuss openly the effects of communal division on social, economic and cultural issues without rancour. This has often resulted in avoidance and silence. In order to overcome these difficulties and deal effectively with issues of division, the Forum will need within its membership those who have professional expertise in the community relations, cultural diversity and reconciliation work.

Composition

The Agreement states that the Civic Forum 'will comprise representatives of business, trade union and voluntary sectors, and such other sectors as agreed by the First Minister and Deputy First Minister'.

It is not within the remit of the Community Relations Council to comment on the efficacy of the various proposals that have been put forward as to how the members of the Forum should be selected, or elected; our area of concern is whether the Forum has the skills and competencies to deal with our unique and particular community relations needs.

The development of Social Partners in other parts of the European Union have been used as an example when looking at the Civic Forum. We in community relations support this concept. However, Northern Ireland has the additional problem of sectarian or communal division which may not be exhibited in other parts of the Union. It is therefore important that not only should the Forum reflect the make-up of the community across the sectarian divide, but should also have in its number, people who are skilled in working across that divide.

The presence of those skills has in a number of areas been the catalyst which facilitates the free and open discussion of difficult and contentious issues which will be essential if the Forum is to reach its full potential.

Community Relations

The Community Relations Council argues for the need for community relations and reconciliation to be included in the make-up of the Forum. We wish to emphasise that we are not arguing that the Council per se is the vehicle for that representation but that there is a clear community relations representation. This could be included as part of the voluntary sector, or as a separate sector with the support of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. The representation could be small but if there is not specific recognition for community relations, a signal is being sent out that the work of reconciliation and community relations is not important and not a strategic part of the peace process. The Agreement itself states (in paragraph 13);

"The participants recognise and value work being done by many organisations to develop reconciliation, mutual understanding and respect between and within communities and traditions in Northern Ireland and between North and South, and they see such work as having a vital role in consolidating peace and political agreement. Accordingly they pledge their continued support to such organisations...."

A direct community relations input into the composition of the Forum would represent a crucial underpinning of work of organisations in this sector. Also, by ensuring that those involved in reconciliation and community relations work had a voice in the Forum, an opportunity would be established for creative two-way exchange with our civic representatives.

Community Relations Council
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