

DT187/198



David Trimble MP
First Minister
The New Northern Ireland Assembly
Stormont
BELFAST

Groundwork Northern Ireland
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1st October 1998

Action for the environment

Dear Mr Trimble,

Thank you for taking the time to issue a statement of support for our Environmental Endeavour Awards. It was important to have the Leader of the new administration supporting the work of local organisation.

I enclose a submission on the role of the Civic Forum and the North/South Council for your consideration. Also enclosed is a copy of our Annual Review which conveys some of the main elements of our work.

If you or your Advisors would wish to follow up the submission or any element of our work, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Mary McKee".

Mary McKee
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

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Executive Director - Mary McKee

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**Submission To
The First And Deputy First Minister
On The Civic Forum**



GROUNDWORK (NI)

SUBMISSION TO THE FIRST AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER ON THE CIVIC FORUM

1.0 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 Groundwork (NI) is a locally based Northern Ireland environmental regeneration agency, which plays a critical part in linking local communities to sustainable development in their areas.
- 1.2 Groundwork (NI) is part of a UK operation generating and spending over £40 million. The Northern Ireland operation has grown rapidly in the past year, working with 14 schools, initiating 20 new development projects, linking with 243 organisations from the public, private and voluntary sectors and increasing its income by 300% for environmental improvements in Northern Ireland.
- 1.3 Groundwork (NI) welcomes the Good Friday Agreement and hopes to play its modest part in helping with reconciliation and reconstruction.
- 1.4 Groundwork (NI) especially welcomes the understanding of those who signed the agreement that representatives of wider society have a role in adding to and supporting the democratic and electoral processes by taking part in the proposed Civic Forum.

2.0 THE POSSIBILITIES

- 2.1 Paragraph 34 of Strand One of the Good Friday Agreement of April 1998 introduces the concept of a consultative Civic Forum. This is an exciting and daring proposal, through which all aspects of wider society can now be engaged in complementing the elected Assembly.
- 2.2 The remit of the Forum is potentially very broad: "social, economic and cultural issues" are both significant and far-reaching. If the Forum can decide on priorities and can focus its time and resources on cross-cutting themes, then it could play a most useful role in providing external support and advice to the elected authority.

- 2.3 It will reinforce democracy. Clearly the Assembly members are elected, whilst the Civic Forum will be appointed, thereby underpinning the distinction. Representatives of civil society know that they bring skill and expertise, but do not claim to have any higher or elected authority, which comes through the ballot box alone.
- 2.4 The work of the Civic Forum can be holistic and integrated. It need not merely examine the subject of one of the new departments of Government - it can look at broader themes and issues and bring new solutions to old problems. Groundwork (NI) is especially skilled at bridging gaps of these sorts and building partnerships between different sectors to deliver sustainable environmental regeneration in Northern Ireland. Groundwork (NI) already involves social services, probation, local councils, the Training and Employment Agency, the Department of the Environment, conservation agencies and the private sector in its work, so feels well able to contribute its experience to the work of the Forum.
- 2.5 This dynamic mix of participants, which Groundwork currently engages, will also be seated around the Forum discussion table. The partnership model, developed so successfully in Northern Ireland, with European assistance, is now being enshrined in the constitution of Northern Ireland through the Civic Forum.

3.0 WHO SHOULD SIT ON IT?

- 3.1 It is always difficult to represent the upwards of 5,000 organisations in the voluntary and community sector alone; when one adds the 10,000 private companies and the 40 trade unions, not to mention the churches and professional bodies, academics and independents, it becomes immensely complicated. However, with systems, structures, procedures and mechanisms, Groundwork (NI) believes it can be done with simplicity and effectiveness.
- 3.2 Groundwork accepts that there are three main sectors in society - employers, represented by the CBI, trade unions, represented by the Irish Congress of Trade Unions and voluntary and community groups, represented by the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action. It therefore proposes that these three sectoral bodies be the nominating bodies and be given guidance on how to select their nominees.
- 3.3 They should also be given guidance on how to brief, support and de-brief their representatives, so that accountability and feedback is built into the process; this will build on the guidelines for selection which should include reference to gender, geography, community background and special interests.

3.4 On the question of numbers, Groundwork supports the proposal that the Forum should be half the size of the Assembly, for symbolic reasons and should therefore not exceed 54 members; however, experts, advisors, and delegations of those wishing to give evidence can boost the numbers through a dynamic process of engagement and involvement on particular issues and topics.

3.5 Whilst Groundwork is willing to pursue its own interests through the sectoral bodies of which it is a member, it would obviously emphasise that environmental and regeneration priorities should be high in the minds of those making selections. These are critical issues for the economic, social, cultural and political future of Northern Ireland and because they are so well integrated in Groundwork's activities, places it well to be seen as a natural choice.

4.0 THE FORUM'S ROLE AND RESOURCES

4.1 The Forum should be a lively, dynamic and attractive body, using new ways to engage with those outside the political and electoral processes. It should use new technology and should develop a rolling programme of round-tables, seminars, conferences, open houses and focus groups as means through which to gauge opinions and views.

4.2 It should focus on three or four priorities each year and should prepare Opinions on them for submission to the Assembly; in return, the Assembly should agree to provide information to the Forum, should agree to receive and consider its Opinions and should agree to give written comment on those Opinions back to the Civic Forum.

4.3 The Forum should be adequately resourced to fulfil its tasks and in the spirit of the Good Friday Agreement which endows the Assembly itself, the North/South Ministerial Council and the British/Irish Council with appropriate back-up, staffing and research facilities, the Civic Forum should therefore have a secretariat of up to ten persons and the capacity to engage its chair and perhaps two vice chairs on a full-time or part-time basis.

5.0 THE NORTH/SOUTH MINISTERIAL COUNCIL

5.1 Groundwork welcomes the North/South arrangements and in particular the reference in paragraph 19 of Strand Two of the Good Friday Agreement that consideration be given "to the establishment of an independent consultative forum appointed by the two Administrations, representative of civil society, comprising the social partners and other members with expertise in social, cultural, economic and other issues."

5.2 Groundwork notes this reference and looks forward to helping give advice and helping to build these consultative mechanisms, in association with its partner and counterpart organisations in the Republic of Ireland. It also notes that amongst the issues listed in the annex to Strand Two for consideration for North/South co-operation are:

- Environment
- Relevant EU programmes
- Urban and rural development

Groundwork has experience in all of these areas and would be eager to lay such experience and views at the disposal of those considering how to construct an appropriate all-Ireland consultative mechanism to fulfil the potential of paragraph 19.

Groundwork (NI) September 1998

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