

# BELFAST & DISTRICT TRADES' UNION COUNCIL

*President:* BRIAN CAMPFIELD  
*Secretary:* DESI MURRAY

ESTABLISHED 1881



45/47 DONEGALL STREET  
BELFAST BT1 2FG



Mr David Trimble  
First Minister  
Northern Ireland Assembly  
Stormont Castle  
Stormont Estate  
Belfast BT4 3FT

10th October 1998

Dear First Minister

CIVIC FORUM

I enclose a proposal for your consideration from the Belfast & District Trades' Union Council, on the role and function of the Civic Forum.

Yours sincerely

Desi Murray  
Secretary

# **The Civic Forum**

## ***Consultation Document from the Belfast Trades Union Council***

### **1. Introduction**

1.1 The establishment of a Civic Forum was included in the Good Friday Agreement voted and accepted in the referendum. Section 34 of Strand One reads: "A consultative Civic Forum will be established. It will act as a consultative mechanism on social, economic and cultural issues. The First Minister and Deputy First Minister will by agreement provide administrative support for the Civic Forum and establish guidelines for the selection of representatives to the Civic Forum".

1.2 The first outlines of what the Civic Forum may look like were published on Monday 7<sup>th</sup> September. A number of organisations mentioned as part of the Civic Forum are conducting an ongoing consultation exercise. On Thursday 24<sup>th</sup> September the Northern Ireland Committee of the ICTU will convene a consultation conference to discuss the Civic Forum. This document is a contribution to the debate within the trade union movement.

1.3 During the multi-party peace talks the Belfast Trades Union Council argued for the involvement of trade unions, community groups and women's organisations. The establishment of the Civic Forum is therefore a welcome step.

### **2. Role, Functions and Related Powers**

2.1 The Agreement says the Civic Forum "will act as a consultative mechanism on social, economic and cultural issues".

2.2 The Belfast Trades Union Council believes that the Civic Forum should set out clearly its aims and objectives. The Civic Forum should be committed to Targeting Social Need; eradicating social deprivation; tackling social exclusion; promoting economic regeneration; safeguarding the environment; and dealing with cultural and equality issues.

2.3 The Civic Forum should not be a rubber stamp for the Assembly. The Forum will, of its own initiative debate, consider issues and come to its own conclusions.

2.4 The Civic Forum shall scrutinise and examine Assembly business. Ministers must consult widely with the Civic Forum. It shall have powers to summon senior civil servants, chairs and vice-chairs of Assembly committees.

2.5 The Civic Forum shall have power to establish Citizen's Juries to examine issues and prepare reports on all issues of importance to the Forum.

### 3. Facilities

3.1 The Civic Forum shall be properly resourced and staffed. It shall have its own secretariat and administration, a research department and press and public relations office. It shall have other such resources as and when necessary.

3.2 The Forum shall have the authority to commission expertise in relevant fields. The Forum shall provide training for members.

3.3 The Civic Forum shall have the right to form sub-committees to investigate issues.

### 4. Membership

4.1 "The First Minister and Deputy First Minister will by agreement provide administrative support for the Civic Forum and establish guidelines for the selection of representatives to the Civic Forum".

4.2 The Civic Forum must strive to represent society as a whole. It must especially strive to represent the interests of those people traditionally excluded and include them in the Civic Forum.

4.3 Membership of the Civic Forum must be inclusive and the method of selection will be accessible and transparent.

4.4 The Forum will be established on core principles which ensure the Forum does not become a self-perpetuating elite. The socially excluded must be represented by the socially excluded.

4.5 Each sector shall have an appropriate balance of gender, religion, age, ability/disability, ethnicity, geographical spread and socio-economic background in the membership of their Forum representatives.

4.6 The trade union movement must ensure that its Civic Forum representation is a balance of the movement. There must be a balance of representation from full time officials, lay officials and members, Trades Councils, and other trade union based organisations. Other sectors will consider their representation in a similar fashion.

4.7 The Belfast Trades Union Council welcomes this historically unique [to Northern Ireland] Civic Forum with its objectives of including those excluded from the power and decision-making process. The Belfast Trades Union Council suggests that previous and current selection criteria to other representative bodies is inappropriate and notes that previous and current criteria tends towards a hierarchical structure. Such a top down approach will disenfranchise those who should be represented on the Civic Forum.

4.8 In order to ensure that the Civic Forum represents wider society the membership should be elected/appointed by a system that supports Para 4.4 & 4.5.

4.9 The Civic Forum must avoid becoming a super-quango. To safeguard against this, membership of the Forum must include those members of society not already serving on quangos. To encourage greater participation and inclusion and to avoid the syndrome of multiple access to the decision making process persons serving on more than one quango shall be ineligible to serve on the Civic Forum.<sup>1</sup>

4.10 The Forum will ensure and monitor levels of participation in the sectors and ensure that members are accountable. Records of attendance and voting will be circulated to members constituent bodies. To enable maximum participation day release will be provided by employers and comprehensive childcare facilities will be established.

4.11 Belfast Trades Union Council is broadly in favour of New Agenda's approach on term of office and length of tenure [New Agenda 6.5]. Membership of the Civic Forum will be for one four year period. Members are exempted for the next four years before they can eligible to stand again, thus ensuring greater participation. One quarter of the Forum will resign each year and new elections for these positions will be held.

### **5. Size of the Civic Forum**

5.1 The Civic Forum will comprise 90+ members. This is to ensure as much representation and inclusion in the Forum as practical.

### **6. Location**

6.1 The Civic Forum will have its main facilities provided at Castle Buildings. As the media will already be set up to cover the Assembly close proximity will help facilitate press coverage, thus providing greater public awareness and credibility.

6.2 To ensure the Civic Forum is accessible is all the citizens of Northern Ireland it will regularly meet outside Belfast and will be open to the public.

6.3 The Civic Forum and Citizen's Juries will require facilities throughout Northern Ireland to ensure the Civic Forum is as accessible as possible to civic society.

### **7. Review of the Civic Forum**

7.1 The Civic Forum must review its own functioning within two years and take steps to ensure that it is both accessible and transparent.

### **8. Powers**

8.1 Belfast Trades Union Council envisages the Civic Forum being invested with a number of powers to ensure the effective carrying out of its role and functions. A fuller draft of those powers will be necessary by the Belfast Trades Council would state that these powers have an imperative e.g. the power to summons ministers, etc.

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<sup>1</sup> Anyone serving on tribunals carrying out a legal service are not considered members of quangos, as would those serving on Partnership Boards.