

NORTHERN IRELAND FORUM OF PEOPLE WITH  
DISABILITIES  
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15 September 1998

Mr David Trimble  
First Minister  
NI Assembly  
Parliament Buildings  
Stormont Estate  
BELFAST



Dear First Minister

**RE: CONSULTATIVE CIVIC FORUM**

Please find attached the Northern Ireland Forum of People with Disabilities submission/recommendations regarding the Good Friday Agreement (paragraph 23) and the establishment of a Civic Forum.

The Northern Forum Of People with Disabilities is a recently established organisation comprising of local fora throughout N.I. – Carrickfergus & District Forum, NW Forum, Armagh & Dungannon Forum and Newry & Mourne Forum. The NI Forum covers all aspects of disability – physical, sensory, hidden, mental and learning disability. The Project is funded through Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust, Peace and Reconciliation Programme, Measure 4.

The mission statement of the 'Forum' states that the "Northern Ireland Forum Of People with Disabilities is the **VOICE** of disabled people promoting equal rights in all aspects of life.

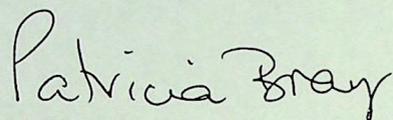
The 'Forum' - is uniquely run by disabled people and serves as a synergetic organisation committed to ensuring that people with disabilities are given the opportunity to obtain their goals in environments, cultures and communities of their own choosing; committed to obtaining the same rights of citizenship for disabled people as for any other member of society; and will accomplish this by raising

awareness, educating, communicating, advocating, supporting,  
networking and improving quality of life whilst promoting respect and  
dignity universally.

I enclose some background information on the 'Forum' and if you require  
information or advice on disability related issues please do not hesitate to  
contact me.

May I wish you well in your future endeavours and every success for the  
New Assembly.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Patricia Bray".

PATRICIA BRAY  
CO-ORDINATOR

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**SUBMISSION ON THE CIVIC FORUM**

The 'Forum's' constituency is obviously disability but as with any citizenship the organisation covers a broad coalition of interest and therefore a common cause around issues of religion, men, women, children, gender and ethnic minorities. This fact is pivotal to all recommendations in this submission.

Civic Forum Representation

In Northern Ireland 17.4% of the population have a disability ie 3% higher than GB; this differential is obviously related to the 'troubles'. Representation on the Civic Forum would obviously cover the gender split. The NI Forum recommend that 17.4% of the Civic Forum Members must be people with disabilities.

Nominations

Each sector should select their candidate. The NI Forum recommend the partnership approach and that nominations from the voluntary and community sector must be made by establishing a select committee from organisations both large and small, thereby, ensuring that those previously marginalised will be able participate for the first time. This select committee must equality proof all nominations. Nominations must mirror the interests of communities across NI. No one body should have an overarching responsibility thereby ensuring that the membership is fully representative of the sector and not the same elite persons from the same elite organisations.

Civic Forum Size

The number of members should be open and not set in stone. Nor restricted to balance with the New Assembly numbers or be calculated to

same on a ratio basis. The Civic Forum provides an opportunity to be creative, innovative and needs to be seen as an important asset to the Assembly structure as set out in the Good Friday Agreement. If the Civic Forum must work to a restricted number then this membership must be divided into sub-areas ie North West, North East etc thus representing the whole of NI, reporting back to a co-ordinating body,

### Core Principles of a Civic Forum

The core principles of the Civic Forum should be co-operation, inclusion, participation and partnership.

These core principles for the Civic Forum should flow from the following question 'What is a post-peace Civic Society?' A post-peace Civic Society should target previously excluded groups eg disabled people, single parents, unemployed etc thereby establishing a grassroots approach. The NI Forum sees the Civic Forum as a golden opportunity to go beyond the sectarian divide, and 'normalise' society post conflict.

### Civic Forum Structures

Whatever structure and process is put in place the principle guide-line of the Civic Forum must be Total Inclusion which means including all religions (not just Christian), gender, disability, ethnic minorities and other marginalised groups. If this principle were applied then a redefinition of a Civic Society for NI would emerge.

The Civic Forum must not be a rubber stamp for the New Assembly but it must be the catalyst for open debates on all issues. The Civic Forum must be transparent and accountable and be flexible in its approach allowing all voices to be heard.

The Civic Forum is developing at a time when the NI Forum of People with Disabilities is developing Northern Ireland's first cohesive Disability Movement. As 100% user led organisation we are part of a revolution. A parallel can be drawn between the Civic Forum and the NI Forum because for the first time all ordinary citizens and that includes citizens with disabilities have the chance of having their voices heard and from a civic platform.

### Civic Forum Location

There is no need for a physical structure; it is vital that the Civic Forum should not have a fixed abode at a single or central location.

### The Civic Forum's Role

The Civic Forum's role is to complement the New Assembly in a supporting and assisting capacity. It should challenge decisions made by the Assembly. One of its main roles will be to give a voice to those who have previously been unheard ie marginalised groups. It could provide debate on large or small issues resulting in informed solutions and recommendations.

As well as providing a balance to the Assembly the Civic Forum could originate its own work around business, cultural, political, economic, social and technology issues.

### In conclusion

It is important that continuing consultation, with all interested parties, must take place and nothing should be decided in haste nor rush through on legislation.

The success of the Civic Forum will be measured by how society as a whole views it. If it is viewed as another 'quango' then it has lost – if society at large feel that it is their Civic Forum then it will have achieved its aims to be representative and independent.

PATRICIA BRAY  
CO-ORDINATOR

SEPTEMBER 1998