

Written Ministerial Statement

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The Executive Office

RECONSTITUTION OF THE CIVIC FORUM

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Mrs O'Neill (The First Minister) and Mrs Little-Pengelly (The deputy First Minister): We wish to advise the Assembly of our intention to reconstitute a Civic Forum as provided for in the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement and the Northern Ireland Act 1998 (NIA98).

Members will be aware that the Civic Forum established in 2000 was disbanded in 2002 following the temporary cessation of devolved government here. Following the return of the Assembly and Executive in 2007, a review was carried out involving consultation with those sectors which had nominated representatives to the Forum. This revealed no evident enthusiasm for its reconstitution on its previous scale and this has remained the position.

The Fresh Start Agreement provided for a Civic Advisory Panel of 6 members appointed by the First Minister and deputy First Minister, and while this was constituted and met on a few occasions during 2016, it also ceased to meet in the absence of Ministers between 2017 and 2020. New Decade New Approach envisaged its reconstitution but progress towards this was curtailed by the Covid pandemic.

We have since been considering the options available and in doing so, we have taken account of:

- The primary role of MLAs as public representatives in scrutinising and advising the Executive on policy and legislation through the Assembly and its Committees;
- The development in the intervening period of enhanced approaches to public participation in the policy making process, including through early engagement, focus groups, advisory panels and co-design.

Having given consideration as to how a reconstituted Civic Forum could add value to today's policy development landscape, we believe that there is merit in re-establishing the Civic Forum consistent with the requirements of the Agreement. The Civic Forum will be reconstituted on a compact, flexible and agile basis, which will complement the direct involvement of stakeholders in policy formulation. It will provide expert views and analysis to inform and assist the work of the Executive on key issues.

As required under the NIA98 we will bring the proposed arrangements for seeking the views of the Forum to the Assembly for approval later this year, and at that stage will provide further detail concerning our proposed specification for the membership and operation of the reconstituted Civic Forum.