

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents the results of work undertaken by Civic Voice during April and May 2020. The survey aims to gauge the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic on the civic society movement. We wanted to ascertain any problems societies had identified – immediate and long term - and where they consider that Civic Voice could assist societies to emerge effectively from Lockdown.

The aims were to:

1. Understand the challenges members are facing since the start of Covid-19
2. Improve our collective understanding of member activity to support all civic societies post Covid-19.
3. Learn how Civic Societies and Civic Voice can best support each other through this difficult time.

The main results are presented in the report and the key findings and implications are highlighted below. Civic Voice will be using the contents of this report to respond to the DCMS Select Committee.

We are grateful to Sue Stanley for her support and to Civic Voice Trustees for guidance on the approach. The plan will be to reissue this survey in 12 months as a follow up focusing on a smaller set of key issues. We hope this can help share learning amongst the civic movement.

Response and Membership

We surveyed all Civic Voice member organisations in England during April and May 2020 and the survey was promoted across all Civic Voice channels. We asked for one response per civic society. We only received multiple responses from three societies; where this happened, we elected to use the response from the Chair or Secretary.

In normal situations, we allow 8-12 weeks for a Civic Voice survey to be undertaken and this will usually result in a higher response rate. For practical reasons, the survey length on this occasion was two weeks.

The survey was sent to 330 civic societies in the form of Survey Monkey and we received responses from 174 societies. The response level is about 53%. These results reflect the activities of those that responded to the survey, who are likely to be the more active civic societies. It could therefore be argued that the results presented are an underestimate of the overall picture.

For the Civic Voice survey data, a manual content analysis was carried out by an independent analyst with experience in survey research. The categories were not pre-defined, but were those which arose from the responses received, based on the frequency of similar responses.

Open ended survey questions can be analysed using manual content analysis, where the responses are categorised and coded by one or more human analysts, or using fully automated or computer-assisted techniques of text analysis.

Many respondents also added additional 'free text' comments and provided 'other' suggestions. These were read and analysed by the policy team and used to inform discussions with the government and sector partners. It will inform Civic Voice's Action Plan to support the civic movement.

The full response set together with coding is available in an Excel spreadsheet via the Civic Voice office.

Civic Voice would like to thank all civic societies that took the time to respond.

Key findings

Many societies are waiting for definite dates to be announced by government before making plans for resuming events and activities.

- Many members struggle with the technology, and their societies' digital communications are under-developed and not well focused. However, the survey shows that many are adopting online communications and using social media to continue their activity whilst in lockdown. Civic societies want to embrace change. Many are rapidly doing so, but still want support and leadership
- A quarter were concerned that the priority to get the UK economy restarted after the crisis would lead to **less funding and concern** for the preservation of the historic environment
- 18% of civic societies are anticipating difficulties during the next 6-18 months and 19% Societies had put all their **activities on hold** for the time being because of the age and vulnerability profile of their members. About a quarter said that they were aiming to keep going with their **normal activities**, carried out by virtual means.
- There was also a concern (15%) that **planning procedures** by Councils might be rushed and with insufficient opportunity to comment, leading to poorer quality applications being approved due to not having appropriate public scrutiny
- Where Societies were contributing to the Covid-19 response, this was often (16%) by **sharing information** and producing publicity, as well as joint working with other local groups to support the community (9%). Other efforts included supporting members who were self-isolating.
- About a third of Societies (35%) said that a priority for them for the next six months was to respond to **Planning Applications**. Around 10% also mentioned input to strategic initiatives in their area, such as the **Local Plan**.
- The effect of the crisis on **town centres and high streets** was highlighted (19%), with businesses potentially closing on the High Street. This would lead to further vacancies in town and city centres, often in historic buildings, leading to dilapidation/decay. The closure of some historic arts and entertainments venues was also mentioned in this context.

IMMEDIATE IMPACT

*“We felt it only fair to our members to suspend membership fees for one year, from 01/04/2020 when new subscriptions fell due to the pandemic”
A Civic Society in London*

We started the survey by asking what immediate impact Coronavirus is having on the activities of civic societies.

18% are anticipating difficulties during the next 6-18 months with 48% of societies feeling greatly confident that they will survive, the rest saying they are unsure and will see how things progress.

82% of respondents have had to cancel members' meetings, 65% have cancelled committee meetings and 46% have deferred their AGMs. Societies are expecting a drop in income and the above comment from a Civic Society in London is representative of several groups in touch with Civic Voice,

When civic societies were asked about their priorities over the next six months there was a good spread of issues, but a core set of activities emerged:

1. Responding to planning applications (33%)
2. Society's normal activities, carried out by virtual means (28%)
3. Just keeping in touch with members, nothing else (23%)

Although down the list of priorities, we are pleased to see that 10% of civic societies said that they intend on using the current period to focus on future strategies for their local group. A few also mentioned financial concerns for their Society, caused by the Covid-19 crisis – 64% of societies are collecting annual subscriptions, but we have numerous examples of individual members cancelling memberships and corporate members not renewing.

Communication with members

Connecting with members, new and old, is key and a variety of channels are in use. Societies use a mixture of traditional mailings, posters, newspaper advertisements and articles, hand-delivered newsletters, electronic means and social media. Several societies have identified the need to modernise and will need support to do so. Just under a quarter reported that their major priority was to **find ways to keep in touch** with members in some form, given the constraints of lockdown

A variety of activities continue. Responses to planning applications, local authority consultations, research, Autumn and Winter events organisation, newsletters, website maintenance and 'paperwork' are all cited. Nearly 100 % of respondent organisations are continuing with planning application scrutiny. Some societies are having a continued input into Local Plan activity whereas in others little has happened during the Lockdown.

79% of societies are continuing to issue newsletters. Almost half of these issue hard copies as well as online.

Few societies are directly involved with the voluntary sector efforts to support local communities, although large numbers of society members are known to be involved through other organisations. Age is an issue.

Embracing Technology

The lockdown has impacted how groups are delivering their charitable objectives. It has been great to see that there has been growing use of social media to communicate and campaign, but the bulk of civic volunteers are kept in touch by email and post.

Use of new technology such as video and telephone conferencing by societies for their own business is variable. Some societies are using on-line meetings successfully. About a quarter said that they were aiming to keep going with their **normal activities**, carried out by virtual means. Some 65 % are considering using Zoom for committee meetings. Around one in ten also said that they were working on public awareness initiatives, such as online **Town Trails, quizzes** and **social media** posts

The Covid-19 pandemic has affected how civic societies are operating but they are still carrying out great work helping their communities at this difficult time. We are hearing some impressive responses from members from across the country and this section of the report aims to highlight positive examples of the work societies are doing to respond the Covid-19 emergency.

We need to focus on what we can do now to set up a better, tomorrow.

- (1) Birmingham Civic Society's 2020 Next Generation Awards may be cancelled but they still want to support citizenship education through a home learning resource pack. <https://www.birminghamcivicsociety.org.uk/new-citizenship-home-learning-resources-for-schools/>
- (2) Oxford Civic Society decided to cancel all the events in their current programme but with co-operation of two speakers they have arranged for two of the postponed public talks to be given as webinars. <https://www.oxcivicsoc.org.uk/programme/>
- (3) Wakefield Civic Society AGM
- (4) London Forum held a zoom meeting
- (5) Bradford mapping
- (6) Coventry questions

CIVIC VOICE RESPONSE

80% of societies considered that the Civic Voice response to the emergency so far had been appropriate.

PRIORITIES FOR CIVIC VOICE

Civic societies are on the front line in enabling people to understand, protect, improve and enjoy their historic and contemporary built environment. The Covid-19 pandemic has hugely accelerated some challenges this target audience already faces, particularly the need for more and better digital communications, and now the use of virtual meetings by planning authorities. These changes are likely to endure beyond the current crisis and we need to prepare for a future world.

Civic societies are in clear agreement as to which themes and issues they want us campaigning on after the crisis. There are three clear areas of work that civic societies think we should prioritise:

- (1) Bringing new life to town and city centres
- (2) Giving local communities more influence in planning and placemaking decisions
- (3) Protecting and enhancing Conservation Areas

Where Civic Voice can provide direct assistance to civic societies, four areas stand out in the responses:

- (1) IT, social media and embracing modern methods of meaningful participation
- (2) Community Engagement
- (3) Campaigning
- (4) Raising the Profile

A key part of Civic Voice's work is to share experience between civic societies. 41% of respondents said that they could **possibly give assistance** to nearby civic societies which might be at risk of collapse. Types of assistance offered included **advice, encouragement and the sharing of ideas and expertise** e.g. technology expertise. A total of 21% said that they would **not be able to offer help** to other Societies, or that it was unlikely. This was often because of their own challenges, particularly with their membership profile and under lockdown.

KEY ISSUES/CHALLENGES FOR THE CIVIC MOVEMENT

We wanted to understand what long term change to the built and historic environment civic societies predicted might happen because of Coronavirus.

A series of potential long-term changes for the built environment are identified.

- Less funding and concern for preservation and heritage (25%)
- Re-shaping of High Streets (19%)
- Deficient planning procedures, poor quality applications approved (15%)

Surprisingly, some respondents (14%) believed that there would be **minimal or no effect** of the crisis in the longer term.

These results show that civic societies are in clear agreement as to which areas of work they want us campaigning on after the crisis.

- (1) Bringing new life to town and city centres;
 - (2) Giving local communities more influence in planning decisions and
 - (3) Protecting and enhancing Conservation Areas
- are the three clear areas of work that civic societies think we should prioritise.

Bringing new life to town and city centres and local high streets

Some respondents (10%) thought that there could be lasting positive effects of the crisis on town and city centres, with **increased pedestrian space, and less traffic and pollution**. Some (7%) also thought that there might be more focus on **quality of life, conservation and the environment**, although a few feared that there might be *less* concern for sustainable development.

The High Street and town and city centres are expected to change considerably with the demise of much retail, significant change of use for some buildings, poor maintenance due to lack of funding and reductions in tourist visitors. Pubs and theatres are at risk of not re-opening for a very long time. A reduction in traffic and public transport and an increase in bicycle use is anticipated. There will be more bicycle lanes. Some narrow streets may become closed to vehicle traffic and one-way for pedestrians at least if social distancing has to be maintained. More city and town centre open spaces may be created. The total number of retail shops may decline leading to consolidation and a potential dereliction zone.

Opinions varied on changes in the operation of planning. Some societies expressed the view that there would be a renewed interest in many aspects of town planning and conservation, while other were concerned that decisions would be taken behind closed doors. Public buildings such as arts centres, theatres and town halls might suffer from lack of investment or close. Economic recovery might override environmental issues, with a relaxation of planning laws. Less funds will be available for building maintenance. There may be a slowdown in house and road building. Road layouts may take more account of the needs of pedestrians and cyclists.

12% of responses considered the impact of home working and whether the reduction in commuting continues as a trend after the lockdown. It is felt that this could stimulate a growth in the provision of services in smaller town and district centres, which in turn could mean rejuvenation of existing disused and underused buildings.

People recognise the impact and change in our town centres and increased scope for high streets to lose retail and be turned over to other civic spaces.

Giving local communities more influence in planning and placemaking decisions

There was also a concern (15%) that **planning procedures** by Councils might be rushed and with insufficient opportunity to comment, leading to poor quality applications being approved, although groups also recognise the risk to the economy with societies also stating that they thought that some current development projects would be either cancelled or delayed. A few thought that there might be pressure for new types of **home design**, with more internal space and access to outdoor areas. Planning for health and **new types of health facility** was also mentioned.

Respondents expressed concerns that local authority planning departments will delegate all decisions to officers and there will be no planning committee meetings at which the public can speak.

Some local authorities are holding virtual meetings (Zoom, Teams) but members of the public may find these meetings difficult to access. For some planning authorities these are short-term solutions during the emergency, but other local authorities seem to have made it a permanent arrangement. 9-10% of societies report that notices of planning applications have been reduced in the press and adjacent to sites by planning authorities.

Simon Gallagher, Director of Planning, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government noted that in England as of the end of April 2020, approximately $\frac{1}{3}$ of LPAs in England have held or were looking to hold virtual planning committees.

Around a third (32%) of Societies were reviewing Planning Applications on the **Council website**. A small number were being sent applications directly, and some others mentioned having regular, direct contact with key Councillors and Officers. The Society's Committee or members **discussed applications by email or phone** (14%), and Videoconferencing/Zoom was also used (12%). **Responses** were made online or by email (18%). A few were attending Planning meetings remotely, and some were delegating/empowering a single member to respond.

Protecting and enhancing Conservation Areas

A quarter of respondents were concerned that the priority to get the UK economy restarted after the crisis would lead to **less funding and concern** for the preservation of the historic environment. This chimes with a recent article in The Times newspaper that quoted Historic England saying that coronavirus has hit everyone hard, including the heritage sector, and that there are many individuals and organisations that are really

struggling for survival at the moment. “Many of the skills that are needed to protect our heritage are already in desperately short supply and if these skilled specialists go out of business during this difficult time, the hard truth is that some of our heritage will be lost forever.”

37% of conservation officer posts have been lost since 2009 and it is fair to predict that this trend will continue. Due to the lack of monies from councils and governments, members accept that activities relating to the historic environment may not be a priority and that it is important that the civic movement continue working to preserve historic buildings.

Reopening and restarting the civic movement might be a challenge

Several societies are concerned that their members will continue to be isolated for a long period after Lockdown is lifted, due to their age or health or family health issues and will be unable to attend meetings.

A wide range of responses indicate that societies currently perceive that they will be back to ‘normal running’ by mid-Summer into the Autumn. Some consider that this period is so short that they will be doing nothing in the interim. However, other societies anticipate many months of difficulties because their more elderly members may be isolated for longer.

Societies identify a wide range of priorities for when Lockdown is lifted, including communications, re-organizing events, cost cutting, planning, traffic, place shaping, litter, health, maintaining members’ enthusiasm and getting campaigns back on track. This wide range reflects the fact that societies play different roles within a matrix of different local organisations.

Civic Societies will need to work closely with Civic Voice in the next 12-18 months to pay close attention to Government advice regarding public events and meetings.

Conclusion

Civic societies are on the front line in enabling people to understand, protect, improve, and enjoy their historic and contemporary built environment. The Covid-19 pandemic has hugely accelerated some challenges this target audience already faces, particularly the need for more and better digital communications, and now the use of virtual meetings by planning authorities. These changes are likely to endure beyond the current crisis and we need to prepare for a future world.

The impact survey has enabled Civic Voice to hear about the effect on civic societies, their members and local communities and helps us to see where focus and lobbying efforts are required to help protect all those in our sector. All responses have been treated confidentially.

Civic Voice will consider how we can support civic societies to take further steps to go from the physical to the digital because unless we can help promote digital participation through this project, we fear that societies, which are reliant on volunteers, face a real risk to their future.

The results are being used to represent Civic Societies, lobby on your behalf and help Civic Voice support you – in particular with our ongoing discussions with MHCLG, Historic England and funding bodies.