

# DCMS Select Committee Evidence

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## About Civic Voice

Established in 2010, Civic Voice is the national charity for the Civic Society movement in England. Civic Voice is a member of the Government's High Street Task Force and the Historic Environment Forum's Heritage 2020 High Streets group. We are supported in Parliament by the APPG for Civic Societies.

It has a membership of 250 societies from all regions of the country. Our Vision is:

**A society where everyone says, "I care about where I live".**

Our Mission is:

**To work with civic societies and local communities to make the places we live in more attractive, enjoyable and distinctive.**

Civic societies are voluntary organisations, with 60% registered as charities, which play varied and important roles in the community life of England's villages, towns and cities. They operate in 76% of English local authorities. Most societies have no paid staff and operate entirely through the efforts of volunteers who tend to be retired people.

A major focus of their interest is the built and historic environment. After local government, civic societies are the most numerous participants in the planning system. In 2019, each civic society scrutinised, on average, 300 planning applications.

However, they also provide an important contribution to the cultural life of their communities by promoting the understanding of local heritage and history, running museums, supporting local artistic provision, helping to preserve historic structures, campaigning to protect the historic built environment and many other diverse activities.

Their role in the voluntary sector is significant and, as HRH The Prince of Wales said at our foundation in 2010, *"Nowhere should be without a civic society and the voice you can provide."*

This evidence focuses on the impact of Covid-19 on the heritage sector from the perspective of the Civic Society movement.

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## The Survey

**Between 20th April and 1<sup>st</sup> May 2020, Civic Voice carried out a survey of civic societies across England.**

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 and 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 survey was sent to 330 civic societies, including societies not in membership of Civic Voice, using Survey Monkey and we received responses from 174 societies, about 53%. For practical reasons, the survey length on this occasion was two weeks. Normally, we allow 8-12 weeks for a Civic Voice survey which usually results in a higher response rate.

For the open-ended survey questions, 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.

These results reflect the activities of those societies that responded to the survey, which are likely to be the more active civic societies. Therefore, the results presented may underestimate the overall level of problems societies are experiencing.

The results were then shared with our own two internal 'sounding boards' to discuss the high-level responses.

The response and draft analysis have been issued to Historic England.

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## What has been the immediate impact of Covid-19 on the sector?

*"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 Covid-19 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 expect a drop in income and the above comment from a civic society in London is representative of several groups.

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%)

10% of civic societies said that they intend 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.

As an organisation, our short-term future is secure, but the long-term impact will be challenging for us.

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

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.

Societies are continuing with a variety of activities. 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.

### **Embracing Technology**

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

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 (or similar programs) 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

To conclude this section: the immediate impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has affected how civic societies are operating but they are still trying to carry out work helping their communities at this difficult time.

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## **How effectively has the support provided by DCMS, other Government departments and arms-length bodies addressed the sector's needs?**

Civic Voice has received a Resilience Grant from the **Historic England Covid-19 Emergency Response Fund** for a project to support civic societies in taking further steps to go from the physical to the digital over the next five months.

Some civic societies which own or lease premises with a liability for Business Rates have received grants from the **England - Small Business Grant Fund**; Leeds Civic Trust, for instance, received £10,000 and we know that the Isle of Wight Society, Weymouth Civic Society, Bath Preservation Trust and Bradford Civic Society were in discussions with Historic England and local government about funding support.

Civic Voice and some larger civic societies that employ paid staff have also made use of the **Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme** to place them on furlough.

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What will the likely long-term impacts of Covid-19 be on the sector, and what support is needed to deal with those?

### **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, 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, 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.

Several potential long-term changes for the built environment were identified:

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

Local consultation, engagement and participation have a vital role in creating high-quality developments, but this depends on councils having well-resourced planning and conservation departments. Our members worry that these areas will reduce in priority for councils because local councils are now going to experience severe economic times.

Civic societies are in clear agreement as to which themes and issues they want the civic movement to be campaigning on after the crisis:

- Bringing new life to town and city centres
- Giving local communities more influence in planning and placemaking decisions
- Protecting and enhancing Conservation Areas.

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

Societies recognise the potential change in our town centres with increased scope for high streets to lose retail and be turned over to other civic uses.

Some respondents thought that there could be positive effects of the crisis on town and city centres, with increased pedestrian space, and less traffic and pollution.

Town and city centres are expected to change considerably with the possible 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 long time. Public buildings such as arts centres, libraries, theatres,

and town halls might suffer from lack of investment or close. Less money will be available for building maintenance.

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.

Civic Voice is a member of the Government's High Street Task Force and continues to feed in these concerns. We have established a series of webinars to raise awareness of these issues with community groups. All community groups are being encouraged to register with the Task Force.

Economic recovery might override environmental issues, with a relaxation of planning laws.

## **Giving local communities more influence in planning and placemaking decisions**

Opinions varied on changes in the operation of planning.

Some societies recognise the risk to the economy, thinking that some current development projects would be either cancelled or delayed. Some societies expressed the view that there would be a renewed interest in many aspects of town planning and conservation, while others were concerned that more decisions would be taken behind closed doors. There was also a concern (15%) that development control procedures by Councils might be rushed, with insufficient opportunity to comment, allowing poor quality applications to be approved.

Planning decisions will need to continue through this period so that the planning system is well placed to play its vital role in supporting the recovery of the economy. We are aware of some community groups that have called for decisions to be halted during this time, but we do not share this view.

A few thoughts 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.

According to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government as of the end of April 2020, approximately a third of LPAs in England have held or were looking to hold virtual planning committees. We are confident that the government is not wanting to put barriers in the way of communities participating in the planning process. Nonetheless, the fear is that these new rules will make it much harder for communities to share views and that we might see more mediocre or poor schemes 'nodded through' without the usual proper scrutiny. We are in discussions with MHCLG and PAS about supporting good guidance examples.

Around a third (32%) of societies were reviewing planning applications on their 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%).

## Protecting and enhancing Conservation Areas

Civic Voice has been delivering a campaign – Big Conservation Conversation - since 2017 and it relates to the fact that 501 Conservation Areas are At-risk of being de-designated.

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. According to *Heritage Counts*, 37% of conservation officer posts have been lost since 2009 and it is fair to predict that this trend will continue. The problem will continue to get worse unless we address the root cause of the problem now. That is that under-funded and under-resourced conservation departments are not being prioritized by national government for funding and support.

Conservation Areas are traditionally designated by local authorities and as such, there is a perception that they are only of local interest or importance. This certainly isn't so. Within the 512 Conservation Areas 'at risk', there are 11,000 Listed Buildings, 140 Scheduled Monuments and 10 Registered Parks and Gardens. These are all national designations.

Given the lack of monies from councils and government, 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 buildings of architectural or historic interest and protect Conservation Areas.

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## What lessons can be learnt from how DCMS, arms-length bodies and the sector have dealt with Covid-19?

Civic societies have not been the focus of any specific messaging from government. This may be because their core activities in the fields of planning and heritage come under the remits of both DCMS and MHCLG. It could be helpful in future for one or other of these departments to assume the lead role in communication with civic societies, provided there is appropriate communication between them.

Through our engagement with Historic England, we believe that they need to be praised for their response.

We have experienced an unprecedented situation and creating the Heritage Sector Emergency Response fund and streamlining the application process is surely a demonstration for future grant applications.

We would hope that DCMS or its arms-length bodies would be able to support longer-term efforts to increase digital skills and participation in civic societies. The government has promoted *The Skills Toolkit* for digital skills, which has an emphasis on employment. A digital skills boost is also essential for the voluntary sector in general and civic societies. We know that the National Lottery Community Fund and Heritage Lottery Fund are both looking into this area.

The rapid response and simplified process by funding bodies is a positive and should be embraced for the future.

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## How might the sector evolve after Covid-19, and how can DCMS support such innovation to deal with future challenges?

The Covid-19 pandemic has hugely accelerated some challenges that civic societies already face. They need to make more and better use of digital communications, both to attract younger members and because planning authorities will increasingly use virtual meetings. These changes are likely to endure beyond the current crisis and we need to prepare for a future world.

### **When we asked civic societies what kinds of direct assistance would be most useful, four areas stood out in the responses:**

1. IT, social media and embracing modern methods of meaningful participation
2. Community engagement and participation in the planning system
3. Campaigning
4. Raising the profile of the civic movement

Civic Voice will use the short-term funding that we have received from Historic England to support civic societies to take further steps to go from the physical to the digital over the next five months. Unless we can help promote digital participation through this project, we fear that societies, which are reliant on volunteers and face to face meeting, face a real risk to their future.

However, we see opportunities to embrace and engage a much wider segment of society in our work and in our own public engagement. We are hearing about other sections of society that may be excluded from digital participation for financial reasons and schemes to make hardware and broadband connections available at low cost should be encouraged.

Launching Conservation Areas at Risk in 2009 was a positive and ambitious initiative from English Heritage at the time and it has helped to raise the profile and status of Conservation Areas within local authorities and the general consciousness. But if at least 6% of Conservation Areas are 'at risk' and cuts to local government are expected to continue, it simply cannot be left to local authorities to solve the crisis. Do we need a new approach to managing Conservation Areas? DCMS may want to consider this.

We would welcome further discussion with DCMS and the Select Committee team about how to further promote community action in support of the historic environment.