

Civic Voice discussion paper

Looking Ahead: challenges and opportunities for the civic society movement in the 21st Century

A discussion paper prepared for the Civic Voice Members Awayday 2020

Civic Voice was created after a national debate consider the way forward for the civic movement. That debate was facilitated through a series of public meetings, discussions and an online questionnaire. What emerged was a determination among many to address the challenges that we face as a movement and there was also a real sense of purpose and vision coming through the debate with many common themes are emerging. There was a strong desire for a new national body to help build a civic movement for the modern day. This new body would:

- have a clear and shared sense of purpose and direction
- have the profile and influence that the movement deserves
- be able to shape official policy and thinking through lobbying and campaigning from the national through to the local level
- facilitate the sharing of ideas by creating opportunities for civic societies to come together to meet and discuss
- remain independent
- provide support and advice to members, not only on policy and planning issues but also on how local societies could be strengthened and developed
- have a positive reputation which encourages engagement with local communities
- campaign on key issues to give a voice to local civic societies.

As we approach the 10th anniversary of Civic Voice, now is a good time to take stock. How are we doing, what do we need to do in the future? Is there anything we need to stop doing, anything we need to start doing or start doing differently? Are we still relevant to both our members and to external stakeholders? Can we do more, bearing in mind our limited resources, to help grow the movement?

In considering these questions it is important to recognise that civic societies are more than just voluntary organisations which care for and champion the places where people live. They are also catalysts for people to debate and deliberate over choices and decisions and they have the potential to be barometers of the wider health of civil society.

This day will look at the key issues facing the civic movement and Civic Voice and will help tease out some possible implications for the civic society movement. It is intended to help stimulate discussion and debate, not to predict what might happen. It will not be a decision-making day but will play a key part in helping to set our agenda for the future, not just for Civic Voice but in terms of how we might hope to see the wider movement develop in the future.

So, looking ahead, what's on the horizon for the civic movement? What emerging factors are going to shape our thoughts and concerns for the future? And how does the civic movement respond to those challenges? How do we help to build a civic movement that is fit for the 21st century and what should Civic Voice priorities be in the coming years?

Here are just some of the issues that we, and our members, need to be thinking about:

- **Trust in and deference to traditional forms of authority is breaking down** – criticism of MPs is part of a longer-term trend of declining trust in traditional forms of authority. On the one hand there has been a decline in mainstream democratic involvement (e.g. voting) but on the other an increase in alternative forms of democracy (e.g. writing to MPs, on-line petitions, participation in protests, etc.). New media, most obviously social media enabled by the internet, but also ‘older’ technologies such as talk radio, have played their part in facilitating this kind of change and given people a public voice not previously available to them. Is there an opportunity for the civic society movement to capitalise on people’s desire to find alternative forms of influence outside of conventional politics?
- **We are witnessing a rapid growth in the numbers of older people** - By 2020, due to greater longevity and underlying demographic trends, 40% of adults in the UK will be aged 55 or over. The average 60-year-old man and woman can, respectively, expect to live to 81 and 84. Government projections indicate that by 2013 we will see 1.2 million more 65-99-year olds compared to today. This has implications not only in terms of housing need but also in terms of infrastructure requirements, provision of care facilities and so on.
- The **planning system** can make people’s lives better, but this is being undermined by deregulation and decreasing resources. Should we be leading a national campaign for the Planning System? How do we open the system up so that it is more democratic?
- **Housing Quality** The government has emphasised the importance of **good design** on numerous occasions over the last 12 months and that is welcome. But if we want to see meaningful change in practice, and create places that enhance people’s lives, the government needs to take action. Under the current permitted development arrangements – which have already produced tens of thousands of housing units – vulnerable people are stripped of any right to light and space and children are having to play in active car parks. Plus, these new units are making no contribution to local services such as doctors’ surgeries, local schools or decent affordable homes.
- **The web will continue to become a more significant tool for local campaigns** – more spontaneous campaigns will be born and created as citizens are increasingly able to directly access other citizens, without the need for bigger organisation to enable this (organising without organisations). New social communication technologies, including social networking websites, create a fresh opportunity for the civic society movement to reach and connect with people. Seen from another angle they present an increased risk of community action taking place without civic society involvement.
- **Climate change will have a massive impact on life in our towns and cities** - the latest projections for the UK indicate that hot summers will, without a decrease in carbon emissions, become the norm for summers by the middle of the century. But we are also likely to see warmer and wetter winters. The anticipated impacts include increasing water supply challenges, impacts on air quality in towns and cities, enhanced impacts of “urban heat island” effects in urban areas on the hottest days, and episodic flash flooding (from a higher propensity for extreme rainfall events). This will test the resilience of the infrastructure of our towns and cities as

well as our homes, requiring us to adapt our buildings, infrastructure and open spaces, and our businesses and public services, to live with the changes.

- **High Streets and Town Centres** are facing challenges. Anyone who has walked down a British high street will not be surprised by the daily news. But Government funding is being invested at an unprecedented level. How do we ensure that the funding and future of our high streets is community led?
- **The governance of our towns and cities will continue to change:** Declining engagement in formal politics has been an ongoing trend. Therefore, we have seen some new approaches to political accountability and governance starting to emerge, such as elected Mayors in London and other towns and cities. Local authorities are responding to this through new kinds of democratic engagement such as citizen panels and other forms of 'participatory democracy'.
- **Community organisations facing declining membership:** There is no shortage of groups for people to join if they interested in connecting with their community but for organizations such as the Civic Societies etc, there is a shortage of new members. "We're pretty much holding steady. Retaining membership is the number one priority," said x, secretary of the y Civic Society. "It's a struggle," He said. "Obviously, we're not the only ones struggling." "We used to have 40 to 45 people," at a meeting. "Now, we're lucky to get 20 people," x said.
- **Civic infrastructure:** Since the Government started following an austerity agenda, we have seen a decline in the number of key buildings and facilities that play a significant role in the life of our towns, cities and villages. Community centres, youth clubs, social clubs, village halls, posts offices, banks and libraries are key pieces of civic infrastructure that help build communities. But they are declining in number.
- **Why does this matter?** Planning and design for infrastructure, business, housing, open space and public buildings in our villages, towns and cities will continue to be much more strongly influenced by issues of sustainability. This will raise both challenges and opportunities for sustaining the character and distinctiveness of England's urban areas, yet civic societies can either choose to shout from the side and not engage, or, help lead the debate. Too many times have Civic Societies said that "Civic Voice should do this..." But, when we do, the same Societies have responded with "... we do not have the resource". Will some societies always be a talking shop, and should we let them? Do they damage the wider 'brand'

The civic society movement will need adapt to take advantage of the new opportunities, not only making the most of the desire from all sides to engage more with communities but also being flexible enough to work with a wider variety of structures of government at the local level – city-regions, elected mayors, unitary authorities, local partnerships and informal, citizen-driven organisations outside of elected government. It will need to place itself centrally in the local power system, whatever shape that takes, if it is to have an effective voice in future policy decisions.

But are we in a position to take advantage of these issues? As a movement we are seeing many societies face the same challenges such as aging membership, falling membership and an inability to recruit volunteers. It could be classed as a cycle of decline.

Yet, on the day we will hear how Southgate and Leeds are both influencing the local agenda and helping Civic Voice to influence national policy, through their work.

If civic societies are declining and declining in membership, should we look for a new funding model? Could Civic Voice become just a think-tank, albeit an influential one, or should we be doing more to raise the competence of the civic movement for example by setting a standard that civic societies should aspire to if they want to register with Civic Voice? How can we address the challenge of decline? Or do we just accept that this is something which is symptomatic of society at large and help manage the decline in an orderly way, switching the lights off when we're done?

Are these the biggest challenges facing the civic society movement?

- Aging membership
- Falling membership
- Variable experience
- Inability to recruit sufficient volunteers to undertake the work
- Lack of diversity
- Lack of representation from wider community
- Weak communication in digital age
- Time poverty
- Nimbyism – which can taint the reputation of the movement

Are these the issues that your own experience would class as the key challenges facing civic societies in the next five to ten years? Do you have experience of civic societies increasing members and increasing volunteers in the past few years? What have they done to do this?

Conclusions

Civic societies are more than just voluntary organisations who care for and champion the places where people live. They can also catalyse debate, bringing people together to deliberate the issues of the day which affect the places where they live, work or relax.

These interconnected trends of change will have fundamental impacts upon the role and approach of civic societies and the way they relate to the natural, historic and built environment and to their communities. Demographic and technological change, political and social trends, climate and other environmental factors are all going to be of huge importance to us as individuals and to the civic movement across England.

Our social values, perspectives and personal and group philosophies will give voice to new concerns about what matters in our cities, towns, suburbs and villages. Technology will foster new ways to bring people together which will 'disrupt' some of the existing ways in which organisations work. Meeting the challenge of climate change will force us all to reappraise how we sustain quality of life and quality of environment in ever-growing towns and cities. It is clear that the civic society movement will need to evolve rapidly if it is to be well placed to not only meet the challenges of the future but to help shape it.

The movement faces challenges to reach more people and in places which have not traditionally been at the heart and soul of its work. It will need to find a new language and approach which expresses its core mission in ways that win public support and connect

with the emotions and concerns of people and communities looking forward in a time of uncertainty and change.

In summary, how do we build on from the first 10 years of Civic Voice to become ever more relevant and influential in the 21st century