

CIVIC VOICE: A REVIEW



by
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Cover image:

Icons of civic pride: the Three Graces, Liverpool Waterfront (World Heritage Site)

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SUMMARY

Civic Voice

S1. This is a review of Civic Voice, the national charity for the civic movement in England. It is the membership body representing local civic societies and similar organisations, providing them with services, campaigning nationally on their behalf, and promoting civic pride. Civic Voice was founded in 2010 following a year-long review of the needs of civic societies after the collapse of a predecessor body, the Civic Trust. This is the first full review of how the organisation has performed and of options for its future.

S2. This review was carried out between mid-July and mid-September 2016, with evidence obtained from Civic Voice documents and its website, observing a Board meeting, an online questionnaire survey of the membership, and especially from extensive face-to-face or telephone interviews with the Board and senior staff, and with senior representatives of civic societies in membership or otherwise, voluntary sector partners, sponsors, and funders in Government Departments and agencies.

S3. Civic Voice is a small organisation with two permanent staff and others engaged on projects over defined periods. It is heavily reliant for its impact on the skills and energy of its staff and voluntary input from Board members led by the Chairman, and carries the risks inherent in a body of this size. Its core costs are not covered by income from its membership, so there has therefore been some reliance on grant aid, sponsorship and income from projects carried out for central government funders.

Operating context

S4. The strategic context in which Civic Voice operates now and in the near future is reviewed in chapter 2. This uses the standard 'PESTEL' methodology to review the political, economic, social, technological, environmental and legal influences on its prospects. This identifies considerable uncertainties about the future and generally indicates that life for Civic Voice is unlikely to become any easier. That finding is a matter for discussion rather than definitive. Nonetheless, Civic Voice is a light-footed organisation with minimal bureaucracy that is well-placed to seize opportunities which become available. With its modest need for resources it may well be able to turn events to its advantage.

Achievements and effectiveness

S5. An extensive review of Civic Voice's achievements and effectiveness is provided in chapter 3. Establishing a representative body on the national scene from nothing to become effective in influencing policy and practice is difficult and cannot be achieved overnight. Building the capacity to be effective is an ongoing task but has been especially important for Civic Voice in its first six years. Its first imperative has been to build credibility with its own actual and prospective member organisations, so that it can both promote their collective view at the national level and call upon their ability to act locally in support of its mission. The number of civic societies in England has been declining for some time, with more losing membership than gaining it, and likewise the number joining Civic Voice has also declined slightly since 2012. Nonetheless, Civic Voice is held in high esteem in the civic movement, with high levels of satisfaction amongst its membership and considerable admiration for it from non-members (who are mainly put off from joining only by the cost). There is some limited evidence that Civic Voice may have invigorated some local civic societies, but there remains a task to renew the sector particularly by attracting a wider cross-section of supporters into membership. Evidence is mixed on the effectiveness of profile-building events for the sector, notably the annual 'Civic Day' promoted by Civic Voice.

S6. The effectiveness of Civic Voice in pressing matters concerning its membership at the national level, such as through changes to legislation and policy, depends on it commanding a favourable reception in Government and its Agencies. This kind of credibility is only built up by hard work over a sustained period, often using soft methods of engagement at one step removed from the tangible and hard-edged changes that specific 'campaigns' seek. In this Civic Voice has been remarkably successful. A particularly sustained following has been built up in Parliament where Civic Voice established the All Party Parliamentary Group on Civic Societies in 2012, which has commanded the support of as many as 78 MPs. Civic Voice has also been raising its standing with the Government, having had meetings with Ministers on six occasions in the last two years and having had a discernible impact on an aspect of planning law of concern to its members. It is also held in high regard by Departments and agencies with funding programmes, being widely viewed as 'punching above its weight'. They appreciate particularly the excellent communications which Civic Voice has with its membership (primarily by a weekly emailed newsletter *Civic Update*) which enables national initiatives to be presented quickly at the local level with a spread across the whole of England. Capacity building in central government has clearly been achieved to a much greater extent than could reasonably have been expected with the level of funding and staff available. The individuals making the case were clearly key to this. Overall, one of the great successes of Civic Voice in its first six years has been to establish itself on the national stage as a highly competent organisation, effective in presenting its members' interests to the Government and others, and having built the organisational capacity to bring this about. This is an enormous achievement for so young a body.

S7. Civic Voice can be expected to move from a period of capacity building to one of achieving tangible impacts. It must choose its campaigns carefully to maximise the benefit it obtains from the limited resources it has available. A mix of activities is apparent:

- reliance on action at the local level by civic groups, feeding into campaigns led nationally by Civic Voice;
- national level campaigns put into effect by Civic Voice itself using the support of local civic groups lobbying their own MPs to strengthen its impact; and
- campaigns run in partnership with other national bodies and relying for their effectiveness on implementation by civic groups at the local level.

The evidence suggests that all three types of campaign had been able to generate considerable activity, raising awareness of the issues tackled. There had been a range of outputs from this (such as surveys carried out, workshops held and meetings with decision makers), but the records were very thin on the outcomes actually achieved. The campaigns had often fallen just short of real impact, and the record of any achievement was almost invariably lost due to a great shortage of campaign monitoring, feedback and evaluation.

S8. Civic Voice will need to move into a period of more carefully managed campaigns where outcomes, monitoring and evaluation receive greater attention alongside the effort put into activities and outputs. This will require greater co-ordination with member organisations. The method of campaign selection, primarily through advice to the Board from the Civic Voice Annual Convention, will need to be enhanced by more systematic and considered evaluation techniques. There is similarly a lack of clarity about the degree of Civic Voice's success in pursuit of its mission. 'Civic pride' is difficult to pin down, but indicators are available and measures of change over periods of time could be a useful campaign tool.

Governance

S9. Chapter 4 of the report reviews the governance of Civic Voice. There is unanimous agreement by Civic Voice Board members that 'governance' has been a 'roller coaster' ride over the last 6 years reflecting the highs and lows of the organisation itself. Equally, governance is considered to be ineffective with some significant improvements needed. This was of course one rationale for the review. Evaluation used well-established methods,

including *Good Governance: a code for the voluntary and community sector*, (a code of governance written for and by organisations in this sector), and *Delivering Effective Governance: Insights from the boards of larger charities*, (an important and highly informative research review into what constitutes good governance for charities conducted by Compass Partnership and the Centre for Charity Effectiveness at Cass Business School).

S10. Applying the six principles from the *Good Governance Code* and the four tiers of best practice from *Delivering Effective Governance* allow an assessment to be made of Civic Voice on a convenient ‘traffic light’ basis, with the following results:

1.	Understanding the Board’s role	Amber
2.	Ensuring organisational purpose	Amber
3.	Working effectively as individuals and a team	Amber / Red
4.	Exercising effective control	Amber / Red
5.	Behaving with integrity	Green / Amber
6.	Open and accountable	Green / Amber
A	Structures	Green
B	Processes	Green / Amber
C	Meetings	Amber / Red
D	Behaviours	Amber

S11. The review identified three priority areas to address:

- Full strategic plans must be drawn up as soon as possible.
- Board meetings need significant improvement (before, during & after meetings).
- Actions must be followed up and promised activities delivered more effectively.

S12. Sixteen detailed recommendations follow from the principles in the *Good Governance Code*, ranging across a wide variety of matters such as the type of governance to be employed, assessing the adequacy and appropriateness of the current financial resources employed, the strategy for Civic Voice (following this Review), team development involving new and existing Board members, and a review of Board behaviours at meetings. The Review also identified a series of opportunities to improve governance meetings, from the way the agendas and papers are handled to the way meetings are run. Consideration needed to be given to how much time is spent at Board meetings looking at things from internal or external perspectives and how much time is spent looking at the past and the future: the future and external environment should feature more dominantly.

Fundraising

S13. The Civic Voice accounts clearly show four issues:

- modest and diminishing subscriptions;
- projects showing significant growth but yielding restricted funds and restricted internal resource which means associated staff cannot be freely deployed on tasks;
- English Heritage/Historic England remain committed funders; and
- in practice there are only three important income streams – subscriptions, projects and English Heritage/Historic England.

There is a need to diversify income and secure core funding on an unrestricted basis. Opportunities need to be investigated particularly around income from members (see below).

S14. Corporate donations are a popular avenue to pursue but often an unsuccessful way of building income. The review showed that by segmenting and targeting, greater precision can be applied to likely corporates who may express an interest to support Civic Voice in some way. However, at outset there must be a clear ‘pitch’ on what Civic Voice is looking to

do and how the money will be used. Some specific suggestions are offered. Civic Voice has been able to develop very satisfactory relationships with a small number of corporate sponsors, often providing help in kind, but more effort will need to be applied in detail to identify significant corporate funding opportunities. More could also be done to encourage individual donors: legacy fundraising has considerable potential and a programme for this is recommended to begin as soon as possible. Approaching carefully targeted high net worth contacts ('relationship marketing') may also be effective, but there can be no guarantees.

S15. Grant funding is likely to be under further pressure in the years ahead, not least due to continued Government cutbacks and low interest rates supporting grant funds, but there was evidence that Civic Voice could do more to track the availability of grant funding opportunities. A 'grant scan' routine should be set up on at least a weekly basis to spot opportunities, and then applications submitted promptly. This would involve searching bulletins and databases in a systematic manner.

Membership

S16. Organisations in membership of Civic Voice currently pay subscriptions based on £1.50 per head of their own membership, up to a maximum of £500, making the cost of joining roughly proportional to ability to pay. However, this is not bringing in enough income: just under £50,000 in the year to April 2015 contrasted with core costs approaching £170,000 (based on general costs + governance costs + staff costs). Even at this modest level there was clear evidence from interviews that subscriptions rates were considered challenging. Some members felt trapped by declining membership and their own low subscription rates which they considered was all the market could bear, and simply did not have the spare cash to spend on Civic Voice. More members, however, measured the subscriptions to Civic Voice against the direct benefits they received, not against the wider benefit of having a national body to represent them. Cracking this problem is now vital.

S17. Part of the solution may well lie in member benefits. The evidence showed that two specific benefits were highly valued by member organisations and their own subscribers: access to cheap public liability insurance which Civic Voice had negotiated with Lockton, and the opportunity for local members to obtain a free day ticket annually to National Trust properties. The former often appeared to pay for the subscription to Civic Voice and the latter was a real incentive to membership. There appears to be an opportunity to expand member benefits and attract and retain additional members.

S18. In its first six years Civic Voice has tried to entice civic societies into membership by promoting its services. It offers so much free to anyone that subscribing members do not obtain significant extra benefits. This has to some extent generated a culture of not needing to pay. There is clear evidence that the civic movement benefits from the services provided by Civic Voice, and that products like *Civic Update* and services like training events have value to those who use them. Much more could be done to capitalise on this, notably by charging non-members for them.

S19. Awareness of Civic Voice is high amongst the leadership groups in civic societies, but is likely to be much less amongst local subscribing members. *Civic Update* rarely penetrates to individual local members and often they hear little about Civic Voice. This does not create a favourable climate for renewing Civic Voice's annual membership, hampers the spread of the Civic Voice message and is an opportunity lost to raise income. Much more could be done to gain individual direct subscribers to Civic Voice (there are currently just 64). Unfortunately there is also evidence of resistance to giving Civic Voice this opportunity, as many civic societies clearly wished to avoid direct Civic Voice contact with their own members. The review identified ways by which Civic Voice could begin to build up its own database of potential individual subscribers to circumvent the problem.

S20. The need to drive home the message about the importance of civic societies paying more for Civic Voice is paramount. Civic Voice may be able to assist in tackling the low income/low expenditure condition in which many societies find themselves. However, in the short term there needs to be more vigour in encouraging donations and explaining the wider benefits of Civic Voice. The review found a woeful level of understanding about Civic Voice's financial needs and the sums which societies needed to pay if they are to receive the current level of services in the longer term.

Strategic options

S21. The Review concludes by presenting in chapter 7 various strategic options for the Civic Voice Board to consider. The 'do nothing' option carries the principal risk that the money currently available will quickly run out. The current arrangement relies on an extraordinarily high level of input from the Executive Director and staff, together with the Chairman, and has still not provided an economically viable model. It is not sustainable. At the other extreme we found no appetite for the closure of Civic Voice: we agree this is not necessary at present. Nor is there a case for Civic Voice to merge with another organisation.

S22. A 'Tactical change' option looks at a number of actions that can be taken reasonably quickly which will either reduce costs or increase income. Typically these will be relatively low risk and fairly easy to implement, but they will need full Board and Executive commitment and sponsorship to succeed. Equally, even to achieve these, very focussed attention and follow through will be needed. This is partly because there is an imperative to maintain existing services at the same time as using the organisation's limited resources to bring about changes which will take time and effort. It is also partly because even small changes need investment up-front before the benefits are reaped in due course, so Civic Voice must either put its limited reserves under pressure or obtain funding to assist its own improvement. Possibilities include reducing the burden on the Executive Director to allow him to prioritise his time better, assembling a group of national-level Civic Voice volunteers, and appointing a proven and skilled fundraiser.

S23. A 'Transformational change' option would be more challenging, more complex and more costly, but be more beneficial. The direction of change most likely to be worthwhile is to enter new markets, and specifically 'individuals'. Civic Voice could reach out into the wider population who are civic-minded and encourage them to make contact through targeted campaigns, public-spirited causes or more modestly just lending their support to an issue without them undertaking any further supporting actions. The unique sales proposition would be that details of the individual would be passed to a local civic society to follow up and any formal membership would reside with that civic society. Civic Voice would secure an active, current and broader database of people interested in civic issues which it might 'harvest', while civic societies would be provided with a 'hot' list of potential members.

S24. It will be for the Board to decide the precise 'way forward'. Whilst no specific or precise recommendations are offered in this respect, an overarching commentary may be helpful. We believe that a blended solution between tactical and transformation work needs to be designed. This should take into account: costs, availability of skilled resource, and what can be achieved in practice, given that the backbone of the charity must remain intact to deliver current work. There is also a need to protect existing staff and executive positions as this remains a major vulnerability. Thus some activities could be stopped, some charged for or some skilled resource brought in (e.g. a fundraiser / donor / membership manager). Volunteer resource for some lighter roles should not be overlooked. Funding and a diversified income stream remain critical. The strategic imperative is to develop a sustainable charity capable of fully delivering its mission that is financially viable in the short and medium term. The plan of action should be referenced back to these needs.

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