



Larger Civic Societies

Notes of a meeting held on 21st April 2017
at Clarion Collection Hotel, St Albans

Attendance

Joan Humble	JH	Blackpool Civic Trust and Civic Voice Chair
Paul Humble	PH	Blackpool Civic Trust
David Evans	DE	Chester Civic Trust and Civic Voice Trustee
Jean Evans	JE	Chester Civic Trust
Robert Osborne	RO	St Albans Civic Society
Geraint John	GJ	St Albans Civic Society
Jill Singer	JS	St Albans Civic Society
Martin Hamilton	MH	Leeds Civic Trust
Marion Coupe	MC	Lytham St Annes Civic Society
Christine Marshall	CM	Lytham St Annes Civic Society
Mary Hogben	MH	The Finchley Society
Keith Leaman	KL	City of Winchester Trust
John Beveridge	JB	City of Winchester Trust
James Littlewood	JL	Cambridge Past, Present and Future

1. Welcome

Geraint John welcomed members on behalf of St Albans Civic Society.

2. Introductions

The participants were asked to introduce themselves and the organisation they represented. They were asked to state a view on whether or not Civic Societies should be Statutory Consultees in planning applications. There was general support for this but with some reservations.

Members of the society reported on their recent work. The society is currently developing a 5 year plan with the aim of developing its membership and improving its effectiveness. RO reported on the results of a members' survey which will inform the development of the plan. The society is aiming to move from a reactive role to a more proactive one.

The Society runs an annual Design Awards and next year will be celebrating the 50th anniversary of the town centre Conservation Area. This will involve an exhibition at the City Museum, a Day Conference, a schools competition and a celebration of "local hero" and former City Surveyor Albert Moody, who was responsible for the preservation of much of the city's heritage.

3. Civic Voice Activity

JH reported on recent Civic Voice activity.

CV was seen as an important consultee by the "Building Better, Building Beautiful" Commission chaired by Sir Roger Scruton. Ian Harvey and Sarah James had been interviewed on the first day of the Commission's deliberations. Ten CV members had attended the Commission's conference in Birmingham and it seemed that engagement of local communities in planning decisions was high on the Commission's agenda. CV had carried out a survey of societies' views on the importance of "beauty" in gaining community support for development and JH reported on the results.

The Civic Voice Design awards were seen as a way of emphasising the positive influence that civic societies – many of whom have their own design awards – could have on the standards of new developments.

The submission by CV on the revision of the NPPF appeared to have influenced the outcome, with further emphasis on the importance of good design as a key aspect of sustainable development and inclusion of further emphasis on the role of Design Review Panels, Community Engagement, Charettes and Design Workshops. Building for Life 12 is being heavily emphasised and CV is looking at ways of providing training for civic societies in the use of this tool.

Three meetings of the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Civic Societies had been organised for the current session. The Annual Conference in Birmingham had been a success.

4. Public Participation in Planning

JH introduced a discussion on a proposal for the CV manifesto for the next general election.

- Civic Voice is calling on the Government to commit to introducing formal 'Pre-application consultation' into the English planning system.
- Civic Voice believes that meaningful engagement with the community could be achieved by introducing a new duty on developers to consult with local communities **prior** to submitting planning applications for new housing and requiring them to produce a **short report** on how the community engagement has **influenced** the final design.
- Pre-application consultations are an opportunity for communities to help shape the places where we live.

The new requirement would cover three points:

- Developers must **consult** communities before submitting certain planning applications, e.g. housing development, having regard to any advice that their local planning authority may provide.
- They must **consider** any responses they receive before they finalise their proposals and submit their applications.
- When submitting their application, they must account for how they have consulted the local community, what **comments** they have received, and how they have taken those comments into account.

We propose to campaign for 'Pre-application Consultation' to be introduced to the England Planning System and establish a campaign to support this. We will make this a manifesto call at our APPG for Civic Societies meeting on 27th March 2019.

MH raised the problems of poor design of many modern homes in terms of inadequate room sizes, storage space etc.

JE noted that, whatever plans were approved, there was a serious problem of ensuring that planned developments were actually built because of lack of resources for enforcement in local authorities.

JL observed that the NPPF had been strengthened in this regard, and that unfortunately this was leading to many applications coming forward with large areas of "reserved matters", which would then be dealt with by officers rather than councillors.

There was further discussion of the question of whether Civic Societies should be Statutory Consultees in planning applications. DE raised the question of how a Civic Society could be satisfactorily defined in law. MH pointed out that engagement needed to be at the pre-application stage, as early as possible, if it were to be of value. JL put forward the idea of a "Consultation Score Sheet", which developers would have to submit with their applications.

The idea of developers having to report on consultations was favoured and again there was emphasis on the importance of early engagement and participation, rather than "consultation" when most of the development was set in stone.

5. 10 years of Civic Voice

JH reminded the group that Civic Voice had been founded in 2010 as a body which would be:

- Campaigning in its outlook

- Responsive to the needs of societies
- Light footed in its use of resources
- Grassroots in its culture and governance.

She presented plans for celebrating the 10th anniversary of Civic Voice in 2020 by re-launching the movement for the next ten years.

It was planned to hold the next Annual Conference on 17-18th April 2020 to coincide with the 10th anniversary of the setting up of Civic Voice – location yet to be decided. It was therefore intended to hold the AGM in autumn 2019 in conjunction with the Sandys Lecture.

6. Open Session

There was general support for the idea of Civic Voice providing training in Building for Life 12 and other relevant areas and that face-to-face sessions would probably best be provided on a sub-regional basis. JL suggested that there could be the possibility of providing training in conjunction with other organisations. There was also the possibility of providing training through online media and there were many potentially valuable programmes already available from other providers such as Historic England. DE raised the possibility of providing a list of such resources.

CM wanted to see more opportunities for societies to network and help each other. Regional groups were helpful but RO pointed out that St Albans did not really fit into an “Eastern” region and felt that they received little feedback on its activities. JL noted that the concerns of Cambridge were much more linked to the “Oxbridge corridor” and regretted that there had been little interest from societies along that corridor apart from Oxford.

7. Key Messages

MH noted that local authorities are increasingly acting as developers, both of housing and commercial developments, either directly or through “arms-length” companies. This could provide civic societies with greater opportunities to influence the quality of developments.

JL said that his key message to the Board was “well done, keep going”, a view that was endorsed by the rest of the meeting.

8. Next meeting

The next meeting of Larger Societies will be held in Chester on Saturday, 28th September 2019.

The meeting ended at 3.30pm and members then had a very interesting short tour of St Albans city centre, kindly led by members of the Civic Society.

David Evans 19/03/19