

Civic Manifesto 2015–2020

Localism for Real

Our ambition is for England to be a place where every individual can say
“I am proud of where I live”

This document provides fuller information and briefing to support the 8-page Civic Manifesto booklet. It details additional proposals that Civic Societies have developed, discussed and agreed. It is intended for MPs and parliamentary candidates, campaign workers, journalists and researchers who want to find out more about what the civic movement wants from the next Government.



Foreword

Two factors have created good cities. One is individual pride, perhaps manifested, in the past, in brilliant shop displays or neat front gardens or clean front steps. The other is civic pride, the communal action that cleared our streets of rubbish in the nineteenth century, our air of smog in the early twentieth century and, later, our historic buildings of neglect.

Today, our shops and offices are often run by international companies. Their owners often do not live locally. National governments tend to have a desire to control as much centrally as possible. We begin to feel powerless to effect what happens locally. We are not nor should we be.

The job of Civic Voice is to encourage local participation in the urban environment. This has value not just in the public arena but also in the private realm. It starts with pride in our places. It goes on to empowerment and participation in making them better.

Increasingly, we may wonder how things happen, why decisions of insensitivity are made, who is in control. Localism is about asserting distinctiveness. It is about asserting the right to be heard. It is about making the local population aware of their rights and capabilities. Localism is a national issue.

Civic Voice is here to try to ensure that successive governments are aware of that.

Griff Rhys Jones

President, Civic Voice





Civic Voice and Government

THE STORY SO FAR...

Civic Voice was launched in April 2010, just a month before the Coalition Government was elected. Civic Voice supported the localism agenda and became strong advocates of neighbourhood planning. However, when the Government claimed the planning system was holding back growth we joined with other organisations to contest that assertion.

From the NPPG to permitted development rights the Coalition Government has learnt it must listen to the civic movement. Our members have engaged with hundreds of MPs. The All Party Parliamentary Group for Civic Societies now has over 75 members and has been addressed by planning and housing ministers.

We have worked with other campaigning groups through the Smart Growth Alliance, Heritage Alliance and more recently the Localism Alliance. We are looking forward to supporting the Place Alliance that has emerged from the Farrell Review. We have partnered with private sector partners such as Bircham Dyson Bell and John Thompson and Partners to organise discussion events with Government and the development industry.

In 2015 the UK will have a new Government. Whichever party or parties form that Government, there will be a new opportunity to consider how we create successful places by handing more power to local people to do what is right for their cities, towns and villages.

Civic Voice has been talking to its members, civic societies active on local issues around England, engaging in their thousands with planning, heritage, civic pride, regeneration, governance and the environment. This manifesto sets out their priorities for the new Government.



Localism for Real

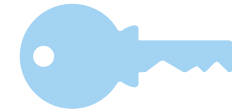
The quality of our cities, towns and villages is vital to the achievement of so many objectives which are shared across the political spectrum: economic growth and prosperity, social cohesion, public health, safety and crime reduction. Most people want to have a say, and many want to play an active part, in making sure that the design of their city, town or village is as good as it can be.

When the Coalition Government was formed they made a commitment to localism including “radically reforming the planning system to give neighbourhoods far more ability to determine the shape of the places in which their inhabitants live”. The results have been mixed. While the take-up of neighbourhood planning and listing of assets of community value has been growing, many citizens feel that their cities, towns and villages are not being shaped locally, but more by developers, planning inspectors and the courts.

Our central message to the political parties is that we need **real localism**. Not a ‘deal’ between the Government and local councils but a system where local power is guaranteed and cannot be taken away. Real localism will be achieved through a planning system which gives effective power to people, a revival of local and neighbourhood government and the further development of community rights.

To achieve real localism the next Government needs to:

1. **Make improving the quality of the public realm in our cities, towns and villages a priority**
2. **Give all citizens opportunities to actively shape the future of their place**
3. **Give local communities the powers they need to enable their town and city centres to prosper**



KEY MEASURES

In particular, the following specific changes would demonstrate the Government’s real commitment to localism and quality of place:

- a. **Require every local authority to produce a Place Improvement Strategy**
- b. **Strengthen policy to support collaborative community planning for major developments and local plans**
- c. **Enable local authorities to control use classes and permitted development rights to meet local need**

Addressing these issues does not have to be at the expense of economic growth. On the contrary the measures we are proposing will bring about a revival of our towns and cities, making development more acceptable to local people, rebalancing the economy, unlocking the potential of the major urban areas in the regions and helping places retain graduates and attract visitors and investors.



The Farrell Review

In January 2013 Ed Vaizey, Minister for Culture, Communications and the Creative Industries, asked Sir Terry Farrell to undertake a national review of architecture and the built environment. The review was undertaken independently by the team at Farrells advised by a panel of 11 industry leaders. Many of the themes and recommendations of the review chime with those in the Civic Manifesto.

There are five cross cutting themes running through the Farrell Review:

- i. A new understanding of place-based planning and design
- ii. A new level of connectedness between government departments, institutions, agencies, professions and the public
- iii. A new level of public engagement through education and outreach in every village, town and city, and volunteering enabled by information and communications technology
- iv. A commitment to making the ordinary better and to improving the everyday built environment
- v. A sustainable and low-carbon future

RECOMMENDATIONS

Among the review's 60 recommendations are that every town and city should have an "urban room" where the past, present and future of that place can be inspected. These "Place Spaces" should have a physical or virtual model, produced in collaboration with local technical colleges or universities and other displays about the place. Urban rooms will have an educational and a civic engagement function as well as promoting investment in the place.

By entering into partnerships with local authorities, built environment practices in the private sector could become much more involved in helping to shape villages, towns and cities through education and outreach. This should be about "championing the civic" through volunteering, collaboration and enabling, and not centred primarily on redesigning these places.

People who make decisions about our built environment, such as planning committee members and highway engineers, should have training in design literacy. Newly elected councillors who already receive mandatory training on financial and legal duties should receive place-making and design training at the same time.

There should be a revolution in support of proactive planning in this country. For the sustainability of our villages, towns and cities we have to reduce our reliance on reactive planning which is characterised by the current system of development control.

Local planning authorities should have interactive online forums for projects over a certain size, giving the public better access to planning debates about the future of their neighbourhoods.

A panel of high-profile media figures and broadcasters could work with the institutions and built environment professionals to explore ways of popularising and communicating good design, so that it becomes an assumed but inspiring part of our everyday lives.



Quality of place a priority

The quality of our cities, towns and villages lies at the heart of economic efficiency, long-term value, and strong, participative local democracy. In a small country where every acre of land is valued, a well-designed and attractive environment can make a big difference to people's well-being as well as making sound economic sense.

We believe there are three elements to creating better places:

i. Caring for what is good about our existing places

This includes the designated heritage assets, assets of community value and buildings and features that add character. Recent research by English Heritage shows that heritage is of major importance to the great majority of the nation, who believe that we do not protect or preserve enough, and that the heritage, far from being an obstacle to development or regeneration, is of fundamental importance to us, as a nation, as local residents, as individuals and as informed citizens.

ii. Making positive changes

Plan making and planning decisions need to ensure that every new development is making a positive contribution to the quality of the built environment.

iii. Caring for and improving public space

Largely outside the planning system, streets, squares, paths, parks and highways make perhaps the biggest contribution to quality of place. The state of the public realm has a central influence on our quality of life. It is the human habitat where we all live our public lives. Civic Voice is concerned that too much of our public realm is becoming ever more degraded and supports action to improve its quality and to empower people to take a more active role in shaping the future of their local area.

At times during the current Government planning has become the most hotly debated public issue. The apparent threat to the countryside aroused the concern of citizens throughout England. Meanwhile the introduction of neighbourhood planning has involved hundreds of thousands of people in plan-making for the first time.

Despite these examples of engagement, for much of the time the planning system is very difficult for people to understand or deal with and the take up of neighbourhood planning remains dramatically skewed towards better-off and rural areas, leaving those neighbourhoods most in need of positive environmental change disenfranchised.

Action is needed to remove the mystique, jargon and complexity of planning vocabulary and processes which deter community engagement.

The current Government has reaffirmed that we have a 'plan-led system' and yet many places have been allowed to get into the position where they do not have an up-to-date local plan. The five-year-land-supply rules mean that residents are being punished for the tardiness of their local authorities, leaving them feeling powerless and frustrated.



Quality of place a priority

Civic Voice believes the planning system has untapped potential to engage people in their community as well as managing change and development for the widest public good. We believe there does not need to be a conflict between a system that puts local people in the driving seat and one that provides opportunity and certainty for developers.

We agree with the recommendation of the Farrell Review that the planning system needs to become more proactive. Local Planning Authorities should be judged as much for their plan making as they are for the speed of their decision-making.

To create attractive, prosperous places that every- one can feel proud of we need to make the planning system work to deliver better places. Every area must have an up-to-date local plan. At present this is a requirement of local planning authorities, but only just over half have achieved it, leaving local many communities in a 'planning limbo'.

Planning authorities need sufficient resources to produce timely plans with quality of place at their heart, and effective measures need to be put in place if they do not. The speed and quality of plan-making should be considered at least as important as the speed of planning decisions.

Because quality of place is not just determined by the planning system we are calling for integrated Place Improvement Strategies which complement the local plan but also include a strategy for heritage management and improving the public realm. Like local plans, Place Improvement Strategies should be produced through an inclusive and participative process. A named senior officer and a senior politician should be answerable for producing this strategy and making sure it is implemented.



KEY MEASURE

Require every local authority to produce an integrated place improvement strategy.

This would cover the three elements above and include a heritage management plan, planning policies on design quality, identification of areas that are priorities for improvements and policies and proposals for improving streets, road and green spaces. It would not just be a document for the planners, but direct the work of conservation officers, asset managers, highways departments, parks departments and street maintenance managers. The Local Plan would closely align with this strategy.



Quality of place a priority

OTHER PROPOSALS

Require **every local authority to designate a senior officer and a senior elected member** who will be publicly answerable for the development and implementation of the place improvement strategy.

Make sure that every place has a plan.

If local authorities fail to produce a plan the Government should not fine the local authority as this further reduces their capacity. Instead they should intervene and appoint qualified professionals to do the job. A comprehensive, collaborative neighbourhood planning process should inform local plans.

Target resources for neighbourhood planning at less-well-off and urban areas to close 'neighbourhood planning divide'. Neighbourhoods that lack capacity or are not ready to produce a full neighbourhood plan should be able to produce a 'neighbourhood planning statement' as an expression of community views. Neighbourhood plans that have not yet been adopted but have reached an advanced stage should have weight at appeal and in local plan-making.

Level the playing field on appeals. At the moment developers can appeal against planning decisions but communities cannot. Introduce a Community Right of Appeal so that recognised and established citizen's groups can appeal against decisions that they believe break national, local or neighbourhood planning policy.

Reverse the incentives in the tax-system which encourage demolition of existing buildings. In particular the differential between VAT on repair and maintenance, and on new build. This must be resolved and the differential eliminated if a level playing field is to be created.

Strengthen the support in the NPPF for design review by requiring all developments over a certain threshold to be reviewed at a pre-applications stage alongside a thorough process of community participation. This could be achieved through the planning validation process.

Require utilities to minimise street-clutter (for example by introducing underground junction boxes for telecoms) and strengthen local authority powers to require utilities to properly reinstate footways and highways after they have been dug-up.



Actively shape our places



In a recent poll 76% said that local authorities should have the power to shape the high street in line with the wishes of the community

Source: COMRES

We face a crisis of civic engagement. This is a symptom of the frustration people feel as power is taken away from communities and they are subject to tokenistic consultation. The organisations that traditionally involved people in public life; community, residents and tenants groups, political parties, trades unions, all showing a long-term decline in membership.

The Civic Movement has not been immune to the decline in civic involvement, but the active core of civic societies are reversing this trend and show what can be done to engage people both in campaigning around local issues and taking direct action to improve and celebrate their place. More spontaneous, social-media-driven actions, like the clear-up campaign after the riots, show there is an appetite for civic engagement if it can be harnessed.

In many areas it is difficult to get people to stand in public office and in some places this has led to a decline in the calibre of elected officials. This is not surprising when the role of local councils is tightly prescribed so they become a mere administrators on behalf of national Government. A constant drive for efficiency, at the expense of effectiveness, has meant that people are treated as customers not citizens.

We need a national debate about the future of local government to secure a cross-party consensus that will give local councils significantly more powers to shape their places and raise their own revenues. At the same time the workings of local government need to more open and transparent.



Actively shape our places

In rural areas Parish Councils provide a legitimate grass-roots level of government with its own modest budgets. This is not available to urban citizens and puts them at a disadvantage when, for example, developing a neighbourhood plan. In many urban areas there are ward forums or similar structures which in some cases work well, but without a statutory basis and their own income they can be closed down at the whim of the local authority.

Successive Governments have taken steps to make it easier to form urban tertiary authorities and some communities have responded to this but the time has come for a more comprehensive approach.



KEY MEASURE

Strengthen the provisions in the NPPF that call for community participation

on major planning proposals and in the production of local plans. The requirement should be that designs for major developments have been produced with the participation of local people rather than simply that they have been consulted.

OTHER PROPOSALS

Move towards putting local government on a proper footing

with powers over the things that matter and the majority of council income coming from local sources, free of Government interference.

Lead a national debate about the future of local government with the aim of developing a cross-party consensus that will give local councils significantly more powers to shape their places and raise their own revenues. At the same time the workings of local government (even when sub-contracted) need to more open and transparent.

Ensure that every part of the country has a tertiary local authority. In most places these are called parish or town councils, but in urban areas they could be called community councils or neighbourhood forums.

Improve the teaching of citizenship in schools to help students understand how they can influence the powers that be or undertake practical actions to improve their place.

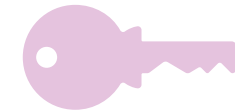


Power to save our centres

The state of the UK's high streets has been the cause of much discussion and several reports to Government in recent years. Our town and city centres do face a critical threat. Up and down the country, what were once thriving retail centres at the heart of their communities are now shadows of their former selves, with swathes of empty shops creating a desolate atmosphere.

It doesn't have to be like this. Some towns and cities are bucking the trend, and showing how simple measures can make a big difference and help draw the shoppers back to struggling centres. We have to recognise that there is no one-size solution. Each place needs its own plans and strategy for survival/development. City and town centres need to become the "living rooms" of the community, where there are events, exhibitions, places to eat and relax. The model where they rely almost exclusively on retail is dead.

Public health, environment quality and place-making demand that we abandon the model of dispersed, car-dependent model of retail and leisure development and strongly incentivise retail and leisure operators and other employers to locate in town and city centres. At present local authorities lack the tools they need to tip the balance in favour of the centre. They need powers that will incentivise town centre location and preserve the mix of uses in the centre.



KEY PROPOSAL

Introduce a much more sophisticated range of use classes for designated town, city and local centres. This would allow local authority to protect essential shops (e.g. bakers, green-grocers, butchers, pubs, post-offices) and restrict those where cumulative impact is a problem (e.g. betting shops, hot-food take-away, charity shops).

OTHER PROPOSALS

Allow local authorities to vary business rates to incentivise town and city centre retail and leisure businesses over out-of-town locations. Consider a levy on out-of-town car parking spaces.

Strengthen planning policy to discourage large-scale out of town retail development by introducing exceptional sign-off by the Secretary of State for all such developments.



The housing crisis

There is common consent that we need to build more houses to meet the demand that is driving up both house-prices and rents to levels that are unaffordable to many. We need to plan for the 3 million extra households that will form in the early decades of the 21st century. The political parties have made various promises to get volumes of housing built each year that have not been seen for decades.

The Plan for Growth (2012) saw the problem as the planning system. It proposed radical reforms of the system to open up more land for development, introduce a presumption in favour of sustainable development, extend permitted development rights and speed up decisions. **Although there has been some revival in house-building recently it is not enough to meet demand and has left many communities feeling that their wishes have been overridden.** Statistics from March 2012 showing 150,000 sites with planning permission yet to even start building.

There are also nearly 600,000 privately owned residential properties in England that are empty and half of these have been out of use for longer than six months. It is clear that it is not just planning that is holding development back.

There has been a concerted campaign to persuade us that the only way to solve the housing crisis is by building in the countryside either through more urban extensions or new settlements (cutely re-branded as 'garden cities'). While there may be some truth in this, there is clear evidence that the ambition to bring back into use the many hectares of post-industrial land in our major urban areas is being abandoned. This risks the competitiveness of our cities by leaving them as hollowed-out and degraded environments, much less able to attract new investment and skilled and educated people.

THE NEXT GOVERNMENT SHOULD

Urgently address the need for quality development of brown-field sites in major urban areas. This means strengthening brown-field-first planning policies and using the tax system to incentivise brown-field development.

Invest in social housing. They should not just rely on the private sector house-builders but directly address the problem of affordability by providing major resources or access to finance to enable much more social and other affordable housing to be built. We know that public finances are still restricted, but the lack of homes is a major infrastructure need as urgent, if not more so, as high speed train lines or airports.

Investigate the extent to which **'land-banking'** is a barrier to development and what measures need to be taken to ensure that sites with planning permission are built out quickly.

Re-use empty properties. Support the work of the Empty Homes Agency, local authorities and others in encouraging the re-use of long-term empty properties. Encourage greater use of Empty Dwelling Management Orders.



The Lyons Housing Review

Sir Michael Lyons was asked to chair a commission of 12 housing industry leaders (private and social), planners and academics for the Labour Party to respond to the housing crisis.

Among the recommendations that Civic Voice would commend are:

Councils should have “use it or lose it” powers to incentivise faster development, giving them the ability to levy council tax on plots allocated for housing in plans where homes are not built within reasonable timescales – as if the houses had been built, and to compulsorily purchase such land where necessary.

Shortening the life of planning permissions and creating greater transparency in the land market to make it clear not only who owns what land, but also to make public which developers have taken out options on land with the potential for new homes.

Local authorities to play a much more energetic role in leading housing development for their communities. They should be provided with greater powers to bring forward developments working with partners, through Housing Growth Areas. This will give councils the ability to act as lead developers on behalf of their communities, with greater control over: where the homes should go; the speed of development; the design and quality of schemes; and the specification of a greater mix of tenures.

Government should work with Housing Associations to unlock further investment, increase flexibilities for those who have the ambition and capacity and encourage others to develop the skills and capacity to play a bigger role. Government should also extend guarantees to Housing Associations to provide the confidence and certainty to deliver more homes. Councils can and should return to a significant role in commissioning and building social housing.

New housing requires public support and it should, of course, improve the quality of people’s lives. Good design, informed by an understanding of what makes homes environmentally sustainable, is therefore indispensable.

OTHER POLICIES ARE AVAILABLE

Civic Voice is a non-party-political organisation and it is important to say that all the major parties have promised to ensure that more houses are built. The Liberal Democrats promise 250,000 homes a year by making finance available to developers, building more affordable homes and bringing empty homes back into use. The Conservatives have concentrated on addressing affordability by making starter homes available at a discount to under-40s by exempting them from the zero-carbon standard. Homes would also be made available at affordable rents for young people by providing additional finance to social landlords.



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