



# Smaller Civic Societies

## Notes of a meeting held on 11<sup>th</sup> May 2017

Ian Harvey (IH) welcomed members to the meeting and explained that this group was being set up to respond to the needs of smaller societies, whose interests and concerns were often distinct from larger groups.

### 1. Introductions

The participants were then asked to introduce themselves and the organisation they represent. They were asked to state the membership fee for their society and to nominate another civic society which they felt was doing an effective job.

Name of Society	Membership fee
• Alnwick Society	£7-12.50
• Coventry Society	£12
• Newport and District Civic Society	£10-15
• Newton Abbot Civic Society	£10-15
• Sutton Coldfield Civic Society	£12-17
• Waltham Forest	£3-6
• Potteries Heritage Society	£10

The group were informed that the average membership fee across the country for a civic society was £12. A discussion was had over the balance between having a stronger mandate with more members, or having more money in the bank with increasing membership fees.

Groups including Chester, Shrewsbury, Tottenham, Pickering and Malvern were all classed as civic societies that smaller societies admire. It was agreed that in the case of Chester and Shrewsbury, having access to a building was a huge asset.

### 2. Civic Voice update

IH gave an update on the latest developments in Civic Voice with particular focus on the progress that had been made in implementing the 42 recommendations in the Green Balance report, which had been published at the 2016 Convention. The Vision, Mission and Values of the organisation had been confirmed and a new strategic plan (to 2020) and a risk register is in place. The unexpected general election had necessitated postponement of the Design Awards ceremony but plans for Civic Day and the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Conservation Areas were progressing well. The success of the War Memorials programme showed what could be achieved when the civic movement worked together.

#### Networking lunch

The group participated in an exercise to understand why they first got involved in joining their civic society. The main reasons involved; giving something back, wanted to meet likeminded people and to make a difference.

### 3. Open Session

IH introduced the session with the results of a survey, which showed the Civic Voice activities, smaller societies thought were most important. The main concerns of civic societies generally were the need for more volunteers, particularly for committee roles, ageing membership and the need to raise the profile of the movement.

The Civic Voice annual survey shows that the top three things societies want to do are: recruit more active volunteers; raise their profile and get more members. A discussion was focused on this.

Societies reported that too many of their members are what might be called passive:, a Civic Society can have many members, but only a few people do the work, and it is nearly always the same people in each society. Civic societies say that they are keen to involve more people in what they do, and that there is a large pool of people out there who are enthusiastic about getting involved in protecting and enhancing their local historic environment, especially in campaigns pertaining to sites they have a local or emotional connection with. The challenge is finding the right campaign and converting this passion into active volunteers for civic societies.

It is within this context that local groups must refine their approach to potential members and volunteers. Local groups need to take stock of their own membership and own contacts. Developing a local skills audit was recommended for groups to undertake, with support from Civic Voice.

It was agreed that there is also a challenge with groups' use of social media. Recent figures published by Civic Voice, show that in England, civic volunteers are still behind the curve on social networking – only 27% value Facebook and other social networks for keeping in touch compared to 42% of the population as a whole.

Many local groups will need to change the way they work: it isn't just about communicating more widely about what they do, it's about changing elements of what they do to position themselves to be more relevant to the local community.

It was agreed that Civic Voice could share examples of other civic societies that have had success in finding new volunteers. Newton Abbot reported success in using local volunteer centres in recruiting volunteers and IH explained advertising in local universities can also be successful.

#### **4. Next meeting**

In response to a question from IH, there was general agreement that continuation of a Smaller Civic Societies Group within Civic Voice was worthwhile. There was consensus that future meetings should hear from individual civic societies and could be thematic, focusing on particular issues. The idea to move the meeting around was also felt to be an appropriate idea. The group agreed that we were not going to solve the issues facing smaller societies overnight but if we start focusing on the challenges in a coordinated manner now, we should be able to move forward.

Actions for Civic Voice:

- Develop a toolkit to allow civic societies to undertake a “skills audit” for own civic society?
- Organise more meetings with specific focus on a series of issues to strengthen civic societies
- To share the Civic Society Assessment Toolkit

Sarah James, 11<sup>th</sup> May 2017