

DRAFT MINUTES

1. Welcome and Apologies for Absence

Martin Hamilton, Acting Chair, welcomed everyone to the meeting.

Civic Voice Members in attendance included:

Bewdley Civic Society, Oxford Civic Society, Chester Civic Trust, City of Winchester Trust, Coventry Society, Cheltenham Civic Society, Heath and Hampstead Society, Hereford Civic Society, Ilkley Civic Society, Kingston Upon Thames Civic Society, Marple Civic Society, Newton Abbott Civic Society, Ramsgate Civic Society, Southgate and District Civic Voice, Freddie Gick – Vice President of Civic Voice, St Albans Civic Society, Wakefield Civic Society, Worcester Civic Society

Apologies were received from:

Blackpool Civic Trust, Buntingford Civic Society, Desborough Civic Society, Ealing Civic Society, Kidderminster Civic Society, Merseyside Civic Society, Newport and District Civic Society, Reading Civic Society, Littleborough Civic Trust, Rossendale Civic Trust, The Alton Society, The Wokingham Society, Wem Civic Society and Wimborne Civic Society.

2. Ratification of appointment of Chair

The meeting unanimously approved the Board's appointment of Martin Hamilton as chair until the next AGM.

3. Minutes of the 2021 AGM

The minutes of the previous AGM were proposed by Ramsgate Society, seconded by Newton Abbot Civic Society, and approved.

At the 2021 meeting, two motions had been passed. It was noted that in respect of the first motion on climate change a network had been formed for those who wished to get involved in this subject; and that in respect of the second motion regarding a formal status for Civic Societies in the planning system, no progress had been made due to the Planning Bill having paused and it was likely that a further discussion on this subject would be required as and when there was anything new to report.

4. Annual Report and statement on theft of funds

Martin Hamilton gave a verbal report in which he noted the resignation of the following trustees: Joan Humble, Helen Kidman, Gill Battarbee, Linda Brown, Philip Riden. He thanked them for their contribution in particular Joan Humble for her hard work as chair over several years, and Helen Kidman who had chaired the Regional Forum as well as serving on the Board. The meeting endorsed these remarks and a vote of thanks was recorded to Joan Humble and the other trustees who had stepped down.

There had also been staffing changes starting with the departure of Sophie Mason in late 2021 and Sarah James who would be leaving in the next few days. Thanks were recorded to Sarah for her brilliant contribution over the last few years and best wishes for her new role. The staff team had been significantly affected by the uncertainties of the last few months following the theft of money.

The Chair read a statement which is on the final page of these minutes regarding the theft. Members asked a number of questions on the statement and suggested contacting the Co-op Bank regarding the failure to flag up unusual activity on the account, and contacting the Police & Crime Commissioner concerning the lack of action or feedback from West Midlands Police. Civic Voice did not have an Audit & Risk Committee and it was suggested this might be a sensible addition to the

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committee structure. New Financial Rules had been prepared and copies circulated to the meeting. It was suggested that random checks of payments and bank statements made should be considered and that there should be a definition of a “significant payment” which might require Board agreement. There were some lessons to be learned about relying on trusted individuals and there could be scope for some guidance to Societies on this. Trustees should always be able to ask questions about the finances and check information supplied.

5. Financial Position

A presentation was made to the meeting showing the income and expenditure for the year to 30 April 2022, which was prior to the theft being discovered. The independently examined accounts for that year were with the accountants and would be reviewed by the Board prior to submission to the Charity Commission and Companies House. An update on the finances to date was also given at the meeting. During discussion it was noted that funders were still engaging with Civic Voice and had appreciated the openness about the theft and the measures taken since it was discovered. Whilst there remained a potential for reputational risk, this did not appear to be an issue.

6. Appointment of McMillan and Co to undertake the annual inspection of accounts for 2022/23

The reappointment of McMillan and Co was proposed by Leeds Civic Trust, seconded by St Albans Civic Society, and agreed. The Chair explained that it was likely the independent examiners would change in the subsequent year but retaining them for the current year would allow them to work through the issues arising from the theft.

7. Proposals and vote on the future direction of Civic Voice and financial plan

A plan was presented to the meeting which envisaged that for the first six months of 2023, Ian Harvey would remain as the sole employee. Making reasonable assumptions on membership renewals, donations and other income, it would be possible for Civic Voice to trade into the autumn without a further injection of money. The working assumption was that in the meantime external income would be secured and/or clarity on the potential to recover the money stolen and timescales for its recovery. The plan envisaged income of £46,000 plus cash in hand of £10,000 at the start of December 2022. Expenditure on staff and on staff costs to the 1 November 2023 would leave a surplus of £3000 on 30th November 2023.

The meeting was asked to approve the proposals and this was agreed.

The Chair explained that there were vacancies for new trustees and that expressions of interest would be requested shortly with a view to appointments being made at the end of January.

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Statement on the theft

As you know, the very existence of CV came under threat earlier this year - from a completely unexpected and trusted source. A volunteer who had been helping with CV's finances for many years without any problems, helped himself to CV's reserve money carefully built up over the last few years.

Under the cover of Covid disruption and staff absence, the perpetrator used the delegated limit of £1k to systematically empty our two bank accounts. It should have been detected and stopped sooner but I regret that our established checks proved insufficient. It happened at a time when we were not meeting face-to-face, the office could not be visited, and we were all struggling with Covid and Lockdown. However, as Trustees, we are ultimately responsible for the financial management of Civic Voice and this has happened on our watch. We apologise for this.

As soon as the theft was discovered in April it was immediately reported to the Police, Action Fraud and the Charity Commission. Since April we have been working to retrieve the situation. On the discovery, CV had but a few weeks to survive financially. I am glad to say that six months on we are in a much better position, mainly thanks to the generous support of our members.

As the perpetrator has admitted in writing what he has done, we wish we could report that the Police have charged him. Very frustratingly despite all the evidence we have provided, we have received little or no response from the Police. Similarly we have received little support from the Charity Commission. We are very disappointed at the lack of Police action, and we are intending to write to the relevant MP, Shabana Mahmood, whose Ladywood constituency covers CV's office address.

We are taking action to recover the stolen money but we are hampered by the high costs of legal advice which we can barely afford. We hope we shall soon be able to put a charge on the perpetrator's house, but we have to plan on the basis that we may never recover the money and certainly not any time soon.

We have taken a long hard look at CV's financial controls and have written a new version which hopefully will reduce the risk of such catastrophes happening again. This blow has had a serious impact on Ian and Sarah, and we are immensely grateful to them for their patience and fortitude while we worked out how to deal with this wholly unexpected situation. They have kept the show on the road.

It has also taken its toll on the committee, and I would like to thank our remaining trustees who have unstintingly devoted far more of their time and energies to saving CV than they ever envisaged. The workload for the committee has escalated way beyond what they signed up for. Compared to the normal 5 meetings a year, we have met on 17 occasions. We have also had meetings with the Chief Planner, Joanna Averley, and the Chief Executive of Historic England, to discuss possible support. Unfortunately nothing has been forthcoming so far, but the meetings have helped to secure CV's reputation.

Staff and Trustees have put our shoulders to the wheel, and hopefully there is now light at the end of the tunnel.

We know that the work of CV is greatly valued, both by societies and more widely. The need for the Civic Movement is as important as ever. Together we will continue to work to make sure that the voice of the civic movement will continue to be heard locally and nationally.