

Statement from the Civic Voice Trustees – December 2023

As we reflect on the past 12 months, it is with mixed emotions that we present this overview of Civic Voice. We are finalising our accounts to the Charity Commission covering the last financial year, but this report also brings you up to date with the current situation. Quite simply, the challenges we faced since the theft have continued to impact our financial stability and our capacity to deliver on our national agenda.

Income and Funding Sources:

Over the past year, our primary focus has been on rebuilding and recovering from the setbacks caused by the theft. Whilst we have sought to continue essential operations, including issuing civic update, our available resources have impacted on our ability to deliver a significant body of activity. Traditional funding sources from government bodies have proved difficult to access, leading to a notable decrease in our overall revenue. This has meant that 51% of our funding has come from membership and 35% came from the donation appeal. These totals amounted to just over £80k. A minority of our income has come from externally funded work. We are pleased to say that we have recently heard from a Government body about a funding opportunity, which we are being encouraged to pursue. This would suggest that external factors, rather than a reputational issue are the reason why further funding has not been forthcoming.

Recovery of stolen funds

The aftermath of the theft has necessitated increased spending on trying to claim the money back from the perpetrator, including legal costs incurred in employing two separate firms of solicitors. During the financial year, these costs came to just under £7,500. This legal advice has resulted in an effective charge being placed on their property at the land registry together with an overarching legal agreement signed by them. We are advised that the property is in the process of being sold, and after other creditors are satisfied, we believe that we should recover the full sum of money owed, based on the final sale figure for the property. The figure agreed with the solicitors is £90,559.65. We have reason to believe that this could be within the next few weeks. Notwithstanding the timing of the sale, the legal agreement requires the payment of the sum in full by 5th January 2024, after which interest is payable.

The theft was reported to Action Fraud as soon as it was discovered. We have had no news from them that the theft is being pursued through the courts, and we have lodged a complaint via the local MP in Birmingham who is liaising with the West Midlands Police on our behalf to try to get answers. We note that West Midlands Police have been placed in “special measures” which may go some way to explaining why there has been no effective action taken on a criminal investigation.

Staffing and resources

We have reduced staff resources to allow us to continue as a going concern. Sarah James left in December 2022 to take up a position focused on Levelling Up in local government. Since the summer Ian Harvey has transitioned to another role on an interim basis with the Institute for Place Management. This temporary position is now Ian Harvey’s substantive role but Civic Voice retains his services for on a part time basis. Whilst this has inevitably impacted on the general work of Civic Voice, his work supporting communities and places through the High Street Task Force, remains relevant to Civic Voice. The loss of two-full time staff of Ian and Sarah's ability had been identified as a risk in the Civic Voice Risk Register, but we could not have planned for in the circumstance in

which it happened. However without these changes, Civic Voice would not have been able to continue.

With the departure of Sarah James, we reduced our presence at the Coffin Works to a post box and no longer have a dedicated space there. We have the option to take back a desk when the time is right.

Not known at the time of the last AGM, we uncovered an unpaid HMRC tax bill, which we have been working to pay off. We approached HMRC and have reached an agreement with them for its payment in installments. Assuming current income levels (and excluding the recovery of the funds from the theft), the remaining deficit will be paid off during the course of this financial year

Member Contributions and Support:

Despite the financial challenges, the unwavering support from our dedicated members has been a beacon of hope. It was your support and generous donations that have made the difference between Civic Voice folding and contributed to the continued success. We also acknowledge significant personal donations from individual members and supporters.

Financial Outlook:

Collaborative efforts are underway to secure a lottery grant, developing partnerships that align with our mission and values. As described earlier, our attempts at attracting external funding have been a partial success—some consultancy work has come our way, but we have not been able to land any lottery funding due to a protracted sign-off process of our previous grant caused by the theft. We are now in a position once again to apply, and a bid will be developed over the next few months. We are optimistic about the potential for positive financial growth in the coming months. Taking into account money that is due to come into our account plus our balance, we have about £15K to support us between now and the membership renewal round next year. This is not a lot of money, but as things stand, our running costs are very small, and we can continue to operate in a very limited capacity until such time as resources improve. Our current monthly expenditure is just short of £2k a month, including existing website and IT infrastructure fees, HMRC bill, and pension contributions. If membership income was to come in at around £40k for 2024-2025, we would be able to continue to operate at the for the next 12 months. None of this takes account of the anticipated return of the stolen funds.

It should be noted that next year will be a “normal” membership year as renewals will, we hope, come through in the normal way – this year was different since a number of societies provided their subscriptions in advance. We extend our sincere gratitude to each member who has stood by Civic Voice during this period, and we hope you will continue to do so.

Transparency and Accountability:

Civic Voice remains true in its commitment to transparency and accountability. We have initiated an internal audit to ensure that every financial transaction is meticulously reviewed. We will continue to provide regular updates on our financial status and progress in the spirit of openness. When issues involve personal matters of staff, we will keep them private. We had to spend several months undergoing an investigation with the Lottery Fund, who themselves acknowledged it was an extremely unfortunate set of events that could not be repeated and led to the theft. The uncertainty surrounding the police investigation has put us in a difficult position regarding what we can disclose publicly, and we would have liked to be more open.

We are also welcoming new Trustees to ensure continued challenge and openness.

Activities

At the start of the year, Civic Voice organised a series of high profile meetings of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Civic Societies

A pivotal achievement for Civic Voice in recent years was campaigning about the importance of 'Pride in Place,' and we were pleased it was included as a mission in the Government's 2022 Levelling Up Missions. To delve into the practical implications of this mission, a thought-provoking debate was initiated, with contributions from The Bennett Institute, the National Lottery Community Fund, and other stakeholders. A series of online webinars tailored for Civic Voice members ensured continued engagement and exploration of the mission's nuances.

We then followed it up with another APPG session focused on how to do high streets differently, which was marked by speakers, including the Heritage Minister, Lord Parkinson of Whitley Bay. This event centred and around high streets, with Historic England sharing early research on Heritage Action Zones, Bromsgrove Council and Bromsgrove Society (just announced as Visa's Best Town in the UK award) showcased their work and the importance of collaboration.

These meetings included the attendance of Civic Voice President Griff Rhys Jones, who always provided thought-provoking insights.

Due to the illness of Craig Mackinlay MP – a fact that is now in the public domain - we had to pause the APPG work, and it is unlikely that they will resume before the General Election. This is because other officers in the group have made it clear that they will be concentrating more on local constituency work in the next 12 months.

In May, we collaborated with Halifax Civic Trust and YHACS to organise a conference at the picturesque Piece Hall. 77 delegates attended the walks and tours, and we heard from local and national speakers, including Nicholas Boys Smith, the new Chair of the Office for Place. Headquartered in Stoke on Trent, it will be officially launched in April 2024

Civic Day in June saw a nationwide celebration, with 70 groups registering, such as Bournemouth, Kendal, Grantham, and Salisbury, organising diverse events and activities, all aimed at spotlighting and nurturing pride in place within their respective communities. These initiatives underscore Civic Voice's commitment to fostering a sense of community identity and engagement throughout the year.

In September, Historic England announced a new national initiative for blue plaques. This provoked criticism from many civic societies, who directly made contact with Historic England on this matter. Reinforcing our position, Historic England approached Civic Voice to see what role we could play in ensuring that the views of civic societies are heard as Historic England continues to develop this initiative.

Ian Harvey also spoke at conferences, including the Association of Town Centre Managers, Historic England's staff conference, and was invited to join Historic England's prestigious Historic Places Panel. These engagements reinforce Civic Voice's reputation.

The Civic Voice Trustees met formally 19 times during the financial year 22/23.

Civic update continued to go out, and we continue to post news articles to the webpage, and social media.

A plan for activities over the next 12 month will be discussed at the AGM – a number of online events have already been advertised to members.

How You Can Help:

Your continued support is invaluable during this period of recovery. Consider renewing your membership or spreading the word about Civic Voice within your networks and putting forward speakers for the new Membership Monday series.

In closing, we appreciate your understanding and ongoing commitment to Civic Voice. The past 12 months have undoubtedly been a test of our resilience, and the very existence as a charity was under threat. Even though we have retrenched in our capacity, we can rebuild, which is what we want to do as we look forward to a General Election in 2024/24 and engaging in the national debate about the role of civic societies.

Thank you for being an integral part of Civic Voice.

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