



Civic Survey 2011

This report presents the results of the first Civic Survey, undertaken by Civic Voice during February and March 2011. It is based on responses to an online survey from 74 civic societies and 270 civic volunteers. We are grateful to English Heritage for its support for the civic survey and to BritainThinks for its guidance on the approach. The second Civic Survey will be conducted in early 2012 and will focus on a smaller set of key issues.

Civic Survey 2011 covered four main areas:

- Civic societies and civic volunteers
- Views on Civic Voice as the new national charity for the civic movement
- Priorities for the civic movement as a whole
- Views on the Big Society and how to encourage civic action

There is also some comparison between civic volunteers when benchmarked against the general population.

The main results are presented in the report and some of the key findings and implications highlighted in below. Unless otherwise indicated the results shown are for civic societies. The full results are available <http://hc.english-heritage.org.uk/HC-Big-society/>

Key findings

Civic volunteers are highly motivated by a sense of public duty to their area and a desire to be part of a community and to make a difference

The diversity of issues and activities in which civic societies get involved is immense and there is a policy focus on land use planning and heritage

Civic volunteers are less positive than their civic societies about the future health of their group, with the majority expecting a static or declining membership and the group to get no stronger. Volunteers are also inclined to think their civic society is less well connected with others in the civic movement.

There are strong views from many civic volunteers on how their groups can encourage them to get more involved; especially through project work, better leadership, an improved profile and making volunteering more fun and sociable. Volunteers are generally happy with the frequency of communications from their groups

When compared with the population as a whole civic volunteers are relatively time poor and ethical, have a much stronger affinity to their community, are more positive about the role of Government and use social networking less

Civic societies are generally run by committees who meet frequently and often depend on a small number of volunteer civic enthusiasts who devote over an hour a day to their civic society

There is growing use of social media to communicate and campaign and the bulk of civic volunteers are kept in touch by email

There is strong support for Civic Voice, especially from those who have been most involved – with three quarters of civic societies rating it “good” or “very good” but a quarter of civic volunteers not able to express a view because it is still new

Civic Voice’s combination of support, information and campaigning is seen as the most useful and it should prioritise helping local groups raise their profile, increase their membership and get involved in Civic Voice and its campaigns

The key issues for the civic movement identified focus on the value of heritage; civic pride; engaging people; local distinctiveness and planning and these are also seen as priorities for Civic Voice

The priorities identified for civic societies focus on localism, raising the profile, attracting more and different volunteers, positive campaigning and developing a strong local vision

There is a fair degree of support for the Big Society, especially where it can bring local benefits and recognise the role already being played by local volunteers

Key issues/challenges for the civic movement

- Turning membership/interest into activity – civic societies that that on average only 14% of members are active volunteers
- Diversify - Five out of six respondents were over the age of 55 and 98% were white
- Look for new ways/paths into active involvement for members and the wider community in general

Civic societies

The range of **activities** with which civic societies get involved is hugely diverse, with a focus on planning and heritage and the various strands of running a voluntary group and engaging members.

Priority activities

- 1 Planning applications

- 2 Newsletter
- 3 Organising lectures and public events
- 4 Conservation areas
- 5 Local Development Framework
- 6 Recruiting members and volunteers
- 7 Running a website
- 8 Campaigns
- 9 Heritage Open Days
- 10 Working with local partners

Civic societies are involved in:

- Taking responsibility for their local area
85% have responded to planning applications and 70% to the local development framework
- Developing pride in local areas
72% organise lectures or other public events
- Opportunities for involvement in the local area
76% are actively involved in recruiting new members and volunteers
- Provide a bridge between local communities and local/central government
28% have met with their MP at least twice a year in the last 12 months, 97% have written to the Local Authority and 64% have met with local councillors

The **motivations to volunteer** for a civic society combine a mix of the personal and the public. The top 5 reasons given by civic volunteers are:

Motivations to volunteer

- 1 I care about the future of my area
- 2 I have skills that can benefit my community
- 3 Local developers need to be monitored
- 4 Local government needs to be monitored
- 5 To know more about where I live

And when asked about the **benefits of volunteering** the top 5 reasons given are to:

- 1 Make a difference
- 2 Feel part of the community
- 3 Know what is going on
- 4 Meet people
- 5 Learn

Of those civic volunteers that responded to the survey, the top ten activities they were involved in at all included:

Planning applications (53%)

Lectures and public events (47%)
Historic buildings and places (46%)
Conservation areas (45%)
Recruiting members and volunteers (44%)
Guided walks and talks (43%)
Heritage Open Days (42%)
Newsletter (40%)
Historical research (37%)
Information leaflets (36%)

These results reflect the activities of those that responded to the survey, who are likely to be the more active volunteers. Therefore these figures are likely to be an overestimate of overall volunteering activity.

Civic societies hold a variety of **meetings** and 86% have business meetings more frequently than every two months. 73% have not met to discuss a forward plan in the last year and more than half have held no fundraising events. Half have met their MP in the last year. More than half participate in Heritage Open Days and over 40% intend to participate in the first Civic Day with a further third still undecided.

Member communications are critical for keeping members informed and involved. The bulk of volunteers receive emailed notices or newsletters and half receive them in the post or have them delivered by hand. Nearly 10% are engaged through Facebook and 4% via Twitter. 86% feel they are communicated with regularly enough. Three quarters of civic societies update their website on a fortnightly basis or less frequently, while half email newsletters and 71% post them quarterly or less frequently. Over half of civic societies hold email contact details for less than 40% of their members and only 3% have them for virtually all their members.

External communications are important to the profile and influence of civic societies. Over half send out press releases quarterly or less often while half write to their local council at least every month and one third to the local paper. 94% of groups have a website and 34% use Facebook or Twitter in some way.

The **membership** of any group is the heart of its success. For those groups that responded the average number of members was 286. Membership is generally static with a 6% turnover each year and 14% of members are active **volunteers**. 16% have not been involved in any project or campaign in the last 12 months while there is a group of civic enthusiasts (7%) who have been involved in 10 or more. This is also reflected in the fact that half the volunteers spend less than 10 hours a month on civic societies while one fifth volunteer for more than an hour a day.

Civic volunteers told us of a huge variety of **campaign and projects** with which they are involved from heritage trails to lorry watches; from saving the local cinema to working with the council on planning guidance for shop fronts and from running civic awards to buying a community boat. They are summarised in this Wordle:

societies not expecting membership to grow in the next 5 years while only 40% of civic volunteers expecting an increase. It is also noticeable that two thirds of civic societies believe they are **well connected with other civic societies** while only just over half of civic volunteers feel the same way.

Civic volunteers have a large number of suggestions for how civic societies could encourage them to **increase their volunteering**, although a large number believe they are at the limit of the time they have available. The main ideas are:

- 1 Provide more worthwhile projects to get involved in
- 2 Provide more positive leadership and be open to ideas
- 3 Improve the profile
- 4 Make volunteering more fun and social
- 5 Make things less committee based and avoid time wasting discussions
- 6 Provide better communications which keep everyone informed
- 7 Provide more support
- 8 Involve a wider range of people
- 9 Just ask me
- 10 Cover my expenses

The verbatim feedback provided when volunteers were asked about the most important thing their civic society could do to encourage them to volunteer or increase the amount of time they already volunteer also highlights the difference between the civic enthusiasts who are already heavily committed and others who want to get more involved:

I am the secretary so I work my socks off for the society!!

Ensure that all members share the same vision and agenda

Have worthwhile projects and be invited to contribute

Get me more spare time in any day!!

Establish its vision for the next 5 years and plan to achieve it.

Develop a clear mechanism to link with other relevant civic groups

I am at my limit now

I do about 80 hours a month and that is quite enough thanks

Do something that I could volunteer for. All my time is spent with other local groups who do things. The local civic society holds talks and a few members work hard in writing highly complicated objections to large planning issues but they don't do practical local work

Ensure volunteers enjoy what they do and see a purpose in it

Less backbiting on committee

A more substantial project rather than manning stalls

Be more open to ideas and willing to work with others

Become more socially and age inclusive

Ask me

Communication as things happen, not afterwards by those in the know

Remove timewasters from committee

Demonstrate success in influencing defined objectives

Get rid of their snobbish attitude

A positive outcome. Assurance of time well-spent

Be more organised - better use of everyone's time

Promote itself more

When civic societies were asked about their **priorities** over the next year there was a good spread of issues:

Civic society priorities in next year

- 1 Planning
- 2 Campaigning
- 3 Raising the profile
- 4 Heritage and listed buildings
- 5 Conservation projects
- 6 Localism
- 7 Running an exhibition, museum, information display
- 8 Increased membership
- 9 Civic Day
- 10 Heritage Open Days

Civic societies also have a range of ideas for making themselves stronger over the next year:

How to make civic societies stronger in next year

- 1 Raise profile and improve image
- 2 Increase number of active volunteers
- 3 Increase membership
- 4 Improve relationships with council
- 5 Attract a younger membership

- 6 Network more with other civic societies
- 7 Strengthen funding
- 8 Improved website and use of social media
- 9 Organise more projects
- 10 Campaign more

It is worth noting that one in six of the responses to the Civic Survey came from someone under 55.

Civic Voice

Civic Voice was launched as the new national charity for the civic movement in April 2010. Civic societies are at the heart of its work and provide its core membership and funding. The survey provides important feedback on awareness of Civic Voice and how it can improve its work to benefit the civic movement.

The **awareness** of Civic Voice is higher among civic societies (two thirds know a lot about it) than civic volunteers (only one third feel they know a lot).

Civic societies clearly value Civic Voice's communications and lobbying activity with the top five **activities of greatest use** being:

Most useful Civic Voice activities

- 1 Raising the media profile of the civic movement
- 2 Briefings on policy issues
- 3 News alerts and bulletins
- 4 Lobbying ministers and civil servants
- 5 Civic society insurance scheme

Civic volunteers also rated the role Civic Voice plays in sharing activities between different civic societies.

Civic volunteers showed highest **awareness** for the following Civic Voice activities:

Civic Voice activity with highest awareness

- 1 Civic Voice website
- 2 Lobbying
- 3 Workshops & events
- 4 Organising Civic Day
- 5 Raising the media profile of the civic movement

It is also apparent that those who value Civic Voice most are those who **get involved** in its activities. Over half of respondents had attended a Civic Voice event and one third had received direct help or had a speaker.

On a key measure of how Civic Voice was **rated overall** the results show 75% of civic societies rate it as good or very good. Over one quarter of civic volunteers "don't know" however, perhaps reflecting the time it takes to connect with a new organisations. It was

also revealing to find over 60% of civic volunteers are not aware they can join Civic Voice as individuals for £10 on Civic Voice's website.

There were important suggestions for how Civic Voice might best **support civic societies** in the next year:

Priorities for Civic Voice to support civic societies

- 1 Raise the media profile
- 2 Help civic societies increase members
- 3 Work alongside individual civic societies to strengthen them
- 4 Organise national campaigns in which civic societies participate
- 5 Increase the number of civic societies who join Civic Voice

Priorities for the civic movement

Civic societies and volunteers were asked to think about the civic movement as a whole and priorities the **key issues** for the movement. These will guide the work of Civic Voice:

Key issues for the civic movement

- 1 Valuing heritage
- 2 Civic pride
- 3 Engaging people
- 4 Local distinctiveness
- 5 Planning for people and place

Civic volunteers and civic societies identified the same top five issues.

They also agreed on the same **priorities for civic societies**:

Priorities for civic societies

- 1 Take advantage of localism
- 2 Raised profile in local area
- 3 Attract more volunteers from different backgrounds
- 4 Run more positive and inspirational campaigns
- 5 Develop a clear vision for the area

And some **priorities for Civic Voice**:

Priorities for Civic Voice

- 1 Influence changes to planning
- 2 Celebrate civic pride
- 3 Improve the way councils work
- 4 Protect historic buildings
- 5 Promote local distinctiveness

Big society and civic action

The Civic Survey included a number of questions about the Big Society and reactions to its different strands.

Unsurprisingly there was most interest in the changes proposed to the planning system and efforts to encourage more volunteers and give new powers to local communities. Responses indicate a belief that central government has the key role to play on planning, local government on improved community rights and voluntary groups themselves in engaging more volunteers.

Over half of civic societies indicate they understand what is meant by the Big Society and feel it is relevant to them. They are particularly enthusiastic if it will help improve their local area and encourage civic societies to form. They aren't particularly cynical about the Big Society (only a quarter sees it as an "excuse for cuts") and they believe it important to recognise the important work already being done by community and voluntary groups.

How do civic volunteers compare

BritainThinks has compared the characteristics of civic volunteers and the population as a whole with some interesting conclusions:

- 🗨 Civic volunteers are relatively "time poor" – with 68% agreeing there "aren't enough hours in the day" compared to 52% in the population as a whole
- 🗨 Civic volunteers are much less likely to see work as a means to an end – with just 14% agreeing with this compared to 43% of the population as a whole
- 🗨 There is a strong ethical strand to civic volunteers – with 51% buying ethical or environmental brands compared to 27% in the UK population
- 🗨 There is a strong degree of trust among civic volunteers – just 19% say they "don't know who to trust these days" compared to 45% nationally
- 🗨 Civic volunteers are behind the curve on social networking – only 27% value Facebook and other social networks for keeping in touch compared to 42% of the population
- 🗨 There is an overwhelmingly stronger affinity to community among civic volunteers – with 93% seeing it as important to them compared to 49% of the population as a whole
- 🗨 Civic volunteers have a better relationship with government – only 22% believe government doesn't "do anything" for them compared to 44% of the population
- 🗨 Civic volunteers are older (5 in 6 are over 55)

The comparison also shows that civic volunteers are much more active in campaigning and much more likely to join other organisations, such as the National Trust, a professional body or amateur theatre groups.

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