

What is the Civic Society Initiative?

In essence the purpose of the Civic Society Initiative is a simple one – to establish the means within twelve months to ensure provision of a national voice and support for the civic society movement.

The loss of the Civic Trust has prompted a groundswell of support for the civic society movement. Messages of support and practical offers of help have been received from a large number of professional bodies, local authorities, voluntary and charitable organisations and others. Over 500 civic societies have already said they want to be kept in touch with the future arrangements for supporting societies and providing a champion for the movement.

It is clear that many share the view that the civic society movement is too important for it to lose its national voice. The role of societies and local community action is as important now as it was when the Civic Trust was set up. This is the sentiment at the heart of the package of measures now being put in place to allow a range of options for the future health of the civic society movement to be explored and assessed.

A full range of options will need to be examined but three things are clear:

- the civic society movement needs an independent champion
- the movement needs to be supported as a network where the voice of individual societies and local groups can be strengthened
- the future needs to be rooted in what the societies want and they need to drive the way forward.

The core package for establishing the Civic Society Initiative which has emerged is as follows:

- one year's funding donated by the National Trust for Tony Burton to lead the Initiative
- office accommodation and in-kind support donated by CPRE (in London) and the RIBA (in Liverpool)
- a charitable 'home' to receive funds and provide governance through the North of England Civic Trust
- a civic society convention supported by Blackpool Council and hosted by Blackpool Civic Trust in October 2009.

English Heritage will deliver Heritage Open Days in 2009.

The Civic Society Initiative will take an open approach and explore a full range of possibilities for the movement and include development of the mission, vision, values, funding, governance and name of a new organisation, or the means to do this, if it is determined one is required. The outcome will be a set of proposals combining immediate practical viability with a 3-5 year plan of the future. There will be a sounding board drawn from the civic society movement and beyond.

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Campaign to Protect Rural England, Civic Trust for Wales,
North of England Civic Trust, Royal Institute of British Architects,
Scottish Civic Trust and the National Trust

Civic Societies – a brief history

The civic society movement has its roots in the nineteenth century and draws from the same foundations as bodies such as the Open Spaces Society and the National Trust. One of the longest established civic societies is the Heath and Hampstead Society, founded in 1897 in response to threats to Hampstead Heath.

Duncan Sandys gave the movement a national voice in 1957 with the creation of The Civic Trust (charity registration 1068759) as a champion for the built environment and especially for the country's rich heritage of historic buildings and places. From the outset, the Trust focused not only on conservation, but also on bringing about positive change and promoting higher standards. Its work included drafting legislation which created conservation areas in 1967 and running the country's largest voluntary cultural event – Heritage Open Days.

The country would look very different today, without the work of the civic society movement.

In London, Covent Garden would have a six-lane highway ploughing through it. Piccadilly Circus would have been redeveloped with overbearing 1960s glass and steel buildings, wider roads, and pedestrians exiled to high-level walkways. The London Evening News ran with the headline *"all London forever grateful to the Civic Trust"* when the announcement of a reprieve was made. Whitehall between Parliament Street and the Embankment would have been flattened for redevelopment, and the romantic riverside monument, Norman Shaw's New Scotland Yard, would have vanished forever.

The Lee Valley Regional Park was pioneered by a civic society initiative which brought together a jigsaw of local authorities over a 20 mile corridor of dereliction stretching from east London into Hertfordshire. Established in 1966 this set a precedent which has been followed elsewhere.

Historic towns like York, Bath, Berwick-on-Tweed and Chester would have been damaged beyond recognition; roads and streets would be lined with advertising hoardings; demolition of historic buildings would be uncontrolled; conservation areas would not exist.

The movement also pioneered initiatives such as the first Environment Week in 1985 for communities across the UK. Sponsored by BT, the first year had 300 communities participating. Over the next ten years Environment Week expanded with over 3,000 events each year

Four strands of activity run through the history of the civic society movement: campaigning to change policy and attitudes, supporting and developing the civic society movement, engaging and empowering communities to demand more from their towns and cities, and raising standards and rewarding the best through awards.

The Civic Society Initiative is being created to ensure this legacy is strengthened and made ever more relevant to the challenges of today and tomorrow enabling a new phase for the movement to unfold.

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Civic Societies – what do they do?

The civic society movement is one of the most important community networks in the UK today. There are over a thousand local civic and amenity societies in the warp and weft of local communities and they have over 250,000 individual members.

Civic societies provide a focus for voluntary and community action to improve the places where people live, work and relax. They champion the importance of these places to decision makers and opinion formers in business, politics, government, the media, the voluntary sector and elsewhere. They play an essential role in helping individuals and communities to understand and take action to improve the quality of their life through the place where they live. Civic societies promote and celebrate the best of what is inherited from the past and what is developed for the future. They are a fundamental source of civic pride.

Civic societies can be provocative, stubborn, forceful, inspiring and outspoken on behalf of the places they care about. They are the grit in the oyster which stimulates people to think, reconsider and widen their horizons. They “speak truth to power” – often resisting damaging change while also celebrating and encouraging positive action. There is a great deal of discussion in public policy and by politicians of all persuasions about community empowerment, double devolution, localism and even direct democracy. The civic society movement is the living embodiment of these aspirations - local people taking local action to care for and improve the places in which they live. Much of the potential of civic societies to help the nation discover and listen to its communities and its roots remains untapped.

Civic societies do amazing things:

- *as watchdogs of the planning system* - commenting on development and land use change and championing the importance of the historic and natural environment - civic societies are among the most active participants in the local planning process nationwide
- *celebrating high quality development and good design* - over 60 civic societies run their own building awards which recognise high quality in new development or refurbishment projects
- *promoting Heritage Open Days* - over 100 societies participate with others in the organisation of the country's largest voluntary cultural event, attracting over 1 million visitors over four days in celebration of architecture and culture by offering free access to over 3,700 buildings and places that are usually closed to the public or normally charge for admission
- *celebrating local heritage* – providing town trails, running blue plaque schemes and organising walks, lectures, events and festivals
- *campaigning for local shops* – promoting a discount card for supporting local shops and campaigning against identikit High Streets
- *local action* on behalf of local communities – tree planting, restoring old buildings, litter picking, installing nest boxes, establishing “Friends” groups for local green spaces
- *national action* – civic societies have a track record of success in raising local issues to the national level and securing changes to law and Government policy – including the landmark *Civic Amenities Act 1967* which created conservation areas with more than 9,000 now protecting the townscape across the country.

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Tony Burton – Director of the Civic Society Initiative

Tony Burton has over 20 years of experience in the field of community action, land use planning and environmental and heritage politics. He is moving from his role as the National Trust's Director of Strategy and External Affairs to take up leadership of the Civic Society Initiative. Prior to the National Trust Tony spent 13 years at CPRE. He left as Deputy Director in 2001. Tony was also a founder trustee of Heritage Link – the voluntary sector networking organisation for heritage groups - and chaired its environmental equivalent Wildlife and Countryside Link. He was a member of Lord Rogers Urban Task Force and has been an advisor to ministers on issues as diverse as urban renaissance and hedgerow protection.

Tony has led initiatives which:

- Changed Government policy to use brownfield before greenfield land for new housing, and town centres before out-of-town sites for shopping centres
- Put the importance of rural tranquillity on the map – winning a British Environment and Media Award for the best public information campaign by an ngo
- Require all planning applications to be publicised by site notices or in local newspapers
- Led to over 1 million people making pledges or wearing badges to say “History Matters”
- Introduced the concepts of sustainable development and environmental capacity into the land use planning system for the first time
- Saved the Green Belt around Chester from intrusive development
- Resulted in Government ministers proclaiming that predict and provide approaches to deciding house building targets are “dead”.

Tony is a geographer, town planner and an honorary member of the Royal Institute of British Architects.

Tony is 45 and lives in south west London. In his spare time he enjoys the countryside and open spaces as an elite orienteer.

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Supporting Quotes

"This is great news. Many people have shown real faith in the civic societies. I want to thank them. It seems inconceivable that such an important movement should sink under the waters, even in such difficult financial times. Let's hope that this can be matched by others and the next twelve months can provide a more solid basis for the future"

Griff Rhys Jones
*broadcaster, author,
former President, Civic
Trust*

"Now more than at any other time, the local civic society movement needs to do its bit to rally membership at grassroots level, support a stronger national voice and prove our relevance."

Garry Thomas
*Hereford Civic Society
Chair*

"The civic societies are at the core of a crucial movement which empowers local communities and helps safeguard and improve the quality of our heritage and the local environment."

**Dame Fiona Reynolds, Director-General
National Trust**

"The civic society movement is larger than any political party, has its roots in the community and high aspirations for the future of each and every town and community. This is a movement that is too valuable and too important to lose. I am supporting in every way possible the re-emergence of a strong national civic society movement that can unite our strong community voice ensuring that our concerns are heard and acted upon.

"The end of the Civic Trust is very sad, however, what I believe can emerge should be a reinvigorated movement that is driven by the membership and inspired by the communities that they serve. "

Laura Sandys
*Daughter of
Duncan Sandys,
founder of the
Civic Trust*

"It is vitally important that the civic society movement is not left without some form of independent national co-ordination or reference. The Civic Trust has played a major role in informing and increasing interest in our public realm and in encouraging higher standards. It is therefore vital that it is re-invented or re-grouped in some form and that the major network of local civic societies is not left to fend entirely for itself."

George Ferguson
RIBA Past President

"More than ever the country is in need of national guidance and support for civic societies"

Nicola Twamley
Greasley and District Civic Society

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"The loss of the Civic Trust is entirely regrettable, leaving an absence of a national voice representing local civic societies. Such societies engage local people in decisions affecting their local environments and are active in promoting better design, conservation of heritage and more community-focused regeneration. The Institute for Historic Building Conservation believes it to be essential that a national voice for civic societies be reinstated as a matter of urgency."

Dave Chetwyn
Chair, IHBC

"Now is the time for the voluntary independent sector to take a lead. A national network is needed - it is the right time to re-invent itself and become an even more important force in urban affairs"

Sir Terry Farrell,
*architect and design
champion*

"The closure of the Civic Trust is a major loss to the charitable sector, one which deserves support if it is to deliver the quality we want to see in our towns and cities"

**Gideon Amos OBE, Chief
Executive, Town and Country
Planning Association**

"The Civic Trust did a great job. It really raised the bar in showing how communities can work together to restore civic pride"

**Sir Peter Hall, Professor of Planning and
Regeneration at University College London**

"We feel that an umbrella movement for local civic trusts and societies is essential for grassroots credibility."

Elaine Smith
Blackpool Civic Trust

"We believe that the single most important function of the former Civic Trust was its work as an umbrella body for the many civic societies in the United Kingdom. We are very anxious to see that work continued and developed so that civic societies have proper support in their work to enhance and sustain the quality of the local environment."

**Robert Upton, Secretary General
Royal Town Planning
Institute**

"We look forward to the re-establishment of a support framework for English civic societies in the context of a wider United Kingdom partnership of the nations."

Matthew Griffiths
Director, Civic Trust for Wales

"The Planning Inspectorate recognises the significant contribution that the Civic Trust societies make in establishing and maintaining sustainable communities. It also acknowledges and appreciates the positive and constructive inputs made by both individual members and groups into the planning appeal process and looks forward to further contributions, fit for a 21st Century appeal system".

**Katrine Sporle, Chief Executive,
Planning Inspectorate**

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An update and appeal to Civic Societies from Griff Rhys Jones

Now more than at any other time, the local civic society movement needs to do its bit to rally membership at grassroots level, support a stronger national voice and prove our relevance."

Garry Thomas, Hereford Civic Society

I am writing with exciting news, a thank you and an appeal for your support. The day the Civic Trust went into administration was a sad one for us all but it is now abundantly clear that support for a vibrant civic society movement is greater than ever before.

We now need your help to make it happen.

We have been overwhelmed by the good will which has poured in since the news about the Civic Trust first broke. Hundreds of societies have been in touch seeking information and asking for something good to come from it all. Your good wishes and practical ideas have been heart warming and I thank you all. There have been offers of help from all quarters and we have found new friends in local government, professional bodies and other community and charity organisations. Everyone is united around the need for a strong champion for civic societies and a network of support that makes their collective voice stronger still.

We can now make this happen. By combining the generous financial and practical support of organisations coming to the aid of the movement with your own practical help and donations, we can build a new movement to support and champion community action for local places.

The National Trust is providing the resources we need for someone experienced to lead the initiative for a year. The Campaign to Protect Rural England and the Royal Institute of British Architects are supporting us "in kind" and providing office space. The North of England Civic Trust (registered charity, no. 513055) is expecting to provide a temporary "charitable home" for our staff and money. English Heritage has stepped in to ensure Heritage Open Days are secure for 2009. Blackpool Council is supporting a convention for the movement on 15 and 16 October to be hosted by Blackpool Civic Trust. We have also had other offers of support.

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We now need your society and its members to match this generosity.

The details are still being sorted out but I am delighted to say that Tony Burton is available to take on the leadership role. Tony has over 20 years of experience in the field. He is currently the National Trust's Director of Strategy and External Affairs and spent 13 years at CPRE, leaving as Deputy Director in 2001. Tony was also a founder trustee of Heritage Link and chaired its environmental equivalent Wildlife and Countryside Link. National and local campaigning and community action are in his lifeblood. We are also extremely fortunate that Ian Harvey, whom many of you know from the Civic Trust, is keen to be involved. He is already providing invaluable support and we hope he can play a key role in the future.

We know we can only be successful if the future is rooted in what makes a civic society successful. You know this better than anyone and we want to explore all the options with you. Any future arrangement needs to meet your needs and be your champion. We will be announcing the new initiative on 1 June and calling on all of you to contribute your ideas and thinking over the next few months and help decide what is affordable to you. In the meantime, keep an eye on the website at www.civicsocietyinitiative.org.uk

And now for the money! This is where we have an urgent need. The next few weeks and months are critical. If we are to hit the ground running then we need the funds to make things work. There are generous offers from the National Trust and others but on their own these are not going to be enough. We can only be successful with the financial support of all the societies and your members.

So this is the moment when I would ask you all to make a donation and to reach out to your members and ask them too. Discussions over membership or affiliation fees are for another day.

I am asking you now - today - to make a donation to secure a stronger, more effective movement for us all and to contact all your members. Between £50 and £100 from each society will see this vision happen. Where you can donate more I hope you can do so. We need to raise £50,000 in the next few weeks to give us all a fighting chance of putting the civic society movement where it belongs - at the heart of community action for the places where we all live.

Thank You
Griff Rhys Jones

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