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Civic Societies and the Planning Process

Exploring the role of local civic societies in the English planning system

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Introduction

This report draws on data collected through a survey questionnaire sent to all Civic Voice member societies with the aim of better understanding the contemporary role that civic societies play in the English planning system. We believe this report is the first extensive survey of how civic societies perceive their role in planning processes under the restructured planning system introduced by the 2011 Localism Act.

Most new development in England's built environment results from the local planning authority approving or refusing developers' proposals, as part of a planning system that has been distinctively characterised by the principle of discretion since its formalisation in 1947 (HM Government, 2004). Hewitt (2014) details how the civic movement has had a close relationship with planning going back for more than a century to the planning discipline's professionalisation in the early 1900s. From early on, architects and planners were active members of civic societies, whilst civic societies themselves were deeply involved in a range of place-making activities. Civic societies have a long history as both stewards and leaders when it comes to place-making.

The contemporary role of civic societies in the planning system, is bound up with debates around the nature of participation in planning activities. These debates have continued since the Skeffington report (CPPP,1969) paved the way for legislation mandating opportunities for participation in statutory planning activities. Under the current legislative framework for planning in England, Regulation 18 of the Town and Country Planning (Local Planning) (England) Regulations 2012 (HM Government, 2012) mandates community involvement from the earliest stage of Local Plan preparation. Meanwhile, Regulation 15 of the Town and Country Planning (Development Management Procedure) (England) Order 2015 (HM Government, 2015) specifies public consultation on individual planning applications. Planning Policy Guidance published by central government offers some advice on how LPAs should engage with communities, including highlighting the role that civic societies could play in setting up forums for scrutinising policy and individual proposals (MHCLG, 2019).

All members of the public are entitled to object to a proposal provided their objections are based on 'material considerations' (MHCLG, 2014). Community engagement therefore has a crucial role in shaping the quality of the built environment with subsequent impacts on people's health and wellbeing. However, recent research shows that, on large developments, only 7% of people trust local authorities (Grosvenor, 2019, p.4), whilst Civic Voice's (2020) own research found that 80% of respondents do not feel that developers engage effectively with local communities. In relation to plan-making, the 2020 'Planning for the Future' White Paper states that only around 50% of Local Authorities as of June 2020 have an up-to-date Local Plan (MHCLG, 2020, p.12), thereby severely limiting the scope for proactive community involvement in plan-making.

It is well known that civic societies play a significant role in place leadership by holding the planning system to account through their local knowledge, local pride and community links

and community mobilisation. Civic Voice's (2021) research, explores in detail how civic societies have engaged with Local Plans, highlighting significant variations in practice. Their research shows that whilst civic societies show a high willingness to engage in plan-making processes, leading to their views being taken into account, the quality of the process precipitated by LPAs varies considerably. Civic Voice's (2020) current manifesto, published 50 years after the Skeffington Report highlights an ambition *'…to move away from 'confrontation to collaboration' and from 'consultations to conversations'.'* (p.1, p.3).

Alongside this, there has been Civic Voice commissioned recent research evaluating Statements of Community Involvement (SCIs)(Parker et al., 2021). These statements are intended to guide public participation in plan-making and individual decisions. The research concludes that:

- SCIs fall short of setting measurable goals for community involvement.
- Local Planning Authorities (LPAs) lack the resources to maintain open dialogues.
- There is a need for a culture shift to seeing community involvement as a resource.

Reform to the planning system in England is currently high on the political agenda. The white paper 'Planning for the Future' released by the then Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) in August 2020, makes a strong case for the need for planning reform and seeks to achieve this through three pillars of reform: Pillar One for development; Pillar Two for beautiful and sustainable places and Pillar Three for infrastructure and connected places. The potentially radical nature of these reforms, including a stated desire in the White Paper to move community consultation away from the individual application stage and focus instead on engagement at the plan-making stage will have significant consequences for community inputs into the planning system. The proposed reforms have been an important topic of discussion for Civic Voice, its members, and the wider planning community as well.

Whilst the White Paper focusses on the planning system itself, it does not widen its attention to established civic organisations such as civic societies that hold our planning system to account. We believe it is vital to also understand the role of civic organisations in the planning system whilst contemplating large scale reform as suggested in the White Paper.

Consequently, this report seeks to understand how civic societies in England currently work with the planning system. Our overall research questions are:

1. To what extent do civic societies engage with place stewardship and place leadership and how?
2. What challenges and opportunities do they currently encounter in fulfilling the above roles?

It is important to acknowledge that the data presented here is based on how civic societies perceive and report their activities, possibly with some positive bias in this respect. However, we hope that this report will provide an evidence base for an important policy discussion around ways to 'factor in' the considerable social capital built up in civic societies.

We explore the above two research questions using a research framework involving four aspects. The first seeks to understand civic societies' role in relation to place-making more broadly; the second seeks to understand civic society's role in the planning system; the third section seeks to understand the civic society's role with regard to the wider community and the fourth and final section probes civic society's own reflections on their future.

Following this introduction, we present our methodology. The results from the research are then presented under the four sections detailed above. Each section concludes with a summary of key findings in that section. Following the discussion of the data, our final chapter presents the overall Conclusions and Recommendations.

Methodology

A survey methodology was adopted for this research as we wanted to understand what the current situation is amongst the population of all civic societies in England.

The questionnaire was prepared by a research team at the Department of Real Estate & Planning at the University of Reading. The survey was administered by Civic Voice to all 232 of their members, via an e-newsletter. This newsletter also has a wider reach beyond Civic Voice members, potentially reaching non-member societies as well, though 90% of respondents are known to be Civic Voice members.

The survey asked societies 24 questions in total, 21 of which addressed the following themes:

- **Introductory Questions:** These questions addressed the broad set of activities that societies were involved with in relation to the built environment and any recent changes that they perceive in this role, especially in the context of the COVID pandemic. These set of three questions aimed to set the wider context for more specific questions on the involvement with the planning system. 3 out of 21 questions (14.3%) target this section.
- **Involvement in the Planning System:** These questions asked societies for details of their current involvement with the planning system, both individual planning decisions and the development of Local Plans. It is the longest section with 9 out of 21 questions (42.9%).
- **Relationship with the wider community:** These questions sought to understand the nature and role of community engagement in civic societies' own workings as well as their relationship with other organisations in safeguarding place. 5 out of 21 questions (23.8%) probe this section.
- **Concluding Questions:** The final set of 4 out of 21 questions (19%) encouraged societies to reflect on the planning White Paper, their role and the extent of their success in influencing the planning system.

Three questions were targeted at identifying the civic society; providing informed consent for the survey; and giving us information on how the questionnaire was completed. We encouraged civic societies to fill the questionnaire as far as possible through discussion in a committee. However, for 57% of the responses, the questionnaire was answered individually by a member of the civic society; for 36% of the responses, the questionnaire was answered by two or more people, but outside a committee. In only 5% of the responses were the questions filled in by discussion in a committee. 2% civic societies did not provide this information. Some questions asked for a choice within options, some asked for a ranking within options and some questions were open. A copy of the full questionnaire can be found in Appendix 1.

Prior to administering the questionnaire to all civic societies, a lengthier previous version of this questionnaire was piloted on a few civic societies with help from Civic Voice. Feedback from the pilot was used to refine the questionnaire wordings and to shorten the questionnaire to ensure that answering it would not be too onerous on respondents.

The survey was opened for responses on 15th September 2021 and closed on 15th December 2021. At this point 58 responses had been received. The survey has generated a substantial volume of both quantitative and qualitative data that will give useful insights into how civic societies engage with the English planning system.

The analysis of the data will be in three parts. In this report we present the results to each of our questions and provide the descriptive pointers that emerge from this data. The section summaries at the end of each section summarises the overall pattern discernible in each section, recognising that these are based on civic societies' own perceptions and reporting of their work. Our overall Conclusion chapter discusses the section summaries and policy recommendations that emerge from these summaries.

This report will be followed by another report – Part 2 - wherein we analyse the data through more sophisticated cross tabulations also drawing out anonymised case studies that yield richer insights. Finally, drawing on this data, we also aim to contribute to academic knowledge through publications in journals, drawing on concepts of place stewardship and place leadership.

Part 1: Setting the Context: The Wider Role of Civic Societies

The questions in this part aimed to set the context for the rest of the survey by exploring the areas that civic societies engage in outside of the formal planning system.

A broad definition of involvement was used, ranging from publicising issues and holding events, to using Society resources to develop facilities and resources. The initial results confirm that societies are engaged in a wide variety of activities related to the built environment outside of the formal planning system with some societies noting some shift in their priorities.

How involved is your civic society with the following themes and activities?
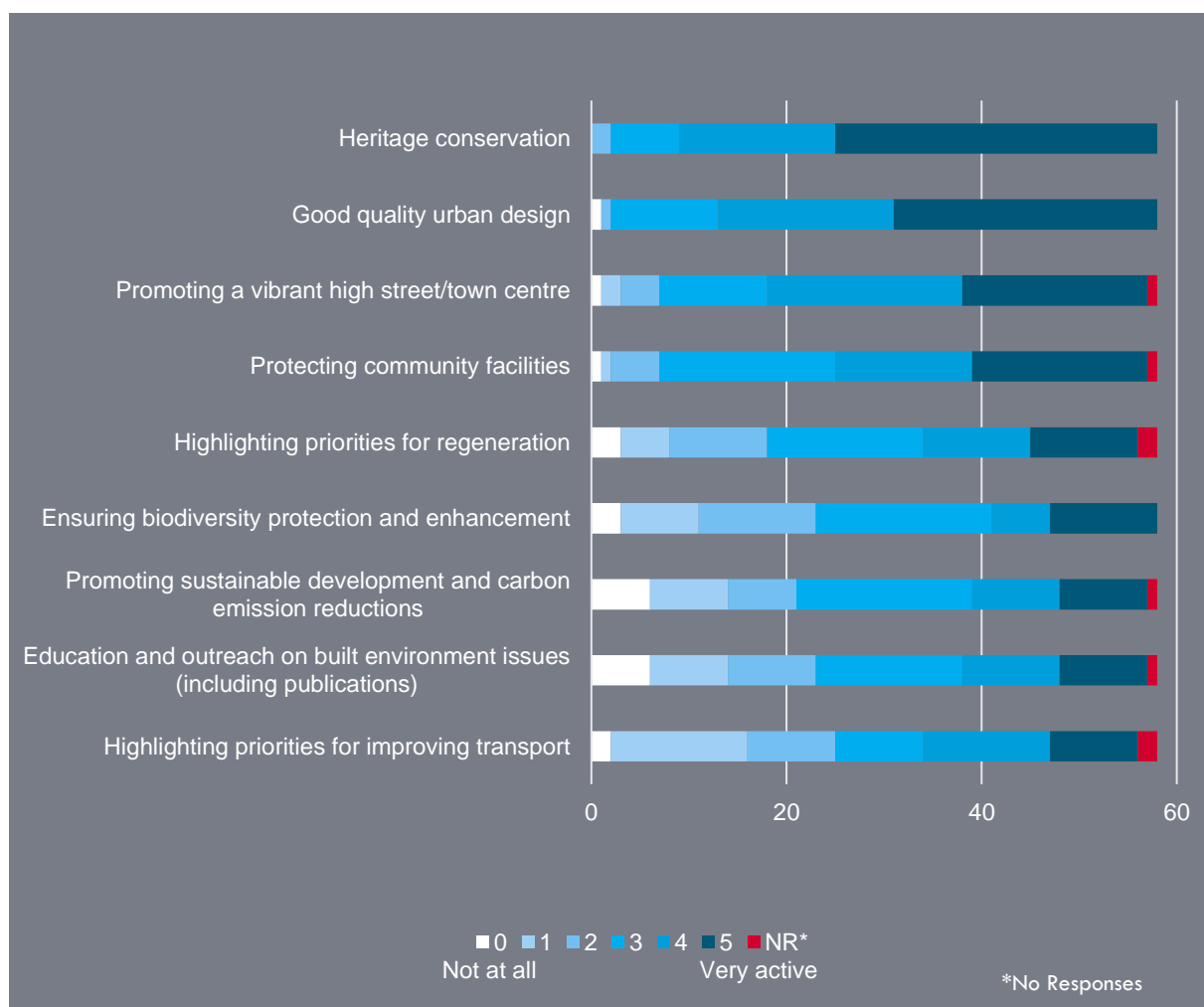

Figure: 1. Civic Society involvement with various activities related to the built environment.

This is a ranking question, where Civic Societies were asked to rank the importance to them of the activities listed. From the results, civic societies are most involved ('Active' – 4; or 'Very active' -5) with the following activities:

- Heritage conservation (84%)
- Good quality urban design (76.7%)
- Promoting a vibrant high street/town centre (69%)
- Protecting community facilities (58.2%)

Very few societies were not active in these areas of activities; three societies amongst the respondents were inactive in at least one of the above, with no societies being inactive in the area of heritage conservation.

'Highlighting priorities for improving transport' was the area where societies were least active, with 44.5% of the societies assigning it an activity level of no higher than 2. The following areas of activity were the most reported by societies as attracting a mid-range (3) level of activity:

- Promoting sustainable development and carbon emission reductions (32.7%)
- Ensuring biodiversity protection and enhancement (32.1%)
- Highlighting priorities for regeneration (27.8%)
- Education and outreach on built environment issues (including publications) (25.5%)

Civic societies therefore are showing involvement in a good range of activities to promote and safeguard the built and natural environment and assets of communities. There seems to be less involvement with transport issues. The next open question asked respondents to list other activities not captured in our list, that they are engaged with in relation to built-environment quality.

Are there any other aims related to promoting a high-quality built environment that your society is involved with?

In addition to the above themes, 59% of the respondents reported that they engage in other issues related to the quality of the built environment. The additional issues indicated in the 37 responses can be categorised into 4 overall themes.

Promoting Civic Pride

Most of these activities relate to promoting the built environment and a sense of place though activities as diverse as protecting heritage assets by working on a Blue Plaque scheme or through Information Boards; campaigning for protecting views; educating and promoting civic pride; safeguarding place qualities; protesting and campaigning against perceived harms to place; rewarding good design through civic awards and 'in-bloom' competitions and promoting tourism.

Protecting the Natural Environment

Protection of the natural environment was also highlighted. Civic societies were involved in flood resilience activities; green space protection and management; tree surveys; promotion of green corridors; cycling/walking initiatives and in creating climate change awareness.

Supporting Community Life

Initiatives to serve the community such as initiating schemes to promote employment, education, awareness, and engagement; engaging in land deals to safeguard community amenities and activities to raise their own profile.

Involvement in the Planning System

Respondents also used this question to highlight their significant involvement in formal planning processes across a wide range of activities. These included contribution to various types of plan-making at neighbourhood, city/town and wider strategic levels; commenting on individual planning applications; responding to planning consultations; working on design guides and design codes; working on regeneration schemes and Heritage Action Zones projects and protesting and campaigning for improvements in processes of plan making or considerations of planning applications.

The next question probes how civic society activities have changed over time.

Has the society significantly changed its activities and campaigns over the last ten years?

There were 54 responses to this question, presenting a mixed picture of positive and not so positive changes. The responses can be categorised into three themes.

Increased engagement with Environmental Issues

Civic societies report both a widening and intensification of activities. Environmental issues, sustainability and climate change are gaining prominence in their activities,

Mixed responses to New Opportunities and Challenges in the Planning system

Where engagement with the planning process has increased, on one hand this is due to specific opportunities such as Neighbourhood Planning, preparation of Local Plans, preparation of design guides and an increased emphasis on high streets or conservation areas. On the other hand, the increased engagement is also due to specific challenges such as institution of permitted developments and a general perceived weakening of the planning system.

The picture of change is, however, mixed. Thus, some civic societies report increased involvement in heritage issues, whilst some report a move from heritage to more wider planning issues. Some report less involvement with planning applications while others report more. Some report widening of geographical scope of activity while others report emphasis on sub-zones such as conservation areas, high streets, or marketplaces. Civic societies' relationship with the planning authorities also presents a mixed picture, both improving and deteriorating. Thus, the precise nature of the broader intensification of engagement with the planning system seem to be diverse.

Internal Challenges and Changes within Societies

Civic societies also lament the difficulty of sustaining voluntary activity and diversifying the age groups of members. They report increased engagement with websites, social media, bulletins, open meetings and a stronger general emphasis on communication strategies with communities as well as members. There are also reports of more networking between fellow civic societies and with other organisations.

One civic society has utilized training provided by Local Authorities to strengthen the civic society and one civic society has uniquely reported changes in working due to taking on a community asset.

Summary

Overall, this section serves to highlight how civic societies have continued to engage on a whole range of place-making activities, building on a longstanding history, but now extending into other areas of community life.

Civic societies seem to be almost all active in heritage/conservation related issues. Other popular concerns are good design, promoting a vibrant high street/town centre and protecting community facilities. Civic societies are also engaged in sustainability and biodiversity related issues, regeneration issues and on education outreach on built environment issues. Transport-related issues seemed to attract the least input. The other activities that civic societies were involved with include promotion of civic pride, protection of the environment, supporting the community and engaging with the planning system. It is not clear if this pattern is indicative of civic society priorities or if it could be symptomatic of the structural space for community engagement afforded to civic societies. For instance, a wider lack of engagement with transport could be a result of a lack of prioritisation of infrastructure issues in general amongst civic societies and/or it could be symptomatic of the scope of community involvement in transport related issues.

Civic societies report that there has been changes in their activities. Mostly the changes seem to be driven by rising importance of environmental issues, challenges and opportunities afforded by the planning system and internal challenges faced by civic societies. There is considerable variation in the direction of change indicating that local conditions may be significantly driving/modifying the direction of change.

The next few questions focus more specifically on civic societies and their relationship with the planning system. The opportunities and challenges afforded by the planning system is reported as a major driver of change. A closer probe is therefore warranted.

Part 2: Civic Societies and the Planning System

These questions form the core of the survey focusing on how societies interact with the formal planning system and the nature of their relationship with Local Planning Authorities.

The results in this section illustrate significant variations amongst civic societies in terms of the extent to which working in the planning system forms most of their work, their relationships with LPAs, with a clear divide between those who are invited by LPAs to engage and those who are not. However, there appears to be more consistency in terms of how societies engage with individual planning applications and whether they engage with the Local Plan.

What proportion of your society's work would you say is about working with the formal planning system?
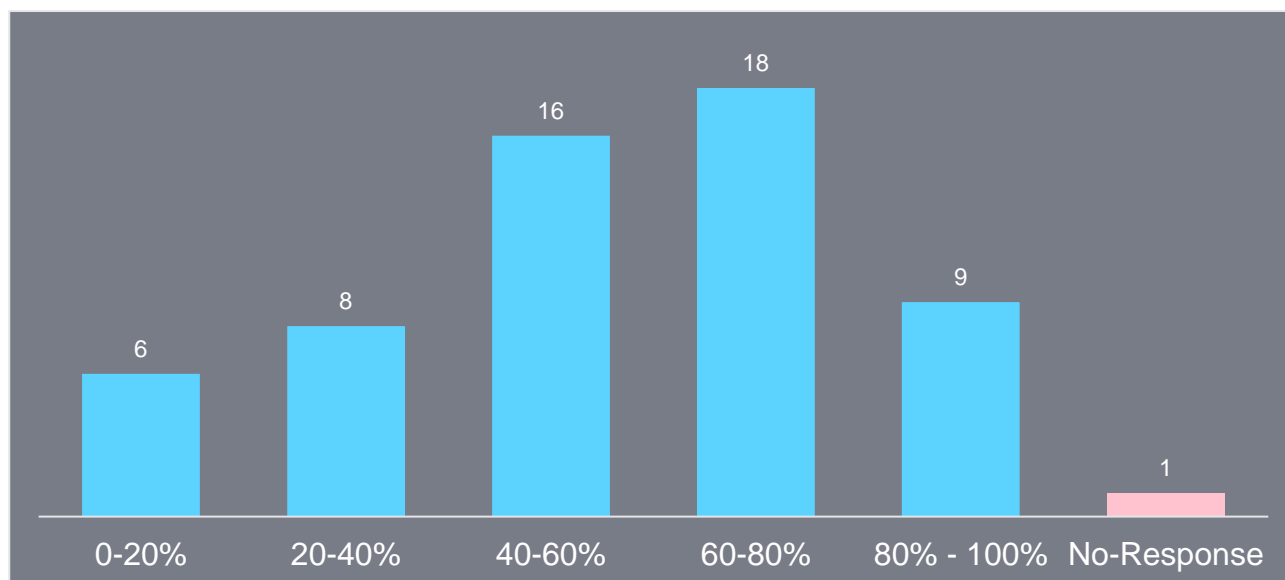
Figure 2: Proportion of civic society work spent in working with the formal planning system.

There was one 'no response.' Of all the 57 civic societies that have responded, engagement in the planning system is only part of what they do, but it is a major part of what they do for most civic societies. Only 24.6% are spending 40% or less of their time engaging with the planning system. A small portion of civic societies (15.8%) spend 80% or all their time engaging with the planning system. More than half (59.6%) of societies fall into the middle ground, with planning accounting for between 40 and 80% of their work.

How many planning decisions were you involved with over the course of the past twelve months?
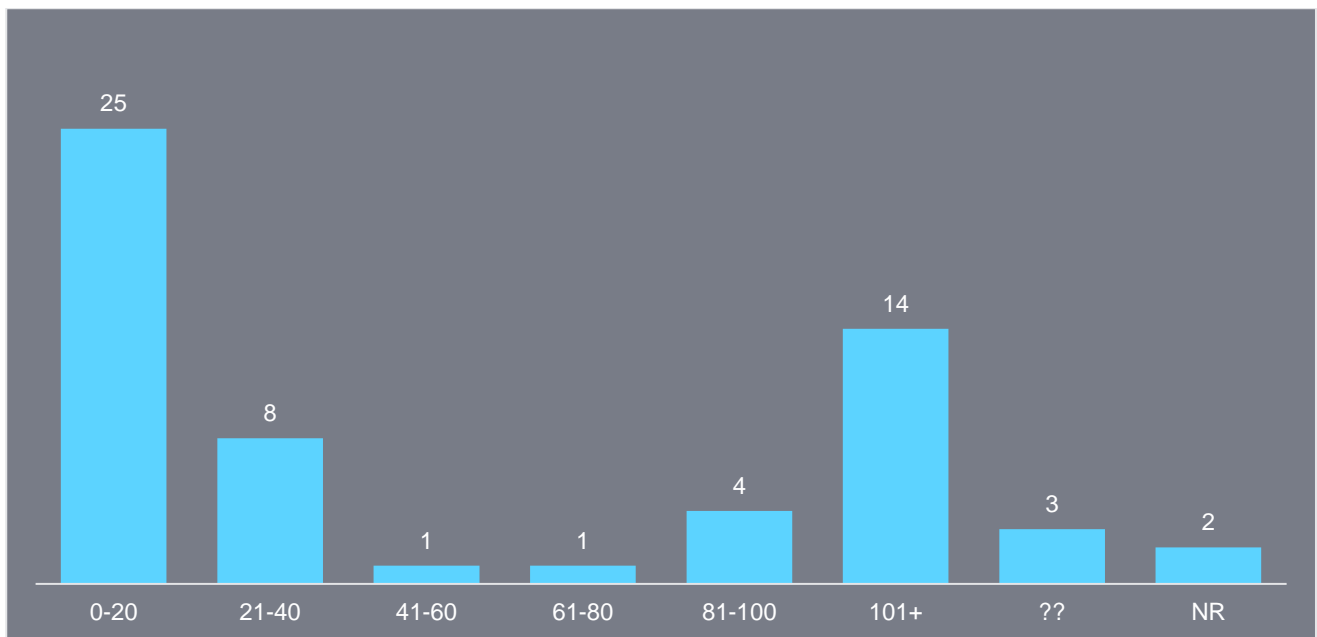
Figure 3: Number of planning decisions involved with over last 12 months.

Involvement in planning decisions was defined in a relatively broad way, ranging from commenting on an application to engaging with the developer directly. There were two 'no responses' to this question and three cases where the answer was not definitive, thus giving a total of 53 valid responses. Over the last 12 months, 62.3% of those societies who responded state that they were involved in a maximum of 40 planning decisions, though the largest number of these were at the lower end, in the 0-20 category.

Of particular note are the 14 (26.4%) of societies who are involved with more than 101 applications in a year, including one that stated they were involved in 1200 applications in a year. Few societies fell into the middle-ground, where they were involved in 40 – 100 applications in a year.

Given the COVID-19 situation, we also asked a follow-up sub-question, asking if societies thought that their response was representative of a longer trend. Overall, nearly 80% of the societies indicated that their response was typical of the longer run trend, in terms of the number of planning applications they have engaged with.

In what ways has your civic society tried to influence specific development proposals in your area?
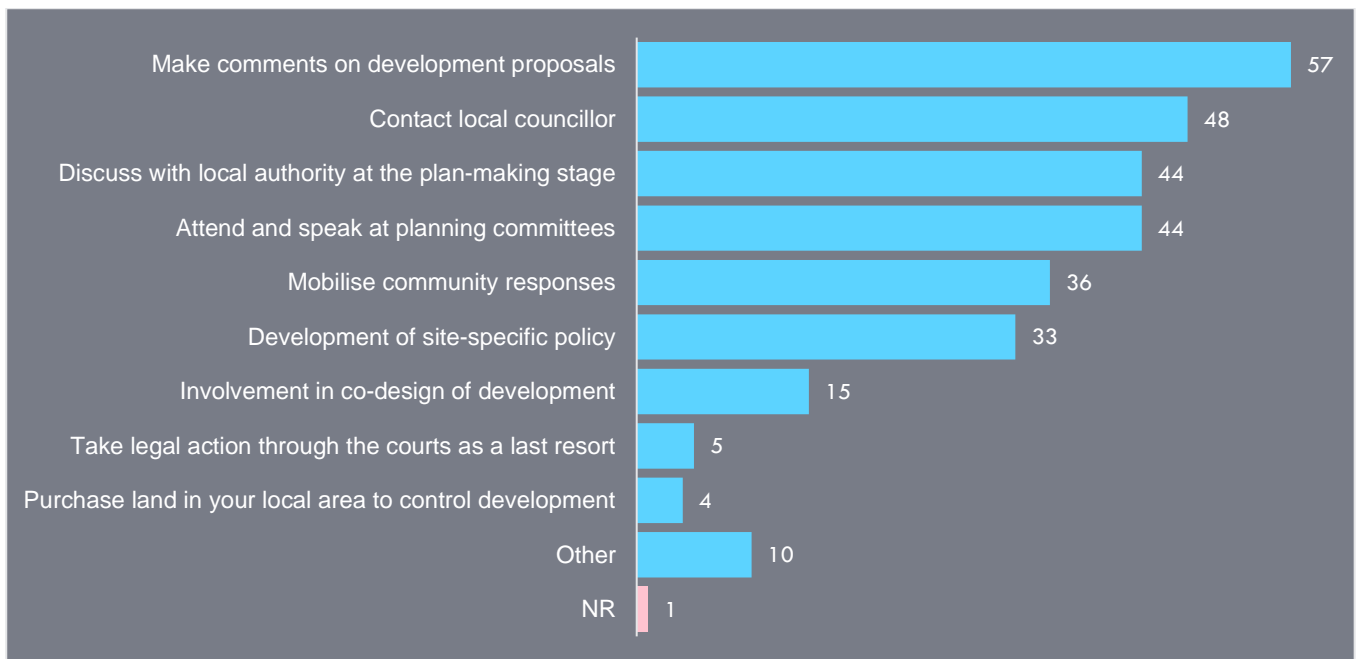
Figure 4: Ways of influencing specific development proposals

In this question, we tried to understand the nature of civic society engagement with the planning process. There was one 'no response', thus giving a total of 57 valid responses. Respondents were asked to select all the ways in which they had engaged with the planning system, to identify overall trends in their engagement.

From the results, societies work to influence development proposals in their area in the following ways:

- Written comments on development proposals – *100% of respondents*
- Contacting local councillors – *81% of respondents*
- Discussions with local authority at the plan-making stage – *75% of respondents*
- Attending and speaking at planning committees – *75% of respondents*
- Mobilisation of community responses – *61% of respondents*
- Development of site-specific policies – *56% of respondents*

Notably, all the responding societies get involved in preparing written comments. However, there are a notable number of societies (42.1%) involved in more resource intensive activities such as, legal action, land purchase and getting involved with the design of development.

A few societies also highlighted 'other' ways in which they try to influence the planning system. These are:

- Commissioning research and specific studies
- Contact with Members of Parliament, Mayors or Local Councillors
- Pre-application contact with developers
- Application to list a building
- Preapplication publication of design ideas for a site
- Liaising with other national bodies

How do you decide which planning applications to get involved with?

We also wanted to know how civic societies decide which planning applications to get involved with. Respondents provided a range of qualitative answers to this question. There were 55 responses in total.

Role of Civic Society Planning Committee

Most civic societies told us that all planning applications were scrutinised and a decision to engage or not was made by their planning committee. This decision tended to follow their own charter/development principles but was also influenced by feedback from community/members, contentious development, or media reports. At times, civic societies looked at an application because they were invited to do so by LPAs.

Importance of Scale and Specific Impacts

The most common reasons for a decision to engage was the scale and location of the development and impact on conservation areas or listed buildings. Impact on open space, green fields, Green belts and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) were also cited. Consistency with plans and policies were other reasons ranked high. A few civic societies were also concerned with conversions (office to dwellings, backyard dwellings or Victorian houses to HMOs) and one said that they considered impact on traffic generation.

Contrasting approaches to Small-scale Proposals

On domestic applications civic societies tended to vary with some stating that they did not look at these unless their attention had been specifically directed to it due to a significant problem, whilst others stated that they routinely looked at alterations and extensions especially if the front elevation was altered and those dwellings that were non-traditional or used non-traditional methods.

A deep concern with place and the built environment can be perceived through these responses. Also, safeguarding of conservation areas – built and natural – as well as concerns with vetting the scale and location of development stand out. Finally, there is an extent to which the decision to comment is dependent on the society's level of organisation and institutionalisation. Next we inquired into the types of development that civic societies engage with.

Planning decisions that your society sought to influence

Civic Societies were asked to give details of the last three major planning decisions that they engaged with. From this, a wide range of development types emerged. In keeping with the responses to the previous question, most civic societies have tried to influence large scale housing developments, large-scale regeneration/redevelopment proposals and issues regarding modification to listed buildings or demolition of buildings of local importance, as well as proposals in or adjacent to conservation areas. Regarding conservation areas/listed buildings, a variety of schemes seem to have been challenged ranging from the scale of a home office to the scale of a 'Euro 2020 FanZone' in a park. In general, Civic societies were also challenging locations of adverts and 5G masts.

At what stage of the development process did you intervene?

The second part of this question probed the stage in which civic societies were intervening in the planning process. 54 civic societies responded. Most societies had got involved in either in the pre-application stage (42.3%) or after an application was submitted (40.7%). Only a handful (13%) started engagement after knowing of the development through a consultation event and an even smaller proportion (3.7%) came to know of proposals through local plan allocations or through LPA announcements.

In general, the results show civic society interest in a variety of large and small proposals, with most getting involved at pre-application stage or soon after an application is submitted when an application appears as part of their regular review of planning applications.

Next, we sought to probe whether Civic Societies were welcomed by LPAs. The next question explores this.

Have there been any occasions when the Local Planning Authority has sought the Society's input directly regarding a development proposal?

Figure 5: Occurrence of instances when LPA has sought civic society inputs for a development proposal.

There were two 'non-responses'. Out of a total of 56 responses, 57.1% of respondents reported being approached directly by the LPA for their input. We sought to enquire into this further by asking how civic societies were brought into the planning application process. 35 respondents replied to this question.

Positive LPA Relationships

Some Civic Societies reported a positive constructive relationship with LPAs. Instances of this involves routinely asking for societies' opinions and including this in Planning Committee meetings; co-authoring pre-application decisions; officers, councillors and Conservation Officers continuously maintaining good relations; regular informal discussions and regular invitations to comment on a variety of applications (this very much depended on the personality of the officer concerned) and consistently advising developers to consult civic societies during pre-application stages.

Inter-relationships between organisations

Personnel in civic societies are also important. There were reports where members of the Civic Society held positions in various capacities linked to the LPA, which then triggered an official request for involvement. Alternatively, civic society members were involved in Neighbourhood Plan preparation which led to invitations to comment. Civic societies have

also been approached for their expertise on planning, conservation, architecture and the history of an area when those areas are being discussed in the Local Plan.

Some Civic Societies mention being invited as a statutory consultee especially in appeals as a Rule 6 party. Other common occasions when LPAs have invited civic societies to participate are when consultation meetings or design charrettes are held for the development of a prominent site.

Tokenistic Participation?

A significant number of civic societies were however sceptical in replying to this question. Many hinted at LPAs 'using' their participation when it suited their agenda (inviting them to object when aligned to their own views) and often giving no credence to societies' views even after they were sought out. One particularly resentful respondent cited an instance of LPAs not taking a decision to Planning Committee even after receiving 150 objections to the proposal.

Given the significant role that Civic Societies play in Local Plan making our next question sought to understand this role better.

Do you get involved in the Local Plan process? How do you decide which aspects of the Local Plan to be involved with?

Yes, 54   No, 2   NR, 2

Figure 6: Occurrence of instances of involvement in the Local Plan process

There were two 'non-responses'. Out of the responses, 96.4% of respondents said they do get involved in the Local Plan process. We wanted to further understand the nature of this involvement. 52 responses to the second part of our question helped with this.

Selective, thematic engagement

A sizeable number of civic societies however focused only on specific aspects of the plan. This may be green belts, or other strategic priority areas; issues such as conservation, public realm, or climate change; developments that would have a significant impact on the town such as proposals for housing, other proposals of immediate concern, controversial proposals or proposals that could overstretch their infrastructure. Some civic societies chose only to engage on issues that their planning committee members had competence in, while one chose to comment only on the principles reflected in the plan rather than the proposals.

In what ways do you get involved?
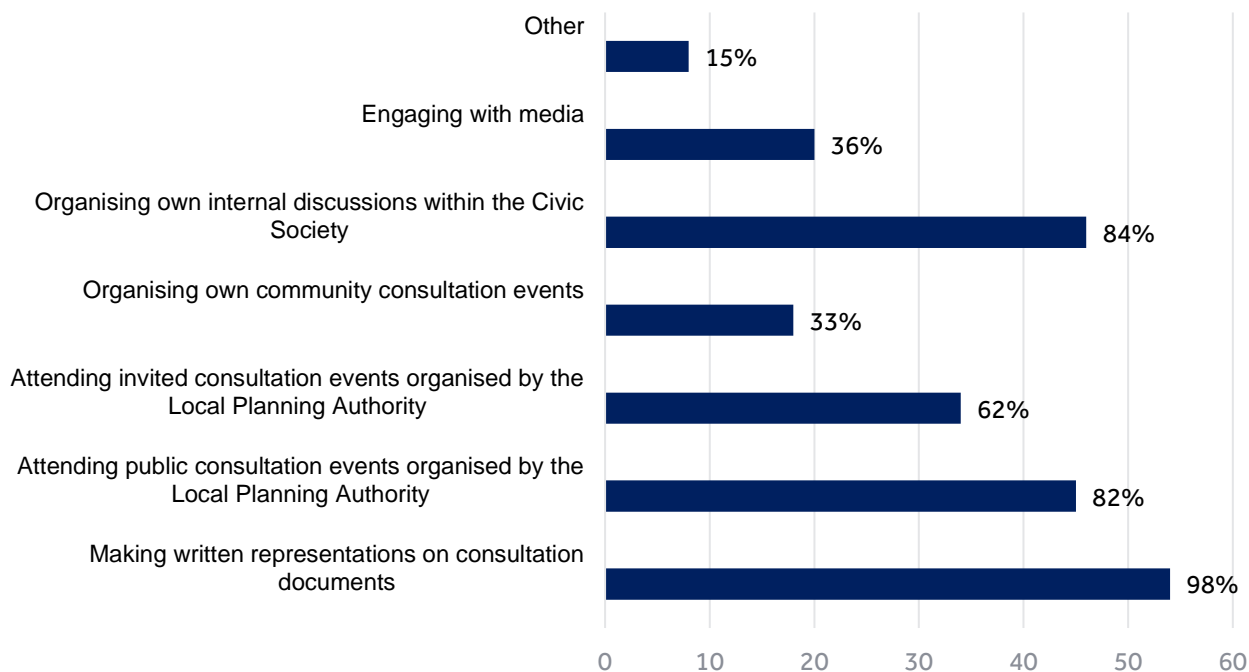
Figure 7: How civic societies get involved in the Local Plan process.

Civic societies were asked to identify all of the ways in which they got involved in the Local Plan process. There were 55 responses to this questions, leading to the following top three methods of engagement:

1. Making written representations on consultation documents – *98% of respondents*
2. Organising own internal discussions within the Civic Society – *85% of respondents*
3. Attending public consultation events organised by the Local Planning Authority – *81% of respondents*

Additionally, around 60% of societies also participated in invited consultation events, possibly linked to their relationship with their Local Planning Authority (LPA),

Overall, most societies engage in the Local Plan process through routes organised by the LPA. However, there were 18 societies (33%) who were involved in running their own consultation events and a similar number who engaged with the media. In addition, 'other' responses to this question highlighted further approaches such as using street displays and leaflets; liaising with other voluntary groups, friends and neighbours; engaging with landowners; getting involved with evidence base development and taking part in the Examination in Public.

Formal and informal participation

Most civic societies were involved by reviewing the plan as a whole and commenting by preparing a critique or a response to the local plan. Participation in formal consultation events

also seemed to be a popular mode of engagement, though commenting through informal channels were also reported. Participation was indirect in some cases, i.e. through participation in other documents such as Neighbourhood Plans, green belt study or other policy documents, which in turn influenced the Local Plan. Finally civic societies were involved in disseminating the Local Plan, including commenting to the wider population through their website, blogs or social media. The answer to the third question therefore overlapped with the responses to the second question above, with a relationship for some societies between their areas of focus and methods of engagement.

Finally it is worth briefly reflecting here on Civic Voice's own research (2021) addressing how civic societies engage with the Local Plan process. Comparatively, this found that around 70% of civic societies engage with commenting on Local Plans, over a two-year time period, though the higher percentage in this report may be due to a longer timespan. Otherwise, the findings were similar, for example around how societies prioritise the areas on which they comment.

How would you rate your relationship with your Local Planning Authority (LPA)?
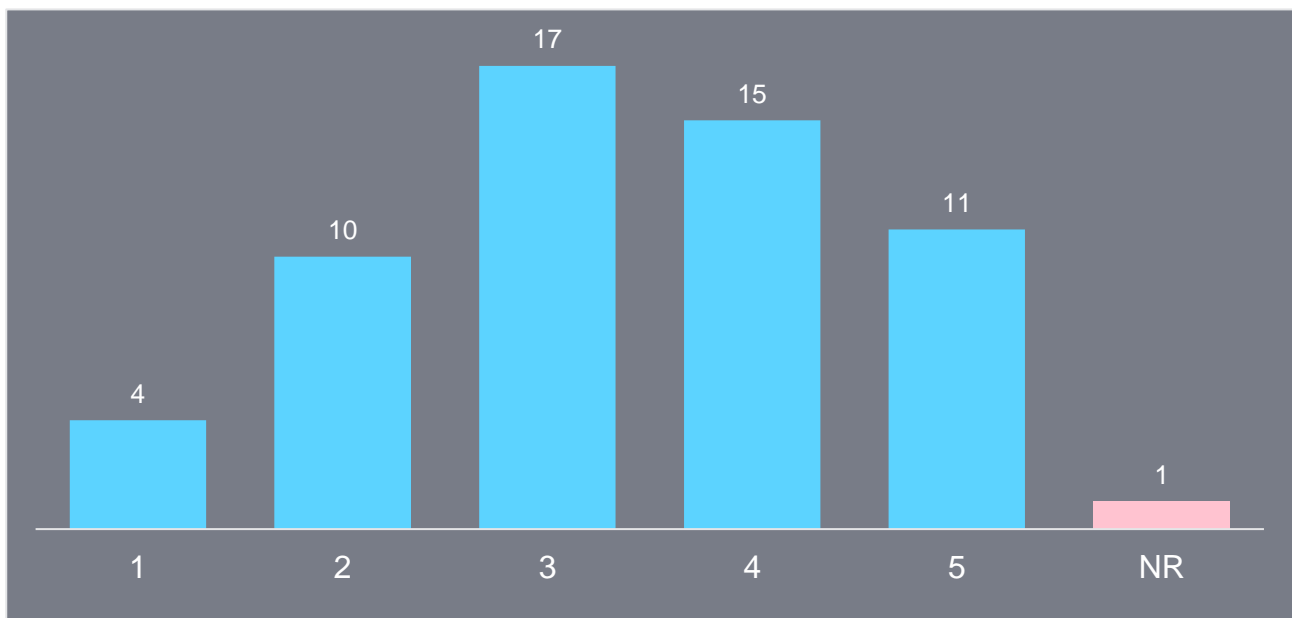
Figure 8: Rating of relationship of civic society with LPA

There was one non-response. Out of the 57 civic societies that responded, 45.6% rated their relationship as 'good' or 'very good' and 24.6% rated their relationship as 'poor' or 'very poor'. 30% of civic societies rated their relationship as neither poor nor good. There is therefore an overall skew towards positive relationships between civic societies and their LPAs.

We asked civic societies to tell us about the factors that affected the relationship between civic societies and LPAs. Written comments were provided by 52 societies addressing key factors influencing this relationship. Regardless of the rating the civic society have themselves given to the relationship with the LPA, we have classified the factors into positive influences, negative influences, and neutral influences.

Positive	Negative
Civic society related	
Civic Society staff expertise and experience which means LPA sees the Civic Society as a friend and as a 'source for good ideas'	Regarded as a nuisance
	Opposition to proposed developments
Professionalism of staff in planning committees	
Unique position of Civic societies in the interface with community thus enabling a wider reach for LPAs	
Improvement of professional capability of civic societies	
Seen to take a balanced view when making comments	
Training to make more influential written comments	
LPA related	
Efforts of particular councillors to engage and listen	Culture of being unwilling to engage with the community and perceived indifference to community views.
Political willingness to listen following reduction in lead party majority	Inappropriate political power often dominated by a few vocal personalities
Good conservation officer	LPA political decision making perceived to be non-transparent.
	LPA decision making perceived to be inconsistent with policy.
	Poor communication of LPA staff
	Resistance to change
	Capacity and capability of planning staff sometimes verging on perceived arrogance.
	Lack of local knowledge of LPA staff
	Opportunism in meeting LPA agendas.

Positive	Negative
	Differing competence levels amongst officers
	Views of Civic Societies are said to be welcome, but this does not always translate to practice.
	Some LPA officers respond, and some ignore Civic Society inputs
Process related	.
Co-commissioning of projects	Need to rely on Freedom of Information Act or complaints to higher/independent authorities to deal with LAs acting as Highway Authority
Regular scheduled meetings with LPA complemented by email and phone contact.	
Involvement in formal forums such as the Master Plan group	Poor treatment of witnesses in planning committee hearings leading to perceived lack of respect.
Close involvement in working groups on different place-based policies	Use of judicial review to overturn Council's own applications.
Teamworking and understanding	Use of technocratic approaches and language
Attendance of councillors at civic society Committee meetings	
Good relationships with individual staff and councillors	Lack of response from LPA to civic society submissions
Wider context related	
Work with and through other more influential societies	Prioritisation of central government housing numbers and other Govt. plans and policies over community views
	Lack of continuity in LPA staffing and elected members
	Lack of resourcing, limiting officer capacity to engage

Positive	Negative
	COVID-19 disruption preventing early engagement of Civic Societies
	Multiple roles of Council as owner, developer, and regulator

The comments identify attributes and changes in civic societies as responsible for much of the positive relationship between civic societies and LPA. In the main these relate to expertise of civic society staff and community links of civic societies. The ways in which civic societies are perceived and the fact that they sometimes oppose development are cited as a leading to a negative relationship.

The comments also point the finger at the LPA for much of the negative relations. These involve perceived limitations of both planning staff and councillors and a perception of a general culture of indifference to values that civic societies uphold.

Many process - related factors that have contributed to both positive and negative impacts were highlighted. The positive involves various co-working arrangements and processes for maintaining a steady stream of communication. The negative processes involve the difficulty of getting information from LPAs, use of non-transparent language, the need to use judicial review and the consequent poor treatment of witnesses by LPAs and in general a lack of response of LPA to submissions.

There were wider contextual factors identified to. On the positive side this involved work with and through influential societies, while on the negative side this involved a range of factors including top-down imposition of housing numbers, lack of resources and continuity of planning staff in LPAs, the at times conflicting roles of LPAs in the development process and COVID.

Has your society's relationship with the Local Planning Authority changed significantly in the past three years?

No, 35   Yes, 22   ... 1

Figure 9: Relationship of civic society with LPA

This question was linked to the previous question. There was one 'non-response' giving a total of 57 responses. Most (61.4%) respondents felt that their relationship with their LPA had not changed significantly. 24 civic societies provided further explanation.

Positive changes in relationship

Reasons for a positive change in relationships centred around various kinds of co-working arrangements on policies/strategies/projects or on shared institutional forums such as Committees; change of personnel at the LPA. Civic Societies also mentioned an increase in their own capacity as contributing to better relations as when a retired planner became the Chair or when the Civic Society organised training for LPA Councillors and officers. Mutual respect is highlighted as essential.

Negative changes in relationship

Many cited COVID-19 as a reason for a negative change. This is due to the difficulty in contacting planners, the cessation of co-working forums as well as the stopping of local councillors' attendance at civic society meetings. Civic Societies also report that relationships turned for the worse when they started more actively challenging applications and bids. The rapid turnover of staff and councillors at the LPA was another reason. Finally, a sense of helplessness due to inability to influence wider institutional changes and find sufficient resources was reported as well as growing issues around trust and integrity.

With the next question, we probed for practical solutions for giving civic societies an effective voice in the planning system, responding to an ongoing debate around the future role of civic societies in the face of reform proposals contained in the Planning for the Future White Paper (MHCLG, 2020).

Which would be more important to give civic societies an effective voice in determining the outcomes of the planning system?
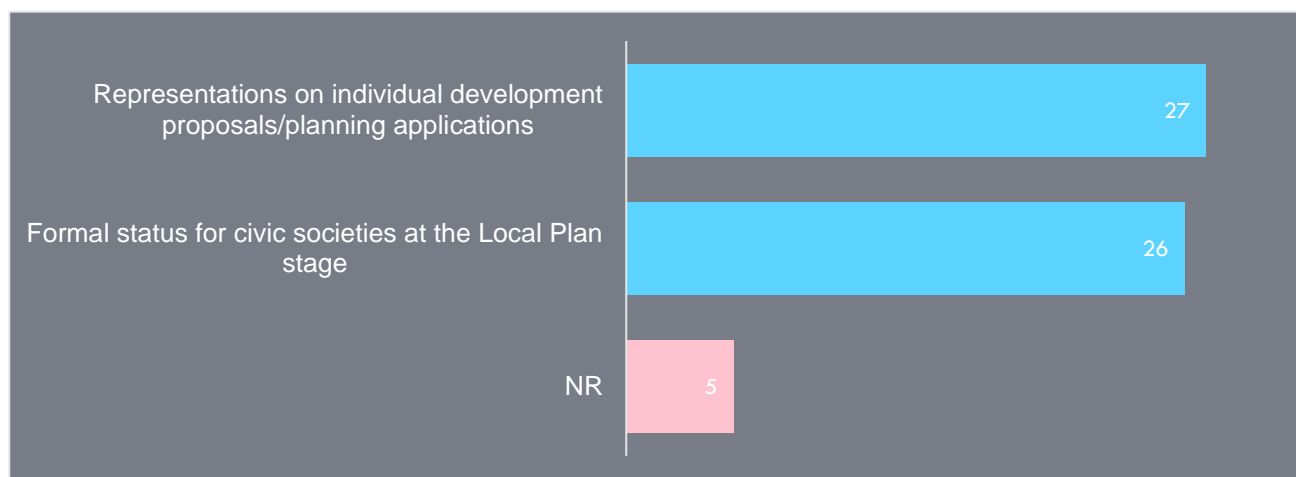
Figure 10: Relative preference for interventions for an effective voice for civic societies.

This was deliberately presented as an either/or choice. Societies could not choose both. There were 5 'no-responses'. Societies' view on what is important to ensure their voices in the planning system seems to be evenly divided between "Representations on individual development proposals/planning applications" and "Formal status for civic societies at the Local Plan stage".

54 respondents also provided further explanation of their response to this question. Civic Societies expressed very different, sometimes opposing views in their further explanations.

While several civic societies said that both the above options were required, many others said neither. These are summarised below.

Arguments for a stronger statutory role

Those who saw a stronger statutory role as desirable expressed the following main reasons:

- Not being taken seriously in the absence of a statutory role
- The weight given to civic society views would be more
- LPAs would resist from trying to shut down civic societies
- Not being a statutory consultee meant that the time allocated to them at hearings had to be shared with other organisations thus severely limiting the inputs

One civic society suggested that this formalisation might be coupled with the Statement of Community Involvement while another civic society highlighted that the NPPF might also need to be adjusted. Devolution can make the formalisation more difficult was highlighted as also was uncertainty about reforms in the light of the planning White paper. One civic society mentioned that not being a named statutory consultee meant that developers could pick and choose who to consult with and civic societies could lose out in this as a result. Another civic society said that it would mean that LPAs had to inform civic societies of developments. There were also normative arguments as one civic society emphasised that a statutory role was the right thing to do as communities must have a say in how their area develops. Another civic society mentioned that a statutory role would guarantee civic society inputs into design, amenity and land use.

Arguments against a statutory role

Those who saw a statutory role as undesirable highlighted the following reasons:

- Civic societies were not the only community groups that can contribute
- Often civic societies are not well run, not representative and not well resourced – 'a seat at the table has to be earned'
- Many civic societies had limited expertise and resources and a statutory role could severely stretch these
- Civic societies by nature are elite and should not therefore have statutory rights
- Civic societies are voluntary organisations and therefore their expertise is often tied to individuals
- Formal status brings with it obligations and if the civic society fails to fulfil these, it can be used against them
- A formal status can only bestow a requirement to consult, but cannot assign any weight to the results of the consultation and hence would not make much difference
- Already a statutory consultee and this had made no difference in their relationship with the LPA.

Statutory role in decision making on planning applications but not plan making

Civic societies in favour of a statutory role in shaping decisions on individual proposals, but not in plan-making cited that the local plan making process currently allowed for civic societies to participate if they wanted to. Some felt that the abstract and complex character of planning made it hard to understand it. While commenting on plans was possible, contributing to them was thought to be harder. Some civic societies were also not focused on all the issues in a local area, preferring instead to work on conservation area issues or in safeguarding heritage assets. They also saw a local plan preparation as a one-off event, while planning applications required constant engagement. Besides societies could tailor their engagement to the capacity they had, by choosing which applications to be involved with.

Statutory role in plan making not planning applications

Those who wanted a statutory role in plan-making specifically argued for this for the following reasons:

- What happened in town was very much dependent on the plan
- Civic societies had expertise which councillors often did not possess
- Local Plan preparation exercises would strengthen relationship with LPAs
- Input into plan policies should be normatively possible.

Some suggestions and wider opinions were also expressed. One civic society mentioned that the issue is more cultural and systemic and therefore wider safeguards are required not just a statutory role to civic societies. Another mentioned that there must be a change in the planning system from one that is driven by growth by private developers to one that is driven by sustainable development and safeguarding quality of life and that place making must be prioritised over housing numbers. There were also explicit calls for early involvement be it in the local plan process or in pre-application discussions about individual planning applications.

Summary

There is evidence that engagement with the planning system is a major part of the work of most civic societies, with some spending more than 80% or all their time engaging with it. It can also be presumed that the planning system also then spends considerable time engaging with or dealing with civic societies. Any reform of the planning system must then explicitly consider this relationship as considerable expertise and experience on local planning matters does also rest with civic societies.

The study also shows that civic societies tend to be either very busy or not that busy at all in terms of the number of applications they were handling in a year. It is difficult to draw any conclusions from this however as civic societies are very variable in terms of size and the extent of area; they cover which could mean that this variation is more reflective of size and therefore capacity than engagement with planning applications.

The intensity of engagement was not just quantitatively polarised, they were qualitatively polarised too. Thus, there were some societies engaged in activities that were significantly resource intensive such as co-design of development, legal action, and land purchase.

However, there was a sub-set of around four activities that more than three quarters of civic societies were engaged in. These involved written comments on development proposals, contacting local councillors, discussions with local authority at the plan-making stage, and attending and speaking at planning committees. More than half civic societies were also involved in mobilisation of community responses and development of site-specific policies. There were also a wide range of other activities that civic societies used to engage with the planning system.

Most civic societies decide on what to get engaged in though their planning committee which scrutinised all planning applications. The civic societies own charter or development principles guided choice in the first instance, but this was also influenced by feedback from community, media and whether a particular development was seen as contentious. The scale of development as well as the nature of impact on Green belts, AONBs etc. were important. There was a contrasting approach to small scale proposals with some civic societies saying they tended to ignore these unless there was a proposal of significance, while others said that they routinely examined all applications for extensions or alterations. Examples of the last three planning applications they were involved with show consistency in civic society involvement in large development proposals, but also show a range of activities from challenges to a home office to objections to a Euro2020 Fan Zone in a park. The consistency amongst civic societies indicates a shared deep concern with place making and safeguarding amenity while the differences indicate again the variations in local priorities and the subsequent size and capacity of civic societies.

Most societies were involved in the pre-application stage or after an application was submitted showing that there was close liaison between the civic society and the LPA. Only very few reported knowing of an application indirectly through a consultation event or even through allocations in a local plan. It must be considered here that more than half the civic societies have been approached directly by the LPA for their inputs. These followed a positive relationship with the LPA resulting in a variety of inputs into LPA tasks. The quality of personnel in civic societies was important too as LPAs were likely to approach civic societies when they possessed expertise. It must also be noted here that a sizeable number of civic societies were resentful and sceptical of the relationship with the LPA. They perceived a relationship where the LPA had the upper hand using the civic society when it suited them and not giving any credence to civic society inputs.

Almost all civic societies were involved in the local plan process. Most were however only involved in specific aspects of it. These could be specific areas or themes or significant developments of immediate concern. Civic societies were also making choices of what to get involved with based on their own expertise and capacities. More than 80% respondents were involved in written representations on consultation documents, organisation of own events and attending public consultation events. Some civic societies were partaking indirectly through the preparation of other LPA documents, helping in collecting evidence and by speaking to landowners. Dissemination of information on the Local Plan through a variety of methods could also be noted.

The relationship with the LPA was slightly skewed toward the positive side. However civic societies provided us with a variety of qualitative information on positive and negative influences on the relationship they had with the LPA. Civic society related factors, LPA related factors, process related factors and factors related to the wider society are identified. Most civic societies also thought that their relationship with the LPA had not changed significantly in the past three years. Those who reported a positive change cited various kinds of co-working arrangements and an increase in their own capacity as key to this change. COVID was cited as a major factor that has adversely impacted on this relationship. This is due to co-working forums stopping and planners being difficult to reach. Rapid turnover or staff in LPAs and wider institutional reforms such as permitted developments were cited.

On the White paper, the reforms suggested therein and suggestions for a statutory role for civic societies that is under discussion led by Civic Voice, civic societies own responses were mixed. Some strongly argued for a statutory role to address some of the issues around relationship with the LPA that they were encountering. Others argued against it primarily pointing to the responsibilities it would bring and the difficulties in fulfilling these given the voluntary nature of civic societies and the general lack of resources they faced. There were also civic societies that argued for a statutory role in planning application decision-making as beneficial, but not in plan making and those who argued for the reverse.
A deep concern with place and the built environment can be perceived through the above responses. Also discernible is a desire to engage with built environment issues and be a conduit to the community. However, these aspirations may be limited by the capacity of the civic society and the nature of its relationship with the LPAs. A proposed statutory role for civic societies were met with a mix of responses with compelling arguments posed for the various positions.

Part 3: Relationship with the wider community

These questions sought to explore the relationships between civic societies and their local communities to ascertain the extent and nature of this relationship.

Can you tell us about other groups or organisations that you have worked with in the last three years
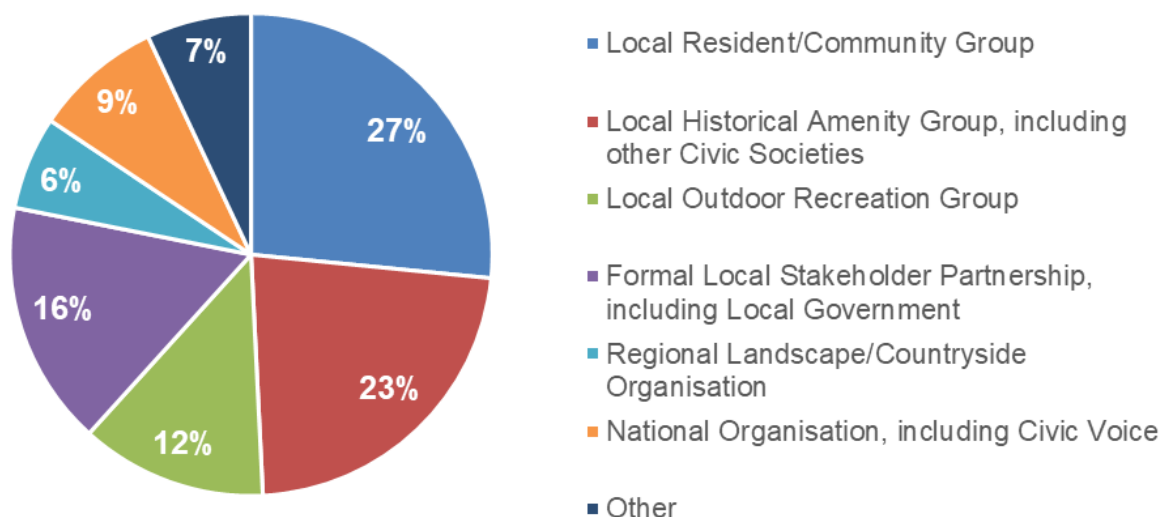
Figure 11: Types of organisation civic societies work with as percentage of all reported collaborations.

There were 52 responses to this question with a wide range of responses covering collaborations with a variety of organisations working at different scales, on a range of different issues. The pie chart above gives a sense of how the 128 organisations identified by respondents are distributed across a series of broad categories. These categories can be broken down further to capture the diversity of these collaborations, though it should be noted that there is more subjectivity in the categories presented here than with other questions.

Local Scale Collaborations

Of the organisations identified 84% of them are organised at the local scale, though with some variation between organisations serving a particular community or neighbourhood and those working at town or district level. Organisations in the local category can be broken down further into several types of organisation, by their level of formality, but also by their interests, with a clear split between collaborations concerned with social concerns and the built environment, and collaborations concerned with recreation, open spaces and the natural environment.

1. Resident/Community Group – 22/128 (17.2%)

Most of the relationships here were continuing, though there were some one-off collaborations around particular planning decisions. Collaborations centred on the following aims:

- Common interests in planning decisions, including campaigning against inappropriate developments.
- Campaigning together for a conservation area advisory committee.
- Liaison and mutual support on community issues.
- Enriching the local heritage list.
- Help to promote better design including being part of a regeneration project.
- Worked together on schemes to provide public facilities.
- Ensure that the right houses are built in the right/correct places.

2. Local Historical/Preservation Group/Society - 18/128 (14.1%)

Many societies have continuing long-term collaborations with other groups concerned with heritage conservation. Joint-working with such organisations had a range of aims falling both inside and outside of the planning system:

- Consideration of planning proposals and policies.
- Adding additional weight and depth in representations on planning matters.
- Common interest on heritage matters.
- Publications resulting from a series of projects.
- Working together to refurbish historic buildings and assets.
- Organisation of Heritage Open Days.
- Identifying risks to heritage and developing strategies or working closely with the local authority to tackle these.

3. Town/Parish Council -11/128 (8.6%)

Most of the specified collaborations with Town and Parish councils were centred on Neighbourhood Plans. Only one-collaboration was identified as a one-off:

- Helping to prepare and implement the Neighbourhood Plan.
- Improving the Public realm
- Creating a town plan.
- Working on Local planning issues
- Updating the Local List of heritage buildings.

4. Other Civic Society – 9/128 (7%)

Helping to illustrate the strength of the civic society movement and working with other civic societies was a popular response. A couple of societies work with multiple other civic societies. These collaborations aim to share information and ideas to generate a stronger voice. The main these are:

- Working across a wider geographical area, including at a national scale.
- Recognising common issues and objectives.
- Exchanging information and ideas.
- Stronger voice through co-ordination and mutual support.
- Protecting the integrity of a significant open space.
- Ensuring that development of heritage assets would meet community aspirations.

5. Neighbourhood Forum/Plan Group - 7/128 (5.5%)

Several societies are working with groups preparing Neighbourhood Plans. However, the aims of working together ranged from preparing the plan through to its implementation and beyond, with one or two of these described as one-off collaborations:

- Helping to prepare and implement the Neighbourhood Plan, including promoting common policies.
- Recognising common grounds in planning matters and engage with the LPA.
- Holding a particular developer to account.
- Improving the town centre.

6. Community Campaign Group on Specific Issue – 5/128 (3.9%)

A smaller number of collaborations were undertaken with groups set up to campaign on particular issues, including two described as one-off collaborations. Joint working here encompassed the following range of themes:

- Saving and regenerating local community facilities.
- Preventing urban sprawl and opposing development, including protecting open spaces.
- Sharing information and outputs.
- Removing litter from streets and open spaces

7. Formal Stakeholder Partnership - 4/128 (3.1%)

Related to working relationships with local government, several societies identified formal stakeholder partnerships, bringing local government together with other groups, for regeneration and addressing traffic issues. These partnerships were also an opportunity to engage with the council on various issues.

8. Green/Open Space Action Group – 7/128 (5.5%)

Civic societies identified relationships with groups set up to promote the protection and improvement of open spaces. These were related to sustainability concerns but also had a different emphasis:

- Promoting and improving specific open spaces.
- Working together on ecology and planning issues.
- Linking protection and practical management of green spaces and trees.
- Mutual support between the organisations.

9. Climate/Sustainability Action Group - 6/128 (4.7%)

A number of societies identified collaborations with groups formed around climate change and sustainability. Some of these were identified as a new relationship. These collaborations had the following aims:

- Widening the civic society's appeal.
- Co-ordinating work on ecology and planning issues including a sustainability plan,.
- Working towards zero carbon emissions across a local area.
- Updating guidance on best practice for retrofitting.

10. Local Business Associations - 4/128 (3.1%)

A small number of societies identified working relationships concerned with promoting local business, including one collaboration with a Chamber of Commerce:

- Working with the property forum to gain intelligence on new development.
- Raising awareness of the importance of heritage and tourism.
- Promoting town centre vitality.

11. Cycling/Walking Groups - 3/128 (2.3%)

A small number of collaborations with recreational groups were identified with the specified aims of promoting tourism and collaborating on objecting to new development.

12. Local Authority – 2/128 (1.6%)

Only a couple of civic societies identified working relationships with their local authorities, though, as noted above, a larger number of groups noted collaborations with town and parish councils. Joint working centred on the production of conservation guidance (leading to a Supplementary Planning Document) and individual decisions, though local authorities were also involved in some of the formal stakeholder partnerships with wider aims.

13. Conservation Area Advisory Committees (CAAC) - 2/128 (1.6%)

Two societies identified their relationships with CAACs, with similar aims to historical societies, but focusing more on providing councils with advice on proposals within specific Conservation Areas. One society noted that 75% of the CAAC was made up of civic society members.

14.   Wildlife Trusts - 2/128 (1.6%)

A small number identified working relationships with their local Wildlife Trust, with the aims of protecting biodiversity and open spaces.

Collaborations with Organisations at the Regional Level

Civic societies were also working with national organisations at the regional level, with a particular focus on landscape and countryside protection:

1. Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE) - 4/128 (3.1%)

On a related note, four societies recorded collaborations with the CPRE, with similar aims of protecting the countryside, but also with a more 'political' focus on preventing new housing in the countryside. One society highlighted the aim of understanding each other's viewpoints.

2. Landscape Organisation - 2/128 (1.6%)

Two relationships were identified with organisations aimed at protecting landscapes at a regional level, including promoting an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and developing a better understanding of the landscape around a particular urban area.

Collaborations with National Organisations

Civic societies were also working with national organisations, though generally with very similar aims. These collaborations were for heritage preservation, sustainability and addressing climate change.

1. Umbrella Organisation for Groups (including Civic Voice) - 5/128 (3.9%)

A small number of societies identified collaborations with umbrella organisations working at a national level (one working across London), including 3 who identified their relationship with Civic Voice:

- Two-way knowledge transfer between Civic Voice (for example, understanding complex planning changes) and sharing on the ground experience. Inputting into Civic Voice priorities.
- Enabling cooperation and sharing of information and skills.
- Partaking in case studies of multiple towns, leading to planning/design guidance.
- Preparation of heritage walks

2. English Heritage/National Trust/Historic England – 4/128 (3.1%)

These organisations have aims around identifying and protecting heritage assets. Historic England is a central government organisation while National Trust and English Heritage are

registered Charities. There was some variation in the precise aims of societies' collaborations with these organisations:

- Support to have a historic site protected
- To clarify small print in the legal standing of building or area status
- In support of Heritage Action Zone projects.

3. *Friends of the Earth – 2/128 (1.6%)*

Two societies identified collaborations with Friends of the Earth, aimed at exploring common interests on climate change mitigation/adaptation and sustainable transport.

Other Collaborations

There was a further set of joint working collaborations that are beyond the above categories:
- School partnership for a local history project with students
- Arts society to encourage inclusion of public art on major development projects
- Local University to consider how the University's strategic plans will work with the plan for the City and what consequences they will have for housing.
- Informal groups looking at opportunities to improve placemaking across the city
- Community Land Trust & Co-housing organisation, addressing key local needs and campaigning
- CAMRA to protect pubs
- Local Golf Course
- Society of Architects to better understand development perspectives
- Charitable campaigning organisations working to support the less well off in areas of housing, transport and sustainability

Respondents also reported on the nature of this relationship. The majority of these collaborations are continuing, long-term relationships with a minority characterised as one-off.

How easy does your society find it to get individual members of your local community involved?
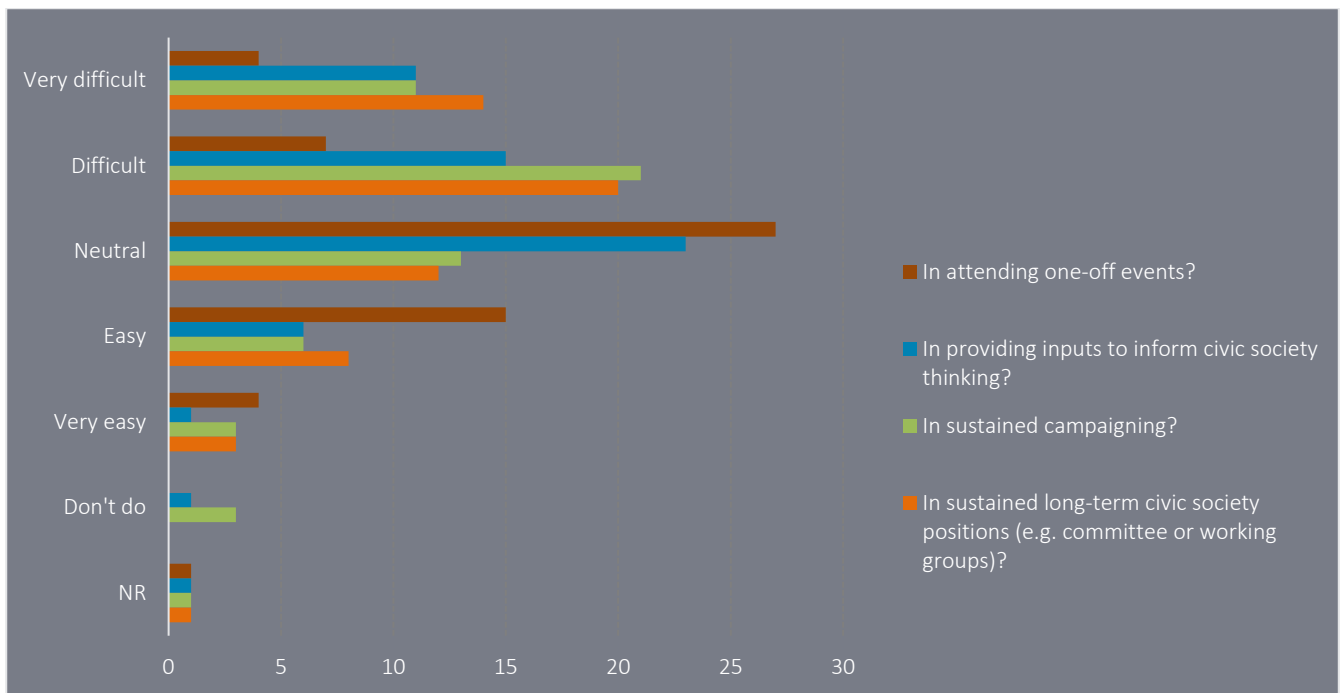
Figure 12: Ease of civic societies' engagement with communities in a range of activities.

There were 2 non-responses to all the specific sub-questions within this question.

All the societies seem to be engaged in one-off events. Of the 55 civic societies that responded, most (45.5%) indicated that it was neither very easy nor very hard. 34.6% said it was either easy or very easy and 20% indicated that it was either difficult or very difficult.

On asking for inputs from the community to inform civic society thinking one society indicated that they do not do this. More (43.7%) civic societies indicated that it was either difficult or very difficult to do this, while only 12.7% indicated that it was either easy or very easy. A smaller number of civic societies (41.8%) said that it was neither difficult or easy.

On engaging the community in sustained campaigning 3 civic societies said that they do not do this. A still higher number of civic societies (54.6%) found this difficult or very difficult, whilst 16.4% indicated it was easy or very easy. 23.6% said that it was neither difficult nor easy.

On involving the community in sustained long-term civic society positions such as partaking in Committees or working groups, the highest number, 58.2%, said that it was either difficult or very difficult, while 20% said it was either easy or very easy. 21.8% said it was neither easy nor difficult.

Overall, there seems to be a general difficulty for civic societies to get individual members of local communities involved in the activities presented. Next we sought to understand the methods of communication that civic societies use to engage with members of the community.

Which of the methods below do you use to engage with members of your local community?
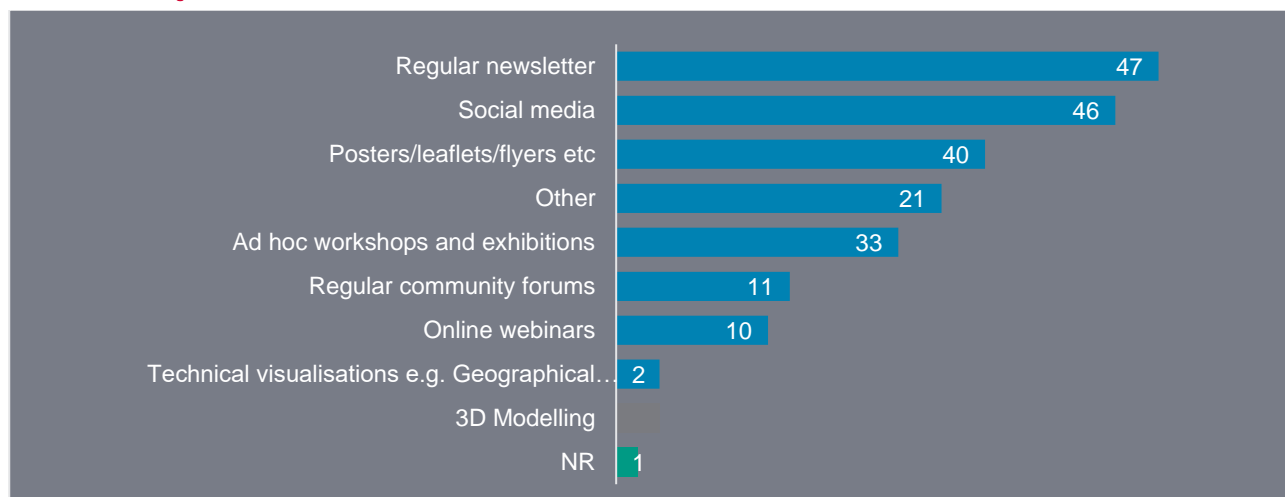
Figure 13: Methods used by civic societies to engage with their local community.

There was one non-response. More than 80% of civic societies used regular newsletters, and social media. 72.7% used posters/leaflets/flyers and 60%used adhoc workshops or exhibitions. These were the most popular modes of communictaion. Less popular were forms of electronic participation such as webinars and technical visualisations, suggesting more traditional methods of communication still pre-dominate. Regular community forums were used by just 20% of civic societies and 18.2% used webinars. 38.2% used other means of communications.

The 'other' category was mainly used by civic societies to provide more detail on the above options, there were also some more examples such as press/media including regular columns in the local newspaper, occupying a building which is a community centre so people can find them easily, guided walks, promotion of tourism, liaison with local businesses, weekly members' planning surgery, providing public access to historic buildings during summer; organising school and other educational visits to historic buildings, personal connections, summer fayres and commentary on local radio stations.

Reflecting on the above answers, suggest one solution that you think would help you better engage with members of your community.

Societies were also asked to consider solutions that would help them to engage better with members of their communities. There were 49 responses and they identified a range of measures.

Membership & Resourcing

A common concern was the need to increase membership and recruit more committee members. More than one response highlighted the concern with an ageing membership, with one society highlighting that most of their committee members are now in their 70s and 80s, compared with the committee in 1975 being aged from 30 to 45. Another society suggested

the wide range of issues that the society engaged with made the recruitment of younger members more difficult.

Related to this, one or two respondents highlighted a decline in civic pride and the feeling that people could make a difference, as well as having more time to engage. One society placed this in the context of *'a poor voluntary sector infrastructure',* where council efforts to address this have been disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Other responses highlighted the need for both more funding, to employ staff and the value of a permanent base, to use for engaging other groups, committee meetings and storage. One society with a permanent base highlighted its role as a community hub, a space for holding weekly planning surgeries and where community members can seek advice.

Social Media

Many respondents felt that a stronger presence on social media would improve their engagement, including as a way of attracting younger members and countering the concern with ageing membership highlighted under resourcing. Related to this, more than one respondent highlighted the need to recruit committee members with communication skills, whilst others suggested the value of webinars and an improved website. Webinars were noted as improving accessibility to society events.

Evidence of Impact

More than one respondent highlighted the importance of evidence of impact on planning decisions.

Print Media

One or two respondents highlighted the usefulness of a regular newsletter for keeping members engaged during the pandemic. Others highlighted the usefulness of having a high profile in the local press, where this exists. Indeed, one respondent noted that they only made it in the press for controversial reasons.

Events

Related to a common desire for greater local visibility, multiple societies highlighted the value of different types of events to raise their profile, including one who highlighted their upcoming 60th anniversary as an opportunity, and another who suggested non-planning related events would help their visibility to a wider audience.

Community Forums

Several respondents highlighted the holding of community forums would be helpful, with one suggesting the council should play a role in this.

Liaison with Other Groups

Societies highlighted opportunities to liaise with other community groups, for example via Facebook. Examples included resident groups, action groups and schools. Other respondents highlighted the importance of engaging with the parish council and with universities, for example through collaboration on dissertations.

Reflecting on the 'Planning for the Future' White Paper proposed reforms, do you think:
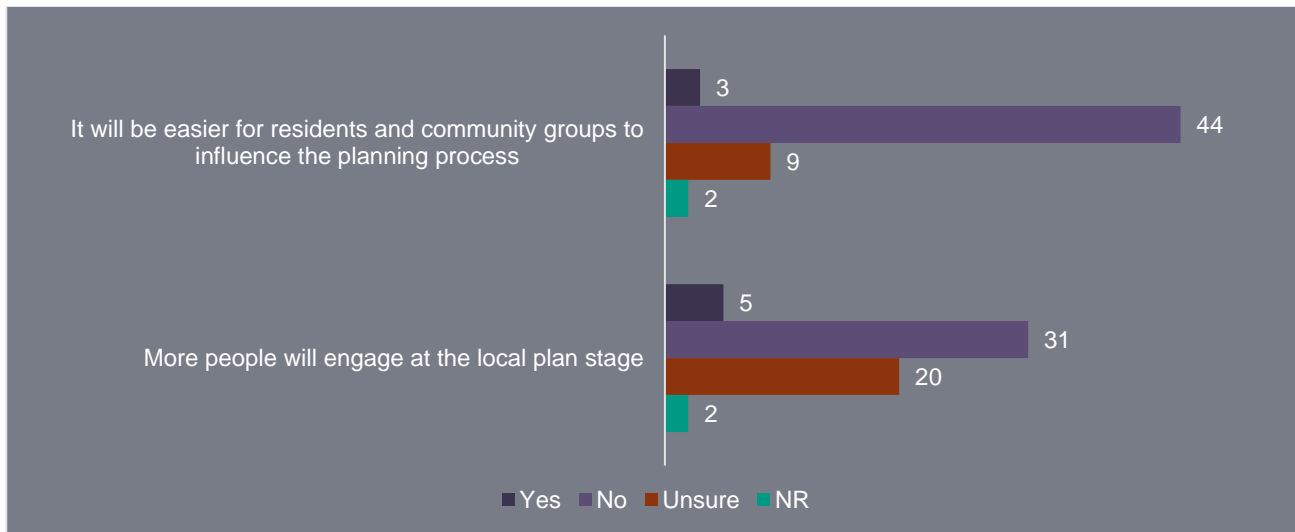
Figure 14: Projected engagement of communities if the White Paper proposals are adopted.

There were 2 non-responses. Out of the 56 responses, whilst there is some uncertainty amongst civic societies about the impacts of the proposed reforms in the 2020 Planning for the Future White Paper, including questions and doubts about what will actually emerge from the process, most civic societies (78.6%) felt that it will <u>not</u> be easier for residents to engage in planning processes, 16.1% were unsure and just 5.4% felt that residents and community groups would be able to better influence the planning process.

Similarly, responding societies also did <u>not</u> expect more people to engage at the Local Plan preparation stage. There were less civic societies, 55.4%, who definitely felt that there would not be more people engaged with the local plan. More civic societies were unsure on the impact of the white paper on the local plan stage, 35.7%, but more, 8.9% alos thought that there would be a positive impact.

Societies were asked to explain their response. 52 civic societies took this opportunity to tell us more. We identified the following themes within the responses:

Easier for communities to engage with concrete proposals

By far the most common response amongst societies was the idea that communities can better understand and engage effectively with tangible proposals for development, where the personal impacts on them can be perceived. One respondent related their experience with their own neighbours:

> *I briefed them about a planning proposal which would impact on views... it was only when the building work started did they react with "I did not realise it would be like this...and yes you did tell us!"*

It was also highlighted that this is the point in the process where communities '*are able to put forward a view with the benefit of real knowledge'*. Consequently, one society described the

proposals contained in the White Paper as *'...a recipe for a massive democratic deficit in planning'*.

Difficulty of Engaging with Policy-making

Respondents noted that Local and Neighbourhood Plans require a lot of time and effort to get involved, as well as being an opportunity that only comes around once every few years. Indeed, it was noted that civic societies themselves struggle to find willing volunteers to commit the necessary time and expertise to engage with policy-making. Whilst the White Paper intends to shorten plan-making timescales, one respondent noted:

> *Our Local Plan has been eight years in the making and has still not reached the site specifics stage. It will now run until 2035, which makes involvement a 'once in a generation' event.*

It was felt that communities struggle to engage with long-term (more abstract) policy development through the Local Plan and will be put off by the time commitment involved. The proposed changes will therefore lead to communities having less say over new development. Some respondents saw this as changes intended to further benefit developers, with one noting that *'developers will only need to successfully influence a local plan and will then have sweeping powers to build on allocated sites...'*. The same respondent raised the need for robust guarantees that they will be consulted, in order to avoid negative fall outs.

Possibilities of Transforming Plan-making

Some respondents expected that engagement with the Local Plan would increase as a result of the proposals in the White Paper. Other respondents felt the structural transformation of plan-making that would be necessary to encourage meaningful community engagement was unrealistic. One respondent questioned whether planners have the necessary skills and time to make the process sufficiently accessible and another respondent questioned whether LPAs would have sufficient capacity to deal effectively with the volume of responses that a 'front-loaded' plan-making process could generate. They felt therefore that the potential to exacerbate existing feelings that communities are not listened to was high. The need to properly resource the statutory planning system was a key conclusion of one society's written response to the White Paper.

Other Themes

Outside of these main themes, the potential of Design Codes were considered to be a positive development, but one which still won't engage the public at large, beyond the 'usual suspects'. Additionally, though acknowledging the possibility of such codes for setting national minimum standards, one respondent warned of the danger of being distracted by the idea of 'beauty':

> *...design must be driven by sustainability and response to climate change, and that the forms, materials, and styles should reflect this, and not be side-tracked by backward-looking stylistic codes for new development.*

A small minority of positive responses highlighted the potential of digital tools to increase engagement, with the suggestion that this would be more inclusive. Two societies highlighted their own detailed written responses to the White Paper, including one society which was called to give evidence to the House of Commons Select Committee inquiry into the Paper.

Summary

Data from this section illustrates the wide range of other organisations that civic societies work with on a more or less formal basis, at different scales. The story here seems to be that societies are able to effectively seek out other groups to work with, where there are mutual aims and benefits. In relation to planning, a common theme was around working with groups to increase their influence in relation to particular applications. Similarly, the variety of organisations reinforces earlier messages about the way that societies' activities have expanded into new areas, with a significant number of collaborations with environmental organisations being reported.

Conversely, the results from this section suggest that civic societies are using a wide variety of methods to engage with their communities, including making an effective transition to the use of social media and webinars but this is not translating into sustained long-term involvement with the societies from members of the community. A key concern for societies in how they engage with their communities is their ageing membership and a lack of new, younger members to ensure succession, raising questions about the future capacity of societies to engage with planning. It was noteworthy that this was also placed in the context of a broader decline in civic pride and participation, raising a related question about how levels of scrutiny in the planning process could decline if civic societies in the future do not have the capacity to engage at the same levels set out in Section 2 of this report.

Detailed responses from some civic societies to the 2020 Planning for the Future White Paper highlight the potential for well organised civic societies to engage in planning in a highly detailed and influential manner. However, it is also clear that societies have significant reservations about how the White Paper will affect community involvement in planning processes. The most striking, if unsurprising, assertion here was that communities only react to concrete proposals and struggle with the more abstract nature of plan-making and policy preparation. Echoing the above point, in the context of a proposed shift in balance toward plan-making, this raises the question of where external scrutiny of this process will come from, if civic societies no longer have the necessary capacity, given their already variable capacity to do so.

Part 4: Reflections on Key Influences, Achievements & Regrets

The final questions asked civic societies to reflect on their answers, to identify key influences on how they worked and the achievements this has led to.

Much of the data from this section of the questionnaire is qualitative. These highlight the extent to which societies' effectiveness is reliant on the skills of its committee members and a good relationship with the LPAs.

Rank the top three characteristics in terms of their importance to your society's effective engagement with the planning system.
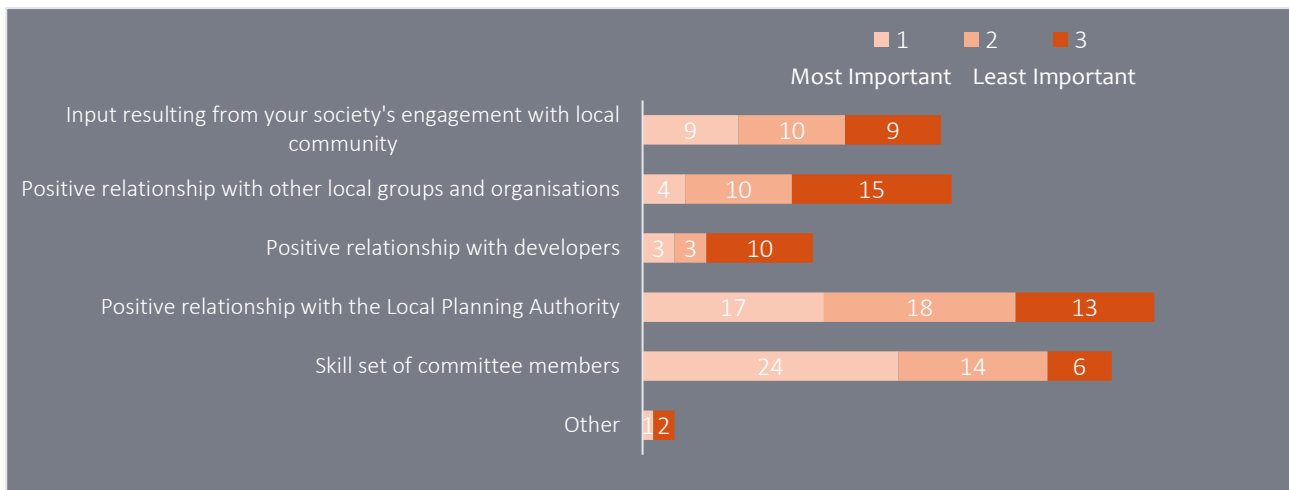
Figure 15: Important characteristics that shape civic societies' engagement with the planning system

82.8% of civic societies indicated that positive relationship with the LPA was important (Ranked either 1st or 2nd), while 75.9% indicated that the skill sets of committee members were important. However, a higher percentage of civic societies, 41.4% ranked the skill set of committee members as most important.

A positive relationship with developers was ranked the lowest, with just 27.6% considering it as important in any way. 48.2 % civic societies considered inputs resulting from engagement with local community as important and a slightly higher share, 50% considered positive relationships with local groups and organisations as important. Those who mentioned 'other' issues largely echoed the above categories, but one civic society highlighted the important need for opportunities to get involved in the co-design of development before an application is submitted.

For the factor you selected highest please explain your ranking

To understand civic societies reflections, we also asked civic societies to further explain their rankings. There were 54 responses to this qualitative question, allowing us to explore the reasons civic societies have provided for their rankings for the top three characteristics societies consider of most importance in their effective engagement with the planning system.

1. **Positive relationship with the Local Planning Authority**

    A core recognition was the considerable power wielded by the LPA as *'decision takers and policy makers'*:

    > *In order to oppose wrong proposals or to advance positive ones it is vital to have a positive and not adversarial relationship with the LPA. The "critical friend" approach will be more beneficial than always being in conflict, though unsuitable proposals must be strongly opposed whenever necessary.*

    Indeed, one respondent highlighted the criticality of this relationship for encouraging planners to consider local needs, rather than just housing targets. Other respondents highlighted the usefulness of this relationship for having 'credibility' with members of the public and the importance of early engagement to maximise influence. The role of feedback in this relationship was also highlighted as important, to allow societies to judge whether their efforts had value, including the citing of societies' beneficial inputs in decisions.

2. **Skill set of committee members**

    Civic society members included heritage experts and some who had themselves, been planners allowing societies to submit to the LPA what they perceived as 'authoritative' responses with 'substance' (rather than simply being opinion-based) and using the correct phrasing. Indeed, one respondent suggested this to be a necessity for members of civic society committees, whilst another noted the significant range of skills, knowledge and expertise amongst its members:

    > *…our committee members include practicing and retired architects, surveyors, architectural historians, local historians, people with ecological expertise and other skills.*

    It was suggested that civic society members were occasionally having to make up for a deficit of skills in the LPA, including lobbying elected members. Another society noted the difficulty of succession planning, with a lack of retiring built environment professionals who could be brought into the civic society, especially as younger professionals would normally be working during daytime on weekdays.

    Other respondents noted the role of expertise in underpinning a positive relationship with the LPA as well as with other groups. They stated that this was linked to the inaccessible and complex nature of the planning system and that it becomes necessary to have planning expertise to engage effectively. Other respondents highlighted the limited availability of these skills amongst small societies.

3. **Positive relationship with other local groups and organisations**
   Respondents also noted how collaborative working enabled them to augment skills, as well as ensure planners received representations from a variety of perspectives. One respondent noted that such groups have *'direct on-the-ground knowledge that makes a difference'.* The knowledge, skillset and absence of politics were also noted as a reason for other groups wanting to work with societies.

Relationship with the Community

Although not amongst the top three priorities voted, respondents who prioritised the importance of their relationship with the community noted it as they perceived this to be a core reason for civic societies existing. Community input and views were also considered as being important to decision-making. One respondent noted the usefulness of community input for having impact with members of the planning committee.

What is your proudest achievement in the last five years as a society? Do you have any regrets?

There were 53 responses to the first question and 50 responses to the second question. These questions gave societies the opportunity to reflect on their key achievements and regrets in relation to planning. Between the two there were common themes, and this section is organised around these, reflecting on both achievements and regrets within the same theme.

Individual Developments

Societies pointed to their success in both influencing improved developments through suggested changes and solutions and preventing poor developments. This was both through campaigning and collaborating with other groups, and direct engagement with applicants and developers from an early stage, with examples cited ranging in scale from a single house to a major dockland regeneration.

One respondent pointed to instances where Planning Officer reports have highlighted information provided by the society. Another noted they were able *'to host a guided tour of the area and identify more than a dozen practical examples of where we have made a difference to development'.* As an example of how civic societies have worked with other groups and coalitions to achieve their aims, one respondent highlighted how they were able to raise '...*tremendous public support to demonstrate the importance of a countryside landscape on the edge of the town on which the...company were hoping to obtain planning permission to build a large and inappropriate estate',* including presenting the community's case at appeal.

Involvement in formal planning inquiries was noted by more than one respondent, including one society which highlighted their role in establishing '*national precedent on the inviolability of Section 106 Agreements',* during a long campaign to save a historic building from

demolition. Similarly, a couple of respondents noted where this had ended up in legal cases, with one citing a supermarket proposal being halted in the Court of Appeal, whilst another worked in collaboration with other activists to launch Judicial Review proceedings that overturned a Secretary of State's decision to permit major infrastructure expansion.

In contrast to achievements around preventing or shaping individual developments, several respondents highlighted developments that they had been unable to prevent from going ahead, including one expressing a wish that they had engaged *'more forcefully and effectively'.* In some cases, this included specific examples of not being able to achieve more in the way of planning gain, the lack of enforcement around caravans and mobile homes in green belt areas.

Level of Influence

Related to this, respondents highlighted examples of where they were able to influence Local Plan policies, for example those addressing heritage and conservation

Several societies reflected on how the local insights and knowledge provided by them and their communities were often not considered by the LPA in either individual decisions or plan-making. This led to feelings of being ignored or being involved in only a tokenistic way and included:

- Lack of engagement with key elected members, including those on planning committees designated to liaise with civic societies.
- Significant effort put into engaging with Local Plan examinations, but where none of the amendments put forward by civic societies and other groups were taken forward by either the LPA or the Planning Inspector.
- Lack of LPA staff continuity, leading to confrontational relationship between the society and the LPA.
- Low profile within the Community:

> *I regret that the Society does not have a high public profile in the Borough - in fact the majority of people have not heard of it.*

One respondent reflected on their lack of ability to influence the range of external factors, including *'the government's relentless, and misguided, onslaught on our planning system.'*

Central Government Policy & Influence

Multiple respondents highlighted the issue of central government policy over-riding the views of civic societies and local communities, including the imposition of arbitrary housing targets, leading to a loss of local control and a poorer quality urban environment. This included the increased influence of the National Planning Policy Framework (MHCLG, 2021) and the delay of Local Plans which then had a knock-on effect of diluting heritage protections.

Neighbourhood Plan Involvement

Several respondents highlighted their roles in either leading or getting involved in Neighbourhood Plan development, including by instigating a Neighbourhood Forum. A couple

of respondents also had regrets in this area, particularly on the time taken to set up a Neighbourhood Forum and an inability to meet aspirations set out in the Neighbourhood Plan for community engagement. One respondent noted their role in influencing legislative change to allow them to lead a Neighbourhood Plan that crossed the boundary between two LPAs.

Heritage & Conservation

Societies cited a wide range of achievements in relation to heritage. These ranged from an Article 4 Direction, preventing the demolition of stone walls; developing conservation appraisals and management plans and organising events to celebrate heritage and improve local pride, such as popular Heritage Open Days. One respondent noted their *'Collaboration with Network Rail to prepare and submit planning application for the renovation of the listed and blue badged footbridge…'* Other respondents highlighted their role in saving key heritage assets and influencing their restoration working with Historic England and producing publicity on conservation areas.

Capacity & Changing Ways of Working

Respondents highlighted that societies have insufficient capacity to engage with all the applications and projects that societies would like to for reasons such as a lack of active volunteers. They stated that engagement with the planning system was time consuming and resulted in a *'steep learning curve'*. One highlighted the survival of the society as a key achievement. A couple of respondents expressed regret for the time commitment involved, whilst another highlighted the loss of expertise:

> *Steady loss of expertise on our planning committee of architects and planners through retirement and the failure to find replacements. This is the core of our dilemma at the moment given the nature of some development applications in a heritage and conservation area.*

This was also reflected in one society's inability to diversify the age-range of their membership from older to younger members.

Societies also highlighted their adaptation to COVID-19 pandemic, and their development of effective social media channels as an achievement to be proud of.

Changing Relationships

Several respondents were proud of the relationships they had developed and maintained, including those with planning officers and elected members, highlighting their *'knowledgeable and balanced voice'.* This has led to being recognized as a key stakeholder, leading to regular meetings with the Head of Planning.

There was also evidence of less productive relationships, which in turn led to a weaker relationship with the community and less influence as a result. A desire for better relationships with individual planning officers and changing relationships with LPAs including where this has resulted from councils restructuring were expressed. One society reflected:

> *...we have not been able to break down the political prejudice that has dogged us for years...through individual Councillors, prevents us from forming meaningful partnerships in local projects.*

The lack of a productive relationship with the LPA was noted to have prevented the full aspirations of a partnership between the society and the LPA, jeopardising the revitalisation of a historic canal system. A society with a high level of retired professional expertise expresses this as:

> *...we deeply resent the government's (and too many developers') view of civic societies as "Nimbys". Indeed, we keep, and cherish, an unsolicited letter from a reputable developer thanking us for our input into his scheme and acknowledging that it was a better scheme as a result, and expressing his appreciation of our approach.*

Other Achievements

A few respondents highlighted achievements that do not fit into the above themes but are worth highlighting:

- Purchasing land for public use.
- Preparation of a local vision document.
- Giving Civic Awards for high quality development.
- Submitting comments on the White Paper on Planning reforms.
- Being brought onto boards such as those for High Street management.

One civic society mentioned that they do not tend to think in terms of proudest achievements, one said that they did not have any proud achievements. A number of civic societies mentioned that they had no regrets.

Other Comments

Societies were given the opportunity to make any final comments and their responses addressed a range of themes on the role of civic societies, including some overall views on their role in relation to planning and some suggestions for practical changes. There were 42 responses. This section organises these comments thematically.

Role as Critical Friend

There is a belief that civic societies have a duty *'to speak up, especially if no other potentially influential body is doing so'.* A desire is expressed for LPAs to engage with societies at all stages of the planning process, in terms of both plan-making and individual developments, including at preliminary stages before proposals are fully formed. One civic society expressed this as:

> *We have a critical role as upholders of standards of good development and   can lead the resistance to bad development*

There is seen to be an important role for civic societies in promoting local control over planning, as a counterpoint to national politics and the imposition of national guidance:

> *…changing damaging policies that are politically imposed such as permitted development rights…Local policies should be the driving force, within an overall strategic framework which has a strong local input.*

This relates to a desire to be seen *'as an integral part of the planning system rather than outsiders to be wary of if in opposition'.*

Institutional Memory & Local Knowledge

In the face of a high level of turnover amongst planning officers in LPAs, civic societies can act as an institutional memory including for conservation areas. Respondents highlighted societies' extensive local knowledge and experience, with one lamenting that this is now valued less than the knowledge of expensive planning consultants. The same respondent suggested that LPAs should draw on societies' knowledge and community links in relation to difficult proposals:

> *…too many Councils 'chicken out' of going to appeals because so called 'experts' are rolled out by developers, and the Councils do not think they can afford other 'experts' to challenge them. They underestimate the ability of local people to present their knowledge of an area in equally eloquent, and often more academic terms than those they are threatened with.*

Variance in Size & Resourcing

Societies highlighted the significant variation in how well resourced they are in terms of size, funding and the skills of members, with *'no common recruiting'* standard. This makes it difficult for societies to engage consistently with planning from area to area, also influenced by the variable size of LPAs and the highly legalistic nature of the planning system. One

respondent highlighted the volume of documentation making up large planning applications and the corresponding difficulty of finding those with the time to review them. This work required expertise and has comparatively less visibility, when compared to other volunteer activities such as tree planting or running a foodbank which most people can do.

Access to Training, Support for Recruitment

Several respondents highlighted that training would be welcome in how to engage effectively. Related to this, other respondents suggest that support for recruiting and retaining members would be beneficial including national and local governments encouraging membership and volunteering for civic societies.

Positive Engagement & Relationship Building

Societies highlighted the need to engage positively, even with poor quality proposals and one highlighted this as a way in which their influence has grown. A common theme linked to positive engagement was building relationships with planners and elected members, with relationships considered by one respondent to be as important as statutory status. In the words of one respondent; *'We have to do politics'.*

One civic society also proposed that community consultation needs to be widened to traffic engineering proposals too, with advance notice and genuine consultation.

Third Party Right of Appeal

One respondent noted that a third-party right of appeal would be the most important positive change that could be introduced, with a tribunal system preventing misuse:

> *We consider that prohibiting communities from being able to appeal against demonstrably bad planning decisions, while enabling developers to appeal against any refusal, is a breach of human rights legislation.*

Role as Statutory Consultees & Community Relationships

Some respondents pointed out that civic societies have a close connection to the community and can act as a bridge between the community, developers, and LPAs. They should therefore be treated like parish and town councils. It was highlighted that metropolitan boroughs, for instance, lack parish councils and consequently don't have this very local input as a statutory part of the system. Such an elevated status would help achieve the aims of the White Paper to engage communities. Other respondents noted that statute would give civic societies a role in a contemporary planning context where design and placemaking are not well valued.

One respondent suggested that statutory consultee status *'is a very bad idea'.* One respondent linked statutory status to the variable size and resourcing of civic societies, suggesting that it may make sense for larger societies, but not for smaller ones, concluding that statutory status for societies should be a locally decided matter. Another civic society suggested that reform should not be aimed at strengthening civic societies but must be aimed at securing more community involvement as a principle. This would then inevitably strengthen civic societies:

Civic societies will be the first to benefit from a more community-led system and we should focus on securing that rather than special pleading for civic societies role.

Another respondent highlighted the important role of other local groups too:

Many other groups...have very valid positions which deserve to be heard in parallel with Civic Societies and they are often closer to the community in which a planning matter arises.

Partnership with other civic societies

Respondents highlighted increasing partnerships amongst civic societies and a desire to take this further. Related to this, another respondent noted the importance of Civic Voice being involved in the development of new legislation.

Central & local government attitude

Many respondents noted the importance of government attitude toward public participation as a key variable, with one suggesting both local and central government were trying to squeeze societies out and another suggesting legal mechanisms were needed to enforce the quality of consultation. Reflecting a comment that consultation was often a *'tick box'* exercise after LPAs and developers had already reached agreement, it was noted that societies would continue to be frustrated as long as the planning system *'is designed to ensure compliance with central government diktat rather than allowing local authorities, after genuine and meaningful consultation with local communities to decide what is best for their own areas.'*

Perhaps the overall feeling amongst societies is best summarised with the response:

Wishing the best of luck to every other Society which keeps on going against the 'system' and keep their communities intact.

Summary

Perhaps most striking here was the considerable value placed by societies on a positive relationship with their LPA and the skill set of their members. Both relate strongly to the civic movement's longstanding place as a home for built environment professionals and similarly longstanding relationship with the planning system. It was particularly interesting to note how local government austerity has given some civic societies an enhanced role in terms of providing institutional memory and filling in for skills and knowledge deficits in the system. Indeed, it was notable that, despite a strong focus on civic societies representing their communities and a strong consensus around the need for planning to be more locally driven, actual input from the communities was considered slightly less important.

These factors also related strongly to where civic societies were highlighting achievements around influencing particular developments, highlighting their self-perception as 'critical friends'. However, this also draws attention to some societies' regrets centring on their relationship with the LPA being less effective. Relating back to the conclusions to Section 3, it is also notable that a lack of capacity was highlighted to engage in the way that societies would like to; in the context of a planning system that has become more complex and the possibility of shifting emphasis to plan-making (under the White Paper reforms), this could lead to a more geographically uneven level of engagement with planning in the future. In relation to the potential for civic societies to take on statutory status, this suggests that some will thrive with this additional influence, but others may simply not have the capacity to perform this role as they would wish to.

Conclusions

One of the key stories this report brings to the light is the extraordinary amount of time and energy that civic societies put into engaging with the statutory planning system. Equally striking is the variety of forms that this takes, driven principally by variations in societies' own size and organisation, the nature and extent of the localities that they represent and their range of relationships with LPAs, with elected councillors and other groups.

Many aspects of the data highlight how the civic movement has evolved and adapted over time, exemplified by adopting into their interests concerns with sustainability and climate change, their continued engagement with an increasingly more complex planning system and their willingness to work with other organisations to achieve their aims. However, other aspects of the data show a continuation of civic societies' century old purposes around engaging with planning and place-making in relatively formal ways, underpinned by the professional skills of members. Against a backdrop of waning civic engagement amongst wider society and a planning system that has become pre-occupied with housing delivery, economic growth and development viability, civic societies play a key role in representing local communities and attempting to ensure that their needs are still accounted for in planning decisions.

Societies themselves point to varying levels of success in their roles as stewards of places, champions of communities and place leaders that hold the planning system to account. We summarise and discuss our key overall findings, and their policy relevance, under the following five headings:

Variation in civic society agendas and capacities

Though there are certainly shared aims, shared values and shared actions between civic societies, our survey responses show there are considerable variations too. These variations must be understood and appreciated before any discussion of the role of civic societies in the planning process is discussed for, they have a profound impact on what civic societies can and are willing to do or not do. The different axes of this variation are one important insight from this report. These can be summarised as:

- The response to new opportunities such as the preparation of neighbourhood plans and design guides and new challenges in the planning system such as permitted development rights are mixed. This has led to some civic societies to narrow their scope of activities while prompting others to wider theirs.
- Civic societies also vary significantly with respect to the time they devote to engaging with the planning system with the number of applications considered in a year tending to cluster at the top end and the bottom end. Any reform envisaged must then understand that civic societies do not uniformly consider working with the planning system as a major part of their work.

- The intensity of engagement and the resources that civic societies bring to working with the planning system is also varied with some engaging in significant, resource intensive activities.
- The scale and type of planning decisions that civic societies engage in vary, with some preferring large development that they perceive will have a profound impact, while some also engage with applications of extensions and alterations. This variation is likely to be more a result of the geographical scale and specificities of the area in which civic societies operate.
- Relationships with the LPA tended to be polarised with examples of co-working cited on one hand and examples of highly acrimonious relationships cited on the other hand. If the role of civic societies as place leaders in the planning system is to be properly accounted for, proactive relationships with LPAs need to be a possibility for all civic societies.

While highlighting these variations, it must be also remembered that civic societies broadly share the following commonalities:

- Reflecting, their longstanding role in place stewardship, a shared active interest in protecting civic pride through engagement with heritage/conservation issues, good urban design, promotion of highstreets/town centre and community facilities
- A strong emerging interest in protecting the natural environment through sustainable development, biodiversity and supporting civic life through regeneration and education on built environment issues
- There is a common pool of routinised activities regarding engagement with the LPA and engagement with the community that most civic societies tended to engage in.
- The planning committees of civic societies tended to be the institutional mechanism through which civic societies made important strategic decisions regarding planning.
- Almost all civic societies are involved in the Local Plan process, but only in specific aspects of it.

Implications

From these reflections, future considerations of the role played by civic societies needs to consider how to maintain their existing independence of purpose and ability to strike their own balance between place leadership and place stewardship activities. Recognising, a longstanding tradition of civic societies as a focus for voluntary action amongst members of built environment professions, there is the potential to reinforce this, through a conversations between Civic Voice and professional institutions such as the Royal Town Planning Institute, Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors and Royal Institute of British Architects. However, forcing societies to increase their focus on the formal planning system, in the face of existing and future capacity constraints would <u>not</u> be a desirable outcome.

Variations in perceptions of LPA relationships with civic societies

In terms of how civic societies engage with the planning system, the variation in relationships between civic societies and their LPAs is crucially important, notably including with respect to elected members.

Societies reported relationships ranging from highly productive to tokenistic at best. The most productive relationships had some of the following characteristics:

- Regular meetings between societies and senior officers.
- Councillors attending civic society meetings.
- Civic societies invited to attend pre-application discussions.
- Civic societies regarded as a source of good ideas.

Perceptions of increased capacity and professional skills of civic societies themselves have driven some of the above initiatives. However, civic societies also reported that they felt they were only invited to get involved when it suited the LPA, limiting their ability to influence proposals. Perceptions of less productive relationships recounted some very different characteristics:

- LPAs ignoring civic society and wider community concerns.
- Perceived culture of LPAs being unwilling to engage with community views, sometimes due to a lack of resourcing.
- Poor communications and perceived arrogance from the LPA.

Implications

From this, it is clear that we need to use the opportunities associated with planning reform to promote culture change amongst LPAs, including the sharing of best practice. Civic societies are an important part of the planning system, not least in the important role they play as institutional memory in an era of rapid staff turnover in planning. However they are voluntary groups, not to be relied upon by LPAs, but to be engaged through constructive relationships.

Prospects for civic society – LPA relations

When civic society-LPA relations go wrong, there can be significant costs, at an extreme leading to civic societies getting involved in campaigning for Secretary of State intervention, requests for judicial review, use of freedom of Information applications and so on, further souring civic society – LPA relations.

However, the evidence collected also shows that there can be a firm basis for improving civic society – LPA relations too. Some of the encouraging initiatives that were reported include:

- Various kinds of co-working arrangements on various types of projects
- LPA councillors attending civic society meetings
- Mutual training sessions organised by civic societies for LPA and LPA for civic societies

- LPAs directing developers to consult with civic voices during pre-application meetings
- LPAs involving civic societies in pre-application discussions
- LPAs actively seeking expertise of civic societies in local history, architecture or other areas of knowledge when warranted
- Active cultivation of relationships of trust and respect

Implications

Building on the previous section, pointing to a range of ways that LPAs could support civic societies (and other groups) with the capacity to play a place leadership role, there are tools that could be used to guide this in a positive direction. As noted in the introduction, civic societies are noted in Planning Policy Guidance as a key stakeholder and this provides a future basis to build upon, for example through inclusion in the NPPF - a definition of 'Non-statutory consultees' in the NPPF Glossary could be one way to achieve this. Similarly, their existing inadequacies notwithstanding (Parker et al., 2021), Statements of Community Involvement do provide the possibility for LPAs confer a 'local statutory status' on civic societies with the capacity to effectively engage in planning.

Prospects for civic societies as champions of the community

The evidence shows that civic societies are good at seeking other groups to work with where there is a shared agenda. They are also good at interfacing with the community at large by disseminating information as well as educating members of the community on issues important for the local area, contributing to raising civic pride. Civic societies contribute to the local economy by protecting local heritage and showcasing historic landmarks through initiatives such as the Blue Plaque schemes or by erecting information boards thereby contributing to sustaining tourism.

Civic societies are, however, facing significant challenges in getting voluntary involvement and contributions from the wider public, especially in engaging with the planning system. Partly this was reported as due to the:

- Level of expertise that the planning system demands
- The abstract nature of the Local Plan making process
- The fact that professionals in younger age groups are typically working making it difficult for them to engage during working hours
- A perceived decline in civic pride in place

This raises questions around succession planning and the future capacity of societies to engage with planning. The concern then is how levels of scrutiny in the planning process can be maintained and how the planning system can continue benefit from the rich local

knowledge that civic societies can bring. In turn, this highlights the key competing factors in considering whether civic societies should have a statutory role in the planning system.

Implications

In thinking about the possibilities for future planning reform, this a strong reminder of the need for the planning system to promote genuine, meaningful engagement with communities that has real impact on the outcomes of planning decisions at both plan-making and individual proposal stages. Particularly, evidence from civic societies highlights a need for engagement to be less technocratic and less reliant on technical knowledge, something that needs to be taken into account when thinking about the future skills of those working in the planning system.

Civic societies' role in the planning system

We have set the scene by highlighting the variations in civic society agendas; the variations in civic society-LPA relations; and the prospects for both civic society relations as well as civic society-community relations. All of these have a significant impact on the prospects for civic societies role in the planning system which we discuss in this section. It is worth recounting some of the issues that civic societies have pointed to with respect to the planning system.

- Top-down imposition of housing targets that leave local communities with no choice and thus renders them helpless
- Prioritisation of extra-local plans and policies over community views
- Frequent turnover of LPA staff and councillors which makes it difficult to build and maintain useful relations with the LPA
- Lack of adequate LPA resourcing limiting officer capacity to engage
- Conflict of interests where the LPA is the landowner, developer and regulator
- Complex planning system which requires specialist knowledge and vocabulary for effective engagement
- Abstract nature of the Local Plan, making community engagement in its preparation difficult.

One of the major recent proposals to reform the planning system involves the publishing of the Planning for the Future White Paper. Civic societies expressed a range of concerns with respect to the Paper:

- Aimed at easing the planning process for developers by reducing community input
- Tries to substitute face to face community input with digital inputs
- Design codes are abstract devices for community engagement and once formulated the scope for community involvement is absent thereby effectively bringing an end to active engaged community involvement.
- Pattern books are backward rather than forward looking.

Specific recommendations from civic societies include the following:

- A significant role for civic societies in bridging the LPA-community divide, especially in major metropolitan areas where there are no Parish councils
- Third party rights of appeal with a tribunal system to prevent misuse
- Training opportunities addressing how to effectively engage with the planning system.

Implications

Building on the previous section, a clear message coming from civic societies about future reform of the planning system is the need to maintain opportunities for communities to meaningful influence at the individual proposal stage, including promoting early engagement from developers to shape proposals.

Reflections on proposals for Statutory Consultee status

The suggestion for granting statutory consultee status for civic societies was discussed at length. One line of argument is that statutory status would act as backstop, giving the societies the right to be consulted earning them respect and thus preventing LPAs from ignoring them. Some civic societies pointed out that it would give them more time in committee hearings as they would not have to share a slot with other community groups. Others pointed out that the status could only get them a right to be heard and that the LPAs could still choose not to respond or to respond in a limited way. Similarly, statutory consultee status comes with expectations, which not all civic societies would be able to deliver on due to their voluntary status and variations in access to resources and expertise. This could then potentially lead to deterioration of relationship with LPAs.

Currently civic societies are relatively free to choose their priorities, according to their capacity and interests. Statutory consultee status could take away this freedom requiring civic societies to give much greater priority to planning issues, at the expense of other activities.

Implications

Civic societies play a significant role in preserving local institutional memory, especially in a context of a dearth of such knowledge within the planning system. Indeed, it is worth noting how providing this kind of knowledge would be very expensive if procured from a commercial planning consultant. Future reforms must make space for this input and the positive influence this can have on new development. However, there is an argument that seeking statutory status is symptomatic of wider problems, particularly the lack of time and capacity for LPAs to properly engage with their communities – it has the potential to be a positive step in assuring the future role of civic societies in planning ut will need to be accompanied by a wider shift in culture toward better valuing community engagement in planning.

Final Thoughts

To return to the original research questions posed for this report, it is clear that civic societies engage with place stewardship and place leadership activities by committing a very significant amount of time and energy to both, albeit in varying proportions. If nothing else, the data presented through this report illustrates that their engagement with place leadership through the planning system is not undertaken lightly, and some of their successes in influencing development demonstrate the value of this. For the future this creates a conundrum of how to maintain this valuable input, often borne of significant local knowledge, institutional memory and accumulated expertise, without undermining their ability and freedom to prioritise the place stewardship activities that are an important part of the civic movement's history. In addition, this intertwines with a future challenge around maintaining this capacity and expertise. However, it is clear that the civic movement has developed the capacity to adapt, collaborate and evolve and it would be detrimental to the quality of future places to not find effective ways to draw on these abilities through the planning system.

The authors hope that this report has been effective in highlighting these characteristics through this exploration of how civic societies engage with the planning process and look forward to developing these insights further through the next report, which will develop in depth case studies of how societies engage in place stewardship and pace leadership.

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Appendix 1: Full Survey Questionnaire

Civic Societies and the Planning Process: Exploring the role of local civic societies in the English planning system

Page 1: Introduction

This questionnaire has been prepared by researchers at the University of Reading, in co-operation with Civic Voice. Using your responses, we aim to develop a detailed understanding of how civic societies engage with the

planning process.

More information about the purpose of the questionnaire, what is asked of civic societies and how any data is managed can be found on the Information Sheet, accessible via the following link:

https://www.dropbox.com/sh/at0evgg2lswdjb1/AADwiUHv8D-Dlfra_kTTX3cga?dl=0

The completed questionnaire should only be submitted by either the Chair or Secretary of the Society. However, you may find it helpful to complete the questionnaire collaboratively, during one of the Society's meetings.

Participation is entirely voluntary and after submitting the questionnaire, you may withdraw from the project by contacting the Principal Investigator. You can also decline to answer any questions that you are uncomfortable with (with the exception of the initial consent to participate, which is required).

The questionnaire has no time limit and only one questionnaire has to be undertaken per civic society. **If needed, responses to the questions can be saved and completed later by participants**. You can do this by clicking on the *'Finish later'* link at the bottom of each page, which will generate a unique link for you to return to the questionnaire later.

Under some questions you will find text in **bold**, which gives an additional instruction on how to answer the question. You may also find text in *italics* which is intended to give some additional guidance on how the question should be interpreted.

Please be assured that steps will be taken to ensure that participant societies are not individually identifiable in any of the outputs from the research and that subjective views expressed will be anonymised. The results will be used in the preparation of a range of outputs, including a detailed report of the results for Civic Voice.

If you have any questions about the questionnaire or need any help with how to respond, please contact the lead researcher; Chris Maidment, by emailing c.s.maidment@henley.reading.ac.uk.

Please click on the 'Next' button to proceed to the 'Consent to Participate' page.

Page 2: Consent to Participate

Before you proceed to the questionnaire itself we ask you to read the following statements about your participation in the research and consider whether you agree with them. If you are happy with the statements, please answer the mandatory consent question at the bottom of the page.

1. I have read the accompanying Information Sheet relating to the project on: *Civic Societies & the Planning Process: Exploring the role of local civic societies in the English planning system*

2. I understand the purposes of the project and what will be required of me, and any questions I have had have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to the arrangements described in the Information Sheet in so far as they relate to my participation.

3. I understand what information will be collected about me, what it will be used for, who it may be shared with, how it will be kept safe, and my rights in relation to my data.

4. I understand that participation is entirely voluntary and that I have the right to withdraw from the project any time, and that this will be without detriment.

5. I understand that the data collected from me in this study will be stored long term in anonymised form and used by members of the research team in the preparation of a range of outputs, for example, conference presentations, journal articles, reports and books.

6. This research has been reviewed in accordance with the procedures specified by the University Research Ethics Committee and has been given a favourable ethical opinion for conduct by the Head of Department.

1. Are you willing to participate in our research study? *Required*
- Yes
- No

Page 3: Introductory Questions

These questions will help us to understand the range of built environment issues that civic societies engage with, setting the context for exploring the involvement of civic societies in the formal planning system on the next page.

2. Which civic society are you answering the questionnaire on behalf of?

3. In your view, on a scale of 0-5, how involved* is your civic society with the following** **(0-Not at all --- 5- Very active)**:
- Heritage conservation
- Protecting community facilities
- Education and outreach on built environment issues
- (including publications)
- Highlighting priorities for improving transport
- Highlighting priorities for regeneration
- Good quality urban design
- Promoting sustainable development and carbon
- emission reductions
- Ensuring biodiversity protection and enhancement
- Promoting a vibrant high street/town centre

*By 'involved' we mean taking some sort of action, which could range from publicising issues, to holding events, to using Society resources to develop facilities and resources.

**Planning decisions on particular development proposals and policymaking are deliberately excluded from this list as they are discussed in detail in the next part of the questionnaire. Here we are interested in your society's interests more broadly.

4. Are there any other aims related to promoting a high-quality built environment that your society is involved with*?
- Yes
- No

4.a. If yes, please briefly describe these aims.

*As above, activities related specifically to the planning system are addressed in the next part of the questionnaire.

5. Reflecting on the above answers, has the society significantly changed its activities and campaigns over the last ten years? If so, how?

Page 4: Involvement in the Planning System

Your answers to these questions will help us to understand how civic societies get involved in different aspects of the planning system, including how they interact with the Local Planning Authority.

6. Overall, what proportion of your society's work would you say is about working with the formal planning system **(Tick ONE Box)**?
- 0-20%
- 20-40%
- 40-60%
- 60-80%
- More than 80%

7. How many planning decisions were you involved* with over the course of the past twelve months?

**By 'involved' we mean taking some sort of action, which could range from commenting on an application, to speaking to the local media, to engaging*

with the developer

7.a. Is this typical of the long-run trend*?
- Yes
- No

*In thinking about the long-run trend we suggest thinking about the last five years or s*o.

8. In what ways has your civic society tried to influence specific development proposals in your area **(Tick ALL that apply)**?
- Discuss with local authority at the plan-making stage
- Development of site-specific policy
- Involvement in co-design of development
- Make comments on development proposals
- Attend and speak at planning committees
- Contact local councillor
- Mobilise community responses
- Purchase land in your local area to control development
- Take legal action through the courts as a last resort
- Other

8.a. If you selected 'Other', please specify:

9. How do you decide which planning applications to get involved with?

10. Please briefly describe the last three **significant** planning decisions that your society sought to influence?

	Brief description of development	If possible, provide the planning application number	At what stage of the development process did you intervene?
1			
2			
3			

11. Have there been any occasions when the Local Planning Authority has sought the Society's input directly regarding a development proposal?
- Yes
- No

11.a. If yes, can you tell us how you were brought into the process?

12. Do you get involved* in the Local Plan process?

- Yes
- No

By 'involved' we mean taking some sort of action, which could range from commenting on the documents, to speaking to the local media, to taking part in discussions

12.a. If yes, how do you decide which aspects of the Local Plan to get involved with?

12.b. In what ways do you get involved in the Local Plan process **(Tick all that apply)**?
- Making written representations on consultation documents
- Attending public consultation events organised by the Local Planning Authority
- Attending invited consultation events organised by the Local Planning Authority
- Organising own community consultation events
- Organising own internal discussions within the Civic Society
- Engaging with media
- Other

12.b.i. If you selected 'Other', please specify:

13. On a scale of 1-5, how would you rate your relationship with your local planning authority? **(1- Very Poor --- 5- Very Good)**:

13.a. Please identify any key factors that have impacted this relationship.

13.b. Reflecting on the past three years, has your society's relationship with the Local Planning Authority changed significantly?
- Yes
- No

13.c. If your answer to Part B is *'yes'* please can you explain why.

14.

- Representations on individual development proposals/planning applications
- Formal status for civic societies at the Local Plan stage

Reflecting on the above, which of the options below would be more important to give civic societies an effective voice in determining the outcomes of the planning system?

14.a. Please explain your response below.

Page 5: Relationship with the wider community

These questions address the relationship between the Civic Society and its wider community and should be answered with the Society's activities in relation to the formal planning system in mind.

15. If relevant, can you tell us briefly about up to three other groups or organisations* that you have worked with in the last three years, with a

common aim in mind.

	Name of organisation	Type of organisation	Aim of working together
1			
2			
3			

Examples of this could include working with other civic societies, residents' associations, neighbourhood forums, community groups, heritage societies, religious institutions etc.

16. On a scale of 1-5, how easy does your society find it to get individual members of your local community involved **(1- Very Difficult --- 5- Very Easy)**:
- In attending one-off events?
- In providing inputs to inform civic society thinking?
- In sustained campaigning?
- In sustained long-term civic society positions (e.g.
- committee or working groups)?

17. Which of the methods below do you use to engage with members of your local community? **(Tick ALL that apply)**:
- Posters/leaflets/flyers etc
- Regular newsletter
- Ad hoc workshops and exhibitions
- Regular community forums
- Social media
- Technical visualisations e.g. Geographical Information Systems, 3D Modelling
- Online webinars
- Other

17.a. If you selected Other, please specify:

18. Reflecting on the above answers, please suggest one solution that you think would help you better engage with members of your community.

19. Reflecting on the 'Planning for the Future' White Paper proposed reforms, do you think:
- It will be easier for residents and community groups to influence the planning process – *Yes/No/Unsure*
- More people will engage at the local plan stage – *Yes/No/Unsure*

19.a. Please explain your response below.

Page 6: Concluding Questions

These questions bring the questionnaire to a close and will help us to better understand civic societies' own reflections on their involvement with the planning system.

20. Reflecting on the above questions, from the following characteristics please rank the top three in terms of their importance to your society's effective engagement with the planning system **(1- Most important --- 3- Least important)**:
- Input resulting from your society's engagement with local community
- Positive relationship with other local groups and organisations
- Positive relationship with developers
- Positive relationship with the Local Planning Authority
- Skill set of committee members
- Other

20.a. If you selected 'other' please specify:

20.b. For the factor that you ranked highest, please explain your ranking.

21. Thinking about your society's involvement with the planning system, what in your opinion, is your proudest achievement in the last five years as a society?

22. Thinking about your society's involvement with the planning system, do you have any regrets from the last five years?

23. Are there any further comments that you would like to make on the role of civic societies within the planning system?

24. To help our analysis, please tell us how this questionnaire was answered:

- Individually
- By two or more individuals outside of a committee meeting
- Collaboratively in a committee meeting