



## What is a Civic Society?

A **CIVIC SOCIETY** is a community-based organisation made up of a diverse group of active local citizens with a shared sense of civic pride and community spirit, who volunteer their time to carry out activities and campaigns that improve their local environment.

Civic Societies are an accepted public voice on all urban development. They often act as community watchdogs or as mediators between local authority planning officials, developers and the general public on planning developments that have serious implications on the quality of lives of local communities. Civic Societies are often called upon to act as custodians of local history and heritage in their local communities. As a result they make an excellent springboard for fostering a sense of civic pride and community cohesion in any given community.

A Civic Society can set up as an unincorporated or incorporated organisation, although the Civic Trust is encouraging all members to become incorporated and preferably set up as registered charities because of the nature of the Civic Societies' work.

### Why are Civic Societies important?

#### Key Objectives

Civic Societies exist to enrich the quality of life of local communities by championing high standards and excellence in the built environment. This area has expanded over the years to include the promotion of excellence and renewal within the historic and natural environment. The key objectives of Civic Societies have not changed much since the first Civic Society, was created in Devon in 1846. Civic Societies exist to:

- promote high standards of planning, architecture, conservation and regeneration
- educate the public in the evolution of the historic, geographic and architectural environment with a particular place.

- secure the preservation, protection, improvement and sustainability of features of historic or public interest in the environment.

### What does a Civic Society do?

#### Key Activities

The remit of Civic Society movement's work is extensive. Each Society's work varies from place to place as this is often determined by the needs within their local community coupled with the capacity of volunteers within the Society. Our recent survey carried out in 2006, showed that Civic Societies generally undertake a diverse range of activities which include:

- ensuring high standards in planning, good architectural design and campaigning for the preservation of historic buildings.
- making annual awards which recognise high quality in new architectural developments
- encouraging new developments designed to enhance the amenities and general prosperity of local communities.
- undertaking practical projects, including restoring old buildings, heritage events, litter picking, pond cleaning, developing new societies and finding solutions to traffic problems
- inputting into local development plans, local area agreements and representing local residents on various strategic regional planning and housing fora.
- promoting, through publications and public debate, a greater interest and knowledge in all aspects of community life, the challenges faced therein as well as the opportunities to be grasped
- campaigning to improve local transport systems and pressing for better public transport.
- Providing organisational support various small local improvement projects such arts clubs, for example, throughout the community

#### About The Civic Trust

The Civic Trust is the leading UK charity dedicated to bringing vitality, sustainability and high quality design to the built environment. An independent charity, founded in 1957, The Civic Trust works with people to promote thriving towns and villages with the aim of inspiring and promoting progressive improvements to the quality of life.

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- creating opportunities for local people to play a part in protecting their heritage and in shaping the future of their community.

## Who carries out the work of Civic Societies? People, staff and volunteers

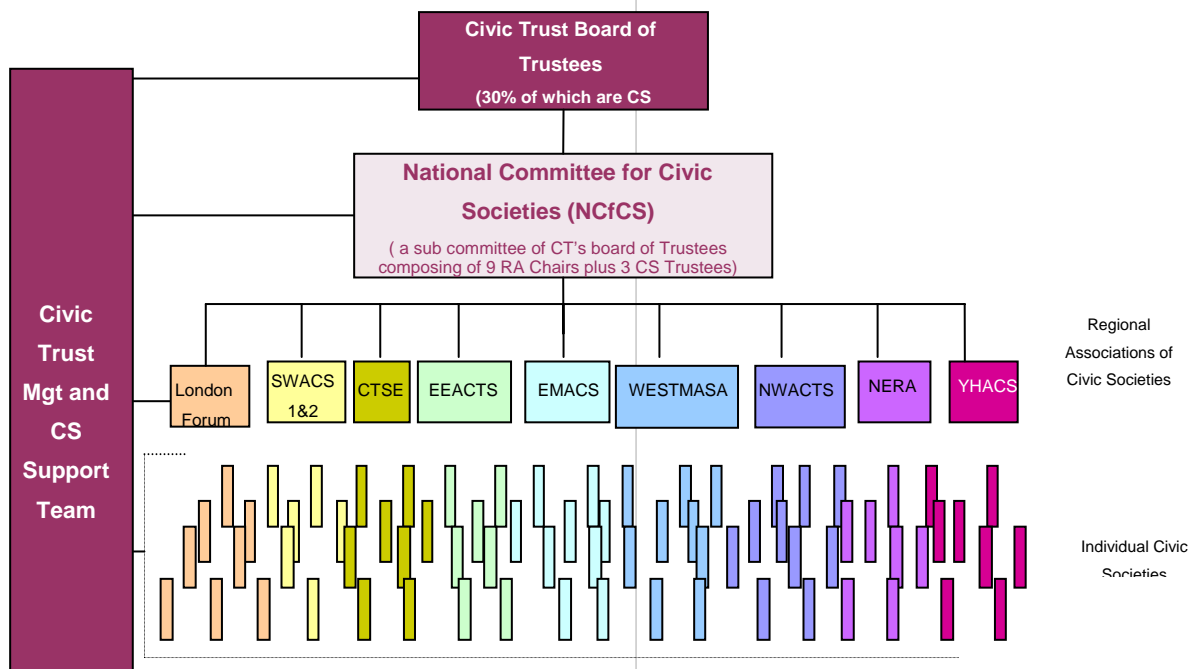
Civic Societies are managed by a core group of volunteers who mainly serve as members of executive committees. Other active volunteers contribute their time to coordinating community events, responding to planning applications, attending strategic local government meetings and fundraising. A recent survey of 186 Civic Societies estimated that their volunteers donate over 2,938 hours per week to projects that impact the public good. However more and more Civic Societies are increasingly recognising the importance of raising funds to recruit paid staff that would run their societies effectively to ensure their credibility and sustainability for the future.

## How is the Civic Society Movement Structured?

There are over 739 Civic Societies currently registered with CT. This culminates in over 250,000 individual members of which only 20,000 or so are active members. The number of members per society ranges from 8 to 6,000.

The highest concentration of Civic Societies can be found in the South East region with 137 societies. This is followed by the South West with 105 societies and London with 91 societies. There are up to 70 societies in Yorkshire and Humberside and 50 in the North West with the North East hosting the smallest number of societies at 14. The membership breakdown for the four remaining regions are in similar proportion to that of Yorkshire & Humber and the North West.

Less than four years ago, the Civic Trust developed and funded nine Regional Associations of Civic Societies (RAs) to coordinate the work of individual societies in each region. The development was undertaken in response to the government's decision to develop regional development agencies.



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Some of these RAs now operate as independent organisations in their own right as registered charities with paid staff. The Civic Trust continues to work closely with these RAs not only through funding which is raised through membership fees but through the role that the regional associations play within the governance structure of the Civic Trust as illustrated in the diagram below.

## How do Civic Societies Operate?

An effective Civic Society operates no differently from any typical third sector organisation. Third sector organisations are identified as voluntary and community organisations, charities, social enterprises, faith groups, cooperatives and mutuals. Such organisations according to Ed Miliband, the minister for the third sector, “make a difference in ways government cannot: in the ways it reaches out to excluded communities, builds the confidence and abilities of those who volunteer, strengthens trust and provides innovative solutions to the new problems that society faces. And in that process, the third sector can build social capital and provide voice for its communities in ways government often cannot”.<sup>1</sup>

Registered Civic Societies, like third sector organisations, have been created by determined citizens to meet specific public needs within a local context. The Civic Society movement, like the third sector is built on the ethos of volunteering and exists to empower citizenship and regenerate local communities. Civic Societies employ the most resourceful and innovate means for tackling social problems. As is now required of third sector organisations, Civic Societies are also required by the members to be transparent, professional, inclusive and democratic. Civic Societies are therefore equal contenders for statutory and charitable funding, local government service level

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/about\\_the\\_cabinet\\_office/speeches/emiliband/doc/third\\_sector\\_review.doc](http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/about_the_cabinet_office/speeches/emiliband/doc/third_sector_review.doc)

agreements, local area agreements and community asset opportunities as any other third sector organisation.

CT requires its member Societies to:

- Ensure their membership closely reflects the demographics of the communities they represent.
- Have in place an executive committee which acts as board of trustees and is responsible for managing the operational and strategic affairs of the Society.
- Have a written and relevant constitution which explains the objects of the organisation, powers of the key officers and procedures by which the Society will be governed. Registered CT members are provided with a model constitution which has been approved by the Charity Commission.
- Be willing to collaborate with the Civic Trust as part a national movement in driving the modernisation of the movement which will include participation in consultations, learning events and promoting the increased use of new ICT tools across individual membership.

## What are the current priorities for the movement?

### The future and beyond

The current Government has not held back in articulating its recognition and value of the unique position that third sector organisations play in helping local people to access and enjoy public amenity services. The minister for the third sector recently reinforced this position by stating that “the role of the Government will be to enable voluntary organisations to deliver services in partnership with the public and private sectors, bringing with them a more intimate knowledge of user needs, the ability to engage hard-to-reach groups in society, and the capacity to



innovate in response to unique local combinations of delivery challenges.”<sup>2</sup>

In response to these plans, CT, as directed by the National Committee for Civic Societies is rolling out a modernisation programme to modernise and equip Civic Societies to embrace a standard of effectiveness that will enable them to take a visible role in delivery of public services. This modernisation programme will seek to raise standards of excellence in governance and service delivery; to encourage effective communication and reciprocal accountability; to

build a more inclusive and sustainable movement and to support individual Societies to set SMART future agendas which in turn will enhance the collective credibility of the movement as well as result in better recognition of the work of individual Civic Societies at national level.

Are you up for our modernisation challenge?

**Contact us now for full membership application pack**

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[http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/newsroom/news\\_releases/2006/060622\\_three\\_sectors.asp](http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/newsroom/news_releases/2006/060622_three_sectors.asp)

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