

Civic Voice Presentation



Tony Burton of Civic Voice

Almost one year to the day from its inception, Tony Burton came to Farnborough to speak to members of several local civic societies about Civic Voice. Prior to the meeting, Chairman David Jennings and I took Tony on a tour of the town. By car, we visited Farnborough Hill School, Farnborough Village, the new development around the airport and North Camp. We then walked through the town centre, completely deserted after the shops had closed, and took a look at the stalled redevelopment project, before returning to Rushmoor Borough Council offices via the site, currently occupied by the community centre, library and police station, where TFS proposes building a town square and arts and entertainment complex. Like us, Tony could clearly see the potential of such a proposal, and encouraged us to pursue our vision.

Tony began by tracing the history of the civic movement, from the first civic society formed in Sid Vale, Devon, 107 years ago. The forerunner of Civic Voice, The Civic Trust, was founded 50 years ago and did pioneering work on the environment, such as protecting mature trees during development, scrutinising shop fronts and developing regional parks. The Civic Trust's great weakness was that it was almost entirely dependent on outside funding, with 95% coming from government, for such things as the Green Flag Award scheme.

When The Civic Trust went bankrupt in 2009, there was an immediate debate regarding the future of civic societies now that they had lost their focal point. Tony, and some other interested parties, set up the Civic Society Initiative, a nine-month consultation during which societies were brought together, sometimes for the first time in decades, for discussions about their activities, how they were perceived and what their aims were.

Tony and his colleagues were impressed by the wide range and diversity of activities engaged in by civic societies, including planning, town trails, youth activities, conservation, campaigns, listing, In Bloom competitions, research and publication, blue plaque schemes, design awards, tree planting, community meetings, clean-ups, asset transfer scrutiny and friends' groups.

With regard to perception, members felt that civic societies were seen as committed, caring and concerned with civic pride, but also as old-fashioned, middle class do-gooders. "An organisation for intelligent crumblyies," said one person. "A vastly untapped resource," said another. "Punching below its weight," said a third.

Members' ambitions included being influential, local, successful, inclusive, dynamic and effective. What they wanted was:

- To raise their profile
- To have influence where it matters
- To mount high-profile and effective campaigns
- Stronger civic societies
- A civic movement
- Financial independence

Armed with this information, Civic Voice was formed. Its aims were:

- To be run by the movement for the movement
- To conduct campaigns, to lobby, to form partnerships and to raise the profile of the civic movement
- To support civic societies
- To maintain financial independence

Civic Voice set out to create a clear identity, using celebrities such as President Griff Rhys Jones, to be an effective lobbyist, to publish and disseminate useful information, to encourage networking, and to offer support to civic societies. Above all, Civic Voice seeks to engender civic pride, believing that everyone has the right to live somewhere to be proud of. The aim is to make lives more attractive, enjoyable and distinctive. There are currently 275 groups in Civic Voice, representing 71,000 members, and more than half of those groups have actively engaged in Civic Voice events. Their success has been largely due to positive television and radio exposure. Shortly after its launch, David Cameron, Nick Clegg and Gordon Brown all expressed support. Campaigns such as that against street clutter and that against the proposed high-speed rail link have also raised the profile of Civic Voice, as has the recent tree-planting week. Meeting with ministers on important issues is another important aspect of Civic Voice's work.

Tony explained that the Localism Bill represents a unique opportunity for civic societies to take the lead in determining local issues:

- A shift of power to communities
- New community rights
- Greater consultation, enforcement and local services
- Neighbourhood planning
- Challenge to politicians and professionals
- Opportunities for civic societies
- Funding and support

Decisions will be made by referendum, even if the local authorities object. Tony warned that if civic societies do not step forward and take the lead in the new process, others surely will!

Effective communication is vital to the success of Civic Voice: websites, bulletins, clusters and networks. Civic Day, to be held on 25th June 2011, will see events staged all round the country to raise awareness of the civic movement. National meetings and campaign workshops are proving extremely useful. Awards have been introduced for the best website and the best newsletter, to encourage societies to improve their communications.

Financial independence is crucial, and Civic Voice needs to raise £150,000 per year to meet its core costs.

According to Tony, we need to strengthen civic societies by:

- Inspirational campaigning, both nationally and locally
- Meeting and sharing between societies
- Creating new societies
- Effective use of websites and social media
- Recruiting volunteers
- Encouraging a wider range of volunteers
- Initiating timed, limited, discrete projects
- Becoming more transparent and democratic
- Raising profile locally
- Improving communications with members
- Raising more funds
- Developing a clear vision for the area
- Connecting more with other local groups
- Taking advantage of the Localism Bill

In conclusion, Tony said that the important thing is to accentuate the positive, even when our message is basically negative. Societies who manage to maintain a positive attitude are more confident and ultimately more successful.

After his talk, Tony answered a variety of questions covering issues such as the right of appeal, parishes, empty shops and green gaps. Then he stayed on to chat to members of the audience. Members from Fleet and Church Crookham, Aldershot and Yateley also stayed to exchange thoughts. We sincerely hope that joint meetings such as this will be a feature of the local civic movement in the future.