

Open Meeting – Broadening the Membership Base

Some fifty participants attended this workshop, aimed at helping member societies diversify their membership, and become more representative of the communities they serve with diverse and younger participants. The event commenced with four short introductory talks.

Dulwich Society Chair, **Ian McInnes** gave a pen portrait of the Society, its *modus operandi* and the challenges it faces. Originally representing residents on the Dulwich Estate, the Society is now open to residents of East and West Dulwich, drawing in a more diverse membership. As well as seeking to preserve the unique character of the neighbourhood, the Society is also heavily involved in practical, workaday issues such as road safety, improvements to public transport and promoting the Council's Cleaner Greener Safer scheme. The overall impression is of a society with "clout" which contributes actively to the wider society, whilst continuing to deliver for its core membership.

Gerry Weston, introduced participants to the Mapesbury Residents Association (MapRA), with a catchment area between Willesden Green, Cricklewood and Kilburn. With around 800 members, it is the largest society of its kind in Brent. Its priorities are to press for improvements in the area (street cleaning, potholes, pavements), to protect the area's largely Edwardian character and to foster community spirit. The Association has initiated a number of groups not normally associated with the civic movement – Reading, Bridge, Theatre, Gardening, Walking, History and Harvesting/Pruning. Some of these draw in a younger demographic, particularly families with children. The biennial Open Gardens day attracts a large number of visitors and raises an enviable amount of money for local charities.

Jeremy Leach, Chair of the recently-formed Walworth Society, had prepared a presentation for the meeting which was delivered by Paul Thornton due to a clash of dates. The Society represents residents of the relatively deprived area south of Elephant & Castle on either side of the Walworth Road. The Society's business model is very different from most civic societies; there is no membership fee, all events are free, all communication is electronic. Membership is by subscription to the email list. There is a monthly eNewsletter and monthly meetings that deal with all active business. The restoration of fire-damaged Walworth Town Hall, and protecting the Walworth Road Conservation Area are major issues. There is a small committee but most tasks are undertaken by volunteers for specific projects.

Paul Bedwell, past Chair of Sheffield Civic Trust and a Deputy Chair of the national organisation, Civic Voice, spoke about initiatives to address the core challenge of attracting members to civic societies across the country. He noted that a number of civic societies had attracted a more diverse membership. For instance, Sheffield, Bradford and Birmingham civic trusts and societies all have Chairs in their 20s. Delegation to dedicated working parties and the importance of micro volunteering were also cited. Paul commended collaboration and knowledge sharing through membership of the London Forum and Civic Voice and drew

attention to analysis tools available to Civic Voice members, the Civic Society Assessment Tool and Trustee Skills Audit.

The meeting then split up into 7 break-out Groups. Each addressed the same question: “based on the ideas put forward in the presentations and the situation in your own societies, which ideas are worth serious consideration by your society?” The following “top ten” ideas received the largest number of nominations from the break-out groups, and drew general approval when presented.

1. We can no longer behave as though **social media** doesn't exist. We must communicate via the media that our target audience, millennials in particular, expect us to be using. Almost all civic societies have websites. In addition, we suggest that Twitter (or possibly Instagram) for immediate news items, and a monthly e-newsletter should be the norm. Societies should be familiar with the use of EventBrite and MailChimp (or similar) for managing event bookings and email lists respectively.
2. In seeking out **younger leaders for our civic societies**, we should look to those rising professionals (such as budding partners in architects' practices) for whom a spell as Chair could be seen as networking or as an element of Continuing Professional Development
3. **We must get out more** – we need to take our message out to where our target audiences meet anyway, such as faith groups, tenants/residents association meetings, ward partnership events etc.
4. We need to mobilise people who are willing to do something but don't want to sit on committees – **micro-volunteering** for short. This suggests a small core committee and a larger penumbra of people who will lead specific initiatives for a finite length of time
5. We should **cooperate actively** (a) with other civic society organisations on our patch, and (b) with civic and amenity societies on our borders
6. We should be as **easy to join** as possible– PayPal, credit/debit card online etc, We should catch potential recruits “in the moment”, e.g. immediately after they move to the area.
7. Would **2-tier membership** make sense – paying members, and an email list that receives tweets and the e-newsletter? Would members migrate upwards, or might the opposite happen?
8. **Awards, competitions and events** – run an annual architectural award, or best window box display or best young volunteer scheme. Run an annual flagship event – local Open House day, Open Gardens, Local History festival etc.
9. Make greater use of other organisations to publicise our activities such as the **London Society, London Forum**, local libraries etc
10. Gain access to the **Civic Voice analysis tools** for assessing the performance of our organisations and whether we have the right skills available

London Forum will organise an Open Meeting in the autumn to examine at least one of these topics in depth. Please go to [surveymonkey.com....](https://www.surveymonkey.com) to indicate which of these would be of most interest to your society.