

## Strengthening Civil Society: the Role of Heritage

Long before anyone had heard of 'Big Society', our members were already demonstrating and contributing to the strength of civil society in a multitude of ways, from the rehabilitation of historic buildings as community resources, to the volunteer-led projects uncovering and celebrating the fascinating stories behind our towns, landscapes, battlefields and parks for the benefit of local communities and visitors alike. Research carried out by The Heritage Alliance in 2011 has provided evidence of and qualified our contribution.

- 97% of Alliance member respondents to The Heritage Alliance's questionnaire are aware of 'Big Society' initiatives and 90% believe it is relevant to their work.
- 73% of Alliance respondents have discussed 'Big Society', in meetings, at seminars or with other organisations.
- Heritage organisations are contributing to all themes of the government's Big Society agenda, and particularly to 'Social Action', encouraging individuals to take an active part in society. Heritage provides a focus for over 400,000 individuals to volunteer each year, offering time and expertise to enhance their environment.
- Alliance member organisations are especially prominent in an enabling capacity to empower other groups and individuals to contribute to civil society, for instance providing the opportunity to support or become a member of a group or cause. We are also contributing significantly on the frontline.

89% of THA member respondents expect to maintain or increase their amount of activity contributing to civil society in the near future, and 82% expect to maintain or increase the range of projects they deliver. Around half are confident that their contribution will increase. We can contribute **still further** if:

- Local authorities engage with and support heritage organisations, recognising the heritage sector's expertise and potential to contribute on the community level, using resources such as Heritage Champions.
- Local authorities maintain or increase their current level of conservation staffing. Conservation expertise within planning departments facilitates engagement with heritage organisations and local heritage projects, and awareness and promotion of local heritage assets and their potential for transfer, reuse and development.
- Local Enterprise Partnerships engage with and involve key stakeholders in the voluntary heritage sector.
- Major funders offer development funding opportunities, providing essential resources for organisations to build on capacity, enabling them to act more efficiently and effectively and to work outside their usual remit.
- The government lowers VAT rating on building repairs and maintenance, to enable and encourage more conservation and reuse of heritage assets by community groups. Alternatively, a scheme comparable to the Listed Places of Worship Grants scheme (providing recompense for VAT on repair and maintenance) should be put in place and extended to all listed buildings and those in conservation areas.

Heritage organisations are contributing to all three themes of the 'Big Society' agenda:

### Inspiring citizen engagement

The 'Social Action' strand of Big Society relates to individuals playing an active part in society, by offering time, expertise or money. Heritage provides a key focus for encouraging and enabling citizen engagement, by inspiring pride in people's local area, and heritage organisations offer a plethora of opportunities for active involvement with an interest or cause.

Being involved in heritage volunteering can in turn increase the sense of involvement with and appreciation of participants' local area and community. Heritage Open Days feedback in 2008 revealed that 84% felt participating made them feel more part of the local community, while 77% of volunteers in 25 HLF-funded projects felt that they belonged fairly or very strongly to their immediate neighbourhood.

- 74% of Alliance questionnaire respondents are already contributing to the 'Social Action' theme. 73% give people the opportunity to become a member of an interest group or cause. The scale of this opportunity is considerable; the National Trust alone has 3.8 million members.
- 79% of respondents which own or manage heritage sites provide the opportunity to donate financially to an interest group or cause, and 63% of all THA member respondents provide this. 63% provide advice and guidance for regional and local voluntary groups and projects.
- 77% of local groups who responded to the questionnaire are involved on the frontline in projects to conserve or enhance the historic environment. 73% carry out outreach work, both to educate about and to encourage voluntary participation with the historic environment. Around half of all THA respondents are involved in this frontline work, and also with national level projects to conserve the historic environment and training for local groups.
- Heritage organisations are offering a huge array of different opportunities for civic involvement, from voluntary custodians of war memorials trained by the War Memorials Trust, to B'nai B'rith's work in coordinating National Days of Jewish Heritage, and historic ship restoration and operation by Heritage Afloat's volunteers.

Heritage organisations require a wide range of support needs to contribute further to this theme. 61% of THA member questionnaire respondents felt that core funding was a 'very helpful' support type, and the importance of core funding was further emphasised by a number of comments. The HLF was identified by some respondents as a potential source of valuable core funding, were its strategies changed.

#### **Core funding: what could be achieved**

- 'Recognising the value of support/infrastructure organisations requiring small amounts of core (not project) funding is critical - they have massive multiplier benefits across the movement with volunteers and local community groups' (Civic Voice)
- 'We are very successful in developing project related activities having grown from 1 person & modest turnover in 2004 to 16 perm staff & £2M turnover in 2010. The massive challenge is to secure sufficient core funding to allow us to develop an effective range of project activity. If core funding declines (as it is with public sector cuts) 'doing' resources have to be devoted to fund raising'. (Norwich HEART)
- 'The biggest challenge is finding the core funding. We know what to do and how to do it but the challenge is to get people to support the ongoing work' (War Memorials Trust)
- 'We need support with organisation, fund raising, data processing, finance, publicity etc. We have no money to pay for any of this and so rely on volunteers. Some form of substantial core funding is essential'. (Heritage Crafts Association)
- 'The AGT has lost its funding for core activities from English Heritage for 2011/12 although it is offered for next year subject to two conditions. We will be able to use reserves for costs for this current year but core costs remain an issue for us and increasing the level of funding is imperative if we are to expand our effectiveness'. (Association of Gardens Trusts)
- 'The biggest issue for our organisation is sustainability. Much of our income is project

based. We would like to see a larger percentage of our income sustaining core costs' (ICON)

- 'We have no long-term security in terms of funding or personnel'. (Jewish Heritage)
- 'We have found nobody who will core fund leaving us totally reliant on volunteers doing work which doesn't benefit them directly but does benefit the sector as a whole' (National Heritage Ironwork Group).
- 'WMT has recently been more active in contacting MPs and Lords etc. and this has seen results but more could be done. The key support would probably be more funding to enable us to do this or in kind/pro bono PR support that gave us the extra resources to do more in this field. At present we are busy enough just doing our jobs and struggle to get the message out to the widest audiences' (War Memorials Trust).

### **Empowering communities**

The government aspires for local communities to be 'able to benefit from a massive power shift, taking power from Whitehall and transferring it to local communities'. This involves giving local residents more power to influence their local area, in terms of inputting to planning and development decisions. Heritage organisations have great potential to contribute to this theme both by directly inputting on the local level to planning, and by enabling others to do so, a potential which is already being realised:

- 56% of THA members which responded to the Alliance's questionnaire are doing work relevant to this theme. The most common activities are provision of advice and guidance on planning (48%), followed by frontline work commenting on planning applications (45%) and inputting to local planning policy (42%). 73% of local groups input to planning policy.
- Methods of empowering and informing local community groups include publications and help desks offering advice and guidance on planning. SAVE Britain's Heritage has been working with local communities for 9 years to give them the guidance, legal support and publicity they need to fight demolitions proposed under the Pathfinder scheme.

To further our community empowerment work, the THA member organisations surveyed again responded positively to all of a range of suggested support needs, with advocacy to both national and local government, and communication and information sharing within the sector marginally most popular.

### **Opening up Public Services**

Heritage organisations are well placed to contribute to the delivery of public services and management of public and community assets. The voluntary heritage sector has the expertise to manage heritage sites as assets in themselves, and as envelopes from which other services can be delivered to communities.

- 36% of Alliance member questionnaire respondents are undertaking work related to this theme. 26% provide advice to help voluntary groups manage local assets or services and 24% are actively sharing information and raising awareness within the sector. For instance, the UK Association of Preservation Trusts offers informal training and skills to local groups through area committees, and the Princes Regeneration Trust provides advice on managing and running services that community groups foresee occurring in a building after a conservation project.
- 27% of local group respondents, and 8% of Alliance member respondents are managing local heritage assets on behalf of local authorities, including archives, local museums and standing ruins.

- 23% of local groups, and 6% of all Alliance respondents, are running other services, such as childrens' centres, social housing, green space and post offices, using heritage sites as venues.

Support from local and central government is highly valued by Alliance members in 'Opening up Public Services', including recognition of heritage organisations as assets which should be an integral part of the planning system, supporting partnerships between development trusts and Building Preservation Trusts, and a lower VAT rating on services.

Heritage organisations are facing a number of **challenges in contributing to civil society**, in particular:

- Limited organisational capacity is felt to be a challenge by 71% of THA member questionnaire respondents, and 82% of local groups.
- Funding cuts by both national and local government were viewed as 'very challenging' by 32% of THA respondents. 50% of local groups feel this way about local government funding cuts, 86% viewing them as a challenge. The negative impacts of cuts were identified as including loss of planners and conservation staff.
- Local government engagement with heritage organisations was highlighted as being in need of improvement by a number of organisations.
- 82% of local groups view volunteer management and recruitment as a challenge.

**Engagement with local authorities can make or break our contribution to civil society**

- 'Asset transfer is a key area for Building Preservation Trust involvement. More support is required to encourage active partnerships between Development Trusts and Building Preservation Trusts. Local authorities need to ensure assets being transferred are endowed.' (UK Association of Preservation Trusts)
- 'We need Government to bring more persuasion to bear on local authorities which are reluctant to pass heritage assets over to the 3rd sector' (Norwich HEART)
- 'The support organisations such as ours need is in persuading national and local government that we are a valuable asset with a wide range of local and wider knowledge and professional skills - possibly as great or in some cases greater than our local authorities - which should be an integral part of the local planning system' (The Highgate Society)
- 'We could be doing a lot of work with the local authorities but just as we are trying to help they seem to be putting more barriers in the way'. (Ramblers Association)

**The Waterways Trust: Waterways Action Squad**

Funded by the Bank of America and 'V' (the National Young Volunteer Service), Waterways Action Squad has engaged 700 young (16-25 year old) volunteers to date in waterside conservation activities including dry stone walling and traditional hedgerow laying in North Eastern England. Previously, young people were hugely under represented in volunteering in the area. The volunteers have learnt many new skills, the waterside environment has been revitalised and conserved, and perceptions of young people within local voluntary organisations have improved.



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### **Lincolnshire Heritage At Risk**

The Heritage Trust of Lincolnshire has recruited and trained 220 voluntary 'Heritage Stewards' to carry out surveys of historic assets and identify those at risk. To date, 3200 surveys have been carried out across the county. Since only 1 of 7 local authorities have carried out a full survey in the last 5 years, here the work of local community members is of great benefit to the preservation and knowledge of the county's assets. The volunteers are also being empowered to understand and help shape their local environment.



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### **Colchester Roman Circus**

Colchester Archaeological Trust and Destination Colchester have raised £242,000 to keep the site of Britain's only known Roman Circus in community hands. The fundraising scheme was highly imaginative, including a Roman feast, treasure trails for children and cinema screenings. A number of local businesses and individuals donated, for instance a local antique shop, a printers and football fans and schools raised money via non-uniform days for pupils. Online fundraising (via Facebook and Twitter) was a key medium.



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### **Towton Battlefield Society**

Opening up Public Services is a key facet of the work of Towton Battlefield Society; the management of the battlefield is a challenging but successful process which has involved bringing together the 6 or 7 private landowners of the site to make decisions. 1 of the landowners has become involved to the extent that they have bought the local public house which had previously closed down, the top floor of which is being planned as a display centre. The process of bringing together the landowners has also led to a better preservation ethic for the future; previously some of the landowners had sold metal detecting passes for their land to private detectorists, but this has not happened for the last two years. The project has thus far depended on, in the Society's words, 'donations and good will'; heritage sites inspire philanthropy and civil engagement.

The Heritage Alliance's research for Heritage Counts 2011 incorporated information and opinions provided by 62 Alliance members (representing 71% of Alliance membership at the time of starting the research) and 10 other heritage organisations. A questionnaire was circulated in March 2011, to which 70 organisations responded. The breadth of the questionnaire responses was supplemented by interviews and detailed comments provided by 6 representatives of the respondent organisations, and by 6 case study projects which provided in-depth illustrations of work carried out in this area.

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