

# **Beyond the fragments: the need for a network of civic activists**

**A few thoughts and musings by Peter Stonham and Paul Salveson**

Our starting point is a desire to nurture the genuine engagement of citizens in things that matter to them at a personal and community level, achieving a real influence on their economic and social environment. Too many of our neighbourhoods, villages and towns feel like they are losing their best qualities, and too many people living in them feel disempowered. But some people and places are bucking that trend. Our ambition is to find and bring together ‘place-focused civic activists’ across the country to mutual benefit, so that more places in the UK feel like they are thriving, not struggling.

## **A lively third sector, but fragmented**

Britain has a remarkably active and dynamic ‘third sector’. Despite cuts in funding and lack of serious recognition by Government and media, it continues to flourish. It is a highly disparate sector, ranging from allotment societies, community land trusts and food banks to civic groups and various ‘adopters’ – be it stations, parks, libraries and much more.

The sector is represented locally by the ‘CVS’ network (councils for voluntary service, but often called other things) and nationally by the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO). There are also country-wide networks which provide a sub-regional tier, in many cases. These networks do a brilliant job, with precious little help.

This paper suggests that there is a gap in the market for a loose network of ‘third sector’ bodies which have a more specific focus on civic action and local regeneration. On ‘Place’. Recognising the importance of ‘somewhere’.

Many national networks of activity-based community groups already exist, not least the Association of Community Rail Partnerships (ACoRP) which Paul Salveson helped form some 20 years ago. There are many others.

## **Developing a radical but non-partisan approach**

There is a space for an intelligent non-partisan conversation about what self-determination and empowerment mean within this landscape, both for individuals and for communities, be they rooted in specific local identities and neighbourhoods, or wider shared beliefs and values about appropriate structures and processes.

A realistic discussion should recognise that there are elements of left, right and centre thinking that have relevance in this debate, and that consensus, or at least co-habitation, across conventional political lines is likely to achieve more than confrontation and accusation across historic and ideological barricades.

So we’re proposing that those who would like to engage in such a dialogue should have somewhere to connect and explore new ways of accepting realities but achieving visions.

We want to initiate a forum for “place-focused civic activists” that will bring together those who feel that there is a missing place for an important conversation about what are key values and objectives in daily lives and specific places, and how they can be achieved within a democratic and responsive framework of governance at national, regional and local levels.

## What is out there?

The cluster of groups involved in civic action and regeneration are immensely varied but include the classic 'civic society', parish/town councils and local heritage groups, through to younger groups of activists fighting inappropriate development, creating their own social and community facilities, taking over libraries, running arts centres and managing childcare facilities.

All too often these groups feel they are operating in a vacuum, sometimes with little local authority support (and occasionally, hostility), with little connection with the outside world and similar groups.

Here's a few snapshots of the sort of group we are thinking of:

- Red and Green Club, Milnsbridge: a former labour club which was on the verge of extinction, in a run-down area of Huddersfield. It is now a thriving cultural and political centre open to a range of views, actively involved with the local community
- Friends of Possilpark Greenspace is a group of local residents in a deprived inner-city part of Glasgow who want to improve their local environment by tackling blight – the many vacant and derelict sites around the Possilpark and Hamiltonhill area. This is achieved by organising activities and community celebrations to bring the sites back into positive use.
- Great Lever Connected: a voluntary organisation in Bolton which is working with the local authority to take over the running of the local library and develop it as a community venue
- Llanidloes Community Centre: after closing down some years ago, a new Community Centre Charity has been set up under new management. Ambitious plans are now in being to improve the facilities and give the building a new lease of life that will see the Centre once more become the focal point for community activity and pride
- Friends of St James Park group (Walthamstow) - developed safe and positive space to play for all, including the creation of a community area. Started as neighbours of the park who wanted to celebrate and enjoy their local space together. They began clearing the litter and debris, then installed safer surfaces and repaired fences. Now organises activities for children and families to come and enjoy the space together.
- Frome Town Council: famous for its ideas on 'flatpack democracy' and involved in a huge range of community activities, including bringing local buildings back to use
- Same Skies Collective: a network of activists in West Yorkshire with a particular emphasis on BAME communities, developing new ideas on local and regional democracy
- Bexhill Town Team: a voluntary group working together to secure a sustainable and prosperous town centre for all who use it, with a positive relationship with Rother District Council
- Friends of Batley Station: a dynamic multi-cultural group which has adopted the local station and is developing a cafe in memory of the late MP Jo Cox, gardens and art work
- Dundee Civic Trust: a voluntary body and charitable trust set up in 1973 aimed at the preservation and promotion of the urban heritage of the City and its neighbourhood, and to encourage the best standards of design in architecture and town planning for new developments

There are thousands more. But they generally don't know enough about each other. What an amazing force they would be if they were able to link up and support each other's activities and promote a radically new approach to civic action that is inclusive, dynamic and collaborative! They

are very diverse but what they all have in common is a very strong sense of place and a great commitment to community-based activity: civic action.

### **Moving things forward**

The initiative for developing a network of these place-focused civic activists needs to be a bottom-up initiative but that will need a catalyst. It should also involve sympathetic urban design professionals, rural and urban planners, community rail activists and similar. But without them dominating!

It is suggested that a small group of those who recognise the need for this dialogue should begin a series of regional 'get togethers' where key issues can be explored, and potential further steps and connections identified.

At the simplest level, a 'think tank' approach may lead to useful outputs that can be shared on-line and links created with others of like mind. But perhaps, more ambitiously, some kind of network may emerge from the initial discussions once it has been seen how much interest there is in the topic and how clearly core principles and objectives can be codified.

The initial informal connections that led to this initiative provide a good starting point to bring together a group of likeminded individuals and suggestions have already been made for get togethers in the North, South and South West of England so more discussions can take place.

#### **Some questions:**

- Would this initiative be seen as treading on others' toes (e.g. NCVO)?
- Is there a real need on the part of many of these groups to build a national network
- What should its objectives be, beyond providing a supportive network? (see below)
- What resources would it need?
- Is a UK network viable in the light of devolution to Scotland and Wales?
- Who should be involved in an initial steering group?

#### **What could the forum do? – here's a list for starters:**

- Sharing experiences
- Hearing from doers and thinkers on this topic
- Identifying common challenges and concerns
- Understanding what elements of a discussion/forum already exist through other organisations
- Finding better frameworks for local citizen empowerment
- Understanding the nature of local identity and affiliation and custody of place
- Providing input to government and other agencies about supporting citizenship and civic action and the resource it represents
- Helping more people understand and get involved in civic engagement and activity
- Collaboration with other bodies with similar objectives

Peter Stonham and Paul Salveson, November 2017