



## **Civic Voice Manifesto 2024-2028**

Civic Voice remains as dedicated as we were when we published our first manifesto in 2011 to create a country where every individual can proudly say, "I am proud of where I live."

Since our launch in 2010, Civic Voice has championed the empowerment of local communities, inspiring local people and businesses to take pride in their surroundings and actively participate in their improvement. In this manifesto, we outline our policy aims across three key areas: high streets and town centres, historic environment, and housing and planning. From ensuring adequate funding for local government to advocating for community involvement in local placemaking, our proposals are rooted in the belief that community engagement is vital for shaping the places we call home.

We strive to create places where the historic environment is cherished, housing is available to all, and high streets are vibrant hubs of community activity. Taken together, these aims will boost pride in our places.

We hope you will join us on this mission.

### **High Streets and Town Centres**

It is important to recognise that our high streets and town centres have always evolved, responding to new services, shopping habits, and technology; and they will continue to do so. We welcome the recent direction of travel from the Government, but we need to go much further.

- We have been consistent for several years that we are not persuaded that the Government has sufficient evidence to justify the expansion in permitted development rights. We continue to see the conversion of unsuitable retail units into poor-quality housing in response to an escalating housing crisis. Permitted development rights were extended in 2021 to allow change of use between Use Class E properties and residential units, putting at risk all high street properties of flipping to homes. The disconnected approach undermines councils' and their communities' ability to make decisions that reflect local needs and preserve and enhance the unique and distinctive character of an area. We ask a future Government to revoke these rights as they undermine the ability to plan.
- We want to see even more place-based policy, and a further commitment to a meaningful Levelling Up Agenda, as well as maintaining the UK Shared Prosperity Fund and Community Ownership Funds. We need to continue increasing devolution, not just to mayoral or combined authorities, but also 'double-devolution' down-to-place partnerships, such as Town Boards or High Street partnerships, consisting of communities. We call on the Government to provide additional funding for local authorities to build place partnerships and place leadership.
- Reform the business rates system to provide relief for high street businesses, particularly small and independent retailers, to alleviate financial pressure and to be modernised to ensure that sectors such as online businesses make a fair contribution.

- To support the regeneration of declining high streets and town centres, the Government should publish a bi-annual list of high streets and town centres setting out what interventions are being planned for their improvement

### **Historic Environment**

Members of the public often describe themselves as custodians of heritage. This custodianship inspires people to take action to conserve the historic environment and historical artefacts and to promote the value of heritage. Civic participation is vital for the future of the heritage sector and can provide a range of benefits for those involved.

- According to the Heritage Alliance, local authority spending on heritage has been cut by more than 40% since 2011, and conservation capacity in planning teams has almost halved since 2009. We recognise that funding for local authority conservation and heritage staff and expertise is key to managing our historic environment. Without this investment, many decisions will continue to be made on an ad hoc basis, eroding the very historic character upon which England's economic prosperity depends.
- We call on the Government to go further and promote the retention and reuse of existing historic buildings to reinforce local character and address climate change and net-zero goals. Reforming the VAT regime on repair and maintenance will promote the long-term sustainability of our nation's irreplaceable heritage assets and tackle carbon emissions.
- Ensure every local authority has the appropriate staffing and resources to create up-to-date conservation area appraisals and management plans.
- Taken together, the above calls will lead to a decrease in heritage at risk.

### **Housing and Planning**

Civic Voice members support the Government's ambition to tackle the housing crisis, with 71% agreeing in 2021 that we need to build more homes. If so much power in the housing supply remains with commercial housebuilders whose activities are determined entirely by market forces, we will never meet the 300,000-target set down by the Government. We need to do much more to 'front load' support for communities in their engagement earlier in the planning process.

- To demonstrate its commitment to 'best in class' engagement, we call on a new Government to adopt the proposal in the Government's Communities Framework published in July 2019 to 'strengthen community involvement in local placemaking... through a planning system centred on community involvement with statutory rights to become involved at every stage from plan making to planning application.'
- We believe that Statements of Community Involvement could be the bedrock of community involvement but, unfortunately, far too many have become too long, out-of-date and out-of-touch documents. We recommend that the Government implement policies and incentives to promote early engagement between communities, developers, promoters, and Local Planning Authorities. Provide guidance and frameworks for constructive dialogue and collaboration from the outset of planning processes.
- To quote the UK 2070 Commission, 'Currently, the future of the UK is being shaped by the incremental, short-term and ad hoc nature of government policy'. We should not be looking for popular decisions but for good and appropriate decisions and the right solutions. We support the UK 2070 Commission's call for a national spatial plan. Civic Voice believes that once we have a national spatial strategy which sets national priorities, then within that framework we would

have regional or sub-regional planning, and then a network of Local Plans, and Neighbourhood Plans.

- Prioritise the development and enforcement of high-quality design standards that enhance local character and meet community needs. Provide funding and incentives for local authorities to adopt and enforce these standards.
- We must invest in social housing. We must address the problem of affordability by providing major resources or access to finance to enable much more social and other affordable housing to be built. We know that public finances are still restricted, but the lack of homes is a major infrastructure need as urgent, if not more so, as high-speed train lines or airports.
- To support the above, we need a fully resourced local government sector. We call on the Government to give all councils funding to appoint dedicated community planning officers with the appropriate skills to work with communities and rebuild trust in the planning process.

This manifesto is the platform for Civic Voice's next strategic plan covering the period 2024-2028.

This document is intended for MPs, parliamentary candidates, campaign workers, journalists, and researchers who want to find out more about what the civic movement wants from the next government.

*The Coventry Society endorsed and adopted this manifesto in its entirety at its Executive Committee meeting on 17<sup>th</sup> June 2024.*