

Zoom town

Peterborough Civic Society Chairman David Turnock and Vice Chairman Toby Wood go head-to-head on the latest issues affecting Peterborough

Toby Well, David, when are we two going to meet in person?

David Quite, this Zoom business has been very useful and has meant that we have all managed to keep in touch but it's not the same as being in a room where we can have an in-depth discussion about local issues and then arrive at a detailed consensus about how we feel on a particular topic. Still, it won't be long before we're back to normal, or as near normal as we can be!

Toby Yes, it's likely that 'You're On Mute' may become THE phrase of 2021. We could make a fortune selling the tee-shirts!

David Anyway, I've got as quiz question for you. How many civic societies are there in England?

Toby I think you've got me there – I'll say 150.

David You're wrong and I think you'll be surprised. According to the number of societies affiliated to the national body, Civic Voice, at the last count there were 332 organisations in the UK. Of course that includes small organisations from small places to the large, from the Eyam Village Society in Derbyshire up to Birmingham Civic Society.

Toby Well come to think of it there are quite a few fairly close to Peterborough. I can think of the Stamford Civic Society, Bourne Civic Society, King's Lynn Civic Society, the March Society and Wisbech Society and Preservation Trust. And no two are the same.

David That's right. What I like about the fact that there are so many societies is the variety. Each one reflects the nature of its location, whether that be urban or rural, old, new or a mixture. It's all about how the citizens of each place see themselves and how

they can celebrate their own environment.

Toby Perhaps my favourite title of any civic organisation is Cambridge Past, Present & Future. That title neatly sums up what we in Peterborough are about as well. Although we want to celebrate the past and its achievements, we are also concerned very much about what is happening in the city now and how it affects the future.

David In Peterborough we are so used to change. In the second part of the twentieth century the Development Corporation started the whole process and we've never looked back. Since then there has been no period when the city has stood still. We're always developing and evolving to reflect overall changes in society and its needs.

Toby I think there are some people who don't fully understand that, even some important people in influential positions in the city.

David That's true. I remember in February when the Society presented evidence at Peterborough City Council's planning committee regarding the plans to demolish the Solstice in Northminster and replace it with new private and student accommodation, Cllr Wayne Fitzgerald was reported in the *Peterborough Telegraph* as having said, "If we listened all the time to views of Historic England and the Civic Society what we would have would be a beautiful cathedral completely surrounded by fields!"

Toby That was followed by someone from one of our local churches on Twitter saying, "What's wrong with our stunning 900-year old Cathedral being surrounded by gorgeous flower-filled fields? A perfect setting, I would have thought."

David Well that's the other extreme I suppose. The most acceptable course of action, as always, is somewhere in the middle. Compromise is often so important when talking about a city's development.

Toby Of course the situation around planning and development hasn't been helped during the Covid-19 situation. I'm thinking in particular about some of the large issues that have arisen during the past year. Many people have become very frustrated.

David Give me some examples.



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Toby Well, there's the situation around the proposed climbing wall at Ferry Meadows. There has been a very vigorous debate around the issue and hundreds of local residents have objected and been most forceful in their opposition.

David I think their frustration has been exacerbated by the fact that, due to lockdown, there have been limited opportunities for people to voice their opinions either in meetings or other public forums.

Toby Yes I agree. People have often concluded, rightly or wrongly, that consultations have rather gone out of the window. I know that many people have felt that their voice has not been heard and their opinions not taken into account. Take the debate over the proposed new football stadium. That's an issue that has divided people. You only have to look online to see that. Hundreds of people on Facebook have joined groups that, on the one hand, are in favour of

a new stadium being built on the Embankment and, on the other hand, are totally opposed and would like to see the green space being retained.

David It's not just the proposed new football stadium that's the issue here. As the Civic Society has pointed out repeatedly, the debate is much broader than that. It's a debate about what should happen on the Embankment. I feel that what people have missed out on most is consultation. Under normal circumstances the local authority or developer would organise ways for people to look at plans and contribute ideas in person.

Toby All that's happened over the past year is that discussion has taken place online and that has frequently led to binary opinions, all very black and white. It's often so hard for nuanced opinions to come to the fore on social media.

David On the positive side, it's going to be so nice to get back outside again, see our family

and friends again. Although we've been able to go out for exercise that's not been the same as being able to go where we want, when we want.

Toby One thing that we're looking forward to doing is promote our blue plaques scheme. We installed a further fifteen plaques nearly a year ago but haven't been able to show them off to everyone. We've got loads of booklets describing them all – there are now thirty-six plaques in and around the city centre. In fact we could devise a post-Covid challenge – how long can it take you to get around all thirty-six!

David Of course there are plenty of other issues to get our teeth into now that things are gradually getting back to normal. I suppose the future of our town centres, and Peterborough's city centre in particular, needs some real in-depth discussion.

Toby Very true, David, but I guess we'll just have to leave that for another time.

