



NW ACTS NEWSLETTER

Editor's Foreword - Networking

I know a close colleague of mine who will be grimacing as he reads the heading! He hates the word. I don't.

Definitions I have found are "the cultivation of productive relationships" and "a supportive system of sharing/exchanging information and services amongst individuals and groups having a common interest".

How true I have found this to be. Fortunate enough to be one of 14 invited from across the country onto the Civic Voice Leadership Course last year, I have been the recipient of and contributed to the wealth of information which we have enjoyed sharing over the last 5 months. The diversity of Civic Societies and Trusts is immense. It can be a city, a town or a village. By the sea or landlocked. North, south, east or west. Industrial, rural, or suburban. Large, medium, or small. All rich in whatever their area has to offer and above all – every single one, unique.

The interesting thing is that they all have similar issues, similar problems. We all have experience of aging committees and a lack of "new blood" coming on board. A lack of numbers able or willing to give time, to take responsibility for new projects or just take on the succession of an office. Could it be that what started out 50 years ago is now in need of a big shake-up and thought given as to how to change to fit the era we now inhabit? A lot of societies are struggling and we need to address the problems we are facing.

I think it would be fair and true in the main, to say that communication is key as to how we move forward. Communication between ourselves and those we wish to reach. Improved format and content of newsletters and e-newsletters, newsflashes, information/membership leaflets, websites and social media. Not all of these will be possible for all societies for a range of reasons, but for those who can and have implemented change, the results have been palpable in the interest shown from the membership.

At Lytham St Annes, we decided that having improved our communication (new website, publicity leaflet and newsletter), it was time to instigate a monthly coffee morning for our members, both new and existing. We have designated the second Tuesday in the month for this at Lytham Hall coffee shop and held our first one on 12th March. We're delighted that not only did we get a good turn out and much chat and laughter, but a new Treasurer, archivist and a postie! Oh – and 6 new members!

By sharing our experiences of what problems we face, we can work with colleagues who may just have solved issues already and have good ideas to pass on. Why re-invent the wheel when the time can be spent on precious time elsewhere?

Any ideas successfully implemented in any civic work will be gratefully received!

Judith Talbot

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An Unlikely Revolution?

In a sleepy seaside resort with a demographic skewed toward the retired, you'd expect tradition and conservatism to rule. Lytham St Annes in the Borough of Fylde is no exception. Change is not a popular concept. So it was not with universal enthusiasm that locals discarded the traditional Council and Committee system they had trusted since 1887 as they made the changes required by The Local Government Act in 2000.

Having been told that 'staying as they were' was not an option; they debated new styles of governance and initially opted for the least change under the 'Streamlined Committee' system. This change was not well received by councillors, and from 2003 onward, Fylde experimented with a range of possible governance styles under the new Act: Streamlined Committees; Executive Committees; and eventually the Leader and Cabinet System.

None of these proved universally popular. The Chief Executive's report to the gloriously inappropriately named "Modernisation Group" in July 2004 noted that *"It is clear that members are not satisfied with the current way of operating."*

But those in leadership at the time saw the advantage of concentrating power into a smaller number of hands using the Cabinet system, and they, together with the Chief Executive, drove pursuit of the 'Leader and Cabinet' system. To bolster their argument, they undertook a consultation whose results showed a small majority in favour of the former committee system. The Council Leader disregarded that result as being too small a sample of the electorate to take notice of.

And so, against the wishes of the public, the Leader and Cabinet system of governance was implemented in Fylde. The first casualty was a Conservative member who would not support the introduction of the Cabinet. She was suspended, then resigned and subsequently stood as an independent to wide local acclaim.

Over the next few years, a series of poor decisions and significant financial mismanagement unfolded. A new and unpopular £7m town hall was being planned. Two swimming pools were closed to wide public anger shortly after a huge loss was discovered in the Streetscene department following the

introduction of a new accounting system that failed to reconcile income with expenditure (and both with bank statements) nine months into a new financial year.


One blog commentator noted *"This Cabinet system focuses power into too few hands and is not sufficiently democratic. It is a system that lacks the capacity to ensure the breadth and depth of vision and experience available from the 50 or so councillors at Fylde is utilised. It fosters an aspirational culture based on patronage from the Leader (in whose gift the 'portfolio holders' rise and fall) and, unlike the former committee and Council system, it singularly fails to create a seedbed and nursery in which new councillors can gradually cut their teeth and develop the talents and experience necessary to become effective and experienced councillors."*

There was continued public dissatisfaction with the quality of decisions being made, and backbenchers lost connection with, and ownership of, decisions that were being taken by the seven person Cabinet in the name of the Council.

Matters reached a head in 2008, when a public meeting was called by fourteen local groups assembled under the umbrella of the Fylde Civic Awareness Group. Two hundred people attended and voted - without a single hand in dissent - for a resolution proposed from the floor that proposed a vote of no confidence in the Cabinet System, and called for a return to decision making by a majority of Councillors in Full Council. That call was subsequently supported by Town and Parish Councils in Fylde representing more than half the electorate.

Fylde Council made moves to consider the matter, but without enthusiasm.

Then, along came the new coalition Government and Eric Pickles as Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government. His pre-election promise allow Councils to return to the Committee System gave heart to the Fylde Civic Awareness Group who submitted evidence to the Localism Bill Parliamentary Committee. They hoped for a route allowing the public to initiate change to the Council's governance structure and to enable the Committee system to be restored by a public petition and referendum.

Continued 

The Localism Act does indeed contain that provision, and as of today, any Council that wishes to do so can change back to the Committee system. Perhaps more significantly, any community that wants its Council to change back to a Committee system now has a clear route - set out in law - to bring that about.

Some Councils were very quick to start the change themselves. Four expect to change back in 2013, and a further 40 councils are considering the change. But those are all Councils where the Council itself had resolved to change.

In Fylde, it is residents who are leading the drive. Their 'Localism in Action Project' began in February with a 'Democracy and Localism' seminar to start the process of collecting signatures on a petition for change. If 5% of Fylde's electorate sign up, it will trigger a

binding referendum on a return to the Committee system.

Chairman of the Fylde Civic Awareness Group Jon Harrison said *"Under the Cabinet System, only seven of Fylde's fifty-one Councillors can vote on decisions, and people simply can't accept that under the Cabinet system, the Councillor they elected to represent them is not able to vote on all the matters that affect their wellbeing"*

The Fylde Civic Awareness Group from Sedate Saint Annes on the Sea is an unlikely revolutionary, but if they succeed in bringing about a change of governance using the Localism Act, that's what they will become.

More details of the group and its activities can be found at www.fylde.biz

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3rd Anniversary Approaches for Civic Voice!

Did you know that Civic Voice is fast approaching its third anniversary and that on April 17th it will be three years to the day that we launched at an event in London attended by over 200 civic volunteers. How time flies....

In a few years we have come a long way in helping to establish a national voice with Government and supporting the growth of the civic movement. So, as we approach our third anniversary, we would like to say a big thank you to all the civic volunteers across the North West who have participated in civic activities during the past three years (and no doubt much longer!). By working together as a movement over the past three years, we have been able to achieve some of the following:

- 350 MPs contacted by civic groups as part of our campaign against the changes to the planning system (January)
- Based on our template, over 200 civic societies had a letter printed in a local newspaper opposing the Government's changes to the planning system (March)
- 150 MPs contacted to oppose the removal of VAT relief for approved alterations on listed buildings (May)
- Met with eight different Secretary of States
- 150 groups participated in Civic Day 2012 (June)
- 4,000 individuals responded to the first ever "Civicwatch" (June)
- Based on our briefing, over 100 groups responded to a consultation on proposed

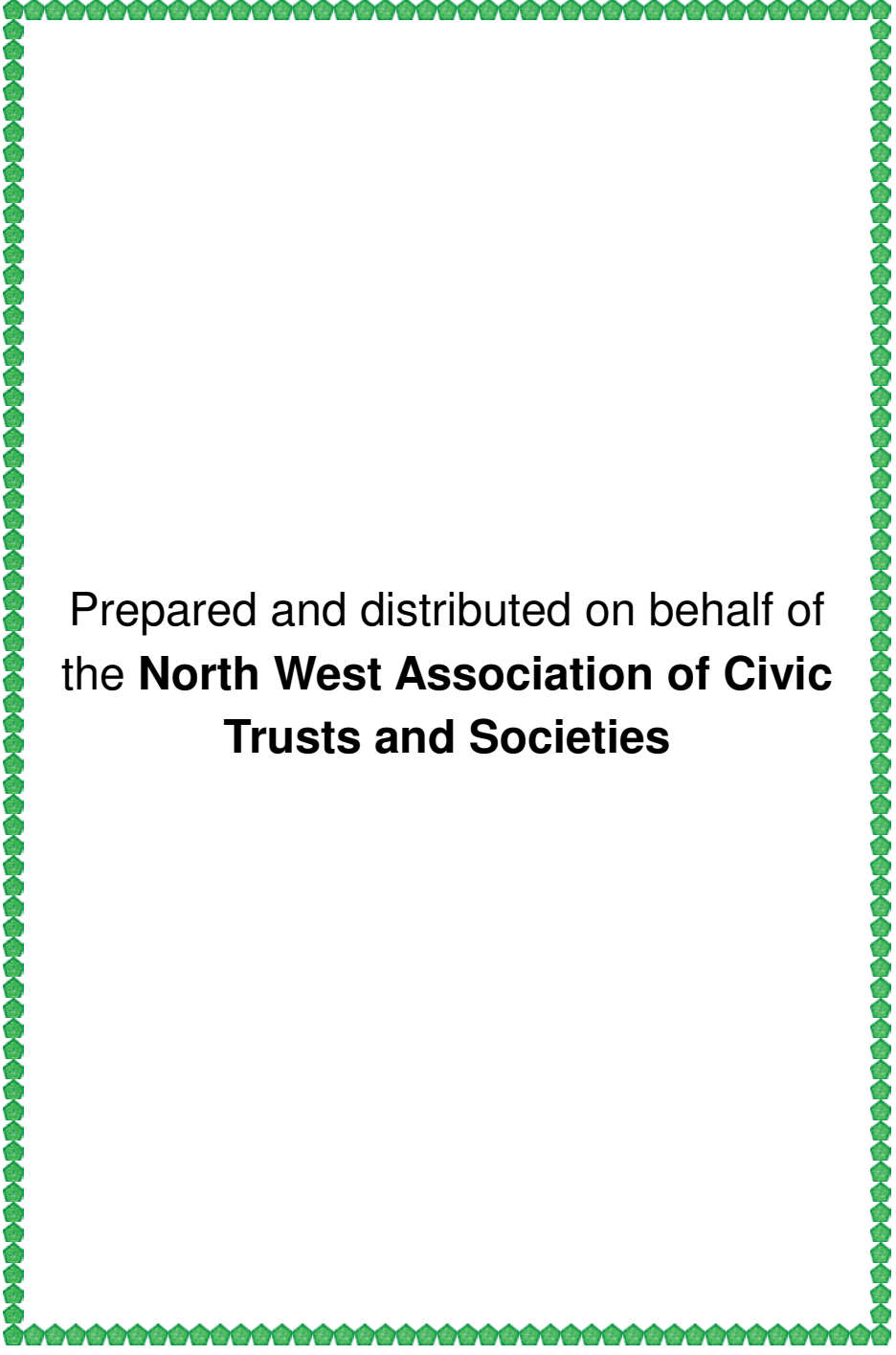
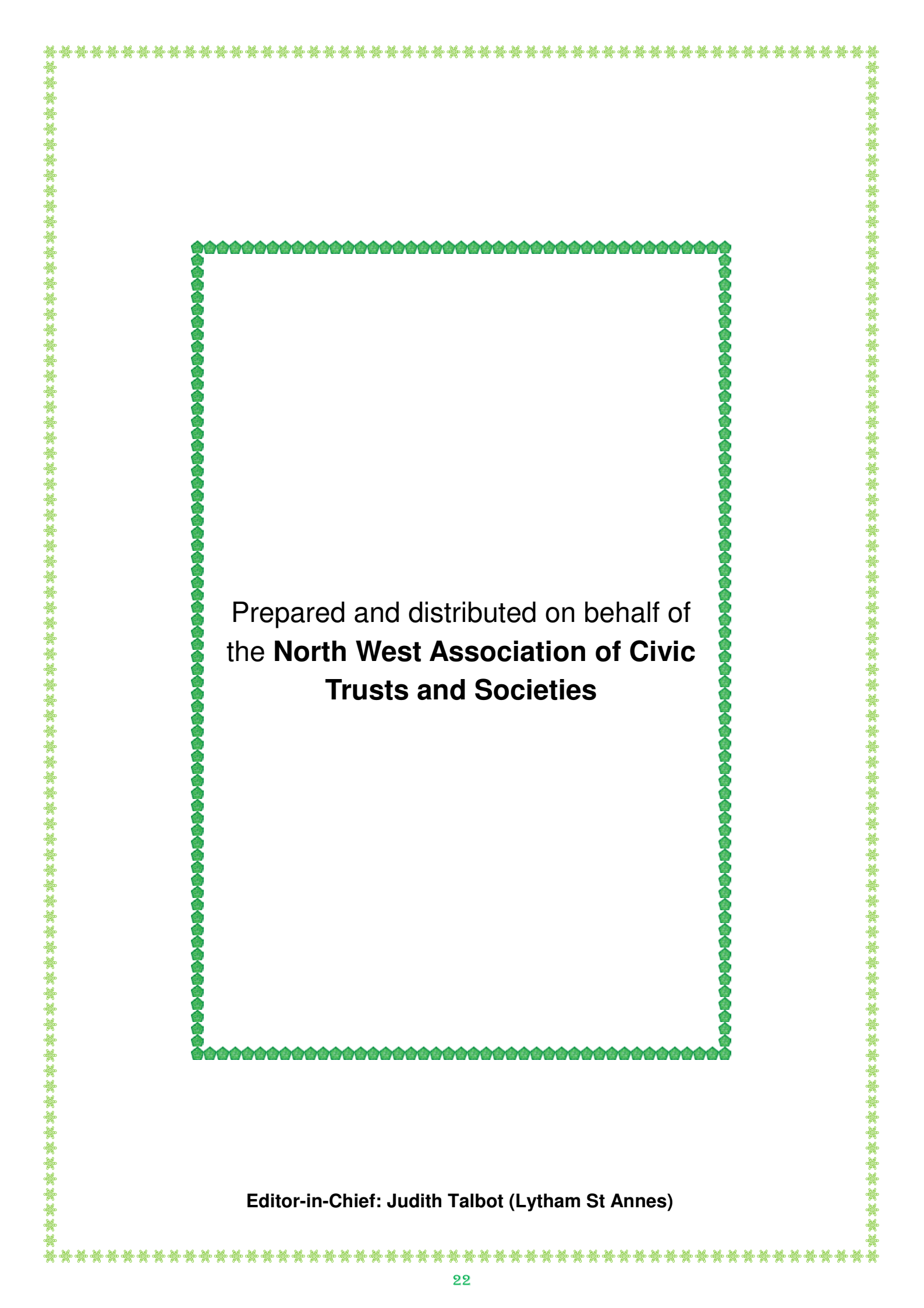
changes to the rules surrounding Listed Building Consent (August)

- 43,000 volunteers helped make Heritage Open Days 2012 a huge success (September)
- Over 200 MPs briefed on the Growth and Infrastructure Bill (November)
- An amazing 375 (over 70%) of MPs being contacted as part of our permitted development campaign (December)
- And to prove it can also be about fun, 15,000 individuals have accessed a National Trust and English Heritage day voucher as part of their membership of Civic Voice (all year!).

We want to thank you for taking the time to get involved in our campaigns, whether nominating ideas or voting at our AGM. We want to thank you for responding to our consultations and helping to shape our thinking and developing our policies. Finally, we want to thank you for attending our workshops and events that are helping to create friendships across the network. By being connected and sharing your ideas, thoughts and concerns, we can continue to demonstrate we make a difference where it matters. If we are to continue to grow as a movement, it is a time to look forward to the next few years, not least a General Election in 2015.

With your input, we are sure that the civic movement can achieve even greater success with Civic Voice continuing to speak out loud and clear on your behalf.

Ian Harvey



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