



STRENGTHENING SOCIETIES – A TOOL KIT

INTRODUCTION:

Bedfordshire Local History Association (BLHA) has developed this 'toolkit' to help local history societies who may be facing significant challenges. These could include falling and/or ageing membership, maintaining interest in activities and developing new ideas, difficulties in engaging younger people and the wider community, financial viability - decreasing revenue and rising costs, an inability to retain or recruit committee members. Other local societies have gone through a similar process, with some success.

The toolkit is designed to be a group activity, ideally involving a society's committee, with the conclusions then tested with members and any partner organisations. It relies on an honest assessment of the society's current position to identify and prioritise the main challenges to be addressed and possible options. If it would be helpful, one of the members of the BLHA committee, or a neighbouring society, could act as a facilitator.

STEP ONE: THE GOALS OF THE SOCIETY

As a starting point, **review the goals or objectives of your society**. Are these still realistic, relevant, or achievable given current pressures? Do you need to modify or reframe them?

STEP TWO: WHO IS YOUR AUDIENCE?

Who are you aiming to interest and serve? Has this changed since your society was founded? If so, how? Who are your current key target audiences? How can you attract them or maintain their interest, particularly younger people.

STEP THREE: IDENTIFY THE MAIN CHALLENGES YOUR SOCIETY FACES

One simple way of identifying the strengths on which you could build and the main challenges you face is to undertake a **SWOT analysis**. This reviews, in turn, **Strengths, Weakness, Opportunities, and Threats**. The analysis will vary from society to society, but a hypothetical analysis is shown below.

STRATEGIC CHALLENGES:

<p style="text-align: center;">STRENGTHS:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Publish regular newsletter/journal setting out original research, which is well-received • Enthusiastic committee • Good reputation and standing with community groups, particularly the parish/town council • Solvent – no immediate financial pressures 	<p style="text-align: center;">WEAKNESSES:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lost key members due to ill health or moving away • Vacancies amongst the committee, which have proven difficult to recruit to • Declining membership numbers & limited engagement with them • Cannot find speakers and/or have exhausted all local history themes or visits nearby • Concerning that falling membership subscriptions may fail to meet running costs • Limited, traditional offer to members • Lack of partnership working with other societies • Low profile amongst public, other societies & local historians • No effective social media presence • Tired or no website
<p style="text-align: center;">OPPORTUNITIES:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reframe goals to make them more appealing to your audiences • Strengthen offer to members • Consult the BLHA Speakers Directory • Offer a rolling six month programme of activities • Promote the society through open evenings and revamped website & social media • Strengthen & widen committee membership • Form alliances & partnerships with BLHA, local or family history societies • Participate in BLHA events and conferences - great for enabling networking 	<p style="text-align: center;">THREATS:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inability to fill key vacancies on the committee • Membership declines rapidly, making the society unviable • Lack of interest amongst potential members and community groups in the society's aims

STEP FOUR: CONCLUSIONS:

Based on the above analysis, **does it seem realistic that concerted action could be taken to strengthen the society's position sufficiently, or would a planned dissolution, or merger with a neighbouring society or community group be more appropriate?**

STEP FIVE: STRATEGIC OPTIONS:

1. **Do nothing/minimum:** Face decline and possible dissolution in due course. **If this is unavoidable, it is essential that dissolution is planned for**, ensuring that research documentation and findings are not lost, and essential archives and assets are deposited with the relevant local authority archive. Other assets could be offered to other societies or charity.

2. **Proactively seize opportunities & mitigate threats:** These could include:
 - **Actively promoting your society to members and the community.** For example, through a refreshed or new website (Community Sites have helped several societies), and the active use of social media to reach out to younger people. Promotion could be done jointly with neighbouring societies.
 - **Reframing your offer** – hold open meetings, wider, more inclusive talks/events. Consult the new BLHA Speakers Directory for possible new talks/speakers. Switch to digital meetings?
 - **Building alliances with neighbouring societies** (some of whom may share similar challenges). Explore the possibility of joint events. Share resources or officers?
 - **Redoubling efforts to recruit new committee members.**
 - **Exploring merger with another society**

HELP & SUPPORT:

You are not on your own. Many societies have faced significant challenges over the years and overcome them. BLHA is happy to work with you. **Contact our Secretary, Clive Makin** at secretary@bedfordshire-lha.org.uk