Dear Stephen,

We are writing following the debates on the National Citizen Service Bill (NCS Bill). Clauses five and six of the Bill - requiring the NCS Trust to produce a business plan and annual report - have been the subject of particular debate in the House of Lords. Lord Ashton committed to writing to you, the NCS Trust, to seek assurances that wherever possible peers’ considerations will be taken into account in these publications.

We are committed to ensuring the NCS Bill remains focused. Clause six sets out measures which the Trust will have to address when reporting on how it has achieved its primary functions, including the number of young people who take part and the quality of the programme.

The Bill currently contains seven such measures. Prior to Committee Stage nearly twenty amendments were tabled, each of which would add a further measure. The question is one of balance. Many of the amendments would underline that NCS is an important programme which must be deployed to its full potential. Equally, the NCS Trust must be able to focus on delivering NCS, not overly prescriptive reporting.

Government believes the Bill, as drafted, strikes largely the right balance. However, peers have made the case for ensuring the Trust reports transparently and we agree that there are certain areas which, if the Trust were to include them in its annual reporting, would help assure parliament that the programme is truly accessible to all.

We therefore write to you to set out the issues that have been raised in the House of Lords and why it would be valuable for the Trust to consider them when reporting to parliament.

Collaboration with the voluntary sector

The NCS Trust works with organisations in the private, public and voluntary sectors, to ensure quality delivery of NCS. The Trust does, however, have a particularly close relationship with the voluntary sector. Many of the organisations that deliver NCS are charities, which in turn work with other charities and social enterprises to help participants do their social action projects.
Consultation and collaboration with the voluntary and youth sectors is therefore a natural part of the Trust’s day-to-day work. We know of the many examples of partnership-working pursued by the Trust, and the Trust’s commitment to supporting the whole social action journey of young people.

This is why we have included a recital in the preamble to the Royal Charter to state ‘that it is desirable that other organisations supporting young people should benefit from the actions of the National Citizen Service Trust.’

We believe it would be beneficial for the Trust, now and into the future, to consider the extent to which it has collaborated with the voluntary sector when discharging its primary functions. This would let parliament know, on an annual basis, the work the Trust is doing to ensure that its relationship with the sector is meaningful. We believe the Trust would report on such matters naturally when complying with clause six of the Bill.

Learning from the youth sector

The NCS Bill would require the Trust to report on the extent to which it has achieved value for money and the extent to which participants from different backgrounds have worked together. Social mixing is a core feature of NCS; it is important that parliament can see how successfully this has been achieved.

We believe it is right that the annual report provides self-reporting on how it has worked to achieve these outcomes across the programme. We also believe that the Trust does, and must continue to learn from best practice in the youth sector. This may be the manner in which organisations commission programmes, or particular innovations and approaches which may improve value for money.

We do not want the Trust to be mandated, in statute, to compare the NCS programme with other youth provision. NCS is independently evaluated and it is for government to consider the value of conducting a comparative study. It would not be right to expect the Trust to have an accurate picture of how other organisations are performing.

If the Trust were able, however, to consider its shared learning when reporting, we believe this would provide valuable insight into how the Trust develops its strategies priorities in line with the experiences it has of other programmes. If NCS is to be a rite of passage for young people in England, the Trust will have to consider how it relates to other opportunities, how it builds on skills young people may have developed elsewhere, and how its commissioning of organisations ensures every young person who wants to participate can do so.
Young people’s involvement

Young people are at the heart of NCS. Everything the Trust does is geared towards delivering outcomes for young people and improving their wellbeing. The NCS Bill and draft Royal Charter make this explicit. It is right that the Trust should consult with young people at every sensible opportunity. The National Youth Board demonstrates the Trust’s commitment to just this.

We suggest that the Youth Board, as well as wider consultation with NCS participants, would offer valuable contributions when the Trust is considering its strategic priorities, and having their voice included would help inspire continuing faith in the Trust’s commitment to involving young people in the setting of priorities and activities.

Commissioning: Social, Economic, and Environmental Impact

The Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012 requires public contracting authorities to take into account social value when securing services under the procurement regime. The NCS Trust already considers its providers’ impact and how they align with the Trust’s ambition to promote social cohesion, improve social mobility, and impact on the social engagement of our young people. The Act does not require commissioning bodies to report on their compliance with it and we do not believe the Trust should be an exception. However, if the Trust were to agree that considering its social, economic, and environmental impact would bring welcome dimensions to its self-reporting, peers would be assured of its commitment to the sustainability of a diverse provider network.

Linked to the Social Value Act is the way in which the Trust commissions. We ask the Trust to commit, in relevant years, to ensuring its business plan and annual report includes information on commissioning. This should include how the Trust has overcome barriers to small organisations obtaining contracts, and how it can continue to ensure risk aversion does not prevent it from being a modern commissioner of services. This will help parliament understand how the Trust sets its commissioning priorities.

Voter Registration

The promotion of social engagement is a central part of the NCS experience. The draft Royal Charter will require the Trust to consider the desirability of encouraging NCS participants to take an interest in local and national politics. We understand that the NCS Trust, and many of its providers, already take such challenges into consideration when providing participants with new experiences. This includes talking to them about the importance of registering to vote and we would encourage the Trust to ask that all of its providers take the time to engage with participants on this issue. This reflects the views expressed by peers in the House of Lords.
Disabled Access

We believe strongly, as does the Trust, that NCS must be accessible to all. It is not surprising that debates on the NCS Bill have turned frequently to this issue, and how parliament will be able to hold the Trust to account.

At Report Stage, we committed to bringing forward an amendment to the NCS Bill, at Third Reading, which would require the Trust to report on the number of participants who have a disability. We are sure that the Trust agrees that it is a welcome requirement.

Also at Report Stage, we heard examples from peers who have expressed concern that some young people have not been able to take part in NCS because of their circumstances. We committed to sharing these with you; you may want to reply to the peers directly.

Lord Shipley highlighted two examples. The first was a young person who had additional needs. The NCS provider is said to have asked for resource to put support in place for the young person, but none was forthcoming. The second is a case of three young deaf people who started NCS in the north-west. Two, who were more reliant on British Sign Language, disengaged from the programme fairly quickly. They said the venue was too noisy and was not inclusive. The third one completed two stages of the programme but not the third stage. Lord Shipley reported that The National Deaf Children’s Society offered deaf awareness training with the providers on numerous occasions but it was not taken up.

Lord Shipley also pointed to the NCS website, saying that there is little advice available about support for disabled participants. Promotional materials do not have subtitles and videos are rarely produced in alternative accessible formats such as British Sign Language.

Lady Royall gave the example of a young person with complex physical impairments who attends a mainstream secondary school. His mother was put in touch with the local provider and held a conversation with them about her son’s needs. The mother explained that she could fund a support worker for the required time and that her son had successfully accessed many outdoor type activities with other non-specialist providers. The provider came back to the mother to tell her that they could not include her son in the NCS scheme—they would require additional funding and would not be able to meet the whole group’s needs. No alternative options were provided.
Ensuring equality of access at the local level, across the country, is a government priority for NCS, and we believe that by addressing in its annual report its progress in this area the Trust will be able to demonstrate its continuing commitment to helping providers deliver the programme to all young people who want a place.

We are depositing a copy of this letter in the House of Lords and House of Commons libraries.

Yours sincerely

[Signature]

Lord Ashton of Hyde
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State

ROB WILSON
Minister for Civil Society