Select Committee on Citizenship and Civic Engagement

Corrected oral evidence: Local Communities

Wednesday 29 November 2017
10.40 am

Listen to the meeting

Members present: Lord Hodgson of Astley Abbots (The Chairman); Baroness Barker; Baroness Eaton; Lord Harries of Pentregarth; Baroness Lister of Burtersett; Baroness Morris of Yardley; Baroness Pitkeathley; Baroness Redfern; Lord Rowe-Beddoe.

Evidence Session No. 16 Heard in Public Questions 133 - 140

Witnesses

I: Dr Henry Tam; Councillor Saima Ashraf, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Community Leadership and Engagement, London Borough of Barking and Dagenham; Stuart Dunne, Deputy Chief Executive, Youth Focus North-West.
Examination of witnesses
Dr Henry Tam, Cllr Saima Ashraf and Stuart Dunne.

Q133 The Chairman: Good morning, and thank you very much for giving up your morning and coming along to give us the benefit of your advice and experience. I have to read out the formal wording about the nature of the session. A list of the interests of Members relevant to the inquiry has been sent to you and is available. The session is open to the public and is being recorded on BBC Parliament. A verbatim transcript will be taken of the evidence and put on the Committee’s website. A few days after this session, you will be sent a copy of the transcript to check for accuracy, and it would be helpful if you could advise of any corrections as quickly as possible. If, after this evidence session, you wish to clarify or amplify any points made during your evidence or have any additional points you wish to make, you are welcome to submit supplementary evidence to us. Could I ask you to introduce yourselves, briefly, and then we will turn to the questions?

Stuart Dunne: Stuart Dunne, deputy chief executive officer of Youth Focus North-West, which is a small charity working with young people across the north-west of England.

Cllr Saima Ashraf: I am Councillor Saima Ashraf. I am the deputy leader of the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham, and I am a councillor.

Dr Henry Tam: I am Henry Tam. I am an academic. I was a lecturer at the University of Cambridge and other places, but I have also been a senior civil servant within the Home Office and the Department for Communities and Local Government, and I worked for seven different Secretaries of State, which was a very interesting experience.

Q134 The Chairman: Thank you very much. Could I start with the first question? What is the current state of civic engagement in the UK? Do you feel the areas that you have specific experience of and work in are better or worse than the average?

Stuart Dunne: Currently, the geographical area we cover is across the north-west of England. The schemes we work with around young people’s civic engagement are fairly good, at this moment in time, and the outlook is quite positive. We bring young people from across the north-west together seven times a year. The young people represent their local youth councils, and come to explore and discuss issues locally and regionally around young people’s voice.

Recently we have adopted all 23 local authorities that engage in that experience and between 100 and 120 young people come together seven times a year. Included within that are their workers. While the young people are with us, we run functional workshops on how to support and develop the youth forums and councils. We also run some contextual workshops as well to look at issues around social inclusion. Some of the workshops we have run over the last 12 months have looked at anti-
Semitism, Islamophobia, young women and democracy. This has provided background detail for young people so they can develop further functional matters.

The group seems to have created a sense of belonging and togetherness across the north-west through action-based work, and some of the success through that has meant that we recently ran the United Kingdom Youth Parliament Make your Mark. Over 200,000 young people in the north-west engaged in that exercise, from a very small budget. I could take all the applause for facilitating and supporting that, but I did very little, if I am open and honest. It was much more down to the young people coming together on a regional basis and looking at the skills they have developed at running things locally.

We are working on more exciting schemes across the north-west. We have two newly elected mayors in the north-west, in the Liverpool City region and Greater Manchester. Both the city mayors are interested in young people’s civic engagement. We have created two youth combined authorities that will, hopefully, hold both city mayors to account in the future. We have looked to develop a partnership with United Utilities around their corporate and social responsibility. The outlook is fairly positive at this moment in time across the north-west.

Cllr Saima Ashraf: Good morning. On that question, I would say that the UK is a divided country and I think the general election and the Brexit vote showed this. Property prices have continued to rise and 58% of Londoners living in poverty are working families. We had the BNP in Barking and Dagenham until 2010 and that was a symptom of the disenfranchisement felt by the white working class. Some 72% of the residents living in Barking and Dagenham from a different background get on well together, compared to white British residents, who are less likely to be satisfied with the area as a place to live. However, we have been doing quite a lot of work, especially in the past two years. We have spoken to over 6,000 residents in Barking and Dagenham: 3,000 of them have been part of the start of a conversation on the borough manifesto, which is a non-political document, and thousands have taken part in a good neighbour guide. This is to establish what we expect as residents and neighbours. These are very simple things, but sometimes talking to people about these things, such as talking to your neighbour, can change a lot. We have recently launched the Big Conversation enabling all resident groups to come together to discuss topics or themes and have a platform where people can come together and openly and honestly have a conversation. The point I am making is that people want to engage. People want to get together; we just have to find the right ways to do so.

Dr Henry Tam: If I may make a distinction, at the outset, the term civic engagement is often used to refer to two quite different things. One is volunteering and helping strangers. The other sense, quite different, is about democratic participation. You can do one without the other. Many analysts tend to conflate the two, and a lot of policy development tends to give support to one in the name of helping the other. They are both
very good things that we should support. I would also point out that according to 2016 figures from the Charities Aid Foundation, in terms of civic engagement in volunteering and helping strangers, the UK is probably among the best in Europe. In terms of civic engagement as in democratic participation, the UK is lagging behind other European countries, judging by voting patterns and other participatory processes. From my discussions with colleagues working in local and central government, the trend reflects that; there is not sufficient democratic participation. There may be protest and activist actions, but in terms of engaging and interacting with local authorities, central government bodies and political institutions, and understanding how you can shape what they do, their policy priorities and the role you can play, the level of democratic engagement is very low. That is a fair assessment of the state of civic engagement, in the two very different senses, in this country.

The Chairman: Cllr Ashraf, can I ask you a supplementary? We have heard a lot about the white working class in Yorkshire and other places. We have been told we must not call them “left-behinds” because it is patronising, but we do not mean to be patronising; we are trying to make a category. Are you making special efforts to reach out to them? If so, what are they, or are they just left behind?

Cllr Saima Ashraf: Our motto in Barking and Dagenham is “No one is left behind”. We are working with everyone. I am talking about my portfolio. When I say I have delivered the borough manifesto, I have not stopped at producing a glossy document. I launched it in July. Before that, there was massive online engagement with paperwork, which is always the most successful one. However, for a few weeks I was in all the different stations in the borough, from seven to nine, with my officers, talking to people, doing roadshows in shopping malls and markets and going to all the resident associations and schools. I tried to engage with as many people as possible. We are very proud of the Summer of Festivals we have in Barking and Dagenham, which includes a series of events such as the folk festival, the Steam and Cider Fair and the Barking town show. We have quite a few. During those festivals, we were talking to residents and engaging in the best way.

None the less, since I have delivered this document I have not stopped there. I have started roadshows, going to each ward and talking to one mayoral area. The ward councillors can help me on this because they know the main spot where parents gather or where more people gather at one place. It can be a coffee shop or a children’s centre or a school. A lot of parents come to have a coffee and Victoria sponge cake with me and talk about things. It is always very well attended.

The Chairman: It would be helpful if you had specific examples of initiatives particularly affecting the white working class, to bring them forward and involve them. Perhaps you could send it in to us.

Cllr Saima Ashraf: Yes.

Baroness Lister of Burtersett: I have a question for Henry. I am glad
you made that distinction because reading your written evidence it very much struck me. Perhaps this is a slightly loaded question, but do you feel we are putting too much emphasis on volunteering in our inquiry and not enough on democratic participation, given what you have said? You are saying the issues arise in democratic participation as civic engagement, not volunteering.

**Dr Henry Tam:** I am very conscious that support for volunteering has grown for a whole range of reasons, particularly for local community reasons, which are always very important. In response to your question, looking back over 20 years of experience there has been a consistent favouring of more support, whether it is funding or time, for volunteering; much more than for democratic participation. If you look at the need for support it is completely disproportionate to the issue involved. I can understand that partly the reason is that volunteering is seen to be a party political-neutral process; that you do not get involved with contested issues. If you talk about climate change or energy policies, people say, “You should not be taking that stance”, because that is favoured by one party or another. If you are saying, “I want to do some good work in my community”, everyone pats you on the back and says, “Jolly good. Go ahead”. It is understandable why people feel it is safer. You get a lot more praise for promoting volunteering than in taking the risk of supporting democratic participation. In a way, that illustrates why there is a much greater need to support democratic participation.

**Baroness Morris of Yardley:** This question does not require a long answer, but I was not quite sure whether you were saying the problem is that more effort, resource and focus is put on volunteering than civic engagement. I was interested in those figures when you said there was a mismatch between volunteering and civic engagement. Do you think there is any cause and effect other than the fact that the people with the money and the resources are concentrating on one more than the other? Does that make sense? If it is true that with less volunteering there is more civic engagement, is there a factor that explains that other than that it gets more attention?

**Dr Henry Tam:** If I could generalise, the UK is a very giving country. There has never been a huge problem of people not being willing to volunteer and help their neighbours and communities. It is always a good thing to have more of it, but there is a need for support for democratic participation. The problem is that many policymakers and foundations, when they have the opportunity to support democratic participation, discuss the issues in terms of civic engagement and say, “We must help civic engagement”. They ask for bids for projects, which come in, and they come in under the heading civic engagement, and they say, “Right, we are now going to help civic engagement so we are allocating so many millions for civic engagement”. They find they are helping to boost volunteering even further but barely making any impact on democratic participation.

**Lord Harries of Pentregarth:** A quick question for Mr Dunne and Cllr
Ashraf. Mr Dunne, you have your seven gatherings a year and you draw on youth councils. Could you say how these youth councils come into being and how representative they are? Cllr Ashraf, you have this big conversation. Are you satisfied that all sections of the community are represented in this big conversation? Do you have facts and figures to indicate that?

**Stuart Dunne:** On the question of how representative the youth councils are, it varies from youth council to youth council. Each youth council has different resources and follows different models.

**Lord Harries of Pentregarth:** How do they come into being? Does the council elicit them?

**Stuart Dunne:** It is a variation. It can either be the council which holds the support for the youth council or it can be a commissioned service, which is part of the council. A good model to look at is the Oldham Youth Council. They have done work recently with MP Jim McMahon on votes at 16. Each school democratically elects young people to sit on Oldham Youth Council. Within that are representative seats for different members of the community. You have representation of SEND, BME and various other groups. With regard to the different youth councils, it varies from one to another. The best youth councils we have seen are those which have a conjoined approach and involve the looked-after children’s forums as well and look at the special educational needs groups.

**Cllr Saima Ashraf:** The Big Conversation is very well attended with quite a broad range of attendees. We have different faith groups and organisations. We also have residents coming along. It is very well attended. I do not have the figures with me right now to give you but I am happy to send them.

**Lord Harries of Pentregarth:** Following on from what our Chairman said at the beginning about the left-behinds, are they engaging in this big conversation?

**Cllr Saima Ashraf:** I would say yes, they are.

**Q135 Baroness Redfern:** Stuart has touched on volunteering as against democratic participation. My question is what role should local authorities play in encouraging volunteering? How could they be more effective? What examples can you give of best practice, as such?

**Stuart Dunne:** Local authorities can play three roles with regard to volunteering. One is to have a strategic element with regard to volunteering, where they could bring organisations together such as the health service, the police and the fire service, and voluntary sector organisations such as the Scouts, St John Ambulance and Girl Guiding, so they can have that local strategic engagement. Local authorities could provide more volunteering opportunities for young people. In a number of areas, local authorities are the largest employers and, therefore, could give young people, in particular, the opportunity to experience what it is like working in a local authority. Local authorities have a particular
responsibility with regard to vulnerable young people, with particular reference to children who are looked after. It is about offering them opportunities to access volunteering. Part of the strategic element is to ensure that it is not a postcode lottery for young people and all young people in different geographical areas have the same access to volunteering opportunities as everyone else.

**Cllr Saima Ashraf:** Volunteering is very personal to people, even young people. I moved here from France 15 years ago, and I have to say I could not speak a word of English at the time. It is only by volunteering that I learned to speak English and then by volunteering with the Met that I learned more about the law and the rules of the country. In Barking and Dagenham—we are pioneers on this and very proud about this, to be honest—we have launched the Every One Every Day project, which is a mass engagement and volunteering programme for all our residents. We have around 250 activities and we plan to reach over 25,000 residents.

**Baroness Redfern:** Could you give us some examples?

**Cllr Saima Ashraf:** They can be very basic, such as cooking or learning or making something together, but they bring people together. We do not dictate what they should be doing; we want people to tell us what they would like to do and we facilitate it. When I say “we” I mean Every One Every Day which is a funding partnership between the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham and Participatory City Foundation. This partnership has created this project, which we launched last Saturday. We have been working pretty hard, and it was very well attended. We had leather-making, sewing, embroidery and cooking. We had so many workshops and all were very well attended. We are starting from two shops, one based in Barking town centre and one based in Dagenham. A lot of schools and other groups are involved in facilitating. We are looking at making it as easy as possible for residents.

**Baroness Redfern:** I am talking about volunteering; helping other people as well.

**Cllr Saima Ashraf:** Yes. We encourage that kind of volunteering as well. We have a crowdfunding platform. We have many schemes. The council is offering volunteering schemes for young people and anyone to get involved in. We have many volunteers: a lot of mums coming forward, especially in the libraries and to be on school governing bodies. We have a lot of faith group volunteering as well.

**Baroness Redfern:** Is that in the community?

**Cllr Saima Ashraf:** In the community, to help others. When we had the Big Conversation a lot of churches, including the Pentecostal churches, mentioned people getting involved in helping the elderly, doing grocery shopping or taking them to hospitals, and such things. There is that kind of engagement too.
The Chairman: Mr Dunne, can I ask a quick supplementary? You talked about the postcode lottery. Your area covers extremely dense urban areas and very rural areas. If I am in Ambleside or Barrow-in-Furness, will I still have your services? Will you be able to reach me there? I understand about Oldham and the conurbations, but how are you dealing with the rural areas? That is an issue we have come across before.

Stuart Dunne: It is a distinct challenge, especially when we talk about the rural areas of Cumbria, Lancashire and Cheshire. The idea of our gatherings when we bring people together is not to do them in a single place but to try to have them in different venues around the north-west. The way it should work is we have two in Cumbria and two in Lancashire. It works out at seven meetings but we also have a residential on top of that. We should cover the geographical area.

One of the things young people have been working on recently around the ruralisation of young people is to do with the challenges of transport, to do with democratic engagement and volunteering. I know it was one of the priorities in the Make your Mark campaign. It is particularly challenging for young people in rural areas. We have looked to develop digital engagement and how we can take meetings and some of our activities to young people. Again, if you are in a rural area of Cumbria you may not always have good internet access. It is certainly work in progress at this moment in time.

Q136 Baroness Barker: You have talked a lot about local initiatives. We need to probe the effectiveness of national initiatives, such as the National Citizen Service. From your experience, do national initiatives work well or are local initiatives far better?

Stuart Dunne: The National Citizen Service and national schemes can support local communities. However, I am not necessarily convinced at this moment in time that NCS has bridged the gap around the recognition and identity of local schemes. If you look at the adverts, they are about joining the national scheme rather than making an impact locally. Although I have no evidence to support this, I am not convinced that local communities feel they can have a say in how the National Citizen Service is directed and what goes on in their local areas.

Cllr Saima Ashraf: I do not disagree with what you say. My daughter did NCS last summer. I found it a very good initiative, to be honest, because I have seen her grow and get more involved. She had a lot of opportunities to do quite different things, which she has never had before. However, it is not linked to local. We do not have the data, as a local authority, for example, and we do not know what those young children feel or what their needs are. We need to know how we can help them more, even if it is by getting in touch with them directly. I knew about my daughter, and I was one of the “Dragons” too, so I could see those young people. I thought there was a huge potential that we could not tap into. Personally, I liked the NCS programme.

Q137 Baroness Eaton: We have spoken quite a lot about volunteering and the
role of local authorities. My question moves on more to Mr Tam’s point about the distinction of democratic engagement. What role should local authorities play in encouraging democratic engagement? How could they be more effective? What examples are there of best practice? Perhaps we could start with you.

**The Chairman:** You might want to answer the last question at the same time, if I did not give you a chance to say something.

**Dr Henry Tam:** Perhaps I can conflate the two things in my response to Baroness Eaton’s question. In terms of good practice in democratic engagement and participation, most of that work is on a volunteering basis. Your Lordships are volunteers. For a lot of people there is an interesting perception with volunteering that local authorities can help both volunteering and democratic participation if you design the volunteering to be in an area which will enhance people’s understanding of democratic practices and processes and help them become more interested and able to play a bigger role in the future. I will mention a number of examples.

At a very simple level, one local authority, I recall, used to have a contract for street cleaning with an outside company. Local people were complaining that they did not do the job properly. The solution that was concocted was that the local authority hired another company to do an inspection, which would then report to the council when they felt that the contractor was not doing a proper job. Local people were still not happy because the contractor that was supposed to be doing the inspection was not inspecting properly, so they were getting complaints about the inspector. Eventually someone came up with the idea of setting up a voluntary street warden scheme where people in the affected streets would be inspectors; they would look at their streets and report what they were not happy about directly to the council. The council would then take it, not as residents moaning but as inspectors acting on behalf of the council, and take action with the contractor directly to say, “We have spotted these problems; do something about it” because the residents who live there have spotted it. That reduced the number of complaints immeasurably and increased the cleanliness of the areas. It hit all the buttons. Those people went from saying, “The council never listens to us”, to saying, “Engaging and working with the council, going through the processes, inspecting and correcting errors is wonderful. We should do more of this”.

Another example of volunteering and democratic engagement was part of Take Part, a much wider project encouraging people to learn from people already in political positions how that could affect communities. A lot of people will say, “We can’t do anything”. It is a sense of total frustration—”Nothing ever changes. If we complain, people just dismiss us. Nobody listens to us”. When people say, “Engage with the politicians, talk to them”, they say, “Oh no, they won’t do anything. Politics is hopeless; politics changes nothing. Politics ignores people”. That particular strand of the Take Part project was to say, “Take time out to learn and to talk to people involved in the political processes already—local politicians,
councillors and MPs in Parliament—meet people, find out what they do and how they solve problems”. A lot of the people who have gone through this learning process, volunteering quite a bit of their time, came out of it quite energised. As you know, Lady Eaton, the Councillors Commission was set up, which discovered that many people say they do not know what councillors do. However, the view of the great majority of people who have spoken to a councillor and asked them for help or worked with them is that councillors do a very important job and do a good job for them. The more interactions there are, the more people understand the process.

**Baroness Eaton:** May I ask a supplementary to my question?

**The Chairman:** Specifically on this?

**Baroness Eaton:** Yes, it is. Earlier you were talking about the difference between the UK and other countries; we do more volunteering and less democratic engagement than some other countries. Knowing that the other countries have a very different political system, I find it hard to make that connection with what you have said about involvement. Politicians in some European countries are quite anonymous because of the list system and the way they are elected. They do not have surgeries or constituencies in the way that we do. That does not quite sit with what you said about getting people involved locally making a difference to their democratic engagement. I cannot quite get my head around that.

**Dr Henry Tam:** Local involvement is one strand. I am trying to work with the grain of the culture of the UK, where it is already very strong.

**Baroness Eaton:** I was not being critical.

**Dr Henry Tam:** Absolutely. In other European countries there are stronger elements of civil education; for example, a culture of learning at a very early age and not being afraid of the fact that this is a contested, controversial political issue.

**Baroness Eaton:** We avoid it and they embrace it.

**Dr Henry Tam:** My final example is the use of techniques such as Planning for Real where, again, local people can feel very frustrated with planning proposals. This is a constant headache for local authorities and national government, when everyone would say there is no win, because if you side with one the others will be against you. Back in the 1970s, the Neighbourhood Initiatives Foundation developed the technique of developing 3D models—and these are not sophisticated models but developed by schoolchildren in the area—and inviting local people in to spend time looking at the models and discussing with each other what is “Totally unacceptable”; “Okay, tolerable”, and, “Yes, it will be great to have this”. People change their cards as they see what other people do and say—“I am not going to put up with any of this if you are going to put the same thing down, but if you’re going to say something I want is tolerable, I will be tolerable towards something you want”. In many cases
they come to a resolution of the problem, and the council can steer a way through. That is a very good example of how local authorities can encourage these practices to resolve problems rather than thinking it is a dead end; everyone will lose.

I will finish by saying there are lots of these practices around. I have written enough about them. One of the things I would say is quite important is that the emphasis has been on completely innovative factors. Governments of all backgrounds and colours have been saying, “We want completely innovative practice. We want to come up with something completely different”. We do not want to keep doing something completely different. We have well-tried and tested practices, up to here; if there was funding support for even a tenth of these, democratic engagement would improve immeasurably.

**Cllr Saima Ashraf:** Between 2001 and 2016, the population in Barking and Dagenham has grown from 164,000 to 206,500 residents, and is increasing. To date, we have around 208,000 residents. Between 2001 and 2011 the white British population reduced from 81% to 49%. We identify BME communities to have grown from 19% to 50.5% now. We have a very young borough. Around 68,000 are under the age of 19. Engagement and volunteering is very personal to people. For me, in Barking and Dagenham, I can tell you that we want people to get involved, and that to have democratic engagement is also to promote cohesion, which is extremely important, to make people feel they are part of one borough and one community.

Again, we are having the Big Conversation, which is quite popular at the moment. We have also had a Cohesion Hackathon, which is a social cohesion project using participatory design techniques to jointly identify and solve cohesion issues, to bring people together to start to design those issues and address those with residents. Personally, I feel that we, as councillors, have such a huge platform. We can do so much, especially in bringing people together. Again, when we are out there doing roadshows they are always attended by the white British community. I was saying to my officers that only last Monday I have seen BMEs, but they are always attended by the white British community, which means a lot to me. To be honest, they are not always very pleasant. They are very concerned and frustrated people. I welcome that because I want to have that platform of engagement where they are heard and where they can honestly have a say. I am starting to have that conversation and putting things on the table but engaging with everybody is the way forward. We have done a lot of work on this but will definitely go on doing so.

**Stuart Dunne:** I suppose I am lucky enough not to work for one local authority but work across all 23 in the north-west. My question would be back to local authorities: if democratic engagement is not one of your responsibilities or foundations, what else is? Developing the citizenry for the future should be a number one foundation for them. If we are looking at how we support and develop more active engagement and democratic practices, particularly for young people, councils and local authorities are
steeped in systems and tradition, and they could be more transparent and accessible for young people and certainly be more responsive. Very often when young people we work with engage in some of the decision-making practices in the local authority, it can take two years for a decision to be made. That is far too long if you are trying to enthuse and motivate young people to engage.

I have already mentioned Oldham as an example of good practice. Manchester is very good at attracting young people from disadvantaged backgrounds and has a very diverse youth council. Liverpool City Council works on a school-based system and has a very active scheme. Another one is Knowsley. That is a staff mutual where the youth service has pulled out from the local authority and runs its own democratic service within the youth service. I agree with Henry, there are lots of existing practices but we do not necessarily celebrate them for what they are.

**Baroness Lister of Burtersett:** Councillor Ashraf, you have talked about bringing people together. We have had a few pieces of evidence that have argued that local authorities could do more to support community development as enabling civic engagement. I wonder if any of you have any views, not only on working with individuals, but enabling communities to be more democratically engaged.

**Dr Henry Tam:** Community development, in one sense, is about having outreach workers who can build up an informal network. That is very important because so often the challenge for local authorities is that they have no way of connecting with local people. They say, “There are all these hundreds of thousands of people. How do we connect with them? How do we develop any projects together”? Where they have community development activities on the ground they find it much easier. The other element of this is trust. If there are community outreach workers helping with community development work where they have been working together, even on small-scale projects, when they say, “There are bigger problems we would like to look at and solve with you”, people already have trust, instead of having to spend another three or six months—sometimes a whole year—building trust. The problem is that, without that, it becomes much more difficult. Community development does add to it, but that is one area that has been cut quite a lot.

**Baroness Eaton:** We talk about communities but they are different things in different places. You have communities of interest and geographic communities. I do not know whether the panel has had this experience, but many authorities have neighbourhood engagement. That is largely ward-based. There is a relationship with the councillor and the council where things such as participatory budgeting can take place—not necessarily on major things but things that affect that locality. I wondered if you have had any experience of those things which engage people with the democratic process.

**Stuart Dunne:** The last local authority I worked for was Blackpool. It depends on the individuals leading community engagement in that area. There were some successful practices where the local, elected member
worked with local officers and community members to develop the local community. I agree with Henry, though, that one of the areas that has suffered cuts during austerity, particularly for young people, is youth works. Youth workers used to provide that link and a political education for young people in their local areas. Certainly if we were to make a recommendation, we would advocate that some professionals who have that local knowledge would be beneficial.

**Baroness Redfern:** I wonder if I could add that that connects to town and parish councils as well, within their communities.

**Stuart Dunne:** Sorry, yes.

**Baroness Morris of Yardley:** Dr Tam, taking your first example about the council which then employed inspectors, it was a silly thing to pay out more money to employ inspectors when all they needed to do was listen and trust the people. On that example, it was not the people’s failure to be civically engaged, it was the council’s failure to respond. I am wondering if there is an issue here. I cannot quite work it out in my head so I am looking to you to do so. Is there not a danger that those of us who are able to operate in the political system think it is about persuading people to understand our system and take part, whereas what they are sometimes saying is, “It doesn’t work for me”. Would you say a little about how much we should concentrate on trying to persuade local authorities to change the way they do things rather than persuading people to fit in with their structures?

**Dr Henry Tam:** A very important issue is that local authorities and government institutions, in general, need to reach out and find out what would work for people. There has been comprehensive research done on neighbourhood management to show that, on average, all the areas in England with neighbourhood management perform much better on all indicators such as crime levels, educational attainment and housing arrears, than comparable areas without neighbourhood management. Clearly, having a focus where people can give their views knowing there will be a constructive response is the way forward. Applying that model, rather than jumping into any problem and thinking, “We have a way of solving it; it will be quicker”, it will be better for government institutions to go to a small sample of local people and say, “What do you think would work better on this”, and explore the options. How to manage that is very critical because a lot of these meetings and discussions are managed very badly.

**Baroness Morris of Yardley:** They are difficult meetings.

**Dr Henry Tam:** You need facilitators with good experience and skills. In fact, it is very highly skilled and often underrated. Sometimes an officer or a councillor who does not have experience will chair the meeting, the residents will get upset, they express their anger before they get to the deliberative stage and the whole thing falls apart, and they say, “We’re never talking to those people again”. You need a properly facilitated process to get through the angst and then consider the options. A very
good example is something called Audit to Action, where the police and local authorities will go to people’s doorsteps and say, “Tell us your views and then we will discuss it together. We will go down one street after another and we will come back to you with possible options. You do not have to come to our headquarters and have travel costs, we will come round every second Wednesday and talk it through”. At a time when fear of crime was going up, even though crime was falling, it was in the areas with that type of engagement that fear of crime was also reduced. Knowing how difficult facilitation is, providing training is the answer.

Q138 Baroness Lister of Burtersett: This question follows on very well from some of the things you have touched on already. Do you think local communities could be doing more to act as sites of democratic innovation? Examples would be participatory budgeting, which has been referred to, citizens juries and, slightly different, the ability to allow votes at 16 in local elections. What more could local authorities be doing and what do they need to enable those kinds of things to happen?

Stuart Dunne: Local authorities can be sites of innovation. However, it is all too often down to individuals within the local institution or to individual services; there does not seem to be a common golden thread that supports democratic engagement. With regards to participatory budgeting, I believe more could be done. I was lucky enough to lead on a great scheme launched by Government a number of years ago called the Youth Opportunities Fund and Youth Capital Fund. It was one of the best projects I have ever worked on. Young people were given full control of providing financial support for services run for young people. That was a wonderful scheme, which stopped as it started to get going.

With regard to votes at 16, yes, I would acknowledge that I am a full supporter of votes at 16. Following the debate and vote on votes at 16 in the Chamber not long ago, there is no clear evidence on whether people support it or not. It might be a good opportunity to start a national debate on the vote at 16, and the practicalities around that.

The Chairman: Does anyone else want to come in on this? The question was particularly about votes at 16, was it not, Baroness Lister?

Baroness Lister of Burtersett: Or sites of democratic innovation. They seem to have been lumped together in the question. Votes at 16 is slightly different. Behind the question is the idea that local authorities could experiment in a local area. It is more about sites of democratic innovation.

Cllr Saima Ashraf: With all the cuts that local authorities are making, it is quite difficult to demand more. Local authorities need to start to do things differently, so reshape and transform the council. This is what we are doing in Barking and Dagenham. It is not easy. You mentioned the police, and we have police cuts as well. In my borough I can tell you that there are many issues that we need to look into. Barking and Dagenham is one of the most deprived areas. Residents in Barking and Dagenham, no matter which class or background, are the working-class people living
in poverty. Looking at engagement, volunteering, I am quite overwhelmed when I look at the numbers of people volunteering who are looking after other people. Looking especially at the faith groups—from Christian to Muslim to the Gurdwara—they are all volunteering. As local authorities we need to transform and look at different ways of delivering. This is why we are now looking at a better partnership with the CVS, for example, and at having crowdfunding platforms. We also introduced the Barking and Dagenham Lottery, which is a lottery for local voluntary groups and residents. It is a win-win for both. There is a lot we need to do and carry on doing; engaging with our partners more, which I am doing with the borough manifesto, which carries on with the good neighbourhood guide, involving residents and what they want. It is listening to what they have to say, so no matter how frustrated they are, they have that platform.

**Dr Henry Tam:** Local authorities can facilitate good, effective and innovative practices. There should be a much greater premium put on learning from others and applying it, rather than creating something completely new. The LGA can do a lot in saying that if you learn from others and apply it they would value that even more than you coming in with something completely new.

Participatory budgeting is a very good example. If done properly it is a very good practice, but I have heard so many examples where the authorities concerned are simply drawing in people on a first-come first-served basis, which completely defeats the purpose of the random sampling you need to underpin participatory budgeting. Already some people are giving it a bad name and saying it does not work; you get one group of self-selected people who push their projects forward. Local sites of good innovative practice will work if they can help to maintain and sustain proper standards in applying the practices which are known to work, but they are known to work on the basis that they follow certain procedures. It should be flagged that once an area does not follow the procedures it is not an example of the practice itself.

**Q139 Lord Rowe-Beddoe:** Let us move on to integration. I would appreciate your comments on what local authorities are doing and what they can do better on this whole question. I was struck that the Woolf Institute, in part of their written report, suggests that many communities do not have much confidence in local authorities, in this particular area. They give examples of Grenfell Tower and the Finsbury Park attack where multifaith organisations are brought in and seem to play a very effective role. May I have your comments on that? The last point is for you, Councillor Ashraf. You mentioned social cohesion earlier on. Is that synonymous with integration, or were you using it in a different way? Perhaps you would like to answer it when you are ready.

**Cllr Saima Ashraf:** If I can start, I would say that integration is a complex issue. There is no silver bullet. We are extremely proud of our Summer of Festivals in Barking and Dagenham. Each summer we have over 10 free events across the borough celebrating our heritage, history and the culture and community of Barking and Dagenham. We have the
Elvis Festival, the One Borough show, the Country Fair Pop Festival and the Dagenham Festival. All that is regardless of race, background or who you are; it is about bringing people together. Some 92% of residents agree that the events should continue and are a good way for people of different ages and backgrounds to come together. Again, this is something we are proud of because it brings people together and starts integration and cohesion. Cohesion is about integration and mixing, wherever you are. As I mentioned earlier, and I know I am going to repeat it again, Every One Every Day is such a project that brings together so many facilities, workshops and activities for people.

The Chairman: Thank you. Could colleagues on either side of you give examples of best practice and whether Cllr Ashraf’s responsibilities in her area are indeed examples of best practice? What can be done to make everywhere like Cllr Ashraf’s area?

Stuart Dunne: I will start with an example. One of the downfalls of local authorities is their geographical boundaries. Sometimes they are consigned to geographical boundaries, whereas we know that communities breach those boundaries. Obviously, there are communities of interest as well. One of the examples we draw back to is a project between young people in Oldham and Rochdale, called Fusion. That was about bringing together two groups of young people, who have challenges with each other, not simply to integrate but to create social cohesion and understanding of each other and their cultures. That was one example.

The role for local authorities can be that co-ordination role of bringing people together. They should have facilities and people working in local communities to be able to understand them, and having an overseeing eye on bringing services together to make sure that local communities’ needs are met.

Dr Henry Tam: When we talk about integration we need to clarify that there are two senses of identity which, again, tend to play into each other. One is what I would call a sociocultural identity—people’s customs, tastes and so on. The other is a civic identity, which is often what we are talking about; that you are a part of this country and under the rule of law of this country. In terms of civic identity, it is very important for there to be very clear integration. People must learn to accept that we are all citizens of the UK, and that identity is non-negotiable. There is a legal process through Parliament to arrive at defining the rules and laws that govern that identity. Everyone must accept it. It does not matter if you can invoke some custom or belief to say, “I don’t quite agree with it”. I am sorry, that is the democratic system. That identity, if you want to be a British citizen, is what civic identity is about.

There is a separate issue that under our own democratic culture we can disagree with what the legal processes arrive at. There is civic disobedience, and so on and so forth, in order to reform that civic identity, but that is part of the democratic process. Separate from that is what I call the sociocultural identity: what people like, how they dress,
what they celebrate as festivals, and so on. On that, far from wanting an integrated, single culture where everyone is the same, what is important here is getting people to understand people’s different perspectives, cultures, customs and preferences. If we use the term integration or cohesion, the challenge is helping people understand one another. Evidence has consistently shown that people who are kept separate from each other and do not see each other or come across each other have this fear and anxiety about others. The rate of suspicion and antipathy is always higher among people who have rarely seen or come across people with different cultures and customs, whereas people with interactions with people of other cultures and customs mostly welcome those daily interactions.

In terms of integration, when it comes to sociocultural issues, it is getting people to mix under congenial conditions. Eating meals together is often cited as a very effective example of bringing people together so they can understand each other, but we must not confuse it with the civic identity, which any Government of the day should be quite firm about and say: “There is no compromise. I don’t care that you say because you have had 1,000 years of customs therefore you can disobey the laws of this country. You can try to reform it and put forward cases through Parliament, and so on, but until that is done that is the law”. Invoking sociocultural issues is neither here nor there. Those are two quite separate issues.

The Chairman: Can I ask you a supplementary on the issue of faith schools and how they work between those two quite different issues that you have raised with us? We have had a lot of questions about whether faith schools where you have children from one faith entirely, whatever it may be, are helping to bridge the gaps that you are talking about.

Dr Henry Tam: If a faith school understands that they will not encourage their pupils to invoke their faith to disagree with the civic identity then that is a good path, but not if they start to inculcate an attitude that, “Because of our faith we do not have to confirm to the civic identity”. That, of course, goes back to the very beginning of the 17th century and the challenge for our country, where allegiance to the Pope could be invoked as breaching the civic rule of law of this country, and it became a very serious issue indeed. Faith, if it is about your religion, not departing from the law of this country, is fine. The other side of it, the sociocultural side, is also whether, because of the way you approach faith, you are using a multifaith technique to say, “Although we are a faith school, we welcome the faiths of other cultures; we can appreciate why they believe what they believe, although we stay firmly with ours”, or are they promoting an attitude which says, “Only our faith is correct; other faiths are highly dubious and we must look upon them as”—whatever word you want to fill in the blank.

The Chairman: Cllr Ashraf, would you like to add something on this? It is an important point.
**Cllr Saima Ashraf:** Yes, I think that, on the religious aspect, it is important to follow equality. We are in such a country—and this is the beauty of this country—where I feel there is equality. It is not perfect and it did not happen overnight, but nowhere is perfect. It is not the same elsewhere in other countries. Being from a different country—I come from France and I have lived in other countries as well—I know it is different. The integration aspect of it, no matter which religion you are from, integrating yourself among your community is definitely the way forward. I have to say that in Barking and Dagenham we have different faiths and they are all very much involved in the work we do, especially since we have started to transform the council. We definitely have a better partnership with each group, and each group is active in helping and volunteering in everything we do, along with the council.

**Q140 Lord Harries of Pentregarth:** Taking for granted the distinction you make, Dr Tam, between one’s social and cultural identity, on the one hand, and one’s civic and political identity, on the other—which you also make very clearly in your written evidence—do you, or any of you, have anything to say about the relationship between local identity and national identity and how far it might be necessary to build, first, a local identity before you can help people to feel a national identity?

**Dr Henry Tam:** I would say, given precisely the distinction I have made, I do not think it is necessary for that to happen. Local identity is very much an issue of sociocultural identity. People can have all kinds of rich sociocultural identities at a local level, which may be different from the sociocultural identity at the national level, so long as they understand the civic identity at the national level. That is what being a citizen of this country is about. That underpins the national identity. Some of the problems have arisen because people think that in order to have a strong sense of national identity they must have a local identity that reflects that. That causes problems because then they think that the sociocultural practices of a locality must also reflect the national identity, whereas the national identity is simply the laws and rules of the country. We need to encourage a healthy separation: locally you can enjoy whatever sociocultural identity and practices you have, so long as you know what being a citizen of this country is about.

**Cllr Saima Ashraf:** Very briefly, I came from somewhere else and I can tell you that two years ago, after 15 years of being in this country, I decided to become British. It was with great pride that I did that. It was a long process but it is all about where you are and how you feel about your identity. I have different backgrounds. However, it is about where you are, where you live and how you feel about it. I am very proud to say that I am now a British citizen living in this country. I was not born and bred in Barking and Dagenham but I always say that I was made in Barking and Dagenham. It is my pride because I love where I am, and I love my community as Barking and Dagenham. Nationally, yes, I adhere to the rules of this country as best I can.

**Stuart Dunne:** The interesting thing around identity is that it is multifaceted. People change their identity quite often. The work we have
done on talking to young people around national identity and how you construct national identity is to make sure that it is not at the expense of their heritage identity. With regards to the local identity and the national identity, the work we have done is around whether, if young people have a good value base, that can spread across their local identity and their national identity, and, just as importantly, their global identity.

The Chairman: Thank you very much. We have overrun. We have kept you too long but you have given us a lot of food for thought and some very interesting local examples. Thank you very much indeed.