Thank you for the opportunity to offer thoughts and comments relating to our experiences with Citizenship and Civic Engagement, which is duly submitted.

1. Citizenship and civic engagement is the ‘bedrock’ of our democracy. It encourages being part of a social community, having a sense of purpose and status.

2. Citizenship is about being part of a common group with rights and privileges, but also with responsibilities and duties. Also each individual, who is part of, or choosing to join an accepted community, would be expected to support the common good, the laws, obligations, and functions that make that group specific or distinctive. An understanding of citizenship should certainly be encouraged as part of the educational process. Appropriate ceremonies could be part of this.

3. Civic engagement and citizenship should be publicly acclaimed and accepted as such, by formal rights and even statute. Each can be awarded a certificate on reaching the voting age. This would also remind those who influence the nation directly and are in authority, of the position of a citizen and their role in society. An informed and supported civic structure and local engagement could act as a monitor of the progress of citizenship.

4. Our current laws and customs do not encourage active political engagement. Perhaps consideration could be given to a compulsory vote, with the opportunity to vote for ‘none of those listed’. There are mixed feeling on the voting age being lowered to 16, as there are some very engaged and thoughtful 16 year olds, but until there is improved engagement with civic responsibilities and politics, it would be prudent to probably remain at 18 years. This could be reconsidered if we can address an appreciation of community and citizenship within our society. As currently we are very poor with our youth provision and engagement.

5. Encouraging good citizenship, should commence at primary school and throughout our life experiences.

6. We are not generally good with citizenship programmes; in fact it could be argued that we are experiencing a decline in the civic ethos, with poor local-governance engagement and accountability. Yes! Let’s have a citizenship ceremony, but it must be meaningful and have depth, with those having influence to also want this to happen and be successful. Local authorities, answerable to their communities, should have more autonomy and less central government interference. We are also seeing an increase in corporate influence on our public life, with governments being influenced by “big money” and its political funders.

7. What responsibility should central government, devolved and local government have? Accepting that parliament is sovereign, the structures and processes that serve this principle, are often seen to be disfunctional and must address the profound disconnection
between our governance structures and the citizen, as certain policies and developments are having a negative impact on our civic life, as we have known them. We are experiencing long-term systemic failures with a lack of real accountability, by successive governments, with poorly drafted legislation and poor evidenced public information. There is much work to be done to rebuild public trust in our institutions. We must re-emphasise the term service and less importance to self-interest.

8. Our values and principles were built and developed over time, by the efforts and sacrifices of our forebears, which are still worthy and deserving of support. They should be held in common agreement, and in support of equality and a sense of purpose and a feeling of belonging and identity. As inequality, or the perception of it, could have a profound impact on the success and cohesion of a society.

9. Yes, many communities and individuals do feel left behind and ignored, they see the loss of their local community structures and poor engagement with social structures and low resourced civic agencies. Closed Police Stations and Neighbourhood Offices, together with reduced library services and lack of youth centres and generally reduced community facilities. These are disappointing and unacceptable outcomes, as our civic structures are being systematically closed to the public and do not allow a reasonable level of engagement with our public agencies. The acceptance of our social neighbourhoods and community as a delight, support and refuge is being lost to a feeling of despair and hopelessness. Young people, particularly, are looking for direction and meaning. A start in addressing these barriers is an improved engagement with the public agencies and public realm to counter the faceless bureaucracy and corporate impunity.

10. A relationship between citizenship and civic engagement is all “one and the same”. As without social cohesion and cooperation we shall have a fragmented society that could have the unfortunate outcome of hostility and separation, each with profound implications. Whereas, we can celebrate our individuality, we must be ever mindful of our common aims and responsibilities.

11. It is an advantage that we are able to communicate in a common language, in supporting our common ties and to prevent isolation.

12. To be a tolerant and cohesive society is what we strive for, but this is also inculcated in our hard won values and standards. But it is also necessary that these are supported by practical and meaningful policies.

2 August 2017