1. ‘Civic engagement’ is sometimes taken to mean involving citizens in doing good work in their communities, when its use should be focused on engaging citizens in democratic political processes. In the former sense (incorporating cash giving, volunteering and helping strangers), the UK already performs better than other European countries according to the annual survey commissioned by the Charities Aid Foundation (2016 figures). However, in the latter sense of democratic participation, the UK lags behind most other European countries (e.g., France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Belgium, the Netherlands, Austria, and all the Scandinavian countries. Source: ‘The End of Voters in Europe? Electoral Turnout in Europe since WWII’ by Pascal Delwit, published in The Open Journal of Political Science, 2013, Vol. 3, No.1, Table 3). The civic engagement that needs most urgent attention in the UK is that which is concerned with connecting more citizens with their own democratic governance.

2. There is a vital difference between socio-cultural identity on the one hand, and civic-political identity on the other. In the UK, people have multiple social and cultural identities – they are at the same time English (or Welsh or Scottish); Humanist (or Catholic or Church of England or Jewish or Muslim or Buddhist); of Anglo-Saxon/Norman/African/Asian/Slavic descent; a Mancunian (or Londoner or Geordie); traditionalist/progressive; devoted to some sports team; and dedicated to one or more causes. They rarely view themselves as being attached to just one of these to the exclusion of others, and governments should not assume that one of these should be their prime identity. By contrast, from a political point of view, there is no question that the civic identity of a British citizen, whose rights are protected by the UK government, and who is responsible to that government and his/her fellow citizens in relation to a defined set of obligations, is of the utmost importance. Some commentators have conflated the need to remind citizens of what it means to be a British citizen, with the desire in some quarters to champion particular social and cultural identities as the defining features of being British. That is a mistake that lawmakers must avoid. The role of civic engagement is to connect citizens with their political identity, as codified by the system of democracy under which they live. (There is a further dimension of European citizenship which should not be ignored).

3. Political citizenship commands support and respect when the government provides stability and security (in military, legal, social and economic terms) to people who then feel that the reciprocal package of rights and responsibilities that binds them to the state merits their commitment. Genuine pride and allegiance cannot be encouraged except through the state setting out and honouring its promises as a fair and effective governing institution for its citizens. Citizenship education, civic ceremonies, lifelong learning, all have a part to play, so long as they relate to relevant policies and practices, and not to rhetorical gestures or hollow symbolism.

4. Military service, unpaid service to local communities, voting, have all been discussed in relation to whether or not they should be made compulsory for all citizens. The one form of civic engagement that should be top of the list for consideration is action learning in democratic governance processes and policy making. All citizens should engage in participatory deliberations where they can learn about what are being put forward, what are their implications according to their advocates and their critics, what they think are the pros and cons in the light of discussing them with others likely to be affected, and expressing their preference. Such participatory events, at the local, regional or national level, require expert organisation and facilitation, and can only work with the full support of the relevant
government bodies. Once they are effectively set up, participation in them can be made a condition for casting a vote in elections or referendum, as that would reduce the likelihood of people voting in ignorance of what they are voting for or against. People are required to learn to drive before they are allowed to drive; perhaps they should have to learn to vote before they can cast their ballot.

5. Both the rights and responsibilities for political engagement should be strengthened. In terms of rights, it ought to be made much easier for people to register to vote and turnout to vote with polling stations at close proximity to their home. The voting age ought to be lowered to include those aged 16-18 since there is no evidence that they would be less able than people of a higher age to judge how they should vote. (It should be noted that although there is much talk about bringing in electronic voting, the increasing risk of hacking, especially by foreign regimes, suggests caution is needed before electronic voting supersedes physical voting). In terms of responsibilities, the suggestion made in paragraph 4 above outlines the need for citizens to engage in action learning about policy deliberation and informed voting before they are ready to vote.

6. As the development of awareness and understanding of how public decisions can affect one’s life, and how one can play a part in shaping those decisions, education has a critical role in enabling citizens to engage effectively with their government. It means that education should cultivate reasoning skills, aptitudes in interrogating the veracity of information, and practical know-how in taking part in deliberating with others as to what policy options or possible candidates would be the optimal choice. Whatever is taught inside a classroom should be connected to action learning activities outside the classroom, through giving democratic input into local authorities and other public bodies. Greater attention should be given to, not so much the curriculum, as the status of citizenship classes (which ought to be recognised as key to securing participatory rights for students) and the competence of teachers in engaging students (which need to be improved through specific training).

7. There is a long standing misconception that encouraging people to be ‘good/active citizens’ in the sense of initiating/organising/helping out with worthy community projects, is equivalent to developing citizens who will be engaged in the political governance of their country. While voluntary activities, promoted by agencies such as the National Citizen Service and others, are socially commendable, those activities teach little about how to participate in public policy evaluation, analysis of electoral contest arguments, or conflict resolution in tackling polarised assumptions about political options. And there is no evidence that they lead to any notable increase in political engagement among people who did not previously engage. It would be far better to value programmes that are designed to promote voluntary good work for what they are, and not invoke tenuous links to civic engagement (in the political sense) as justification for them. In order to raise civic engagement in democratic political processes, what is needed is a substantial increase in the number of action learning activities that are tailor-made to expand citizens’ understanding, skills, and experience in shaping public policies (see paragraph 4 above).

8. If we focus on civic engagement in democratic politics (as opposed to the promotion of good work by citizens), one of the best examples of a sustained and high impact support programme is provided by ‘Together We Can’, the programme for civil renewal and community empowerment implemented by the UK government in partnership with local authorities and community organisations across England from 2003 to 2010. The programme involved
coordinating the activities of 12 government departments to provide support to national, regional, and local groups to experiment, learn, share, and promote practices that help more citizens engage in the democratic development of policies that affect them, especially in areas where trust and participation in the activities of government bodies were at the outset low. Specific projects included community hubs for ‘Active Learning for Active Citizenship’; ‘Guide Neighbourhoods’ that help communities learn from each other regarding how to engage with public bodies; ‘Civic Pioneers’ that promote tried and tested engagement techniques across local authority areas; resources to expand the use of participatory budgeting in deciding how to allocate public resources; and use of community audits to target local problems. More details can be found from:


9. Any discussion of values should bear in mind the distinction between socio-cultural identity and civic-political identity (set out in paragraph 2 above). People with diverse socio-cultural identities will have a range of values, some overlapping, some clearly distinct. There is no inherent reason why they must all have the same socio-cultural values (e.g., how they worship, what they eat, the music they like). But under their civic-political identity as British citizens they are all bound by the values of an inclusive democratic state that oversees the reciprocal granting of protective rights and enforcing of compliance responsibilities. On the threat to these values of citizenship, two things should be noted. First, the freedom to pursue diverse socio-cultural values does not extend beyond the point where the pursuit of any such value undermines the rights and responsibilities of a democratic citizen. In other words, no one can claim that their beliefs, customs, traditions entitle them to treat any individual or group (e.g., women, ethnic or religious minorities) in a harmful or disrespectful manner contrary to the standards and expectations set under the banner of democratic citizenship as guaranteed by the British rule of law. Anyone at risk from such harm or disrespect should be assured by the government that no concession will be made to people seeking to invoke values that are incompatible with the equal protection accorded to all British citizens. Secondly, the values of democratic citizenship are derived from the civic ideal that has evolved in Britain. They ought to be honoured by the state, but does not depend on the state for their legitimacy. In other words, the government cannot arbitrarily declare what those values are, even if it commands a majority in the House of Commons. Indeed, if any British government should bring in policies that go against the values of democratic citizenship (e.g., targeting disabled people or ethnic minorities for ill treatment, withdrawing protection for women from abuse or attack), the upholding of the values of citizenship may require active protest and civil disobedience.

10. There are at least three main factors that cause groups to feel they have been left behind. First, the wealth gap between the superrich and those barely coping has led many who are daily struggling to feel that the system is not only rigged against them, but that nobody is
seriously trying to change things to give them a fairer chance to get by. Richard Wilkinson and others have meticulously documented the severe negative effects of wide income inequalities on those at the bottom end of society. Secondly, planning and development policies have for decades created structurally deprived areas where low wage job opportunities, poor housing, higher than average crime levels routinely go together to give local residents a sense that they are of little concern to the wider society. This is compounded by regeneration schemes that break up neighbourhood community networks, bring in new housing and facilities that push house prices/rents up beyond what local people can afford, and push more low income people into other deprived areas where they can find an affordable place to live. Thirdly, anti-immigrant and anti-benefit claimant propaganda has proliferated to encourage UK residents with low standards of living to feel that undeserving foreigners with jobs and native Britons without jobs are getting special treatment that in effect pushes hard working families to the margins of society. To overcome these barriers, the government should consider measures to moderate the wealth gap, improve deprived areas for local people, and clamp down on hate speech and scapegoat-targeted propaganda, respectively.

11. Any country with citizens that have a diverse mix of socio-cultural identities will have a stronger sense of shared civic identity if they have more opportunities to interact freely and positively. There is evidence that mutual respect and integration are enhanced by people getting to know each other more, while prejudice is fuelled by the lack of experience of people with apparent differences. For example, according to the findings by Rose Meleady, Charles R Seger and Marieke Vermue (‘Examining the role of positive and negative intergroup contact and anti-immigrant prejudice in Brexit’, published in the British Journal of Social Psychology, June 2017), individuals who come into contact with immigrants more often are less likely to have anti-immigrant prejudice, and more likely to be among those who voted ‘Remain’ in the EU referendum. So instead of pandering to the prejudiced calls to cut diversity in order to increase integration, the government should ensure there are more opportunities for people to interact with others from diverse backgrounds so that there is less misunderstanding, less alienation, and a greater sense of togetherness. This would also suggest that policies to segregate schools by faith or allow selection by religion within a school are likely to be inimical to civic integration (Note: in existing Church of England free schools that are bound by the 50% cap on religious selection, 63% of pupils are classified as ‘of white origin’, but in Church of England secondaries that religiously select all of their places, 78% are white [source: government’s figures as reported by the British Humanist Association, 2016]).

12. The ability to communicate in English is a vital dimension of being a British citizen, and every encouragement and support should be given to all citizens to be reasonably proficient in English. Refusal to try to learn or get help to understand English should not be sanctified as an emblem of diversity, but discouraged as a hindrance to civic solidarity. However, we must bear in mind that, just as some UK citizens have to rely on sign language or cannot read English because of their visual impairment, people who have come from abroad and may not initially be able to grasp English should not be looked down on, but given sympathetic assistance in learning to communicate in a different way. The British people should also be reminded how common it is that we ourselves do not speak the language of the countries we visit, or even settle in as expats. As for naturalisation and arrangements such as the citizenship test, again we need to separate out concerns with civic identity from those about socio-cultural identity. The emphasis should be much less on selective cultural knowledge, and far more on civic-political information relating to the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, legal and political
procedures, and how to access and check guidance on appropriate civic behaviour (e.g., registering to vote, paying taxes, learning about public policies, reporting crime, etc).

13. The ‘Together We Can’ programme for civil renewal (mentioned in paragraph 8 above) included support for projects that brought people with diverse backgrounds to learn from each other (e.g., ex-miners and asylum seekers in Yorkshire discussing their perspectives of local challenges; young and the elderly learning more about each other’s needs and experiences that are of interest to others; people with learning disability and public service providers discovering more about what works and what doesn’t), or to work together to tackle common problems (e.g., identifying problems of crime in local neighbourhoods and supporting each other with the help of the police and other agencies in increasing the sense of community safety; engaging in community health initiatives that get people to share information about key threats and how to detect and seek help to minimise health risk; involving pupils in schools in administering restorative justice that build confidence and cut disruptive behaviour). If these projects can be supported, sustained and spread to more parts of the UK, they would very likely help to promote a positive and engaging vision of British Citizenship.

6 August 2017