Viewpoint and experience: I submit this response as an individual, based on long experience of working in the field of community involvement. I directed research and policy at the Community Development Foundation between 1981 and 2005, analysing a wide variety of community projects across the UK and in a variety of European sites. I carried out consultancies for numerous local authorities and was the main author of CDF’s influential advice to government on integrating community involvement into regeneration policies in the 1990s. From 2005 to 2008 I was seconded to the Home Office and the Department of Communities and Local Government as a senior adviser on community empowerment. Since 2008 I have carried out a mixed portfolio of research, policy analysis and project development on community involvement. I directed, with Dr Brian Fisher, the Health Empowerment Leverage Project (HELP), which was commissioned by the Department of Health in 2010 to examine ways of measuring the economic value of community development in health¹. In 2010-12 I worked with Community Places in Northern Ireland on a series of contracts for the NI Government and the City of Belfast on strategies for social inclusion, community development and voluntary sector policy². My book with Colin Miller, Rethinking Community Practice (Bristol: Policy Press, 2013) proposes a new synthesis of ways to energise communities and public services together. I was awarded an MBE for services to community development in 2009.

Focus. I am addressing especially your question 7, regarding how society, government, third sector organisations and individuals can encourage civic engagement, with implications for other questions.

Importance of the issue. It is vital for individuals and society alike that everyone has a sense of belonging to society in some way or other. For individuals, this is connected with mental health, social opportunities and life chances. For society it is connected with social cohesion, mutual responsibilities and political stability. Engagement cannot be imposed or required. It has to be achieved by people’s free choices. But government, industry, voluntary organisations and individuals all have a part to play in creating the best climate for inclusive involvement.

The neglected layer of engagement. Citizenship and civic engagement are usually discussed in terms of the individual on the one hand and society or the state on the other. There is much less attention to the intervening layer which is vital to link the two, namely community activity. Much of this activity takes place on a local face-to-face basis, some also through wider networks and social media. Whilst family and household constitute the private sphere, community activity is the level of society where involvement begins and largely takes place. It is the level where personal and public issues intersect, and is also a stepping stone between private life and practical engagement in public issues. It can be seen concretely in community groups and activities of all kinds, such as tenants’ and residents’ associations, parent-teacher associations, environmental groups, health groups, social clubs, youth clubs, friends of parks, choirs, drama groups, art clubs, charitable activities based on faith groups and hundreds more. These can be called collectively the community sector. Whilst these activities amount to a huge area of national life, the fact that each of them is small and local consigns the entire sector to having a low profile. Its role is rarely addressed adequately in public debate and policy.

¹ www.healthempowerment.co.uk
² www.communityplanningtoolkit.org
Not just the voluntary sector. It is widely accepted that a flourishing voluntary sector is one of the main vehicles for civic engagement. However, different segments of the voluntary sector have different roles in this respect. Large, professionally-run voluntary organisations sometimes mobilise numerous volunteers and represent wide public opinion on specific issues. But many of the larger voluntary organisations operate primarily as service providers rather than as vehicles for civic engagement. Local community groups and projects, on the other hand, involve people more personally and actively. To become involved in civic engagement, most people need a vehicle that is near at hand, unthreatening, and small enough for the individual participant to matter. Independent local community organisations are in fact the largest part of the voluntary sector, not only by numbers of organisations but in terms of volume of volunteering. But investment directed towards the voluntary sector as a whole is largely swallowed up by the service-providing functions of the larger, professionally-led organisations. There is little trickle-down to the community sector, other than through the small but critical stratum of ‘infrastructure’ organisations which specifically commit themselves to this role. A government policy aiming to support civic engagement must pay particular attention to boosting conditions for the community sector and its infrastructure.

Favourable and unfavourable factors. The volume and effectiveness of community activity and the groups through which it works are not purely spontaneous or random phenomena. To some extent they reflect, on one hand, general social and economic advantages and, on the other, availability of certain forms of help to combat disadvantage. The largest ever survey of the voluntary and community sector in England, commissioned by government in 2008, sampled all 149 local authorities and found that sheer numbers of organisations in this sector, large or small, ranged from 200 to 3000. Seaside town Brighton had three times as many organisations as Seaside town Torbay, though only a 16% higher population. The London Borough of Camden had eight times as many such organisations as the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham, though only a 30% higher population.

Positive factors and outcomes. A government report in 2004 identified five key types of help affecting the level and effectiveness of community activity, and five key outcomes of successful activity. All of these remain highly relevant. The five helping factors were:
- access to free or affordable meeting space
- availability of seedcorn funding
- availability of help from skilled community workers
- networks for mutual support between organisations
- opportunities for learning about active citizenship and engagement.

The five outcomes were:
- a higher level of trust and co-operation amongst people in a locality
- more confident, motivated and active citizens
- more effective community groups and organisations
- a stronger, more varied and inclusive local community sector

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3 Important research and campaigning on voluntary sector infrastructure has been conducted by the National Association for Voluntary and Community Action (NAVCA) - see [https://www.navca.org.uk/resources/111-commission-on-the-future-of-local-infrastructure-research](https://www.navca.org.uk/resources/111-commission-on-the-future-of-local-infrastructure-research)


greater capacity of community groups and organisations to engage in joint work with public authorities. Parallel studies showed that it was possible to measure these kinds of outcome, and a good deal of research into outcomes was carried out in the first decade of the century.

**Moving in the wrong direction.** Support for the community sector has, however, fallen sharply over the past few years, especially in England, due to the combination of a number of factors. Local authorities used to be the principal source of support, but since this function was discretionary, most of it has disappeared as a result of the cuts in local government funding. This is also exacerbating the pressures on healthcare. The ‘Big Society’ notion that voluntary and community organisations would function better without state support has proved to be badly mistaken. The Big Society concept was not even mentioned in the 2017 election.

**Importance to the public services.** The activities of the community sector are also vital to the functioning of the public services. It is increasingly clear that the health and care systems can only cope with 21st-century needs if more bridges can be built to community activity. The same applies in areas such as policing, education, environment and others. The health system is making efforts to find ways to boost community participation, but is at the same time suffering from the depletion of the key local authority role and loss of its expertise. Public services also need to change their professional cultures in order to engage better with the communities whom they want to engage with. Aside from the question of whether they support the community sector, public service providers, whether operating in the public, private or voluntary sector, perform (or more usually neglect) a vital function in terms of their openness and responsiveness to community involvement. In the major government survey cited above (note 4) what community organisations primarily felt they lacked from public service bodies was not resources but contact, dialogue and cooperation.

**Reforming practice.** The practice which specialises in supporting the community sector, community development, was severely reduced in England during the ‘Big Society’ period. It was somewhat better sustained in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, which did not adopt the Big Society concept. Community development has also suffered from certain long-standing difficulties about clarity of objectives. It needs to be revived as part of a package to stimulate citizenship and civic engagement, but in a new form designed to squarely address the issues being discussed by your committee. Some of its traditional tools and practices remain vital, others will need to be modified or created. An area that needs new thinking is how to create genuine partnerships between public service providers and their user communities, such that disasters like the Grenfell Tower fire are prevented.

**Action.** A plan to revive and increase the role of community activity in promoting citizenship and civic participation urgently needs to be pursued despite the difficulties of present conditions. The following three elements should feature in any such plan:

(i) Allocation of ringfenced resources to local authorities to revive and amplify their role in supporting the community sector and its infrastructure. This could be achieved by a very small

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8 Gabriel Chanan, *Thriving Third Sector*, Cabinet Office, Office of the Third Sector (later Office for Civil Society), 2010
fraction of new government expenditure so long as it was genuinely ‘new’ money and was
ringfenced securely to this objective.

(ii) Analysis of what all public service providers can do by changing practices within existing
resources to engage with their user communities and be more responsive to their involvement,
influence and cooperation. Experience suggests that the establishment of structured partnerships
is necessary to make participation genuinely effective and overcome the recurrent tendency to
invoke community involvement merely cosmetically⁹.

(iii) Development and deployment of more coordinated and effective forms of community
development, with clearer objectives, practices and measurement of outcomes on citizenship and
civic participation.

6 August 2017

⁹ Gabriel Chanan, Searching for Solid Foundations: Community Involvement and Urban Policy, Office of the
Deputy Prime Minister (later Department for Communities and Local Government), 2003