Dr Sarah Mills and Dr Catherine Waite – written evidence (CCE0030)

1. About The Researchers
Dr Sarah Mills is a Senior Lecturer in Human Geography at Loughborough University. Her research focuses on youth citizenship, informal education and volunteering and she has published widely on these themes. She is an expert on the geographies of youth citizenship and youth organisations in the UK. She is Chair of the Royal Geographical Society’s Research Group on ‘Children, Youth and Families’.
Dr Catherine Waite is a Lecturer in Human Geography at University of Northampton. Her research explores geographies of migration, young people and sport.

2. Executive Project Summary
Dr Mills’ ESRC-funded research project on National Citizen Service [ES/L009315/1: 2014-7] explored the state’s motivations behind, the voluntary sector’s engagement with, and young people’s experiences of NCS. Dr Mills & Dr Catherine Waite (Research Associate) collected data using several research methods including qualitative interviews with NCS graduates (30), regional delivery providers (22) and key ‘architects’ of the NCS programme (8). The researchers also conducted policy analysis, an online survey with NCS graduates (407), an ‘on-the-ground’ ethnography of one team’s NCS journey, and a participatory animated whiteboard video of their NCS experience (more details via project website). The project submitted written evidence to the Public Bill Committee (NCS Bill) in January 2017 and has fed key findings to NCS Trust, Cabinet Office and other stakeholders.

3. Relevant Project Publications

Peer-Reviewed Journal Article
Open Access PDF Free to download here
Full web-link: http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0962629816300944
Hard Copies Available on Request

End of Project Report
Open Access PDF Free to download here
Full web-link: http://www.geographiesofyouthcitizenship.com/project-outputs.php
Hard Copies Available on Request

4. Written Evidence with respect to Select Committee Question 6 on National Citizen Service

4.0 Case-Study Context: What is National Citizen Service?
Launched in 2011, National Citizen Service (NCS) is a short-term voluntary scheme for 15-17 year olds in England and Northern Ireland. Over 300,000 young people have completed the NCS programme, comprised of three distinctive phases over 3-4 weeks during Summer, with shorter versions available in Spring and Autumn.
Phase One is a residential experience usually held at an outdoor activity centre to create bonds between young people. Phase Two is a second residential, usually hosted in University Halls of Residence. Activities here are focused on skills development for the future through a series of
workshops and group tasks. For both residential experiences, young people are in large ‘waves’ (circa 100 people) from the same region, but activities are completed within smaller teams of young people from the same village or town. For the final phase of the programme, young people return to their home communities to design and complete a social action project, for example fundraising, campaigning or renovation projects. The programme ends with a graduation ceremony to celebrate their NCS journey.

NCS is a unique voluntary youth programme because it was created, driven and funded by the UK Government. It employs a top-down regional delivery model overseen by the NCS Trust, with provider contracts awarded through a tendering process. A wide range of providers have been involved in NCS delivery including private sector partnerships, businesses, social enterprises and voluntary sector charities. Participants pay £50 to join an NCS programme, with bursaries available for low-income groups.

NCS is subject to programme evaluation, initially by NatCen and currently by Ipsos MORI [link]. The NCS Trust also reports to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (previously the Cabinet Office and Department for Education). In April 2017, National Citizen Service received a Royal Charter following the NCS Bill (House of Lords).

4.1 “Do voluntary citizenship programmes such as the National Citizen Service do a good job of creating active citizens?”

4.1.1 Social Action and NCS’ Brand of Youth Citizenship

Young people in our research project were overwhelmingly positive about their NCS experience, based on narratives of fun, friendship and futures. The survey data revealed clear benefits to their participation: 96% of respondents would recommend NCS to other teenagers, 91% were proud of their achievements on NCS, and 90% of respondents felt more confident as a result of NCS. Active citizenship centred on ‘social action’ is the ‘brand’ of youth citizenship embodied by NCS (Mills & Waite 2017). Our research uncovered that citizenship within NCS infrastructure, its curriculum and ‘on-the-ground’ is often equated with volunteering. Survey data from graduates revealed that 86% of respondents felt they learnt what it means to be a citizen on NCS. However, within our qualitative research, understandings of what citizenship meant were almost exclusively about the responsibilities of young citizens to volunteer. Citizenship was often used by NCS staff and graduates as a synonym for ‘social action’, or ‘community’. Other parts of our data-set support this finding that citizenship within NCS is ambiguous and, at times, weakly linked to forms of political participation and the wider relationship between rights and responsibilities.

We are not critiquing youth volunteering or social action per se, with the benefits of this activity widely reported. However, we are highlighting that the model of NCS and its promotion of a particular ‘brand’ of youth citizenship centred on social action as the number one tenant of being a ‘good’ citizen (rather than say, voting or democratic participation) tells a story about the state’s vision and priorities, encouraging a type of citizen that performs ‘safe’ and compliant acts of (youth) citizenship.

Recommendation: Citizenship education and political literacy should be embedded within Phase Two of the NCS curriculum (see also 4.1.2).

4.1.2 Regional Geographies of NCS

Our research project also found that the regional geographies of NCS shape young people’s experiences with respect to citizenship education.

Regional delivery providers (RDPs) either directly deliver NCS programmes or work with a range of local delivery providers (LDPs) to sub-contract and deliver NCS on the ground. Our research
revealed that this mixed geography of service provision is creating some regional disparities in the NCS experience, with a ‘postcode lottery’ for young people. Overall, geography matters in relation to the exact programme young people receive and there are two core areas where this has the biggest impact on the NCS experience:

i) **Phase Two’s Activities**
The second residential with workshops and group tasks designed to improve skills for the future varies based on each RDP. Although one would expect some variations in programme specifics due to local dynamics, our research did identify a lack of consistency in activities and core messages. For example, some participants expressed frustrations at missing out on ‘Big P’ political education content i.e. debates, or meeting MPs that other RDPs delivered.

**Recommendation:** A review of Phase Two to ensure consistency across Regional Delivery Providers, including scope for citizenship education and political literacy

ii) **Youth-Led Social Action**
The extent to which social action projects are youth-led is also shaped by the regional geographies of NCS. Whilst some RDPs encourage young people to design their own projects based on young people’s passions or interests, other RDPs pre-design social action projects for young people to choose from and deliver. Around half of our survey respondents designed their project with their team, with 28% indicating it was a combination of their provider and their team, and 16% indicating it was their provider alone. We recognise challenges in terms of preparation, insurance and risk assessments for social action projects with short lead times, however the extent to which some providers arrange social action projects limits the ‘buy in’ young people have as participants.

**Recommendation:** NCS Trust should prioritise youth-led social action in future commissioning rounds and support Regional Delivery Providers with these logistics.

4.2 **“Are they the right length?”**
NCS is a short-term programme compared to the regular activities of voluntary youth organisations or local authority youth work. Although 89% of survey respondents felt they had made a difference through social action, there is no doubt NCS is a short-term experience and time-limited. There was a sense of frustration for some participants at not being able to continue their projects, and 80% of our survey respondents would like to do more social action. However, NCS is full-time for 3-4 weeks of a young person’s (on average) 6 week summer holiday and any longer for an NCS programme would – based on our overall analysis – impact on young people’s opportunities for paid/unpaid work, educational or other extra-curricular activities, or family commitments and caring responsibilities.

**Recommendation:** Retain the current programme length of NCS, but ensure greater opportunities for NCS alumni to continue social action projects through signposting to other relevant opportunities.

4.3 **“Should they be compulsory, and if so, when?”**
NCS is not compulsory and participants currently ‘opt-in’ through dedicated and widespread marketing campaigns. To make NCS compulsory would dramatically change the rationale and ‘place’ of NCS in society. Compulsion would change the character of NCS and create further obstacles for NCS Trust to integrate with the existing youth sector landscape.
Recommendation: NCS should remain voluntary without compulsion

4.4 “Should they include a greater political element?”
Yes. See Section 4.1 for a detailed discussion. Furthermore, our project revealed some interesting dynamics on the scales of youth citizenship within NCS. The climax of the NCS programme is the social action project. Our research found that this model locates the real arena for active citizenship in young people’s own local towns, cities and villages – as part of a wider national collective. This framework – coupled with the varied content of Phase Two (See Section 4.1) – has resulted in little awareness by NCS providers or amongst participants about how their activities at the local scale are connected to global issues, politics or challenges. Our data indicates that NCS graduates are aware that they are part of a bigger, national movement, beyond their local team. However, our data-set revealed that other ‘scales’ of youth citizenship – such as European and global citizenship formations – have been relegated. We found a weak relationship between NCS and the International Citizen Service (ICS), a scheme with a shared genealogy but a separate organisation. Indeed, there was only one reference to ICS in the whole of our data-set from either providers or young people. This dual approach with two organisations has created a scenario whereby a global outlook is a ‘bolted-on’ additional extra or alternative to NCS, rather than part and parcel of what it means to be a citizen. Overall, ideas of multi-scaled identities are marginalised within the NCS framework.

We believe that NCS is – like many institutions in civil society during the past year – struggling to grapple with ideas about national identity, belonging, and citizenship. In light of Brexit and subsequent political debates, there is a pressing need for NCS to reconsider its scales of youth citizenship.

Recommendation: UK Government and NCS Trust should revisit the aims and objectives of NCS in relation to citizenship, identity and belonging in post-Brexit Britain

4.5 “Should they lead to a more public citizenship ceremony?”
The current NCS graduation rightly celebrates the achievements of young people and is a chance to reconnect as alumni. It already has elements of being part of a wider national (political) project i.e. receiving a certificate with the Prime Minister’s signature. Any changes towards a more ‘public citizenship ceremony’ would further entrench NCS as a national political project and not address the wider scalar dilemma discussed in Section 4.4. Furthermore, any shifts towards this form of ceremony would have to carefully consider devolution as NCS exists in England and Northern Ireland, but not in Scotland or Wales.

Recommendation: Retain existing format of graduation ceremonies

4.6 “Are they good value for money?”
This research project did not investigate value for money or a cost benefit analysis as part of its objectives. This topic was recently discussed by the Public Audit Committee [link] and £1.26 billion has recently been committed to NCS delivery for 2016-21, with a target of 360,000 young people completing NCS annually by 2020-21 (60% of the target population of 16 year olds). However, our research did reveal the ‘hidden costs of social action’. Our research found that a key component of the NCS experience is fundraising. This is either through social action projects that aim to fundraise for local charities, or fundraising activities required to support and deliver different social action projects themselves. The money raised for charity by NCS participants is

1 National Audit Office Report, January 2017
noteworthy, with inspirational achievements by young people. However, our interview and ethnographic data highlights there should be more sensitivity as to who shoulders the burden of donations, sponsorship and resources. Not all young people and families have the resource(s), time and/or opportunity to contribute in ways that are often assumed by NCS, for example completing sponsorship forms or supporting bake sales.

Furthermore, there were other hidden costs of social action in relation to travel. Whilst the £50 cost of NCS is well covered through participation bursaries for low-income groups, participants were not always aware when signing-up to NCS about travel times and costs. From our survey findings, most of our respondents (40%) travelled between 15-30 minutes to their social action project. However, around 10% were travelling between 45 minutes to an hour each way. These issues were most acute in rural areas. Public buses were the most common mode of transport (35%), with 30% of NCS participants using parental car travel. This raises further questions about the ‘hidden’ costs of social action projects. A small number of providers in our research project offered transportation, but this was not universal.

**Recommendation:** To investigate the provision of free or reduced cost local bus travel for NCS participants during their social action project.

**Recommendation:** To offer small social action project bursaries for participants who already receive the £50 waiver for the participation fee.

### 4.7 What other routes exist for creating active citizens?

Please see the submissions from other Political Literacy Oversight Group (PLOG) members (Chaired by Dr James Weinberg) for evidence-based discussion on these themes.

### 5 Conclusion

NCS has become a key part of the youth policy landscape and is set to further expand. It is driving forward new partnerships (e.g. recent announcement of a three year pilot with the Scout Association) yet remains controversial within parts of the voluntary and youth work sector. There is potential for it to identify new ways of building bridges within and between communities, and to support civic engagement, as per the Lords Committee’s interests. The recommendations in this submitted evidence could help to improve the NCS experience for young people and embed citizenship and political literacy within its programme.

Further project findings – beyond the scope of these questions in the call for evidence – can be shared upon request, or consulted in the end-of-project report (see Section 3 for links).

*22 August 2017*