Unlock Democracy Greater Manchester – written evidence (CCE0052)

We are a local group of the national organisation Unlock Democracy. We chose to address four of the twelve questions (Qs 3, 4, 5, 7) as these involve issues that particularly pre-occupy us.

3. As things stand currently, for the vast majority of citizens, concepts of formal rights and responsibilities remain vague and untested, presumed as inalienable until individual events or circumstances conspire to confound this widely held misinterpretation.

The UK’s uncodified constitution means that citizens, through no fault of their own, in general, have no basic comprehension of the scope and limits that constrain the activities of UK government administrations, central or local. Furthermore their rights are dependent on ad hoc statutory protection or upon judicial protection under common law.

The imminent passage of the European Union (Withdrawal) or Repeal Bill provides us with a golden example of the dangers inherent to this unique (amongst European Democratic States) arrangement, providing the Executive function with numerous opportunities to diminish the basic freedoms and privileges of UK citizens.

The UK should move swiftly towards establishing a succinct, modern and relevant codified constitution, preferably through the platform of a citizen focused and driven Constitutional Convention - a process in which political parties must be involved but only as equal participants amongst a wide array of actors representing all strands of civic society. Such a codified constitution should express rights and responsibilities of citizens and their reciprocal equivalences for layers of government, civic institutions, judiciary etc.

As people in other countries with codified constitutions know, knowledge of their constitution is learned in schools, can be accessed on-line or purchased in a book shop; probably their constitution states that all citizens should be provided by government with a copy of the constitution including its updates. When personal, local, national, even international issues are raised the written constitution can be a source of guidance for individuals to understand and decide on their opinions on the issue at hand and are in a better position to discuss the issue productively with others and when circumstances arise vote on matters with more confidence.

In Greater Manchester in 2016 the lead up to the election of the city region mayor was an opportunity to show the range of public interest in expressing how or whether their citizenship was adequately respected in politics, local and national government and systems of governance in general.

An independent initiative headlined the Greater Manchester People’s Plan was launched. It provided opportunities for any Greater Manchester (GM) citizen to contribute ideas and opinions on what sort of GM they wanted in the advent to the Combined Authority and elected mayoral election in May 2017 resulting from the Government’s approach to regional devolution in England.

It was an independent public engagement programme, by and for citizens and civil society. It offered a website with an online survey for people’s contribution of their ideas on six
major themes: homes, health and care, transport, democracy, environment, jobs and economy. Volunteers organised a programme of varied public meetings (including one on democracy) around these themes and they were publicised on the website as well as through local community networks.


It is valuable evidence of people’s willingness to contribute ideas and opinions in both individual approaches online and collectively at participatory and deliberative public meetings.

In the example of responses to the theme of DEMOCRACY in both the survey and the related public meeting participants expressed how they felt democracy was getting further from their grasp. Their ideas on ways to start reversing this included interest in the use of: citizens’ juries, citizens’ assemblies, an elected regional assembly, re-introducing community councils, more pro-active use of local councillors surgeries including discussion sessions, defined public scrutiny roles external to the local authorities /GM Combined Authority, for instance.

The report referenced above gives qualitative and quantitative evidence on issues raised eg 60% of survey respondents favoured a directly elected assembly for GM; 69% support for changing the voting system; urgent concern that only 6% of under 25s were survey respondents; better two-way communication between local councillors and citizens; a growing readiness for more online communication eg voting registration, Council websites (as two-way platforms) and methods of voting; development of civic education programmes for democratic participation.

A codified constitution would define rights and responsibilities of citizens and reflect the evident aspirations of people for fair treatment in civic engagement. It would also clarify the extent and limitations of governance rights and responsibilities at all levels of government systems and administration.

4. Civic engagement can be seen as both a responsibility and a right of citizenship. Beyond the existing legal framework, should citizens have additional formal rights and responsibilities? How do you see the relationship between the two? Should they have the force of law individually or be presented as reciprocal duties between citizen and state? How should they be monitored and/or enforced?

As the GM People’s Plan report shows there is an appetite in our city region for changes to the voting system. Respondents and participants expressed the view that (FPTP) ‘first past the post is not working in GM’ and wanted ‘a more proportional system that would value every vote, capture the diversity of the city region and add healthy counterbalancing opposition to dominant parties in the belief that better proportionality in representation correlates with better overall outcomes for citizens.’ ‘Widespread disappointment among YOUTH event participants that as part of the GM devolution deals there had been no discussion about lowering the voting age to 16 as in Scotland’
Current law does not encourage active political engagement. People feel invisible but real barriers and frustrations with politics and the effects or other of voting: In GM young people feel ‘invisible.’ Says an older contributor: ‘important that ‘young people get a say. It’s their future’. ‘Official means of participation are very poor at drawing in the young.’

Culturally as expressed in mass culture TV and Radio for instance, through popular drama, films, soaps are mainly non-party political and usually not political at all, as if it’s not appropriate to portray people spending some of their time interested in politics. There seems to be a convention that not talking about politics is the accepted nay preferred norm. This is not healthy in a self-proclaimed democracy.

At the national level the correlation between poor voting turnout and the FPTP voting system is increasingly highlighted; also growing distrust of politicians, their motivation and honesty, particularly relating to finance is cited as a factor.

Nationally, in addition to the point made above in GM, citizen-led national campaigns for proportional representation (PR) are increasing in prominence. Political parties – Liberal Democrat Party, Green Party, UKIP have stated manifesto support for proportional representation (PR). Although the Labour Party (LP) does not express support for PR in its manifesto there is now a LP growing campaign for PR.

Our view is that the current ‘first past the post’ electoral system for general elections inevitably discourages the participation and engagement of a great many of the electorate. In the many so-called ‘safe’ constituencies, voters who support the unsuccessful parties are effectively disenfranchised and discouraged from fully engaging with the political process because there is no chance of their representative being elected.

In addition, under a system of proportional representation (PR), there would be a more diverse parliament as smaller parties, eg Liberal Democrat Party, Green Party and UKIP, gained seats proportional to votes cast. This would result in the views and voices of supporters of currently under-represented parties being heard.

Decades of research from around the world has shown a correlation in countries which use systems of PR with many positive outcomes. These include: higher voter turnout, better gender balance in politics and fairer representation of black and ethnic minority groups. Moreover, citizens are reported to be more satisfied with their democracies. More detail on these last points is fully expressed at: www.makevotesmatter.org.uk

5. As mentioned in our responses to questions 3 and 4 a codified constitution would mean universal access to knowledge of our rights and responsibilities. It would be a primary source for any learning at any age about these matters from childhood onwards and it would be the primary source for any age-related learning materials.

That a codified constitution is not yet in preparation is no reason to delay re-visiting the curriculum and learning programmes on citizenship and civic engagement for children and young people and what they should contain. Further it should be part of any apprenticeship or employment related training programme and university programmes.
The 14-19 year olds who attended the GM People’s Plan event on YOUTH; and others taking part in events and activities organised by regional universities’ youth and community academics and departments; the Political Studies Association funded Young Citizens’ Assembly in GM in 2016 - have shown that given appropriate and energising material and leadership this age group does of course demonstrate enthusiasm and grasp of political decisions that affect them and others and how they can define politics from the perspectives of their own lives and others.

They also have ideas which would be very useful in devising and updating the curriculum. See report: Democratic Devolution, The future of Greater Manchester by Dr Andy Mycock and Cllr Beth Knowles on the Democratic Devolution Young Citizens’ Assembly especially the young people’s manifesto on Education, Identity, Democracy, Health and Social Care, Transport.) Link here to: https://www.psa.ac.uk/sites/default/files/Democratic%20Devolution%20-%20The%20Future%20of%20Greater%20Manchester.pdf

Rather like our points in question 4, on this there seems to be a convention that not talking about democracy and politics with children and young people is the accepted norm. In a self-proclaimed democracy this is not healthy. Communicating the message through childhood and teenage that civic and political engagement is not an embarrassing and unfathomable minority interest but an important part of self-expression and demonstration of self-worth and the worth of others, which is vital for the health of a democratic society and the experience of being citizens.

7. One important feature of local government Statutory Duties that was scrapped in 2011 is the “Duty to Involve” at a time when the Government’s stated aim was to stimulate a culture of citizen participation. Prior to this, briefly (from 2009), all local public services (councils, police and fire services and local health bodies) were all under a legal duty to inform, consult and involve local people on the exercise of their functions.

At a stroke the repeal destroyed what could have been a step in the right direction towards more citizen engagement: it would have been a legal right to citizens and service users to have a say about their local areas and services. Changes to laws and changes to culture feed each other (eg equalities; drink-driving legislation). The re-instatement and further development of this Statutory Duty should be prioritised.

Way back in 2010 an Ipsos MORI survey about whether people wanted to be actively involved in decisions about cuts in local services, found that 76% of people wanted to have some degree of information, consultation and involvement. Surely in 2017 the appetite to have a say among citizens is at least as strong if not stronger. If the independently organised events, activities and survey responses which Greater Manchester citizens took part in, contributed to, and which lead to the Greater Manchester People’s Plan publication in April 2017, is noted, motivation can been alerted. http://www.peoplesplangm.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/PEOPLES-PLAN-April-2017.pdf

What is needed is more participatory democracy in addition to more electoral democracy; we need a shift towards local authorities becoming motivated and committed to an ongoing relationship-driven engagement of citizens in decision making, which is
demonstration of the statutory Duty to Involve. Of course this needs dedicated funding but it should lead to better quality, more effective and consensual decision making. It is very much dependent on reviving, enhancing, valuing and sustaining a local government relationship with community networks.

We should also heed initiatives in participatory budgeting with its roots in Porto Allegre, Brazil and its further adoption in Cordoba, Spain and Chicago USA, for instance. There are key dimensions to the success or otherwise of such initiatives and they include: shared information and communication between groups of citizens and local government/politicians; attention to the bywords: scrutiny, accountability and partnership between citizens and politicians; and most of all citizen inclusion in deliberation and decision-making.

We recommend local authorities experiment in participatory budgeting, allocating a proportion of the local authority budget to such initiatives. As Dominic Grieve MP quipped: “Democracy costs money; lack of it costs more.”

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