1. As a national charity supporting great placemaking that involves and empowers communities, our response draws on our experience of supporting civic engagement in how places are shaped – our streets, community buildings, parks and open spaces, housing and neighbourhoods.

2. Changes to the places where we live, work and play are governed by a range of rights (and their associated laws – e.g. Housing and Planning Act 2016 ) and with them responsibilities as citizens to act with care for those places and spaces (e.g. not to vandalise or litter). While “civic engagement can be seen as both a responsibility and a right of citizenship” (Call for Evidence, p.3), it is one thing for citizens to have rights and another to have agency – the knowledge and confidence to act on and engage with those rights. Education can play an integral role in this – both formal education and capacity building and training in other contexts.

3.0 The education system provides a limited citizenship education for children and young people. Since 2002, the subject of citizenship has been a statutory subject on the National Curriculum at secondary level. There is no statutory citizenship curriculum at primary level. The curriculum provides for building knowledge, skills and confidence relating generally to our political and social structures and engaging in these domains as citizens. However, there is little to support pupils’ knowledge and engagement with their built environment and changes to the shape of their neighbourhoods. These gaps in education at both primary and secondary level have been supported to some extent by organisations like The Glass-House Community Led Design, regional architecture centres, CABE and other local and national charities and non-profit organisations.

3.1 In 2013 and 2014, The Glass-House worked in partnership with the Citizenship Foundation (an independent charity championing civic participation) to develop the Make it our Neighbourhood project to provide an educational programme of resources and training to empower young in placemaking. The pilot project focused on engaging young people in new developments to their neighbourhoods, introducing them to the principles of design and planning within a context of active citizenship and supporting their involvement with live built environment projects. While regeneration processes deliver new infrastructure and can encourage social wellbeing in communities, local people are sometimes alienated rather than engaged in the process through a lack of or poor meaningful and transparent engagement. We have observed and heard from young people that very often they lack the opportunity to have a role in these developments.

3.2 One example of this kind of project in practice, was a partnership programme we delivered with developer St James and White City school Phoenix Academy to empower over 30 young people (Year 10 pupils), many of whom are from the White City estate, one of the most deprived areas in the borough (http://hamunitedcharities.org.uk/grants/reports/supporting-communities-preventing-social-exclusion-and-tackling-need/2-background-information-on-hammersmith-and-fulham-and-the-targeted-areas-and-wards) to inspire and empower young people to become more active citizens. Students learned about regeneration and the development process through exploration and analysis of their local area, visited inspiring spaces and a live construction site, developed a vision and design ideas for a new public green space and presented and discussed their ideas with local businesses and community organisations, as well as the Board of Directors of St James. It helped to grow students’ confidence and skills in participating in civic life, as well as in their classrooms and career development and empowered them to share their views and ideas with other stakeholders. (http://www.theglasshouse.org.uk/project/white-city-green-empowering-young-people-through-new-development/#1470311221219-3d715457-1849).
4. Empowerment through the design process can act as a route to wider civic engagement that can help shift citizens’ attitudes to seeing their places, for example, as a responsibility that they have a hand in, rather than something that is managed solely on their behalf by their local authority or other agencies. With over 15 years’ experience of supporting communities to meaningfully engage in and lead design processes to transform their spaces and places, we hold many stories that demonstrate how transformation extends to personal development and people’s relationship with their communities and environments. These include the unemployed, isolated man who participated in a tenant-led project to create a gathering space for young people (story told in Dredge, L. (2014) ‘Crap places kill people’—how local involvement in place-making aids health and wellbeing, Town & Country Planning Journal, TCPA available at http://www.theglasshouse.org.uk/project/crap-places-kill-people-how-local-involvement-in-placemaking-aids-health-and-wellbeing-town-country-planning-november-2014/). The experience helped the man to re-engage socially in his local area and gave him the confidence to seek training in youth work which led him to becoming involved in working with young people on his estate. There are so many isolated people who need a route back in to society and participation in a process such as the design of new spaces or buildings can provide a transformative opportunity that brings much wider benefits to the individual and their role as civic actors. This is not easy to quantify, but is hugely impactful.

5. As a society, a huge cultural shift is needed from being reactive in civic life to proactive. In the realm of our built environment, the growing movement of community-led housing is a clear example of communities saying the market offer isn’t working for us and let’s do something that works for us. However, the way central and local government and other civic agencies invite citizens to contribute to shaping and engaging is still quite often as commentators rather than as contributors and collaborators. Civic engagement is a role we are expected to embrace largely in a voluntary capacity – a responsibility as citizens. Can we give back in return for this contribution? Capacity building and training can be opportunities to support people to engage and to gain skills that will not only support them to engage in civic life, but also provide employability and life skills. This is particularly important with communities who are marginalised. The question asked by Maxwell Ayamba of SHEBEEN – Sheffield Black & Ethnic Minority Environmental Network at a 2014 debate organised by The Glass-House, echoes this point: “The Big Society was created to encourage social action but how can people play an active role if they are not empowered?”.

6. In our work, we have explored the value and impact of employing creative approaches to help people of different ages, abilities and backgrounds to engage in civic life, through a number of collaborative action research projects with higher education and community partners (http://www.theglasshouse.org.uk/stories/#1469709886645-b7a3030f-cd72). One example of this is the Unearth Hidden Assets through Community Co-design and Co-production project which involved four sub-projects working across health, play, housing and neighbourhood development. The projects employed a range of different creative approaches that all had the aim of helping to unearth and mobilise assets that helped to advance community action, connect people, build confidence and ownership through the process. Our sub-project worked with voluntary group, Tidworth Mums, who were supporting army and civilian families by providing soft play activities not already available locally. With support from partners in the project, the group were given space to explore the impact of their contribution and build confidence and skills as a community support group. Their journey revealed to them the value of their contribution as civic actors and helped them to connect with other organisations and networks, becoming a voice for the community in local decision-making arenas. See:
7. It is important that we review how we evaluate the policies and programmes supported by central and local government and other public agencies, which are often short-term approaches with very strict frameworks/boundaries. What happens at the end of these cycles? What are we learning from them? Where does this learning sit and how can we make it useful to as many people as possible to support and enhance civic engagement? Should we be using different parameters for evaluation, which are less about target numbers, and more about demonstrating impact? We have explored impact and legacy through the Starting from Values – Evaluating Intangible Legacies research project led by the University of Brighton: http://arts.brighton.ac.uk/projects/starting-from-values-evaluating-intangible-legacies. The project looked across a number of action research projects supporting community action that were funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council to investigate the impact of projects on individuals, groups and communities. Using values-based frameworks, the approach sought to move beyond the notion of target-driven deliverables to assess the real impact that projects had on people and organisations, and their ability to act as supporters, contributors and leaders of civic action.

8. The nature of policy-driven funding, and funding projects to deliver a prescribed set of outcomes and processes (such as a Neighbourhood Plan) can also limit people’s abilities to lead civic action on their own terms. In the Scaling Up Co-design Research and Practice (http://www.theglasshouse.org.uk/project/scaling-up-impact-and-reach-through-co-design/), we explored how collaboration across civic society organisations can scale up their impact and reach in supporting and empowering communities. We discovered that with a simple infrastructure for supporting ideas generation, asset mapping and project development, new collaborations could emerge that extend the reach and impact of the contributing organisations. Furthermore, initial collaborations led to the development of networks that could continue to generate projects and civic actions through mobilising their collective assets to support shared values and ambitions.

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