Who we are
The Charity Retail Association (CRA) is the only body in the UK which represents the interests of charity retailers. We have nearly 400 members encompassing around 80 per cent of all charity stores in the UK. Our members range from national chains, to individual hospice shops, and everything in between.

Volunteering in charity retail
Charity retail is the biggest source of volunteer opportunities in the UK, with 220,000 people currently volunteering in the sector. The UK’s 11,200 charity shops can therefore play a key role in promoting an active and engaged citizenship. Charity shops provide people with an excellent way to learn new skills, enter or re-enter the workforce; in addition to helping to combat mental health problems and social isolation.

Therefore, we believe that any government plan to boost citizenship should take account of the role of charity retail. We believe the evidence submitted in this representation particularly addresses question 7 (on how society can support civic engagement) and question 12 (which seeks examples of initiatives that help to promote a cohesive society) laid out in your call for evidence.

The volunteer base
The pool of charity shop volunteers is huge. As noted already, nearly a quarter of a million people volunteer in the charity retail sector today. But this only tells some of the story. In addition, public polling carried out this year by the independent think tank Demos, demonstrated that 6 per cent of all adults have worked or volunteered in a charity shop at some point in their lives. This equates to nearly three million people across the country.

Given the size and depth of our volunteer base, there is no doubt that the charity retail sector can do a significant amount to harness civic engagement in this country.

What is more, we know that those who do volunteer in charity shops find it to be a rich and rewarding experience.

Overall, 93 per cent of volunteers say they are satisfied with their current volunteering role, and 90 per cent say they would recommend their organisation as a ‘great place to work’.

These positive feelings are consistent across all groups and ages of volunteers. However, we find the specific reasons that people volunteer, and the exact positive outcomes they get from doing so do vary considerably by age, as we will elaborate on below.

Young people and employability
As the chart below demonstrates, there is a strong divergence in what different age groups perceive to be the biggest advantage they derive from volunteering.
It is clear that young people perceive that the main benefits they will get from volunteering in a charity shop relate to employability – specifically work experience, and job skills and confidence building.

Supporting this kind of volunteering can therefore play a key role in helping young people to fully integrate into society by gaining the skills they need to find full time employment.

**Older people and social interaction**

By contrast, older people (in particular retired people who have no need to seek employability related skills) most commonly cite contribution to the charity they are volunteering for, and also the social benefits of their work.

It is clear that that volunteering can play a key role in combatting social isolation. 92 per cent of volunteers agree that a clear benefit of volunteering is the opportunities provided by social interaction and many have lived these benefits themselves. Over three-quarters of volunteers believe that their role has improved their self-esteem and confidence (77 per cent), and improved their physical and/or mental health (73 per cent).

Such positive outcomes are why Community Service Volunteers (CSV) estimate that for every £1 spent on volunteers, £3.38 of value was created including through improved health outcomes.

So, there are clear benefits to society - in addition to a payback for the economy – to be gained by encouraging this kind of volunteering. It has been proven that it helps people to continue to engage with their fellow citizens and lead fulfilling lives, right into their later years.
Concerns
Overall, when we talk about volunteering and charity retail, we are talking about a very positive picture. However, there are some concerns which interventions from policy makers could help to address.

For example:

- whilst the total number of volunteers has risen by 4 per cent in the last three years, this has been slower than the growth in number of shops;
- 55 per cent responding to a recent survey stated that volunteer availability and recruitment had declined in recent years;
- research by Charity Finance Magazine has concluded that recruitment of volunteers is the number one concern reported by charity shop managers.

Our members are also working hard to find ways to diversify their volunteer base. One such scheme has been set up by the British Red Cross and allows people to sign up for ‘short-term’ volunteering roles (limited to 12 weeks). This attracts a new kind of volunteer who previously felt unable to commit to volunteering over a longer period.

Conclusion – how you can help
Making it easy for people to volunteer in charity shops has clear benefits for civic society. The outcomes for charity are positive and the volunteers themselves gain a great deal.

This is why the CRA’s Manifesto for Charity Shops, published in June 2017, asked the next government to dedicate itself to creating a “volunteer revolution”. We believe your Committee can play a key role and making this vision become a reality.

For example, whilst charity shop volunteers are still most likely to hear about their role through inquiry or an in-store advertisement, the proportion of volunteers who found their role in this way is declining (down from 52 per cent to 46 per cent since 2013).

Were public sector workplaces to offer volunteer days and signpost their staff towards the opportunities in charity retail we believe that even more people would find out about the benefits and opportunities of this kind of volunteering.

Likewise, providing volunteers with an opportunity to formally recognise their new skills through a qualification can give a major boost to their employment prospects, self esteem and ability to become fully rounded citizens. The Government should commit to recognising this with appropriate qualifications accessible to all.

These are just a couple of practical ideas of how policy makers can help to boost volunteering in charity retail, something which as this representation has demonstrated leads to positive benefits to all of civil society. We would be happy to meet with any members of the Committee to discuss these issues in greater depth.

Sources
Regular quantitative and qualitative surveys of the CRA’s membership
Civil Society Media, *Charity Shops Survey 2016*

Demos Report, Shop for the Future. Author: Peter Harrison-Evans. Publication date: September 2017

Demos report, *Giving Something Back, Measuring the social value of charity shops*. Authors: Ally Paget, Jonathan Birdwell. Publication date: November 2013

Demos report, Measuring Social Value: The gap between policy and practice. Authors: Claudia Wood and Daniel Leighton. Publication date: June 2010

*4 September 2017*