The meaning of citizenship and civic engagement in the 21st Century

1. We need to ask ourselves, “What does it mean to be British, what are our values, beliefs, and recognise cultural and ethnic diversity?
2. Society has undergone significant change in the last 60 years which has led to a far more inclusive and enriched social profile.
3. Each of us needs to have understanding of how the law works, so we can recognise what is legal/illegal and the purpose of the law.
4. British society offers everybody the means to engage in a wide range of inclusive opportunities and active participation, both at local level and wider national and international engagement for the benefit of the individual of wider society and the global dimension.
5. As Soroptimists we have become involved with local members of the Guiding movement in County Durham and developed a joint challenge badge with Rainbows, Brownies, Guides and their leaders all taking part in civic engagement activities including raising funds for the charity MND.
6. We have also enabled a local school for children with a variety of physical and mental issues to visit the Prince Bishop Alpacca Farm. This has made a significant difference to their ability to relate to one another, our members, the animals and the wider community. Children who rarely spoke of their experiences outside of school were talking to teachers and their families about a simple visit which had proved to be a life changing experience. 7 Citizenship is about making sense of the society in which we live leading to respect, engagement, empowerment and support for others irrespective of race, belief and gender.
8 There are various ways to be a good neighbour some of which are outlined above.
7. We all need to engage in the processes of democracy as it enables each of us to have a voice. We’re concerned that the electoral process seems to be less relevant to young people and wondered if the way to improve that would be to look for example, at greater use of social media, electronic voting, systems designed to be relevant to the way in which particularly young people live and experience the world around them.
8. Several of us answered practice citizenship test papers. Whilst relieved that we all achieved at least the necessary 75% required to pass we felt that the certain questions were of little relevance in modern day Britain. They seemed rather to test the ability to read and retain information from a handbook rather than true citizenship. How many born and bred in this country, without reading that handbook, would know when the Romans succeeded in conquering Britain, the date of the Union flag and when the Tower of London was built? All of these were questions to be found in the citizenship tests

The rights and responsibilities attached to citizenship

1. All citizens need to be aware of their rights under law, both criminal and civic.
2. We are concerned that we live in a society which is dominated by the rights of the individual rather than a recognition that each of us has responsibilities to each other and the wider society. A “rights” dominated society is very selfish, self-centred and unhealthy.
3. Rights as a global citizen are equally important, such as awareness of the ecological threats to the environment
4. We need an awareness of global issues directly and indirectly impacting on society
5. The right to a good education is essential if each of us to make a positive contribution to our society
6. The right to have one’s individual needs respected is essential.
7. We felt, that whilst the needs of the individual were important they should not exclude the needs of others. In the past, the community took responsibility for the children living within its boundaries and this offered safety and protection for young people, a respect for authority and a recognition that bad behaviour would be challenged and have consequences. Members felt that this had been badly eroded to the point where challenging the behaviour of a child or young person could lead to violent, or at the very least unpleasant, consequences for the adult raising concerns.
8. Responsibilities as a good citizen at, local, national and international level is a cornerstone of good citizenship
9. Understanding that one’s actions will impact on the lives and wellbeing of others is the mark of a good and responsible citizen

The state of citizenship education and the role that it plays in creating active citizens

1. Citizenship should be compulsory at least until the age of 16. In real terms it remains subject to the constraints imposed by the nature of school curriculum choices. It needs to form an active part of the national curriculum. Post 16 it is more likely to be reflected in choices made in relation to further education. It features within programmes such as the D of E Award Scheme, (but members expressed concern at the cost of undertaking such a scheme due to the nature of the challenges required of young people). It is embedded into alternative qualifications such as the International Baccalaureate where a key element is active citizenship and voluntary work.
2. Schools have always promoted active citizenship and engaged young people in issues, charities, community project, global crises.
3. The current national curriculum covers a wide range of relevant issues one of the key elements reflects the increasingly diverse and inclusive nature of British society within local, national and European context.
4. The importance of beliefs that reassure, challenge bigotry and Insularity are an important part of each child and young person’s education.

The role of voluntary citizenship schemes such as the National Citizen Service

1. Members felt that the National Citizenship Service had great merit and understood that it had been difficult to obtain wide recognition and support for the scheme across the country whilst noting the concerns of the National Audit Office Report.
2. The inclusivity of the Scouting and Guide movements which transcends religious belief, encourages diversity, promotes friendship and encourages gender equality and volunteering at a local, national and international level in working on community projects.
3. The Duke of Edinburgh Award encourages active participation. Raleigh International encourages fund raising through events to finance the projects undertaken globally.

The ways society can support civic engagement and the role of Government and Parliament in supporting that

1. Greater education creating the personal belief that individuals can make a real difference is vital.
2. Funding targeted appropriately at relevant groups. The Princes Trust is a good example of this on a national scale.
3. Each regional MP could create a clear organisation within the respective constituencies funded directly through Government funding.
4. Members noted the effectiveness of past campaigns such as “Keep Britain Tidy” which were remembered by all ages, not just those who were adults at the time it was initiated. Government should look for similar relevant eye-catching campaigns which would benefit society as a whole.

The values that all of us who live in Britain should share and support

1. Members felt that above all the word RESPECT should apply in our everyday lives. This would include matters listed below and this isn’t an exclusive list.
2. The freedom to worship and a respect for individual beliefs and faiths.
3. Respect for diversity has long been a feature of British society and has enabled many citizens of other countries to settle and live a peaceful life within our country.
4. To respect and seek to help vulnerable members of society such as those with special needs, the financially constrained and the old person who lives on their own. Being a good neighbour, on the street, in the tower block, in the town and internationally is at the core of being British.
5. The law of our country is respected internationally due to fairness and justice being at its core.
6. Respecting others and understanding the consequences of one’s actions on others.
7. Concern was expressed at the bullying culture which seems to have developed as a result of social networking. An incident which, in the past, would have been over and forgotten in a day is replayed over and over whilst watched by many others. This needs to be tackled at all levels of society and seen to be completely unacceptable.

The relationship between civic engagement and social cohesion

1. There is a duty on all of us to make sure that British society is inclusive so that all can benefit from the rich diversity of cultural integration, sharing, embracing and celebrating the best of the contribution all can bring.
2. There are such connections, significantly Notting Hill Carnival, Chinese New Year, the Asian celebrations (Melas) of cultural engagement across the North East.
3. Civic engagement when achieved for the benefit of a community creates a sense of civic and community pride, a feeling of personal contribution, active participation and respect for and understanding of all British citizens.
4. Concern was expressed that life is now lived at a hectic pace and the opportunities taken up in the past to volunteer have become rarer. Members spoke of having several years at home with children which enabled them to volunteer at school, nursery and youth groups. Parents now are often both working full-time a short time after their children are born. This may be for financial and/or personal reasons, but it reduces their capacity to volunteer in their local communities. Whilst recognising the positive social aspects of nurseries it can also lead to children being institutionalised from a very young age.

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