Susan Hedley – written evidence (CCE0074)

1) SUMMARY

2) CREDENTIALS

2.1 A private citizen, widely floating voter with no paid or voluntary office, and no previous involvement in politics other than going to cast my vote, until, made possible by variable work shifts, observing numerous Northumberland County Council Full Council, Cabinet, and various Scrutiny Committee meetings over last 4 years, local Parish Council meetings, and meetings of North East Combined Authority committees.

2.2 After decades working in varying fields and locations, now employed back in Northumberland to serve numerous customers from all walks of life in a market town on the boundary between urban post-industrial areas, sparse rural areas, and urban Tyneside.

3) Q.1. WHAT DOES CITIZENSHIP AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT MEAN IN THE 21ST CENTURY? WHY DOES IT MATTER, AND HOW DOES IT RELATE TO QUESTIONS OF IDENTITY?

3.1 I have noticed that since the EU referendum, instead of most people saying “it’s a waste of time, it makes no difference, they’re all the same, they’re all in it for themselves, they have decided already and they don’t care about us”, most people now have some opinion and awareness of local and national politics and are prepared to express an opinion about it – so maybe they have already become more engaged, because they saw that in the EU referendum where each vote had an equal chance of having an effect, their vote did count, and that they needed to vote to get what they wanted. The result of the 2017 Parliamentary election might also be reinforcing their conclusion.

3.2 So maybe it needs to be proved that their votes and voices are listened to and can make a difference before they are prepared to spend their precious time on being engaged.

3.3 Without their engagement, our democratic system will become moribund and fail.

4) Q.2. CITIZENSHIP IS PARTLY ABOUT MEMBERSHIP AND BELONGING. ARE THERE WAYS WE COULD STRENGTHEN PEOPLE’S IDENTITY AS CITIZENS, WHETHER THEY ARE CITIZENS BY BIRTH OR NATURALISATION? COULD CITIZENSHIP CEREMONIES OR EVENTS THROUGHOUT THE
EDUCATIONAL PROCESS PLAY A ROLE? SHOULD PRIDE IN BEING OR BECOMING BRITISH BE ENCOURAGED?

4.1 I think that there would be several benefits if everyone were treated equally and with substantial ceremony as they gain the right to vote.

4.2 Giving everyone the same opportunity together, whether they were just reaching the age to vote or were just gaining it through becoming British citizens, would allow people from all walks of life to meet and interact and have the same introduction to our democracy.

4.3 Perhaps everyone coming up to 18 as well as those seeking citizenship should have the same education and preparation together and be encouraged to take the Life in the UK test.

4.4 Within a reasonable time of them attaining the right to vote by whatever means, perhaps they should be required to select a date when they could attend a major event to celebrate their attainment of the vote, meet others who are doing the same, meet elected representatives, and see and learn the locations and means by which they can follow, observe and participate in all stages of democratic policy and decision-making, including knowing how they can report on these if they wish.

4.5 I think that this is of fundamental importance in getting people through the door and engaged when they are not from groups who are traditionally “in the know”.

4.6 This might include a point in the event where they could nominate and vote on a subject for the elected representatives do deal with to illustrate how procedures work, and how an individual’s vote can count.

4.7 This might also help elected representatives to connect with new voters, and possibly to identify rising issues which might need their attention.


5.1 See section 4 above.

5.2 Perhaps there should also be “democracy service” on a par with jury service, whereby perhaps 4 citizens are required to sit on a local authority scrutiny committee to help to bring day-to-day insight and experience to discussions, but without having a vote on the committee. Unlike Jury service though, they should be positively encouraged to talk to as many people as possible about the proceedings which they have seen, and perhaps encourage them to come and watch. Even if they didn’t feel confident enough to speak in a committee, they could usefully tell other people who they meet about what they have seen.

5.3 Over the last few years of observing various local government meetings, I have been extremely worried that I am more often than not the only member of the public who is observing, and that often there are no reporters there either. This means that whatever information which
people get about local government workings is not first hand, and is either filtered through press-releases, or is not available until it is published in the agenda of the next meeting as minutes to be agreed, so that it is too late in the proceedings for them to act. Minutes are rarely word for word, and miss the nuances of how participants have interacted.

5.4 Despite the fact that they have very rarely seen proceedings, and do not have access to first-hand information to see how they work, many of my fellow citizens seem all too ready to be disparaging about democratic proceedings and as such detached from them.

6) Q.4. DO CURRENT LAWS ENCOURAGE ACTIVE POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT? WHAT ARE YOUR VIEWS ON CHANGES TO THE FRANCHISE FOR NATIONAL OR LOCAL ELECTIONS, INCLUDING LOWERING THE VOTING AGE? SHOULD CHANGES BE MADE TO THE VOTING PROCESS OR THE VOTING REGISTRATION PROCESS?

6.1 Some young people might well be disengaged before they even reach the vote, because they are seeing decisions or omissions made, or issues ignored, the results of which they will have to live with and/or clear up in future decades, without having any recognised means of having their voice heard in the decisive debate.

6.2 SUGGESTION
We probably have more data available about under-18s to help to verify their identity than for any other generation. After the disappearance of the two Child Benefit data discs in 2007, it is possible that even criminals could do it.

6.3 Could polling stations not be used for them to cast an advisory vote? This would encourage the political debate to include the issues which are of greatest concern to them, and would therefore allow those of voting age to hear and balance their judgements before voting. It would also allow young people to get used to taking part in votes before their vote achieves legal standing.

6.4 If the unelected House of Lords can have an influence, surely our soon-to-be-voters i.e.16/17 year-olds should have an authoritative means of being heard.

6.5 At the very least, some sort of third soon-to-be-voters elected house, or forum based on equality and inclusiveness, should be set up on an equal basis to Commons and Lords to debate, examine and report on issues, even if they can have no part in legislating.

7) Q.5. WHAT SHOULD BE THE ROLE OF EDUCATION IN TEACHING AND ENCOURAGING GOOD CITIZENSHIP? AT WHAT STAGES, FROM PRIMARY SCHOOL THROUGH TO UNIVERSITY, SHOULD IT BE (A) AVAILABLE, AND (B) COMPULSORY? SHOULD THERE BE ANY EXEMPTIONS? SHOULD THERE BE MORE EMPHASIS ON POLITICAL PARTICIPATION, BOTH INSIDE AND OUTSIDE CLASSES? HOW EFFECTIVE IS CURRENT TEACHING? DO THE CURRICULUM AND THE QUALIFICATIONS THAT ARE CURRENTLY OFFERED NEED AMENDING?

7.1 EVERYONE should Google “Edie and Bethan – It’s Debateable” and spend the 5 minutes which it takes to listen to this Radio 4 Listening Project’s slot last broadcast on Wednesday 16th August 2017 at 10.55.
7.2 In 5 minutes, these two perspicacious primary school girls clearly explain the importance of learning debating skills and being able to understand other points of view. It is more common sense about the essence of democracy than I have heard in decades from the powers-that-be who appear on Radio 4, and IT SHOULD BE MADE PART OF THE LIFE IN THE UK TEST.

7.3 OFFICIAL ACTION SHOULD BE TAKEN ON WHAT EEDIE AND BETHAN SAY.

7.4 [A pity that with its recent imposition of registering and logging in order to access licence-payer funded Listen Again, the BBC has locked out all of those licence payers and potential friends of democracy across the world who are not prepared to hand over curatorship of their contact details for yet another database whose number and range of customers and wealth of cultural detail on them must be a very desirable one for hackers, and who are not prepared to allow the BBC to harvest their preferences, and, unless they specifically object, to seek to direct their future choices].


8.1 COMPULSION = DEVALUATION AND ADMISSION OF FAILURE –it devalues and diverts resources from genuine effort, bringing the whole into disrepute because individual motivation is lost in the perception of it being compulsory, and it might also provoke active hostility and attempts to undermine it from those who it does not suit, and whose time, talents and enthusiasm might be spent more profitably in other avenues.

8.2 There are already too many compulsory calls on people’s time and resources, which reduces their power to choose what is most suitable in their situation, and perhaps their sense of, and right and motivation to, self-determination, thus undermining their sense of responsibility.

9) Q.7. HOW CAN SOCIETY SUPPORT CIVIC ENGAGEMENT? WHAT RESPONSIBILITY SHOULD CENTRAL GOVERNMENT, DEVOLVED AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS, THIRD SECTOR ORGANISATIONS AND THE INDIVIDUAL HAVE FOR ENCOURAGING CIVIC ENGAGEMENT? WHAT CAN THE GOVERNMENT AND PARLIAMENT DO TO SUPPORT CIVIL SOCIETY INITIATIVES TO INCREASE CIVIC ENGAGEMENT?

9.1 See section 14 of my submission to the Communities and Local Government Select Committee> Inquiries>Parliament 2015>Overview and Scrutiny in Local Government: e.g.

9.1.1 Require a LOCAL PORTFOLIO HOLDER with specific budget to uphold and promote democratic systems to voters and encourage their engagement.

9.1.2 EMULATE -Northumberland County Council’s excellent Democratic Services Department
Councillors and Democracy section of NCC website, especially Forward Plan of Key Decisions and Calendar of Meetings, which includes working groups not open to observe.

9.1.3 Publish DRAFT MINUTES – currently, minutes of meetings aren’t generally available to voters until published in agenda of following meeting, when too late to get questions onto agenda. With internet, it should be possible to circulate draft minutes to members quickly, and publish them to voters with any queries to be raised at next meeting highlighted. This way, voters could contact elected representatives in meaningful time, rather than always being left one step behind, awaiting publication of previous minutes in next meeting agenda.

9.1.4 Look at providing more detailed minutes for those who can’t observe due to time or distance – e.g. HANSARD. COULD VOLUNTEERS OR STUDENTS BE ENCOURAGED TO HELP?

9.1.5 See also its section 14.5 on points relating to the conduct of public consultations.

9.2 In addition to my recommendations to that inquiry, live-streaming, as Parliament manages to do, might be extremely helpful in making first-hand democracy accessible to many more people, especially if it were done by volunteers such as media students, who could at the same time develop a valuable knowledge of what they were streaming, and enable minimum strain on local authority resources.

9.3 At local authority meetings, have a compulsory agenda item where, if members of the public are present, they are welcomed and there is a brief explanation of the function of the meeting, who the people are, what their role is, and what political group and ward they represent, and a brief explanation of the items on the agenda. This explanation might encourage more people to continue to follow them if they were observing for the first time, especially if they were being live-streamed.

9.4 More account should also be taken of the needs of people with disabilities, such as explaining to people who cannot see, on which side the various political groups sit in chamber, and making sure that speaker’s names are given in full.

9.5 There should also be heavy emphasis on making sure that public address systems are working effectively, that participants are required to switch on their microphones when they speak, and that public address systems are not subject to interference by items such as mobile phone signals which haven’t been switched off, or by people speaking over each other. I have seen too many instances of pivotal points being inaudible in such circumstances.

10) Q.8. WHAT ARE THE VALUES THAT ALL OF US WHO LIVE IN BRITAIN SHOULD SHARE AND SUPPORT? CAN YOU IDENTIFY ANY THREATS TO THESE VALUES, WHICH AFFECT THE CITIZENSHIP OF, FOR INSTANCE, WOMEN OR VARIOUS MINORITY GROUPS? IF SO, HOW CAN THEIR CITIZENSHIP BE STRENGTHENED?

10.1 Having been able to borrow the Life in the UK test Study Guide, Handbook, and guide to passing the English test for British Citizenship, from the library [although Northumberland libraries do not hold a copy of “Life in the UK: a Guide for new residents], it seems to me that it is all reasonably put together.

10.2 EXAMPLES OF THREATS
10.2.1 However, I have seen one or two men from another continent who, without having good enough English to be able to understand points in debate, do not seem to have absorbed the information about equality of gender, and who speak to and treat women in a way which I have not seen British men do for 40 years.

10.2.2 I have also met women who, for their own safety, have felt forced to move out of the areas where their family has lived for generations because of the behaviour of immigrant men.

10.2.3 I have also been managed by a new citizen from another continent who did not appear to have any respect for the people in the community into which they had come, and appeared determined to flout any laws, including employment laws, which they could get away with flouting.

10.2.4 In all of these instances, when questioned, the immediate response has been that the questioning is racist. I do not think that these are isolated instances.

10.3 COMMENTS AND SUGGESTIONS

10.3.1 WHEN GENERATIONS OF OUR BRITISH PEOPLE HAVE PUT IN UNTOLD EFFORT AND SUFFERING IN THE FIGHT TO ACHIEVE THE VALUES OF RESPECT, EQUALITY AND JUSTICE FOR WORKERS AND EVERYONE ELSE WHICH MAKES OUR DEMOCRACY WHAT IT IS TODAY, and attracts so many people from across the world, it is extremely galling and disturbing to see these values being taken back decades by a small minority of immigrants who do not come here out of a desire to participate in our democracy, but out of a desire to extract whatever they can from it in material terms.

10.3.2 IF OUR ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES WERE PREPARED TO ACKNOWLEDGE AND ADDRESS THIS PROBLEM, THEN IT COULD NOT UNDERMINE OUR DEMOCRACY. Instead they are cowed by the prospect of their actions being labelled racist instead of standing up as they should for the people who they represent.

10.3.3 This means that THOSE WHO HAVE THE LEAST VOICE AND MOST EXPOSURE TO SUCH ABUSES, and who our democracy is supposed to protect i.e. women, children and others amongst the most vulnerable, and those on low incomes, whether at home, at work, or reliant on public transport, ARE DISPROPORTIONATELY AND ADVERSELY EFFECTED.

10.4 OUR ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES CAN ONLY SPEAK OUT ABOUT THESE ISSUES IF THEY AND THE COUNTRY AS A WHOLE ARE WHOLLY HONEST ABOUT HOW BRITAIN HAS ACTED ON PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES ACROSS THE WORLD IN THE PAST, where and how Britain has gained its wealth, and who now controls its wealth.

10.5.1 I think that it might be helpful if, in the Life in the UK Test, even more emphasis were placed on respect for British Democracy, and the part that ordinary British people played in bringing it about, and the effects on communities across the world of British interactions with them, whether positive or negative, so that this could be the basis of proper democratic debate in our society.

10.5.2 I have also failed to spot any useful mention of the NHS in the Life in the UK literature [and who funds it, who works in it, where they are trained etc.], even though it might be one of the
biggest attractions of entry into the UK and one of the biggest influences in weak local economies across the world.

11) Q.9. WHY DO SO MANY COMMUNITIES AND GROUPS FEEL “LEFT BEHIND”? ARE THERE ANY SPECIFIC FACTORS WHICH ACT AS BARRIERS TO ACTIVE CITIZENSHP FACED BY DIFFERENT COMMUNITIES OR GROUPS - WHITE, BME, YOUNG, OLD, RURAL, URBAN? HOW MIGHT THESE BARRIERS BE OVERCOME?

11.1 See section 14 [RECOMMENDATIONS] of my submission to the Communities and Local Government Select Committee>Parliament 2015>Overview and Scrutiny in Local Government.

11.2 See also my written submissions at the back of the report of the Speaker’s Commission on Digital Democracy.

11.3 N.B. Current newspapers are no longer available in Northumberland libraries.

11.4.1 Above all, governmental bodies at all levels should reverse and explicitly address the cut-back-imposed culture of “desk-top studies” and expecting the actively interested or the desperate to find them online, both of which probably serve to reinforce existing connections rather than making new ones, and instead they should go out to where the majority of voters are who don’t have time to be interested and are not desperate, but who do pay taxes and are very busy doing their best for the future of their families and communities.

11.4.2 SUGGESTION
Use existing official communications such as Council Tax bills and electoral registration to include optional forms for people to give a picture of their circumstances, most pressing requirements and concerns, and best methods for engaging in democracy.

   e.g. I recently heard at a meeting that in one ward, 60% of residents in Gentoo housing don’t have computers.

11.5 We should be aiming for transparency, accountability, and availability to scrutiny of democratic processes such that citizens of all ages, resources, walks of life, locations, and origins know and can access all stages open to direct their participation and observation.

6 September 2017