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?

A sense of citizenship and an ability to take part in civic engagement are essential elements of social cohesion. The opposite of this would likely be a sense of alienation and an inability to take part in society which is damaging both for those who suffer this and for wider society at large. At its worst, alienation and disengagement can lead to ill health (mental and physical), poor choices and even violence. In broader societal terms, alienation and disengagement can lead to social fragmentation.

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?

The best way to encourage a sense of membership and belonging as well as a constructive, tolerant pride in our society would be to reduce the material differences between us. Vast amounts of academic evidence show that materially more equal countries have a higher level of trust than those that are more unequal as well as being healthier and less antisocial or violent. Trust is the essential bedrock for promoting civic engagement as it creates an atmosphere where people want to leave their homes and socialise with others. Good health is also massively important as it is much harder to travel beyond the front door and feel socially confident when in poor health. Fear of violence, discrimination, and anti-social behaviour is also a huge inhibitor of social interaction.

The UK urgently needs to embark on a national mission to reduce inequality and we strongly advocate that the government commits to a comprehensive Inequality Reduction Strategy, across all its departments, to deliver the fairer, better society we all need. This strategy should also be supported by a public-facing, national, Inequality Commission that can collect and collate evidence from the public and experts on how inequality affects people’s everyday lives and how it might best be tackled.

See: https://www.equalitytrust.org.uk/trust-participation-attitudes-and-happiness
and: https://www.equalitytrust.org.uk/about-inequality/spirit-level

3. 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?

We do not think that citizens can – or should – be compelled towards civic engagement. It is hard to think of a bigger admission of national failure than a state having to compel its citizens to be sociable. Such ideas are best left to totalitarian regimes, not democracies. Citizens should want to be engaged with their society and if they’re not then the state should worry and seek to find out why. As outlined above, we think inequality is the major barrier to civic engagement and we therefore advocate a comprehensive, national, Inequality Reduction Strategy as being the best,
long-term policy to promote civic engagement. At a time when there are threats to many employment and other human rights and when the UN Declaration of Human Rights is not being upheld, then it is surely incumbent upon the state to seek to attend to basic human rights before seeking to advocate a new conditionality.

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?

We support the introduction of proportional representation and an elected second chamber, as evidence shows that fair voting systems promote greater equality and greater political engagement.

See: https://www.makevotesmatter.org.uk/proportional-representation/

We would also support expanding the franchise to 16 and 17 year olds on the basis that many other entitlements are given to 16 year olds, not least the right to join the Armed Forces.

We also note that the continued existence of the monarchy perpetuates the notion of British people being subjects rather than citizens - and that the current constitutional construction of the UK includes all sorts of inequalities between the home nations. A new, written, federal constitution of equal states that redefined the role of the monarchy could helpfully promote a sense of equal citizenship, and therefore civic engagement, across the UK.

The current electoral system is open to fraud and abuse, we think digital options ought to be explored. The system’s aim ought to be to enfranchise the largest number of those eligible to vote.

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?

Some practical and age appropriate political education ought to be included in a statutory PSHE curriculum, to be mandatory (including RSE/SRE) across all types of primary and secondary schools, regardless of status. The proposal to drop Citizenship A Level, suggests that there is currently a lack of serious commitment to this subject.

6. Do voluntary citizenship programmes such as the National Citizen Service do a good job of creating active citizens? Are they the right length? Should they be compulsory, and if so, when? Should they include a greater political element? Should they lead to a more public citizenship ceremony? Are they good value for money? What other routes exist for creating active citizens?

Voluntary citizenship programmes can have a role to play but their likely success, in terms of the numbers and diversity of people attracted and the quality of work they do, is more likely to be related to the underlying health and wellbeing of the UK population. Confident and able volunteers are more likely to be found from populations that have high-levels of trust and are well-resourced, educated and healthy in the first place. A materially more equal society is the essential pre-condition here.
We would not support any element of compulsion and would question the value of a public citizenship ceremony as potentially prizing form over content. Political education around the institutions of the UK, the role of democracy and the importance of voting should be considered but we recognise the challenges in doing this in a fair and balanced way.

We question the term ‘active citizen’ and would like to see a definition. We suggest that many of the population are indeed, ‘active citizens’ but are not being measured or evaluated as such. For example, the caring duties family and other members undertake without payment, community action, informal sharing economies etc, all contribute to society.

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?

The national level Inequality Reduction Strategy that we called for earlier in this document could and should be mirrored by Fairness Commissions at local authority level and we note that there have been many such commissions set up in recent years. All policies at national and local level should be designed, wherever possible, to redistribute wealth, income and opportunity as widely as possible so these are not just enjoyed by a relatively small, affluent section of society, which is the case currently.

The Socio-economic Duty (struck out of the Equality Act 2010) that requires public bodies to have regard to socio-economic inequalities should be implemented immediately. [https://www.equalitytrust.org.uk/%E2%80%98e%E2%80%99-word-must-go-back-legislative-agenda](https://www.equalitytrust.org.uk/%E2%80%98e%E2%80%99-word-must-go-back-legislative-agenda)

Third sector organisations, campaign groups and individuals have a role to play in lobbying for such progressive changes and we are in the process of developing manifestos for national, local and individual level action to encourage this. We have also produced a general activist pack to this end: [https://www.equalitytrust.org.uk/inequality-not-inevitable-our-new-guide-activists](https://www.equalitytrust.org.uk/inequality-not-inevitable-our-new-guide-activists)

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?

Any society should strive for the maximum tolerance, kindness and respect between its citizens and communities as possible. We believe that the best guarantor of such values is to achieve greater material equality between its citizens. Income and wealth determine where people live, where they go to school and what sort of work and life chances they have. Currently, our material inequality is actively corroding any sense of fellow-feeling as people’s life experiences diverge so sharply and they find it difficult to relate to each other. In these circumstances, distrust and suspicion can grow and people and communities can turn in on themselves and become detached and/or resentful.

However, we do not subscribe to the idea of ‘Fundamental British Values’ that has been promoted by the Government, particularly within education. These values were not particularly British and were in contradiction to the Equality Act 2010. There was also no transparency about how Fundamental British Values had come to be defined.
The big threats to values and to the citizenship of individuals with protected characteristics and those of a lower socio-economic status, are structural racism, sexism, disablism, homo-, bi- and transphobia and discrimination which are embedded within institutions and some parts of society. Some aspects of the media play a part in amplifying structural discrimination and the UK’s entrenched inequality embed them further within our society.

9. Why do so many communities and groups feel “left behind”? Are there any specific factors which act as barriers to active citizenship faced by different communities or groups - white, BME, young, old, rural, urban? How might these barriers be overcome?

Many communities and groups feel left behind because they are, in fact, being left behind. The richest 1,000 people in the UK have as much wealth as the poorest 40% of households and FTSE 100 CEOs routinely earn around £5million a year while the average UK wage is £28k. With the rungs on the ladder this far apart it is little wonder that social mobility is severely lacking according to the government’s own Social Mobility Commission. Citizenship is a two-way process; in order for people to engage in a positive way with the state, then the state must engage with its citizens in a positive way and protect and respect them.

This vast material inequality is now beginning to seep through to matters of life and death with life expectancy levels stalling and infant mortality rates beginning to rise. The fact that so much of the nation’s wealth is (and is very acutely perceived and felt to be) concentrated in London and the South-East also aggravates this sense of being left behind in other parts of the UK. This is also compounded by disparities in income and wealth between old and young, urban and rural, white and BME communities as well as between men and women – all of which are component parts of our overall economic and social inequality.

The only way to overcome all these divisions between us is to actively plan to reduce them. We need the government to commit to a national mission of economic and social renewal based firmly on reducing the gap between rich and poor in the UK.

See: https://www.equalitytrust.org.uk/wealth-tracker-2017-0
and: http://www.bmj.com/content/357/bmj.j2258
and: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-40608256

10. How do you see the relationship between citizenship and civic engagement on the one hand and social cohesion and integration on the other? What effect does the level of diversity in schools and workplaces have on integration in society as a whole? How can diversity and integration be increased concurrently?

The level of civic engagement is a function of the society around it. Evidence suggests that a materially more equal society is more conducive towards greater civic engagement and this, in turn, is supportive of closer communities.

The less economic inequality there is, the more diverse schools and workplaces will become and different communities will be brought together in common spaces. However, for this to happen at scale, it will require the creation of more mixed communities around those schools and
workplaces. And this will only happen if material differences are compressed such that social segregation, by area, is reduced. Both ‘exclusive’ gated communities and so-called ‘sink’ estates must become relics of the past. We need to aim for genuinely mixed communities where income and wealth differences are not stark enough to be noticeable and are therefore unlikely to create misunderstanding, suspicion or resentment between people.

In addition to this, more diverse schools and workplaces (and we would add colleges and universities too) are unlikely to materialise unless our chronic social immobility problem can be fixed and the social classes can mix more than they do now. As the Institute for Fiscal Studies reported in 2011, it will be very hard to improve social mobility without tackling inequality first. We must also tackle structural discrimination in order to break down the hierarchies of power within workplaces and educational establishments. Fewer than 5% of school heads are non-white, and only 13% of teachers are from BME backgrounds.

See: https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/5541

11. How important are levels of English proficiency for first and second-generation immigrants and what could be done to increase them, including through support for ESOL classes? Are there particular barriers faced by newcomers to Britain? Could the naturalisation process, including the citizenship test, be improved and if so, how?

We think that ESOL classes are vitally important to help immigrants settle in the UK and we deplore the cuts to ESOL provision that have occurred in recent years. We support the call for a national, co-ordinated ESOL strategy as demanded by leading educationalists earlier this year: http://feweek.co.uk/2017/02/03/education-leaders-call-for-co-ordinated-national-esol-strategy/

The major problem facing immigrants to the UK at the moment is the poisonous, xenophobic and racist atmosphere generated by some politicians and sections of the media. While these deserve special censure, we also note that very unequal countries, such as the UK, more generally provide a fertile breeding ground for intolerance and downward social discrimination (or scapegoating). In conditions of great inequality, people are forced to consider their own status within the social pecking order and in order to preserve or advance their status there can be a tendency to kick down on those around or below them. Immigrants to the UK tend to suffer from this.

For more on this, see the section on the Bicycling Reaction: chapter 12 (pp166-169) The Spirit Level: Why Equality is Better for Everyone.

7 September 2017