The Democratic Society – written evidence (CCE0095)

The Democratic Society is a not-for-profit organisation operating across the UK and Europe to achieve more and better democracy, creating opportunities for people and institutions to have the desire, opportunity and confidence to participate together. We work to create opportunities for people to become involved in the decisions that affect their lives and for them to have the skills to do this effectively. Yet we are acutely aware that what it means to be a citizen in the UK today is a complex and challenging question to answer. It is all too easy to generate a rose-tinted view of Britain and argue that the core principles of citizenship – and of ‘Britishness’ – remain static. In some ways they do, yet in many others the society we see today bears little resemblance to that previous generations would recognise; never in human history have we experienced such a rapid transformation of human civilisation, driven by technological as well as social change.

Our world is now smaller, due to air travel and the internet, we shop less on the high street but more in out-of-town malls and online, we no longer wait by the telephone, use paper maps, and we are as likely to meet our life partners online as at a party. Ironically, and despite the enormous rise in opportunities to hear different voices, we tend to seek out like-minded forums to reinforce our views, and the much-heralded democratisation of media has created the spectre of ‘fake news’ and an ever-more critical need for information literacy and civic cohesion. We are more connected, yet more of us report that we are lonely.

For many, the speed that we live our lives at has accelerated and with it so have our expectations, firstly, of getting a rapid (if not immediate response) and, secondly, to be part of the process. The world has shifted from passive to active, but where is democracy in this?

Citizenship in the 21st century means being actively involved in the things that affect our lives, not a passive bystander. And yet there is a tension in the competing world-views and the rich tapestry that our country has become; between our institutions and the public, between young and old, urban and rural, rich and poor, etc. Public institutions have not transformed at the same pace as society, they have been slow, often resistant. The public sees this and demands more. It demands more openness, greater access to information and genuine involvement in decision making. Parliaments and governments must respond, the democratic models of the past have reached their use-by-date and are ripe for renewal, indeed they must be reinvigorated if they are to retain their relevancy in the future. As a nation, we can build a more connected and participatory society but, to do so, our institutions must be willing to change and our citizens better resourced and supported.

In our submission, we hope to address these challenges and to put forward ideas that will support positive change, enabling greater participation to happen. We would, of course, welcome the opportunity to discuss this directly with Committee.

Dr Andy Williamson
Managing Partner

Michelle Brook
Director of Strategy and Development

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?

1.1. We have lived through an age of emerging individuality, the emergence of a multi-cultural society and the effects of globalisation, and yet there are some who feel uncomfortable and who feel left behind. Citizenship must be as much about cohesion
as individuality. And, generally speaking, we have been poor at educating future generations in what being a ‘citizen’ entails. Now, more than ever, we must have these conversations.

1.2. The UK Parliament has a long-standing record in attempting to make itself more open and accessible to citizens, with the Puttnam Commission\(^1\) being the catalyst for much excellent work around outreach and engagement. Both Houses have recognised the need for a robust, multi-faceted engagement strategy that can strengthen Parliament’s reputation with the public, enhance respect for and trust in it as an institution.\(^2\) Looking at how Parliament can open itself up in the digital age, the Speaker’s Commission on Digital Democracy made some clear and far-reaching recommendations about the modernisation of the House of Commons, which we largely support, but note that follow-through has been at best slow and often non-existent\(^3\). This is unfortunate because actions will fix democracy, not words alone.

1.3. Identity today is multi-dimensional – family, faith, friends, personal interests, politics, location (at multiple levels and across time and even generations) and popular cultures all define who we ‘feel’ we are, identify as and with, and how we think about the world. **It is impossible to model a system of civic engagement as a one-size-fits-all solution, this would simply end up as a mediocre compromise, unsatisfactory to everyone. We must consider civic engagement in terms of multi-channel, multi-media and across space and time.**

Effective engagement is not just a cold church hall on a rainy Thursday night, but a range of physical and online spaces, where as many people as wish to be are engaged, informed and heard in ways that suit them.

1.4. The good health of civic engagement is vital for many reasons. Strong and effective civic engagement means that decisions will be informed by the lived experience of citizens and their active participation. It is possible for citizens to hear other perspectives, consider the complexities of decision making, understand the value of their input, and be better informed about how outcomes are reached. It means that citizens are more likely to embrace decisions, even when the outcome is not what they originally wanted.

1.5. Involving people early means that more options are considered. There are many opportunities where the ‘wisdom of the crowd’ can be advantageous over the current models of limited evidence taking from selected self-interests and consultations that appear far too late in the process to affect real change. **Above all, seeking a wide range of views as early as possible lowers the chance of mistakes and therefore the cost of rectifying flawed policy decisions after they have been implemented.**

1.6. Listening matters but so does transparency. If we are to rebuild trust in our public and political institutions (and we must if they are to retain their legitimacy) then citizens must be able wield their powers for scrutiny and accountability in an effective and

---

informed manner. As society becomes increasingly complex and technology creates both the opportunity for and expectation of effective participation, ensuring that citizens feel they can shape their society and community is vital for trust, legitimacy and for citizens to feel that they are invested in a collective project to which they are inclined to contribute.

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?

2.1. We agree that citizenship, on one level at least, is about membership and belonging but it is not binary. We can feel ourselves to be citizens of multiple places and ‘citizenship’ is about more than a passport or a piece of paper. Many of us feel many loyalties and shared identities, whether it is to a homeland beyond the UK, to the nations of the UK or the towns, regions and even estates we live in or were brought up on.

2.2. Citizenship ceremonies are certainly a way to instil a sense of pride and belonging for many new arrivals but it is more important to foster a wider sense of openness, tolerance and understanding. Culture lives on and can seed a positive view of citizenship, whereas a ceremony is but a single bloom. **Belonging is about the long-term building of connection, trust and shared values; it is about building strong social capital**, but this is a double-edged sword and can result in the rise of hatred and discrimination against others, especially when some people feel forgotten, left out and lack any sense of a future for themselves or their families.

2.3. Education from an early age is critical to ensure that our society feels a joint sense of belonging, embracing its many differences as enriching and not closing-down to fear and a mind-set of scarcity and ignorance.

We must encourage and support our future generations to think critically, understand the information that they are presented with, discuss, debate and value dialogue. This means teaching young and old that a society that works together, even through difficult choices, is ultimately stronger and that respecting a diversity of opinion is critical to this.

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?

3.1. The latter part of the 20th and early part of the 21sts centuries were marked by a dramatic professionalisation of the civic sphere; NGOs grew bigger and louder\(^4\). As the concept of a civil society was fractured by the advance of technocracy and the mantra of individualism, this monolithic approach suited the needs of both government and the

sector. With the advance of digital and social tools and the normative adoption of the internet, however, society has changed. Small groups and individuals can now coalesce, quickly start campaigns and expect to be heard by those in power. They can equally quickly dissipate and vanish only to reappear somewhere else or for other purposes. This is the age of ‘loose ties’, when informal connections and networks are built across time and shared interests.

Broadly speaking, for governments and legislators, this is more of a process issue than a legal one. However, apart from Scotland, it can largely be said that the legal position on citizen engagement predates the digital age.

3.2. Scotland has recently introduced the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015, which attempts to strengthen and enforce the rights of citizens and the responsibilities of the public sector towards them. The UK could consider following suit. Whilst this would be a good thing, it does not fundamentally change the perceptions of the value of engagement nor the attitudes to it, at least in the short-term. Though we are largely positive about it, this Act might be seen as a stick rather than a carrot by some. Whilst it may prove to be useful, it is only ever going to be part of the solution. Good law is needed but should remain a last resort for the intransigent or avoidant. It is much more effective to encourage and support the transformation of processes and services to be more citizen-focussed, open and transparent. Education and encouragement through demonstrable benefits (for both sides) is a better way to promote wider civic engagement and more likely to embed a cultural change and build trust.

3.3. We all have a right to participate in the democratic process and institutions have a responsibility to ensure that this happens. But it must happen in a timely and effective way, not pay ‘lip service’ or consult after decisions have been made. The question of whether citizens have a duty to participate is more difficult and nuanced; we would like people to feel that they can participate but we would be reluctant to suggest that this should be anything other than by choice.

Coercion and compulsion seem poor bedfellows for an active democracy.

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?

4.1. Active political involvement goes significantly beyond voting. Laws relating to the franchise relate to only one part of enabling and encouraging political (or civic) involvement.

We believe that the biggest weakness in the current UK democratic process is the lack of engagement between elections. That said, we would support widening the franchise for voting at all public elections throughout the UK to fall in line with electoral law in Scotland.

4.2. It has been suggested by some commentators that changes to the electoral registration process have caused a significant loss of enrolments and that this is most prominent
amongst young people. Conversely, online enrolment has been demonstrably successful at getting people to register. However, the current online enrolment ‘system’ is a rather disconnected process and we would encourage the UK government to consider implementing a seamless end-to-end voter enrolment system.

4.3. Accepting that the devolved nature of electoral enrolment to local government presents some challenges to this, there are already systems in place (such as National Insurance) that could be used to automatically enrol voters as they reach the age of franchise. We note that such automatic voter enrolment is commonplace in other countries.

4.4. We also note concerns over postal voting but see the potential for fraud in this area as low and remain disappointed that the UK has failed to embrace more up-to-date methods of voting, such as online. Whilst we acknowledge doing so is challenging, we believe that this is about understanding both the risk profile and appetite for risk in the electoral system and that those who dismiss online voting as ‘insecure’ are naive, failing to compare like-with-like or understand the wider societal context and impacts.

4.5. In terms of civic engagement in the electoral process, we are seeing some small respite in the long-term decline in voting. However, we are also seeing an increasing distrust in the process and the perception of the misuse of processes by politicians. Most notably there is public scepticism about media bias, campaign tactics and campaign funding. The behaviour of some politicians in the Brexit Referendum was unfortunate, to say the least. We note that whilst a candidate for a Parliamentary seat is forbidden from intentionally misleading the public to get elected, the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 contains no such restriction on the official sides in a referendum campaign. This is unacceptable and it undermines the integrity of our democracy.

Referendums are a poor fit for the UK’s system of representative democracy and appear more likely to be used as political tools rather than as a legitimate plebiscitary mechanism. It is hard to argue that a binary response is an effective way to settle a highly complex and contested issue.

4.6. There is ongoing debate about the ‘fairness’ or otherwise of the First Past the Post system used for elections to the UK Parliament. We do not particularly wish to add to this debate other than to note that the current system does not appear to effectively capture the views of the entire electorate and does privilege incumbency in a way that could be considered detrimental to a more open and representative democracy. Electoral systems can present confusion for the average voter too. They can be faced with a dizzying array of electoral systems. Voters in Scotland, for example, have in the very recent past engaged in two binary referendums (one binding, the other not), a first-past-the-post election to the UK Parliament, Additional Member election to the Scottish Parliament and a Single-Transferable Vote election to their local council (the same system used in Elections to the European Parliament). We would encourage Parliament to bring forward an independent review of the electoral system, such as in the manner of the 1985 New Zealand Royal Commission on the Electoral System. We believe that this is long-overdue.
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?

5.1. There has been little meaningful and coordinated national policy debate about what constitutes ‘good citizenship’ in the UK today, which makes it difficult to define a role for education. This is really where we should start. We would, however, strongly argue that there is a need to rethink the way citizenship and civic education is conceived and delivered, and that any initiatives to develop citizenship education actively seek the involvement of a diverse range of people in shaping it.

5.2. The challenge of educating for the complexities of the modern world and preparing citizens for participation in civic life should not be understated. Opportunities to understand how decisions affect your life, how you can help shape them, and how you can get involved, in addition to navigating difficult conversations with people that hold different views, should be available at every level of existing formal / compulsory education. Additionally, there are huge opportunities in further, higher, informal, digital and lifelong education settings, although this submission will not be able to provide the focussed attention that they each deserve. These opportunities might come in the form of information about political systems and representative democracy, but we would argue that this, in isolation, is not good enough. The absence of public consultation in the formation of the British values cited in recent educational policy documents suggests that these values were not co-produced with the public. This makes it difficult to extract deeper understanding of public interpretation of what the values mean, or how they should be ‘actively promoted’.

5.3. There are some pertinent questions to ask when considering what form citizenship education should take, what British values mean, and how this is determined. It’s interesting that it is only England that has formally adopted a requirement for schools to actively promote ‘British values’ (of which there is no evidence the other countries governments have agreed to, although the Prevent duty also applies in Wales).

5.4. Citizenship has a range of competing identities to consider, which includes the hyper-local, regional, national and global. How schools navigate these complexities in practice to instil a sense of citizenship seems to depend on decisions made by the leadership, which are steered by Government guidance, but they are also influenced by external forces.

5.5. Current practice raises some red flags. Firstly, the imposition of values, instead of the co-creation of values following dialogue across the nations involving a diverse range of people, does not secure the necessary buy-in and trust from citizens to make it useful, or advance conversations about participatory democracy. Secondly, values and how they are played out can be subjective, which raises issues for school leaders and teachers, but also standards inspectors. Any future guidance around ‘good citizenship’ must be clear, and cognisant of Article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights².
Arguably, there is mixed messaging being given to young people across the UK as the result of a global educational agenda that is driven by increased individualisation, which plays out through “the rise of the measurement culture”\(^6\). We believe that education is crucial to strong civic engagement and that it cannot start early enough. **Citizenship must be measured by active participation and engagement, not by awards and qualifications; it is inherently a practical and applied subject.** Schools should embrace strong citizenship education as a core skill that our young people grow up with. Educational institutions can also draw on democratic principles and embed these into the way they function.

Raising a generation of children to become adults who understand why citizenship matters and how to take part in a constructive, connected and active way is vital. But we must not stop there, very few of us, whatever our age, have received sufficient education to take part in civil society with confidence and effect.

Life-long and just-in-time learning of civic skills remains critical too - people often engage in a democratic process because a problem has arisen, at this point they need right the knowledge and skills to be effective. Without these, democracy can feel like a ‘black box’ designed to work for others and this leads to disconnection and disenfranchisement.

**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?

There is no evidence to suggest that NCS has delivered any significant benefits in terms of developing a culture of active citizenship amongst young people. As the Public Accounts Committee recently noted, current evidence “does not in itself justify the level of public spending on the programme, nor demonstrate that NCS in its current form will deliver the proposed benefits to wider society.”\(^7\)

When it comes to other routes for creating active citizens there is much to be said for government, particularly local government, allowing and supporting citizens to take a more active role in their communities. Whether this is creating mechanisms for more and more meaningful involvement in local decision making or passing control of assets to local communities (a process already being enabled in Scotland).

The barriers to engagement tend to be lower at the more local levels of government, yet the opportunity to create some real lasting and living change is greater. Building up local civic activism is a proven track record to both greater community cohesion and individuals becoming more engaged and empowered. It is critical in this process that the public body is receptive and open to new methods of participation. It is better still if they are willing to co-create solutions with communities and methods such as

\(^5\) See: [http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CCPR.aspx](http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CCPR.aspx)


\(^7\) See: [https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmpubacc/955/95502.htm](https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmpubacc/955/95502.htm)
Participatory Budgeting are showing promise in terms of widening involvement and taking decisions back to the community. There participatory methods, when they are done well, serve too to build trust between actors, a cornerstone of strong democracy.

We must be cautious; We all too often lament ‘the usual suspects’ and lobbyists who dominate the conversations, but creating new models, and particularly new online ones, risks alienating some members of our communities and creating new [digital] elites. This must be guarded against and new democratic processes must be designed to be open and accessible to all who wish to participate.

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?

7.1. If we are to improve the quality and quantity of civic engagement then we must also change the way that decision-makers in government and parliament work. Civil society will not remain engaged if the outcome is the same, the process disappears into a ‘black hole’ or the decision-making process is not clear, transparent and auditable.

We do not support the idea of replacing representative governance, but we strongly agree that our representative system can and must become more accessible and participatory if it is to remain relevant

7.2. Greater involvement can also encourage greater initiative from citizens ourselves. But greater involvement is also a vital part of building a more aware citizenry who can help scrutinise decisions and exercise accountability in an effective way.

7.3. There are a variety of ways through which this can be done. Examples of good practice exist but more could be done to embed their use. This is true across all levels of government in the UK, and in the work of the UK Parliament, Scottish Parliament and particularly evident in the work of the National Assembly for Wales. When it comes to building a more collaborative and engaged relationship with citizens, local government is a particularly promising place to build this. This level involves smaller constituencies, more tangible areas of work, and matters which are directly relevant to the lived experience of citizens. However, effective engagement has a cost and it is critical to ensure sufficient funding is made available. Whilst there are long term cost-savings made possible by better, higher-quality engagement, the short-term cost of doing more (or of doing something where before it was missing) is always going to be higher.

7.4. It is worth drawing attention to some of the range of techniques available to government and legislatures at various levels within the UK to try and work in a way that is more open to input from citizens, and supportive of collaborative relationships with them. They range from enabling the public to raise concerns or suggestions in an open way; consulting early on plans; collaborate closely with stakeholders outside government to design and implement policies and services; facilitating feedback on services or new laws; and allowing citizens to take on more responsibilities themselves such as running services or managing local assets. Allowing people to deliberate peer-to-peer can built into many of these settings.
There are many ways this can be achieved in practice. Often consultation is seen in a negative light: treated as rubber-stamping decisions that have already been made. Instead of this, effort can be made to consult at an earlier stage of policy development, and in such a way that those consulted can add more valuable insights and suggestions. A more deliberative format can also be employed, using peer-to-peer engagement rather than the traditional (and too often adversarial) ‘us and them’ style interaction with government.

Allowing comments on texts, the collaborative editing and drafting of documents online is a way that the wider public can be engaged with in a more involved, collaborative way. There are also tools to encourage engagement with evidence, such as embedding evidence in questionnaires, or using simulation to encourage people to play with different variables and consider their attitudes about how these should be weighed up.

Such approaches are not just available to government at different levels, but can also be used in the work of legislatures. Taiwan and France are examples of where civil society initiatives have received support from elected members. In both cases, allowing citizens to use online tools to collaboratively scrutinise and develop legislation. The legislatures of Brazil and Chile have developed platforms for allowing direct public participation in their legislative drafting processes. Participatory Budgeting is a technique for involving citizens directly in the allocation of public budgets. From its origins in Brazil it is now used extensively through the world, from large scale public spending programmes in Paris to the Community Choices fund in Scotland, that aims for 1% of local authority spending to be allocated by the public.

Digital techniques like these are often those that need most explaining to government and legislators, but this does not mean that offline engagement, and techniques needed to do this effectively, are not important. Using well-facilitated small-group discussions, targeted at key groups, increases reach. Approaches such as appreciative inquiry can help focus discussions on what opportunities there are to collaboratively do more.

We appreciate the potential of digital tools but strongly caution against the reification of them as a panacea for democratic renewal – they are not, and only become sustainably effective where they are used as part of the transformation of the underlying processes and the culture.

There is also more that civil society itself can do, and which government can support. A criticism sometimes raised of parts of civil society is that there has been a movement towards civil society operating in a way that treats the public as funders or numbers for petitions dealing with already defined, and narrow, political goals (many NGOs are in themselves inherently undemocratic and opaque in the way they operate). Civil society actors can encourage public awareness of evidence and debates, to take more active roles in sharing their own insights, developing policies and in taking direct actions to address issues themselves. There are promising examples of what this kind of healthy relationship between government, civil society and the wider public should look like. For example, a Department of Health consultation on unpaid carers made available a ‘DIY consultation toolkit’ to encourage people to run offline events where they could discuss this issue and feed ideas into the consultation; and during the consultation informing the Digital Britain report, a civil society activist actively helped enable people around the
country to run their own discussions about the topic and feed in their views.

7.10. Having a conversation about how civil society could be helped to do more is a promising area of further inquiry. Though it will not happen overnight, strengthening and then making use of civil society relationships is one part of recognising how relationships and opportunities can best be used to reach out to the public. This kind of opportunism is important for building sustainable engagement and should come at a lower cost.

8. 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?

8.1. Alienation - from the wider society and from democratic processes - is often the product of multiple identifiable characteristics of deprivation or exclusion, of which there are a considerable number of possible combinations. These diverse identifiers make it extremely difficult to precisely identify causes and challenging to develop strategies to engage with such groups. Some broad characteristics include: lower socio-economic status; low levels of educational achievement; geographic location; disability; and ethnic and linguistic minorities. Additionally, there invisible groups who are intrinsically hard to identify (often because they do not wish to be), such as the travellers, homeless, sex workers, criminal groups and non-openly LGBTQ people. Citizens who feel that the way politics is conducted, reported on and how public institutions engage are not relevant to them present a significant challenge.

Citizens’ interests are more likely to be piqued by relevant, particularly local, issues and there is a symbiotic relationship between participation in the democratic process and everyday forms of civic engagement that can be harnessed over time.

8.2. In seeking a trigger point for engagement, it is important to recognise that this is likely to need a sustained approach and that there is no ‘silver bullet’. There is, however, a clear causal link between interest and action. Those who are not interested and view political or social participation as a low priority are less likely to engage or become involved in civic activity. Though this is not some marginal group at the outside of society, virtual half of the people in the UK do not engage.

8.3. Those who are not members of interested and organised groups or experts in a field, those with low levels of internet access, those without a working understanding of the policy process, young people who are outside formal education or are disengaged from their studies, the geographically remote and those who feel alienated from mainstream political culture are all groups missed by current engagement initiatives for a variety of reasons. Research carried out by the Hansard Society identified six key factors that must be addressed when building sustained and effective engagement with democratic institutions:

1. The importance of face-to-face contact;
2. An interest in becoming more informed about politics and democracy;

---

3. Overcoming a strong feeling that democratic institutions are not listening;
4. The importance of the local area;
5. The importance of institutions coming out to the people; and
6. The utility of placing information about democratic institutions in accessible places where citizens live out their daily lives.

8.4. Over time, the barriers to engagement can be overcome by increasing knowledge and awareness of democratic processes, increasing the citizen’s level of confidence and helping the citizen to understand how engaging with public institutions will benefit them. However, this is not a one-way-street.

Public institutions must adapt to become more open, accessible and willing to engage in genuine dialogue, demonstrating that public input to their processes is not only valuable but actively sought. They must adopt processes that encourage as broad a range of participation as possible.

7 September 2017