Since May 2015 I have been engaged in a cross-European research study concerning Young People’s citizenship and engagement and I am very happy to present to the Committee a short account of the initial findings of that study (www.partispace.eu). We are currently preparing comparative papers on themes of ‘space’, ‘styles’ and the pedagogical framing of young people’s civic participation as well as on the specific role of Youth Councils.

In terms of ‘civic participation’ in our study there is clear evidence of a cleavage between the political domain and the socio-cultural domain, whilst the forms of social division with which the Committee will be familiar have a clear impact on issues of identity and belonging, and there are many examples of this throughout the report.

Funding and support for Youth Services and for community engagement projects has been greatly curtailed in recent years, whilst at the same time being restructured through schemes such as the National Citizen Service. Whilst other scholars who have conducted evaluations of and more critical financial assessments of the National Citizen Service than I have are better placed to comment, the loss of continuing ongoing spaces in neighbourhoods which can foster association and belonging cannot be compensated for by what is essentially a three week long summer scheme. I would be happy also to provide further information to the Committee on this issue.

I would also advise the Committee to consider the ways in which the failure to prioritise connection and mutuality lends itself to a deepening crisis, felt in many schools and across all communities, in young people’s mental health. This is evident in the research we are currently conducting at MMU into the experience and response to loneliness among young people, which we are undertaking for the Co-op Foundation. Again, others will have fuller evidence on this, but I would be happy to assist the committee with suggestions of who to talk with and where to look for this evidence.

In other words, it will by no means be sufficient for the Committee to consider narrowly political accounts of the problems of democracy in relation to the non-participation of marginalised groups, and I would certainly suggest that some of the forms of socio-cultural participation to which the Partispace study points (especially in sport and in the arts in may forms) are very much worth including in the framing of the discussion, as are the forms of self-help and mutual aid being developed of necessity in many of the poorest neighbourhoods as a result of austerity policies.

7 September 2017