Kevin Harris, Chief Officer, Queen’s Park Community Council – written evidence (CCE0100)

Queen’s Park Community Council (QPCC) is London’s first and only parish council, established in 2014. It is co-extensive with the Queen’s Park ward of Westminster City Council, with a population of 13,769 (2015). The ward has the highest number of households (1,632) with dependent children, and the highest number of Black / African / Caribbean / Black British residents, in Westminster. The Index of Multiple Deprivation (2010) places 33 per cent of the ward in the top 5 per cent most deprived in England. In terms of its diversity, the ward is ranked in the top 0.8% of England. In the City Survey (2012), 30 per cent agreed that they could influence decisions affecting the local area and 22 per cent wanted to be more involved in decisions taken at borough level.¹

We welcome the establishment of the Select Committee and the opportunity to contribute to its work. Our comments below address mainly your second and seventh questions, with reference also to questions 9 and 10. Our experience reflects the response of citizens when they are given genuine opportunities to participate in and contribute to local governance. The logic is that more meaningful citizenship – through local representation around local issues – generates higher levels of civic engagement.

We wish to stress the role of community development in the history of QPCC. Several years of high quality, sustained community development carried out by Paddington Development Trust succeeded in engaging residents, leading to a successful campaign to establish their own local council, thereby taking responsibility for addressing a number of local issues. In diverse urban areas particularly, it is hard to see how such formal empowerment can be achieved without sustained investment in community development.

With reference to the relationship between citizenship and civic engagement on the one hand and social cohesion and integration on the other; we note a tendency towards segregated schooling in the Queen’s Park area, with many local parents apparently opting for non-local schools because of the demographics. This seems to suggest that integration is not the preferred option for many native citizens. While many residents lead by example in promoting integration and active civic engagement, their efforts need to be reinforced by authorities and employers.

We identify three particular components of civic engagement in Queen’s Park, as follows:

**The importance of scale** – Queen’s Park is an appropriate scale (boundary approximately 2 miles round) to make democracy work as a cultural characteristic, which people can be proud of and to which they feel they can contribute unproblematically. Within wider local government, ward boundaries are too weak functionally and QPCC can be seen as a reaction against that.

**Information and awareness** – people will not readily engage if they do not understand the different levels and responsibilities of governance, or if they feel their views are not represented. As it is, too many people emerge from the UK education system with scant understanding of how local government works or what purposes it serves. Further, in Queen’s Park some of our population have come from parts of the world with weak traditions of democratic involvement.

¹ Sources for these data can be provided on request.
From our point of view, it is critical to involve local people as much as possible in the preparation and dissemination of information about what the council does and has done. At all levels of the process, wide representation at decision making level is key.

**Addressing democratic detachment.** In the global context, democracy is in turmoil. Detachment from democratic processes is a huge barrier to civic engagement, and low levels of civic engagement jeopardise democracy. In Queen’s Park, we sense that it is possible to promote *participative democracy as an immersive culture* – by this we mean that we want it to become a resilient, uncontested feature of day-to-day life in families, schools, workplaces, community groups, and voluntary and statutory organisations.

To this end we are exploring the effects of changing the relations between the classic governance roles of ‘citizen’, ‘representation’ and ‘expertise’. Thus for example, by involving more residents on working groups which feed directly into Council, or in augmenting the work of paid staff through their own expertise, we increase the amount that gets done and can make the effects of local governance more apparent to more people, thus stimulating a virtuous spiral of civic engagement. This would be represented by larger overlaps between the circles in the diagram.

**Concluding remarks**

Increased levels of civic engagement will follow from closer association with democratic processes and a more pervasive democratic culture. Both the processes and the culture can be made more meaningful through local governance driven by community development, as we believe is shown by the experience of QPCC. The challenge now is, how to ensure that the relation between local government and residents feels like part of a natural continuum, not seen as something detached or in conflict?

*7 September 2017*