SENSE – written evidence (CCE0102)

Sense is a national charity that supports people with complex communication needs to enjoy more independent lives. Our expertise in supporting individuals with complex communication needs benefits people of all ages, as well as families and carers. We provide information and advice, offer a wide range of flexible services and campaign passionately for the rights of the people we serve. At Sense we believe that everyone, no matter how complex their communication needs, deserves the right to be connected and part of society. It’s why we strive to unlock barriers to communication so everyone can enjoy meaningful lives – be it through speech, sign, touch, movement, gesture, sound, or art.

To respond to this consultation, Sense has drawn on a wide range of evidence from key areas of our public policy work (health, social care, education, employment welfare and benefits), practice knowledge from Sense services, and our contribution to Jo Cox’s Commission on Loneliness.

**Question 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? How might these barriers be overcome?**

Those with complex communication needs can include wide range of people. From people who are deafblind, to those with multi-sensory impairments, complex needs, or autism. We all need to be connected yet we all connect differently. As we currently live in a context where communicating through hearing and sight is heavily relied upon, for those who do not there can be significant barriers to engaging equally and fully in everyday life – including civic engagement and citizenship.

Loneliness, isolation, and exclusion

Recently, Sense produced a report and led a one-month campaign on tackling loneliness and isolation in relation to disability as part of Jo Cox’s Commission on Loneliness. Increased civic engagement and citizenship can contribute to tackling loneliness. However to do this it’s necessary for central government, devolved and local governments, with the support of third sector organisations, to address underlying contributors to loneliness across a wide range of public policy areas, such as:

1.1 Disability awareness and discrimination
Throughout Senses’ public policy work, we have found that a lack of disability awareness has been a key contributor to barriers across a range of areas. Unfortunately, much more still needs to be done to increase understanding of disability across public life; from greater awareness of how to make things accessible and the importance of doing so, to understanding what disability is and how the way we understand it then affects how we address barriers. It also includes having more positive and diverse representations of disabled people to directly challenge the common underestimation of disabled people. This is vital in preventing both direct and indirect discrimination so that people can fully participate, engage with, and contribute to society.

1.2 Accessibility (including public spaces, local services, the workplace, leisure or transport)

A lack of accessibility across public life such as leisure activities, the workplace, or public transport can act as a barrier to civic engagement. Featured in Sense’s report on loneliness, Ian explains how “Simple things like going to the pub can be a stressful experience when you have both sight and hearing impairments. I have to try hard to hear in noisy places and even walking to the bar can be a challenge because of my tunnel vision. There aren’t many venues for young people that are accessible to someone like me. Meeting friends is difficult.” Sense’s report on loneliness also highlights that inaccessible transport can be a significant barrier - preventing people to live independently and engage in public life. Understandably, being restricted in when you can leave your house can result in isolation.

Another example was highlighted in the Sense Case for Play report which found that many families with disabled children could not use their local parks, outdoor play areas, or attend local leisure activities as they were not suitable.

To address this point, it is important for understanding of accessibility to be further increased across a variety of sectors and for accompanied training to be developed where needed. One way in which Sense has been doing this is by providing specialised toolkits for specific environments and professional roles such as for play settings or employers.

1.3 Information and communication

Accessible information is vital to any informed participation and good communication is fundamental to meaningful engagement in relationships, social groups, and public life. For those with complex communication needs accessible information and communication means making sure information and communication is provided and translated into a format that is accessible to the individual. What is accessible for each person can vary greatly. It can include British Sign Language (BSL), hands on signing, deafblind manual, braille, large print, speech to text, audio, or easy read.
A lack of accessible information and communication can often be a significant barrier in civic engagement and citizenship. Some examples include: continued issues around information, communication and voting. Another example recently highlighted in the concluding observations on the UK government’s progress in meeting United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) is the provision of interpreters for those with hearing impairments and jury duty.

Sense has been a leading organisation on the importance of accessible information, reflected by our involvement in the development of the Accessible Information Standard and consultations with disabled people relating to its implementation. Many of the learnings from the Standard and accompanied processes can be applied across a variety of the other sectors.

Accessible information needs to incorporate technology in an increasingly digitally-focused world. More awareness-raising is needed around what technology is available to support people’s access to information (and communication). Sense has been involved in the Heritage Lottery Funded Online Today project aiming to get more people with complex communication needs online.

Barriers can be further overcome by drawing on the expertise and guidance of long standing specialist organisations like Sense, especially when it comes to meeting communication needs across a variety of sectors.

**Question 10: 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?**

Sense has a number of initiatives which address barriers, leading to more meaningful civic engagement and citizenship by bringing communities together. These are suitable and accessible services that are embedded within local communities. Initiatives such as these should be highlighted as good practice, signposted to those in need, promoted to local communities, properly funded and supported. Below are a few examples:

1. **Sense TouchBase Pears**

   **TouchBase Pears** is a pioneering, multi-purpose centre which offers a range of day service opportunities for people with complex communication needs. Also open for the local community and the general public, it is a space that brings people together in a welcoming environment where everyone can feel connected, included and part of the community.
Developed and designed by Sense with a focus on sustainability and creating value for the whole community, the aim of TouchBase Pears is to promote social inclusion and help meet our vision of disabled and non-disabled people enjoying activities and our facilities side by side. We consulted with all sectors of the community to ensure we created a facility that will benefit everyone. The centre has a family-friendly café, a sensory garden, art exhibitions and performances, children’s activities, a wide range of rooms and facilities for hire, and a community library. Sense are incorporating much needed employment and training opportunities for disabled people and designing services (around sports) directly in response to what those using services have expressed interest in.

1.2 Sense Buddying Project

Sense has over 40 years of experience developing short breaks for children and young people with complex needs where volunteers provide primary care and facilitate activities. Buddying is a supportive friendship between two people living in the same community who share common interests. Young disabled people ‘buddy up’ with their non-disabled peers who enjoy similar leisure activities and hobbies.

A buddy is not a relative or a paid worker but rather is someone who offers a young person who has complex sensory and communication difficulties a supportive friendship. The voluntary nature of a buddying arrangement, and the fact that time spent together is mutually negotiated, offers a different kind of a relationship than with family members or paid professionals. Relationships are characterised by greater perceived equality, sincerity, and are often more long-lasting.

A volunteer buddying scheme can fill the social and emotional gap that may not be met by existing statutory provision. The child or young person can follow their preferred interests, gain increased confidence, get out and about in their local community, develop vital skills towards independence and above all, socialise and make friends.

Buddying provides an opportunity for like-minded disabled and non-disabled peers to come together and develop friendships through a shared interest and hobby. In this regard, though the scheme is primarily for disabled people, it is providing civic engagement opportunities for the volunteer as well by building equal relationships, friendships, and closer communities.

1.3 Sense shops as local community hubs

Sense has around one hundred charity shops across the country. Increasingly the aim of these shops is to become community hubs to bring people together, volunteering (such as the National
Citizens Service), and campaigning. For example, as part of Sense’s month-long campaign with Jo Cox’s Commission on Loneliness, Sense shops hosted a number of events and activities.

**Conclusion**
This consultation response has outlined barriers to civic engagement and citizenship faced by disabled people (in particular those with complex communication needs). In a society that heavily depends on communication via sight and hearing, it is vital to address how this can marginalise those who do not communicate in this way. In particular, this means increasing disability awareness, ensuring accessible information and communication, and improving accessibility in general across public life. What central, devolved, and local governments can do is support suitable and accessible services that are embedded within communities, and draw upon the expertise of organisations like Sense.

*7 September 2017*