Locality – written evidence (CCE0140)

About Locality and our members:

Locality is the national network of ambitious and enterprising community-led organisations, working together to help neighbourhoods thrive. We represent over 600 community-led organisations, who operate in neighbourhoods across England, undertaking a wide variety of different activities, reflecting the communities they serve. What unites our members is a sense of ambition for their local neighbourhood, an enterprising approach to finding local solutions to local problems, and a clear sense that this activity should be community-led and based on self-determination. They act as ‘anchors’ within their community, providing stability, flexibility and a responsiveness to local need.

Community anchor organisations are fundamental to the creation of successful and self-confident neighbourhoods, uniquely placed to provide solutions to many of the intractable economic, social and environmental problems we face as a society. They foster self-reliance rather than dependency, and provide communities with a degree of resilience to cope with changing circumstances. They are independent organisations, working interdependently with the public and private sector locally.

Community anchors build and harness a huge amount of social capital in their local communities, and are key institutions in supporting active citizenship and civic engagement. Through their strong relationships with vulnerable and excluded groups locally, they support people to have a voice in their local community and shape neighbourhood priorities. Community anchor organisations also often play an important role in reinvigorating common assets locally, which ensures that communities can directly control the important activity in their neighbourhoods.

Summary:

Locality welcomes the opportunity to submit evidence to the House of Lords Committee on Citizenship and Civic Engagement. The remit of this Committee, to identify new ways of building bridges within and between communities and support civic engagement, is an extremely important one. The EU referendum exposed a number of deep divides in our society: an economic model which has generated deep patterns of inequality, as well as a sense of democratic deficit which has left people feeling they lack agency and a stake in their communities. It also exposed an unease about demographic change, with people living increasingly separate lives across age, class and ethnicity, made toxic by a strident immigration debate.

Community anchor organisations are an essential component of the fabric of our communities and their role is more important now than ever. They stimulate active citizenship and civic participation through volunteering and community organising, and act as a catalyst for community cohesion, bringing together diverse groups to work together for the local neighbourhood. Through community development and community organising, they give local people a voice and strengthen community involvement in local decision-making. They are also powerful local economic agents, using assets and enterprise to drive regeneration, often in the most disadvantaged areas.

Throughout this response, we highlight the importance of neighbourhoods as a key site for building civic engagement and citizenship, and the fundamental role of community institutions and community infrastructure in supporting this capacity. We highlight the need for places and
spaces within neighbourhoods for communities to come together, and make recommendations for protecting and developing vital community assets through community asset ownership. We also make recommendations for strengthening neighbourhood-level governance and decision-making, in order to build participatory democracy and develop community agency.

Throughout this response, we draw on emerging evidence from Locality’s Commission on the Future of Localism, which we established earlier this year, in partnership with Power to Change, to investigate what is required to reinvigorate local democracy and community empowerment.¹ The Commission is chaired by Lord Kerslake and brings together politicians, community leaders, and policy expertise. The Commission is due to report its findings and recommendations in January. We have been holding evidence hearings and consultation events across the country, and been receiving written evidence, in order to harness ideas and innovation about how we can ensure people have a greater stake in their local area and the decisions that affect them.

Locality have also established a new member-led network ‘the Future Places Network’ to bring Locality members together to discuss the role of community institutions in the context of Britain’s exit from the European Union. We are holding our first session in September; we will be focusing on the role of community anchors in promoting community empowerment, building community cohesion and driving community economic development. We will also be considering how they can do this better and making recommendations on what we need to do to build a more supportive policy environment.

We would be very happy to feed in further evidence from this research project, as well as our Commission on the Future of Localism, to the House of Lords Committee on Civic Engagement and Citizenship.

Responses to questions:

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. The power of community is a core expression of what citizenship and civic engagement mean in the 21st century. Neighbourhoods are a key source of the sense of belonging and connectedness that underpins people’s identity as citizens and within wider society. The place where people live can affect their social capital, their support networks and opportunities to connect, as well as their health and wellbeing. Equally, neighbourhoods can also reinforce inequalities and isolation, which can undermine people’s connectedness to wider society and their sense of belonging.

1.2. Civic engagement takes many forms; ultimately, it is about people getting involved to make a difference and impacting change in some way, through both political and non-political channels.² The community is a key site of civic engagement, and local democratic institutions often provide a channel for that engagement. However, civic engagement is about more than turnout at local or national elections; participatory democracy requires neighbourhood governance and forums that can facilitate deliberation and local decision-making. Civic engagement through participatory democracy and involvement in local decision-making often requires resetting the relationship between citizen and state, which

¹ For more information, please see: http://locality.org.uk/our-work/policy/localism-commission/
² Definitions
needs to be enabling and generous rather than controlling and obstructive. Throughout this response, we make recommendations for strengthening neighbourhood-level governance.

1.3. Civic engagement also finds expression in community action; participation in local action can demonstrate to people the power of getting things done in partnership with their neighbours. Evidence gathered through our Localism Commission (forthcoming) is demonstrating how this participation can reinforce community ties, and affect how people identify their own capacity and power, which can also foster greater participatory democracy. Active citizenship and civic participation at the neighbourhood level can also act as a catalyst for community cohesion, bringing together diverse groups to work together for the local neighbourhood.

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. A key way to strengthen people’s identity as citizens is to build and strengthen the community institutions that foster connectedness and belonging. We expand on our recommendations for strengthening these institutions - and how this facilitates civic engagement and citizenship - in later questions throughout this response.

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. Civic engagement can be strengthened by re-thinking the relationship between citizen and state. Localism and community empowerment form a key part of this. The Localism Act (2011) built on the Coalition Government’s intention to “promote decentralisation and democratic engagement [and] end the era of top-down government” by introducing a set of Community Rights to empower communities to take action locally. Whilst these have offered an important route for communities seeking to save valued local assets or shape local planning, barriers remain to achieving a truly bottom-up model of civic engagement.

3.2. The opportunities to reinvigorate the localism agenda and strengthen local democracy was a core motivation of Locality establishing our Commission on the Future of Localism. Evidence gathered so far has demonstrated the frustrations felt when considerable time and effort is dedicated to community action, which is then disregarded by local government and leads to greater disconnect. Fostering civic engagement requires the devolution of tangible powers to communities, including responsibilities over resources, to unlock community agency.

3.3. Community organisations can be a key link between the formal rights and responsibilities of citizenship, and the capacity to translate these into civic engagement and community action. Through community development and community organising, they give local

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3 Coalition Agreement, May 2010
people a voice and strengthen community involvement in local decision-making. Considering citizenship in terms of ‘formal rights and responsibilities’ does not always fully capture the barriers which exist to civic engagement, and we expand on these further in our response to Question 9.

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. A key part of encouraging greater civic engagement is in supporting community infrastructure. Community organisations are a huge source of civic capacity and participatory potential – they often provide important spaces for community conversations and activism, and through community development and community organising techniques they give local people a voice. This fundamental role does not necessarily rely directly on external funding programmes – it is a core functioning of their community purpose. However, funding pressures elsewhere, including the decline in grant funding and squeeze on income through contracts⁴, alongside rising demand, can have a significant impact on organisational sustainability and the diversion of time and resources from community development activities.

7.2. A core way in which government can support civil society initiatives to increase civic engagement, is through focusing on the sustainability of civil society organisations. Community organisations are fundamentally important to ensuring that neighbourhoods are places where feelings of belonging and connectedness can flourish, and where civic engagement is developed. However, the environment within which community organisations are operating is becoming increasingly challenging, with implications for the sustainability and viability of this vital sector. Whilst community organisations have faced a perpetual challenge in maintaining financial stability, these issues have become increasingly complex and pressing. Alongside this, local VCSE infrastructure – a common source of advice and support – is increasingly squeezed, and government interest and capacity for providing further centrally funded support programmes is waning.

7.3. One key route for financial sustainability is through asset ownership, which, when done well and properly supported, provides a sustainable foundation and robust financial basis for the growth of community and civil society organisations. The organisations which are best able to sustain their activities during turbulent financial pressures, are those which generate revenue, including renting buildings or hosting new services. In order to unlock the widespread benefits which community asset ownership can bring to local areas, a coordinated strategy of investment from funders, central government, and social investment is required and we have been calling for a £1 billion ‘Community Asset Investment Plan’⁵.

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⁴ From 2010/11 – 2012/13 the value of income from grants and contracts to the voluntary and community sector has fallen by £1.7 billion, NCVO Civil Society Almanac http://data.ncvo.org.uk/a/almanac15/introduction-2/
⁵ For more information, please see: http://locality.org.uk/our-work/campaigns/places-and-spaces/
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?

9.1. An uneven economic model has been a key contributing factor in why many communities and groups feel “left behind” within an increasingly divided and unequal society. Whilst government’s economic strategy is increasingly regional, it is still far from local. Indeed, the economic benefits of the development of city regions may exacerbate inequalities within places even as some of the differences between them are levelled out. Britain’s exit from the EU is an important opportunity to strengthen the potential of community economic development; maximising and harnessing local assets for the benefit of the local community, and delivering neighbourhood-level economic opportunity.

9.2. Efforts to encourage active citizenship need to account for the barriers many face to this kind of involvement and recognise that there is often a lot of work needed to reengage communities, and break down barriers. A core finding of the evidence received through our Localism Commission, is that for many people experiencing multiple-disadvantage, the opportunities to be involved in local community activities and initiatives can seem extremely alien and distant. This can be a result of a lack of confidence and personal sense of power and agency, perhaps connected to wider disadvantages of health, employment opportunities or housing. In this way people are actively excluded from citizenship through economic inequalities and disadvantage. Community anchor organisations can play a fundamental role in community development activities which re-engage these groups and tackle part of this citizenship deficit.

9.3. Democratic structures at both central and local government can deepen divides if they are not representative of the whole community; this can act as a further barrier to civic engagement and participation. This is not purely about representativeness through elected leaders, but through wider participatory democratic channels and forums. For example, local democratic structures can help support children and young people to express their views – for example through youth councils. BAME community organisations and community infrastructure are also essential in supporting black and ethnic minority leadership and participation. Research from Locality and Ubele, for example, has demonstrated how the sustainability of BAME community owned assets poses a real threat to community representativeness and voice.

8 September 2017

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