Response to Citizenship and Civic Engagement Committee question 8
What are the values that all of us who live in Britain should share and support? Can you identify any threats to these values, which affect the citizenship of, for instance, women or various minority groups? If so, how can their citizenship be strengthened?

1. The values that underpin public life in Britain are formally expressed in legal conventions that successive UK governments have committed to since the Second World War. In particular the UK has a formal binding commitment in international law to adhere to the standards set out in the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) and abide by the rulings of its court. The ECHR is administered by the 47 member Council of Europe, not the EU.

2. The UK is also signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and this instrument also provides clear definitions of the principles, standards and values that inform education and services for young people.

3. In the absence of a written constitution, the most consensual formulation of the principles and values underpinning public life in the UK, and which all living in Britain should be expected to share and support is found in these international conventions. This was made explicit in domestic law through the 1998 Human Rights Act.

4. Since 2014 the Department for Education (DfE) has promoted guidelines that oblige schools in England to promote ‘fundamental British values’ of democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs. However, in the absence of a formal definition of national standards and values set out in a constitution, the minimalist DfE definition may be perceived as expressing the opinion of a government at a particular point in time.

5. Citizenship education has evolved to meet the challenges of violent and anti-democratic ideologies through a focus on the positive liberal agenda of respect for human rights and open debate. However, ‘fundamental British values’ are expected to be promoted through a whole school ethos rather than through Citizenship where human rights issues can be discussed and debated.

6. ‘Fundamental British values’ may set up an unfortunate imaginary binary opposition between Muslim values and British values. Consequently a more inclusive frame of reference for fundamental values is required. Reference to human rights and fundamental freedoms is to be preferred.

8 September 2017