New Citizenship Project – written evidence (CCE0170)

How can government and parliament best create and support an engaged and active citizenry in Britain?

(1.1) A word first on where this response is coming from: the New Citizenship Project is a pioneering strategy and innovation company, on a mission to support the shift in the dominant story of the individual in society from Consumer to Citizen. We help organisations do things better (and do better things) because we think of people differently, using creative industry skills to inspire participation from people as Citizens instead of simply serving them as Consumers. Our work spans all industries and all sectors, with clients including Tate, Guardian, National Trust, and many more. Our way of working is rooted in defining generative inquiry questions, in response to which we then work alongside our clients, supporting them to innovate, test and learn.

(1.2) In this submission to the House of Lords Select Committee on Citizenship and Civic Engagement, we’d like to begin by articulating an illustrative example core question government might hold openly with the citizens of Britain, in order to create the space for the engaged and broad-based 21st century citizenry we believe we could have in this country: How can government and parliament best create and support an engaged and active citizenry in Britain?

(1.3) Even articulating a question in this way represents a significant shift from the current framing of this call for evidence as another example of outdated and dry public “engagement”, which is practically impenetrable to all but the usual suspects. It’s great that this Select Committee is happening at all, but we see a huge opportunity for its medium to match its message: for you to facilitate a genuine public conversation about what the relationship between the state and the citizen might be.

(1.4) In other words, our first unashamedly provocative response is that if government really want to figure out how best to engage citizens, you should be asking them. Our dream project would be to help you ask that question - to help you hold the space for a true national conversation - not just to try to answer it for you yourselves.

(1.5) Accepting for now, though, the remit of this call for evidence, there are a further four contributions we would like to make: a conceptual framing, and then three categories of action we would recommend.

Conceptual framing:
The Citizen is a concept of the role of the individual in society, not a legal status

(2.1) The default use of the word Citizen is, at least implicitly, as a legal status. This is the case in the text of this call for evidence, in the terms of which “citizenship” is shorthand for “British citizenship”.

(2.2) This is an unhelpful starting point, and needs to be explicitly set aside. I can be a citizen of my town, of England, of the United Kingdom, of Europe, and of the world, whether or not any or all of these have a legal status attached. Thinking and acting as an interdependent member of the community at each and every one of these levels is what it takes to live a good life; not choosing
between them. Citizenship is not a question of what passport we hold; it is an idea of who we are as human beings, a question of what we can do, and what we should.

(2.3) As such, the idea of the Citizen is better understood in contrast to two other ideas of who we are: the Subject, and the Consumer. In Subject mode, we do as we are told by our betters, with little or no power to shape the course of our own lives. In Consumer mode, we have the power to choose and the right to complain; our role is to get the best deal for ourselves, as narrowly defined individuals. In Citizen mode, we can and want to shape the societies and communities we live in. We define what the available options are, instead of just choosing between them; and we seek the best for the defined community as a whole, not just our own immediate self-interest.

Quickfire concepts table from This Is The #CitizenShift

**Action pathway 1:**
Stop undermining the Citizenship inherent in human nature

(3.1) The good news is, human beings are inherently participatory, empathic, collaborative creatures - despite what we may have told ourselves over the last century or so. There is a growing consensus in the fields of animal behaviour and evolutionary biology, perhaps most popularly expressed by Frans de Waal in his TED talk on Moral Behaviour in Animals, that empathy and collaboration are as significant as drivers of evolution as competition and status. The potential for Citizenship is present in all of us.

(3.2) But we don’t exist in a vacuum. The messages we receive in our day to day lives (through the news, through advertising, through the built environment), the measures that govern us (what success looks like at home, at work, in society), ultimately the way that we are invited to participate all shape our response to the world around us.

(3.3) We have been involved in a number of studies that show when people are primed to think as Consumers they are less socially motivated, less likely to participate in their communities and wider society. When people are primed to think as Citizens they are more socially motivated. This
is as true with prompts as subtle as a single word, or in the case of the data below, exposure to a single normative statement. Simply asking people “to what extent do you agree that it’s important to find brands that fit your personality?” can be enough to diminish significantly their motivation for local and national participation - regardless of the extent of their agreement.

(3.4) When the effect of such subtle primes is so significant, ask yourself what we are doing to Citizenship when the average person is exposed to somewhere between 1500 and 5000 commercial messages a day, when the Consumer Confidence Index is reported regularly as a critical indicator of societal success, and when “consumers” becomes more of a colloquialism than “people” - let alone “citizens”. Citizenship needs air to breathe, as well as nourishment.

The priming effect of Consumer and Citizen norms, gathered in partnership with YouGov. Data explained fully here.

Action pathway 2: Build lifelong Citizen skills across society

(4.1) Nourishment is, however, important. Citizenship is a muscle you build, not a cup you empty. Citizenship education should be thought of primarily as a lifelong pursuit of learning-by-doing, that is about building this muscle and repeatedly creating the conditions for its exercise and development; not just a set of rules to be learned by rote, or something that is only for children, though we should start young.

(4.2) An obvious point to start in building the skills needed to be a Citizen is formal education. But this is not about a specific module or area of the curriculum aimed at informing young people on their status as a citizen. As measures like Everyday Democracy show, it is not just an information gap, it is a skills and belief gap. The way our children participate at school is far too limited in scale and scope, children on average speak as little as 20 seconds during a 45 minute lesson. We need to move from Citizenship Education to building Citizens through all our education.
Case study: School 21

(4.3) School 21, a new school based in East London, was started on the premise that our school system wasn’t adequately equipping young people with the skills they need in the 21st Century. The founders talk of “a shared belief that education must be done differently if we are to prepare young people properly for the world they are going into…. we need schools to rebalance head (academic success), heart (character and well-being) and hand (generating ideas, problem solving, making a difference).” School 21 has created approaches intended to build student’s sense of agency: one of the central premises is helping students find their voice, helping them to communicate in different contexts through oracy programmes like Voice 21 developed with Cambridge University; another is in perseverance, fostering the belief that sustained effort and contribution results in better outcomes; a further approach is to work collectively, to have constructive dialogue between students through coaching groups and feedback.

(4.4) If it starts from our formative education, it certainly doesn’t end there. What if...

- Universities saw increased tuition fees as a prompt to look meaningfully at undergraduate education - moving from passive lectures into active forums - by questioning how students can meaningfully shape their own education.
- Workplaces created more opportunities for people to act outside their immediate job roles, building employees’ civic muscle e.g. employing open sourcing methods to gain ideas and insight from across the business rather than from the few in charge.
- Government equipped administrators with the new skills of governance needed to make civic engagement meaningful: “convening, conflict assessment, negotiation, active listening and reframing, facilitation, and consensus building”

These ideas are the focus of widespread experimentation both across the world and indeed across the UK, but here at least there is little or no explicit structural support or backing from government. These structures matter.

Action pathway 3:
Develop structures, systems and spaces that encourage participation

(5.1) The skills we develop are only as good as the structures and spaces we put around them; without structures which offer these skills meaningful outlets, they wither on the vine. Sustained, broad-based civic engagement (such as the much cited example of Porto Alegre’s participatory budgeting process or the less famous Better Reykjavik platform) is only possible through establishing structures, methodology, processes, measures, and providing spaces, both physical and online, to allow for meaningful participation. The absolutely critical ingredient, though, is a meaningful level of power. Where trivial, inauthentic participation opportunities are provided, people will either not participate, or will them with the disrespect they deserve (Boaty McBoatface, anyone?).

(5.2) A useful starting point is to develop a typology of engagement opportunities, to understand what does exist and what could be created. Various models exist including Gaventa’s spaces for change and Arnstein’s ladder of participation. All emphasise the inadequacy of choice between a pre-determined set (as in voting) and of feedback on predesigned approaches (as in standard consultation processes). We prefer this model, since it accentuates what the individual can do. A revised iteration is expected in a forthcoming book in Spring 2018.
(5.3) The potential implications of this for the role and processes of government are profound. Today, we have outdated “old power” policymaking systems where most people simply consume the outputs (in the form of public “services”) and a very few become intensively active citizens at the sustain level, in effect becoming institutionalised as part of government (councillors, for example). Where we need to be is a place where a far broader swathe of society are active participants in much lighter touch ways, but still more dynamic and participatory than voting.

(5.4) The momentum behind this shift from purely representative democracy to a hybrid representative-participatory model is gaining pace around the world - Taiwan’s vTaiwan platform is another of the pioneers, and there was recent fanfare in Argentina over the announcement that 20% of the laws passed in that country in the last year originated as online citizens’ proposals. The UK - or at least UK central government - needs to move further, faster.

Parting thought: a time for hope

(6.1) The nature of these sorts of discussions often tends to focus on the negative; on diagnosing the problems of disengagement, of a dearth of Citizenship, and seeking to understand the reasons for them. This, however, misses a big part of the picture. Across the country, just as across the world, people are already doing this stuff, both professionally, in the best local authorities, and in self-organised structures in local communities. We wanted to finish by citing a case study of a nascent project that we think hugely exciting; but with the caveat that such initiatives need government to come in soon as an explicit supporter of such initiative if we are to take this change to scale.

One to watch case study – Participatory City

(6.2) Participatory City is a 5-year project in Barking and Dagenham with local residents, government and organisations. The objective is to increase practical participation, working with 25,000+ people to grow a new network of 250 projects and 100 businesses; projects and businesses meant to support the community in a sustainable way covering childcare, food production, retail, business skills, manufacturing and the environment. It builds upon work done with Lambeth Council in 2014/15, to develop new systems for civic engagement – both citizen to citizen and citizen to government. Participatory City is designed to counteract the fragmentation of communities, where individuals interact with organisations and institutions over and above peer to peer learning and support. The approach is to develop local projects that find new ways of fostering participation and getting resources to the people who need
them most: “a re-organisation of local systems to lift all boats.” The learnings from the work done so far and what happens next, when done at scale, should offer real insight into the structures and spaces needed for a flourishing of participation and civic empowerment.

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