1. About Church Urban Fund

1.1. Church Urban Fund’s (CUF) vision is to see people and communities across England flourish and enjoy life in all its fullness.

1.2. We work relationally, inclusively and effectively to bring about change through three core programmes:

- **Together**: A national network that resources local churches and other groups to respond to social and community issues collaboratively.
- **Near Neighbours**: Building social cohesion by bringing together people of different faiths and none, developing leadership skills, and providing opportunities for people to work together to improve their communities.
- **Just Finance Foundation**: Helping shape a fairer finance system, including through financial capability training, work with credit unions, promoting savings, and raising awareness.

1.3. As the Church of England’s social action charity, we have unique access to local communities across England through the parish network. This ensures that all we do is rooted in and informed by real life experience.

1.4. Our submission focusses on five of the sets of questions raised by the Call for Evidence. We do not address all the questions in each set, but focus on those on which relate most closely to our work in, and learning from, local communities.

2. (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?

2.1. For us, civic engagement or active citizenship means playing an active part in civil society. This can take many forms from volunteering through to fundraising, advocacy, community-building and political participation or activism.\(^1\) For a healthy society and democracy, it is important that none of these forms are overlooked, or overemphasized at the expense of others.

2.2. Civil society can be understood as a space ‘between the citizen and the state’, characterized by freedom of association, the expression of diverse values and views and the socialization of individuals as ‘citizens’.\(^2\)

2.3. We have identified four of functions of civil society which we believe are of vital importance for civic engagement in contemporary Britain:

- Fostering cohesive communities in which people can belong, connect and contribute.
- Building citizenship skills, and the motivation and confidence to use them.
- Maintaining a healthy democracy by giving expression and representation to diverse views, beliefs, and experiences, including through political participation.
- Bringing events, activities and projects into being in communities, for community benefit.

2.4. Through our Together and Near Neighbours programmes, CUF is actively involved in furthering all four of these purposes in communities across England. For example, Catalyst, our youth leadership training programme, equips young people to work together to make a positive difference, giving them the skills and confidence needed to be influencers and engaged citizens in a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic society.

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2.5. Civic engagement matters because it occurs in an intermediate – and therefore a connecting – space between the state and the people that make up society. What happens in that space determines which voices are heard in public debate; who feels that they ‘belong’; who shapes local and national decision making; and, in turn, whether individuals and communities perceive themselves to be ‘of worth’ to wider society.

2.6. CUF’s work in communities is underpinned by a belief in the dignity, agency, strengths and potential of each individual, and a recognition that everyone has something valuable to contribute within their community and to wider society.

2.7. Civil society, then, is the poorer if any group is excluded (or self-excludes) from civic engagement, whether because of the way in which engagement is sought (or not sought), their education, social norms, lack of financial resources, time poverty, or a perceived or realistic sense that their involvement would make little or no difference.

2.8. Voluntarism is an important facet of civic engagement. However, government and statutory bodies can play an important part in increasing the extent and depth of civic engagement, across all social groups (see Section 4).

2.9. In the more deprived communities within which much of our work is focused, many people are accustomed to being ‘done to’, rather than being trusted to work together with professionals, politicians and others to contribute their own knowledge and experience to finding solutions, whether to personal issues, local decision-making, or national government policy. The trend towards co-production arguably has the potential to shift this balance of power in relation to service provision (if adequately resourced), but to foster the same effect in relation to public policy, people in local communities will need to see very tangible evidence of deep listening and responses to what they have to contribute.

2.10. An important function of civil society is to serve as a space within which alternative narratives and perspectives about how we can live together well emerge, are formulated, and are shared and diffused within society. Civic engagement can help ensure that these alternative narratives are communicated in ways that reach into and shape political discourse and policy, ensuring that it is informed by a range of life experiences, beliefs, and understandings of the world that is reflective of the diverse society in which we live.

3. (6) Do voluntary citizenship programmes such as the National Citizen Service do a good job of creating active citizens? […] Should they be compulsory, and if so, when? […] What other routes exist for creating active citizens?

3.1. Seeing active citizenship as something that takes place largely within the domain of civil society is an important reminder that it is not something that can be imposed by government. It seems unlikely that a compulsory citizenship programme, beyond that delivered as part of school curriculums, would produce life-long ‘active citizens’: as with other components of compulsory education, there is the risk that those who don’t enjoy it simply feel resentful for being forced to engage, and thus become more entrenched in disengagement once the essential requirements have been dispensed with.

3.2. Over 430 young people have taken part in Catalyst, Near Neighbours’ exciting and inspirational (voluntary) programme for young people aged 16-30. Catalyst helps participants develop:

- A positive identity for living in a multi-faith, multi-ethnic Britain.
- The skills and experience to play their part in building a strong civil society.

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The confidence and commitment to act as agents of change in their neighborhoods.

3.3. Catalyst gives participants practical experience of working towards shared goals with people of different faiths, ethnicities and backgrounds. An evaluation of Catalyst by Coventry University found that 87% of participants felt more prepared and enabled to take on leadership roles within their community. One participant, Jasmin, said:

‘The programme taught me so many new communication, leadership, social, and interfaith skills … We are not often taught about parliament and politics in school and I must say the sessions we had really pushed my passion in wanting to become an MP and giving back to my town … I have also been involved in many more initiatives, campaigns, programmes in my community that I would not have dreamt of doing before the programme.’

3.4. Another way to create active citizens is to give people opportunities to ‘give it a go’. Between September 2011 and March 2017 our Near Neighbours Small Grants programme, funded by the Department for Communities and Local Government, awarded grants to 1,433 projects bringing people from different faith or ethnic groups (including people of no faith) together to make a difference in their communities. Near Neighbours Coordinators can provide guidance at all stages of project development, making the programme a great way for people to ‘get started’ in their communities.

3.5. Near Neighbours is having a positive impact on civic engagement. 84% of project leads reported an increase in volunteering in their communities. 69% of projects stated that they would be continuing after the Near Neighbours funding had finished.

3.6. CUF’s Together programme is revitalizing civil society by providing churches and other groups with encouragement, advice, assistance with applying for funding, and relevant training, as they seek to engaging effectively in their communities. An evaluation of the programme during 2016 reported ‘many positive stories of people being encouraged and developed to become volunteers for the first time’.

3.7. In 2016 Together Development Workers supported over 550 projects and activities, and assisted other organisations in securing more than £1,000,000 for community and social action initiatives. Our Together Small Grants scheme supported over 90 community projects in 2016, 69% of which involved local volunteers, helping people develop skills, confidence and experience as active citizens. One such project in the Tees Valley linked newly arrived refugees and asylum seekers with local residents through weekly friendly football matches. These have begun to generate real friendships, dispelling myths and prejudices and building social cohesion.

3.8. Places of Welcome, an initiative that emerged from Together, now sees over 150 community spaces being opened up each week to bring people together, encouraging them to actively participate. Some share a skill or interest with others who come along, others help serve drinks or clear up. These may seem like small steps, but they help nurture a sense of belonging, an important precondition for civic engagement.

4. (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?

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5 Figures based on impact reports submitted by 737 projects.
4.1. We suggest three main ways in which government can support increased civic engagement, in collaboration with other sectors:

- **Resourcing** citizens with the skills, inspiration and confidence to engage.
- **Receptivity and responsiveness** to civic engagement, demonstrating that it makes a difference.
- **Reshaping** culture in the public sphere.\(^9\)

4.2. **Resourcing citizens**: Associational activity is an important context for socialization into civic engagement.\(^{10}\) Besides investment in specific programmes that train young people and adults in leadership and citizenship skills (see Section 3), the resourcing of trusted civil society organisations that have strong relationships amongst social groups known to be less active in civic engagement is an important way in which government can help build social capital and civic capacity amongst these groups. The Near Neighbours programme exemplifies this approach.

4.3. Such support needs to be targeted so that it contributes to greater equality of participation in civil society, whilst also deepening integration and cohesion. Supported groups should therefore be able to demonstrate active partnership and collaboration across more than one cultural, religious, ethnic or demographic group.

4.4. **Receptivity and responsiveness**: A vibrant civil society is a vital component of a healthy democracy, and a key role for government in sustaining such a civil society is to engender trust that it is indeed listening to the diverse voices emerging from it.

4.5. People need to see multiple, clear examples of ways in which civic engagement is ‘worth it’, both at local and national level. This is particularly the case amongst sections of the population who feel disconnected from, and poorly served by, the political status quo.

4.6. This might require a new approach to communicating with the public about policy decisions. This could involve something as simple as producing ‘You said…, We did …’ graphics for use on social media, like those used by businesses to indicate that they are listening to their customers. Making the impact of community consultation on policy-making more transparent could incentivize future engagement.

4.7. **Reshaping culture**: ‘Public institutions and political systems need to include the identities and concerns of minority communities to encourage them to participate fully in society’.\(^{11}\) Some positive changes have already taken place in this respect: for example, we now have the most diverse UK Parliament in history. However, further progress is needed, particularly in relation to the representation of people from different socio-economic and educational backgrounds in society-shaping professions such as politics, law, and media. In addition, consideration needs to be given to the meta-narratives underpinning public debate. Whilst secularity has an important part to play in holding the public sphere open for all to participate, a lack of genuine engagement with alternative meta-narratives, such as those of Christianity, Islam and other faiths, can compound segregation and close down opportunities for greater mutual understanding and inclusion.\(^{12}\)

5. **(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?


\(^{11}\) Barrett, M. and Zani, B. *Political and civic engagement*, Routledge, Hove, p. 28.

\(^{12}\) Data from the latest British Social Attitudes survey show that 47% of adults in Great Britain regard themselves as belonging to a religion.
5.1. **Socio-economic divergence:** Many communities and groups feel ‘left behind’ because, in terms of access to financial, political and cultural power, they have been. Earlier this year the Social Mobility Commission reported that new divides have opened up geographically, across income groups, and inter-generationally, and that these are likely to widen.13

5.2. **Individualism:** The construction of personal identity through achievement and consumption have become dominant cultural currents within our society. These currents inevitably exclude, marginalize and disempower those who are less able to consume, and who do not achieve highly in the particular ways that society has come to value.

5.3. We are now seeing the unravelling of the illusion of the sufficiency of this individualistic narrative. Revitalizing civil society and rediscovering social cohesion will require us to rebalance a proper sense of individual agency, creativity and responsibility with a renewed sense of mutuality, reciprocity and inter-dependence in relationship with others. In this, there is much to be learned from the solidarity and reciprocity that are often more intuitively valued and sustained within more economically deprived communities, and amongst some migrant and ethnic minority communities.

5.4. **Language and cultural barriers:** Limited English skills and particular cultural or religious traditions and beliefs can affect people’s ability to be active citizens. There are particular concerns, for example, about the limited opportunities that some Muslim women have to engage with wider society. Experiences of prejudice, discrimination, abuse, or harm – or fear that these may happen in future – can also prevent participation, particularly for religious, ethnic or other minority groups.

5.5. Cultural effects on civic participation are not limited to religious or ethnic minority groups. The decline of the associational life that was once central to white working-class communities, for example, has seen many such communities becoming increasingly characterised by cultural norms that tend towards a lack of civic engagement.

5.6. **Economic pressures** on households can reduce the time, resources and even emotional capacity for civic engagement by their members. Working hours, working conditions, housing costs and wage levels and the normalization of dual-income households all have a bearing on people’s availability to get involved in voluntary activity.14

6. **(10) How do you see the relationship between citizenship and civic engagement on the one hand and social cohesion and integration on the other? […] How can diversity and integration be increased concurrently?**

6.1. We believe diversity is to be celebrated. It brings a richness and creativity to our workplaces, communities and national life that can benefit us all. However, growing diversity along religious, ethnic and cultural lines means that we all have to work harder at living together well, particularly during times of change.

6.2. Where the lives of individuals or groups are shaped by divergent traditions, beliefs or life experiences, it is likely to take considerable time, effort and commitment for a sense of safety, mutual understanding and partnership to be built. This has not always been sufficiently acknowledged from a policy perspective. Many communities have undergone substantial change in terms of the ethnic and religious composition of their populations, with little recognition or practical support given either to help the pre-existing population adjust to, interact with and begin to understand incoming groups, and vice versa.

6.3. Language barriers make integration much more difficult, and the provision of appropriate English language and cultural education is important. However, these are tools, rather

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than solutions in their own right. Integration itself is primarily a relational process, worked out at a local level, but in the context of national and international discourses and policies. In this regard, we need to concern ourselves not only with interactions across ethnic and religious boundaries, but also socio-economic ones.15

6.4. What seems to have happened is that a version of ‘tolerance’ coined by a liberal elite (whose experience of multi-cultural Britain has often been very different from that of people living in many deprived communities) has been imposed unthinkingly on wider society, particularly through mainstream media. This has closed down space – both in public debate, and to some extent in communities too – for the legitimate discussion of the pain, loss, conflict, competition, and sense of segregation that has resulted from the changing composition of some communities. For some, this contributes to a stronger sense of marginalization and alienation from wider society, whilst others turn to more extreme views and more damaging ways of expressing them.

6.5. Integration requires interaction across diversity, encompassing an honest acknowledgement of tensions and differences, a genuine desire to understand the experiences and perspectives of others, and a commitment to trying to see all people as valuable and unique fellow human beings. Through our Near Neighbours and Together programmes, Church Urban Fund are actively engaged in facilitating these kinds of connections and relationships in local communities, and our newest initiative, ‘Real People Honest Talk’ is designed specifically to generate the kinds of genuine interaction and relationships across difference that we believe are crucial to a more cohesive society.

8 September 2017