NALC – written evidence (CCE0190)

I am writing in response to the recent Lords Select Committee on Citizenship and Civic Engagement’s call for evidence.

The National Association of Local Councils (NALC) is the nationally recognised membership and support organisation representing the interests of around 10,000 parish and town councils and many parish meetings in England. Local (parish and town) councils are the backbone of our democracy and closest to local people, providing our neighbourhoods, villages, towns and small cities with a democratic voice and structure for taking action, contributing in excess of £2 billion of community investment to supporting and improving local communities and delivering neighbourhood level services.

We welcome the opportunity to respond to this call for evidence. The key points we would make in response to the consultation are set out below:

- Local councils are ideally placed to encourage citizenship, civic engagement and social cohesion in their community and currently host a number of initiatives to encourage this through hosting events, fund raising initiatives, and keeping public services running amid the cuts coming from higher tiers of government.

- Young people are currently disengaged with politics. Getting them involved in local and national elections is key in engaging them with issues that affects them and their community. Local councils who have responded to our consultation have suggested that the voting age should be lowered to 16 to encourage younger people to do so.

- More must be done by all tiers of government to encourage citizens to volunteer and participate in their community. Citizens must engage if they are to be active in their community.

As the first tier of local government in England, local councils are positioned at the very heart of the community and ensuring that citizenship and civic engagement is promoted positively is a high priority for them. We welcome the opportunity to respond to this call for evidence.

We were however disappointed that the Select Committee decided to host the call for evidence during August; a month when local councils do not ordinarily meet. We gained a number of responses from local councils but think that number would have been much higher if the call for evidence was held outside either side of summer recess. Further to this, we would like to request for an extension of the deadline for written responses to be submitted to 8th October, to give all local councils the chance to respond to this call for evidence.

In response to our consultation, local councils from a host of different counties agreed that one of their top priorities must be to provide a reasonable level of civic support and community engagement to the area they serve. These local councils did however make the point that it is a two-way street, and citizens must also play an active role in society in order to feel a sense of belonging to their community.
Local councils have been engaging with their communities in a number of ways. They have launched public realm schemes to make their areas attractive places to live in, invested money into local community groups to provide spaces for their community to come together, and carry out work on a daily basis to ensure public services and public facilities remain available for their community to use.

Local councils who responded, agreed that hosting events and ceremonies was an important factor in engaging with their community. For example, in Berkshire, Woodburn and Bourne End Parish Council hosted a community show in the hope of bringing the community together to celebrate their area. Over 200 members of the community attended and the event (gaining a very positive response), with a demand for the show to be hosted annually.

This event relied heavily on the work of volunteers, but some of the local councils who responded highlighted that the lack of volunteers in society is an issue that is affecting citizenship. Communities are all about volunteering and if no one volunteers their time to their community, social cohesion will break down. The Government should be looking at how it can invest and support more voluntary citizenship schemes to boost volunteer numbers.

NALC has begun work to engage with national voluntary sector bodies, to explore how we can strengthen local councils and voluntary sector relations. NALC has worked with voluntary sector bodies such as NCVO and Locality and hosted a number of roundtable discussions with them to discuss volunteer engagement. NALC has also worked in partnership with these bodies on projects such as ‘Our Place’ and ‘#VolunteersWeek’ to name a few.

Local councils have also reported during this consultation that there is a notable lack of interest from young people when it comes to getting involved with their community. We also think this needs to change if we are to create the civic heroes of tomorrow. NALC has been carrying out work to encourage local councils to engage with younger volunteers including hosting the Star Councils Awards and dedicating a category to Young Councillors of the Year. NALC has also launched a Diversity Commission to look at how local councils can engage with different audiences and be more representative of the community they serve.

Some local councils suggested that the Government could introduce citizenship to the school curriculum to help younger generations understand the importance of community cohesion and get them involved at an early age.

Lancing Parish Council is one local council who have been engaging with local schools. They have set up a youth council, which allows anyone from local schools, aged 13 – 19, to get involved. The youth council meets once a month to discuss issues that are facing the community and allows younger people to feed in their ideas on how the local council can go about solving them.

Local councils told us that this is not the only difficulty they are having when it comes to engaging with the younger generation. They have had huge difficulties in encouraging younger generations to vote in local and national elections.
Some local councils argued to bring down the voting age to 16, with the hope of encouraging the younger generation to get their voice heard in local and national elections. With a boost in younger voters, policies may be formed to appeal to the younger generation, hopefully leading them to engage once again with democracy.

Local councils can play a vital role in encouraging social cohesion and civic engagement in their areas but more support is needed from higher tiers of government in order for this to happen. NALC are looking to work with the national bodies for district councils, county councils and other forms of local government to discuss some of these issues.

With more spending cuts coming from central government, more restrictions are being put on local councils, and more responsibilities being transferred to local councils from other tiers of government, local councils are finding it increasingly difficult to serve their community effectively. We are calling for more freedom and support to be given to local councils to allow them to support their communities in any way they can.

Should you require any further information on this response please do not hesitate to contact Ben Murray, policy and projects officer, on 020 7290 0314 or via email at Ben.Murray@nalc.gov.uk

Please note we are happy to provide further evidence should you need it.

Yours sincerely,

COUNCILLOR SUE BAXTER

CHAIRMAN

8 September 2017