1. I would like to respond to your call for evidence on how to think about citizenship and civic engagement in a more vibrant, positive and integrated manner. I will especially focus on question 7 about support for civic engagement and civil society initiatives and the responsibilities of different actors involved. However, I will do so in the context of several other questions which were raised about the contemporary meaning of citizenship and civic engagement, their relation to social cohesion and integration as well as people’s identity as citizens, and people feeling “left behind”.

2. We seem to face something of a paradox with regards citizenship and civic engagement. One the one hand we live in an era of an unprecedented and increasing level of interconnection and interdependence. Yet at the same time that does not mean that the quality of those relationships is necessarily any higher. In fact, the state of our social and political relationships seems to suggest a strong sense of disconnection—from ourselves, others and the environment. Our dominant materialist worldview has left us socially estranged and vulnerable to separatist manipulation. It has left large segments of the population feeling isolated, left behind, excluded by ‘the elite’, and threatened by immigrants and globalization more generally\(^1\). It also fuels unprecedented levels of poor mental health which incapacitated support services are unable to address\(^2\).

3. What we do in these circumstances is seek to secure our own survival and our concept of who we need to take care of, who is ‘us’, becomes narrower and narrower. We feel a collective sense of helplessness to change the situation we are in and look to strong charismatic leaders to lead us out of here. We look to people who we believe to have more knowledge, power or resources than us to create solutions. Instead, we need to collectively find ways in which to re-connect to ourselves, others and our environment, to abandon old forms of identity and connection in order to forge new ones. In other words, the starting point for new and better forms of citizenship and civic engagement should be where people are\(^3\).

4. The way this works is as challenging as it is simple. They key is to create enabling environments in which people can connect to themselves, others, and their environment. Evidence from research I have co-produced with Tree House Liverpool CIC, an exceptionally innovative community organisation, demonstrates that creating such safe and appreciative spaces enables people to embark on a journey of personal growth, develop better relationships with those around them, and take up greater responsibility for their shared spaces and society in general\(^4\). In the case of Tree House, this is done by organising activities

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3 Monbiot, George (2017). This is how people can truly take back control: from the bottom up. The Guardian, 8-2-2017 https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/feb/08/take-back-control-bottom-up-communities?CMP=share_btn_link
in shared spaces, i.e. the local park and adjacent area, including, yet not limited to, gardening, yoga, child-led play, tree planting, litter picking, philosophy discussions, street art, dog walking and film screenings. Yet, and this is crucial, it is not the organisation of the activities per se that is key, but the spirit in which this is done. There are tons of examples of nice community initiatives that bring people together and make a local area look better\textsuperscript{5}. What is distinctive of what I am suggesting is that the activities (and the organising of these) cultivate a psychologically safe and appreciative space. This enables people to be themselves (rather than hiding behind a facade), interact with others with unconditional positive regard (rather than for their own self-interest and personal gain), and understand others’ point of view (rather than subsuming these under their own).

5. There is no single one-size-fits-all way in which this can be done. I cannot offer suggestions as to structures, or activities or purposes, because these all depend on the context and situation people are in and what they experience and feel in their interactions with others. Therefore, once more, this is where the starting point should be. But what is vital is that whatever shape or form an initiative takes, it should be guided by a profound ethical commitment to the quality of relationships of all those involved as well as shared abilities and willingness to be vulnerable, flexible and learn.

6. The fundamental challenge is that this does not tend to happen. It is not what people in general and governments in particular are used to. The United Kingdom has an especially poor track record when it comes to citizen engagement, as its admirable aspirations for participation, collaboration, inclusion, and empowerment have tended to end up in pathologising, patronising, controlling, manipulative practices that have had an adverse effect on socio-economic inequalities and structurally damaged people’s trust in government\textsuperscript{6}. And the main barrier to enabling and sustaining community organisations continues to be government.\textsuperscript{7} In addition, public services tend to operate through a punitive, rationalistic system which takes little to no account of the diversity of human experience and reduces the complexity of service delivery to a question of how many, how often, how long and for how much. ‘Professionals’ are exhorted to ‘see’ people through a deficit model to ‘fix’ them, treating them as ‘things’ easily characterised and categorized into groups to do things to using one or two distinguishing criteria.

7. So what I recommend government to do is not only a genuine commitment to double decentralisation but an actual empowerment of to local authorities and communities in terms of budgets, policy, and support. In contrast to the apocalyptic damage done by austerity reforms and an the continuation of centralised power, public services and communities alike should be properly supported and resourced to become psychologically


\textsuperscript{7} Richardson (2008); McCabe & Phillimore (2017)
safe and appreciative environments. Community initiatives should not be treated as quick and easy savings measures but should be valued (morally and financially) for their contribution to sustaining community engagement and citizenship. Public services should not solely focus on providing services and solving problems for people but, more fundamentally, on creating conditions in which we can all create spaces for feeling good, growing ourselves, and reviving our sense of connection and community. This means they should first and foremost be concerned with the quality of relationships\(^8\): not assuming about or imposing on citizens but helping them to recognise their inner capacities to take charge of their lives and discover their own paths towards greater well-being. It requires those who claim expertise to at the very least to have humility, to accept the failures of the past, and to allow for the possibility that communities and client groups they think of as lesser and needy have more things to teach the world about how to live and work and be than they may imagine.

8. I hope the Select Committee will find these brief recommendations helpful. Please contact me if you would like any further information.

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