Mr Michal Siewniak – written evidence (CCE0201)

Polish national living in Welwyn Garden City (Hertfordshire)

Submission is in my personal capacity. All my responses are based mainly on my experience of working in the Community & Voluntary Sector as well as time in which I served as a local Councillor.

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?

I am an EU migrant from Poland, a local ‘community activist’. I was brought up under communism in Poland, and when I watched the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989 I never dreamt that Europe could change so much in such a relatively short period of time. Growing up in Poland in 1980’s was an interesting experience! From time to time, I have to “pinch” myself as I still can’t believe that until 1989 Poland as well as many other Eastern European countries were separated and we were not able to travel freely abroad, express openly our views, practise our religion or even watch foreign TV. I still remember queuing and trying to get basic items in order to bake a Christmas cake. We were also not allowed to learn English so I was taught Russian. Overall, our freedom in those days was hugely limited. This is why I feel that citizenship and civic engagement matter so much! My childhood has most definitely shaped me (which I only understood when I migrated to the UK) and helped me to understand how important it is to be actively part of the process.

I do feel that we in Britain take for granted our ‘freedoms’ also when it comes to voting and being aware of the political & democratic processes. This is also why I think this exercise, led by the Houses of Lords, is so important, practically today when we are experiencing an ‘identity crisis’.

We all have different experience when it comes to ‘identity’. I am from Poland, but I also identify myself as a Christian and ‘Global Citizen’. We are ‘wearers of multiply hats’ which in many ways reflect the society we live in; diverse and very multicultural.

2. Citizenship is partly about membership and belonging. Are there ways we could strengthen people’s identity as citizens, whether they are citizens by birth or naturalisation? Could citizenship ceremonies or events throughout the educational process play a role? Should pride in being or becoming British be encouraged?

I will try to respond to first part of the question. I feel that despite many success stories there are still gaps in relation to civic engagement. Understanding the benefits of democracy increases people’s confidence in terms of engaging with Government and Statutory Institutions. It increases their opportunities to improve job prospects, living conditions and health. Understanding democracy or what citizenship is & means build a sense of ownership over our
I do believe that it hugely helps in becoming proactive members of our communities and move away from feeling a victim of our own circumstances.

I have mentioned below many projects which I’ve been running to strengthen and promote the citizenship. Organising social outings (trip to the Houses of Parliament) could have wide range of benefits to our people. Many of us have seen the Houses of Parliament but have no physical sense of its history and current work. Visiting the Parliament would enable people to see “Parliament in action”. Meeting e.g. local MP will give participants an opportunity to ask relevant question and it will raise their aspirations.

Irrespective of cultural, social and economical barriers, encouraging people (maybe in particular from minority backgrounds) and develop a sense of inclusion and belonging. All these planned activities would help to build new networks, partnerships and most importantly they would put our residents at the heart of civic activism.

3. Civic engagement can be seen as both a responsibility and a right of citizenship. Beyond the existing legal framework, should citizens have additional formal rights and responsibilities? How do you see the relationship between the two? Should they have the force of law individually or be presented as reciprocal duties between citizen and state? How should they be monitored and/or enforced?

4. Do current laws encourage active political engagement? What are your views on changes to the franchise for national or local elections, including lowering the voting age? Should changes be made to the voting process or the voting registration process?

I don’t think that laws encourage active political engagement. I had a privilege to stand and win a seat in Welwyn Hatfield. I took huge pride and responsibility in representing my residents. Having said that, less than 35% voted when I was elected. People are disconnected, there is a lot of distrust and confusion.

It is now more than 12 since the EU referendum. I have lived in a number of European countries but I don’t remember seeing anything like the effect of the vote. It seems to have resulted in a complete lack of ability to have a mature debate on issues which affect us all, like globalization, migration and the refugee crisis. I truly feel that we’ve lost an ability to listen to each other. We are no longer able to build a space for a real dialogue. ‘Cheap journalism’, sensationalism do not help. Instead of projecting a balanced and matured debate, many of the newspapers try to divide us. This also discourages people and very often those who have no voice, became even more isolated and disadvantaged.

As a councillor, I have suggested to reduce the number of local elections (from each year to every other year) so protect public finances (in our area that cost is £100,000) but also to reduce the number of elected members. Some of my ideas didn’t go down very well and at times I felt discouraged and disheartened.
5. What should be the role of education in teaching and encouraging good citizenship? At what stages, from primary school through to university, should it be (a) available, and (b) compulsory? Should there be any exemptions? Should there be more emphasis on political participation, both inside and outside classes? How effective is current teaching? Do the curriculum and the qualifications that are currently offered need amending?

I think that schools and educational authorities play a vital part in promoting the ‘citizenship agenda’. I also think that a lot more needs to be done to encourage students from a very young age to learn how to debate and discuss many important issues. I have been involved in number of initiatives (see question 7). I have recently attended a meeting which took place in the Netherlands (June 2017). It was so refreshing and uplifting to see many people who believe in united world. It was a really important experience for me which once more demonstrated that we have a huge responsibility to bring unity where there is disunity or bring and understanding where there is hate and divisions. Maybe because we are in difficult, uncertain and turbulent times, we should try a bit harder to become, wherever we are and whatever we do, ‘Champions and Ambassadors’ for Unity. We all have a huge part to play in being builders of bridges not walls. We all should, in every single environment, to take every risk and use every opportunity to each person we encounter that there is so much more than unites us than divides us. I’ve tried always to do my part. As an employee of a local secondary school, I’ve set up a ‘debating club’ which brought together many students from a lot of different backgrounds. The school itself has a bad reputation however this small initiative enabled me to interact with students and discuss with them many topics which at that time were relevant (e.g. first talks of Scottish Independence Referendum etc.)

6. Do voluntary citizenship programmes such as the National Citizen Service do a good job of creating active citizens? Are they the right length? Should they be compulsory, and if so, when? Should they include a greater political element? Should they lead to a more public citizenship ceremony? Are they good value for money? What other routes exist for creating active citizens?

I think that community and voluntary sector has a hugely significant role to play. As a Service Manager for a local charity, I am in ‘position of influence’ to promote ‘citizenship and volunteering’. Only last weekend (2 September), I’ve run a really successful Volunteering Fair which brought together almost 20 local providers which were trying to recruit new volunteers. Each of these organisations is a real champion for their organisation and we all need to create an environment where volunteering (which is so strongly linked with the citizenship agenda) is recognised as a way to address some of the issues which your inquiry is trying to resolve. I am so proud to be working in such a vibrant ‘industry’! It is evolving, no doubt, we have to be smart. Since I started in the sector nine years ago it’s changed incredibly, and now with tightening of budgets and resources, we are adapting by learning new techniques, adopting new technologies and collaborating even better. We have to use every opportunity to make a difference and serve our communities. This means in fact – creating active citizens!
Very often charities are perceived as fluffy - this is wrong, each charity is essentially a business, a social business and we’re accountable to our funders so we have to show that we are making an impact - every single day.

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?

I have been involved in running number of initiatives which promote civic & community activism. The ‘Parliament Week’ is one of my favourite campaigns in the UK. The Parliament Week is a UK-wide programme of events and activities that inspire, engage and connect people with parliamentary democracy and processes.

I have helped to organise 8 trips to the Houses of Parliament (via the Houses of Parliament Tour Office and local MP’s) as well as many debates which encourage people to debate & learn e.g. “European Elections – why would I bother to vote” (Hoddesdon, March 2014), or “Youth and Democracy Debate” with a local secondary schools (Hatfield, November 2016).

The aim of each of these projects is to increase civic participation within residents. These projects, which are always delivered in partnership other agencies, help to address the issue of civic engagement and build a platform for "community activism". My main objective is always to enthuse people to get involved in democratic processes and intensify the dialogue between institutions and their citizens. I absolutely love them and I think that are critically important!

The next trip takes in November 2017.

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?

I watched the collapse of the Berlin Wall but I would have never dreamt that Europe and Poland will change so much in such a relatively short period of time.

I think that recent turbulent times have created a lot of problems and divisions. It is ‘us against them’. In a way, I don’t want Europe to be divided again. I went through that experience and I want us to work together to address the global issues. I don’t want us to take a step back. I would like us all to recognise and champion diversity and challenge prejudice, in any way and form.

From my point of view re - building trust, so damaged during this campaign, may take a lot of time. I hope it won’t affect building the cohesive society which I want to be part of.

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?
I’ve always tried to demonstrate that even though I come from a minority background, I can be a ‘net contributor’ (not only in financial terms). One of the things which I’ve learnt in Britain is not to stigmatise people. Only because you come from an ethnic background, it doesn’t necessarily mean that you are ‘hard to reach (or as I prefer to call these groups ‘EASY TO IGNORE!). Do we do enough to effectively interact with these, very often distinctive groups? It really doesn’t often have to be a sophisticated project. A smile or a nod or any other act of kindness can help to build bridges. And that is a lot of truth in saying that even though we have the greatest technology, there is so much which keeps us apart. We all need to take some responsibility and actions and demonstrate each and every single day, with new ‘pair of eyes’ and seek opportunities to create a platform for engagement and dialogue. Barriers and walls will fall down (as they did in 1989) and I hope that having a ‘BME or any other label’ won’t stop us from making this lovely planet a better place.

10. How do you see the relationship between citizenship and civic engagement on the one hand and social cohesion and integration on the other? What effect does the level of diversity in schools and workplaces have on integration in society as a whole? How can diversity and integration be increased concurrently?

In my case, the whole experience of living in the UK enabled me to improve my life chances and my language skills. It has also helped me to break down various barriers and recognise the importance of diversity. Settling in the UK, trying to be part of the local community, encouraged me to get to know other cultures and people of other faith groups. The whole experience has broadened my horizons and it made me more tolerant and rounded person.

I have been always proud to be from Poland but I also knew that I had to do my part to integrate. That didn’t of course losing my ‘Polish identity’. I’ve also tried to use other campaigns to bring the recent migrants and the local community together (e.g. Hatfield Polish Day in September 2009) or even ‘utilise’ national tragedies (e.g. plane crash with Polish MP’s) which enabled me to introduce Poland to many people who came along to our commemorating events.

Today, in a current political debate, I also think that the UK’s ability to demonstrate modern and forward thinking society where people from all sorts of walks of life are treated the same, have been affected.

11. How important are levels of English proficiency for first and second generation immigrants and what could be done to increase them, including through support for ESOL classes? Are there particular barriers faced by newcomers to Britain? Could the naturalisation process, including the citizenship test, be improved and if so, how?

This is very important issue. I don’t think that you can effectively become an active citizen when your language skills are not good enough. Unfortunately with poor ESOL provision, that is not always easy. I like the Danish model which almost enforces people to learn the language as soon as they arrive into the country. The initial emphasis is on the language and upskilling e.g.
refugees so that they become independent and ‘self – sufficient’ as soon as possible. A lot of resources are put in place which long term helps to break down barriers and smooth the integration process. Also, many residents are encourage to volunteer as quickly as possible in order to boost their job prospects.

12. Can you give examples of initiatives and role models that have helped promote a positive vision of British Citizenship within a tolerant and cohesive society?

*Lech Wałęsa*, was the leader of the Polish Solidarity Movement, a guy who helped to bring down communism in Poland. The reason I think he was an impressive guy is because he was just an electrician, and he didn’t have impressive qualifications, but he led a movement that helped free my country. He had faith, believed in something and was able to mobilise a nation.

More locally, a true British hero – *Jo Cox* who said that a lot more unites us than divides us. I love the ‘Great Together Campaign’ which was set up in her memory of Jo Cox. Local communities were invited to get together with their neighbours to share food and celebrate all that we hold in common. There were more than 100,000 events organized across the UK e.g. street party, shared barbecue or a picnic. What mattered was that people had fun and opportunity to bring communities closer together. Jo was a true ‘Ambassador for Citizenship’.