VSO – written evidence (CCE0211)

Introduction

VSO is an international development agency with over 55 years’ experience of addressing poverty and disadvantage through our unique approach of working through volunteers. By working closely over time with carefully selected partners – from grassroots organisations to government ministries – volunteers provide the right support to help ensure that local development efforts deliver the greatest impact and lasting change.

VSO is currently managing the delivery of the Government-funded International Citizen Service programme, a development programme which brings together young people aged 18-25 to volunteer alongside young people in developing countries. The ICS programme has three main interdependent objectives: development impact in communities, the personal development of individuals and the creation of active citizens, and since its inception in 2011, more than 15,000 young people from the UK have participated in the programme. Between 2005 and 2011 VSO also led the “Global Exchange” programme with the British Council, which was a cross cultural exchange between the UK and developing countries with active citizenship at its heart.

We welcome the opportunity to give written evidence to this inquiry.

Definition of citizenship and what we mean by active citizenship in the 21st century

1. Active citizenship is one of the three core objectives of the ICS programme. The theory of change for the programmes defines the following as core parts of active citizenship: inspiring other people to take action; questioning and debating the status quo; being involved in decision-making that affects our lives; and, influencing people in power (at community as well as regional, national and international levels).

2. VSO’s ‘Valuing Volunteering’ research, a participatory research project conducted over two years with the Institute of Development Studies and published in 2015 involving more than 3,700 people, found that volunteering is often the first step towards greater participation in their own development and active citizenship.

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?

3. From VSO’s Impact beyond volunteering study, which involved over 3,000 returned VSO volunteers across a broad range of ages and backgrounds from around the world, 77% of respondents reported changes in social action as a result of volunteering, with over 50% increasing the amount of volunteering that they did as a result of their volunteering experience.

4. There is a strong and growing evidence base to prove that national and international citizenship programmes such as the National Citizen Service and International Citizen Service (ICS) catalyse active citizenship amongst participants, which is sustained after the programmes are completed: though it is too soon to see long-term impacts of ICS on active citizenship outcomes, initial reports are that participating in the programmes do lead to longer term increases in active citizenship and social action beyond the initial “action at home” period (6 months after volunteers return). Over two thirds of returned ICS volunteers report that they have carried out voluntary work or completed social action since completing their placement, and 91% of returned UK and international volunteers saying that participating in the programme has affected their attitude towards social action in their community.

‘Before I would help out with things that were happening, whereas now I feel like I start things myself. I used to just turn up and participate but now I feel like I am the mobiliser, I feel like I can do things. I contacted my friend and we are going to do something on the SDGs.’ ICS returned volunteer, UK.

5. 62% of 191 participants who were interviewed 10 years after taking part in the World Youth and Global Exchange volunteering programmes run by VSO, were still taking part in some sort of community action or volunteering in their local community.

6. VSO understands volunteering to be formal as well as informal activity comprising the following key elements: it is done out of individuals’ free will, it is conducted outside the household for the benefit of the wider community; it is driven by motives other than financial gain; and, it is not a substitute for paid work. Mandatory

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3 Based on latest data available from ICS reporting data in September 2017
volunteering programmes, therefore would seem to go against one of the key core principles of volunteering- that it should be done out of the free will of the individual.

7. From VSO’s experience, participating in volunteering programmes frequently sparks an increase in political action; 55% of respondents to VSO’s Impact beyond volunteering study reported that they were more involved in community, social or political action post-placement. Many ICS volunteers engage with decision-makers both during their placements and as part of their “action at home” after returning, but often need additional support with this to build their confidence and guide them through the first stages of engaging effectively. Any government-supported schemes which place a greater emphasis on political engagement should recognise the barriers, real or imagined, which discourage disadvantaged young people in particular from engaging politically.

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

8. Any government-sponsored citizenship or civic engagement programme must consider how issues of social cohesion can be addressed as part of their efforts. All programmes should consider diversity and inclusion in their design, including the budget, to ensure they are able to effectively recruit and support diverse groups of people. If this is not considered at design stage, they will be unable to create an inclusive programme. The first of seven quality principles of the ICS programme is that “a diverse range of young people are given the opportunity to take part in the programme,” and this has been built into all aspects of the design and functioning of the programme. ICS is a leader in diversity for a programme of its nature, compared to other European and international youth volunteering schemes.

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?

9. By bringing together young people from different backgrounds- both within the UK cohort of volunteers, and through their experience of living and working in host communities in different countries with teams of international volunteers, there is a strong body of evidence to support intercultural cohesion resulting as a result of programmes like ICS and NCS. For example, see Ahmad’s account of living with a Christian host family in Zimbabwe as an ICS volunteer.

10. In addition, the Global Exchange and World Youth programmes run by VSO and the British Council, promoted cohesion by bringing together volunteers from different backgrounds. Often the deepest learnings were about UK society and cohesion;

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some former UK-based volunteers on the programme were more shocked by the poverty that they encountered on the UK aspect of their placements than on their overseas placements, and longitudinal research into the impacts of the programme highlighted some of the long-term effects on the participants:

“It has been almost ten years since I participated in the world youth scheme. It had a huge impact on my life and the course it took. It gave me the confidence and knowledge to become a detective in Hackney one of the most diverse boroughs in London. I honestly think that the insight the experience gave me into other cultures has made me a better police officer.” (UK Volunteer on exchange with Ghana)

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?

11. There should be greater recognition from the state of the value and impact that volunteering can bring, both to the professional and personal development of volunteers but also to the social capital and active citizenship. There can also be tangible economic benefits: a study from the Kings Fund exploring the contribution of volunteers to the NHS found that every pound invested in volunteering yielded 11 in return.5

12. In Germany, for example, youth volunteers are recognised as having a full-time legal status up until the age of 27. VSO sees the value in campaigns such as those led by Citiyear and other UK youth NGOs, which advocate for the recognition of full-time volunteers in the UK.

13. The current benefits system also acts as a barrier to people effectively participating in some volunteering programmes like International Citizen Service, in spite of the considerable evidence of the long-term potential of such programmes to have a positive impact on the professional development and future employability of participants. For example, individuals accessing Housing Benefit cannot take part in the programme as they will lose access to their entitlements while participating in the programme, and individuals living in live service areas for Universal credit are prevented from accessing Universal Credit for up to two years after returning from the programme due to residency requirements7. Such unintended policy


6 https://www.gov.uk/guidance/universal-credit-full-service-and-live-service

7 According to guidance received by the Universal credit helpline in September 2017
consequences such be addressed across government, with greater recognition from the Department of Work and Pensions on the value that citizenship and volunteering programmes can bring to both employability and social cohesion.

**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?**

14. Lessons learnt from implementing specific initiatives aimed at promoting diversity within youth volunteering programmes like ICS and other youth volunteering programmes across Europe illustrate are that there exist many barriers to participation in citizenship programmes- including cultural, economic and legal barriers. There is no “one size fits all” approach to addressing cohesion and approaches should be targeted according to the needs of the specific groups concerned.

15. As with efforts to genuinely reach those who are “left behind,” in developing countries, it should be recognised that there is a cost associated with addressing barriers to participation. Learnings from an EU funded “International Volunteering for all” project which looked at how to increase participation in the ICS programme from young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds was that often successful measures were cost and labour intensive (for example pre-assessment day workshops for applicants from lower socio-economic backgrounds) and therefore not sustainable to support participation at scale.

16. Finally, it is worth noting that the language of citizenship can be excluding for some groups- particularly refugee groups, and this should be factored into the branding and design of citizenship programmes.