Community Channel – written evidence (CCE0213)

About Community Channel:
Broadcasting on free-to-air television 24 hours a day into all UK homes, Community Channel changes lives and communities, inspires new ideas, new conversations, volunteering and community engagement.

Launched in 2000, Community Channel audiences continue to grow, with over 10 million unique viewers watching Community Channel content last year. Our BARB-rated TV audiences are over 9 million a year, based on unique individuals who watch for at least 3 minutes, and on average 20 minutes.

In July 2016 following a successful ‘community shares’ Crowdfunder campaign, Community Channel moved out of Media Trust ownership to become a charitable Community Benefit Society (CBS), owned by its new community shareholders, who range from individuals in communities across the UK through to charitable foundations and media companies.

The Channel broadcasts free-to-air across the UK, on Freeview, Sky, Virgin Media and Freesat, and most content is available online. Media and digital partners donate bandwidth, content and marketing support. The demographic we reach (35+, and lower demographic) are still major television consumers.

“Watching Community Channel has literally changed my life. It inspired me to leave the house, to join a local group as a volunteer, and then to get a job. Now I in turn mentor others. Thank you.”

Response to the call for evidence to the Committee:

1. The Community Channel response emphasises:
   • the importance of the media and digital sector in promoting, reinforcing, inspiring and defining citizenship and civic engagement in the 21st Century
   • the importance of supporting civil society, communities and citizens across the UK to communicate through a range of media, from mainstream media to social media, to participate in content creation directly and indirectly, to ‘have a voice’, and to be seen and heard by as wide an audience as possible.
   • The role of government and regulators in enabling, encouraging the media and digital sectors to play a lead role in bringing people together, at local and national levels, and promoting engaged citizenship through both face2face and digital activity.

2. Our experience of many decades working across the media and civil society, through Community Channel’s 17 years of existence, the 23 years of the Channel’s original
parent charity Media Trust, and the social action broadcasting work of Community Service Volunteers that inspired Media Trust’s founding, underpins our belief that civil society, civic engagement, positive approaches to citizenship and identity, all rely immensely on positive reflection across media, and that media, whether mainstream or digital, national or local is a key, if not THE key, force that can create either positive or negative social values.

3. It is vital not to take for granted the long-fought-for media ecology of the UK, with its old and new institutions. We urge the Committee to look seriously into the role and potential role of the media in encouraging and fostering citizenship and civic engagement as part of the report, and would be happy to provide further evidence in more depth. Below are just a few areas for consideration:

4. **Public Service Broadcasting and The Communications Act 2003**

4.1 Ofcom’s principal duty, as set out in section 3(1) of the Communications Act 2003, includes “furthering the interests of UK citizens in relation to communications matters.” (1) Ofcom should be more actively involved in future discussions around citizenship and civic engagement and how its regulation of communications can support this area. Pressure on Ofcom and government from public service broadcasters to reduce their social action and citizenship roles, particularly on the high impact free-to-air UK-wide broadcast platforms, has led to a significant reduction in the visibility of positive civic engagement. Television remains by far the most watched, and influential medium in the UK, including among young people, and should not be disregarded by the Committee (2). The creativity and resource that can be put into encouraging the UK to bake, thanks to ‘The Great British Bake Off’, could also be channelled into innovative content that inspires social action, volunteering and civic engagement.

4.2 Clearly the growing and widespread influence of digital, social and ‘user-generated’ content has enormous influence for both positive and negative behaviours.

4.3 We would like to encourage Ofcom and the newspaper (self-)regulators to play a more active role in countering and minimising negative portrayal of various communities across the UK, across mainstream media, and digital media, to minimise reinforcement of negative attitudes and behaviours, and to inform, and inspire, positive civic engagement, including formal and informal volunteering and social action. The ultimate extreme of ‘hate crime’, and related ‘fake news’ can be minimised through positive campaigns and engagement with the wider media and digital industry.

5. **The unique role of The Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS):**

5.1 DCMS has a unique potential role to bring together the media and digital sectors, the lottery distributors, and the wide range of civil society organisations, from the tiniest community groups through to the largest charities, and the growing movement of social enterprise, co-operatives and mutuals.
5.2 We would encourage the Office for Civil Society to collaborate more closely and proactively with the broadcast, media and digital teams in DCMS with a specific purpose of inspiring citizenship and civic engagement. The power of bringing together the different parts of DCMS

5.3 We encourage DCMS to lead the way in supporting civil society organisations to have the resources to use media and communications effectively, to give a voice to the people and communities they support and represent, and to inspire others across the UK to engage in civil society, to develop new forms of mutual, co-operative and voluntary activity, using both mainstream and digital media to share best practice, tell stories and inspire social action and civic engagement.

5.4 We would encourage the DCMS and other government departments to widen their support to older people, indeed those above 25! The growing 50+ population has much to offer, both in taking active roles themselves, but also in inspiring, mentoring and supporting others.

5.5 A sustainable future for content creation and distribution, focussed on social action, citizenship and civic engagement:
We encourage DCMS to ring-fence a significant amount of the ‘Contestable Fund’, the new pilot £60m fund within DCMS created with BBC funds, for content that is related to education, religion, and social action (3). We expect that this fund will become available in early-2018, following the recent DCMS consultation on its purpose (see also Community Channel response to the consultation). Part of the fund’s wider purpose is to create public service content for broadcast (free-to-air), into all UK homes, creating content that reflects issues, voices and communities not seen on mainstream public service platforms. There is great potential to develop a dedicated high impact content fund for social action, with opportunities for co-production and co-funding from media and digital partners. We are also encouraging major funders, particularly across the lottery distributors, to add match funding to this fund, for both broadcast and digital content that reflects our shared visions and ambitions to support, strengthen and empower people and communities across UK.

6. Cross-government collaboration: We would welcome a more formal, regular, structured and influential cross-departmental activity around the areas of citizenship and civic engagement, to minimise duplication of effort and resources, and increase sharing of best practice.

7. The potential impact of Community Channel
7.1 We would encourage support for and investment in the Community Channel, to continue to grow its mainstream TV audiences and its digital and social media audiences, alongside its partnerships with mainstream and digital media. It is a unique UK platform for content and voices related to civil society, civic engagement, volunteering and social action, faith and ethnicity, bringing together the inspirational diversity of the UK communities and UK citizens, of all ages and backgrounds.

7.2 Amy, just one of our millions of viewers, told us:

“Community Channel connects me with local communities, not only my own but others around the country and the world. It makes real human lives feel like they are connected to me, no matter how far, everyone counts, alone we are nothing, together we are something. In a world of disconnection, mainstream media control, and faceless internet groups, the Community Channel provides a connection to others and to community action, in a way no other media outlet has managed.”

Amy Rose Taylor, Community Channel viewer, aged 35-44.

Thank you for considering this response.

Caroline Diehl MBE,
Chairman & Founder, Community

References:
(2) http://www.thinkbox.tv/Research/Nickable-Charts/TV-viewing-and-audiences