Introduction

This submission sets out the response of the Migrants’ Rights Network (MRN) to the call for evidence from the Select Committee on Citizenship and Civic Engagement.

MRN is an innovative national NGO working and campaigning for the rights of all migrants. Our overall mission is to promote a rights-based approach to migration, which reflects international human rights standards, and involves migrants as full partners in the development and implementation of policies that affect them.

Q1. What does citizenship and civic engagement mean in the 21st century? Why does it matter, and how does it relate to questions of identity?

- In this day age, there is much focus on citizenship, identity and civic engagement in the UK, a possible outcome of the diversity of our society, and unwarranted fears of certain communities, and how they are perceived. But, there is little clarity on what it means to be civically engaged, or what identity newcomers to the UK, or those that settle here, or are born here are meant to adopt.

- With the recent reviews and reports on social cohesion and integration by Dame Louise Casey and the APPG on Social Integration, both reports have highlighted either ‘discrimination and disadvantage isolating communities from modern British society’, or in the manner in which migrants have been described as the ‘other’. The Casey review, although first admitting that 89% of people thought their community was cohesive and a similar proportion felt a sense of belonging to Britain, goes on to suggest a different position with negative views about the cultural and economic impact of migration and of migrants themselves.

- And, both reports have tended to concentrate their views on what expectations we should have of new and settled communities in their behaviours and interactions with other communities. There is usually scant requirements for Governments, local or national, to review whether there are any structural or systemic reasons for why certain communities may not feel able or willing to ‘fit’ into wider society.

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1 Migrants’ Rights Network, www.migrantsrights.org.uk
3 Integration Not Demonisation, August 2017, All-Party Parliamentary Group on Social Integration
Identity is a complex issue to approach, especially when individuals will have multiple identities based on where they live, were born, their religious and ethnic background, sexuality and gender. Identity is not necessarily one based on which nation state they belong to, or to which State they have citizenship of. What is clear is that when a State does affords someone their rights and entitlements, and they are free from discrimination, they are more likely to be able to identify with the positive values of the country. Offering them the same rights will offer more harmony in UK society, and offer a sense of positive identity because they are treated equitably.

Where those rights are not afforded, and individuals are pushed to deal with a system that does not seem them as equals, there is little value for them to civically engage, and ‘integrate’ into a society that is regularly pushing them to the fringes.

There needs to be recognition that certain individuals are not afforded an ability to be civically engaged due to their immigration status in society. The UK’s immigration system because of its complexity, and lengthy decision-making processes offers little reassurance to some migrants who end up stuck in a waiting game to secure their status in the UK. Many undocumented migrants, will try and remain invisible within society, and to the Government because of their precarious situations.

Q2. 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?

In a globalised society, there is little reason to encourage there to be pride in any one nation, and especially one where ‘Britishness’ or ‘being British’ is ill-defined. Currently, the rhetoric of ‘Britishness’ suggests assimilation, and taking the majority population’s views and culture, whilst eroding their own. Yet, history will probably show that Britain has thrived on having a diverse society: economically and socially.

We favour the approach used by MIPEX⁴, which involves outcomes measured in terms of a range of independent variables which, taken together, give a better indication of the direction and dynamic of belonging.

For communities and individuals to ‘belong’, there also needs to be consideration made to national immigration policies where the provisions of the immigration Acts – in particular those of the 2014 and 2016 Acts – need to be recovered to consider the extent to which they have contributed to the emergence of a ‘hostile

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⁴ Migrant Integration Policy Index, 2015, www.mipex.eu
environment’ directed against migrants and the communities they live in.

- There is little evidence that citizenship ceremonies, and events play a role in encouraging further civic engagement. Before there was any expansion or focus on this, we would highly recommend a review of how they are currently perceived by those who participate in them.

- In the Casey Review, oaths were mentioned as a recommended action for government, but these would only have been requested of migrants and newcomers. There are no requirements for the rest of society to take such ‘oaths’ and does nothing to show that integration is, and should be a two-way process.

- To increase the demands on migrants already living and working here – ignores the vital ongoing contributions made by migrants to the UK. Migrants shape at every level the dynamic development of British economy, society and culture, in both visible and invisible, but no less essential, ways. There is no evidence to suggest that they do not value the opportunity to live and work in the UK, or that they lack a sense of belonging and appreciation of the UK, despite the costs and barriers they already face.

Q3. 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?

- During MRN’s Listening Campaign in 2017, many migrants commented on the lack of political engagement because of their inability to vote in national elections and referendum campaigns. In Boston, one EU National said a key issue they felt their migrant community faced is an ‘inability to vote (except in local elections)’.

- Some migrants without voting rights become disinterested in political engagement because the current system does not give them access to the political process. In our Listening Campaign in 2017, when talking about Brexit, an asylum seeker from Oldham, said ‘I don’t know much about it because I can’t vote.’

- Some local Members of Parliament are also reluctant to represent and support non-British constituents, as they have no voting rights in General Elections, and therefore, are deemed to be of little value. This leaves some individuals without any recourse to challenge national government policies, and are unable to receive support from their political representative.
Q4. 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?

- The government’s integration policy is set out in a paper entitled “Creating the Conditions for Integration”5 which states the government will act only exceptionally and see integration as a purely local issue. Yet many local authorities, subject to large budget reductions by central government, do nothing. As integration policy is split between different central government departments, devolved administrations of Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, and local authorities, with no coordination between them, the result is often that nothing is done. In many cases, regional and local authorities may not have the data (apart from the census), guidance, resources, migrant forums or willingness to respond effectively to newcomers and reverse inequalities for long-settled communities.

- For examples, there continues to be local hostility among the voting population against migrants, and Gypsy, Roma and Travellers, and this means that elected councillors are reluctant to address issues, and engage with these communities.

- There must be more national activity to describe the positives of migration, and its importance for the UK’s history and future endeavours. This would then trickle down into local communities, and increase engagement.

Q5. 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?

Values should be mutually defined with settled and new communities. It is still unclear what constitute as ‘British values’. Values can be deemed to be abstract, subjective, and do not reflect new and emerging communities, or identities. Any values someone does hold would be formed by many different factors.

Rather than values as a commonly shared idea, it would be preferable to focus on rights, which are concrete, defined in law, and against which a society could be benchmarked more easily. All those who live in Britain should be encouraged to share and support these rights.

Increasing hurdles to citizenship is not likely to foster any ‘shared values’. Rather it would have the opposite effect - instead generating mistrust, insecurity and resentment among

non-citizens. There are already significant costs attached to achieving citizenship which can amount to over £1300 per application.

Q6. 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?

- In Boston, an EU National responding to MRN’s Listening Campaign said that the community there felt left behind due to a lack of investment in the town’s services and infrastructure: ‘In Boston people do not travel a lot, they live in small communities and everyone for them is a stranger and a potential enemy (including British people coming from other counties). Disseminating fear and paranoia among them is a very easy and effective strategy. The nature of the most work available here is low paid and does not require any qualifications, therefore the majority of migrant workers are from a low background and do not speak any languages. The government was too busy investing in big cities and big projects so this little town had no money to improve its old and ineffective infrastructure and in this time of austerity, cuts hit really hard the weakest points i.e health, education, roads, housing. [This] all combined created the monster of xenophobia.’

- While there are some steps to address the disparities between some communities through initiatives like the Race Disparity Audit, this in itself is not sufficient because it does not provide any context for those disparities existing, and will not provide any solutions for addressing these. Much of this will need to be taken up by local governments, who are already stretched and usually lack the resources, to fully comprehend, and resolve these barriers.

- We would recommend, any reviews of barriers to engagement, should include the following factors as have been well-set out in the Migrant Policy Integration Index (MIPEX) and can be summarised as:
  i) Anti-discrimination
  ii) Labour market mobility
  iii) Family reunion
  iv) Education
  v) Political Participation
  vi) Conditions for residence
  vii) Access to nationality

- Within this list access to nationality would remain the prerogative of UK government (though in a wider settlement of the national question there may be scope for determining access citizenship of England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales in accordance separate constitutional arrangements for each country).
Q7. 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?

- Diversity in schools and workplaces does not necessarily ensure integration or social cohesion will happen naturally, and will be taken forward outside of those settings. Comments on the matter from EU Nationals in Boston, responding to the Migrants’ Rights Network’s Listening Campaign were quoted as saying: ‘I go to high school where students are dividing themselves into different nationality groups and stick together most of the time’ and ‘most of racism is going on in schools.’ In response to this, an EU National from Boston suggested that there should be ‘greater integration for children. Schools need to understand cultural differences.’

Q8. 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?

- English proficiency is a useful tool for individuals to be able to participate in all fabrics of society. However, it should not be viewed as the only means by which migrants can be seen to be a part of society. Communities, and

- Where ESOL has been available, the barriers to accessing ESOL include:
  - The cost of ESOL classes
  - No funding for asylum seekers to access ESOL classes during their first six months in the UK. An asylum seeker from Wolverhampton, responding to MRN’s Listening Campaign, said: ‘I am an asylum seeker and I should be allowed to learn English; I should not have to wait for 6 months because it is not fair.’
  - ESOL classes being taught by native English speakers; for people arriving in the UK with little to no knowledge of the English language. Classes when taught by someone who also speaks the non-English language of the students can be helpful during the initial classes. An EU National living in Boston, responding to MRN’s Listening Campaign said: ‘There should be free ESOL courses with bilingual professional teachers who could teach English, translate phrases, words, teach English grammar in migrant’s native language. I could not understand the English teachers, therefore I do not go to Boston College or other places with native teachers who cannot explain me basic grammar and translate words in my native language.’ Another respondent seconded this, saying that ESOL classes should be ‘held by the teacher speaking the learners’ first language.’

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- In some locations, the distance of travel to and from the nearest ESOL classes mean needing to take transport, which is an expense that some students cannot afford.
- ESOL classes are not always held during times of day that are accessible to students; there is not always enough choice of day/evening classes available.

- All these comments suggest the quality of ESOL classes, and their availability need to be reviewed with the individuals that participate in those classes.

We would encourage the committee to consider the following additional information, which offers views from migrant communities perspectives from across four areas in the UK: Migrants’ Perspectives on Brexit & UK Immigration Policies, August 2017, [https://migrantsrights.org.uk/blog/2017/08/07/migrants-perspectives-brexit-uk-immigration-policies-2/](https://migrantsrights.org.uk/blog/2017/08/07/migrants-perspectives-brexit-uk-immigration-policies-2/)