University of Hertfordshire – written evidence (CCE0248)

Introduction

Academic and professional staff at the University of Hertfordshire have grouped together to submit the evidence below. A list of contributors is included at the end of this document.

The evidence reflects opinions formed through academic research and personal experience. Their expertise covers a range of issues, including research into well-being and housing, experience working in education in citizenship engagement and experience as an elected official. They also have personal experience of engaging in local government and the National Citizen Service. All contributors to this evidence share a belief in the importance of civic engagement.

The range of their expertise demonstrates the wide variety of different circumstances that can impact on active citizenship. If the Committee would like more information on any aspect of the evidence below, we will be happy to provide more detail.

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?

For members of the University involved in civic activities outside of their work, citizenship and civic engagement reflected being engaged in society, whether that was acted through your work, your personal life or in wider civic activities such as voting, volunteering or campaigning. It was felt to reflect connection and active engagement.

For researchers whose work is focused on communities, there was concern that the move to frame people as ‘consumers’ in their engagement with public services has led to the concept of the citizen has been largely expunged from policy discourse. The danger of this is in undermining the role of the active citizen, which necessitates involvement in – or the capacity to be involved in – the framing of public policy and services, and not just feeding back, as a ‘customer’, on the quality of goods/services on offer by administrators on behalf of politicians. So citizenship does matter, if people are to be empowered to influence public life, and identity matters also, as the consumer-citizen dilemma highlights.

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?

There was a general agreement among members of the University that citizenship ceremonies can be a positive marker of belonging. This is reinforced by the research that has been carried out by one group of academics at the University on how experiences can help create memories which have the potential to transform relationships. Their studies, suggesting that social events and festivals have a positive impact on individuals and
relations with others, would seem to indicate that we should not underestimate the
importance of ceremonies and events for the people involved if we are concerned with their
positive recollections.

There was less universal agreement on encouraging pride in being or becoming British. It
was recognised that there are many different aspects to being British that might make an
individual proud of their citizenship. For some people this may be the monarchy, for others
the achievements of sportspeople, the reactions of ordinary people to national events, or
public institutions such as the NHS or BBC. But that one of the freedoms of British
citizenship is that there is no requirement or expectation to be ‘proud’ of your nationality,
and that this freedom is also something to value and consider carefully when we look to
encourage national identity.

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?

There was no broad agreement on this questions, but members of the University did
consider if there was a place for civic responsibility to be developed among young people in
different ways, through education and encouraging volunteering.

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?

While there was disagreement on some aspects of this question, such as whether to lower
the voting age, there was strong agreement that measures should be introduced to make
voting easier, whether this was technological developments towards e-voting, making it
easier to turn up and vote at any polling station, or moving election days to the weekend.
There was also some support for making voting compulsory, as long as there is a ‘none of
the above’ option.

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?

Given that these respondents all work in a university, it should not come as a surprise that
they all regard education as vital to encouraging citizenship, although there are differences
of opinion as to how ‘formal’ this education needs to be. There was discomfort with the idea
of ‘good’ citizenship, with ‘active’ being seen as a term that better expresses the desire for engagement, without pre-judging what form that engagement should take.

A researcher with experience of working with inner-city communities in a civic engagement context suggests that, in terms of citizenship education, too much attention is paid to formal schooling, teaching and learning. Research suggests that learning from experience as an active citizen, through non-formal, community-centred, collective processes of critical reflection on manifestations of active citizenship, are key to learning the skills required to be an effectively active citizen. However, opportunities for this type of learning are limited, as community activists (e.g. parent governors, tenant association representatives, patient consultative committee members) are often denied the time, space and resources to engage in such reflection.

Within formal education, it was pointed out that the principles of inclusivity and equality needed to be established within the practice of education (and other public institutions). If citizens are valued and supported in their education then they are more likely to succeed, making them more likely to become active citizens. For example, there are indications, including poor levels of literacy and numeracy, that certain learners are not being supported or equipped to develop fully and productively. If a society wishes to benefit from engaged citizens, then it needs to engage with them first.

With regards to civic education within school, it was felt that this should focus more on society than politics, giving young people the information they need to become engaged and be heard.

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?

Those members of the University who have had interactions with the National Citizen Service are very positive about it. The young people who have taken part have grown in confidence, independence, acceptance and understanding and participants have gone on to remain active citizens, engaging in volunteering. But there were frustrations that there is no continuation within the programme, such as former participants who wanted to return and mentor or support current participants but found themselves unable to do so. They wanted to be able to capture the intense four-week programme into something ongoing, and were frustrated by the organisation.

As the research previously mentioned indicates, memory creation can be positive for the well-being of individuals. A NCS citizenship ceremony, that acted as a rite of passage, could be a powerful and positive signal of belonging that stays with people.
However, it is important to note that formal programmes are not the only, or even the most effective forums for encouraging citizenship. Research suggests that citizenship, if it is learnt at all, is learnt in later life, informally, and through experience. For this reason, we need to be looking at how we can capitalise on the experiences of active citizens to inform and educate others (including younger people) on the realities of active citizenship/civic engagement. Work has previously been carried out by a researcher on residents groups working with schools to provide real-life case studies of citizenship in action. In translating their activities into the language and discourse of the Citizenship curriculum, the resident representatives began to see themselves, and talk about themselves, in terms of active citizens.

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?

Members of staff who hold elected office in local government reflected that people can be excluded from attending formal civic events as they often fall during “office hours” which has in part contributed to the stereotype of civic leaders being of retirement age. Employers can help by allowing flexible working where possible but local governments need to be taking the lead on this by being mindful of the timing of their meetings. This applies not just to being a councillor on a committee, but also to any members of the public who are interested in the content of the meeting or indeed wish to make a representation in person.

Reflecting on technological changes within society, there was concern that people need to be better educated on the use of their data to ensure that trust between individuals and government is maintained. Ongoing education about what ‘consent’ means, how to exercise it, and on the rights and responsibilities of individuals and organisations will be critical to developing and maintaining relationships of trust between the individual as citizen and those collecting data, including government and government sponsored agencies. As a matter of course, individuals and communities should be seen as co-constructing and collaborating in designing the evolving digital society in which we increasingly live and act as citizens.

Researchers within the University wanted to emphasise that encouraging civic engagement cannot be undertaken lightly. Their research suggests that facilitating the engagement of disenfranchised or marginalised groups takes active, sustained and skilled communication, it cannot be enough to talk at people and tell them what is available. Instead, groups need to be brought into a conversation around society and their involvement in it.

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?
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?**

Our researchers who looked at the positive impact of events to create memories, have also carried out research with older people aiming to tackle social isolation. When working with this group, they found that one of the key problems was tackling issues around public transport in rural areas. While keen to engage with events in their communities, this group felt isolated and that their independence was compromised by the lack of transport, which left them dependent on others to be able to take part in events.

One researcher at the University has highlighted the extent to which tenants in social housing are left behind, ignored, marginalised, stigmatised, under-valued. They highlight that ahead of the tragedy at Grenfell Tower the tenants, functioning as active citizens, had warned local policymakers and service providers of the very real danger of catastrophic fire. Their warning was ignored: they were left behind, in spite of their attempts at being active citizens. The emphasis placed on the housing and property market in the UK, and the pivotal role of homeownership in political campaigning, reinforces the marginalisation of tenants in social housing. For tenants to be empowered as citizens, the relationships between property/home ownership, social inequality, social values, and political interests will need to be examined.

Those within the University who had experience as representatives within local government highlighted that the use of the term ‘left behind’ was emotive and not always helpful, often linked to communities reaching for reasons why they had not received services or opportunities that they felt others were able to access. Using the term reinforces and increases the sense of separation between groups, not a good first step towards bringing them together.

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 approaching this question, members of the University were keen to reflect on how to allow individuals there own views while also approaching a sense of community. There was reflection on the suggestion by philosopher John Rawls of “overlapping consensus’, which involves citizens not having to put their personal identity on the back burner but finding ways of developing a broad consensus that draws upon their identity.

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?

There was consensus among members that some English language proficiency was important to be able to navigate and interact in society. But that this could only be expected if ESOL classes are well-funded and widely available.

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?

Members of the University reached for a number of role models from Malala to sports teams (such as the 100m relay team who have Nigerian, Jamaican, Trinidanian and Iranian/Moroccan heritage). It was also highlighted that there are active cross-community projects within Northern Ireland which aim to integrate communities and promote cohesion.

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