Mr James Cathcart – written evidence (CCE0253)

1/ Introduction: I am currently on an ‘adult gap’ year from F/T working to focus on research, writing and campaigning on youth policy, participation and citizenship. My last job was as a CEO of the British Youth Council. I started as a FT Volunteer 35 years ago and worked with children and young people ever since as a youth worker, juvenile justice worker, social worker, trainer, writer, manager, mentor, trustee and CEO. This submission is based on that experience and focuses on youth.

2/ Whilst at the British Youth Council until 2016, I led several initiatives, across a range of settings, to promote youth citizenship and civic engagement. In partnership with Government, Cabinet Office Democratic Engagement Team, The Department for Education, Office for Civil Society; Local Government and Devolved administrations across the UK, the Electoral Commission and others. I understand that the British Youth Council will also be submitting evidence so I would defer to them as the authoritative source for any good practice examples I highlight, for example:

   a. The successful work of the UK Youth Parliament in growing its reach, diversity and representativeness beyond the usual suspects and activists. It has been largely unreported but its building a foundation across the UK communities in partnership with schools, local Government and Parliaments, including devolved administrations.

   b. Local Youth Councils network (ongoing partnership with local authorities) which supplement School Youth Councils, and using a combination of local elections and reserved seats, represent a cross section of the community to inform and influence local government decision making. These, and young Mayors Network, work in together with the Youth Parliament and are coordinated by the British Youth Council.

   c. The British Youth Council Youth Select Committees (ongoing partnership with Parliament/Education and Engagement service and Clerks) to produce a series of reports based on a popular vote of UK teenagers. Recent topics include Mental Health, Addressing Racism and Religious Discrimination. Relevant to this Committee are their report on the feasibility of Votes 16 and inclusion of citizenship in a new Curriculum for Life.

   d. The Make Your Mark ballot of those aged 12-18 across the UK. This has grown from a few thousand in 2009 to nearly a million individual votes cast in 2016. The priority topics are debated in the House of Commons by the Youth Parliament. This generation of young people has been engaged in growing numbers of the last seven years, and growing into the adult electorate of 18-24. The numbers are all recorded per local authority, by turnout and by issue – an excellent data source.

3/ Also attached as Appendix: Copy of an Open letter from me, with recommendations, sent to the Prime Minister on youth engagement reforms: ‘Democracy is an ongoing dialogue
with its citizens not just at elections. The health of a nation is measure by the value it places on engaged with its youth’.

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?

1.1 The formal definition of citizenship, or legal status with rights and responsibilities, is a contract between the state and the individual. In the 21st century, its an imperfect model, challenged by globalisation, localism, technology, and individualism. We are going through a period of transition to determine a new contract, post Brexit in a new world.

1.2 ‘Civic engagement’ is the degree to which the individual chooses to freely ‘engage’ voluntarily with the community and nation. It can be incentivised, nurtured and indeed valued by the state. In the 21st century it has to adapt to the concept of global citizenship. It has the potential to mitigate war, poverty and the ill-effects of climate change, as well as give a moral compass to deal with new technological threats like robotics. We can’t direct the wind of 21st century change, but we can trim the sails. Civic engagement can not only, inform and influence decision makers, but will increasingly mobilise direct action. It matters if we are to steer in one direction and not to waste resources and time.

1.3 Civic engagement is the sum of the decisions, choices and actions we take to improve the community and world in which we live, for ourselves, families and fellow citizens. We are not just individuals striving to survive, but communities sharing to thrive. This may be self-evident to thinkers, visionaries and those responsible for good government, but it is the concern of us all, and in particular, the young who will inherit the consequences, This generation are better placed than previous generations, to adapt, innovate and partner up across nations and generations.

Why is it important now?

1.6 The world is changing fast, with the digital revolution fast-tracking communication, education and self-empowerment. Information. One no longer needs permission, but can increasingly ‘self-empower’ and connect with like minded individuals to mobilise, using the internet. This will become more evident with more youth people taking the initiative and challenging the status quo. So it is imperative that things that unite us in nationhood are nurtured, and harnessed for the common good, so that the potential of invention becomes the servant of the citizen, not the enslaver of it. The challenge is not to try and control these new powers, but embrace them, and underpin them with sound incentives and encouragement of people to ‘want’ to be active citizens and stakeholders for the benefit of all. Young people want to participate and partner now, and its important the older generation responds quickly and ‘talks to them not about them’.

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?

2.1 Pride should be encouraged. In a post-Brexit UK this is not clear for citizens and immigrants alike. However, I predict after a period of angst and reflection we will discover a new Britain to be proud of, rather than trying to reinvent the past. To this end we should encourage and be encouraged, inspire and being inspired by young leaders to show the way.

2.2 Recommend exploring:

1. Declaration of citizenship at birth, as part of the Birth Certificate
2. Education emphasises the rights and benefits of citizenship, the right to vote, to represent, and be of service. Young people should have this underlined with the power to vote at 16.
3. Encourage youth citizenship
4. Give more honours (BEMs) to young leaders/role models
5. Appoint (or have reserved temporary elected seats) for young people under 30 in the House of Lords. This could be all ages and called Lord Senators, or Citizen Senators.

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?

3.1 We need a new Magna Carta for the 21st Century, a Bill of Rights, which articulate existing and new reciprocal rights and responsibilities in a post Brexit Britain, protected with the scrutiny and amended rights determined by the Supreme court. I hope this Committee’s report makes a significant step towards that outcome. Recommend bold progressive measures.

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?

4.1 We need electoral reform. We need a step-change in practice and behaviour in politics to deliver good modern and efficient Government. These needs to starting with education of the future electorate, on the basics of democracy and how to vote. My target is youth because, time, this will embed through the all the generations.

4.2 Every young citizen should be auto-enrolled on the register in time to vote, rather like the issuing of a National Insurance number. It should be an automatic entitlement rather a right than you can opt into.

4.3 We should introduce votes at 16 alongside a curriculum of citizenship education that explains the mechanics of democracy and voting, monitored by Ofsted and the Electoral
Commission, and reported to Parliament. This could draw on the excellent model of good practice of the Parliament Education and Outreach service materials and curriculum.

4.2 I also refer to the positive conclusions and recommendations of Youth-led Youth Select Committee report into the feasibility of Votes at 16, http://www.parliament.uk/education-resources/Youth-Select-Committee/BYC%202014%20Report(WEB)FINAL.pdf and the experience of lowering the voting age in Scotland. Public opinion had been against this change before the reform was introduced in Scotland. It was alongside a year of preparation through school curriculums. The Electoral Commission follow up report and surveys of the public opinion afterwards showed a clear majority in all age groups in favour of continuing the right to vote. Its worth noting that in Scotland the charity YoungScot works to engage ‘all’ young people as citizens where every young person automatically receives a ‘Youth-Card’ strengthening their identity and opportunities.

4.3 I also commend the Youth Select Committee inquiry and report called for a new Curriculum for Life in schools, http://www.byc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Youth-Select-Committee-A-Curriculum-for-Life-Report.pdf (to include a range of practical and social subjects as well as academic).

4.4 I would recommend the establishment of a All party Youth & Citizenship Commission (similar to one set up in 2008/09 led by Professor Tongue, Liverpool University, to explore these ideas.

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?

5.1 There should be mandatory, audited and consistent citizenship education (refer to my previous answer and sources – Votes at 16 and Curriculum for Life reports by the Youth Select Committee) and growth of the Make Your Mark ballot and UK Youth Parliament elections in schools. Citizenship in the educational context includes democracy, but also about the causes, campaigns and charities and how to support them. Through schools, more could be done to incentivise youthled ownership of social action through participation school councils, youth councils and grant giving using the Youthbank model. The National Citizen Service have borrowed similar ideas from existing social action initiatives like the Prince’s Trust, but I would welcome more investment in aligning NCS with school and FE provision and other learning environments.

5.2 Other evidence already shared with the Committee (6th Sept) from the Department of Education, referred to the encouragement of ‘mock elections’. However, this overlooks the real elections of young representatives to school councils, local councils (shadowing local authorities) and UK Youth Parliament as well as the Make Your Mark ballot conducted largely through schools which reached nearly a million pupils in 2016. There are also similar initiatives in the nations – the devolved Scottish Youth Parliament and plans to develop a
new Youth Parliament for Wales in 2017. Northern Ireland did have cross community direct elections through schools, until the programme was paused in 2016. It was commended as good practice during the visit to London by the President Higgins, of Ireland, when he addressed young Members of the Youth Parliament in 2014.

5.3 Further and Higher Education should include opportunities to study and prepare for community and citizenship leadership, and public service. There has been a emphasis on buzzword education – such as ‘resilience’ and ‘character building’. These are ideas that I expect to already be part of the holistic learning experience already. Instead we should target resources to qualifications that include the skills and practice of civic engagement and public service engagement. We stress Health and Well-Being, Media Studies, Communication – why not civic studies, where pupils learn about local and national decision making, resources, priorities, choices, expertise, research, planning, manifestos, elections, voting, governance, scrutiny, accountability...

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?

6.1 In my previous role as a strategic partner of the Cabinet Office, when the idea of NCS was first promoted, I inputted into development of this initiative, and I’ve monitored its progress ever since, most recently the committee stages of the NCS Bill and the Audit Commission report. I have met those involved including several Ministers for Civil Society, the CEO, young graduates and attended local teams. I am currently campaigning for the appointment of young trustees to the new Board.

6.2 There is plenty of existing evaluation of the impact of the NCS programme and on those taking part. In my view the programme has an impact on most of those it reaches, particularly on their personal, and social development in a team setting. It creates active citizens for a while (a few weeks) but we need further longitudinal studies to determine if it creates long-term active citizens for the investment it gets. It’s a short four-week programme, much of which is about team building and planning and the time for citizenship input and community service is therefore less.

6.3 They are more of a taster programme than an ongoing creator and supporter of active citizens. That would require more service over a longer period (6 months to a year). The current model is more of a personal development programme, located in the community, which introduces young people to citizenship – not embedding it. As such it has potential but is relatively expensive and impractical to roll out. I would favour the investment being all year round, with greater integration into the school curriculum, the age range extended from 14-18, (and indeed a programme to include adults/retired!) and renaming it the National Youth Service, and a follow up version for Gap Year Students or post college or FT school at 19 – 20, as the National Citizen Service with more of a combination of skills, community work and public service – leading to a qualification.
6.4 It has the potential to follow up sessions on voter registration, democracy, and how to vote, with auto-voter registration.

6.5 NCS’s evaluation reports acknowledge of the talent and potential of 16 and 17 year olds add weight to the case for lowering the voting age to 16. There is an opportunity for the current Government to introduce this, using the National Citizen Service to support it. Young people are earning their right to vote. But the main vehicle for citizenship should be schools and colleges and not holidays. These should be left for value added activities (sport music and arts) and family time.

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?

7.1 As you may have surmised from previous answers I would advocate the great investment, profile and encouragement of youth participation at all walks of civic life, in particular through democratic engagement and youthled participation. There is an existing structure to do this – the British Youth Council and its partnerships across the UK, with Local Government, schools, youth services, Government Departments, drawing on its experience of successful engagement and inclusive projects. However it is a charity and could do with some investment on the scale of the National Citizen Service.

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?

Shared values: truth, equality, inclusions, diversity, freedom of speech/free press, the rule of law, checks and balances, scrutiny, representative democracy, recognition and reward.

Threats: Ignorance, spin, the internet, greed, abuse of power, the divisive political model of Government, and the current exit process of the European Union.

Answers – education, Bill of Rights, Magna Carta, Constitution, the internet, innovation and technology, youth empowerment and leadership. Recognition. Investment.

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?

Politicians need to talk to people not about them. Democracy is a dialogue not just an election, it needs to be nurtured between elections, starting in schools, continuing in communities, empowered in Board rooms.

Q 10 and 11 – No comment.

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?
Appendix

Extract of letter sent to the Prime Minister 9th June 2017 by James Cathcart

“I believe that young people deserve an ongoing commitment from Government and Opposition after this election, to engage them in the democratic process.

Democracy is a dialogue between elections, not just a vote in them. There is a new opportunity, starting today, for more meaningful youth participation in that conversation. The 18-24 youth vote has earned the right to inform, influence and scrutinise, but we need new ways to respond to, and embed that. We should also be starting the process now, of educating, preparing and listening to the next generation, aged 13 -17, who will vote in the next General Election in 2022.

I’d therefore ask that, during this time of reflection, you take forward the following youth-inspired agenda, with input from young people and their leaders.

1. A new **Youth Minister** role at Cabinet level.
2. A new **Department for Youth Affairs**, and matching Select Committee.
3. Strengthened **duties to consult young people** on local/national Government policy and decision-making.
4. A new independent **Youth Commissioner** championing youth participation (up to age 25) across society in general.
5. A **Youth Citizenship Commission** to review and champion the following by 2022
   a. **Auto-enrolment** of all young voters through schools, as the entitlement of every pupil.
   b. A **democracy curriculum**, to prepare future voters aged13-17
   c. **Votes at 16** to ensure equal voting rights UK
   d. **New powers and seats** in decision-making committees for local youth councils and devolved national youth parliaments.

An increased #youthvote is a new opportunity for democracy. Please take it, and nurture it with an ongoing commitment to listen and engage”