

## Written evidence from Professor Matthew Flinders, University of Sheffield – CCE0001

1. I am delighted that the Liaison Committee has decided to undertake a follow-up inquiry in relation to the April 2018 report by the Select Committee on Citizenship and Civic Engagement – *The Ties that Bind: Citizenship and Civic Engagement in the Twenty-First Century* (HL118, 2017-2019). I was the special adviser to the Select Committee on Citizenship and Civic Engagement from June 2017 through to the publication of its final report. Since then I have continued to explore the changing nature of citizenship and civic engagement through my research, writing and engagement activities, within and beyond the United Kingdom. In this submission I would like to make three points:
  - i. The insights and arguments presented by the Select Committee on Citizenship and Civic Engagement are of **greater relevance today** than when they were first made.
  - ii. This been **recognised by the government** and it is possible to identify fragments of the 'Ties that Bind' report in recent ministerial speeches and commitments.
  - iii. Addressing the 'citizenship opportunity' demands **an integrated and community-led approach** to policy making
  
2. The main finding of *The Ties that Bind* report was that a major 'citizenship challenge' existed. This was reflected in high levels of social polarisation, falling levels of trust in politics, rising levels of social frustration and anxiety, and a general sense of social fragmentation and disconnectedness. The committee explored the 'everyday' impacts of this situation through a number of trips to different parts of the United Kingdom, and also through engagement activities with young people. This face-to-face engagement brought the focus of the inquiry to life. It revealed how feeling connected, respected and encouraged to play a role in your community allowed individuals to build flourishing communities in which people pulled together rather than apart. It also revealed how a range of policy areas (housing, health, regeneration, policing, etc.) were all to a large extent dependent on the existence of low-cost high-trust relationships with local communities.

3. Since 2018 the twin challenges of 'getting Brexit done' and coping with the global Covid-19 pandemic have each in their own ways focused attention on issues relating to citizenship and civic participation. Brexit has left many communities deeply divided, while also unleashing new territorial tensions within the United Kingdom. And although the Covid challenge led to a major upsurge in volunteering it also revealed the existence of entrenched structural inequalities in society in the starkest of terms. The financial costs of tackling Covid are also likely to fall upon today's younger generation in ways that limit their life chances and increase inter-generational tensions. **As such, the insights and arguments presented by the Select Committee on Citizenship and Civic Engagement are of greater relevance today than when they were first made.**
  
4. The central point being made is that although the June 2018 response by the government (Cm 9629) to the 'ties that bind' report was possibly less supportive of the agenda being presented than might have been hoped it is equally possible to suggest that a new 'window of opportunity' may have opened. **This is an opportunity that the government appears to have recognised.** In June 2021 it published a 'Declaration on Government Reform'<sup>1</sup> which signalled a shift in government thinking towards many of the core issues, themes and ideas that had raised by the Select Committee on Citizenship and Civic Engagement. In a speech that accompanied the launch of the declaration the then Minister for the Cabinet Office and Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, Michael Gove, underlined that it was 'precisely because the Covid crisis revealed weaknesses in our government and society' that a bold new reform agenda was necessary. 'We have a mission to level-up our country; to make opportunity more equal. We have to ensure overlooked families and undervalued communities see material change in their lives...It also means restoring and enhancing local and civic pride by helping communities to shape their areas more effectively, **and strengthening the ties that bind us across the whole United Kingdom**' .
  
5. This raises an important point. One of the central findings of a significant amount of research in the fields of political science and public policy is that good ideas or prescriptions for reform are rarely on their own enough to drive positive social change. What's

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<sup>1</sup>[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/993902/FINAL\\_Declaration\\_on\\_Government\\_Reform.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/993902/FINAL_Declaration_on_Government_Reform.pdf)

generally needed is a constellation of three factors: broad social acknowledgement that a challenge or problem exists and needs to be addressed, a commitment by the government of the day to tackle the challenge and finally the existence of an evidence-based and coherent reform agenda. These are often framed in terms of the 'problem', 'political' and 'policy' streams but the reason for highlighting this point is simply to emphasise how the socio-political context has changed since 2018. Social fragmentation, polarisation and the need to focus on 'the ties that bind' are now on the agenda in ways that they simply were not back in 2018.

6. This brings me to a third and final point about the need for **an integrated and community-led approach** to policy making. The main finding and argument of the 'ties that bind' report concerned the lack of co-ordinated policy-making and the benefits of thinking in terms of 'the civic journey'. The civic journey is a very simple idea. It reflects the ways in which individuals develop, mature and change as they move through life, but it does so with a focus on the person's position, role and relationship(s) with their wider community. It also includes a focus on the role of the public sphere, in general, and the state, in particular, in terms of nurturing and supporting what might be termed 'the civic infrastructure' (e.g. citizenship education, volunteering opportunities, political participation, support in older life, etc.) within which individuals live and negotiate the challenges of everyday life. The civic journey focuses attention on supporting, inspiring and empowering young people and local communities. It nurtures a fresh and ambitious approach to gaining skills, accessing opportunities and promoting community engagement. It seeks to ensure that national policy frameworks and public spending are not only better integrated and better spent but also aligned with the stated needs of young people and local communities. The benefits of this approach are:

It seeks to address fragmentation in relation to both social change and policy-making in order to facilitate joined-up thinking and connectivity between different age groups, opportunities and forms of engagement.

It reveals the existence of gaps or where provision is particularly threadbare, and encourages working with young people to co-design a more attractive and skills-focused 'civic offer'.

It highlights the existence of key transition points and helps underline the notion of civic momentum, as such it seeks to increase efficiency, catalyse innovation and avoid duplication.

It provides a tool that can be used by individuals, groups and communities to explain how they think the civic journey needs to be reimagined, and underlines the role of the state in terms of facilitation.

It raises questions about 'exit', 'entry' and 're-entry' to the civic journey and the integration of new communities in ways which casts a fresh solution-orientated light on perennial social challenges.

It adopts an evidence-based design-led approach that works *with* young people and local communities to develop place-based or age-related policies, interventions or opportunities.

It promotes a systemic approach to thinking about the synergies and positive spill-overs between specific policies or initiatives in order to ensure that the whole adds up to far more than just the sum of its parts.

It offers a positive vision of a confident country in which all young people are empowered and supported to prosper as both individuals and active citizens.

It complements contemporary governmental priorities regarding community-powered innovation, place-based policymaking, equality of opportunity and 'levelling-up' regional economic disparities.

7. It was this focus on ambition, connectivity and *systemic* change which the Select Committee on Citizenship and Civic Engagement sought to promote. The focus on 'the civic journey' was presented as both a connective thread for engaging with different communities in a conversation about shared aspirations and beliefs; and for 'joining-up' government when it comes to the design and implementation of policies. The fact that the government's Safe and Integrated Communities Inter-Ministerial Group has not met since 2019 underlines the need for bold, renewed and refreshed thinking.
8. It is possible that the forthcoming white paper on 'levelling-up' might offer some fresh thinking *vis-à-vis* civic participation and community engagement. There is certainly an increasing acceptance that successful policies are generally developed *with* – rather than imposed *upon* – local communities. The July 2021 proposals from the Commission on Smart Government – *Strategic, Capable, Innovative, Accountable: Four Steps to Smarter Government*<sup>2</sup> – speak to this agenda; as do the findings of a recent

Institute for Community Studies project - *Why Don't They Ask Us? The Role of Communities in Levelling-Up*<sup>3</sup>. New innovations are being launched – such as the UK Year of Service<sup>4</sup> – older attempts to level the land when it comes to social investment are beginning to bear fruit– such as Big Local Project<sup>5</sup> – and new forms of inter-organisational collaboration are emerging – such as the ‘Shaping the Future of Volunteering’<sup>6</sup> campaign that was launched by 24 of the UK’s leading charities in 2021. But what’s lacking (and what ‘the civic journey’ provides) is any way of tying these initiatives and opportunities together in a way that can help build a more coherent, confident and inclusive society.

9. This submission of evidence has not focused on the specific issues that generally dominate any discussion on citizenship and civic participation. This is not to suggest that citizenship education, the National Citizen Service, volunteering, voting methods, citizenship ceremonies, etc. do not matter but it is to suggest that they cannot be discussed in isolation or as discrete topics in their own right. There is a need to think about the ‘ties that bind’ these various policies and opportunities together if the government’s broader objectives concerning equality of opportunity, economic fairness and the creation of a country in which everyone feels that they belong, and to which everyone feels they can contribute, are to be achieved. The evidence suggests that a real appetite to engage exists amongst the public. The 2021 Prince’s Trust Tesco Youth Index, for example, revealed that almost three-quarters of the 16-25 year olds surveyed were positive that ‘theirs is the generation that can change the future for the better’. Working with young people and local communities to design a new civic journey provides a way of translating this raw confidence into a dynamic, confident and inclusive society.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.governsmarter.org/four-steps-to-smarter-government>

<sup>3</sup> <https://icstudies.org.uk/insights/report/why-dont-they-ask-us-role-communities-levelling>

<sup>4</sup> <https://wearencs.com/uk-year-of-service>

<sup>5</sup> <https://localtrust.org.uk/insights/research/the-halfway-point/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.royalvoluntaryservice.org.uk/about-us/our-impact/charity-partners/shaping-the-future-with-volunteering/#:~:text=Shaping%20the%20Future%20with%20Volunteering%20A%20group%20of,to%20be%20dynamic%20and%20welcoming%20places%20for%20volunteering.>