

Select Committee on Citizenship and Civic Engagement: submission of evidence

Response by: *Imagine – Connecting Communities through Research*.¹

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Imagine is a large five-year Economic and Social Research Council project (2013-17) funded through the Research Councils UK Connected Communities programme (Grant number ES/K002686/2). The project involves university researchers from a range of disciplines working together with a variety of community organisations across the United Kingdom to explore why and how people participate in civic and public life. Our key contribution is connected to the ways in which it is possible to co-produce research to understanding the context of civic engagement within diverse communities. The research has foregrounded the importance of community development, community activism, and arts and humanities approaches to civic engagement.

<http://www.imaginecommunity.org.uk/>

Summary/key points

- Co-produced research is important. We use the term ‘co-production’ to describe methodologies that are collaborative, participatory and democratic and which try to access hidden or otherwise absent voices in civic life. Co-producing research has enabled us to develop methodologies that include voices and perspectives that uncover different forms of engagement, whether this be with groups of Muslim women, young people, people with complex needs or diverse groups within community settings. Community research teams are an essential part of this as they are able to set priorities that are important to them.
- Funding should be made available for open ended, experimental projects that make use of creative arts and a multiplicity of methodologies to encourage dialectical thinking. This can include groups researching hidden histories, artistic and visual understandings of engagement, including poetry, visual and relational art and approaches that rest on creating spaces for dialogue and communities of practice.

¹ Longer title: ‘The social, historical, cultural and democratic context of civic engagement: Imagining different communities and making them happen’.

- Community development support is essential. Local authorities are cutting back but there needs to be staff supporting community projects and initiatives, regardless of whether or not there is a co-production partner such as a University.
- We welcome the fact that the Select Committee is seeking to understand better the benefits of civic engagement. In this response we focus in particular on the relationship between civic engagement and identity (1), the ways that civic engagement, in its varied and different forms, can be supported (7), barriers to belonging and citizenship (9) and issues of social integration, citizenship and role models (12).

Question 1: Civic engagement and identity:

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. *People belonging to communities of place, identity and interest need to be able to reclaim their own histories.* In one part of the *Imagine* project, a research team explored activities, achievements and legacies of the Community Development Projects (CDPs) of the 1970's in three areas: Benwell (Newcastle), North Shields and Hillfields (Coventry). The CDPs were part of an experimental Home Office anti-poverty programme, initiated in the late 1960s in 12 'deprived' neighbourhoods, adopting an action-research approach. The CDPs understood the value of historical research and importance of documenting 'hidden histories' of local working people to counter histories of the powerful. In Benwell, North Shields and Coventry today groups of local people are keen to write their own histories to challenge the stigma still associated with the areas, thus strengthening and empowering local community groups (see www.dur.ac.uk/socialjustice/imagine/). This applies also to BAME groups who want to see their contribution to British society recognized as part of 'British history' which underpins civic engagement.

Question 7: How can civic engagement be supported?

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?

1 *The government should provide funding to community development workers so that communities can run projects in a productive way.* These could take the form of small development grants that are 'light touch' in terms of review and which encourage experimental development projects.

2. *Co-production of research is important.* If delivered in an ethical way, co-production can empower communities and elevate voices that traditionally have been on the margins. This is a democratic form of knowledge creation and a more ethical way of working with

communities that feels less like 'doing things to communities'. Research that is co-produced by universities and community organisations has the potential to empower communities to collectively construct new life worlds, in that the process of doing research together, and co-producing the research questions can make visible new kinds of knowledge that can be articulated and heard in new ways. Collaborative research can bring communities to the heart of social research while capturing the funds of knowledge held in communities that exist outside the corridors of education institutions. Through *Imagine* we worked with community researchers embedded in their communities to explore civic engagement, which takes many forms. Co-production can also help some of the most marginalized people in society to become agents of social change. An example of this comes from our work with young adults with learning disabilities and other complex needs in Sussex and Blackpool. They co-produced a research project on the resilience of young adults with learning disabilities with an *Imagine* PhD student. Led by the young adults with learning disabilities and other complex needs, resilience games were produced that could support other young people to build their own resilience and to lobby local government for changes that would support the resilience of young people with complex needs more widely. For example, one group of young people engaged with their local bus company to lobby for bus company staff to be trained to support people with complex needs travelling on buses.

3. *Citizens have a right to get knowledge back.* A key message from a roundtable on the theme of *The role of research in promoting and supporting community development in urban neighbourhoods* at the Imagining Benwell Workshop, Discovery Museum, Newcastle, 21 January, 2016

(www.dur.ac.uk/resources/beacon/ImaginingBenwellWorkshopReport21.1.16finalversion.pdf):

If we are thinking about improving places, we need to ask why they are as they are. We need to divest ourselves of the idea that people have made them as they are. Citizens have a right to get knowledge back. The role of social sciences is to say how things can change. People know their areas best.

4. *Civic engagement is a process and needs support.* Our work has shown that it does not happen overnight and it needs workers at grassroots level supporting disengaged communities, hence, the importance of community development workers.

5. *The idea of 'Communities in control' from the Localism Act needs to be understood from a community perspective.* A summary of comments from a roundtable on the theme of *Communities in control* at the Imagining North Shields Workshop, The Meadows, North Shields, 3 April, 2016:

(www.dur.ac.uk/resources/beacon/ImaginingNorthShieldsReportfinalversion4.5.16.pdf):

- Localism powers are difficult to enact in areas of deprivation. Is the Localism Act designed for the benefit of voluntary groups in leafy suburbs wanting to take over the local pub or library?
- The infrastructure is not effective enough - for example, funding from the Cabinet Office was given to start a Neighbourhood Plan in a 6-month time period when it takes much longer.
- The local authority doesn't have an asset transfer policy and there are loopholes in the Localism Act: e.g. even if a building is listed as a community asset, if the local authority decides to demolish it they can without consultation. Whereas if they wanted to sell it they have to give 6 months' notice.
- There are not enough resources to support communities in control.
- Each local authority is dealing with it differently; some are devolving really difficult situations.
- It is too complicated and complex. Taking control requires a community development background and business experience. Lots of communities would not know where to start taking control and need support to do this.
- Is it about transferring assets or liabilities?
- The pace and speed is too fast and it can generate false hope in communities. There is a need to have a good sense of what the community can do.
- Local councillors have a role in supporting the communities they represent to exercise more control over their social/local environment. Concern was expressed about the decline in political engagement including at the community level.

6. *Social cohesion needs to be co-produced.* One of our community research team commented that there should be events that celebrate diversity and BME people will buy into that. People new in this country are not then being forced to leave their culture behind and adopt an alien one.

7. *Organisational structures can support civic engagement.* When we considered the legacy of the Community Development Projects of the 1970's we learned about the importance of organisational structures (e.g. Coventry and Newcastle Law Centres developed from Coventry Income and Legal Rights Service and Benwell Community Law Project).

Question 9: What are the barriers to belonging and citizenship? 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?

1. *Impact of austerity.* Some community organisations struggle to survive in a context of economic austerity and increasing needs, while others have risen to the challenge and have expanded their remit (for example, food banks). Many are keen to play a role in designing and delivering services, but this requires support from local and central government. See responses to question 7.

Question 12: Issues around social integration and role models?

(‘Lucy’ [British Asian girl, pseudonym], aged 16).

Living on My Street

My street is a very long street. It is very multi-cultural.

On my street live English, Irish, Pakistanis, Scottish, Indian, African, Afghans, Italian, Polish, Slovaks and Spanish

It’s good to meet and mix with other people, and learn about each other,

We all get on with each other.

We don’t argue.

We accept everyone.

My street is the best street in Rotherham.

2. *Civic engagement is an essential component of marginalized communities’ lives.* Through civic engagement they have to construct support networks, volunteer, be neighbourly, develop community-based education, create safe spaces, and share resources in order to make life manageable. These are day-to-day activities that enable British society to function. Such roles can be uncovered and validated and recognized as citizenship through co-production that understands their value. Ceremonies suggest that citizenship is a test to be passed, a right to be earned, rather than a recognition of the civic contribution that migrant and ethnic minority communities make every day.