

Consultation response: House of Lords Select Committee on Citizenship and Civic Engagement

Introduction

1. Caritas Social Action Network (CSAN) is the social action agency of the Catholic Church. We represent a network 41 Catholic charities and diocesan agencies who work for the most vulnerable in our society.
2. This submission is a summary from various member charities of the Caritas network, responding to Questions 7 and 9.

Summary

3. The charities in the Caritas network reported that volunteering is an effective way to support civic engagement, because it not only fosters a sense of commitment to the local community, but also builds relationships between different people within that community. The role of faith groups in both supporting volunteering and maintaining inclusive community groups was highlighted.
4. Poverty was identified as the most significant barrier to civic engagement. There is a need for investment in local initiatives which provide those who are excluded by their poverty with material assistance as well as the opportunity to challenge their situation.

Question 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?

5. The charities of the Caritas network are dependent on thousands of dedicated volunteers who offer their time and talents for the common good of all. The charities have noted the impact that this work has on their volunteers' engagement with civic structures and wider society.
6. Volunteering creates a sense of commitment to wider society. It is an opportunity to express a natural instinct to help other people or put something back in to the community.



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7. Volunteering also encourages inclusiveness. Relationships are built between members of society with very different backgrounds and interests. The knowledge that the volunteer has given up their own time for others creates an environment of trust and allows for a genuinely personal encounter between the volunteers and those they help.

8. This is possible because charities offer organised opportunities to offer help, regularising the relationship between those in need and those with something to give. Familiarity with and involvement in the lives of others challenges the prejudices which can cause division in society and lead to some feeling marginalised.

9. This engagement with disadvantaged members of society provokes an interest in social change. In our charities' experience, this has led to volunteers engaging with the civic structures which have the power to address the issues they have witnessed.

10. In a recent survey at the Cardinal Hume Centre, a homelessness charity in London, volunteers reported that they consider the greatest personal benefit of volunteering to be an increased appreciation of different cultures and an increased understanding of issues facing vulnerable people. They also reported an increased interest in being involved in more social action as a result of their volunteering.

11. Likewise, volunteers for CAPS (Catholics for Aids Prevention and Support) engaged with local authorities in South London to raise awareness of the importance of faith for many people diagnosed or living with HIV in the family (PLWH). Acting on what they had learnt through volunteering with CAPS, they attended several consultation meetings held to decide on the range of support services that are funded by local authorities for those living with HIV. As a result of this input in the consultation process, for the first time ever four local authorities in South London have commissioned faith-specific peer support groups as part of their Service Level Agreements with agencies providing a range of care and support for PLWH.

12. Local and national government should follow the charity sector's lead in encouraging volunteering to promote civic engagement and inclusion. Charities in the Caritas network promote volunteering through talks to schools and parishes, through faith networks, online via websites and social media, by attending fairs at universities and colleges and through engagement with local businesses.

13. Members of the network also suggested that funding for small community groups would support volunteering. The support should be given with the caveat that it be used together with other organisations on projects which reach out to all sections of society to encourage communication, understanding and tolerance among those of all faiths and none.

14. Caritas members also recommended that those with the responsibility for assigning funding to local projects take the initiative and seek out those projects which encourage inclusion and civic engagement, rather than challenging those running the projects to bid for and win financial support. The current requirements for local authority funding discriminates against smaller

organisations and grassroots initiatives, often party-run by volunteers who do not have the time or expertise to engage with complex application processes.

15. Furthermore, there is a need for local and national government to listen “to those at the coalface”. Caritas Salford, for example, recommended that a poverty truth commission, such as that seen in Leeds, be set up in every local authority. Through this learning, local and national government will gain an insight into how best to allocate funding.

16. Finally, the charities in the Caritas network are concerned that the contribution of faith groups to civil society could be underestimated. A recognition of the central importance of religious belonging in people’s lives was identified by our members as a way in which local and national government might support civic engagement.

17. Faith groups encourage people to identify with their area as they are often linked to schools, local organisations and community events. There is also an ethos of encouraging involvement and using our gifts for the common good. This gives people the confidence to engage in voluntary work, and also makes clear that there is a responsibility to engage in community life. Many of our charities’ volunteers are motivated by their faith and heard about the opportunity to volunteer in the Caritas network through their church.

Question 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?

19. The Caritas members who contributed to this response cited poverty as the major barrier to active citizenship. Amongst poor or marginalised groups, the day to day challenges just to survive leave little time to devote to the needs of others in the wider community. Paying the rent, caring for a sick family member or working more than on job take priority. These issues must be resolved before somebody can dedicate their time to civil society.

20. This is especially true for those who are socially excluded by their poverty, such as the homeless. Without some sense of community and belonging, engagement in wider civil society is impossible. Caritas Jersey, for example, is “committed to the principle of ‘subsidiarity’, which is to say that decision making should devolve to the lowest practicable level. However, problems arise when that level of participation is not possible simply because of cultural attitudes, lack of education and poverty.”

21. Caritas Jersey runs a Leaders scheme to enable those who face barriers to become more active in their community and in the wider Jersey society. Candidates are selected from the minority communities on Jersey to become ‘leaders’ and articulate their community’s concerns and frustrations, helping them gain a voice in society and helping them campaign for what they believe in. They also attend an extensive six-day residential course on Community Leadership run by Citizens UK. In turn candidates are expected to offer their services to their community: on



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the successful completion of this leadership course participants will have undertaken 50 hours of approved work in their community and receive a Professional Certificate in Community Leadership, issued by Newham University, Birmingham. Caritas Jersey hopes that in time we may see some of these leaders in the States Assembly.

22. It was also recommended that specifically dedicated community and youth workers would help those who are excluded to overcome these barriers, because they have both a sense of belonging within the given community or group and the time and commitment to dedicate to mobilising local people in mutually supportive forms of local civic engagement. Social support which is provided with communities empowers local people to challenge those situations, structures and organisations which they identify as contributing to their alienation and exclusion from wider society.

23. Finally, our members have found that those who cannot speak English, of course, face a barrier to civic engagement. Offering free ESOL classes (English for Speakers of Other Languages) not only resolves communication issues but is a very effective civic engagement model, bringing together volunteers to help people acquire language skills that will help them, in turn, to engage with society and reduce their isolation.