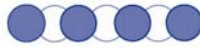


CLES Bulletin is a topical summary of an issue which has recently emerged. Its aim is to provide a pithy précis of the issue, thus creating a quick and easy to read document which directs to more detailed material, if required.

CLES Bulletin No. 29
Active Citizenship

CLES BULLETIN





Introduction

This CLES Bulletin looks at active citizenship in the UK. There has been a decline in traditional democratic engagement in recent times, however other forms of citizenship are being displayed in society, such as formal and informal volunteering.

Encouraging an increasing number of people to take part in society more widely is a growing agenda within government and this bulletin looks at the ways the linkages between civic participation and democratic participation can be made.

Traditional Democratic Engagement

There is clear evidence of declining engagement in traditional democratic processes, with governments, and other organisations considered to becoming more remote, and insufficiently accountable to their stakeholders¹. Turnout at the UK general election in June 2001 was 59.54%, down from 71.4% in 1997, and an all time low. MORI has estimated that only 39% of young people (aged 18-24) voted at the 2001 general election. This democratic issue is closely wedded to questions of active citizenship, more active citizens enhance and develop the democratic realm more widely.

What is Active Citizenship?

Active citizenship is about taking part in society. Individuals are capable of creating a better society through a direct and positive contribution to their communities. Active citizenship is about more than just voting in elections.

Active citizenship can be defined as ‘citizens taking opportunities to become actively involved in defining and tackling the problems of their communities and improving their quality of life’.² It is about reconnecting citizens to their

communities and institutions to become more actively involved in addressing their common problems and enhancing the political process.

Active Citizenship & Civil Renewal

Civil renewal is at the heart of the Home Office's vision of life in our 21st century communities. As a political philosophy it has been around for centuries but it is, increasingly, being taken up by public bodies, people working in the voluntary and community sector, and active citizens in their own communities, as the effective way to bring about sustainable change and improve the quality of people's lives.³

The civil renewal agenda as defined by the government is the development of strong, active, and empowered communities, in which people are able to do things for themselves, define the problems they face, and tackle them in partnership with public bodies.

The government has demonstrated its commitment to this agenda by establishing the Active Citizenship Centre, which has been created to promote research that demonstrates the value of civil renewal and inform policy making. The Centre showcases best practice examples of civil renewal in different fields and in different areas of the country.

The Centre is a partnership between policy makers, academics, practitioners and citizens. It has a multi-disciplinary steering group to advise on research and best practice in civil renewal. The Centre has been initially funded by the Civil Renewal Unit (CRU) of the Home Office.

The Active Community Unit has also been established within the Home Office aims to promote the development of the voluntary and community sector and encourage people to become actively involved in their communities, particularly in deprived areas.

Developing Active Citizens

In developing active citizens, communities need to be given more opportunities and support to become actively involved in defining and tackling their

¹ Enhancing local electoral turnout, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, <http://www.jrf.org.uk/knowledge/findings/government/g52.asp> & Turnout at Local Elections, ODPM, <http://www.local.odpm.gov.uk/research/turnout/01.htm>

² Home Office Glossary, <http://www.active-citizen.org.uk/>

³ Home Office website



problems and improving their quality of life. Communities need to be helped to form and sustain their own organisations, to bring people together to deal with their common concerns. Providing better opportunity, by removing the barriers to involvement, can develop active citizenship. The Active Citizenship Centre outlines the following ways in which greater participation can be achieved;

- Citizenship education: increasing learning opportunities
- Volunteering: increasing opportunities to make a contribution
- Civic participation: increasing opportunities to engage with state organisations
- Confidence building: intervening to remove obstacles to citizens coming forward with their concerns
- Feedback: making it easier for citizens to complain and hold state bodies to account for their action
- Consultation: seeking citizens views prior to taking action
- Shared governance: sharing power with citizens/groups
- Devolved decision-making: handing specific powers to citizens/groups to carry out

Active Citizenship Survey

The Home Office conducts a citizenship survey every two years. It gives national measures of volunteering, civic participation, social participation and social capital. The 2003 survey also has questions relating to community cohesion. Ten thousand people are sampled nationally with a booster sample of 5,000 from ethnic minorities. The results of the 2001 and 2003

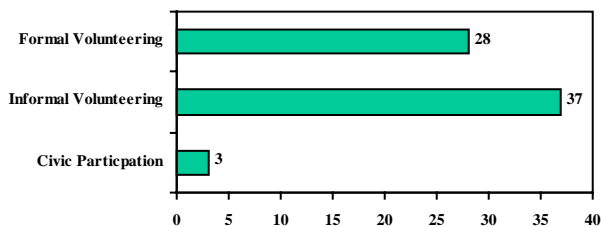
surveys show that there is already a healthy level of active people in society, with 51% engaged in some kind of civic participation or formal/informal volunteering. The Active Citizenship Unit is responsible for the achievement of the target of increasing voluntary & community sector activity, including increasing community participation, by 5 percent by 2006.

Conclusion

The learning of citizenship in the domain of civil society has been under resourced in comparison with similar learning in the workplace (for example through trade union involvement), and as a result, work to develop citizenship skills in civil society has tended to be short term, less systematic and less sustainable. Those who have suffered most from this are those who are already most vulnerable to social exclusion and least likely to become active citizens in any context.

Public interventions are most likely to be effective if they provide individuals with opportunities to explore and acquire the skills in context, rather than through formal instruction. However, there is a serious lack of research into the processes of informal citizenship learning within civil society⁴. The work of the Active Community is welcomed and identifying the barriers to involving people in society is the first step, however implementing change is always more difficult.

Participation in Voluntary and community activities at least a month before interview (2003)



⁴ Education and Training for Active Governance and Citizenship in Europe: Analysis of Adult Learning & Design of Formal, Non-Formal & Informal Educational Intervention Strategies (April 2003)