

National Citizen Service Bill, Debate, House of Lords October 25, 2016

I welcome and support this bill not only because of the impact, actual and potential on building the confidence and contribution of participants but also for its intention to both formalise and improve the accountability and functioning of the NCS. It may seem obvious for us to support a scheme with such clear aims to encourage young people to engage with their communities and take responsibility for their transformation and one that claims some positive impact on community cohesion.

It will be very important to ensure good access to the scheme. The noble Lord, the minister said in his speech that NCS is “accessible to everyone” and went on to remind us that where needed the opportunity is delivered at no cost to the participant. But cost is not the only barrier, much as I welcome the discretionary waiving of the fee to enable participation. As I note and welcome the existing record of bringing together people from diverse backgrounds, widening participation can be a challenge, for instance for young people with specific disabilities, or from remote areas, or from hard to reach backgrounds – the challenge increases of course as we seek to include more young people.

The Noble L, the Minister, described NCS with some understandable pride, I sensed, as “the fastest growing youth movement for a 100 years.” There's a risk that this might be heard as implying a competitive approach which I know the Minister does not intend. What a pity it would be if NCS threatened other valued and good youth organisations, particularly when they sometimes have reduced funding, fewer volunteer leaders, and long waiting lists. Building on the NCS experience, which is a good one as we've heard but short, is surely critical. If NCS becomes a stand alone one-off, then what a waste that would be. It would be good if the Minister could help us with evidence of young people moving on to other volunteering and engagement – giving as well as receiving – and clear intent to enable that.

Finally, my Lords, but importantly can the Minister say anything about the role of young people themselves in the ongoing development of NCS? To value young people, encourage them in their development and their contributions to society, which are clearly and wonderfully the basis of NCS, will involve inviting them to – not just allowing them- a voice in its future.

I am glad to welcome and support this Bill and ask the Minister to respond in due course to what I hope the House hears as positive queries which I trust can enhance the National Citizen Service.