



## An Introduction to Active Citizenship

### What is active citizenship?

Active Citizenship is a term used to describe the involvement of individuals in public life and affairs: this can take place at local, national and international levels. This briefing outlines the different ways that people can be active in their local community and reasons why people might want to be an active citizen.

### Different Levels of Active citizenship

Individuals might be active in their communities in many different ways. Some people choose to get involved in issues or causes that directly affect their lives at a local level, while others might want to do something to make a difference to a cause that has an impact globally. Below is an outline of the different usages of the term 'Active Citizen'

- It is used most often at **local level** to refer to citizens who become actively involved in the life of their communities; tackling problems, bringing about change or resisting unwanted change. Active citizens are those who over time develop the skills, knowledge and understanding to be able to make informed decisions about their communities and workplaces with the aim of improving quality of life in them.
- At **regional and national level** it can move from voting in democratic processes, to being involved in campaigning groups, to becoming a member of a political party.
- At **international level** the global active citizen may be involved in movements to promote environmental sustainability or fair trade, to reduce poverty or to eliminate people trafficking and slavery.

An active citizen is not necessarily a 'good citizen' as they may not follow the rules or behave in a certain way: in many instances they may challenge the rules and existing structures, although will generally stay within the bounds of democratic processes and not become involved in violent acts. They typically embrace a set of values associated with active democratic citizenship including respect for justice, democracy and the rule of law; openness; tolerance; courage to defend a point of view; and a willingness to listen to, work with, and stand up for others.

### What does an active citizen do?

A common view amongst people and policy makers is that active citizenship is where citizens become involved in:

- **Civil participation:** people getting involved with each other to pursue their own goals and interests; such as residents associations, sports clubs, faith groups etc.
- **Civic engagement:** the more formal routes of public participation in the process of governance such as through user panels, citizens' juries, citizen governors, non-executive board members, advisory groups, etc.

However, this is a rather narrow perspective and doesn't reflect the full spectrum of the work that people volunteer to undertake (mostly unpaid) for the benefit of others in their community and beyond.

Most people find it more helpful to think about 'active citizenship' by what motivates people to become involved. This helps to define what each form of citizenship offers to the individual, what they learn about local people and communities, as well as the kinds of activities in which they are involved. Some examples follow: they are not exclusive one from another, and many citizens will participate at any combination of these:

- **The citizen motivated by the sense of personal responsibility** - The citizen who recognizes the importance of taking part in government elections, who becomes increasingly aware of individual rights of citizenship as well as the responsibilities that this places on every adult. This citizen will not only vote at elections; they may be good neighbours (helping others less physically able than they are), but many also become volunteers, involved in activities of charities and similar bodies across their area concerned with issues in which the citizen has a particular or personal interest. This includes those who become school governors, or who become trustees of a local charity as a consequence of skills and knowledge they already possess.
- **The citizen motivated by participating in activities in their community** - The citizen who increasingly becomes involved in local activities and groups, who seeks to learn more about participatory structures and associated community rights, and who actively engages with those structures. This can range from helping to shape services to better meet local needs, public consultation exercises on developments affecting their community, through to involvement in longer-term strategic planning for the future of their area.
- **The citizen motivated by justice and fairness** - The justice orientated citizen who seeks to develop a high level of awareness of collective rights and of collective political and social responsibility. This person primarily participates within groups, taking responsibility for engaging with issues of social justice and equality, actively challenging unequal relations of power and promoting social solidarity and justice as appropriate: this could be both within their local area or much wider, and might also be taking account of the world-wide context.

The majority of people are active citizens in one way or another but, as you can see, the range of activities that might be involved in is very wide. Accessing support to help them be successful in those activities is equally varied, and much depends upon whether those activities are structured or not (i.e. where the skills, knowledge and experience required can be easily quantified). The development of Community Action Networks across Southwark seeks to ensure that appropriate support is available for all active citizen activities, and help ensure that they can play their full part in whatever activities they choose to be involved in.

#### Further information and resources:

- For Take Part's "how to" guide on How To Become An Active Citizen ... [http://www.takepart.org/contentControl/documentControl/12714\\_how%20to%20become%20an%20active%20citizen.pdf](http://www.takepart.org/contentControl/documentControl/12714_how%20to%20become%20an%20active%20citizen.pdf)
- "What is Citizenship" guide by Institute for Citizenship ... <http://www.citizen.org.uk/what-is-citizenship.html>
- For Do It Trust information on modern volunteering and social action ... <http://doittrust.org/about-us/>
- Citizenship Foundation, on Young People and Citizenship ... <http://www.citizenshipfoundation.org.uk/main/page.php?402>
- UK Government guide to Citizenship ... <https://www.gov.uk/browse/citizenship>

For further support or information on Active Citizenship contact the Community Southwark **Volunteering and Engagement Team** on 020 7358 7020 or email [engage@communitysouthwark.org.uk](mailto:engage@communitysouthwark.org.uk)

