

Public Inquiry Response: “Citizenship and Civic Engagement”

To: House of Lords Citizenship and Civic Engagement Select Committee

By: The Intergenerational Foundation

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The Intergenerational Foundation (www.if.org.uk) is an independent think tank researching fairness between generations. IF believes policy should be fair to all – the old, the young and those to come.

Introduction

The Intergenerational Foundation (IF) welcomes the opportunity to comment on government policy towards citizenship and civic engagement. Growing age segregation is changing the shape and structure of British families and communities. IF would like to stress that this feature of the generational divide not only holds significant economic costs, but also acts as a barrier to integration, tolerance and cohesion. In order to promote a more trusting and cooperative society, we would like to bring the following points to the select committee’s attention:

1. Different age groups are growing apart

Last year IF published a research paper entitled, ‘[Generations Apart? The growth of age segregation in England and Wales](#)’, in which we demonstrated that over the last two decades different age groups have become increasingly segregated at both a micro-level and macro-level. On the micro-level, members of the same age group are becoming more highly concentrated in the same neighbourhoods. Retirees and young adults are growing closer to their own groups and further from one another, and today just 5% of the typical urban under-18’s neighbourhood population are over the age of 65. Our urban areas are becoming a tale of two cities. On the macro-level, rural and suburban areas are growing older and large cities growing younger in relative terms; between 1991 and 2014 the median age of rural areas rose almost twice as quickly as urban, inner-city areas.

2. Age segregation is costly

While spatial age segregation is often viewed as natural, or even beneficial, the recent trend is troublesome for a number of reasons. Age groups living apart places growing pressure on public services. When young adults and their retired parents live in close proximity to one another, the former can provide health assistance for the latter, and the latter childcare for the former; but as families drift apart, the onus falls on the state to care for both. Moreover, the Social Integration Commission in 2014 estimated the cost of age, ethnicity and socio-economic segregation to be over £6billion each year.

An even greater concern with regard to citizenship and civic engagement, however, is the social and political cost of the phenomenon. A lack of face-to-face contact — a natural by-product of age segregation — undermines trust and solidarity between generations. [IF research](#) suggests that older people in Britain have the most negative impression of the young out of any country in Europe. Spatial divides cause social divides, make different groups more susceptible to media stereotypes and limits opportunities to identify common goals, culture and knowledge; age segregation is self-perpetuating phenomenon.

Finally, uneven concentration of age groups causes political problems, as competition among the old and young for limited resources and institutions to meet their age-specific needs causes the political subordination of shrinking local minority age groups. This is a particular concern in rural and suburban areas, where the combination of older populations and disparities in propensity to vote leave young people underrepresented. Far from benign, the current pattern promises to reduce intergenerational social contact, to place strain upon care services, to cause disparity in political power, and to foster distrust and fear. It promises to compromise integration, tolerance and cohesion in British society.

3. Housing policy is a key cause of growing segregation, but can also effect positive change

One of the main causes of this divide is Britain's housing crisis. Students and young families are renting privately in city centres at higher rates as they are no longer able to afford property in the suburbs; the rise in the house price to median income ratio means that far fewer young adults are able to take their first steps onto the property ladder. The flight of youth to the city centres is also a concern for rural communities, whose future viability is threatened by shrinking local working-age populations. The housing crisis and rural-urban economic imbalance must be addressed in order to treat the aforementioned social and economic ills.

As IF has [previously argued](#), a policy that makes it easier for people living in large homes to subdivide them without requiring planning permission has huge potential to open new housing units. Promoting downsizing-in-situ would have a number of benefits: it would enable older people who want to downsize — but would not be willing if it meant leaving their local communities — to do so. In subdividing the top storey of their homes into one bedrooms flats for young people to buy, they would increase housing supply and relieve the inflationary pressures that limit property ownership among young people; and living in close quarters would increase inter-age mixing, fostering understanding and shared experience. Providing opportunities to downsize in cities would also allow older property-owners in cities to find more suitable living spaces without being forced to move to rural areas; this could be achieved by enabling private developers to provide older people with housing under Section 106 agreements. Finally, ensuring new developments contain a wide mix of housing types and a variety of tenures will promote inter-age communities.

Together, these policies could stabilise or even begin to reverse the trend towards growing age segregation, which would have benefits for both young and old alike.

If you would like to learn more about the work of the Intergenerational Foundation or would like to organise a meeting to discuss the points we raise further, please contact:

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