

‘Rewarding Active Citizenship’

Rt Hon Hazel Blears MP

City & Guilds Individual Profile in Active Citizenship Launch event Monday 11th December 2006

I'm really delighted to be here at the launch of the City & Guilds Individual Profile in Active Citizenship, which I think is the start of something really important and really special.

It is of great credit to City & Guilds, with your long, proud history of providing innovations in learning and qualifications, that you are pioneering this recognition for active citizenship. I'll say a little bit about why I think that matters so much in a moment.

But I am also pleased and proud that this initiative has its genesis, like so many good things, in the City of Salford. Salford is my birthplace and home, as well as being the City I represent as an MP. It is a City which has made a huge contribution to the life of the nation, from its former industrial might, to its cultural contribution from LS Lowry to Morrissey, and today its renaissance as a vibrant student city, a place of social innovation, and a cultural hub for the region. If the BBC fulfil their pledge to relocate to Salford, bringing new jobs and talent to the Media City, the future looks even more exciting.

If you haven't been for a while, or if you think Salford is still the *Dirty Old Town* of Ewan MacColl's ballad, or the rain-soaked streets of *Coronation Street*, then I invite to see the changes that are taking the place, the cranes on the skyline, the regeneration and renewal, and the new sense of optimism on the faces of the people who live and work there.

I'm serious. Come and visit us and see what's happening, and you won't be surprised that something as innovative and at the same time practical as this City & Guilds recognition for active citizenship comes up from the streets of Salford.

Why does rewarding active citizenship matter so much?

Politicians often talk about democracy and citizenship in great flights of rhetoric. But for me the point is simple, practical and easy to articulate: ordinary people should

have as much power as possible over the decisions that affect their own lives, families and communities. Or, to be even more precise: 'power to the people'.

That's what being an active citizen means: taking control over the decisions that count.

There are two reasons why I think this is so important:

Public services need to be efficient, successful and popular if they are to justify their tax-based funding, and one way to virtually guarantee that they are efficient, successful and popular is to fully engage people in their design and running.

People want choice, not uniformity; they want information, not being kept in the dark; they want to be treated as an individual, not a cog in a machine; they want the sense that they matter, that they are important within the system, and not an inconvenience.

Indeed they want to feel that the system is being run for *their* benefit, not for the staff and suppliers.

Who knows better what services the local Sure Start should run than local Mums?
Who knows better what services local home helps should provide than pensioners?

I am always impressed at ingenuity, dedication and common sense of the people actively running local services. There's a reservoir of common sense problem-solving at the core of every working class community – often it is the women in the vanguard – and our job is to tap into that reservoir.

The second reason is more subtle, but no less important: **citizenship engagement is vital for our democracy**. Democracy cannot be left to the politicians, planners and pundits.

Democracy should be an active, not a passive state. It means people taking control over the decisions that affect them, having the platforms on which to stand to influence what happens in their homes, on their streets and estates, in their neighbourhoods and in their country. It requires local groups, campaigns, action committees and spontaneous outbursts of activity.

This can never be a substitute for electoral politics and political parties, but we cannot underestimate the importance of what Edmund Burke called 'the little platoons' we all belong to in our communities. Those 'little platoons' are changing, of course.

New research shows that Britain is a nation of joiners of organisations.

Ten years ago, the average Briton belonged to six organisations, from churches to trade unions and neighbourhood societies. Now the average person has 17 up-to-date memberships.

The fastest expanding membership organisations are online communities, and the average adult belongs to eight. They include video site YouTube, whose worldwide membership has grown from 2.8 million to 72 million in one year.

If we can channel just some of this energy and enthusiasm into local active citizenship, then we can transform our communities.

And if we can revitalise democracy at this very local level, with people getting engaged at street level, then we can see a better future for our democratic politics more generally.

Why? Because at street level, people learn the skills they need to become active citizens and community champions, and it is these skills that this new initiative seeks to reward.

There are 3.6 million people who have carried out at least one act of civic activism in the last year. If we can get just a fraction onto the City & Guilds programme just imagine the potential!

There is a host of initiatives which prove people will get engaged if they think they're going to make a difference:

- community justice centres, like the one in Liverpool, where local people helped to appoint the judge and help to design punishments

- the expert patient programme, which gives patients the knowledge to shape their own treatment and discuss their care with the professionals from a position of strength
- Sure Start – which involves thousands of parents in a variety of schemes.
- there are now half a million members of Foundation Trust hospitals in the UK – more than any of the political parties.

Across the country – active citizenship making a difference. There are not many problems beyond the wit and will of working class communities to solve.

So to conclude – congratulations on today's event, on this programme, and on all the work you do. Well done to all involved.

Thank you.

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