



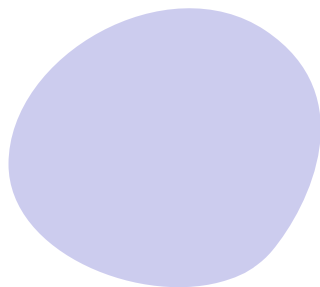
**Institute for
Community Studies**

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The Civic Journey: Learning from life

Written by Professor Matt Flinders

TIME TO
TAKE
ACTION



About this discussion paper

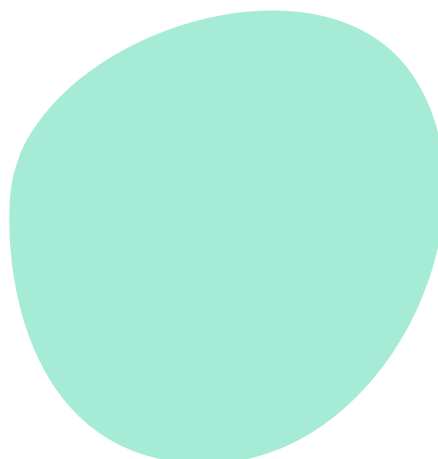
The Civic Journey is a two-year youth-led programme that was launched in September 2021.

Against a backdrop of increasing evidence concerning social polarisation and community fragmentation, the project focuses on illuminating and unleashing the civic potential of young people to reinvigorate communities, identify innovative solutions to local problems and to invigorate the ties that bind individuals and groups together in a manner that celebrates diversity and difference.

This is not an academic project. It focuses on the challenges, barriers, and blockages that young people face in their everyday lives. It seeks to work with young people and organisations to nurture the belief and confidence of both individuals and communities.

The project is led by the Institute for Community Studies at The Young Foundation in partnership with the University of Sheffield and the University of Huddersfield. It is funded by the National Citizen Service Community-Interest-Company (NCS CIC).

For more information, visit [The Civic Journey](#) or contact Emily Morrison, Head of the Institute for Community Studies



Introduction

Thinking about life through the notion of a journey is not at all new. It's common for music, films and photography to describe the different journeys that people go on as they live their lives. The path through life to death will inevitably have lots of twists and turns, ups and downs, challenges and opportunities. In many ways, this is what makes life so exciting. But while some people enjoy choice over how they live and support to deal with the challenge they face, others have fewer options and may feel vulnerable and isolated. The stories people tell, particularly young people, about their lives and how they feel about their future matter. Brexit has divided communities, the Covid pandemic has affected the lives of younger people in lots of ways, and secure jobs seem increasingly difficult to find. And yet the evidence still suggests that young people are keen to play an active role in rebuilding local communities and delivering positive social change. This context for this project, which is focused on listening to young people, hearing about their lives and understanding how they feel about the future. But it's more than that; it's about working *with* young people across the UK to design a new approach to supporting them and their communities.


The 'journey' element...

Whether it's Otis Redding's classic song 'Sittin' on the Dock of the Bay' or Molly Sandén and Will Ferrel's 'Husavik' (which is a town in Iceland that looks across a broad bay), lots of songs reflect upon life as a journey. Greenday's 'Hitchin a Ride', the Eagles' 'Hotel California', Green Day's 'Boulevard of Broken Dreams', Good Charlotte's 'I just wanna live'... the common theme is on journeying through life and the dreams and aspirations that different people have. Whether it's the stress of starting school, the tensions of being a teenager, anxieties about leaving home or the pressures of being a new parent, there is no doubt that different stages bring different challenges. And yet the resources or support structures that different people have to cope with or manage these stresses and strains are far from equal. These leads us to consider the 'civic' element.

The 'civic' element...

'Civic' is a bit of an old-fashioned and clumsy word so, for now, let's just think of 'civic' as another way of saying 'community'. Individuals do not live their lives in total isolation. They progress through life as part of a community and, as such, they bounce-off and interact with other people. It is these people – this wider community – that forms the 'civic' element of anyone's journey through life. The school, the church, the sports club, family and friends – these are the things that provide individuals with a support structure. People who care about you, friends you can talk to, laugh with, cry with – to help you navigate through life's challenges. It's also these 'civic' structures that provide individuals with a sense of belonging

Politicians and policymakers often talk in terms of 'financial' or 'economic' capital, which basically means how much money an individual or organisation has. In recent years, the notion of 'social' or 'civic' capital has attracted increased interest. Essentially, this refers to the level of embeddedness or belonging an individual has in their local community. Studies of happiness and quality of life suggest that civic capital (ie the number of friends, organisational memberships and so on that someone has) is just as an important indicator of quality of life (if not *more* so) than how much money they have in the bank. Studies also show that policies that have been designed and implemented through forms of co-production with local people and local communities also tend to be far more effective and efficient. This insight allows us to bring both elements together.



The 'journey' concept

I've never really enjoyed 'arts and culture'. One of the saddest elements of my own journey is that I was 24 years old before I read my first novel. And yet I can still remember the first time I saw Edvard Munch's painting, *The Scream*. The agonized face in the painting is so haunting it's probably not surprising that it is so widely seen as capturing the anxieties of modern life. (I hope the fact that I first encountered it hanging outside one of the 'Scream pubs' that used to be located near to universities does not detract from this cultural insight.)

Pubs are, in many ways, part of the civic journey. The right to buy an alcoholic drink at 18 is very much part of the rite of passage into adulthood. The 'local' also provides a hub for community engagement and socialisation. Starting school, moving to secondary school, learning to drive, going to college or getting a job, graduation, starting a family or buying a house... these are all common and important stages of life. But they are also stages at which different people might need different levels and different forms of support. This is where the civic or community-based element comes into the 'journey' approach. What support structures are needed to ensure that young people are able to thrive and flourish?

Thrive and flourish, that is, as both individuals *and* as active and engaged members of their local communities. This is a critical point. In an age of increased social polarisation the civic journey emphasises the ties that bind individuals and communities together.

The civic journey provides a way of thinking about the support structures that young people need. It recognises the existence of diversity and acknowledges from the outset that there is no 'one size fits all' civic journey. The aim is more about listening to young people about the support structures they would like to see put in place, and building clearer links between the various elements. There are, currently, lots of different policies, investments and opportunities for young people - but they tend to be highly fragmented and very often disconnected. Moreover, those young people who would benefit most from the support are often in the weakest position when it comes to identifying or accessing support structures.

The benefit of thinking about the civic journey in very practical terms is it allows for comparisons to be made between the current system (ie 'What *is* or *was*') and a more ambitious and connected system (ie 'What *might be*'). Take a look at the following stories – they are designed to try and bring the idea of the civic journey to life.

Case Study #1 John from Swindon

'What is or was'

John grew up in Swindon, Wiltshire. He is now twenty-three and still lives with his mother in an area of the town called Penhill. When John was young, Penhill used to be a sprawling council estate on the edge of town, and he enjoyed exploring the local fields and woods with his friends. His main hobbies were running, boxing and fishing, and he attended the local comprehensive school. Like the majority of his friends, he left with just a handful of low-grade GCSEs. He refers to 'citizenship education' as 'a joke' and 'a waste of time' and has never heard of the National Citizen Service (NCS). University was never mentioned to him as an option or aspiration. He joined the army at sixteen but left after a year and returned to Penhill to find the Royal British Legion, where the boxing club had been based, had been closed down. He says he feels 'trapped' and describes his estate as 'an island' due to the way in which it has become encircled by new housing estates and shopping centres. John voted for Brexit - as did his mother - and resents the closure of the railway works and major car plants that historically provided good and secure jobs in the town. He is nostalgic about the past, fearful about the future, and accepts that he has to develop new skills and possibly even return to education if he is ever to progress beyond his current part-time job as a Tesco bakery assistant. But he has no idea what to do or where to start looking for support. Volunteering, John argues, is 'for mugs... all work, no pay' and the local further education college closed four years ago. What John really wants - he confides in an almost silent whisper - is

an opportunity to work on a farm. "I'd love that," he says, "develop skills, meet people, work with animals...the odd cheeky beer".

'What might be'

The civic journey matters to John for the simple reason that he feels trapped but lacks the basic skills or knowledge to move out of his current situation. What was a rather 'yo-yo' (ie 'you're on your own') secondary education experience might have *been* very different if John had enjoyed the opportunity to develop his confidence, meet people from beyond his estate, and be inspired by a bold approach to citizenship education within and beyond the classroom. It might also have been very different if he'd enjoyed the support of a specialist careers adviser who had the time to get to know him, or if he'd known about the existence of summer work placements or professional apprenticeships. His civic journey would certainly have been very different if local youth services had been able to keep the boxing club open, possibly even becoming a coach. The NCS would have been a great scheme for John to get involved in when he left the army, and he might still jump at the chance of getting involved in something like RockCorp (he also has friends on the estate that he thinks would be interested). Moving from where he is *now*, with his part-time job, to where he wants to *be* might also be transformed if he knew about the UK Year of Service and the variety of environmental placements it offers.

Case Study #2 Anna from Cornwall

'What is or was'

Anna lives in St Just, Cornwall. She is 20 and is in the final year of a philosophy degree at the University of Manchester. Her family runs a holiday letting business and she has two sisters (one adopted).

Anna went to school in Penzance for both GCSEs and A-levels and was captain of the girls' rugby team. As an academy, her school had not taught citizenship education and she remembered the NCS experience as "a bit weird", with too much of "a focus on wind surfing and selling cakes" and not enough emphasis on real issues. "It all just felt like we were ticking a box for our university applications, there was nothing to go on to after NCS".

At this point Anna becomes highly animated. "Living by the sea is not everything it's cracked-up to be," she argues. "Beyond all that Doc Martin and Rick Stein stuff, there is rural poverty, social deprivation and an acute lack of affordable housing". The mining and fishing industries that once sustained West Cornwall – where Anna lives – have gone and yet "the levelling-up debate only ever focuses on the north of England". She is interested in politics but deeply disillusioned with the political system.

Anna reveals that one of her sisters has been battling a serious eating disorder for many years but has never been able to access the level of care and support she needs. When asked how she feels about her future Anna takes several seconds to think before slowly explaining that her biggest fear is having to return to West Cornwall. "I know it's going to happen," she concedes. "I've racked up all this debt doing a degree that I doubt will ever really help me get on in life". Most of her friends are applying to

do masters degrees, but for Anna "that's just a way of avoiding the real world for another year.

"What would you do if you were me?," Anna asks the interviewer.

'What might be'

Although she's never thought of it in such terms, the civic journey matters to Anna because it would offer her answers, options and opportunities to shape her own future in ways that benefit her community and society more broadly. If citizenship education had been taught in a more challenging, provocative and dynamic manner, then maybe Anna might feel more positive about her interest in politics. If the NCS had offered some follow-on opportunities to take part in social action projects, or to be connected with a community mentor, then her personal confidence, professional skills and social understanding might be stronger. A greater emphasis at university on practical skills for life and civic engagement might have continued this civic momentum to the extent that the thought of returning to West Cornwall might even have been viewed as an opportunity for Anna to become a changemaker in her local area, through active campaigning and political participation. As graduation approaches, the idea of a 'service year' working in the voluntary sector or community sounds incredibly appealing to Anna and she immediately wonders about whether her love of rugby might be combined with a focus on mental health and wellbeing amongst young women. The English Football League Trust is a partner in the UK Year of Service and Anna decides to explore whether she might be able to get the Rugby Football Union to become a partner.

Case Study #3 Priya from the West Midlands

'What is or was'

Priya is 17 and lives in Smethwick in the West Midlands. Her grandparents came to the UK in the early 1960s from Punjab and Priya is proud to describe herself British-Asian. She has three brothers and two sisters and likes the fact that her paternal grandmother lives with them in what she describes as a 'pretty busy house'. Priya's father runs a small business with two of his brothers while her mother focuses on domestic matters.

Educational achievement has always been a high priority within Priya's house. All her older siblings attended university and Priya went to an all-girls school in Birmingham where she excelled at dance and drama. She comes from a traditional Sikh family with community life based around the local temple, and she has a strong personal commitment to the notion of *seva*, which is a Sanskrit word for service to others and the community. But in recent years she has become frustrated with "the temple culture", which she describes as being dominated by men, and increasingly keen to meet people from different faiths and backgrounds. "I live in the Birmingham bubble," she jokes.

Priya is interested in politics but claims to know nothing about it. Did her school teach citizenship education? "It depends what you mean by being a 'good' citizen," she responds. "It was quite a religious school and, in my world, politics is for men". She is, however, looking forward to being able to vote when she turns 18.

Her main concern for the future revolves around the fact that she does not want to go to university but sees this as her only option if she wants to leave home and meet other people. Her father recently suggested she should study at the University of Birmingham to stay at home and save money. Priya describes this as "my nightmare option" and explains that she has recently joined an online support network for young women in the same situation. "At the moment, we just chat and support each other but, at some point, I'd love to get into campaigning or even working in a women's refuge... I'm sure my dad would see this as a 'nightmare option' from his perspective!"

'What might be'

Priya is already a member of an active and flourishing community that is centred around her local temple. She also receives a lot of support and careers advice from her large family, but she wants to meet more people from beyond her own community and to explore options that do not involve going straight to university. She describes the online support network she helps to run as a "life support" mechanism.

During her second year of A-levels, the Arts Council launches a national competition to generate ideas that utilise participatory arts projects to foster civic engagement. With the support of her school, Priya uses this opportunity to develop a web-based focus on photography to showcase the multi-layered challenges that *all* young people face – irrespective

The Civic Journey: Learning from life

of their background, culture or religion – in a provocative, uncomfortable and stark manner. The project receives funding and allows Priya to take a gap year, in which she sets up a small charity that supports and showcases youth-led political photography – bringing artists and communities together through exhibitions and events.

The charity also works with young people who have completed the NCS scheme in order to sustain interest and engagement around social concerns. An 'NCS Alumni' national photography competition is held every year with shortlisted submissions exhibited in public buildings all over the UK. The success of the charity leads Priya onto a degree apprenticeship in digital design and marketing, which she completes while working for a large Bristol-based social enterprise. Her plan is to establish an 'ed-tech' company that links classrooms around the world. Her parents are incredibly proud of her achievements, as is her local community, and this is reflected in the creation of a permanent gallery and exhibition space in her local Sikh temple.

Learning from life

Three people. Three stories. Three different civic journeys. But all united by common themes and challenges. The stories revealed a huge amount about how it feels to be a young person today. The stories also revealed the existence of different types of support structure. Some formal or state-funded (from mental health services provided by the National Health Service through to more specific opportunities such as the NCS), other informal and community-based (like the role of the Sikh Temple in Priya's life, or the boxing club in John's). Common themes arose including the importance of careers guidance, the inadequacy of citizenship education and a general disillusionment with conventional politics. The significance of key transition points also became clear, notably the transition from education into the workplace. What each of the stories really underlined were the fears and worries of young people today. In this sense all three of the stories fit with the results of national surveys in the sense of exposing the far-reaching concerns and anxieties of young people.

The key question for this project, however, is how to change things: How can a shift be achieved from the 'what *is* or *was*' towards a more ambitious and integrated vision of 'What might *be*'? The good news is that there are reasons to *be* positive.

The (civic) opportunity

The UK faces a major challenge. Increasing levels of social polarisation and division, growing levels of anti-political sentiment, the existence of inter-generational tensions, and increasing levels

of social inequality can no longer be ignored. We are certainly not unique in facing these challenges - and the Covid-19 pandemic certainly underlined the existence and impact of deep social inequalities – but we are arguably at a crossroads in terms of needing to address an increasingly 'dis-United Kingdom'.

There is evidence that an appetite exists in the general public for fresh and radical thinking on these issues. The government's commitment to 'levelling up' and ensuring greater equality of opportunity also chimes with a focus on the civic journey. It's therefore possible to argue that a very rare post-Brexit, post-Covid, 'civic opportunity' exists to design a youth-led agenda for change. The big question for our programme is whether the civic journey idea provides a useful or valuable way of thinking about this agenda.

Questions for discussion

These questions are explored in more detail in the longer report published alongside this discussion paper, which seeks to develop and flesh-out the points, issues and themes. The main question, however, is: does the idea of the civic journey resonate with you as an idea that has potential?

We welcome thoughts and suggestions. What is missing? How could the approach or idea be improved? How might we take it forward? Equally, what don't you like? Are there elements that are worth saving? What ideas might you offer in its place? How do we 'do' research on this topic? What are the main transition points?

The aim of these questions – and of this discussion paper - is to begin a conversation as part of this project's own journey.

Send thoughts and comments to m.flinders@sheffield.ac.uk



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