



Research  
England

# AN EMERGING RESEARCH STRATEGY FOR CIVIC UNIVERSITIES

LEARNINGS FROM THE INSTITUTE  
FOR COMMUNITY STUDIES

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National Civic  
Impact Accelerator

# CONTENTS

<a href="#"><u>Why we need a research strategy for civic work</u></a> .....	3
<a href="#"><u>The emerging research agenda</u></a> .....	6
<a href="#"><u>Crosscutting themes</u></a> .....	15
<a href="#"><u>References</u></a> .....	18

# 1

## **Why we need a research strategy for civic work**

## Background

The National Civic Impact Accelerator (NCIA) was an ambitious three-year programme 2022-25 to gather evidence and intelligence on the conditions for success regarding university civic activity, share innovative approaches to delivering civic work, influence the wider policy landscape, and provide universities with the framework and tools to deliver meaningful, measurable civic strategies and activities. The programme, funded by Research England, part of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), aimed to create collaboration and policy and practice innovation involving universities, local government, business groups, and the community sector, to drive place-based transformations.

## Aims and objectives

As part of the NCIA, the Institute for Community Studies at The Young Foundation developed an evidence base around the question ‘what are the conditions required to support universities in making a positive contribution in their places?’. Topics were approached from the perspectives of diverse stakeholders to bring greater understanding of how university activities can impact local communities and places positively.

## Our participatory approach to evidence generation

Evidence assembly and generation followed a multi-step process where decisions were made that affect the final output (eg, selecting the subject matter, developing research questions, selecting inclusion parameters and methods). These decisions were often made without external input, leading to evidence that is shaped by the biases and priorities of the researchers involved, known as ‘evidence selection bias’. This can limit its usefulness and meaningfulness (Drucker, et al., 2016).

Alternatively, evidence collection processes can actively seek engagement of stakeholders, practitioners, the academic community, and others, including those with lived experience (Themini and Carregha, 2022). In our work on NCIA, the Institute committed to reducing ‘evidence selection bias’ through engaging in a generative dialogue with diverse stakeholders in our evidence assembly process and throughout our research programme. To support this, the Institute convened four co-commissioning panels, representing the academic community and wider cross-sector key stakeholders. The panels were involved at key stages in our evidence collection process, to guide, support and challenge our work, with the aim of producing evidence that will support and advance civic practice meaningfully. In addition, we engaged individuals with lived experience within communities through primary evidence generation activities (such as calls for evidence) in the later part of the research programme.

## Our research co-commissioning panels

Each panel comprised senior stakeholders from relevant organisations, as well as representatives from universities, selected based on their experience, knowledge and engagement in the subject area (see Appendix 1 for details). The four co-commissioning panels corresponded to different thematic areas of civic impact:

- Environment, climate and biodiversity;
- Social and cultural impact;
- Health and wellbeing; and
- Inclusive placemaking.

In February 2024, the Institute brought panel members together in a series of in-person meetings. In advance, each panel was provided an overview of the existing evidence, [now published](#)<sup>1</sup>, on their area of civic impact. The panels were asked to reflect on:

- what evidence exists and where there are gaps in the evidence base;
- novel or emerging questions that have not been addressed; and
- new evidence that may help to advance their own and others' civic practice

A rich discussion ensued, in which panel members shared their operating context, areas of focus, and priorities for the future. Given the diversity of the panel members, and, in many cases, their positionality as practitioners rather than researchers, the discussions focused on common topic areas and priorities in practice rather than landing on specific research questions. The discussions were synthesised by the Institute team, to identify three priority topic areas per panel.

## Developing our NCIA research agenda

The Institute team reviewed the emerging priority topic areas against the existing evidence base, in order to generate a number of broad research question areas. These were informed by the potential for Higher Education (HE) sector innovation and original contribution to knowledge, with the following concerns in mind:

- What evidence might best serve the priorities of the co-commissioning panel members?
- What evidence might best contribute to the strategic aim of accelerating civic impact?
- Is the research question novel and meaningful?
- Is the scope of the research question focused enough and broad enough?

These research questions, detailed in the remainder of this report, have informed the evidence activities of the Institute as part of the NCIA programme. The NCIA research agenda also exists as a potential 'jumping off point' for future evidence activities related to civic practice.

The research questions presented in the rest of the report are by no means perfect or exhaustive. They are an invitation, and we hope they will be challenged, improved and developed beyond the NCIA programme by researchers and practitioners with an interest in this area.

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<sup>1</sup> Contributing to Place: A Series of Evidence Reviews on University Civic Impact, all available here: [Contributing to Place - Civic University Network](#)

# 2

## **The emerging research agenda**

# THEME 1

## Environment, climate and biodiversity

The urgent challenge of mitigating climate change and achieving net-zero carbon emissions demands the participation of actors across all sectors and sizes. Although universities have the potential to play a key role in this transition, the nature and scope of this role is complex and ill-defined, limiting the contribution of universities. This highlights a key role for commissioning research to address gaps in the evidence for effective contribution to the just transition to net zero for civic universities.

Additionally, much of the evidence base and activities of universities have focused on greenhouse gas emissions, and particularly carbon emissions, broadly reflecting the priorities set by central government (the 'net zero' agenda) (see: The Royal Anniversary Trust, 2023; Hoolohan et al., 2021; Ruane, 2023). This leaves out a range of other challenges, from climate adaptation to biodiversity, nature depletion and conservation (Deivanayagam & Osborne, 2023). There is an opportunity to look beyond sustainability as the reduction of emissions, towards a broader vision where universities play a multifaceted role.

### Priority topic 1.1

#### Supporting and shaping the local transition to net zero

There is growing recognition of the role of universities as anchor institutions who can participate in shaping the future of their places. In terms of sustainability, universities can play a role in shaping how their places move towards greener futures. The co-commissioning panel prioritised the examination of the role that universities may play in supporting local ambitions, including how universities may work in partnership towards greater sustainability in their places.

##### Research questions

- What are the best ways for universities to engage in local transition net zero activities?
- What challenges and opportunities do universities face when it comes to supporting the delivery of the local transition to net zero?
- What conditions need to be in place for universities to work effectively in partnerships towards net zero?

### Priority topic 1.2

#### Championing the just transition

There is a growing appetite for institutions to champion a social justice approach to the transition to net zero (see: University of Leeds, 2023; Dietzel and Venn, 2020; Baxter, 2021). However, it is not yet clearly defined what justice and fairness looks like when it comes to environmental policy and outcomes. The co-commissioning panel were interested in the role of universities as champions for the just transition, both within universities and in their places. This includes range of activities, from education of students to thought leadership, to university policies.

## Research questions

- To what extent is there a consideration of social justice and fairness in university sustainability strategies and how is this defined?
- What are the barriers and enablers for universities to implement just sustainability strategies?
- What opportunities are there for universities to champion a just transition in their places?

## Priority topic 1.3

### Knowledge and skills for a green future

As educators, universities have a key role to play in equipping both young people and adults in their places to navigate the climate emergency and transition to net zero. This is a dual but interconnected task: on one hand, providing a 'climate education' which will equip students to navigate the transition to net zero, and on the other hand, providing learning paths and transmitting skills for the changing job market. However, questions remain as to what the content of 'climate education' should include, which might range from technical skills for specific sectors and raising public awareness of climate change to supporting climate activism and the imagination of alternative futures (see: The Carbon Literacy Trust, 2023; Climate Fresk, 2023; DfE, 2022; University of Reading, 2021; UNFCCC, n.d). The co-commissioning panel therefore prioritised research on what constitutes a climate education, and how to support young people and adults in the changing job market as a result of the transition to net zero.

- What is working when it comes to the delivery of climate education for young people and/ or adults?
- What constitutes a climate education and who decides this?
- What are the challenges and opportunities that university face in the delivery of climate education?

## THEME 2

### Social and cultural impact

This thematic area covers one area of traditional focus for civic practice at universities: engaging local communities for positive social impact (Goddard et al., 2016; Gherhes et al. 2020). Additionally, this area considers the social impact of cultural activities and infrastructure held by universities or other institutions for the benefit of local communities. Challenges exist in defining and evidencing social and cultural impact and value at a sector-wide level, especially in the longer term, leading to a paucity of systematic evidence (Kelly and McNicoll, 2011). In particular, further research is required to understand community perspectives and experiences of civic engagement (Creative Communities, 2023; Reed, et al., 2018).

## Priority topic 2.1

### Evaluating community-university partnerships

A series of challenges remain when evaluating the social impact of Civic University Agreements and civic partnerships between universities and community organisations more broadly. Given the diversity of possible approaches and the often-limited amount of time and resource given for evaluation, it can be difficult to assess what is working and for whom when it comes to engagement of the local community groups and stakeholders



(Creative Communities, 2023). The co-commissioning panel prioritised the exploration of civic partnerships, particularly how they are perceived by community partners and how they can create impact for local communities.

- What are the challenges and opportunities experienced by stakeholders and community organisations when it comes to partnering with universities, and how might they be overcome?
- What are the conditions for successful community-university partnerships and how might we best identify and address community needs?
- What are the best approaches for evaluating and improving community-university partnerships?

## Priority topic 2.2

### Measuring the civic impact of universities on arts and culture

Universities have the potential to play a role in making arts and culture more accessible, ensuring a wider proportion of local communities can reap benefits from a range of interventions – from arts and culture activities and infrastructure to education and careers in the sector. However, there is a lack of systematic knowledge on the civic impact of universities when it comes to arts and culture in places. Although there is increasing research in the area, much of it has focused on the civic role of arts and culture organisations (see: Calouste-Goulbenkian Foundation, 2022), with little evidence available on the role of multi-purpose or anchor institutions such as universities. Additionally, there is little evidence available on the impacts and outcomes of arts and culture interventions on those involved, particularly at a community level. There is a long-held critique of metrics-based evaluations that they can lead to a mindset where only what can be ‘counted’, counts – thereby favouring output and outcomes that are easily quantified, and hindering those that are not. This represents both a challenge and an opportunity for further research, to understand the qualitative or hard to measure impacts of arts and culture interventions. Additionally, there is an opportunity to capture the impact of arts and culture interventions from the point of view of partner institutions, involved individuals (residents, academics), and the wider community.

#### Research questions

- How do universities understand their civic role in relation to arts and culture?
- How do university-led or supported arts and culture interventions work, and what benefits can be identified from these activities?
- What works when it comes to meaningfully measuring and capturing the civic impact of arts and culture interventions delivered by universities in their places?

## Priority topic 2.3

### Meaningful student civic engagement

Universities can have a positive impact in their places through student civic engagement, such as volunteering, service learning, student union activities, and collaborative research projects. These activities have the potential to deliver benefits to local communities and organisations as well as students themselves (Mycock, 2024; Walsh and Santharuban, 2023; Williams, 2017; Lau and Body, 2021).

This proposed commissioned topic aims to explore the civic role of universities from the perspective of student activities and engagement with the local community. Universities can leverage their resources to contribute to this. One example that has been

widely explored in existing evidence is student volunteering. Volunteering is a powerful way for students to contribute to their local places, while reaping benefits themselves (Williams, 2017; Themiminulle et al., 2022; Barton et al, 2019). However, there remains no coherent framework to effectively evaluate the longitudinal benefits and outcomes of volunteering in higher education (NCCPE, 2009). Furthermore, a focus on student experience has created a significant gap in evidence on the impact of volunteering on communities, and how it is experienced by those hosting the students (Holdsworth and Quinn, 2010; Tansey, 2012).

### Research questions

- What are the sites and practices of meaningful engagement between students and local communities? What factors enable them?
- What are the challenges and barriers to meaningful engagement between students and local communities? (From the perspective of students and local communities.)
- How do students and local communities conceptualise and experience the civic role of universities?

## THEME 3

### Inclusive placemaking

This theme covers the economic impact of universities, with a particular focus on the places universities are situated, referred to as placemaking. Universities have the potential to play a role in the development of place (the physical and material environment); economic development (jobs and skills); knowledge exchange; and in respect of devolution (local governance).

Literature on anchor institutions has brought a new lens to the potential role of universities in delivering economic impact, considering their activities as large local employers and procurers of goods and services. Additionally, there is a wealth of literature on skills pipelines, with an increasing focus on local places. Universities have the potential to develop skills for local needs (Kempton et al, 2021), support local entrepreneurial ecosystems (OECD, 2022), retain graduates with high levels of specialisation in their places (Bridge Group, 2021), and increase the intake of local students to support social mobility (Lewis & Bolton, 2023), amongst other activities. Although these fields of activity are relatively well known, a gap remains when capturing universities' impact on local places in the round. This points towards an opportunity to centre placemaking in economic impact assessment, and generate evidence to support the delivery of effective strategies and activities for positive economic outcomes.

### Priority topic 3.1

#### Economic impact of universities on places

The framing of universities as anchor institutions has shed light on their potential to deliver economic outcomes locally. Universities can have an economic impact on their places through their role as employers, providers, and procurers of goods and services. However, economic impact analysis has often focused on the regional and national level, failing to isolate the contribution to local places (see: London Economics, 2023; Frontier Economics, 2021). This means that little is known about the effectiveness of place-focused strategies, policies and provision. The co-commissioning panel prioritised enquiry into the approaches that universities have taken when designing and delivering place-based strategies for economic impact.

### Research questions

- What tools and strategies are successfully delivering local economic impact (at a range of scales)?
- What is working when it comes to measuring and capturing the economic impact of universities on their places?
- To what extent is place-based economic impact prioritised by universities in relation to other priorities, and to what effect?

## Priority topic 3.2

### Placemaking and local innovation

Universities are not just places of education and research but are well-established large businesses, with experience in developing structures, in delivering large-scale infrastructure projects, and in utilising their role as anchor institutions to develop strong relations with local partners and stakeholders. Previous literature has focussed on small business, entrepreneurship, and tech firms, but little on universities' roles in major projects (see: UPP Foundation, 2019; Cavallo et al, 2018). The co-commissioning panel recommended conducting further research in this area to build understanding about the role of university in economic placemaking.

### Research questions

- What are the conditions for success when universities work in partnership with the private sector with the aim of improving local places?
- What do local and UK-wide businesses consider the role of universities to be in placemaking initiatives?
- What is working when it comes to universities supporting local entrepreneurial ecosystems?

## Priority topic 3.3

### University participation in local workforce development

The 'Business Barometer' survey by the British Chamber of Commerce and Open University found that skills shortages are the number one challenge businesses are facing, highlighted by 75% of businesses (2022). It is expected that this challenge will be exacerbated in the future, due to an ageing population and expected changes to work permit processes (British Chamber of Commerce and Open University, 2022).

Universities have a potential role to play in addressing the workforce skills gap in the UK and investing in the local workforce but face a tension between seeking the best outcomes for students and for their places. Although the role of universities here is recognised (Bridge Group, 2021), there is limited evidence to understand the specific impact that universities can have on place. The commissioning panel is keen to build understanding of the role universities are taking to support social mobility and invest in the local workforce and what can be learnt to inform future evaluations of these initiatives.

### Research questions

- What is working when it comes to universities supporting the capabilities of the local workforce in response to specific local skills requirements?
- What are the challenges and opportunities for universities when working with Further Education (FE) providers in building capacity in the local workforce?
- What are the barriers to delivering effective skills strategies in places?

## THEME 4

### Health and wellbeing

Universities - as anchor institutions, producers and transmitters of knowledge - have the potential to contribute to the health and wellbeing of communities within and around them. Considering the breadth of potential health-promoting activities, the first task is to conceptualise the role and priorities of universities when it comes to health and wellbeing. There is a wealth of work towards this conceptualisation, with health frameworks and networks seeking to guide best practice in this space (see: Healthy Universities, n.d; Dooris et al, 2010; International Conference on Health Promoting Universities and Colleges, 2015). 'Healthy university' frameworks, such as the Healthy Universities Network and the Okanagan Charter, seek to conceptualise and guide the holistic role of universities in health and wellbeing.

The Healthy Universities Network's approach is particularly useful as it brings together a 'healthy settings' approach, which considers the social determinants of health, and the 'whole university approach', which posits a learning environment and organisational culture that enhances the health, wellbeing and sustainability of its community and enables people to achieve their full potential (Dooris et al, 2010; Dooris et al, 2019). However, an opportunity remains to link up thinking and evidence on healthy universities and civic universities, encompassing complementary priorities such as partnership and place-sensitive working.

There is progress in conceptualising health-promoting universities. However, this does not replace the work that universities need to do to contextualise their health strategies and activities in reference to their strengths, assets and the needs of their students, staff, and local community. Additionally, there is a significant lack of evidence on the impact of different strategies and approaches on health outcomes for students, staff and local communities, presenting clear opportunities for further research.

#### Priority topic 4.1

#### University partnerships to improve health and wellbeing outcomes

Universities have the potential to positively impact health and wellbeing outcomes in their places, in part by partnering with other organisations. The aim of these partnerships can range from providing training and bolstering talent pipelines in places, to partnering for research and innovation in health. Much of the existing evidence focuses on how universities have collaborated with the NHS since the 1950s, initially through teaching and research priorities, and more recently through integrated models of partnership, collaboration, education and health delivery (Medical Schools Council, 2018). There is an emerging opportunity for universities to partner with Integrated Care Systems in their places, an initiative supported by both the Civic University Network and NHS Confederation (2021). However, there is no consistent evaluation of how these models of collaboration between the NHS and universities have translated into health and wellbeing outcomes in places.

Additionally, universities can partner with anchor institutions, community organisations and other actors in their places towards the improvement of health and wellbeing outcomes. Given the potential variety of the configurations and aims of these partnerships, there is limited evidence on their effectiveness. The co-commissioning panel recommended further enquiry to

understand the impact of university partnerships- with NHS and other organisations- on health and wellbeing outcomes, particularly in relation with local communities.

### **Research questions**

- What frameworks or approaches are useful for capturing and measuring the impact of civic universities on health and wellbeing outcomes, including through partnership working?
- How are university health partnerships perceived and experienced by other local actors, including local communities?

## **Priority topic 4.2**

### **Addressing health inequalities**

The World Health Organisation, amongst other major bodies, have noted the role of the social environment in influencing health outcomes (WHO, 2023). Focusing beyond the physical and mental aspects of health to recognise their social determinants is essential to understand why health outcomes differ significantly by region, race, class and more (Marmot et al., 2020). This is referred to as 'health inequalities', an area of knowledge that has gained traction in universities and amongst other actors in places.

Universities have the potential to identify and directly or indirectly shift the social determinants of health in their places, leveraging their assets and resources to improve health and wellbeing outcomes. However, a range of approaches and activities may be used to address health inequalities, across a broad range of domains, including economic, social, cultural and environmental initiatives. This means that evidence of this activity and its effectiveness is not currently captured in a single place. The Health Anchor Learning Network (HALN) has gone some way in describing the areas of activity of health anchors towards improving health equity, and opening channels to share and capture learning in this area. Some of this learning is applicable to universities as anchor institutions, and the network model is an example of how universities could coordinate efforts towards increasing health equity.

The co-commissioning panel recommended research to further understand how university assets can be leveraged to deliver better health and wellbeing outcomes within their local communities. This includes recognising any work that is focused on delivering health and wellbeing benefits to reduce inequality of opportunity in place.

### **Research questions**

- What is working when it comes to universities addressing the social determinants of health, and how does this translate to health and wellbeing outcomes in place (at a range of scales)?
- How might university assets and resources be leveraged towards improved health and wellbeing outcomes for local communities, staff and students?
- What are the barriers and opportunities to using university assets and resources to improve health and wellbeing outcomes for local communities?

## **Priority topic 4.3**

### **Staff and student mental health and wellbeing**

Mental health support has, increasingly, become a priority for universities, particularly in relation to the wellbeing of staff and students. A growing mental health crisis among students creates issues including deficient performance, dropping out of university, and self-harm

and suicide (Lewis and Bolton, 2023). While there is a wealth of information available to universities regarding the promotion of mental health (see: SMaRteN, 2023; Student Minds, n.d.; Office for Students, n.d.), a gap remains in the impact of these approaches on student mental health outcomes. Furthermore, there is little guidance or existing evidence of what works to support staff mental health at universities (Morrish, 2019).

The co-commissioning panel prioritised research into different approaches to support student and staff mental health to gain greater insights into what works to produce positive mental health outcomes. In particular, the commissioned research will explore the impact of trauma-informed approaches in university settings, which has the potential to reduce the negative impact of trauma experiences and support mental and physical health outcomes (Office for Health Improvement & Disparities, 2022).

### **Research questions**

- What conditions would best support universities in improving student and staff mental health?
- To what extent and how successfully are universities utilising a trauma-informed approach in their health and wellbeing support provision for students and staff?

# 3

## Crosscutting themes

Looking across the impact areas of the evidence base, a range of crosscutting themes begin to emerge, suggesting their importance to the delivery of civic impact.

## **Priority crosscutting theme: Placemaking**

As the UK government moves towards greater devolution of power, pushing out of Westminster and Whitehall and across regions, there is an increased focus on places and their unique needs and opportunities. Universities are well suited to deliver change in their neighbourhoods, given their role as part of local ecosystems and their knowledge of the unique conditions and assets of local communities (Goddard and Vallance, 2018). This recalls the civic university agenda of the past centuries before globalisation diverted HE attention internationally (UPP Foundation, 2019). There are opportunities to consider the role of universities in their places at a range of scales - including as convenor, building bridges between actors in place, and leading the coordinated delivery of activities and strategies aimed at localised impact.

### **Research questions**

- What are the conditions for successful university activities and strategies aimed at improving places?
- What are the conditions for success when it comes to building bridges between a university and local actors in its place?
- What are the conditions for success when it comes to universities taking leadership in their places?

## **Priority crosscutting theme: Ecosystem building**

It is clear that the challenges facing places are too vast and complex to be tackled by a single institution, no matter its capabilities. Rather, working in partnership has the potential to bring about more innovative approaches and effective solutions. Other anchor institutions in places (such as the NHS) are also reckoning with similar questions and hold distributed resources and capabilities that are complementary to universities. There is an opportunity to explore the potential of working in partnership to deliver civic change. This requires an understanding of effective partnership models, as well as the barriers and opportunities to working in partnership.

### **Research questions**

- What are the conditions for success when it comes to universities building and/or taking part in ecosystem building in their places across a range of domains (eg business, education, the arts, environmental)?

## **Priority crosscutting theme: Addressing inequalities**

Throughout the different topic areas, a recurring theme is the need to address a wide range of existing inequalities within and between places and localities. Disparities exist in many dimensions and are measured through a range of indicators including health (life expectancy, years in poor health), wage, employment rates (average), and educational attainment (Overman and Xu, 2022). Universities have the potential to play a role in addressing some or all of these inequalities through the generation of knowledge and the mobilisation of strategies and activities. In the past, many of these efforts have concentrated on promoting



educational attainment amongst local people as a route to social mobility. However, regions across the UK face other inequalities that universities might play a role in addressing. Questions remain about what activities universities should prioritise to reduce inequalities, which strategies are most effective, and to what extent efforts can and should be clustered to tackle several inequalities at once. Additionally, challenges remain in disentangling the causes and symptoms of inequalities, and understanding where interventions should happen for the greatest impact.

### Research questions

- What are the conditions for success when it comes to universities addressing inequalities in their places, across a range of local scales?
- How might universities work in coordinated or holistic ways to address multiple inequalities through civic activity?

### Next steps in the research programme

After developing the research agenda, four rapid literature reviews were conducted, addressing each of the four thematic areas, and focused on a research question where a clear evidence gap was identified. These four literature reviews have [now been published](#)<sup>2</sup> and led to three novel pieces of research, also published through the NCIA. The co-commissioning panels were re-convened to support the development of the literature reviews and novel research, supporting refinement of the research questions and approaches to data collection where possible and where relevant.

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<sup>2</sup> Contributing to Place Volume 2: A Series of Evidence Reviews on University Civic Impact, all available here: [Contributing to Place: Volume 2 - Civic University Network](#)

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## Appendix 1: Members of the Co-Commissioning Panels

	Environment, climate and biodiversity	Social and cultural impact	Health and wellbeing	Inclusive placemaking
<b>Panel members</b>	Ashden, MCS Charitable Foundation, Climate Change Committee, University of Manchester, University of Plymouth, University of York, University of East Anglia, University of Leeds	Sport England, Culture, Health and Wellbeing Alliance, University of Manchester, Warwick Business School, University of Leeds, Arts Council, NCCPE	The Children’s Society, Health Anchor Learning Network, NHS Confederation, University College London, The Health Foundation, University of Manchester	Locality, British Chamber of Commerce, Progressive Policy, City-REDI



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