



BECOMING CIVIC: Reflections on the first phase of NCIA's action learning programme

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1. Introduction

This short report is one of a series of outputs to flow from the National Civic Impact Accelerator (NCIA) programme. The NCIA, which launched in March 2023, is a three-year programme funded by Research England. The programme's intention is to support universities across England to develop their civic leadership, maximise their local, social and economic impact, and help address national and global challenges. The National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE) leads an action learning process within the NCIA. Participants from civic partnerships work together to address challenges in developing civic activity and building a collective understanding of 'what works', and in what context, for effective civic activity. The action learning process aims to gather evidence and share learning about how civic work can be encouraged and supported.

1.1 Purpose of this report

The purpose of this report is to provide a record of the key points emerging from the first phase of the action learning process. Its aim is not to provide a comprehensive account of the action learning process – these findings will be published following the conclusion of the action learning programme within a more detailed report in 2025. Instead, the report reflects on the facilitation and observation of the action learning process, capturing some key cross-cutting findings and emerging themes from meetings held in its first phase alongside reflections from participants.

1.2 Structure of the report

This report consists of five sections. Following this introduction, Section 2 outlines an overview of the action learning process and reflects on its facilitation. Section 3 reflects on the observation and analysis of the action learning meetings. Section 4 provides a summary of findings emerging from the meetings. The section includes quotes from participants' reflections on the action learning process. Finally, Section 5 sets out the next steps for the action learning programme.

2. Action learning group design and facilitation

2.1. Overview of the action learning process

The NCIA action learning programme is an 18-month systemic learning process. The process brings civic partnerships together to reflect on specific challenges they face, and to consider how these might be addressed to further partners' civic ambitions. Partners return to their institutions to take insights and learning into practice, to inform future activity. The learning is captured to share with others who are not directly involved in the process.

The NCCPE designed the action learning process, which includes two learning phases involving themed groups, and three opportunities for the full cohort of participants to be brought together in person (at an initial launch event, mid-way through the process and at its completion). During each phase, thematic groups meet regularly online, facilitated by NCCPE staff. This supported learning process creates highly purposeful and useful spaces to balance learnings and reflection with plans for action.

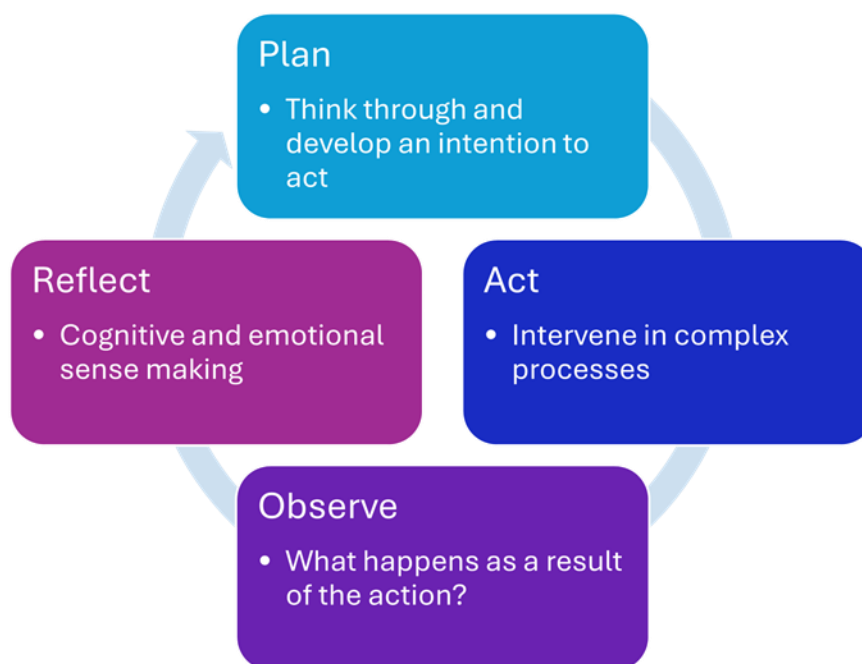


Figure 1: A cycle for participants to use in approaching the action learning.

Civic partnerships (made up of universities, voluntary and community sector organisations, local government, healthcare or business) were invited to express interest in the programme. They were asked to provide information about their partnership; summarise the specific challenges and opportunities arising from their civic activity; reflect on their current status as civic partnerships (new, developing, established); and reflect on who would be involved in the action learning process. The participating universities were encouraged to develop their expressions of interest in partnership with their civic partner organisations. Of the 38 applicants, twelve partnerships were invited to join phase 1 of the programme, representing diverse places at different points on their civic journeys (Appendix 1).

Participating civic partnerships were offered small grants of up to £5k to contribute to the costs of involvement of civic and community partners, and to support local action relevant to the outcomes of the action learning group meetings.

2.2. Theming the action learning groups

The expressions of interest formed a rich data set, capturing how applicants viewed their civic work, and highlighting some common themes and challenges. NCCPE reviewed these expressions of interest and developed a summary of the core areas of challenge and/or opportunity faced by the civic partnerships.

The review was also informed by the ‘seven Ps’, a thematic framework developed by the NCCPE (Appendix 2). Themes chosen were defined broadly, bringing different aspects of each theme together to enrich participants’ experience and bring people together around a shared focus.

The NCCPE mapped out the types of content and topics likely to be explored within each theme. These were shared with the civic partnership leads, who selected the themes that resonated most strongly with their work, nominating partnership members to attend relevant action learning groups.

The groups convened around the following themes:

- Measuring Civic Impact (split across two groups due to popularity)
 - How is civic impact being measured currently? What data or information is collected across a partnership and how can we use this?
- Mobilising Knowledge for Civic Impact
 - How can we use different forms of knowledge to advance civic activity? What is the unique contribution of research in place?
- Balancing the Needs of Locals, Local Communities, Staff and Students
 - How can we work with and manage the expectations of these groups? What contributions can the university make to a place that also benefit staff and students?
- Navigating Complex Local and Political Geographies
 - What mechanisms and structures exist in a place that allow us to work effectively across organisations and geographies?
- Valuing and Embedding Civic Engagement in Organisational Strategy
 - How can we articulate the value of civic activity to senior leadership? What structures can we put in place to operationalise a joined-up approach to civic activity?
- Building and Maintaining Effective and Equitable Partnerships
 - What do equitable partnerships look like and how can we put this into practice?
- Collaborating with Communities to Address the Climate Agenda
 - What is the unique role of the university in a place to address the climate agenda? How can a university support and champion climate action in their community?

2.3. The action learning meeting structure

The initial action learning group meetings were used to refine themes and topics. This enabled the NCCPE to focus each group and ensure members had a shared purpose. Once the focus was determined, members could switch groups if they did not match their interests. This flexible approach enabled people to shape the groups and ensured that people were placed in the right groups. Colleagues from the Institute for Community Studies (ICS) provided evidence snapshots for each theme to inform the discussions and mobilise existing knowledge.

The action learning spaces were designed and facilitated to encourage sharing of ideas and work in development, for peer reflection and feedback. Participants were encouraged to take away an action from each meeting to put into practice within their partnership (such as testing a new approach to their work or thinking about a new concept or way of working). An observer



from CRESR has been present at each meeting to take notes to inform the wider learning emerging from the programme.

Opportunities in facilitating the action learning process

- The groups have built connections. The process of bringing people together around common challenges has resulted in a network of colleagues and facilitators who can support each other and gather feedback on each other's ways of working.
- Tools and resources have been developed to help to direct the conversation in some groups. For example, the Place Navigator tool, which supports different organisations working for the benefit of their common locality, was conceived from the Navigating Complex Local and Political Geographies group. A draft version was developed in partnership between ICS and NCCPE with regular input from the action learning group. The Place Navigator has been taken on by the NCCPE and will be further developed as a resource to support place-based working.
- When groups or themes had a specific focus and included individuals who were actively working on the thematic issue, meetings tended to be most purposeful and self-directed.

Challenges in facilitating the action learning process

- When themes were too broad, where participants had very different needs, or where there was already a lot of relevant activity, it was hard to narrow the focus to ensure the meeting was purposeful.
- Some participants were less able to prioritise the time to participate fully in the group, resulting in a lack of consistency in group membership.
- Although the process was designed to encourage civic and community partners to play an active and full part in the meetings, fewer of them have been involved in the meetings than expected. This reflects a range of factors, including university-based participants' need to be sure that their partners' time would not be wasted; and the university-focused character of some of the challenges that the civic partnerships wanted to cover. This has given us pause to reflect collectively on how to ensure the topics balance university and partners' priorities appropriately.

3. Observing and analysing the action learning process

NCCPE and CRESR have worked together to synthesise the themes arising from the action learning process. CRESR researchers have observed all the action learning meetings to understand how change is happening. NCCPE have facilitated all the action learning meetings and captured initial reflections on themes and actions emerging to share with ALG participants and the rest of the team. They have also used Miro (an online whiteboard) as a tool to support the reflective learning practice.

The thematic analysis identifies the tactics and resources that partnerships are using to navigate their challenges and create impact in their places and aims to understand the drivers and enablers of civic change and the challenges that participants are seeking to overcome.

3.1 Observation of action learning meetings

CRESR researchers observe the action learning group meetings to identify emerging themes. For the CRESR research team, a key question is how institutional change is happening. We aim to understand who is involved in the conversation, and how universities can enable and sustain civic activity.

Having observed the meetings, we map our notes against themes that emerge from the discussions and then sense-check these with NCCPE and CRESR colleagues. While there are obvious overlaps, the thematic analysis highlights some of the challenges and opportunities identified through the group discussions.

3.2. Reference documents for action learning groups

In addition to observing and analysing the action learning meetings, CRESR researchers have collaborated with NCIA partners to develop two key reference documents. The first is a [theory of civic change](#) document, setting out a rationale on how universities can work for the good of their places. This brings together the diverse understandings and expectations of programme partners so it can be used as a reference point by members of the action learning groups and the wider civic university movement. The second is the [civic university FAQ](#), a concise

document designed as a launchpad allowing partners to structure their conversations about how they understand 'civic' activity and what that will mean in practice.

These resources have been designed to help their users navigate the 'paralysis' of defining and understanding civic activities. They are intended as a starting point for conversations and not as a way of confining them within predetermined parameters. In complex environments, finding agreed definitions and metrics and a shared language that is understood across different sectors and organisations can feel endless. While participants in the meetings demonstrated diverse understandings of civic activity, these resources can stimulate conversations about how to define partnerships' aims and objectives and what terms they should use to describe them. We found, for example, that some grassroots community organisations disliked the term 'civic' and the focus on universities' institutional role and processes. At the same time some local authority partners associated the term more with public engagement with local democracy. This raises the question of whether language that decentres the university and is thus more acceptable to community partners can carry sufficient weight within the university itself to influence decision making processes.

4. Themes emerging from the action learning process

From the outset of the action learning programme, it has become clear that there are common issues across the groups. NCCPE and CRESR have met following each round of action learning to discuss and tease out participants' emerging priorities. Following the completion of the first phase of the programme, the team have identified the following themes, highlighting the opportunities they present and some pathways towards addressing some of the challenges.

4.1. Resourcing civic activities

Discussions across the action learning meetings have centred on the importance of resources, both from within universities and externally, in enabling or hindering civic work. Implicit in these discussions are two questions:

- What level of resource is there?
- How can we best apply the resources we have?

Partnerships were keen to share their experiences of the resources available within university civic teams and explore if and how staffing for civic activities was sustainable. A particular challenge is the number of staff working in engagement and partnership management who are currently on short-term contracts. Participants were also interested in how civic work could be embedded across an entire university, rather than just within a dedicated civic team or role.

Skills development was also viewed as an important part of developing institutional practice. Participants were keen to find out about accessible external training opportunities, such as those provided by Citizens UK. As well as identifying barriers caused by lack of resources, the action learning groups have identified resources that could support civic work.

Resource challenges were well-rehearsed in the first three rounds of meetings, and participants expressed concerns about short-termism and attachment to particular initiatives or research projects. The fourth round of meetings began to identify non-financial resources, from time and people to tools such as the [place navigator](#), that could support civic work. Participants highlighted the importance of resources ranging from institutional leadership and bespoke funding opportunities (such as the [regional innovation fund](#)) to the use of existing frameworks such as the [sustainable development goals](#), as well as the emotional labour and solidarity of colleagues and partners.

One participant from the Organisational Strategy group identified leadership commitment and operational resources as two main enablers of civic work. A participant from the Mobilising Knowledge for Civic Impact group highlighted several key elements: a newly established public engagement team with extensive experience in cultural and public sector civic work; core budgets to support relationship-building activities and pilot projects; and a few exceptionally dedicated academics who often volunteered substantial amounts of time beyond their working hours. A participant from the Navigating Complex Local and Political Geographies group noted that civic engagement is fundamentally a human and relational activity, asserting that the best resources are always teams, networks, and shared learning.

The NCIA team is doing further work to understand how well civic activity is being resourced within universities and hopes to publish results of this in autumn 2024.

4.2. Leading civic activities and getting buy-in and support

Participants shared different forms and models of leadership. These ranged from the highly structured (boards, partnerships and formal leadership roles) to the bottom-up, broad based community organising model championed by Citizens UK. Some participants highlighted the importance of senior leadership. Others emphasised the importance of ‘small relationships’ and convincing colleagues, underlining that leadership is collective as well as individual.

Many participants have demonstrated that they are civic leaders who are working in inclusive and creative ways—promoting collaboration, ensuring equity in partnership, and empowering their colleagues inside and outside of the university to undertake and value civic work. While participants have highlighted the importance of both inclusive co-production and passionate leadership, there is a tension in balancing the importance of inclusive co-production with gaining buy-in from senior leaders who act as gatekeepers for resources such as staff time and finance.

Even when the impact of civic work can be demonstrated or a compelling case is made for undertaking civic activity, participants have found they must still seek validation for the work through their institution's senior leadership, which typically involves a budget commitment to show the work's value. Quite often, that buy-in only occurs if individuals can identify where the civic outcomes relate to institutional Key Performance Indicators (KPI).

In addition to effective leadership, action learning participants have recognised allyship as a vital strategy for advancing the civic university agenda. Examples of successful allyship include sharing experiences of how different partnerships have addressed similar challenges within their contexts, the language used to promote the agenda, and the tactics employed to integrate specific initiatives with other institutional strategies.

Reflecting on the significance of leadership and allyship, a participant from the Navigating Complex Local and Political Geographies group identified the vice-chancellor of her university as a crucial internal ally who fosters relationships with local community groups and highlights the university's civic work. She also noted the university's estates team as key supporters of their civic agenda.

Similarly, a participant from the Climate Agenda group underscored the importance of colleagues interested in civic engagement, university leaders, and community partners in his university's civic mission. He implied that senior leaders within the university who are committed to civic work are more helpful to the civic agenda than community partners, as senior leaders tend to have permanent roles, enabling them to make longer-term impacts than community partners whose involvement might be more transient because of the insecure nature of their work.

4.3. Translating intentions into actions and getting things done

Discussions in the action learning meetings have shown that it is relatively easy for universities to declare an intention to 'be civic'. What is more challenging is finding ways to translate this intention into actions. Recognising the importance of translating intention into actions and reflecting on the opportunities to advance civic work, a participant from the Navigating Local and Political Geographies group noted: "At my university, civic work is integrated into our overarching mission to generate and apply knowledge that contributes to the economic, social, and cultural success of students, partners, and the communities we serve." The participant added, "Our mission further states that through education enriched by research, innovation, and engagement with business and the professions, we transform lives and economies. This integration creates opportunities to advance civic work across various activities, including research, teaching, and enterprise, as well as through our international efforts and social impact initiatives."

Other participants saw the role of individual convener (or 'glue') as vital in achieving this end. However, this is not always a formal role. Such individuals often hold many of the connections, partnerships and knowledge of civic working, while being under-resourced and stretched. While they tend not to have much decision-making power, they hold the knowledge of how their institution works in its place. Ultimately, a convener is an important cog when translating intention into action.

The action learning participants have discussed how various initiatives and projects have been



effective in translating civic intention into actions – from Kent’s [Right to Food](#) programme to [Students at the Heart of Knowledge Exchange \(SHoKE\)](#) in Cambridgeshire and Essex. In addition, Staffordshire University has published its first [Connected Communities Report](#), which serves as a framework for academics, researchers and staff members to highlight good practice and its subsequent impact. Since its publication, more academics and researchers in the university have come forward to ask for their work to be included, which will result in more future engagement with the framework to collate good practice. Over time, the expectation would be that all researchers and academics have a desire to contribute to the report.

4.4. Navigating different power dynamics

Participants have grappled with different facets and experiences of power, ranging from engagement with new forms of devolved governance to the perceived differences in influence between academic and professional staff in universities. They sought to explore how different ways of exercising power enable or prevent action, questioning the dynamics of influence within civic activities. They were also keen to identify in whose interests and on whose behalf universities engage in these activities, probing the motivations and beneficiaries of civic engagement. They questioned how universities see themselves as accountable and to whom, examining the relationships between institutional actions and their perceived responsibilities to various stakeholders.

Participants reflected on local power dynamics between the university and the community, and within the university itself, particularly between professional services staff and academic staff. Both staff groups contribute to civic activity, but the rewards and recognition frameworks that validate civic activity differ.

A participant in the Organisational Strategy group emphasised the importance of raising awareness about these differences among university staff. Others highlighted the importance of equity in rewards and recognition in unlocking opportunities and helping to embed civic activity within universities.

4.5. Communicating and telling stories of civic activities

There has been a strong focus on communication and storytelling in some of the action

learning group meetings, highlighting the importance of narratives that are inclusive and welcoming and that link civic activity to other concerns. Reflecting on the most effective language for communicating civic activities, a participant in the Climate Agenda group noted the importance of fluidity in language. She suggested using language that is adaptable and can be understood by various stakeholders, including council members, community groups, and hospital staff. Additionally, it is crucial to incorporate language commonly recognised in strategic and planning documents to ensure alignment and coherence.

Other participants have identified telling a 'story of change' as a useful method to construct narratives about their civic work. The key questions to consider here are: What are the effects of communicating civic activities in different ways? Are there ways of telling the civic story that are more effective than others, and how do these affect different audiences?

Using a 'story of change' approach involves communicating and telling stories not just for their own sake, but to draw in resources and demonstrate impact. While the action learning process highlighted the strong potential of stories and other creative approaches, there are key questions to consider: are there ways of telling the civic story that are more effective than others for different audiences? What are the effects of communicating civic activities in different ways? How can the participants make the qualitative data from their stories 'quantifiable' and therefore more persuasive to decision-makers within universities?

Broadening 'civic language' and making it relevant to others, thus bringing wider audiences together to recognise the civic element in their work, was a recurring theme during the formation of the action learning groups. Ensuring clarity around what language is used, when, and how, can strengthen relationships and address power imbalances in the civic university space, while recognising that different partner groups (such as local government, businesses, healthcare, the voluntary and community sector) all have their own preferred language and terminology. This highlights the importance of translation and sense-making between partners at an early stage of partnership formation.

5. Next steps

Initially the action learning groups were convened through a curatorial approach based on applicants' expressions of interest. Our second in-person meeting enabled participants and their partnerships to feedback on what is working and where they would like to focus next. In some cases, partnerships questioned whether the challenges they had initially identified were still their priorities. With confidence in how the process was working in practice, ALG participants were able to highlight where existing themes should continue, or where new themes would have value in phase 2. In addition, participants are being offered the opportunity to join 'sprints', 3-hour online events to tackle specific tasks (e.g. creating a resource) together in a time-limited way.

In addition, participants in phase 2 can bid for innovation grants of up to £15,000. Civic partnerships have been encouraged to work together to bid for funding that can test new approaches within their contexts, to explore if and how this can accelerate practice, and share their experiences with the wider sector.

Finally, we have invited two new civic partnerships to join us. Selected from the original shortlist of applicants, Brunel University and University of Plymouth will add different challenges, context, and variety to the learning process.

Whilst the civic partners work together to develop and enhance their own practice, the NCCPE and CRESR will continue to work with them to capture and share learning. We will create tools and resources, blogs and case studies that reflect some of the things that emerge from the action learning process. In addition, the NCIA programme will offer opportunities for people to come together to share their own experiences, expertise and practice, and to hear from others working to embed civic goals within their work.

6. Resources

[Civic Impact Framework](#) developed by the Civic University Network

[Edge Tool](#) developed by NCCPE

[Partnership Cycle](#) developed by NCCPE

[Place Navigator](#) currently in development by NCCPE and the Institute of Community Studies

[A theory of civic change](#) developed by CRESR

[The civic university FAQs](#) developed by CRESR

[Taking stock of Engaged Learning: How universities are supporting community-based and service-learning](#) produced by NCCPE

Appendices

Appendix 1: The 12 participating partnerships



England location map showing the partnerships involved in the action learning process. The map is made available under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution non-commercial 3.0 license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/).



The 12 partnerships are made up of the following organisations:

- Anglia Ruskin University
- City, University of London: Working with Knowledge Quarter
- Edge Hill University: Working with Wigan and Leigh Community Charity, West Lancashire Council for Voluntary Action, Ormskirk Friends of the Earth, Burscough Community Farm and The Sewing Rooms
- Lancaster University: Working with Lancaster City Council, University of Cumbria, Lancaster and Morecambe College, Morecambe Bay Hospitals Trust and Lancaster District CVS
- Universities for Nottingham: University of Nottingham and Nottingham Trent University working with Nottingham University Hospitals Trust
- Staffordshire University: Working with VAST Services and Expert Citizens CIC
- Camberwell College of Arts (University of the Arts London): Working with Citizens UK
- University of Bath: Working with Bath Spa University
- University of Kent: Working with The Food Foundation
- Universities Partnership: University of Leicester, De Montfort University and Loughborough University working with Leicestershire County Council
- University of York: Working with York Civic Trust
- Teesside University

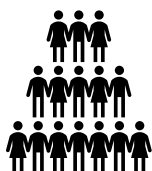
Appendix 2: The ‘Seven Ps’ of civic activity

NCCPE developed the following framework called the ‘Seven Ps’ which can help people think about universities’ civic activity:



Place

Civic as physical location: we are choosing to interpret civic as ‘local’ activity which is focused on realising benefits in a university’s location. This could be local or regional engagement, but not national or international. We are interested in how universities choose to describe their civic boundaries and how their notions of place afford different possibilities and challenges for action.



People

Civic as people-centred and relational behaviour: universities and their staff and students are actors in society. We are interested in exploring their collaborations, partnerships and relationships, and how these can be optimised.



Partnership

Civic involves mutual agreements on shared priorities: at a corporate level, relational behaviour needs to translate into place-based partnership with other ‘anchors’ of the community.



Purpose

Civic as a pathway to public benefit: we are interested in how universities negotiate, describe, activate and evaluate the value they create through their civic activity, and frame their purposes for civic work.



Practice

Civic as practical action: we are interested in the practical ways in which universities can embed civic practices and behaviours into their academic activity and how they can use their ‘anchor’ role (procurement, employment practices, facilities etc) to benefit people and place.



Process

Civic as organisational culture: we are interested in what being a ‘civic university’ means for the ways that universities organise and govern themselves.



Policy

Incentives or disincentives for civic action: we are interested in exploring the policy and funding mechanisms which enable or hold back civic activity.



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Becoming Civic: Reflections on the first phase of NCIA's action learning programme

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