

Establishing Civic: Strategy and Practice

Reflections and Recommendations from the NCIA Action Learning Programme

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Background

The National Civic Impact Accelerator (NCIA) was a three-year programme to gather evidence and intelligence of what works, share civic innovations, and provide universities across England with frameworks and tools to deliver meaningful, measurable civic strategies and activities, running from 2023-2025. The programme was funded by Research England, part of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI). It drove collaboration and policy and practice innovation, involving universities, local government, business groups, and the community sector to inform place-based transformations.

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Executive Summary

This report offers an in-depth reflection of the 20-month Action Learning Programme (ALP) delivered through the National Civic Impact Accelerator (NCIA), involving 14 university-led partnerships across England. The ALP brought together universities and their civic partners to explore how to strengthen civic engagement, address shared challenges, and embed strategic civic practices within their civic partnerships, institutions and communities.

The report is structured around 4 lenses ('4 Ps') to clarify the complex dynamics in play and to frame how the lessons learned can be applied to policy and practice: **Purpose, Process, People and Place**. The report tracks the journeys of individual participants and partnerships, many of whom achieved meaningful change, through the ALP. Some strengthened the institutional legitimacy of their civic work, others forged better relationships with community partners, while the majority were able to define civic activity with more clarity and frame their own work within this definition. The programme also revealed the extent to which the ongoing financial crisis is undermining universities' capacity to support civic activities.

The report identifies four key enablers of effective civic engagement. First, **civic engagement is sustained through patient, reflective, and relational practice**—often building from initial one-off projects (that might provide the catalyst for more sustained practice). Second, **civic practitioners require peer networks and reflective learning environments to navigate complexities, sustain momentum, and strengthen the strategic contribution of their work**. Third, **institutional alignment of civic work is essential**: civic activities must be framed in ways that align with broader institutional priorities. This means articulating how civic engagement contributes to university agendas such as research impact, regional development, and student experience. Finally, **lack of sustained investment risks fragmentation of civic work and loss of trust** with community partners.

The following table sets out key findings of the programme, outlining the core **focus, key insights, implications and recommendations** for each of the 4 P's. These are expanded upon for specific audiences, University Leaders, Civic Practitioners, Civic Partners and Policy Makers in Section 5, Recommendations.

Purpose

Framing Civic as a pathway to public benefit

Key Insights

Civic work needs clear articulation to gain legitimacy and strategic alignment. Many institutions struggled with a “paralysis of definition.”

Implications

Lack of shared definitions and metrics leads to fragmented efforts and weak institutional support.

Recommendations

Support universities and partners to create robust evaluation frameworks to measure the impact of their civic working, embed practices into university strategies, KPI's and promotion criteria.

Process

Civic as organisational culture and systems

Key Insights

Civic engagement is sustained through iterative, reflective, and structured practice. Many institutions lacked coherent processes.

Implications

Civic work is often siloed, under-resourced, and dependent on individual champions.

Recommendations

Invest in civic infrastructure (e.g. engaged learning pathways, civic boards); create governance and workload recognition structures.

People

Civic as relational and identity-based work

Key Insights

Relationships and trust are foundational. Civic roles are often marginalised and emotionally demanding.

Implications

Practitioners feel isolated and undervalued; community partners experience inconsistent engagement.

Recommendations

Recognise and reward civic roles; support connector roles; build peer networks and shared learning spaces.

Place

Civic as place-based and power-aware engagement

Key Insights

Place is relational, as well as geographic. Universities must share space and power with communities.

Implications

Universities often define civic boundaries narrowly and overlook local knowledge.

Recommendations

Co-create place-based strategies; improve access to university spaces; align civic work with local priorities.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Purpose and scope of the report

This report identifies and reflects learning from the National Civic Impact Accelerator (NCIA) Action Learning Programme (ALP), a systemic peer learning programme, designed and run by the National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE). The NCCPE brought together civic partnerships from across England to share challenges and collaboratively reflect, learn, and adapt within a structured environment that encouraged collective and emergent learning.

In July 2024, the NCIA published an interim report, *Becoming Civic: Reflections on the first phase of NCIA's action learning programme*¹, which set out the ALP structure and shared emerging learning. This follow-up report builds on that foundation, synthesising learning from the full 20-month programme. Its aim is to strengthen the higher education sector's understanding of the civic landscape, highlight effective approaches to civic activity, and present contextual case studies of the partnerships involved.

This report is organised around the '4 Ps' framework- Purpose, Process, People, and Place - each representing a distinct lens through which civic activity can be understood and strengthened. This framework builds upon the NCCPE Edge tool², a resource structured around the lenses of Purpose, Process and People to determine the extent engagement is embedded strategically within a higher education institution. Place has been added as an additional lens to consider the place-based nature of civic engagement, and the role place plays within partnerships involved in the process.

1.2 Background to the action learning programme

The NCIA launched in early 2023 as a three-year programme funded by Research England. Its goal, to help universities across England strengthen civic leadership, maximise local, social and economic impact, and respond to national and global challenges. Building on the work of the Civic University Network (CUN), the NCIA set

out to generate intelligence on civic innovations and provide universities with the framework and tools to deliver meaningful and measurable civic strategies and activities. The NCIA programme is built around 4 workstreams:

1. Evidence Capture: Delivered by The Institute for Community Studies (ICS), City-Region Economic Development Institute (CityREDI), Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research (CRESR) and Queen Mary University London (QMUL). Developing a living civic evidence base to understand what works, for whom and in what contexts.
2. Learning and Innovating: Delivered by NCCPE and observed by CRESR. Piloting new civic approaches and building capacity through the action learning programme.
3. Scaling Up: Delivered by Sheffield Hallam University. Engaging the sector through tools, training, and communication to maximise reach.
4. Programme Management: Also delivered by Sheffield Hallam University. Ensuring effective cross sector governance through expert oversight, leadership and infrastructure.

The ALP, designed and led by NCCPE, ran for 20 months between July 2023 and April 2025. Its purpose was to strengthen civic capability and capacity across the higher education sector. The programme brought together civic partnerships (comprising universities, civic, community and voluntary partners) to tackle common challenges in civic engagement and co-create innovative solutions. These partnerships hold significant expertise but also face a variety of challenges that slow progress. By convening a range of partnerships to reflect, learn, adapt, and share their approaches, the ALP became a core element of the NCIA. It drew on research developed in other workstreams and shared the subsequent learning and outputs with the wider sector.

1.3 Civic challenges in higher education

During the three years of the NCIA (2023-2025), universities faced growing financial pressures, limiting sustained investment in civic activity. Civic practitioners were challenged to both advocate for its strategic value and find meaningful ways to evaluate its impact. Existing metrics often fail to capture the relational and long-term nature of civic work, making recognition and resource allocation within universities difficult.

To join the ALP, the NCCPE invited expressions of interest from university-led partnerships. A thematic analysis of the expressions of interest revealed common themes, which were later used to curate the ALP thematic groups:

- Articulating the value of civic work in language that resonates both internally and externally.
- Understanding the role of evaluation and how it can inform the measurement of civic impact.
- Overcoming both geographic and institutional boundaries in building partnerships.
- Enabling students and staff to feel rooted in place and contribute meaningfully to local prosperity.
- Collaborating with other local anchor organisations to address shared priorities e.g. climate agenda, health inequalities, inclusive growth, and access to good work.
- Scaling up small pilot projects into sustained civic practice.

Since the start of the ALP, the NCCPE and CRESR have been documenting how the partnerships have worked through these challenges. This report examines the evidence that has emerged over the course of the 20-month programme. It shows how the learning environment created through the programme enabled participants to address existing civic challenges, refine their approaches, and attempt to embed civic engagement within their institutions, partnerships and local communities.

2. Methodology

The programme adopted an action learning approach, bringing civic partnerships together to reflect on specific challenges they face, and to consider how these might be addressed to further partners' civic ambitions. The NCCPE designed and facilitated the ALP around a reflective learning cycle to create purposeful spaces to balance learnings and reflection with plans for action.

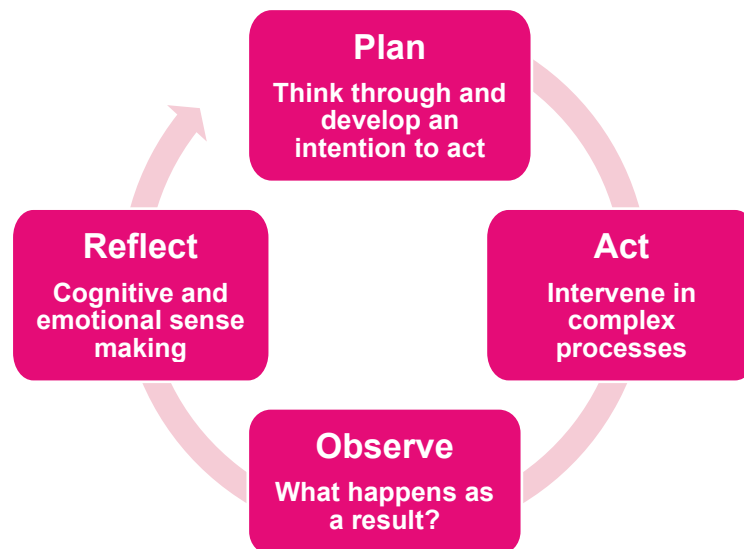


Figure 1, reflective learning cycle used in the ALP.

The ALP ran in two phases, combining regular online meetings with three strategically timed in-person events. These events, held at the beginning, midpoint, and end of the programme were central to building relationships across the participants, sharing context, and co-developing approaches.

A diverse mix of university, community and civic partners took part in the programme. Twelve partnerships at various points in their civic journey, from new to well established were invited to join the programme in the first phase and two additional partnerships joined in phase two. Partnerships were invited to participate based on their location, type and size of organisation, level of maturity in embedding civic engagement, and specialism, ensuring a broad range of organisations were represented and to maximize the opportunity for transferable learning to the wider sector. The selection criteria also included involvement and collaboration with partners outside of the university, and partnership teams were expected to include

community and civic partners. In phase one each partnership received £5,000 in innovation funding to pilot civic initiatives, with additional bursaries to support civic partner involvement. In Phase two, a competitive funding process offered up to £15,000 for collaborative projects, encouraging cross-partnership working and the development of scalable civic approaches.

Partnerships formed small teams of individuals, from universities (academic and professional services staff) and civic partner organisations e.g. local authorities, health trusts, colleges and community organisations. Over the course of the programme 101 individuals participated, this was made up of 27 people from civic partner organisations and 74 people from universities. There were 66 participants in each phase of the ALP, with 45 participants taking part in the full programme. Each partnership joined up to three thematic learning groups based on their challenges and areas of expertise. These themes (listed on page 11 and expanded upon in the appendix) were initially informed by expressions of interest and refined through a launch webinar. The thematic groups provided a focused environment for peer learning, enabling participants to reflect on challenges and plan how they wanted to test new approaches in their contexts. The thematic foci of the groups changed at the mid-point in-person day, where participants took the lead in defining areas of shared interest.

NCCPE facilitators produced summaries of each round of meetings to support the connections across the learning programme. Data collection was conducted by CRESR researchers through observation. Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns in civic practice and partnership development. While the programme faced limitations such as uneven engagement from university staff and civic partners due to staff changes and commitment challenges, the structure enabled consistent reflection and generated valuable insights for the wider sector.

The methodology of the programme, along with reflections on the process and recommendations for running similar peer learning processes is further explored in the appendix.

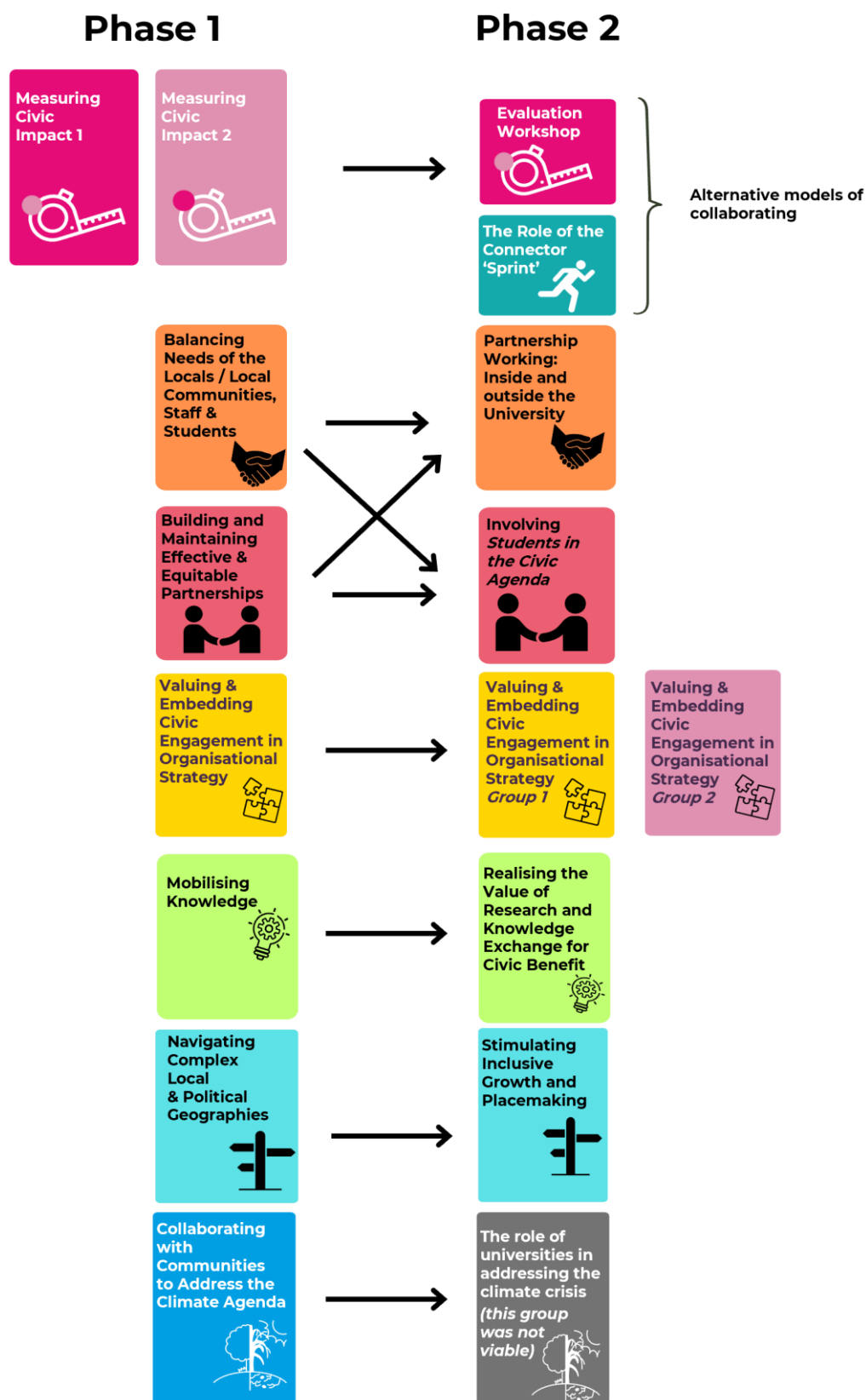


Figure 2, The focus of the thematic learning groups in phase one and phase two.

3. What we've learnt

Learning from the programme was shaped by the rapidly changing context in which universities operated from 2023 to 2025. During this period, universities faced severe financial pressures, leading to restructuring processes and tighter controls on spending. This report seeks to celebrate the tactical, creative and resilient approaches that participants in the programme utilised to support institutional change and make civic work 'stick'.

Ideally, universities would have the time and capacity to plan their civic approaches. In reality, civic activity often emerges across departments, institutions and organisations, and is often not identified under the label of 'civic'. There is a familiarity in this challenge; the NCCPE's work to embed public engagement in higher education reflects a similar narrative, including nuances between definitions of terms attached to the work - what is included, what is excluded and how disparate activities are brought together³.

3.1. Framing activity through the '4 Ps': Purpose, Process, People, and Place

The EDGE tool, (Assess your institutional culture: Introducing the EDGE tool, 2025) developed by the NCCPE, provides an organising framework for institutions to assess the support for public engagement at an institutional level. The EDGE tool uses the three categories of Purpose, Process and People as lenses through which to view the extent to which engagement is embedded within a university. Civic activity has an added lens of place, reflecting that much of a university's civic role is shaped and dictated by the needs and characteristics of its place. It is worth noting that 'civic' and its approaches are not consistently understood across universities and the meaning of 'civic' varies outside the higher education sector. This was picked up in the early discussions of the ALP. For example, in local government the term 'civic' is often associated with administering the democratic function of a council. The NCIA produced a Civic University FAQ,⁴ that sets out the different ways 'civic' can be articulated and understood. The paper references how important it is for partners

undertaking civic work to come to an agreement on what they deem 'civic' to be and provides a starting point and moved discussions towards shared understanding. Even with a clear definition, participants noted that embedding civic activity across their organisations can be challenging. To frame the learning from the ALP, we have provided broad definitions of the '4 P's framework'

Purpose

How do universities negotiate, describe and evaluate the value they create through their civic activity, and frame their purposes for civic work?

Process

How do universities build civic identities and partnerships through intentional, iterative practices? What does being a civic university mean for the ways that universities organise and govern themselves?

People

Are academic, professional staff and students given opportunities and support to develop a civic identity? How do trust-building and relationships shape civic success? Are citizens of a place able to work with the university on civic activities or define the civic work that universities commit to?

Place

How do universities understand and enact their civic role within specific geographies and partnerships? How are civic boundaries identified, and how does this reflect and affect histories, relationships and power dynamic?

In the Theory of Civic Change,⁵ another output emerging from the NCIA, the 7 P's framework (Purpose, Process, People, Place, Partnerships, Practice and Policy) was utilised. The additional Ps, Partnership, Practice and Policy have not been used as lenses in this report, as throughout the ALP, these were observed to run through the 4 P's.

The following sections explore each of the 4 P lenses in turn, drawing out what they reveal about the journeys of the partnerships involved in the ALP. The 4 P's offer a practical framework for understanding the complexity of civic engagement. Together,

they capture the strategic intent behind civic activity, the organisational practices that sustain it, the relationships that give it life, and the contexts in which it takes place.

3.2. Purpose: moving the civic agenda from the margins to mainstream

Civic activity can be viewed through a ‘purpose’ lens. When embarking on this work, a key question to ask is:

How do universities negotiate, describe, and evaluate the value they create through this activity?

The purpose lens focuses on how institutions frame their civic mission, align it with broader strategic goals, and communicate its relevance to internal and external partners. In the early rounds of the ALP there was fragmentation in how universities, partners, and local communities defined and understood civic work. Participants struggled to describe the purpose and scope of the civic work of their organisation. For university participants this is linked to the complexity of the internal landscape, and the challenges of mapping and understanding the full breadth of civic activity being undertaken.

A ‘paralysis of definition’ for civic activity was observed across all ALP groups. This caused challenges for people to evidence the collective impact of the civic work and thereby make a case to secure funding and evidence its value to the mission of the organisation. Participants asked the following questions:

How can we describe ‘civic’ in language that is clear, inclusive and accessible beyond higher education?

Who initiates the conversation about civic activity?

What’s in it for community partners?

Is ‘civic’ simply a label for what universities already do?

To support the groups with some of these questions, CRESR and NCCPE introduced the Civic University FAQ paper to some of the ALP groups, which provided a starting point and moved discussions toward a shared understanding. Even with a clear definition, participants noted that embedding civic activity across their organisations remained challenging. Some universities had strong civic narratives for specific projects (or areas of work), but these were isolated from wider institutional strategies, and the narratives were not understood beyond the project teams.

Participants recognised that building links with research and knowledge exchange for civic partnerships required clear strategies and supportive structures. When thinking about purpose, leadership was viewed as essential - not simply through authority, but through the ability to listen, connect, and embed civic purpose across organisational silos.

The ALP brought together participants from a wide range of roles across universities and civic partner organisations; from universities- operational delivery staff, academics, project managers, and a small number of senior strategic leaders operating at executive level and from civic partners - grassroots community volunteers, voluntary organisation, local authority and health trust staff working at various levels. The diversity of representation enriched the learning environment, allowing for multiple perspectives on civic engagement and institutional change.

Strategic leaders played a particularly influential role in embedding civic activity within their partnerships and individual organisations. Those who were most effective anchored civic work within institutional KPIs and broader strategic frameworks, ensuring it was recognised as core business rather than peripheral activity. By aligning civic goals with organisational priorities, they were able to mobilise support across departments and sustain momentum.

A key tool used by these leaders was the development of compelling narratives. By clearly articulating how civic engagement meets both community needs and institutional strategy, they generated buy-in from staff and partners. These stories helped translate abstract civic ambitions into tangible, relatable goals, galvanising

action and supporting strategic planning. In doing so, they demonstrated that civic responsibility is not only compatible with institutional success, but also integral to it.

However, the fragmentation of civic responsibilities across teams and departments was repeatedly cited as a barrier to coherence. Several participants stated that their universities portrayed civic work in strategy documents with broad and performative language, creating a disconnection internally among staff working on civic activities and with external civic partners. The sense of ambiguity around the term 'civic' began to shift as participants engaged more deeply in the ALP meetings. A need emerged amongst participants to create the time and structure to develop a shared language and understanding of a partnership's civic activity. Allocating time and space to co-define civic within a partnership was more likely to ensure a shared understanding and ownership over the agenda.

Over time, the ALP meetings created a space for practitioners to legitimise their work and build confidence. By the second phase, many participants no longer viewed civic activity as peripheral but as a central part of how universities could implement their strategic aims, some participants began to make progress on civic activity being formally recognised by their university. Participant B, for example, began the programme questioning whether their university's civic ambitions reached beyond anchor partners to schools, rural communities, and peripheral groups. By the end, they had helped embed civic into the university's strategic core, contributing to a Civic Agreement with anchor organisations and a memorandum of understanding with a local hospital. The programme also enabled them to articulate the value of their role and press for professionalisation of civic practitioners.

Participant C, a senior leader, initially voiced frustration at the lack of clarity or shared definition of civic activity. Through the ALP, they found solidarity and strategic insight from peers, which reshaped their approach. They argued that civic purpose cannot rest solely on institutional commitments; it depends on practitioners who can deliver civic work in practice. For them, the ALP became an essential space for peer reflection, challenge, and support.

By the final in-person event, participants reported that the programme had helped shift civic roles from the margins to the mainstream. They gained confidence in framing their work as central to their institution's mission and developed stronger narratives to articulate its public value. Practical examples, such as student partnerships and community-driven initiatives, demonstrated civic work as intentional and impactful. Participants also recognised that this clarity could strengthen future research bids and funding proposals.

However, the challenge of demonstrating civic value within existing performance frameworks persisted. While a November 2024 letter from Education Secretary Bridget Phillipson⁶ gave participants momentum to raise the profile of civic work, many noted that institutional recognition had yet to materialise. Concerns remained about how civic activity could be meaningfully featured in frameworks like the Research Excellence Framework,⁷ REF (*the framework used in the UK to assess the quality of research*), prompting calls for new sector-wide approaches to evaluation.

In sum, participants came to see 'purpose' as a blend of clarity, legitimacy, and visibility. Clear definitions reduce fragmentation, legitimate roles give practitioners recognition, and visibility across the institution ensures civic activity is embedded as a valued part of the university's culture and identity.

3.3 Process: civic practice as ongoing process

Civic activity can be viewed through a 'process' lens. When embarking on this work, key questions to ask are:

How do universities build civic identities and partnerships through intentional, iterative practices? What does being a civic university mean for the ways universities organise and govern themselves?

The process lens examines the systems, structures, and practices that underpin civic engagement. It considers how universities organise themselves to support civic work through effective governance, clear strategy, funding, and evaluation.

The ALP reinforced the idea that civic engagement is not a fixed destination, but a continuous process shaped by university civic strategies and external partnerships. Across the 14 partnerships, the programme enabled reflections on practical approaches to civic engagement work and the processes that facilitate or hinder these. The activities classed as ‘civic’ (as outlined in the Civic Impact Framework⁸) are wide-ranging, this makes it challenging for universities to pinpoint where civic work happens, demonstrate its impact, and embed it within organisational structures.

A strong theme throughout the ALP was the pivotal role of students in advancing the civic agenda, particularly through Community Engaged Learning (CEL), which emerged as a practical and strategic priority for several partnerships in the process of advancing their civic activity. Participants in the *Involving Students in the Civic Agenda* thematic group shared a growing belief that students are not only beneficiaries of civic work, but co-creators. Discussions in this group explored how to build the capacity to deliver community-based learning, align student and community needs, and integrate civic practice into teaching and learning.

Participants discussed how framing CEL within a pedagogical framework- rather than simply as a route to workplace skills- could help embed it into institutional planning and the curriculum while strengthening its academic credibility. Designing intentional learning experiences that benefit students, academics, and community partners requires careful planning, structured support, and a shared understanding of civic learning outcomes. These outcomes should extend beyond employability to include personal growth, critical thinking, and social responsibility.

As well as creating opportunities to embed CEL in the curriculum and the wider student experience within universities, there was a growing recognition that mapping community challenges and building relationships with the community was a key part of this work. Striking a balance to ensure that community organisations were not overburdened whilst also providing equitable access for all students to engage with civic and community learning opportunities was a challenge shared across ALP participants.

Participants shared examples of effective community-engaged learning and student volunteering, noting these were most impactful when embedded within place-based partnership strategies. These approaches not only align with student motivations to contribute meaningfully to their communities but also enhance student satisfaction and graduate outcomes. For these initiatives to be sustainable and institution-wide, allocated dedicated time within their workloads to support and embed this work effectively. The Plymouth Compass framework⁹ an example of how to support students to navigate their whole university experience, identifying and understanding the attributes they will gain in four key areas: academic, civic, professional and personal. The framework provides university staff with an audit tool to understand how the curriculum is currently supporting students and how to develop it in the future. It is an example of how to support students to navigate their whole university experience, identifying and understanding the attributes they will gain in four key areas: academic, civic, professional and personal. The framework provides university staff with an audit tool to understand how the curriculum is currently supporting students and how to develop it in the future.

Over half of participants shared that their institutions had civic goals but did not have clear processes to achieve them. Most referenced that while community partnerships existed, they were often ad-hoc, dependent on individual commitment rather than structured with institutional support. In half of the partnerships involved in the programme civic engagement often remained fragmented, with limited visibility of who was active and a tendency to repeatedly target the same areas of underrepresentation. Challenges also surfaced around how to establish equitable partnerships. Processes to support this were discussed using two prompts the NCIA Equitable Partnership toolkit¹⁰ and a report from the Higher Education Policy Institute; Stronger Together – Why we need a new and expanded role for universities and university groupings.¹¹ Other tools were shared to support partnership working, including the NCCPE partnership cycle.¹² These provided ideas and mechanisms to develop processes than underpin effective civic partnership working.

The themes of evaluation and impact measurement ran through all learning groups in phase two of the programme. Most groups expressed the need to understand the outcomes and legacy of civic engagement and how to articulate its impact to make

the case for the resourcing and recognition of civic practice. However, expertise and understanding of how to effectively measure the impact of such a broad agenda was often limited, highlighting a need for evaluation frameworks and collaborative approaches to evidence gathering that reflect both quantitative and the qualitative value of civic working.

Tips for creating an impact report for civic working were shared by one university who had just completed a pilot impact report. They developed a framework to collect evaluation data from staff across the institution and produced a report that balanced case studies with data. This approach helped colleagues see the range of civic practices already underway and recognise their value. By embedding data collection into staff training and reporting processes, the university aimed to make the report an annual exercise, building momentum and embedding civic practice more deeply each year, and also providing an opportunity to showcase what was happening to staff, partners and governing boards across the institution.

Tools like the Civic Impact Framework, CIF, also supported universities and partners to ask the right questions about their civic activity and develop locally relevant metrics.

Whilst tools like the CIF supported people to ask the right questions, participants sought more support to develop metrics and indicators. The NCCPE provided workshops to support people developing a Theory of Change and an evaluation plan, and developed the civic outcomes framework to help people identify outcomes relating to their civic work

When participant E, joined the programme, their partnership and institution lacked a structured approach to civic engagement. By the end, they felt more confident, informed, and embedded within their institution's civic journey. The development of their partnership's Civic Agreement is a good illustration of this progress. But the participant also acknowledged the labour involved in the process of piloting a civic project, which can often be slow, under-recognised, and under-resourced. Their advice to 'start small' and embrace the uncertainty was validated by other participants in the group. This position affirms a key learning on 'process' from the

programme, that impact is generated from both the success of large-scale initiatives, and the accumulation of smaller projects.

The ALP was itself a civic practice, showing how internal structures and cultures shape external civic identity. Participants highlighted the value of cross-university collaboration, peer learning, and open forums for dialogue. Other initiatives shared by partnerships like 'Place Leaders Dinners' and 'Civic Mobilising Groups' demonstrated how convening spaces can generate alignment and momentum around place-based priorities and strategies.

At the final in-person meeting, participants highlighted the value of the programme in creating a space for reflection. In a pressured higher education environment where outputs and metrics dominate, and relational working is under-resourced, opportunities to pause, share, and think critically about civic work are limited. The programme offered a supportive setting for participants to step back from daily pressures and engage in purposeful dialogue with peers. This reflective space was especially meaningful for those without formal civic roles. Many explained that their civic work stemmed from personal values. Recognising this values-driven commitment is essential and highlights the need for universities to acknowledge and reward civic contributions, even when they fall outside formal job descriptions or institutional strategies.

Ultimately, embedding civic engagement as a 'process' requires institutional commitment and recognition of civic roles. Civic work must be resourced, valued, and made visible, and provide personal and professional rewards for those who drive it forward.

3.4. People: relationships as the foundation of civic practice

Civic activity can be viewed through a 'people' lens. When embarking on this work, key questions to ask are:

Are academic, professional staff and students given opportunities and support to develop a civic identity?

How do trust-building and relationships shape civic success? Are citizens of a place able to work with the university on civic activities?

Throughout the ALP, participants reflected on the centrality of 'people' in civic work. Across all learning groups it was widely discussed that civic work builds on a relational foundation, shaped by trust, mutual understanding, effective communication, listening, negotiation and networking-building skills. The groups discussed how to navigate power dynamics, especially for those whose roles are marginalised in institutional hierarchies. For example, when civic activity is led or coordinated by professional services staff it can go unrecognised or be taken for granted. It is worth noting that the ALP participants were predominantly involved or interested in civic engagement activities, rather than other aspects of civic activity e.g. procurement, employment practices etc.

The ALP enabled valuable peer connections to be formed. Participants described the ALP groups as one of the few professional spaces where they could speak honestly about the challenges of civic work, share learning, and receive solidarity/support. The structure of ALP meetings, problem-based, peer-led, and conversational-enabled a form of knowledge exchange that was both rooted in practice and mutually beneficial to participants. When considering supporting staff and students to develop a civic identity it is worth considering how to create a reflective space for peers to share and learn from each other.

The role of community input into civic activity was a core part of the discussions of several ALP groups. How can universities develop a 'front-door' functionality so that people in their locality know how to approach them, how they can work together, and how to access support from the university? What creative and inclusive engagement methods can be used to understand what local communities want or expect from their university? Two partnerships used open space methodologies, a format of meeting where the agenda is designed by the attendees, to understand priorities for

their local communities and worked with partner organisations like Citizens UK to convene around locally relevant areas of social action.

Participant F, a local authority partner, offered valuable insight into the ‘people’ dimension of civic activity. As one of the non-university participants, they brought an external perspective formed from their public sector experience. Their reflections revealed a developing understanding of the strategic pressures facing HEIs and, to combat this, the power of relational approaches in driving civic collaborations. In one of the group meetings, they reflected that *‘strong partnerships do not rely only on structures, but on people who are willing to build bridges across cultural and institutional divides’*. Their ALP journey highlights the importance of inter-sectoral empathy: the ability to see things from another institution’s perspective. It also speaks to a wider programme learning on trust-building being a gradual and meticulous process which cannot be fast-tracked.

Students are a key asset in universities’ civic work and need support to develop their sense of civic responsibility. Creating structured opportunities for students to be involved in civic activity was core to one group and featured in discussions across the others. Providing in-curriculum opportunities for community engaged learning or service-learning mitigated students missing out on these enriching experiences that are otherwise only available as an extra-curricular volunteering opportunity. When opportunities only exist outside the core curriculum it risks reinforcing existing divides as it may be difficult to take part if a student must work or has caring responsibilities. Participants discussed how linking these opportunities to graduate outcomes, employability and skills development facilitated internal buy-in to provide opportunities within the curriculum and demonstrate their value to students.

Academic civic practice is a fundamental part of a university's unique role in place, and how academics are supported to leverage their expertise was a theme throughout the programme. Discussions were had around how knowledge exchange funding,¹³ participatory research funding¹⁴ and impact acceleration accounts¹⁵ was used to address community research agendas. External reporting metrics such as the REF, Knowledge Exchange Framework,¹⁶ KEF, and Higher Education Business and Community Interaction,¹⁷ HEBCI, data were identified as key sector drivers that

could be used to support, identify, and champion civic academic practice.

Participants also discussed mechanisms to understand the research needs and capabilities of communities. Networking and co-creation events between academics and community organisations were cited as one way of developing connections and identifying mutually beneficial research propositions. Resources developed by the NCCPE, such as ‘purposeful partnership cards’,¹⁸ were shared to support participants to run events like this in their partnerships.

The role of the ‘connector’ featured across all parts of the ALP. This was described as a person that connects people across university silos and opens up the university to those working outside it. They can translate university jargon and technical language for a range of audiences, see areas of connection and common ground between university staff and communities, and create the conditions for relationships to develop and thrive. They often understand the complexity of other organisations and infrastructures and can support university staff to understand and work with different organisations. Conversations about the ‘connector’ were so prevalent that a focused session to design a resource (a ‘sprint’), was run to better understand what these people do, explore how they do it, and to begin to articulate the value of ‘connectors’. This session fed into the creation of a resource¹⁹ currently in publication to support civic professionals to articulate the skills, knowledge and attributes they bring to their work.

The ALP has demonstrated that people are the foundation of civic work. If ‘connectors’ aren’t recognised and given autonomy to act and if staff and students aren’t supported to develop an understanding of their civic identity and to build mutually beneficial and trusting relationships, a university’s civic ambitions will struggle to become reality. Additionally, academics should be given opportunities to be nurtured and challenged to develop a civic academic identity; see ways in which their academic expertise can be applied to their place; be supported to develop relationships; and to develop their civic knowledge building.

3.5. Place: from geography to connections- expanding the civic space through co-existence and relationships

Civic activity can be viewed through a ‘place’ lens. When embarking on this work, a key question to ask is:

How do universities understand and enact their civic role within specific geographies and partnerships?

How are civic boundaries identified, and how does this reflect and affect histories, relationships and power dynamic?.

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.

‘Place’ emerged as an evolving concept throughout the programme. Early reflections tended to treat place as static geography, such as a city, region, or university campus. As the programme progressed, participants began to explore place as a relational concept. Participants became more attuned to how their institutions could open themselves up to local communities, from rethinking campus access to responding to local priorities with humility and flexibility. Some participants discussed how stepping outside their comfort zones enabled them to learn about other institutional models and community dynamics, allowing them to question existing civic boundaries and explore new areas of work beyond them.

At the start of the ALP there was a group dedicated to thinking about place: navigating complex local and political geographies. This group shared a common understanding of the complexity of working in place and the need to understand nuanced local agendas and ways of working. This group asked key questions such as:

What is the structure of the local government?

Who operates in each scale?

How can we work together at these different scales?

What role do universities have in supporting local struggles and building power for diverse local communities?

How do universities with campuses across many areas interact with place?

It was acknowledged in the ALP groups that working in a place-based way is challenging, takes time, and relies on effective relationships and mutual understanding. Members of this group wanted to develop approaches to work across complex socio-political geographies and deepen their understanding of local and regional policy contexts.

After the mid-point ALP day this group chose to focus on stimulating inclusive growth and placemaking. This indicated a shift from the need to understand the complexities of place to thinking about a university's role in improving a place for its local communities, students and staff. This group built on the understanding and challenges of working in place, evolving their discussions to consider power and equity, and how to ensure the drive for economic growth does not leave people and places behind. At the end of the ALP members of these groups stated they had increased their knowledge of different infrastructures in a place, how power is distributed in and across these, and of the local and regional policy context for civic working. They also reflected that they had increased sensitivity to the power dynamics in place-based working and developed their understanding of how to approach holding space for this.

Some participants reflected on the limits of universities' power within place, especially in areas where trust with local communities had eroded. This shows universities do not just occupy or shape the place they are located – they are also shaped by it. Other participants described how civic priorities were sometimes out of step with those of local government or businesses, leading to tensions around collaboration with community partners. Participant E who works in local government reflected that because they are not mandated to work with universities, like they are with the NHS and other place-based organisations, there could be a hesitance to work with universities and there was a need to be clear about the reasons to do so. Additionally, they stated the need to understand each other's timescales, ways of

working, decision making and other organisational practices, that are often assumed knowledge.

These challenges prompt a deeper question:

Whose priorities count and whose voices matter in the civic university mission?

Participant A's reflections capture this shift in understanding of place. Having joined the stimulating inclusive growth & placemaking group, they entered the programme with questions around how universities could support place-based innovation and skills development. By the end, their learning had become more action-oriented. They called for greater alignment between national and local government and HEIs, noting that civic impact requires not just willpower, but policy coherence and sustained funding. The participant's reflections also resonated with a wider theme: place as a site of power negotiation. Universities must learn to share space, both symbolically and materially, for example rethinking campus access to the local community. Other participants repeatedly emphasised the need for an inclusive approach to accessing university spaces, particularly the spaces historically marked by exclusion. The ALP highlighted that civic places are not static. They are constructed through relationships, values, and shared practices.

Across the ALP approaches were shared to support working in a place-based way including using community organising techniques to understand and support grassroots activism in place, forming a coalition of the willing and building from there, reading and using local strategic documents e.g. growth and skills development plans, and attending local council meetings or reading minutes to identify areas of shared interest.

Navigating the complexities of place, understanding the different organisations that exist in places, their remits, key agendas and how they function was such a key aspect of the ALP it led to the development of a resource with direct input from participants: the place navigator.²⁰ This resource was developed to support the need to understand places, it was iterated and tested with ALP participants. The place navigator aims to convey some of the tacit understanding of place that was valued by the ALP participants.

The ALP has shown that being a 'civic' university is a journey. Contextualized through the 4 Ps of civic, this section explores how the participants developed their civic purpose, engaged in change processes, strengthened relationships, and reimagined their sense of place. The civic journey is still work in progress, and there is much work to do.

4. Tracing the civic journey of three action learning partnerships

This section explores how three university-led partnerships- A, B and C - navigated their civic journeys through the NCIA ALP. Framed through the '4 Ps of civic', it captures their distinctive civic contexts at the start of the programme and institutional changes resulting from their participation. The partnerships each demonstrated a good awareness of both the challenges and opportunities involved in civic engagement, along with a clear commitment to the ALP. While shaped by distinct institutional and regional contexts, they shared a common goal: to embed civic purpose more effectively within their universities and local communities. The partnerships selected different ALP groups reflective of their context and priorities. Partnership A was drawn to measuring civic impact, the climate agenda and navigating complex geographies; partnership B to civic knowledge mobilisation; and partnership C to valuing and embedding civic engagement in organisational strategy.

4.1. Foundations and entry points

The three partnerships entered the programme from distinctive institutional and geographical starting points, carrying their own questions, assets, and ambitions. Partnerships A and B joined at the outset in August 2023, participating from the first phase of the programme. In contrast, partnership C entered in April 2024, at the beginning of the second phase, bringing fresh perspectives while also navigating the challenges of joining a programme already in motion.

Partnership A began with clear awareness of a fragmented civic landscape. Although the lead university of the partnership was involved in impactful work with local underserved communities, their civic engagement work was largely uncoordinated. The partnership sought to use the ALP to establish a more integrated framework for their civic activity, particularly across complex local and political geographies shaped by different local authorities. The partnership's emphasis on the climate agenda demonstrated a regional commitment to sustainability, and industrial ambitions toward Net Zero. Their concerns around consistent understanding of terms like 'civic

impact’, and who the metrics ultimately serve, reflects a thoughtful, critical stance toward the nuances of civic collaboration.

Partnership B brought a distinctive arts and design-based civic lens to the programme, focusing on creative collaborations with community partners. Their motivation was to connect their grassroots engagement with a more embedded institutional strategy. Their concerns included the ethics of data collection with “over-researched communities”, the importance of storytelling in impact narratives, and the need for robust methods of evidencing civic impact. These issues are noticeable in their prior work across local regeneration, public engagement, and social purpose initiatives. The partnership expressed an interest in exploring the following ALP themes: ‘mobilising knowledge for civic impact’, and ‘navigating complex local and political geographies’. Their interest in the ‘mobilising knowledge for civic impact’ theme reflects a broader desire to integrate civic activity into their academic practice and develop civic academic identities. The partnership saw civic engagement as a means of activating creative capital, notably through projects collaborating with community organisations. They also highlighted an aim to build sustainable civic models that authentically engaged local communities and use artistic and design-based methods to facilitate social change.

Partnership C, joined in phase 2 but came prepared with a strong grounding in civic engagement work. While they lacked a formal civic team, their Law Clinic and Dental Social Enterprise initiatives highlighted a commitment to community engagement and community engaged learning. Despite these successful initiatives, they identified three major challenges: enhancing and embedding best practices across the university; addressing entrenched inequalities in health, transport, and housing; and fostering more inclusive and accessible engagement practices tailored to the needs of their diverse communities. Their entry point into the programme reflected both ambition and challenges. They recognised the need for greater coherence across ad-hoc civic activities and emphasised the importance of listening to local communities.

4.2. Milestones

Over the course of the ALP, all three partnerships attained significant civic milestones, supported in part by NCIA funding, and leveraging the peer support and networks created by the ALP to turn their civic ambitions into action.

Partnership A utilised the innovation funding to launch an innovative community engagement initiative that combined students, academics and community organisations. Community organisations submit a project brief detailing a task students will work on, expected timescales and format of the final output. These are shared with students and matched with an appropriate academic who then oversees the project and supports the students to work on the brief. This project embodies the 'People' and 'Place' dimensions of civic, as it taps into relational and locally-rooted civic activities centred on lived experiences. At the end of the programme, participants from the university in the partnership reported a more confident and coherent understanding of how civic engagement is situated within their university's broader strategy. The ALP was repeatedly credited as a crucial enabler prompting cross-departmental dialogue, revealing gaps in institutional knowledge, and offering a platform to exchange ideas and best practice with peers from other institutions. They also noted that hearing from others in similar roles, but working within different organisational structures, helped them think more strategically and more holistically about their own approach. This feedback reflects the 'Process' dimension of civic and the role of peer learning spaces in advancing individuals' understanding and approach to civic activity and how it can support them to enact change in their organisation and partnership.

Partnership B used NCIA innovation fund to pilot a civic fellowship project. The fellow was embedded within a civic partner organisation and enabled the university to think through how they can incorporate community organising into research and the curriculum. An academic participant from partnership B also commented that the ALP supported them to understand their own institution and a professional services staff member stated they gained a much better understanding of how the higher education sector approaches civic, community and public engagement. The ALP also provided a peer support network which the partnership capitalised on by organising a

round table discussion to develop their understanding of how academics can be supported to undertake civic activity and develop their civic academic practice. The focus on mechanisms that underpin and facilitate academic civic practice show a developing understanding of embedding civic activity through the 'Process' lens whilst also addressing the 'People' dimension of civic activity by supporting civic identity development in staff. Embedding the fellow in a civic partner organisation supported the partnership to deepen their connection with the university, supporting the partnership to develop the 'Purpose' dimension of civic activity.

Partnership C identified the need to have a 'front-door' for community members and organisations to understand what the university does and how they can work together. In collaboration with community partners, using priority setting activities (such as the purposeful partnership cards from the NCCPE) they developed a shared understanding of each other's priorities, navigating misalignment and differing expectations with honesty and transparency. Through these activities they reached consensus and used this grounding to develop a community hub, a part of their website where community members can find out how to work with the university. Beyond the 'front-door' initiative, the ALP enabled wider relationship-building across the partnership. Members reported a strengthening of civic ties with local organisations. These emerging networks were described by one member as connections that 'almost certainly wouldn't have happened without the ALP'. The ALP also created a reflective space for members of the partnership to share challenges associated with their civic activity and learn from others in similar positions. Partnership members - most of whom did not have civic engagement formally included in their roles - used the sessions to build confidence, test ideas, and learn from colleagues across the sector. The act of listening, as one partnership member highlighted, was 'just as valuable as contributing.' Collectively, these milestones stand as a formative in the partnership's civic journey. They were grounded in 'Process' reflexivity, and an emergent civic 'Purpose' that resonated with the needs of their local community.

In each case, the reported milestones were about more than delivering discrete civic projects - they represented structural shifts in how the partnerships' universities conceive civic activities and turn ambitions into actions.

4.3. Institutional changes resulting from their participation in the programme

The partnerships did not simply carry out civic activities, they changed how civic work is thought about, planned, carried out, evaluated and legitimised within their institutions.

Partnership A moved from a fragmented to a clearer and more integrated approach to civic work. This was enabled by the ALP, which prompted better coordination and created institutional momentum around embedding civic activity into the student experience. Members of the partnership reported that learning from other institutions in the programme helped them overcome internal ambiguity about how civic activity could be supported and overseen with governance structures.

Partnership B's most profound shift was internal. While they entered the programme with a focus on improving relationships with community partners, they came to understand that internal legitimacy of civic work, coupled with resources and shared narratives, were prerequisites for sustained civic partnership working. The civic fellowship became a model for this change, and the ALP gave them a platform to legitimise civic work and drive the change. This speaks to the 'Process' in civic: developing mechanisms to support civic academic practice.

Partnership C used its relatively short participation in the programme to clarify its offer to community partners in collaboration with them. They strengthened relationships between civic organisations and the university through meaningful listening and dialogue; reducing the over-burden experienced by some community partners. It also enabled participants to turn ideas into action, operationalising civic activity by using a strategic approach to get senior buy-in.

4.4. Challenges and sustainability of civic work beyond NCIA

Despite their successes, the partnerships encountered challenges, highlighting the fragility of civic momentum in a financially constrained context.

Partnership A is currently seeking sustainable funding for its civic work. The ambition to create student-led civic initiatives via microgrants is high, but questions remain about how this will be funded beyond the NCIA. This tension between aspiration and sustainability is typical of civic efforts across the country.

Partnership B is looking to build community organising into academic civic practice and the curriculum and align the wider institutional social purpose agenda with practical civic activity. The culture change they are working towards in their university takes time and requires patience.

Partnership C faced resource constraints and capacity issues typical of institutions newer to the civic agenda. However, they demonstrated how focused support and access to peer learning providing by the ALP can accelerate progress.

All three partnerships recognised that sustaining civic work requires more than projects- it needs ongoing investment in people, shared processes, and long-term purpose.

4.5. Conclusion: a shared but divergent civic journey

While the civic journeys of A, B, and C differ in scale and starting points, they converge on several key themes:

- Articulating civic value enables institutional support (Purpose)
- Becoming civic is a developmental and iterative process (Process)
- Civic engagement is deeply relational (People)
- Place is not a static physical space, but a dynamic site of co-existence and complexity (Place)

Through the ALP, each partnership grew in its capacity to think systemically, act collaboratively, and advocate for a civic mission that reflects the realities of their local communities. Their journeys show that civic progress is not linear. It is shaped by reflective spaces like the ALP that allow civic practitioners to test, challenge, and develop their ideas.

5. Reflections

5.1 Reflections on the role of the action learning programme in supporting institutional change

The ALP took place during a period of well-publicised financial challenges in UK higher education. These pressures had real implications for universities' ability to sustain their civic activities. As the programme progressed, the participants who had civic roles in their universities found themselves navigating uncertainties, while advocating for the value of civic engagement in a sector where resources were increasingly scarce. However, what emerged from the programme was not only a clearer picture of the barriers to civic engagement but also a better understanding of what effective civic engagement should look like.

During the programme, participants repeatedly discussed the opportunities and risks of engaging in civic activities. When done well, civic activities offer universities a chance to build relationships with local partners, while contributing to the wellbeing of their communities. But when done ineffectively or ignored altogether, it risks alienating local partners and undermining trust, particularly when civic promises are not followed by sustained action.

This report has shown that civic work cannot be treated as a marginal tick-box exercise. It must be integrated into institutional structures and rewarded by senior leaders. Many of the participants in the programme highlighted the ambiguity around their civic roles, lack of available resources, and inconsistent institutional support, with some describing their civic work as “self-designed and still evolving”, often taking place in isolation or without institutional recognition. These reflections point to a key finding of the programme: universities need to move from treating civic activity as a personal passion project to recognising it as a shared institutional responsibility.

The ‘4 Ps’ framework has been used in this report to help us understand the learnings emerging from the programme. It provides a helpful scaffold for both reflection and action, through which universities and civic practitioners can better understand their roles, clarify their ambitions, and design more sustainable approaches to civic engagement.

The first lens, Purpose, helped participants grapple with a fundamental challenge: how to define the civic mission of their institutions in clear and actionable terms. At the start of the programme, many partnerships reported uncertainty and hesitation in articulating their civic goals. Over time, they developed more confident narratives that linked civic engagement to institutional priorities like student success, research impact, and regional development. A clearer articulation of civic purpose gave legitimacy to their work and helped articulate its broader public value. It also enabled them to advocate their work more effectively within their institutions.

The Process lens focused on the internal systems and structures required to embed civic engagement in institutions. Throughout the programme, the participants noted that while their universities had civic aspirations, these were not always matched by co-ordinated strategies and resources. The programme highlighted how civic activity often remained siloed, with success dependent on individual champions rather than institutional support. Through the programme, many partnerships began to consider how to formalise civic work through strategic planning processes and reflective evaluation practices. These reflections point to the importance of embedding civic work within organisational culture, not only by civic aspirations or a series of piecemeal projects, but as an ongoing commitment.

The People lens emerged strongly across the programme, with civic activity repeatedly described as fundamentally relational, built on trust, continuity, and mutual understanding. The programme surfaced the often-unseen emotional labour of civic practitioners who act as connectors, bridging university silos and fostering relationships with local communities. While participants in these roles often reported feeling isolated or undervalued, this is not an inherent feature of the role itself. Rather, it reflects institutional conditions that fail to formally recognise, support, and reward this work. The programme offered not only a space for shared learning and collaboration, but also a sense of solidarity for those navigating these challenges.

Finally, the Place lens encouraged institutions to rethink what it means to be located in a community. Rather than seeing place as a fixed geographic boundary, evidence emerging from the programme highlights that the participants' understanding of place evolved from a fixed geography to a dynamic site of negotiation and complexity

shaped by histories, exclusions, and evolving needs. The programme saw some partnerships use mapping tools to identify under-engaged groups, while others started rethinking campus accessibility issues. This highlights the need for universities to move away from imposing place-based understanding onto communities and instead engage in open dialogue that builds shared ownership and co-created priorities.

To conclude, the ALP demonstrated that civic engagement cannot thrive without clarity of purpose, institutional processes that enable it, people who are recognised and supported, and a clear connection to the places universities seek to serve. The programme provides a model for advancing the civic university agenda through peer-learning and reflective practice that empowers civic practitioners to adapt civic engagement work to their context.

5.2. Recommendations

The following summary tables outlines the key findings and recommendations for each 'P' of civic activity and the different audiences that intersect with the work.

Purpose

A clearly articulated civic purpose legitimises the work, aligns it with institutional missions, and helps surface its public value. Without this clarity, civic work risks being marginalised or misunderstood. What we learnt through the ALP was that many partnerships struggled with defining civic purpose at the outset. Over time, they developed clearer narratives that linked civic work to institutional KPIs and strategic goals.

Policy Makers

Recommendations

Develop national civic evaluation frameworks and embed civic activity in funding/accountability mechanisms.

Rationale

Would incentivise institutions to take civic work seriously and provide a shared language for evaluating impact.

University Leaders

Recommendations

Recognise civic work in promotion and planning processes.

Rationale

Would legitimise civic roles, attract investment, and support staff retention.

Civic Practitioners

Recommendations

Align civic narratives with institutional goals using data and stories.

Rationale

Helps gain credibility and influence within institutions.

Civic Partners

Recommendations

Co-create civic agendas with universities.

Rationale

Ensures civic work is grounded in local priorities and builds trust.

Process

Civic engagement is not a fixed destination but an ongoing, iterative process. It requires intentional structures, reflective practice, and institutional alignment to be sustained. We learnt that many institutions lacked coherent processes to support civic work. While civic ambitions were often articulated, they were not always backed by structures, resources, or cross-institutional coordination.

Policy Makers

Recommendations

Fund regional civic infrastructure and long-term systems.

Rationale

Enable sustainable processes that outlast projects and staff turnover.

University Leaders

Recommendations

Establish internal structures for coordination and recognition

Rationale

Reduces Duplication increases visibility and supports staff wellbeing.

Civic Practitioners

Recommendations

Use reflective tools and peer learning to advocate for change

Rationale

Empowers strategic roles and builds shared language for advocacy.

Civic Partners

Recommendations

Co-design accessible engagement pathways.

Rationale

Improves trust and facilitates collaboration on shared priorities

People

Civic engagement is fundamentally relational. It depends on trust, mutual understanding, and collaboration across boundaries. We learned that civic roles are marginalised; staff and students lack structured opportunities, and community partners value continuity but experience fragmentation.

Policy Makers

Recommendations

Invest in civic capacity building and connector roles.

Rationale

Strengthens human infrastructure and professionalises civic roles.

University Leaders

Recommendations

Recognise civic roles in workload and promotion,

Rationale

Legitimises work, improves retention and embeds civic values.

Civic Practitioners

Recommendations

Build peer networks and advocate for connector roles

Rationale

Reduces isolation and surfaces effective practices.

Civic Partners

Recommendations

Build continuity and advocate for shared ownership.

Rationale

Embeds partnership working and supports equitable collaborations

Place

Place is dynamic and relational. Engaging with place requires humility, responsiveness, and shared ownership but we know that universities define civic boundaries narrowly and priorities may not align with local partners.

Policy Makers

Recommendations

Align research and place-based funding with regional strategies and governance.

Rationale

Supports coherent, place-sensitive strategies and reduces misalignment.

University Leaders

Recommendations

Develop inclusive co-owned place-based strategies.

Rationale

Ensures civic work reflects live experiences and builds trust.

Civic Practitioners

Recommendations

Use creative methods to understand the layers of a place e.g. relationships, physical geography, history, identity and the interconnected nature of these.

Rationale

Engages marginalised voices and adapts strategies to local realities and needs.

Civic Partners

Recommendations

Redefine civic boundaries and advocate for access.

Rationale

Challenges extractive models and reflects diverse local needs.

Appendix: Methodology of the Action Learning Process

Construction of the Process

Universities, in collaboration with civic partners, were invited to express their interest in participating in a programme that would help them better understand and develop their civic work, pilot civic approaches and in turn, build capability across the sector. Expressions of interest were received from 38 institutions, with each application outlining:

- Civic challenges
- Involvement of civic partners
- A self-assessment against the civic impact framework
- Organisational strengths and opportunities for civic working
- Existing partnerships and examples of practice
- Context of the institutions and their place

A diverse mix of university, community and civic partners took part in the programme with twelve partnerships at various points in their civic journey, from new to well established invited to join the programme in the first phase and two additional partnerships joined in phase 2. Partnerships were invited to participate based on their location, type and size of organisation, level of maturity in embedding civic, and specialism; ensuring a broad range of organisations were represented to maximize the opportunity for transferable learning to the wider sector. The selection criteria also included involvement and collaboration with their partners outside of the university, and partnership teams were expected to include community and civic partners.

Meeting structure and format

The programme ran over two phases between 2023 and 2025, with regular online ALP meetings. Meetings were held on Teams- use of digital tools like Padlet and Miro. Meetings followed a structured format that included:

- NCIA updates from facilitators
- Reflections from participants on their current work, any challenges they were facing or their contexts.
- Presentations or task, followed by a discussion or reflection task
- Actions to takeaway
- Debrief for facilitators and observers

The facilitation of the meetings was undertaken by the NCCPE Team; each meeting had two facilitators. The facilitation of the meetings was divided between the two facilitators to bring variation in style of facilitation and allow team expertise to be deployed to specific discussions. At the end of each round of ALP meetings the facilitation team would meet to discuss and reflect on any key themes emergent across all the ALP groups and this would inform the design of the subsequent round of meetings.

The online meetings were supported with three in-person events that brought together the whole cohort of participants. The in-person events took place at the beginning, middle, and end of the programme.

The first in-person event was a chance to build relationships, share the context and challenges and opportunities for each partnership, and come together in thematic ALP groups to set the scope and aims of the first round of online ALP meetings.

Phase 1 ALP online meeting themes

- Measuring Civic Impact (split across two groups due to popularity)
- Mobilising Knowledge for Civic Impact
- Balancing the Needs of Locals, Local Communities, Staff and Students
- Navigating Complex Local and Political Geographies
- Valuing and Embedding Civic Engagement in Organisational Strategy
- Building and Maintaining Effective and Equitable Partnerships
- Collaborating with Communities to Address the Climate Agenda

The second in-person meeting took stock of the progress made in the first phase of the ALP and reviewed the emerging resources to support civic work. Through an Open Space methodology, the second phase of ALP group themes were set, co-creating the scope and aims of each group. This resulted in changes in thematic

focus of several of the groups, a reorganisation in group membership and the involvement of alternative approaches to peer learning. We sought to augment the work of the groups by providing other structures for learning such as providing a workshop on evaluation methods and a 'sprint' on 'Making the case for the Role of the Connector' in the civic agenda. At the second in-person meeting a short guide on how to make the most of the ALP was shared, this was informed by learning the first round, and the competitive innovation funding scheme was launched.

Phase 2 ALP online meeting themes

- The role of universities in addressing the climate crisis (this group didn't have a viable number of members to run)
- Realising the value of research and knowledge exchange for civic benefit
- Stimulating inclusive growth and place making
- Partnership working; inside and outside the university
- Involving students in the civic agenda
- Valuing and embedding civic engagement in organisational strategy (*two groups covered this theme*)

The final in person meeting was an opportunity for participants to come back together and share what civic practices they had developed since being a part of the programme and share the impacts and challenges that arose through their funded projects. The meeting provided space for participants to test and refine outputs emerging from the process such as the Place Navigator and the Outcomes Framework and set out potential next steps for civic networks, collaborative working and policy development.

Innovation Funding

The inclusion of Innovation Funding was a core part of the design and methodology of the ALP enabling partnerships to pilot new interventions to accelerate their civic work. Understanding that even with goodwill, ambition, and an appetite to further their impact on their people and places, universities would be unable to take risks, try different approaches and bring that learning back into the learning programme

without some monetary resource. A subsequent report²¹ is in publication showcasing the innovation funding projects.

Financial resources, of £5000, were provided to all partnerships in the programme to support them in testing pilot projects tailored to their challenges and their contexts. There was also £2,000 to support involvement of civic partners whose costs needed to be covered to enable their participation.

Alongside the Innovation Funding, bursaries were provided to all partnerships to facilitate the involvement of civic and community partners. This was intended to cover travel, civic partners time and aimed to remove barriers to civic partners involvement.

At the second in-person event, the Innovation Funding competitive process was launched to access larger amounts (up to £15,000) of funding to undertake civic work. Partnerships were encouraged to apply as consortia for funding with the ALP facilitation team being interested in cross-partnership bids with clear ideas, a commitment to challenge, and an ability to work proactively with others.

The Innovation Funding aimed to further the NCIA's vision to increase the connectivity, momentum and effectiveness of the HE sector's civic activities for local, societal, economic, and environmental benefit and maximise the contribution universities can make towards addressing societal challenges and responding to policy priorities. The facilitation team made some suggestions towards how the funding could be used:

- A focus on challenges that are expressed locally to the partnership that builds new knowledge that can benefit society.
- Partnerships can apply to work as 'buddies', focusing on challenges expressed locally but are common to both partnerships, providing opportunity for a comparison of challenges and development of resources that can be used in different contexts.
- Bids that explore a wider methodology or approach. This might include the development of training and taking lessons forward.

The application process had two stages – a short preliminary form that introduced the partnership or consortia and a brief idea for innovation funding. Some of these

preliminary applications were invited to continue through to a lengthier application and in some cases were asked to work with another university partnership who were undertaking similar work in different areas of the country.

The ALP funded six projects through the second round of Innovation Funding of which questions and challenges that the projects tackled, along with the methods, learning and impacts created will be shared in a subsequent report.

Data collection and analysis

Data from the ALP meetings were gathered through participatory observation and facilitator reflections. Researchers from the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research (CRESR) attended each ALP meeting as observers and produced detailed notes throughout the 20-month programme. Their role was to identify and analyse how participants discussed civic activities, navigated systemic challenges, and developed partnership working practices over time. A structured note-taking guide was used to capture key dimensions of civic learning. This included identifying the issues participants prioritised, mapping enablers and barriers to institutional change, and recording observations on how collaborations were emerging within and across partnerships. After each meeting NCCPE facilitators and CRESR observers would reflect on key themes emerging from the meeting and make connections to discussions in other groups.

Following each round of ALP meetings, CRESR researchers undertook a thematic analysis of the data, using iterative coding techniques to identify emerging themes. Visual analysis tools, such as Miro boards, were used to synthesise findings and support collaborative reflections. These summaries were then reviewed by NCCPE facilitators. All data were anonymised in line with ethical approval by Sheffield Hallam University. The findings presented in this report capture key reflections observed throughout the programme.

Limitations

The ALP faced some limitations that influenced both its delivery and the findings presented in this report. From a facilitation perspective, challenges included participant turnover within partnerships due to staff changes and institutional restructuring, varying levels of engagement across partnerships, and imbalanced representation, with university staff significantly outnumbering external civic partners. These factors limited the diversity of perspectives that the programme aimed to explore.

In terms of data collection, use of observation meant that the ALP meetings were not recorded, nor were verbatim transcripts taken. This approach was chosen to create a safe and open environment for discussion, encouraging honest and reflective contributions from participants. However, it also meant that some nuances and specific details may not have been fully captured in the observation notes. While this imposes some limitations on the depth of data collected in the meetings, our priority was to identify systemic patterns of civic practice, rather than focus on individual accounts. As such, the findings evidenced in this report still offer valuable insights on civic activities for the broader higher education sector.

All outputs resulting from the ALP were reviewed by participants, ensuring that nuances in their experience and insights were represented appropriately.

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Establishing Civic: Strategy and Practice – Reflections and Recommendations from the NCIA Action Learning Programme

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