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ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

Civic Geographies of Care: Mapping the Scope and Scales of Universities' Civic Action

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ABSTRACT

This article presents empirical evidence from the UK to explore where 'civic geographies' emerge and how they are enacted. Responding to Jenkins and Blunt's call in *Area* for 'geography as a discipline to revisit its civic scope and ambition' in the context of universities' civic engagement, it draws on scholarship on care ethics and evidence from recent research with civic universities in England to propose that institutional place-based civic activities are bound up with attitudes and practices of care. By following care practices, it argues, already-existing civic geographies can be identified and utilised to guide institutional and sector-wide approaches, extending beyond traditional knowledge exchange partnerships to ecological and bioregional engagement. A case study of an environmental initiative in South Yorkshire signposts how this can happen, drawing together transdisciplinary networks of academics into an epistemic community shaped by a common care for place.

1 | Introduction

The call for geography to 'revisit its civic scope and ambition' (Jenkins and Blunt 2024) in the context of universities' civic activities (Goddard et al. 2016) remains largely unanswered. Universities' responses to the challenges of their places have often become bogged down in a 'paralysis of definition' (Dobson and Owolade 2025a) or curtailed by the wider financial crisis engulfing UK universities (Dobson and Owolade 2025b).

Evidence is emerging, however, of where and how civic geographies of place-based engagement are developing. This paper draws on one aspect of the National Civic Impact Accelerator programme, a three-year drive funded by Research England to support civic universities in England, gather evidence of 'what works' and share best practice. As part of this programme, researchers examined how civic activity is resourced and maintained during a period of unusual financial pressure within UK universities (Dobson and Owolade 2025b). This evidence expressly concerns the relationship between the civic ambitions articulated by universities and the resources (funds, time, people, leadership) allocated to the task. It thus focuses less on universities' rhetoric than on how and where they act and what they prioritise.

The evidence from that work is analysed here, showing that geographies of civic action emerge at interconnected hyperlocal, administrative and regional scales; and that they are driven by normative as well as pragmatic concerns. Civic geographies thus position universities as ethical actors in their places, attending to challenges at different local scales through practices of care that extend beyond their commercial or political interests. A case study of emerging civic practice in South Yorkshire in the north of England illustrates how this happens organically and informally as well as through official strategies and decisions.

The article thus offers an empirical platform for the concept of civic geographies and identifies their scope and scale, while

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showing how this research agenda can be advanced with a focus on universities' responses to current ecological challenges. The following sections discuss the term 'civic geographies' and related literature, including literature on care; present findings from focus group discussions and a case study demonstrating how academics converge across social and natural sciences and the arts and humanities through shared care for their local environment; and conclude by advocating for civic geographies to embrace ecological considerations.

2 | What Are 'Civic Geographies'?

The term 'civic geographies' is underdeveloped and the literature on the topic is sparse. A special issue of the journal *ACME* in 2015 sought to engage with 'the connective or associational dimensions of civics, coupled to a sensibility of engaging with the places, buildings and wider infrastructures of civic life', suggesting that to consider the civic is to explore what enables people 'to feel connected to or associated with something "larger" than themselves, an assembly of others who might be regarded as a "community" or a "society"' (Philo et al. 2015). From a US perspective, Block et al. (2018) introduce the idea of 'critical civic geography' as a tool to analyse service learning and community-based research at two Chicago universities, emphasising the use of geographical methods and theories to 'work toward countering inequalities in society and promoting positive community change' (2). The term, however, appears to have had little traction until its revival in Jenkins and Blunt's (2024) article, which explicitly links it with the burgeoning literature on civic universities.

In the UK, the current wave of interest in civic universities can be traced back to Goddard's call (2009; 2016) for universities to engage with wider society on social as well as economic issues. His intervention echoed a growing concern in the US with universities' roles as 'anchor institutions' in their places; advocates of anchor institutions emphasised a normative mission to tackle social inequalities as well as an economic mission to improve the fortunes of their host cities (Taylor and Luter 2013; Cantor and Englot 2014). More recently, a national Civic University Commission in the UK (UPP Foundation 2019) stressed the importance of reconnecting universities with their local communities, highlighting the need to demonstrate the public benefits arising from universities' activities.

The work of the Civic University Commission was taken forward through a Civic University Network hosted by Sheffield Hallam University (SHU) and, from 2023 to 2025, the National Civic Impact Accelerator (NCIA) programme. Among many resources developed over this period was a Civic Impact Framework (Dobson and Ferrari 2021); a Theory of Civic Change (Dobson 2024); a toolkit for developing equitable partnerships (Gifford et al. 2025); guidance on achieving economic impact (Pugh et al. 2024); and summaries of learning from an 18-month action learning programme involving more than 100 participants from 14 university-led partnerships (Owolade et al. 2024; Adams et al. 2025).

While these resources fleshed out in significant detail how universities can engage in civic activity through different forms of practice, there was less direct focus on issues of place and scale. To a large extent this reflected the diversity of universities' place-based engagements and the forms of local governance in the UK; while a university in London, for example, might focus on its immediate hinterland in one or two boroughs, others may have a regional focus, while research-intensive institutions will also have substantial international engagements—the University of Nottingham, for example, has campuses in China and Malaysia. One response to this patchwork was the development of a 'Place Navigator' tool to help practitioners engage with relevant partners in their localities (National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement n.d.).

2.1 | Civic Geographies of Care

The notion of civic geographies combines spatial and social bonds, as Jenkins and Blunt (2024) and Philo et al. (2015) have observed; the experience and praxis of civic universities, as observed through the NCIA programme, also signal a stance of attentiveness towards particular places and communities within them. Attentiveness is a key theme in the literature on care ethics (Tronto 1993). Tronto calls for attention to who cares, what is cared about, how care is given and how it is received. She argues (1993, 19) that 'caring requires that one start from the standpoint of the one needing care and attention'. In a recent article in *Area*, Kapsali (2025) takes up and extends this call, arguing for 'a caring geography that centres care and solidarity as interrelated, embedded practices'. Solidarity is understood as 'negotiated mutuality across difference' (Karaliotas and Kapsali 2021), a description appropriate to universities' asymmetrical relationships with the stakeholders in their localities. Kapsali draws on the extensive literature on care to argue that care is situated and relational (Lawson 2007) and collective rather than individual (Chatzidakis et al. 2020).

By using the lens of care, place—in the context of the civic university—becomes understood as constituted through relationships across different scales (Massey 2005) rather than through administrative boundaries; Trogal (2017) argues that practices of care both produce space and are shaped by it. Care involves attending to the mundane and everyday aspects of place and human activity (Kapsali 2025) and the undervalued economic activities of caring (Gibson-Graham 2008). Applied to the civic work of universities, this highlights the importance of more-than-market motivations, challenging the emphasis on financial value and economic returns (Brown and Carasso 2012). It valorises practices of repair and remaking (Mattern 2018) as well as innovation and invention. Returning to Tronto's formulation of an ethic of care, it focuses attention on practices of 'caring-with' (2018) and giving and receiving care, as well as the challenges of caring about, and taking care of, which are 'the duties of the powerful' (Tronto 1993, 114). Questions of power and of unequal relationships are implicit in any discussion of care and of universities' civic action (Lawson 2007; Jones and Columbano 2022). Lawson (2007, 9) argues that care ethics 'invites us to question what our discipline [geography] values'. That observation can be applied more broadly to universities and their work as place-based institutions.

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3 | Researching Care in the Civic University

Within a year of the launch of the NCIA programme in late 2022, it was evident that civic universities were facing severe financial challenges. The NCIA team decided additional work was needed to consider these issues and their likely impacts. An initial online survey was conducted in summer 2024 of individuals working in civic roles. This drew 22 responses from 20 institutions. Selected key questions were then shared at a webinar in October 2024 which was attended by 41 people involved in universities' civic activities, either as practitioners or partners.

Following this scoping, in February 2025 the author convened three focus group discussions with practitioners identified as central to the civic work of their institutions. A purposive sample (Ahmad and Wilkins 2025) of 64 potential participants with specific responsibilities for civic activity across 40 institutions was identified, covering all English regions, Scotland and Wales, but excluding Northern Ireland for logistical reasons. From this cohort 42 individuals were invited to attend in-person events, providing a balance of locations, types of institution and seniority; 31 practitioners from 27 universities responded, including some who had been informed of the discussions by colleagues and had asked to join. Of these, 25 participants from 20 universities in England and one in Wales actually attended. The focus groups each lasted around two hours and were held under the Chatham House Rule, so quotations and participating institutions are anonymised. Ethical approval was granted by Sheffield Hallam University. The discussions were audio recorded and manually transcribed.

The discussions centred on how civic activities are and can be resourced in challenging times. This focused attention on which initiatives, relationships and practices universities are now prioritising and how these can be maintained in future. The discussions thus generated a wealth of material on the types of relationships that matter to civic universities, and the activities considered most important in times of financial stress. Using Tronto's categories of care, the conversations thus highlighted what universities care about, what they feel responsible for taking care of, who they care with, and—to some extent—how they offer care to their places and communities.

Reading between the literature on care and on civic universities, an analysis of the focus group discussions shows both how civic universities exercise care, and where they do so. This permits a fleshing-out of the concept of civic geographies based on empirical data, showing where and how universities attend to their perceived civic responsibilities.

4 | Attentiveness in the Civic University

Thematic analysis of the transcribed discussions revealed six modes of civic activity and three spatial foci, showing both what universities care about when engaged in their civic roles and where this happens.

4.1 | Modes of Civic Care

The discussions demonstrated six ways in which universities chose to attend to the concerns of their localities and communities. These are ethical; connective; nurturing; policy-focused; expert; and resource-led. In undertaking any action, a university might adopt more than one of these stances.

The first of these is ethical. Ethical action derives from a sense of moral purpose and principle (Tronto 1993). Participants described 'a real passion to go out and engage and work civically with communities', a concern to address inequalities and advance social justice, and to support local people and organisations through activities such as student volunteering. One participant spoke with pride about an environmental project in which their university was a lead partner, stating that it was 'empowering young people to be the changemakers for the future of the planet'. This mode of civic care is driven by a strong sense of the public benefits universities can provide and their moral onus to take a lead on behalf of their localities.

The second mode is connective. The focus here is on building and strengthening connections within local communities and between communities and the university. It is characterised by activities such as deep listening and storytelling, often accompanied by a valorisation of community knowledge to complement that developed within the academy. Building trust, identifying shared challenges and interests, and equitable action characterise this mode of civic activity. One participant commented:

> We've spent years going out and talking to communities where they set the agenda about what civic would mean.

Another said:

> Hearing those [community] voices, being in listening mode rather than talking mode, is really important.

Here, deepening the connections between the university and communities is regarded as just as important as the projects or actions that stem from these connections.

The third mode is nurturing. While this is an expression of care, it is more instrumental and institutionally led than the connective mode, with a focus on contributing to local education systems, improving attainment and widening participation—areas where universities have a clear offer, but where they also have an institutional interest in developing local cohorts of skilled and motivated students. It places the university in a parental position vis-à-vis local populations, raising questions of the unequal power relationships embedded in civic engagement (Shiller 2017). One participant gave an example:

> One thing we're doing with our local college is trying to unlock T level acceptances [*technical qualifications for those aged 16+*] – we have just agreed to create a

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> foundation year for local college students and that's something that can make a difference.

The discussions also revealed three modes of civic activity that were more pragmatic and less driven by principle. Questions of power are inescapable in these initiatives. In Tronto's framing of care, they are more concerned with what universities 'care about' or 'take care of' rather than caring with others or care-giving towards their communities. These are the expert mode, in which the university shares its expertise with partners in a process of knowledge exchange; a resource-led mode, where activity follows the money available and funding is used to bring partners to the table; and a policy-focused mode, in which the university works with partners on shared governance agendas.

The last of these has been particularly important in some parts of England as government plans to create new mayoral combined authorities take effect (see Section 4.2). Several participants saw this complex devolution agenda (Morphet and Denham 2026) as a key area of civic activity, benefiting both the universities and their partners in local government. One commented:

> There's something about forming strategic agreements... How do we pool things together so we're not only stretching ourselves but also drawing in capability?

4.2 | The Where of Care

The forms of civic care outlined above indicate geographies in which action is possible. While a few participants mentioned universities' global outlook—especially in relation to research-intensive institutions—it was notable that this was phrased in general terms, either in recruiting international students or in sharing knowledge. The 'global' civic university makes little distinction between one place and another, and in many ways increases the pressure to become place-agnostic (Grant 2021).

In contrast, the 'local' takes three specific and identifiable forms. The first is the hyperlocal: neighbourhoods that are close to a campus or are of interest because of the disadvantages they experience or the connections built through long-term relationships. Other connections may arise from initiatives to open university facilities such as libraries and lecture halls to local residents. Sometimes attention is driven by the large numbers of students in particular neighbourhoods and the need to maintain good relationships with residents, as one participant explained:

> If we don't get our relationships right in local communities, those communities become hostile to our students. ... I've got to talk to our neighbourhood lead about students and recycling. She's going to absolutely hold us to account.

The second is the geography of local governance and administration. The political and geographical complexities of English local government within a centrally directed system (Pill 2024; Morphet and Denham 2026) mean that there are often overlapping boundaries and responsibilities (between local government and health services, for example, or between different tiers of local government). England currently has two parallel systems of two-tier local governance, plus a growing number of 'unitary authorities' that combine local government functions. In urban areas there are city councils and—in many cases—mayoral combined authorities that have strategic oversight of issues such as transport and economic development; outside the main conurbations, in places where there are no unitary authorities, there are district councils which provide functions such as refuse collection, and larger county councils responsible for issues such as education and social services. This system is periodically in flux through nationally driven reorganisations designed to promote unitary and mayoral combined authorities.

Universities must negotiate partnerships across this often confusing landscape and can sometimes play the role of a neutral broker. The geography of governance can steer universities' civic work, as a participant from one large city with a mayoral combined authority described:

> We've been talking recently about more of a joined-up civic university agreement with other universities and the combined authority. Should it sit within the combined authority, and should they be telling us what they want from us?

Third is the geography of regional economies, including labour and housing markets. Here universities are seen as providing R&D expertise, skills for employers, innovative technologies and economic contributions such as spin-off companies—activities valorised through policies such as UK Research and Innovation's Knowledge Exchange Framework. One participant highlighted the importance of connecting situated local work with these regional impacts:

> It's interesting to think about the visibility of your backyard – it's really important working in that hyperlocal space but still being able to think about regional, national and international impact.

Together, these three scales of civic activity delimit the 'civic' without restricting it to the city or municipality. The ethical concerns and relationship-building activities of civic practitioners play out largely in geographies that are proximate to the main physical presence of the institution.

4.3 | A Civic Geography of Care: The River Dôn Project

As an illustration of a civic geography of care, SHU's formal and informal relationships with the River Dôn Project[1] demonstrate how abstractions of 'place' and 'civic' become materialised in the connections and labour of care for 'something larger' (Philo et al. 2015).

The River Don shapes the landscape and lives of 1.37 million citizens in South Yorkshire. The River Dôn Project (RDP), hosted

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since 2022 by a local social enterprise, Opus Independents, seeks to transform decision-making and generate new connections between residents and the ecologies of the river based on the concept of the 'rights of nature' (Krashi et al. 2024). Globally, there are over 150 'rights of nature' initiatives (Putzer et al. 2025). Since 2022, RDP has explored the possibility of legal personhood for this 69-mile stretch of water, considering whether the river has rights and what systems, including new digital platforms, are required to achieve this.

RDP responds to the crises of nature depletion and climate change by focusing on one river and how it flows through and shapes a bioregion (Hubbard et al. 2023). It also addresses questions of connection and community by encouraging acts of stewardship and care for both human and non-human communities. Linked to that, it confronts challenges of governance and accountability, asking who is responsible for the river and how responsibility can be exercised. Its focus on place is relational and grounded, showing what a civics of care could look like.

RDP draws academics, professional staff, artists and community members into relationships of care. While it does not feature in any Civic University Agreement or strategic documents, care for place has prompted individual members of staff to pursue collaborative projects. Since 2023, this has brought in nearly £65,000 from SHU, including £40,000 to support a series of artist-led events and exhibitions; a further £40,000 has been granted through the EPSRC-funded Ecological Citizens programme to explore local stakeholders' relationships with the Don. Of the total, £41,832 has directly funded RDP work while most of the remainder has supported staff at SHU to work with RDP.

More widely, RDP has convened a network of academics and practitioners spanning geography, visual and sonic arts, ecopoetry, microbiology, social sciences and knowledge exchange support. By early 2026 RDP had worked collaboratively with at least 26 academics from SHU, including 11 from arts and humanities; seven from natural sciences; and eight from social sciences. The result is an emerging epistemic community (Haas 1992) which holds and maintains shared meanings and values that persist beyond institutional frameworks. Through attentive practice, care becomes materialised in place. A striking example is the Faethm exhibition at Kelham Island Industrial Museum (Sheffield Hallam University and the River Dôn Project 2025), in which artists responded to the river through installations, found objects, film and other visual, written and audio media.

In terms of modes of civic care, the engagements between academics and the RDP have been mainly ethical and connective, driven by ecological concerns and linking with the river and its communities through research, collaboration and artistic practices. The 'where' spans the hyperlocal, administrative and (bio)regional, moving between scales to engage with ecosystems and governance across South Yorkshire through activities such as river walks, data collection and stakeholder mapping.

By forming a gathering-space for a loosely networked epistemic community, RDP manifests itself as an expression of care that is both pragmatic and hopeful. It begins to articulate what a thriving river could look like in terms of access, obligations, networks of relationships and the flourishing of humans and non-humans together. It thus gestures towards multispecies justice (Celermajer et al. 2021), and what Barnett (2018, 24) calls the ecological university—'a university that recognises that it is situated amid ecosystems of vital significance to the planet's wellbeing'. It is a potential manifestation of the concept of *ecopolis*, the mutual placemaking of all species, attentive to the experiences of those who are marginalised to 'imagine a political community in harmony with non-human animals, nature, and the Earth' (Orrego Torres and Rossello 2024, 458).

5 | Conclusion

The evidence from the group discussions presented above shows how care provides a lens through which civic geographies can be brought into focus, while the case study offers an illustration of a civic geography of care. Together, they suggest that civic geographies can be revealed through grounded attentiveness, following the concerns and practices of care demonstrated within civic universities.

Such civic geographies can encompass but extend beyond universities' rhetorical commitments to partnership, revealing concerns that respond locally to the wider global challenges presented by the climate and biodiversity crises. Initiatives such as RDP reveal a need for civic geographers to respond at ecological as well as administrative scales, paying attention to bioregional connections (Hubbard et al. 2023).

This calls for an expanded view of the *polis*, the sphere in which civic relationships are formed. Trogal (2017) describes care as a form of spatial production. Starting with the fabric of the university, this requires scrutiny of the physical spaces the university produces, who can access them on what terms and their effects. Campuses are investments into localities but can also have unintended consequences—for example, when local housing markets become dominated by students (e.g., Revington et al. 2023) and limit access and affordability for others.

In architect Paul Downton's framing of *ecopolis*, 'the purpose of the city must be to create an environment that generates health and enhances sustainability' (Downton 2009, 20). The campus provides a starting point, but Trogal also calls for attention to space 'beyond the proximate' (Trogal 2017, 159), highlighting the associated practices of mutuality (ibid., 166). Not all proximities are physical, and not all physical proximities involve the same density of relationships. In the face of environmental as well as governance crises, it is no longer tenable to speak of place and space, and the relationships these encompass, without considering the ecosystems that support and form them. Ecology is both locationally specific (the return of species such as salmon and ospreys to the River Don, for example) and infinitely connected at nested, overlapping and shifting scales (Whatmore 2002). As Morton (2010, 4) describes it, it 'includes all the ways we imagine how we live together'. Milligan and Wiles (2010) speak of 'landscapes of care' that encompass issues of governance, cultural practices and social norms, policies and place characteristics. Adopting a praxis of attentiveness and openness, civic geographies of care can thus extend to the non-human with what de

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la Bellacasa (2011, 85) calls a 'speculative commitment to neglected things'. The university can be a central part of such a reframing.

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Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Endnotes

[1] The diacritic is used in the official name of the project, but not in the name of the river.

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