

# Time to Serve



Summary report of an  
Onward Roundtable

**UK** year of  
service

ONWARD 

## About Onward

Onward is a not-for-profit thinktank registered in England and Wales (no. 11326052). Our mission is to renew the centre right for the next generation, by coming up with bold new ideas and reaching out to new groups of people.

You can find out more about us on our website at [www.ukonward.com](http://www.ukonward.com) and @ukonward on all major social media channels.

## About National Citizen Service

NCS Trust Community Interest Company (NCS CIC) is the organisation that was responsible for delivering the National Citizen Service programme until 2018. It retained some funds from non-taxpayer sources such as corporate sponsorship and parental contributions to the scheme. The NCS CIC is now responsible for deploying these funds in ways which support the NCS programme and the aims it was founded to address.

## About this report

This summary report is a record of a roundtable event held in September 2021, hosted by Onward and supported by NCS. The event was held under the Chatham House Rule, so all comments below are anonymised and the discussion summarised.



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## Foreword

Young people are both society's best resource and the resource we most frequently squander.

They are the last to be hired, the first to be fired and, it turns out, the most likely to be placed on furlough - with all the economic scarring that those things entail. The stereotype of a carefree, sociable youngster is false: as Onward's research has shown, young people are increasingly more isolated, less socially attached, and less trusting than the generations that went before them. Indeed, around one in three 16-29 year olds currently display depressive symptoms. We should be more worried about these things than we often appear to be.

How should we respond to the generational impact of the pandemic? The Government has done much: introducing furlough, Kickstart and traineeships to support young people into work, and investing in mental health and social support where necessary. But there is more that can be done to help young people recover from the pandemic - and help the country to get back on its feet too - civic service.

The idea of offering young people the chance to do a year's civic service is not new or controversial. The USA has invested in Americorps since Bill Clinton was in the White House, allowing young people to undertake a placement in a school, the Peace Corps or a charity in return for a wage and occasionally college credits. Germany and France have schemes for young people to get paid to contribute to their community or the environment. The results suggest that civic service not only gives people valuable skills but that civic service leads to higher levels of volunteering and philanthropy in later life.

I am delighted that NCS is trialling a similar approach in the UK. As we discussed at this roundtable, the early experiences are extremely positive. Young people want to undertake placements, and social employers want to offer them. The anecdotal evidence from participants suggests that young people are benefiting from the experience - and that it is embedding a culture of civic contribution that may pay dividends for society over the course of their lives.

But obstacles remain. To implement civic service at scale will require considerable long-term funding, which in turn will require evidence of effectiveness. As we discussed, there is a need to show a meaningful reduction in time spent out of work to justify any taxpayer funding. There is also a need to demonstrate social impact, to justify investment from social investment or ESG investors. But with the right evaluation - and the right data - it should be possible to demonstrate levels of impact robustly.

If that is possible, then there is no reason why a civic service approach should not be rolled out much more widely, to give every young person the opportunity to contribute to the recovery from coronavirus, and benefit from a decent wage and a purposeful job.



**Will Tanner,**

Director, Onward

## Introduction

This paper sets out the challenges that young people have faced over the past two years, with their education disrupted, social lives overturned and mental health struggles an issue for many. However, the resilience they have demonstrated gives us real cause for optimism.

Across the different services NCS and our partners are delivering, I have seen creativity and innovation as we positively impact young people despite the uncertainties of the past 18 months. As we launched the UK Year of Service we had no way of knowing what the appetite would be, but it has been voracious. Almost 1,000 young people expressed interest in the UK Year of Service programme in its first week, demonstrating the desire of young adults to help the country 'build back better'.

I am convinced that there is deep social value to be had from furthering Civic Service in the UK, based on the strong evidence from similar programmes elsewhere. With the help of independent evaluators, we will be assessing the impact and value of a 'Year of Service' to the UK through this pilot. It has the potential to connect young adults to their communities, to form a habit of civic engagement and to build confidence and resilience, helping them to become world-ready and work-ready. With youth unemployment currently at 13%, it can also help the most disadvantaged young people, placements for those on Universal Credit through the Kickstart Scheme.

We believe that initiatives like the UK Year of Service can address a range of societal issues and be a great example of government, enterprise and civil society working together. Please get in touch if you're interested in finding out more about the pilot.



**Mark Gifford,**  
Chief Executive, NCS Trust

## Summary

It is hard to overstate the effect of the pandemic on younger generations. Workers aged between 16 and 25 years old made up nearly two thirds of job losses during the pandemic up until March 2021 and were more likely to be furloughed than any other age group. Those that were at school and university suffered disruption to teaching and exams, with lost learning at school estimated as reducing lifetime earnings by up to £40,000 on average over a young person's working life. Young people have also been strongly affected by the mental health aspects of the pandemic. In our report, *Age of Alienation*, we found that more than two fifths of 16-to-24 year olds say they are sometimes or always lonely.

The compounding effect of these challenges is considerable and warrants a response from policymakers. While ministers have gone to great lengths to insure against job losses through the furlough scheme and to underwrite job training through Kickstart, there is one area where young people are clearly demanding greater opportunity: the ability to serve their local community and wider civic goals such as education, care and climate. This partnership between Onward and the National Citizen's Service explored how policymakers might re-evaluate the offer for young people, develop new models that better serve their needs, and to build institutional capacity around civic service for the long term.

In particular, we explored the practical and political challenges around establishing a new model of civic service, similar to those in other countries, by which young people in the UK could undertake a paid work placement of 30+ hours a week for 9-12 months in areas of clear civic need, while being paid at the National Living Wage. This UK Year of Service concept would hope to meet multiple needs - it boosts employability,

encourages young people to build careers of community service, and builds delivery capacity in everything from mental health to disaster response. The discussion focused on the merits of such a scheme in principle, and the steps that would unlock it, at scale, in practice.

## Key points of the discussion:

### **1. The need for an ambitious and coherent offer for young people.**

There was agreement from those present that, as we emerge from the pandemic, there is an opportunity to re-evaluate the opportunities available to young people. While unemployment levels have remained much lower than forecast at an aggregate level, it remains true that young people represented the vast majority of those who have lost their jobs, and also experienced the most disruptive effects of education closures and furlough. There is considerable focus on “building back better” but what does it mean for younger generations who have disproportionately borne the brunt of unemployment, furlough and educational disruption in the last eighteen months?

This challenge framed the session and underpinned many of the contributions. Attendees observed that as the Government attempted to improve opportunity in different places through the levelling up agenda they should also consider the specific disadvantages faced by young people, including in relation to skills, work and mental health. There was a belief from those in the room that young people were interested in contributing more to society, and that this should go beyond traditional approaches to volunteering or social action and better recognise the time contribution of young people to civic action.

## **2. The UK Year of Service - an opportunity to embed a culture of service among new generations.**

The NCS presented their proposals for a UK year of Service. This is a pilot scheme, funded by the NCS Trust to demonstrate the potential of a scheme which boosts employability, directly employs young people in socially beneficial roles, and inspires these young people to build lives and careers of civic service. It was launched earlier in 2021 and will give 300-400 18-24 year olds the chance to take part in the pilot, with placements starting in August 2021.

Young people will carry out work placements for 30+ hours a week, lasting 9-12 months in one of 3 areas: healthcare, public services or the environment, whilst being paid at the National Living Wage (and more in London). Work placements range from promoting and providing Covid-19 vaccinations to replanting Scotland's rainforest, and tutoring students to help them catch up on missed schooling. Such schemes require wage subsidies and spending on training and support, but employers have already shown themselves willing to shoulder some of this burden in the pilot.

The attendees discussed how the objective was to give young people genuine skills which can embed the discipline and skills of employment, provide some of the cultural context of work, and contribute to young people's CVs. The scheme was built on extensive feedback from young people themselves that what they wanted was experience of the workplace, and an opportunity to contribute to society directly rather than through intermittent volunteering or social action efforts. It was acknowledged that early intervention could deliver stronger long-term benefits for the taxpayer, by helping to ensure young people gain a foothold in the labour market early in their career.

There was a deep sense among attendees that the concept of “civic service” had inherent value that was often overlooked. Young people want to contribute to society and often lack the means to do so. As Onward research has shown, younger generations are also less socially attached so perhaps would particularly benefit from schemes that inculcate a stronger sense of community, belonging and participation. The extent to which the UK Year of Service can achieve this, through its placements in social care, forestry, education, and further afield, is being tested with robust evaluation, to prove the benefit of civic service to policymakers. It was noted that the scheme would also need to be evaluated on its core employment outcomes, and not fall into the trap of previous schemes that focused on softer social outcomes but failed to demonstrate a meaningful effect on employability, earnings and skills uptake.

### 3. The perspective of young people

The event benefited from the contributions of a number of young people, including members of the CS Youth Voice Forum. These contributions gave a perspective that is often lost in policy debates, that of young people themselves. One contributor, currently on a UK Year of Service placement, gave a powerful personal testimony:

*“I come from a single-parent background, I was involved in a lot of gang-related activities when I was young. Throughout school, I felt I couldn’t relate to others who fretted about GCSEs. I was a 15 year old who was on bail for a crime I didn’t commit. I joined a football academy and I made the decision that I would never go back again. I had the opportunity to go to America and play for an academy and go to university.*

*“I saw loads of people growing up without role models, and City Year UK gave me the opportunity to complete my placement at my old high school. Teachers who said that I’d never amount to*

*anything were still working there, and I could prove them wrong. I have rejoined the organisation as a school service leader. I have recently graduated from university, and the skills and experiences I have gained from City Year UK have allowed me to become successful.*

*“I want to be a frontline advocate to open doors for young people. Without City Year UK funding, I wouldn’t be able to follow my passion to inspire and motivate young people. City Year UK has allowed me to be the best version of myself.”*

It was also noted that the UK Year of Service filled a gap in the labour market, for people who were neither well off enough to benefit from family networks but not disadvantaged enough to benefit from schemes such as Kickstart, but who nevertheless may struggle to find work. One young person said:

*“I can’t get a job at a cafe in Newcastle, yet I am here at a roundtable such as this. If someone is in that middle ground, where one is not terribly rich, nor the worst-off, where one is going to a polytechnic, where one is not on Universal Credit so does not qualify for Kickstart, or where the parents are not high up enough to get an internship somewhere, then it could be a struggle. Last year was the worst year of my life, because I couldn’t sit my A levels. Government is failing young people with employability, wellbeing, and education. The country should serve young people too, not just vice versa.”*

There was agreement that this first-hand experience showed the value of civic service - as opposed to a normal work placement or entry level job - to young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. By giving young people opportunities to contribute, it allowed them to be the role models they had never had, and to find purpose in civic service. In this sense, civic service was seen as an opportunity to transition from the volunteering of youth to a lifetime of contribution in adulthood. One attendee said:

*“Volunteering has been a big part of my life, with it amplifying the person I want to become professionally. But you can only volunteer for so long as a young person, and at what cost?” There was a sense that, by working with a variety of organisations as a paid employee, young people can understand their potential career routes and their value in the labour market, as well as contributing to society. While they may volunteer already, they will do so for different reasons.”*

#### **4. The challenge of creating and scaling a civic service model**

The discussion centred on a number of key questions for scaling and growing the scheme from a pilot to a national scheme. These included questions about the design of the scheme, and the explicit decision to pay young people for civic roles: should we value things only for their price or for their value? Another way of asking this question is whether the scheme substitutes for activity that would otherwise take place, therefore subsidising deadweight cost, or is genuinely additive in terms of jobs and value created. This raised the question of how the scheme worked with existing organisations and supported them to grow, rather than competing with civic society.

Finally, there was a question of funding: the pilot is temporary and relies in part on a temporary government funding scheme, Kickstart, to support the costs. How can this be funded in the long-run, and who would fund it?

In answer to these questions, attendees strongly argued that the pay was vital, as these were real jobs (not volunteering roles) which gave young people skills, experience and purpose. It was noted that without an element of pay the scheme would likely be dominated by more middle class or affluent young people, who already benefit from social capital and have access to work experience and enrichment programmes through their families

and networks. This was echoed strongly by the young people in the room, who said that they would not have contemplated civic roles without the ability to be paid, as it would conflict with part-time jobs alongside school or university.

On the subject of how the scheme interacted with existing organisations, there was a sense from those in the room that it would complement rather than conflict with civic society. There was considerable goodwill towards organisations such as the Girl Guides and Scouts and there was a recognition that there are around 170,000 charities across the country based on local societies, with turnovers of less than £30,000 a year. These organisations would benefit enormously from the ability to support a young person in a civic role for a year and would not have the ability to do so under their own steam. It was noted that if NCS succeeded in scaling the scheme, it might lead to useful cross-fertilisation of ideas between these organisations, which would be valuable given the lack of innovation in many small civic organisations. It was noted that the scheme should be cross party to ensure that it was not politicised.

Finally on the question of funding, there was an acceptance that without long-term financial backing the scheme was not viable. This funding could come from a number of sources. Clearly, if the NCS can demonstrate that civic service delivers stronger employability and skills outcomes than traditional jobs schemes then it would be sensible for government to direct funds towards a larger version of the scheme. But it was also noted that there may be other sources of funding available, both philanthropic and corporate. In particular, there was a recognition that corporates are increasingly directing funds towards ESG investing, and the potential for social bonds or other instruments to support this scheme long term.

This might also help to ensure that people recognise the value of service. Because volunteering is by definition unpaid, it does not appear in GDP statistics but the value it creates is real. By creating a scheme that recognises and rewards civic roles, service years could start to substantiate the third pillar and create a more concrete basis for recognising the role of wider civic action.

## 5. Opportunities for future growth and innovation

There was discussion of the opportunities for developing the scheme in future. It was noted that the scheme should measure the impact of work placements on productivity and retention if possible. For example, when the Prince's Trust ran a scheme to find young people employment in health and social care, they found that young people on employability programmes take fewer sick days, and that 87% have commitment to a career with that employer. This suggests that civic service can lead to real productivity and retention benefits that do not always show up in more socially focused evaluations.

Also discussed was the extent to which young people are genuinely motivated by civic service, and that this could be much better harnessed. There was a sense that during the pandemic, many young people had actively volunteered to support vaccination, local charities and support those shielding. There was an opportunity to build on that civic outpouring and create meaningful pathways for action. The NCS noted that they were hearing young people without established pathways for work experience say: "help me with my pathway, help me with my passions, and inspire me". It was noted that young people who have taken part in an NCS programme give back on average 7 hours back to their community.

There was discussion about whether a more flexible model might allow it to scale more effectively. For example, some present

believed that a 3 or 6 month offer might be more attractive for corporates to fund, and that a more digitally enabled approach could work to support young people in places where roles were not readily available. It was also noted that a more flexible approach to evaluation could be valuable: technology companies, for example, do not wait for a 3 year evaluation before deciding to scale a product, they are constantly evaluating it and scaling much more quickly when they find things that work. Could the UK Year of Service employ a similar approach? Another option was for the UK Year of Service to publish its data in a much more open source fashion, to allow academics and think tanks to interrogate results in real time.

There was agreement, irrespective of government support, the scheme should be expanded to FTSE companies and their supply chains, through existing CSR programmes and their wider commitments to social mobility. This would encourage companies to consider how their roles contribute civic value as well as creating new routes for young people to gain experience in the role of work. The idea should be to inspire young people, not just to fix their disadvantages, and to provide them with the networks and mentoring that can propel them into a meaningful career.

There was also a suggestion that government procurement could be better used to support social value through civic service. The taxpayer spends £300 billion on public services every year, much of which is commissioned through private and civil society organisations. Therefore there may be an opportunity to use this process to create more civic roles, by prospective providers using civic service as a way of proving their social value in the commissioning programme.

## Conclusion

This roundtable explored the inherent value of civic service to society as a whole and to the individuals who benefit from it. There was strong agreement that the UK had an opportunity to emulate the success of other countries in supporting new civic service models, and that the UK Year of Service created by NCS represents an exciting pilot that could prove the benefits. It was clear from the young people present that there is huge appetite from younger generations for such a scheme, and early results are promising.

The challenge is how to design a policy framework that encourages and rewards approaches like this, rather than one that focuses entirely on more traditional employment schemes. It was clear that strong, open source evaluation of outcomes, covering both core employability metrics and wider social benefits, would be key in influencing policymakers. It was also clear that finding alternative funding sources alongside government would be valuable, as this is something that employers, investors and local authorities would directly benefit from in terms of impact, skills development and recruitment.

The roundtable reiterated that for levelling up to be successful, policymakers will need to consider how to support young people to find and secure meaningful jobs that give them purpose as well as financial reward, and that civic service may be a low cost way to support young people in lagging parts of the country find opportunity and progression. The consensus was that ministers and corporate leaders should be actively exploring ways to make civic service the norm rather than the exception and to scale the impact that the UK Year of Service is already demonstrating.

## Mobilise the youth

I had my first taste of service when I was 16, when I was attending a school for the blind down in Shropshire. On Saturday mornings, I would go around to see an elderly lady called Mrs Plum to help where I could and to keep her company. When I was leaving to go back to Sheffield at the end of the course, I was about to say to her how glad I was that I had been of some assistance to her over the past year, when she said to me “David, I’m so glad to have been of some help to you over the past year”. At that point I realised just what a two-way street service was –it’s a win-win for both the ‘giver’ and the beneficiary.

This is exactly how I see the benefits of our UK Year of Service scheme, which is being funded by the NCS Trust CIC, where I am a director. These 18-24 year olds are helping to tackle some of the biggest challenges of our time: boosting vaccine uptake, helping pupils catch up in schools, filling labour gaps in social care and much more. Their employers, and society more broadly, are benefiting from the effort, passion, and skills of these young people. Meanwhile, our UK Year of Service members are being given 9-12 months of valuable work experience, training and employability support that will help get their career off to a flying start, whilst understanding the pleasure of giving back to one’s community. This initiative is a boon to both society and those taking part.

Over 100 placements are currently underway, with several hundred more still to come as part of the pilot programme. Around 100 different employers will be providing placements. These numbers demonstrate the interest in the scheme from both young people and employers. We have an external evaluation company measuring the promise of impact of the scheme, and we shall see down the line the effects on our members’ employability and civic engagement. Research on similar, longstanding programmes in the US, France, Germany and more suggest that the outcomes of the UK Year of Service will be wide ranging and positive.

Building the self-confidence and self-esteem of young people is an obvious gain to them and to society, but so is the confidence which will carry them forward to fulfil their full potential and avoid the revolving door - so often seen with youngsters with an uncertain future, or who have experienced the intergenerational disadvantage which fails to offer a first foothold on the ladder of life.

The question will then become: “How can we make sure this scheme is available to more young people after the pilot ends?”. The answer is likely to be through a partnership between government, civil society bodies and private employers. The government already spends large sums of public money on remedial action, when early investment in the life chances of young people would not only benefit them but save expenditure down the line. There is a chance here to reframe when and how we spend that money by investing in the UK Year of Service, strengthening the offer to young people with training and enrichment, and as an important step on their civic journey.

The story is similar for civil society. Meanwhile, private employers dominate in vital fields like green energy generation and social care. These firms could look to support young people through the programme with an eye on their ESG performance, boosting community relations and building a recruitment pipeline.

We are seeking, through our support of the pilot programme, to demonstrate how a Year of Service programme can work in the UK, as it already does in many other countries. We welcome anyone who wants to join us on that journey, contributing ideas, funds, or employment opportunities for young people. Our hope is that together we can make giving a Year of Service a powerful and compelling option for young people across the country.



**Lord Blunkett**

Former NCS Trust Board Member  
Former Cabinet Minister

## Social bonds and community

One of the many pernicious aspects of the pandemic has been its impact on younger people. While they have been largely spared the health impacts of the disease – in the UK, the over 70s have been nearly 800 times more likely to die of COVID-19 than the under 25s – they have borne the brunt of the economic and social costs of the response. Younger workers made up two thirds of those who lost their jobs in the first year of the pandemic. Their school and university careers have been interrupted, and as a consequence they are likely to be around £40,000 less well-off over their lifetimes because of the learning they've lost.

Beyond the economic costs, the social costs are just as worrying. According to the Young Minds charity, around two-thirds of young people think their long-term mental health will be negatively impacted. They feel more isolated, compounding the long-term trend identified in Onward's *Age of Alienation* report which found that more than two fifths of 16-to-24 year olds say they are sometimes or always lonely.

Even if they have less social attachment to interpersonal networks or connections to their local community, we also know that this generation of young people is unusually socially conscious. This strong desire to do good in the world creates an opportunity to redress the deficit in their lives. The challenge for policymakers is to create more routes for young people's ideals to be translated into practical action. No one doubts the last two years have been tough, but young people are also resilient and optimistic and, with the right help and support, will bounce back.

In this context, the proposal for a Year of Service is an idea whose time has come. Harnessing young people's desire to make a difference to a demanding, hands-on and – critically – remunerated role undertaking social action in the community, it would provide an opportunity for participants to gain a sense of

meaning and purpose while also improving their long-term job prospects. There are no silver bullets in policy-making, but the Year of Service ticks a lot of boxes. The demand from young people is there, the need in communities is there, and the infrastructure provided by the UK's world-leading charitable sector is there. With the Government on board as its financial backer, we could give every young person the chance to regain what's been lost over the last two years, creating a powerful legacy of the kind of togetherness that – at its worst – was what made the pandemic bearable.



**Lord O'Shaughnessy**

Chair, Onward's Social Fabric Programme

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