

Great British National Service

How national service could develop skills,
improve mental wellbeing, and increase a sense
of belonging among Britain's youth



François Valentin | Adam Hawksbee

ONWARD➤

About Onward

Onward's mission is to develop bold and practical ideas to boost economic opportunity, build national resilience, and strengthen communities across all parts of the United Kingdom. Our vision is to address the needs of the whole country: young and old, urban and rural, for all communities across the UK – particularly places that have too often felt neglected or ignored by Westminster.

We believe in an optimistic conservatism that is truly national – one that recognises the value of markets, supported by a streamlined state that is active not absent. We are unapologetic about standing up to vested interests, putting power closer to people, and supporting the hardworking and aspirational.

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Thanks

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About this report

Public opinion research for this report was conducted by JL Partners, who undertook a 6,064-person poll between 28th April and 9th May 2023 and convened three focus groups - two with a general sample of the public in Milton Keynes and Blackpool, and one with young people aged 16 - 21 from across the UK.





Contents

Executive summary	1
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Youth in crisis?	7
------------------	---

National service: Past and present	19
------------------------------------	----

Public attitudes to national service	40
--------------------------------------	----


Recommendations	51
-----------------	----

Conclusion	65
------------	----

Endnotes	67
----------	----

Executive summary





The idea of national service can sound nostalgic. It might call to mind a bygone era of conscription and compulsion, when young people had few prospects and limited horizons. But national service is, at its core, about a shared experience. Whether military or civic, it is about a cohort of future citizens participating in a collective rite of passage in which they learn about each other, develop new skills and build a sense of purpose. Across the world, countries are returning to the historical idea of national service to face their current challenges. It is time Britain did the same.

Britain's youth face three pressing challenges - they are unskilled, unhappy and unmoored:

- **Unskilled.** Young people are struggling to develop the practical skills to succeed in life. In the wake of the pandemic, over a quarter of secondary students are persistently absent. A total of 70% of employers say that young people qualified up to A-Level standard don't have the required life skills for the workplace. One in five 18-24-year-olds are now economically inactive, a fifth more than pre-pandemic.
- **Unhappy.** Young people have poor mental wellbeing. Referrals to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services increased by 39% between 2020/21 and 2021/22, with 1.1 million under-18-year-olds referred. A total of 58% of young people rank mental health as one of the top three issues for their generation, jointly top of their concerns alongside the cost of living at 59%.
- **Unmoored.** Young people have lost a sense of belonging to their community or nation. Almost half of 18-24-year-olds are more likely to distrust their neighbours (48%) than they are to trust them (35%), a rate of distrust three times higher than for people over 65. Only 18% of the public believe that young people are more or as patriotic as previous generations - 74% believe that they are less so.

But there is cause for hope. Young people are the most likely to want to engage in their community and volunteer: 66% of 18-34-year-olds say they want to help out in their area, ahead of 50% for 35-54-year-olds and 37% for people aged 55 or older. During the pandemic, three in four 16-24-year-olds were either already volunteering or wanting to volunteer to support the nation's recovery.

This is the backdrop and motivation for revisiting national service. Onward has commissioned new polling and focus groups to gauge public opinion, conducted extensive interviews with French officials to understand their new “Service National Universel”, and engaged with leaders from the UK’s community and youth sectors.

In the past, national service served an important social role. A study of Denmark’s draft lottery found a positive causal effect on numeracy and literacy ten years after service, with the largest improvements for men with the lowest previous skill level. Studies of US college students that participated in military training and British army veterans found increased psychological resilience. Research in France found that conscripted soldiers were more likely to vote.

Today, many developed countries are reembracing national service. Whether it is the Swiss Civilian Service, German Voluntary Social Year or US AmeriCorps programmes, they all offer a shared experience for young people to grow and develop. France has been the most ambitious, introducing the new Service National Universel (SNU) under Emmanuel Macron with the aim of full participation for every young person. Onward’s interviews with the architects of the French programme highlight important lessons to inform a new British model.

During the last decade, Britain began a national service experiment. The National Citizen Service (NCS), championed by former Prime Minister David Cameron, aimed to engage young people in civic service and improve community cohesion. But the programme lacked the necessary political and practical support, plus had its funding reduced in 2022 just as the challenges facing young people became most acute.

British public opinion stands firmly behind an emboldened national service programme. Polling conducted for this report by JL Partners finds that 57% support national service compared to 19% who oppose, with higher support among Conservative voters (71%), parents with adult children (63%), and those without university degrees (59%).

Crucially, nearly three times as many young people (18-25) support the scheme than oppose it: 46% against 17%. But members of the public are broadly against a mandatory scheme and want any programme to blend civic and military-style

activities. Focus groups with both the general public and young people themselves suggest a shared purpose for any new programme: developing skills, building mental resilience, and increasing a sense of belonging.

The Government should therefore form a new Great British National Service for every 16-year-old. The scheme need not start from scratch – the existing National Citizen Service serves as a solid foundation to build from. Full participation should be the goal, but a mandatory programme would generate unnecessary resistance from the public, parents, and young people.

Instead the programme should be an “opt-out” model, with a default that all young people are enrolled. This approach will avoid the selection bias that occurs with voluntary schemes, in which more affluent young people are likely to step forward and opportunities for social mixing are missed. If 20% of 16-year-olds-opt out, roughly the proportion that opposed the scheme in our poll, GB National Service would need to cater to 600,000 people.

The programme itself should build on the history of the NCS and other international schemes – combining a two-week residential programme, a community service programme over the course of six months alongside school or college, and an optional year-long civic programme.

Any such scheme would require significant investment – scaling up the per head costs of the existing NCS scheme suggests a total of roughly £1 – £1.3 billion a year. Two steps should be taken to lower these costs as much as possible. First, a Swiss-style model should be adopted in which public and private organisations contribute financially in order to secure support from national service participants. Second, the Government should consider a bold move to address intergenerational inequality and invest in young people, such as reconsidering the pensions triple lock.

A new national service scheme will only work if it has the support of the youth sector and civic bodies focussed on young people. One of the biggest challenges with the National Citizen Service was that it was seen as a competitor to the third sector at a time when their public funding was being reduced. The Government should form a GB National Service Advisory Board to steer the development of the programme, made up of key figures from the youth sector. The programme should, wherever possible, serve as a platform

and connector for the existing youth offer - harnessing the best of what exists, and creating new opportunities where there are gaps.

National service might conjure up images of the past. But in a moment with too few shared experiences and precious little to offer young people, it can be a crucial tool in building character and purpose. An emboldened scheme will require investment and focus from the Government, but offers both political and practical reward. Serving a broader cause alongside your peers was once the moment when young people became productive, happy, and proud citizens. It can be again.

Table of Recommendations

Challenges

Recommendations

Young people are unskilled, unhappy and unmoored

1. The Government should create a new Great British National Service scheme

Voluntary schemes struggle to get sufficient enrolment, but mandatory schemes face significant pushback

2. GB National Service should adopt an “opt-out” model and target enrollment of 600,000 young people

Purely residential programmes have large costs and a limited long-term impact

3. GB National Service should combine a two-week residential programme, six months of social action, and a voluntary additional year of service

A mass enrollment scheme would cost between £1 billion and £1.3 billion

4. GB National Service should be funded through a combination of fees from partner organisations and a change to the tax system to increase intergenerational fairness

Previous national service schemes haven't leveraged the full potential of Britain's youth sector

5. GB National Service should be shaped by an advisory board made up of youth sector organisations, employers, and other relevant bodies

Youth in crisis?



This chapter sets out the nature of the crisis facing Britain’s youth and its three main elements: a persistent skills problem, a surge in poor mental wellbeing, and a lack of belonging. Young people today are unskilled, unhappy and unmoored.

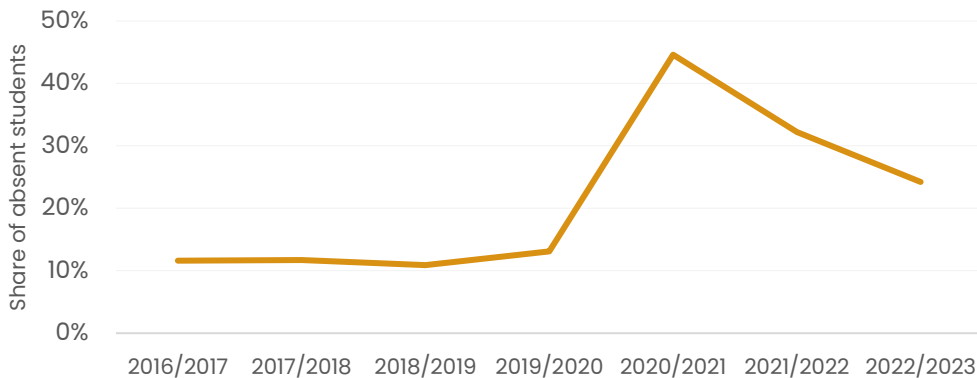
This report defines “young people” to be in the mid-teens to 24-year-old bracket, regularly defined as “Gen Z”. This definition is in line with the UN which, for statistical purposes, defines those persons between the ages of 15 and 24 as youth. When polling data for teenagers is unavailable, the report uses data from the 18-25 age group.

Unskilled: Struggling in the classroom and the office

The skills gap among young people starts at school. Since the pandemic, many schools face a growing challenge with student absence. Research from the Centre for Social Justice suggests that almost a quarter of students are now persistently absent, meaning they miss more than 10% of lessons.¹ The Children’s Commissioner found that of the 1.67 million young people categorised as “persistently absent” in the autumn term of 2021, 621,000 were absent due to illness alone and a million absent for other reasons.²

Figure 1: The rate of persistently absent students (%)

Source: Department for Education 2023³



The students that are attending school increasingly struggle to attain the basic levels of education they need. In England, the share of students achieving at least five good GCSEs or equivalent rose from 40% in the early 1990s to around 80% in the 2010s. But among the most recent cohort, literacy rates are an

international exception. While in all other OECD countries young people aged 16-24 outperform their compatriots aged 55-65 on literacy proficiency scores, young people in England are on par with their elders. Overall, England ranked 25th out of 32 OECD countries in terms of the literacy skills of those aged 16 to 24 in 2019.⁴

This relative decline will have serious effects at a national level. Only 2% of young people and children have the critical literacy skills to detect fake stories⁵ and individuals with poor literacy earn 7.1% less than they would with basic levels of literacy.⁶

Numerical skills are also subpar. Again, young people underperform relative to their international peers: while English 55-65-year-olds ranked 13th out of 32 of OECD countries on numeracy proficiency, 16-24-year-olds are 24th.⁷

A daunting entry into the professional world

Nearly three million young people do not believe that their job prospects will ever recover from the Covid pandemic – 36% of the age group.⁸

They have rightful cause for concern: the unemployment rate for 18-24-year-olds in the UK was 11.4% for the second quarter of 2023, roughly three times higher than the overall unemployment rate of 3.8%. Economic inactivity for young people not in full time education rose from 15.7% in January 2020 to 18.1% in January 2023.⁹

This high unemployment rate is compounded by larger issues around economic inactivity. 770,000 16-24-year-olds in the UK were NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) in the first quarter of 2023, representing 11.3% of all young people in this age group.¹⁰ The rate has remained persistently high over the last five years.¹¹

While nearly two thirds of young people report that “it is hard to get a job these days”, some have lost hope entirely.¹² Nearly one in ten young people studying or out of work report that they never intend to start working. 30% of 18-24-year-olds do not believe they will ever be able to achieve their career ambitions.¹³

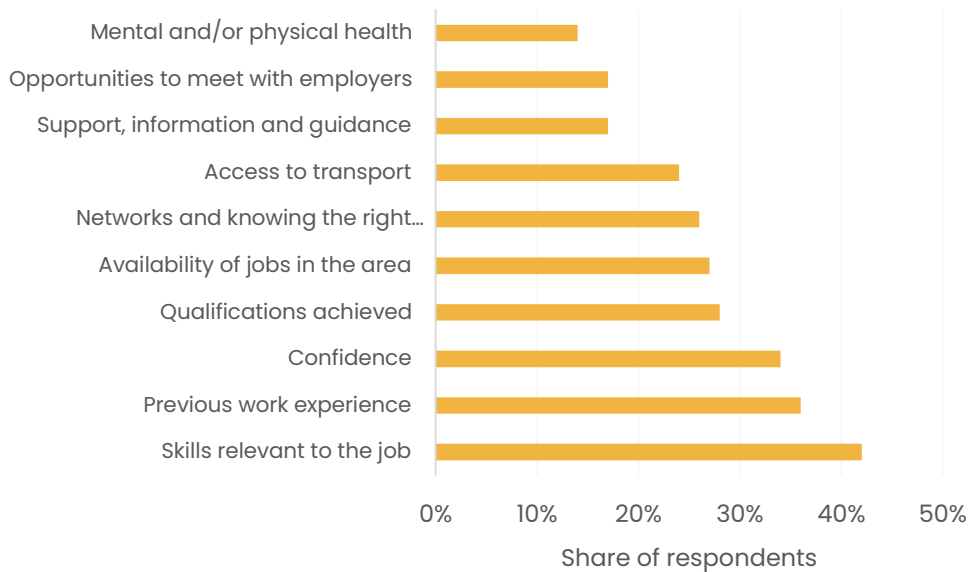
Even for those who are able to find work, many young people in the UK face low wages and insecure employment. 43% of workers aged 16-24 were in severely insecure paid work such as zero-hours contracts or agency work compared to 17% of 25-65-year-olds.¹⁴

Between school and work: stuck in the skill and confidence gap

These challenges partly stem from a "skills gap" between young people's qualifications and the skills employers are looking for. Young people themselves say that they feel victims of such a gap. 42% of this cohort believe that their education has not equipped them with the skills to get the job they want.¹⁵ This concern is mutual for employers, with the first reason preventing businesses from hiring young people being lack of skills (42%), before experience (36%) and confidence (34%).¹⁶

Figure 2: Main reasons preventing employers from hiring young people

Source: The Health Foundation, *Bridging the Gap*, 2023



This skills gap is not only about qualifications but also character and soft skills. A survey for the Duke of Edinburgh's Award stated that 98% of senior managers think young people should invest more in enhancing their soft skills and one in three believes that soft skills outrank academic achievements when hiring.¹⁷ A report from Cardiff University found that employers consistently rated academic credentials to be less important than soft skills and 'job readiness'.¹⁸

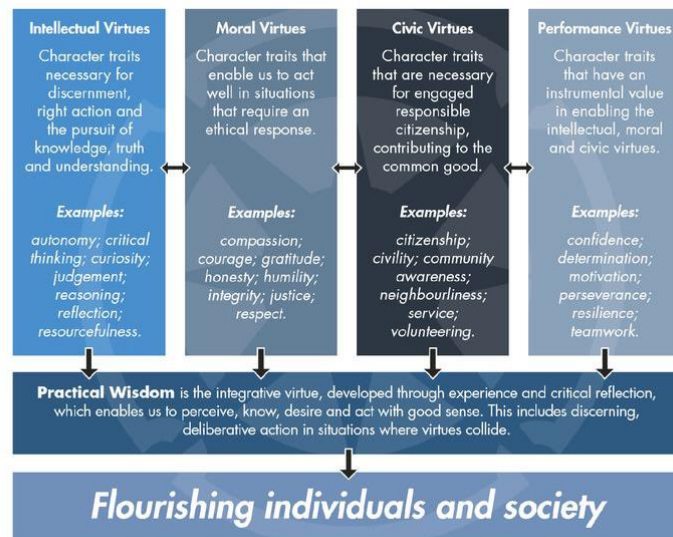
Soft skills and character

Soft skills refer to the interpersonal abilities and character traits that will influence how well a person interacts with others. A Manpower survey found that the top soft skills in demand in 2022 included critical thinking/analysis, resilience/adaptability and leadership.¹⁹

These soft skills fall under the category of character virtues. Character is defined by the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues as “a set of personal traits or dispositions that produce specific moral emotions, inform motivation, and guide conduct.” Character education includes “all explicit and implicit educational activities that help young people to develop positive personal strengths called virtues.”²⁰ There are four main categories of good character: moral (courage, humility, empathy, gratitude), intellectual (curiosity, critical thinking), performance (resilience, self-regulation) and civic (volunteering). For students, character can be “caught” (by setting priority virtues), “taught” (during assemblies) and “sought” (with inspirational speakers).²¹

Figure 3: The building blocks of Character

Source: Jubilee Centre Framework for Character Education



This skills gap is intertwined with a confidence gap, exacerbated by the Covid pandemic. In 2021, more than half of young people reported having a personal loss of confidence following the pandemic. A total of 44% did not know how

they would get their life back on track. A quarter worried that they did not have the skills for jobs available to them, while 44% lost confidence in their ability to do the job they were trained for.²²

Young people also do not find their work as satisfying as previous generations. Only 21% of 18-25-year-olds say they put in “maximum effort” with work – 13 points below the national average. Only 20% think that employees go “above and beyond at work”, 20 percentage points lower than the national average.²³

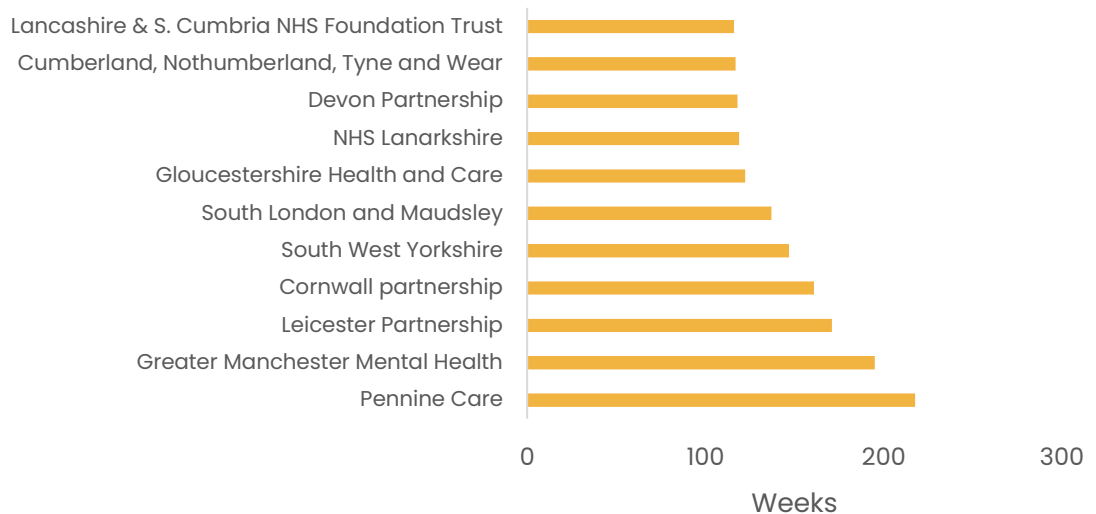
Unhappy: Challenges with Mental Wellbeing

Economic and academic challenges facing young people are happening amid a surge in mental wellbeing issues and loneliness.

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) saw a 39% increase in the number of children in England needing treatment for serious mental wellbeing problems from 2020/2021 to 2021/2022.²⁴ Referrals were already up 60% between 2017/2018 and 2019/2020. In 2022, 1.1 million under-18s were referred, including for depression, serious anxiety or self-harm. The surge in mental health cases is such that a quarter of a million children have been discharged from CAMHS without any treatment. Some NHS trusts are having to turn down as many as 60% of young people referred by GPs and average waiting times are in some cases over 150 weeks.²⁵ More than 80% of community CAMHS centres report not being able to meet current demand.²⁶

Figure 4: Average wait for CAMHS treatment

Source: Politics Home/FOIs to NHS trust²⁷

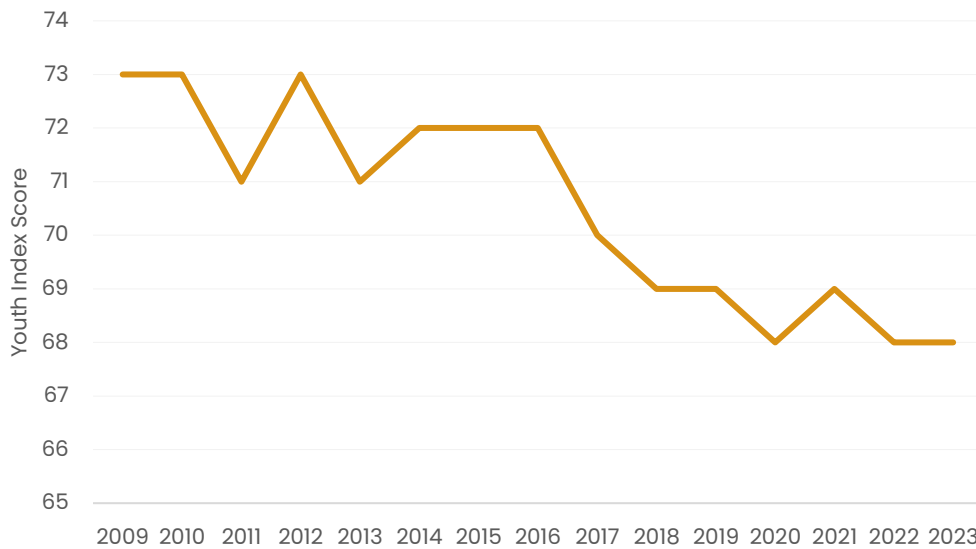


Suicide among young people has reached record highs. The rate among 15–19-year-olds in England and Wales is at its highest since 1981 at 6.4 suicides per 100,000 people, despite the overall suicide rate for all ages dropping in the same period.²⁸

Even when taking away the more extreme cases of mental health, the mean happiness and confidence scores of 16–25-year-olds in the UK are lower now than they were a decade ago as measured by the Prince’s Trust Youth Index: overall happiness dropped from 71 to 67, confidence from 74 to 68.^{29,30}

Figure 5: Youth Index Score (happiness and confidence) at an all-time low

Source: The Prince’s Trust NatWest Youth Index 2023



The causes of this mental health crisis are complex, but loneliness is playing an outsized role in shaping it. The NHS reports 29% of 17–22-year-olds with a “probable mental disorder” report that they often or always feel lonely, more than five times the rate of those who do not report one.³¹

16–24-year-olds are twice as likely as the national average to feel persistently lonely. Around one in five Gen Z adults report being “often isolated from others” (18%) and “often lonely” (19%), compared to fewer than one in ten over 65s (8% and 5% respectively).³² This is a trend that youth workers have been observing in recent years. A quarter of youth workers polled for UK Youth in 2018 believed that people will most likely experience loneliness in their lives aged 12 to 15 while a further 20% believe that 16–18-year-olds are most at risk.³³

Young people's friendships have declined both in quantity and quality. In 2022, Generation Z was the cohort with the highest percentage of people having three friends or fewer (49%), a 17 percentage point increase since 2011. 18-24-year-olds also are less likely than the national average to say that their friends can be relied upon. Around one in five (22%) 18-24-year-olds say they only have one or no close friends - 3 percentage points higher than the national average.³⁴

This trend is supported by focus groups conducted by Onward in April 2023, which suggested that mental wellbeing among young people is becoming a significant public concern. When asked about the biggest difficulties young people faced, nearly all participants raised mental health as the main issue, with more traditional concerns like job prospects or education rarely cited. Many parents participating in the focus groups spoke about their children facing considerable mental wellbeing challenges, ranging from anxiety to suicidal thoughts.

"Mental health of children is dire at the moment."

Woman, 37, Teacher, Milton Keynes, Conservative to Undecided.

"Mental health (is the biggest issue young people face). I work at a hospital, and I know it's massively increased."

Man, 34, Health and Safety Officer, Blackpool, Conservative to Undecided

"Mental health is the top (issue), I see it every day in school, and there's nothing in place to deal with it."

Woman, 46, Homemaker, Milton Keynes, Labour to Undecided

"It's hard because I feel I pander to my son, and it seems he gets weaker instead of stronger."

Woman, 39, Self-employed, Milton Keynes, Labour to Undecided

"Mental health and help is hard to get. It's a genuine psychiatric illness. People can be on the edge and only when they try something to end their life do they get the smallest bit of help."

Girl, 17, Student, Doncaster, Undecided.

"Lots of people I know are struggling with mental health. A girl at my school killed herself when I was in year 7 and so the school has made a big thing about it and brought in a therapist and counselling."

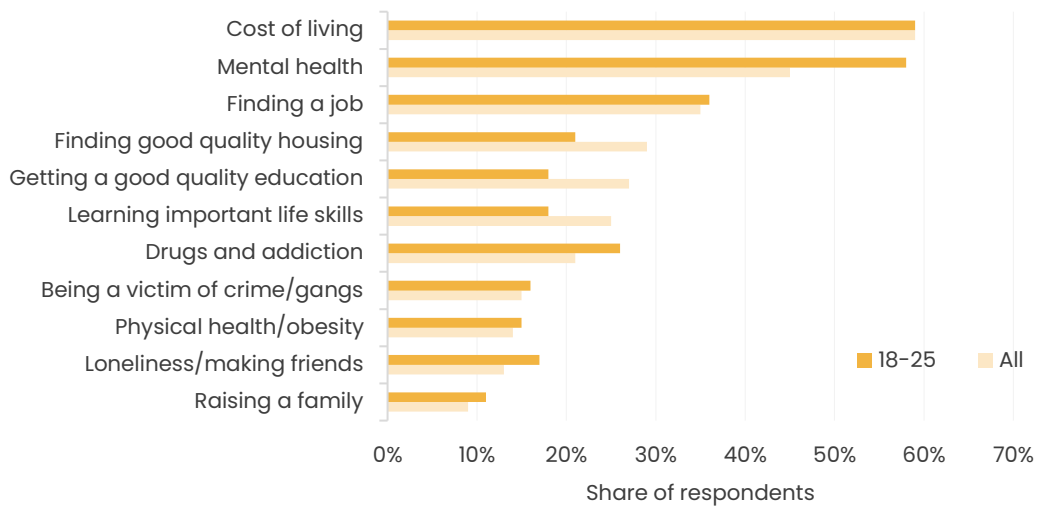
Girl, 16, Student, London, Undecided.

The broader public also recognises that there is a mental wellbeing crisis among young people. Polling conducted by Onward and JL Partners found that 45% of respondents believe mental health is one of the top three issues faced by young people in their daily lives. This comes second only to the cost of living (59%) and comes ahead of many traditional youth-related issues, such as finding a job (35%) or getting a good quality education (27%).

Young people themselves are even more worried by mental health issues, with 58% making it a top three issue - almost equal to cost of living (59%). A total of 24% rank it as the biggest issue their generation faces.

Figure 6: What are the biggest issues facing young people?

Source: JL Partners for Onward (April, 2023)



Unmoored: Challenges with belonging

This crisis in mental wellbeing and the loneliness epidemic points to a larger issue of a lack of sense of belonging to a common community, both local and national.

Young people have grown increasingly distrustful. 18-24-year-olds are more likely to distrust their neighbours (48%) than they are to trust them (35%).³⁵ This is a new trend. In the US, the political scientist Robert Putnam argued in *Bowling Alone* that young people in the middle of the last century tended to be

more trusting than any other age groups, before progressively becoming one of the least trusting categories.³⁶ Sociologist Peter Hall wrote in his seminal work *Social Capital In Britain* that the UK had gone through a similar transformation.

In the UK today, 18-24-year-olds are three times more likely to distrust their neighbours than people over 65.³⁷ As a result, only 36% of young people regularly stop and talk to their neighbours, down from 54% in 1998.³⁸ Only 26% of young people agree with “I borrow things and exchange favours with my neighbours,” a 12-percentage point drop since 1998.

This civic apathy manifests itself in volunteering – with a decline in the proportion of young people who volunteer monthly from 44% to 34% in the last decade³⁹ – and in politics – with the 18-24 age group the least likely to vote or participate in political activity.⁴⁰

This growing civic apathy has risen alongside a decline in national sentiment. Younger people report lower levels of national pride than older generations. Research conducted by JL Partners for Onward indicates 57% of young people believed they were less patriotic than previous generations, with only 24% arguing they were more patriotic. Among the general population only 18% believe that young people are more or as patriotic as previous generations, while 74% believe that young people are less patriotic.

This decline in national pride is compounded by a larger fracturing of society into siloed communities. Only half of graduates have friends without degrees, while half of Britons do not have a friend from a different ethnic background.⁴¹ British geographer Danny Dorling had mapped how the richest and best educated were living in increasingly segregated environments in every decade between 1970 and 2000.⁴² The proportion of 18-34-year-olds reporting that all their friends are a similar age to them increased from 30% to 39% between 2011-12 and 2017-18. Young people’s friendship groups are also more politically homogeneous than older generations: 49% of 18-34-year-olds say more than half of their friends have similar political beliefs to them, 12 points higher than those aged 35 and over.⁴³

Even cosmopolitan cities like London suffer high levels of ethnic division comparable to many of its US metropolitan counterparts. While black communities in London are marginally less geographically divided than they are in the United States, Asian communities have segregation index scores well

beyond their American counterparts.⁴⁴ Those trends are especially apparent for young people. In 2011, 60% of the South Asian population in London lived in white majority neighbourhoods, but only 46% of South Asian pupils attended white majority secondary schools and 35% were in white majority primary schools.⁴⁵ In 2016, 40.6% of secondary schools in England were identified as ethnically segregated or potentially contributing to segregation.⁴⁶

The rise in youth violence, while shaped by socio-economic issues and a lack of opportunities in disadvantaged communities, also reflects an atomisation of relationships. The Children's Commissioner for England estimates that as many as 27,000 children are in gangs, 60,000 either self-identify as gang members or have siblings that are gang members and 300,000 may know a gang member. The Department for Education found that 12,720 children in England were 'at risk' due to gang involvement in 2020/2021, a 16% increase from 2018/2019.⁴⁷ While many young people join gangs to chase status or as a shortcut to adulthood, others enjoy what psychologist Philip Zimbardo calls "deindividuation", a process of feeling strength and liberation from being part of a mob or group, often while wearing the same clothes.⁴⁸

Silver lining: An appetite for belonging and action

There are signs that young people want to contribute and be part of a community. 18-34-year-olds are also the most likely group to intend to help out or volunteer. In 2023 66% of them did so, ahead of 50% for 35-54 and 37% for 55 or older.⁴⁹

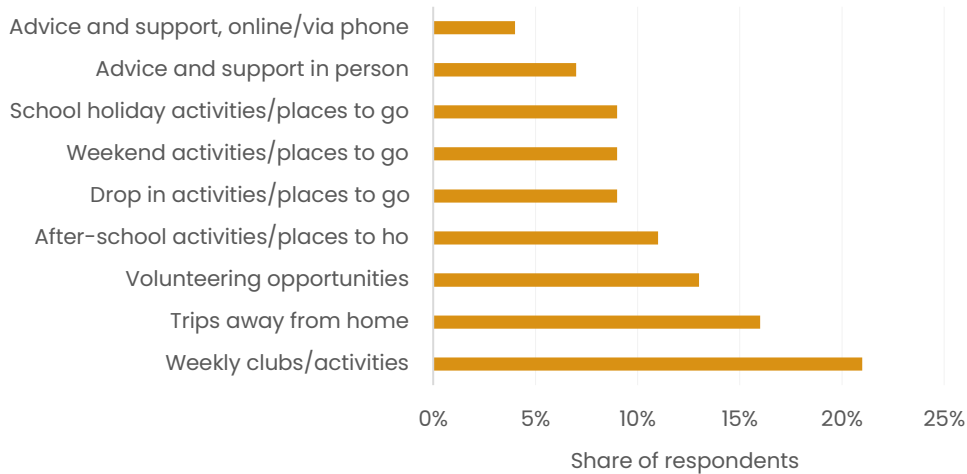
Although the pandemic damaged young people's mental wellbeing, it also revealed a new appetite for moments of community and connection. In 2020, at the height of the pandemic, 73% of 16-24-year-olds were either already volunteering or wanting to volunteer to support the nation's recovery.⁵⁰ Specifically, many wanted to give back to their community, with 69% of 16-19 year-olds wanting to help their local community with the recovery through volunteering and social action⁵¹

Data from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport's Youth Review showed that young people want these experiences and expect the country's youth policies to support them. Respondents wanted weekly clubs/activities to be the main priority of youth policy (21%), with trips away from home and volunteering opportunities coming second (16%) and third (13%) respectively.⁵² When asked,

two thirds of young people also report wanting to help their local community through volunteering and social action.⁵³ And 72% want more opportunities to engage in extra-curricular activities such as volunteering opportunities.⁵⁴

Figure 7: Young people’s support for youth policy priorities

Source: DCMS Youth Review, February 2022




While today’s young people face unique challenges, they remain confident in their capacity to be a force for good. The Youth Social Action Survey found in 2020 that 88% cared about making the world a better place. According to the Prince’s Trust, 74% of 16–25-year-olds believe that their generation can change the future for the better.⁵⁵

During the Covid pandemic the *New York Times* columnist David Brooks argued that in the United States “there is now a vast army of young people ready and yearning to serve their country. This is a passionate idealistic generation that sees the emergency, wants to serve those around them and groans to live up to this moment.”⁵⁶ With the data painting a similar picture for the UK, Government should harness this sentiment and mobilise the UK’s youth as a force for good.

National service: Past and present





Facing this triple crisis of employability, mental wellbeing and belonging will require a range of policy interventions. Schools, charities, local government, health providers and other organisations will all have a role to play alongside families and communities.

In the past, both in the UK and across the world, one tool has contributed greatly to build skills, mental resilience and patriotism among young people: national service.

This chapter sets out how national or civic service schemes have been deployed in the past, how they can help young people that are unskilled, unhappy, and unmoored, and how other countries are resurrecting new forms of national service.

National service as nation-building

At the turn of Millenium, most Western Democracies had abandoned military service or had transformed it into a considerably shorter experience. Around 85 countries globally still have some form of conscription, seven of them in the EU.⁵⁷ With the return of war to continental Europe, some countries, such as Latvia, have re-established military service. Others are considering it such as in Germany, where senior politicians are worried about the security landscape as well as the state of German society.⁵⁸ Germany's centre-left Minister of Defense Boris Pistorius even considered that the phasing out of conscription a decade ago was “a mistake”, arguing that conscription played an important part in retaining social cohesion:

“Back in the day there was a conscript at every second kitchen table. Which meant there was always a connection to civic society at large. It appears that the people have lost the awareness that they themselves are part of the state and of society. Taking responsibility for a set period could open eyes and ears for that.”⁵⁹

Beyond the military need for easily-mobilisable armies of conscripts, military service has often delivered valuable secondary objectives. In the words of the former Singaporean Deputy Prime Minister Goh Keng Swee, “nothing creates loyalty and national consciousness more thoroughly than participation in its defence.”⁶⁰ As Jon Yates highlights in *Fractured*, national service was and remains to this day one of the key pillars of national unity among the young and ethnically diverse Singaporean nation.⁶¹

National service in some cases accelerated the affirmation of the citizen in a democracy. In a form of quid-pro-quo arrangement, the temporary soldiers became “stakeholders” of the democratic polity which paved the way for the extension of the franchise to large swathes of the male population.⁶²

Military service also impacted key metrics for a healthy democracy such as voter turnout or national pride. Military service in France in the late 20th century is estimated to have had a strong positive effect on turnout, with a seven percentage point increase for servicemen alongside no observable change in political preferences.⁶³ Another study found that those who served between 1987-1991 in a different region to their own reported an 18% increase in Spanish identity relative to their peers 25 years later.⁶⁴ Military service among those posted outside their region of birth also reduced the probability of voting for a separatist party by 11 percentage points and increased turnout in servicemen by about 11 percentage points.

Military service also had positive effects for servicemen themselves. Military training improved psychological resilience and reduced symptoms of depression among college freshmen in the US, with the proportion of students with clinical depression dropping from 10.5% to 7.2%.⁶⁵ The study suggests that the healthy lifestyles developed during service, such as exercising or eating healthy food, contribute to strengthening resilience and lowering depression.

A qualitative study on the impact of military service on mental health of older UK veterans found that British veterans dealt better with workplace stress and trauma, with veterans reporting higher levels of confidence and resilience.⁶⁶ As one veteran puts it: “I just got on with things really...being in the military you had to have a certain amount of discipline. That sort of attitude developed a positive defence to dealing with anything that came up.”⁶⁷

In around 85 countries with some form of conscription including South Korea, Cyprus and Brazil, military service continues to have positive side effects. The “natural experiment” that is Denmark’s draft lottery has allowed social scientists to find a positive causal effect on numeracy and literacy ten years after service. The effect of service is largest for men with the lowest numeric and reading skills, who are more likely to complete vocational training after service.⁶⁸

Data from Israel highlights similarly positive impacts. Israeli discharged servicemen tend to be more tolerant than highschool students (the control group) towards people of different cultural or ethnic backgrounds.⁶⁹ Ex-servicemen themselves believe that military service has made them more open, with 71% agreeing that “soldiers become more tolerant towards other cultures during military service.”

While military service is often associated with higher levels of aggressive nationalism and chauvinism, 43% of discharged servicemen in Israel believe that spending from the defence budget should be reallocated to other areas such as health, education or welfare – a 14-point increase from the control group. Earlier studies found similar results, with service in the Israeli Defense Forces as a potential “turning point” for young Israelis to “reconsider their prejudices and beliefs.”⁷⁰

National Civic Service

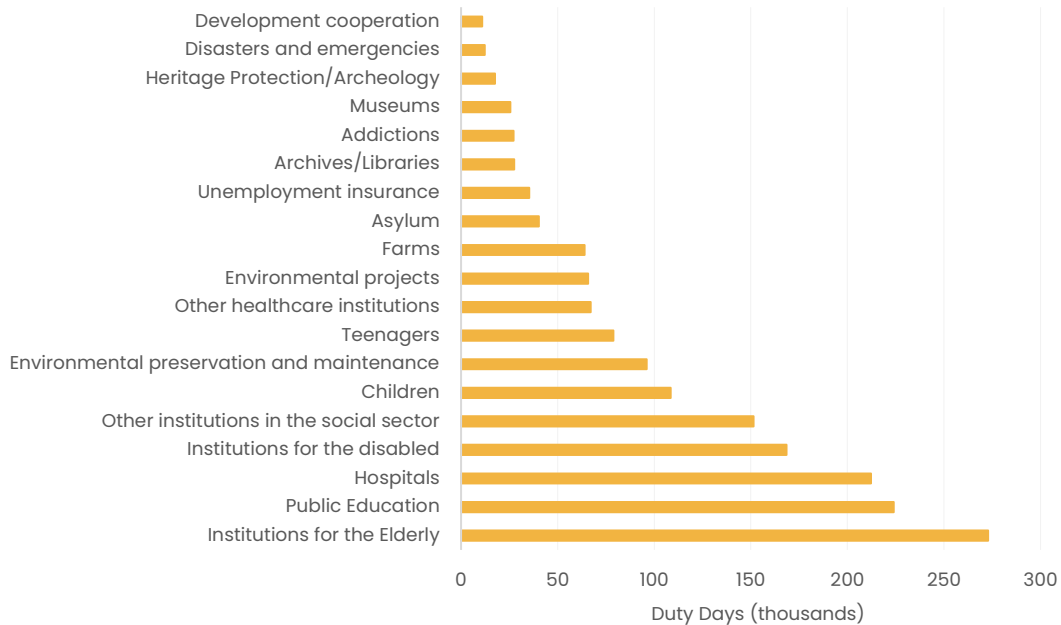
Many countries across the world have introduced some form of national civic service, either as explicit alternatives to military service or as stand alone schemes. This section summarises the key national service schemes that are in operation across the world, mapping their objectives and structure.

Swiss Civilian Service

Switzerland has a mandatory military service, but individuals who are conscientious objectors can instead choose to do civilian service. The Swiss Civilian Service is a national civic program that allows individuals to serve their country in areas such as healthcare, social work, and environmental protection through partnerships with organisations in these sectors that are keen to have the “civilistes” work for them. In 2021, many of the service hours were spent in health or care positions, with 16% in care homes, 13.1% in schools, 12.4% in hospitals and 9.9% in various institutions for handicapped people.⁷¹ While the “civilistes” can choose their postings through an online portal, they can also be called upon for emergency postings.⁷²

Figure 8: Postings of Swiss “civilistes”

Source: CIVI Annual report 2021



The program lasts for 12 months and provides participants with training, education and a stipend, with the Swiss government funding the program and covering the costs of salaries, training, and accommodation for participants. According to a report by the Swiss Federal Department of Defence, Civil Protection and Sport, 20,266 young Swiss citizens performed some civilian service in 2021 and 6,000 were admitted that year, approximately 2% of the one million Swiss citizens aged 18-30 who have to undergo either national service or civilian service.⁷³

The organisations that partner up with the Civilian Service pay to have the “civilistes” work for them. As a result, with a revenue of around 35 million Swiss francs and spending of just under 37 million francs, the program only has a deficit of 2 million francs, down from 11 million in 2015.⁷⁴

Although the programme is compulsory, enforcement does not seem to be a major issue: in 2021, only 381 disciplinary sanctions were issued, which result in up to a 2,000 franc fine.⁷⁵

The German Voluntary Social Year (Freiwilliges Soziales Jahr, or FSJ)

The FSJ is a national civic service program that was created in 1964. It is aimed at young people aged 16-26 who have completed their compulsory education, and who want to gain work experience while contributing to society.

The FSJ is organised by the German Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, and it is supported by a network of organisations across the country. Participants can choose to work in a range of fields, such as education, health care, social work, environmental protection, and culture.

The programme typically lasts for 12 months, and participants receive a small allowance to cover their living expenses. They are also entitled to health insurance and other benefits. In addition to gaining work experience, participants are encouraged to develop their personal skills and engage in social activities.

The FSJ is not mandatory in Germany, but it is an option for young people who want to take a gap year before starting university or entering the workforce. You have to be under 27 but have completed full-time compulsory education to enrol.

According to the German Federal Statistical Office, in 2019-2020, 52,465 young people participated in the FSJ and 3,142 in a related program called the Voluntary Ecological Year (Freiwilliges Ökologisches Jahr, or FÖJ).⁷⁶ The program is far from being a rite of passage, with only 0.05% of the 9.7 million 16-27-year-olds in Germany having enrolled in the FSJ or related programs.⁷⁷

AmeriCorps

AmeriCorps is a national civic program in the United States that engages individuals in service projects focused on areas such as education, health, and the environment. AmeriCorps members can serve in a variety of roles, including tutoring and mentoring young people, assisting with disaster relief efforts, working in community health centres, and promoting environmental stewardship.

AmeriCorps members serve for a period of 10 to 12 months, and receive a living allowance, health insurance, and an education award upon completion of their

service. AmeriCorps has programs for both adults and young people, and is administered by an independent government agency.

The program has a measurable positive impact on civic norms. In 2008, Americorps were more likely to rate themselves higher than control groups in their ability to understand and identify problems in the community (by 26% compared to the control group), their ability to lead successful community-based movements (by 25%) and confidence in their capacity to work with local government (by 24%).⁷⁸ 72% continue to volunteer after their service and 57% volunteer more than 80 hours in two to three years after their service.⁷⁹

AmeriCorps also actively engages in social mixing, with strong results. While only 72% of volunteers in general agreed they were confident in interactions with people from different backgrounds and cultures, that number increased to 93% post-AmeriCorps.⁸⁰ AmeriCorps also has a direct impact on employability: 99% of the members who joined to gain new skills report that their goal was reached.⁸¹

A cost benefit analysis of the AmeriCorps programs estimated that for each dollar spent, the federal government gained a return of more than \$2 either via increased tax revenues and productivity. That return rose to \$3.5 when including social benefits (such as improved social and human capital).⁸²

Case Study: France's National Service Experiment

In 2017, Emmanuel Macron pledged to introduce a new form of National Service in France - which became the Service National Universel (SNU). Given similarities between the challenges facing young people in the UK and France, the experience of introducing the SNU is worth examining in depth. In order to understand the programme, Onward conducted a series of interviews with key figures behind the scheme in March and April 2023.

Context and political origins

France formally abolished its military service in 1997 but in 2017, the then presidential candidate Emmanuel Macron included in his platform the reintroduction of a month-long military service for 18 to 21-year-olds. With France recently hit by a series of deadly Islamist terrorist attacks, Macron argued that national service would play an essential part in ensuring “every young French person [has] the opportunity to meet his or her fellow citizens,

engage in social mixing and republican cohesion over the course of a month.”⁸³ National service would also constitute in Macron’s mind a “mobilisable reserve in case of a crisis” and “help young people entering their professional life as well as their life as a citizen.”⁸⁴

This pledge was opposed by many in the military, who did not see the need for an army of conscripts given the increasing specialisation of the French army. The costs of a military service were deemed too prohibitive, while military officers were worried it would take away from their resources and capacity. As such, Macron reworked his pledge as a form of civic service but the objectives remained largely the same, with the President in 2019 labelling the SNU “indispensable to the nation”.⁸⁵ Former state Secretary for Youth Sarah El Hairy described the programme as more than a “public policy device” but as a “society-wide project” in a country “in need of cohesion” that would make France’s “youth more resilient and stronger.”⁸⁶

The SNU in practice

Four objectives were established in 2018 for the Service National Universel (SNU):

- Transmit “republican” values (republican in the French context translates roughly into “civic” and “patriotic”)
- Reinforce national cohesion
- Develop a culture of civic engagement
- Integrating young people socially and professionally

After a trial run with a small group of volunteers in 2018, the program is now open to all young people aged 15 to 17. In 2022, the SNU enrolled 40,000 participants (3,000 in February, 17,000 in June, 20,000 in July), up from 15,000 in 2019 and 2,000 for the 2019 pilot.⁸⁷

The SNU programme is divided into three phases:

1. Connection: mandatory, two weeks
2. Service: mandatory, 84 hours throughout the year
3. Commitment: optional, minimum of three months

Phase One - “Connection”

The “connection” phase is the mandatory two-week-long first step for all participants. These trips are organised in “SNU centres” which are often boarding schools or summer camp facilities. It does integrate some aspects of military service, including a uniform (a shirt and a cap) and a flag-raising ceremony where the volunteers sing the national anthem. The volunteers engage in physical activities, organised volunteering, or cultural activities like visiting important local museums and memorials. The use of mobile phones is limited to specific moments in the schedule to encourage interaction between volunteers.

Some days have a specific focus which bring together different types of activity. A ‘national defence and memory day’ aims to make young people more familiar with the military and defence sector, and involves role-playing simulations, presentations from army officers and hikes. On a day focussed on biodiversity, participants typically engage in physical outdoors activities (such as rock climbing, cycling or kayaking), while also engaging in volunteering activities (picking up litter, building birdhouses) depending on the needs of the local community. The module also includes moments of debate where the volunteers discuss environmental issues and how their habits impact their environments.⁸⁸

Figure 9: Schedule for an average day in phase one⁸⁹

Source: SNU Guide pratique actualisé (2022)

8:00–8:15am	Flag raising ceremony
8:30–9:30am	Sports
9:30am–12:30pm	Sports
2:30–6:30pm	Activities
6:30–7pm	Free time
8:30–9:30pm	Internal democracy (a moment to reflect on the day and discuss current events/news)
9:30–10:30pm	Free time

While each SNU centre is run differently depending on the local circumstances, the leadership in each centre usually includes a mix of people from different backgrounds including the military (often retired personnel), education (usually teachers), and the youth sector.

Phase Two - “Service”

The “Service” phase is part-time and takes place during the school year following the “Connection” phase, lasting for at least three months. Participants choose from a range of civic engagement activities, such as working with a local charity, participating in a sports club, helping in a retirement home or volunteering with the military or police. The goal of this phase is to foster a sense of civic responsibility and encourage participants to make a positive contribution to their communities, while also getting familiar with a professional environment.

Phase Three - “Commitment”

At the end of the first two phases, each volunteer can continue their commitment by completing phase three of the SNU. This voluntary commitment is aimed at young people aged between 16 and 25, and lasts from three months to one year. Unlike the other two phases, this commitment will continue to be voluntary even should the program become mandatory for all young people in France.

Rather than creating new structures, phase three uses existing programs such as the Service Civique scheme, the European Solidarity Corps or other programs with the army, police and “gendarmierie”. Other possibilities include working full time for an NGO in France or other volunteering opportunities internationally.

Evaluating the SNU

The SNU marks its fifth anniversary in 2023, and its impact has been studied closely with encouraging results. The French National Institute for Youth and Popular Education (INJEP) conducted surveys of SNU participants in 2021.⁹⁰ They found:

- 85% of participants felt that the SNU had a positive impact on social cohesion in France, and 91% reported having made new friends during the program.
- 80% of participants reported having developed a greater sense of civic engagement as a result of the SNU.

- 88% of participants reported having developed new personal skills during the SNU, such as teamwork, communication, and problem-solving.
- 94% of participants reported being satisfied (57% very satisfied) with their overall experience in the SNU.
- Even more “militaristic” elements were well received, 89% of participants said their uniform was “important to group cohesion.” 90% endorsed the flag-raising ceremony, decreasing to 75% of “non-volunteers” who enrolled under parental pressure.⁹¹

The survey also identified some areas for improvement, such as the need for more individualised support for participants during the “Service” phase and better communication with parents and local communities about the goals and objectives of the program.

The INJEP report highlights a worrying selection bias, with a third of participants coming from “uniformed” families (such as the army and police) despite representing only 2% of the population. In another sign of the selection biases of a voluntary program, around two thirds (63%) of participants also reported having good or excellent results at school.⁹²

Overall, the INJEP evaluation suggests that the SNU has had a positive impact on young people in France, particularly in terms of promoting social cohesion, civic engagement, and personal development. 90% say they recommend the program to friends and 77% have stayed in touch via social media with other former volunteers. SNU senior staff also report that former volunteers have become informal ambassadors for the program when back in their classrooms, insisting on the “uniqueness” of the experience.⁹³

Breaking down the program into its different phases, what stands out in the “Cohesion” phase is the solidarity between participants and the disconnect both from the family environment but also from the digital world given the restrictions on mobile phone use for the two weeks. Many respondents highlighted the positive impact the absence of phones had on encouraging young people to interact with each other. More abstract life skill classes (e.g. on finances or health) were not as popular, although many participants recognised their importance.

The political and logistical challenges of a mandatory programme

Polling data from France shows strong and consistent support for the SNU programme. In 2018 various polls found that 60% of the French backed a three-to-six-month mandatory civic service scheme.⁹⁴ When asked about a shorter two-month long programme, 74% of young people backed the idea, with 32% very favourable to it. While 76% of young people believe the scheme would be difficult to implement, 74% believed it was “an opportunity for young people” and 69% believed it would give a “good image of young people” to wider French society.⁹⁵

Recent polls show that support for a mandatory scheme in which all young people are required to participate remains very strong, with three quarters of the population backing it. Support is above 50% across all age groups (including 68% of young people), social classes, income and education level, regions and political preferences.⁹⁶

Yet as it stands, only 4% of the target cohort (aged 15 to 17) participate in the scheme. Despite backing from the public for 100% participation, progress in expanding the SNU has significantly slowed down during 2023 as the government handles challenges with its pension reforms. The debate around the potential compulsory nature of the SNU was deemed to be too politically controversial in the current environment with many young protesters in the streets. As a result, momentum behind the SNU has slowed down, although Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne stated that the “generalisation” of the scheme remained the Government’s goal.⁹⁷

These political headwinds have been compounded by the logistical difficulties that a mandatory program would pose. Those active in the youth sector, many of whom are directly involved in the implementation of the program, have highlighted the difficulties of finding facilities or staff to scale up the SNU from 32,000 participants to the 800,000 in that age bracket. There are serious logistical considerations for the government. The current capacity that the state can mobilise as accommodation is “clearly inferior to what would be necessary to host between 210,000 and 280,000 young people simultaneously” according to a report from the French Senate.⁹⁸ Figure 10 below shows the types of venues that have been used to date in the “Cohesion” phase of the SNU.

Figure 10: Breakdown of the type of venue for the SNU's cohesion phase in 2022

Source: Finance Commission of the Senate

	February	June	July	Total
Public Schools	13%	30.2%	35%	26%
Agricultural Schools	6.5%	13%	19%	12.8%
Other Schools	3.1%	3.5%	12%	6.3%
Holiday camps	42%	34.3%	22.7%	33%
Other	19.3%	13%	6.7%	13%
Unidentified	16.1%	6%	4.6%	9%

The report from the French Senate also highlights that a mandatory program would require considerable efforts to train qualified personnel in the youth sector which has been negatively impacted by the decline of attendance in summer camps and other related youth organisations in the past decades.

Costs have also been a concern. According to the Senate report, the cost per participant in the SNU is around €2,187. Using those costs per unit the Senate believes mandatory programme would cost at least €1.75 billion, but expects costs to increase between €2.4 and €3.1 billion per year.⁹⁹

The government is currently exploring two scenarios for a mandatory SNU: one that would take place during the school year as part of the curriculum and another that would happen outside of the school year (closer to the current model). There are no clear indicators on which model the government will choose, or how they intend to overcome the obstacles outlined above.

Figure 11: International civic service schemes

Source: Onward Research

	Mandatory or voluntary	Civic or military	Length of service	Mission	Participation (% of eligible cohort)
Swiss civilian service	Mandatory	Alternative to military service	180 days	Offer an alternative to those who do not want to serve in the army, provide services of public interest where resources are lacking	20,266 but only 6,000 in “active duty.” Less than 2% of the eligible cohort but virtually 100% of the male population when combined with military service) ¹⁰⁰
German FSJ	Voluntary	Previously an alternative to military service, now civic	6 to 18 months, usually 12 months ¹⁰¹	Practical activities geared towards learning skills, within institutions that work towards the common good, in particular in welfare, child or youth institutions. ¹⁰²	55,000 (0.05%)
Americorps (State and National, VISTA, NCC)	Voluntary	Civic	10–12 months	To improve lives, strengthen communities, and foster civic engagement through service and volunteering ¹⁰³	62,000 (no upper age limit, so can’t calculate %)
French SNU	Voluntary, aims to be mandatory	2 weeks full-time with one year of related actions	2 weeks full-time with one year of related actions	Promoting republican values and principles, strengthen national cohesion, developing a culture of commitment, supporting social and professional integration	32,000 (4%)

The British Experience with Civic Service

The idea of establishing some form of a national civic service has been a recurrent conversation in Britain for the last 30 years, with proposals coming from all sides of the political spectrum.

From 1997 onwards, the Labour government set up several youth volunteering organisations like the Young Volunteer Challenge (YVC), a government-designed and funded pilot that offered opportunities for 18–19-year-olds from deprived communities across England. The Blair Government also launched the Millennium Volunteers (MV). MV was a voluntary scheme created to promote sustained levels of volunteerism among young people aged 16–24. Following a consultation paper published in 1996, the scheme was created in 1999.

It was not until the latter half of the 2000s that Gordon Brown as Prime Minister advocated for a compulsory national service scheme. In a 2009 piece in *The News of The World*, Brown set out his “ambition to create a Britain in which there is a clear expectation that all young people will undertake some service to their community, and where community service will become a normal part of growing up...That would mean young people being expected to contribute at least 50 hours of community service by the age of 19.”¹⁰⁴ In early 2010, then secretary of State for Children Ed Balls unveiled a £6 million fund for five two-year pilot programmes providing “community activities” opportunities for 14–16 year-olds.¹⁰⁵

At the same time, David Cameron articulated his own vision of national service. The National Citizen Service (NCS) was a flagship project designed to provide 16-year-olds with the opportunity to become active and responsible citizens with a stake in their communities¹⁰⁶. The NCS was heralded by the future Prime Minister as a “kind of non-military national service”.¹⁰⁷

In February 2012, as the first pilots had been set in place Cameron wrote: “I want National Citizen Service (NCS) to inspire young people and to help them realise just how much they can achieve. I believe that every young person should have the opportunity to spend time mixing with others from different backgrounds, developing new skills that will stretch and challenge them, and learning about the importance of being active in their communities.”¹⁰⁸ Pilots of the programme in 2012 were anchored around five phases, set out in Figure 12 below, that combined residential trips with local social projects.

Figure 12: The proposed phases of National Citizen Service (2012)

Source: NCS Prospectus, 2012¹⁰⁹

Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 4	Phase 5	Phase 6
	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	30 hours part time	
Induction	Activity based residential	Community residential	Social Action design	Social Action	Ongoing
An inductor phase in which expectations are set and relationships built between participants and staff	A set of tasks completed in a residential setting away from home which are personally challenging. Typically in the form of an outdoor challenge experience. Focused on personal and social development	A set of structured tasks that involve understanding, visiting and helping the local community and developing skills. Completed in a residential setting within the participants local area. Increased autonomy and responsibility for time and tasks	Participants design a social action task in consultation with the local community to address a problem/issue identified in Week 2>	A period of at least 30 hours of social action on a part-time basis, including fundraising and project delivery. A graduation fair or event to encourage participants to get involved in ongoing social action or volunteering activities in their local areas.	A graduate programme including training sessions and reunion events. Provides rewards/opportunities for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work experience • Social action • Ongoing networking • Further structured programmes

The program has evolved, but typically the NCS was delivered over a period of two to four weeks during the summer months, and consisted of a residential phase and a community-based social action phase. During the residential phase, participants would take part in outdoor activities and team-building exercises, and have the opportunity to meet and socialise with other young people from diverse backgrounds.

Since its inception, over 800,000 young people have participated in NCS.¹¹⁰ Evaluations suggest significant benefits:

- NCS alumni volunteer for seven hours a month more than peers.
- Every pound invested on the NCS returns up to £8.36 in social value by improving wellbeing and higher education outcomes of participants.
- 90% of participating young people would recommend the NCS to others.
- Three to five months later 80% of volunteers reported feeling more positive towards people from different backgrounds and 70% are more likely to help with their local area.
- 78% of participants said they felt better prepared for challenges that life might bring.

- All wellbeing measures improved for summer cohorts: life satisfaction (+0.4); the extent to which they feel the things they do in their life are ‘worthwhile’ (+0.5); happiness (+0.4); and anxiety (-0.5).
- Studies by London Economics and by Jump x Simetrica found that the value for money for every £1 spent on the NCS generated an economic benefit between £2.33 and £3.49.

However, NCS faced three major challenges:

1. **Participation:** NCS repeatedly failed to hit its participant targets despite receiving £97.5 million, or around 85% of the DCMS’ youth sector budget in 2020-2021 (total budget £113.5 million).¹¹¹ In 2014-2015 the programme attracted 58,000, less than the initial target of 80,000 and the minimum target of 60,000.

The 2013 Spending Review said the NCS should target 120,000 places in 2015 and 150,000 in 2016.¹¹² In 2015, Chancellor George Osborne stated that by 2020 the NCS would have 300,000 annual volunteers. In 2016, David Cameron pledged to make the NCS “the largest programme of its kind in Europe” and aimed for the NCS to cover 60% of all 16-year-olds by 2021 (around 450,000 volunteers per year).¹¹³ The scheme only reached the 100,000 mark in 2018/2019, around 13% of the target cohort.

Figure 13: NCS participants (residential phase)

Source: NCS Annual reports

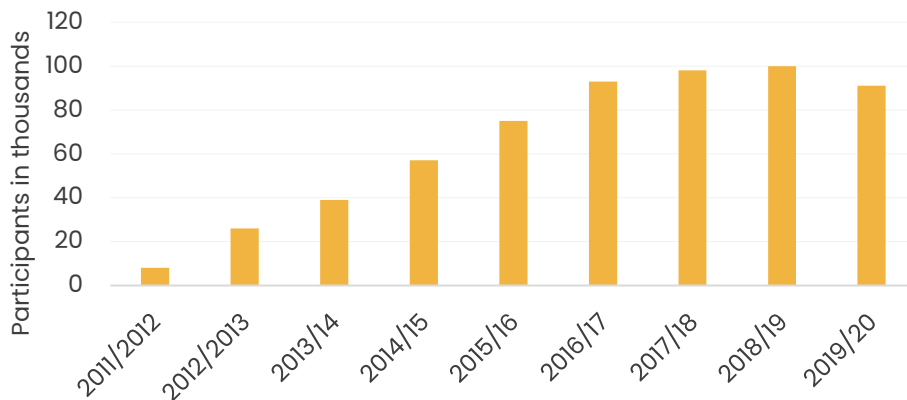
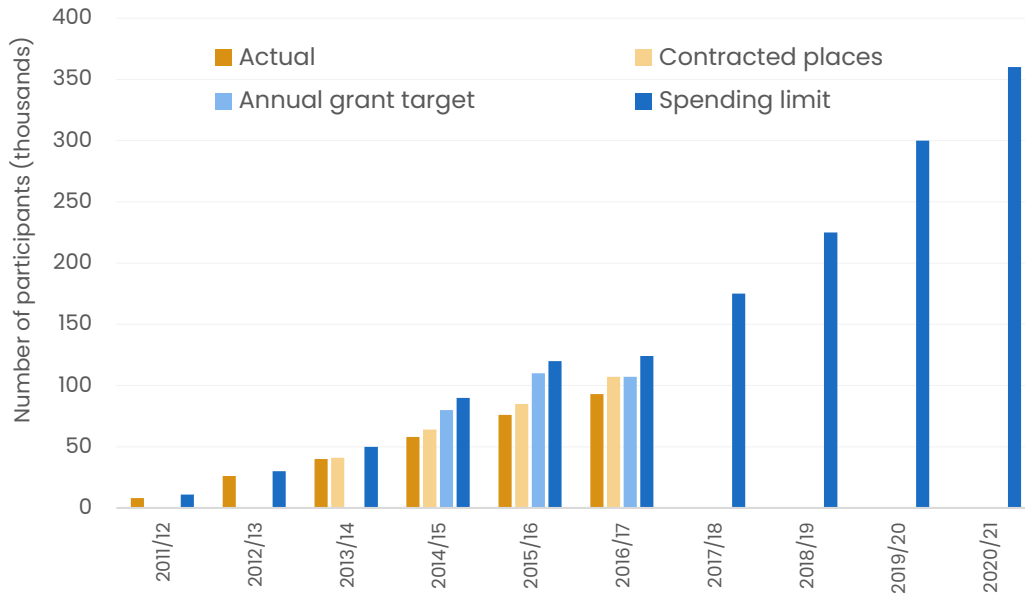


Figure 14: NCS participants and objectives

Source: NAO report on NCS (January, 2017)



2. **Costs:** The cost per participant in 2016 was around £1,863 - around 20% higher than the target cost of £1,562 set out in the Autumn 2015 Spending Review.¹¹⁴ A 2017 NAO report highlighted that cost control had not been prioritised by the NCS trust. Providers, who received 83% of NCS spending in 2016–2017, also often failed to meet their participation targets.¹¹⁵ But by 2019 these costs per head had dropped to £1,379 against a target of £1,468.¹¹⁶

3. **Youth Sector Collaboration:** NCS faced significant headwinds given the impact on the youth sector of the 2008 recession. As the House of Commons Select Committee highlighted in 2011, the NCS was a “good principle” but suffered from “bad timing.”¹¹⁷ Organisations like YMCA England, despite being supportive of the scheme, worried that “the focus would be placed so much on the NCS that other youth services would suffer as a result”.¹¹⁸ Within the original NCS leadership many felt that the cuts in youth spending happening simultaneously to the creation of the NCS gave the scheme a bad image within the youth sector, hampering the credibility of outreach efforts.¹¹⁹

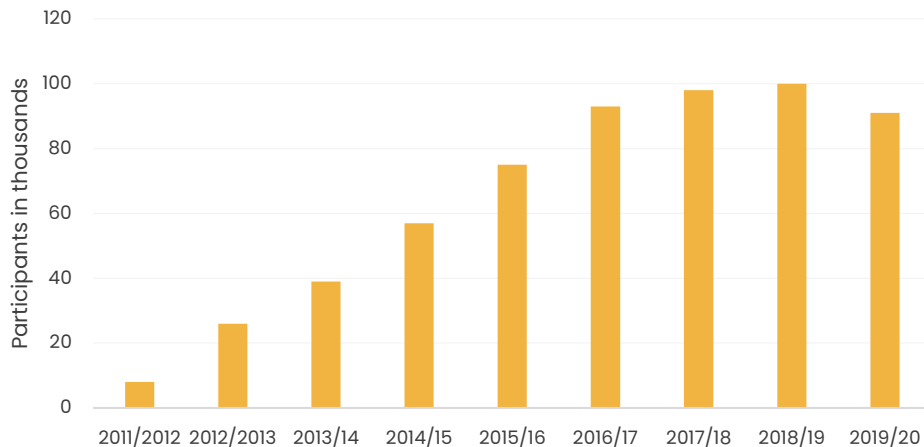
National Citizen Service today

The NCS still exists and aims to provide young people aged 15 to 17 with a range of skills and experiences to help them to succeed. But the programme has gone through a series of significant transformations.

Following Covid, the programme’s budget was significantly reduced. The youth policy review of March 2022 committed £171 million in investment for the NCS over the next following years – a cut of around two thirds, given the scheme at its peak received £180 million annually. For the 2022/2023 financial year the NCS trust has been allocated a £72 million budget, less than half of the funds in 2019/2020.¹²⁰

Figure 15: Government grants to the NCS

Source: NCS Annual reports



In practice, the NCS has transformed both its activities and its mode of functioning to become a year-round scheme with more “bespoke experiences” and the ambition to further put “young people in the driving seat.”¹²¹ The NCS’s structure will go from nine regions to just two (North and South), while the residential trip has been downsized from two weeks to five days.¹²² Former David Cameron aide Paul Oginsky was supportive of the year-round model but fearful that the program with a shorter residential trip would “lose the shared experience.”¹²³ At the NCS’ peak between 2017/18 and 2018/2019, around one in seven eligible young people participated in the program.

The NCS is also piloting the 'Year of Service' programme, a 6-12 month paid service placement in local communities. For 2021/2022, UK Year of Service had 278 participants in paid work placements with ten different partners and 75 employers in the environmental, public service or healthcare sectors. Data from the pilot suggests that the programme has been successful in reaching more marginalised groups: 67% of the participants were unemployed prior to joining, 53% accessing government benefits and 26% from ethnic minority backgrounds.¹²⁴

The lesson to take away from the development of the NCS is not that a voluntary national service scheme at scale is impossible. Instead it suggests that ambitions around a larger programme need to be (a) realistic in terms of implementation timelines, (b) given sustained political support and investment and (c) developed in partnership with the youth sector.

Other Civic Organisations

Many other non-public entities have also been seeking to support young people with skills, mental resilience, and a sense of belonging in recent decades. While their impact is positive, they have a smaller reach than a full national service programme and often suffer from self-selection biases that limit their capacity to be a generational rite of passage.

Cadets

The UK cadets are a youth programme sponsored by the Ministry of Defence that is aimed at promoting leadership, teamwork, and other valuable skills through military-style training and activities. The program is open to young people aged 12 to 18. The cadets participate in a range of activities, including camping, hiking, shooting, drill, first aid, and more.

According to the Ministry of Defence, there were approximately 131,000 cadets in the UK as of March 2021. The cadets are supported by over 34,000 adult volunteers, many of whom are ex-service personnel.

Prince's Trust

The Prince's Trust is a UK-based charity founded in 1976 by the then Prince Charles, Prince of Wales. Its mission is to help young people aged 11 to 30 who

are unemployed, struggling at school or facing other disadvantages to build their confidence, skills, and self-esteem.

The charity helped 60,046 young people in the UK via its different Education programmes in the 2021/2022 year. 75% of young people who completed the Prince's Trust's employability programmes progressed into education, employment, or training over the last five years.¹²⁵ The Prince's Trust has also supported over 90,000 young people to start their own businesses since 1983.¹²⁶

The Trust is supported by a range of corporate partners and donors, and its work is delivered through a network of volunteers and staff across the UK.

Duke of Edinburgh's Award


The Duke of Edinburgh's Award (DofE) is a youth development program that operates in over 140 countries around the world. It was established in 1956 by Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, with the aim of encouraging personal development and achievement among young people aged 14 to 24. In the UK, 330,000 young people took part in the DofE in the 2020/21 academic year.¹²⁷ The programme is divided into four sections:

- **Volunteering:** Participants are required to undertake a voluntary service to their local community for a minimum of one hour per week for three months.
- **Physical:** Participants must take part in a physical activity for a minimum of one hour per week for three months.
- **Skills:** Participants must develop a new skill or improve an existing one. This could include learning a musical instrument, a language, cooking or anything else that interests them.
- **Adventurous Journey:** Participants must plan and undertake an adventurous journey in a remote and unfamiliar environment and should involve camping and outdoor activities.

The Duke of Edinburgh's Award is organised through a network of licensed operators, who are responsible for delivering the program in their local area. These operators include schools, colleges, youth groups and other organisations. The programme is supported by a team of trained volunteers, who act as assessors and supervisors for the various sections of the Award.

Public attitudes to national service





In recent years the British public have indicated broad support for the idea of national service. A 2009 poll for Prospect magazine found that 64% of British adults support a compulsory national citizenship program in which young people aged 16 to 25 would be required to spend one year doing community work.¹²⁸ A 2016 poll even found that 47% of British adults were in favour of reintroducing national military service (for 17 to 21-year-old males) with 49% believing that conscription would result in reduced crime rates.¹²⁹

But there is little detailed evidence on public sentiment towards a more modern form of civic service. Why might the public think national service is necessary? What would their priorities be for its focus and design? And, crucially, what do young people themselves think a national service programme should look like?

In April 2023, JL Partners conducted three focus groups for Onward - one with young people aged 16 to 21 and two others with the general population in Blackpool and Milton Keynes. JL Partners also ran a 6,064 person poll focussed on young people and national service with respondents aged 18 and above.

National service enjoys broad public support

When asked “if the government introduced a new national service scheme for young people to complete, would you support or oppose it,” 57% supported the statement with only 19% opposing.

Support is strong across all political affiliations: Conservative voters support national service by 71% to 11%. Just over half of Labour voters also support national service (51%) compared to 25% who are opposed, as do a majority of Liberal Democrat voters (53% support to 22% oppose).

Parents are more likely than those without children to support national service. 57% of parents with children 18 or under and 63% of parents with children over 18 support such a scheme, against 51% for those without children.

Support is strongest among those without degrees and in the lowest socioeconomic groups. 59% of respondents without a degree backed the scheme, seven points more than those with degrees. 53% of socioeconomic grade AB respondents support the idea of national service, rising to 58% for C1C2 respondents and to 59% for DE.

Figure 16: Support for a national service scheme by voting intentions, children, socioeconomic grade and higher education

Source: JL Partners for Onward (April, 2023)

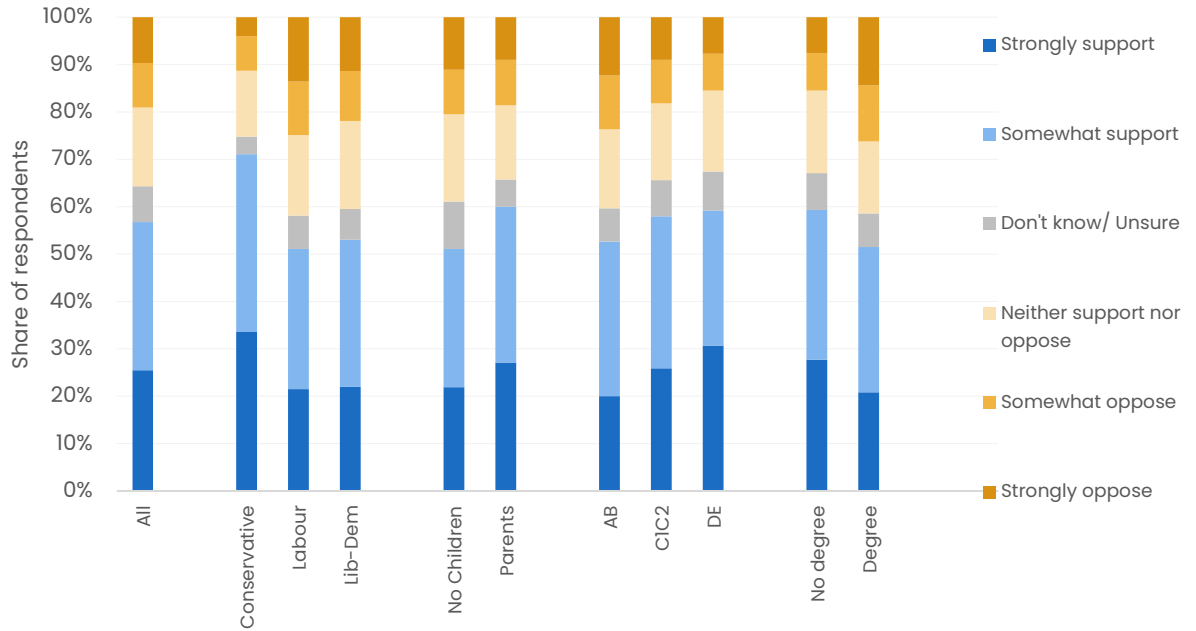
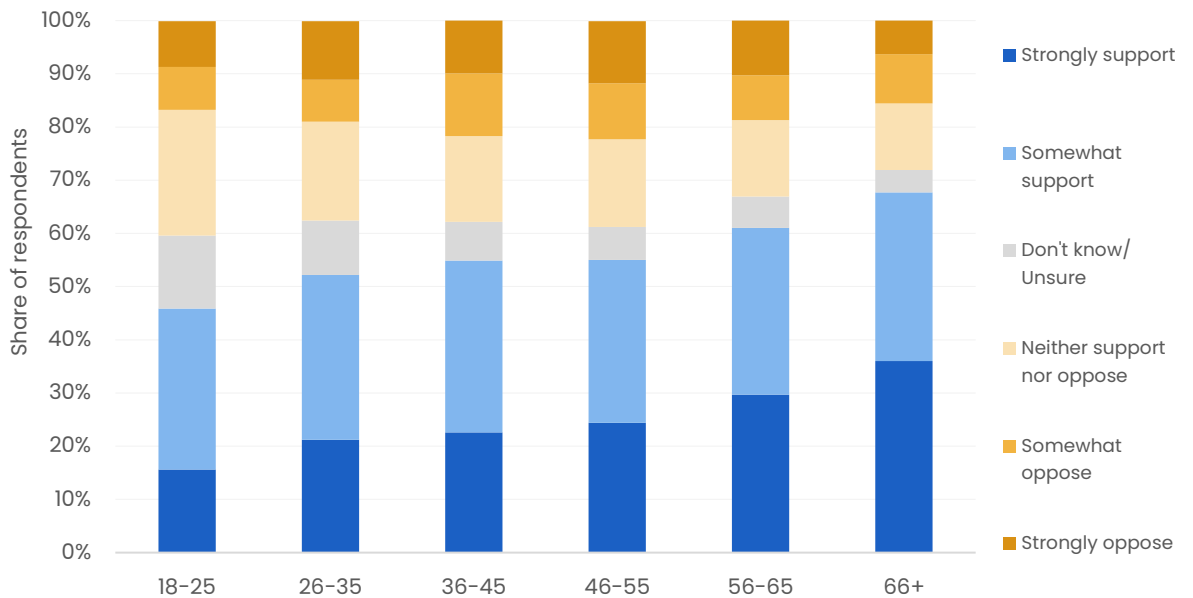


Figure 17: Support for a national service scheme by age

Source: JL Partners for Onward (April, 2023)



A common concern about national service is that support is strongest in age groups that will not participate. While the scheme is most popular among the oldest age categories, support remains strong across all age groups, even among 18 to 25-year-olds. Nearly three times as many young people support the scheme than oppose it (46% against 17%). The rejection rate of the scheme among young people is actually lower than in any other age group with the exception of the 66+ age group.

Comments from focus group participants also suggested similarly strong support for the introduction of some form of national service.

“We need this back in this country.”

*Man, 35, Photographer, Milton Keynes, Conservative to Labour Switcher
(written in bold on his sheet)*

“I think it’d be helpful, yes. It’d make the weaker people stronger and bring those who are overaggressive into line.”

Woman, 39, Self-employed, Milton Keynes, Labour to Undecided

“It’ll get them into the countryside and out of their comfort zone. People need to realise the world is a very large place, and they need to get experiences out of it. Experience maketh the man.”

Man, 34, Health and Safety Officer, Blackpool, Conservative to Undecided

“It’s worth doing to my mind. I spent some time in the military and if I hadn’t, I think I’d have ended up in prison. Basic training gives you respect, determination and a lot of life skills.”

Man, 34, Health and Safety Officer, Blackpool, Conservative to Undecided

“I used to do air cadets, fund-raising and things like that. It feels nice to do something for someone else and it’s given me experiences like flying and other skills.”

Girl, 17, Student, Doncaster, Undecided.

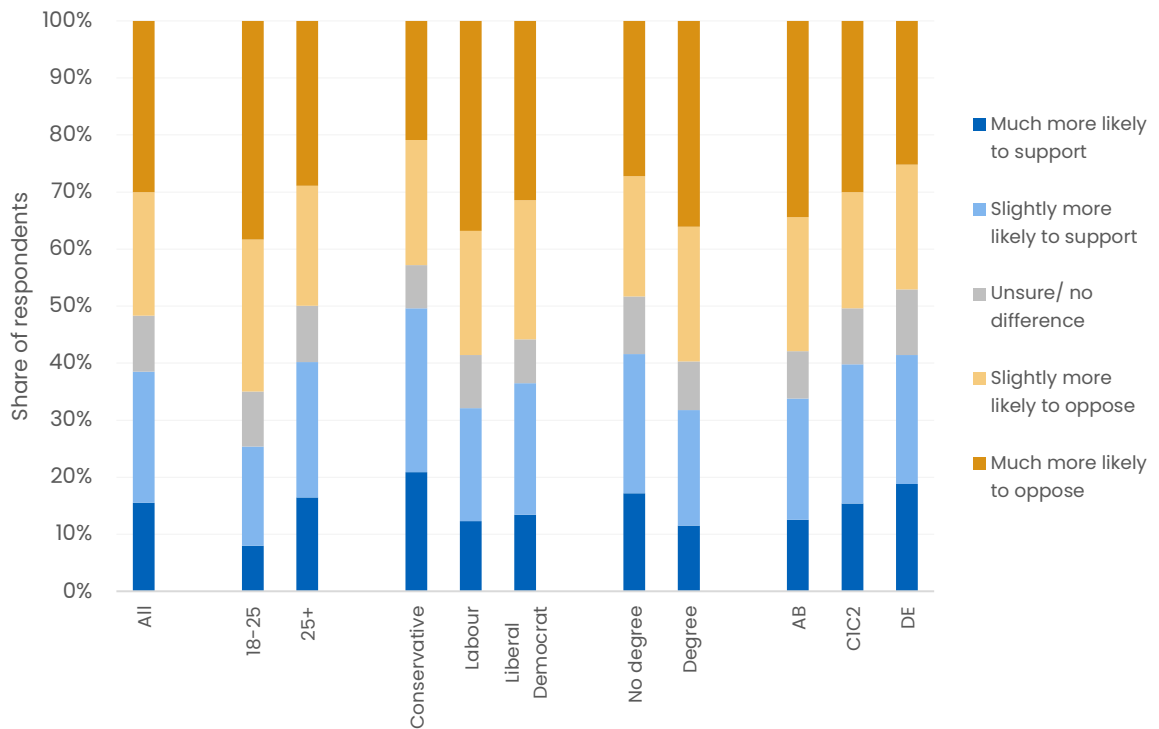
Whether national service should be compulsory for all young people divides public opinion

Onward’s research finds that 52% of respondents would be more likely to oppose national service if it were mandatory, with 30% saying they would be much more likely to oppose national service. 65% of young people would be more likely to oppose it if the scheme was mandatory.

Respondents with degrees (60%), in the AB social grade (58%) and 2019 Labour voters (63%) were all more likely to oppose a mandatory scheme. Only 2019 Conservative voters (50%) and Leave voters (52%) would be more supportive of making national service mandatory.

Figure 18: Is a mandatory scheme more likely to make you support or oppose national service

Source: JL Partners for Onward (April, 2023)



Those who are favourable to the idea of national service however tend to be more favourable to a mandatory programme. Removing from the sample those who oppose the idea, 58% of respondents would be more likely to support such a scheme if it were mandatory.

Responses from focus groups participants clarify why some might oppose a mandatory scheme.

“I don’t think it would be successful if it was compulsory, you get a high proportion of school refusers now. Even the threat of their parents being taken to court doesn’t mean anything to them.”

Woman, 37, Teacher, Milton Keynes, Conservative to Undecided

“Anything that is being enforced on someone where they don’t want to do it doesn’t sit right with me. If you have a choice, it’s a different ball game.”

Woman, 42, Medical Secretary, Blackpool, Conservative to Labour switcher

“I think if you make it compulsory you make it harder work for everyone.”

Woman, 37, Teacher, Milton Keynes, Conservative to Undecided

“You shouldn’t be forced to do it, you’re at school a lot, but we should all do a bit just to help.”

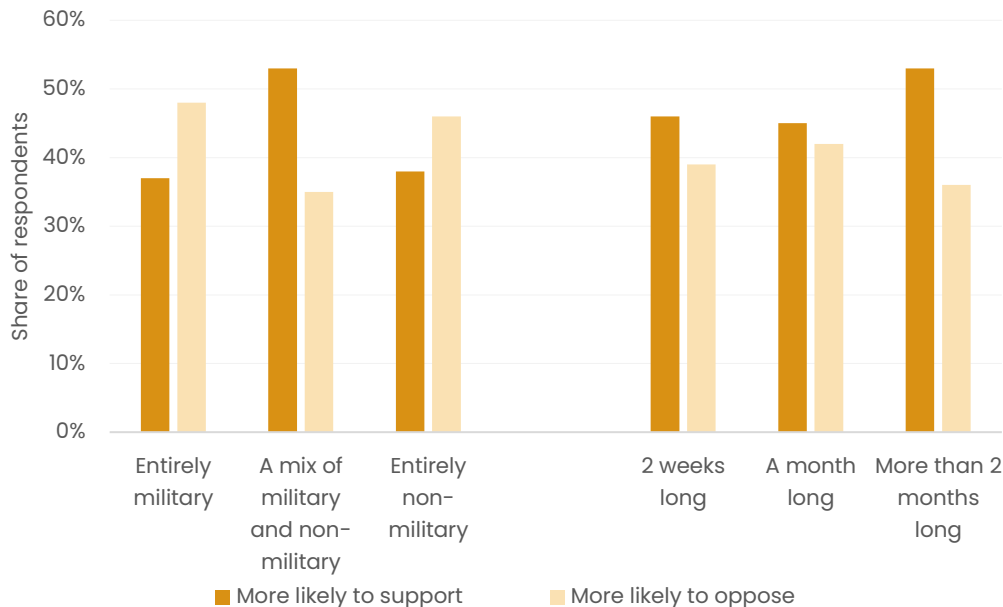
Girl, 17, Student, Doncaster, Undecided.

The marginally most popular scheme would be a mix of military and civic activities and last for two months

While respondents do not want a fully militarised scheme, they would like national service to include some military elements. 48% say they are more likely to oppose the scheme if it were fully military, with only 37% more likely to back a military option. Opposition to a fully military scheme is stronger than support in all age categories except among the 66+ group. But equally, a fully non-military scheme received similar support (38%) and rejection (46%) rates. A national service scheme that blended a mix of military and non-military was more popular, with 53% saying they would be more likely to back such a programme.

Figure 19: Would the following options make you more likely to support or oppose a national service scheme (net figures)

Source: JL Partners for Onward (April, 2023)



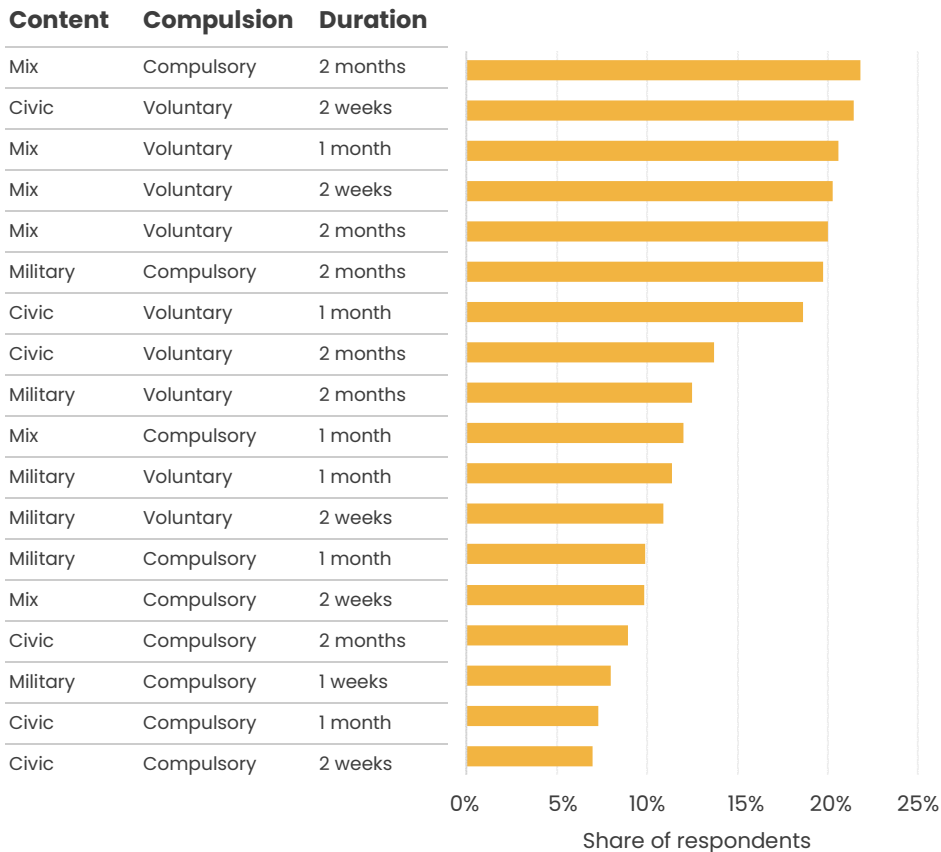
The public broadly favour longer programmes over shorter ones. While all three options for the length of a programme (two weeks, a month, or more than two months) increased support more than opposition, the least popular option was the intermediary one. In a sign that respondents want a potential program to be long enough to make an impact, the most popular pick was the two-month-

long option with both the highest support rate and the lowest rejection rate of all three options. Young people are most likely to prefer a shorter option, with 59% saying they would be more likely to support national service if it were two-weeks long against 32% for a two-month long program.

Which combination is the most popular? In the figure 19 above, respondents were asked about their views on the content, compulsion and duration of national service separately. Figure 20 below shows that the combination with the greatest support is a mixed military and civic scheme that is compulsory and lasts two months. A total of 22% of respondents said that they would be more likely to support national service if it had these three characteristics. This option is closely followed by a civic, voluntary scheme lasting for two weeks which has 21% support - suggesting there is no strong preference among the public that separates these sorts of schemes.

Figure 20: Would the following options make you more likely to support or oppose a national service scheme? The most popular combined answers

Source: JL Partners for Onward (April, 2023)



The biggest perceived drawbacks are that national service would be costly and unpopular with young people

The idea that national service would be unpopular with young people was the biggest concern for respondents, with 56% selecting it as one of the three biggest issues of such a scheme.

But young people themselves are also the least likely of all age groups to consider that the alleged unpopularity of the scheme among their peers would be one of its biggest problems. Only 42% of young people believe this would be a major drawback, 14 percentage points lower than the general population. And, as shown above, while young people are the age group least likely to support national service, there are still three times as many young people who support a new scheme as there are who oppose it.

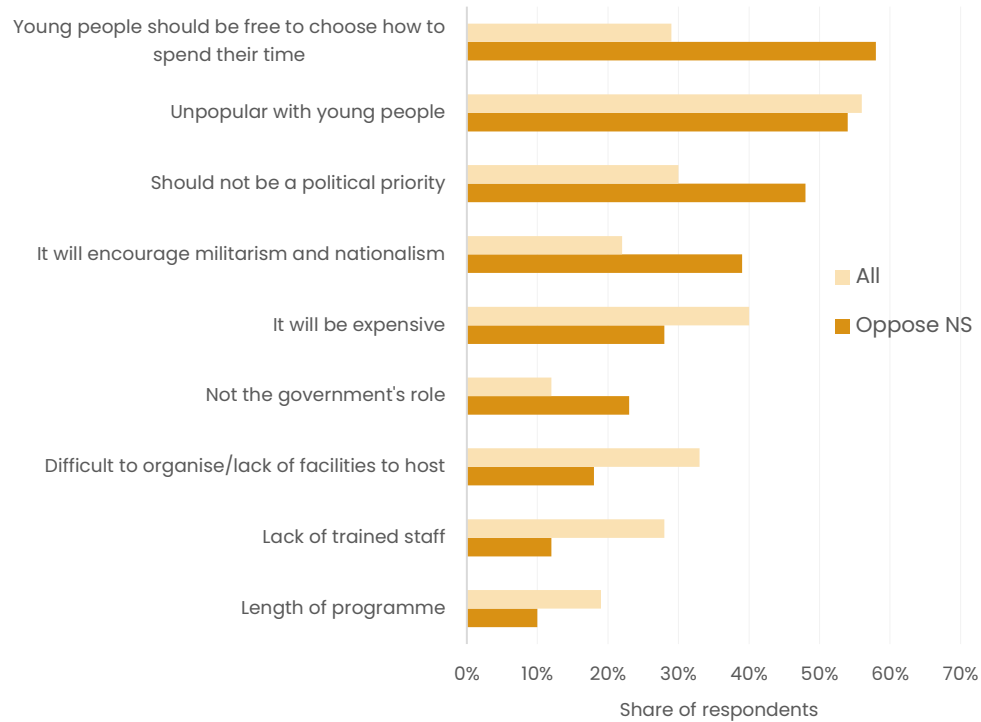
The second biggest concern identified was around costs, with 40% of respondents citing it as a top three concern. Worries about cost were particularly pronounced among respondents likely to vote Conservative (45% made it a top-three concern) while those likely to vote Labour were less worried (37%).

Other potential drawbacks to national service flagged by respondents were a mixture of ideological/political (such as “should not be a political priority” or “young people should be free to choose how they spend their time”) and logistical (“difficult to organise/lack of facilities to host” or “lack of trained staff”).

Overall, the concerns of those opposed to national service seem to be more political than practical (e.g. “young people should be free to choose how to spend their time” or “it will encourage nationalism and militarism”).

Figure 21: What would be the biggest drawbacks to a national service scheme that you can identify?

Source: JL Partners for Onward (April, 2023)



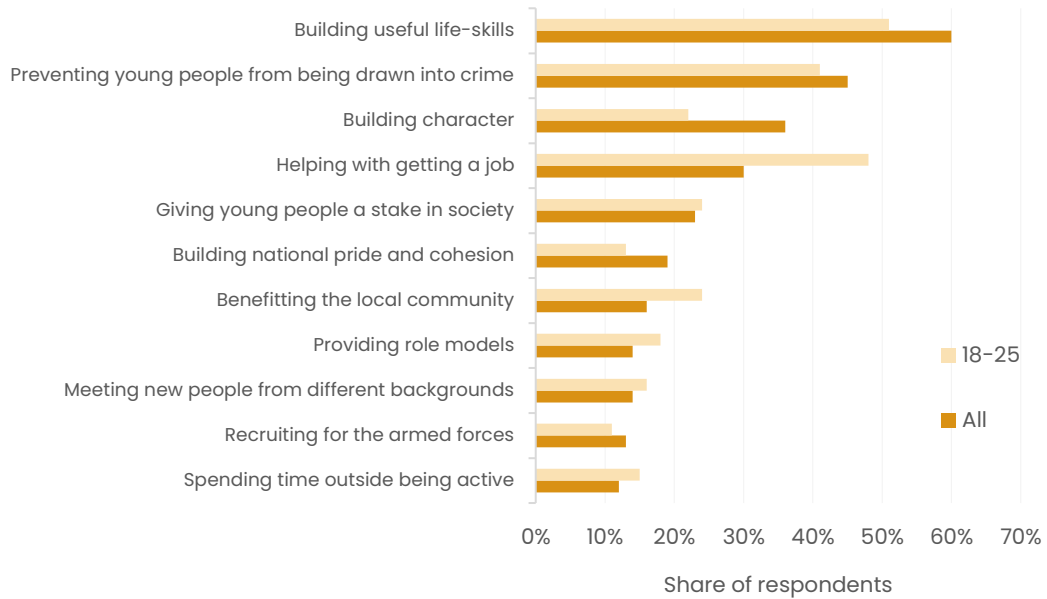
The public believe national service should focus on developing skills and building character

When asked what the main objectives of a national service scheme should be, respondents prioritised building important life skills (60%), preventing young people from being drawn into crime (45%), building character (36%) and helping with getting a job (30%). Young people themselves have slightly different preferences from the general population, placing greater emphasis on helping with getting a job (17% versus 8% in the general population) and on benefiting the local community (7% vs 5%).

In focus groups, respondents were also enthusiastic about the idea of intergenerational mixing. A teacher in Blackpool said that “young people could get a lot from a link up with a care home. Say you got a young person matching up with an older person, it opens their eyes, these older people have a lot of experience.”

Figure 22: What do you think the main objectives of a national service scheme should be?

Source: JL Partners for Onward (April, 2023)



The biggest perceived advantages are increasing employability, improving mental health, and creating a sense of belonging

Despite identifying potential drawbacks, respondents remain optimistic about the potential benefits of national service. The poll asked if national service would have a positive effect on “finding jobs,” “socialising and loneliness,” building a “sense of belonging and/or pride” and “improving mental health.” All four options garnered overwhelming support with over 70% support for each of them.

Recommendations





Recommendation 1: The Government should create a new Great British National Service scheme

National service has appealed to politicians for decades as a tool to develop skills, build mental resilience, and engender a stronger sense of belonging. Today, in the wake of the pandemic, young people need support in these areas more than ever. Experience with the National Citizen Service and other voluntary programmes can ensure a new scheme is based on what works and what doesn't. International programmes, including from the French SNU, provide further practical lessons. Public support is there for a bold new programme, among both the old and the young.

Great British National Service should focus on the three challenges outlined in the opening of this report:

- *Unskilled* - developing soft skills and character to support young people to enter the workplace through sport, interactive learning, and social action projects.
- *Unhappy* - increasing mental resilience and tackling loneliness by giving young people a sense of purpose, increasing grit, and exposing them to managed risk.
- *Unmoored* - building a stronger sense of belonging by supporting new relationships and providing opportunities for work in the community.

Great British National Service does not need to be started from scratch - the National Citizen Service, an arms-length body of the Department for Culture, Media, and Sport, should instead be scaled up. NCS and DCMS are already committed to delivering the Government's Youth Guarantee - a pledge that by 2025 all young people will have access to regular clubs and activities, adventures away from home, and volunteering opportunities.¹³⁰ This Guarantee was announced as part of the Levelling Up White Paper, and has been supported with £560 million of funding to date.¹³¹ GB National Service is an opportunity to build on that pledge - providing a positive shared experience for all young people that reflects the scale of the challenges facing Britain's youth.

Recommendation 2: GB National Service should adopt an “opt-out” model and target enrollment of 600,000 young people

There are few opportunities for young people, and more generally British citizens, to interact and build connections with people from different cultural or geographic backgrounds. A national service scheme in which every young person participated would be such an opportunity.

But to date voluntary schemes have failed to secure anything like full participation - at its peak in 2018/19 National Citizen Service only secured 13% of their target cohort and in 2022 France’s SNU only enrolled 5%. As well as low levels of participation, voluntary national service schemes suffer from a number of problems:

- **Positive selection bias:** Young people who have already begun to develop the skills and faculties that national service supports are most likely to apply. A third of the participants in the early stages of the SNU came from “uniformed” families (such as the army and police) despite representing only 1.3% of the population.¹³² Two thirds (63%) of SNU participants also reported having good or excellent results at school.¹³³ In the UK, Millenium Cohort study data from 2015 shows that 45% of young people in the least deprived decile attended youth clubs, girl guides or scouts weekly, nearly twice as much as those from the most deprived decile.¹³⁴
- **Negative selection bias:** Young people who would benefit most from national service are least likely to apply. The poorest young people are disproportionately affected by the challenges discussed in this report including unemployment, low literacy and numeracy skills, and mental health issues. 42% of those from lower-income families believe their job prospects will never recover from the pandemic, 13 points higher than those from more affluent backgrounds.¹³⁵ Yet the Duke of Edinburgh programme, which has made significant efforts to diversify their socioeconomic reach, has a participation rate of young people in poverty of 14.6%, half the national rate (30%).¹³⁶
- **Limited social mixing:** These two broad types of selection bias combine to reduce the role that national service can play in facilitating interaction between different groups. If national service only caters to a small subsection of young people who are proactive and engaged, then it will fail to build cohesion among British citizens over the long term.

- **Resource-intensive recruitment:** A voluntary scheme would need significant investment in marketing and promotion in order to secure participants. Interviews conducted by Onward suggest that both the NCS and SNU struggled with the level of resource this activity required, which detracted from the design and delivery of the core programme and increased per head costs.
- **Lack of shared ritual:** One of the ways that national service builds a sense of belonging and patriotism over time is through its role as a generational rite of passage in which everyone participates. This sense that national service is a duty, and a part of being a citizen, is lost if young people need to volunteer for the programme. Labour frontbencher David Lammy MP made this case in his book *Tribes*, arguing that “without compulsion, there is no obligation. And without obligation, there is no duty. The whole notion of civic service is founded on the perception that a nation is made up of ‘independent but interdependent citizens’ who have a duty to one another.”¹³⁷

An alternative would be to make the scheme mandatory – as it is in Switzerland, or military service schemes are in Singapore or Israel. But a mandatory scheme also comes with a number of challenges:

- **Enforcement:** Onward polling found that three times as many young people supported national service than opposed it (46% to 17%). The Youth Review also found that while young people want weekly clubs/activities to be the top priority of youth policy (21% of respondents), trips away from home and volunteering opportunities came second (16%) and third (13%).¹³⁸ But there will always be a portion of young people and parents who do not wish to participate. A mandatory scheme for all young people would require some sort of enforcement mechanism which is likely to face significant opposition. Onward’s focus groups found that this was a primary concern for members of the public, with a teacher from Milton Keynes commenting: “I don’t think it would be successful if it was compulsory, you get a high proportion of school refusers now, [and] even the threat of their parents being taken to court doesn’t mean anything to them”. Current enforcement mechanisms for mainstream education do appear to be ineffective, given that around a quarter of pupils are now persistently absent despite £8.6 million worth of fines being levied on parents in 2022.¹³⁹ Although international evidence suggests the need for penalties might be rare: Switzerland, with its demanding 180-day long civic service, reported only 381 disciplinary decisions in 2021 for over 20,000 enrolled in the program.¹⁴⁰

- **Attitude of participants:** If young people were forced to engage in national service, they may harbour resentment and engage less positively in the programme. Again, this was a concern raised in interviews and focus groups conducted by Onward - one participant in Blackpool told us “Anything that is being enforced on someone where they don’t want to do it doesn’t sit right with me”. Mandatory diversity training programmes in the United States have proved to be counterproductive, with one study finding that “people often respond to compulsory courses with anger and resistance- and many participants actually report more animosity toward other groups afterward.”¹⁴¹ But international evidence on comparable programmes suggests this might not be a significant challenge. A study on Canadian community service found that mandated and non-mandated high school participants reported similar results for the following statements: “I became friends with new people through my volunteer activities” (66% and 70% respectively agreed), “I had a lot of fun volunteering” (74% and 81% agreed), and “I didn’t really get to do anything meaningful/interesting in my volunteering work” (80% and 83% disagreed).¹⁴²
- **Limited public support:** A new national service scheme which would require significant government investment and attention needs to command public confidence. But a majority (52%) of respondents to Onward’s poll said they would be less likely to support a national service scheme if it became mandatory, a figure that rises to almost two thirds (65%) of young people.
- **Logistics and delivery:** There are around 750,000 young people who turn 16 every year.¹⁴³ Delivering a programme that covers this many young people will require a significant expansion of delivery capacity - including premises and transport for a residential programme, youth workers and volunteers to deliver sessions, and community groups to host and support social action projects. This operational constraint has limited expansion of the NCS in the past, particularly in the context of funding reductions to the youth sector in the early 2010s. The youth sector has also been hit especially hard over the last decade. Local authority spending in England on youth services in 2020/2021 was down 74% in real-terms expenditure from the £1.48 billion spent in 2010/2011. Local Authorities in Wales have also decreased their real-terms spending on youth services by 31% over the same period.¹⁴⁴

So the Government must aim for the highest possible level of participation and reduce selection bias, while also avoiding the hard edges of compulsion and managing the operational challenges of a large scale programme.

An opt-out model (otherwise called “presumed choice” or “deemed consent”) with enrollment as the default option is an effective compromise. Schools would have responsibility for coordinating between GB National Service and young people, ensuring that they or their parents have the ability to opt out before they are assigned to a programme. Participation in any particularly risky activities (e.g. white water rafting or abseiling) may still require active consent, but if this isn’t received then young people would still participate in other elements of the programme.

Opt-out models are common in other areas of policy. In 2020 the UK introduced an opt-out process for organ donation - registration rates prior to the law being passed were around 40%, but since the law has been introduced only 3% of the population have actively opted out.¹⁴⁵ The introduction of auto-enrollment pensions in 2012 increased workplace pension coverage from around four in ten eligible employees to around nine in ten.¹⁴⁶ The Government has also recently announced plans to make flexible working the default in employment contracts.¹⁴⁷

Opt-out rates for the above programmes are reasonably low - 3% for organ donor registration, and around 10% for workplace pensions. These are very different contexts, but give an indication of the scale of inertia among the public, given that approximately half of the population in both examples had not opted in, but did not opt out when the default changed. In Onward’s poll, 17% of 18-25-year-olds did not support the idea of national service - while this group are slightly older than the target cohort, and the question is not regarding their personal participation, this gives a reasonable sense of the level of potential opposition.

Combining the likely response to default/opt out models and the opinion of young people from Onward’s poll, a conservative assumption is that 20% of young people might opt out - at least as GB National Service is being introduced. The target for enrollment would therefore be approximately 600,000 young people once the programme is fully operational.

Given the logistical challenges of scaling the programme, mass enrollment should be worked towards over the course of a Parliament - with a full opt out scheme rolled out in a series of local authority areas before being expanded to cover the whole UK by 2030. Specific operational challenges, like accommodation and staffing, are discussed in more detail below.

Recommendation 3: GB National Service should combine a two-week residential programme, six months of social action, and a voluntary additional year of service

The design of national service schemes differs across the world. But over time most modern programmes have coalesced around a common set of ingredients: a brief and intensive residential programme to support social mixing and engage in structured activities, a period of community action alongside school or college, and an optional longer period of civic service for those who could benefit most.

This is the model adopted by the French SNU, and has strong similarities with both the Duke of Edinburgh scheme and the more recent design of the NCS.

Phase One: Two week residential

GB National Service should see every 16-year-old (approximately 750,000 people, reducing to 600,000 once opt-outs are considered) participating in a two-week residential programme in the UK that takes place during the easter or summer school holidays.

The residential should focus primarily on building a stronger sense of belonging among young people by facilitating face-to-face social mixing around structured activities. It would also build soft skills and character through sport, physical activity and interactive learning.

Outdoor physical activities would be a core element of the residential. The SNU in France, for example, includes orienteering races, mountain hikes and first aid exercises with firefighters. An evidence review of “Adventure and Wilderness” programmes by the Youth Endowment Fund based on 11 international studies found a positive impact on addressing behavioural difficulties.¹⁴⁸ There is also

evidence that structured sports can improve relationships between different social and ethnic groups.¹⁴⁹

Activities would also be offered to build a sense of citizenship and social responsibility. Evidence from France's SNU suggests that classroom-based learning is ineffective compared with interactive learning.¹⁵⁰ Activities could include sessions with public officials in their workplaces (e.g. council leaders in town halls or magistrates in courts), simulations and role-playing games, and trips to heritage sites or museums.

Experience from the SNU highlights the importance of "internal democracy" - participants should be able to take responsibility for shaping the residential phase, building a collective charter of values or having conversations on current events. 77% of SNU volunteers believe these sessions are key moments in the experience.¹⁵¹ As one volunteer puts it: "I love the internal democracy [sessions] in the evenings because it is a time for us, we talk about everything and we determine the programme. We are asked to share our thoughts and I like that."¹⁵² The DCMS Youth Review highlighted that the lack of opportunities for young people to proactively shape programmes is becoming a frustration: this would be an opportunity for them to "talk at the table, rather than just be at the table."¹⁵³

The residential programme should not be a military-style exercise. While physical activity and teamwork are important elements, there is little evidence that overly strict forms of discipline or military drills would be beneficial. However, some elements borrowed from the military could help build a sense of patriotism and belonging. The SNU for example has a flag raising ceremony in the morning and a uniform for its volunteers, which also received overwhelming support in surveys of volunteers (90% for flag-raising ceremonies and 89% for uniforms).¹⁵⁴ As the JL Partners polling for Onward showed, 53% of respondents would be more likely to back national service if it blended a mix of military and non-military elements.

The use of mobile phones should also be strictly limited during the residential programme. Previous Onward research has highlighted the disruption that phones can play in mainstream education.¹⁵⁵ One study found that following a ban on phone use, student test scores improve by 6.41% of a standard deviation and students at schools with strict bans were 2% more likely to gain A*-C in five GCSEs.¹⁵⁶ Students who performed in the lowest quartile for achievement

benefitted the most, gaining an average 14.23% of a standard deviation, more than double the improvement seen amongst all children.

The residential phase presents two logistical challenges. First, accommodation - as with the SNU, all sorts of facilities, ranging from schools to holiday camps would need to be mobilised to meet the challenge. Planning for the scheme should include an immediate audit of available premises, along with a taskforce to understand and overcome regulatory barriers to converting suitable premises into temporary accommodation (e.g. around planning use cases or health and safety).

Second, staffing - the entire youth work sector in England is estimated at around 70,000 paid employees and 180,000 volunteers.¹⁵⁷ For a mandatory program in France with 800,000 young people per year, the French Senate estimated that the program would have to recruit between 39,000 and 52,500 staff if done during school holidays.¹⁵⁸ The Government will have to undertake a workforce planning exercise to determine how many of the workforce in the youth sector could be temporarily transferred to this programme, and how many new full time staff or volunteers need to be recruited.

In order to ensure that the most disadvantaged pupils are able to participate, bursaries should be available to cover any additional costs. Around 1.5% of 16- and 17-year-olds are in full time employment - many of these may opt out of the programme, but the Government should consider covering a portion of their salary to encourage participation as they would with jury duty.

Phase Two: Six months of social action

GB National Service should see every 16-year-old participating in a social action project over the course of six months, totalling 50 hours (approximately two hours a week). This is comparable to the SNU, which requires 84 hours of community service over the course of a year, and the Duke of Edinburgh Silver award which requires an hour a week for six months.

Phase two would be monitored in schools, as is the case in many US high schools requiring “community hours” for students to graduate. Maryland and the District of Columbia for example have statewide high school service requirements and 23 states provide extra credit towards graduation for service learning or community service.¹⁵⁹ Students typically receive a form from their

schools to log hours, with adults signing off on hours to confirm their completion. In the District of Columbia, community service activities need to be pre-approved by the school.¹⁶⁰ Today in the UK, many schools have a Duke of Edinburgh coordinator who performs a similar function in certifying volunteering hours for various stages of the award.

There is strong evidence on the benefits of social action and community engagement for young people on the three challenges outlined in this report:

- **Developing skills:** Social action can improve soft skills, with one study finding an increase in ‘grit’ (up 6% compared to control group), empathy (8%) and cooperation (9%).¹⁶¹ Over two thirds (73%) of current or recent volunteers aged 16 to 19 credit social action with enhancing their job prospects, and a third (34%) say it helped them get their first job.¹⁶² 87% providers of youth social action see developing character as central to their work.¹⁶³
- **Building mental resilience:** Social action has been found to increase resilience (9% compared to control group) and reduce anxiety by up to 22%.^{164,165} Experts have recommended volunteering and social action as a key mechanism to develop a sense of “purpose” through new relationships and activities - one of the key steps to reducing loneliness.¹⁶⁶
- **Creating a sense of belonging:** A study following bachelor students engaged in social action found that, after their involvement, 75% of volunteers felt like a positive member of their local community and 95% believed they had the potential to be a “positive force for social change”, up from 33% and 44% beforehand.¹⁶⁷ 81% of Americorps alumni agreed that they are aware of the important needs in their communities, up from 49% pre-programme.¹⁶⁸

As well as the traditional forms of volunteering, phase two should also encourage students to mentor younger peers in schools. While benefits of mentoring for mentees is obvious, teen mentors also benefit from these mentorship opportunities, with higher end-of-year self esteem among teen mentors than the comparison group.¹⁶⁹ Youth mentors also report strongly improved communication skills, and an improved ability to deal with individuals from different cultural backgrounds.¹⁷⁰

One of the biggest logistical challenges in phase two will be matching the 600,000 participants with social action projects. Sign-ups can be phased

throughout the school year, but it is still likely that there will be around 150,000 - 200,000 young people looking to volunteer at one time. A significant portion of these might be matched with large national organisations that will have capacity to coordinate themselves, like St. John's Ambulance or the Special Constabulary. But other, smaller community organisations may still struggle to reach national service participants.

One mechanism that could assist with this process is the creation of a single volunteering portal that would match young people with organisations or initiatives. Onward set out a model for such a portal in *The Good Life*, echoing recommendations made by the APPG for Social Integration and Danny Kruger MP.^{171,172,173} Equivalency status could also be granted to organisations that accomplish similar volunteer work, like the Duke of Edinburgh Awards, given they respect certain quotas on social mixing.

Phase Three: Year of Service

GB National Service should offer all young people who have completed the residential and social action phases the opportunity to complete an additional year of service between the ages of 18-24. The service would be completed wherever help is most needed across the UK, while phase two takes place in the young person's local community.

The NCS is currently piloting the 'Year of Service' programme, a 6-12 month paid service placement in local communities. If the program proves to be successful, it would be a natural next step for those eager to do more.

For 2021/2022, UK Year of Service had 278 participants in paid work placements with ten different partners and 75 employers in the environmental, public service or healthcare sectors. Data from the pilot proves that the programme has been successful in reaching more marginalised groups: 67% of the participants were unemployed prior to joining, 53% accessing government benefits and 26% from ethnic minority backgrounds.¹⁷⁴

The benefits of phase three will likely be more concentrated on developing skills and character. City Year found that 90% of "Inspired" volunteers, a full-time volunteering scheme, moved into education, training or employment after completing the programme.¹⁷⁵ The share of volunteers that believed they had the skills to do what they wanted to do in their career rose from 33% to 88%

during their experience, while 87% agreed that they felt part of their local community, up from 53% pre-scheme.¹⁷⁶

Research from McKinsey highlights that every pound invested in service year programs generates between £2.70 and £4.30 of impact when taking into account the benefit to both the individual and the community in which the volunteer is serving.¹⁷⁷ The Jubilee Centre have described this as a “double benefit” to both the young person participating and the community.¹⁷⁸

Recommendation 4: GB National Service should be funded through a combination of fees from partner organisations and a change to the tax system to increase intergenerational fairness

The French Senate provides a blueprint to estimate the costs of Great British National Service. The Senate believes a mandatory SNU would cost around £1.7 billion for a cohort of 800,000 young people. The UK has a slightly smaller cohort of 750,000, reducing the figure for a mandatory scheme with 100% participation to £1.6 billion. In an opt-out scheme with 20% of young people choosing not to participate, this would reduce again to around £1.3 billion.

Another way to estimate the total figure is to use the cost per volunteer of the UK National Citizen Service. For the 2019 cohort (the last not affected by Covid) the cost per participant was £1,379. Accounting for inflation, the generalisation of the scheme to an entire 750,000 cohort would cost around £1.3 billion, or just over £1 billion for 80% enrollment after opt-outs.

This overall cost estimate of between £1 billion and £1.3 billion is six to eight times the current budget of the National Citizen Service, and roughly double the figure committed to the existing Youth Guarantee (£560 million).

The value for money for this investment would likely be considerable. Studies by London Economics and by Jump x Simetrica on NCS found that the value for money for every £1 spent generated an economic benefit between £2.33 and £3.49.¹⁷⁹ Reducing pressures on NHS mental health services alone would yield significant cost savings - in 2022 referrals to Child and Adult Mental Health Services cost the NHS £2.9 billion.¹⁸⁰

There are mechanisms to reduce the upfront costs of a large-scale national service scheme. The Swiss Civilian Service (CIVI) is largely funded by the various organisations who attain access to the programme's participants - the "civilistes". In 2021, the CIVI partnered with 4,698 organisations who recruited young people and assigned them tasks.¹⁸¹ During Covid it also provided the Swiss government with an easily mobilisable and accessible reserve, especially in health services.¹⁸² On average CIVI receives around £20 per day of service - meaning the average day of service only costs the taxpayer just over £1. The overall costs of the Swiss CIVI is £32 million, but when offset by these contributions from partner organisations the total cost to the taxpayer is only £2 million.¹⁸³

GB National Service could also be funded through a symbolic change in public spending priorities to promote intergenerational fairness. The Resolution Foundation's 2022 Intergenerational Audit finds that "years of stalled pay growth and high housing costs have left the young in a financially precarious position" and that "non-pensioners are on average £816 a year worse off as a result of changes to working-age benefits since 2010, while pensioners are £666 a year better off."¹⁸⁴ The IFS has found that "support for a single person with no other source of income is 137% higher for those over pension age than for those just under it".¹⁸⁵ Pensions are estimated to reach a total cost of £147.3 billion in 2027-2028, a 41% increase from the £104.3 billion spent in 2021-2022 and more than education, defence and policing combined.¹⁸⁶

An investment into young people's future through the creation of a Great British National Service could be funded by reforms to pensions. The state pension triple lock has been described by Lord Hague as "unsustainable" and by Tim Pitt, former special advisor to two Chancellors, as "increasingly hard to justify".¹⁸⁷

It is difficult to forecast the exact savings from removing the triple lock and replacing with a form of "double lock" because forecasts of inflation and wage growth are volatile and Government would need to decide whether to index to prices, wages, or an average of both (but not the maximum of both, as under the status quo). However, the OBR forecast that state pension costs will rise by around 0.1% of GDP over the next decade - if pension spending were instead held constant as a portion of GDP, that would equate to roughly £2 billion a year.


Recommendation 5: GB National Service should be shaped by an advisory board made up of youth sector organisations, employers, and other relevant bodies

To be successful, Great British National Service needs to harness the capacity of the youth and community sector in the UK. When it was established, National Citizen Service failed to build the necessary relationships with the youth sector - hampering its ability to scale. Youth sector organisations in France have also argued that the lack of consultation and channels for them to get involved in the SNU has created mistrust and tensions.¹⁸⁸

An advisory board should therefore be established for Great British National Service that includes senior leaders from across the youth and communities sector, along with employers and business leaders who can ensure the programme boosts employability. In practice, this advisory board could be formed by some of the existing members of the National Citizen Service - which includes representatives from the youth sector, education, and business. Crucially, the board should also include young people themselves so that their voice is heard in the design of the GB National Service Scheme.

Conclusion





Young people in the UK today are unskilled, unhappy and unmoored. These are deep trends that have only been accelerated by the deep disruption caused by the Covid pandemic. This report argues that a Great British National Service scheme, while no silver bullet, would provide much needed help to deal with those challenges while harnessing this generation's desire for more meaningful action and connection.

While many democracies across the world are having this conversation, others have already implemented successful schemes and have reaped the benefits. The creation of the NCS was a step in the right direction but lacked the support and the scale to make a lasting mark. Having a majority of an age group partake in such a scheme will come with logistical challenges, but has the power to be deeply transformative.

A Great British National Service could give young people the skills, the confidence and the sense of belonging to thrive in the years to come. In the words of Franklin D. Roosevelt, while “we cannot always build the future for our youth, we can build our youth for the future.”

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