

An Introduction to Creating a Civic University Agreement

Event Report
January 2021



Civic University
Network

Overview

This webinar provided an opportunity to hear from four civic partnerships about their approach to developing civic agreements. The teams were from Keele, Manchester, Glasgow and Nottingham. Each team was invited to reflect on these questions:

- The UPP Commission recommended the creation of Civic University Agreements. Would you describe what you are doing as creating a 'civic agreement'? Why have you chosen to take the particular approach you are pursuing?
- What practical advice would you offer to other HEIs / partnerships who are planning to embark on a similar process? What are the key steps they need to plan for?
- Have there been any particular 'light bulb moments' or crises which delivered particularly valuable learning?

This report summarises the presentations and identifies some key learning points. You can access the presentations and resources shared by the teams in the Members' area of the Civic University Website.

Key takeaways from the event

There is no one size fits all approach to developing a civic agreement

Each case study revealed a different approach, sensitive to the context. From Nottingham's 'portfolio' approach, to Keele's thematic 'deals'; from regional HE partnerships (Manchester) to individual HEI activity (Keele); from the generation of new agreements (in Nottingham and Keele), to the better alignment of existing partnership arrangements (Glasgow).

But there are some common features

All of the case studies described a similar set of steps in developing their civic strategy. These include: investing in partnership development; consultation; evidence gathering and mapping; clarifying governance; securing resources and investing in delivery and evaluation; comms and PR.

Personal relationships are key

In every case, the role of individuals and importance of personal relationships were highlighted. Involving people with expertise in partnership development is vital. Many of the

people leading this work in HEIs worked previously in other sectors, and that experience and those networks can be extremely valuable.

This process is all about collaboration

Both between a given university and its civic partners and also between universities, recognising that civic partners have a shared interest in the success and strengthening of the place and communities where they are based.

Civic agreements should start from the ‘outside in’ not the ‘inside out’

Being responsive to partner priorities, and sensitive to the pressures they are working under is crucial in building momentum. But the agreements need to align with areas where the university has assets and strengths to contribute. Developing this alignment is a key part of the development process

Developing civic agreements takes time – you can’t rush the process

Achieving common purpose and developing trust takes a significant amount of time. The case studies spell out just how long that can take, and the necessary steps to build into the process. As the Nottingham team said, ‘everything takes longer than you think’

Civic agreements build on existing activity

None of the HEIs have started from scratch. The ‘call to action’ in the UPP Commission to develop strategic partnership arrangement has allowed them to scale up and develop existing collaborative activity with a civic focus.

Civic agreements require strong leadership

Vice chancellor endorsement and involvement has been crucial in every case.

Beware of over-reaching

It is tempting to develop overly ambitious plans. Starting smaller, in a more targeted and focused way, means you can move more quickly and build momentum.

Resourcing delivery is essential

Agreements will falter without really effective project management and leadership. Agreements need to be underpinned with the resources, people and infrastructure to deliver results.

Covid-19 has disrupted the work, but also provided added momentum

The pandemic has placed a lot of stress on the civic activity in all the HEIs. While it has disrupted some of the activity, it has also revealed how strong civic partnership arrangements allow for HEIs to respond much more quickly during an emergency. The pandemic has also accelerated commitment to more joined up working.

Developing a 'civic' culture across HEIs is very much work in progress

There is strong 'top down' and 'bottom up' enthusiasm for civic activity within HEIs, but there are usually only pockets of activity, and many academics are still uncertain of the contribution they can make. A lot of internal work is needed to build civic readiness across the institution.

Celebrate and shout about what you are doing

It is important to build awareness and to make people feel part of something: celebrating, showcasing and building a community focused on 'making a difference'.

Presentations

There were five presentations at the event, which are summarised below

- An overview of Civic Agreements
- The Universities for Nottingham Civic Agreement
- University of Keele – The Keele Deals
- University of Manchester – developing a regional civic agreement
- Civic partnership working in Glasgow

An overview of Civic Agreements

- Paul Manners, Civic University Network and National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement

Paul provided an overview of how HEIs are approaching Civic Agreements, drawing on a survey of network members conducted earlier in 2020. These findings are captured in the Civic Network Guide ‘A Civic Recipe Book’, available via the [Civic University Network Members’ Area](#).

A key challenge is working out how to define the focus of your civic strategy. There are different ways of focusing this work. Typically, HEIs will consider the following:

A geographical lens	Deciding how to define sensible geographical boundaries around the work. This will be informed by a number of considerations – including whether you are working with other HEIs on an agreement; on existing local government boundaries, etc.
A partnership / sectoral lens	Deciding on who your priority partners will be in your agreement. Do you want to work across multiple sectors, for instance, or to focus on a subset of sectors, for instance prioritising health or local business?
A thematic / challenge lens	Another useful way of focusing an agreement can be to identify key challenge areas, which partners / communities identify as priorities, and which align with expertise / assets in your HEI.

Defining the ingredients of a civic agreement

Although civic agreements and strategy may lead to an HEI investing in whole new areas of activity, for many HEIs a first step is to identify what they are already doing which makes a civic contribution, and to try to ensure more effective coordination and alignment across this activity. Typically, HEIs report that there are a thousand flowers blooming, but often the work is happening in disconnected pockets.

The table below describes two broad types of ‘ingredients’ typically incorporated in a civic agreement – **civic ‘behaviours’** (policies and practices related to its social and economic impact), and **civic ‘knowledge building’** (focusing education and research power on civic outcomes). HEIs typically will ‘pick and mix’ from these activities and seek to develop a better coordinated and focused approach that is greater than the sum of its parts.

1. Civic behaviours – maximising the civic contribution of the HEI	
Internal facing policies <ul style="list-style-type: none">• EDI• Sustainability• Volunteering	External-facing ‘Anchoring’ activity <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Procurement• Community policies• Employment• Estates• Social Responsibility
2. Civic knowledge building – aligning research and teaching with local priorities	
Education and skills <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Widening Participation• Skills• Engaged Learning	Research, Innovation and KE <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Research challenges• Knowledge exchange• Public engagement

The Civic Recipe publication includes examples of how different HEIs are working with these different ingredients.

Following Paul’s overview, four case studies were shared of ‘work in progress’ across the UK.

The Universities for Nottingham Civic Agreement

- Fiona Anderson, Head of Civic Engagement, Nottingham Trent University
- Mike Carr, Executive Dean, Enterprise, Nottingham Trent University
- Tim Guyler, Assistant Chief Executive, Nottingham University Hospitals NHS Trust

The Universities for Nottingham civic agreement is the first Joint Civic Agreement to be signed by two universities. Its focus is both the city of Nottingham and the county of Nottinghamshire. The team emphasised how long it takes to do this work well. They have been working on their agreement for almost three years, building on an already strong base:



The team walked through the four phases of activity that they had delivered:

- Exploration – involving mapping activity, a Joint Economic, Social and Cultural Impact Study, and targeted stakeholder engagement. This led to the identification of five themes as potential focal points for the agreement
- Testing – the themes were then robustly tested in interviews and workshops, leading to a consultation synthesis document
- Co-curation - which involved finalising the mission, selecting signatory partners and negotiating the content
- Mobilisation – establishing governance arrangements and putting in place programme planning, management and monitoring

Governance included three key groups:

- Leaders' Forum (chief execs of the core partners, focused on policy alignment and future strategy)

- Programme Management Board (senior leaders, the engine room of delivery)
- Shadow Programme Management Board (University staff only, to identify and iron out internal management and delivery issues)

The agreement has five thematic areas, shown on the left and 6 core partners:

- D2N2 LEP
- Nottingham City Council
- Nottinghamshire County Council
- Integrated Care System – Nottingham and Nottinghamshire
- Sherwood Forest Hospitals – NHS Foundation Trust
- Nottingham University Hospitals – NHS Trust



Each theme contains a number of joint initiatives, 14 in total, which are described in the agreement.

The focal points contained in the agreement have provided a hugely important enabler of productive collaboration by providing practical, shared goals based on mutual interest. Mike Carr recommended a pragmatic approach to identifying priorities: *‘Sometimes it’s very easy to jump in on ‘we must solve all the big problems’. But actually, in reality, the resources that we have, and some of the stubbornness of these things makes that very difficult. So within our agreement, we blended a series of big, what I call ‘move the dial’ projects with activity that we would do anyway but that we needed to do more’.*

Links

The full text of the Civic Agreement, which outlines the mission, and the programme of initiatives that has been committed to:

[https://www.universitiesfornottingham.ac.uk/assets/downloads/Universities for Nottingham Civic Agreement 2020.pdf](https://www.universitiesfornottingham.ac.uk/assets/downloads/Universities_for_Nottingham_Civic_Agreement_2020.pdf)

A collection of case study 'stories' which capture how different groups of people across communities come into contact with the universities. They have identified eight groups, providing a lens through which the impact can be seen more clearly. These are: the next generation (children and their parents), the ambitious (post-16 learners), businesses, innovators, the community, creatives, patients and policymakers.

<https://www.universitiesfornottingham.ac.uk/stories>

An interactive map that visualises the impact of the universities for National, Regional, Sub-Regional, Local Enterprise Partnership, Local Authority and Parliamentary Constituency geographies: <https://www.universitiesfornottingham.ac.uk/statistics>

The map is based upon a report commissioned from public First. You can access a detailed explanation of the methodology used by Public First in developing the Universities for Nottingham Interaction Metric:

[https://www.universitiesfornottingham.ac.uk/assets/downloads/UfN Interaction Metric explainer.pdf](https://www.universitiesfornottingham.ac.uk/assets/downloads/UfN_Interaction_Metric_explainer.pdf)

University of Keele - The Keele Deals

- Ann Pittard, Associate Director for Engagement and Partnerships

Ann outlined Keele's distinctive approach which has been to develop a series of 'deals' focused on different themes, beginning with economic development:

2017 Keele Deal | Economy

2018 Keele Deal | Culture

2019 Keele Deal | Health

2020 Keele Deal | Recovery

2021 Keele Deal | Inclusion

The work began in 2015, when Keele's new VC, Trevor MacMillan joined the university. The first deal took 2 years, subsequent ones were quicker. The thematic approach made the process more manageable: *'it's a challenge enough developing relationships and working on highly complex formalised agreements with a small group of partners, let alone working across a broad portfolio. So we chose to go for 'bite size' chunks'.*

Each deal has had a slightly different geography – for instance, the Culture Deal was focused on Stoke on Trent and Newcastle Under Lye, linked to a City of Culture bid.

Each deal is built on a robust analysis of the needs of the area. With the Economy deal, this analysis revealed some distinctive challenges: a very patchy understanding of the role of innovation in driving growth and very low levels of business related innovation:

'We took the view that we could do what a lot of universities are doing, which is work with companies who are receptive to and perhaps doing R&D already, and scale in that way. But that really wouldn't be addressing the issues in the local area. And so we made a strong focus on first time innovation and first time R&D, and being able to demonstrate that with companies in very practical ways. This also involved our graduate base as well in terms of the capacity and skills. With the goal of demonstrating what good research development and innovation looks like and the value that that add could add to that businesses'.

Like the Nottingham team, Ann emphasised the significant amount of development time needed to deliver a strong and committed partnership approach, and stepped through the timeline for the Health deal.

Although the work began before the Civic University Commission, Keele has drawn on the work of the Commission, in particular the four 'tests' for a civic university that were set out in the [UPP Commission's final report](#).

Tests for a Civic University

A public test

- Can people talk about “our university” with pride and awareness?
- Is civic activity aligned to public wants?
- Are the views of local people reflected in either the formal governance or informal and communications structures and strategies of the university, including as regards the progress against the goals of the Civic University Agreement?

A place test

- How well are the university’s teaching programmes aligned with the structure and demands of the local labour market and likely developments in the coming years?
- Which population is the university serving? How local, and how diverse (including in terms of age, gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation)?
- Are universities following a single national university model or are local variants being adopted?

A strategic test

- Can the university define where its civic boundaries are? What is the geographical area it is primarily focused on?
- Is it clear how the university is linked to local/regional leadership in the area – including its graduates?
- Does the university have a clear analysis and strategy? Can it use that analysis to explain/underpin why its global or national activities supports/strengthen its civic activity, and can it clearly articulate what outcomes, impacts and benefits it wants as a result of its strategy?

An impact test

- Can the university measure the impact of its activity?
- Has the university been thoughtful about how it works with other local universities and other institutions to maximise that impact?

In reflecting on the lessons learned, Ann emphasised how important it is to focus on delivery: *Our approach was about organising and scaling, and capacity, resources, and delivery are absolutely key. You can very quickly erode trust with partners if you don't deliver. So getting*

capacity and resources in place, but also effective project management arrangements plus senior level buy in and oversight to make sure that they're delivering

She also reflect on the capability needed within universities to deliver this kind of work: *'skills need to change. We're moving into an era where we're looking at slightly different skills'*.

Links

The University of Keele website includes links to useful resources and more information about their four 'deals': <https://www.keele.ac.uk/business/keeledeals>

The University of Manchester

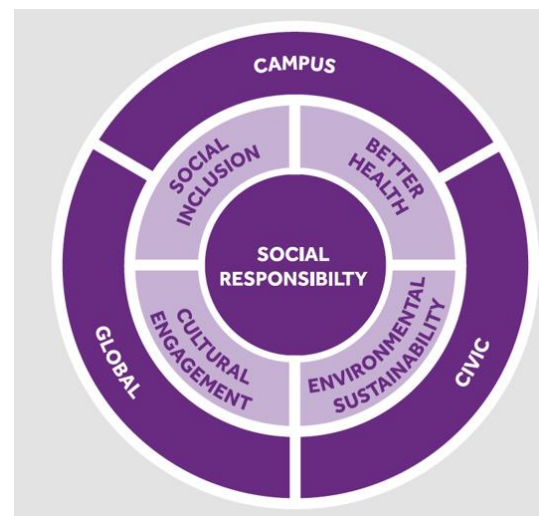
- Julian Skyrme, Director of Social Responsibility, University of Manchester

Manchester is at a more embryonic stage than Nottingham or Keele, but has ambitious plans to develop a deal involving all of the universities in the Greater Manchester region. This encompasses 10 local authorities, 2 cities and over 50 towns.

Julian provided an update on the evolving partnership and started with contextualising the work at the University of Manchester. The work fits with the University's long-standing commitment to Social Responsibility, which was defined as one of the University's three core goals in 2011:



The University of Manchester's core goals



The University's social responsibility plan

The UPP Commission has provided an opportunity for the university to revisit and restate its founding civic mission. In particular, it has encouraged the university to explore a more collaborative approach to its engagement with the city and region, with parallels with the approach that has been developed in Nottingham.

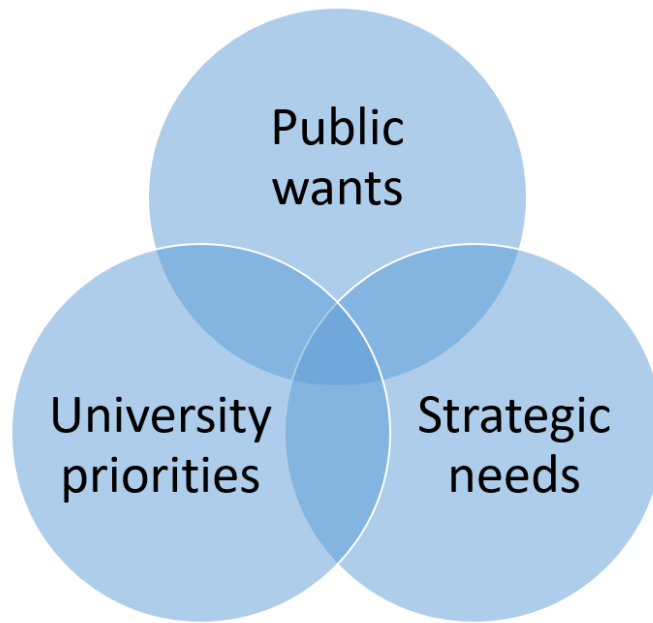
Julian emphasised the importance too of taking an ‘outside in’ approach – rather than the more typical ‘inside out’ mind-set: *‘trying to be more much more cognizant of the strategic needs and priorities of the region in which we’re based and trying to orientate the goals, strategies and the priorities of our university towards these, rather than starting with our own faculties and schools which we tend to traditionally do in higher education.’*

As with Nottingham and Keele, the work is being underpinned by evidence gathering – to understand local and regional priorities, and their alignment with the strengths and assets of the university:

‘So we’ve got lots of areas where we think we make an interesting contribution, but how can we take the best of those contributions and scale that up to something that is more strategic and involves the whole of the capabilities of the university and the needs of the city region?’

They are also looking to better understand how the public perceive and value the universities, using a survey and focus groups: *‘our plan during 2021 is first of all, to do a survey of 1000 residents across Greater Manchester (there are 10 local authorities, so aim to get a sample of 100 in each), and that would be designed to understand what the public value most from universities and what they value most about the development of the areas in which they live’.*

Julian described how the goal of more joined up working by the HEIs in Greater Manchester has been boosted by their collective response to Covid-19, with a key forum being a weekly meeting of the vice chancellors.



Julian used this diagram to describe the three different ‘inputs’ that will need to be balanced in the final agreement

As with the other civic partnerships, the civic strategy will provide an opportunity to scale up existing activity, and to enhance its local, regional, national and global impact. Examples of such activity include:

- A new Productivity Institute funded by ESRC
- Work at MMU on re-imagining the high street
- An Inequalities Commission launched by the Mayor Andy Burnham and being chaired by Professor Kate Pickett, which is being serviced by The University of Manchester

Work is ongoing to build the collaboration across the five HEIs in the region, Manchester, MMU, Salford, Bolton and the Royal Northern College of Music.

Links

The University of Manchester website includes links to useful resources about its civic engagement and social responsibility activity:

<https://www.manchester.ac.uk/discover/social-responsibility/civic/>

Civic partnership working in Glasgow

- Des McNulty, Assistant Vice Principal - Economic Development and Civic Engagement, University of Glasgow
- Kevin Kane, Executive Director, Glasgow Economic Leadership and Business Director, Innovation and Industry Engagement, University of Strathclyde

There are similarities between Glasgow and Manchester: both have a strong civic culture with the universities strongly embedded in the city. Kevin described the various fora and partnerships already in place, including *Glasgow Economic Leadership (GEL)* – equivalent to an English Local Economic Partnership, which was established in the wake of the financial crash in 2008.

‘This brings together of the civic leadership, the political, administrative leadership, private sector leadership and senior public sector figures in the city, in a quadruple helix sort of model. It also has a number of key sector work streams, to the same design made up of people from the university sector, the colleges, business and key public agencies, including the council’.

Kevin also noted that the universities are embedded in the *Glasgow Economic Recovery Group (GERG)* established by the City Leaders to chart a way out of the economic impacts of Covid-19. Though immediate issues relate to supporting business, medium to longer term issues strongly include the universities (and colleges) in term of skills (upskilling and reskilling) as well as building on the universities asset base in research and innovation. Glasgow has three Innovation Districts anchored by Strathclyde (GCID, AMIDS) and Glasgow (GRID) recognised by all partners (City Council, Scottish Government and its agencies) as vital to the future of the Glasgow and city regional economy.

Des described another key partnership, the Commission for Economic Growth, which was originally set up as part of the Glasgow City Deal.

This context has strongly influenced how the universities are approaching their civic strategy. As elsewhere, Covid-19 has provided an added boost to collaborative working in the city. Des described a key recent development:

'Setting up an academic advisory group to support the City's Social Recovery Task Force. The idea behind this is to curate the academic expertise that comes in from four universities across the city region, to topics that the city itself is interested in, whether that's domestic violence against women, or the impact of COVID on black and ethnic minority communities or whatever. The agenda is set by the city and the various voluntary sector agencies that they're involved with. And the universities have a chance to be proactive in responding to these issues, to provide research but also to respond to research requests or, or needs that the citizens themselves identify'.

A current focus is to develop a joined up approach in the run up to COP26, which will be hosted in the city. Des described a key challenge being to find a way to combine a 'bottom up' and 'top down' approach:

'We're trying to find a way where we can combine a top down approach with a bottom up approach, so we can harness the expertise and energy of our staff, and indeed, our students who've been very proactive in looking at the implications of COP; and link that with our cooperation efforts between the city and the universities' leadership. I think the challenge is really dealing with a bit in the middle: how do we get the academic units and the middle tier decision making within the university to fit in with both the energy coming up from below and the intention being driven by the leadership'.

All of this activity has resulted in a large number of agreements and projects between the universities and partners across the city and region. Des closed by reflecting on how to take this partnership work forward:

There's a myriad of these different agreements. Whether we need to put energy into coordinating these different agreements into a single agreement, or whether it's best to do a kind of experimental and opportunistic process, where we develop cooperation, build up trust, and take that forward, is an interesting set of issues that we have to face. Currently there probably isn't much scope at the city region level to spend a lot of time negotiating agreements, per se. They would far rather get inputs from us to help them in dealing with their exigencies. And what's really important about this is developing a dynamic conversation between the universities and the partners, so that we understand what each other can bring to the table and find ways to cooperate and make it make work'.

Links

Glasgow Economic Leadership

<http://glasgoweconomicleadership.com/>

Glasgow Economic Recovery Group

<https://www.glasgow.gov.uk/article/25869/Post-Pandemic-Economic-Recovery-Plan-for-Glasgow-to-be-developed>

Take it further

You can access the four presentations and linked resources in the new Members' Area of the Civic University Network website (launching in January 2020).

You can access the Members' Area at

www.civicuniversitynetwork.co.uk.



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Members' Area