CIVIC CAPITALS AT RISK: THE FRAGILE FOUNDATIONS OF THE CIVIC UNIVERSITY

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National Civic Impact Accelerator

BACKGROUND

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

SUMMARY

Universities' civic engagement and the impact and sustainability of their local partnerships are increasingly vulnerable at a time of well-publicised financial challenges in UK higher education. This report takes stock of the current situation, sets out key risks and opportunities, and makes recommendations for university leaders and government policymakers.

Based on in-depth group discussions with staff from 21 universities who are involved in civic roles, and supported by a survey and findings from the National Civic Impact Accelerator programme, the report identifies five forms of resource or 'civic capital' within universities: economic, social, cultural, symbolic and emotional. It shows how civic work is performed under conditions of precarity, frequently reliant on ad-hoc funding and vulnerable to cuts and reorganisations.

We identify four key risks that result from this. First is a loss of focus and coordination, generating uncertainty among local stakeholders about the reliability of universities as partners. Second is a loss of institutional memory, leading to the need to repeatedly reconstruct local relationships. Third, stemming from the first two risks, is the loss of trust and reduced credibility of universities as civic partners. In a wider context in which the role of higher education is under scrutiny, there is thus a fourth risk of losing relevance to local communities and strategic partners.

The report shows how civic practitioners – university staff from a variety of professional and academic backgrounds who create and support local partnerships[1] - are working to sustain their civic capitals under challenging conditions. It identifies five key conditions for a thriving civic university: trust, legitimacy, network building, respect and funding.

On the basis of our research we make five recommendations for university leaders and three for government, which are **set out in detail in section 7** and summarised below.

University leaders should:

- Set clear local priorities in strategic documents such as Civic University Agreements
- Make room for ideas and organic development by fostering a civic culture
- Resource civic teams with long term budgets
- Ensure sustainability of civic activities through long term commitments
- Be accountable both internally and externally for delivering these commitments, with regular reporting supported by locally agreed metrics

Government policymakers should:

- Articulate a clear narrative about the value of civic engagement and expectations of local impact
- Incentivise civic activity by ensuring resources are consistently available through the core funding mechanisms for higher education
- Foster conditions to make civic activity sustainable by coordinating place-based policies between government departments

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INTRODUCTION

Why this matters

The financial crisis facing universities in the UK is now widely known, with extensive commentary in the media and in public policy. A survey by Universities UK in May 2025 revealed that almost half the 60 universities that responded (49%) had closed courses; 19% had reduced investment in research, while 79% were considering future reductions; 18% had closed whole departments; and 60% had cut back on repairs and maintenance.[2] An assessment by the Office for Students published in November 2024 concluded that without 'bold and transformative action' 72 per cent of UK universities could be in deficit by the 2025-26 academic year[3], while the Financial Times[4] reported in March 2025 that the sector's finances were 'towards the most pessimistic end' of last year's financial modelling, increasing the risk of a 'sudden market exit'. Numerous institutions have announced redundancies, prompting a growing number of industrial disputes.

In this context, universities' civic engagement and partnerships in their localities are increasingly vulnerable, despite growing awareness in recent years of the key role they can play as 'anchor institutions' in their communities. The importance of universities' contribution to their localities has been shown in (for example) the Civic University Commission's report[5] in 2019 and subsequent reports from the Civic University Network. However, a rising number of institutions are curtailing civic activities, reducing the staff, funding and institutional support allocated to them. Yet there is an expectation from government that universities will pay more attention to their civic role, clearly articulated by education secretary Bridget Phillipson in a letter to universities on 4 November 2024 which set out five priorities for higher education providers:

- Play a stronger role in expanding access and improving outcomes for disadvantaged students
- Make a stronger contribution to economic growth
- Play a greater civic role in communities
- Raise the bar on teaching standards
- Improve efficiency and deliver value for money

The paragraph on universities' civic contribution emphasised partnership building and local leadership:
'I want to ... ensure that you play a full part in both civic engagement, ensuring local communities and businesses benefit fully from your work; and in regional development, working in partnership with local government and employers to shape and deliver the economic and social change that is needed across skills, research and innovation. This civic contribution must be locally led, and you will each have distinctive and different roles to play, but I am clear that the government will want it to form a core part of a renewed vision for the sector.'

While there has been no further guidance since November, the Department for Education is expected to provide more detail in summer 2025. Given the evident tensions between what government expects and what universities are doing in response to their financial challenges, it is vital to understand the pressures bearing down on universities' civic work and to identify how this work can survive and thrive in future.

About this report

This report focuses on the resources required for effective civic activity. While the focus of attention in the current climate is inevitably on money, financial resources are not all that matters. We introduce the idea of 'civic capitals' as a way of thinking about such resources as time, skills and knowledge, emotional labour, the support of university leaders, and relationships built up over months and years (see Section 1 for details of why we have chosen this approach).

Using this notion of civic capitals as our guiding frame, we have structured the report as follows:

- An introduction to the civic capitals we have identified, with examples of how these support universities' engagement with places and communities
- An assessment of the current state of civic capitals in universities, showing how civic work is performed under conditions of precarity
- An assessment of the risks to civic activity that arise from the current state of resourcing
- Opportunities to strengthen civic activity in the current environment
- Methods and tactics for sustaining civic activity
- The conditions required for a thriving civic university ecosystem
- Recommendations for university leaders and policymakers

This is not the first time attention has been drawn to the need to effectively resource civic activity. In *Resourcing our civic ambition* [6], published by the Civic University Network and National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement in 2022, the authors highlighted contemporary policy imperatives 'to invest more money in place-sensitive ways to deliver demonstrable impact for all citizens of the UK' but warned (p.6) that *'in practice, the multiple sources of funding and different policy imperatives have created in many HEIs a legacy of overlapping functions which are not necessarily efficiently or proactively aligned'.* The *Civic Recipes* report published shortly afterwards[7] detailed the 'civic behaviours' and 'civic knowledge building' that can contribute to successful civic engagement. The aim here is not to duplicate that work but to take stock of where we are in a financial environment that has become much harsher in the last three years, and to identify what needs to happen now at a time of significant threat to the survival of civic activity within UK universities.

What we mean by civic activity

There has been, and continues to be, discussion about what exactly is meant by a university's civic work. This is inevitable as such work is locally produced in response to situated needs through the collective imagination of communities. However, as a guide we use the following statement[8] produced by the National Civic Impact Accelerator (NCIA) [9] programme:

- We understand universities' **civic activities** as a set of collaborative and inclusive relationships and practices that happen for the benefit of a place, towards a shared set of outcomes coproduced with local institutions, leaders and populations.
- A **civic mission** is a choice by universities to recognise the value and potential of these relationships and practices and invest in them to agreed outcomes.
- **Civic engagement** is the process of building and continuously improving locally beneficial relationships.
- **Civic impact** describes the outcomes that flow from such relationships.

How we researched this report

This report arises from the work of NCIA, a programme funded by Research England and led by Sheffield Hallam University and six partner organisations[10] to support civic activity within English universities and gather and share evidence on 'what works'.

Within a year of the programme's launch in late 2022, it was evident that the challenges facing civic universities had become much tougher. The NCIA team agreed additional work was needed to consider these challenges and their likely impacts. To do this we undertook an initial online survey of individuals working in civic roles in summer 2024. This drew 22 responses from 20 institutions. A selection of key questions from the survey were then shared at a webinar in October 2024 which was attended by 41 people involved in universities' civic activities, either as practitioners or partners[11]. Finally, in February 2025 we facilitated three in-depth focus group discussions with practitioners identified as central to the civic activity in their institutions. These events, held in Sheffield and Bristol, involved 25 participants from 20 universities in England and one in Wales. Participants were also invited from Scotland but were unable to attend. While our report therefore mainly relates to the situation in England, universities across the UK face similar financial pressures although devolved governance means that nations can develop distinctive policy responses.

The focus groups were held under the Chatham House Rule and quotations and participating institutions are therefore anonymised. Ethical approval was granted by Sheffield Hallam University. The discussions were recorded and transcribed by the lead author and observed by the co-author, who providing additional insights and sense-checked the analysis.

Survey findings

The preliminary survey provided a mixed picture of enthusiasm and anxiety. Respondents reported engaging with a wide variety of partners, including business and industry, local government, health and social care, schools, voluntary and community organisations and arts groups. One third (seven respondents) said responsibility for their activity lay with strategic university leadership, while a similar proportion said it was the responsibility of a professional services team or department. Twelve respondents reported that their institution had developed a Civic University Agreement and a similar number had a dedicated civic impact or engagement team.

In nine cases, respondents said there was a dedicated budget for civic activity. However, only four said there was a long-term budget. Three said there was a time-limited budget to support particular activities, three said civic activity was funded on an ad-hoc basis, and four said there was no formal budget but staff time was allocated. In most cases (15) teams consisted of five or fewer individuals. Nine respondents said their university provided grants to external organisations for civic activity.

While these findings indicated a modest but significant level of commitment, this contrasted with a strong sense that activities were underfunded and their sustainability was in question. All but one disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that ‘financial resources allocated to civic activity in your institution are sufficient to achieve its aims’. While five respondents felt civic activity was ‘a core part of the university’s work and will be supported for the foreseeable future’ and nine said it was ‘secure for the next 2-3 years’, four said they had to make a financial case for the work to continue and another four said it was unclear how the work would be supported beyond the next financial year (i.e., 2024-25). Although a large majority felt positive about their local partnerships and their university’s civic activities, most disagreed that their universities’ civic ambitions ‘influence decisions and activities across the institution’.

1. CIVIC CAPITALS AT WORK

Excited, positive, ambitious: webinar participants shared their feelings about civic activity in October 2024

Civic capitals are resources that exist in an organisation that enable it and the individuals who work within it to achieve their civic goals. They include day-to-day resources such as the budgets that pay for staff time and activities, and the resources such as skills and knowledge that are built up over time and that individuals and teams draw on to do their work.

We have come to the idea of civic capitals both through the direct evidence of participants in this research and through previous NCIA work that has highlighted the different resources required to undertake civic work, including the intangible resources of leadership, buy-in, cooperation and emotional labour. We have drawn especially on evidence from an 18-month action learning programme organised and facilitated by the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE) as part of the NCIA programme,[12] which informed our approach to this research.

Different capitals can be identified in different contexts. One of the most familiar approaches is the 'five capitals' model developed by Forum for the Future,[13] which developed a framework for sustainability based on natural, social, human, financial and manufactured capital.

Another approach is set out in a recent report on universities and regional growth, which identified seven relevant types of capital – human, technological, information, relational, physical, organisational and monetary.[14]

In this report we identify five types of capital that emerged from our discussions with civic practitioners: economic, social, cultural, symbolic and emotional.[15] Other capitals are likely to emerge from other aspects of the NCIA's work (especially in relation to the physical impact of university campuses), but these were the most pertinent to the question of how civic activity is resourced. While civic capitals are necessary (civic work wouldn't happen without them) and interconnected (each supports the others), it is questionable how well universities understand their importance.

As an illustration, imagine an individual with responsibility for civic activity in a fictional University of Middle England. Their salary and the budget for their work are forms of economic capital. They have good relationships with the local authority and some community organisations, creating social capital, but because they don't have a team working with them there is a limit to the number of relationships they can meaningfully sustain. Fortunately, there is a Civic University Agreement which the individual can use to remind the university's leaders of their commitments; this provides cultural capital. They also get invited to report on their activities at meetings of the university executive team; this is symbolic capital, indicating to the individual and to the university more widely the importance attached to civic work. Partly as a result of this, and partly because of the individual's own passion for their community, they have a high degree of emotional capital or personal investment in their role. This passion is infectious, motivating other colleagues and partners to support the university's civic work.

The distinction between cultural and symbolic capital can sometimes be unclear as there are often overlaps. It is most helpful to think of cultural capital as tangible or institutionalised – documents such as Civic University Agreements, qualifications, projects – and symbolic capital as largely intangible and often informal, involving legitimacy, leadership and access to power. This is how we have used these categories here.

In undertaking civic activities within and for their institutions, practitioners both build civic capitals and draw on them.

Economic capital

Economic capital refers to the financial resources that underpin civic activity such as grants and budgets. But it also covers the economic effects that universities have within their places and communities. The economic capital applied within universities, creating teams and roles, can contribute to wealth-building within communities.

In our focus groups we were given numerous examples of how this could happen. One university with expertise in aerospace had invested in a facility within its city that both showcased its expertise and also provided opportunities to connect with one of the city's more deprived communities. Another had supported an enterprise park in a local town centre. In a third case, a university used its role as a local 'anchor institution' to attract a major national organisation to invest in a regeneration project. A university in the south of England pooled funding pots to support an affordable housing scheme. A survey respondent commented:

'It's mighty impressive to see how important civic engagement is to HEIs in certain regions where the University IS the pillar of the community and helps prop up the local economy. It's also inspiring to see universities coming together and collaborating within their specific regions.'

This work often depends on a process of 'translation' between universities and their local counterparts to identify how the resources of higher education can meet local needs. One participant commented:

'These things are hard to do and hard to keep going. At this point in time it's particularly difficult because universities don't feel they've got a lot of spare cash to throw at something like this, but there is recognition that there's an expectation from government that we will make this kind of civic contribution.'

However, we also heard examples of naivety and short-term thinking where investments did not have the expected impacts. One participant described this as a 'coffee shop' approach: universities would assume investment in a café would create connections between local residents and the university, rather than taking the time to discover their communities' needs.

There can often be a disjuncture between the investments a university ostensibly makes within its locality and its investments in the teams and individuals whose job is to build local partnerships. Decisions about capital investments and the work of partnership-building are often uncoordinated.

Illustration: The Preston Model

The University of Lancashire (formerly UCLAN) supported Preston City Council and the Centre for Local Economic Strategies in developing the 'Preston Model' of community wealth building, reforming its own procurement practices to ensure more of its budget is spent with local businesses. The university has applied its research skills to generate insight and evidence, focusing on the development of locally-owned cooperative businesses.[16]

Social capital

Social capital describes the collective and personal agency that arises from belonging to groups and networks. Social capital is typically described as 'bonding', 'bridging' and 'linking'[17]: creating ties within a group or community, bringing together different groups, and building asymmetrical relationships (for example, between a client and contractor or a mentor and mentee). Universities build social capital both within their organisations through shared purposes and activities, and externally by supporting partnerships and relationship-building. In our focus groups, examples of both bridging and linking social capital were shared. The bridging work is often informal and organic: one participant spoke of 'years of engagement with communities' and another described how their university had worked with community partners to assemble projects to address local priorities. A third spoke of their vice-chancellor's recognition of the value such work creates:

'The VC said lots of important people in the region would be very upset if we weren't here. It's about the personal relationships we've built up with key figures in the region.'

Another participant described a stance of being 'friendly and accessible', open to new opportunities to build relationships without a pre-set agenda. Work to widen participation in higher education often generates linking social capital; as some participants noted, universities often have formal relationships with local schools to support them in raising students' attainment.

Cultural capital

Cultural capital refers to the resources embodied within institutions or networks that support the culture of an organisation. Within a university, it includes the system of qualifications and academic recognition, curricula and processes, governance mechanisms and awards. Within the field of universities' civic activities, it can include Civic University Agreements or other protocols involving external partners; statements of intent (for example, on a university website), or the existence of civic or public engagement teams.

More broadly, policies on widening participation or initiatives to engage with local communities (for example, opening university libraries to members of the public) and recognised forms of knowledge exchange produce cultural capital. Projects with community partners generate cultural capital, embodying the trusted relationships being built between university staff and their partners. In our focus groups we heard of universities across the country that have assembled projects and partnerships to address local priorities and concerns, evidencing in tangible form the university's commitment to its locality.

Illustration: Community Gateway, Cardiff

An example of action to build trusted local relationships is the Community Gateway partnership in Grangetown, Cardiff. The partnership is a long-term commitment by Cardiff University to invest in nine social, environmental or economic themes chosen by local communities. One example is a 'live teaching' partnership in which the university's business school supported local businesses in developing a 'shop local' campaign. Students were asked to develop ideas to set up a local business forum, and five projects were chosen for graduate students to work on with the forum as part of their studies.[18]

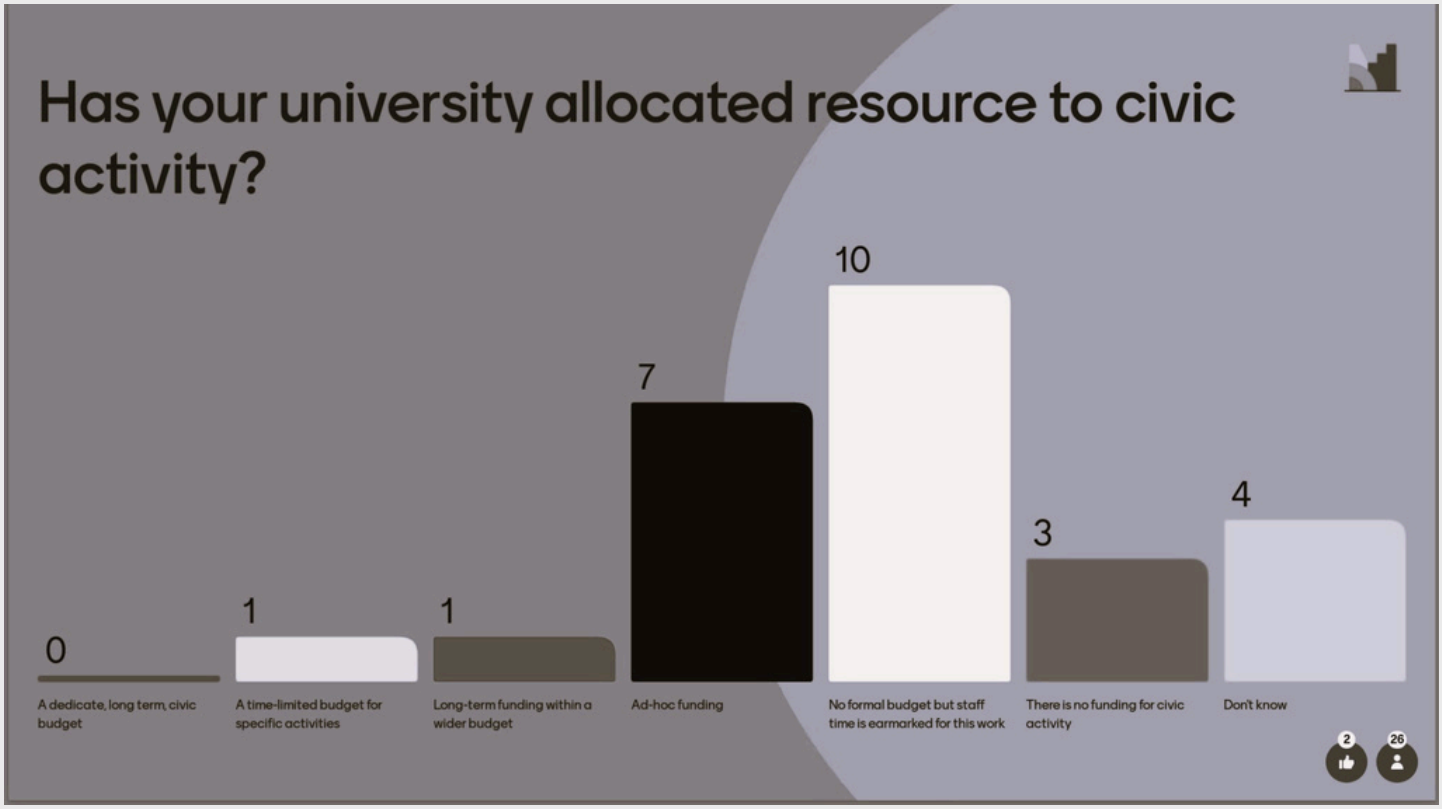
Symbolic capital

Symbolic capital, in contrast to cultural capital, is largely intangible. It concerns issues such as legitimacy and access to power, the idea of 'buy-in' and leadership support. In our focus groups we heard both positive and negative accounts of such support, or the absence of it. While cultural capital may be manifest in agreements, policies and projects, it also exists independently of these. Symbolic capital may mean having the support of the vice-chancellor, or be shown in the seniority of the posts responsible for civic engagement. Universities can create symbolic capital if they dedicate senior staff to partnership-building and if university leaders show up to meetings with their counterparts in local government or other anchor institutions; less visibly, they do so if they create a culture in which academics are encouraged in their engaged scholarship and if the staff involved in civic teams are given permanent employment contracts. At a local level, universities can build symbolic capital by acting as independent experts and trusted brokers without the disadvantage of political alignment.

Emotional capital

Emotional capital is an addition to the traditional view of 'capitals' as resources. However, it became clear during our research that civic work depends to a large extent on the personal commitment and passion of its practitioners. These individuals do not take up their roles because they are part of a professional career structure or because they have high status; in some cases, roles have been created to recognise the pre-existing commitment and labour of the postholders. Such 'connectors' often occupy hybrid roles that do not easily fit within existing professional or academic reward structures. In our focus groups we heard how such roles place high demands on those who occupy them, in that there are few limits to the amount of work that can be done or the potential it presents; they also demand highly-tuned negotiation skills, listening and empathy. These are resources or capitals that practitioners bring to their roles, and while they can be enhanced through training and professional development they are primarily to do with personal qualities and motivation. However, undertaking this work can also build emotional capital in terms of commitment and engagement from others, both within higher education institutions and externally. There seem to be few current ways of recognising the value this emotional capital presents; often it is only noticed when it is lost (for example, in terms of burnout or exhaustion). We will return to this notion of emotional capital as this report progresses as we believe it is an essential condition for a thriving civic university ecosystem.

2. LIVING ON CAPITAL



High ambition, precarious funding: webinar participants highlighted the fragility of budgets for civic activity

In their engagement and partnership-building work, universities have often built substantial capital. Their support for local projects, commitment to local partners, and their work as advocates for their places has built up a bank of trust and goodwill in many instances. However, like families living off inherited wealth, we found that universities often draw on these resources without adequately replenishing them.

Economic capital

In a challenging financial climate for universities (and a context of long-term funding cuts in other public services), civic activity is increasingly viewed as expenditure rather than investment. This drives demands to demonstrate short-term financial returns, coupled with a squeeze on the resources allocated to undertake civic work. Several focus group participants highlighted their institutions' fixation on attracting international students as this was the only aspect of their work perceived to generate a surplus. Local partnership-building is unlikely to meet this objective and so is being deprioritised in many cases: one participant referred to a 'visible narrative of de-investment'. Another said civic work was not taken seriously unless an income stream could be attached to it.

Alongside pressure to generate financial returns, civic practitioners find the resources at their disposal are being curtailed. While many are still on permanent, long-term contracts, there have been high-profile examples of universities that have drastically reduced their civic teams or dismantled them entirely, while others report a growing tendency to appoint staff in junior positions on short-term contracts. Funding for civic work has been fragile for many years (as the 2022 Resourcing Our Civic Ambition report detailed). In many cases civic work is financed through Higher Education Innovation Funding (HEIF), a £260m pot managed by UKRI. However the formula that governs funding allocations uses income received from partner organisations rather than the benefits that accrue to the community:

'We use data on the income received by an institution from its users (businesses, public and third sector services, the community and wider public) as a proxy measure for the impact of its knowledge exchange activities'.[19]

Participants in our focus groups suggested it was becoming more difficult to use HEIF funding to support activities that had no income stream attached. In one discussion, participants talked about applying for philanthropic or consultancy funding to keep their work going or conducting evaluation work for charities, while one said they were now being asked to part-fund their own role. Such pressure to generate external income diverts resources from universities' civic work: an increasing proportion of practitioners' time must be spent finding the funds and making the case for their roles to continue.[20] This can become self-defeating, reducing civic impact and scope:

'One of the challenges I've been given is I have to part-fund my own role, so I have to write myself into research projects. That takes away from doing the civic stuff I was actually employed to do.'

Social capital

The issue of social capital illustrates how civic activity provides a return on investment, and the kind of return that can be anticipated. Social capital is measured in terms of the strength, density and variety of networks and connections; by creating and sustaining connections, they multiply. Such connections are sustained through repeated, respectful contact and a readiness to discover and explore shared interests; they are weakened when one party or another turns them into transactional negotiations or tries to use them instrumentally to advance its own interests.

In our focus groups, participants highlighted that civic work does not start from a blank slate: it builds on layers of previous connections and joint work. Relationships are reinforced through continuing attention and care.

One participant described the background to a successful research grant application as consisting of four years of meeting for coffee every six months. Others stressed the need to listen to their communities to identify where the university could best offer support and expertise. For one participant, 'knowing your backyard' was particularly important: spending time in the locality, understanding the dynamics of local relationships and being alert to opportunities.

Some highlighted the value of students in building relationships with community organisations as volunteers and being ambassadors for the university[21]. However, others contrasted this with the often negative effects on the university's reputation of student behaviour within residential neighbourhoods, and the relatively short-term nature of most students' connections with their place of study. Another challenge was the increasing time required to support multiple networks; as social capital increases, it requires greater effort to sustain.

Being intangible, it is not always obvious when social capital is lost. This is most conspicuous when people leave or move roles and their knowledge of relationships and networks is not passed on to colleagues or seen as a continuing priority; the cost becomes evident in the work required to rebuild these relationships. One participant whose institution was being restructured commented on the impact of uncertainty:

'*We don't know where our jobs are going to sit, and that creates a feeling of well I can't promise these people something, I don't know whether to start this project, because I'm not sure whether my role might exist in twelve months' time.'*

The fewer people that are engaged in civic activity within a university, and the more junior their status, the more likely it is that contacts and connections will be lost if individuals change roles or leave, and the more vulnerable they are likely to be to restructuring and redundancy during financial cuts.

Illustration: A toolkit for community engagement

As an example of work that can support institutions in building social capital, the Institute for Community Studies published a toolkit to help universities involve people from local communities in civic activities, showing how community development principles can be integrated into Civic University Agreements. The toolkit points out that 'the involvement of those affected by the decision-making of large institutions in making those decisions is seen as a means of ensuring better outcomes. This is driven by concerns at the inability of centralised power and detached decision-making to achieve appropriate outcomes for communities. Moreover, communities and the diverse range of perspectives, knowledge and experiences they represent are increasingly seen as having value to add to public discourse, decision-making and problem-solving.' This requires long term commitments from universities that build on local people's strengths and capacities.[22]

Cultural capital

As places of learning, universities make much of the foundations of knowledge built by scholars of the past. The foundations of knowledge and institutional capacities that facilitate universities' civic work function in the same way, with the difference that these are seldom acknowledged. Focus group participants spoke of networks of relationships built over years with local partners, ranging from local authorities to football clubs. Such relationships generate alliances and shared understandings that can pave the way for new projects or bids for research funding. In one university in the north of England, for example, academics pooled knowledge to develop projects to meet local needs for economic development. A Civic University Agreement can validate existing relationships, as well as enabling universities to think strategically about which of many possible partnerships they should prioritise.

A key indicator of the strength of this cultural capital is the time allocated to staff engaged in civic work. Time is the key constraint affecting whether work can be done and relationships maintained. While there is usually a link between time and funding, time does not always have to be budgeted: often individuals have a tacit understanding that they can engage in or prioritise an activity, or conversely, that an activity is no longer a priority. One participant spoke of an 'inverse pyramid' operating in their institution, in which several senior staff had some responsibility for civic work but very little time, while a few junior staff were employed specifically on civic projects. Another spoke of how civic activity had to be smuggled in alongside other responsibilities:

'*There are no allocated roles, there's no allocated responsibility for civic engagement, so it's sort of developed by stealth.'*

Nevertheless, many recognised themselves as part of a cohort of university staff who are committed to working with local communities, whether or not they all have an official 'civic' responsibility. However, this can lead to a patchwork and ad-hoc approach where individuals have to act opportunistically. As one said, *'I don't have any support so I'm doing everything on my own on the ground'.* Another commented: *'We go in, we do something, we disappear'*. Such opportunism can often lead to a shallow understanding of partnership; one participant spoke of the naivety of colleagues who assumed that community partners would welcome the offer of student volunteers:

'...when we listen to our staff they have this real passion to go out and engage and work civically with communities and to share knowledge, but with a real naivety that they are a force for good and that community partners and civic partners are waiting for them.'

Symbolic capital

While Civic University Agreements can build cultural capital within a university, there can be a mismatch between rhetoric and reality. Statements by leaders are not always backed with resources of time and people to undertake the commitments a university has made. In our focus groups we heard of gaps in executive structures where nobody was responsible for civic engagement, and a risk of tokenism that undermined universities' local credibility. As one participant commented, *'We shouldn't lead where we don't have something to offer'.*

Several mentioned a wider context in which the role of universities themselves is being undermined in a society which has increasingly cast doubt on the value higher education provides. One spoke of how a mayor turned to them after a local civic event and openly questioned the point of university education. A survey participant highlighted the need to *'be a lot clearer about what the HE sector brings to the places in which institutions are embedded*':

'...the vast majority of people, even those who are university educated, only see the degree education side and are largely unaware of the research, development and enterprise that universities contribute. As a sector we have communicated this poorly and it hasn't helped the reputation of HE.'

This matters because universities' credibility as anchor institutions and civic partners depends on their standing within society as well as their economic clout. In societies where universities themselves are under threat, they are likely to need their civic partners as much as, and perhaps more than, than their partners need them; one participant argued that sustaining civic work could guarantee

universities' future, rather than the other way around.

If their civic pronouncements are not regarded as credible, the risk becomes higher that universities will be abandoned by their partners at a time of crisis.

Emotional capital

Over recent years a growing number of universities have developed Civic University Agreements, and even more have made strong statements of their civic commitment and funded staff and projects to turn those commitments into practice. This has built a bedrock of economic, social and cultural civic capital and (to a lesser extent) significant symbolic capital. When we turn to emotional capital, however, the picture is different. Many participants in our focus groups suggested that reserves of emotional capital are being rapidly drained.

A deep personal commitment to civic work was still strongly evident. Civic practitioners feel passionate about their work and have a clear sense of vocation. As one said, *'We have a duty of care to support our local communities'.* But this can place the burden on the individual practitioner rather than the institution, as one survey respondent observed:

'Staff are passionate about forging closer links with community organisations and local government. In practice there is no clearly defined approach or boundaries on what activities and projects to include.'

At the same time there was an acknowledgement that the mental health of university students and staff has been put under strain since the Covid-19 pandemic and this situation has been aggravated by recent rounds of financial cuts. One focus group participant compared the situation in their institution to a marriage breakup, where short-term trauma might eventually result in a better outcome:

'We are very much still a civic university. What that looks like and how that's resourced is I guess a different conversation, but in a couple of years it could be something really positive.'

For civic practitioners, many of whom are on temporary contracts or must repeatedly justify their own roles, there is an added layer of anxiety. Some felt the burden of risk had been shifted from the institutions onto individuals, who were constantly under pressure to show a return on investment:

'It takes a lot of hard work and a lot of resilience and persistence and time – and we're not being resourced to do any of that. ... You're expected to pursue that as an add-on in your own time: you're not rewarded for it, you're not incentivised for it even when you do it really well.'

This can lead to a situation in which practitioners feel insecure about their own futures and unable to give meaningful assurances to local partners, and a fragmented civic landscape where ‘what you have is the bits and pieces of committed people’.

3. CIVIC CAPITALS AT RISK

The focus groups and survey respondents provided strong evidence that the civic capitals built up over recent years are now at high risk of being eroded. At a time when government is stressing universities' civic role, it is becoming much more fragile. We now see a series of risks unfolding that, if not reversed, are likely to destabilise significant local partnerships and destroy the goodwill that accompanies them. We have identified four areas of risk that are interconnected, but have increasingly severe potential effects. While the first two mainly affect universities, all have wider ramifications.

The loss of focus

Universities are complicated institutions and suffer from the issues of coordination and communication that are common to large organisations. Yet as many have demonstrated in response to financial challenges, when an issue is seen as a priority it can be tackled comprehensively and decisively, even if that decisiveness brings its own challenges. The civic landscape of universities in the UK is not characterised by decisiveness or comprehensiveness.

Part of the challenge is that universities sometimes try to be all things to all people. One participant from a university in the south of England expressed frustration with *'so many missions and ambitions'* at their institution that it was hard to know which to prioritise. Others described multiple overlapping networks that could drain practitioners' time and energy. One participant from a local authority background found the structures of universities and the relationships of academic staff chaotic – *'we've got no idea who's talking to who'*. When partnerships are between different complex institutions – for example, between a university and a healthcare provider or a local authority – this challenge is magnified.

In the context of the civic university, this underlines the importance of clear leadership and priority-setting. A Civic University Agreement that does not guide action rapidly becomes yet another forgotten rhetorical pledge. Without guiding priorities or principles, civic activity becomes largely opportunistic, bringing together enthusiastic staff with temporary resources until the money runs out and multiplying the labour required to coordinate and connect projects and activities. It also exacerbates the risk that multiple staff from the university will try to forge relationships with the same community partner, creating burdens rather than benefits for the partners involved.

However, priority-setting carries its own risks. Setting a clear direction means that many worthwhile connections and ideas will not be followed up; one focus group participant highlighted how the attention of a senior manager had actually

reduced their scope to forge new relationships and test out ideas. Another warned against a reductive focus on metrics and league tables:

'*We think it's important to communicate what we do, but to avoid that very superficial league table approach, which really turns a lot of people off.'*

Alongside priority-setting, therefore, there needs to be support for a civic culture across the university (see Recommendation 2).

The loss of memory

The loss of institutional memory is both individual and collective. Its effects are primarily felt internally, but they ripple beyond the organisation as they increase the burden of participation for universities' partners.

The main area in which the loss of memory is obvious is in the need to 'reinvent wheels' because expertise is not passed on or embedded within an organisation. The loss of expert staff through redundancy or the ending of temporary contracts is a key factor. Civic activity depends strongly on tacit and relational knowledge – knowing who to work with and having an understanding of partners' needs that stems from repeated listening and interaction. Relationships cannot simply be passed on from one member of staff to another, or filed away to be resumed when resources allow. Learning disappears when an individual leaves, and more so when a team is dismantled or restructured. One participant commented:

'*...because of the constant restructuring which seems to be repetitive over so many years ... there's not that continuation of learning, and all the knowledge and those relationships and that richness of what we do feels like it's been lost... It's expensive to lose all that valued knowledge.'*

There is also an opportunity cost that stems from job insecurity: staff may choose not to follow up potential opportunities to embed and share their learning if they do not know if they will be in post to see an initiative through.

This is not simply a problem for the university. One focus group participant described their university as *'an institution with a very short memory in a city with a very long memory'*. Community organisations and elected members in local government often have many years or even decades of understanding of their locality and have built up networks accordingly; a university's impacts are remembered long after the staff involved have disappeared. There is thus a risk that universities' reputations are damaged because they are not seen as reliable long-term partners, and when enthusiastic new staff arrive with a passion for building new partnerships they risk being greeted with scepticism.

The loss of trust

In any situation of partnership-building, partners have to learn to understand each other's cultures and ways of working, priorities and values. They must also adjust their expectations to the capacities and resources of their counterparts, as well as identifying where they can add value and innovation. When the individuals or teams who nurture and build such partnerships disappear, their work often has to start again; and when civic teams are selected for redundancy or restructuring on the basis that they are a cost to the university, the price of such decisions can be felt in a loss of faith in the partnership process and a corresponding unwillingness by partners to commit their time and energy to relationships that universities do not appear to value.

Several focus group participants were going through processes of restructuring and felt an immediate threat to their work; at least two did not attend the groups because in the two months between receiving the invitation and the dates of the discussions they had left their civic roles. This reflects a wider loss of civic staff across the UK higher education sector, with some institutions removing entire teams to achieve short-term savings. The immediate impact of such changes stretches beyond the workload of the staff involved, affecting planned as well as existing activities. One participant said they had to keep asking themselves, 'Should you shut down this conversation?' Universities cannot both make the case for their importance as civic partners and simultaneously remove the people and resources required for such partnerships to work. As one participant pointed out:

'I've seen at first hand where I've left an institution because the activity was just being completely dismantled. There was no longer anything happening. So there's a question of how the organisations that are doing it really well can build more influence at senior level.'

As well as making universities' civic commitments appear tokenistic, financially-driven decisions also raise questions about universities' motivation for engaging in civic work. Several participants described their institutions' overwhelming concern with attracting international students to balance the books, prompting potential partners to suspect that universities only wanted to engage with them to support their own quest for additional funding. As one commented:

'What's going on is we're in a competition for international students and that is sink or swim, and the way you get international students is by pressing flesh in the right places, getting the right agents in place and rising up those league tables. And for senior management that's just existential.'

In a separate discussion, a participant from a different university made a similar point:

'Unless you can evidence bringing in international students you're not going to get the budget, and there's no point even putting in for the budget.'

One participant argued that universities needed training on how to be a good partner to their civic collaborators.[23] There was particular criticism of the 'saviourist' attitude adopted by some universities while using partnerships to further their own search for additional funding. Another participant said the constant demand to demonstrate income and outcomes *'wilfully ignored the truth'* about the complexity of civic work and what could be done with the resources available.

When universities are restructured or reprioritise resources, relationships with community partners can be significantly damaged: we heard how one former vice-chancellor lost credibility when their institution withdrew support from a local educational facility. Others highlighted the reputational risk involved when universities appear to abandon relationships their staff have spent years building.

The loss of relevance

In a context in which the value of higher education is under scrutiny, a withdrawal from civic engagement carries the risk of a loss of relevance. Focus group participants highlighted how their universities are enmeshed in localities in terms of housing and spatial planning, and the importance of strong relationships with local authorities to align interests and plans. This requires contacts at operational as well as strategic levels, and at a level commensurate with the seniority of the people the university hopes to engage with:

'If you're sitting in rooms with leaders of councils and hospitals, for that to be a junior role is a big ask, especially if it's a junior role on a temporary contract.'

Participants also highlighted the opportunity cost resulting from the loss or downgrading of relationships in a context in which there is a growing expectation that research proposals will be collaborative and demonstrate wider public benefit and impact.

However, participants acknowledged that universities still have some way to go in convincing local partners of the benefits they can bring or engaging with them equitably: *'There's an attitude that we can just play around with these [community] organisations because they want to work with us.'*

In many quarters universities' relevance has never been established; the benefits of spin-off businesses and engagement with strategic partners have seldom trickled down towards more disadvantaged communities. Some participants highlighted the dissonance between universities' worries over their relatively recent financial challenges and the experiences of those who have experienced

austerity and urban poverty for the best part of the last two decades. When universities plead poverty it is likely to receive little sympathy from partners who have lived with financial challenges for much longer.

Illustration: Addressing the climate emergency

A review of 16 published Civic University Agreements[24] in 2021 found that all of them explicitly named environment and climate as a priority for their local action. Themes included supporting local net zero targets (80%) and generating relevant research (90%). Nearly one third had a focus on sustainable travel. Some, such as Universities for Nottingham, pledged to work to change community behaviours in line with their environment commitments. The report shows how universities can be significant and relevant partners within their localities in addressing key shared challenges; such partnerships depend on continued investment by universities in their civic activity.

4. OPPORTUNITIES TO REBUILD CIVIC CAPITALS

Despite the troubled times universities are experiencing, there are opportunities to build and sustain meaningful partnerships with local communities. The first is that the current government has indicated that civic engagement is a national priority. The education secretary's letter to higher education institutions in November 2024 made it clear that universities should continue to build local and regional partnerships and that these needed to be locally distinctive and relevant to the needs of their communities (see Introduction and Recommendations 6-8). However, participants in our discussions, in common with external commentators, have pointed out that there is no resource earmarked for universities to do this work and that 'there's a massive increase in civic expectation at a time when resources are dwindling'. The implication is that government expects institutions both to manage their own budgets effectively and to prioritise civic engagement. Some of the ways in which they are attempting to do that are covered in section 5. There was some scepticism about whether such an expectation is realistic; some suggested the current trend of diminishing investment would only change either if earmarked funds were made available or if universities were given a clear 'duty to cooperate' with partners.

Illustration: How civic universities support the Government's missions

Following the 2024 General Election, the NCIA published a short report[25] summarising how civic universities align with government priorities of driving inclusive economic growth, creating jobs, breaking down barriers to opportunity and supporting health and wellbeing. The report highlights universities' role as large local employers; their ability to convene stakeholders via Civic University Agreements; their track record in developing business opportunities; their ability to inform local economic policies; and their experience in working on the ground with local partners.

A second opportunity lies in government plans for devolution and local government reorganisation. Some universities are already engaging with new mayoral authorities and forging links at regional or sub-regional scales to match the evolving map of local governance; one participant noted that *'civic engagement and partnership in a strategic way is mission critical because we need to be in the discussions about devolution'*. Another was optimistic that devolution would bring additional resources to their area but cautioned *'It's still a trickle-down economics approach and we know that doesn't work. ...There's another kind of civic that's not going to be captured and that is very vulnerable,*

and that's working with our most vulnerable populations.'

However, devolution only presents an opportunity in some parts of England. In some, such as London, where no changes are planned and where universities have many overlapping relationships both with local partners and with each other, the opportunity is one of greater collaboration and strengthening existing relationships.

The networks of existing relationships across the country provide a third opportunity to rebuild civic capitals. The longer and deeper a relationship is, the more likely that it will form the basis for collaborative activities and projects and the greater the potential benefits to both parties. Focus group participants emphasised the importance of maximising awareness of the work and relationships that already exist, but warned that universities should be careful not to over-promise in terms of commitment or potential impacts. Raising the profile of civic work could help to counteract the sense that the work is unimportant:

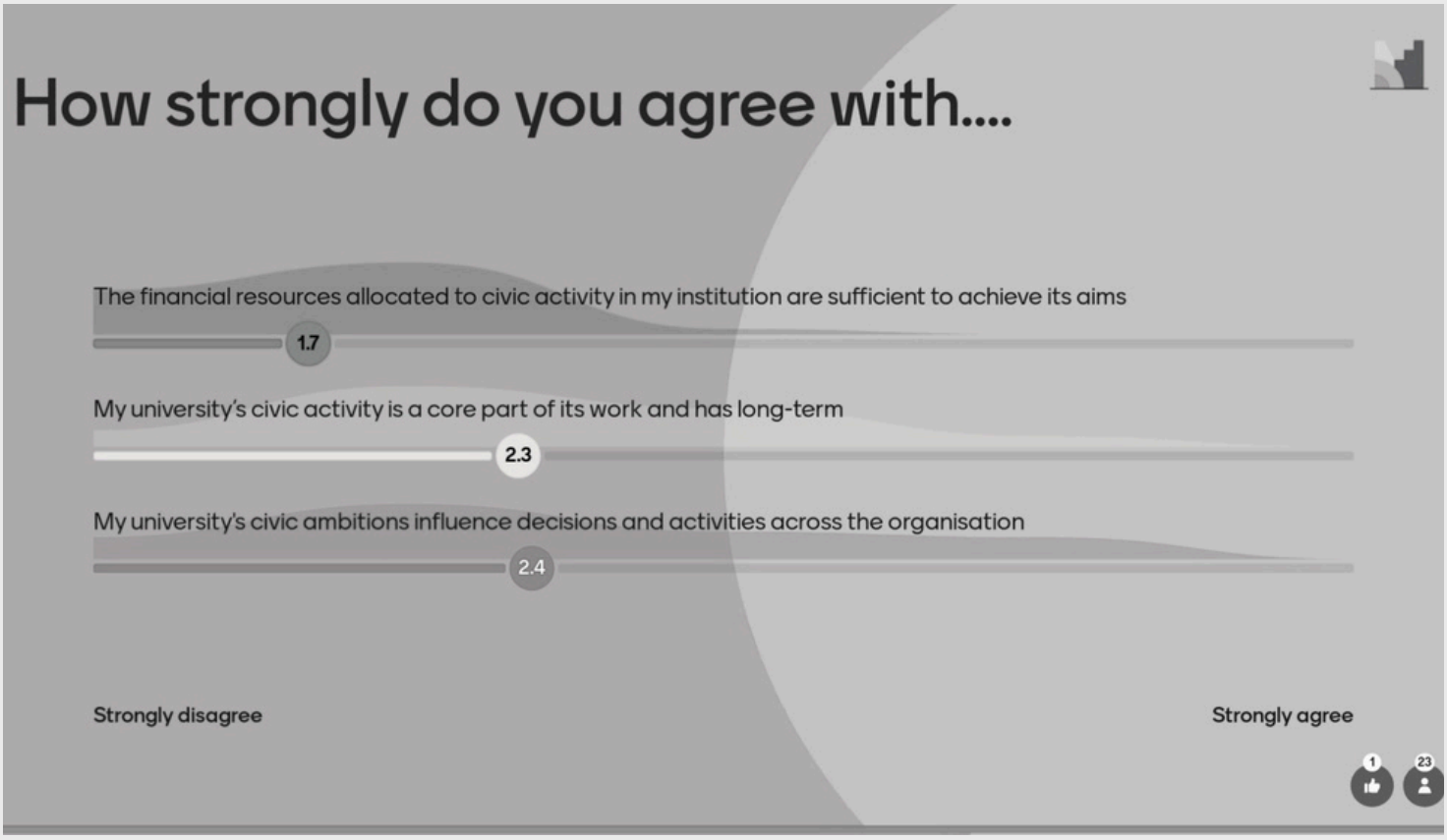
'Apart from my role there isn't a single person who has civic engagement in their job title... It's buried and no-one knows about it. So there's something about maximising the visibility of that work.'

Illustration: Equitable partnerships for civic engagement

Relationships matter, but not all relationships are equally healthy. As part of the NCIA programme, Queen Mary University of London has developed a toolkit for equitable partnerships,[26] with exercises, case studies and resources to help civic universities ensure that all voices are heard and power imbalances are addressed. The toolkit sets out ten clear principles for equitable partnership in public engagement, based on findings from a series of workshops with university staff and community partners.

The fourth opportunity is that of engaged scholarship. Whatever else happens at an institutional scale, there will always be academics who forge their own relationships and partnerships with local people and organisations. The challenge is to map such interest and engagement and to translate it into strategic partnerships that can draw on the expertise and goodwill developed through such bilateral relationships.

5. SUSTAINING CIVIC CAPITALS



Limited influence, insufficient funding: webinar participants had mixed views about the sustainability of their work

While the overall picture of civic activity is one of retrenchment and risk, universities and their civic teams – where they still exist – are creative and energetic in exploring how to sustain their work. Despite rather than because of their context, we found civic practitioners to be positive and enthusiastic about their work's potential. However, as one noted, 'when we exist on fumes we have to be so opportunistic'. Our discussions highlighted several ways in which this is happening. None are solutions to the challenges civic practitioners face, but they can help them weather some of the current storms and in some cases, continue to build for the future.

Sustaining economic capital

At a time when resources are stretched, agreeing priorities becomes more important. Some participants gave examples of resource-pooling, either within institutions or between universities and their partners, to fund strategically important work. One participant described how universities, local authorities and mayoral combined authorities in one region had joined forces to identify several million pounds to invest in local economic development. This requires negotiation

and focus and can mean agreeing not to support other worthwhile projects and activities, but it has the benefit of bringing colleagues and partners together to decide where to concentrate their energies. Another mentioned a fund for community-led housing research established by their local authority:

'It's very small amounts of money but in terms of raising our profile in the city it's been absolutely fantastic. And in terms of the number of academics who are using that fund to grow the impact of their research, it's really taken off.'

At the same time there is continued evidence of ad-hoc and piecemeal funding, cobbling together income from a diminishing pool of potential funds. Some universities continue to rely on the funding pots that have been the mainstay of civic activity in recent years such as HEIF, the pilot Regional Innovation Fund in 2023-24, and the £15m Research Wales Innovation Fund. However, these are vulnerable to policy changes (such as increased focus on economic growth) and competition can be intense. Since Brexit, EU funds such as the European Social Fund and European Regional Development Fund are no longer available. Some universities have ventured into new fields such as National Lottery and philanthropic funding; here, too, there is fierce competition and universities are potentially competing with partners who also rely on these sources of support. Others mentioned the prospects of generating consultancy income or other commercial funding; here the risk is both that excessive time becomes devoted to fundraising, and that the work done to earn external income no longer fully aligns with an organisation's civic mission. Several participants expressed frustration that there was no obvious funding stream for civic activity:

'On the one hand the government's asking us to run like businesses, but on the other they're asking us to do activities we're not funded to do.'

Conversely, success in bidding for funding can *'buy breathing space'* for civic teams – *'your horizons open up and it buys you credibility'*. Such an approach, though, entrenches vulnerability and risk.

A further source of income can be secured if a university chooses to devote a portion of its research or knowledge exchange income to its civic work. The 'quality related' payments made to universities on the basis of their research excellence, for example, can be used to support civic engagement as part of a university's research culture and activities. However, there is currently no incentive in the system for this to happen (see Recommendation 7).

Sustaining social capital

Civic practitioners in universities are finding ways to sustain internal and external networks despite challenging conditions. Some (both in our focus groups and in the NCCPE's action learning programme) have found that student volunteers can support projects agreed between universities and their partners, or that community partners can create volunteering opportunities that align with civic objectives. Others stress the value of informal internal networking – as one focus group participant said, it makes a difference whose office you share. That said, there is a correlation between the time and people allocated to civic engagement and the amount of network-building and network-maintenance that can be done. One participant highlighted the labour involved in this:

'It's all those real granular conversations, and they take time and effort and are quite exhausting.'

Similarly, a survey respondent commented that despite civic activity being regularly featured in university internal and external communications, *'it is often a battle to get things included'.* Another said that work was sustained *'through my own independent activities'* as '*there is not really any joined-up thinking in my department'*. Participants in our discussions also highlighted the value of actions broadly aligned with civic goals, such as opening campus facilities to local people or funding community-led research. Such activities do not always have visible civic impacts but help to strengthen the web of connections on which successful civic engagement relies.

Sustaining cultural and symbolic capital

The work to sustain the cultural and symbolic capital of the civic university is often the same: the different types of capital can describe different effects of the same activities. Broadly, these relate to establishing and legitimising civic work, mainly within the university itself but also among partners. One participant spoke of the need to leave a 'legacy':

'What legacy are we developing for the future leaders in their civic roles? What are we setting up that will safeguard the HE sector to carry on with that civic mission collectively? And that's a conversation that I don't really hear, but I think is really important for us to be thinking about.'

At a strategic level, participants shared examples of linking their work to their institution's core missions, performance indicators and income generation policies; linking work to national policies to legitimise it by aligning with government agendas; and looking for ways to measure and communicate impact. Several highlighted the importance of a 'compelling narrative' of civic work at an institutional level, and the value of 'good news stories' in making their activities visible and showing how they contribute to the university's missions.[27] A survey respondent said they had been able to influence the recruitment process for a new vice-chancellor to highlight the importance of the university's civic role. A focus group participant commented:

'Within the university, we need to think very carefully about how civic engagement helps with all our other missions. It's not just a thing on its own.'

Operationally, participants shared how individual projects could function as 'proof of concept' of the value of civic work, convincing doubters of the potential impacts. They also spoke of the importance of curating their activity, mapping and telling a coherent story of the various projects they were engaged in. They highlighted the importance of having teams of civic practitioners at an appropriate level to raise awareness and influence decision making, and highlighted the value of Civic University Agreements in legitimising and validating existing partnerships. One survey respondent described how their civic team provided small grants to help deliver public engagement activities in line with the university's civic priorities. But as another pointed out, there is a need to foster a national context in which civic activity is valued:

'... until the policy environment changes, I doubt there will be an incentive for greater investment from the university. There is so much we could do... but until government recognises civic as a third pillar [alongside teaching and research] and creates long term funding streams to support, I suspect the problems will persist.'

Sustaining emotional capital

People who are passionate about their work are also more vulnerable when that work is undermined or perceived to be of little value. Participants stressed the importance of recognising the emotional labour of civic activities, and of supporting practitioners to work on the issues they most cared about. One described regular meetings of a 'civic caucus' of engaged staff who would meet at their institution to share knowledge and experiences. One university launched a podcast to enable civic practitioners to talk about their work: *'Nobody listens but it doesn't matter – getting people to talk about their work binds them deeply to the project.'* Overall, though, universities have not yet acknowledged the need to sustain emotional capital, which increases its vulnerability.

6. CONDITIONS FOR A THRIVING CIVIC UNIVERSITY

Money, time and better structures are needed to support civic activity, according to webinar participants

Reflecting on the survey responses and focus group discussions, we can identify a set of conditions for a thriving civic university that align with the capitals described above. These conditions are individually necessary, and collectively go a long way towards being sufficient to sustain effective civic work.

i: Trust

Trust is a product of social, cultural and symbolic capital. It is generated through connections and networks; through approval and encouragement within university policies and practices; and through celebration and support by universities and their external partners. It is reinforced by effective and equitable delivery of projects and initiatives. Case studies and storytelling express publicly the value attached to relationships and enable partners to articulate the benefits of their work in terms that are meaningful to their audiences. Trust relies both on the longevity and the density of connections: it is reinforced through repeated

collaboration and delivery of activities, and through awareness and reputation. One participant described how this happened in their institution:

'A lot of what I do is storytelling. It's working outside the institution but coming back into the institution to tell the story of success and what it has looked like. It's being able to keep providing assurances when they're needed within the institution that this work matters and it needs buy-in and support ... that you're in the room when the strategies are being formed...'

ii: Legitimacy

Legitimacy is a typical example of symbolic capital. It is achieved when the repeated civic rhetoric of university leaders is seen to be backed by action; when civic practitioners are valued and rewarded and given leadership positions; and when civic practitioners are in the room when decisions are made. Legitimacy is built when decisions are seen to be transparent and equitable, and when civic activity is at the centre of a university's mission rather than being seen as an add-on.

iii: Network building

Civic activity depends on networks and collaborations, and on investment of time and capacity in partnership-building. Within a locality, partnerships need to be multi-dimensional to reflect the complexity and variety of local life, and equitable to respond to the varying capacities and unequal opportunities experienced by different groups[28]. Network building needs to generate social capital within a university as well as externally, supporting multi-talented civic teams and building future civic leaders. This takes time and requires a focus on connections and interdependences rather than vertically segmented working within departments or academic faculties.

iv: Respect

Respect supports and builds emotional capital. It can take several forms, from reward and recognition for individual practitioners to the public celebration of civic work. Providing opportunities to share civic work builds respect among colleagues and partners; similarly, giving individuals opportunities to improve their skills and engage in relevant learning helps them to feel valued. Leaders and managers can minimise the burden of emotional labour for their staff by setting clear and realistic priorities and expectations and supporting them in the trade-offs that must always be made between conflicting opportunities. Respect also needs to be nurtured within the locality as well as within the university; one survey respondent highlighted the need to 'spend less time talking about what we do for our communities and more time asking what our communities need us to do'.

v: Funding

Money on its own does not guarantee a thriving civic university. But without it, trust, legitimacy, networks and respect all become more vulnerable. In this sense economic civic capital enables social, cultural, symbolic and emotional capital.

In the next section we make some recommendations about funding, based on the experiences and feedback of the participants in our workshops. But it is important to stress that funding alone will not create engaged universities and to beware of perverse incentives: Civic University Agreements or comparable initiatives designed to secure funding without sustained and equitable engagement from local partners could end up undermining the credibility of universities that proclaim themselves as civic.

While the economy of the higher education sector in the UK creates a dependence on income generation from teaching and research, we should recognise too that universities have considerable freedom in managing their budgets and that civic teams are among their smaller expenses and have the benefit of low overheads and a high degree of flexibility. A university that is only as ‘civic’ as external funding permits undermines the notion of an anchor institution that is embedded within and committed to its place.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

While this report does not present a comprehensive picture of the state of civic activity across the HE sector, it provides the most detailed information to date and reinforces findings from other strands of the National Civic Impact Accelerator's work, notably the action learning programme[29] which involved participants from university-led partnerships across England, and from the needs expressed during development work for the prototype Civic Impact Dashboard[30]. It also picks up on concerns expressed more than five years ago in the Civic University Commission's report, Truly Civic[31], about the sustainability of resourcing for universities' civic activities. We can therefore be confident that the following recommendations are based on the best available evidence.

Recommendations for university leaders

If civic activity relates to a university's relationship with its local partners as an anchor institution, then the prime focus must be local: civic activity needs to be co-produced within a locality and accountable first to local partners using metrics or indicators that are contextually meaningful. This presents both an opportunity and a responsibility: there can be no uniform approach to civic activity to be adopted from national policies or templates.

Recommendation 1: Set clear local priorities, especially in key documents such as Civic University Agreements. In straitened financial circumstances, there needs to be clarity about which local needs to prioritise and where universities can add value and apply their expertise most effectively. Such priorities need to be agreed transparently with local partners; resourced appropriately within the university; and communicated clearly across the institution and to local publics.

The Civic University Network and the NCIA programme have developed (or are in the process of developing) several tools that can support this process, including the Civic Impact Framework, Theory of Civic Change, Place Navigator, Civic Impact Dashboard and Civic Outcomes Framework; these complement an online Guide to creating a Civic University Agreement.[32]

The Civic University Network's Civic Recipes report[33] shows how different universities have approached this process in order to benefit their communities and address current challenges. King's College London, for example, has a London-wide focus but this is complemented by a hyperlocal focus on the 'home boroughs' of Lambeth, Southwark and Westminster. Aston University has set five thematic priorities – health and wellbeing, education and employment, sustainable socially inclusive prosperity, environment, and justice.

Recommendation 2: Make room for ideas and organic development. While universities and their partners will benefit from a clear sense of direction, they should also recognise that much innovative activity emerges from 'under-the-radar' local relationships and from the work of engaged academics. Such work should be encouraged and celebrated as part of a civic university's culture through reward and recognition schemes and workload management. While this may not have the same strategic priority as the headline commitments in a CUA, it is a key part of what makes a university a credible local partner and demonstrates that civic values are embedded within an institution.

The Institute for Community Studies has published a suite of four reports[34] showing the wealth of activity and local benefits that can arise when university staff work with local partners on shared interests. These reports cover health and wellbeing; environmental sustainability; arts, culture and student volunteering; and local economic impacts.

Recommendation 3: Resource civic teams with long term budgets that are flexible and adaptable enough to support emerging needs and priorities, and clear lines of communication with university leadership. These teams need to be supported at a level (both in terms of numbers and seniority) commensurate with the importance of strategic local relationships.

This requires a change in approach from many universities, which currently fund civic activities on the same basis as short-term research projects; instead, they need to be considered as part of a university's infrastructure in the same way as (for example) an admissions team or IT support are considered essential infrastructure. Just as professional or technical services are needed to keep a university functioning, civic teams (whether or not they have the word 'civic' in their job titles) are needed to support and sustain local partnerships.

Recommendation 4: Ensure sustainability of civic activities through long term commitments such as Civic University Agreements, celebration and recognition of achievements and impact, and embed this in institutional policies and strategies. The Guide to creating a Civic University Agreement noted in Recommendation 1 shows how this can be done.

The *Resourcing our Civic Ambition* discussion paper (see Introduction) introduced a draft framework to inform place-based civic engagement, which universities may find helpful in planning long-term investments. The framework prompts organisations to consider the characteristics of the places they relate to; local partnership capabilities; and the infrastructure needed to support collaboration. In tandem with resources such as the Civic Impact Framework, it can help universities ask the key questions about how to fit their civic ambitions to the realities of their local circumstances.

Recommendation 5: Be accountable within both the institution and the locality for the commitments in CUAs and strategic plans. This should be done through regular reporting to key partners and through appropriate locally chosen metrics or indicators agreed with partners. The Higher Education Statistics Agency's HE Business and Community Interaction (HEBCI) survey[35] has several questions that could be adapted to form the basis of local indicators, including questions on strategy (section 1), infrastructure (section 2), social community and cultural engagement (section 4) and regeneration (section 5). The Civic Outcomes Framework, currently in development, can also support this process.

Accountability is not only about metrics, though. The NCIA Equitable Partnerships Toolkit (see section 4) sets out important principles of accountability to local community partners.

Recommendations for national policy

While ownership of the civic agenda must rest in the communities and organisations that are most affected, we recognise that the current financial crisis in higher education stems from national policies on funding and inter-university competition as well as from individual choices by higher education institutions. National policies have put universities in a position where short-term competition for international students has become disproportionately critical to universities' survival. This has a detrimental effect on civic activities which are marginalised because they are not income-generating. There is thus a responsibility at national level to create conditions for a more financially sustainable approach.

Recommendation 6: Government policy needs to **set out a clear narrative** about the necessity and value of civic engagement and its expectations that universities will maximise their impact as local anchor institutions, and this needs to be reflected in ministerial responsibilities. A start has already been made in the form of the education secretary's letter to universities on 4 November 2024 and we are aware that policy work is taking place within the Department for Education. Resources such as the Truly Civic report and the Civic Impact Framework[36], as well as more recent outputs from the NCIA including the '12 pillars' of economic development[37], the Theory of Civic Change and the reports of the action learning programme should inform this work, providing a nuanced approach to the variety of relationships and impacts covered by the term 'civic activity'.

Recommendation 7: Government policy needs to **incentivise civic activity** by ensuring resources are consistently available. Within the current funding framework for higher education, civic work frequently relies on short-term

funding and is characterised by a high degree of insecurity. This needs to change. The Truly Civic report, written in a different financial context, set out recommendations for bespoke funding. Our recommendation now is that the fundamental structures of university financing need to support universities in undertaking civic activities.

The most obvious sources in England – comparable approaches need to be devised (or developed from existing policies) for Scotland, Wales and NI - are Research England's knowledge exchange funds, which total £328m in the 2024-25 financial year. An adjusted allocation formula could be used to incentivise civic activity without a requirement to generate income for universities. The Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF) should also be adjusted so that income is attached to the 'public and community engagement' strand of the framework, along with more rigorous reporting of impact to replace the current self-assessment approach. It may also be helpful to earmark a small portion of universities' 'quality related' research funding (£1.98 billion in 2024-25) to encourage research that directly relates to or arises from universities' civic activities and objectives.

Taken together, an allocation equivalent to the £100m a year proposed by the Civic University Commission would amount to 4 per cent of Research England's funding for 2024-25. However, unlike the Civic University Commission we are not convinced of the benefits of a centrally managed competitive bidding process for civic university funding as this detaches the funding process from local accountability for priority-setting and delivery. We do recognise, though, the need for transparent accountability and reporting, and funding should be dependent on evidence of universities' investment in place-based partnerships.

This calls into question current approaches to costing activity. UKRI's Transparent Approach to Costing (TRAC) framework[38] does not recognise partnership-building or civic impact as distinct activities. The four categories in the framework are teaching, research, 'other income-generating activities' and support activities. If the Government wants to incentivise civic activity, it should ensure that the mechanisms that direct funding to universities align with its ambitions.

Recommendation 8: Government policy needs to **foster conditions to make civic activity sustainable.** This extends beyond education policy to all involved in place-based policies and governance. The first requirement is to create a stable policy environment in which long-term partnerships can be built. Current reorganisations of local government and healthcare, whatever their anticipated benefits in terms of devolution and efficiency, are disruptive in the short term and can dismantle relationships that have taken years to build. There should be a firm

commitment to creating a stable local governance environment to enable partnership-building. Second, government needs to ensure a thriving civil society through support for voluntary and community sector organisations and local initiatives to widen democratic participation and accountability. Without a strong civil society, universities' well-meaning civic initiatives may fail because of a lack of local capacity to engage. At government level, this demands effective policy coordination between the Department for Education, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, the Cabinet Office, the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, and the Department of Health. At a time when the civil service is under pressure to do more for less, such coordination becomes harder to maintain.

1 The shorthand term ‘civic practitioners’ covers a wide range of roles and job titles, as these are formulated differently by different institutions. We include anyone working in a university with a primary or substantial responsibility to work with local partners in support of the university’s declared civic mission or objectives.

2 Universities UK (6 May 2025). ‘Universities grip financial crisis – but at what cost to the nation? Available at https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/what-we-do/creating-voice-our-members/media-releases/universities-grip-financial-crisis-what

3 Office for Students (2024). ‘”Bold and transformative action” needed to address financial sustainability – OfS’. 15 November 2024, available at: https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/news-blog-and-events/press-and-media/bold-and-transformative-action-needed-to-address-financial-sustainability-ofs/

4 Borrett, A. (2025). ‘UK universities facing rising risk of bankruptcy, says regulator’. Financial Times, 30 March 2025.

5 UPP Foundation (2019). Truly Civic: Strengthening the connection between universities and their places. Available at: https://upp-foundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Civic-University-Commission-Final-Report.pdf

6 Day, N. and Manners, P. (2022). Resourcing our Civic Ambition: Discussion paper. Available at https://civicuniversitynetwork.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Resourcing-our-Civic-Ambition-Discussion-Paper-March.pdf

7 Civic University Network (2022). Civic recipes: How HEIs are framing their civic activity. Available at https://civicuniversitynetwork.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Civic-Recipes-How-HEIs-are-framing-and-focusing-their-civic-strategies.pdf

8 See https://civicuniversitynetwork.co.uk/portfolio-items/theory-of-civic-change/?portfolioCats=80
9 See https://civicuniversitynetwork.co.uk/about-us/ncia/

10The Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research at Sheffield Hallam University; The Institute for Community Studies at the Young Foundation; the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement; OECD; Queen Mary University of London; City-REDI at the University of Birmingham.

11 The webinar was part of the action learning programme facilitated by the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement. Alongside presentations of work from the action learning programme, we took the opportunity to ask participants their views on the current state of civic activity in their institutions.

12 Owolade, F., Adams, G., Williamson, Z., Duncan, S., Manners, P. and Dobson, J. (2024). Becoming civic: Reflections on the first phase of NCIA’s action learning programme. National Civic Impact Accelerator. Available at: https://civicuniversitynetwork.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Report-Becoming-civic-reflections-on-the-first-phase-of-NCIAs-Action-Learning-Programme.pdf

13 See https://www.forumforthefuture.org/the-five-capitals

14 Kelleher, L. and Ulrichsen, T.C. (2024) Powering regional engines of growth: How universities can enhance regional economic growth through knowledge exchange. UCI Expert Insights Paper 03. Policy Evidence Unit for University Commercialisation and Innovation (UCI), University of Cambridge.

15 The first four of these were noted by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, who is credited with the original formulation of the idea of capitals. The concept of emotional capital is our addition.
Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In Richardson, J. G. (Ed.), Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education, pp. 241-258. New York: Greenwood Press.

16 See https://civicuniversitynetwork.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Case-Study-UCLAN-The-Preston-Model.pdf

17 Claridge, T. (2018). Functions of social capital – bonding, bridging, linking. Social Capital Research, https://www.socialcapitalresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Functions-of-Social-Capital.pdf

18 See https://civicuniversitynetwork.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Case-Study-Community-Gateway-Live-Teaching-Projects.pdf

19 UKRI (n.d.) Higher Education Innovation Funding. Available at https://www.ukri.org/what-we-do/browse-our-areas-of-investment-and-support/higher-education-innovation-fund/

20 Evidence from work outside the NCIA such as the Coproduction Futures Inquiry led by Professor Beth Perry at the University of Sheffield reflects similar challenges. See https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/social-sciences/news/how-can-universities-better-support-co-produced-and-participatory-research

21 See also the Civic University Network's report on student civic engagement: https://civicuniversitynetwork.co.uk/resources/student-civic-engagement/

22 The toolkit is available at https://civicuniversitynetwork.co.uk/portfolio-items/effective-community-engagement-toolkit/?portfolioCats=80

23 NCIA's equitable partnerships toolkit aims to respond to this challenge: https://civicuniversitynetwork.co.uk/portfolio-items/equitable-partnerships-for-civic-engagement/?portfolioCats=80

24 See https://civicuniversitynetwork.co.uk/portfolio-items/the-role-of-universities-in-addressing-the-climate-emergency/?portfolioCats=80

25 See https://civicuniversitynetwork.co.uk/portfolio-items/how-civic-universities-support-the-governments-five-missions/?portfolioCats=80

26 See https://civicuniversitynetwork.co.uk/portfolio-items/equitable-partnerships-for-civic-engagement/?portfolioCats=80

27 The Civic Impact Dashboard and Place Data Playbook, currently in development by NCIA, could help universities craft such narratives.

30 See https://civicuniversitynetwork.co.uk/resources/civic-impact-dashboard/

31 UPP Foundation (2019). Truly Civic: Strengthening the connection between universities and their places. The final report of the Civic University Commission. Available at: https://www.upp-foundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Civic-University-Commission-Final-Report.pdf
The report made the following recommendation on funding civic activity (p.38): '...we conclude that a small dedicated fund of money – and we recommend here £500m over a number of years – specifically dedicated to this civic mission, and with a focus on disadvantaged places and areas where the civic role can have a particular impact, ought to be beneficial. In addition, we propose a further £120m into the existing Strength in Places fund. Taken together, such spending represents only a couple of percent of the total annual funding of the HE sector but will, we feel, have an outsize impact in supporting continued or increased focus in this space from institutions.'

32 See https://civicuniversitynetwork.co.uk/resources/case-studies-reports-toolkits/#guide

33 See https://civicuniversitynetwork.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Civic-Recipes-How-HEIs-are-framing-and-focusing-their-civic-strategies.pdf

34 See https://civicuniversitynetwork.co.uk/portfolio-items/universities-social-and-economic-impact/?portfolioCats=80

35 Information about the HEBCI survey is available at https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/business-community

36 See https://civicuniversitynetwork.co.uk/resources/civic-impact-framework/

37 See https://civicuniversitynetwork.co.uk/portfolio-items/university-economic-impact-two-essential-reports/?portfolioCats=80

38 See UKRI-281122-QuickGuideTransparentApproachCostingTRAC.pdf

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