



Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, University of Birmingham

Briefing Note

National Citizen Service Bill [Lords' Committee]

'Youth social action is practical action in the service of others to create positive change. It provides an important mechanism for young people to develop and express their character while benefiting others'.

(Jubilee Centre, 2014, *Statement on Youth Social Action and Character Development*)

Summary: National Citizen Service and Character Development

The introduction of the National Citizen Service Bill on October 11th highlighted the new Conservative government's continuation of the commitment to develop social action and civic service amongst young people. **Enshrinement of the NCS Trust through Royal Charter dovetails with the emerging consensus on the importance of character education in schools and other character development initiatives in society.** Theresa May's recent announcement of £80million to fund the Youth Investment Fund and social action charity Step Up To Serve further demonstrated this commitment (DCMS, 2016). **This briefing aims to outline evidence of the linkages between character-building initiatives and the development of a habit of service in young people, an objective which is central to the NCS programme.** In so doing, it will draw upon research from the Jubilee Centre and other organisations working to build the evidence-base in this area.

Civic Virtue, Citizenship and Character

In order to place programmes such as the NCS within a framework of character and character education, it is important to emphasise that the concept involves more than developing resilience, perseverance and grit. Whilst these traits are important, the Jubilee Centre (2013) defines character in broader terms and in relation to four virtue types:

1. **Performance virtues:** behavioural skills & psychological capacities enabling us to enact other virtues (e.g. resilience, perseverance, determination);
2. **Intellectual virtues:** required for the pursuit of knowledge, truth & understanding (e.g. reflection, communication, critical thinking);
3. **Moral virtues:** enable us to respond well to situations in any area of experience (e.g. compassion, empathy, trust)
4. **Civic virtues:** necessary for engaged & responsible citizenship (e.g. service, volunteering).



Whilst the traits developed through the NCS and other social action programmes touch on each of these types, the centrality of the civic virtues of service and citizenship to the notions of a '*habit of service*' and the '*double benefit*' make them the current focus.

[Character Development through Social Action and the 'Double Benefit'](#)

At the second reading of the Bill, a number of Lords alluded to the benefits that NCS and social action can incur not just for the young people involved, but also for the wider community. As the noble Lord Blunkett described, 'This is of course a reciprocal venture. We give and we gain'.

The Jubilee Centre's statement on youth social action (YSA) defines this concept as the ***double benefit***, which '...develops a range of capacities in young people, while simultaneously building and enhancing the communities with which young people engage' (Jubilee Centre, 2014). **Evidence from a study of 23 prominent social action providers (working in total with 1 million young people a year) in 2015 showed that 91% of staff interviewed saw their provision as 'beneficial to both the individual and society' (Jubilee Centre, 2015).** The evaluation of YSA conducted by Ipsos MORI in 2015 also showed that 97% of regular participants were aware of the personal and social impact, as opposed to 86% who were involved in a one-off activity (Ipsos MORI, 2015), with initial findings from the Jubilee Centre's 'Habits of Service' project suggesting a similar trend (Jubilee Centre, 2017, *forthcoming*). **The potential behind unlocking the double benefit for an increasing number of young people and their communities through the NCS is, therefore, hugely significant.**

Research has also examined the nature of this benefit for young people who take part. Evidence suggests social action builds personal character – through greater expression of traits such as empathy, cooperation, resilience, and a sense of community (BIT, 2016; see also Jubilee Centre, 2015; Jubilee Centre and Step up to Serve, 2015) – and consequently improves career prospects in later life (CBI & Pearson, 2015). Findings such as these demonstrate the advantages of volunteering programmes in helping young people to develop civic virtues, and the potential resulting effects on social mobility and social cohesion.

[Developing a 'Habit of Service' – Positive Initial Findings](#)

Aside from the introduction and expansion of the NCS, recent announcements such as the piloting of the Skillforce Character award and the aforementioned £80million of funding for youth organisations suggest that this Bill is part of a broader drive to instill a commitment to civic service in young people. **When viewing the NCS as part of this more substantial set of measures, it is possible to see it as one step towards inspiring a habit of service for life in future generations.** In the Bill's second reading, however, a number of speakers legitimately raised concerns about research evidence into the effects of the NCS/social action and the social changes it brings about. This is a particularly pertinent concern given the level of government investment this Bill would commit.

Whilst this is an area where there is much work to be done, the Jubilee Centre is currently conducting research into what constitutes a habit of service and comparing



graduates of the NCS and other YSA programmes who are prone to regularly participate and those who are not. **The study is one of the first serious empirical investigations of this topic, with 4,500+ participants – over 50% of which are NCS graduates. Initial findings are very positive suggesting, amongst other things, the benefits of programmes such as NCS. A summary of early findings suggests that young people are more likely to make a habit of service if: they start their social action journeys early, gain opportunities to reflect on their social action experiences, and have access to quality programmes (Jubilee Centre, 2017, forthcoming).** Greater understanding in this area – to which this research will contribute – will be enormously helpful in determining how best to encourage NCS participants to continue with social action after graduation.

References

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