# Extending civic engagement to post-industrial towns

## Universities' role in levelling up and building back better, Part II

A report from the UPP Foundation October 2020

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# Note from the authors – carrying out research in a time of Covid

This report was commissioned and begun at the back end of 2019. Back then, the focus of public policy in higher education was on the role that universities would play in a newly independent UK, given the Brexit referendum and the commitment of both main political parties to implementing the result of the referendum. Then came Westminster deadlock and a December 2019 General Election, and a newly re-elected Conservative government with a mandate both to deliver Brexit in the specific way outlined by Boris Johnson, and a broader levelling up agenda for the future of the UK.

The qualitative work for this project took place either side of that election campaign, over November 2019 through to January 2020. Public First conducted a national opinion poll and ran six focus groups with AB and C1C2 voters in Dudley, Oldham and Darlington. At this time, discussion was concerned with regeneration in the context of Brexit and the levelling up agenda. The first draft of the report was written on this basis, and the polling was published as a stand alone release in February 2020[1].

Since then, of course, the Covid-19 pandemic has affected almost everything universities have done, and indeed the priorities and activities of all our respondents and others in these areas. Public policy has become dominated first by the health agenda, and now increasingly by the jobs and economic renewal agenda.

As such, this report has in one way changed track, and in one way remained consistent.

This work now consists of two separate but linked pieces of analysis. The first report, published separately and conducted more recently, argues that jobs and retraining will be a major focus of all universities over the coming months. This is a great example of the way universities can demonstrate their value to their place and to their community. We estimate that 5m jobs are 'at risk' across towns and cities in England – of which over half, 3.1m, are at risk among non-graduates who hold only a Level 3 qualification or below. We argue that this group should be a priority for a levelling up agenda in which universities, working with FE, could play a significant role. We also argue that the current government commitment to retraining is too limited, and will exclude 75%-80% of non-graduates at risk of losing jobs.

[1]  "How universities can help to level up towns" https://wonkhe.com/blogs/how-universities-can-help-to-level-up-towns/ and "A tale of divided Britain" https://upp-foundation.org/a-tale-of-a-divided-britain/

This second report consists of much of the same original qualitative and quantitative research as was conducted last year with the accompanying policy conclusions. It focuses on the wider role of the university in 'left behind' towns, beyond the more immediate issues of employment and economic regeneration.

It is likely that public perceptions have changed since our original primary research was gathered. More recent polls and issues trackers suggest, unsurprisingly, that jobs and the NHS now represent the nation's two priorities. On balance, however this report has taken the decision to publish primary research as it was. It is too early to say whether there are long-term structural shifts in public opinion on the role of universities, levelling up, or anything else. There is a risk that we as policymakers, funders, universities and politicians respond too quickly to noise, not signal.

We also feel that Covid-19 has shone a light on many of the issues flagged in this report even before the pandemic took hold, including the role of civil society, the role of universities as local actors; and the importance of ensuring that all actors – state, society, businesses, civic society – maintain resilience and surge capacity for services which come under strain in times of crisis. As such, this report, although delayed, remains relevant to policymakers and universities across England for consideration in the short and the long term.

**Public First**
**On behalf of the UPP Foundation**
**October 2020**

## With thanks

The UPP Foundation would like to pass on our huge thanks to several colleagues who provided comment and feedback as the report was drafted. Professor Andy Westwood, Professor Sir Chris Husbands, Chris Millward, Professor Jane Robinson, Professor John Goddard OBE, Professor Mary Stuart, Michael Wood, Natalie Day, Nick Hillman, the Civic University Network partners and UPP Foundation Trustees and Advisory Board. All views expressed in the report and errors are the UPP Foundation's.

# Executive summary

This report, as originally conceived, followed on from the conclusions of the UPP Foundation's Civic University Commission (CUC) in early 2019. It takes on and develops further the idea of what Civic University Agreements could do – in particular looking at the levelling up agenda – and how universities can practically play this civic role.

Importantly, this report adopts the CUC's view of the civic role of a university and suggests that it should be even more focused on the role of universities in 'left behind areas' and on less economically and socially advantaged areas which do not have a university immediately in their vicinity. Some recent evidence on the way in which local areas contribute spillover benefits suggests that in the UK, the satellite towns around local major towns or cities are becoming decoupled from larger urban area growth. In other words, university activity focused in a city or large town may not naturally spread to other towns – and may actually make the gap between where they are present and not present even larger.

This is not an argument for satellite campuses and indeed these are specifically excluded from consideration in this report. Such provision can be valuable, and be a win-win scenario:

a 'cold spot' gains provision in its local area, which can often raise participation from people who would not travel to access tertiary provision; the local area gains the economic, social and cultural benefit of a university campus; and the university gains financially (at least in theory, and into the medium term) from an expansion of student numbers and accompanying research and commercial funding.

But there is no guarantee it will work – there have been examples where the university has had to withdraw from additional provision in a 'left behind' area. And although there's likely to be a need for an expansion of places over the next twenty years, we set this aside as a slightly different issue which is primarily about meeting student demand. Such expansion may have – indeed should have – a wider levelling up benefit, but that is a separate question.

Since the initial publication of the Civic University Commission a number of reports on this topic have been published. These include the UK2070 Commission[2] and the HEPI publication on universities supporting regional inequality[3], as well as Professor Richard Jones' work on the potential impact that universities could have at the heart of regional regeneration.[4] All of these reports build on and draw from the insight of the Civic University Commission.

[2] The Final Report of the UK2070 Commission: Make No Little Plans – Acting At Scale For A Fairer And Stronger Future"

[3] "Making Universities Matter: How higher education can help to heal a divided Britain"

[4] "A Resurgence of the Regions: rebuilding innovation capacity across the whole UK"

Similarly, this work builds on the work of these reports, and endorses their broad conclusions as regards universities and improving place.

Specifically drawing on public opinion insight, the core question for this report is as follows: what role can universities play in 'left behind areas' where they do not have direct provision? What can they realistically do, either as the lead or in partnership? And crucially – and often overlooked – what do local people in these areas want from their areas, to improve them?

We conclude that the general public is split between those who feel their local area has improved in recent years (likely to be younger, and living in larger urban areas) and those who feel it has got worse. But respondents across ages and types of urban living identified housing, NHS and the decline of the high street as a priority.

The latter is a good example of an issue which often doesn't make national attention, but makes a real appreciable difference to the quality of life of many people.

While our respondents in polling and focus groups were positive about the theoretical role universities could play in their area – and many could name without hesitation all the universities around where they lived – they were speaking from a position of low engagement. Over a third of people have never visited their local university. Despite this, 59% of respondents want universities to play a greater role in their local economy, and 50% of the public agree that universities can and should be involved in the delivery of government services in a local area.

The results of the poll and focus groups present us with a clear set of priorities for local people. We consider these through three lenses: things universities have a natural locus on; things which the local population want; and things which are likely to have a significant impact on the local area. From this, the report concludes that there are five areas which all universities ought to focus on in their contribution to the levelling up agenda:

## 1) Town centre regeneration

Improving the physical environment of the local area, including the high street, as well as other local amenities, including through support for cultural and entertainment facilities.

## 2) Jobs and economic localism

Supporting, directly or indirectly, jobs in the local area for residents, including attracting graduates to move to the area, or move back to the area, and boosting the economic capability of the local area. As noted above, given the economic impact of the Covid crisis, this is considered separately in its own standalone report and interactive map.

## 3) Boosting educational attainment in schools and for adults

Distinct from widening participation or raising aspirations, this includes direct upskilling both for school aged children, particularly at secondary level, as well as adult education for those in and out of the labour market.

## 4) Research and development of the local area

Applying and implementing research into local challenges, which can be taken forward by third parties, as well as supporting knowledge exchange and innovation for new and existing businesses.

## 5) Supporting the NHS

As trainers of professional medical staff, but also improving public health through student and research activity.

## Recommendations

This report makes a number of recommendations for taking forward action in these areas. It concludes that, among other things:

- **Government should allocate a proportion of the Towns Fund and other programmes aimed at high street regeneration to a major programme of community development in local town centres. Universities would be able to bid in partnership with local government for this funding for new capital, on the condition that these are placed in town centres and universities situate some of their teaching, research and community activity there as an anchor.** This fund would use the capabilities of universities as local civic institutions to revitalise towns. Government would provide capital funding to a partnership of civic actors including a university to redevelop a part of the high street – either dilapidated shops or build a new community asset in the town centre. This building/collection of buildings would be new civic centres fit for the 21st century. **Universities would need to be part of consortia bidding to build, manage, and provide services through these new buildings – including a commitment to remain there for a period of ten years as an anchor tenant.** Universities' role could include moving new accommodation, teaching or research facilities, student and staff volunteering locations there, or establishing public facing activity such as incubating business support, providing CPD, or adult and community learning.

- **Universities should work with civil society organisations such as access charities to develop a new nationally available, but locally designed and delivered, tutoring and mentoring scheme** – recognising that Covid-19 led to a widening of education gaps that will likely lead to greater inequity in those applying to HE. This scheme should bring together universities and student volunteers and offer the choice of two routes to be rolled out in local areas, one with a greater focus on pastoral support, aspiration raising and widening participation, and one with a greater focus on attainment raising.

- **Universities should be designated as a primary 'surge capacity' provider to the NHS and the wider public sector for health crises.** In practical terms, this means they should be funded by the NHS through a dedicated "NHS capacity fund" to run a permanent surplus capacity in terms of medical research, facilities, medical kit, and staff. These resources can be used in day to day university business in normal times – essentially providing additional funding from the state for universities to allow them to do more research and teaching – on the quid pro quo understanding that such resources must be able to be deployed to the NHS and government, should they need it, on almost instantaneous notice as surge capacity.

- **The Shared Prosperity Fund should support a major interdisciplinary research programme looking at 'levelling up' post-industrial towns.** University research should be at the heart of the debate and the research should be practical and immediate, specifically looking at the actions universities can take – either in the lead, or in support of wider civic action. This should be done with international partners, recognising that post-industrial decline is a global phenomenon across much of the developed world.

The report concludes that additional funding will be needed for this expansion of the levelling up role. This report suggests that the Civic University Fund outlined in the original Civic University Commission ought to be doubled, from £500m to £1bn over the next five years. It also argues that the Towns Fund, worth £3.6bn, ought to hypothecate a proportion of spend towards capital regeneration in left behind areas and the renewal of high streets. Universities would be able to bid in consortium with other local partners to access funds from one or all of these funds, in order to enact a civic role and address the challenges identified.

Universities have a major role to play in their local areas and geographies. The public opinion work is clear that local people know of their universities – even if they are more hazy on exactly what they do, and the majority have never been inside one. Local populations are also clear on what they want to see in their towns and their priorities for regeneration. And although Covid has in some ways dominated the discourse with a focus on health, it also illustrates that not all regions and towns are equally well placed to weather the storm, and that jobs and the economy will not be hit evenly.

Universities have historically thought of their civic activity as largely concerned with the towns and cities in which they have physical presence. But this report argues that their 'orbit' can be thought of as wider than that – and that the answer need not be additional campuses or satellite provision – though that may remain appropriate in some instances. Rather, there are five clear priorities where universities can work with local partners to make concrete changes that will improve lives.

# Chapter 1 – Advancing the role of the civic university and a broader definition of place and placemaking

### Developments since the UPP Foundation Civic University Commission

The UPP Foundation Civic University Commission, which looked at the social, cultural and economic role universities play in their local communities, reasserted the civic role of universities for the 21st Century, and put the importance of 'place' at the heart of the agenda.

Since the Commission reported in Spring 2019, the political rationale for prioritising the civic has grown, with the re-election of a Conservative government explicitly committed to 'levelling up' and addressing many elements of economic and social policy through a place-based lens.

And of course, since this report was commissioned and the public opinion work undertaken, the university sector, the country, and the world have been shaken by the emergency of the Covid-19 pandemic. Universities have seen a fundamental change to their everyday practices happen in a matter of weeks. Everything – student teaching, accommodation, research, finances –

has been affected. Some of the ramifications will continue in the HE sector for many years to come. The attention of Vice-Chancellors and their teams will continue to be on managing their institutions through this crisis, including the financial implications, and responding to the various government packages of support available to them.

But the effects have also been significant on the communities which were already a priority pre-Covid. The social and economic dislocation of the pandemic, sadly, is likely not to have been evenly distributed. Many areas which are already facing challenges have seen greater levels of redundancy, as well as the disappearance of many voluntary organisations and 'little platoons'. The argument of this report is that the twin problems of Covid-19 and the levelling up agenda must be met with one unified response.

More positively, Covid-19 has shone a light on how universities, civil society, and civic actors work collaboratively. The role of universities – stepping up to the plate significantly on everything from research, to using their accommodation, to accelerating training of NHS staff,

to sharing medical and other kit, to opening up their facilities including 3D printing, to volunteering by staff and students – should be recognised and commended.

It is clear that as we recover as a country from Covid, we need to ensure that all actors – state, society, businesses, civic society – maintain resilience, capacity and a collaborative attitude.

The Civic University Commission – and this call to action across civic action generally – generated huge enthusiasm from the sector, who have welcomed the opportunity to highlight their work and recommit to the importance of the civic agenda. At the time of publication, over 60 universities across the UK are formally

committed to following the main recommendation from the Commission, namely to develop and implement a Civic University Agreement setting out how universities will work with local partners to deliver an agreed civic engagement and improvement strategy in their area. Since then, the UPP Foundation has developed a guide for developing a Civic University Agreement[5] and Chris Millward, Director of Fair Access and Participation, published a paper on how Civic University Agreements can dovetail with HEI work on building Access and Participation Plans.[6]

The Commission also recommended a fund to help support this work, called the Civic University Fund.

> "A new fund should be created that allows universities with co-signed Civic University Agreements to bid for resources that will allow them to implement their strategies. We think that the fund should be worth around £500m over a 5 year period, with universities bidding on a competitive basis for multi-year projects (meaning a typical award may be in the region of £20-£30m). The fund should be administered jointly by DfE and BEIS recognising the dual industrial strategy and educative focuses of the fund– and building on the existing joint departmental responsibilities of the Universities Minister – and it should have a preference towards supporting places that are both economically and socially vulnerable, as with the new UK Shared Prosperity Fund approach."

This report from the UPP Foundation follows on, sequentially, from the conclusions of the Civic University Commission. It takes on and develops further the idea of what Civic University Agreements could do, separately from the jobs agenda in immediate response to Covid – in particular looking at the levelling up agenda.

It also develops the main proposal for how funding through the Civic University Fund might work. As the quote above shows, this fund was designed for "supporting places that are both economically socially vulnerable".

This report suggests that the definition should now be even more focused on the role of universities in 'left behind areas' and less economically and socially advantaged areas *which do not have a university immediately in their vicinity.*

It is this specific angle which has increasingly come to the fore, both in the wider research around urban regeneration, and in the current political context.

5   https://upp-foundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/2202-UPP-Foundation-A-Guide-to-preparing-Civic-University-Agreements-Booklet-A4-digital.pdf
6   https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/52a8d9e2-442d-46c8-a947-955adac7089e/cuc-conference-access-and-participation-and-civic-university-agreements.pdf

## Levelling up beyond the immediate university environs

The work of the Civic University Commission and other research in this area focuses largely on the most direct and immediate impact that universities can have on their existing locale. Research shows, for example, that universities do have a significant positive economic impact nationally – UUK data from 2017 suggests that universities contributed £21bn to overall economic growth, and supported over 1m jobs[7]. Other work with a more regional focus suggests that universities deliver local economic benefit through 'spillovers' to local firms, making them more productive[8], and that universities and cities can often mutually reinforce one another, with a pool of talented graduate labour making it attractive for businesses to set up in a region, further delivering growth and jobs and revenues locally, creating a supply chain and broader social and cultural facilities, and in turn encouraging more students locally and from afar to go and study at the university in that city[9].

One important question, however, remains: to what extent does this benefit – this agglomeration of benefits and social, economic and cultural growth – spill out more widely into areas where a university is not present?

There has been recent research that suggests that this is indeed a greater problem than commonly understood in policy circles. For example, IPPR North summarise the evidence as follows:

> The UK should be particularly concerned about the connections its regions make within the country and with other countries. The evidence indicates that UK regions are 'decoupling, dislocating and disconnecting' from one-another (McCann 2016). There are indications that London isn't acting as an 'engine' for the whole UK economy: London and the South East (as a single region) is highly productive and internally well connected, but in the rest of the UK regions are lagging, with Scotland appearing to work differently again (ibid). There is also evidence that the UK is in a sub-optimal position within global value chains, and vulnerable to being 'cut out' – especially in the current climate (Los and Chen 2016).
>
> Likewise, at a smaller geographical scale, there is some concern that city cores are benefitting from globalisation but satellite towns are not. In one sense this could be seen as an issue of city region boundaries – towns are often part of city regions' functional economic areas, and some investment is going into the city centres. But it is also a question of flows between places – about whether the gains that result from high productivity flow, via commuting and supply chains, from either urbancores, or indeed more peripheral advanced manufacturing sites, into areas that have less productive economies.
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> IPPR North, "Divided and connected: regional inequalities in the North, the UK, and the developed world", November 2019

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[7]  Universities UK, "The economic impact of universities in 2014-15", https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Pages/economic-impact-universities-2014-15.aspx

[8]  Kantor and Whalley, "Knowledge Spillovers from Research Universities: Evidence from Endowment Value Shocks", https://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/10.1162/REST_a_00357?mobileUi=0

[9]  The broader economic literature for the growth of cities as engines of national and global productivity is set out in Glaeser, "Triumph of the City", and a summary of the way in which universities engage with cities in the UK is set out in Ransom, "Future of cities: Universities and Cities" https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/477295/future-cities-universities.pdf

Why does this discussion matter? Because any assessment by universities of the role they might play in supporting economic growth within the UK needs to recognise that there is a difference between action they may take where they are present – which has been the focus so far for many – and wider work into areas which are geographically close, but which require a different approach.

This shapes the territory in which universities can make a reality of their civic role. The purpose of the report is to help guide universities into productive action in these areas – and look at how this is funded. So the overall scope of this report is to answer three questions:

- Given the limitations and scope of universities' role, how can they help improve 'left behind' towns and other areas which are close to, but not directly hosting, a university?

- What does the role of a university/ies look like, practically?

- What do people living in such towns actually want?

## How and what can a university do?

The first point that should be made is that universities should not do this on their own. All work in this area should be done in partnership. Indeed, the common theme of all the work on the civic role of universities emphasises these partnerships. These partnerships should be drawn from a recognition of what local areas and people need. Some of these areas will be ones which universities can naturally lead on, but many will be ones which are led by other partners and supported by universities.

It is reasonable to point out that universities, unlike the local police, the local council or housing association, or the local NHS Trust, do not have many direct levers with regards to cutting crime, improving social housing, or addressing public health, respectively.

But equally, it would be wrong to conclude that universities have no locus on these issues. They have significant indirect levers as an anchor institution – as a purchaser, as an employer, as a hotbed of research, as a provider of accommodation, and as a convenor of students.



*Image credit: Queen Mary University London [– Festival of Communities]*

They also play a much broader convening role as an organisation that naturally engages with many other local civic actors – and has a remit that is broader than any one other actor, including local government.

So although universities may not be able to directly build or refurbish social housing, they could play a role in improving the stock by requiring minimum standards in private accommodation which their students use. Or doing applied local research into drivers of crime in the area. Or in providing guidance to students on their own health, and encouraging volunteering in these areas. Or thinking about where they build new accommodation or buildings, or where they procure from, and so on and so forth.

As noted above, these actions can have spillover effects into neighbouring areas. And most universities have already designed 'cold spots' or priority areas into which they direct much of their civic activity – including, for example, Widening Participation activities with local schools.

But this project is specifically concerned with the extent to which these civic activities – as discussed in the Civic University Commission – work at scale when the university isn't right on the doorstep. What is a university's 'orbit' and how can they act when the orbit is weaker?

We believe that there ought to be scope for universities, as major anchors, to have an impact beyond the immediate areas in which they have a physical footprint. So to answer the first question posed in this report – given the limitations and scope of universities' role, can they help improve 'left behind' towns and other areas which are close to, but not directly hosting, a university? We offer a qualified 'yes'.

One option often raised is that of new provision, or satellite campuses. Such provision can be valuable, and constitute a win-win scenario: a 'cold spot' gains provision in its local area, which can often raise participation from people who would not travel to access tertiary provision; the local area gains the economic, social and cultural benefit of a university campus; and the university gains financially (at least in theory, and into the medium term) from an expansion of student numbers and accompanying research and commercial funding. There have been many instances where a university has delivered a satellite campus that has had a benefit in a 'left behind' area – for example, the work of Coventry University and their new provision in Scarborough.

However, we exclude questions of new campuses or provision here. As noted, it can often be the right solution for an area. But there is no guarantee it will work – there have been examples where the university has had to withdraw from additional provision in a 'left behind' area. And although there's likely to be a need for an expansion of places over the next twenty years, we set this aside as a slightly different question which is primarily about meeting student demand. Such expansion may have – indeed should have – a wider levelling up benefit, but it's a separate question.

Instead, this report considers policy options for how universities can impact upon areas which are in the orbit of a university, but where there is no direct higher education provision from that university in that area. And in doing so, we look to answer the latter two questions posed above:

- What does the role of a university/ies look like, practically?

- And what do people living in such towns actually want?

Taking the latter of these first, this report advances the debate by exploring, via new primary qualitative and quantitative research, the opinions and views of residents of three towns commonly thought to be at the heart of debate around 'levelling up' and which have previously had a focus on civic regeneration: Dudley, Oldham, and Darlington. These three areas are all what can be termed post-industrial. The other cluster of areas which are often discussed in this context are coastal areas. The reason this project chose the former is that they tend to be closer to a larger urban area with a university and are more instructive for universities seeking to lean on or support actions to improve these areas. Equally, the project also considered that some coastal towns have unique characteristics, so the lessons of improving them are less transferable.

Having established the priorities that people have for their local area– and what they think about universities – we then sought to answer the first of these two questions by bringing that lens of public opinion to bear on the literature on the role of universities in regeneration which focuses largely on what is technically feasible or politically promising. Universities will need to recognise that the areas in which their efforts are deemed particularly effective may not align exactly with the priorities of local citizenry, as well as understand that some issues – combating social isolation, for example – may be both difficult to address and absent from the radar of local people. Balancing these drivers will be an important way in which universities set priorities.
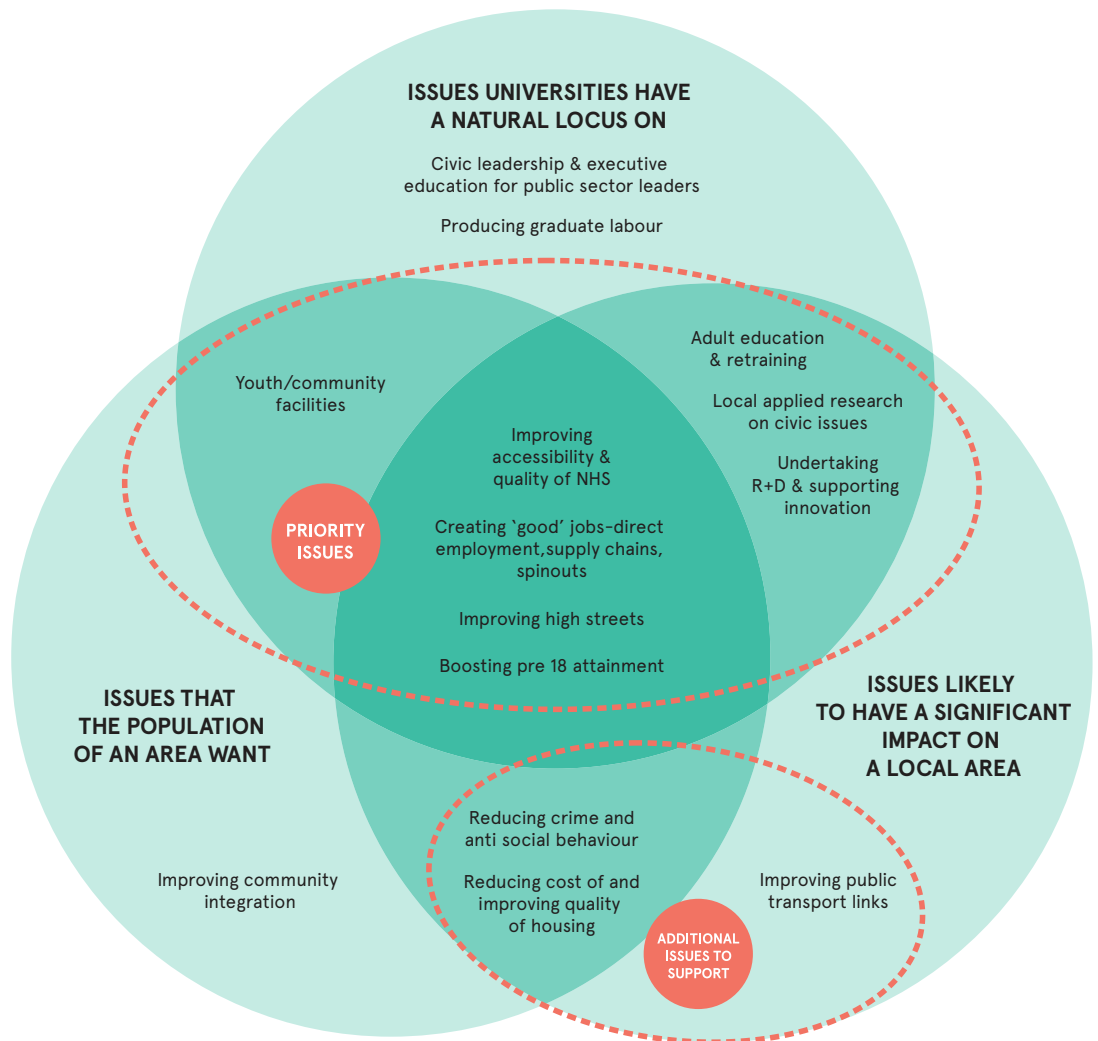
This report suggests bringing these three drivers together:

- What are the issues which are needed to regenerate areas that have been 'left behind'

- What areas could universities play a role in

- What areas do the public want to see actors – including universities – focus on

It is possible to identify a cluster of public policy issues which fit into at least two of these criteria, and some which seem to have the potential to address all three:

## CONCEPTUALISING THE CIVIC ROLE FOR UNIVERSITIES

**ISSUES UNIVERSITIES HAVE A NATURAL LOCUS ON**

Civic leadership & executive education for public sector leaders

Producing graduate labour

Adult education & retraining

Local applied research on civic issues

Youth/community facilities

Improving accessibility & quality of NHS

Undertaking R+D & supporting innovation

PRIORITY ISSUES

Creating 'good' jobs–direct employment, supply chains, spinouts

Improving high streets

Boosting pre 18 attainment

**ISSUES THAT THE POPULATION OF AN AREA WANT**

**ISSUES LIKELY TO HAVE A SIGNIFICANT IMPACT ON A LOCAL AREA**

Reducing crime and anti social behaviour

Improving community integration

Reducing cost of and improving quality of housing

Improving public transport links

ADDITIONAL ISSUES TO SUPPORT

We conclude from our primary research – explored more in section 3 below – that there are five areas which are likely to deliver impact in an adjoining area, based on their contribution in policy and economic terms, and their public popularity – and that universities have at least a partial locus on. These are:
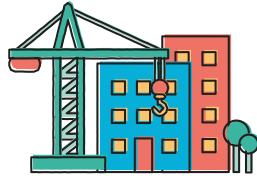
### 1) Town centre regeneration

Improving the physical environment of the local area, including the high street, as well as other local amenities, including through support for cultural and entertainment facilities.

### 2) Jobs and economic localism

Supporting, directly or indirectly, jobs in the local area for residents, including attracting graduates to move to the area, or move back to the area, and boosting the economic capability of the local area. Given the emergence of the jobs crisis since this research was commissioned, we address the question of jobs and retraining separately in our partner report.

### 3) Boosting educational attainment in schools and for adults

Distinct from widening participation or raising aspirations, this includes direct upskilling both for school aged children, particularly at secondary level, as well as adult education for those in and out of the labour market.

### 4) Research and development of the local area

Applying and implementing research into local challenges, which can be taken forward by third parties, as well as supporting knowledge exchange and innovation for new and existing businesses.

### 5) Supporting the NHS

As trainers of professional medical staff, but also improving public health through student and research activity.

Chapter 2 details the findings from the new qualitative and quantitative research which lead us to conclude that these ought to be the priorities for universities with regards towns in their orbit, but where they are not physically present. Chapter 3 outlines some policy conclusions.

# Chapter 2 – What does the public want universities to do in their local area?

In order to test how the civic university mission could be put into practice, and what the public want from universities, this project commissioned two forms of new primary research:

- A national opinion poll of 2000 people, carried out by Public First, into the public's priorities for their local area, and their views on universities

- Six focus groups to explore the feelings of (non-graduate) voters in more detail – two in each of Dudley, Oldham, and Darlington

The poll and the focus groups were used to rigorously test what the public thought about their local areas, how they need improving, and what role – if any – universities could or should play in supporting them.

The focus groups in Dudley and Oldham were conducted before the 2019 general election, the opinion poll was conducted before and after the election (10-17th December 2019), while the focus groups in Darlington took place in January 2020. It was in the groups in Darlington where the project most closely tested a range of policy proposals and recommendations from universities, following results of the opinion poll.

All of the public opinion work took place before the widespread Covid-19 pandemic in the UK and globally. It is highly likely – based on other polling Public First has conducted from March 2020 to date – that similar polling taken in the wake of the crisis would show a greater skew towards the NHS and public health, as well as public services generally and support for small businesses. It is, however, too early to say whether this represents a sustained shift in attitudes or simply represents 'noise' in data. Therefore, we recommend that while universities will want to recognise immediate concerns locally (as they should), they should not ignore this baseline opinion test of what local areas want – as well as the underlying economic structures which suggests what will be needed in the longer term.

This chapter examines:

- What the public think about their local areas

- What the public thinks about universities

- What the public think universities can or should do to improve their local communities

## What do the public think about their local area?

### National opinion polling

The opinion poll showed a clear divide by feelings about an area, depending on what type of environment respondents live in.

The larger an area people live in, the more likely they were to report that their local area has improved while they have been living there. While 30% of people who live in cities say that their local area has improved (39% the same, 25% worse), this figure decreases to 22% of those who live in large towns, and only 17% for those who live in small towns – almost half of the figure for those who live in cities.

While **30%** of people who live in cities say that their local area has improved, this figure decreases to **22%** of those who live in large towns, and only **17%** for those who live in small towns.

**Young people are the most positive about their local area.**

18–24 year olds

31%

35–54 year olds

26%

55–64 year olds

14%

Younger people were the most positive nationally. 31% of those aged 18-24 believe their local area has improved (38% think it is the same, 21% think it has got worse), but only 26% of 35-44 year olds, and 14% of 55-64 year olds – fewer than half as many seeing improvement as the 18-24s.

In terms of priorities for improving an area, there was more consensus, with little variation seen by region of the country, age of respondent, or type of environment that people live in. The top ranked issues for their local area (not the country as a whole), among all voters, were:

- Cost of housing, which (narrowly) was the top ranked issue among all voters in terms of proportion selecting it as "one of the top issues facing your local area", with 49% of all voters choosing the cost and availability of housing as one of the most important issues facing their local area

- 48% of voters stated that access to local NHS services was a priority

- 48% said the decline of the high street

- 40% said high levels of crime and anti social behaviour

Polling was carried out between 10th December and 17th December 2019 across 2006 UK adults weighted by age, gender, region, Social Grade, 2017 and 2019 General Election vote and 2016 EU Referendum vote. The full raw data for the polling is available on the UPP Foundation's website.

## % of people who said each thing was one of the biggest issues facing their local area.

Cost and availability of housing
**49%**

Ability to access local NHS services quickly
**48%**

High streets in decline
**48%**

High levels of crime and anti-social behaviour
**40%**

Expensive / poor quality public transport
**37%**

## Focus groups

The most in-depth element of primary research for this report was drawn from six focus groups (of 8 participants each) in which the project explored the issues raised in the opinion poll, and others, in more detail.

One pair of focus groups was held in each of three locations: Dudley, Oldham, and Darlington. The eligibility brief for participants was:

- C1 / C2 adults (sometimes known as lower middle class and skilled working class)

- All in work at least part time

- No graduates

- Resident in that area for a minimum of five years

In each location, one group was held of 18-40 year olds, and one group of 40+. Groups were mixed gender and split approximately 50-50 in term of voting intention / voting record in the 2019 General Election between Labour and the Conservatives.

The locations for the groups were chosen very specifically. The features that these towns have in common are very pertinent to the policy debate around the role of universities and the 'levelling up' agenda:

- All three locations are politically significant, as an electoral battleground in 2019

- They are all areas which, while reasonably prosperous in some regards, have lower wages and productivity than the national average. They are towns which represent the sort of areas typically known as 'left behind' in the British political and media landscape

- They have a high non-graduate resident base, and students from those areas tend to go to higher education locally

- All of these three areas have some 'branch' tertiary provision, but do not have universities directly in them[10]

- They are within the 'orbit' of large metropolitan areas that have universities and a more productive local economy (and, with reference to earlier discussion, this is why coastal areas that are also 'left behind' were not considered for primary research)

These features allowed the project to test out the general view about the towns and their economic future, as well as investigate the value of current tertiary provision in the town to people who didn't directly attend it, and explore how visible the 'spillovers' from the major neighbouring economic hubs, and other nearby universities, were.

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[10]  To be more precise, they don't have a 'hub campus' of an institution, bearing that town or region's name. But reflecting the focus of much of universities' work in economic regeneration, all three of them have an element of higher education provision in the town: Oldham College runs Oldham University Campus, and Teesside University has a satellite campus in Darlington. Meanwhile, the government has approved £30 million from the New Towns Fund to establish University Centre Dudley, run by Dudley College

The project explored in depth the feelings of such participants to their local area – comparing and contrasting where appropriate with the national opinion results.

The main conclusions from the groups can be summarised as follows:

*The decline of local institutions and civic engagement ran through all our conversations in focus groups.*

Whether it was the unloved high street in Dudley, the parlous state of Darlington Football Club, or the withering away of Oldham Rugby League FC and the cricket clubs, there is a sense of civic loss throughout these towns which is found in many towns across the country.

The churches, political parties, trade unions, fraternal organisations and big employers that used to provide elements of social cohesion have all faded. Everyone in Oldham also spoke unprompted and vehemently about heavy social segregation between the town's white and Pakistani-origin communities.

The groups were clear that many parts of civil society in these towns had taken a battering in recent decades. One way in which this was explored was through asking about local sports teams. Oldham Rugby League Football Club, the town's sporting heart, was generally felt to be in decline. Cricket leagues have shrunk, as have Sunday League football teams. Darlington attendees spoke at length about the difficulties the local football team is having with ownership and the future of the local stadium.

Local patriotism remains, but in many cases it is weak, built on the memories of an industrial heritage. Older voters in particular talked of how major industries would put their town on the map.

The decline of local authority youth services was sorely felt in Dudley and Oldham. In particular, in Oldham, a town known for poor social cohesion following race riots in 2001, and which is today still segregated along racial lines, the one remaining civic organisation is not run by local government or any educational organisation, but local charities and philanthropists. Mahdlo is supported by a range of philanthropic organisations, as well as Oldham Council – but no universities – and it offers youth services, accessible to all young people in Oldham, with a focus on supporting the disabled.[11]

Darlington residents were significantly less cynical and dejected than their counterparts in Dudley and Oldham. However, it is a town suffering from many of the problems we associate with towns in the north and midlands. Although there are signs of growth and development, it is not going into the sort of places that residents actually want.

"They are building things, but the high street is horrendous […] the town centre is dying."

There were fewer complaints in Darlington about institutional decline than elsewhere. Locals were quick to point out much of the history of the town, and how well it has been preserved. The council was not an object of criticism or derision.

*These towns feel the harsh edge of global change – though in many ways this affects younger voters more than older voters.*

The economic decline of many of these areas is still top of conversations for many voters and when prompted, it provides the overarching explanation for why the area is struggling. Respondents also saw the effects of a 'second wave' of deinsutrialisation, driven by globalisation, and the move of much commerce and business online.

Across all focus groups in Dudley, for example, residents regretted how things were changing, and many felt that local decline was showing no signs of stopping.

"Merryhill [shopping centre] has killed Dudley. But even they are suffering from online shopping too."

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[11]  https://www.mahdloyz.org/support-us/supporters/project-funders/

The high streets in the heart of Dudley, once filled with independent shops, are now dominated by an uninspiring mixture of "betting shops, charity shops, Boots, or Turkish barbers." Many locals believe this is the responsibility of Merryhill shopping centre, which opened on the edge of Dudley in 1990, boasting 250 shops and 10,000 free parking spaces. Such is its dominance that in 2008 the local government re-designated the area around Merryhill shopping centre – Brierley Hill – as Dudley's 'strategic' town centre.[12]

"How can HP Sauce go to Poland?" The history of deindustrialisation and outsourcing in the West Midlands is still keenly felt, despite the current health of the local car industry. Whether it was HP Sauce being moved to Poland by Heinz, the closure of MG Rover's Longbridge factory in 2005 – after a significant, failed government bailout[13] – or the handling of local regeneration projects, there was a pervading sense not just of economic decline, but of a cosy relationship between politics and big business. As one attendee put it, "Rover were treated like kings, but our small businesses got no help."

On the positive side, it is clear that for some voters – still working, but towards the end of their time in the labour market – these changes to how businesses ran were benefitting them. Older voters, particularly in Darlington, spoke positively about how online shopping has reduced prices for them, and how the spread of pop up shops and restaurants in place of retail institutions allowed them to eat out a lot more.

*Residents feel, culturally, a long way away from their more prosperous city neighbours.*

We spoke to residents in Dudley around a month before the 2019 general election. In all groups in the town, residents were overwhelmingly cynical, after years of disappointment from governments and institutions of all kinds, that they would see the benefits promised to their region.

The West Midlands recently elected a mayor for the region for the first time. The mayor is charged with a range of regeneration schemes, including adding lines to and extending the Birmingham-Wolverhampton tram network. Many respondents doubt that the tram will even make it to Dudley, as planned. "Birmingham just gets everything. The mayor only cares about Birmingham town centre."

We found a similar mixture of post-industrial cynicism in Oldham. Oldham is only seven miles by road from Manchester – 26 minutes by train – but it is very much on the periphery of Manchester's prosperity, rather than part of it. Respondents talked about Manchester as if it were physically a long way away from them, and there was limited sense of a pan-Greater Manchester identity.

Darlington respondents spoke more positively about their former local MP, and also showed a high degree of familiarity with the new Tees Valley Mayoralty. But they were also quick to point out that while areas such as Newcastle were strong, previous efforts to regenerate either Darlington, or places like it, such as Stockton, had not worked. "Remember the Mary Portas money they put into Stockton, and that failed."

*They wanted to see young people stay in the area, but were very pragmatic about why this might not happen.*

Dudley residents expressed surprise that young people would want to stay or move into Dudley. "Why would you move to Dudley?" [...] "People are working just to survive here." [...] "My son's in the army, he doesn't want to come back home."

Much like the residents in Dudley, focus group participants in Oldham agreed that the main reasons that young people would stay local was that it was cheap, and that they wished to stay near their families.

In Darlington, similarly, voters were very pragmatic. "Be realistic. You live in the north east."

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[12]  https://www.dudley.gov.uk/residents/planning/planning-policy/dudley-local-plan/brierley-hill-area-action-plan/

[13]  https://www.nao.org.uk/report/the-closure-of-mg-rover/

## What do the public think about universities and regeneration of their area?

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### National opinion polling

In opinion polling for this report, the public are generally positive about universities.

59% want them to play a greater role in supporting their local area. In all regions, universities are seen to be positively delivering for their local communities.

## Should Universities play a bigger role in supporting your local area?

**59%**
Agree

**VS**

**6%**
Disagree
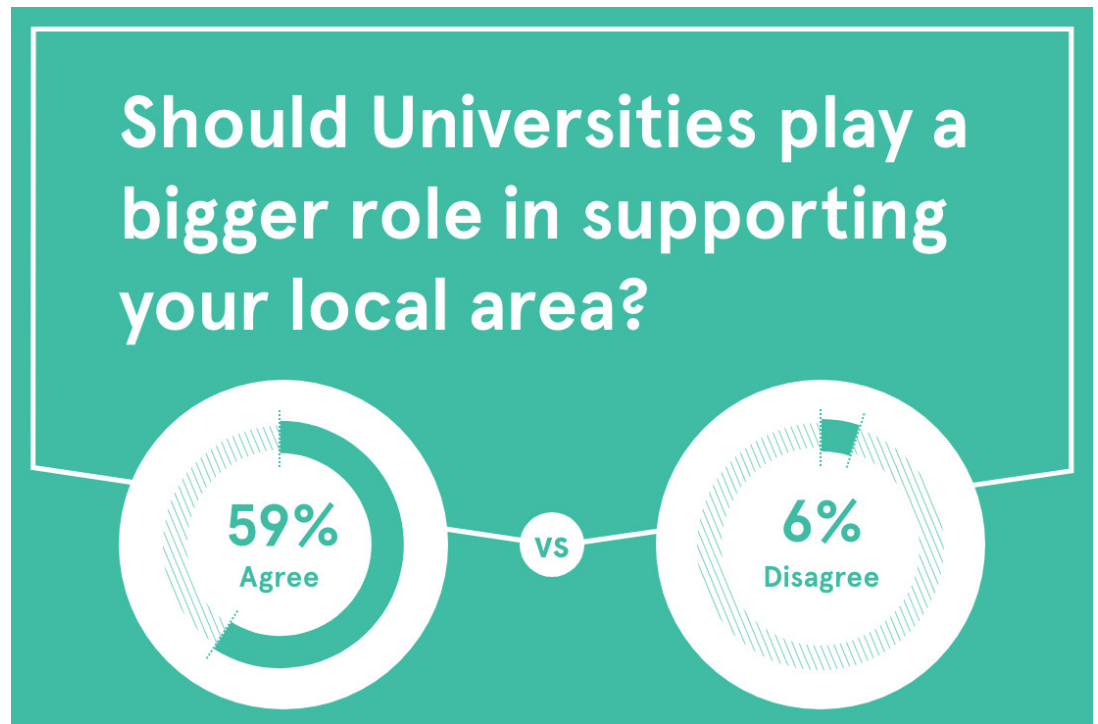
**36%** of people have NEVER visited their local university – **32%** of ABC1 and **41%** of C2DE.

(Socio economic groups)

The public think that universities' main civic responsibilities are to do with education: 'inspiring school children to think about their future in education'; and 'developing closer links with schools and colleges' ranked highly in the poll.

The poll also asked the public to select things that a university working in partnership with others could do to improve their local area. Out of the options available the public were most supportive of localising a university's economic footprint. They want institutions to hire locally (selected by 27%), to conduct research into how to improve the local area (25%), and to encourage graduates going into the public sector to stay local (27%).

However, there was also an acute sense that the current university system creates a brain drain in many of Britain's communities. While attendees in focus groups said that students rarely returned home to work because of the poor jobs market, respondents to our poll want – by a two to one majority (42% to 18%) – graduates to return home. This increases to a three to one majority (47% to 16%) for respondents in the North East of England.

But the polling isn't all good news for universities. It presents significant challenges too. Over a third of people (36%) have never visited their local university, this increases to 41% of respondents of C2DE background. And awareness is low even for those living within very close proximity to one or more institutions – 33% of city dwellers have never visited their local university.

A majority of all respondents believed that universities' roles should be to focus on educating adults 'of all ages' rather than 'primarily young adults'. This was true across different social grades, whether they voted for Leave or Remain in the 2016 referendum, and across all regions in the country. This would mark a significant shift away from how universities currently operate, and is actually reminiscent of the original principles of the civic university.

**% of people that think these civic institutions are doing a good job in their local area:**

| Institution | % |
|---|---|
| Local MPs | 21% |
| Local Government / Council | 21% |
| Local Cultural institutions | 29% |
| Local Businesses | 29% |
| Local Universities | 30% |
| Local Sports Clubs & Teams | 33% |
| Local Hospitals | 34% |
| Local Charities | 34% |

There is general apathy towards all civic institutions, and low levels of knowledge (with high numbers answering don't know to questions about local levels of performance). Universities are roughly in the middle of local civic institutions; local sports clubs and teams, local hospitals and local charities are seen to be performing best for their local area.

### Focus groups

The project discussed the role of universities at length in all six of the focus groups. It is worth noting that each of the regions that the groups were held in have very large student populations, so the report was aiming to draw from a high level of general local perception of higher education – but, as noted elsewhere, the groups were deliberately chosen in towns where there is no main campus provision of HE:

- The West Midlands has twelve universities, and around 200,000 students in higher education, the fourth-largest regional student population in England

- The North West has a large university population: 235,000 students spread across 15 universities, many of which are in Greater Manchester

- There are far fewer university students in the North East of England compared to the North West or the West Midlands. The 106,000 students attend five universities in the region – but these are all within a very short drive of Darlington: Newcastle, Northumbria, Durham, Teesside, Sunderland

*Awareness of institutions was high and positive.*

When asked, most respondents in the focus groups could very quickly rattle off the names of local universities to them. Around half of all respondents knew people – friends or family – who had gone to one of the universities to study. Name recognition was much higher than many other civic or social organisations would have received among similar focus groups, and required very little prompting.

Initial attitudes to universities and higher education was warm and positive, if disconnected. Respondents recognised the desire of young people to go off and study, "Spread your wings, there's a big world out there."

There was no resentment that universities in other towns and cities were "creaming off" the most talented young locals from these towns, who were unlikely to return. "It's better to get out" was the prevailing sentiment, as cities with universities have better opportunities and better jobs than places like Oldham. When prompted, however, there was a recognition that it would be better, all things considered, for such graduates to return – but a pragmatic recognition that there needed to be jobs for them to come back to.

*But very few attendees had ever visited a university and few could say anything that they did.*

In the groups we ran, it was unusual for more than two out of any eight participants to have visited any of the local universities, even though they could name them all rapidly. Typically, visits were for public lectures or cultural events – eg a play at a local university theatre. This reflects the national opinion poll findings that many working class respondents never engage with a university in any way at all.

*The universities felt disconnected from the area.*

Although half of the students in Birmingham come from the West Midlands, distance and indifference was the overwhelming impression given when it came to universities. Rightly or wrongly, local people think there is mutual indifference and incomprehension between universities and non-graduate voters in towns. "The unis, they just get in with big corporates if they ever think about businesses." The project deliberately chose towns where there was no 'main' university, but where there is some form of tertiary provision, either branch campuses, or through the local colleges. But perceptions of those institutions was relatively low, and visit rates were equally low. This is a disheartening finding for some of the universities and local government who have invested considerably in these areas.

For example, although Darlington does not have a university of its own, Teesside University – based in Middlesbrough – established a satellite campus there in 2011. It recently launched the National Horizons Centre, a £22 million project which has attracted investment from the government's Local Growth Fund, the Tees Valley Combined Authority, and the European Regional Development Fund. This project has been hailed as a catalyst for 'talent development' in the north east, and a necessary step towards boosting prosperity and the knowledge economy across the north east of England.[14] However, Teesside University's investment is nearly unknown to many of Darlington's locals. When prompted to think about the Darlington branch campus, many respondents didn't even know it was a university. One respondent who had visited Teesside for a course in the past noted that "I went to Teesside university in Middlesbrough and in Darlington, and the Darlington building doesn't feel used. It's just a building, feels empty and could be used better."

*People were amenable to universities helping in their area, but needed to be led entirely to possible solutions.*

Universities and their local role were ultimately a distant, low-priority concern. Crime, antisocial behaviour from local children, a rise in homelessness, and the poor quality of the local environment were the residents' main concerns. But when asked to put these frequently cited problems against the role of the university, there was total incomprehension. There was little awareness of universities as local institutions which have – or could have – any role other than education in the area. When asked to consider this spontaneously, respondents in all six groups were unable to articulate any possible activity which universities could do locally.

14  https://netimesmagazine.co.uk/news/teesside-university-opens-22-3-million-game-changing-bioscience-national-horizons-centre/

In order to address this, each focus group was presented with a prompt sheet – as set out below – giving ideas as to areas universities could work in:

## 1. The civic, boosting the local community, supporting your local place.

**Should universities…**

- Encourage staff and students to undertake a sustained period of volunteering in local services?

- Encourage staff and students to carry out projects and research into how to improve the local area?

- Encourage staff and students who are graduating as teachers, doctors, social workers, nurses to work and study in their local area?

- Do more to encourage young people to move to, or move back to your local area?

## 2. Economic localism, putting the university at the heart of your local economy.

**Should universities be encouraged to…**

- Buy as many services and goods from local suppliers in the local economy?

- Put new facilities and in and around high streets in town centres?

- Employ local people for their operations and facilities?

- Offer advice, mentoring, and incentives for local businesses to grow?

## 3. Specific education initiatives.

**Should universities be encouraged to…**

- More local students to study at their universities with more generous A Level offers?

- Staff and students to work with local schools to raise standards?

- Encourage universities to provide more local adult education and training?

When prompted with these, the general response to all of them was yes. But given the low level of prior understanding, and the level of prompting required, it is likely that such responses fall into the "would you like a pony?" category – why would you say no? There was little sense of linking this activity to the core role of a university – it was felt to be additional charitable activity – all well and good, but not really what a university would 'normally' do.

There was also caution as to the sustainability of any activity. On student volunteering, for example, it was felt to be good but young people would not take it up at scale – "I don't think someone studying maths is going to want to help the homeless". Any enthusiasm for efforts to encourage students to study locally was tempered with a gloomy jobs market: "Once the course is over and there's no job opportunities they're just going to disappear after four years", "If you're gonna come back to Darlington you've got to love Darlington [...] Why would they come back here to work in Asda when they can follow their dreams elsewhere?"

*Instinctively, people felt as universities as self-interested institutions, rather than civic and social actors.*

Interestingly, the dominant view of universities – and one that was treated largely neutrally, rather than negatively – was as self-interested, private organisations. Questions as to whether universities ought to engage more locally on issues of procurement, for example, were met with interest, but some people were sceptical of the cost implications. It was felt that it would be a "nice to have" if universities bought locally, but not something that they ought to do if it significantly increased price or reduced quality. Respondents were more sceptical about any *obligations* from universities to procure services from local businesses. Even though many in groups believed that small businesses often, unfairly, lost out to larger competitors on big contracts, the public are *very* conscious about value for money and good budgeting. "Although they are trying to do the right thing, they still are a business and they have to think about their budget at the end of the day."

On local employment there was significant support. Participants were keen to know about opportunities available at universities in their region: "I'd be interested in working at the universities, but have you ever seen them advertise to locals?"

Respondents were hawkish about waste – and most examples they gave were from local government. Whether influenced by seeing failed regeneration projects in their home towns, local incompetence – "they spent £13 million on a through-road and a roundabout which was built and then ripped up before it opened" – or a prevailing culture of public austerity, this is a deeply-held attitude.

Many regarded universities as similar to businesses with a bottom line to look out for, rather than as the public-private hybrid that they are. Only once did the moderator lead the groups to consider the nature of universities' position in society – not as businesses, but taxpayer-supported institutions with a social purpose, working in a regulated market. Once this was considered, there was greater enthusiasm for the idea of encouraging universities to procure more services locally.

*When prompted, respondents liked efforts on regenerating town centres, on giving opportunities for local children, and getting training for jobs.*

Bringing the high street back to life is the priority for many, as was finding ways of giving more opportunities for local children, so they can do better in school and avoid falling into crime. This was common across all groups: what really matters to the majority of people is the quality of their local environment, levels of crime, and how the local economy and schools offer as much opportunity as possible for the next generation of children. While on first glance this may not seem relevant to universities, there is, as the paper explores later on, a direct role that universities – in partnership with local authorities – can play in reimagining the town centre.

Encouraging universities to improve links with local schools and local children, as well as seeing what they could do to improve the local environment, were more unambiguously popular propositions.

There was little awareness of the links that universities in all three of the regions are forging with schools. However, anything that could be done to give local children hope, motivation, and access to better education was welcomed. As one attendee said, it would be good for students to work with kids in local schools to "show them how hard you have to stick in" to get on in life.

This did not necessarily mean encouraging more local school pupils to go to university, however.

"I think too many people are pushed to go to university anyway, I know a lot of people stay in university because they can't get a job" – a commonly held view.

Getting trained with the right skills was paramount. University-backed adult education programmes were popular, as was the suggestion that universities could play a greater role in supporting other local services, such as social work and childcare.

Many attendees recognised how universities can play an important role in supporting town centres and high streets. Teesside University's main campus is in the heart of Middlesbrough, and "students' drinking antics" aside, the Darlington groups widely saw it as an important hub in the town centre, where there are significantly more independent businesses than comparable towns like Stockton and Darlington.

We can draw three broad conclusions from our quantitative and qualitative survey of public opinion:

- There is very little awareness of the purpose and role of universities among lower-middle class and working class residents in general, and little awareness of the what civic work and local outreach universities may be doing.

- The public are not averse to universities taking a greater role in regeneration, though they require significant prompting and persuasion. They would like universities to play a local, social role, but they are concerned about wasting money and cautious of repeating the mistakes of many failed regeneration projects that have come before them.

- The public are very clear on what they would like done to support their local area. If universities are serious about their civic role, they must work hard to align their priorities with the public's.

# Chapter 3 – Recommendations for improving the civic role of universities

In the previous two chapters we have established three important things:

- This country urgently needs to address its huge disparities in regional productivity, wealth, and civic wellbeing

- Universities in this country have a civic as well as educational purpose, and this is as much part of their historic mission as it should be part of their mission in the 21st century

- The general public would like to see universities play a greater role in supporting the economy and civic society in their local areas, however they find universities distant institutions that have no natural locus or interest in this

In this final section, we are going to look at how civic universities can address these three things and step forward in their efforts to support their local economy and local communities in meaningful ways.

## The broader question of regeneration

The question of regeneration, of course, goes far wider than just universities. The government's Industrial Strategy Council has recently summarised the problems facing the regions in the UK[15].

Empirical evidence, from the UK and internationally, point towards three key explanations for these regional differences:

- **Place-based fundamentals:** Geography, local culture, governance and infrastructure are important factors determining the economic activities of a region. These shape the nature of the local workforce and the type and volume of private investments a place can attract.

- **Agglomeration:** Places attract clusters of economic activity which become self-sustaining. These agglomeration effects arise because specialised firms benefit from the ability to trade with other firms in their industry and because these firms benefit from sharing the common resources offered by large cities.

- **Sorting:** Workers, especially highly-skilled workers, also tend to cluster. This means small initial differences between places can generate large disparities in the skills of the workforce, which then shape regions' industries, attractiveness and productivity."

The Council's review of evidence, both in the UK and internationally, suggests that reducing regional disparities – "levelling up" – is possible with the right set of policy interventions. Some of the key factors in policy success are:

- **Local growth strategies need to be multi-faceted:** As the causes of regional differences are multi-faceted, so too must be the policy response to them. A broad and integrated package of policy interventions are likely to be needed, embracing social and health policy, housing and transport policy, and investment and innovation policy.

- **Focus on the "local" and on the "left behind":** As spatial differences are local, so too must be the design and implementation of policies to correct these differences. The value of these interventions is likely to be greatest among places falling furthest and fastest behind.

It is clear that universities *do* have a role to play in the council's recommendations. This is especially true when it comes to investment and innovation policy, and potentially true in social and health policy. This way, civic universities can be equal partners in regeneration initiatives, alongside businesses and government, who help to deliver much-needed improvements in infrastructure and local services.

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[15] https://industrialstrategycouncil.org/comprehensive-set-local-industrial-strategies-consistently-applied-key-levelling-uk

Similarly, Professor Richard Jones has studied the potential impact that universities could have in regional regeneration in his 2019 paper, *A Resurgence of the Regions: rebuilding innovation capacity across the whole of UK.*[16] This includes:

> Addressing the imbalance between where research into healthcare and particularly public health takes place and where ill people actually are.
>
> - London, Oxford, and Cambridge take the vast majority of government, charity, and research council funding into public health research.
>
> - This should be rebalanced in light of the stark differences in life expectancy – as much as nine years – between the prosperous south east and the poorer north.
>
> - The recently published Marmot Review into Health Equity in England found that people – particularly women – in the North East of England are significantly less healthy than those living in London.[17]
>
> Giving the recently formed Industrial Strategy Council statutory status and greater strength.
>
> - Jones argues that the Industrial Strategy Council should have a similar status to the Office for Budget Responsibility and the ability to hold government organisations like UKRI to account for progress in improving productivity and reducing economic disparities between regions. This could have an impact on how UKRI funding is given to universities, and would be an important metric to apply to universities research.
>
> - He also advocates the development of 'place-based' research strategies at UKRI, which will take into account the important local economic role of universities.

## A potential typology for considering universities' civic impact in areas where they don't have a permanent base

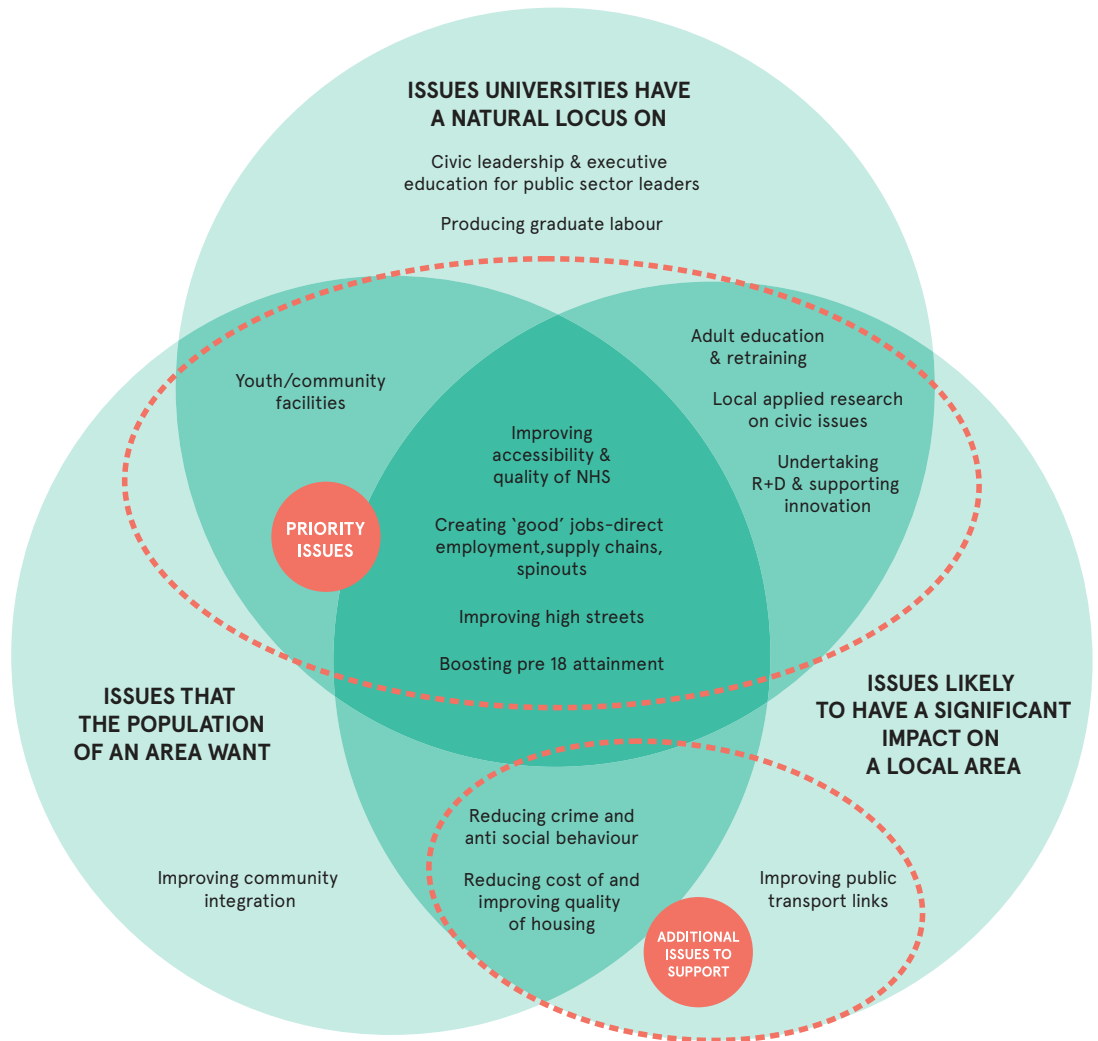When considering what universities could do, three lenses can be applied:

- What are the issues which are needed to regenerate areas that have been 'left behind'

- What areas could universities play a role in

- What areas do the public want to see actors – including universities – focus on

[16] http://www.softmachines.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/ResurgenceRegionsRALJv22_5_19.pdf

[17] https://www.health.org.uk/publications/reports/the-marmot-review-10-years-on

Bringing these together, we identify a cluster of public policy issues which fit into at least two of these criteria, and some which seem to have the potential to address all three:

## CONCEPTUALISING THE CIVIC ROLE FOR UNIVERSITIES

**ISSUES UNIVERSITIES HAVE A NATURAL LOCUS ON**

Civic leadership & executive education for public sector leaders

Producing graduate labour

Youth/community facilities

Adult education & retraining

Local applied research on civic issues

Undertaking R+D & supporting innovation

Improving accessibility & quality of NHS

Creating 'good' jobs–direct employment, supply chains, spinouts

**PRIORITY ISSUES**

Improving high streets

Boosting pre 18 attainment

**ISSUES THAT THE POPULATION OF AN AREA WANT**

**ISSUES LIKELY TO HAVE A SIGNIFICANT IMPACT ON A LOCAL AREA**

Improving community integration

Reducing crime and anti social behaviour

Reducing cost of and improving quality of housing

Improving public transport links

**ADDITIONAL ISSUES TO SUPPORT**

Drawing from the summary of research into 'left behind' towns and improving their outcomes – not just economically but also socially and culturally – as well as the insight from polling work and focus group work done for this project but also for the Civic University Commission, the above diagram shows how several issues intersect and can be prioritised from the perspective of universities.

To repeat the point from earlier, universities need not lead on all of these areas. They have – as per the top circle – a natural locus on some of them. But for others, they should be partners and supporters of an effort across multiple civic organisations. Universities should consider that their role can include being a convenor, a researcher, a funder, an employer, a purchaser, and an advocate – as well as a direct lead.

This is politically fertile territory at the present time. Within the last few months – since the initial publication of the Civic University Commission – a number of reports on this topic have been published. The two most notable ones, from the perspective of universities, are the UK2070 Commission[18] and the HEPI publication on universities supporting regional inequality[19]. Both of these build on, and draw from, some of the insight of the Civic University Commission. Similarly, this work draws from and shares much of the insight of the two reports, and endorses their broad conclusions as regards universities and improving place.

In particular, the present report endorses one main conclusion from the HEPI paper:

> "We propose that place should be central to higher education and research policy. A university's geographic role needs to be used more effectively as an agent for change, both within the core cities where the majority of higher education institutions are based, **as well as the surrounding areas that may have been left-behind in today's post-industrial, knowledge-based economic focus** [our emphasis]. Given the divisions within British society today, painfully exposed through Brexit as well as in terms of entrenched inequality, universities should be a key ally of Government in helping to bridge divided communities.
>
> The Civic University Commission inspired a much-needed mirror for universities to reflect more honestly on their role and responsibility to their region. We now need to go further, both as institutions and as a sector in terms of understanding the potential of universities' civic mission. The proposed Civic University Agreements were an important first step, and with over 60 universities now signed up to develop one, they clearly identify a sector need. The longer-term challenge for universities is to ensure the civic role is hardwired into the fabric of their institutional culture and outlook. Regional priorities require equal attention and prestige as global efforts".

[18] The Final Report of the UK2070 Commission:
Make No Little Plans – Acting At Scale For A Fairer And Stronger Future"
[19] "Making Universities Matter: How higher education can help to heal a divided Britain"

This section of the report now makes a series of recommendations around five key areas, drawn from the above typology.
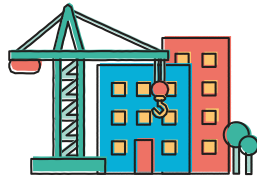
### 1) Town centre regeneration

Improving the physical environment of the local area, including the high street, as well as other local amenities, including through support for cultural and entertainment facilities.

### 2) Jobs and economic localism

Supporting, directly or indirectly, jobs in the local area for residents, including attracting graduates to move to the area, or move back to the area, and boosting the economic capability of the local area. This is considered separately.
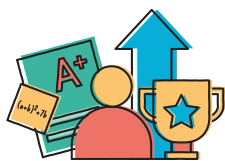
### 3) Boosting educational attainment in schools and for adults

Distinct from widening participation or raising aspirations, this includes direct upskilling both for school aged children, particularly at secondary level, as well as adult education for those in and out of the labour market.

### 4) Research and development of the local area

Applying and implementing research into local challenges, which can be taken forward by third parties, as well as supporting knowledge exchange and innovation for new and existing businesses.

### 5) Supporting the NHS

As trainers of professional medical staff, but also improving public health through student and research activity.

Again, the focus here is on action that universities can take when they are not present directly in the town or area. And importantly, the report recommendations specifically exclude questions of new campuses or provision. As noted earlier, it can often be the right solution for an area. But there is no guarantee it will work – there have been examples where a university has had to withdraw from additional provision in a 'left behind' area. And although there's likely to be a need for expansion of places over next twenty years, this report sets this aside as a slightly different question which is primarily about meeting student demand. Such expansion may have – indeed should have – a wider levelling up benefit, but is treated as a separate question. Instead, this report considers policy options for how universities can impact upon areas which are in the orbit of a university, but where there is no direct higher education provision from that university in that area. They also recognise the changed environment post Covid-19, and the role universities will have in leading the repair work to economies and societies.

## Recommendations

The main recommendations are summarised here, and the full list is set out below.

- **Government should allocate a proportion of the Towns Fund and other programmes aimed at high street regeneration to a major programme of community development in local town centres. Universities would be able to bid in partnership with local government for this funding for new capital, on the condition that these are placed in town centres and universities situate some of their teaching, research and community activity there as an anchor.** This fund would use the capabilities of universities as local civic institutions to revitalise towns. Government would provide capital funding to a partnership of civic actors including a university to redevelop a part of the high street – either dilapidated shops or build a new community asset in the town centre. This building/collection of buildings would be new civic centres fit for the 21st century. **Universities would need to be part of consortia bidding to build, manage, and provide services through these new buildings – including a commitment to remain there for a period of ten years as an anchor tenant.** Universities' role could include moving new accommodation, teaching or research facilities, student and staff volunteering there, and public facing activity such as incubating business support, providing CPD, or adult and community learning.

- **Research funding should be increasingly prioritised towards wider benefits of places, and universities should consider how to use this and other third party funding more generally, to provide an income stream to support civic expansion.** Areas such as public health and town centre regeneration should be high priority for this investment **and the way in which research funding is awarded should be amended to acknowledge the potential for local impact. We echo the call in the recent UK2070 Commission report to increase the investment for applied research by 30%.** Additionally, other third party funding streams will be allocated by government in the aim of economic growth and jobs which could be accessed by universities, for example the recent Getting Britain Building Fund. It is likely that additional funding to support City Deals, jobs and retraining, and other economic stimulus packages can be accessed by universities. **Universities should consider bidding for these funds with a specific goal to provide a revenue stream to support physical or other expansion into left behind areas within their orbit.**

- **Universities should work with civil society organisations such as access charities to develop a new nationally available, but locally designed and delivered, tutoring and mentoring scheme** – recognising that Covid-19 led to a widening of education gaps that will likely lead to greater inequity in those applying to HE. This scheme should bring together universities and student volunteers and offer the choice of two routes to be rolled out in local areas, one with a greater focus on pastoral support, aspiration raising and widening participation, and one with a greater focus on attainment raising.

- **Universities should be designated as a primary 'surge capacity' provider to the NHS and the wider public sector for health crises.** In practical terms, this means they should be funded by the NHS through a dedicated "NHS capacity fund" to run a permanent surplus capacity in terms of medical research, facilities, medical kit, and staff. These resources can be used in day to day university business in normal times – essentially providing additional funding from the state for universities to allow them to do more research and teaching – on the quid pro quo understanding that such resources must be able to be deployed to the NHS and government, should they need it, on almost instantaneous notice as surge capacity.

- **The Shared Prosperity Fund should support a major interdisciplinary research programme looking at 'levelling up' post-industrial towns.** University research should be at the heart of the debate and the research should be practical and immediate, specifically looking at the actions universities can take – either in the lead, or in support of wider civic action. This should be done with international partners, recognising that post-industrial decline is a global phenomenon across much of the developed world.

## 1. Universities should prioritise town centre regeneration in towns within their orbit.

This should specifically include continuing research into these areas, and a focus on capital development – and active relocation of facilities if appropriate. Partnership with other actors will be critical.

Universities are important economic hubs. City-centre universities help bring footfall and spending to their surroundings, from students, university staff and local workers alike. However, considering their role as anchor institutions, they could enhance their commitments to town centres and local high streets by collaborating with local government, local charities, the NHS, local creative cultural sectors, local FE college and local business to invest in public service provision and workspace for a town centre.

Universities are already playing an important role here, both in terms of their research, and also material contributions to their local area. Universities UK highlights projects like Sunderland University's Hope Street Xchange, the New Keele Deal supported by Keele and Staffordshire universities, and Falmouth University's Launchpad, among others, as examples of university-backed projects which are making additional contributions to their local economy.

Some universities are deliberately looking at new campuses precisely in these type of 'left behind' areas within their orbit. For example, Nottingham Trent University is building new premises in Mansfield and is deliberately shifting some provision to that area.

The Institute for Place Management at Manchester Metropolitan University has a strong record of bringing together its university with leaders from local government, local business, and the community.[20] Its High Street Task Force is producing research which will benefit the high streets and communities in its local area, and crucially, it is doing so with its local area as an equal partner in a consortium.

However, universities will only do such capital work if they can make it work financially. Even civically minded institutions require that the case for expansion can be made in revenue or capital terms. This report recommends diverting elements of existing funds to prioritise expansion into these left behind areas.

This report recommends that:

• **Government should allocate a proportion of the Towns Fund and other programmes aimed at high street regeneration such as the Future High Streets Fund to a major programme of community development in local town centres. Universities would be able to bid in partnership with local government for this funding for new capital, on the condition that these are placed in town centres and universities situate some of their teaching, research and community activity there as an anchor.** This fund would use the capabilities of universities as local civic institutions to revitalise towns. Government would provide capital funding to a partnership of civic actors including a university to redevelop a part of the high street – either dilapidated shops or build a new community asset in the town centre.

This building/collection of buildings would be new civic centres fit for the 21st century. **Universities would need to be part of consortia bidding to build, manage, and provide services through these new buildings – including a commitment to remain there for a period of ten years as an anchor tenant.** Universities' role could include adult and community learning, lectures other teaching or research facilities, student and staff volunteering and enterprise locations, public facing activity such as incubating business support, providing CPD, citizens advice and health clinics.

• As part of the development of the Civic University Agreement, universities will be developing a sense of their local population's priorities. **Universities should consider how their research – including applied and translational research – can be focussed on addressing these issues by shining greater light on the issue, even if they don't have a direct locus on it – for example through research into crime, or health provision, or housing.**

• Poor quality transport is a long-running concern in the north of England in particular, and it affects university staff and students as much as it does local residents. Some universities already directly operate or subsidise local bus transport for students and local residents. **While this is not an option for everyone, research and action on transport should be a priority for many universities in their Civic University Agreement.**

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[20] https://www2.mmu.ac.uk/news-and-events/news/story/index.php?id=9231

## 2. Universities should focus on improving educational attainment in schools and for adults,

This should include direct upskilling both for school aged children, particularly at secondary level, as well as adult education for those in and out of the labour market.

The public want to see universities take a greater role in improving educational attainment in schools, and in helping to increase skills throughout the whole economy. This means more than universities doing outreach to local schools for prospective applicants. As the Civic University Commission made clear, there is a distinction between widening participation, and raising attainment – and there should be a greater focus on the latter, regardless of whether it has an impact on widening participation, or on enrolment to the university.

This report recommends that civic universities should have an explicit strategy, backed by resources, for raising attainment in their local area. This should be distinct from their widening participation strategy (though many of the schools will overlap) and should focus particularly on areas where low attainment is prevalent within the orbit of the university. This is likely to include, in many instances, the towns of the type considered here.

The strategy should be led by the university but deliberately designed with partners. But priorities that we expect many universities will want to address include:

- Working with the local Multi-Academy Trusts (often known as School Trusts). In many areas, the majority of schools will be academies and the Local Authority will have little expertise or capacity to advise on school improvement issues. **The Civic University Network should work on a national level with the Confederation of School Trusts to help broker partnerships between universities and major School Trusts.**

- Continuing to promote student volunteering into schools – and **specifically, working with government and civil society organisations such as access charities to develop a new nationally available, but locally designed and delivered, tutoring and mentoring scheme – recognising that Covid-19 led to a widening of education gaps, and attainment raising and aspiration work that will likely lead to greater inequity in those applying to HE. This scheme should bring together universities and student volunteers and offer the choice of two routes to be rolled out in local areas, one with a greater focus on pastoral support, aspiration raising and widening participation, and one with a greater focus on attainment raising.**



*Exeter Maths school is sponsored by the University of Exeter and Exeter College. Opened in September 2014, the school is for students from across Cornwall, Devon, Dorset and Somerset - inspiring enthusiasts for maths, physics and computing across the region.*

Under either route, university students should work with local civil society organisations and local schools and it should be a formalised and lengthier process, less dependent on the number of students choosing to volunteer for a few hours. Universities should consider developing and delivering more formal and revised methods of training students to be tutors, to support this.

- **Delivering new models of provision of schooling – in particular post-16 specialist institutions.** This has been developed already in Maths but could, in principle, be set up to specialise in other areas including STEM, creative arts, or music. Government should work with universities to set up a dozen major institutions in partnership with universities over the next few years.

- Civic universities should also work with local authorities and their local FE provision to **support the provision of adult and lifelong learning, delivered in towns where there is no university present, and based in the CEZ. The government should make this possible by relaxing the eligibility requirements for adult learning courses, and by using their response to the Augar review to introduce the funding for the recommended lifelong learning allowance.** This should be sufficiently generous to drive a whole new generation of adult learning – and should be focused, if resources are constrained, specifically to adults in these areas, where universities, FE colleges (linked to the recommendation around town centre regeneration and community development) can combine to create a tangible offer for adults in these areas. More people are able to take advantage of it.



*Sheffield Children's University, part of Sheffield City Council and backed by Sheffield City Region and South Yorkshire Futures, rewards and celebrates children and young people's voluntary participation in extra-curricular activities. Participation in CU is proven to increase attainment and attendance in school.*

- Universities should consider how to take their findings about how digital education can best be delivered and work – through their Widening Participation efforts and other routes – to ensure that there is no digital exclusion among under 18 year olds and that schools and other institutions can best deliver inclusive and high quality online learning.

## 3. Universities should prioritise research and development work that looks at applying and implementing research into local challenges and research funds should consider the benefit to local growth

This should include looking at research which can be taken forward by third parties, as well as supporting knowledge exchange and innovation for new and existing businesses.

Many universities already conduct research which is beneficial to their local areas. However, as noted above, a huge amount of research money is invested in the most prosperous parts of the country, depriving poorer regions of the valuable spillovers that research funding provides.

According to the National Centre for Universities and Business, the government's plan to increase overall R&D spending to 2.4% of GDP by 2027 will be transformative if properly delivered. It will put universities at the heart of government efforts to rebalance Britain's economy.[21] But it is important that an element of this research is specifically focused on applied or translational research. The plight of post-industrial towns is also a global phenomenon – so universities should be looking to develop international leading research and collaborations on this.

The uplift to 2.4% will provide substantial investment into the kind of applied and translational research that can drive economic and social improvement on the ground without sacrificing universities' pursuit of excellence. A funding shift of this kind will help change the mind-set of academics and universities, encouraging them to further engage with their local communities and deliver research with meaningful outcomes for their local economy and society. Universities, as anchor institutions within their communities, are uniquely placed to support this – providing a key interface between research infrastructure, local businesses and public sector organisations, to tackle local issues.

[21] https://www.ncub.co.uk/blog/research-funding-universities-and-the-place-agenda

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This report recommends that:

- Research investment be targeted towards addressing local social and economic problems. Areas such as public health and town centre regeneration should be high priority for this investment and **the way in which research funding is awarded should be amended to acknowledge the potential for local impact. We echo the call in the recent UK2070 Commission report to increase the investment for applied research by 30%.**

- **The Shared Prosperity Fund should support a major interdisciplinary research programme looking at 'levelling up' post–industrial towns.** University research should be at the heart of the debate and the research should be practical and immediate, specifically looking at the actions universities can take – either in the lead, or in support of wider civic action. This should be done with international partners, recognising that post-industrial decline is a global phenomenon across much of the developed world.

- **Universities should consider how to use R+D funding, and third party funding more generally, to provide an income stream to support civic expansion.** There are many areas of funding increasingly available for universities to access, which have a place based element – the R+D funding addressed above, for example. Additionally, the Getting Britain Building Fund allocated lots of local funds to projects which involved universities being part of civic programmes to grow jobs and economic growth. There will also be additional funds allocated in similar ways via Local Authorities, LEPS, and potential new City Deals and other programmes designed to improve jobs and growth. These programmes should be considered with a specific goal to use them as a revenue streams to support expansion (physical presence or otherwise).

## 4. Universities should embed their role as part of a wider NHS infrastructure, with an increasing focus on public health and providing surge capacity for times of crisis

Universities already play a significant supporting role in the NHS. As well as their day to day role as trainers of thousands of medical staff a year – doctors, nurses, and other allied health professionals – they also have an underappreciated role in governance of many hospital trusts. They also conduct an element of preventative work on improving public health through student and research activity – medical research is worth tens of billions a year and much of that goes to universities.

Covid-19 illustrated the immense power universities have to mobilise to address major health crises – whether that's through vaccine research or through lending supplies to the NHS. But it also illustrated that a major health crisis is likely to have economic knock-on effects to universities that risks taking their attention away from providing surge capacity to the NHS.

This report recommends that:

- **Universities should be designated as a primary 'surge capacity' provider to the NHS and the wider public sector for health crises.** In practical terms, this means they should be funded through a new dedicated "NHS capacity fund" to run a permanent surplus capacity in terms of medical research, facilities, medical kit, and staff. These resources can be used in day to day university business in normal times – essentially providing additional funding from the state for universities to allow them to do more research and teaching – on the quid pro quo understanding that such resources must be able to be deployed to the NHS and government, should they need it, on almost instantaneous notice as surge capacity. This would avoid criticism of 'wasted' capacity

within the NHS, or resources being left idle, but would build in more latent surge capacity when and if needed. This could also include providing latent test capacity, as some universities such as Nottingham are doing – to be used for their own students, but which can also be deployed to broader local testing.

- **Universities that have medical schools, or who deliver nursing or other allied health professionals degrees or degree apprenticeships, should work closely with the local NHS providers and commissioners to encourage staff to stay in the area.** As recommended in the Civic University Commission, and endorsed by Andy Burnham, the Mayor of Greater Manchester, universities and local actors could partner to offer 'golden handcuff' proposals to support local retention. A proposal which targeted 500 health sector professionals across a region with a financial incentive of £10,000 structured across three years (£2k / £2k / £5k) would have a steady state cost of £4.5m a year, with some universities potentially well placed to make a financial contribution towards this.

## 5. Universities should use their own power as employers, procurers and conveners to support local economic development and skills

As Universities UK states, universities in this country support nearly 1 million jobs, directly and indirectly. They are often among the biggest employers in a local area, at all levels of skills. Their role as employers, and in the supply chain at large, has never been more important. While maintaining a focus on value for money, universities should be explicitly told that they can take a broad conception of value, which includes maintaining vibrant local economies and labour markets. Equally, given the challenges of local regeneration, local government capacity will be absolutely critical to ensuring local resilience and economic growth in the future.

The report recommends that:

- All non-academic, professional services jobs – which can include very senior roles – should be advertised as widely as possible with a specific focus on nearby towns. This should include working closely with colleges and local government to put on jobs fairs and outreach programmes to cement public awareness of them as employers.

- For their supply chain, civic universities should ensure that their own procurement frameworks incorporate enough flexibility at contract awarding stage to prioritise their own workforce development (eg through apprenticeships, or workplace training) and companies that give something back to society, while maintaining value for money.

- Many universities successfully support and incubate small businesses and start ups from their students – including through providing premises, mentoring, and taking an equity stake. Some of this is funded via EU programmes and is thus potentially at risk.

The Civic University Fund should specifically have the goal of funding universities to support freelancers, small business start ups, and self-employed graduates who operate within the sub region of the university – including basing them in spaces developed through the Town Centre regeneration funds (recommendation 1) where these are being created.

- Universities should look to partner with their local government bodies to create a specific programme of training and upskilling in local government. This could include graduate recruitment programmes into local councils, encouraging secondments between university staff, local businesses; and local government; and programmes of training and upskilling for existing local government staff. This could encompass general management or specific programmes eg on planning, innovative finance, or regeneration.



*Founder of Lotus Maternity Ltd, Olivia Swift.*

*The business offers breastfeeding-friendly clothes and postnatal support services. Lotus Maternity is now an award-winning business selling locally-sourced products. Olivia received support from both the University of Nottingham and Nottingham Trent University with setting up and growing the business, from website development to marketing and branding.*

## Funding for this resurgence of civic activity

Much of this activity, of course, will cost money. But the UK currently faces something of a perfect storm, as the existing challenges set out by the Government around the need to regenerate and level up communities combines with the immediate short term priority of recovering from the economic and social dislocation caused by Covid.

As a national priority, there are already considerable sums invested into initiatives targeting such areas – either aimed at universities, or for local initiatives generally.

The UK government has invested billions since the 1980s to try and regenerate the UK's poorer regions. From local development corporations championed by Michael Heseltine, and the Blair-era New Deal for Communities, to the flurry of investment announced since the 2016 referendum, this has been a long-running domestic priority.

In its 2019 report, the Civic University Commission recommended a £500m Civic University Fund, provided over a 5 year period to support universities invest in their local areas and become civic institutions as well as academic ones.

The Commission also recommended doubling the Strength in Places fund to complement the Civic University Fund.[22]

The rationale for additional funding is that incentives for universities to grow in their core mission of teaching and research have been place blind in recent years, as the Commission concluded. There will be increasing constraints on university funding streams in the coming years – pending changes to tuition fees in the response to the Augar review and changes to research funding – with pressure on international students numbers and an expansion of capital expenditure to meet growing numbers.

Even civic institutions require the ability to fund their activity. Universities need to be able to make a business case for expansion and civic work is no exception. Given that the incentives have driven, in part, a place agnostic approach, it is reasonable to conclude that additional civic funding is needed to rebalance incentives.

Additionally, what is clear now is that these proposed funds from the Civic University Commission are not significant enough to meet the challenges that communities face, and which universities can play a role in helping them rise to meet.

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[22] https://upp-foundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Civic-University-Commission-Final-Report.pdf

This report therefore recommends three principal sources of funding for this expanded civic and recovery role for universities as part of the levelling up agenda:

1. **The Civic University Fund should be increased to £1bn**

2. **As per the partner report on jobs, the Lifetime Skills Guarantee fund of around £2.5bn should be broadened in eligibility to include those with a Level 3 qualification who wish to train at Level 4 and 5 through universities**

3. **An element of the existing £3.6bn Towns Fund should be allocated towards capital rebuild in high streets, which universities can bid for in collaboration with other local actors**

The *expanded Lifetime Skills Guarantee* has been discussed in the separate accompanying report.

In terms of the way in which the *Civic University Fund* could operate:

- This fund should identify a clear set of terms of reference for the allocation of grants. The key principles should include:

  • Universities must be the joint lead bidder for this fund, alongside local government

  • However, they must also bid in partnership with at least one other civic actor – and ideally a broader coalition of organisations

  • The fund should prioritise projects and programmes which focus on one of the five areas identified as priorities in this paper

  • Although universities must be the joint lead bidder, they do not need to be the lead institution in delivering the programme identified in a successful bid. As discussed above, there are many areas where universities do not have a natural locus, and will be best in supporting, for example, local government to take the lead

- The fund should set a priority towards projects which are applied or translational, and which can be 'shovel' ready. They do not have to be capital projects, but they must be able to mobilise quickly, and show evidence of impact within three years of grants being allocated

- Greater priority will be given to projects which set out a path towards financial sustainability in the medium term

- Government should consider whether, in the medium term, resources available through the Civic University Fund need to increase

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None of this precludes any of the existing partnerships, or funding streams which are available and which universities collaborate on and receive. It is also likely that some of the areas identified in this report – for example, growing 'surge' capacity in the health sector – will best sit outside of this fund, and be channelled through existing health infrastructure and funding streams.

But the advantages of a dedicated fund – which, depending on the Government's ambitions, could be drawn from a hypothecation of existing funds or new public money – are that it provides a clear focus on joint, civic action – with universities at the heart of them, bringing their expertise to bear. It ought to act to bind universities and other civic actors even closer together, and recognise the unique role which universities can play in leading, or supporting, civic actions to help level up a place. And with a clear focus on distinct areas of public priority, as well as those which may deliver impact within a quick timescale, it offers the opportunity to provide a visible demonstration of the civic role universities can play in supporting the regional growth and civic renewal agenda.

The Towns Fund would have an element of funding specifically dedicated to capital regeneration in high streets, with an intention to create destinations with high footfall which would draw people to towns.

Universities would be a critical partner to a bid– especially where they do not have physical presence in the town already. They have many ways in which they can support such regeneration:

- If appropriate, they may look to place some of their capital expansion into the rebuild. This could include accommodation blocks, but also lecture and other teaching or research facilities – especially that which is public facing (i.e. for incubating business support, providing CPD, adult and community learning education)

- New capital premises should be a focus of staff and student volunteering locations. Many voluntary groups require empty space to carry out some of their activities – everything from tutoring to creating food banks to arts and creative activities. The sites will provide open shared space for universities and their staff and students

- Universities will be well placed to organise and manage the facility, in some instances

As with all of the proposals in this document, universities do not need to lead on the proposal for new capital regeneration. But they have a unique role in providing expertise in large scale capital redevelopment, as well as being an 'anchor tenant' of any new premises. This report recommends that any bid from a consortium to receive funding through the hypothecated element of the Towns Fund will need to include a commitment from at least one university to the concept, including a commitment to use the facility for ten years as an anchor tenant.

To summarise how the funds interrelate:

## Civic University Fund

- A total investment of £1b of revenue over 5 years

- Additional investment distributed as part of spending round

- Bids need to come from coalitions of universities and civic partners. Must include the relevant local authority.

- Projects or programmes should be delivered in 'left behind towns'

- Focused on one or more of the five priority areas identified in this report (town centre regeneration, jobs and economic localism, educational attainment, research and development and innovation in AND of the area, supporting the NHS)

- Would fund project, programme and equipment/delivery costs but not capital rebuild

## Towns Fund

- A proportion of the existing £3.6bn Towns Fund should be hypothecated for education and civic led renewal of high streets

- This would be a funding stream for capital projects, which local universities, in partnership with others, could bid for

- Funding to renovate or build spaces where universities, the local authority, FE college, NHS and charities could work in partnership to deliver activities in the high street including in towns where footfall is important, and where universities may not have a physical presence

- Universities and other bidders would need to commit 10 years of activity within the space

## A wider drawn Lifetime Skills Guarantee

- £2.5bn has been allocated to support adults without a Level 3 qualification to access a free Level 3 qualification at college, with eligibility of courses limited

- This fund should be expanded over time such that it includes those who already have a Level 3 qualification who want to retrain at Level 4 and 5 and who want to access training at universities

# Conclusions

Universities have a major role to play in their local areas and geographies. The public opinion work makes it clear that local people know of their universities – even if they are more hazy on exactly what they do, and the majority have never been inside one. Local populations are also clear on what they want to see in their towns and their priorities for regeneration. And although Covid has in some ways dominated the discourse with a focus on health, it also illustrates (as this accompanying piece of analysis makes clear) that not all regions and towns are equally well placed to weather the storm, and that jobs and economic the economy will not be hit evenly.

Universities have historically thought of their civic activity largely focused in the towns and cities in which they have physical presence. But this report argues that their 'orbit' can be thought of as wider than that – and that the answer need not be additional campuses or satellite provision, though that may be appropriate in some instances. Rather, this report draws from public opinion in a number of towns in this space to argue that there are five clear priorities where universities can work with local partners to make concrete changes that will improve lives.

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