



Empowering the next greatest generation through social action and volunteering



Abstract:

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, communities have come together with a new sense of shared purpose. Social action and volunteering have and will continue to play a vital role in helping the nation 'build back better'. At NCS we know the value social action and volunteering bring; not just to communities, but to the young individuals we support as well. They support key skills development, build confidence and improve wellbeing. Through our core programme activities, our growing nationwide network of Changemakers and new services planned from 2021, we are working to ensure young people become not the lost generation, but the next great generation; a generation who found their voice and used their voice to rebuild our nation.

A misunderstood generation, hit the hardest by COVID-19

As a society, we know we face an unprecedented set of challenges from COVID-19. But, the pandemic has had a particularly huge impact on young people. The majority (71%) feel that their voices are not being heard in relation to the pandemic.¹ They feel misrepresented by the media.² They also feel concerned for their futures - with unemployment disproportionately affecting young people.³ This bleakness and uncertainty is causing a modern day mental health crisis. 18-29 year olds have reported significantly higher instances of depression, anxiety, loneliness and thoughts about self-harm compared to older generations.⁴ For those with existing conditions, 80% have experienced worsening mental health during the pandemic.⁵

Young people want to play their part in helping the nation build back better

There is no doubt that the pandemic has had a devastating impact, the world over. Research suggests that the common media portrayal of young people as being self-interested and dismissive of lockdown restrictions is perhaps unfair - Beatfrees⁶ found that Gen Z have in fact been worried most about the impact of COVID-19 on wider society (vulnerable people, the NHS, economic crisis). This sense of social responsibility has also manifested into real action, with 51% saying they have been making more effort to help those in need, and others expressing regret that they have been unable to offer greater levels of support.⁷ Our own research at the start of the first lockdown, found that 73% of 16-24 year olds were either already volunteering or wanting to volunteer to support the nation's recovery.⁸ And our latest survey,

conducted just last month, found seven in ten 16-19 year olds want to support their local community through volunteering and social action to help with the recovery.⁹

Young people hold a strong belief in their collective power. Even before the pandemic, the Government's own Youth Social Action Survey found the majority of young people said they cared about making the world a better place (88%).¹⁰ By September, Facebook IQ found that 72% of GenZers were showing more interest in activism and social causes since the COVID-19 outbreak.¹¹ Most recently, research from The Prince's Trust found 74% of 16-25 year olds believe their generation can change their future for the better, and 58% are more motivated than ever to work for a positive future.¹²

Empowering young people to 'do good' through social action and volunteering

Government has continued to advocate for youth involvement at this critical time, with MPs calling for a **"structured programme for young people to serve their local areas in meaningful roles that build their skills and their sense of public duty"**.¹³ As the Government's flagship youth programme, NCS has harnessed the altruism of our nation's young people. This activity has the double benefit of also providing important skills and developmental opportunities at a time when young people need them more than ever.

At our core has always been a drive to enable young people to connect, make a difference, and feel part of something bigger. Our typical summer programme places social action at the forefront, with 30-60 hours being dedicated to doing good via local community projects (30 hours during our autumn half-term and term-time programmes). This is about providing a platform for young people to engage with their community by completing passion projects, raising awareness and providing solutions to the issues they care about.

We believe social action shouldn't just happen in a moment on programme. Our national Changemakers network now runs in 121 local authority areas and counting. They include monthly meetings where NCS graduates meet to plan and deliver ongoing social action projects. Since September 2020, NCS has hosted 1,217 events across the country, engaging over 5,500 individuals in over 17,500 hours of social action activity.¹⁴ This is all part of the ambitions of NCS Trust to create a year-round open access Changemakers for young people.

The power of youth social action and volunteering

There is strong evidence to support the benefits of social action and volunteering. Arguably these benefits feel even more relevant as we consider the impact of the pandemic.

They help young people understand local issues, feel more engaged and more driven to play their part in supporting their communities in the long-term. Opportunities for engaging with others to address civic concerns during adolescence make it more likely that in the long run people will identify and contribute to the common good.¹⁵

Social action and volunteering are also seen to boost educational attainment, and support participants to develop key employability skills.



Previous literature around the topic of volunteering identifies that it can improve educational outcomes in four key ways: by strengthening UCAS statements,¹⁶ increasing motivation in school,¹⁷ decreasing likelihood of dropping out of school¹⁸, and by directly improving cognitive skills.¹⁹ Involvement in these activities also helps to develop important life skills. The Behavioural Insights Team provides compelling evidence that young people who take part in social action initiatives develop some of the most critical skills for employment and adulthood, such as empathy and problem-solving.²⁰ There is an increasing body of research around the value of these skills in helping young people to succeed in life. Recent research by The Skills Builder Partnership uncovers that beyond the correlation between essential skills and higher qualification levels, there is evidence of a wage premium of around 15%, or £3,400 per year, for full-time workers aged over 19 moving from the 1st percentile of skills score up to the median.²¹

According to the Government's National Youth Social Action Survey, self-reported benefits include: increased self-confidence/self-esteem (cited by 44% of young people doing some sort of social action in the past 12 months), improved communication skills (42%), improved working as part of a team (38%), 'help in motivating others' and improved social skills (both mentioned by 31%).²²



Such benefits feel evermore important at a time where young people today report how getting a new job feels 'impossible' due to the amount of competition (60%), with one in five feeling scared that their skills and training are no longer useful (21%).²³ Indeed skills development is rightly a priority for the Government, as set out in its recent Skills for Jobs white paper, which aims to **“ensure that people can learn the skills they need to get great jobs, as well as provide the means to plan a fulfilling and productive life”**.²⁴

We also know social action and volunteering can support mental health. Data from the Understanding Society survey shows that following the first lockdown there was a doubling of the proportion of young people not able to concentrate, and a tripling of those not able to enjoy day-to-day activities.²⁵ Supporting people with their mental health during the pandemic is a key priority for the Government, with Public Health England amplifying the issue, and leading mental health charities being given £5 million to expand their support services.²⁶

For many young people, volunteering during these difficult times has helped to give them a sense of purpose and a reason to get up in the morning.²⁷ Context is of course important, but there is high quality evidence of volunteering being positively linked to enhanced wellbeing, including improved life satisfaction, increased happiness and decreases in symptoms of depression.²⁸ NCVO found that 77% of volunteers believed that volunteering had improved their mental health²⁹, with 18-24 year olds being the age group most likely to agree that volunteering had helped them to feel less isolated (77%)³⁰. Recent research from Belong, the social integration network, found that volunteering may support greater psychological resilience in a time of crisis, with those who have volunteered during the pandemic reporting higher levels of wellbeing (+5.3%) and greater optimism for the future (+5.6%) compared to non-volunteers.³¹ Our own research

shows how the NCS programme, with social action at its core, delivers improved wellbeing outcomes among participants when compared to non-participant peers (including life satisfaction, happiness and anxiety).³²

Social action and volunteering during the pandemic

Despite the challenges of COVID-19, and our disappointment in not being able to deliver a typical programme last year, NCS Trust - together with our incredible partners on the ground - still managed to facilitate and deliver a far-reaching programme of social action and volunteering.

We launched our flagship 'Keep Doing Good' (KDG) programme on 1st June 2020, to coincide with National Volunteering Week, through an initial collaboration with the Charity Retail Association. The partnership marked an important move to help get charity shops open and earning again during a time where the industry body estimated over half of their volunteers were unable to return to their positions due to Government restrictions. Then, during autumn, we launched a programme of activities including a wrap around support and resources programme for schools and FE colleges (themes included post-COVID-19 socialisation, health and wellbeing, and skills and employability), together with our more traditional half-term and term-time autumn model which included an optional (up to) 30 hours of social action.

In total, we managed to engage with thousands of young people who together delivered more than 500,000 hours of social action and volunteering to support their local communities during the pandemic.³³

Feedback from young people tells us that their social action and volunteering experiences have helped them during the worst of years. 90% said they felt able to develop and practice skills that would be useful to them in the future after taking part in last summer's activities. This included teamwork (91%), communication

(82%), and staying positive (63%).³⁴ It has also given them confidence, providing them with the tools to help others, and to feel more connected to their community.³⁵

The groups of young people we have been able to engage with is also important. The National Youth Social Action Survey suggests a significant participation gap between children and young people from low-income backgrounds (29% C2DE) and their more affluent peers (41% ABC1) taking part in meaningful social action.³⁶ NCS typically over-indexes when it comes to participation among more economically disadvantaged young people (as well as SEND and young people who are BAME).³⁷ Positively, during 2020 we were able to maintain similar proportions of engagement among these groups, despite some of the barriers to participation that were heightened by the pandemic, and with some evidence of enhanced benefits.³⁸

Moreover, there's been a wider community benefit: three in four young people who got involved with Keep Doing Good encouraged someone else to volunteer as a result. And almost two in three said they are now likely to continue volunteering locally.³⁹ 71% of participants who were involved in NCS autumn activities felt that their NCS experience had increased their motivation to help others in their community.⁴⁰



We have some great case studies to share...

In response to the pandemic affecting job security and financial stability, a team of inspiring Gateshead teens, supported by Groundwork North East, spent the summer running a school uniform donation service. They collected any outgrown or unused items and made sure they got into the hands of those most in need. After receiving over 500 donations within the first week, with 200 families collecting items while the hub was in place, the team continued to partner with community centres and schools to set up donation hubs and donated surplus non-branded items to the Great North Air Ambulance charity shops. The project was awarded by local MP, Liz Twist, for its work in making a difference during the pandemic, and the team hope to inspire others to create similar projects this summer.

In Bradford, a group of teens worked hard to spread positivity amidst the pandemic in an area hit particularly hard with local lockdowns. Alongside Bradford City FC Community Foundation, they teamed up with train operator Northern, to design a mural to brighten up public areas of the city, in addition to celebrating the key workers who have gone above and beyond during the pandemic.

Reflecting on the valuable role played by young people in supporting the charity retail sector, Robin Osterley, Chief Executive of the Charity Retail Association stated:

“For our members who were reopening their retail chain after a long period of closure, having young people volunteer alongside their staff and existing volunteers enabled them to process donations, sort stock and sell items more quickly – bringing much needed funds back into their parent charity. As one of our hospice members said: ‘during the five weeks we had our young volunteer, we saw a 25% increase in listings on our eBay shop and a 33% increase in sales. We also gained a lot of useful knowledge and new ideas from them, especially around brands.’

The sector also received some really positive press from the partnership, at what was a very challenging time for charity retail, and showcased the benefits of volunteering in our amazing sector.”

In short, we have witnessed real tangible benefits from the time and efforts young people have given to their local communities; turning 2020 from what could have been a year of ‘No You Can’t’ into ‘No We Can’.



What's next?

We are still in the midst of the pandemic, focusing on recovery and on coming out the other side a stronger and more connected nation. NCS Trust, together with our network of partners, continues to work hard to broaden the support we offer to young people during these uncertain times. We are ambitious in evolving our programme from one 'moment' to a youth 'movement'; offering more year round activities and wrap around support for our country's young people.

During 2021, we will build on the early success of our Changemakers programme. Our aim is to run the programme in all 150 local authority areas, and open it up to non-NCS graduates. We are ambitious to increase opportunities for engagement among those young people who may not have followed the traditional summer or autumn programme route. We will be focusing on providing year-round projects to support localised volunteering, including skills-based social action, to support young people in making career choices further down the line. Changemakers will get to develop stronger links to local charities, organisations and individuals, especially their peers, through a mutually beneficial mentoring scheme.

We are also looking forward to launching a range of exciting new services that seek to enhance the Government's Kickstart employability scheme. From March 2021, these packages will use volunteering and community action as a critical ingredient in helping young people find and keep work, as well as improve their own mental health and wellbeing.

In conclusion...

Youth social action and volunteering are vitally important in helping to rebuild our communities, focusing our attention on creating a more positive future for the nation's young people. Together with our partners, we will continue our mission to create a country of connected, confident and caring citizens where everyone feels at home. Social action and volunteering will play a critical component of this.

NCS is committed to supporting young people to become not the lost generation, but the next great generation, and who found their voice and used their voice to rebuild our nation.

For more information about this article email research@ncstrust.org.uk

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Footnotes:

- ¹Debut (January 2021) Voice of the future- [Listening to Gen Z on Covid-19, mental health, education, work, and misinformation](#)
- ²The Nuffield Foundation/Ecorys (November 2020) [To Lockdown and Back- Young people's lived experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic](#)
- ³House of Commons Library (February 2021) [Coronavirus: Impact on the labour market](#)
- ⁴The University College London (May 2020) [Covid-19 Social Study](#), cited in The Childhood Trust (June 2020) [Children in Lockdown: The Consequences of the Coronavirus Crisis for Children Living in Poverty](#)
- ⁵YoungMinds (Summer 2020) [Coronavirus: Impact on young people with mental health needs: Survey 2, Summer 2020](#)
- ⁶Beatfreaks (May 2020) [Take the Temperature](#)
- ⁷Ibid
- ⁸YouthSight for NCS Trust (April 2020)
- ⁹YouthSight for NCS Trust (February 2021)
Note: NCS Trust surveyed a representative sample of 1,084 young people aged 16-19 in England online, using Youthsight's youth panel, between 17 and 22 February 2021.
- ¹⁰Ipsos MORI for DCMS (October 2020) [National Youth Social Action Survey 2019](#)
- ¹¹Facebook IQ (September 2020) [Meet Your GenZ Community](#)
- ¹²The Prince's Trust (January 2021) [The Prince's Trust Tesco Youth Index](#)
- ¹³Danny Kruger MP (September 2020) [Levelling up our communities: proposals for a new social covenant](#)
- ¹⁴Figures from 1st September 2020-26th February 2021
- ¹⁵Constance Flanagan and Peter Levine (2010) 'Civic Engagement and the Transition to Adulthood', *The Future of Children* 20(1): 159 - 179 cited in NCS Theory of Change, Shift (2018)
- ¹⁶Richard Addler and Judy Goggin (2005) 'What Do We Mean By 'Civic Engagement'?' *Journal of Transformative Education* 3(3): 236 - 253 cited in NCS Theory of Change, Shift (2018)
- ¹⁷Peter John (2005) 'The Contribution of Volunteering, Trust, and Networks to Educational Performance' *Policy Studies Journal* 33(4): 635 - 656 cited in NCS Theory of Change, Shift (2018)
- ¹⁸Joseph Allan (1996) 'The effects of volunteering on the young volunteer' *The Journal of Primary Prevention* 17(2):231-258 cited in NCS Theory of Change, Shift (2018)
- ¹⁹Matt Grist and Phillida Cheetham (2011) 'Experience required: A demos and v report on capability building and work-readiness' Demos: London;
- Leslie Morrison Cutman and Ingrid Schoon, (2013) 'The impact of non-cognitive skills on outcomes for young people: Literature review' Cabinet Office cited in NCS Theory of Change Shift (2018)
- ²⁰The Behavioral Insights Team (January 2016) [Evaluating Youth Social Action: Does participation in social action boost the skills young people need to succeed in adult life?](#)
- ²¹Skills Builder Partnership (February 2021) Better Prepared- [Essential skills and employment outcomes for young people](#)
- ²²Ipsos MORI for DCMS (October 2020) [National Youth Social Action Survey 2019](#)
- ²³The Prince's Trust (January 2021) [The Prince's Trust Tesco Youth Index](#)
- ²⁴Department for Education (January 2021) [Skills for Jobs: Lifelong Learning for Opportunity and Growth](#)
- ²⁵UK Household Longitudinal Study, Understanding COVID-19 Study, April 2020 and Wave 9 2017/18, cited by The Health Foundation (August 2020) [Generation Covid-19- Building the case to protect young people's future health](#). 'Unable to concentrate' 22% 2017/18 vs. 47% April 2020, 'Not enjoying day-to-day activities' 16% 2017/18 vs. 46% April 2020
- ²⁶Gov.uk (May 2020) Press release: [£5 million funding given to mental health community projects](#)
- ²⁷Barnardo's (June 2020) [Mental Health and Covid-19: In Our Own Words](#)
- ²⁸Ricky Lawton, Lulian Gramatki, and Will Watt (2019) 'Happy Days: Does volunteering make us happier or do happier people volunteer?'
Martin Binder (2015) 'Volunteering and Life Satisfaction: a closer look at the hypothesis that volunteering more strongly benefits the unhappy', *Applied Economics Letters*, 22 (11), pp 874 – 885 cited in What Works Wellbeing (October 2020) [Volunteering wellbeing: what works and who benefits?](#)
- ²⁹NCVO (January 2019) [Time Well Spent: A national survey on the volunteer experience](#). Note: This figure is in relation to all respondents, though NCVO report little demographic variation in relation to the perceived benefit of volunteering on mental health
- ³⁰Ibid
- ³¹Belong and The University of Kent (February 2021)

[Community, Connection and Cohesion during COVID-19- Beyond Us and Them](#)

³²This includes statistically significant impacts across the four NCS wellbeing measures - life satisfaction, extent to which they feel the things they do in their life are worthwhile, happiness and anxiety - when compared to a control group of non-participants. Kantar and London Economics for DCMS (July 2020) [National Citizen Service 2018 evaluation](#)

³³NCS 2020 participation stats

³⁴NCS Summer 2020 KDG survey results. As explained by the Skills Builder Partnership, 'Staying positive' is about individuals being equipped to manage their emotions effectively and being able to remain motivated and to motivate others, even when facing setbacks

³⁵NCS 2020 KDG and Moving Forward survey results- agreement with statements: Feel more confident in meeting new people (85% Keep Doing Good participants, 71% Moving Forward participants). Keep Doing Good participants: 70% feel more connected to their local community, 95% enjoyed feeling part of a wider team of young people coming together to support their community, Moving Forward participants: 73% feel NCS has helped them reconnect with people after lockdown, 71% said their NCS experience had increased their motivation to help others in their community

³⁶Ipsos MORI for DCMS (October 2020) [National Youth Social Action Survey 2019](#)

³⁷During NCS's 2019 programme, 23% of NCS participants were on FSM vs. 14% of the comparable 16-17 year old population. 29% classified themselves as BAME vs. 25% of the state secondary school population and 6.2% were SEND vs. 1.7% of the state secondary school population.

³⁸For example, 19% of Keep Doing Good summer 2020 participants were on Free School Meals, and 22% during Autumn. This compares to 14% of the comparable 16-17 year old population. Participants on FSM (based on the question 'has your young person received Free School Meals in the last 8 years') were significantly more likely to say that they would 'definitely' be likely to continue volunteering locally (33% compared to 27% not on FSM) as a result of attending NCS's KDG programme.

³⁹NCS Summer 2020 KDG survey results

⁴⁰NCS Autumn 2020 Moving Forward survey results

All photos show real NCS social action and volunteering projects delivered between 2019 and 2020.

