

STORY OF

2020



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Introduction

Executive Summary

The National Citizen Service (NCS), launched in 2010 to help build a more cohesive society. It was commissioned and managed by NCS Trust (NCST), a Royal Charter Body and Arm's Length Body of the UK Government, to create a country of connected, confident, caring citizens where everyone feels at home

NCS evolved over fifteen years to offer a variety of experiences that supported young people at a crucial moment in their lives. It connected young people across many walks of life, building their skills and confidence, and empowering them to make a difference in their communities.

In November 2024, the Secretary of State for the Department for Culture, Media & Sport announced the decision to wind down NCS and NCS Trust. We are immensely proud of the impact we have had for young people and this report provides a summary of the evolution of NCS, the impact we had and considerations for the future of the sector as at our closure in March 2025.

Designed to improve social cohesion among 15-17 year olds in England, NCS. Over its lifespan, NCS delivered over 1 million experiences to young people, resulting in more than 18 million

hours of community-based volunteering and social action. The programme offer evolved over time. Initially NCS delivered a four week residential model, but adapted to incorporate online and community experiences.

NCS consistently reached a diverse group of young people, frequently over-indexing in young people from underrepresented backgrounds and groups most in need such as those on free school meals, or young people with special educational needs and disabilities.

NCS achieved positive outcomes across several key areas - with impact seen on key cohesion measures such as positivity to others from different backgrounds, political literacy and social inclusion, and social mobility. It provided value for money, the 2019 summer programme generated £3.05 in benefit for every £1 spent.¹

Future considerations for the youth sector are outlined in this report. These include maintaining a focus on social cohesion, promoting partnerships between education and the youth sector, recognising the critical role of youth services in mental health, targeting support for 15-17 year olds, and ensuring sufficient national infrastructure for youth provision.



¹ Kantar (September 2021) National Citizen Service 2019 Evaluation Report

Joint Foreword from CEO and Chair of the Board



As the Chair and CEO of NCS Trust we are extremely proud of the incredible impact that NCS has had on the young people of this country. We are sad and disappointed in the decision to wind-down NCS but are confident that our knowledge, learnings, and impact will live on long after NCS comes to a close. NCS and NCS Trust has been on an incredible journey over its 15 years of existence and we hope that this report brings this journey to life, along with important considerations for the future.

NCS was created to help bridge social divides and support a more cohesive society by empowering young people at a “rite of passage” moment in their lives. NCS connects young people across many walks of life, building their skills for life and work and increasing their confidence, showing them that they can make a difference to their communities. While NCS has evolved significantly over the years, our unique purpose has always remained core to NCS.

NCS started as a pilot programme with a few thousand participants and grew significantly over the years. In 2017, NCS Trust became a Royal Charter Body and the NCS Bill was passed. While NCS was always growing and evolving, it went through a significant pivot in response to the Covid-19 pandemic and launched a new strategy with a diverse, year-round offer in 2023. NCS also became so much more than a programme, the Trust started to work more collaboratively with the youth sector, contributed research and insights and helped shape the government’s ambitions for young people.

We are immensely proud of our impact on young people, our work with partners across the youth sector, and the young people who have contributed to over 18 million hours of volunteering and social action. NCS has supported young people to grow their strengths and realise their potential — through boosting their confidence, getting involved in social action, making new friends from different backgrounds, and learning skills to become world and work ready. None of this would have been possible without the dedication of our diverse partner network who deliver NCS experiences on the ground and the amazing staff at NCS Trust. We want to thank all of those who have been involved with NCS over the years.

While we are saddened by the decision to close NCS and NCS Trust we are proud of what we have achieved and hope that the learnings from NCS story will support the sector moving forward.

Michael Devlin

Harris Bokhari

Foreword from Board Youth Advisor and Co-Chair



For the last 15 years, NCS has supported young people across the country to step out of their comfort zone and meaningfully connect with a range of other young people, growing their confidence, skills and aspirations. During this time, the world has changed significantly, and with it the needs of young people. By prioritising youth-centred design, robust evaluation and continuous improvement, NCS evolved its offer for young people. Throughout it all, the commitment to inclusive universality and fostering social cohesion have set it apart as a unique and powerful experience for young people, at a key time in their lives.

NCS has shown what it means to value young people's voices. By embracing young people's creativity and constructive challenge, NCS built a culture of collaboration, accountability and shared power. Its bold approach to youth engagement has demonstrated how young people can be meaningfully embedded across all levels of decision-making, and empowered young people to understand the impact their perspectives can drive.

From completing an NCS residential experience myself in 2018, to becoming an adviser to the NCS Royal Charter Body Board, NCS has made a profound difference to my life. With over 1 million NCS experiences delivered to young people across England, I am not alone. It has been a privilege to witness the transformative impact NCS has had on so many young people, and see their passions flourish as they learn new things about the world, themselves and others. I have been continually inspired by the power and resilience of other young people I have met through NCS, as well as the dedication of the staff at the Trust and partners across the youth sector who have made NCS possible.

Although NCS is coming to an end, I hope the NCS story will inspire innovation across the sector and that the learnings within this report will support the continuous development of opportunities for young people, and future youth policy decisions.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'J. Evans'.

Jess Evans

Key Facts and Figures

Our participation:

- In total, over 1 million NCS experiences were delivered to young people.
- More than 18 million hours of community-based volunteering and social action were completed by young people through NCS experiences.
- Through digital experiences from 2023 - 2025, NCS reached 260,244 engagements.

Our Reach:

The NCS offer consistently reached a diverse group of young people:

- In 2023/24, 25% of young people that took part in NCS experiences were eligible for free school meals. This is compared to 21% of state secondary school pupils.
- In 2022, 33% of participants in summer and autumn programmes were from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds compared to 26% of state secondary school pupils.²
- In 2019, 23% of participants were eligible for free school meals, compared to 14% nationally.³

Our Impact:

- During the NCS pilots in 2011, the proportion of young people who felt confident being the leader of a team increased by 13 percentage points more among NCS participants.⁴
- In 2015, NCS increased university intake by 12% and access to higher education by 50% among disadvantaged young people.⁵
- In 2019, 76% of participants felt more positive about people from different backgrounds to themselves after attending NCS.⁶
- For every £1 spent on the 2019 NCS Summer programme, an economic benefit of £3.05 was generated.⁷
- In 2022, the summer programme had a strong positive impact on young people's sense of responsibility towards their local community and their ability to have an impact on the world (8pp increase).⁸

² <https://wearencs.com/press-release-2022-23-ncs-annual-report#:~:text=9%25%20of%20NCS%20summer%20and,of%20state%20secondary%20school%20pupils>

³ National Citizen Service (June 2020) Annual Business Plan April 20202 - March 2021

⁴ <https://data.parliament.uk/DepositedPapers/Files/DEP2013-0454/document2013-03-11-165308.pdf>

⁵ Exploring the wellbeing impact of NCS, Jump Projects Limited and Simetrica, 2017

⁶ National Citizen Service 2018 evaluation, DCMS

⁷ Kantar (September 2021) National Citizen Service 2019 Evaluation Report

⁸ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6572e6c233b7f20012b720c6/E03008536_National_Citizen_Service_Trust_ARA_22-23_Web_Accessible.pdf

The Story of NCS

Intro

In November 2024, the Secretary of State for the Department for Culture, Media & Sport announced the decision to wind down National Citizen Service (NCS) and NCS Trust. We are immensely proud of the impact we have had for young people and are sad and disappointed by the announcement.

NCS was founded to help build a more cohesive society through supporting young people at a crucial moment in their lives, through connecting young people across many walks of life, building their skills and confidence, and empowering them to make a difference in their communities.

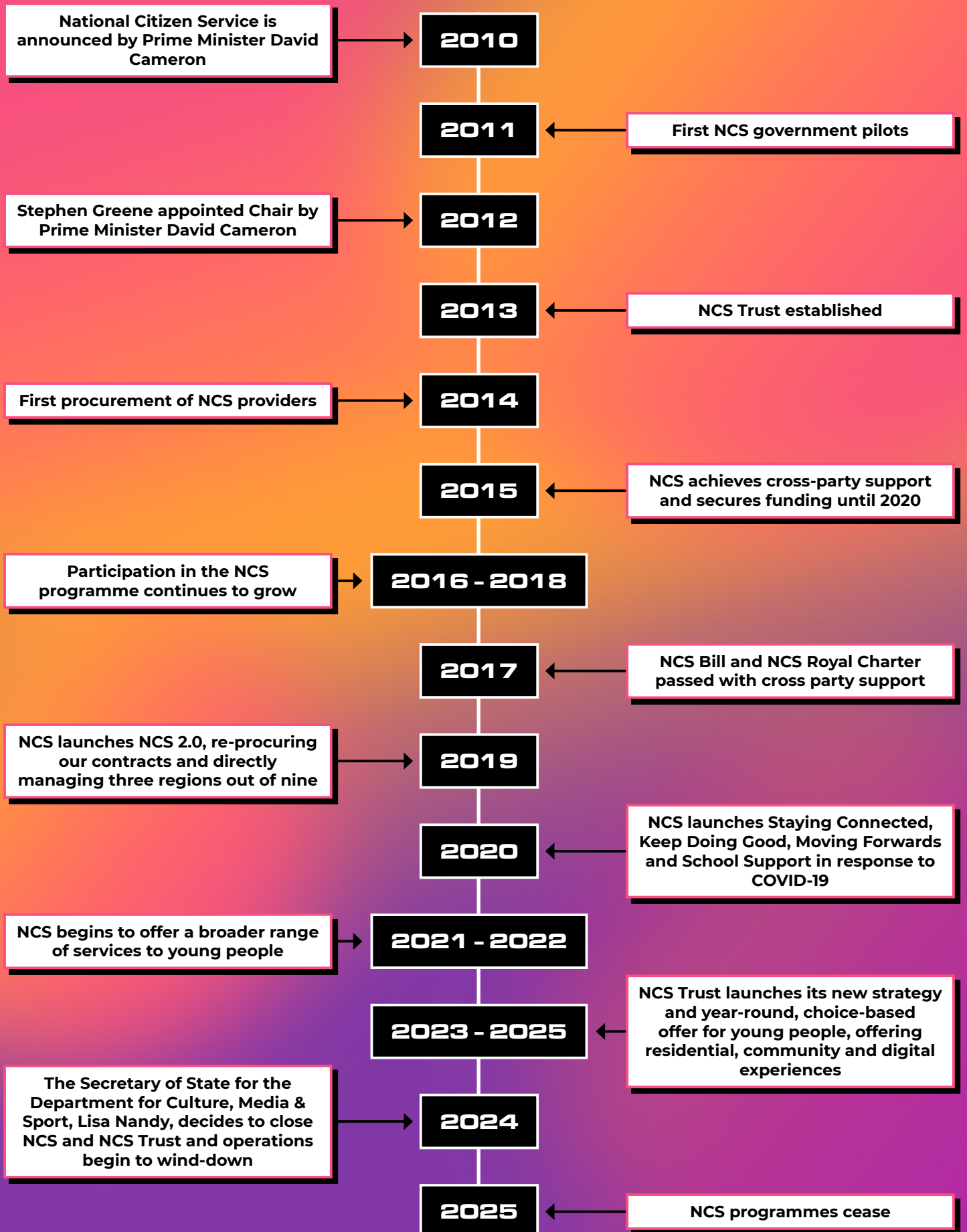
NCS was an offer for 15-17 year olds in England. It was first piloted in 2011, grew rapidly over 10 years and then went through significant transformation from 2020 to respond to the evolving needs of young people. The NCS programme was almost entirely funded by HM Government, first through the Cabinet Office and then transferred to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). NCS Trust was the organisation set up to manage the NCS offer.

Given that neither the NCS offer nor NCS Trust will exist after 2025 this report provides a summary of the evolution of NCS, the impact we had and considerations for the future of the sector. It includes key facts & figures, features of NCS' evolution and key learnings. We hope this report will provide some valuable insights as the government develops its national youth strategy.





Timeline





Through all its evolutions, these areas remained fundamental to NCS:

Social cohesion: NCS was always focused on social cohesion. Our vision was *'A country of connected, confident, caring citizens where everyone feels at home'*. We have always been focused on bringing together young people from different backgrounds and bridging social divides.

Universality: To achieve social cohesion we always provided a universal offer, encouraging participation from all walks of life and providing additional support to those who need it.

Residential: We saw the impact of taking young people out of their comfort zones, away from home, in a focused, exciting and new environment. Evidence and impact evaluation proved that it builds confidence, capability and connection.



Inception and pilot (2010 - 2012)

How did NCS start?

The NCS programme was announced in 2010 by David Cameron, the Prime Minister at the time. It was part of the Big Society agenda and was built on three key principles; social cohesion, social engagement and social mobility.

What was the offer?

It was a 4 week+ voluntary programme for young people in England aged 15-17 that included a 10 day residential. The programme included 4 key phases:

- **Adventure:** Embracing the outdoors and stepping out of your comfort zone
- **Skills:** Living away from home learning skills for work and life
- **Social action planning:** Using tools gained on programme to plan a project
- **Social action delivery:** 30 hours delivering social action projects

How was it delivered?

The first pilot was run by 12 delivery organisations including Bolton Lads and Girls Club, the Football League Trust, the Challenge, and Young Devon and South West Consortium. As the pilot grew the number of delivery organisations expanded.

What was the impact?

- Around 34,000 young people took part in the pilot years.
- NCS participants were more diverse than the population from which they were drawn e.g. NCS participants were more likely to be eligible for Free Schools Meals (23% vs 14%)
- There were a range of statistically significant positive impacts of the programme in relation to communication, teamwork and leadership.
- The proportion who felt confident in putting their ideas forward increased by 7 pp more among NCS participants than among the control group.
- 85% of participants agreed that NCS had made them learn something new about themselves.
- The total unit cost per place was £1,553 in total.⁹

What were the key features?

- NCS was launched as a pilot and expanded quickly, aiming to reach large numbers of young people.
- NCS focused on a specific age range (15-17) supporting young people at a pivotal moment in their life as they transition into adulthood.

- **Key learning from this period:** A consistent trustworthy brand and both schools and parents/guardians were crucial to encourage young people to sign up to the NCS programme.



⁹ <https://data.parliament.uk/DepositedPapers/Files/DEP2013-0454/document2013-03-11-165308.pdf>

The early years and rapid growth (2013 - 2019)

What was the offer?

The programme continued as a 4-week+ programme and evolved based on learning and evaluation from the pilot stages. Upon celebrating the end of their programme, young people became NCS Graduates and had the opportunity to engage in a range of development pathways including local, regional and national youth boards and social action and volunteering opportunities.

How was it delivered?

The NCS Trust was established in 2013 as a community interest company that managed the NCS programme. In 2014/15 for the first time, NCS Trust commissioned a large number of diverse local and national delivery organisations to deliver the programme across England.

What was the impact?

- Almost 600,000 young people took part in the programme during this period.
- All 2015 programmes had positive impacts on participants knowing how to tackle a problem in their local areas and their likelihood of voting.¹⁰
- In both summer and autumn 2016, NCS showed a positive impact on anxiety and life satisfaction.¹¹
- The large majority, 90%, of 2017 participants rated their NCS experience as both worthwhile and enjoyable.¹²
- The total unit cost per place for Summer programme in 2017 was £1, 821 on average.¹³

What were the key features?

- NCS was a structured programme with specific themes and focuses that were designed to be consistent over different locations.
- NCS aimed to become a national institution, with the ambition to reach all young people.
- NCS Trust commissioned delivery partners with rigorous requirements.

• **Key learning from this period:** This emphasis on consistency meant that the NCS programme wasn't very flexible for different groups of young people and posed barriers to NCST working with smaller, specialist youth sector organisations.



¹⁰ <https://wearencs.com/sites/default/files/2020-07/NCS%202015%20Evaluation%20Report.pdf>

¹¹ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5efcb513d3bf7f7f695a34b09/NCS_2016_Evaluation_Report_FINAL_July2020_1.docx

^{12/13} <https://wearencs.com/sites/default/files/2020-09/NCS%202017%20Evaluation%20Report.pdf>

NCS 2.0 (2019 - 2020)

What was the offer?

A similar programme took place, ranging from 3-4 weeks+, as well as the NCS Grad offer. Both the 3 and 4 week models included 2 x 5 day residentials while the length of the social action project varied. It was aimed at building teamwork and confidence, life skills and working together to have a positive impact on your community, with a celebration event at the end of the programme.

How was it delivered?

NCS Trust re-commissioned its contracts in 2019 for delivery in 2020. NCS was delivered across 9 regions covering the whole of England; 3 of these regions were directly managed by NCST and others were managed by sector partners with an onward supply chain of diverse, local organisations.

What was the impact?

- Almost 100,000 young people participated in summer and autumn programmes in 2019.
- 23% of participants were eligible for free school meals, compared to 14% nationally.¹⁴
- 76% of participants felt positive about their chances of getting a job in the future (an impact estimate of +3pp).¹⁵
- Participation in NCS increased levels of social trust; a proxy for understanding attitudes to social cohesion.¹⁶
- For every £1 spent on the 2019 NCS summer programme, an economic benefit of £3.05 was generated.

What were the key features?

- Re-commissioning aimed to reduce the unit price of the programme, offering better value for money, enhance the quality of the programme through a competitive process and expanding the number of delivery partners.
- *Due to the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 the re-commissioned contracts were never delivered as intended and had to be re-purposed.*



¹⁴ National Citizen Service (June 2020) Annual Business Plan April 20202 - March 2021

¹⁵ National Citizen Service Trust Annual Report 2019/2020

¹⁶ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/61323c80d3bf7f05b7bcb53e/NCS_2019_Evaluation_Report.pdf

Pandemic pivot (2020 - 2022)

What was the offer?

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic NCS Trust could not deliver its usual in-person programme. NCST quickly pivoted, offering alternative activities to young people, including a central online hub, opportunities to volunteer and support for young people as their education was disrupted.

How was it delivered?

Existing contracts from NCS 2.0 were repurposed to deliver alternative activities, with residential delivery reintroduced as restrictions allowed. NCS Trust worked closely with partners to ensure delivery was safe and impactful.

What was the impact?

- In 2020, almost 24,000 young people engaged in NCS, despite Covid-19 restrictions. In 2021, almost 100,000 young people engaged in NCS.
- In 2022, 33% of NCS summer participants were from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds compared to 26% of state secondary school pupils.
- In 2020, almost three quarters (73%) of participants who received support to return to education felt NCS helped them reconnect with people after lockdown.
- In 2021, 86% of summer participants were proud of what they have achieved following the programme.
- In 2022, the summer programme had a strong positive impact on young people's sense of responsibility towards their local community and their ability to have an impact on the world (8pp increase).

What were the key features?

- NCS created opportunities for young people in line with Covid-19 restrictions, including residentials when possible, but also a variety of other experiences in the community, online, and in-school.

- **Key learning from this period:** This period represented quite a significant broadening of the NCS offer, and NCST learned a lot about how its outcomes could be achieved in different contexts, although the greatest impact was still seen in the residential experiences.



Year-round NCS (2023 - 2025)

What was the offer?

NCS Trust launched a new strategy and offer for 2023-2025, supporting young people to grow their strengths through a diversified year-round offer made up of many different ways to engage in NCS. This built on learnings from the pandemic and was a significant change from one, consistent residential programme. Young people had the choice to participate in:

- A 5 day **residential** based around different themes of employability, social action, or life skills
- Regular activities within their **community**
- Innovative **digital** experiences

NCST also, for the first time, commissioned a small number of **targeted** community experiences with demographics and geographies most in need.

How was it delivered?

Across the different experiences, NCST worked with over 200 different partners. NCST contracted a national partner, Ingeus, to work with a diverse supply chain across England to deliver the residential experience. We awarded grants for the first time to a diverse range of local and specialist youth sector partners to deliver community experiences. Our digital experiences were delivered by a variety of contracted partners, with an emphasis on co-design with young people.

What was the impact?

- Over 500,000 experiences were delivered to young people during this period.
- In 2023/24, 38% of participants that took part in our experiences were from diverse ethnic backgrounds. This is compared to 27% of state secondary school pupils.
- In 2023/24, 57% of NCS funding went directly to youth and community-based organisations.
- In 2024/25 our Net Promoter Score for our residential experience was 61.
- For our interactive game, Neohaven Noodles, 62% of respondents felt more confident understanding how the decision you make can have consequences.

What were the key features?

- The NCS offer was choice-based and varied - with young people able to choose a residential theme, or what type of experience they participated in.
- NCS was year-round, with multiple different ways to engage how young people liked, and not just a residential taking place primarily in the summer holidays.
- NCS was still primarily universal, with all young people able to participate and connect with others, but we had an approach of “targeted universalism”, with some provision directed to the areas most in need. 50% of residential experiences were prioritised for the Local Authorities most in need, and NCST also commissioned targeted experiences from specialist organisations with particular groups of young people.

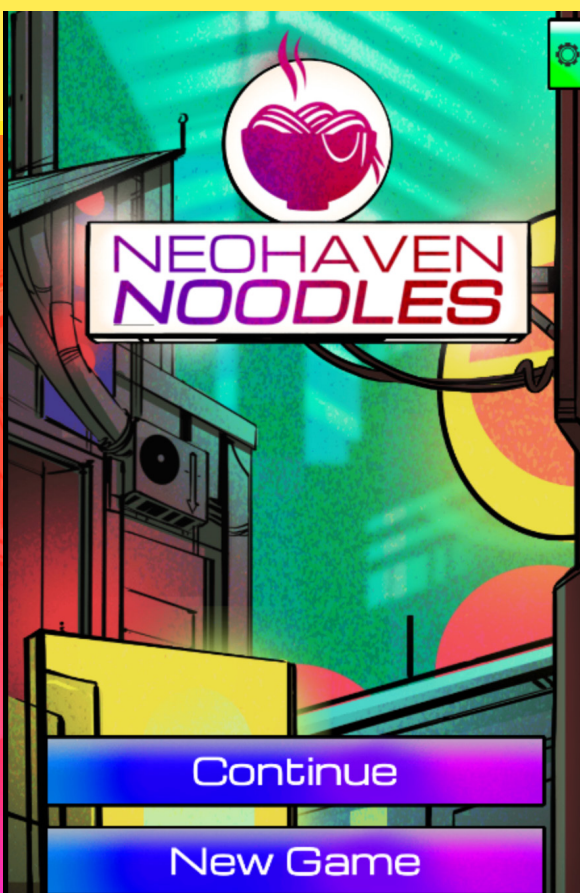
- **Key learning from this period:** Given the offer was transformed so much, NCST had a more formalised approach to learning to gather and use key insight to inform future implementation. Through a collaborative process with young people, NCST staff, and delivery partners, we gathered valuable learnings including:
 - **The youth sector needs space and support for partnerships:** The youth sector is enormously diverse with many small, hyper-local, or specialist organisations working alongside large, well-established or national companies or charities. However, when they are operating in the same area or even with the same young people, many organisations might not know each other which risks silos, missed opportunities for shared learning, and competition for limited resources. Funders should invest time and resources into supporting meaningful partnership creation and connection among local and regional stakeholders. NCST did this through facilitating national and regional level conferences and networking events, and working in partnership with regional infrastructure bodies such as the Regional Youth Work Units.

– **The importance of the education sector:**

In this transformed offer, NCST hoped to broaden how it engaged young people beyond a resource-intensive school recruitment model. In reality, this proved difficult to achieve and schools were still the main place that young people heard about NCS experiences. This poses many challenges to youth sector organisations who often compete with one another to access schools. Many of these challenges are outlined further in our Education and Enrichment report, and NCST was working to improve this through activities such as the Enrichment Partnerships Pilot.

– **The challenges of evaluation and data collection:**

Due to being a government programme, NCS always had a well-funded and robust independent evaluation, including for the varied offer. A more diverse offer, particularly community delivery where there were hugely varied activities tailored to local contexts, posed challenges to evaluation which often needs consistency and fixed parameters. Our partners rightly focused the majority of their resources on direct delivery with young people; but funding for management activities such as data collection was limited and accountability can be difficult with granted (i.e. not contracted) activities.



Supporting and other initiatives (2009-2025)

Our evolving youth voice practice

NCS always existed to serve young people. We believed that young people's voices should be heard and amplified. As the world navigated lockdown and COVID-19 we realised that it was more important than ever to amplify the voices of young people and ensure that key decisions at all levels of NCS delivery and governance were shaped and influenced by young people. This led to the initiation of our first Youth Voice strategy and the development from youth boards into a formal Youth Voice Forum (YVF) in 2020. Alongside this we created two roles to help lead on Youth Voice, the Co-Chairs to the YVF, who also sat as formal NCS Trust Board members, ensuring that youth voice was present and embedded at the highest level of decision making. In 2022, the YVF developed into a remunerated Youth Advisory Board. Across the years, a diverse range of fantastic young people have dedicated their time to share their views, influence decision making and develop their skills.

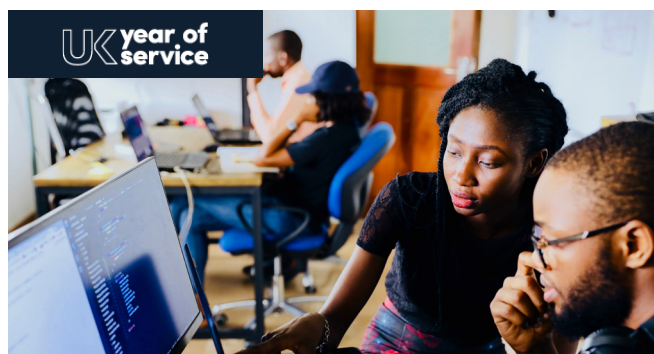
NCS Trust also encouraged youth voice through different avenues. From 2020 until our closure, our Youth Advisors to the NCS Trust Body Board were involved in public appointments processes at NCS Trust, both for new board members and for the most recent Chair of NCS Trust, Harris Bokhari. We utilised a broad range of young person insights, commissioned our own surveys, analysed existing research reports and drew insights for evaluations. Our youth voice was expanding with young people involved in deep, meaningful participatory design at the heart of our digital experiences. NCS Trust has been noted as a role model in the space, convening other Arms-length bodies and Ministers about amplifying youth voice. In late 2021 we also received the Youth Voice Award at the Youth Friendly Employer Awards in recognition of our innovative approach.

We fundamentally believe in the power of young people and that youth voice should always be considered, ensuring it is meaningful and consistent.

Our research, insight & pilots

NCS began as just a programme and over the years evolved into a much broader body. A key element of our 2023-2025 strategy was to shape the government's ambition for young people and we worked collaboratively with the government and sector to support this ambition. We have commissioned research, developed policy proposals, initiated a range of pilot programmes and built a number of strategic partnerships, all with the aim of further supporting young people and the sector.

[UK Year of Service](#) was a pilot set up by NCS Trust following the pandemic, a national employability programme for 18 to 24 year olds with a mission to place young people into socially beneficial work placements lasting 9 to 12 months. Over 400 young people have been supported throughout this programme, and partner-reported post-placement outcome data suggest that over 80% of participants go directly into education, employment, or training following their placement.



NCS Trust built a strategic partnership with the Duke of Edinburgh's Award commissioning research, convening roundtables and developing policy proposals to influence government on the key role of enrichment in education. This project's success led to NCS Trust and the Duke of Edinburgh's Award being awarded £2.7m by DCMS to be delivery partners for the Enrichment Partnerships Pilot. The pilot aimed to test whether providing centralised support to schools around enrichment has a positive impact on the quality and uptake of enrichment activities locally. Grants were awarded to 17 organisations who worked with 171 schools across the North East, North West and East of England. NCS Trust also commissioned research and submitted evidence on a range of other topics such as mental health, social cohesion, skills, social action, democratic engagement and many more.

Over the years we also aimed to work more collaboratively with the sector. We adapted our commissioning approach in 2023 to enable us to work with more diverse, grassroots organisations, working with over 200 organisations in total. We held our largest ever partner conference in 2024 and subsequent regional events to encourage collaboration between our network. We provided secretariat support for the Back Youth Alliance, a strategic alliance of national youth sector organisations. We also had a range of partnerships for different themes, having worked with ShoutOut UK, Youth Employment UK, Skills Builder, UK Youth and the Faith Belief Forum, just to name a few.

Our involvement in national events

NCS Trust was the only Arms-Length-Body focused exclusively on delivering services to young people. As a national body we wanted to support young people to be at the heart of historical events. In 2018 NCS hosted the Commonwealth Youth Forum at City Hall in London. NCS supported the BB-Thank-Q for frontline workers in the pandemic, where young people met the Prime Minister at Downing Street. We oversaw the volunteer programme for 200 volunteers for The Queen's Platinum Jubilee Pageant. NCS volunteers supported the Floral Tributes leading up to, during, and five days following the State Funeral for Her Majesty The Queen. 200 young volunteers helped support the Coronation of King Charles III. As a thank you, 50 young people had the opportunity to join a private screening of the Coronation at St Margaret's Church next to Westminster Abbey.

MAY 2023



200 young volunteers support the Coronation of King Charles III.

SEPTEMBER 2022



NCS volunteers supported the Floral Tributes leading up to, during, and five days following the State Funeral for Her Majesty The Queen.

JUNE 2022



NCS oversaw the volunteer programme for 200 volunteers for facing roles at the Queen's Platinum Jubilee.

APRIL 2018



NCS host the Commonwealth Youth Forum at City Hall in London.

MAY 2021



Supporting the BB-Thank-Q for frontline workers in the pandemic, young people meet the Prime Minister at Downing Street.

Considerations for the future

Drawing on 15 years of experience and valuable insights gained through NCS, we believe that as the programme and Trust closes, several key areas warrant careful consideration to ensure the continued support and development of young people and the youth sector.

Social cohesion

NCS was founded to focus on social cohesion. Our vision was '*A country of connected, confident, caring citizens where everyone feels at home*'. Riots in 2011 gave fuel to the initiation of NCS and we saw a repeat of this in 2024, with the worst outbreaks of racial violence and Islamophobia in the UK for decades. It's clear that social divides have not improved. Hate crimes targeting people's sexual orientation have increased by 112% over the past 5 years.¹⁷

While NCS has always been focused on social cohesion, there is no consensus in academic nor policy literature on its definition. It broadly encompasses the things that make communities, groups and societies a coherent entity. NCST articulated social cohesion in a way that is relevant for our context. We drove social cohesion outcomes by supporting young people's connection, confidence, capability and citizenship.

Social cohesion was seen by many as NCS's unique selling point. There is significant evidence of the impact NCS experiences had on areas that relate to social cohesion. The programme aimed to build social cohesion by mixing young people from different backgrounds and providing them with the confidence, skills and opportunities to build relationships with new people. After taking part in NCS, young people were more likely to be democratically active, engaged in volunteering, and have higher levels of trust in others than those that have not taken part. In 2019, 78% of participants felt more positive about people from different backgrounds to themselves after attending NCS.¹⁸

In the digital space we were supporting young people not quite ready for in-person NCS experiences through content and tools that helped them build empathy and confidence. We were also directly addressing current issues that influence social cohesion through our youth incubators - one of which is designed to help young people understand and navigate how AI and social media generate polarising fake news and bias.

There are no other youth organisations purely focused on social cohesion. There is significant evidence that NCS Trust's approach to building social cohesion has positive outcomes. Given the increasing tensions in England and globally, it would be beneficial to have an intentional cohesion programme for young people.



¹⁷ ONS. 2023. Hate crime, England and Wales, 2022 to 2023 second edition.

¹⁸ National Citizen Service 2018 evaluation, DCMS

Partnership between education and the youth sector

The education and youth sectors are both ultimately driving better outcomes for young people. The education sector with a more formal approach and the youth sector more informally, and both are needed. There is evidence that enrichment can improve young people's essential skills, health and participation in education. Enrichment activities include sports, arts clubs, volunteering, social action and adventures away from home. A recent report we commissioned found that enrichment activities can encourage children and young people at risk of missing school to attend.¹⁹ The report provides examples of how enrichment can reach some of the most marginalised children with poor school attendance, some of whom are less likely to respond to other methods of engagement.

Both the education and youth sectors want to provide more high-quality and equitable access to enrichment activities. Both sectors are keen to work together. There are significant benefits of collaboration but barriers to doing so. The education and youth sector often lacks the capacity, resources and funding to be able to build and invest in enrichment partnerships. Effective partnerships are built on trust, which takes time to build, something which is often missing with short-term funding. To support these sectors to work together funding and capacity is needed to support collaboration.

Role of youth services in addressing young people's mental health

We are experiencing a youth mental health crisis. The Big Mental Health Report 2024 by Mind, reported one in five children aged 8-16 were identified as having a probable mental illness in 2024. For young people aged 17-19, this increases to nearly one in four.²⁰ To address the crisis, early intervention and preventive support is key. Youth provision, which includes a range of structured activities and support services, plays a vital role in supporting young people's wellbeing and can be part of the solution.

There is evidence that youth services have positive outcomes on mental health. Music, arts, recreation and community activities can positively impact mental health outcomes and universal youth sector provision activities and programmes positively impact emotional and behavioural difficulties. However, the evidence base is underdeveloped making it hard to draw robust conclusions. Robust scientific studies with high-quality data collection, evaluation, monitoring into the link between mental health and youth provision are required to further build the evidence base.

Despite the benefits of youth provision, there are often barriers for young people to access them. This could be a lack of confidence, awareness, funding or transport. Social prescribing is a mechanism where healthcare professionals connect people to community services through a link worker to improve their overall wellbeing. It offers flexible, tailored support to meet young people's specific needs and effectively addresses health inequalities by forming a 'web of support' around children and families.²¹ Evidence shows social prescribing is an effective early intervention for symptoms like anxiety, social isolation, and low mood.²² Social prescribing should be used as an early intervention mechanism to support young people's mental health.

The youth mental health crisis needs to be addressed. Youth provision should be part of the solution. It needs to be recognised and supported through social prescribing and further research.

Importance of NCS age range (15-17)

NCS always served a specific age range, supporting 15-17 year olds in England through a pivotal period in their life as they transition into adulthood. It's a period of uncertainty, decisions, independence and opportunities. While most youth provision is available to 11-18 year olds there is often a drop-off in the offer towards the end of the age bracket. This is coupled with a drop-off in participation around this age range, potentially driven by changing needs and interests, more independence and increased pressure from further education or work. In research NCS commissioned it was noted that starting new activities (e.g. sport) at a later age means that skills levels are different across age groups, which can create additional barriers to starting new activities at a later age.

¹⁹ Education and Enrichment Report, 2024.

²⁰ Mind. [The Big Mental Health Report 2024](#).

²¹ Centre for Mental Health. [A dual crisis: The hidden link between poverty and children's mental health](#); July 2024.

²² Barnardos. [The Missing Link: Social Prescribing for Children and Young People](#); October 2023.

15-17 is a pivotal age for young people. Evidence suggests that if people aren't on an employment, education or training pathway by age 16-17, the likelihood of them having poor employment outcomes as adults rapidly increases. In July to September 2024 an estimated 13.2% of all people aged 16 to 24 years in the UK were not in education, employment or training (NEET).²³

Launching a year-round, flexible offer which included digital experiences was a tool we used to ensure we kept pace with young people of our target age range. We embraced digital experiences and touchpoints through our strategy to meet young people in their spaces and on their terms. We considered and aimed to address the issues and impacts of digital on mental health and social cohesion and ensured we provided universal access, including for those who may not be able to attend in-person activities. We adopted more agile, interactive ways of working with co-design at the heart and worked openly with sector partners to upskill and share learning and best practice.

There should be a specific focus on the 15-17 age range given the importance of this transitional time, and careful consideration into how you best meet their needs. This support needs to be embedded into a broader, consistent youth provision and strategy that supports young people throughout their development.

Ensuring sufficient national-level infrastructure for youth provision

The scale of the NCS programme meant the Trust developed a number of capabilities and functions that will always be vital in the delivery of a national youth offer. This included commissioning services, collecting and managing data, establishing policies and best practice, defining standards and frameworks, quality assuring delivery among many others. In the earlier years these functions were leveraged primarily for the delivery of a fairly standardised NCS programme, but as NCS evolved the Trust increasingly took on a wider remit - fulfilling the role of a broader and youth-focussed grant funder, enhancing its research, insights and policy function, acting as an incubator for innovative new projects, driving best practice in youth voice and participation, facilitating learning and capacity building among diverse partners - to name just a few. These functions and capabilities at national level remain vital for the delivery of a quality youth offer, and it will be helpful to review the landscape of youth sector infrastructure in the UK post-NCS closure to assess where there might be gaps. As part of this, considering the potential role of a broader arms-length body for youth would be important.



²³ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/unemployment/bulletins/youngpeoplenotineducationemploymentortrainingneet/november2024>



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