

THE NATIONAL CITIZEN SERVICE

Building Capable Citizens. Strengthening Britain.

A policy brief from the author of *The Stench of the State* and *Finally Worthy*

The problem in one paragraph

Britain has world-class schools, universities, Armed Forces and emergency services, yet no permanent institution dedicated to developing citizens throughout life or to harnessing their talents for the public good. The formation of character, capability and belonging is left to chance: abundant for those whose families can buy it, absent for most of those who need it most. The best schools prove daily that cohesion and confidence can be deliberately built. The country then lets that work stop at the school gate. The answer is a permanent institution that develops citizens throughout life, just as the NHS protects health and schools develop knowledge.

The National Citizen Service is a permanent institution that develops citizens from childhood to retirement through education, service, work and national resilience.

Imagine every young person entering adult life with recognised skills, practical experience, friendships across Britain and a habit of service. Imagine every community knowing that, when crisis comes, trained citizens will answer alongside the emergency services. That is what this institution builds.

The evidence, division by division

For children, the evidence is a decade old and unanswered. When Channel 4's School Swap placed state pupils in the independent sector, the principal advantage observed was not superior classroom teaching but thousands of additional hours of structured development: leadership, sport, music, debating, service. The Social Mobility Commission has repeatedly found the same unequal access to the activities that build confidence, rationed by parental income. For young adults, the case is the transition itself. Around one million are not in education, employment or training, roughly one in eight of the age group. Three decades of successive youth schemes followed; official evaluations repeatedly found heavy deadweight and poor accountability, and no institution owns the transition into adult life. Employers complete the picture, reporting shortages not of knowledge but of communication, teamwork, resilience and workplace behaviour. For adults out of work, long-term dependency compounds the same developmental gap where it is hardest to reverse; every mainstream welfare system now conditions support on engagement, and none has built a route through accredited training and genuine placements. And for the nation, the pandemic and each winter's floods have shown the willingness of citizens to serve and the absence of any structure to receive, train and deploy them. Four gaps, one missing institution.

The governing principle

Rights and responsibilities go hand in hand. Society supports without condition those who genuinely cannot support themselves, permanently. Citizens who are able to contribute are expected to do so, and work, contribution and service remain the route to dignity and independence. The principle is reciprocity: nothing for nothing, with protection absolute for those who need it.

The proposal

A permanent national institution, the National Citizen Service, standing alongside education, the NHS and the Armed Forces. Not a youth scheme, not a revival of historic National Service, and not an additional burden on teachers: separately staffed, separately funded, independently governed and accountable to Parliament. Four divisions:

- School Development Service. Every child develops the wider capabilities currently rationed by family income. Operating through the existing school estate, which stands empty every evening, weekend and holiday, but independently staffed and funded. Schools educate; the Service develops citizens: leadership, public speaking, first aid, financial literacy, outdoor education, enterprise, digital skills, community service and mentoring.
- National Citizen Transition Programme. Every young adult enters working life with skills, experience and belonging. A structured full-time period after education ends: certified skills, real work placements, deliberate mixing across class, region and background. Military participation is one voluntary pathway among many, not the model.
- National Contribution Service. Every adult who can contribute does, on a route back to paid work. After a period of unconditional support following job loss, continued receipt of taxpayer-funded assistance for able adults is conditional on participation, week on week: around thirty-five hours of accredited training, work placements and community service. Those who decline without good reason do not continue to receive support, with safeguards for dependants and an immediate route back through resumed participation. This is reciprocity in practice, and the objective throughout is progression into paid employment.
- National Civil Reserve. Every community can call on trained citizens when crisis comes. Former participants form an organised reserve for floods, pandemics, severe weather and other civil emergencies: national resilience built from citizens rather than announced in strategies.

Answers to the obvious objections

- Militarisation? No. Military involvement is voluntary and one pathway among many.
- Teachers overloaded? The NCS is separately staffed and funded; it uses school buildings, not school staff.
- Duplicates Scouts, cadets, DofE? It provides the universal baseline they cannot, and partners with them.
- Displaces paid jobs? Legislation prohibits it.
- Invisible disabilities? Contribution is assessed on functional capacity, with exemptions where appropriate.
- Unaffordable? It runs on infrastructure the taxpayer already owns and returns employability, productivity and resilience.

Britain owes every citizen opportunity, protection and dignity. Every citizen who is able owes Britain contribution, responsibility and service. The full argument, including costings, implementation phasing and the fiscal machinery that funds it, is set out in Finally Worthy: How to Rebuild Britain by the Centenary of VE Day 2045.