Additional response to the second recommendation of the Public Accounts Committee’s Forty-Sixth Report of Session 2016-17: National Citizen Service

NCS Trust, November 2017

Context

In March 2017, the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) in its Forty-Sixth Report of Session 2016-17 published eight recommendations following its review of National Citizen Service (NCS). Seven recommendations were directed towards DCMS and NCS Trust, while one (recommendation number seven) was directed towards the Cabinet Office. DCMS and NCS Trust accepted all seven recommendations directed at them in their response, which was published in the Treasury Minutes in October 2017. The fifth recommendation includes a request from the PAC to see detailed plans to grow NCS participation (see figure 1). This paper provides those plans.

**Figure 1: Extract from PAC report**

"The Department and Trust need to think radically about what meeting the revised targets means for how NCS is provided and works alongside other organisations. The Committee expects to see detailed plans to support achieving the revised participation figures within six months."

The structure of this paper is as follows: the first section gives a summary of participation to date; the second section covers the four initiatives through which we intend to increase future participation; the third section sets out, at a high-level, the timescales in which we are undertaking these activities. Finally, the fourth section emphasises that the pace of growth should never be at the expense of other considerations like programme quality, impact, social mix and reach.

1. Participation to date

2. Growing future participation
   2.1. Optimising our customer journey
   2.2. Deepening integration with local communities, schools, and youth and volunteering organisations
   2.3. Recommissioning our network
   2.4. Government supports

3. Roadmap

4. Other considerations
1. Participation to date

NCS Trust is proud of the growth NCS has achieved to date (see figure 2). In 2009, just 158 young people took part in the first NCS pilots. Today, 400,000 young people have taken part. In the last academic year, we engaged 91% of all mainstream schools, carrying out over 17,000 recruitment events, and covering all local authorities in the UK. Over 100,000 young people are expected to participate this year alone. This makes NCS the world’s fastest growing youth movement for 15 to 17 year olds.

![Figure 2: NCS growth: 2011 to 2017](https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/National-Citizen-Service.pdf)

A note on targets

During the PAC hearing, and within the PAC response, 247,000 was referred to as a participation target. As stated in our Treasury Minute, it is important to clarify that 247,000 is not a target, but a “participation limit” as termed by the NAO.\(^1\) This “participation limit” refers to the maximum number of participants Treasury could fund. It is set as a top level estimate so that NCS is never in a situation where it must prevent a young person from participating. Indeed, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) does not have allocated budget to fund 247,000 places without calling on Treasury reserves.

Targets are negotiated annually with DCMS, based on latest demand forecasts. Given the uncertainty which arises when forecasting many years out, this approach ensures targets are realistic and achievable, and protects taxpayers by accurately balancing supply and demand. The target for 2017 has been set at 101,000 places.

Nevertheless, our mission is to grow NCS into a treasured national institution and rite of passage for young people. We are ambitious for our future participation and will do everything we can to support as many young people as possible to take part in NCS. The rest of this paper outlines the ways in which we plan to achieve this.

2. Growing future participation

2.1 Optimising our customer journey

The NCS customer journey (see figure 3 below) describes the four key steps to creating a brilliant experience for young people who take part in NCS. The central task in driving up participation is making sure each and every part of this journey is amazing. Information on what we are doing at each stage to achieve this is set out below.

**Figure 3: NCS customer journey**

![Explore, Entry & Engage, Experience, Exit & Extension]

Explore: raising mass awareness of NCS

When NCS began as a Cabinet Office-run programme in 2011, prompted awareness of NCS (a standard marketing metric), was 2%. Since then, we have built a strong NCS brand, with prompted awareness reaching 83% in summer 2016 (Department for Education Teacher Voice Omnibus, page 14). As pointed out by NCVO, the NCS brand has “helped young people see that volunteering is valuable and is valued in the eyes of education, future employers and their peers”. We’ve achieved this through:

- Smart, integrated campaigns which:
  - Use a range of platforms, particularly digital marketing through social media
  - Target teachers and parents/guardians as well as young people
  - Support key recruitment windows at key points during the academic year

- Segmentation of our customer base so we can appeal to young people in different ways depending on demographic, ethnicity, and religion

- Robust measurement of the effectiveness of our campaigns using econometric analysis so we can continually improve

- Consistent use of branding throughout our network to make sure the NCS brand is instantly recognisable

But we can do more, and are looking at ways to:

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- Make our brand increasingly youth-led to reflect the voice of young people more authentically
- Use behavioural insights to further influence our campaigns
- Invest more in teachers and parents/guardians who are key supporters and important influencers on young people
- Make our customer segmentation more sophisticated in order to direct advertising based on attitude and mindset as well as demographics

**Entry and engage: making it easy to sign up and take part and reducing attrition**

For a young person, the first step in committing to participate in NCS is placing an “expression of interest” (EOI). Last year, half of all Year 11s completed an EOI. To generate this interest, we hold thousands of assemblies, parents’ evenings and other events in schools up and down the country. These events are run by highly engaging staff who are expertly trained.

The next step is turning this EOI into a sign-up. This process is called “conversion”, and so far year, our rate of conversion has been 40%. To achieve this, we have a sophisticated social media presence and contact centre, staffed with experts trained to answer questions from young people and encourage them to sign up and take part.

Whilst 40% is a high conversion rate, we can do more to drive this figure higher, whilst reducing the rate of attrition. Note: attrition refers to young people who sign up but do not participate in the programme. Last year, this stood at 23% - around one in five young people.

To increase and decrease the rate of conversion and attrition respectively, we are taking a number of measures to improve, which include:

- Making online sign-up easier and removing complexity by developing a single social media platform and single website
- Making sure our sign-up process is accessible for all young people, including those with inclusion needs
- Making it easier for prospective participants to finalise their preferred date immediately to avoid clashes with holidays or other commitments
- Reconfiguring how our waiting lists are managed
• Trialling a “buddy scheme” pilot, with specific support from the Behavioural Insights Team (BIT), so young people can “take a friend” on NCS, reducing the fear factor which often causes young people to drop out

Experience: enhancing programme quality

It’s crucial that when young people come to do NCS, the experience lives up to and exceeds expectations. We measure this through a “Net Promoter Score” (NPS)\(^4\), which is calculated using live text feedback from young people, captured as they go through the programme. Our NPS score is market leading (55% amongst young people and 70% amongst parents), and according to recent evaluations of the NCS programme, nine out of ten young people said they would recommend NCS to a friend.

We are constantly evolving our programme to create an even better experience for young people. For example, we are working with partners like Santander to help young people build knowledge and skills through mini-work placements on programme. We are improving our democratic engagement offering so that more and more young people taking part in NCS have a chance to meet their local MP and other elected representatives. So far this year, 251 Parliamentarians have visited the programme, including 135 MPs, 100 councillors and others. We are also exploring new programme models that deliver the same programme outcomes whilst allowing us to offer more variety within the programme itself. For example:

• An alternative to “phase one”, for young people who are less willing or able to take part in the flagship outward-bound option

• More meaningful social action projects (for example, projects which span regions, cohorts and years)

• Working closely with our network of partners to identify activities which have the most impact, and rolling out these activities to all NCS programmes

Exit and extension: building an NCS community

“Exit and Extension” includes everything that happens after a young person finishes the NCS programme. The key activity associated with “Exit” is a graduation ceremony where every young person who has participated receives a signed certificate from the Prime Minister. We are working to make these ceremonies as special as we can, through partnering with football clubs and other organisations to find suitably exciting venues, including options big enough to accommodate young people coming together from across the country to graduate.

\(^4\) “Net promoter score” (NPS) is a common industry measurement of customer satisfaction. Is is calculated by taking the percentage of customers who would not endorse a product, and deducting this from the percentage of customers who would endorse a product.
Following graduation, it’s crucial that “NCSers” have access to a thriving alumni network which gives them a framework to realise their ambitions, using the confidence and tools NCS has given them. Our online platform, the “Opportunity hub”, is a “one-stop-shop” of post-programme opportunities for NCS graduates. For example, we signpost young people to International Citizen Service (ICS), and we know that one in four young people who volunteer for ICS abroad are NCS graduates. We are working with partners across sectors to improve this offering, so young people can access an increasing variety of opportunities to continue with their social action journey, or pursue further training, employment and apprenticeship options.

Through our network of NCS Regional Youth Boards, NCS graduates are able to stay involved as a collective voice for their communities, shaping NCS for future cohorts. In addition, hundreds of young people stay involved with NCS in some capacity; either by going into schools as advocates to speak about the programme, or by working on the programme itself as paid or voluntary staff members - 8% of our workforce are NCS graduates. As our pool of graduates grows (now around 400,000), we are exploring ways to engage this network more broadly.

2.2 Deepening integration with local communities, schools, and youth and volunteering organisations

Schools

Growing participation in order that most young people take part in NCS means becoming even more embedded in the education system both locally and nationally. We already have substantive reach, being present in 91% of schools and colleges across all Local Authorities. We engage schools by:

- Working closely with the Department for Education (DfE) and Ofsted to understand and shape education policy as it relates to NCS (see “Government Support” section)
- Working with sector stakeholders like Headteacher organisations, Teach First and the Independent Schools Council to gain support and raise awareness of NCS
- Providing best practice guidance to our network on how best to engage with the school sector
- Providing direct support with schools which are most difficult to access through our central School Engagement Team
- Publishing schools’ NCS participation data on the NCS website
- Maintaining a Champion Schools’ framework, celebrating schools with high levels of NCS engagement
This summer, we are also piloting a new way to reward school engagement through introducing a school stipend. This consists of a small payment made to a designated “NCS Coordinator” each term if a school achieves a set of requirements to promote the NCS programme. If successful, we plan to offer this to schools across England.

But we can do more. In particular, we are looking at how we can better engage teachers and parents/guardians in the school context. Whilst we know young people are important advocates for NCS, they are a transient audience: every year there is a brand new cohort of young people to attract. As an audience, teachers and parents/guardians have greater longevity, and are important influencers over teenagers’ decision making. Our key areas of focus are:

- Making sure that all teachers and trainee teachers know about NCS, and are supportive before NCS is formally introduced to young people themselves
- Finding better ways for parents and teachers to share recommendations and testimonials to spread the word and encourage their peers to promote NCS to the young people they interact with
- Building understanding of the post-programme impact of NCS on school attainment and employment, to better promote the programme to parents and teachers
- Developing clear routes for those teachers to form part of our workforce, further enabling them to advocate for NCS in their schools

Local communities

NCS will not become a rite of passage unless we are fully embedded in the communities which we serve. Our regional partners work closely with hundreds of local partners to deliver the programme on the ground – including local councils (e.g. Oxfordshire County Council and Northumberland County Council); local youth organisations (e.g. Bolton Lads and Girls Club and the Jewish Lads’ and Girls’ Brigade); schools and colleges (e.g. Mountbatten School and East Durham College); sports clubs (e.g. Nottingham Forest in the Community and Rotherham United Community Sports Trust); national charities (e.g. Catch 22 and University of the First Age) and housing associations (e.g. Bournemouth Churches Housing Association).

In addition, our localities team is designing new approaches to knit NCS into the tapestry of local life. The underpinning aims of this “place based approach” is to test tailored, locally-driven and innovative approaches to drive up participation in NCS and improve long-term impact.

Local authority engagement
A key element of our approach is developing a more collaborative relationship with local government, building upon the recent Government Guidance to Local Authorities on NCS, which is supported by the Local Government Association. To understand the most effective routes to engaging local government, we are working with the National Youth Agency to test different approaches across seven local authorities: Bradford, Doncaster, Stoke-on-Trent, East Cambridge and Fenland, Ipswich, and Hastings. Through these pilots we will articulate how NCS can directly support local authorities in delivering their statutory studies, develop strategic NCS champions within local government, and improve the ability of our delivery network to work effectively with local government.

**Mayoral engagement**

The new Combined Authorities and directly-elected Mayors, all of whom have placed a major focus on supporting young people, are an important new route to ensure NCS is seen as a key strategic partner to support local priorities. Building on our strong relationship with the Greater London Authority, we are hoping to engage all of the directly-elected Mayors to understand how best we can work together to support young people in their areas.

**Opportunity Areas**

NCS Trust is strongly committed to supporting the Government’s focus on the twelve social mobility Opportunity Areas, as one of DfE’s three national strategic partners. The Opportunity Areas provide an excellent focal point for collaborative efforts to test delivering a step change both in social mobility interventions, but also our broader place based approach to improve scale and impact of NCS.

As part of our work with Opportunity Areas, we are working with local partners to test a range of opportunities that will encourage greater take-up and impact of NCS which include:

- Providing additional support to schools to recruit young people through our School and College Coordinator model
- Partnering with voluntary and community sector organisations to provide volunteering opportunities post NCS
- Partnering with local universities to provide higher education experience days for NCS graduates considering applying to University
- Providing mentoring opportunities to young people, working with the Careers and Enterprise Company
- Working with local business leaders to support NCS graduates making the transition from education to an apprenticeship
Delivering “NCS ready” pilots for the harder-to-reach (for example, looked after children, young offenders or young people from pupil referral units)

New partners

To be truly embedded NCS needs to integrate seamlessly into a wider offering for young people, and we are continually looking to expand our network of partners to achieve this. Last autumn we piloted a new “pathfinder” approach, where we worked with a wider group of local organisations - including Sea Cadets, UK Youth, Fire and Rescue Services and Ambition - to deepen the reach of NCS and test innovative approaches to support NCS as it grows.

We are continuing to work with a range of leading youth organisations, including football clubs and leading uniformed organisations, to build on this approach and collectively provide a richer offering for young people. For example, we recently announced a new partnership with The Scout Association to:

- Open up a new opportunity for The Scout Association to deliver innovative NCS programmes, enhancing the impact and quality of the Explorer Scout and Young Leader experience by integrating the NCS experience within Scouting. This will support the growth of both organisations and offer new opportunities for social mixing

- Offer unique social action and personal development opportunities for NCS graduates to support: Explorer Scouts, Scouting Network, the Young Leaders Scheme and adult volunteering in Scouting. This will help extend the reach of NCS beyond its core programme and support sustainable growth for Scouting

- Offer new roles for NCS graduates to support the growth of Scouting in disadvantaged communities. Increasing the reach to communities that stand to benefit most

- Allow both organisations to test and learn new approaches that will improve outcomes for young people and deliver good value for money

Board of Patrons

Chaired by David Cameron, our cross-party, cross-industry Board of Patrons spans education, charity, business and the media. It has twenty members, which include Baroness Brady, CBE, of West Ham United; Dame Sally Coates, DBE, of United Learning; and Bear Grylls, of the Scouts. We are working with each of these influential individuals to explore ways in which they can use their networks and experience to support us at every stage of the NCS customer journey.
2.3 Recommissioning our network

As stated in our Treasury Minute, our network will be refreshed through a phased re-commissioning process starting in 2018.

Following on from the previous section, a guiding principle of this network re-design is the need to focus on local communities and local organisations to achieve long-term social impact. The lessons we learn from our innovation and local integration work will support this network re-design, where we will encourage organisations of all shapes and sizes, which meet a clear set of minimum requirements, to submit proposals. Increasing the diversity of our network will help us to reach groups of young people we are currently unable to reach, whilst making sure more and more local organisations have the opportunity to join the NCS family.

In addition, through the way contracts are designed, we will encourage provider behaviour to focus on long term planning for future growth, alongside short term targets.

We will share a more detailed plan outlining this process in due course.

2.4 Government support

Securing significant policy support, is critical if we are to achieve a step-change in participation.

- **DfE**: We are working with DfE and Ofsted to integrate NCS with the education system at the top level. In July of this year Ofsted released guidance to school inspectors explaining that where schools present evidence about their involvement in NCS, it would be appropriate for the inspection report to comment on the impact of the service. In addition, the Department [has/will] publish[ed] guidance for schools and colleges on how best to engage with NCS. As flagged by NAO, if NCS is to grow into a rite of passage for all young people, more substantive DfE support is needed. This could be achieved through clarifying the role of NCS in the national curriculum, strengthening references to NCS in the Ofsted inspection framework, publishing data on NCS participation by school, and re-visiting the duty to promote the NCS opportunity in schools.

- **DCMS**: We coordinated with the “National Event and Ceremonies Team” on the NCS Passchendaele project, which saw one hundred NCS graduates stewarding the commemorations in Belgium last year. We have also had preliminary conversations on how we can work together on digital awareness and cyber security, youth engagement in heritage, and using sport - particularly football - to attract young people to NCS.

- **HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC)**: The NCS Act provides for NCS Trust to use Treasury data to write to young people encouraging them to sign up to NCS.
We are working with HMRC to implement this, which will help to drive an uptake in young people signing up.

- We are collaborating more widely across government to support our growth ambitions, whilst helping departments with their policy agendas:
  - We have had discussions with Home Office and Ministry of Justice on how we can better reach youth offenders through youth offending teams; as well as young refugees through the refugee resettlement programme.
  - We are speaking to Department for Communities and Local Government on their local integration strategy and how we can support this through our localities work, particularly in Opportunity Areas.
  - Through Department or International Development, we have partnered with ICS to support mutual recruitment to our programmes.
  - We are in conversations with Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs about conservation and how we can support in this area.

We are keen to continue to build on this cross-government working, not only to support our expansion, but also to improve the quality of our programme and help individual departments to fulfil their own ambitions.

3. Roadmap

This paper has laid out the key activities we are doing, and are planning to do, to grow participation in NCS. Figure 4 below sets out a view of the planning horizons for the activities we are undertaking.

**Figure 4: Planning horizons**

- **Do now**
  - Optimize customer journey
  - Deepen relationships with schools and teachers
  - Increase parental/guardian involvement
  - Local authority guidance

- **Plan now**
  - Single brand and website with optimised date booking engine
  - Local authority and mayoral engagement
  - Wider and deeper engagement with Department for Education

- **Test & Develop now**
  - Programme choice and alternatives
  - Flagship social action projects
  - Local authority and mayoral engagement
  - Wider and deeper engagement with other Government departments
  - Recommissioning, including new partners
4. Other considerations

Whilst growing participation is a priority for NCS, it must be balanced against other key considerations, like:

- **Quality**: As stated in the first section above, we currently have a strong “net promoter score” of 55% amongst young people, and nine out of ten NCS graduates would recommend NCS to a friend.

- **Impact**: NCS makes young people more confident, more likely to enter higher education, less likely to be prejudiced against those different to them, more likely to give back to their community (an additional 4 hours per month on average), and more likely to vote. Independent research has estimated that for every £1 spent on NCS, £8.36 is returned in social benefits.

- **Social mix**: Currently, 34% of NCS participants are from Black, Asian or other ethnic minority groups, compared to 20% of the population; 18% are on Free School Meals, compared to 13% of the population; 5% having Special Educational Needs, compared to 3% of the population, and 13% are from the 10% most deprived areas in the country, compared to 11% of the population.

- **Reach**: We believe that in spite of high participation ambitions, it’s important that we continue to target the hardest to reach, who find it more difficult to sign up for the NCS programme. We will continue to test a range of pre-NCS interventions, to ensure that young people who do not currently sign up are aware of NCS and the opportunities it presents before becoming eligible for NCS. For example, this includes: working with the Careers and Enterprise Company, to make sure providers are able to help support more young people onto NCS; working with the Behavioural Insights Team to test a buddying programme; and The Challenge to provide personal coaches for young people with complex needs who would otherwise be unable to take part.

As explained at the outset, targets are set annually within a limit set by Treasury. There is therefore no value for money risk associated with the 247,000 participation limit. Whilst we must nevertheless strive to reach it, growth should not be at the expense of quality, impact, social mix and reach.