



King's Research Portal

Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication record in King's Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

de St Croix, T. (2017). Time to say goodbye to the National Citizen Service? *Youth and Policy*, n/a(n/a).
<http://www.youthandpolicy.org/articles/time-to-say-goodbye-ncs/>

Citing this paper

Please note that where the full-text provided on King's Research Portal is the Author Accepted Manuscript or Post-Print version this may differ from the final Published version. If citing, it is advised that you check and use the publisher's definitive version for pagination, volume/issue, and date of publication details. And where the final published version is provided on the Research Portal, if citing you are again advised to check the publisher's website for any subsequent corrections.

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Research Portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognize and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the Research Portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the Research Portal

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact librarypure@kcl.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Time to say goodbye to the National Citizen Service?

Tania de St Croix

The National Citizen Service (NCS) was touted as the flagship of the UK government's 'Big Society' agenda when it was introduced in England in 2011. Funded by central government, it has grown every year; 93,000 young people took part last year, at an estimated cost of £1,863 per participant (NAO, 2017, p.4). Earlier this year, NCS gained a place on the statute books through the NCS Act 2017; yet its 'value for money' has been the subject of ongoing scrutiny (NAO, 2017; Public Accounts Committee, 2017). In this context, this article discusses - from a youth work perspective - whether NCS should be retained, reformed, reviewed or replaced.

From the beginning, NCS received a mixed reception in the youth sector; while some mainstream organisations seemed uncritically to welcome almost any spending on youth activities, others argued that its resources could be better spent in keeping youth services open at a time of widespread cuts. This line of argument emphasised the high cost of a short summer scheme for 16 year olds in comparison to year-round provision for a wider age range; for example, the Education Select Committee's (2011) Services for Young People inquiry recommended that NCS was not continued in its current form in the light of 'concerns about the scheme's cost and practical implementation' (p.60). 'Value for money' concerns have re-emerged in recent months, as official bodies have criticised the high cost per place, the money wasted on unfilled spaces, the lack of financial accountability, and the need for evidence on longer term impact (NAO, 2017; Public Accounts Committee, 2017).

There is much to discuss in these documents; however, this article starts by setting 'value for money' arguments (and their underpinning logic) to one side. Instead, the following discussion revisits an argument I have put forward in earlier writing: that the main problem with the NCS is that its ideological basis in conservative neoliberalism positions young people and youth work in damaging ways (de St Croix, 2011; 2012; 2015). While I have previously shied away from suggesting that the NCS should be closed down, this article suggests that serious consideration should be given to replacing NCS with renewed investment in grassroots youth work. Any such changes should not be imposed, however, but rather should be decided locally, as part of a thoughtful and inclusive review that might even retain elements of NCS at a local level if young people and youth workers so decide.

The discussion that follows is not intended to criticise the workers, local organisations, young participants, or so-called 'alumni' of NCS, or to diminish what they achieve on NCS. It is important to acknowledge that many young people and youth workers enjoy taking part, and benefit from their participation. This should hardly be surprising to readers of this journal; residential experiences and social action have been intrinsic to youth work for over a century. Nevertheless, it is necessary to ask robust and challenging questions of NCS; not only because of the substantial financial support it receives from government at a time of devastating youth service cuts, but also because of its underlying origins in the Conservative Party and its supporters, and that Party's attempts to give it 'taken for granted' status as a semi-permanent element of youth policy. At a time when young people are

calling for renewed investment in youth work (UK Youth Voice, 2017), and demonstrating a great deal of engagement with progressive and hopeful politics, it is a good time to re-imagine publicly funded youth work – beyond the local authority youth service (see Davies, 2017), and also beyond the NCS.

Creating the NCS as a ‘product’

The National Citizen Service was introduced under the 2010-15 Coalition Government, having been proposed by the Conservative Party some years previously as a universal ‘rite of passage’ for 16 year old school leavers. Apparently inspired by the then Prime Minister David Cameron’s time at Eton (Winnett & Kirkupp, 2010), NCS was intended to bring together school leavers from different social backgrounds in the spirit of National Service: ‘one shared, classless, patriotic mission’ (Conservative Party, 2007, p.1). Pilot programmes began in 2011, the majority of which were run by the Challenge Trust, an organisation set up by government advisor Nat Wei’s Shaftesbury Partnership, with founding members from transnational corporations and multinational consultancy firms. Initially coordinated by the Cabinet Office, NCS is now funded by government through the NCS Trust, which (since 2014) coordinates and publicises the scheme and contracts its delivery by charities, social enterprises and private companies.

Its costs have risen steeply each year as it has been scaled up for increased participation: the government has committed to the rather striking figure of £1.26 billion over the 2016-2020 period (NAO, 2017, p.4). While this year’s National Citizen Service Act is limited in its implications (for example, the government ‘may’ fund NCS but is not required to do so), it is unusual to see legislation underpinning youth provision, and this acts to lend an air of permanence to a scheme that has been criticised as the ‘vanity project’ of a former Conservative Prime Minister (Mycock, 2010).¹

While its per-person costs have risen, NCS has gradually contracted from a two month summer scheme to a three or four week project, that brings together groups of young people from diverse social backgrounds to take part in an outdoor activity residential, a residential or non-residential phase of learning about ‘life skills’ and the local community, and the planning and carrying out of a social action project. Rather than emerging from what young people in local areas say they want, NCS takes similar – sometimes identical - forms in every region of England and, more recently, Northern Ireland.² It is closely controlled and prescribed: its programme, timings, outcomes, and evaluation are embedded in the contracts that providers are required to adhere to.

1 Note that Cameron’s (2016) first announced role after retiring from politics was as Chair of NCS Patrons.

2 The devolved Scottish and Welsh administrations have chosen not to run NCS (Mills & Waite, 2017).

With so much standardisation, NCS is packaged as a consumable product. Indeed, this is further implied by its rocketing marketing budget, with £2.7 million spent on television marketing in 2016 and around £100 spent centrally on marketing activities for each space filled (Public Accounts Committee, 2017, p.12). This ‘product’ orientation is highly problematic in a programme that is said to be about active citizenship. It is the antithesis of Mark Smith’s (1982) characterisation of the participants in youth work as ‘creators not consumers’. This is one of the ways in which neoliberalism is reproduced by NCS; according to a neoliberal framework, there is no conflict between ‘product’ and ‘citizenship’, because consumerism is the primary way in which active citizenship is envisioned.

Of course, the extent to which young people shape each NCS project will depend on the skills and aptitudes of its workers, on managerial factors such as policy and training, and on the confidence and values of young people themselves. We know that young people and grassroots youth workers can claim spaces for critical conversations and transformative experiences, even in constrained circumstances (de St Croix, 2016), and this is as true of NCS as of other forms of youth provision. Thus it is perhaps unsurprising that both research (Murphy, 2017; Mills & Waite, 2017) and anecdotal evidence elicit stories of genuine youth participation, but also of substantial constraint.

What is striking is that, even in the ‘social action’ element of the scheme, which is specifically intended to be designed and carried out by young people, the need for a ‘social action experience’ to take place within a tight timescale militates against genuine involvement at young people’s pace and starting from their concerns. For example, the group observed as part of an independent research project was tasked with painting a ‘community room’ in a college, a project that was pre-designed by regional staff (Mills & Waite, 2017). The same research also came across youth-led examples of social action – and one, a campaign to lower rail fares, could even be described as political - but in general NCS is designed to produce ‘neoliberal citizen-subjects for a neoliberal state in neoliberal times, encouraging a “type” of citizen that performs ‘safe’ and compliant acts of (youth) citizenship.’ (Mills & Waite, 2017, p.72).

De-professionalising youth workers

While NCS is clearly problematic in terms of its positioning of young people as ‘safe and compliant’ citizens, the top-down nature of its implementation positions its workers in a similar way. In official evaluations, young people are consistently positive about NCS staff, yet the views of these workers themselves are marginal to, and often entirely absent from, NCS policy documents and evaluations. It is well established that face-to-face youth workers are often marginalised in policy documents that concern their work and not involved in decision-making (de St Croix, 2016); in this case, their silencing merely reinforces their de-professionalisation in the context of NCS.

This is materially demonstrated by the poor pay and conditions of youth workers on NCS. Most NCS ‘leaders’ (as they are often called) are employed on temporary contracts for a few weeks or months each year. As well as resulting in a lack of job security, such precarious seasonal forms of employment inevitably limit the extent to

which workers can question or challenge what goes on; most will probably leave if they are unhappy, or keep quiet if they wish to be re-employed. Unfavourable terms and conditions are the new norm in the youth sector as few jobs are available and unions lose negotiating power. Poor pay – even for senior roles – is endemic, and is likely to become worse in the light of recent pressures on NCS providers to lower their costs. Table 1, below, provides a typical example from the largest provider, in which a ‘seasonal’ manager responsible for young people and up to 14 staff is paid less than £110 per day, most of which include ‘long working hours’ and overnight stays (see Table 1).

Table 1: NCS Programme Leader for Summer 2017, summarised from the Challenge (2017)

Job title:	Programme Leader (Manager role)
Working hours:	Contracted for 14 days per programme (maximum 42 days between June and September 2017).
Pay:	£110 per day for the 14 days, of which 10 days are residential (overnight). Note that “you should be prepared for long working hours”. This amount includes pay in lieu of statutory annual leave. Workers must also complete up to 2.5 days unpaid compulsory training.
Responsibilities include:	Managing up to 14 staff; ensuring effective delivery of the programme; leading evening sessions; supporting behaviour management; leading on safety and engagement of young people.

In addition to poor employment practices, the ‘packaged’ nature of NCS is as problematic for youth workers as it is for young people. The structure of the programme and also its content and means of delivery are mapped out in close detail. For example, leaders are given plans for ‘engaging pre-set evening sessions’ (the Challenge, 2017, p.2). While some of these activity plans may be useful – particularly for inexperienced youth workers, and given that there is no paid time for preparation – such standardisation constrains youth workers’ ability to improvise, be creative, and use their professional judgement. Notably, the phrase ‘youth worker’ is suspiciously absent from much NCS documentation, and some trained youth workers who have also worked on NCS do not see NCS as youth work (personal communications; see also Murphy, 2017). This seems significant; why would a large scale programme for young people in their leisure time, drawing largely on youth work’s history and ideas, avoid professional terminology? Perhaps to avoid the criticism that the NCS worker’s role appears to be envisaged (from the top) as little more than supervising and leading groups, rather than being based on notion of informal education and the need for professional judgement in complex situations. Of course, it would be impossible in practice for the role to be as straightforward as is envisaged; but acknowledging this would require substantially enhanced employment conditions.

Privatising youth work

Neoliberalism involves the organisation of people and workplaces in ways that enable the accumulation of profit by the richest groups and individuals in society; a key element of this is privatisation, which the NCS legitimises. Currently, there are 9 regional NCS providers, of which three are profit-making companies (NAO, 2017). The lack of contestation around profit being made from youth work is, perhaps, surprising, but reminds us that such practices have become normalised. Of course, profit is a slippery concept, and so-called non-profit organisations are not exempt from capitalist logic, including the need to create a 'surplus' and the tendency to adopt commercial practices (Rochester, 2013).

Below the layer of regional providers running NCS, other organisations (mostly small specialist providers) are subcontracted to deliver the scheme in local areas. It is well established that small, local organisations can lose out in subcontracting relationships: they are asked to share the risk of the larger organisations but have smaller reserves, and suffer disproportionately when targets are not met. This risk will be intensified now that the NCS Trust has been directed to recoup money from 'unfilled spaces' - any youth provider will know that an unfilled space does not mean that money was not spent (for example, a residential venue will not refund the cost for a young person who does not turn up). As well as the risk to smaller youth providers, there is presumably a risk to the reliability of evaluations. The 'payment by results' arrangements that incentivises recruitment will also, inevitably, incentivise organisations to exaggerate the number of young people who have signed up to and 'completed' NCS. Such dynamics are not unique to NCS, of course, but as the largest government funded scheme for young people, NCS enables and legitimises the normalisation of profit-making in youth work.

Young people as 'human capital'

My final example, for now, of the fundamentally neoliberal nature of NCS is its positioning of young people as 'human capital'. The most recent evaluation of NCS is described as a 'wellbeing and human capital value-for-money analysis' (Jump, 2017), and aims to show that NCS 'produces' a 'return on investment' of between £2.20 and £8.36 (depending on the time of year of the programme and what factors are included). This claim is supported by highly complex and questionable economic modelling; I plan to discuss this in more detail in a future article. For now, it is enough to say that any monetising of young people's involvement in a youth programme changes the nature of that programme. However seductive it may be to make cost-based claims, they undermine any notion of youth provision as being intrinsically important; a matter of young people's 'rights' to association, to play and to active citizenship, amongst others (see Farthing, 2017).

Neoliberalism is inherently individualising – it is about the 'privatisation of public troubles' (Hall & O'Shea, 2013, p.12). This can clearly be seen in the way NCS is evaluated – for all that the programme appears to be rooted in group work and team-building, the methods and language of evaluation suggest rather that what is really valued is the creation of entrepreneurial individuals, who will work to improve their own lives and may even 'help' those less fortunate, but are not expected to develop any understanding of structural inequalities, let alone challenge them.

This is reflected in the wording of questionnaires used to evaluate NCS outcomes. Since early pilots of the scheme, young people have been asked to agree or disagree with various statements at the beginning of NCS and after taking part. Their results are compared with a 'control group' of young people who did not participate. The evaluators use these results to measure the 'distance travelled' in terms of the young people's attitudes and behaviours. Such evaluation mechanisms can be problematic in themselves; but what is particularly interesting here is how some of the evaluation statements embody the neoliberal ideology of NCS. In past versions of the evaluation, young people have been asked whether they agree that 'In the long run people get the respect they deserve in this world', and 'If you don't succeed in life it's your own fault' (see de St Croix, 2011; 2013; 2015). These statements are classically neoliberal, reproducing the message that success is earned, failure is our own fault, and social context does not matter. The agree/disagree statements in more recent iterations of the evaluation have been less obviously crude, but the changes measured by NCS remain fundamentally individualist and neglect the role of social inequalities.

The way ahead for NCS: Reform, replace, or review?

Until recent political events, the practice of re-imagining youth work - thinking in a utopian way about what youth work could, or should, become – may have been a creatively rich exercise, yet it sometimes felt futile, at least beyond the very local scale. In the light of the recent general election campaign and results, and without over-romanticising the possibilities for electoral politics, it is now not only reasonable but even urgent for practitioners, activists and researchers to think seriously and practically about what kind of youth work policy and practice we would like to see, and how we might get from here to there.

In this context, reviewing the NCS may not appear to be the most pressing priority for the field. However, a re-imagined youth policy that does not question the basis of NCS would be both problematic and contradictory. Just as local authority youth services were, quite rightly, the target of robust criticism by progressives in the past (for example, for being overly bureaucratic, too ready to see young people as 'problems' to be 'fixed', insufficiently self-critical, and too quick to conform to the policy priorities of the day), today the NCS receives the bulk of government money and support for youth work. As such, it must be subjected to critical scrutiny.

Unlike 'value for money' criticisms, which tend to call for cost-cutting alongside ever more complex forms of metrics-based evaluation and auditing, this article suggests that merely reforming NCS is unlikely to be transformative. NCS's entire formation and existence are bound up in conservative neoliberal logic: it is fundamentally based on product rather than process; on consumption rather than creativity; on the quickest possible throughput of both young people and youth workers for maximum profit. However, an immediate closure of NCS – even if it is replaced by neighbourhood youth work - may not be the best way ahead either. If politics is to become more decentralised and participatory, it is vital that policy changes must not be imposed on people – particularly marginalised groups of young people and precariously employed workers.

Rather than reforming or (immediately) replacing NCS, then, I suggest that it should be reviewed holistically alongside youth work provision and resourcing, both nationally and locally. After a period of transition, the resources currently allocated to NCS should be devolved to local communities for participatory budgeting by young people, youth workers and community members. Certain principles must underpin this budgeting: for example, money should be ring-fenced for young people's informal leisure-time services that they attend by choice; young people and youth workers should have a say on how programmes are carried out; and youth workers must be valued and supported. In making these decisions, local committees may well build on the positive aspects of NCS, that themselves draw on many decades of youth work history and practice: the residentials, the emphasis on groups, and on young people's action and political education. Other elements might be rethought: the layers of profit-slicing, the restriction to 16 year olds, the short-term nature of the project, and the 'packaged product' orientation that militates against genuine youth participation.

What I am calling for is a re-imagined youth work provision – in which localised versions of NCS can be considered, yet only alongside other forms of youth work. Any change should not be sudden or imposed; time must be taken to discuss the possibilities with young people and youth workers, to think about how we can learn from the successes and limitations of various forms of youth provision, and how we can best use resources to benefit young people – taking into account the need for specific attention to potentially marginalised social groups. Local, participative decision-making means that, in some local areas, the idea of keeping a 'summer' or 'school leaver' element could be retained. The point is that such decisions must be made locally, primarily involving those most affected and most knowledgeable – young people and youth workers.

Acknowledgement and note

Grateful thanks to youth workers, researchers and others who discussed an earlier version of this paper – alongside a very stimulating paper by Bernard Davies (2017) - at 'In Defence of Youth Work' seminars in Manchester and London in June 2017, entitled 'What future for state-funded youth work?' I intend to develop these ideas further in future writing, and welcome correspondence on this topic: tania.de_st_croix@kcl.ac.uk.

References

- Cameron, D. (2016) I've found my first job after politics, building the Big Society, *The Telegraph*, 11th October.
- Challenge, the (2017) NCS programme leader job description, downloaded from *The Challenge website* on 22nd June 2017
<http://www.ncsthechallenge.org/site/uploads/2017/01/2017ProgrammeLeader.pdf>
- Conservative Party (2007) It's time to inspire Britain's teenagers: National citizen service for the 21st century: A six-week programme for every school leaver, London: Conservative Party.

- Davies, B. (2017) Beyond the local authority youth service: Could the state fund open access youth work – and if so, how? A speculative paper for critical discussion, *Youth and Policy*, 116: 24-44.
- de St Croix, T. (2011) 'Struggles and silences: Policy, youth work and the National Citizen Service', *Youth and Policy*, 106: 43-59
- de St Croix, T. (2012) 'If someone is not a success in life it's their own fault: What Coalition youth policy says about young people and youth workers', *In Defence of Youth Work*, 15th August, <http://indefenceofyouthwork.com/2012/08/15/if-someone-is-not-a-success-in-life-its-their-own-fault-coalition-youth-policy-revisited/>
- de St Croix (2015) Volunteers and entrepreneurs? Youth work and the Big Society, in G. Bright (ed.) *Youth work: Histories, policy and contexts*, Palgrave Macmillan.
- de St Croix, T. (2016) *Grassroots youth work: Policy, passion and resistance in practice*, Bristol: Policy Press.
- Education Select Committee (2011) *Services for young people*, London: The Stationary Office.
- Farthing, R. (2017) Can rights trump outcomes? *Radical Youth Practice*, available at <https://radicalyouthpractice.org/2017/05/29/can-rights-trump-outcomes/>
- Hall, S. & O'Shea, A. (2013) 'Common-sense neoliberalism', *Soundings*, 55: 8-24.
- Mill, S. and Waite, C. (2017) Brands of youth citizenship and the politics of scale: National Citizen Service in the United Kingdom, *Political Geography*, 56: 66-76.
- Jump (2017), *If you could bottle it... A wellbeing and human capital value for money analysis of the NCS 2015 programme*, Jump.
- Murphy, S.F. (2017) The rise of a neo-communitarian project: A critical youth work study into the pedagogy of the National Citizen Service in England, *Citizenship, Social and Economics Education* 1–15. Doi 10.1177/2047173417707760
- Mycock, A. (2010) National Citizen Service is an unproven vanity project, *Guardian*, 24th July.
- NAO (National Audit Office) (2017) *National Citizen Service: Report by the comptroller and auditor general*, January, London: Cabinet Office and Department for Culture, Media and Sport.
- Public Accounts Committee (2017) *National Citizen Service: 46th report of session 2016-17*, March, London: House of Commons.
- Rochester, C. (2013) *Rediscovering voluntary action: The beat of a different drum*, Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Smith, M. (1982) *Creators not consumers: Rediscovering social education (2nd Edn)*, NAYC Publications.
- UK Youth Voice (2017) *Youth Voice manifesto: Dear Prime Minister*, London: UK Youth.
- Winnett, R. & Kirkup, J. (2010) 'General election 2010: David Cameron: What Eton taught me about citizenship', *Daily Telegraph*, 9th April.

Tania de St Croix is Lecturer in the Sociology of Youth and Childhood, King's College London.