

A Discussion Paper

Meet the Menders

If our social fabric is frayed,
who's fixing it?



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Executive summary

Britain's social fabric is frayed. But in communities across the country, people are hard at the work of repair. For years, many thousands of people have been working to revitalise the capacity of communities and foster a healthier and more active civic sphere.

In recent years, there have been a growing number of programmatic efforts to support this work – pots of funding for one initiative or another. But less attention has been paid to the practitioners who do this work; to the skills, methods, and dispositions they are applying; and to the institutions, training, and communities that help people to do this work.

For the past six months, Kinship Works has been working with the support of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. We set out to map the disciplines of civic renewal and their supporting professional architectures. Our goal was to treat civic renewal with the same respect we show to mature professions, from midwifery to brain surgery, while being mindful of the risks of codifying this work, losing the very qualities that make this work so powerful. We are grateful for JRF's support for this work. The recommendations are our own.

The problem

The disciplines we describe are not short of skilled practitioners, but these practitioners too often have to go it alone. They often lack a shared account of what the work is, somewhere to learn it, colleagues to share skills with, and names and evidence that mean something to senior leaders and funders. Much of the support for civic disciplines that does exist has been built piecemeal by small organisations, often with significant duplication.

This has consequences. Practitioners often arrive at the work of civic renewal sideways and learn it without support. Work that is

not understood as skilled is not funded as skilled: it is bundled in with other duties and is the first to be cut when budgets are tight. In government, one symptom of this lack of appreciation for civic skills is the imbalance between capital and revenue; it is now much easier to fund the renovation of a community space than it is to pay for the skills that will help that space to thrive.

Despite all this, we are also alert to the risks of treating civic renewal as just another set of professions. Mapping a field can flatten it, and describing discipline can slip into prescription and bureaucratisation. Some of the work we describe in this report would be damaged by being codified, and some practitioners want nothing that looks like a traditional profession. We have kept this tension in mind as we moved through the work to recommendations.

A typology of disciplines

We have identified six broad categories of work, comprising fifteen disciplines. We do not see these as rigid categories, but as something more like recurring patterns. They are:

1. **Connecting and brokering** – this covers community and peer connectors, local area and patch-based coordinators, and civic space-makers and space-holders
2. **Mediating** – this covers community stewards, and peace-builders and bridge-builders
3. **Empowering** – this covers community organisers, and community power-builders and collective advocates
4. **Seeing and reflecting** – this covers lived-experience and peer researchers, and cultural, creative and heritage practitioners
5. **Reforming and building** – this covers civic institution-builders and systemic

imagers, and community and social entrepreneurs.

A sixth category, **Creating the conditions**, comprises work that is more enabling. It tends to sit in public institutions, looking outward. In this category we include institutional wranglers and system connectors, relational practitioners in public services, civic and place leaders, and infrastructure rewirers. If the other disciplines we describe engage directly in the work of civic repair and renewal, these disciplines are more about making the work possible.

Cutting across these disciplines we also identify five practices that show up in many disciplines. These are: restorative and healing practice, deep listening, facilitation and convening, participatory methods and co-design, and community research and inquiry.

Finally, we describe a civic ethic. This is a disposition we found running through almost all of the best civic work. It contrasts with the bureaucratic mentality that currently dominates government. It includes: seeing the whole person, as opposed to a single problem or category; starting with strengths, not deficits; seeing relationships as the work rather than an afterthought; being grounded in place; centring agency; and being driven by purpose and moral values, and comfortable with blurring personal and professional boundaries.

We hold all of these definitions lightly and offer them for discussion and improvement.

Mapping support

For each of the fifteen disciplines we asked: how well is this work supported, and how mature is the infrastructure around it? We have mapped five dimensions of support: codification, institutions, learning and training, communities of practice, and academic underpinnings. We rate each on a five-point scale from “missing” to “fully mature”. A low score is not always a negative; in some cases, disciplines told us they do not want the formalisation and restriction of some of

the forms of support such as formal qualifications. However, gaps such as a complete lack of available training, or no communities of practice do make it harder for practitioners to develop, and disciplines to flourish.

We find significant variation. Some civic disciplines have dense support built up over decades; others have almost none. Community organisers and community and social entrepreneurs have the most mature support architecture, while community stewards and institutional wranglers have the least well developed. There is also significant variation within disciplines: for example, peer research is well supported in mental health but largely absent from criminal justice or asylum, while peer connectors are well-supported inside the NHS but less so outside it. Support tends to follow funding, and stop where the money runs out. When we compare the different dimensions of support, we find that communities of practice are the strongest dimension, while codification and training are the weakest.

Recommendations

The work of civic renewal merits better support. However, this does not necessarily mean attempting to professionalise these disciplines, assuming they should follow the paths of more traditional careers. We believe it would be possible to more deliberately support this work without running this risk. One key principle is that the locus of civic renewal should remain in the civic sphere, while the state supports the work from a distance, for example with funding, convening, and by seeding institutions.

The civic sector should do the work needed to support these disciplines – developing role profiles, syllabuses, training courses, evaluation frameworks, and best practice case studies. It should do so, however, in a less piecemeal fashion, and more on the model of a commons. Relevant materials should be openly accessible and collectively governed. Government, major foundations, and keystone civic bodies should support this

work by backing a long-term funding and institutional settlement.

At the core of this settlement we propose the foundation of a **network of Civic Colleges**. These would be sites of civic power and learning, rooted in places, sitting independently in the civic sphere. They would be places for people to go to acquire and refine the disciplines we describe in this report, not least by sharing skills with each other.

We believe Civic Colleges would be most powerful if funded by an endowment model, likely with a blend of public and foundation and other philanthropic investment, potentially with statutory backing. Many or all of the Civic Colleges would grow from existing institutions and initiatives. For their design and spirit, we would look to historical institutions, such as settlement houses and mechanics' institutes, and the example of folk high schools in Denmark.

Beneath this headline proposal, we also recommend six strands of work:

- Funding centres of excellence for emerging disciplines
- Patient multi-year funding for convenings and peer networks
- A route to formal recognition for disciplines that want it
- Investment in pathways into disciplines, including apprenticeships and portable progression frameworks that span similar disciplines
- An effort to build the relevant enabling capacities in the public sector, in local government and frontline public services as much as in Whitehall
- Shared administrative infrastructure to free practitioners from operational work

Introduction

The phrase ‘Britain is broken’ has become so over-used that it rolls off the tongue with barely a thought. It means many things but chief among them is a sense that our social fabric is frayed – that community capacity and infrastructure have been dangerously depleted, and that as a society we are coming apart at the seams.

There is now a recognition not just that these trends must be reversed with urgency, but that this effort is already well underway. Across Britain people are working – and have been for years – to revitalise the capacity of communities and to foster a healthier and more vibrant civic sphere. Within these efforts, there is rightly a focus on ‘doubly disadvantaged’ places that exhibit material deprivation and a hollowed out civic life. If Britain is broken, the work of repair is well underway.

As the work of civic renewal has matured, there has been lots of talk about its programmatic aspects: projects like Big Local (a National Lottery Community Fund programme which invested £217m across 150 areas); government initiatives like Pride in Place; and the many local examples of communities taking ownership of assets, or improving health and wellbeing, or creating new opportunities for young people.

In this report we look at civic renewal through a different lens: the disciplines that make up the field. To date, this has been considered mostly in a piecemeal fashion, such as via research into a particular profession or practice. As a consequence, we lack a comprehensive understanding of the workforce needed to enact civic renewal, and of the requisite skills and mentalities. We also don’t have full sight of the support there is available today for these disciplines – from training, to practitioner communities, to role profiles and career pathways – or of the gaps in this support. This hinders those who want to support civic renewal, from philanthropic foundations to government.

In this project, we set out to map the disciplines of civic renewal, treating them with the same respect we would show to a mature profession, like teaching or midwifery. We have developed a typology, which we offer here for discussion. We have also mapped the supporting architecture around the disciplines we identified along five dimensions: codification, supporting institutions, learning and training, communities and meetups, and academic underpinnings. Finally, we make recommendations for how the disciplines of civic renewal could be better supported. We offer these in the same spirit as the typology – as starting points for discussion.

What felt clear, embarking on this work, is that the disciplines of civic renewal deserve to be valued more highly. At the same time, we are mindful of the risks of unnecessarily professionalising this work, and in doing so bureaucratising it. In the following section we offer a definition of the problem we are trying to solve, and the risks inherent to doing so.

The problem

The disciplines we describe in this report are often not short of enthusiastic practitioners. But what they very often lack is the kind of financial and institutional support that typically accompanies mature professions. This could be anything from a shared account of what the work is, somewhere to learn it, colleagues doing the same job who can be sought out to share skills with, and an academic evidence-base to explain the work's value to senior stakeholders and funders.

One consequence of this lack of definition, recognition, and support, is extensive duplication. Small organisations, working in isolation and with little money, write their own role profiles, design their own training, and build their own ways of showing that the work is worth funding. Very little of this work is then shared across the sector. It sits on hard drives, or in reports to funders, or in the head of the person who developed it.

There is also a cost for practitioners themselves. Very few of the practitioners we spoke to had set out to do the job they now do. They arrived at it sideways – through a volunteering role, or a job in a related service, or because something needed doing and nobody else was doing it. They learned the work as they went along, often without a supervisor who had done similar things before, and often without recognising that they were developing valuable skills. Several practitioners described a sense of isolation. People said they lacked colleagues to compare notes with, or a supervisor to discuss a difficult case with, or even an account of the work that makes sense to the people around them.

Underneath all this sits a question of value and standing. Many people we interviewed felt that government and other actors did not recognise the value of community organisations and the work they do, and that public institutions often behave in ways that actively hinder the work.

Community work has a long history of being patronised with a wave of the hand: this is charity, or volunteering, or a hero story. It is

treated as optional – nice when we can afford it – while other work, done by nurses and teachers, is essential.

The most common concerns we heard were:

- Investment in community organisations being regarded as risky: “they don’t trust us with money”. People drew attention to the tendency to trust large professional services organisations over community workers, who “are in it because we live here and breathe here”.
- A combination of silos and high staff turnover in government, which leaves community organisations having to speak to different parts of the same public authority multiple times, repeatedly building new relationships when trusted contacts move on.
- Occasional hostility, when government bodies such as local authorities see community organisations as stepping on their turf, or become perturbed by unconventional methods and approaches. In contrast, we also heard about excellent examples that show what is possible when public authorities and civic organisations work together and value each other’s contributions.
- Community organisations struggling to show value through traditional performance reporting and funding control mechanisms, which often insist on narrow measures of deliverables.

This undervaluing also shows up in budgets. Civic work is often bundled in with other duties, given to whoever has capacity, and cut first when budgets are tight. The community manager ends up also fixing the light bulbs and issuing the invoices. The problem is not just a lack of funding, but continual uncertainty. It is common for community and civic organisations to have to put staff at risk on an annual basis while they wait for funding to be approved, or the latest contract or grant agreement to be signed. The organisation may

have existed for decades, but staff are not afforded the security of knowing from one year to the next whether they will remain employed.

Finally, the undervaluing of civic disciplines plays out in an over-emphasis on capital funding, relative to revenue funding. Government finds it easier to fund buildings than the people needed to run them. This is partly because the work of civic renewal is less legible than the buildings it takes place within. The result is a stock of civic assets that are under-used because the disciplines that would activate these spaces have no reliable way of being paid for. For all these reasons, we think it worthwhile better defining, recognising, and supporting the disciplines of civic renewal.

The risks of professionalisation

We recognise that there are downsides to formalisation, for example by encouraging civic work in the direction of defined professions and regulated qualifications. Professionalisation is not the only way to value work, or to support it better, and it will not be right for many of the disciplines we name in this report. In the course of the work, we heard four particular risks to keep in mind as we try to bring more definition to the work of civic renewal.

The first is that categorising disciplines forces intrinsically human and relational work into bureaucratic boxes, losing the holistic instincts that make it powerful. A community project leader is more approachable than a Job Centre adviser, or a doctor, partly because they are seen as a human first, as opposed to being a specialised ‘professional’. Civic work is able to range across the siloes of bureaucratic or clinical professions. By categorising the work, we could risk making it more legible, but less impactful.

Second, there is a risk that formalising this work makes it less adaptable. Often, the people who do civic work on the ground find themselves spanning a huge range of skills and activities: chairing a meeting,

deescalating a fight, navigating local services. People said they respond to new challenges every day on intuition, with little time to think and intellectualise. There are downsides to this, but also upsides. Some argued that community work consists of precisely this ability to adapt. Others said the work is less about skills and practices, and more about applying a certain disposition in a wide range of situations – they talked about their work as a vocation, not a profession. For people who felt this way, the idea of defining disciplines came a distant second to the need for more funding.

Third, there is a risk that description turns into prescription. This is a particular risk if civic work becomes codified into syllabuses and training. Civic work adds value in part because it embodies the notion of *metis* described by James C Scott: practical intelligence learned by people working in a local context. We should not assume that learning requires formal training; it might just as well be achieved by swapping tacit knowledge among practitioners.

Fourth, professionalisation risks creating an industry of certificates and gatekeepers, inhibiting the real work. For many types of civic work – e.g. peer researchers – it is vital that the work remains readily accessible, and does not become hidden behind institutions.

In general, these concerns have leaned us towards certain ways of recognising and supporting the work of civic renewal – for example, communities of practice, as opposed to more formal accredited qualifications. We also note that each of the disciplines we identify are different; some lend themselves more to professionalisation than others.

How to read this report

This report draws on a programme of interviews and visits carried out over the course of 2026. We spoke to practitioners working across the disciplines we describe, along with funders, academics, and people working in institutions that support this work. Alongside the interviews we visited places where civic renewal is under way, spending time with practitioners where they work. Quotations are unattributed to respect the privacy of practitioners. The emerging typology was tested in a workshop and the mapping of support was assembled through desk research and tested with practitioners in the relevant fields.

The report is set out in three parts.

Part 1 lays the conceptual groundwork. Anyone trying to make sense of civic work runs quickly into questions of definition – what counts as a discipline, how does this differ from a practice, where does the work sit in relation to the state, and how does this all relate to longer-standing traditions, like community development? In the first section of the report we share reflections on these questions.

Part 2 presents the emerging typology and our assessments of the maturity of current support. We present a typology with three sections: 15 disciplines grouped into six categories; a series of cross-cutting practices that run across many disciplines; and a civic ethic, a disposition and moral code that we notice runs through almost all civic work. The typology is not intended as a set of rigid categories, but as a series of common patterns. We hope it is helpful for people seeking to understand this work, and for practitioners to contextualise their work and see the wider movement they are part of.

For each discipline we evaluate the maturity of the supporting architecture. We do this across five dimensions: codification, institutions, learning and training, communities of practice, and academic underpinnings. The

intent is to show where support is already mature and where it is threadbare. The idea of rating maturity raises complicated questions, which we also address in this section. Nonetheless, we hope these assessments are helpful for funders and policymakers who want to support this work.

Part 3 shares our recommendations. We argue that the locus of civic renewal must sit in the civic sphere; the state's job is to create the conditions in which this work can thrive – through infrastructure, funding, convening, and by seeding institutions. We make recommendations on these fronts, at the heart of which is the idea of supporting the creation of a network of Civic Colleges: centres of power and learning, existing in the civic sphere. These important institutions could be endowed via combined investments from foundations, high-net worth donors, and government.

Scope

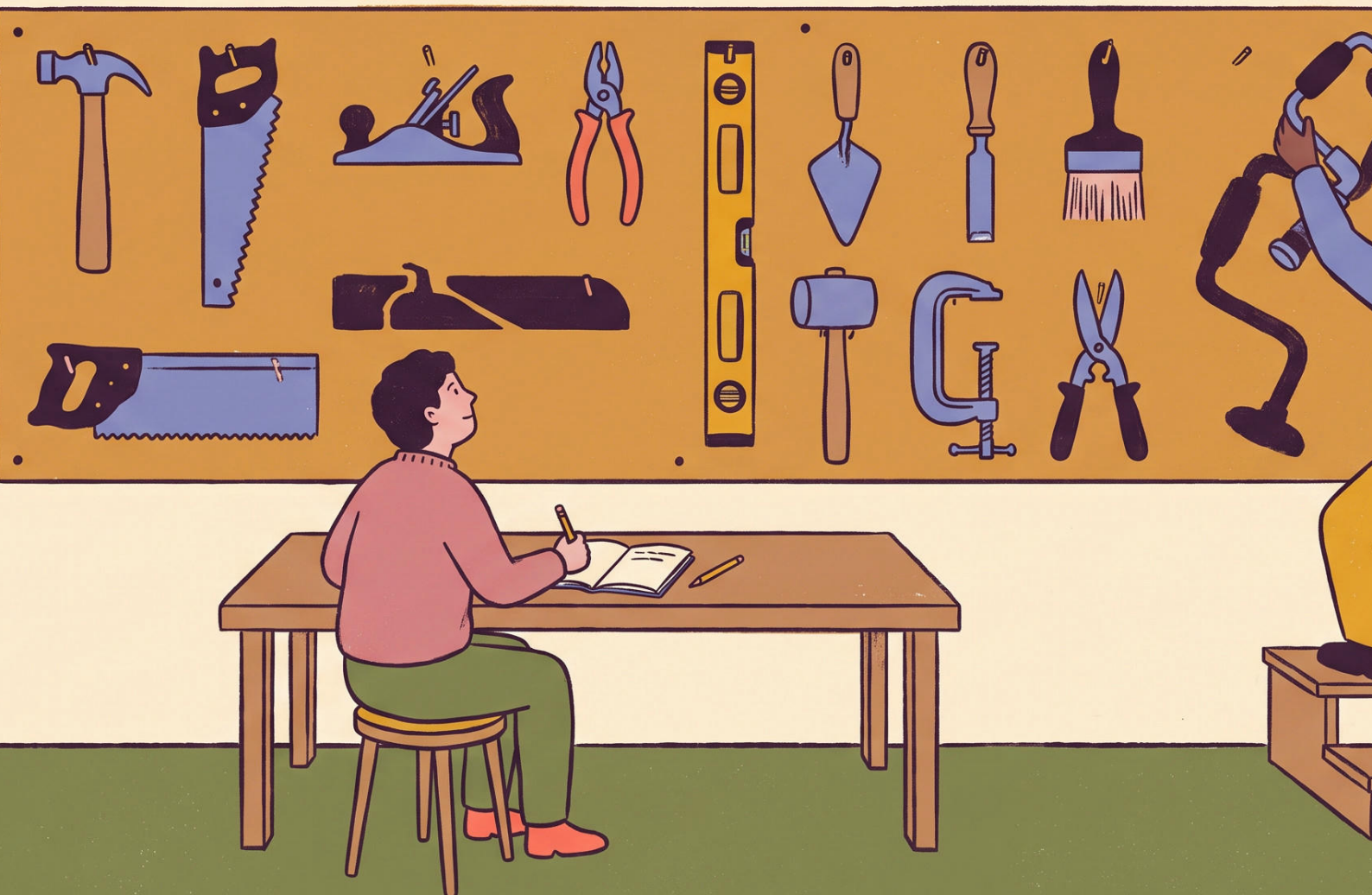
We have focused on the most direct efforts at civic and community-led renewal, emphasising what it takes to do this work in doubly disadvantaged places. We therefore look mainly at work that sits outside the state, in the civic sphere, as opposed to work done by public servants. For more on the public sector, see our wider initiative at Kinship Works to map communities of public service reformers.¹

We are also concerned with the ecosystem in which this work takes place, because it does not happen in a vacuum. We have therefore also looked at the most relevant roles that sit in the state and look outward (e.g. a relational social worker, a civic-minded school leader, a local authority Chief Executive who sees their work as stewardship of a place). Of course, these boundaries are blurred; many people who work in the civic sphere are themselves funded by government.

¹Freeguard, Gavin. Kinship Works, *Mapping public sector reformers: an update*. Available at: <https://medium.com/kinship-works/mapping-public-sector-reformers-an-update-382f1de85d4c>

1

Definitions and distinctions



Definitions and distinctions

As we moved through our research, we got an ever better appreciation for the nuances involved in the work of civic renewal. Through our interviews and visits, we soon realised we were seeing not just a range of different disciplines but also a set of cross-cutting practices – techniques and ways of working that seemed to be used by many disciplines, much as a technique like statistical analysis can be used by many different academic disciplines, from physics to sociology.

Along the way, we also accumulated a series of distinctions and contextual observations that we found useful in making sense of what we saw – about how one discipline can operate at different levels of a system, how the disciplines of civic renewal sit in relation to the state, and how they relate to the longer tradition of community development. We comment on these issues here, before turning in Part 2 to the typology itself.

Disciplines versus practices

We see a discipline as a recognisable cluster of skills, mentalities, and methods, used purposefully to achieve a particular end. Disciplines are sufficiently coherent that an architecture can grow around them (e.g. meetings, journals, training, and syllabuses). They often come to be associated with a sense of belonging or professional identity. Disciplines are about more than techniques; they include mentalities, ethics, and cultures.

We see a practice as a technique or method, or a family of techniques or methods, which is used by many different disciplines. School subjects are a useful analogy: physics, chemistry, and biology are disciplines; while statistical analysis, running experiments, and constructing proofs are practices used in all these disciplines. Sometimes, a practice can also grow to become a discipline in its own right; an example is qualitative research, or a research method like ethnography.

Levels of the system

Most of the disciplines we have named can be practised at multiple levels of a system. A civic peer connector, for example, can operate at the level of an individual community centre; at the level of a city, connecting networks across it; or at national level, convening a community of practice. In some cases, practitioners work their way up through these levels as they become more senior. In other cases the levels require very different skill sets, meaning that people can spend whole careers getting better at one level.

These levels become important when we begin to assess professional support. Support for a discipline is often uneven across levels, and a discipline can look well supported until you ask: ‘at what level?’ Several of the best-resourced training routes we found equip a person to do the work at junior level, or in a local place, but with no route to a more senior or geographically scaled version of the role. It will often be useful, then, to specify both a discipline and the level at which is being carried out.

Conditions and sequencing

Different disciplines and practices are needed in different combinations at different stages of the work of civic renewal. In our research, we found that this was less about time and more about conditions. For example, work of civic imagination can depend on there already being sufficient trust in a place. A community might need to start with healing and peace-building, or with building relationships through the practical work of reclaiming a civic space, before they are able to ask big questions about the future.

We find it helpful to think of an analogy with the disciplines involved in building a house: architects do their work early; then bricklayers and carpenters come in; then plumbers

Figure 1 One discipline, three levels of the system



Note: Support for a discipline is often uneven across levels; a discipline can look well supported until you ask ‘at what level?’

and electricians; then plasterers and painters; while the architect might return later to shape how the work is proceeding. The question ‘which disciplines do you need for civic renewal to flourish?’ is inseparable from questions about local conditions, sequencing, and maturity.

Position vs. the state

Some of the disciplines we describe sit in the state and look outward into communities (e.g. relational practitioners in public services; civic-minded school leaders). Others sit in communities, either working within the community they are part of (e.g. peer navigators), or looking back at the state (e.g. institutional wranglers). Many of the disciplines we describe are best thought of as standing in the historic third space of the commons, and indeed much of the work we describe can be thought of as variants of commoning.

None of these relationships are clean. Increasingly the state funds roles (e.g. social prescribing link workers, Local Area Coordinators, Community Health and Wellbeing Workers) that sit, as best they can, in the civic sphere. The position of a discipline is less about where the funding comes from

and more about the look and feel of the work – what logic the work runs to, and how the role is perceived by the people around it.

How does community development fit in?

One term we heard often from practitioners was ‘community development’. This raised the question of how community development relates to the work we are describing: is it a discipline, or a practice, for example, or something else?

Over time, we came to think of community development as a process, happening in a place, typically involving many of the disciplines we describe in this report. It is the broad and long-running work of building connection, capacity, power, and economic sustainability in a place. Most of the fifteen disciplines we describe show up in this process at some point, and several are essential.

Continued

Seen this way, we could understand civic renewal as a twenty-first-century evolution of community development. The goal is similar though arguably broader. What has changed is the level of ambition and urgency but also the terrain – a more depleted state, a thinner associational life. We also now have a different understanding of the relevant craft, and arguably a more granular sense of the disciplines and practices involved.

We could say that community development has broadened, deepened, and fragmented, much as academic subjects broaden and deepen over time, splitting and branching into different and distinct sub-disciplines; particle physics, astrophysics, materials science. Some of the ‘newer’ disciplines we describe here might previously have been seen as aspects of community development. Others are more genuinely novel.

Our goal in this report is not to displace or re-label the historic and important work of community development, but to bring new levels of specificity to the disciplines and practices involved when this work is done today.

2

The disciplines and their support



The disciplines and their support

In this section of the report we present our typology of the disciplines of civic renewal, and, for each discipline, an assessment of the architecture that supports the work. Our goal is to bring more shape and visibility to work that has often been hard to see. We also hope that a typology can help practitioners to situate themselves and each other in a wider field, and help funders and policymakers to shape the support they provide.

- Communities of practice and peer networks for practitioners to join
- The work's academic underpinnings

Our assessments of support are presented in summary for each discipline, before being brought together in a table at the end of this part of the report.

How we have structured the typology

As we mapped disciplines, we began to notice two other aspects to the work of civic renewal. First, some methods or techniques are used in multiple disciplines. Second, we began to see a certain disposition or mentality which was present in almost all of the best work we saw, and which we came to think of as a 'civic ethic'.

The typology therefore comprises:

- The fifteen disciplines, grouped into six higher-level categories
- A set of cross-cutting practices that run across many disciplines
- A civic ethic that characterises the work as a whole

For each of the fifteen disciplines we describe the work as we saw it in our site visits and interviews, give examples, and assess the maturity of support. Our assessments of support cover five domains:

- How the work is codified, e.g. in frameworks, occupational standards and role profiles
- Institutions that support and develop the work
- Learning, training and continuing development

The fifteen disciplines

A Connecting and brokering

Make new links between people, institutions and opportunities

- 01 Community and peer connectors
- 02 Local area and patch-based coordinators
- 03 Civic space-makers and space-holders

B Mediating

Repair relationships that have broken down

- 04 Community stewards
- 05 Peace-builders and bridge-builders

C Empowering

Build and exercise a community's collective power

- 06 Community organisers
- 07 Community power-builders and collective advocates

D Seeing and reflecting

Produce knowledge and meaning about a place, from within the place itself

- 08 Lived-experience and peer researchers
- 09 Cultural, creative and heritage practitioners

E Reforming and building

Build working civic alternatives that can sustain and grow

- 10 Civic institution-builders and systemic imaginers
- 11 Community and social entrepreneurs

F Creating the conditions

Work from inside institutions to make civic renewal possible

- 12 Institutional wranglers and system connectors
- 13 Relational practitioners in public services
- 14 Civic and place leaders
- 15 Infrastructure rewirers

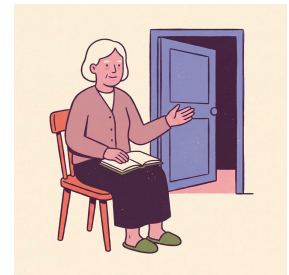
A Connecting and brokering

These disciplines help people navigate life in a place. They work by strengthening relationships: between individual people; between people and institutions or opportunities; and between communities and public services. This supports civic renewal by strengthening the connections through which a community functions.

What distinguishes these disciplines from the *mediating* disciplines that follow is that connectors and brokers tend to make new links, while mediators tend to repair links that have broken down (e.g. due to a loss of trust).

01

Community and peer connectors



Maturity of support

3 Codification	3 Institutions	3 Training	3 Communities	3 Academia	3.0 Overall
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The core work of community and peer connectors is seeing the person in front of them, listening to what matters to them, and then brokering useful connections – to another person, a group, an asset, an opportunity, or a formal service. There is a priority on warm relationships, as opposed to cold-referring or ‘discharging’ people. The work is relational and open-ended; community and peer connectors form and foster relationships, rather than case-managing. If needed, they can bring their weight to bear to make sure connections work for people – chasing up emails, arranging meetings. They can also translate between the state and the community, and between different community groups. In these cases, the work is similar to the disciplines of advocacy and empowerment, which we cover below.

Connectors are employed in various parts of the system, and where they sit changes the nature of the work. Some are employed by the state, for example as social prescribing

link workers in the NHS. Others are employed by community anchors and the voluntary and community sector; faith sector; or social enterprise sector, where they tend to be accountable to a place or neighbourhood, rather than to a service. The skills involved are much the same in both cases, though the incentives and operating environment differ.

Examples include:

- [Social prescribing link workers](#), now employed in large numbers in the NHS
- Community Health and Wellbeing Workers ([Paddington Development Trust](#))
- [Bolton at Home’s Peer Navigators](#)
- Care navigators and community connectors in local authority and VCS settings

- [Heart of Blyth](#), Northumberland County Council’s community wellbeing programme, funded through the Health Foundation’s Shaping Places for Healthier Lives

journals, but little work on the discipline of connecting and brokering in its own right. There is no dedicated journal and outside the NHS there are few communities of practice to join.

Assessing the supporting architecture

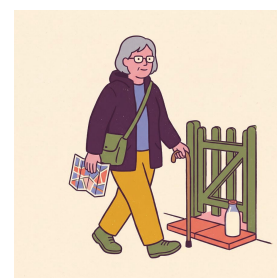
Connectors and brokers are some of the better-codified disciplines covered in this report, though mainly in an NHS context. NHS England’s investment in social prescribing has produced a [workforce development framework](#), describing standards and continuing development expectations; a national academy, the [National Academy for Social Prescribing](#); and a practitioner membership body, the [National Association of Link Workers](#), working on training and career pathways. Around [3,600 link workers](#) were in post in England in 2023/24, with the NHS Long Term Workforce Plan projecting a need for 9,000 by 2036/37. Nothing comparable exists for the same work outside healthcare, where roles and job descriptions are typically developed locally and there are no shared occupational standards.

Training is thinner than the level of codification suggests. There is no single regulated, nationally recognised qualification for this work. What exists is a patchwork: accredited short courses, some e-learning, the Level 3 [Community Health and Wellbeing Worker apprenticeship](#), and locally designed programmes. Programmes tend to be time-limited. For example, Bolton’s Peer Navigators, one of the more established schemes, is [an 18-month, part-time placement](#) with no formalised route into a comparable career.

Peer connectors are a good example of the opportunities and the risks of state involvement. NHS money has done a lot to define and legitimise this discipline, but it has also pulled the discipline’s centre of gravity into clinical settings, and shaped what counts as good practice around what a primary care network needs. The academic literature follows the same contours – a growing evidence base on social prescribing, published mostly in health

02

Local area and patch-based coordinators



Maturity of support

4 Codification	3 Institutions	3 Training	4 Communities	3 Academia	3.4 Overall
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Area-based coordinators are a well-codified discipline supported by three decades of evidence, a well-established framework, and an active professional network. The Local Area Coordinator model was first developed in Western Australia in the late 1980s and brought to the UK via Ralph Broad's [Inclusive Neighbourhoods](#). The model embeds a coordinator in a defined community of c.8-10,000 people to help residents develop their own vision of a good life, build networks, and limit unnecessary dependence on public services.

The difference between area-focused coordinators and peer connectors is that the latter treat their unit as a person: someone comes for help, or is referred. A local area, or patch-based, coordinator's unit of work is a place. They hold a defined geography and are, in a loose sense, responsible for that place, a little like a park ranger. Posts sit mainly within local government or its commissioned partners, established through site agreements. This gives the discipline a stability that most of the other disciplines in this report lack, but also ties its fortunes closely to the fortunes of local authority budgets.

Examples include:

- Local Area Coordination programmes in [Derby](#), [Thurrock](#), [Swansea](#), the Isle of Wight and the Scottish Borders
- The [Local Area Coordination Network](#), hosted by Community Catalysts

Assessing the supporting architecture

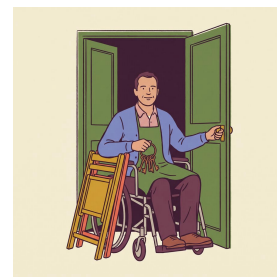
The supporting architecture is among the most strong and coherent we found. There are documented role profiles, supervision standards and design principles, maintained by the [Local Area Coordination Network](#). Practitioners can access induction support and regional gatherings.

There are credible evaluation studies, including social return on investment analyses by Kingfishers for [Thurrock](#) (2015) and [Derby](#) (2016), suggesting around £4 of social value for every £1 invested. There is also peer-reviewed work by [Bainbridge and Lunt at the University of York](#), drawing on their evaluation of City of York Council's programme, and an [independent evaluation of the Suffolk pilot by Reinhardt and Chatsiou at the University of Essex](#). Because the discipline has an international footprint, it may be more recognised and resilient than a purely domestic discipline.

Two gaps in support stand out. There is no enduring body charged with supporting the discipline, while the most relevant training is not recognised as a regulated qualification, and is not widely available through universities or further education colleges. This means a person can be a highly competent Local Area Coordinator but struggle to demonstrate their competence or transfer their skills into a neighbouring area of work.

03

Civic space-makers and space-holders



Maturity of support

2 Codification	4 Institutions	2 Training	4 Communities	3 Academia	3.0 Overall
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These practitioners create and hold open spaces in which communities can form. This work is often central to the work of community asset development organisations – bodies that acquire, restore and run buildings and land on behalf of a community, such as [the Old Fire Station in Gipton, Leeds](#) or [intoBodmin](#). They often hold a building in community ownership and use it as a base for wider community-building activity.

This work is distinct from the more general role of community anchors, tending to focus on a particular space, often one or more community-run buildings. Civic space-makers and holders do not ‘deliver programmes’ or ‘services’. As one interviewee described their work: “I try to make our space feel like a mix of a club and a service”. There is an emphasis on the space being welcoming and safe; a place people can go, outside of the state, with no judgment and no expectations.

Space-makers and holders include people stewarding physical assets but also people who focus on the more relational aspect of the work: people who hold gatherings, convenings, and engage in everyday civic hospitality, whether part-paid or unpaid.

Examples include:

- [The Old Fire Station, Gipton, Leeds](#)
- [intoBodmin](#)
- [Hastings Commons](#)
- [Nudge Community Builders, Plymouth](#)

Assessing the supporting architecture

The aspect of this work that relates to buying and refurbishing assets is reasonably well served. There is a vibrant sector of institutions working in and around community-led development, and codification related to property management, finance, and governance (e.g. see [ACRE’s Hallmark quality standard for community buildings](#) and [Locality’s guidance on community asset transfer](#), the [accreditation scheme for community-led housing advisers](#) run through Community Led Homes with the Chartered Institute of Housing, and the Community Land Trust Network’s [State of the Sector](#) report, and detailed [operational guidance for community shops and pubs](#) from Plunkett UK). Training follows the same pattern: there are many workshops available on issues like asset transfer, the governance of community spaces, and community share issues, fundraising. Peer learning is also on offer, with a growing number of [study visits](#) to pioneering sites of community development, such as those Stir to Action runs through its ABCs of Community Assets programme.

There is much less support for the relational aspects of this work. Holding a space open – being present in the space, without running a service or programme, letting a room fill with conversation and connection, judging when to intervene and when not – is demanding work, particularly in communities that are divided or where trust is low. The skills involved in this work are largely unwritten. The nearest analogue we found in our research is the Restorative Justice Council’s

Practitioner Registration Framework, which describes levels of skill in holding difficult conversations.

Although there is a case for this work receiving better support, several practitioners also told us there are risks to codification.

A competency framework for an idea like ‘civic hospitality’ would clearly undermine the intuitive and informal spirit that makes this work valuable. There might be a case for seeing relational space-holding more as a practice – something many disciplines do – than as a discipline in its own right.

Nonetheless, the practitioners we spoke to were clear that they wanted more time to reflect on their work and learn, better security of tenure, and the chance to learn from people doing similar work.

B Mediating

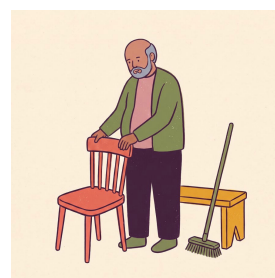
These disciplines are all about maintaining or repairing relationships, often in a place. While peer connectors build new relationships, mediators help to repair relationships that have gone wrong – between neighbours, community groups, or between a community and an institution. In places where it's needed, this work is often primary: you have to rebuild trust before other work (e.g. connections, or imagination) can happen. There are two disciplines in this category, the first of which can apply in any community and the second of which tends to focus on places where there are divisions and trust has broken down.

04

Community stewards

Maturity of support

1 Codification	1 Institutions	1 Training	1 Communities	2 Academia	1.2 Overall
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Community stewards smooth the countless small frictions that arise when a community shares space together. Think of the managers of the [Old Kent Road Family Zone](#) in Southwark, for example, or of park keepers who ‘know the regulars’, or library workers who function as part-time social workers, keeping the peace in a space. This is ambient work; it is there in the background, and this makes it different from a more explicit process of facilitation or mediation.

Community stewardship is one of the most important and undervalued of the disciplines we encountered, but some might question whether it is really a discipline at all. Certainly this work can be done by people with a wide range of job titles, and it shows up in the day jobs of many public servants – a teacher watching over a playground at lunchtime, for example. While this might make community stewardship look like a practice, rather than a discipline, we believe it is worth treating as a discipline because community stewards are working towards something specific – a shared space that is safe

and welcoming – and this entails a key set of core skills. We also met people whose working lives are organised around these skills, even if their job title does not say so. In the end, we concluded that naming community stewardship as a discipline might help this work get the recognition and support it deserves.

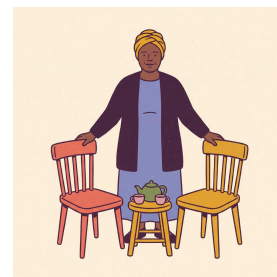
Assessing the supporting architecture

Community stewards have very little support; this discipline gets the lowest maturity rating in the report. Practitioners sit mostly in sectoral frameworks – librarianship, housing support officer, park ranger (for example, CILIP’s [Professional Knowledge and Skills Base](#) for librarians) – which codify the primary function of the role and often miss the aspects of stewardship. There is no body supporting the discipline, no direct training, and no peer community for people who steward civic or public space. The closest thing to codification we found in our research is the Warm Welcome Campaign’s [guide to setting up a Warm Welcome Space](#). Relevant skills such as trauma-informed practice and

de-escalation are taught to public servants in some sectors as an adjunct to other professional development.

There is a small academic literature, but this focuses mostly on social infrastructure, left-behind neighbourhoods, and the costs of a depleted civic realm. We did not find any significant literature on the practice of community stewardship itself – what a good steward does, hour by hour, in a library or a park or community centre.

Peace-builders and bridge-builders



Maturity of support

3 Codification	4 Institutions	4 Training	3 Communities	4 Academia	3.6 Overall
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These are people who help to repair community trauma and inter-group relationships. This can include relationships between communities and institutions, between groups in a community, or more generally between all of the above in a particular geography. This discipline originally emerged in post-conflict zones – there are strong traditions in Northern Ireland and Colombia, for example – but is now often being applied to mend fractured state-citizen relationships in ageing democracies like Britain and America.

Building trust is an explicit aim of this work, rather than a by-product, and this is one of the features that marks the discipline out. Practitioners set out to repair a relationship, and treat any other outcome as downstream of that work. The methods of the work reflect this; there is a focus on structured dialogue, collective trauma practice, and community-level reconciliation. This work is different from peace-building in post-conflict zones, which is a distinct career.

Examples include:

- The Relationships Project's [Bridge Builders programme](#)
- The Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea's [Grenfell Recovery programme](#) and its efforts to heal the relationship between the council and local community after the Grenfell fire
- The [After Disaster Network](#) at Durham University

Assessing the supporting architecture

This discipline splits into two main halves. Where the work descends from restorative justice, the architecture is well-established: the [Restorative Justice Council](#) maintains a [practitioner registration framework](#), and there is a [Restorative Service Quality Mark](#) for organisations, [accreditation for training providers](#) and an annual continuing development requirement, as well as accredited qualifications, skills-sharing forums for registered practitioners, and a substantial academic literature with its own journal, [The International Journal of Restorative Justice](#). This is one of the few disciplines in this report that has something close to a mature professional infrastructure.

Support for community bridge-building, by contrast, is thinner. There is some recent codification, amounting to the [Bridge Builder's Handbook](#), written by Neil Denton with the Relationships Project and Durham's After Disaster Network. There is no formal professional registration. The institutional base is relatively nascent and rests on a handful of small but impressive organisations – the Relationships Project, the After Disaster Network at Durham, and organisations working in the tradition of healing justice, such as [Healing Justice Ldn](#). Northern Ireland has more support infrastructure, including a statutory [Community Relations Council](#), the Executive's [Together: Building a United Community](#) strategy and long-standing practitioner bodies such as [Corrymeela](#), for historical reasons, and only some of this support transfers to other contexts.

These differences reflect the history of the discipline, which emerged in post-conflict situations and has only recently begun to be applied to divided communities in places like Britain. Aspects of the work, such as trauma-informed training, are widely available (e.g. to social workers and NHS staff), but not as applied to community-level peace-building. This is a well-developed discipline, but its application to the work of civic renewal – e.g. in low trust communities in Britain, as opposed to post-conflict zones – is under-developed.

C Empowering

These disciplines are concerned with a community's capacity to act on its own behalf and to improve local conditions. Some of this work is about building the conditions for collective power – relationships, leadership, and a shared sense that acting together is possible. Other aspects of the work are about exercising that power; turning relationships and shared experience into action and change.

06 Community organisers

Maturity of support

4 Codification	4 Institutions	4 Training	4 Communities	4 Academia	4.0 Overall
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The discipline of community organising has a long history and is supported by prominent organisations, such as [Citizens UK](#) and [Community Organisers Ltd](#). This work centres the empowerment of citizens to take control over the conditions of their lives, including by challenging established institutions and power dynamics. Characteristic practices include relational meetings, one-to-ones, listening campaigns, and public actions. The goal is to build the capacity for collective action, as opposed to helping people to access services or simply make connections.

Examples include:

- [Citizens UK chapters](#) and their member institutions
- Community Organisers Ltd's [Social Action Hubs](#) across England
- [ACORN](#) branches

Assessing the supporting architecture

This is the best-supported discipline in the report, and the only one to score four across all five dimensions we assessed. There are two main UK traditions with

somewhat different codifications and lineages. One runs back through the American [Industrial Areas Foundation](#), founded by Saul Alinsky in 1940, to the [founding of Citizens UK](#) in 1989, and provides a competency framework, role profiles, continuing development expectations and a well-known articulation of method in its [Five Steps to Social Change](#). The other developed through the Cabinet Office's [Community Organisers Programme](#) (2011-15), run by Locality with RE:generate and has national qualifications with an Ofqual-regulated awarding body, [Skills and Education Group Awards](#), up to Level 3 Certificate in Community Organising, alongside its own published [Community Organising Framework](#). A third cluster has emerged more recently around [tenants' union organising](#), where ACORN runs in-house training in the ACORN model, albeit without external accreditation.

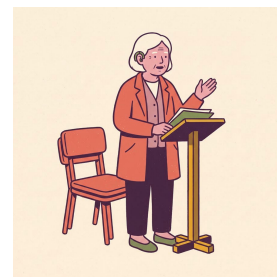
The training environment is mature by the standards of this report, though not by the standards of a mainstream profession. Several thousand people have been trained in community organising through each of the two main routes, and there are some examples of university accreditation: Citizens UK's leadership courses are [accred-](#)

ited by [Birmingham Newman University](#) as a Professional Graduate Certificate in Community Leadership, and [King's College London](#) runs credit-bearing modules with them. The intellectual tradition is also rich, particularly in the United States, running through writers like Saul Alinsky, Marshall Ganz and Freire, and there is a long-standing academic journal that publishes relevant work, the [Community Development Journal](#), published since 1966.

Some interviewees we spoke to felt that the maturity of the field may have brought downsides, making the work somewhat less adaptable, with strongly held views about how organising should be done. This is a useful insight into the trade-offs that play out when a civic discipline matures and develops institutions, formal methods, qualifications and a recognised canon. The newer centres of energy around tenants' organising may be a corrective to this, and it is notable that they have grown outside the more historic and accredited routes rather than through them.

07

Community power-builders and collective advocates



Maturity of support

3 Codification	3 Institutions	2 Training	3 Communities	3 Academia	2.8 Overall
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This discipline covers two related but distinct kinds of work.

The first is power-building: work that creates the conditions from which collective action becomes possible. Asset-based community development (ABCD) is the clearest example. It starts from the strengths that already exist in a place – skills, associations, relationships, physical assets – based on the insight that a community that sees and feels its own capacity will be more likely and able to act. This work is not technically speaking campaigning or advocacy, but it can enable both.

The second is collective advocacy: standing up for people in a way that increases their self-efficacy, for example by helping a person to challenge unfair treatment and to exercise their rights. This work is most relevant to civic renewal when it is done collectively, and it typically starts not from a place but from a shared experience – for example, a community that has been let down by a mental health system, or a group of tenants who share a neglectful landlord. This work is prominent in disability rights and mental health, where it is often done through advocacy collectives and expert patient groups, or patient leader programmes, and in tenant and resident activism through tenants' unions and community-led housing campaigns. It also connects to community-led research and inquiry, using evidence as a way for communities to hold organisations to account. Community power is not always adversarial to the state. In some cases it is actively sought out and recognised

by institutions as a feedback and accountability function. [Rotherham Doncaster and South Humber NHS Foundation Trust](#), for example, asks to be held to account for meeting its promises, including through its [Communities' Leadership Executive](#), a shadow decision-making body of fifteen community representatives.

The distinction from community organising is mostly one of tradition and orientation. Organising has a particular lineage, oriented towards building organising power and running campaigns. Collective advocacy more often begins from an identity or a shared experience, while power-building in the asset-based tradition does not tend to be oriented around a campaign. In practice the three overlap and many practitioners move between them.

Examples include:

- [Nurture Development's](#) asset-based community development work
- [Rotherham Doncaster and South Humber NHS Foundation Trust's Communities' Leadership Executive](#)
- [ACORN](#), the [London Renters Union](#) and [Living Rent](#)

- Advocacy collectives such as the [National Survivor User Network](#) and [Shaping Our Lives](#), and the [patient leadership](#) programmes associated with David Gilbert

Assessing the supporting architecture

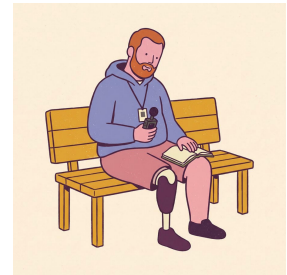
There is a patchwork of support for this discipline, though some sub-fields are considerably better supported than the discipline as a whole. Each tradition has its own codification: there is a mature literature and framework around asset-based community development, codified by the [ABCD Institute](#) at DePaul University and, in the UK and Ireland, by [Nurture Development](#); published methods and member handbooks from tenants' unions, most fully the [ACORN model](#); a [Code of Practice for Advocates](#), an [Advocacy Charter](#) and a formal [Advocacy Quality Performance Mark](#), all held by the National Development Team for Inclusion, in the mental health and disability advocacy field. Each of these sub-disciplines also has its own institutions, gatherings and academic lineage. However, there is no qualifications framework that brings these variants together, no apprenticeship for collective advocacy, and few meetups where an ABCD practitioner and a tenants' union organiser would find themselves in the same room. The reason, in short, is that these traditions do not see themselves as one field.

D Seeing and reflecting

These disciplines produce knowledge and meaning about a place, working from within the community who live there. They matter for civic renewal because a community that cannot describe itself will be described by others, often in a language of deficits, and sometimes to its disadvantage. It also matters because imagining a different future depends to a degree on being able to articulate a story about the present.

08

Lived-experience and peer researchers



Maturity of support

3 Codification	3 Institutions	2 Training	2 Communities	3 Academia	2.6 Overall
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In this work, lived experience is used deliberately as an aide to research and inquiry. It is supported by competency frameworks and principles of mutuality and reciprocity, such as the [UK Standards for Public Involvement](#) and the NIHR's [payment guidance](#) – ensuring, for example, that people with lived experience are well-supported and properly compensated. This discipline is especially mature in mental health, and is also prominent in homelessness, substance-use recovery, and increasingly in social care through experts-by-experience.

Peer researchers work in a wide range of contexts, and this is not only a civil society activity. Peer researchers work extensively on public sector research agendas – evaluating services, shaping commissioning, sitting on research advisory groups in the NHS and in local authorities – and also work in third sector research and advocacy. The methods are similar although the skills required to apply them in different contexts will vary.

Examples include:

- Peer support workers and survivor researchers in mental health services (see the [Survivor Researcher Network](#))
- Doncaster's [People Focused Group](#)
- The [Mayday Trust](#), which merged with the Welsh charity [Platform](#) in 2023
- Experts-by-experience in adult social care (the Care Quality Commission's [Experts by Experience](#) programme)

Assessing the supporting architecture

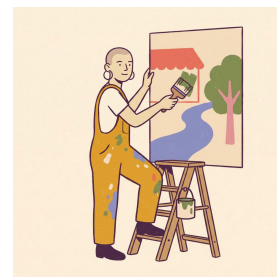
Support for this work is mature in mental health, but less so elsewhere. In mental health, there is a national [Competence Framework for Mental Health Peer Support Workers](#), developed by the National Collaborating Centre for Mental Health, a curriculum and a Level 3 Certificate in Peer Support Work offered by [ImROC](#), values frameworks from survivor-led organisations, including NSUN's [4Pi National Involvement](#)

[Standards](#) and [Shaping Our Lives' principles](#), and a strong evidence base including a [Cochrane review](#) of consumer-providers in statutory mental health services. In homelessness and substance-use recovery support is more nascent, with practitioner accreditation attached to particular models, such as Mayday Trust's [PTS qualification](#), accredited by Coventry University, and [Groundswell's](#) peer research training. In social care there are frameworks for involving people, such as Think Local Act Personal's [Making It Real](#) and [SCIE's co-production guidance](#) but with less focus on peer researchers. There is much less support in criminal justice, asylum and unpaid care.

Communities of practice and training are the two lowest-scoring dimensions of support for this discipline, which means practitioners are often left without practical support. There is also no nationally regulated qualification. Formal qualifications, and their associated professionalisation, need to be considered carefully. Peer research is a skilled role, and practitioners are likely to benefit from some training, for example in peer research methods, ethics and how to handle difficult conversations. However, there can also be downsides to formal training if it creates barriers between peer researchers and the communities they are part of. Peer researchers we spoke to did not feel they needed credentials; what they wanted was to be paid properly, supported when the work opened up difficult feelings, and to be treated with respect, as researchers rather than as data. The important difference here might be between formal credentials on the one hand, and training and skills development opportunities on the other.

09

Cultural, creative and heritage practitioners



Maturity of support

3 Codification	4 Institutions	4 Training	4 Communities	4 Academia	3.8 Overall
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This discipline uses community arts, participatory culture and heritage activities to engage with and activate communities. This includes socially engaged artists and culture-led regeneration. The work is distinct from the wider arts sector in its focus on civic renewal, and distinct from general renewal work by foregrounding culture – storytelling, memory, ritual, and the creation of shared symbolic capital. The practitioners we talked to often described their work as meaning-making – helping communities and places to tell their stories and deepen a sense of pride or identity.

There is a case for also including civic uses of sport in this section, which do similar work through community participation, regular gatherings, and helping to form local identity.

Examples include:

- Historic England's [High Street Heritage Action Zones](#) programme (2020-24)
- The [Portland Inn Project](#), Stoke
- [Homebaked](#), Anfield, Liverpool
- [Battersea Arts Centre's](#) work with the [Co-Creating Change Network](#)

[National Lottery Heritage Fund](#); sector bodies such as the [Museums Association](#), [Historic England](#) and the [Heritage Alliance](#); [ArtWorks Alliance](#), the UK community of practice for participatory arts, which maintains a [Code of Practice](#), and place-based exemplars in most regions. Codification is emerging; for example, a network led by Battersea Arts Centre is developing practitioner standards for socially-engaged practice and there is the Museums Association's [Code of Ethics for Museums](#), revised in 2025, and [heritage engagement guidance](#) from Historic England and the National Lottery Heritage Fund's [inclusion, access and participation](#) principle.

There is lots of training available at post-graduate level – applied theatre, community arts, heritage management, museum studies – and there are apprenticeship standards for [collections technicians](#) and [cultural learning and participation officers](#). The academic literature is substantial and long-running. Practitioner communities are also active and well-attended.

Assessing the supporting architecture

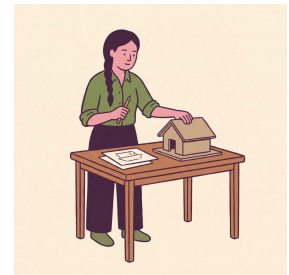
This discipline scores highly, but more of the support available is focused on the wider cultural sector, as opposed to civic applications. There are many relevant institutions: funders such as [Arts Council England](#) and the

E Reforming and building

These disciplines are about building civic alternatives: institutions, enterprises, or working examples of an alternative way of running a local economy. They tend to work at a higher level of the system than many of the other disciplines we have covered; for example, by creating a new local institution that can buy and restore buildings. These disciplines construct alternatives, which then survive alongside the existing system – they speak to the idea that ‘other futures are possible’ by building working examples.

10

Civic institution-builders and systemic imaginers



Maturity of support

2 Codification	4 Institutions	2 Training	4 Communities	3 Academia	3.0 Overall
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Institution-builders and imaginers work in an ambitious space, creating living demonstrations of alternative civic futures. The work tends to operate at two levels. They often start by creating a new institution, usually rooted in a place – such as [Nudge Community Builders](#) in Plymouth, [Hastings Commons](#), and the [LS14 Trust](#) in Leeds. Then they use that institution as a demonstrator, inspiring and provoking people, and informing system-level change. This goes beyond rhetoric to also building their own scaling architecture: creating institutions to pool risk, and establishing peer networks to spread ideas and skills. The goal ultimately is to support alternative civic and economic systems at scale. The most celebrated practitioners – [Dr Jess Steele](#) in Hastings; Hannah Sloggett and Wendy Hart in Plymouth; [Immy Kaur](#) in Birmingham – work at both levels simultaneously.

Examples include:

- [CIVIC SQUARE](#), Ladywood, Birmingham
- [Hastings Commons](#) and the [Common Treasury](#), Hastings
- [Nudge Community Builders](#), Plymouth
- [CLES](#) and the work to scale the [Preston Model](#)
- Alternative and post-capitalist economic models, such as the [Doughnut Economics Action Lab](#)

Assessing the supporting architecture

This discipline is unusual in that it is supported by an impressive array of institutions, while the work itself is largely uncoded. There is a remarkable network of demonstrators: a network of neighbourhood-level institutions stretching from Birmingham, Hastings, Plymouth, Leeds, [Watchet](#) (the Onion Collective), Liverpool and [Glasgow](#) (Kinning Park Complex), many

founded in the last fifteen years, most well-known to each other. At system-level there are think tanks and networks such as [CLES](#) and [New Local](#), and publishers such as the worker co-operative [Stir to Action](#), and frequent well-attended gatherings, among them New Local's [Stronger Things](#) and Stir to Action's annual [ABCs of the New Economy festival](#). There are strong intellectual underpinnings, running through the literature on the commons and on alternative economic models, and the field has recently begun crossing into mainstream evidence.²

Codification and training are weaker, and we believe mostly by choice. Community wealth building is a sub-specialism that has been codified into a [five-pillar framework](#) by CLES, now embedded in Scottish primary legislation through the [Community Wealth Building \(Scotland\) Act 2026](#) – the first legislation of its kind. Several leading organisations have published frameworks of their own. However, none of these act as a competency framework for individual practitioners and local leaders. This partly reflects that the work tends to be exploratory in spirit and against the grain. Training exists for specialisms – short courses on co-operative finance and community land, for example, or regenerative economics. The most mature support for learning exists in a growing number of study visits supported by organisations like [Stir to Action](#).

²For example, see Rose et al., '[The mental health and wellbeing impact of a Community Wealth Building programme in England](#)', The Lancet Public Health, 2023.

11

Community and social entrepreneurs



Maturity of support

4 Codification	4 Institutions	4 Training	4 Communities	4 Academia	4.0 Overall
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These are people who create enterprises focused on improving their community or the place they live. Many come to the work through their own experience of the issues that their enterprise addresses. This can bring people to civic work who would not have otherwise considered themselves as a ‘civic practitioner’.

Some of these ventures are set up to deliver a financial return for those who own and run them; they may look to access social investment funds as part of this. Others are not-for-profit, reinvesting any trading surplus in the enterprise. Some are set up specifically to operate at break-even, run more as a way to keep activities going than to generate profit. Whatever the specific model, these enterprises differ from other types of civic institution in earning their income through trading rather than raising through charitable giving or public sector grants.

Examples include:

- Community-owned pubs, shops and energy schemes (see [Plunkett UK](#) and [Community Energy England](#))
- Citizen First Liverpool, run by Public Life
- Community businesses supported through Power to Change’s [Empowering Places](#) programme (2017-22)

Assessing the supporting architecture

Support for this discipline ranks highly; alongside community organising it is the only other discipline to score four points across all five dimensions assessed. It has well-established definitions, principles and legal forms, a dedicated regulator, the [Office of the Regulator of Community Interest Companies](#), several long-standing institutions including [Social Enterprise UK](#) and [Co-operatives UK](#) as membership bodies, specialist investors such as [Better Society Capital](#), the [Social Investment Business](#) and [Resonance](#), and an international network in the [Social Enterprise World Forum](#).

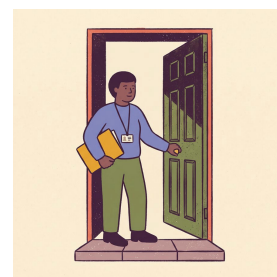
For practitioners, there are dedicated providers including the [School for Social Entrepreneurs](#) and [UnLtd](#), alongside universities delivering significant volumes of training. Financial support and mentoring are available to support those studying, through SSE’s [Match Trading](#) grants and [UnLtd’s awards](#). Conferences and practitioner networks are available to develop and strengthen connections. There is no dedicated apprenticeship for this discipline, which is a notable gap in a discipline otherwise well-served by training and qualifications.

F Creating the conditions

This final category is a little different to the others, in that its practitioners work within public institutions rather than civic organisations. However, they are instrumental in creating the conditions for civic organisations to start, grow and flourish.

These are practitioners who might be delivering a public service differently; acting as a leader who shapes the conditions and terms of how a place or a neighbourhood works; a frontline worker stitching services and institutions together; or someone redesigning how the money moves and the rules work. While most of the disciplines in this report are directly engaged in the work of civic renewal, these four disciplines help to make this work possible.

12 Institutional wranglers and system connectors



Maturity of support

1 Codification	1 Institutions	1 Training	3 Communities	2 Academia	1.6 Overall
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These are people who work at the seams of public institutions, helping to make them work better for people. Wranglers and connectors are disciplines that focus explicitly on seeing gaps, potential connections and misalignments, and finding ways for services and organisations to join up. This could include, for example, a school wellbeing officer who connects the parents of pupils to housing support, a hospital discharge coordinator who finds the one arrangement that will allow someone to go home safely when they want to, or a family hub navigator working across services that do not talk to each other.

The distinction between these practitioners and community and peer connectors comes down to the subject of their work. A peer connector's material is a person and their community: they start with the person in front of them and look outward for what might help. A system connector's material is

the institution: they start with understanding where services do not join or work together, and set about making this better, often for a class of people rather than an individual. System connecting and institution wrangling is a matter of knowing how institutions actually function as opposed to how they are described, and being willing to expend significant personal energy to get them to work better.

Examples include:

- School-based family support workers (partly covered by the Level 4 [children, young people and families practitioner](#) standard)
- Primary care and [hospital discharge coordinators](#)

- Family hub navigators (now the [Best Start Family Hubs](#) programme)
- [Care co-ordinators](#) in NHS personalised care teams

Assessing the supporting architecture

There is little supporting architecture for this discipline; it is the second-lowest ranking of all the disciplines assessed. Codification is largely absent: the work appears as a component of broader role profiles rather than in its own right, and there is no occupational standard for system connecting. The nearest examples would be workforce guidance attached to particular programmes and the [workforce development framework](#) NHS England publishes for care co-ordinators, a closely related role in primary care.

There is no dedicated institution; the institutional homes sit inside sectors, none of which owns the discipline as a whole. There is no apprenticeship, no qualification and no recognised university route. Sub-thematic networks exist – practitioner networks attached to particular programmes, such as the [National Centre for Family Hubs](#) and NHS England’s [personalised care training networks](#) – but no venue that brings these together.

The academic base is sparse and mostly theoretical, with lineages running back to Lipsky’s [Street-Level Bureaucracy](#) (1980) and Williams’ [The Competent Boundary Spanner](#) (2002) rather than to any single body of applied work.

Overall, our observation is that the work of institution wrangling is now widespread and critically important but happens almost entirely under the radar. It is done in the gaps between roles that are funded, and by people whose job descriptions describe something else. There is not currently a vocal push for better support.

Relational practitioners in public services



Maturity of support

3 Codification	3 Institutions	3 Training	4 Communities	3 Academia	3.2 Overall
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This discipline covers practitioners, most often based in public institutions, who work in a person-centred and highly relational way. This means starting from what matters to the person rather than from what the service offers, and focusing on the quality of human relationship as one of the primary ways of effecting change.

Examples include:

- [Camden's Centre for Relational Practice](#) and the training it offers other councils
- The [Wigan Deal](#)
- [Community Led Support](#) sites in adult social care, run with NDTi
- Councils in the [Relational Councils Network](#)

Assessing the supporting architecture

This discipline has historic origins but has been subject to increased attention for around the last two decades. It is now gaining support quickly. There are multiple enabling institutions, including [the Relationships Project](#), which has a goal of 'making relational practice common practice'. There is also the [Camden Centre for Relational Practice](#), established by Camden Council in November 2024, which offers training and peer support to other authorities through the Department for Education's [sector-led improvement programme](#) for children's services.

Codification is maturing: there are council-level relational practice frameworks, the [Be Wigan behaviours](#) developed through the Wigan Deal, the [Three Conversations](#) approach used across adult social care innovation sites, and Mayday Trust's [PTS Response](#) in homelessness, which has a Coventry University-accredited qualification attached. Practitioner communities are the strongest dimension, with a growing [net-work of councils](#) sharing good practice in relational approaches. There are also complementary learning communities, for example for [Human Learning Systems](#). New Local's annual conference, [Stronger Things](#), is another example of a meetup to explore work in a relational spirit.

What is missing in terms of support are partly the more formal underpinnings, such as academic journals, or an established and securely funded support institution, and nationally recognised qualifications. This means relational practitioners can gain many years of experience, and develop exemplary skills on the job, but then struggle to prove their credentials.

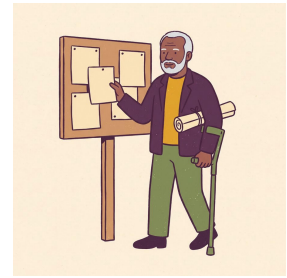
The theoretical lineage of relational practice is strong, running back over 100 years to the work of community leaders like Mary Parker Follett. In more recent decades a strong literature has emerged in think tanks and universities, partly inspired by Hilary Cottam's influential book advocating for relational approaches, [Radical Help](#). There is also a growing awareness in relational approaches at the care system regulator, the [Care Quality](#)

Commission, which is a further sign that the field is maturing.

Civic and place leaders

Maturity of support

2 Codification	3 Institutions	3 Training	3 Communities	3 Academia	2.8 Overall
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Civic and place leaders create the system-level conditions that allow change to happen in a place. The discipline is most often practised by chief executives and other executive leaders of large institutions in a place – local authorities, NHS trusts, large anchor employers, and significant civil society organisations people whose decisions and relationships shape what is possible for others.

The work emphasises forming deep relationships with peers across sectors, and operating in a generous, trust-based and adaptive way over the long term. This is leadership oriented to a place rather than to running a service, delivering a programme, or growing an organisation. In this model, a leader's job is to steward the conditions in which a community can flourish – including by sponsoring and protecting the other disciplines we describe. In this sense, civic and place leadership is distinct from more traditional models of public sector or corporate leadership, which tend to focus more on running an institution and delivering core functions.

It is rare for a public sector leader to be explicitly hired as a 'civic and place leader', but when people choose to work in this way it can be highly consequential for the place, and for the other disciplines described in this report.

Examples include:

- [Our Future](#), in Grimsby and North East Lincolnshire
- The [Wigan Deal](#)

Assessing the supporting architecture

Considerable architecture exists for public sector leadership in general, but little of it addresses the civic dimension. There are the LGA and Solace's [managerial leadership programmes](#) for senior officers; a [Chief Executives' Development Framework](#) published by [Solace](#); competency frameworks in adjacent sectors, such as the Chartered Institute of Housing's [professional standards](#), masters programmes such as [INLOGOV's MSc Public Management](#) at Birmingham, and international executive programmes such as the [Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership Initiative](#). Place leadership is recognised in the academic literature, with a substantial body of work on inclusive city leadership – Robin Hambleton's [Leading the Inclusive City](#) (2015) – and on the governance of place, with research homes including [INLOGOV](#) at Birmingham, [CURDS](#) at Newcastle and Cambridge's [Bennett School of Public Policy](#).

As yet, there has been less codification of civic stewardship as a distinct discipline. One attempt to name and develop this work as a practice is [Our Future](#), founded in 2022 by Emily Bolton and Jason Stockwood and working in Grimsby and Rochdale; they are helping to convene the next generation of civic leaders through its [Open House](#) gatherings. There are also initiatives like [Big Education's leadership programme](#), which puts an emphasis on the civic aspects of school leadership. The most common request we heard from the practitioners we interviewed was for it to be easier to meet with peers to discuss and refine their practice, and to have more space and permission to work in these ways.

Infrastructure rewirers

Maturity of support

2 Codification	3 Institutions	2 Training	4 Communities	2 Academia	2.6 Overall
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This discipline describes people who redesign public systems – funding, commissioning, contracting, governance, accountability – so that they better support civic work. Rewirers also break down into a number of more specialist sub-disciplines, working on the parts of the bureaucracy that are most hostile to civic work: for example, by shifting to more outcome-based and holistic accountability regimes, or by developing long-term new financing mechanisms, such as place-based social investment and pooled funds. Rewirers are similar in spirit to wranglers, but they focus on changing the system rather than making the best of it.

Examples include:

- NHS England’s commissioning of [A Better Way](#) as learning partner to sixteen integrated care boards working differently on community engagement (2023-24)
- Relational contracting in local authority commissioning, such as the [Plymouth Alliance](#)
- Trust-based and flexible grant-making by foundations, codified in IVAR’s [Open and Trusting Grant-making](#) commitments
- Place-based investment vehicles and pooled community funds, such as Local Trust’s [Big Local](#)

Assessing the supporting architecture

This is an emergent discipline with rapidly coalescing language and an unusually strong community of practice, but little else beside this. Practice communities are the standout feature: annual gatherings such as New Local’s [Stronger Things](#), or the Human Learning Systems [practical learning communities](#) run by Collaborate, and peer groups for funders trying to change how they fund, notably IVAR’s [Open and Trusting](#) community of practice.

Codification is happening slowly, though mostly focused on specific aspects of the work. There are frameworks – most prominently the [human learning systems](#) approach, and Collaborate’s [Commissioning with Communities](#) toolkit (2025), which codifies good practice – alongside A Better Way’s [eight principles](#) and its [Behaviours for a Better Way](#), and CLES’s [five principles of community wealth building](#). None of these is a full competency framework for the practice of institution wrangling, but they are bringing definition to important aspects of the work. Skill-building tends to happen through practitioner communities, and through a small number of relevant programmes run by universities, such as the Government Outcomes Lab’s [Leading Cross-Sector Partnerships Programme](#) at Oxford.

Academic underpinnings are the weakest dimension of support. There are relevant theoretical lineages, running through complexity science, public value and developmental evaluation, but there is little empirical work about the discipline of institutional redesign itself, and no dedicated journal.

Summing up the ratings

We assessed each discipline on five dimensions of support: the extent to which the discipline has been codified, the institutions that exist to support practitioners, the extent of training available, whether there are active and resilient communities of practice, and whether the discipline can draw on deep foundations of academic research.

Ratings were given on a five point scale:

1. **Missing.** Where a discipline is visibly mainly in the work itself, but lacks formal support – there may be little or no codification, training, or peer community.
2. **Emerging.** Where a discipline has started to be named, and might have early institutional homes. There might be informal meetups and sporadic opportunities for training, but these are poorly funded, or piecemeal.
3. **Developing.** For these disciplines, support has begun to mature; there might have been initial efforts at codification, multiple supporting institutions, and several routes to train, but support is fragile and has notable gaps.
4. **Established.** The discipline has a clear professional identity and is backed by multiple anchor institutions, likely with recognised training routes, and multiple active practitioner communities.
5. **Fully mature.** The full set of supporting architecture is in place: major institutions, recognised qualifications, journals, and a deep and resilient practitioner community, with the standing that tends to be associated with long-standing professions.

It is important to note that a low score in one dimension is not necessarily a problem to be fixed; some disciplines, for example, choose not to develop formal training, or to

codify their practice, judging that the work is better served by flexible and responsive practitioners. Not every discipline, therefore, will want to achieve the highest possible score across each dimension. However, a low score in most or every dimension may indicate that a discipline struggles to be recognised and respected, and may therefore also struggle to attract funding.

The table below synthesises the ratings for each discipline. Each cell rates the strength of support for that discipline on that dimension, on the same five-point scale.

How to read the table

The table is intended to measure the extent of support in each dimension today. There are a range of reasons why support might be thin, and they call for different responses.

- Support for some disciplines is thin because they have been starved or underrecognised, despite the work itself being well-established. The work might be well understood by the people who do it, but there has been little funding or institutional attention. Community stewards are an example. They get the lowest overall rating in the table, at 1.2, yet almost all the practitioners we spoke to recognised that this work is valuable.

Table 1 Rating support for the fifteen disciplines

DISCIPLINE	CODIFICATION	INSTITUTIONS	TRAINING	COMMUNITIES	ACADEMIA	OVERALL
01 Community and peer connectors	3	3	3	3	3	3.0
02 Local area and patch-based coordinators	4	3	3	4	3	3.4
03 Civic space-makers and space-holders	2	4	2	4	3	3.0
04 Community stewards	1	1	1	1	2	1.2
05 Peace-builders and bridge-builders	3	4	4	3	4	3.6
06 Community organisers	4	4	4	4	4	4.0
07 Community power-builders and collective advocates	3	3	2	3	3	2.8
08 Lived-experience and peer researchers	3	3	2	2	3	2.6
09 Cultural, creative and heritage practitioners	3	4	4	4	4	3.8
10 Civic institution-builders and systemic imaginers	2	4	2	4	3	3.0
11 Community and social entrepreneurs	4	4	4	4	4	4.0
12 Institutional wranglers and system connectors	1	1	1	3	2	1.6
13 Relational practitioners in public services	3	3	3	4	3	3.2
14 Civic and place leaders	2	3	3	3	3	2.8
15 Infrastructure rewirers	2	3	2	4	2	2.6
Mean	2.7	3.1	2.7	3.3	3.1	3.0

1 Missing 2 Emerging 3 Developing 4 Established 5 Fully mature

Note: Shading in this table indicates depth of established support. A darker cell means more architecture has been built up around that discipline in that dimension. This does not necessarily imply that the work is better, or closer to where it ought to be. **Overall** is the mean of the five ratings; We are aware that averaging a five-point ordinal scale is not good statistical practice. We include averages as illustrative guides to aid comparison.

Continued

- Some disciplines are thinly supported because they are young, and have not had time to accumulate support like journals, meetups, or training. Infrastructure rewirers are one example, while one could argue that relational practice in public service is further along but still relatively early in its journey to establish adequate support.
- Some are thinly supported by choice, or would be damaged if support was

‘thicker’. One example is civic space-making. The work of holding a space open – being present, not running a programme, letting a room fill with agency and potential – is especially hard to codify, and several practitioners were explicit that codification could hinder this work. Civic institution-builders make a related point from a different angle: much of their value lies in working against the grain, so overly codifying or professionalising this work could lose the rebellious spirit that makes it powerful.

Our assessment is intended as a guide rather than implying that all disciplines should aim to achieve full maturity across all dimensions of support.

Practices

The following practices emerged from our interviews and visits as being distinctive to civic work, but showing up in multiple disciplines. These practices should not be thought of as secondary – some are as important to civic renewal as the disciplines themselves. They can also be supported in their own right, such as with training, practitioner meetups, and through codification of what good looks like.

The practices are:

- **Restorative and healing practice.** This includes restorative dialogue, restorative justice-informed methods, and trauma-informed work. It is especially prominent in the disciplines of connectors, stewards, peer practitioners, relational practitioners in public services, peace-builders, among others.
- **Deep listening.** This is a recognisable skill or practice, with its own literature, and one that seems to be present in almost every civic discipline.
- **Facilitation and convening.** This includes the ability to create a space that feels safe enough for people to share what they are thinking, holding groups of people in productive discomfort, surfacing what matters to people, and guiding people to action even when there is no consensus. This is distinct from more traditional approaches to chairing. As a practice, it is especially prominent in civic space-making, organising, power-building, and civic imagination.
- **Participatory methods and co-design.** This practice runs from community-led forms of service design to more formalised methods like participatory budgeting, co-produced research, and the use of deliberative platforms.
- **Community research and inquiry.** This practice comes close to being a discipline

in its own right. It seeks to build insight and evidence, for example about a place, at the same time as building community power. It also harnesses and learns from lived experience.

In the table below we have made a preliminary attempt to map the practices onto disciplines, showing where they are most relevant. This should be taken as illustrative; in reality, most of the practices show up at some point or other in all of the disciplines we have described.

Figure 2 Fifteen disciplines and five practices

DISCIPLINE	Restorative and healing practice	Deep listening	Facilitation and convening	Participatory methods and co-design	Community research and inquiry
01 Peer connectors	2	2			
02 Area coordinators	1	2	1	1	1
03 Space-holders	1	2	2	1	1
04 Community stewards	2	2			
05 Bridge-builders	2	2	2	1	1
06 Community organisers		2	2	1	2
07 Power-builders and advocates	1	2	2	2	2
08 Peer researchers	2	2	1	2	2
09 Cultural practitioners	1	2	2	2	1
10 Institution-builders		1	2	2	1
11 Social entrepreneurs		1	1	1	
12 Institutional wranglers	1	1	1		
13 Relational practitioners	2	2	1	1	
14 Civic and place leaders		2	2	1	
15 Infrastructure rewirers		1	1	2	1

Note: The civic practices we identify can appear in any discipline, but we have made an effort here to illustrate where they seem most relevant.

Part 2

A civic ethic

As we pulled together our notes from visits and interviews, and began to develop our typology of disciplines and practices, we noticed that a certain ethic or disposition ran through all of the work we were seeing. We noticed something similar when working on an earlier Kinship Works report, [Civic Rewilding](#). There we described a ‘community instinct’ that was distinct from, and in almost direct contrast to, the more bureaucratic instincts of a traditional public service.

We concluded that it would be helpful to name this civic ethic, because it so clearly departs from the mentality that currently dominates most large public institutions. As an example, people working on the ground in communities tend to see a person in their social context, and not as an individual, or a symptom or a problem to be solved. They relate to people, often face-to-face, as rounded human beings, as opposed to defining people by siloes (e.g. a patient, or a job-seeker). They

take time to get to know the person and their community, listening deeply – and the strength of their work comes in part from this depth of understanding. They focus on strengths, not weaknesses. And they often seek to empower the person, unlocking their agency, quite unlike the often disempowering effects of bureaucracy.

Civic practitioners also seem to work in systemic ways, focusing on the structures and systems which have led to the person being in a particular situation. The debt a person is in, or a spell of unemployment, or a child excluded from school, are understood as the product of systemic challenges like a shortage of affordable housing, rather than individual failings. This is why civic work often entails or is closely allied with advocacy, organising, and campaigning.

We could articulate this civic disposition through a series of principles:

- **Seeing the person as a human being** first and foremost, as opposed to the abstract categories of bureaucracy (job-seeker, pupil, patient)
- **Seeing the structure behind the situation.** Understanding the root causes of people's challenges, and the ways in which these might be changed.
- **Strengths before deficits.** Looking for what is there – capacities, assets, relationships, stories – before seeing what is missing or broken.
- **Relationships as the work, not an after-thought.** Recognising that a deep and authentic human connection is often the way in which change is achieved.
- **Continuity and long-termism.** Not 'discharging' people once a single problem is solved, but staying with a person, sometimes for years.
- **A non-anxious disposition.** Being willing to sit with ambiguity, to deal with the anxiety of not intervening, and to give people space to grow, and even to make mistakes.

- **Centring agency.** Prioritising the work of rekindling a person's, or a community's, capacity to shape the circumstances of their own lives.
- **Blurring personal and professional boundaries.** Recognising that public servants are human beings too, driven by purpose and informed by their own experiences.

Finally, the work of civic renewal is very often, though not always, grounded in a place. Much of the best work takes place at neighbourhood-level, and is accountable to local people. This work often builds out from something tangible: a much-loved building, garden, or communal meal.

3

Recommendations



Recommendations

What could be done to better support the people who are doing the work of civic renewal? We start with describing a framework and strategy for supporting this work, and then we describe a central proposal – establishing a network of Civic Colleges – along with a series of six complementary initiatives.

The overall approach

Support for the disciplines we have described should continue to sit in the civic sphere, and not be taken into government. This ensures the necessary independence and guards against the work becoming overly bureaucratised. However, we also believe that these vital disciplines should be supported in a less piecemeal and duplicative way. And we believe government itself should be far less agnostic about the health of these vital disciplines, and should support the work in a more strategic and sustained, and less scattergun, way.

To square this circle, we believe the civic sector should build the shared infrastructure to support these disciplines on the model of a commons.

This would mean building support for civic disciplines in a shared and collaborative way, so that support and materials are widely accessible, and governed together for the common good. Wherever possible, materials – role profiles, syllabuses, evaluation frameworks, case studies – would be published openly under Creative Commons licences, and people would be encouraged to improve and adapt the materials.

The state, meanwhile, should support these efforts, in particular with funding and by helping to bring the necessary institutions into being.

Government should partner with major foundations and civic bodies to develop a funding and institutional framework for the long-term development of essential civic

disciplines. The state should see its role here as one of facilitator rather than leader – listening deeply to what practitioners need, and stepping in to fill gaps.

This could include playing a strategic convening role, bringing together major universities, historic civic spaces like Toynbee Hall, civil society funders like the National Lottery, and large endowed foundations to support the development of institutions and multi-year funding settlements. The state could also support the endowment of key aspects of this support infrastructure, which we cover more below.

As well as facilitating an improved funding settlement, government could encourage and in some cases require public organisations to engage with communities in a more meaningful and consistent way on policymaking, scrutiny and decision-making, and look to reform public procurement to make it more open to community organisations to win contracts, building on the [Procurement Act 2023](#) and the 2025 [National Procurement Policy Statement](#), along the lines of Locality’s [Keep it Local](#) principles.

Below we set out a number of more concrete recommendations in this spirit.

Main recommendation: a network of Civic Colleges

Our central proposal is the creation of a network of Civic Colleges: independent institutions, rooted in places. These would be sites of civic power and learning – places people can go to learn the disciplines that are vital to a thriving civic life, including from each other. We suggest starting with 8–12 Civic Colleges, providing a good spread across geographies.

This does not mean applying one mode of learning to all disciplines; a key feature of the colleges would be their diversity. This would be a range of very different institutions, each dedicated to the success of the relevant disciplines. Not every discipline needs a college per se, some might resist or not benefit from the formalisation or codification that a college might bring. Likewise, the formality of colleges might vary: some would have accredited courses with syllabuses, others might be less orderly places, busy from dawn to dusk with meetups, unconferences, and tacit knowledge exchange. What matters is having a secure and long-term space in which learning can flourish in the most appropriate way.

What would Civic Colleges be like?

A civic college would be rooted in a place and would be independent of national and local government. It would offer learning across a range of the disciplines described in this report – likely more than one, but probably not all of them – in an integrative way. The colleges would, we believe, want to avoid the silos that have come to characterise academia and inhibit learning. A peer-connector, community organiser, and a relational social worker might find themselves in the same room, learning a practice they all find important. There would be specialist learning available too, where useful, for example to learn the technical, legal, and financial aspects of acquiring and renovating community spaces.

The Civic Colleges could host a vibrant calendar of visits and residencies, bringing in practitioners from other parts of the country and other fields. The Civic Colleges would also, of course, be civic institutions in their own right: perhaps housed in a heritage building with local cultural significance, and with an open programme and a public presence.

Figure 3 One way a Civic College might look



1 A seminar circle

A peer-connector, community organiser, and a relational social worker might find themselves in the same room, learning a practice they all find important.

2 A library and archive

Practitioners can access literature and even historical artefacts to help deepen their understanding of their discipline.

3 A workshop

Specialist technical training would be available, where useful, for example to learn the legal, financial, and logistical aspects of acquiring and renovating a community space.

4 A meeting room

Local civic leaders might meet to discuss how they are fostering the conditions for civic renewal in the local area.

5 An open door

The College could host a vibrant calendar of events for local people, as well as hosting visits and residencies, bringing practitioners from further afield.

6 A kitchen

This would be a civic institution in its own right, a place where people can gather, build relationships, and imagine a better future for their local area.

Note: In practice, the colleges would be a range of diverse institutions, some with accredited courses and syllabuses, others less orderly, many grown from existing institutions and buildings.

How would Civic Colleges be funded and governed?

We suggest an endowment model of funding, safeguarding the necessary security and independence. This speaks to one of our main findings: that support for disciplines is so often unreliable, limping from one grant or contract to the next. An endowed institution could take a 30+ year view of a discipline,

which from our research appears to be the timescale over which this work matures (e.g. consider the rise of community organising).

The Civic Colleges could be capitalised via a blended mechanism combining public money with foundation capital. We note that in the latest estimates, UK and Irish universities secured around **£1.55bn** in new philanthropic funds in 2024-25, and US institutions around

³Note that these figures are measured with different methodologies.

[\\$61.5bn \(roughly £48bn\)](#) in FY2024.³ Within this, there are significant contributions from High-Net Worth individuals and foundations, including to found university-based institutes with endowments. This is in addition to the more substantial flows of public money into academia. Perhaps in future a small portion of this funding could be usefully directed to Civic Colleges.

Civic Colleges would not be created anew, but would emerge organically and in different flavours rather than being imposed from the centre. Some would grow from existing institutions, likely including some of the backbone and enabling organisations named in this report. Others might be associated with existing settlement houses, further education colleges, or Universities with a serious civic mission.

There is a case for putting the Civic Colleges on a statutory footing, which might help to give them standing and longevity: it would help to settle the question of whether this work is regarded as a serious part of the national fabric. There is also a case for giving Civic Colleges a route to accredited status, such as for issuing degrees and other qualifications, though this was not named as a priority among the people we interviewed.

Learning from history

There is a long history of institutions with a similar flavour to Civic Colleges. This includes the rise of Mechanics' Institutes from 1821, beginning with the Edinburgh School of Arts; the movement of settlement houses, such as the founding of [Toynbee Hall](#) in 1884; [Ruskin College](#), founded in 1899; and the [Workers' Educational Association](#), formed in 1903 and still running. These are all examples of community- or democratically governed learning organisations.

There are also lessons here to learn from. It has been argued that Mechanics' Institutes lost sight of their original focus, and many were absorbed into local authority provision. Ruskin College suffered from financial instability, and became part of the University of West London in 2021. These lessons should

be taken into consideration for new institutions. They support the case for endowments and for a governance structure in which Civic Colleges own significant assets for themselves, including their buildings.

One interesting model is Denmark's [Folk High Schools](#) (folkehøjskole). These were founded from 1844 by Nikolaj Frederik Severin Grundtvig (1783–1872), a theologian, philosopher, and education reformer, who argued for popular, non-credentialed adult education. There are around 70 such schools today, funded by a per-student state grant and tuition fees. Despite being state funded and rooted in statute, they set no entry requirements, hold no examinations, and award no qualifications. This is an interesting model for Civic Colleges to learn from, especially for disciplines less interested in formal learning.

Other recommendations

Beneath the headline proposal for Civic Colleges, we make six further recommendations. Some are things colleges would do, others are policies to complement colleges and work alongside them. We see this as a package of complementary measures – powerful on their own, but more so if pursued as part of an overall strategy to revitalise civic life.

1 Fund Centres of Excellence

The problem

There is insufficient support for civic disciplines, whether through professional bodies, research funding, or recognition of the disciplines and their role in the institutions of the state. It is clear from our interviews that most practitioners do not want a top-down edict on what good looks like, but there does seem to be space for centres of expertise.

Recommendation

Government should work with [UK Research and Innovation](#), and the [ESRC](#) in particular, to fund a series of Centres of Excellence for emerging civic disciplines, and invite practitioners from the field to propose the scope and makeup of these centres. This strikes a balance between state support and ownership from practitioners themselves. Research could be commissioned to explore the form these centres would take. These institutions, alongside the Civic Colleges, could host a new generation of practice-oriented journals, publishing articles on the frontier of the field. Different disciplines would suit different models of Centres (e.g. some could be hosted in national government, some in local government, and others independent).

2 Support convenings, peer networks and communities of practice

The problem

Much of the learning in civic work is necessarily tacit – hard to write down, but clear when you see it, and best learned by watching someone, and through reflective practice, as opposed to classroom learning. Some of the most valuable development therefore happens through peer learning: practitioners meeting one another, swapping notes, working through hard cases. These networks, however, are often informal, fragile, and dependent on the volunteer time of individuals, and where they exist, they are unevenly resourced. This often leaves practitioner know-how sitting in people's heads and hands while new practitioners find it hard to break into the field. From our interviews, we find a real hunger from practitioners to connect and learn from each other.

Recommendation

Government and foundations should provide patient, multi-year funding for convenings, peer networks, and communities of practice across civic disciplines. This should focus on supporting the social processes of learning – peer exchange, study visits to places where good work is happening, and support for pioneering centres of practice to host visiting cohorts. Priority could be given to disciplines where peer infrastructure is thin. Some networks could later mature into formal bodies; others would remain useful precisely because they are informal and light-touch. Practitioner networks could become custodians of the civic commons we described above. Civic Colleges could also host these networks.

3 Open a route to more formal recognition for disciplines that want it

The problem

A handful of the disciplines we have mapped are mature enough to sustain a recognised body of their own, with a defined practice, a body of evidence, and an active community of practitioners. But there is currently no clear route by which a civic discipline can develop more formal recognition. While this route is not right for all disciplines, it may well be for some. Not having this option matters because formal recognition supports career progression, public legitimacy, and institutional memory that outlasts individuals. As things stand, the [CLD Standards Council Scotland](#) is probably the closest existing model of a professional body for this work anywhere in the UK; it covers Scotland only, and registration with it is voluntary.

Recommendation

Government should signal that, where a civic discipline wants it, it will support a route to formal recognition – whether through royal charter, recognition on the model of the [CLD Standards Council](#), or other appropriate forms. The aim is not to impose this on disciplines that do not want it, or to favour one form over another, but to make clear that the door is open for disciplines that wish to seek more formal recognition.

4 Invest in pathways into the disciplines

The problem

There is no portable framework for entry into or progression across the disciplines of civic renewal, either based on qualifications or experience and skills learned informally. Practitioners often move between roles, but it is hard to demonstrate to employers how skills transfer and layer. Most disciplines have no Level 3 or Level 4 apprenticeship route, and where apprenticeships do exist – such as the Level 3 [community health and wellbeing worker](#) standard – they are siloed by sector. The result is that the field is hard to enter

from the outside and hard to move around within. Where entry routes exist, they are often short-term and tied to a one-off pot of funding.

Recommendation

Government and major foundations should support the development of clearer pathways into civic disciplines: apprenticeships, conversion routes for mid-career professionals, and recognition of vocational experience and skills learned informally. The goal is to build a portable framework that facilitates movement across related civic roles.

Any such framework should recognise experience as readily as it recognises training; a route that only counts formal teaching as valid would exclude most of the people currently doing this work. The benefits of qualifications (respect, parity with other professions, clear portability) should be balanced with their potential drawbacks (e.g. formalisation, which can squeeze out the more intuitive or dispositional aspects of a discipline). The goal is partly to make these disciplines visible to young people choosing a career, and to those in adjacent fields – teaching, social work, the public services – who want a lateral move.

Civic Colleges would be a natural home for this work, and their integrative character would help to make a portable framework possible.

5 Build complementary civic capability across the public sector

The problem

The work of civic renewal does not sit independent of the state. There are complementary disciplines in government and public services that look out toward communities, and professionals such as policymakers whose decisions and ways of working either hinder or support civic work. Government has more direct purchase here than over the wider civic ecosystem, as the funder or direct employer of these roles. As yet, little direct support is offered to shift ways of working, and there

is generally poor ‘civic literacy’ across most disciplines in public service.

Recommendation

Teams leading on capability in the public sector should be more deliberate about supporting civic work. This is partly about spreading civic-friendly disciplines like relational practice, such as by establishing a formally recognised Academy of Relational Practice. It also means building civic literacy into more traditional disciplines, most notably the policy profession, so that policy professionals understand the grammar and affordances of civic work: how it relates to government, how it needs to be funded and evaluated, how it spreads (not via roll outs and replication, but in more organic ways).

Many of the most important of these wider enabling roles sit in local government, or in decentralised systems like the NHS (e.g. people involved in commissioning and procurement). The workforce and improvement bodies that serve these sectors are therefore also responsible for helping to shift culture and mindsets. Civic Colleges could ultimately serve a role here too, welcoming public servants for training to develop their understanding of civic methods, and doing so alongside civic practitioners.

6 Establish administrative infrastructure as shared services

The problem

Civic practitioners spend disproportionate amounts of their time resolving issues related to everything from HR, to legal and compliance issues, to logistics. This is symptomatic of a lack of recognition of these disciplines, which often sees them bundled together with other jobs. It also reflects a lack of funding for the operating costs of small civic organisations, as flagged in Locality’s [Community powered neighbourhoods](#) (2025). While there have been some efforts to provide shared services as infrastructure, these offers are patchy.

Recommendation

Major foundations and charity-sector bodies should work together to develop and subsidise shared service models, aiming to free civic practitioners to focus on their core work, while also increasing the quality of these important support functions. This could learn from existing efforts to develop such support, such as the [NHS trust in Doncaster](#) that provides HR and legal support to partner organisations. It could mean anchor institutions sharing their support functions and expertise; or it could mean creating and funding sector-wide administrative support infrastructure. Some organisations are already experimenting with these models – [Superhighways](#) in London and the UK-wide [Cranfield Trust](#) among them – and we could scale and systematise what works.

Conclusion

We began this report by observing that Britain's social fabric is frayed, and that the work of repair is already well underway. The movement for civic renewal has been growing for years, having taken root in local places, and it is now reaching regional and national scale.

Over the last few years, it has been good to see increasing support for this vital work from senior officials, politicians, and major institutions. But much of the conversation has focused on the more programmatic side of things: projects and initiatives, government schemes, and pots of funding, often with an emphasis on capital projects. In this report, we have focused instead on the people doing the work. What skills, methods, and dispositions do they bring, what support can they rely on, and how could this support be improved?

What we find is a dizzying array of work that is richer and more varied than is often appreciated. We name fifteen disciplines, a series of cross-cutting practices, and a civic ethic that runs through the work, distinguishing it from more bureaucratic efforts. Together, this amounts to a substantial body of craft, somewhere between a movement and a field.

The success of these efforts will be vital to Britain's social, economic, and democratic future. Yet as things stand, much of the work is done by practitioners who learn as they go, and whose work is often disrespected and undervalued. Support is highly uneven. Some disciplines, like community organising, are backed by mature institutions, training, and thriving communities. Others, like community stewardship, have very little support at all. Overall, we are struck that the map of support seems to reflect the pattern of historical funding, rather than being the result of a sustained and intentional effort of field-building.

Given all this, two things feel clear. The first is that there should be a more determined effort

to support the disciplines of civic renewal. It cannot be right that so many skilled practitioners work alone, design their own training from scratch, and lack communities of peers to learn from. The second is that it would be easy to make things worse by pushing this work down a path of professionalisation. We need to better support the work without bureaucratising it with rigid codification, gatekeepers, and accreditation.

We think it is possible to square this circle. Civic organisations should continue to support this vital work in the way they have been doing, such as by building vibrant communities of practice. This support could be developed in a more collaborative spirit, on the model of a commons – for example, by publishing materials like syllabuses and role profiles openly under a Creative Commons licence by default, so that people can share and improve them. These efforts should then be backed by a bolder long-term settlement, a combination of funding and institution-building, delivered by major foundations, philanthropists, and government.

We believe a network of Civic Colleges could sit at the heart of these efforts, serving as a vehicle to deliver them and as a galvanising focal point. Civic Colleges would be powerful and independent institutions, rooted in places. They would be joyful spaces, full of hope and determination, where people can come together to learn the skills we need for a thriving civic life. To complement this, we have proposed a series of other reforms, from opening up UKRI research funding to long-term support for practitioner networks.

We offer these proposals, like the typology itself, as starting points for discussion. We would welcome the chance to refine these ideas and put them into practice with partners.

