

# UNDERSTANDING AND REDEFINING CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE NORTH

Laying the groundwork

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## 60-SECOND SUMMARY

The north of England has always been characterised as having a rich and vibrant civil society. However, civil society in the North is currently undergoing considerable change. Over the next three years, IPPR North will undertake a programme of research on, and entitled, the Future of Civil Society in the North. It will form a coherent evidence base to help inform and shape local, regional and national policymaking regarding the role of civil society in the north of England.

This short briefing paper sets out a different way of thinking about civil society, which will inform our ongoing programme of work.

We propose that civil society can be understood in terms of three key principles.

- **Civil society is about relationships:** it is about people coming together on the basis of a mutual interest, a common goal or a shared space, and about the networks of relationships that emerge through this process.
- **Civil society is about space and place:** it takes place in local communities, in neighbourhoods and public spaces; it helps to shape and bring meaning to local areas; and it constitutes a public sphere in which people can come together to converse. In each of these respects, the forms and nature of civil society are necessarily determined in part by wider structural trends.
- **Civil society is about value:** it is both about how we value its activities and the types of values, beliefs, opinions and attitudes that underpin it.

Informed by these three key principles, our work on the Future of Civil Society in the North will investigate different ways of thinking about and understanding civil society. Our programme of work will be particularly focussed on the following themes.

- The types of civil society relationships and institutions that are likely to survive or thrive in light of ongoing structural changes across the north of England.
- How civil society is shaped by, and in turn shapes, different spaces – from the level of the neighbourhood to that of the devolved city region, and across entire regions, including the North as a whole.
- The different ways in which civil society is valued in the North, and how that value is shaped by political, economic, environmental and social contexts.

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