



Connecting Urban and Rural Learning Initiatives – PASCAL
Learning Cities Network (LCN)

The Civic Thread: Weaving Urban and Rural Knowledge into a Learning Society

Meeting Summary Notes

Held on 16 October 2025

Time: 8 am GMT, 06:00 PM Canberra, Melbourne, Sydney

**Speaker: Dr Rhiannon Jones (FRSA), Associate Professor Civic Practice. Head
of Civic and Communities, University of Derby**



Dr Rhiannon Jones (FRSA) is Associate Professor (Civic Practice), Head of Civic and Communities at the University of Derby. She leads CivicLAB an Institution-wide centre on participatory culture, creative dialogue, and civic practice and leads the curation and delivery of the Civic flagship programmes. She chairs the International Contemporary Working Art Group for Cumulus, the only Global Association in Art and Design. She is a member of the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement and Trustee of Bolton Gate Arts Farm and New Art Exchange, a ground-breaking, Global Majority, NPO for Arts Council England and an award-winning and internationally recognised Gallery.

She regularly works with Council for Higher Education in Art and Design and the Royal Society of Arts and Manufacturing. Her research into placemaking is a case study for the National Centre for Academic and Cultural Exchange and her groundbreaking community practice and methodology has been guest presented at the All-Party Parliamentary Design and Innovation Group and with Policy Connect, Westminster H.E, RSA and Design Council UK. She is a published academic, most recently with Routledge (2025), Intellect Books (2024), Taylor and Francis (2025) and had works featured with Council for Higher Education in Art and Design on Women in Leadership (2023 - 2025) and NCACE

(2024) as example of best practice. She frequently provides keynotes Nationally and Internationally within the Civic, Creative and Cultural Industry Sector. She judged the UKNA artists in 2024 and judged the Derbyshire Community Business Awards for East Midlands Chamber of Commerce in 2022-23. She co-founded InDialogue, curating international conferences and residencies, supporting over 600 artists from over 15 countries since its inception. She founded Designing Dialogue CIC the first spin out from the University of Derby, that tours S.H.E.D; a public art, touring and innovation space which has received several national honours and has engaged with 12 counties, 41 partners and 42,596 people directly, 700 creatives and commissioned 50 new works. She has received funding from partners such as Design Council, UK, CHEAD, Arts Council England, RSA and local trusts and councils. Accolades include finalist for Universities Alliance Award (2022), Shed of the year finalist (2020), UK Green Gown Awards: Benefiting Community (2021). She has been selected as a social regenerative entrepreneur and is a Catalyst Grant holder from, the Royal Society of Arts (2023-4) and is a UKRI ARC Accelerator funded grant holder for commercialisation of research (2025) and Public Realm Strategy writer with Plan-It and commissioned by London Borough of Barnet on Creative Health and Sustainability public realm works (2024-5).

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Meeting Summary

Purpose

To explore how urban and rural knowledge systems can be interwoven to strengthen civic identity, inclusive learning, and place-based innovation—anchored by Derby’s role as a UNESCO Learning City.

Key Themes

- **Civic Threads as Connective Tissue:** Dr Jones introduced the “civic thread” as a metaphor for the interlaced relationships, practices, and shared values that shape civic life. It is a dynamic tapestry of local knowledge, public dialogue, and collaborative action.
- **Derby as a Learning City:** Positioned centrally in England, Derby bridges urban and rural geographies. Its industrial heritage, growing diversity, and civic infrastructure make it a compelling site for inclusive learning. Derby was designated a UNESCO Learning City in 2022 for its commitment to lifelong learning, civic engagement, and sustainability.
- **Strategic Civic Leadership:** Leadership must be culturally and morally committed to civic life. Dr Jones emphasised the role of connectors and enablers—universities, local authorities, third sectors—working in partnership to foster autonomy and co-creation.
- **S.H.E.D Case Study (Social Higher Education Depot) from Designing Dialogue CiC:** A mobile, modular arts and engagement space co-designed with communities. SHED exemplifies participatory design, climate action, and place-based learning. It toured sites including the V&A Dundee and Timber Festival, gathering pledges and stories from diverse publics.

- **Urban-Rural Dialogue & Unlearning:** The session called for reframing dominant narratives and embracing risk and experimentation. Dr Jones's methodology, *The Artistry of Conversation*, positions dialogue as a public art form to bridge urban and rural divides.

Five Civic Goals (Derby's Framework)

1. Securing our future
2. Driving ambition and positive change
3. Making a positive environmental impact
4. Supporting health and wellbeing
5. Investing in culture as a driver for change

Reflections for Practitioners

- Civic identity is co-created, not imposed—requiring active listening and responsive design.
- Learning cities must be accountable to their communities, fostering inclusive participation and adaptability.
- Urban-rural knowledge exchange enriches civic practice and strengthens resilience.

You Tube Video Link of the presentation:

<https://youtu.be/f2H41fWTPdQ>