

Valuing People, Places and Spaces – Terms of Reference for Discussion Papers on Social and Cultural Infrastructures

This terms of reference document sets out the requirements for short discussion papers, as part of a series that will be produced for the British Academy's work theme on social and cultural infrastructures. It provides details of the work theme and its aims, along with guidelines on the deliverables, how to respond, and a timeline.

Social and cultural infrastructures: context and aims

Social and cultural infrastructures refer to the spaces, services and structures that support the quality of life of a nation, region, city or local community. These spaces, services and structures bring people together and strengthen the social and cultural fabric of communities. It is an area that has been brought to the fore by the Academy's previous work on [Cohesive Societies](#) and the [COVID Decade](#) evidence review and policy reports.

Additionally, *social infrastructure* is a concept that has become embedded in the languages of policymaking and academia over the last few years. The government's Levelling Up White Paper alone contains nearly 50 mentions of the phrase, either used on its own or alongside the phrase *social capital*. The importance of social infrastructure to people and communities is well understood both internationally and within communities across England, even if 'social infrastructure' is not necessarily a concept or expression commonly used among the general public.

The Academy's social and cultural infrastructures work theme aims to explore the importance of social and cultural infrastructures for policy making, including investigating how social and cultural infrastructure policy interventions can address deepening spatial inequalities and contribute to recovery from COVID-19.

Within this work theme our newly established *Valuing people, places and spaces* strand aims to explore facets of social and cultural infrastructures, from a wide variety of SHAPE perspectives. This strand will comprise chiefly of two core activities: a series of roundtable discussions, and the discussion papers commissioned.

Previous British Academy work in this area

The British Academy and Power to Change came together in early 2022 to collectively explore questions relating to social infrastructure and its value to different communities. The Bennett Institute for Public Policy and the Institute for Community Studies were commissioned to undertake two related research projects. The first of these explored [examples of international policy interventions](#) that aim to strengthen social infrastructure to draw out learning for UK policymakers. The second involved [peer research into community definitions and understandings](#) of social infrastructure in England.

In January 2023, [Space for Community: Strengthening our Social Infrastructure](#) brought together the findings of these two research projects. This report aims to deepen our understanding of social infrastructure, and so give policymakers (local, regional and national), civil society leaders, and communities themselves the insights needed to strengthen this infrastructure and help meet current and future challenges.

The research findings emphasise the need to understand the value of listening and responding to community voices, and the importance of considering accessibility and inclusion. The research has shown, in particular, the importance of social infrastructure as a ‘seed-bed’ for the creation, enhancement and maintenance of social capital, a vital element of the social fabric of our communities. It has also shown the importance of ‘accidental’ social infrastructure – those places which are intended to serve a different purpose, but which nevertheless act as social infrastructure. Supermarkets, for example, can serve as vital spaces for people to connect with each other to stave off loneliness.

The report explores three aspects of social infrastructure: 1) the use of social infrastructure to support the social fabric of places, 2) treating social infrastructure as an infrastructure, and 3) defining the purpose of social infrastructure. For each of these three aspects, policy considerations arising from the findings of the research have been drawn out.

Discussion paper potential topics

Following the culmination of this first phase, the British Academy is now seeking to commission a series of discussion papers that will 1) delve deeper into the findings and outcomes of the first phase as set out above, and 2) broaden out the exploration of social and cultural infrastructures to include aspects not covered within the first phase. It is expected that some discussion papers will focus more on the first of these aims, while others will focus more on the second aim.

The overarching question that discussion papers should explore is ***how can policy interventions support the role of social and cultural infrastructures in strengthening the UK’s social and cultural fabric?***

Delving deeper into the findings and outcomes of the first phase

We would welcome discussion papers that explore aspects of *Space for Community: Strengthening our Social Infrastructure* in more detail. Areas of potential focus could be one or more of the eight policy considerations listed in the report. These are:

Using social infrastructure to support the social fabric:

1. Social infrastructure should be seen as an asset that contributes to the creation and maintenance of the social fabric.
2. Social infrastructure in places needs to be mapped and recorded.

Treating social infrastructure as infrastructure:

3. Social infrastructure should be open, accessible and inclusive.
4. National and local policymakers should consider social infrastructure at a community scale.

5. The importance and costs of maintaining social infrastructure need to be understood.
6. The role that the private sector plays in the provision of spaces that can be used as social infrastructure needs to be recognised and reflected in future strategic planning and policymaking.

Defining the purpose of social infrastructure:

7. National and local policymakers should include and understand community voices when designing and maintaining social infrastructure.
8. National and local policymakers should work with communities to develop approaches that manage competing purposes.

Broadening out the exploration of social and cultural infrastructures

We would also welcome papers that consider broader aspects of social and cultural infrastructures, and the policy challenges posed by issues concerning social and cultural infrastructures, than those explored in *Space for Community: Strengthening our Social Infrastructure*. This could include a focus on one of the following aspects (but note that this list is not exhaustive):

- How can social and cultural infrastructures be measured, and so enable a better articulation of its presence, scale and value?
- How can social and cultural infrastructures contribute towards tackling a particular policy issue, or with contributing towards specific policy agendas?
- How can cultural infrastructures in particular play a role in strengthening the UK's social and cultural fabric?
- How do different groups within a community value, experience and interact with social and cultural infrastructure? Potential groups to consider include children and young people or people with a disability.
- How does place (or type of place) interact with social and cultural infrastructures? For example, how do different types of place (e.g. rural, urban or suburban areas) interact with social and cultural infrastructures?

Discussion papers:

Objectives

We are seeking contributions of no more than 4000 words that will add depth, context and practical elements to the evidence base on social and cultural infrastructures. The objectives of the discussion papers are, therefore, to:

- Provide evidence from SHAPE disciplines around one or more of the aspects detailed in the above section.
- Prompt engagement and debate among policy audiences, by posing challenging questions that highlight gaps and opportunities for policy where the evidence points to these (noting that these are not opinion-pieces but should include useful conclusions building on the evidence referred to).

Audience

The target for this programme overall is policy and policymakers; as such, the discussion papers should be policy-relevant and presented in a form that is accessible for policymakers. We note that policy can be defined as the system of ideas and processes which govern behaviour and practice to achieve defined goals, within an organisation or community, in other words, including business and other institutions.

In terms of place, the social and cultural infrastructures work theme targets UK policy and policymakers. However, experience, evidence and knowledge from other parts of the world can be drawn on, where relevant to UK policy.

Deliverable

Reflecting the objectives listed above, the expected deliverable is **a short, robust, evidence-based, well-referenced and balanced discussion paper that responds to the objectives, and addresses the audience identified above**. They should also be evidence-based and meet usual academic standards. All papers will be subject to peer review, which will be facilitated by the Academy.

For clarity, the expectation is that this work will be based on existing knowledge, research, and analysis on these topics rather than new research. Authors can draw on their existing published material as well as a wider evidence base, but the paper should be an original work that has not been published elsewhere already.

As highlighted above, these are not opinion-pieces, but **should include useful conclusions and where appropriate, proposals, areas for further discussion, or gaps and opportunities for consideration**.

Following the peer review, the paper will be published in the author's name, by the British Academy, either individually or as part of a series.

Author profile

The author or authors of the paper (jointly authored papers will be accepted) must have demonstrable expertise linked to academic or policy knowledge that enables them to contribute authoritatively to the public debate on this issue.

The nature of this programme means that a range of perspectives and backgrounds are welcomed and expected. The framing of the programme is around the SHAPE disciplines and as such the papers should bring out evidence from these disciplines. However, it is important to highlight that relevant non-academic expertise is welcome.

Responding to this call

To respond, please submit a proposal (comprising a brief CV, a short outline or abstract that describes the paper you would like to contribute to this series).

These should be sent to George Evans by email (g.evans@thebritishacademy.ac.uk) by 03 April 2023.

Please ensure your outline / abstract describes how your paper will respond to the objectives and the framing set out in these Terms of Reference.

Your proposal will be evaluated by the work theme's Steering Group, alongside members of the Academy's public policy team. If it meets the requirements, we will request a short follow-up call. Assessments of expressions of interest will be based on the following criteria:

- relevance of the paper to the framing and objectives set out in these Terms of Reference;
- quality of the proposed approach and robustness of the ideas presented;
- relevance to the policy and research landscape; and,
- the alignment of the delivery date with our timetable below.

If you would like to discuss any aspect of this or ask questions in advance of submitting your proposal, please contact George Evans on the details above.

Fees

This is a paid commission with fixed terms. The fee paid for each paper will be £4,000. Payment will be made in two tranches, with 50% upon signature of the contract and 50% on completion.

Timeline

Proposals must be submitted by 03 April. We expect to be able to inform prospective authors whether we will be commissioning their proposal by mid-May. Finalised papers must then be submitted by July 2023 (exact date tbc).

Interested authors are encouraged to submit a proposal as soon as possible. After receiving your proposal, we will respond to inform you when you can expect a decision.

Questions

If you have questions, please contact George Evans (g.evans@thebritishacademy.ac.uk). We are happy to discuss the framing and offer further guidance if required.