

The British Academy

Knowledge as a critical starting point

An evidence paper for the
British Academy's Where
We Live Next programme

Introduction

This paper provides supporting evidence for **knowledge**, which was identified as a critical starting point for a place-sensitive approach in the accompanying report, '[A place-sensitive approach for environmental sustainability](#)'.

Here, we delve into and provide further context on knowledge across five main points, which highlight the mechanisms, networks and cultures that need to be in place for broader forms of **knowledge** to be harnessed. For readers interested in the broader features of a place-sensitive approach, you can find further evidence on [Language](#), [Participation](#) and [Partnerships](#) in our [evidence hub](#).

Lived experiences

The importance of leveraging and recognising different types of knowledge was a strong theme in the programme's regional workshops and evidence report.¹ Drawing on local knowledge, which is often grounded in lived experiences, can help better understand why and how people develop their feelings about a place, its people and priorities. However, this is not always recognised by policymakers at a national level.

Tapping into the local knowledge of nature, green spaces, the built environment and how communities interact with, and are affected by, environmental issues and related structural factors on the ground, is vital for effective evidence-based policy that meets different socio-demographic needs.² By considering this range of available insight, policy will better reflect the realities facing people in varied communities and be better equipped to communicate the need for policies that, while contested, would benefit people and planet.³

While there are commitments and indications across central government on devolving powers to help harness and bridge these knowledge gaps, further information is needed on the mechanisms for how local experiential, tacit or community knowledge will be systematically integrated into national policymaking. Policymakers could find ways to ensure that local knowledge is integrated and filtered up to the national scale, so that policy can better reflect the realities facing people in varied communities.

Spaces for knowledge exchange

Knowledge sharing at a place level often happens within the places and spaces where people interact within their community, which we have elsewhere defined as 'social infrastructure'.⁴ Cafes, community centres, parks, libraries, bulk-buy supermarkets, and independent businesses have been used to host discussions about sustainability and were identified as good place-based examples of the way in which people share knowledge within the community and make space for conversations that address issues of climate anxiety or scepticism, which affect policy delivery.

These social infrastructures can be tapped into by policymakers to support a two-way process of communication and knowledge exchange, gaining insights from local communities while also engaging them in the policy agenda of government. There is also a growing role for digital spaces for engagement and knowledge exchange, although research suggests that policymakers should not rely solely on digital technologies, as digital exclusion remains a barrier for communities.⁵

Careful consideration of where knowledge is shared between people within a place could be a potential opportunity for policymakers to develop better knowledge sharing. Policymakers should consider investing in this more informal infrastructure for knowledge sharing between people within communities. This should include a properly resourced social infrastructure for knowledge sharing, ranging across intergenerational spaces from playgrounds and universities to libraries and community centres.

¹ The British Academy, (2023), [Understanding the role of place in environmental sustainability](#).

² The British Academy, (2023), [Understanding the role of place in environmental sustainability](#), p. 17.

³ The importance of place-based knowledge and citizens' preferences to inform decision-making was a finding identified in the British Academy's work on [Governance for Accelerating Net Zero](#).

⁴ The British Academy (2024), [Social and Cultural Infrastructure for people and policy: Discussion Papers](#), p. 111.

⁵ The British Academy (2024), [Social and Cultural Infrastructure for people and policy: Discussion Papers](#), p. 111.

Community-led and policy networks

Community-led networks, such as [Scottish Communities Climate Action Network](#) (SCCAN) and [The North East Scotland Climate Action Network](#) (NESCOAN), were examples shared in our Glasgow workshop, illustrating how voluntary and community groups are responding to the knowledge deficit by developing forums that help capture the range of community-led climate action projects happening across places. These networks coordinate place-based climate action driven by people in their own communities. This knowledge base offers more inclusive and diverse perspectives on what is happening on the ground and what national governments need to do to support these initiatives.

Evolving policy-based networks were also identified to harness expertise from actors that are actively involved in delivering the day-to-day and long-term planning and delivery for places across the UK. They are important mechanisms for knowledge exchange for national government. A good example is the [Association of Directors of Environment, Economy, Planning and Transport](#) (ADEPT), a network through which place leaders connect and share best practices, as well as formulating new ideas based on what is and is not working for their places.

Similarly, [Britain's Leading Edge](#) (BLE), a network that engaged in our national workshops, comprises voices from rural upper-tier local authorities, with the goal of sharing knowledge and raising awareness of the challenges and opportunities facing UK peripheral communities. These networks do more than provide knowledge; they draw attention to the lack of tailoring policy and funding approaches to the place-specific context of rural areas, as well as challenges with the current devolution approach.

Policymakers should consider tapping into these existing knowledge-based networks and forums, harnessing local policy voices as well as citizen voices to complement existing evidence. Bringing these community knowledge strands into stronger networks can prove helpful for more joined-up policymaking. There is scope to strengthen understanding of how and why environmental challenges intersect with other sectors, such as health/well-being, and regional economic development. This can help support idea generation, linking up different policy priorities, and provide a better understanding of all contexts.

History and evaluations of the past

Perspectives on the past provide a rich source of knowledge for national and regional policymakers and were actively considered when discussing issues around energy, housing and nature recovery.⁶ For example, participants in the regional workshops drew on past examples in discussions on delivering a just and socially reliable transition for communities, and in identifying the lessons from previous energy transitions that share many similar challenges (e.g., from coal to oil and gas).

There is a need to make learning more effective by turning routine monitoring into a learning process, including the ability to discuss failure and change. A focus on the past can also help to undo the narrative that assumes the nuts and bolts of place-based initiatives can be easily transferred to another place without deeply examining why this initiative worked well (e.g., what is the established trust with parish and town councils).

A forward-looking knowledge exchange process requires an element of reflecting upon the past, which is often overlooked in policymaking. Policymakers should foster a culture of knowledge sharing and learning across local and national government to join-up learnings and share best practice. This will support idea generation, linking up different policy priorities, and a better understanding of contexts.

⁶ Owens, S., Haldon, J., Ritvo, H., Burton, T., Hanxomphou, C. & Walker, G. (2022), [Lessons from the History of UK Environmental Policy](#), The British Academy.

Linking knowledge with skills

Regional and national stakeholders highlighted a need for policy initiatives that focus on enhancing training, apprenticeships and upskilling opportunities for emerging and transitioning sectors. This means considering both specialist and technical roles (e.g., engineering, construction, retrofitting, and risk management) as well as more generalist roles, which are rapidly emerging as companies and wider organisations adopt more sustainable business models that require them to decarbonise and keep up with the latest regulation and legislation. Our Manchester workshops showed that there are already a range of initiatives responding to this need (e.g., [The Green Skills Academy](#)).

For national policymakers to facilitate local leadership and drive forward-thinking, approaches addressing issues around the shortage and lack of skills will be essential. This includes digital skills, leadership skills, public engagement skills, communication and narrative skills to equip local leaders with the capabilities to deliver these changes and are highly critical for delivering wider features of place-sensitivity, such as development of partnerships and public participation.

There are well-known challenges around a lack of skills, as well as a lack of training and capacity within local councils. Preliminary findings from research being conducted into the regional development opportunities provided by nature recovery identify challenges with a shortage of skills and provision, and difficulties with retention that can lead to a delay in developing and delivering [Local Nature Recovery Strategies](#).⁷

For places to transition and support more sustainable futures, policymakers should pay closer attention to how they will enable an environment that can re-skill and upskill citizens across new and transitioning sectors, to support both sustainable outcomes and boost local economies. This means developing appropriate skills and educational mechanisms to support and equip people with the capacities needed to support shifts in high-emission industries. Promoting and changing the narrative to more sustainable career pathways can help build longevity and adaptability to changing economies.

⁷ Treloar, G., Reed, J., Wills, J., Willett, J., Bateman, I. & Osborne, J. (2025), [Nature Recovery and Regional Development: A summary report for Britain's Leading Edge](#), The University of Exeter.

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