

The British Academy

Multi-level, cross-sectoral partnerships that promote collaboration

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

Introduction

This paper provides supporting evidence for **multi-level partnerships**, identified as a key feature 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 partnerships across five main points, which highlight multi-level and cross-sector partnerships as key enablers for driving innovative and environmental sustainability action, drawing on different forms of collaboration, knowledge, language and forms of participation in and across places. National governments play a vital role in coordinating and enabling an environment where collaborative partnership work can be developed and sustained over time.

For readers interested in the broader features of a place-sensitive approach, you can find separate papers on [Knowledge](#), [Language](#) and [Participation](#) on our [evidence hub](#).

Collaborative leadership

Policymakers could work to establish more opportunities for multi-level partnerships, to develop better collaboration between scales of governance (local/regional and national).

The complexity of the place ecosystem—being multi-layered and at times, overlapping between local, regional and national scales—makes collaboration an essential ingredient when developing partnerships that address a range of place-based issues and agendas.¹

Partnerships are viewed as important ways to foster and actively develop more collaborative leadership, providing opportunities to leverage diverse skills and perspectives, deliver more creative and innovative solutions, enable collective accountability and encourage cross-scale and cross-sector engagement.

There is a wide range of existing and emerging environmental sustainability-focused partnership work across the UK. These can be described as projects, programmes, schemes, networks, coalitions and large-scale initiatives that seek to work collaboratively with a range of place-based actors. Some of these may be independent, others are driven by local authorities or the third sector.²

There is also a policy imperative for central government to be working more closely and collaborating with local and regional partners to unlock growth in a particular area.³ The draft [English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill](#) underlines a need to create more 'genuine relationship of equals' between central and local government and commits to 'constitutional autonomy and partnership', reflecting the need for both vertical and horizontal collaboration across governance levels.⁴

Collaboration does not always happen naturally when working within organisational silos. Policymakers should be aware of the cultural shifts that need to take place to set successful priorities, responsibilities and boundaries. Multi-level partnerships do not substitute political leadership; national and local policymakers will need to facilitate interconnections across scales alongside conscious and designed coordination with the capacity to enable this type of collaborative work.

Cross-cutting approaches

Whilst there is an increased interest in developing and delivering partnerships in place, there are opportunities for policymakers to promote more cross-cutting approaches to help support environmental sustainability goals, as well as wider place-based needs.

Taking a more cross-cutting and integrated approach to partnerships was considered valuable for both regional and national policymakers to make wider national policy goals (e.g., improving physical and

¹ Madgin, R. & Howcroft, M. (2023), [Developing a People-Centred, Place-led Approach: The Value of the Arts and Humanities](#), University of Glasgow.

² The Academy's work on Net Zero governance identified collaborative leadership as central to accelerating Net Zero, enabling coordination, knowledge sharing and collective accountability.

³ The UK Government (2025), [Green Book Review 2025: Findings and actions: HM Treasury](#) [Accessed 12/08/25].

⁴ The UK Government (2025), [English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill: Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government](#) [Accessed 12/08/25].

mental health, quality of life and strengthening social cohesion) sensitive to the specifics of a place.

An example discussed in our Manchester regional engagement workshop was the importance of delivering partnership work that centres on health, mental health and well-being alongside environmental sustainability. The [‘My Place’](#) project—a partnership between the Wildlife Trust for Lancashire, Manchester and North Merseyside and the Lancashire and South Cumbria NHS Foundation Trust—has explored the co-benefits of nature-based social prescribing to build people’s connections to nature while also improving mental health and well-being outcomes for people in the Northwest.⁵

Policymakers at all scales should facilitate partnership work that responds to wider place-based needs. This means adopting a cross-cutting, integrated approach to both small- and large-scale partnership work to ensure these initiatives foster targeted people—and place—interventions. This can help coordinate investments across government departments, reducing duplication in projects and enhancing wider impact.

Strategic direction

Aligning partnerships with existing national strategies, legislation, or principles can be an opportunity for policymakers to help mobilise and achieve buy-in from a range of actors.

Those leading on energy policy have found that having a legally binding commitment to deliver net zero by 2050 has helped cement long-term thinking and created more opportunities for partnership work at a place level, bringing in expertise, skills and resources from local government, statutory and regulatory bodies and non-government organisations to support and deliver on this goal across places. This was identified as a useful way to mobilise stakeholders, particularly from the private sector, helping to build links between companies and the community, which can be of value when finances are strained. At the time of engaging with stakeholders, the introduction of [Local Nature Recovery Strategies](#) was viewed as a promising opportunity for central government to support local leadership in a way that helped deliver national policy goals, galvanising partnerships and action at all spatial scales.

The Wellbeing of Future Generations Act (Wales)

Perspectives from the regional workshop in Cardiff reflected the importance of the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act (WFGA) as a key legislative driver for many of the partnership activities conducted in Wales. This was seen as a clear move away from short-termism towards goal-based governance, and as a way of promoting lasting local projects, recognising their contribution to the different elements outlined in the Act. In a housing context, this has been important for project realisation both economically and ideologically, delivering innovations in construction techniques and housing models (e.g., [Innovation Housing Programme](#) and [Optimised Retrofit Programme](#)).

Place Principle (Scotland)

The Place Principle established in Scotland was identified as a key driver for partnership work in the Glasgow event. Beneficial to this was the way in which it provides the overarching context, creating a framework for consistent partnership work that recognises local distinct needs and priorities. This work has been particularly useful both in the context of energy transitions, developing local energy planning approaches and funding local energy schemes across Scotland.⁶ As well as for setting goals and indicators which places can then adopt and are relevant to their place.⁷

Both these examples have facilitated partnership work by embedding legal and principles-based frameworks that prioritise long-term, locally tailored approaches to public service delivery and

⁵ The Wildlife Trust for Lancashire, Manchester & North Merseyside (nd), [Nature and Wellbeing Service](#) [Accessed 12/08/25].

⁶ The Scottish Government (2021), [Local Energy Policy Statement](#) [Accessed 12/08/25].

⁷ Nature Scot (2023), [Nature Scot and the Place Principle](#)

⁸ The UK Government (2025), [Pride in Place](#). Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

community development. The recently published [Pride in Place](#) strategy presents an opportunity for future place-focused partnership work.⁸

Partnerships can be further strengthened and more effective when supported by a clear strategy that communicates a clear set of commitments. Policymakers should consider aligning partnerships with existing national strategies to help put existing legislation into practice.

Helping turn an overwhelming challenge into a practical, deliverable set of activities, help to build trust in national policy at a local level and ensure change is enacted in the most beneficial way for different places in the long term.

Long-term funding opportunities

Challenges to the existing funding landscape were identified across policy contexts, creating constraints in sustaining and building longevity for existing and emerging partnership work.

The work of the [Place-Based Action Network \(PCAN\)](#) was identified as an example in our regional engagement workshops and formed part of commissioned evidence for this programme. The network focused on delivering what were termed 'Climate Commissions', which were a city-wide or area-wide partnership model delivered across a range of places in the UK. Climate commissions were created to help shape and drive place-based climate action, offering evidence and expertise, developing strategic and finance plans, supporting cross-collaboration (across public, private and civic sectors) facilitating public participation through surveys or other engagement activities with citizens.⁹

An evaluative review of climate commissions over the course of their five years revealed significant challenges in enabling and delivering the intended outcomes of this model. The review found issues in mobilising and sustaining financial support. This was attributed to the centralisation of the UK's financial system, compounded by the absence of place-based financial institutions, and the sustained reduction in the capacity of local and regional authorities to support place-based finance due to successive funding cuts.^{10,11}

Securing funding can also provide further stability to community-based projects, ensuring that they have the capacity to establish permanent staffing positions and help retain a sense of continuity for the work they do. Regional stakeholders noted the current limitations to funding, namely short-term funding cycles and competitive culture, which means places or organisations find themselves bidding against each other.

Policymakers will need to ensure that they are creating long-term funding opportunities to facilitate place-sensitive partnership work that can be maintained over time to ensure their impact is long-lasting across places.¹² This might include exploring more innovative funding models and diversifying funding sources that can support longevity and scalability.

Community-led action projects

Policymakers could take on more opportunities to collaborate and mobilise the energy of community leaders and civic actors to promote partnership work that is centred on driving innovative and creative solutions.

Community-led projects that are led by local authorities, charities, grassroots organisations, social/cultural enterprises and cooperatives were regarded as important enablers in driving sustainable approaches across places in the UK.

⁸ Kytherotis, A., Armstrong, A. & Howarth, C. (2024), [UK Climate Commissions and Place-based climate action: Evaluating Policies, governance, networks and scales](#), A case study report for The British Academy; Howarth, C., Brogan, J., Curran, B., Duncan, M., Fankhauser, S., Gouldson, A., Owen, A. & Stuart-Watt, A. (2023), [Enabling Place-Based Climate Action in the UK: The PCAN Experience](#), A report by the Place-based Climate Action Network (PCAN), UK.

¹⁰ Howarth, C., Brogan, J., Barry, J., Bryant, S., Curran, B., Damien, A., Duncan, A., Fankhauser, S., Gouldson, A., Lock, K., Owen, A., Robins, N. & Van Der Horst, D. (2024), [Final report of the Place-Based Climate Action Network \(PCAN\)](#), UK: Place-Based Climate Action Network.

¹¹ Howarth C. et al. (2023), [Enabling Place-Based Climate Action in the UK: The PCAN Experience](#), A report by the Place-based Climate Action Network (PCAN), UK.

¹² Howarth C. et al. (2023), [Enabling Place-Based Climate Action in the UK: The PCAN Experience](#), A report by the Place-based Climate Action Network (PCAN), UK.

[The City of Trees](#) project, situated in Greater Manchester and shared in our Manchester workshop, is an example of this. It was initially established as a tree planting initiative with the aim of rejuvenating green spaces and enhancing biodiversity. The project has created opportunities for citizens to participate, connect and learn more about nature, recentring the importance of woodlands, and harnessed a culture of stewardship and care within the community and for the natural environment.¹³ This has enabled new relationships and developed greater trust and empathy within and between people and organisations.

What started as a tree planting project has now evolved and become an important initiative in supporting local and regional policymakers by providing evidence on trees and flood prevention, promoting more natural flood management solutions and using data to identify flood-prone areas in the region.¹⁴

Community energy projects were also regarded as valuable and positively shared in our Glasgow event. Harnessing both civic engagement and enthusiasm, as well as empowering community members to take more control and leadership in driving energy-positive solutions. Examples shared included: [Community Energy Scotland](#) and [Glasgow Community Energy](#).

Policymakers should consider working more collaboratively with community-based organisations, local businesses and researchers by supporting these community-led projects, leveraging the trusted and strong relationships already formed through community engagement, as well as channelling civic enthusiasm. Policymakers can also consider drawing on learnings from these more inclusive, community-led projects, to help identify best practices that can offer valuable learnings for wider partnership work.

Wider place dynamics

Promoting knowledge of history, cultures and heritage is crucial to help strengthen and develop more diverse and inclusive partnerships but is an overlooked facet.

Bringing in different bodies with a direct link to a place—such as educational institutions (universities, schools/colleges), government departments, health trusts and cultural and arts-based organisations, was viewed as a positive way of bringing in wider expertise which could strengthen existing approaches.

For example, [Risky Cities](#), a project feeding into the [Living with Water Partnership](#) between the Environment Agency, Yorkshire Water and the University of Hull, has partnered with the National Youth Theatre and Absolutely Cultured, a cultural development organisation, to link engagement between Hull and the Humber estuary region's heritage with raising awareness of, and adaptation to, increasing flood risks.¹⁵

Being cognisant of language and framing can be a useful way to draw in wider place-based stakeholders to strengthen partnership work. Stakeholders in the nature recovery policy space recognised that they were often tied to technical language and drew mainly on environmental expertise. This can cause issues when working with new partners that do not use the same terms and, therefore, being adaptive and modifying language could help strengthen existing approaches by bringing in a diversity of perspectives.

Policymakers need to consider how best to draw in wider place dynamics such as culture, heritage and history. Attention to these place dynamics can help leverage a more diverse set of expertise and important place attachments, such as pride in place and people's sense of belonging, to strengthen existing approaches.

¹³ [The City of Trees Project](#) [Accessed 12/08/25].

¹⁴ [The City of Trees \(2025\), Flood Resilience in the Rainy City](#)

¹⁵ University of Hull (nd), [Risky Cities](#) [Accessed 12/08/25].

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