

Measuring social and cultural infrastructure in the higher education sector

Response deadline: 04 February 2026

The British Academy is commissioning an organisation (or group of organisations) to lead a project to explore the measurement of social and cultural infrastructure in relation to the higher education sector. This project will investigate how the measurement framework developed in [Measuring Social and Cultural Infrastructure](#) can be operationalised by the higher education sector, through a project that trials the framework across a range of higher education institutions and settings. This project is being jointly commissioned by the British Academy's public policy team, and the higher education and research policy team.

Social and cultural infrastructure: background and overview

Social and cultural infrastructure refers to the spaces, services and structures that bring people together, and that can strengthen the social and cultural fabric of our communities.

Brought into focus by the British Academy's work on [Cohesive Societies](#) and the [COVID Decade](#) evidence review and policy reports, our current [policy programme](#) on social and cultural infrastructure examines how these infrastructures can be understood and invested in by policymakers and others to help achieve a range of policy aims.

Phase 1 overview

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 two organisations jointly commissioned the [Bennett Institute for Public Policy](#) and the [Institute for Community Studies](#) 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 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.

Phase 2 overview

The Academy's most recent phase of work in this area explores how social and cultural infrastructure can best be measured and valued, and what role different institutions and sectors play in creating, supporting and enhancing this infrastructure. It aims to deepen our understanding of social and cultural infrastructure, to explore its different dimensions and its value in relation to distinct policy areas, aims and challenges.

Measuring social and cultural infrastructure

A key component of this phase has been an investigation into how social and cultural infrastructure can be measured, and what a measurement framework could look like.

To achieve this, the Academy commissioned the [Bennett Institute](#) to conduct a major project to better understand how to measure the role that social and cultural infrastructure plays in the fabric of our societies.

The final report, [Measuring Social and Cultural Infrastructure](#), was published in April 2025. The report starts by considering how social and cultural infrastructure can be identified in relation to some of the characteristics associated with all kinds of infrastructure. It then explores the challenge of measuring social and cultural infrastructure, and subsequently develops a framework for measuring the critical, yet often overlooked, assets, facilities and spaces of which it is formed.

To ensure the framework can be used by a range of stakeholders, from national policymakers to community organisations, it is designed to be flexible and to be applicable at different spatial scales. To this end, rather than prescribing a strict methodology to follow or determining what kinds of data should be used, it prompts its users to reflect on their own skills, resources, and purpose when deciding upon how and what to measure.

Other activities in phase 2

Alongside the commissioned work on measurement above, other activities in this phase included:

- Sector-focused work to discuss in more depth what social and cultural infrastructure looks like in specific sectors and what purpose it serves. We focussed on the [higher education](#) and creative and cultural sectors.¹
- The Academy commissioned London Development Trust to carry out [an independent research project](#) investigating young people's views and needs in relation to social and cultural infrastructure.

¹ A summary of the creative and cultural industries roundtables is upcoming in early 2026.

- An exploration of the role social and cultural infrastructure can play in addressing specific policy challenges. We focused on tackling disadvantage, and reducing crime and improving safety.²
- A collection of nine discussion papers, '[Social and cultural infrastructure for people and policy](#)', exploring from different disciplinary perspectives how policy interventions can support the role of social and cultural infrastructure in strengthening the UK's social and cultural fabric.

Building on this work we have developed a three-part typology for how a social and cultural infrastructure lens can provide a way of understanding how these resources can be leveraged by stakeholders across the policy ecosystem and beyond, to achieve potentially powerful positive outcomes:

- Social and cultural infrastructure as a framing for policy challenges and problems
- Social and cultural infrastructure as a vehicle for designing effective policy solutions
- Social and cultural infrastructure as a tool for policy implementation and delivery

Objectives and Approach of this Funding Opportunity

Following the culmination of the work detailed above, the British Academy is now exploring how the measurement framework developed in *Measuring Social and Cultural Infrastructure* can be operationalised across a range of settings, and by a variety of organisations.

In order to gain this insight, the Academy is seeking to support a research-based project into how the measurement framework can be operationalised and utilised, focussing initially in the higher education sector. Due to the Academy's own position within the higher education landscape as a funder and as a national policy voice for the disciplines it represents, and as a follow-on to the series of roundtables held last year exploring universities as social and cultural infrastructure (detailed above), we plan to focus this project on the higher education sector. Our goal is to trial the measurement framework across a range of universities, capturing a diversity of institution types, regions, histories, disciplinary representation, and so on.

Core research questions

- What are the benefits and challenges provided by the social and cultural infrastructure measurement framework, both to individual institutions, and to the higher education sector more broadly?
- What do the insights garnered by the framework reveal about universities' role, and potential role, in relation to social and cultural infrastructure, as approached through the three-part typology set out above?

The Academy is seeking to support a project(s) that will identify how to address the above questions by working with a methodologically appropriate selection of universities/university departments to explore how the measurement framework can be developed and used for further research. In their proposed methodology, project teams should cover the following components:

² A summary note will be published in early 2026.

- An appropriate sampling size of universities and/or departments, schools and faculties within them. While the Academy is open to all methodologically appropriate suggestions, the sampling should represent geographical and mission variation in the sector.
- Strategies for developing, tailoring and trialling the measurement framework based on the core research questions (see above).
- An approach to synthesis and generalisation of findings for the wider higher education sector.

The project team should also note there is an expectation of close working with the Academy during the project, and support to connect with wider policy work will be provided as needed.

Context of the research

The Academy expects that the proposed research is strongly cognisant of, and grounded within, the current higher education landscape and the policy agendas that are shaping and impacting upon the sector. Consideration should also be given as to how the measurement framework might sit alongside higher education-specific exercises (such as the Research Excellence Framework and Knowledge Exchange Framework) and to how the framework might complement others that exist in the HE sector, such as the Civic Universities Network's [framework for civic impact](#).

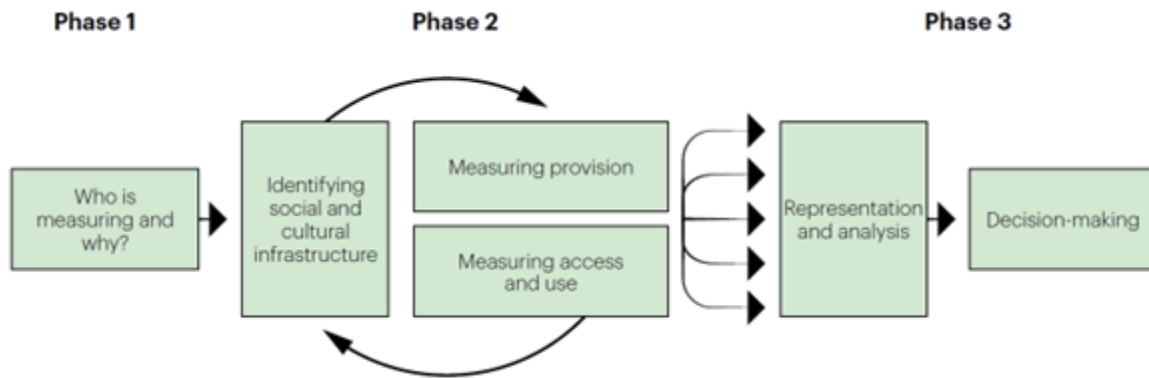
More broadly, the project should also be situated within the current wider policy context, and if so, where appropriate, consider relevant initiatives such as MHCLG's Pride in Place strategy, its Plan for Neighbourhoods, and the English Devolution Bill.

The Academy also expects the research will seek to build upon aspects of the Academy's previous work on social and cultural infrastructure as outlined above.

Process of trialling the framework

Through this project we are seeking to understand how the measurement framework functions in practice within the higher education sector. The Academy is interested in gaining insight into both how the framework is understood and used from a strategic standpoint of organisations and their overarching aims, and also the practicalities of using the framework, particularly within complex organisations such as universities.

It is essential that the commissioned organisation will recruit universities into the trial, and then work collaboratively with them to trial the measurement framework set out in *Measuring Social and Cultural Infrastructure* within each university. The framework set out in the report divides the process of measurement into three phases, as shown in the diagram below, and the research should consider each of these phases within the project. Tender responses should clearly outline how each component of their proposal will address each phase.



The three phases encompass: 1) Who is measuring and why?; 2) Identifying social and cultural infrastructure, measuring provision, and measuring access and use; and 3) Representation and analysis, and decision-making Further details on the measurement framework can be found in [*Measuring Social and Cultural Infrastructure*](#).

In relation to each individual university, the Academy expects the research will involve exploring which aspects of the framework work well, which aspects are more challenging, and what are the benefits of using the framework at both strategic and operational levels. This will likely involve examining and evaluating the different stages of the *process* of universities mapping out and measuring their social and cultural infrastructure, as much as the *outputs/outcomes* of the measurement exercise itself.

The project should seek to analyse findings across the universities in the trial, examining any commonalities or differences across the universities (or relevant unit of analysis), such as the impact the size, focus/specialism, or location, of universities, has had on how the framework functions. It will also be important to identify any changes or adaptations that could be made to the measurement framework, to maximise its effectiveness based on the results across the cohort.

Outcomes of the project

The Academy is seeking to gain understanding of how the outputs and outcomes of the measurement framework might be used and/or further developed to provide individual universities with useful and actionable insights and evidence on the social and cultural infrastructure that they currently provide or are involved with. This will include considering benefits and impacts not just in relation to the university, but also to stakeholders such as local communities, organisations and services. We envisage that trialling the framework will provide universities with outputs and information that they can use for a range of purposes and decisions, such as planning and evaluating civic engagement activities, quantifying their social value to the wider community, and providing evidence to strengthen funding bids and encourage investment.

Across the universities, the Academy expects the project should explore the generalisability of the findings, for example how the outputs and outcomes of the framework can also be utilised collectively by the higher education sector.

Outputs of the project

We expect the project to result in a final report, suitable for publication by the Academy after external peer review. It should address the two overarching questions set out above, namely:

- What are the benefits and challenges provided by the social and cultural infrastructure measurement framework, both to individual institutions, and to the higher education sector more broadly?
- What do the insights garnered by the framework reveal about universities' role, and potential role, in relation to social and cultural infrastructure, as approached through the three-part typology set out above?

This final report should be suitable for a range of audiences, including those within the higher education sector, as well as policy and research audiences with an interest in social and cultural infrastructure more broadly. We expect projects to consider the relevant policy context and challenges when developing outputs and a range of other policy outputs are encouraged as part of the response.

The commissioned organisation should work closely with staff at the British Academy throughout the project to ensure complementarity between the project and other activities within the wider social and cultural infrastructure work theme. For example, other Academy-led activities focusing on the measurement framework will be particularly relevant to the project. The Academy will also have a high-level steering group advising this project and so the research team should consider this and the opportunity to interact with the senior stakeholders who sit on this group in its proposals.

Please note, all outputs will be owned by the British Academy and the commissioned group will have a creative license output for the published works.

Responding to this funding call

We welcome responses from organisations which indicate how they can bring their expertise to conduct this project. Responses should be no longer than 8 pages and should outline:

- Detail how your organisation would recruit or select universities to take part in the trial
- A project plan, setting out initial thinking on:
 - how you propose your organisation would work with universities during the three phases of the project
 - how you propose your organisation would synthesise and bring together the findings from across the universities involved
 - Any key risks you anticipate, and how these would be mitigated
- A short description of existing organisational expertise including examples of relevant prior work
- A breakdown of the budget with clear justifications that demonstrate value for money

In addition, respondents (including any co-applicants) will also be required to upload a CV.

Respondents should note the following timetable:

- Review panel (w/c 16 February 2026)
- Funding decision announced (w/c 23 February 2026)
- Initial meeting between commissioned organisation and Academy team (by mid-March 2026)
- Delivery of final draft report for peer review (November 2026)
- Delivery of final report (December 2026)

Proposal assessment criteria

- The ability of the organisation to recruit and then work successfully with a range of universities to trial the framework
- An understanding of social and cultural infrastructure, and of the measurement framework
- An understanding of the higher education landscape in the UK, and of the role universities currently play, and could potentially play, in relation to social and cultural infrastructure
- The expertise of the project team/organisation, and their experience in conducting comparable projects
- The experience of the project team/organisation in producing outputs aimed at both policy and research audiences
- A consideration of any relevant equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) factors
- The demonstrated value for money

Please note, the tender is open to project teams in UK based organisations only. Responses should contain a brief outline of resource implications and justification of value for money and proposals should not exceed £60,000 (excluding VAT).

Indirect costs are not eligible for consideration. The response should confirm the organisation is able to deliver according to the timetable provided above.

As noted above, we also expect all teams to specify a dedicated person(s) who will liaise regularly with a British Academy team member. Responses should be submitted via Flexi-Grant by **17:00 GMT on 04 February 2026**.

We are happy to discuss the invitation to tender and offer further guidance if required. Please contact policy@thebritishacademy.ac.uk

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