



# Understanding the role of place in environmental sustainability

*A summary of insights from Where We  
Live Next commissioned research*

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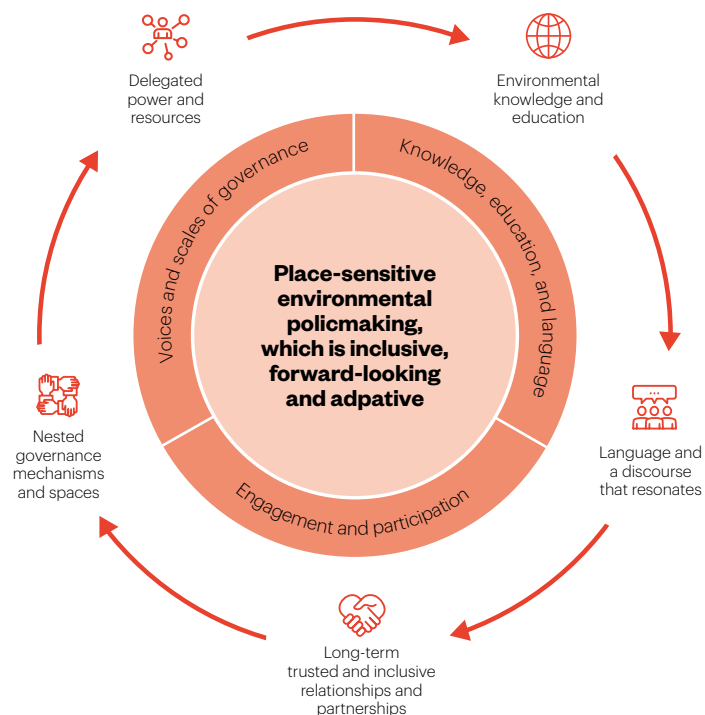
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# Executive summary

In 2017, British Academy research under its *Where We Live Now* project established the importance of place in terms of the design and resourcing of effective and efficient policymaking.<sup>1</sup> This report draws together new SHAPE<sup>2</sup> research to explore how a place-sensitive approach to policymaking can help navigate complex and dynamic change required to address the growing environmental challenges we face.

Drawing principally on six pieces of academic research commissioned by the British Academy, alongside a piece of social media research and wider British Academy policy work, the report shares insights and examples which illustrate place-sensitive environmental policy in practice. In doing so, the report identifies several common themes that underpin effective place-sensitive policymaking as it relates to environmental sustainability. These themes are derived from synthesis of the evidence across three main areas: knowledge, education and language; engagement and participation; and the voices and scales of governance (see Figure 1).

*Figure 1. A set of inter-linked research themes*



Running through all the research is the conclusion that environmental sustainability across a range of specific issues is underpinned by place-sensitive policymaking that is inclusive, forward-looking and adaptive. This approach recognises and builds on the diversity of places, and how that manifests in tangible (built and natural environment, infrastructure) and intangible (plurality of people, culture, beliefs and relationships) factors. It supports policymaking that meets the needs of everyone, particularly those experiencing disadvantages

<sup>1</sup> The British Academy (2017), *Where We Live Now*.

<sup>2</sup> SHAPE stands for Social sciences, Humanities and the Arts for People and the Economy/environment. See <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/this-is-shape/>

such as temporary and poor-quality housing, limited public transport, air pollution, lack of access to green spaces and increased risks of flooding. Five additional inter-connected themes demonstrate the features of place-sensitive policymaking that support this approach:

- 1. Environmental knowledge and education** can underpin the transformative shifts in behaviour that are needed for environmental sustainability. This also supports elements of other themes like engagement, governance and informing policy through lived experiences. It can happen in academic institutions as well as ongoing civic education programmes and more creative, fun and inclusive arts-based settings.
- 2. Language and a discourse that resonates** with the values, culture and experiences of a particular place and community creates a more compelling narrative for change and may increase the efficacy of environmental policy. But the values and priorities of different communities of interest are not always neatly aligned and often these conflicts need to be considered and ultimately resolved within responsive but coherent policy discourse at a national or even international level.
- 3. Long-term, trusted and inclusive relationships and partnerships** sit at the heart of the range of methods that are most effective for engaging people where they live. For engagement to be successful, it needs to reach minority, marginalised and hard-to-reach groups who may be engaged locally but disengaged from politics. Engaging children and young people at the local level and co-designing policy with them can help overcome barriers to participation, counter climate anxiety, and increase the efficacy of policy solutions.
- 4. Nested governance mechanisms and spaces** can flex and adapt to meet the changing needs of local environments and communities. Effective environmental governance is likely to be multi-level, fluid and organic: it requires work within, across and between different levels of governance and different policy/departmental structures. This acknowledges the place-specific and wider ecosystem factors for environmental policy. It is important to use existing community-led social infrastructure, civic spaces and cultural assets to generate richer and deeper dialogues.
- 5. Delegated power and resources** that build out from existing and emergent governance processes that already work is important, particularly when resources are tight. This extends beyond relying on local authorities to peer-to-peer mechanisms and sharing lessons learnt between places. It is also clear that bringing a wider range of local organisations and civil society groups into governance systems may require additional resourcing and capacity.

Readers of this report may find much of what it contains familiar. Those familiar with the challenges of environmental policymaking are well versed in the benefits of a place-sensitive approach and this report brings together and reinforces the evidence for this approach. It provides a basis for exploring the question “What is the role of place-sensitive policymaking in environmental sustainability?”.

In practice, however, the picture remains highly variable and policymakers have struggled to implement this approach. Based on this initial evidence-base, therefore, the British Academy will be working closely with a range of policymakers to develop and test a set of principles for place-sensitive environmental policy, alongside publication and discussion of a more detailed set of practical case studies.





# 1.0 Introduction

Climate change and environmental issues are increasingly becoming national priorities in governments around the world. The complexity and scale of these issues demands an approach that encompasses a wide range of perspectives to help support the transition to more sustainable living and meet our environmental goals.

The social sciences and humanities are fundamental to providing behavioural, historical, political, economic, ethical and other insights to these policy debates, alongside science and technology disciplines. The British Academy's public policy team aims to employ these SHAPE disciplines in answering pivotal questions relating to environmental sustainability, providing fundamental insights and contributions, such as how to ensure the necessary cultural shifts that are vital to the development, delivery and adoption of environmental technologies and practices, not least to support the transition towards net-zero.

With access to a multidisciplinary evidence base and expertise, we aim to reframe debates within the environmental sustainability policy ecosystem in order to find more effective and efficient policy solutions; foster creative interactions between our disciplines and key communities; and promote dialogue, support initiatives, and maintain networks relevant to our disciplines, including partnerships with the other national academies.

The British Academy's Where We Live Next policy programme aims to explore sustainability through the lens of place and place-sensitive policy. It seeks to examine how visible different places, and the diversity of people and cultures within them, are to policymakers when they make decisions about the environment and how policymaking in this area could be strengthened. The programme builds on the evidence from the Academy's Where We Live Now project, which focused on exploring what places mean to people and why, along with what place-sensitive policymaking might look like in practice.<sup>3</sup> In early 2022, the British

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<sup>3</sup> The British Academy (2017), Where We Live Now. See the annex to this report for further information on this project.

Academy commissioned seven pieces of research that explored various facets of environmental sustainability using a place-sensitive lens. This report synthesises this evidence base and brings together insights to help stakeholders to better understand the role of place-sensitive policymaking and its application to environmental sustainability. In doing so, it examines how engaging with people in the places where they live leads to better and more effective and efficient policymaking in practice, reflecting the diversity of communities and the local environments in which they live. The Academy plans to build on this research base and develop an analytical framework from which a set of principles for place-sensitive policy on environmental issues can be derived with the help of key stakeholders in this space.

It is important to note that there is already a range of evidence and activity at the global, national and local levels of government and within civil society groups on this theme. The evidence in this report is centred on a small portfolio of research that focuses on what the SHAPE disciplines can bring to the discussion. As the programme of work continues, it will draw on wider research and insights, and attempt to address key gaps in the evidence base in consultation with a range of stakeholders from within the research and policymaking communities, and civil society.

Policymakers are often drawn to technocratic approaches to tackling environmental issues, focusing on the role of scientific and technological solutions. However, history would indicate that social and technical systems co-evolve in practice.<sup>4</sup> Whether it be getting communities to transition to more sustainable practices or to adopt net zero technologies, policymakers also need to consider the behavioural and cultural shifts required to achieve these transitions at the scale and pace needed to meet our environmental and carbon goals.

Research from the SHAPE disciplines not only allows us to tap into an understanding of human behaviour but also enables us to tease out the wider social and systems issues such as existing inequalities, cultural and religious practices that drive individual behaviour and motivations. With such insights, it can provide context for how communities understand current environmental concepts and help us to predict how people might react to and engage with these changes, therefore enabling policymakers to find the right incentives and approaches and implement them successfully.

SHAPE research can also be useful at highlighting methodologies and tools for more effective engagement and participation with places and community members across the UK, helping to develop strong relationships of trust between places and policymakers that can aid in developing and delivering effective solutions. There are often already existing mechanisms and systems in place that, if adopted and scaled up, can support community approaches and local place-based delivery on issues of environmental sustainability which can accelerate the necessary shifts. This is particularly important when resources are tight.





### **Scope of the report**

Environmental sustainability has many different, yet often interconnected, dimensions. A truly sustainable approach recognises that people are an intrinsic part of the natural world, not separate from it. It also acknowledges that many environmental issues are multi-spatial (potentially having local, regional, national and global impacts) and can have short, medium and long-term impacts. Some of the key dimensions of environmental sustainability, as they relate to place place-sensitive, are:

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<sup>4</sup> Owens, S. et al (2022), Lessons from the History of UK Environmental Policy, British Academy

*Table 1. Key dimensions of environmental sustainability as they relate to place-sensitive policymaking.*

	<p><b>Climate change</b> Transport, heating, cooling, energy efficiency, flood management etc.</p>	<p>Many of the actions needed to mitigate and adapt to climate change and deliver on our net zero goals in the UK relate to how people move around and keep homes and businesses warm (and increasingly cool and dry) in the places they live. Policies in this area can not only shape our local environments but also raise significant fairness issues which can impact the communities in those places, exacerbating existing disadvantages, and can in turn influence behaviours and local responses.</p>
	<p><b>Nature</b> Biodiversity, habitats, rivers and seas, land use etc.</p>	<p>Natural habitats and the wildlife within them can be very place specific. However, nature can also be mobile and part of global complex ecosystems. Nature and landscapes are clearly shaped by policies but also by local people, through farming and land use and wider cultures and beliefs. The increased focus on environmental goals is starting to lead to a policy shift towards stewardship and regenerative practices; local people and communities are key agents in this change, but access, ownership and accountability can all be issues.</p>
	<p><b>Pollution and resource use</b> Wider emissions besides carbon: plastics, waste etc.</p>	<p>Air pollution and waste can have very place specific impacts, as well as further afield if waste treatment and disposal are outsourced. Pollution can sometimes have a greater impact on more marginalised communities who may struggle to have their voices heard. As there is a move from extractive to more sustainable approaches, there are opportunities in terms of how places think about waste, for example, through the development of local community sharing and reuse schemes, and circular business models.</p>
	<p><b>The built environment</b> Housing, civic and green spaces, infrastructure, planning etc</p>	<p>Policies relating to the built environment and associated green spaces (parks, gardens etc) can be particularly important in terms of place shaping, enabling more sustainable lifestyles and supporting mental and physical wellbeing. Engaging the diverse voices of local communities in this area, including more disadvantaged groups, who may live in cold leaky rented homes and may not have access to green spaces or public transport, can give people a greater sense of agency and help embed more sustainable and resilient policy approaches.</p>

The evidence base for this report, which covers a wide range of environmental sustainability issues, also ties closely with the Academy's other work on net zero. The Net Zero Policy Programme so far has considered how collaboration across sectors (public, third sector, business, and local community), can foster shared commitments to goals, values and programmes to deliver net zero as part of a sustainable future.<sup>5</sup> These two projects provide complementary insights: *Where We Live Next*. This, in turn, provides a frame of reference for net zero policy work which will look at specific policy and practice that supports and enables net zero objectives in different places, at different levels of governance and across different sectors. The Academy's international work on just transitions and nature-based solutions is also relevant here and will inform both these projects.

### Overview of the report

Chapter two provides background on our previous *Where We Live Now* project, which makes the case for place-sensitive policymaking. The chapter then looks at what a place-sensitive

<sup>5</sup> The British Academy (2023), [Net Zero Policy Programme](#).



approach can bring to policy and to the issues of environmental sustainability, drawing on evidence from existing literature on place-based approaches to environmental issues.

Chapters three, four and five explore the high-level themes that have emerged from our evidence base. The high-level themes, which overlap and influence each other, are: knowledge, education and language; engagement and participation; and voices and scales of governance. Our research indicates that these interconnected insights can help shape thinking about more effective environmental policymaking, one which meets the overarching need to be inclusive and sensitive to the different places in which policies are enacted. The themes can also help ensure that policy is forward-looking and adaptive, which is crucial when dealing with complex climate and environmental issues.

It is important to note that this report focuses on place-sensitive policy and not ‘the other end of the telescope’ – i.e., more centralised approaches to environmental sustainability. Depending on the environmental issue in question, national policies such as product, building or planning standards, or environmental targets, can be equally important. To be fully effective, local, national and global approaches to environmental sustainability need to be sufficiently aligned, coherent and focused on delivering action and what works in practice. It will also require change at the national level on closely related issues such as housing, social security and transport policy. Again, the research summarised in this report is not focused on these wider aspects of change or fundamental issues of environmental justice, both in the UK and globally and the report should be read with these limits in mind.

This report is not intended to cover the research projects in detail, as the outputs produced by the six commissioned projects can be found in the [evidence hub](#) for those interested in exploring them in greater depth. Other relevant literature/research has also been referenced in places to provide additional evidence across the identified themes. Given that the main insights in this report are primarily drawn from a small sample of research, the conclusions at the end highlight possible gaps and further areas for future policy research.

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Place-sensitive policy recognises differences in the built and natural environment







## 2.0 Making the case for place-sensitive environmental policy

The British Academy's Where We Live Now project, published in 2017, aimed to better understand the concept of place and its impact on people and relationships. The project emphasised the ways in which places matter to people and how this could be utilised to improve the effectiveness of policy. Place as an analytical concept was shown to be a powerful lens through which policymakers could design more tailored policy interventions and allocate resources more efficiently.<sup>6</sup>

The project made the case for place-sensitive policymaking in relation to the demand for local and regional productivity through a collection of evidence-based reports and a set of roundtable discussions hosted in Manchester, Cornwall, Cardiff and London. It drew on SHAPE disciplines to explore place-based growth, moving beyond economic concepts to encompass wellbeing, culture and the environment.<sup>7</sup> The findings included:

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<sup>6</sup> The British Academy, Where We Live Now: Perspectives on place and policy.

<sup>7</sup> The British Academy, Where We Live Now: Making the case for Place-based policy, p. 1.

- That policymakers at all levels should consider people’s strong views about what the future for their area should look like, and how success and productivity should be measured.<sup>8</sup>
- That the UK government should pilot new approaches to place-based policymaking which go beyond devolution. For example, pioneering approaches to involving local people.
- That local and national governments work together to better understand places and agree the best level to make decisions.<sup>9</sup>

### Overview of the report

Since the publication of *Where We Live Now*, the importance of place has entered debates on environmental sustainability, challenging the non-spatial and technocratic perspectives that have tended to dominate the discussion. Environmental debates have also significantly evolved as scientific evidence highlights that places are getting close to irreversible tipping points in terms of climate and planetary boundaries which makes the need for action at scale and place more pressing. Some of the changes include:

- An increased understanding of the interaction between different environmental issues and systems and between social and environmental change. There is a recognition that this can lead to non-linear and cascade impacts which increases uncertainty and complexity in decision-making.<sup>10</sup>
- The understanding that people are part of nature, not separate from it, which requires new approaches for thinking about wellbeing and an increased recognition that natural impacts can be both hyper-local as well as global.<sup>11</sup>
- The speed of scientific knowledge and technological change - which can have positives and negatives - has accelerated, with deep implications for policymaking and regulation, highlighting the need for more forward-looking approaches.<sup>12</sup>
- The increased frequency of climate impacts in the UK and globally, which impacts supply chains, finance, insurance, etc, and has raised the importance of adaptation and resilience and nature-based solutions at the local, national and global levels.<sup>13</sup>
- Increased climate anxiety and activism amongst children and young people and intergenerational concerns about equity and a just transition are raising questions about the narratives and language being used to address loss and damage as well as hope and agency for a positive future in the places where people live.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>8</sup> [The British Academy, \*Where We Live Now: Making the case for Place-based Policy\*, p.9.](#)

<sup>9</sup> [Ibid](#), p.9.

<sup>10</sup> Owens, S. et al (2022) *Lessons from the History of UK Environmental Policy*, British Academy; National Engineering Policy Centre & Royal Academy of Engineering (2020) *Net Zero: A systems perspective on the climate challenge*.

<sup>11</sup> See projects and publications under the British Academy’s Urban Infrastructures for Well-being programme, for instance.

<sup>12</sup> UNCTAD (2019) *The impact of rapid technological change on sustainable development*, United Nations ; Hamdani, A et al (2018) ‘Technological progress and the future of the corporation’, *Journal of the British Academy*, volume 6, supplementary issue 1 (Reforming Business for the 21st Century).

<sup>13</sup> Almássy, D. (2022) *Realising the potential of nature-based solutions for a transformative societal change*, British Academy.

<sup>14</sup> Barford, A et al. (2021), *Young people and climate change*, British Academy.

- The way in which these fast-changing shifts play out in different places and for different communities can leave people feeling overwhelmed by the changes needed for more sustainable living. Many may not be sure where to start on this journey and may face additional significant barriers to change, such as existing financial hardship or job and housing insecurity. These sentiments therefore bring to the fore the usefulness of a place-based approach as it allows a shift in focus towards how these sustainability challenges manifest, how they translate into daily experiences, and, crucially, the kind of solutions available to address these simultaneously.

There is also a recognition that a place-based approach directly responds to the ‘think global, act local’ narrative, which can help reduce the distance between issues of environmental sustainability at an ecosystems level and people’s lived experiences, behaviours, and the places they inhabit. Whilst climate and biodiversity deals are agreed internationally, they must be adopted and adapted at the local level.<sup>15</sup> For efficacy, climate and environmental change needs to be situated locally to allow for individuals to develop deeper engagement with these issues and connect them to place. This can help change attitudes and behaviours and engender constructive place-protective intentions that incorporate sustainability goals with pre-existing identities and attachments to place.<sup>16</sup>

### **Place-sensitive policymaking and environmental sustainability**

Place-sensitive policymaking has many potential benefits in terms of facilitating and driving the shift towards environmental sustainability. A place-based lens not only unearths the different needs for people, nature and the environment between places, but it also highlights the need to link the different scales of decision-making (local/regional/national/global) and sustainability impacts together, in a way that can better anticipate and prepare for change.

It also places emphasis on the importance of engaging with local people and institutions as active participants in the development and implementation of policy solutions. To implement this effectively will require rethinking around the forms of governance that best create a more decentralised, inclusive and co-ordinated approach to decision-making.

The need for systems-level thinking has become pertinent to these discussions of how to govern environmental sustainability. For instance, the Royal Academy of Engineering, has explored this in relation to the UK’s transition to net zero, outlining the benefits of a systems approach to tackling these issues:

*“A systems approach can help policymakers frame a policy question in a different way; it encourages evidence gathering that draws upon the widest, most diverse and critical perspectives leading to a ‘bigger picture’ view of the policy problem and how it might be tackled.”<sup>17</sup>*

Taking a systems-level approach acknowledges the complexity of the issues faced, recognises the real and perceived long-time scales, the breadth of policy areas which these issues link to, and also the number of stakeholders that need to be involved to work towards these goals.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Endfield, G., Jarvis, S., Hayes, J. (2022), *Situating Climate Change: Understanding the importance of Climate place and community*. University of Liverpool, p. 2.

<sup>16</sup> Endfield, G et al., *Situating Climate Change*, p. 2.

<sup>17</sup> Royal Academy of Engineering (date), *Net Zero: A systems perspective on the climate challenge*, p. 6.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, p. 2.



Internationally, place-based approaches to policymaking have also been championed by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and the UK Committee on Climate Change. These bodies have all recognised the need for a range of publics, communities, state and non-state actors to become more actively involved in addressing climate change. The independent review of net zero led by Chris Skidmore MP concluded with recommendations that place a need on creating sustainable governance structures, catalysing local action, and increasing transparency and engaging with the public.<sup>19</sup> In the UK Government, the language of place-sensitive policymaking, along with an assertion of the importance of place, has become well established across a range of policy documents that have recently been published as outlined below.

*Table 2. UK Government policy documents relating to environmental governance, and their approaches to place.*<sup>20</sup>

Document	Date	Approach to Place
Build Back Better: Our Plan for Growth	March 2021	Asserts the importance of place for the government's 'levelling up' strategy, and sets out plans for delivering regional economic growth
Decarbonising Transport: A Better, Greener Britain	July 2021	A place-based approach is recognized as the most effective way to approach transport decarbonisation
UK Hydrogen Strategy	August 2021	Low carbon hydrogen is identified as playing a critical role in the transition to net zero; small-scale place-based projects are presented as resolving key energy challenges
Net Zero Strategy: Build Back Greener	October 2021	Section on 'local climate action' emphasises the 'essential role' devolved and local government play in meeting national net zero ambitions. Document identifies the key priorities for supporting local action on net zero as setting clearer expectations for local places, providing resources for local places, and building capacity and capability at the local level
Heat and Buildings Strategy	October 2021	Local authorities are recognized as key players in decarbonising buildings to help reach net zero by 2050, although barriers to local action are acknowledged
Levelling Up White Paper	February 2022	'Systems Reform' chapter promises devolution to 'economic geographies', and identifies problems with previous initiatives in this area, including policy churn and weak institutions; siloed policymaking, especially in central government; and weak local government.

### Place-sensitive environmental action

Beyond the commissioned work for this report, organisations such as the Local Government Association (LGA) have published useful evidence on how to address climate change through place-based leadership on climate action, highlighting notable case studies where initiatives

<sup>19</sup> Brader, C. (2023), Mission Zero: Independent review of Net Zero, (House of Lords Library), [Accessed 24 January 2023].

<sup>20</sup> Hatzisavvidou, S., Britton, J., Berglund, O., Robbins, C., Shackleton, D. (2022), *Voices, Spaces, and Scales of Environmental Governance in the South West of Britain*, University of Bath, p. 6-7.

are already underway.<sup>21</sup> Networks have also been established to translate climate policy into action on the ground in local communities. These create opportunities for climate action within localities to support the shift towards a decentralised energy system, such as decisions about low-carbon business opportunities, renewable energy investment, urban transport, energy management, buildings efficiency and the management of climate risks.<sup>22</sup>

Place-based approaches have also gone beyond climate action to include how to address the crisis in nature and in particular issues of agriculture, biodiversity and the conservation of habitats. For instance, there have been various case studies exploring more place-based approaches to restorative agriculture, which can provide possible starting points for the transition towards a more sustainable agri-food system.<sup>23</sup>

The lens of place has also become increasingly prominent in terms of natural resource management and conservation practices. There are multiple examples of place-based conservation that include ‘collaborative landscape stewardship, climate change adaptation, ecosystem management, conservation legislation, regional tourism planning, open space preservation and community development’.<sup>24</sup> In the UK context, there are already several examples of how organisations working in this space are taking a place-based approach to address these issues. The Wildlife Trust, for example, focuses on connecting people with nature in their Nature on Your Doorstep programme, which provides knowledge and insights of local wildlife, and activities for connecting with nature and understanding how to protect it in their local areas.<sup>25</sup> Other groups, such as those in the Rivers Trust network, have developed stewardship and catchment partnerships that build links between companies and communities to enact local change, and develop and scale local solutions.<sup>26</sup>

The UK’s conservation strategy 2021, though not explicitly noting the need to take a place-sensitive approach to address the issues of conservation, does emphasise the need to listen more to people’s views, experiences and ambitions for their local environment.<sup>27</sup> It recognises the need to understand how to align statutory conservation ambitions with the wider objectives of the people in any given place.<sup>28</sup>

### Addressing a complex and dynamic policy context

A place-sensitive approach to policymaking can help to build a broader understanding of the issues in a given place and the inter-dependencies between them. Places have their own particular, and often complex, set of physical and human characteristics which interact with each other and with other places, creating a range of issues for policy to address. For example, places are sites where issues such as poverty, education, crime, lack of public services and environmental degradation can all be present and intimately linked to each other. Understanding these broader challenges, and how they play out at the global, national and local scales and the differing priorities they have, can allow us to navigate this complex and dynamic

<sup>21</sup> Local Government Association (2022), Climate action: place-based leadership and communication, [Accessed 15 August 2022].

<sup>22</sup> Place-based Climate Action Network [Accessed 15 August 2022].

<sup>23</sup> Swagemarkers, P., Dominguez-Garcia, M.D., Milone, P., Ventura, F., Wiskerke, S.C. (2019), ‘Exploring cooperative place-based approaches to restorative agriculture’, *Journal of Rural Studies*, 68, pp. 191-199.

<sup>24</sup> Williams, R.D., William, P.S., Kruger, E.L. (2013), ‘The Emergence of Place-Based Conservation’, In Williams, R.D., William, P.S., Kruger, E.L (eds), *Place-based Conservation: Perspectives from the Social Sciences* (Springer), p.3.

<sup>25</sup> The Wildlife Trusts (n.d.), ‘Nextdoor Nature’ [Accessed 6 October].

<sup>26</sup> The Rivers Trust (n.d.), ‘Guiding Water Stewardship’ [Accessed 6 October].

<sup>27</sup> Natural England (2022), *Conservation 21: Natural England’s conservation strategy for the 21st century*, p. 7.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, p. 7.

environment.<sup>29</sup> It can make what may seem like a confusing set of competing priorities more tangible and relatable, and help identify co-benefits. A place-sensitive approach to policy can enable a more pluralist approach to decision-making that, by including people in the process rather than just imposing change on them, is more likely to work in practice. However, it is also important to reiterate that this approach on its own may not be able to address structural issues, such as poverty and insecurity, that may prevent more marginalised groups from engaging in environmental activities.

Place-sensitive policy which empowers and resources local communities to act, can enable them to better adapt to change. Some of the drivers for change that are shaping UK environmental and place-sensitive decision-making include the following (although this is by no means an exhaustive list):

- The UK has a legally binding target of reducing emissions by 78% by 2035 compared to 1990 levels (63% relative to 2019), leading to net zero by 2050. The UK's hosting of the 26th UN Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP26) increased focus on climate issues across all layers of government. However, the latest Climate Change Committee progress report found that although a solid net zero strategy is in place, important policy gaps remain.<sup>30</sup>
- Although the UK's long-term environmental challenges have been articulated by the 25 Year Environmental Plan, post-Brexit it is still not completely clear how UK environmental standards and land use approaches will evolve and impact local areas.
- As the British Academy's COVID Decade reports found, the pandemic had a large impact on the way people think about, and the importance attributed to, issues of sustainability, including the long-term health of the environment, the value of green spaces, and the impact of political decisions and institutions and practices.<sup>31</sup> The pandemic provided a push to develop stronger, sustainability-led approaches for urban planning that focused on a just transition to net zero carbon, allowing us to put in place strategies which include the hyper-localisation of amenities, green spaces, and traffic-free streets.<sup>32</sup> The pandemic response also aided in breaking down certain barriers to business, local organisations working with, and alongside, government to address social and environmental issues. Discussions in the aftermath of the pandemic revolved around adopting a 'greener recovery.' However, there are risks that as infection rates fall the community relationships that were built during the pandemic may begin to erode.
- Climate impacts in the UK, such as the recent extreme weather events (e.g. heatwaves and storms), have brought to the fore discussions on climate change, climate resilience, and adaptability in different places.
- The war in Ukraine and the impacts on energy and food security in the UK risks shifting attention away from longer-term environmental goals in order to tackle the immediate economic and social impact of the conflict. The cost-of-living crisis and the inequality in cities and towns across the UK manifests in increased risks of fuel and food poverty. Increasing numbers of households face tangible challenges such as 'heat or eat' as well as sometimes intangible pressures such as the hidden costs of poor-quality housing stock: which can have considerable impacts upon wellbeing. The pressures on households during this time can also limit receptiveness to sustainability initiatives and the effectiveness of

<sup>29</sup> Sloam, J., Henn, M., Huebner, C. (2022), *Youth, Sustainability and Democracy: How Young People can Shape environmental policy in Urban Spaces*, Royal Holloway University, Nottingham Trent University, University of Sheffield, p. 3.

<sup>30</sup> Climate Change Committee (2022), 'Progress in reducing emissions'.

<sup>31</sup> The British Academy, *The Covid Decade*, p.15.

<sup>32</sup> The British Academy, *Shaping the Covid Decade*, p. 30.



environmental policies in such communities, especially when the intangible aspects of deprivation are not recognised or accounted for.

- In addition to the above competing priorities, both public and private resources are being severely stretched by inflation and economic stagnation, limiting funds available for local investment and testing the resilience of many local/place-based actors.

### **A more holistic approach**

Whilst the evidence gathered for this report indicates a wealth of strategies and initiatives to develop and implement place-sensitive policymaking to address the UK's environmental agenda, the mechanisms by which it is done often remains unclear. Our commissioned research has emphasised the need to better recognise the diversity of place-based actors, and the people within them, and how they differ within and between places. In particular, the review of climate policy related documents compiled by Hatzisavvidou et al, indicated that a place-based approach currently entails a focus on local authorities, not other local agents of climate action.<sup>33</sup>

Hatzisavvidou et al suggest that current environmental strategies constitute a definition of place that is oversimplified and flattened.<sup>34</sup> The understanding of place in these approaches is focused on administrative and physical boundaries which may not always be the optimal way to define a place.<sup>35</sup> This fosters a lack of recognition that 'place' is often experienced differently across communities within the same locality and a lack of understanding of the intangible qualities of a physical place, what some refer to as 'placeness'. For example, research by Sunikka-Blank et al details the inner and outer dimensions of place in the neighbourhoods that were observed in the case studies for their research. These were not necessarily visible in the physical fabric but clear in the intangible community aspects of the place.<sup>36</sup>

More broadly, even when particular places or cities are mentioned in policy documents, such as those detailed above in table 2, there tends to be little consideration for the diverse people and cultures within them, other than in the context for the impact that net zero transition will have on employment.<sup>37</sup> The overemphasis on employment presents a very limited understanding of the aspects of social and economic life that shape people's sense of belonging to a place. A deeper place-sensitive approach would reconsider how the transition to net zero impacts not just employment, but also livelihoods and wellbeing in a broader sense.

There is recognition that whilst there are particular devolution and decentralisation strategies (e.g. metro mayors) pursued by central government that could aid a shift to more place-sensitive approaches, through greater local decision-making powers, there are enduring questions about how to maximise the effectiveness of these strategies so that they truly reflect the diversity of people's connection with place, and enable diverse voices to shape the future of their cities, towns and villages.

Overall, our evidence base indicates that for the 'how' to be addressed, a more holistic and pluralistic understanding of place should be considered, particularly one in which places are not understood as mechanical systems but as organisms, inextricably tied up and shaped by the natural world. In this way, place-sensitive approaches to decision-making should consider the best outcomes for both people and the planet.

<sup>33</sup> Hatzisavvidou et al, [Voices, Spaces, and scales of Environmental Governance](#).

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, p. 6.

<sup>35</sup> Sunikka-Blank, M., Bradley-Neto, A., Choudhary, R. (2022), [A trans-disciplinary approach to scaling community voices for place-sensitive policy-making through places and practices of food](#). The University of Cambridge.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Hatzisavvidou et al, [Voices, Spaces, and scales of Environmental Governance](#), p. 10.



## 3.0 Knowledge, Education and Language

The evidence base collected for this report points to knowledge, education and language as key cross-cutting and interlinking facets of place-sensitive policymaking. This section identifies some of the local environmental knowledge that a place-sensitive lens can tap into and how this can give insights into changing environmental and community needs. It provides examples of how understanding intersectional social and environmental impacts are important, particularly when it comes to the needs of under-represented groups and how to support the more marginalised to enact change. It goes on to share research on how language, values, and cultures that shape responses to environmental issues can differ between places and communities and the importance of environmental policy narratives resonating with different groups so that communications are effective. The section then examines the importance of education on environmental issues and on the structural mechanisms that places and communities need in order to enhance awareness of these issues and how policies are developed and implemented.

### 3.1 Place-sensitive policymaking harnesses local knowledge

The research for this report found that current policymaking can fail to take account of the knowledge of communities, particularly those that are marginalised, and the insights they have into their local environments. Tapping into the local knowledge of nature, greenspaces, the built environment and pollution, 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. This can only happen, however, if the right mechanisms, networks and cultures are in place to harness the knowledge.<sup>38</sup> The research outlined below highlights how tangible, practical community projects which proactively address local needs, such as problems caused by poor quality housing and lack of access to healthy food, can provide valuable mechanisms for wider positive environmental change if they are supported to do so.

Viewing citizens as sources of local knowledge and valuing their lived experience –including what has worked and has not worked in the past, or insights on emerging risks and how things are changing ‘on the ground’ – can enable policymakers to gather insights on how complex policy challenges play out, and can be addressed, in different places. Local citizens’ knowledge often ‘reflect[s] a depth of experience that, due to place attachment and time continuity makes them suitable to detect changes in climate over long periods of time’.<sup>39</sup>

When empowered and supported, local people can aid in developing, formalising, and delivering potential solutions that draw on their knowledge of the places they live and the intersections and dependencies between the different issues that exist, and their cumulative impacts, within those places. Civic empowerment can generate a greater sense of agency and build efficacy amongst individuals and local groups and simultaneously generate a more productive and sustainable public policy.

#### **Box 1. Case study: Community created data**

Related evidence by Sunikka-Blank et al demonstrates how the inclusion of data sources curated by stakeholders and lay persons in the form of Google Maps listings and reviews for food outlets can include the voices of the local community and people who may be underrepresented in traditional fora.<sup>40</sup> Non-invasive and freely available sources of community created data, supported by quantitative spatial and modelling data, can help policymakers gain a better understanding of the lived experiences in a given neighbourhood, identify priority groups (e.g. single mothers, single men, local entrepreneurs) and where the groups can be reached (e.g. local kebab shops, cafes). Using the lens of places and practices of food, the evidence in this report explored a mixed-methods approach for scaling lived experience across city-scale data and models to expose intangible features of community.<sup>41</sup>

Whilst bottom-up approaches to knowledge sharing are vital for effective policymaking, the evidence base for the report also identified some gaps in public knowledge on environmental issues, which raises questions about the public understanding of, and engagement with, climate change and other environmental debates in the context of their daily lives in the places they live. Evidence suggests that there is a general need to consider the avenues of communication around environmental issues addressing what is being communicated to the public and by whom.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>38</sup> In addition to the research for this report, there is international evidence of these points in the British Academy’s Just Transitions research. For example, see Abbott, M. et al (2022) Indigenous thinking about nature-based solutions and climate justice, British Academy.

<sup>39</sup> Reyes-Garcia, V., Llamazares-Fernandez, A., Gueze, M., Garces, A., Mallo, M., Vila-Gomez, M., Vilaseca, M. (2016), ‘Local Indicators of climate change: the potential contribution of local knowledge to climate research’ Wiley Interdisciplinary Rev Climate Change, 7(1), pp. 109-124. cited in Endfield et al, *Situating Climate Change*, p. 30.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid p. 16.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid p. 16.

<sup>42</sup> Endfield et al, *Situating Climate Change*, p. 26.



### Utilising local weather knowledge

Tapping into people's place-specific environmental knowledge is explored by Endfield et al, who used local weather knowledge as an innovative place-based 'way in' to discuss issues of climate change. The focus was to use local green spaces as conversational backdrops to get local community groups to tap into local weather knowledge whilst capturing the distinctive characteristics of the places they inhabit in order to spark new ideas to address current and future problems in a public space.<sup>43</sup>

Proactive community-based initiatives discussed by participants in Endfield et al's study, such as tree and grass seed planting, highlight the ways in which community groups have made significant investment in improvements to enhance biodiversity in their local areas and the social and cultural benefits associated with the woods and fields. In this case study, this voluntary endeavour was then harnessed and led to the development of a new wetland, with a small amount of local authority investment. These types of interactions with proactive environmental community groups reveal that local environmental know-how is based on experience of living and working in green spaces and engaging in their stewardship over time. This could be brought to bear more effectively in planning and management of environmental policy interventions and decisions.<sup>44</sup>

### Cambridge Food Bank and changing social needs

Local knowledge can also improve understanding of the additional and changing needs of a given place, which is key to delivering responsive policies that maintain their impact over time. Members of a community will be aware of its various challenges and inequities and can provide useful insights into how issues of environmental sustainability intersect with other local needs.<sup>45</sup> Evidence for this report by Sunikka-Blank et al explores place-based issues through the lens of food and the more invisible and intangible aspects of community relationships, but it also highlights the intersections between food and fuel poverty and broader environmental issues.

Sunikka-Blank et al provides case study evidence from Cambridge foodbank, based on discussions with the foodbank CEO Margaret Saner. The case study highlights the role that local actors can play in understanding some of these issues. The CEO of the foodbank notes her experiences of the interactions with members within the local area, identifying the issues that this particular place is currently facing such as poor-quality housing and intergenerational poverty. The foodbank is to be able to provide good quality food, particularly fruit and vegetables that for low-income neighbourhoods becomes a problem of access when people do not have space to grow their own food and land-use, planning and transport policy and other structural issues may mean that they are restricted to shopping in more costly local supermarkets. Place-based interventions such as food banks have a deeper level of understanding of the experiences and needs of a particular locality, the social barriers the community may face, the built environment in which it is based and whether it has access to spaces such as gardens and allotments. This knowledge is largely unharvested by policymakers, yet it could help them to formulate more place-sensitive environmental policies that reflect the heterogeneity of places, and better understand that self-representation for individuals living in those places may be different from how things may look to policymakers in the data.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Endfield et al, *Situating Climate Change*, p. 5.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, p. 12.

<sup>45</sup> Sunikka-Blank et al, *A trans-disciplinary approach to scaling community voices*.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, p. 15.

Foodbank networks which share experiences amongst their members in a particular town, city or region may be able to help policymakers to easily access this type of insight.

### Youth and sustainability in London

Sloam et al's research studies the complex relationship between youth and sustainability in London. It outlines how children and young people will often link environmental issues to other key priorities in their local neighbourhoods.<sup>47</sup> For instance, participants involved in the research spoke about a lack of recycling facilities and rubbish on the streets being particularly prevalent in poorer neighbourhoods. Poverty and underfunded public services were seen as the driving forces behind the various challenges they faced, noting that poorer places in London were being frozen out and left behind.<sup>48</sup>

Connecting these issues was important for young Londoners, not only for understanding the complexity of environmental and social issues faced and the resulting power dynamics, and how these sit within a locality, but also to consider how action and potential solutions are formalised.<sup>49</sup> In order to effectively 'make a change', young respondents emphasised the need to participate in projects and initiatives in their communities, noting youth work and mentoring as potential avenues. Local initiatives that possess knowledge of a given place and have access to some of the challenges that individuals of a community face are useful in trying to address these factors simultaneously. For instance, the Rural Urban Synthesis Society (RUSS), based in Lewisham and founded in 2009, is a community-led self-build project that provides affordable homes using recycled materials. Initiatives like this were viewed as positive and innovative ways in which you can tackle the London-wide housing crisis but also engage with local community members on how to do so in a sustainable manner.<sup>50</sup>

## 3.2 Sustainability discourse differs from place to place

The way that people talk about sustainability is clearly an important variable in how policy gets interpreted and enacted on the ground in different places and communities. Official policy discourse on sustainability normally displays some degree of distance from the idiomatic and context-specific discursive articulations within communities.<sup>51</sup> This can create differences in interpretations, contradictions and conflicts that limit the effectiveness of policy implementation and create unintended, and sometimes perverse, consequences.

Discussions and debates on climate change and the environment are often framed with a negative and dystopian view of the world, signalling the threats of temperatures rising and an emphasis on the challenges and difficulties ahead. However, such negative frames do not seem to compel positive action, nor do they support constructive and restorative policy discourses aimed at mitigating or reversing environmental harm.<sup>52</sup> Place-sensitive approaches to environmental policy may help to develop more positive language and optimistic narratives in terms of what can be done in a place to showcase more positive visions for local areas in the future and give people a greater sense of agency in achieving this. The evidence collected for this report suggests ways in which this can be achieved. However, the evidence also shows that

<sup>47</sup> Sloam et al, *Youth, Sustainability and Democracy*, p. 13.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, p. 13.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, p. 14.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, p. 14.

<sup>51</sup> Griggs, S. & Howarth, D (2013) *The politics of airport expansion in the United Kingdom: Hegemony, policy and the rhetoric of 'sustainable aviation'*, Oxford University Press.

<sup>52</sup> Christensen, M. et al (2018) '[Environmental Themes in Popular Narratives](#)', [Environmental Communication](#), Volume 12, Issue 1; idström, S., & Åberg, A. (2016). Rising seas: Facts, fictions and aquaria. In J. Newell, L. Robin, & K. Wehner (Eds.), *Curating the future: museums, communities and climate change* (pp. 230-239). New York: Routledge.

this needs to be backed up by national strategies and governments leading by example if it is to ring true with local people and ultimately be effective.

### **Regional differences in discourse and values**

Research conducted by Relative Insight for the British Academy analysed differences in the language used to describe and discuss sustainability issues on social media.<sup>53</sup> They found that as well as different parts of England prioritising different environmental sustainability issues, there were also different ways in which these issues would be understood and talked about. For instance, places with a colonial heritage, like Bristol, have seen climate and pollution issues becoming linked to anti-colonial discourse and issues of environmental racism and justice. However, in the South West, people tended to frame sustainability as an issue of behavioural change rather than one of system change. The physical geography of places also tends to play a key role in how people engage with sustainability, with issues such as flooding or coastal erosion providing entry points for local engagement with discourses around climate change.

Different parts of the country also appear generally to be at different stages in their engagement with and understanding of prevalent discourses on sustainability. For instance, the discourse on choices such as veganism is prominent in most regions of England but there are different focal points for discussion. In the North East, for instance, there is a focus on finding online resources and communities for sharing knowledge and ideas, perhaps reflecting the earlier stage of development of these values and practices in the region. In contrast, the East Midlands online discussion was more focused on ethical food choices for people who have already adopted more ethical practices; the South West was involved in deeper, more philosophical discussions around the associated ethics, suggesting an even more developed community of practice in the region. Conversely, these ethical issues and behaviours were not a prominent feature of sustainability discussion on social media in London, which may suggest that the practices are already more sedimented in the local urban community where other mechanisms for discussion and knowledge-sharing are already well developed.

Fundamentally there is a differential understanding of what is meaningful and valued within different places and communities when it comes to sustainability. This is something which will change as a result of dimensions of place, scale and time. And while it is clear that a greater number of individuals and communities are getting actively involved in addressing sustainability issues, these are notoriously ill-defined and there is no homogenous lexicon, nor a coherent set of norms and values, from which this action is coordinated. This fragmentation creates opportunities for change, but it also leaves the policy field open to contestation, uncertainty, and scepticism. Building a common lexicon of basic environmental terms, as is now starting to be done by regulators with terms such as 'greenwashing', may help increase the efficacy of policymaking but this research indicates the importance of also linking this environmental discourse to the values and experience of a particular place.

### **Building compelling narratives**

Endfield et al's research responds to the need for a better understanding of how individuals and communities interact with and rearticulate sustainability policy discourse through local cultures, values and understanding. The aim of Endfield et al's 'weather walks' was to try and 'reinvent' climate policy discourse by narrowing the distance between the concept of climate change and local culture and practice. Linking local weather and environmental impact to global climate change can make the issue more certain and policy agenda more relevant to communities. This can, in turn, provide policymakers with ways to make abstract, high-level,

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<sup>53</sup> Relative Insight



and technical policy discourse appear more practical, contextualised and connected. It can also help ensure that policymakers are not just focused on money as a source of motivation for behaviour change but also look at deeper issues such as connections with nature to help achieve this shift.

Language is also important in linking sustainability policy to other key priorities, such as Covid recovery or ‘levelling up’. Hatzisavvidou et al looked at climate policy in four UK cities and found that across the four different local authorities, there had been a shift to capitalise on the positive language of ‘green recovery’ in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, in order to respond to the competing challenges. This new discourse brought together concepts like care, wellbeing, and justice under the single demand for green recovery and was seen by local officials as a way in which to connect a wider range of concerns on the minds of their local communities, building broader and stronger engagement and support. However, lack of national strategy and support from central government was seen as a key barrier in putting the ideas into practice and led to a narrower focus on net zero rather than a wider, more holistic set of actions.

Building compelling narratives also becomes relevant when considering the benefits of more positive language, particularly for children and young people. Work in this space is already underway: the Places of Hope project, for example, explores alternative pathways that showcase and offer glimpses of how life in the future might be better.<sup>54</sup> Such initiatives can reinvigorate excitement and provide optimistic views for the future. This may help to address issues of climate anxiety and frustration by building compelling narratives for children and young people and encouraging them to become involved in local climate action, or local policymaking, where they may have more agency.

### 3.3 Education plays an important role in building and sharing community knowledge

Education, both in a formal institutional setting and more informally within communities, can play an important role in helping to develop and deliver place-sensitive environmental policy. Building and nurturing knowledge about the environment and the natural world and what this looks like in terms of the local places can help to link up people’s daily experiences with regional, national and global impacts, policies and actions. Crucially, however, the evidence for this report also highlights the importance of teaching people – at school but also beyond through civic education – about how policy is developed and how to influence and enact policy change so that environmental knowledge can be put to good use. The potential for accessing diverse groups of children and young people, by providing knowledge about issues such as climate change, biodiversity loss and opportunities for deliberation on the impact of these changes and what to do about it, is considerable.<sup>55</sup>

Schools, universities and community groups can also inspire and motivate people to develop new ideas and creative visions about how to tackle the environmental issues in their communities and further afield. For example, the International Youth Think Tank involves young people from different countries in conferences and other activities aimed at driving positive societal change.<sup>56</sup> Arts education activities in the wider community can also create a common language for change or developing research programmes to apply environmental

<sup>54</sup> Utrecht University (n.d.), ‘Places of Hope – Appetite for the future’.

<sup>55</sup> Sloam et al, *Youth, Sustainability and Democracy*, p. 9.

<sup>56</sup> International Youth Think Tank [Accessed 16 January 2023].

learnings to local problems, academic institutions and civil society groups can help to achieve the shift to greater sustainability in a place-sensitive way.

Additionally, educational institutions are deeply embedded in places and communities. They play an important civic role as anchor institutions, bringing together and strengthening social and cultural infrastructures, and in this role, they can showcase place-sensitive environmental action. Through the decisions they make around school and university building and estates management practices, procurement policies, travel plans and the like, they can demonstrate to the people living in their areas what good sustainable practice looks like. In the process of doing so, they can also share their experiences of what works – and what doesn't – in different places with policymakers.

### **Box 2. Case study: Education and young people in Nottingham, Sloam et al**

Sloam et al's study focused on young people in Nottingham and their perceptions surrounding issues of environmental sustainability. Findings from this research showed how many of the young people involved not only felt they did not know enough about environmental issues in general, but also felt under informed on ways to address these problems at a local level. Local councils were suggested as potential knowledge-sharing hubs that could raise awareness and educate not just children and young people but also the broader population of a given place by sharing information on local level initiatives and how people may become involved. For example, young people noted that they were not aware of Nottingham's efforts to become carbon-neutral by 2028, something which the council could do more to promote.<sup>57</sup>

Policymakers are recognising the importance of education in building the knowledge base amongst young people. Plans were announced at COP26 to introduce climate education into the national curriculum in England and Duke of Edinburgh-style achievement awards for action to protect the environment.<sup>58</sup> Whilst such initiatives have been received with great optimism and an increased amount of engagement with young people, Sloam et al's research found that policymakers often continue to doubt the ability of children and young people to contribute to policy related discussions due to supposed immaturity or lack of knowledge and experience.<sup>59</sup> This finding also correspond with evidence the Academy collected for its Childhood Policy Programme.<sup>60</sup> Sloam et al suggests that, rather than simply being incapable of engaging with the issues, children and young people are often not being adequately provided with the knowledge they need to fully understand the process of decision-making and the things that go into designing and implementing policies that will affect their local communities, which excludes them from more policy specific environmental discussions.<sup>61</sup>

### **Civic education**

The development of common knowledge and understanding of the rights and responsibilities of citizens in a democratic society provides the foundations for public engagement in the policy process. Drawing on the existing knowledge of Finkel's work on the principles of civic education, Verson highlights how civic education-based programmes can have a meaningful

<sup>57</sup> Sloam et al, *Youth Sustainability and Democracy*, p. 23.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, p. 99.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, p. 10.

<sup>60</sup> See British Academy (2022), *Reframing Childhood: the final report of the Childhood Policy Programme*.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, p. 4.

and long-lasting impact by increasing political information, building feelings of empowerment, and mobilizing citizens to engage in political participation.<sup>62</sup>

Arts-co production interventions, which included the seven-day *HOME* festival that explored art and homelessness, and *Meet me at the River*, a pop up exhibition on the historic transatlantic trade of enslaved Africans, functioned as one element of a pedagogical journey towards civic education and reinforced the findings of existing literature on the efficacy of civic education.<sup>63</sup> These programmes enable a degree of civic competence which includes personal capabilities to influence the political process and the adherence to democratic norms and values. In particular, the activities built up problem-solving and advocacy skills, public speaking skills, and better understanding of democracy.<sup>64</sup>

The case study has shown that equipping people with the knowledge and awareness of environmental sustainability in an accessible manner can help with the successful delivery of environmental goals. Evidence not only points to the importance of providing knowledge of key scientific concepts and definitions, but also in equipping individuals with knowledge of the policy process and the broader policy ecosystem in which decisions get made. With this dual knowledge, individuals can understand the environmental issues present in the places they inhabit and utilise their skills to actively work on finding and implementing solutions through engagement in the policy process. The evidence also sheds light on the importance of bridging the knowledge gap by tapping into people's daily routines and behaviours, which can help policymakers shift the narrative from addressing environmental issues on a global and planetary scale, to more local ways of understanding the issues and implementing solutions. This may be particularly important in the drive to instigate individual behavioural changes which encourage more sustainable living, seen as important in recent policy discussions following the publication of the "*Behaviour change for climate and environmental goals*" report.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Finkel, S.E. (2013), 'The Impact of Adult Civic Education Programmes in Developing Democracies'. WIDER.

<sup>63</sup> Verson, J (2022), *Arts Co-Production and Place Sensitive Governance*, University of Warwick, p.2.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, p. 7.

<sup>65</sup> Environment and Climate Change Committee (2022), *In our hands: behaviour change for climate and environmental goals* [Accessed 22 November 2022].



## 4.0 Engagement and Participation

Engagement and participation are recurring themes throughout our evidence base. The research illustrates that to maximise impact and address issues of fairness and diversity, engagement of the public in policymaking on environmental issues needs to take a variety of forms, at different levels of scale and depth. It needs to be inclusive and extend beyond those who are already actively engaged, addressing the barriers to engagement that more marginalised groups may face such as time constraints, unfamiliar decision processes and communications. Given that many environmental issues are not easily ‘fixed’ and require continuous engagement, the research identifies the importance of building long-term trusted relationships and a more strategic and systematic approach to engagement.

The examples in this chapter highlight the importance of engaging children and young people on environmental issues and the value of co-designing policy responses with them. They also emphasise the value of building on what local groups are already doing and the engagement mechanisms and social infrastructure that exists and is already very much embedded in communities. The case studies explored also note that the spaces in which people are engaged in is important, and how cultural assets in a community, such as museums and other local community hubs, can be used to maximise impact but need to be sufficiently resourced to do so. The research shares examples of more creative approaches to engagement and identifies that for place-sensitive policymaking to be effective, community members and places need to be engaged with in a timely and meaningful way.

### 4.1 A variety of engagement models are needed to capture the place dimensions of policy

The scientific case for environmental action has co-evolved with green transition initiatives. Discussions on the need for more renewables, greater energy efficiency and security and



reduced energy prices has been brought into sharp relief by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These factors have led to an expansion of sustainability departments in councils, civic organisations, and local businesses whilst also bringing the importance of public engagement to the fore of wider environmental discussions.<sup>66</sup>

Insights on public engagement have been brought to attention by a recent review led by the *Defra Social Science Expert Group* (SSEG).<sup>67</sup> The review considers wider contexts for public engagement, including the various ways in which people participate and the settings within which engagement takes place. In doing so, it makes the important point that there is no single ‘public’, and engagement must consider the range of different publics in different contexts. It also raises important points on the opportunities and challenges of public engagement, for policymakers that are thinking of how best to incorporate public perspectives, but also for natural and social scientists seeking to frame questions for engagement and interpret outputs in meaningful ways.<sup>68</sup> Additionally, a recent joint report published by Lancaster University and Climate Citizens explores the use of deliberative processes in developing climate policy. The report offers a useful overview of how more deliberative methods can contribute to better policymaking, highlighting the factors that need to be considered to successfully use deliberative public engagement.<sup>69</sup>

Our evidence base provides some additional insights on the already large and growing array of public engagement methods being adopted to engage the public on environmental issues. Hatzisavvidou et al, for instance, looks at Climate Change Citizens’ Assemblies (CCCA), which have become an increasingly popular method for public engagement. Key to the CCCA model is the integration of expert presentations, scientific evidence and engaging in conversation and discussion with community members. Deliberative engagement approaches of this type, by involving people directly affected by environmental policies but who are not usually engaged in the policy design process, could lead to the development of policies that are more likely to succeed in practice.<sup>70</sup>

#### **Engaging with a greater diversity of stakeholders**

There is growing literature on the differential impact of environmental issues – and the policies designed to address them – on particular societal groups and how just environmental transitions require engagement and participation of all those impacted including minority and hard-to-reach groups. Work by the British Academy on Just Transitions for instance has highlighted many complex challenges to delivering transitions to net zero in ways that do not have unintended negative consequences on certain communities or worsen existing inequalities.<sup>71</sup> Whilst the issues of diversity in public engagement have been considered, research commissioned for this report noted there is still a long way to go, outlining that often the individuals and NGOs who engaged with issues of local climate governance for instance tended to be community members who are already actively involved in decision-making processes and that reaching beyond these groups was often difficult.<sup>72</sup> As emphasised by Hatzisavvidou et al, the lack of engagement with diverse community voices in local approaches to policymaking can often lead to a limited perspective on how to implement change in a just and effective way.<sup>73</sup>

<sup>66</sup> Sloam et al, *Youth, Sustainability and Democracy*, p. 9.

<sup>67</sup> Defra Social Science Expert Group (2022), *Review of Public Engagement*.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, pp. 6-7.

<sup>69</sup> Lancaster University and Climate Citizens (2022), *The Role of Deliberative Public Engagement in climate policy development*, p. 16.

<sup>70</sup> Verson, *Arts Co-Production and Place Sensitive Governance*, p.13.

<sup>71</sup> The British Academy (2021), *Just Transitions*.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid, p. 15.

<sup>73</sup> Hatzisavvidou et al, *Voices, Spaces, and scales of Environmental Governance*, p.21.

Despite the significant investment in Climate Change Citizen Assemblies, focusing on this model to deliver place-sensitive engagement may risk excluding already marginalised members of society.<sup>74</sup> Social vulnerability and marginalization can hinder participation which evidence shows can be due to the unfamiliar decision-making processes and a focus on verbal communication. Verson's research, for instance, indicates that public engagement forums, often place an emphasis on good communication skills, in order for individuals to fully participate. This can act as a barrier for members who attend these assemblies to effectively engage with this forum.<sup>75</sup> Whilst this deliberative approach has played an important role in developing public trust and creating a social mandate for action, focusing solely on a CCCA model to deliver public engagement cannot be the only way forward.<sup>76</sup>

Rather, the research for this report reveals the importance of considering a more place-sensitive approach to engagement, which provides less traditional avenues of public engagement, that can help create better and more meaningful participation with places and communities.<sup>77</sup> However, it is vital that sufficient resources and support is given to engagement processes that enable a more inclusive approach so that more hard-to-reach groups are able to fully participate in the process.

#### **Addressing common challenges of public engagement**

The evidence collected for this report has highlighted some of the drawbacks of certain approaches, like the Climate Change Citizen Assemblies noted above. There is however, no single best way of engaging people on sustainability issues in the places they live. To decide which model of engagement is most appropriate, it is important to understand and be clear about the problem/issue being addressed and who is being impacted. The objectives of the engagement should be clearly defined, adequate time should be allocated, and people should know what to expect, during and afterwards.<sup>78</sup> Additionally, public engagement should also be considered on a long-term basis, embedded as a continual process rather than just something that is put in place as a one off. This is particularly important for environmental issues, many of which take a long time to address or may require ongoing attention.<sup>79</sup>

Bringing people together regularly can also help ensure that engagement exercises strengthen communities rather than exacerbating divisions. Hearing a range of viewpoints and lived experiences, can help address conflicting interests or divergent perspectives and can help people develop a greater understanding of others in their locality. Along with more continuous forms of public engagement, research indicates that a place-sensitive approach can also help address feelings of disappointment from individuals, which can often occur either because divergent perspectives remain unreconciled or because genuine political or legal constraints on outcomes have not been made transparent.<sup>80</sup> By setting out more realistic aims and actions needed by a particular place, individuals can feel they have more agency and ability to achieve something tangible.

Along with the burdensome demand on time and resource in public engagement, Hatzisavvidou et al's report finds that there is a lack of depth in how people are engaging with many climate forums. For example, individuals that had previously been involved in a public call for evidence in support of net zero plans had noted that they hoped it would elicit place-specific, bottom-up proposals that would be put into action, but expressed disappointment

<sup>74</sup> Verson, *Arts Co-Production and Place Sensitive Governance*, p. 13.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid*, p. 10.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid*, p. 17.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid*, p. 6.

<sup>78</sup> Defra Social Science Expert Group (2022), *Review of Public Engagement*, p. 6.

<sup>79</sup> Hatzisavvidou et al, *Voices, Spaces, and scales of Environmental Governance*, p.14.

<sup>80</sup> Defra Social Science Expert Group (2022), *Review of Public Engagement*, p 26.

that, while the volume of responses was high, they tended to be generic.<sup>81</sup> Generally, the research found that this method of engagement was not seen as serving to broaden or shift the parameters of the local response; responses tended not to be particularly ground-breaking, recommendations were not radical enough, and often reproduced established themes and approaches in climate policymaking.<sup>82</sup>

Related evidence highlighted that the generic approach to these types of engagement has also failed to take into account the specific characteristics of a given place. For instance, Hatzisavvidou et al found that the constraints of delivering net zero plans in Bath, considered a World Heritage City, were not being recognised in such forms of engagement.<sup>83</sup> This is important to note, as specific characteristics of a place are essential, with heritage sites and existing architecture being integral to a places' identity and community pride.

### **Co-design and co-production with children and young people**

Chapter 3 noted the importance of viewing children and young people as agents of knowledge with the ability to identify and explicitly link how environmental issues intersect with other key priorities in their local communities. The stories of grass-roots initiatives led by young people across the world have also been highlighted in the British Academy's ongoing Youth Futures programme, across countries as diverse as Fiji, Uganda and Algeria, showcasing stories of youth activism and leadership.<sup>84</sup>

Sloam et al's research seeks to take this a step further by offering a broader perspective on the role of young people, noting the practical benefits of youth engagement specifically in public policy.<sup>85</sup> The research details that generally, children and young people are viewed as having the strongest incentives to solve environmental problems in the places where they live. But the extent to which opportunities are offered for children and young people to participate in policymaking is limited.<sup>86</sup> The Academy's Childhood Policy Programme, for instance, reported that children and young people often face considerable barriers to expressing their 'right to be heard' on matters that affect them.<sup>87</sup> Moreover, children and young people are themselves a diverse group, and face intersectional challenges from factors such as their race, ethnicity, gender, experiences of deprivation, and disabilities.<sup>88</sup> Place-sensitive approaches to policymaking, with the focus in more localised settings, can provide a more promising avenue for youth participation in environmental policymaking. Kraftl, for example, has explored how children and young people's urban knowledge and creative engagement with their local environment has helped policymakers, planners, and designers to build smarter and more sustainable urban spaces.<sup>89</sup>

Additionally, a more place-sensitive approach has the potential to generate a greater sense of efficacy amongst young participants, as they are more likely to achieve tangible change within their communities.<sup>90</sup> As Sloam et al showed in the case studies of Nottingham and London, young people are keen to engage with policymakers on sustainability issues, but often lack the confidence that their voices will be listened to. Yet, this scepticism of traditional methods of

<sup>81</sup> Hatzisavvidou et al, *Voices, Spaces, and scales of Environmental Governance*, p. 17.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>84</sup> The British Academy (2020), *Youth Futures*.

<sup>85</sup> Sloam et al, *Youth, Sustainability and Democracy* p. 2.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>87</sup> The British Academy (2022), *Reframing Childhood*, p. 31.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 34-5.

<sup>89</sup> Kraftl, P. (2020), 'Including children and young people in building cities', *Reframing childhood, past and present*, British Academy via medium.com [Accessed 11 November 2022].

<sup>90</sup> Sloam et al, *Youth, Sustainability and Democracy*, p. 8.

consultation has often meant that young people channel their interest in environmental issues into more direct forms of democratic participation, including activism and protest.

Fridays for Future, a youth-led school strike founded by Greta Thunberg, is an exemplar of the way in which children and young people are using climate activism to participate in issues of climate change and highlighting worldwide solutions that are pertinent to the places in which they inhabit.<sup>91</sup> Such motivations that we have seen embodied by children and young people through social environmental movements can be harnessed and directly feed into policy interventions that can have an impact on places. But to do this, policy actors should consider bringing children and young people directly into the co-design and co-production of the spaces in which the policy issues can be discussed and engaged with.<sup>92</sup>

The British Academy's own SHAPE Sustainability Impact Projects offer a more research-led model for children and young people to engage locally with sustainability issues. The projects, based at universities around the UK, use a 'living lab' model of engagement, in which students and staff at universities work with groups within local communities to investigate and find solutions to local sustainability issues. Examples of projects include developing a community-led system helping consumers to reuse, repair and upcycle in Leicester, engaging children and young people in arts-based research methodologies to address negative perceptions of green spaces in inner-city London, and encouraging education about biodiversity decline through 'biodiversity walks' and local art exhibitions in and around reed marshes in coastal Wales.<sup>93</sup>

## 4.2 Cultural assets can help provide place-sensitive engagement

Much of the discussion on place-sensitive policy is not just about who we are engaging but also the spaces in which we engage and what mechanisms we are using to do so. The research for this report suggests that public spaces within a place are a crucial factor in how people develop their sense of community; they are sites of cultural engagement and political contestation, where values, opinions and narratives are formed and debated in response to local issues and policy change. Yet, many spaces can be overlooked or taken for granted by policymakers when considering policy options for generating stronger and more sustainable places. Paying greater consideration to the diversity of social and cultural assets in a community can help policymakers understand what gives people their 'pride in place' and the cultural 'inner worlds' that hold communities together.<sup>94</sup>

### Engaging people in civic spaces

Common to both projects in Verson's research is the increased use of civic spaces by marginalised people. Importance is given to cultural assets of a given place, to be viewed as spaces that can offer an additional value. Evidence here emphasises the role of place-specific cultural assets which include museums, parks, theatres, music venues, public squares, churches, historic sites, cafes, and civic buildings. The artistic performances adopted in this report, enabled these places to be accessed and occupied by marginalised groups to engage on a specific subject. Participants involved in the research described a sense of agency emanating from engaging in public spaces in new ways.<sup>95</sup>

<sup>91</sup> <https://fridaysforfuture.org/>

<sup>92</sup> British Academy (2022), *Reframing Childhood: the final report of the Childhood Policy Programme*

<sup>93</sup> Students Organising for Sustainability UK (2022), *SHAPE Sustainability Impact Projects: harnessing the power of arts and humanities to tackle the sustainability challenges*. [Accessed 16 November 2022].

<sup>94</sup> Sunikka-Blank et al, *A trans-disciplinary approach to scaling community*, p. 11.

<sup>95</sup> Verson, *Arts Co-Production and Place Sensitive Governance*, p. 13.



*Meet me at the River* was an exhibition, co-produced by Migrant Artists Mutual Aid (MaMa) and the National Museums Liverpool funded by the Liverpool City Region Race Equality Commission. This museum model involved working directly with the National Museums of Liverpool to deliver a pop-up style exhibition in which artifacts and archives acquired by museums that were implicated in the trans-Atlantic trade of enslaved humans became a space for deliberation and reflection.<sup>96</sup> This exhibition used large projected images (e.g. the voyage of a ship engaged in the slave trade and images of mothers seeking sanctuary holding artifacts and archives in the collections of the International Slavery Museum).<sup>97</sup> The images presented in this model are nuanced, opening space for dialogue, reflections and in this case, unearthing questions on the archives of violent histories.<sup>98</sup> This model offered a unique opportunity to invigorate the role that museums play in places and in particular offering insights for how public spaces like these can be useful for much broader citizen engagement to occur.

In addition, it is not only museums who can play a role in facilitating public engagement, but as Sunikka-Blank et al's research explores, food spaces (cafes, restaurants, food vendors, shops) through being part of close-knit systems can also offer valuable spaces for citizen engagement. These place-based community pillars that already exist, are spaces frequented by citizens on a daily basis and as such provide a sense of comfort and familiarity. Sunikka-Blank et al highlights additional place-based research that notes the example of pubs in particular as having an important place in British society and as such, have become the heart of local communities particularly in deprived areas. Alongside, offering a space for socialising for community members in the UK, pubs have turned to alternative ways to use their spaces, as seen in the UK pandemic where many were set up as food banks during the crisis.<sup>99</sup>

#### **Member led community groups**

Engaging with community groups that are led by their members is a potentially powerful way to enable more inclusive use of place-based cultural assets. In Verson's research, member-led groups were shown to be a key component in strategies to engage with marginalised communities. Through the case studies of local arts-based co-production, Verson revealed several benefits of engaging member-led groups in a community. In particular, evidence suggests that member-led organisations tend to have sophisticated pre-existing local networks, reaching out to a diverse range of micro-level governance structures, such as religious organisations, charities and voluntary organisations, schools and other local social infrastructure. These networks which are already embedded at community level bring with them trusted relationships between a diverse range of actors and can provide a strong entry point for policy engagement.

Community groups that are member-led and value-driven tend to support and strengthen social infrastructure. The Academy's Covid Decade report also provides evidence of this benefit, showing how community-led social infrastructure provided greater community resilience against both the health impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the wider economic and social impact of the pandemic and lockdown measures designed to curtail it.<sup>100</sup> Where member-led groups exist and work together, local networks and governance are in place to deliver responsive projects which can often be scaled up when required. These factors allow both the flow of knowledge and information into policymaking decisions, but also provide mechanisms through which policy can be implemented effectively at the community level, taking into account the local diversity and actively involving a wide range of community members in delivery.<sup>101</sup>

<sup>96</sup> Verson, J. *Arts Co-Production and Place Sensitive Governance*, p. 23.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid p. 23.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid p. 24.

<sup>99</sup> Sunikka-Blank et al, *A trans-disciplinary approach to scaling community*, p. 4.

<sup>100</sup> The British Academy (2021), *Understanding the Covid Decade*

<sup>101</sup> Verson, *Arts Co-Production and Place Sensitive Governance*, p.16.

Thus, the infrastructure supported by member-led community groups can help policymakers build on what is already there, overcoming time and resource constraints that often prevent them from engaging with a more diverse range of groups, including more marginalised groups. Member-led groups understand and embody the communities they are in, so they make it quicker and easier to fully observe, interact and build partnerships with diverse and marginalised communities in the development of sustainable policy and practice.

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Partnerships with existing community groups can lead to more inclusive approaches







## 5.0 Voices and Scales of Governance

The importance of governance factors for place-sensitive solutions to environmental sustainability issues comes through strongly in our evidence base. The research we commissioned for this report did not focus exclusively on questions of governance, but it has suggested there are good reasons for improving the working connections across and between different governance levels and structures, and empowering leaders to act in their communities and local areas. These are not new ideas, however, and the response to the Covid-19 pandemic highlighted that these lessons are still not embedded in practice.<sup>102</sup> Considering this from a sustainability perspective, this section identifies examples of existing and emerging place-sensitive governance activity which is joined up and deliberative. It also highlights that policymakers and practitioners seeking to scale up from these examples will need to consider factors including resourcing, legislative tools and the tackling of cultural barriers.

There are still enduring and important questions about how you align governance at different scales in practice, the activities and interactions (e.g. roles and responsibilities), and who is involved either on an individual or an institutional level. These identified gaps in our evidence base require further exploration as the British Academy's ongoing work in this area develops.

### 5.1 Place-sensitive approaches require empowered actors to work together across silos

While environmental targets like net zero are set on a national level, the realisation of those targets relies at least in part on local levels of decision-making in practice. Beyond decision-making, a place-sensitive approach also empowers leaders on a local level to take necessary

actions while fostering collaboration across and between local and national governments. For example, greenhouse gas emissions<sup>103</sup> originate from processes that are embedded in specific places, and even though there are structural factors at play, it is sometimes argued that the local is the most appropriate political jurisdiction for bringing about the necessary actions to reduce emissions. This position is supported by the fact that local governments have considerable authority over land use planning, waste management, transportation issues and energy consumption.<sup>104</sup> Another example arose during the Covid-19 pandemic: local authorities emerged as driving forces of climate governance, quickly adopting the narrative of ‘green recovery’ and developing strategies and action plans to deliver ambitious visions for the post-pandemic era.<sup>105</sup>

Research by Hatzisavvidou et al expands on these points. They identified various issues with the understanding of place-sensitive governance:

- A focus on the role of local authorities does not give enough emphasis to other local agents of climate action.<sup>106</sup>
- The agency of local authorities is often misunderstood or oversimplified; though they have new responsibilities and targets, many still lack the actual power to implement initiatives such as green recovery plans which requires agency and resources.<sup>107</sup>
- There are a range of further barriers, including siloed ways of working, limited allocation of devolved resources on climate-related issues, and a lack of clarity on roles and responsibilities between national, regional and local levels.<sup>108</sup>

As Hatzisavvidou et al set out, the point is illustrated by recent central Government policy initiatives that seek to decentralise decision-making, but in practice are largely focused on devolving powers and establishing Metro Mayors. The UK Government’s Build Back Better policy paper, for instance, published in 2021, highlights the need to be working ‘in tandem with local communities and businesses, empowered local institutions will help to drive forward change in their areas, setting strategic direction and delivering for places’. It cites actions such as refreshing the *Green Book* to improve the understanding of the impacts of policies on places and electing eight metro mayors across the country. This affirms the government’s desire to devolve and decentralise to give more power to local communities.<sup>109</sup> But while these initiatives have reaped great benefits in some places, they may not necessarily be the solution for all places, particularly outside cities. To deliver on the stated ambitions, this and similar policies need to acknowledge the differences between places, taking into account variations of what they might need and accompanied by clear resources and support, as well as delegating powers and responsibilities.

Illustrations of this approach are provided in a 2021 report from the Royal Town Planning Institute on place-based approaches to local planning. Their series of case studies provide insights on local strategies and interventions to tackle climate change. They highlight that delivery and implementation of policies on these issues cannot fall solely on a single council department and note that working across departments is essential.<sup>110</sup> Meanwhile in the case of

<sup>103</sup> Betsill, M.M and Bulkeley, H. (2006), ‘Cities and the Multilevel Governance of Global Climate Change’, *Global Governance*, 12, p. 141.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid

<sup>105</sup> Hatzisavvidou et al, *Voices, Spaces, and scales of Environmental Governance*, p. 1.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid, p. 10.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid, p. 11.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid, p. 6.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid, p. 6.

<sup>110</sup> Royal Town and Planning institute (2021), ‘Place-Based Approaches to Climate Change’, p. 29.



local planning, they reflect on the need for partnerships between planning and sustainability officers in order to truly achieve a place-based approach to climate action.<sup>111</sup>

## 5.2 A place-sensitive lens encourages thinking about multi-level governance

Achieving environmental goals can be a complex process that this report and the supportive evidence highlight requires a place-sensitive approach. Simply passing much of the role for navigating this complexity to local governments without additional powers or resources or changing what happens at the national/central level does not represent place-sensitive policymaking. This section will explore approaches which consider the coherence of governance across local, regional and national levels, as well as with the private sector. The challenge our research brings out is that current approaches often focus on the interaction between scales and spheres of governing, offering little emphasis on how ‘place’ is experienced differently within localities. Taking such an approach, limits the scope to address questions of climate justice between and within our cities, towns and regions, and in particular how these relate to social and economic inequalities.<sup>112</sup>

Drawing on analysis of a programme supporting a transnational network of municipal governments, Betsill and Bulkeley’s work makes a case for multi-level governance as a conceptual framework for the analysis of global environmental governance, one that more fully captures the social, political, and economic processes that shape global environmental governance. They contrast this approach to one that is hierarchical and focused on the responsibility of the state. The multi-level approach they describe is equally concerned with spheres (state/non-state) of authority as it is with tiers (local/national).<sup>113</sup>

In a similar vein, Hatzisavvidou et al’s research looked at the multi-layered approach taken by cities in the south-west of the UK (Bath, Bristol, Cardiff, Exeter) based on key climate emergency and Covid recovery documents in the four cities, and workshops and interviews with a range of stakeholders, including local Councillors and officers involved with climate policy.<sup>114</sup> The findings highlight the differences across the cities’ approaches, in particular the variety of consultation approaches and cross-sector partnership bodies which are involved in both climate and pandemic responses.<sup>115</sup> One example it considered was the Government’s ‘levelling up’ agenda. This was viewed by the research participants as a great opportunity to tackle funding issues, often the most prevalent barrier to driving place-based initiatives. It was particularly noted that through the levelling up strategy, local authorities not previously eligible for EU regional funds could gain support for low carbon projects and devolve decision-making, although the researchers also noted the likely challenges accessing these funds.<sup>116</sup> Meanwhile, although this research also brought out the fact that small projects and interventions that are happening at the local level are bringing social value through job creation, a more transformative approach will require more systematic and co-ordinated governance.<sup>117</sup>

On a broader level, Hatzisavvidou et al’s research like Betsill and Bulkeley’s, makes the case for a multi-level governance system. It sets out the stakeholder groups that may have the best links

<sup>111</sup> Royal Town and Planning institute (2021), ‘Place-Based Approaches to Climate Change’, p. 28.

<sup>112</sup> ‘Ibid’ p. 3.

<sup>113</sup> Betsill, M.M and Bulkeley, H. (2006), ‘Cities and the Multilevel Governance of Global Climate Change’, *Global Governance*, 12, p. 142 .

<sup>114</sup> Hatzisavvidou et al, *Voices, Spaces, and scales of Environmental Governance*.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid, p. 10.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid, p. 17.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid, p. 18.

into what is happening within communities and places and how these may be changing and evolving<sup>118</sup>. This includes:

- Local authorities and businesses
- Other actors with access to or control over land and resources (such as farmers, the faith groups, universities, developers, canal trusts, railways etc.)
- Utility providers (particularly electricity networks, on whom a lot of the place-based energy transition will depend, and water companies whose work has a direct impact on the natural environment); and, financial organisations

Overall, place-sensitive multi-level governance must work vertically and horizontally, so both scale and place are essential dimensions. The research reviewed here notes that mechanisms must be in place to ensure that the specific features and needs of each localities are fed through to other levels of governance to help contextualise policy interventions and ensure the appropriate level of autonomy. Equally, different bodies with a direct link to a place – such as different local councils, government departments, health trusts and local enterprise partnerships – must be able to learn from each other, share evidence and resources and provide accountability to help improve policy responsiveness to diverse and changing local needs.

### 5.3 Place-sensitive governance can build on existing and emerging forms of decision-making

#### Neighbourhood planning

A place-sensitive approach to understanding governance can also build on existing community forms of decision-making. Case study evidence on this theme by Burton, details some of the power shifts in the way decisions are being made over where we live and the places we create. In this research, the focus is on the rise of neighbourhood planning which has pioneered a new approach to local governance and participative democracy, particularly in cities.<sup>119</sup>

With some contextual analysis of the history of neighbourhood planning, the evidence gathered illustrates how neighbourhood plans are directly influencing the location and design of new housing, protecting green spaces and heritage, revitalising high streets and bringing people together to shape the future of their area. They have been tested in planning appeals and in the Courts and are pioneering a different democratic mandate for the decisions over where and how we live.<sup>120</sup> The report highlights the already growing research base on the nature, growth and impact of neighbourhood planning, demonstrating how this approach has become relevant to a wide range of public policy priorities and one which is improving local engagement, allocating more land for building than in Local Plans, improving design policy and making development sites more acceptable to local people.<sup>121</sup>

The report outlines neighbourhood planning as already pioneering local level governance at the scale where communities self-identify with the place they live in. Offering a useful perspective in neighbourhood planning not just as a way to make very local planning policy but as a way to exercise power. It details the practicalities and complexities of decision-making noting the power dynamics and necessary shifts that need to take place for effective governance. The report also highlights the biggest impact of neighbourhood planning which is how it

<sup>118</sup> Hatzisavvidou et al. *Voices, Spaces, and scales of Environmental Governance*, p. 21.

<sup>119</sup> Burton, T. (2022), *Neighbourhood Planning: A new horizon for who decides where we live next*, p. 1.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid*, p. 1.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid*, p. 2.

can act as a catalyst for strengthening community confidence and initiative. Neighbourhood planning brings communities together in a shared endeavour, envisioning a different future for their local place and putting in train multiple initiatives which respond to local priorities.<sup>122</sup> The evidence base indicates that some of the broader lessons to learn from neighbourhood planning experience and how community-led governance and policymaking can best flourish, are the following:

- True Transfer of Power- Neighbourhood planning carries legal weight when making decisions, which exercises real power over future development projects. Communities respond best when meaningful power is transferred to them at a neighbourhood level.
- Tackling inertia – Disrupting current forms of decision making and power, is rarely possible without addressing who benefits from the current system. A combination of legislative tools and cultural change is needed, which requires strong leadership that can help break down these cultural barriers.
- Providing support – As important as government funded support for neighbourhood planning has been, there has also been the need for the planning community to help itself, build networks and offer practical and moral support. It is important that support and peer-to-peer learning be built into the design of community-led governance from the start.

Burton's case study provides useful lessons for others looking to develop community-led governance and policymaking.<sup>123</sup> As a voluntary initiative and despite profound challenges it has had notable successes, stimulating action in nearly 3,000 communities and delivering new legally binding land use planning policies in nearly half of them. As an exercise in neighbourhood decision-making neighbourhood planning has moved well beyond proof of concept and demonstrated the potential of community-led place-sensitive approaches to governance.<sup>124</sup>

### **Arts co-production and Place- Sensitive Governance (ACPSG)**

The findings for Verson's report support ACPSG as fostering the conditions necessary for approaches to environmental governance by taking an ecological approach that foregrounds diversity, interconnection, and sustainability, which are useful when attempting to pave the way for the transition to net zero and addressing broader environmental goals.<sup>125</sup>

The report illustrated how different types of arts-based activities function as civic education necessary to engage marginalised people in place-sensitive policymaking. Additionally, by animating place-based assets for environmental governance it supported the sustained engagement of marginalised communities in real time deliberative democracy.<sup>126</sup>

Arts interventions in this report were underpinned by a theoretical framework of co-production which evidence suggests can support the positive social conditions necessary for the UK to meet its net zero carbon emissions goals without exacerbating social inequalities. Implementing these interventions in environmental governance illustrates the importance of co-production, one that is authentic, impactful and goes beyond 'tick box exercises'. The evidence suggests that environmental governance as we have seen in this case has more influence and impact if people participate in the making of the policy but also if it is linked to meeting a personal need and there 'exists a territorial linkage between community member and the place where direct

<sup>122</sup> Burton, *Neighbourhood Planning*, 6.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid, p. 1.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid, p. 7.

<sup>125</sup> Verson, *Arts Co-Production and Place Sensitive Governance*, p. 2.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid, p. 30.

beneficiaries are located.<sup>127</sup> It shows that effective public participation increases the legitimacy of environmental decision-making.

The evidence in this report included a selection of best practices that mapped co-produced arts interventions as a strategy for place-sensitive environmental governance that worked across scales. The report included local government in Coventry, Metro government in Liverpool, national museums, and charities. These brought into dialogue with micro-governance in the community in both casual forms and organised forms. As such, the report documented a range of cultural initiatives that enabled marginalised citizens to learn, rehearse and perform habits of citizenship, thus creating an important and current reference point for best practices in arts and place-based governance.<sup>128</sup>

The case studies in this piece of research suggest the need to consider more thoroughly how decisions are being made, at what level, and the role that ordinary citizens along with civil society groups/organisations can play in shaping policies. In addition to this, the concerted collaboration and co-creation between policy officers and civil society groups and other place-based actors leads to mutual learning, establishing and strengthening relationships of trust.

### **The role of civil society**

The role of civil society and the publics in engaging with decision-making has been an important facet of environmental policymaking.<sup>129</sup> Historical analysis shows that successful policy interventions on the environment have often come from governments responding to and working collaboratively with civil society. Our recent Environmental Policy History details case study evidence which can provide useful examples of this. For instance, Hanxomphou's analysis of environmental policy in Scotland, shows how civil society organisations can help identify critical issues and put them on the agenda of policymakers who are further from the coal face and in need of intelligence from local communities to properly ascertain the impact. The background on the campaign against the Greengairs landfill showed that unpacking and understanding the concerns of ordinary citizens can benefit the affected communities and wider policy and regulation.<sup>130</sup>

In a similar manner, more sustained, well-organised, evidence-based campaigning through respected civil society organisations can also be important. The research notes that the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE) was able to positively influence policy because it collaborates with academic researchers and experts to deliver compelling evidence and communicate it effectively through established channels. In a complex policy ecosystem with competing demands on policymakers, these well-established civil society organisations can provide vital support to sound policymaking.<sup>131</sup> Both cases highlight that a relationship of trust, participation and effective consultation with communities will be essential tools in how we move forward with environmental policy for the future.<sup>132</sup>

<sup>127</sup> Verson, *Arts Co-Production and Place Sensitive Governance*, p. 12.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid*, p. 33.

<sup>129</sup> The British Academy (2022), *Environmental Policy History*, p. 7.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid*, p. 7.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid*, p. 7.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid*, p. 7.





## 6.0 Conclusion

The research commissioned for this report identifies several ways in which social and environmental issues are deeply entwined in the places in which we inhabit. The evidence indicates that environmental policymaking is too ‘place blind’, often failing to recognise the importance of places and people in the first instance but also not considering how different places are and the variety of ways that these social and environmental interactions play out in different localities. This is clearly a complex and evolving picture.

However, it is clear from the evidence base collected so far that developing a better understanding of these local interactions and working with places, rather than without them – or worse, against them – is crucial if we are to meet the challenging environmental goals we have set as a country. A place-sensitive approach to environmental policymaking has been illustrated as a vital way in which we can achieve this. The research commissioned and collected by the British Academy highlight’s several key themes that underpin effective place-sensitive environmental policy.

### **Developing policy that is inclusive, forward-looking and adaptive**

An overarching theme in the report is that place-sensitive policymaking is inclusive and takes a holistic approach to the places in which it is applied. In doing so, it recognises the diversity of places in the UK, and how this difference is manifested tangibly (through the built and natural environment and associated infrastructure) but also, importantly, intangibly (through the plurality of people, culture, beliefs and relationships). The research highlights the importance of recognising the diversity of organisations and people in those places and ensuring that policy is not focused solely on local authorities but also embraces other local actors, such as civil society groups, local businesses and other community hubs, and includes more marginalised and under-represented groups. Developing policy that meets the needs of everyone, particularly those experiencing disadvantages such as temporary and poor-quality housing, limited public transport, air pollution, lack of access to green spaces and increased risks of flooding, is a core aspect of overall sustainability.

### **The role of environmental knowledge and education**

Our evidence indicated a knowledge deficit, both in terms of what the bigger scientific and policy picture means for local places and lifestyles, but also, crucially, in terms of how policymakers harness the knowledge of nature, green spaces and environmental impacts of policy at the local level.

The research for this report has suggested that place-sensitive policy fosters a more joined-up approach to policymaking where policymakers can take greater account of the different interests and lived experiences of people, and people can feel more empowered and engaged in the policy process. Giving people agency and recognising their role as stewards of their local environments can enable them to make connections between the different things that matter to them in the places they live. This can unlock rich new sources of community value that deliver wider social and environmental co-benefits and drive sustainable and adaptive change. In this way, place-sensitive environmental policy could help create the right mechanisms, networks, feedback loops and cultures to enable a virtuous circle of more informed and effective evidence-based policymaking that recognises the challenges and competing interests that some communities face and is able to keep up with the rapid pace of environmental change.

The role of education and educational institutions in building, sharing and showcasing environmental and community knowledge is well known. What our research also identified, however, was the continued importance of educating people in the democratic process, the policy ecosystem and how to solve problems within the local community so that everyone knows how to influence and enact policy and put their growing environmental knowledge to direct good use to support and shape the communities where they live. The research highlighted that this type of knowledge building could underpin the transformative shifts in behaviour that are needed for environmental sustainability. This needs to happen not only in academic institutions but also, to make it accessible to all, through ongoing civic education programmes and more creative, fun and inclusive arts-based activities.

### **The importance of relevant language and discourses**

The discourses of environmental sustainability can vary from place to place as well as the ideas and values which underpin them. Building a common lexicon of basic environmental terms such as 'greenwashing' may help increase the efficacy of environmental policymaking. To maximise impact, however, the research for this report indicates the importance of also using language that resonates with the values, culture and experiences of a particular place and community.

The research also indicates that whilst local actors can bring different environmental issues together to develop a more compelling and positive narrative for change, unless this is also backed up by national policy and strong leadership, its effectiveness may be limited. The values and priorities of different communities of interest are not always neatly aligned and often these conflicts need to be considered and ultimately resolved within responsive but coherent policy discourse at a national or even international level.

### **Developing long-term local engagement and participation**

Place-sensitive environmental policy often requires the development of long-term trusted and inclusive relationships and partnerships. Research for this report suggested that whilst there is no single best method for engagement and a combination of approaches is often needed, SHAPE-based methodologies can lead to deeper and often more effective engagement with people in the places they live compared to some alternatives. It is important that such engagement includes minority and hard-to-reach groups, particularly when issues of fairness and just transition are being considered. For this to be successful, it needs to address the



barriers to engagement, such as language and childcare provision, that such groups may face. Engaging member-led groups which are rooted in local community networks can be a helpful way to involve more marginalised communities, many of whom may be actively engaged in their locality but disengaged from politics and the policy process.

The research also highlighted the importance of engaging with children and young people, who may experience climate anxiety and feel overwhelmed by the scale of the problems, and they may also have difficulty being heard in the policymaking process. Engaging children and young people at the local level can help overcome some of these barriers to participation and help ensure that policy solutions take account of their local lived experiences, such as short-term insecure tenancies, which can shape their ability to engage in environmental change. Co-designing policy approaches that will impact the places children and young people live can build confidence and positivity, increasing the efficacy of the solutions adopted.

### **Developing nested governance mechanisms and spaces**

Place-based governance is important as it can flex and adapt to meet the changing needs of local environments and communities. Effective environmental governance is likely to be multi-level, fluid and organic: it requires work within, across and between different levels of governance and different policy/departmental structures. Governance which spans departments and organisational silos in this way is particularly important for environmental issues where nature (and pollution) can be both very place/habitat specific but also part of a wider ecosystem and frequently mobile and also where change is needed both in terms of individual behaviours and also wider sectors and systems.

The research for the report found that the types of spaces available to engage in decision-making can also be important. Engagement in civic spaces and cultural assets, such as museums and social hubs, which people already frequent, and using existing community-led social infrastructure to involve people, can be beneficial. Using arts, cultural and other creative engagement approaches can lead to richer and deeper dialogues that can be multi-sensory and self-reflective. This type of more innovative engagement can help people tap into emotions, values and sources of civic pride. For many of the different engagement approaches examined in the research to work in a truly effective, inclusive and sustained manner, however, clearly requires sufficient funding and support.

### **Delegating power and resources**

The research for this report suggests that power and resources may need to be transferred and decentralised in a more meaningful way for nested governance to be truly effective. The research also found that using and building out from existing and emergent governance processes that already work is important, and likely to be vital when resources are tight, noting that peer-to-peer support mechanisms and the transfer of learnings between places are also valuable.

Whilst local authorities and mayors clearly play an important role in place-based decision-making, they are not the only local actors that need to be involved in governance processes, particularly outside cities. Local authorities are already severely stretched dealing with a range of other local challenges along with navigating resourcing and capacity issues. A reliance on local decision-making will therefore make it difficult for place-sensitive governance to be able to truly tackle climate-related issues.

While this report does not delve into the debate over how resources should be allocated, it is clear that resourcing and capacity need to be considered, noting in particular that bringing a wider range of local organisations and civil society groups into governance systems may require additional funding and support, but can also aid in mitigating some of these challenges and

generate longer term efficiencies. In addition, it can also give communities a voice, increase the legitimacy and trustworthiness of decision-making, and ultimately build connections between places and people. Clear roles and responsibilities and the upward and downward sharing of information are also necessary to enable co-ordination between different levels and scales of governance. However, the research also indicates that for this more complex governance landscape to work effectively, and to overcome inertia, legislative tools may be required, and cultural barriers need to be addressed.

### **Limits of the existing evidence base**

Along with identifying the insights and benefits that a place-sensitive approach to environmental policymaking can bring, this report also touches on some of the gaps in our existing evidence base. These include:

- How to understand the various interactions between layers of governance, most importantly, how to better align local, national and international governance on environmental issues in practice, a topic area that will be covered in more detail in relation to the climate in the Academy's net zero Policy Programme.
- Related, what a place-sensitive approach to environmental policy means for central actors, particularly in terms of roles, responsibilities and the delegation of powers and resources (with greater clarity around what still needs to be done centrally or through structural change and what can be decentralised). Given current financial pressures and growing environmental and resilience challenges, these issues are highly pertinent. They are also relevant to questions of how to ensure environmental change is inclusive so that more disadvantaged and marginalised communities can also be supported to play their part.
- How to better calculate and account for the impacts and co-benefits of a place-sensitive approach to environmental sustainability. There is a risk that if these things are not quantified, they will not be counted, and valuable 'win-wins' will be overlooked.
- What are the steps required to effectively scale up different local initiatives so that these approaches can be used in other places and the cost-benefit ratio of doing so. This is particularly important given the transformative nature of the environmental challenges faced.

### **Next steps**

In the next phase of work, the Where we live next programme will start to build on the insights from this initial evidence-gathering phase by shifting to examining more practical facets of place-sensitive environmental policymaking, exploring the question of "how can place-sensitive policymaking enable environmental sustainability?". Part of this will involve commissioning a series of policy case studies that represent a broad range of environmental sustainability topics which are pertinent to places (see graphic in section 1.0). These case studies will provide practical and policy-focused insights from the SHAPE disciplines to help policymakers understand how people and communities have responded to environmental issues, the mechanisms for good decision-making, and the right incentives and approaches to be developed to deliver successful outcomes and avoid unintended consequences. The case studies will also seek to address some of the gaps identified in the evidence as set out above.

The evidence base covered by this report, along with the further commissioned case studies outlined above, will form a portfolio of work that will be used to develop a set of guiding principles for place-sensitive policymaking on environmental sustainability. This will build on wider thinking on environmental decision-making frameworks and principles. The primary mechanism for developing the Academy's place-sensitive environmental principles and testing the draft principles will be through active engagement with stakeholders within the policy ecosystem.



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# Background on Where We Live Next

## Background

The British Academy has embarked on a new policy programme entitled ‘Where we live next’, which aims to apply a place-sensitive approach to environmental policymaking in the UK. It examines how visible different places, and the diversity of people and cultures within them, are to policymakers when they make decisions about the environment and how policymaking in this area could be strengthened.

## Evidence Collection

The first set of activities for the programme was to develop a multi-disciplinary evidence base. As part of this, in early 2022 the Academy commissioned six research projects and a piece of social media research that explored various facets of environmental sustainability using a place-sensitive lens. Research projects were asked to respond to one or more of the following areas:

- The social, cultural, and educational factors affecting just transition
- The voices, spaces, and scales of environmental governance
- Multidisciplinary insights on place and the delivery of a sustainable and productive economy
- The relationship between businesses and communities in local sustainability approaches.

In the spring 2022, we held two virtual workshops, which brought together the project teams along with members of the policy, practice and wider research communities working to understand and address issues of environmental sustainability. The research teams presented their work, received feedback from one another and attendees discussed the connections and contrasts across the commissioned projects. Insights from these workshops were used to inform the write-up of this report.

### **Project Teams**

The research groups are listed below. All of these are referenced throughout the evidence report and full versions of their outputs are provided on our [evidence hub](#).

#### **University of Bath – ‘Voices, spaces, and scales of Environmental Governance in the South West of Britain: Exploring Climate Policy and Green Recovery’**

Project lead: Dr Sophia Hatzisavvidou, University of Bath

#### **University of Cambridge – ‘A trans-disciplinary approach to scaling community voices for place-sensitive policy-making through places and practices of food’**

Project lead: Professor Minna Sunikka-Blank, University of Cambridge

#### **University of Liverpool – ‘Situating climate change: understanding the importance of climate, place and community’**

Project lead: Professor Georgina Endfield, University of Liverpool

#### **Royal Holloway University, Nottingham Trent University, University of Sheffield- ‘Youth Sustainability and Democracy: How Young People can Shape Environmental Policy in Urban Spaces’**

Project Team: Professor James Sloam, Royal Holloway University, Professor Matt Henn, Nottingham Trent, Dr Christine Huebner, University of Sheffield

#### **University of Warwick – ‘Arts Co-Production and Place-Sensitive Governance’**

Project lead: Dr Jennifer Verson, University of Chester

#### **Environmental Planning Campaigner- ‘Neighbourhood Planning: A new Horizon for who decides where we live next’**

Project lead: Tony Burton

### **Evidence Hub**

The outputs produced by the commissioned research projects above can be found in our online [evidence hub](#).



# Acknowledgements

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## Working Group

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