



# Where We Live Now

Making the case for place-based policy



BRITISH  
ACADEMY

*for the humanities and social sciences*

# Where We Live Now: Making the case for place-based policy



Through *Where We Live Now*, the British Academy reviews the evidence for people's attachment to place and considers whether place-based policy-making – aligning the design and resourcing of policy-making to the scales at which individuals connect to places, irrespective of departmental or sectoral divisions – would produce more responsive and effective policies to improve people's lives.

This paper sets out the key project findings, notably from a set of roundtable workshops in Manchester, Cornwall, Cardiff and London. These 'Productivity+' roundtables provided an opportunity to consider the qualitative analysis of, and creative solutions to, place-based growth, moving beyond solely economic concepts to encompass well-being, culture and the environment.

Places matter to people. They shape the way we live our lives, feel about ourselves and the relationships we have with others. Moreover places – not least because of their history, character and physical form – contribute significantly to personal and societal wellbeing.

In a country like Britain, a nation of nations with different yet entangled histories, places vary enormously: from huge cities to tiny rural settlements; and they may be upland, lowland or coastal. All our places have been shaped by many generations of people and cultures. Most of us have immense affection for the places where we live: they might be places where we grew up, live or work now; where we have family and other relationships; and places are full of memories, stories and our lived experiences.

Yet today, surprisingly, we are largely ‘place-blind’ when it comes to making policy. We often design policies for health, education, social care, employment, the economy and new infrastructure separately, and as if places were all the same. We design solutions then ‘roll them out’, expecting them to work wherever they land, whether in Tower Hamlets or Tower Hamlets or other parts of the UK, irrespective of the enormous differences between places and the circumstances of the people who live and work there.

---

**“ For example, in order to capitalise on Cornwall’s better quality of life, productivity targets could be set around the industries predominant in that area such as tourism, food and drink.”**

At a time when, it is clear, many people feel increasingly disconnected from those who make decisions, place offers a means of reconnection, more sensitive and appropriate policy-making, and better outcomes in terms of our individual and societal wellbeing. And at a time when devolution of many policies is being actively pursued (at least in some areas) through the Coalition and then the Conservative Government’s devolution agenda, the City and Growth Deals; place offers a lens through which to pursue better local solutions and joined up services than traditional top-down approaches would deliver. Yet it requires more than devolution to properly understand and reflect the importance of place.

During 2016 the British Academy brought together academics and practitioners in the humanities and social sciences to explore the notion of place in today’s context, and to develop the case for place-based policy making. What follows are the key themes, thoughts and suggested solutions that emerged from four regional round tables held in Manchester, Cornwall, Cardiff and London; and debates within and around the Academy’s Fellowship. In these places, we gathered local policymakers, academics, and representatives of civil society organisations to discuss ways of achieving inclusive growth by asking what should be included (in an ideal world) in a productivity strategy, in which productivity is understood much more broadly than as simply an economic phenomenon – through a place-based lens. We commend these ideas to the Government and to decision-makers in the many places around the country who are grappling with these issues today.

## New definitions of progress and productivity

In many of the places we explored, we met local people who had clear views about what progress and productivity should look like in their areas, and were equally clear that these were often not the same as the Government's ideas. Local areas – whether huge cities like Manchester or London, a rural area like Cornwall or a place of distinctive cultural character like Cardiff – want to address their own problems, whether these are structural weaknesses in the labour market, skills shortages or legacies of past economies; and develop solutions that respond to these needs. Traditional measures of success often do not adequately reflect either the challenges or the strengths of particular places. For example, according to ONS (2016), Cornwall has low productivity but relatively high well-being, while London is economically successful but scores poorly on well-being and demonstrates increasing inequality.

So, in order to capitalise on Cornwall's better quality of life, productivity targets could be set around the industries predominant in that area such as tourism, food and drink. London by contrast requires specific policies relating to housing affordability and supply, transport capacity and quality of the working life. These issues raise questions about the relationship between well-being and productivity: not least, which is the end and which is the means? Either way, well-being and productivity are much more closely connected than our current measures of success often assume. Some decision-makers implementing national packages like City Deals, which seem on the surface encouraging, highlight that they can be too formulaic and insufficiently responsive to local conditions. Some places pursuing these Deals want to move from crisis management to preventative solutions but find national frameworks too restrictive and rigid.

We discussed examples of nationally driven economic, social and environmental measures as opposed to the needs of the place. This led participants to identifying the following solutions:

- City and Growth Deals should include measures of success relative to the place itself, not be simply based on metrics from other locations or other Deals. For example, simply adding more jobs in Manchester does not address the specific unemployment characteristics or skills deficits in the Combined Authority region
- policies that foster well-being and well-being measures throughout our lives should be pursued, rather than adopting solely economic measures of progress
- greater weight should be placed on the value of the things which improve the quality of our lives, including green space, access to nature and culture, quality of the local environment and the strength of local networks
- employers should be encouraged to place greater emphasis on nurturing skills development, lifelong education and the general health and well-being of their workforces, as well as providing jobs.

---

**“The most commonly quoted problems relate to health, social services and employment support systems which, it is believed, could work much better if they were integrated at local level.”**

## Integration, not fragmentation

A common frustration raised in all our discussions is the siloed nature of many public policies and the difficulties this creates for those who are trying to make new and different things happen. Local businesses and authorities seeking new solutions want to develop a rational, joined-up response to problems which, on the ground, are self-evidently connected. The most commonly quoted problems relate to health, social services and employment support systems which, it is believed, could work much better if they were integrated at local level. For example, we heard evidence from organisations working in rural Wales that families in a given community may be supported by different case workers for different issues and for different family members. Not only is this a case of ‘doing to’ rather than ‘doing with’, but makes little sense for either the families involved or the resourcing of key services. Moreover, the employment and skills solutions offered did not match the available jobs in the area, nor account for systemic issues such as chronic under-employment which had given rise to poor public health within the community.

Operating at different scales of place, for example at the regional level, can provide a redistributive function, enabling policymakers to address the specific needs of local places, without operating in a vacuum.

This is only part of the solution, and concerns around the development of postcode-lotteries may arise, but a fully empowered local authority should be able to devise local policy which meets the needs of their own population, thus creating diversity of services, not disparity.

Pooling of resources between local authorities could better deliver shared services; targeting assistance where it is most needed. We need joined up policies across the board and at different scales appropriate to defined needs: for example, London needs a more integrated approach to meeting housing needs across all boroughs as well as locally sensitive solutions. Communities must feel involved in local change, and this can make the difference to whether new housing development is accepted or rejected.



“Greater weight should be placed on the value of the things which improve the quality of our lives, including green space, access to nature and culture.”



Ideas suggested to us included:

- integrated health, social services, employment and education budgets at different decision levels to enable joined up solutions based around personal well-being to be developed
- using place – at different scales – as the focus for joined up policy by evaluating the combined impact of services on people and engaging them in developing better approaches
- enabling policy makers to understand better the experiences of the communities they serve through innovative and more meaningful approaches to consultation
- adopting a ‘whole-life’ perspective on people in a locality, from birth through school, further studies, employment and to retirement and late-life care, addressing how their needs at different life stages can best be met
- addressing inequalities (particularly health and socio-economic inequalities) as a long-term goal, which is best pursued at the level of locality.

## Resilience and long term thinking

Some individuals involved in the project felt that too many of our current public policies focus on short term needs and problems. Yet most of these problems also need long term, integrated solutions, especially those which relate to long term changes in our population, structural shifts in employment and economic systems, and those relating to climate change. Short term crises like floods, factory closures and mass immigration need short term responses, of course, but they also need to be framed within a much longer term view of how society can strengthen its resilience to shocks and plan for a changing and less certain future.

---

“Using place – at different scales – as the focus for joined up policy by evaluating the combined impact of services on people and engaging them in developing better approaches.”



Our discussions suggested the following solutions:

- greater integration of land use policies so that flood prevention, mitigation and management are built into the way we support farming, forestry and housing and other forms of development from the outset, which can account for overlapping places, for example, by connecting plans for the upland sheep farming community with the downstream town vulnerable to flooding
- long term strategic planning that integrates transport with housing, economic growth and societal well-being, looking at issues from walking and cycling to regional and national transport infrastructure: all levels of decision-making will need to be involved
- better long term planning for structural adjustments in the economic and employment systems, including skills development and re-training as an essential part of employment policy, recognising that both needs and solutions will vary between places
- better management of the cultural needs of new and changing communities to enable integration and harmonisation with the needs of pre-existing and new communities
- better collaboration with Universities to inject valuable academic perspectives on long term challenges in localities
- a clearer commitment to long term sustainability in national and local policies: a good example of this long-term joined up thinking is the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, which marries social and economic solutions with environmental and cultural concerns.

---

“We suggested greater integration of land use policies so that flood prevention, mitigation and management are built into the way we support farming, forestry and housing and other forms of development from the outset.”





## Valuing place-based assets

In many of our discussions, people were both proud of what made their place special – whether a country, region, city, county, street or village – and clear about why it was important to sustain those unique elements or qualities. Local traditions and products – food, accents, music and the arts – vary enormously but all help make a place distinctive. The objective of improving or sustaining these qualities is rarely captured in formal policy making or consultation. Sometimes these attributes have a visible form: an ancient building, a street market, a pub or community shop, distinctive terraced housing or an arts centre, but sometimes not. We discovered that in Croydon people expressed strong attachments to physical heritage and history and needed assurance that their views would be heard.

The following ideas came out of our discussions:

- every community should begin its planning processes by identifying what, in the locality, matters to people and what constitutes its character and identity, its ‘sense of place’ or (in Welsh) ‘cynefin’. These attributes form the basis of what is special about a place and its future resilience and success and should be at the heart of decisions
- specific place-based elements eg. heritage, arts, culture and environmental attributes should form a positive part of plans rather than being seen as optional extras
- the contribution the cultural agenda can make to productivity and progress should be celebrated and supported.

---

“Sometimes these attributes have a visible form: an ancient building, a street market, a pub or community shop, distinctive terraced housing or an arts centre, but sometimes not.”







## Recognising that quality of place really matters to people

Too many people feel that we are becoming a country of anonymity. New infrastructure (schools, hospitals, public transport etc.) is often designed without sensitivity to the landscapes and townscapes within which they sit, new houses frequently look identical whether you are in Cumbria or Cornwall, Somerset or Suffolk, and traditional high streets are rapidly becoming clone towns. Those we worked with felt that public consultation often feels ritualistic and inaccessible. As a result, too often we feel like victims, not players and we often object to new development – especially housing – as the only way to get our voices heard.

Yet there are solutions, which include:

- improving local consultation and participation in planning and local policymaking to understand better the real nature of place, what we care about and the scale of place we relate to in different parts of our lives
- Involving local people much more deeply in the debate about where and how to build new housing. There is evidence that objections diminish the more involved people feel, so long as the new development addresses the concerns they have
- we should encourage higher standards of architecture and design, reflecting local and historic building traditions. New development should fit in the existing area and be viewed both in the context of the long-term impact on an area, as well as the potential to correct some of the mistakes of the past
- place-making should be at the heart of the objectives of the planning system: it is there to create good places to live and to manage change in ways which connect people together.

# Conclusions

Place based policy-making offers some exciting new possibilities to reconnect public policy with our lived experience and the places and relationships we care about; and as a result, to deliver more meaningful and effective solutions.



To achieve this requires, but is so much more than, devolution. We need to ensure that policies reflect the scale of places people relate to, and also the range of public interests in a place, which can include the interests of people who live outside the immediate area. Existing models of devolution represent a step forward but were often viewed as too formulaic: we need a mix of strategic guidance; clear principles and frameworks, combined with much greater discretion to deliver meaningful solutions at the local level. The challenge is to make decisions at the level which most closely reflects people's sense of connection with place, and to find mechanisms to give a voice to all those who have an interest.

The imperative for longer term and more joined-up policies is not new. So why have we repeatedly failed to deliver it?

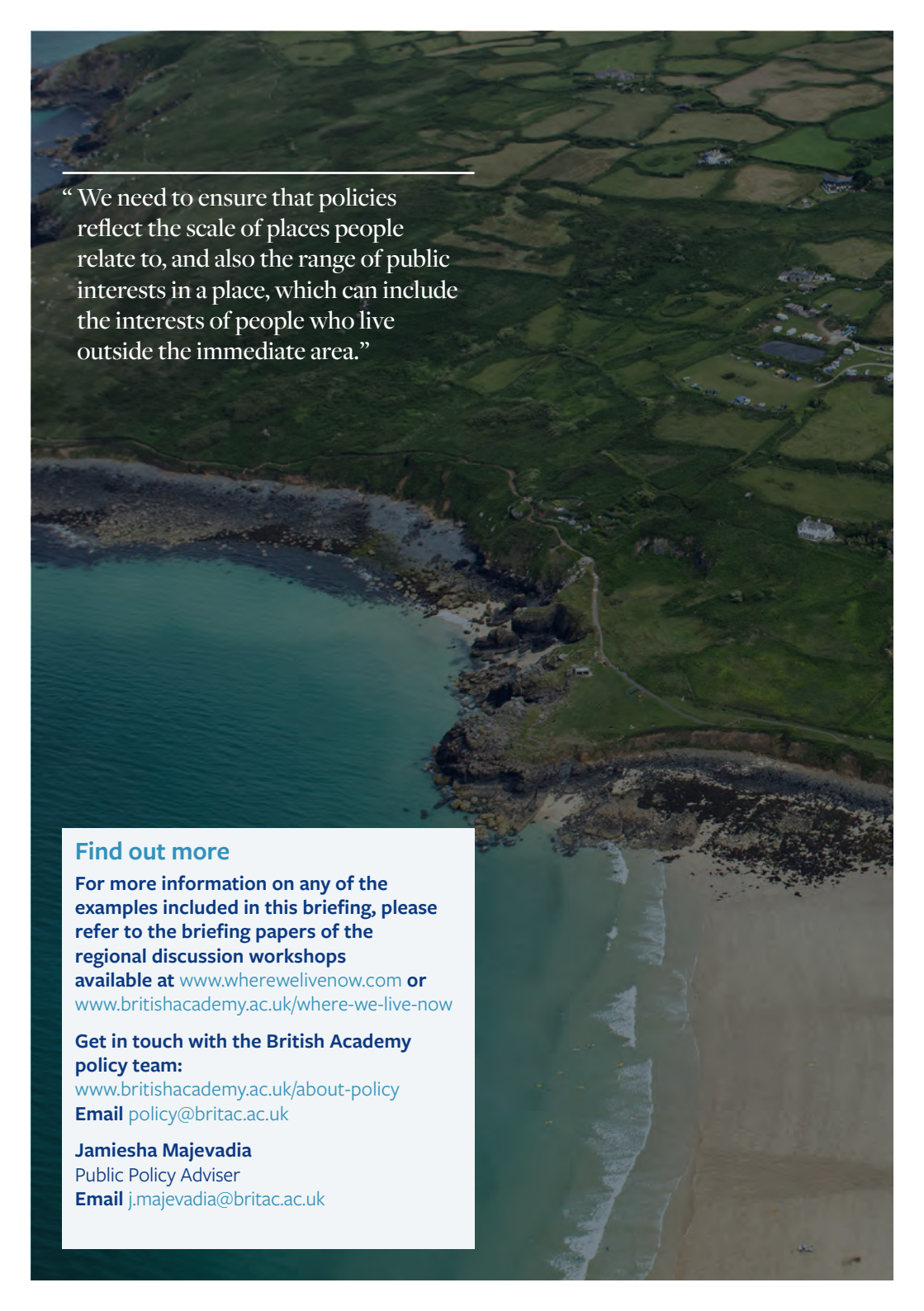
Achieving what seems obvious and sensible can seem overwhelming because it poses a fundamental challenge to the way things are done and requires so many things to change. But we have some experience, and we should learn from previous attempts such as Government regional offices and Public Service Agreements, as well as evaluating the current round of devolution and city/county deals.

Focusing on place can make this challenge feel possible. Long term, joined up policy which takes a more rounded and more human view of success is a great prize. But at the national level it is almost impossible to conceive. It is both more imaginable and more achievable when viewed through the lens of a particular place, by focusing on a scale of change we can comprehend.

We therefore urge the Government to pilot new approaches to place based policy-making which go beyond devolution, develop pioneering approaches to involving local people, insist that local and national government work together to better understand places and what they mean to people; and to agree the best level to make decisions to achieve a new definition of productivity, centred on our collective well-being and committed to improving the quality of life for all.

## British Academy

Where We Live Now



“ We need to ensure that policies reflect the scale of places people relate to, and also the range of public interests in a place, which can include the interests of people who live outside the immediate area.”

## Find out more

For more information on any of the examples included in this briefing, please refer to the briefing papers of the regional discussion workshops available at [www.wherewelivenow.com](http://www.wherewelivenow.com) or [www.britishacademy.ac.uk/where-we-live-now](http://www.britishacademy.ac.uk/where-we-live-now)

**Get in touch with the British Academy policy team:**

[www.britishacademy.ac.uk/about-policy](http://www.britishacademy.ac.uk/about-policy)

**Email** [policy@britac.ac.uk](mailto:policy@britac.ac.uk)

**Jamiesha Majevalia**

Public Policy Adviser

**Email** [j.majevalia@britac.ac.uk](mailto:j.majevalia@britac.ac.uk)



BRITISH  
ACADEMY

*for the humanities and social sciences*

Place based policy-making offers some exciting new possibilities to reconnect public policy with our lived experience and the places and relationships we care about; and as a result, to deliver more meaningful and effective solutions.

This paper sets out the key findings from *Where We Live Now*, a British Academy project on place-based policy.

Published 2017

The British Academy  
10-11 Carlton House Terrace  
London SW1Y 5AH  
+44 (0)20 7969 5200

[www.britac.ac.uk](http://www.britac.ac.uk)  
Registered Charity:  
Number 233176

 [britac\\_news](#)  
 [TheBritishAcademy](#)  
 [Britacfilm](#)  
 [BritishAcademy](#)