

What Works Centre for UK Climate Adaptation Scoping Insights from Online Scoping Workshop (9th July 2026)

Defra and UKRI are collaborating on the scoping of a potential new What Works Centre for UK Climate Adaptation. The emerging vision is to build an evidence base on real-world adaptation interventions to evidence what works for scaled up adaptation action and investment. The prospective centre could be an ambitious programme, commencing in the summer of 2027 and operating for a duration of 3-4 years. The centre is currently in the scoping phase and is awaiting approvals.

The emerging objectives are as follows:

- To build evidence base of adaptation interventions in a range of contexts to inform decision making
- To develop best practice for assessment of climate adaptation measures
- To synthesise and disseminate evidence of what works into a single repository, tailored to user needs
- Build UK capability in climate adaptation

An online scoping workshop was held on 9 July 2026. Selected attendees from across government, devolved administrations, academia and wider stakeholders were invited to engage in this online workshop. Workshop discussions built upon initial scoping work carried out at the ACCESS Annual Assembly on the 18/19 June 2026. This document provides a summary of the insights gathered from attendees at the workshop, which were provided via discussions held in the workshop and some captured on the Padlet (up to 15 July 2026) that was made available ([available via this link](#)).

It does not indicate the confirmation of any funding for the proposed What Works Centre for UK Climate Adaptation, or specific areas that would be included, if the funding was to be approved.

1. What are your reflections on the Centre's emerging vision and objectives?

Attendees were supportive of the proposed What Works Centre for UK Climate Adaptation and its ambition to strengthen adaptation decision-making. Discussions highlighted the need for the vision and objectives to better reflect the complexity of adaptation evidence, place-based contexts, implementation challenges, and the legacy of the Centre.

Moving beyond evidence generation to enabling action

Many participants noted that a key challenge is not simply a lack of evidence on adaptation options, but the ability to implement, govern and scale adaptation effectively. Key points included:

- The need for emphasis on implementation, governance, coordination and accountability.
- A need to build capacity to use evidence, both qualitative and quantitative, not just produce it.
- Recognition that uncertainty around climate issues is not a temporary evidence gap that will be solved, rather, adaptation decisions must often be made despite uncertainty.
- Stronger focus on evaluation to understand which interventions deliver effective outcomes.
- Learning from both successful and unsuccessful adaptation efforts.
- There is a need to demonstrate an effective use of public resources by building up the evidence base around economics, co-benefits, and the cost of not doing anything.
- The Centre should have a common language of assessment that can potentially be used as best practice across government.

Context specific adaptation

A recurring theme was that adaptation outcomes are shaped by local circumstances and governance arrangements. Participants cautioned against seeking universal solutions and instead encouraged an approach that reflects differing places, sectors and communities. However, the Centre should be genuinely UK-wide in its reach. Key points included:

- What works in one location or governance setting may not work elsewhere.
- Equal and effective engagement with devolved administrations in addition to central government bodies and agencies, should be reflected in the Centre's objectives.
- Adaptation should be understood in terms of what works, for whom, where, when and under what conditions.
- Consideration should be given to trade-offs, distributional impacts and wider consequences over time.

Participants emphasised that adaptation depends on relationships, partnerships, multi-scalar governance capacity and stakeholder engagement, as much as it does on technical solutions.

Support scaling and mainstreaming

Attendees highlighted the difficulties of moving from pilot projects to widespread adoption. Key points included:

- Successful local initiatives can lose effectiveness when scaled up and therefore adaptation approaches should balance transferability with sensitivity to local context.
- More attention is needed on the conditions that support uptake and implementation.
- Feasibility and user needs should be considered when assessing interventions.

- Adaptation needs to be linked back to a clear political priority as large scale partnership and mobilisation to work towards a particular aim
- The evidence should take the needs, priorities, and capability of other public services and government departments (e.g. NHS, emergency services, ICBs) to utilise any generated evidence into consideration. Aims and objectives need to be clearly defined as not all institutions are subject experts.

Timeframes and legacy

Participants commented on the feasibility of ambitions to be achieved within the Centre's lifespan and that temporality should be explicitly clarified in the vision. The following points were highlighted:

- The scope should reflect realistic deliverables.
- Prioritisation may be needed around the highest-risk climate issues.
- A clearer legacy plan is required to ensure learning and impact continues beyond the initial funding period.
- Capacity-building and long-term research infrastructure should be considered from the outset.

Future focussed and imaginative vision

Participants encouraged an imaginative, transformative and future focussed vision for the Centre. Key points included:

- The vision should put an emphasis on outcomes.
- Engaging actors beyond the adaptation community.
- Supporting innovation and new approaches to adaptation challenges.
- Building capability for future generations of adaptation practitioners and researchers.
- Using historical, archaeological and geological evidence to inform the scale of what's coming.
- Imagining future environmental outcomes decades down the line.

2. In light of the requirements for all What Works Centres, what activities are most critical for the Centre to deliver the emerging objectives?

Attendees suggested that the Centre should remain pragmatic in its priorities and avoid becoming overly broad in the initial stages. It was suggested that the Centre should have a distinct role and avoid limited long-term capacity or impact. Attendees also highlighted the need to be clear about how the Centre differs from typical government capacity-building and training programmes.

Attendees suggested that early activities could include:

- Co-defining and refining research questions and scope.
- Co-producing a Theory of Change.

- Establishing a shared vision and clear guiding principles e.g. place-based working, co-production, equity and inclusion. This should be done with the recognition that the focus may need to evolve.
- Understanding existing evidence base, projects, and investments to avoid duplication and maximise impact.
- Developing a clear engagement, partnership, and networking plan.
- Producing a legacy plan from the outset.
- Building agility into the Centre to respond to changing knowledge, political and geopolitical contexts, and technological change.
- Clearly defining the difference between adaptation and resilience.

Co-production, participation, and decision making

Many attendees emphasised the importance of co-production throughout the Centre's activities and understanding how communities can participate more effectively in the co-design of solutions. As the Centre develops, attendees suggested ensuring collaborative working and co-production are adequately resourced. In-person engagement was viewed as particularly valuable, especially events designed to bring together a broad range of stakeholders. Cross-sector and inter-sector collaboration was viewed as being key. Involving the insurance community was also suggested.

Evaluation

Attendees suggested producing an evaluation framework developed with diverse stakeholders to identify the criteria against which interventions should be assessed.

Several attendees emphasised the importance of developing robust evaluation frameworks that help identify what works, in which contexts, and for whom.

Suggestions included:

- Understanding what works across different intervention types, including technological, nature-based, and behavioural approaches.
- Assessing interventions across different climate hazards such as heat and flooding.
- Learning from success as well as failure.
- Evaluating different finance models and identifying which approaches work well.
- Exploring the costs, benefits, and trade-offs associated with meeting adaptation objectives.

It was proposed that the first year could focus on a small number of case studies operating at different scales, including national, place-based, and local examples, to understand what could work.

Scaling and implementation

Several attendees emphasised the importance of focusing on implementation and understanding how adaptation can move from pilots to wider adoption, whilst remaining relevant to local contexts.

There were also suggestions that the Centre should focus on delivering entities such as local authorities, highways authorities, rail operators, and water companies, where many adaptation barriers and infrastructure resilience challenges are present. Barriers to implementation are often highly context-specific, meaning a solution that works in one setting may not work elsewhere due to differences in governance, regulation, or local circumstances. It was said that it is important that the Centre does not focus solely on pilot projects but also examines broader barriers to implementation, including skills, capacity, procurement, and other cross-cutting challenges that affect long-term scaling.

Capacity building

Several attendees noted the importance of capability-building and suggested the Centre should remain responsive to the needs of stakeholders. However, there should also be room for supporting learning through doing e.g. by having embedded fellows within councils, regulators, agencies, and civil society organisations.

There was a view that the Centre should be structured to support both long-term research and shorter-term responses to emerging policy needs, balancing activity across different timescales.

Governance

Attendees suggested that climate risks are often well understood, but that greater attention may be needed on how risk information is used, communicated, and acted upon by government (multi-scalar).

Some attendees suggested the Centre could help identify successful examples that can be replicated elsewhere and support leadership development across the adaptation community.

International learning

Several attendees suggested that the Centre could draw on international evidence and experience. Areas highlighted included:

- International adaptation approaches.
- International finance models for major infrastructure investment.
- Lessons from large-scale implementation programmes.
- Understanding how top-down approaches interact with local needs and community priorities.

Legacy

There was a view that the Centre should establish systems, relationships, evidence, and approaches that remain useful beyond the initial funding period. Attendees suggested that a dedicated legacy plan should be developed at an early stage and refined as the Centre evolves.

The importance of building agility into the Centre so it can adapt to changing political contexts and priorities over time.

3. Are there any topics/thematic areas that should be prioritised for the Centre, and are there any that should be out of scope?

Attendees suggested that it may be beneficial to narrow the scope and identify issues with a stronger existing evaluation evidence base that could be used for testing and learning from adaptation methods. They suggested focusing on an immediate issue where short-term outcomes can be measured and evaluated. There was also a view that concentrating on more tangible issues could enable a greater impact within a smaller area. Given the relatively short timeframe, some attendees felt that a more focused approach would be pragmatic, although a blended approach that incorporates cross-cutting themes is ideal.

The following topics were suggested by attendees as being in scope for the Centre:

- Infrastructure resilience
- Water, including flood defences, water scarcity and drought
- Heat mitigation
- Health
- Nature and nature recovery
- Agriculture

However, many attendees stated that narrowing the focus solely by hazard or sector would not be effective and could lead to siloing. They noted that some of the most important adaptation questions and issues cut across sectors including, questions of responsibility and accountability, what evidence influences investment decisions, how trade-offs are managed, how maladaptation can be avoided and assessing interventions that address interdependent, cascading or 'contradictory' impacts. It was suggested that focusing separately on issues may not reflect the reality that climate impacts often occur simultaneously, trigger knock-on effects which can exacerbate existing vulnerabilities. This could limit the ability to build long-term resilience to an increasingly complex risk landscape.

One attendee suggested exploring an approach that combines a receptor focus with a decision-framing focus. A systems-wide approach was also suggested.

Structurally, one attendee suggested considering a dual role for the Centre: a focus on two or three intervention areas that can be assessed in depth, combined with a more cross-cutting capability that is responsive to wider policy and partnership needs. Suggested cross-cutting themes:

- Scaling potential
- Vulnerability and justice / impacts on vulnerable groups
- Understanding systems of adaptation governance and accountability
- Implementation capacity and barriers
- Place-based adaptation (inc. the role of place at city, urban, and coastal levels)
- Co-production and how decisions are made (including underrepresented voices)

- Just and equitable resilience
- Building resilience and capabilities within communities
- Systems-wide resilience
- Evaluating evaluation – exploring what good evaluation looks like
- Business-led technological innovation
- Economics, including the co-benefits of adaptation
- The psychology of change management (institutionally, within government, and at the local level)
- What works to keep societal infrastructure functioning

Out of scope

Attendees suggested that approaches which treat adaptation as a list of options detached from governance, capability, place, justice, and uncertainty should be considered out of scope.

Overall reflections

Overall, discussions centred on whether the Centre should prioritise specific thematic areas or sectors or instead adopt a more cross-cutting approach to climate adaptation. Attendees highlighted the need to consider the advantages, risks, and trade-offs associated with each option, while balancing the need to scale up activity but maintaining place-specific effectiveness. Some attendees noted that, even if the Centre focuses on a limited number of thematic areas, its staff capacity should remain broader to ensure it can cover a wider range of topics. Attendees also highlighted the importance of establishing robust networks, both academic and non-academic.

4. What are the potential barriers and challenges to the successful delivery of the Centre's objectives?

Who to engage with and how

A key challenge discussed was who the Centre is for, and therefore who should be engaged with, and how, in order to maximise the effectiveness of the outputs. Key points included:

- The climate adaptation challenge is complex and cross-cutting, and therefore there is a need to engage wider policy areas, but a challenge in ensuring coverage whilst also retaining an ability to deliver.
- Clearly identifying the end user and ensuring that the outputs of the Centre are useful and used.
- There is a need to include a breadth of perspectives, not just government and policy, but also, for example, the private sector and community sector. It was acknowledged that involving different perspectives and priorities is challenging, and there is a need to acknowledge communities who have previously been excluded, and communities that have been over-researched.
- Strong co-development and co-production with partners will be crucial.

Capacity to engage

The capacity of organisations to engage with the Centre was identified as a potential barrier. Key points included:

- Well-resourced organisations/sufficiently supported organisations will likely be able to engage with the Centre, and the outputs, but those who are under-resourced and lack capacity-building support may not.
- Stakeholder fatigue is an issue, and therefore careful consideration should be given to ensure engagement is at an appropriate level, in the right place, at the right time.
- A need to be responsive to staff turnover, and the importance of relationships at an organisation level, rather than reliance on individuals.
- The Centre could act as a 'centre of centres' - connecting work that is ongoing.

Political framing

The political framing was identified as a challenge, and the need for agile framing and re-framing in response to changing priorities at a policy level. Key points included:

- Consider a framing that emphasises benefits i.e. lowering household bills, reducing the risk of flooding to communities and businesses, etc.
- Consider positioning from a place-based community-led approach, as this has had traction in some areas.

Team capacity and skills

Attendees highlighted that a fundamental challenge will be ensuring that the project team has the appropriate balance and breadth of experience and skills to operate in this landscape (research/policy interface) and maximise the Centre's potential for impact. Additionally, some stakeholders may have a limited capacity to engage. For example, many public institutions lack resources which would impact capacity building support. This can be mitigated by including subgrants.

Risk of duplication of existing work

A key risk identified is the potential for the duplication of existing work, but this can in part be mitigated by the forming of partnerships and networks (for knowledge sharing) with other programmes and initiatives with a similar climate adaptation focus.

Challenges associated with getting evidence into practice

The assumption that better evidence automatically leads to better adaptation was highlighted as a barrier, and that there is a need to understand why the extensive evidence already available is not being used. Key points included:

- Importance of developing a Theory of Change for the Centre, to demonstrate how the evidence will influence decisions made by government.
- Recognition of the multitude of factors influencing policy decisions.

- To help with implementation, consider having embedded researchers and multiple routes and formats for obtaining and sharing insights accessibly.
- There is good literature on decision making under uncertainty, but more could be done regarding training and considering solutions in this space.
- Important to balancing the generation of evidence with supporting the implementation and application of evidence.
- Consider the delivery model, and how to utilise private sector/delivery organisations that support the uptake of real-world solutions. Traditional public sector research model may not be enough to obtain information that is useful to making decisions.

Understanding the existing evidence base and availability of evidence

It will be important to understand the breadth of evidence currently available, as where there is limited or no evidence on a topic, it will make the assessment of what works challenging and would mean investing in building the evidence base, through robust impact evaluations. It was highlighted there is very little counterfactual evidence in this field.

Valuing and utilising different types of knowledge and evidence

Attendees discussed the importance of valuing different types of evidence, and the risks of unintentionally privileging some evidence types. Key points included:

- Ensure the problem to be solved is clearly defined, as the types of knowledge and knowledge required will be defined by the problem.
- There is a risk that the Centre could privilege quantitative, short-term, easily measurable evidence over qualitative, situated, uncertain and long-term knowledge.

Timeframes, legacy, and agility

The challenging timeframes of the Centre, how to ensure its legacy, and the need for it to be agile were key points of discussion. Key points included:

- It will be quite challenging in the three or four-year programme to get meaningful evaluation data from either evaluating projects that are already on the ground or to set up new trials.
- A three or four-year programme may be too short to build the relationships, trust, institutional memory and learning systems needed for adaptation.
- A clear plan for the Centre's legacy is important: consider ways of embedding, and the importance of collaborations and partnerships with previous and existing investments.
- There is a need to look back and look forward: making connections and building on existing work, while also considering the longevity of the Centre, and its ability to pivot to ensure that it is agile and responsive in a changing climate and changing political context.

5. Wider reflections

Wider reflections from the plenary discussions and the Padlet were the following:

- There should be thinking around how the Centre can ensure consistency in adaptation advisory function amongst other relevant UKRI investments. It should not start from scratch.
- The Centre should be clearly different from previous investments that address adaptation.
- It is important to include nature in high level adaptation messaging.
- Thinking around what the overarching exam question is was suggested.
- Building 'UK capability' should include competencies and organisational learning in addition to training.
- The Centre should be honest about power and politics, understanding that adaptation evidence can have positive as well as negative impacts on different actors.
- It may be useful for the Centre to be designed with the National Adaptation Plan and the Climate Change Risk Assessment in mind.
- Not framing solely around adaptation and incorporating resilience may provide a broader lens that considers responses to hazards and risks.
- There is a need to be specific about private sector involvement, and which organisations would be best placed to get involved. Understanding the potential barriers and constraints to private sector collaboration.