

What Works Centre for UK Climate Adaptation Scoping Insights from ACCESS Annual Assembly (18/19 June 2026)

Overview

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 of real-world adaptation interventions for scaled up adaptation action and investment. The prospective centre could be an ambitious programme, commencing in the summer of 2027 and operating for 3 to 4 years. The centre is currently in the scoping phase, and 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

A scoping activity was undertaken at the ACCESS Annual Assembly on the 18 and 19 June 2026. It was open for all attendees, online and in person, to engage with. This document provides a summary of the initial insights gathered from attendees at the Annual Assembly, which are captured on the Padlet that was editable until 24 June 2026 (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.

Reflections on emerging vision and objectives

Contributors noted that the Centre should be transformational in its ambitions. It is important for any new investment to build on existing knowledge, include knowledge exchange mechanisms, and relevant organisational infrastructure services should be clearly identified in the announcement opportunity. It should be place-sensitive and work towards principles of just-adaptation by being informed and relevant to context. Attendees highlighted the need for the investment to provide coordinated training within organisations and across sectors more widely. Acknowledging the building of strong, relevant partnerships will be critical to knowledge exchange, which was an aspect that was highlighted by contributors. Finally, it was identified that the role and use of data (existing or new) should be explicit within the announcement opportunity.

What do you think the key outcomes from the Centre should be?

Regarding outcomes, attendees noted that documenting best practice and learnings, potentially through an updated database, would be beneficial in sharing and learning from what has or has not worked.

It was suggested the Centre should provide structure for future governance and best practices for local authorities, ensuring that place-context is taken into consideration. Additionally, attendees identified the need to trial interventions that are radical and transformative in nature. It was stated that it is important for the Centre to advocate for evidenced actions that have been highlighted for target audiences.

Do you have reflections on what should be in or out of scope for the Centre? Climate Adaptation is a huge area; Defra/UKRI are looking to narrow down the scope of the Centre to 2-3 cross-cutting themes. Potential themes might include issues such as overheating, impact on vulnerable groups, food security, infrastructure, water availability, productivity or health.

Three key areas for consideration emerged from attendees. The aims and governance of a Centre, specific areas of climate adaptation, and the importance of place-based adaptation.

Regarding the aims and governance, contributors suggested that the evaluation of how adaptation is defined, who it is defined by, and through which lens should be in scope. Assessing uncertainties of evidence and knowledge gaps was also identified as important. Preventative spend and the evidential burden required to shift the status quo was recommended as being in scope for a Centre. Assessment criteria and its parameters need to be clearly defined. It was also suggested that the creation of a Public Policy Working Group should be a mandatory requirement, to learn from ACCESS, as best practice learning from an existing relevant investment.

Attendees noted that a wide range of adaptation methods exist across sectors, meaning intended outcomes, specifically how they are funded and delivered needs to be considered. The following areas and sectors of climate adaptation were highlighted as important to the investment scope: nature and land use (including unlocking multiple benefits for biodiversity, and assessing acute risks and their chronic underlying issues and complex habitat mosaics), public health, water quality, and the built environment (including cooling buildings and energy resilience to flooding).

Finally, attendees noted that a close attention should be given to place-based, tangible, practical, and timely adaptation. Delegates noted that adaptation and novel interventions should be targeted in location but diverse in geographical spread for real UK coverage and wider, and more inclusive participation. Finally, risk experiences and how it links to vulnerability and the holistic evaluation of need for

adaptation should be within scope; for example, having AC on may have adverse environmental effects, but can be good for people's health.

Nothing was identified by attendees as being out of scope.

Who are the key partnerships required to deliver the Centre?

The attendees identified various organisations and networks across policy, academia, and civil society, highlighting the importance of academic and non-academic collaboration and community co-production.

National, devolved, and local government authorities were noted. Along with government organisations. In addition to nature agencies and partnerships involved in policy research (Environment Agency, Natural England, Natural Environment Social Research Network), and wider stakeholders within the landscape (Climate Change Committee, Met Office, Coastwise).

Nature based NGOs were noted as pertinent for providing evidence for What Works in practice, with specific examples including RSPB, Woodland Trust, Wildlife Trust, and National Trust.

There was a key theme of engaging communities, through community based civil society organisations (Centre for Thriving Places, Coastal Partnership Network), and direct community advisory groups, with a focus on place-based reforms. There was specific mention of marginalised communities, and equality networks. Engaging the international community was also proposed.

Academic Networks (ACU, British Academy) were mentioned, along with other UKRI Funded programmes that bring academics, policymakers, and industry experts together (METIUS, MACC, LUNZ).

Finally, wider stakeholders in industry were considered, such as National Energy System Operator and Royal Town Planning Institute.

What do you see as challenges or barriers to deliver the Centre?

Contributors noted that marginalised communities are at risk of not being meaningfully engaged. It is imperative the Centre ensures minoritised and deprived groups can fully contribute their knowledge. Questions were asked on the scale of the programme (local, UK or wider), and it was not always clear to contributors what the overriding objective is; will the centre focus on learning or also lead application of findings? The Centre must have a clear focus, and both learn from, and build off past initiatives, to avoid any risk of repeating existing work. Attendees noted a potential conflict to navigate if the Centre has sustainability goals but is framed closely to a growth agenda.

The uncertainty of climate change (unpredictable, extreme weather events for example) makes risk management difficult. Land use can also be a challenge, when

dealing with varying terrain, vulnerable to climate change. The risk of an imagination gap was noted, and utilising historical and geological records could support with ideas on the future of climate change. Moreover, contributors stressed the challenges of collating, synthesising, and creating accessible qualitative evidence. Lastly, it was noted the importance of understanding the risks and opportunities of utilising AI.

Wider reflections

Attendees highlighted the need to reflect on how systems approaches are embedded within adaptation. There was also a need for clarity on whether the Centre will focus on thematic areas or specific sectors within climate adaptation, and whether its role will be to assess 'what works' or determine what can be tested.

Governance arrangements also need to be considered; it was suggested that co-production approaches and distribution of funding should be within the assessment criteria. It was noted that specific requirements for a distributed funding model could enable and incentivise more equitable partnerships. The ESRC policy on project co-leads from business, third sector or government departments should be highlighted to attendees to encourage and incentivise equitable partnerships built into the Centre. It was noted the potential inclusion of 'flex-funds' may also add value to the What Works Centre.

It was suggested that the UK Adaptation Inventory, developed by the Tyndall Centre and the MACC Hub, should be engaged with, aligning with earlier comments on the need to build on existing data. Regarding wider engagement, although climate commissions and some regional partnerships have now been dissolved, it was noted they may still be worth considering.

Finally, contributors stated that the Centre should have continuity from existing investments, as well as be challenged to deliver a meaningful legacy that will exist after the initial funding period.