

Universities
Policy
Engagement
Network



Place and Policy: Building Back Better and the Role of Universities

An Eastern Arc response to UPEN's call for evidence

Eastern Arc is the regional research consortium that comprises the universities of East Anglia (UEA), Essex and Kent. It is a collective voice for the universities, but also an advocate for the region, addressing its needs and championing its opportunities, from the recognised challenges of social and economic deprivation in our coastal communities, to the opportunities we have as hubs for transport and trade, renewable energy and the creative economy.

Our universities are firmly rooted in our communities. We recognise the disproportionate impact we have on our surrounding area compared to larger, metropolitan universities, and acknowledge and build on this through our strategies, alliances and networks at both consortium and institutional level.

1. How does 'place' affect academic policy engagement for our work?

'Place' is central to all of our work, and this is made clear in the strategic frameworks that inform and guide us.

At consortium level we are defined by our region. As we make clear in [the background to our collaboration](#), all of our members 'are on the North Sea rim, a region rooted in the land but shaped by travel, trade and migration.' As such, involvement, integration and relevance to our region and the wider beneficiaries of our work are embedded in our [Strategy 2020-25](#).

As part of this, we are engaged with the national conversation around 'place' and 'levelling up', producing [position papers](#), responding to calls for evidence, and ensuring that our academic expertise is brought to bear in this area. It is essential that the needs of our communities are recognised; there is a real danger that our region is overlooked in the continuing work to identify national need; this point is made in our [position paper on the place agenda](#).



At institutional level 'place' is integrated into each university's strategy or plan.

- The University of Kent [defines itself](#) as a 'dual-intensity university grounded in place,' serving its communities by 'contributing actively and substantially to their health, wellbeing, prosperity and success.' Its [Strategy 2025](#) makes clear that it will work in partnership with organisations in Kent and Medway to support activity which brings resources into the region, enables economic growth and contributes to long term sustainability and quality of life in Kent, as well as working with disadvantaged groups across the region in order to promote access to the university.
- UEA and Essex are both members of the Civic Universities Network. This commitment to and engagement with place is embedded in the [UEA Plan 2016-20](#) (to be 'a leader in regional economic and cultural development'). The University is currently reimagining its strategy in time for its 60th anniversary in 2023, and is working with local stakeholders to understand and define its role within and for the benefit of the community.
- For Essex, its place-based civic mission is clear in its [2025 Vision](#), which states that it will use its research to 'tackle with rigour the questions that matter for people and communities and putting ideas into action to improve people's lives.' Its Strategy 2019-25 goes further, making a commitment to
 - connect researchers with communities to realise the benefits of a world-class university for the region through sustainable partnerships;
 - engage with the local communities in which the University and its campuses are located, to increase its opportunities to have impact in the world.

The University is also an Essex ['Anchor Organisation'](#) and has made six Anchor Pledges whose delivery will further support the University's partnership with, and impact within, our local and regional community.

2. What relationship do we have with local, regional and other sub-national stakeholders and other actors?

To realise the place-based focus of our strategies, it has been essential that we establish, develop, and nurture strong relationships with individuals and organisations within our region who work within and on behalf of their communities. These include county and borough councils, local enterprise partnerships (LEPs), businesses, charities and individuals.

These relationships take many forms, from acting as board members, to being advisers, research providers, and funders. It is important to note, too, that this relationship works in both directions (CEOs and others sit on the councils of each university, for instance), and is integrated into the work and structures of the organisations involved. The following are examples of how we engage with a wide range of local and regional stakeholders, but provide only a small indication of our involvement.



Local councils

We work on many different levels with our local councils. For example, Essex has worked with Essex County Council to establish a [Chief Scientific Adviser](#). His role is to apply the University's internationally-recognised expertise in big data and advanced analytics to inform and support Essex County Council decisions and policy development.

In Norwich, UEA is working closely with Norwich City Council on the Norwich Good Economy Commission, more detail of which is in Section 3. Together, and with other stakeholders, they have pinpointed key issues that pressurise the performance of the local economy, developing proposals to explore and address these issues, and delivering meaningful projects that have impact.

The University of Kent has been working closely with Medway Council on issues of regeneration, including developing a University Enterprise Zone around its Medway campus, and being part of the recent successful bid with Medway Council for [£14.5m levelling up funding](#) for Chatham dockyard and city.

Local enterprise

All three universities work closely with their Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs), [NALEP](#) and [SELEP](#). Members of universities are on a range of the boards and panels of both LEPs, helping to develop and drive policy agendas within the region.

In addition, they work closely with their local chambers of commerce and with individual businesses, as directors, board members or advisers. Eastern Arc has also provided funding to and worked closely with local businesses for knowledge exchange activity through the Research England-backed ['Enabling Innovation: Research to Application' programme](#).

Our work - and in particular our data analysis - helps to inform and drive policy locally and nationally. Examples of this, such as the Smart Data Analytics for Business and Local Government, are given in Section 3.

Local NHS Trusts

Through our research and education we have strong links with local NHS trusts. This includes a role in coordinating and facilitating their work (for example, through the [UEA Health and Social Care Partners](#)), as well as increasing capacity (such as through the new [Kent and Medway Medical School](#)).

Local charities

As with commercial organisations, many of our members are board members or directors of local charities. However, our work also helps to inform and drive policy. The [Institute for Volunteering Research](#), for instance, is based at UEA and provides analysis and advice to regional and national charities on developing and supporting



their volunteer base. One of its recent projects, funded by the ESRC, brought together researchers across EARC to look at volunteering during the pandemic. A discussion about this is available on our podcasts page, [here](#).

3. Examples and case studies of how we support engagement of academic expertise with relevant policy development around ‘place’ and ‘levelling-up.’

There are a huge number of case studies across our region. What follows is a small sample of these.

- [The Essex Centre for Data Analysis](#). This centre is a partnership venture between Essex County Council, Essex Police and The University of Essex. It aims to support the Essex public sector in making evidence-led decisions, intervene early, and prevent some of the biggest challenges facing people and places in the county. ECDA has been transformational in supporting communities to recover from COVID-19 and building a data culture with citizens and colleagues throughout the county.
- [Creative Estuary](#). Creative Estuary is a consortium of public sector and cultural organisations, working together to support the Thames Estuary Production Corridor. The universities of Kent and Essex are working with SELEP, Kent and Essex County Councils and 11 local authority areas, as well as Opportunity South Essex, South East Creative Economy Network (SECEN), and cultural organisations Metal, and Cement Fields.
- [Food Innovation Cluster](#). The Norwich Research Park (NRP), including UEA, has gained Department for International Trade (DIT) designation as a ‘high performance opportunity’ (HPO). This identifies Norfolk and Suffolk as a global centre of excellence for plant science focusing on nutritious food. The plan, driven by New Anglia LEP, is intended to attract investment, but also to act as an advocate for the world-leading plant science in the region.
- [Norwich Institute for Healthy Ageing](#). NIHA is a collaboration between UEA, Norwich City Council, UEA Health & Social Care Partners (HSCP), Norfolk County Council, NNUH, John Innes Centre, Quadram Institute of Bioscience and the Earlham Institute, and provides research and policy recommendations around behaviour change to promote human flourishing and health and reduces the risk of premature disease by up to 70%.
- [Centre for Public and Policy engagement \(CPPE\)](#). The CPPE was established to ensure research at the University of Essex improves people’s lives by acting as a hub, bringing together diverse public and policy engagement activities across the university to raise our local, regional, national and global reputation for using research for societal benefit.
- [Smart Data Analytics for Business and Local Government](#). Led by the University of Essex and involving the University of Kent, this project sought to help harness the power of ‘big data’ – routinely collected data from private or public sector interactions – by linking together previously disaggregated data

into comprehensive data sets. These could then be used by local governments and small to medium-sized business enterprises to understand how they can make best use of limited resources to deliver services to residents in health and social care, education, crime reduction, housing and transport.

- **[Norwich Good Economy Commission](#)**. In collaboration with Norwich City Council, the University of East Anglia and other organisations, the NGEC carries out research to identify key issues and works collaboratively to explore how we can improve people's lives. Issues the NGEC has tackled include digital inclusion, social enterprise, and skills training, and it has produced reports and outputs including research on zero hours contracts, an economic strategy, and an event exploring how to 'build back better' after the pandemic.
- **Bids by [Medway](#) and [Great Yarmouth & East Suffolk](#) to be UK City of Culture 2025**. Both Kent and UEA worked closely with local councils and other agencies on bids that formed part of a process of regeneration and place-making. Although neither bid was in the final shortlist, the process of working with regional policymakers, creative industries, and community organisations was important in developing identity, purpose and belief in areas of significant deprivation.
- **[The Catalyst Project](#)**, established in 2015, the project works to improve local community services for the vulnerable in Essex and Suffolk. Led by the University of Essex, in partnership with Essex and Suffolk County Councils, the project has used the University's academic expertise in policy evaluation and social data analytics to evaluate the council-led programmes to help improve outcomes and allocate resources more efficiently, and to apply the University's expertise in data analytics and visualisation to help Councils to understand their populations better.
- **[Growing Kent and Medway](#)**. Growing Kent & Medway is a collaborative project that aims to support practical and policy development in making the region a centre in climate-smart technology in food production, processing, packaging and supply chains. The University of Kent, one of its academic partners, is developing a Mentoring Hub that will provide local enterprises with specialist advice from business and management experts on how to improve their marketing and promotion.
- **[Development of a Kent and Medway Employment Plan](#)**. The University of Kent is part of the K&M Employment Taskforce, which is led by the County Council and involves a wide range of stakeholders. Recognizing the dramatic effect of Covid on sectors such as retail and hospitality in particular – and with the employment market likely to be challenging for some time – the Task Force is backing a range of measures introduced by Government to open up new job opportunities and to support jobseekers.

- [Supporting the development of a sustainable energy network.](#) UEA worked to develop a network of partners, including Cefas, ORE Catapult and EEEGR, to build on East Anglia's leadership in renewable energy, environmental sustainability and diversity and to explore new opportunities for improving the health of the Southern North Sea (SNS).

*Phil Ward, Director of Eastern Arc
(on behalf of and with the collaboration of the Eastern Arc universities)*

26/11/2021