
Geography
for all our
futures

Our geographical futures

The Geographical Association supports teachers to improve the quality of their geography lessons – so that more young people can enjoy the benefits of studying geography. We work with over 20,000 primary and secondary teachers every year, championing their good practice.

We are a voice for geography, advocating for the power of the subject in education and to society.

A geographically literate society is needed to help address a warming climate, protect the 10,000 schools facing flood risk[1], decide where to build 1.5 million new homes, tackle inequality in the UK and abroad, live sustainably, promote biodiversity and help safeguard our place in an uncertain world.

[1] DfE (2023) Sustainability and climate change: a strategy for the education and children's services systems

Geography shapes who we are, how we view the world and how we live within it. It enhances everyone's learning, livelihoods and lives.

Geography helps us all better understand the world's complexity by revealing its people, places and environments – how they were, how they are, and how they are changing.

Geographical understanding is needed to respond positively to the key challenges that face us.

The Geographical Association, teachers, the wider geographical community, policy makers, partners and supporters can help to build a geographically literate society. This work starts in the classroom.

In *Geography for all our futures* I outline some of the key opportunities and challenges that will shape the Geographical Association's discussions as we develop our 2025–2030 strategy.

I am inviting you, as geographers from all backgrounds and perspectives, to share your views and contribute to the next phase of the Geographical Association's journey.

I look forward to hearing from you.
Thank you,

Steve Brace, Chief Executive, Geographical Association

Revealing the world

In the Early Years and Foundation Stage pupils encounter geographical perspectives through fostering their understanding of our '*culturally, socially and ecologically diverse world'.*[2]

From ages five to fourteen geography is a statutory National Curriculum subject in England. Its aim is to '*inspire a curiosity and fascination about the world and its people that will remain with pupils for the rest of their lives'*.[3]

At GCSE geography is a popular subject with almost 300,000 GCSE candidates[4]. GCSE entries have grown by 66% since 2010. A level has 35,000 annual entries, and 6500 students go on to study geography at university each year.

[2] EYFS statutory framework for group and school-based providers
[3] Geography programmes of study: key stages 1 and 2
[4] Joint Council for Qualifications

Geography achieves good gender parity and the subject's growth at GCSE has come largely from previously under-represented young people; those from Black, Asian and other UK minority ethnicities, from disadvantaged backgrounds and/or studying in non-selective maintained schools[5]. However, the subject's growing diversity at GCSE has not been sufficiently carried through to A level or beyond. At university geography is one of the least diverse subjects[6].

Although geography graduates are more likely to secure above-average graduate employment and salaries, the subject is not seen by all young people as a means to support their aspirations for further study and careers.

In 2023 Ofsted reported significant improvements in the teaching of geography in primary and secondary schools. Geography lessons have become more ambitious and now bring sharper focus to the distinctive nature of this subject. Ofsted also identified the need for improvements in the teaching of mapping and fieldwork skills and the use of geographic information systems (GIS).

However, teachers' abilities to achieve these needed improvements are restricted by weaknesses in their professional knowledge[7] and low levels of subject-specific continuous professional development (CPD). In addition, there is a shortfall in recruiting subject-specialist geography teachers. In 2023 recruitment of trainee geography teachers reached only 56% of the required target[8].

Our subject needs more trained geography teachers, more subject-specific CPD for primary and secondary schools, and stronger advocacy for how geography can support young people's aspirations.

'Teachers received very little subject-specific CPD, with the greatest need for CPD on fieldwork, using GIS and teaching procedural knowledge.'[9]

[5] Royal Geographical Society (2022) Geography of Geography
[6] Academy of Social Sciences (2024) Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) in the social sciences
[7] Ofsted (2023) Getting our bearings: geography subject report
[8] Schools Week: DfE slashes secondary teacher recruitment targets
[9] Ofsted (2023) Getting our bearings: geography subject report

Fieldwork for all

Fieldwork helps young people explore interdependencies between people and the environment through real-world contexts.

However, fieldwork is in decline. Ofsted has found it 'under developed' in almost all inspected schools[10]. In 2023 Teacher Tapp identified that 40% of surveyed secondary geography teachers were offering less fieldwork than before Covid[11]. This reduction is hitting disadvantaged pupils the hardest[12].

Prohibitive costs, time pressure, unsupportive leadership teams and teachers' lack of confidence and competence in providing fieldwork are all cited as reasons for fieldwork's decline. A national plan is needed to ensure all primary and secondary pupils can experience regular and high-quality fieldwork.

In 2024 thousands of primary and secondary geography pupils joined in with the GA's National Festival of Fieldwork. Their fieldwork took place in many different settings from coasts to highstreets, rivers to local neighbourhoods.

Fieldwork is also vital for our future. It is through fieldwork that young people can develop a hands-on awareness of nature and our impact on it, and start to develop the green skills that they will need for the careers of the future[13].

Fieldwork has a positive influence on young people's environmental views as, *'time spent in nature can have lasting impact on children's attitudes to the environment'*[14]

[10] Ofsted (2023) Getting our bearings: geography subject report
[11] TES (2023) How to save geography fieldwork in schools
[12] Sutton Trust (2023) School Funding and Pupil Premium
[13] Natural History Museum (2022) Rapid evidence review: National Education Nature Park and Climate Leaders Award
[14] Harris, F. (2021) Developing a relationship with nature and place

Mapping our future

The Ordnance Survey (OS) holds geospatial data on 500 million unique features that make up Great Britain and it makes 20,000 daily changes to its digital map of our nation[15]. The use of geospatial data is vital to the UK's economy, environment and society and will provide up to £11 billion benefit annually to the UK[16].

From the Early Years onwards, geography pupils create and analyse maps, and use globes, atlases, digital maps and geospatial data. The OS and Esri UK have ensured that thousands of primary and secondary schools have access to high-quality digital mapping. Esri UK's geospatial technology is enabling schools to map the biodiversity in their school grounds, as part of the National Education Nature Park.

Despite this, young people are not developing the geospatial skills they need. Ofsted has identified the need to improve the teaching of mapping skills in primary schools and how GIS is 'rarely taught' in KS3 geography. This is of wider concern as the Geospatial Commission has identified how, *'the UK cannot realise the value from geospatial without a skilled workforce. The pipeline of geospatial skills depends on schools, further education and continuing professional development'.*[17] Without a national strategy that develops geospatial skills from the classroom to the workplace, the UK potential to realise the benefits of geospatial will be held back.

Geospatial's value

- The Geospatial Commission's map of underground pipes and cables will, by reducing cable strikes and damage to pipes, deliver £490 million of economic value[18]
- OS data fulfilled 250 million address requests that were needed to deliver home tests during the Covid pandemic
- Esri's technology is deployed in more than 35,000 organisations worldwide.

[15] OS: Capturing the changing face of Great Britain
[16] Government launch call for evidence to be geospatial world leader
[17] UK Geospatial Strategy 2023
[18] National Underground Asset Register (NUAR)
Photo © Denise Freeman

Geography and green skills

Achieving clean power, protecting our lives and livelihoods from environmental risks, deciding where to build new homes and achieving net zero will require green skills to become embedded in every sector of the economy. However, the CBI has identified a lack of awareness of the green economy. It argues that a 'huge task' is needed to educate the public about the opportunities of net zero and without this people will be less likely to consider green careers[19].

Geography has a vital role to play in supporting the next generations' awareness of environmental issues and the development of their green skills. This role has strong public support. In June 2024 YouGov found that '*70% of all UK adults agree that young people need to study geography to prepare them with the skills and knowledge needed to work in "green jobs"'.*[20]

Geography can, however, better align the benefits of its specialist knowledge and the green skills it provides with the widest range of careers. Currently, there are no explicit references to green skills either in the geography curriculum or the examination specifications. Our subject needs to be at the heart of a national strategy to support young people's green skills.

[19] Skills and training for the green economy
[20] YouGov Omnibus Survey June 2024

This will mean advocating for geography's role in preparation for a range of careers, for example green finance, insurance, planning and environmental management. GCSE geography needs to be positioned as a precursor to relevant T levels and apprenticeships as well as A levels. Geospatial data needs to be highlighted as the geographical catalyst for driving economic growth, protecting the environment and helping underpin our transition to net zero.

Young people – our 'next generation geographers' – deserve to hear these messages regularly in the classroom and beyond.

The net zero economy is already four times bigger than the UK's manufacturing sector[21].

The Government aims to make London the world's Green Finance capital[22].

[21] United Kingdom Low Carbon Environmental Goods and Services
[22] Labour Manifesto 2024
Photo © Boy Anthony/Shutterstock.com

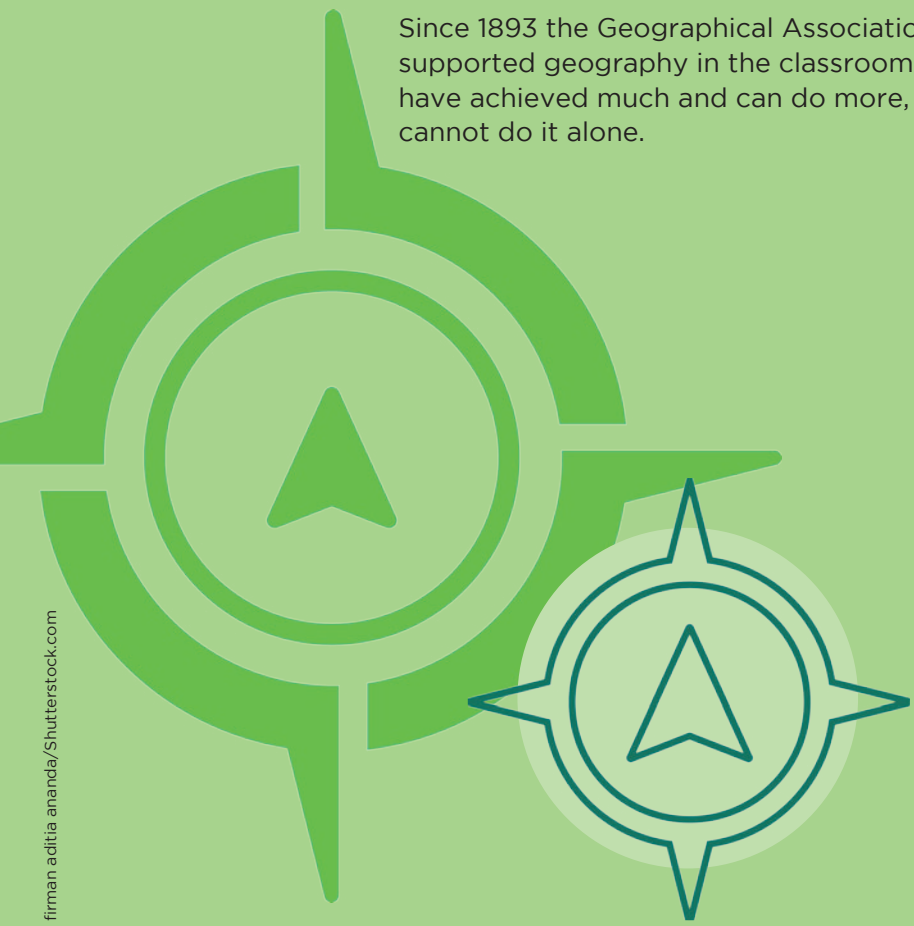
What does this mean for the Geographical Association?

The challenge of building a geographically literate society is substantial.

In order for geography to thrive in schools it needs to be seen as a subject that supports all young people's future aspirations and have enough well-trained and supported teachers to achieve this.

We also need to do more to sustain and share the enthusiasm, aspirations and interests of the next generation of geographers as they progress through their studies.

Since 1893 the Geographical Association has supported geography in the classroom. We have achieved much and can do more, but we cannot do it alone.



The scale of the challenge will require partnerships with:

- Teachers – the bedrock of the subject community – their schools and trusts
- Government, its agencies Ofsted, Ofqual and the Geospatial Commission, 'geographer' parliamentarians and the Geographers in Government profession
- The Geographical Association's Strategic Partners: Discover the World Education, Environment Agency, Field Studies Council and Ordnance Survey
- Key partners including the Awarding Organisations, Esri UK, Geological Society, Oak National Academy, Royal Geographical Society, Royal Meteorological Society, university geography departments and other subject organisations
- Alumni geographers and like-minded partners from the business, charity and third sectors
- The next generation of geographers themselves.

The following principles will underpin the development of our 2025-2030 strategic plan:

- Championing geography for everyone
- Strengthening the subject and the subject community
- Developing the next generation of geographers
- Ensuring the Association's future financial and environmental sustainability.

What can you do?

Together we can achieve more for geography.

Please contribute your advice, views and support so that geography can become part of everyone's future.

You can join the GA or get in touch:

www.geography.org.uk
chiefexec@geography.org.uk
0114 296 0088

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