

Written evidence from the South East Climate Alliance

Written evidence on the NAO report: “Local Government and Net Zero”

Submitted by Sally Barnard on behalf of the South East Climate Alliance

Introduction:

1. **The South East Climate Alliance** (SECA) is a coalition of more than 100 environmental, community and faith groups across the South East of England uniting for urgent action on the climate emergency. See this list of member groups <https://seclimatealliance.uk/about/>
2. SECA was set up in 2019 with the initial goal of getting every council in the South East to declare a climate emergency. When that goal was largely achieved, it shifted focus to engaging with local councils over their climate action plans, sharing good practice, and monitoring progress.
3. There are 56 local authorities in the SECA area (East and West Sussex, Surrey, Kent, Hampshire and the Isle of Wight). SECA has been tracking progress across all of these via the [SECA Survey of council climate action](#). This is a regularly updated database and provides the most detailed snapshot of council climate action in our area currently available .
4. The SECA Survey demonstrates that there is great variability in local authority responses across the region, with some councils way ahead of others in taking effective action.
5. Many of our member groups have been trying to engage with their local councils to encourage them to speed up and scale up their climate action plans. So we are witness to the huge challenges councils face and the many barriers to action.
6. We are responding to this call for evidence because it is clear to us all in SECA that, without a national framework, supportive national policies and significant extra resources, local authorities have little chance of driving the level of change needed to meet this global emergency.
7. There is a lot that local community groups can do to support and work alongside local authorities in driving this agenda. But without joined-up action between different levels of government, we feel that all our efforts are being blunted. At present many of our members feel frustrated and demoralised because central and local government responses to the climate emergency seem so out of kilter with the scale of action needed.
8. This submission combines inputs from multiple SECA members across the South East, some of whom will also be responding in their individual capacity.

Executive summary:

Our key points are as follows:

9. **Variability of response:** Our SECA survey shows some good examples of proactive councils but in general shows a variable and piecemeal response across the councils in our area. Of our 56 councils, 41 have declared a climate emergency and the other 15 have formally recognised the climate emergency since 2019. This appears encouraging, but despite this the pace of change is slow and significant examples of carbon reduction activity are slow to appear.
10. **Communications:** there has been progress on coverage of climate issues on council websites but, with notable exceptions, it tends to lack depth and quality. Also councils are often having to reinvent the wheel with climate action due to lack of central communication, coordination and knowledge sharing.
11. **Feedback and monitoring:** There is little evidence from council websites of reporting back to residents on progress with action plans. There is no national framework to report against and compare. Lack of information leaves those residents who are awake to the crisis feeling anxious and mistrustful .
12. **Community engagement:** there is evidence that this is improving but it remains patchy and poorly resourced.
13. **Policy Framework:** The lack of a coherent and joined-up national climate action policy framework covering issues such as green building standards, road building, oil and gas exploration, and airport expansion, is having a detrimental effect on local decision making, and holding councils back.
14. **Resources:** Resources and skills available for local authority climate work are not proportional to the scale of the challenge
15. Further details on each of these points, with evidence, good practice examples, and recommendations, are provided below.

VARIABILITY DUE TO THE LACK OF A NATIONAL FRAMEWORK AND TIMESCALES:

16. Councils have widely varying action plans and targets (*data from the latest SECA Survey at the end of June 2021*):
 - The majority (82%) of councils in the SECA area have produced an action plan for their own council estate and operations. Most (66%) are aiming for net zero by 2030 or earlier. However, as council emissions typically only account for a few per cent of total area emissions, this is a drop in the ocean.
 - Approx. 60% of councils have an action plan and targets relating to area wide emissions for their whole council area; 20% 'seek to influence' their whole

area but have no action plan or target and the other 20% do not appear to accept any responsibility for whole area emissions

- Action plans are very variable in quality, content and ambition. Targets vary from net zero by 2030 for the whole area to no target at all and no action plan for the wider area (*see 'analysis' tab on SECA survey*)
17. The pace of change is slow: In many cases it has taken 12-18 months for councils to produce action plans following their recognition of the climate emergency. For 4 councils no reference at all can be found to a climate action plan.
 18. Councils have competing statutory responsibilities which skew their attention from the climate crisis.
 19. Some quotes from SECA member groups:

"Why is there no road map, timescales, action plan from the Government ? "

"No local village, town, district or county council in our area has a costed plan which forms part of any nationally coordinated plan"

"We have discovered worrying signs of inability to act satisfactorily on the climate emergency"

"Council climate action strategies highlight the councils limitations due to needs from central government, in effect producing a feedback loop of inaction"

"Some councils are only just starting to recognise their responsibilities"

"Local authorities should be acting in line with central governments plans on a local level"

"Central government needs to exert more authority to make local authorities act...but also more advice "

"The leader of our council is an active climate denier who doesn't even think they need to take action"

20. Recommendations for action on variability:

- A **flexible national framework** with priorities, targets and timescales. This should not be so prescriptive as to deflect proactive councils from their progress.
- A **coordinated national approach** with clear lines of responsibility and expectations.
- A **clear central lead** for net zero.
- New **statutory responsibilities** for local authorities to lead, set out plans and monitor and report on area wide emissions. A clear expectation that local government has a key leadership role to play, and responsibility for, the emissions of their whole local area.
- That councils be given a **statutory duty to tackle the climate and ecological emergencies**.

- **Central advice with priority setting** – councils may need help to identify priorities for action and work quickly toward the biggest gains.

COMMUNICATIONS

21. Only 39% of councils in the SECA area have a mention of climate change on their home page. This has improved from 23% in November 2020
22. 89% of councils have a dedicated climate page . This has improved from 70% in Nov 2020. However the information is often scanty and uninspiring
23. Councils do not appear to receive good quality information, help and knowledge sharing from central sources.
24. Quote from a SECA member:
“There is insufficient information from local councils aimed at residents, businesses and community groups on how each stakeholder can achieve net zero”
25. Examples of good communication practice:
 - **Sustainable Adur and Worthing magazine**: beautifully edited, inspiring, great graphics and real climate action <https://www.adur-worthing.gov.uk/sustainable-aw-magazine/>
 - **‘Planet Woking’** initiative set up by Woking Borough Council <https://planetwoking.co.uk/>
 - **Eastleigh Borough Council** has more in depth advice than most on its climate page <https://www.eastleigh.gov.uk/environment/climate-change-and-environment/what-you-can-do>
26. **Recommendations for action on communications:**
 - A **national climate communications strategy** consistent from top to bottom.
 - **Communications resources** for councils to use (similar to Covid where we have posters in our streets, social media campaigns, graphs/interactive maps showing progress etc)
 - A **national knowledge sharing framework**, sharing resources and good practice.

LACK OF FEEDBACK /MONITORING

27. We have found very few examples of councils feeding back progress on emissions. It is hard to find information on how councils are progressing with their action plans. This leaves residents anxious and distrustful that ‘nothing is happening’ in their area.
28. There is no national framework to report against and compare.

29. Quotes from SECA members:

“There is no meaningful common baseline for all LAs and Government Departments and networks to follow”

“Our district council is not being transparent with action they are taking”

30. Example of good practice:

- **Gravesham Borough Council produced a Climate Change Annual Report in Dec 2020**

https://www.gravesham.gov.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0008/1103993/Climate-Change-Annual-Report-2020-Inaccessible.pdf

31. **Recommendations for action on feedback and monitoring:**

- That there is a **statutory requirement to feed back progress** on emissions reduction for the council itself and for the whole council area in a form that is readily understood by residents .

LACK OF ENGAGEMENT WITH COMMUNITIES

32. There is a rich tapestry of climate focussed community action going on out here in our local communities (SECA has at least 110 active community groups in our alliance).

33. We have a lot to offer to support our local authorities once we develop mutual trust. We also have a key role in holding our local authorities to account.

34. However our SECA survey shows that council engagement with communities has generally been slow and again very variable.

35. Some ways in which we can help:

- We can help disseminate information on Government/local authority initiatives to our communities in user friendly ways.
- We can work with councils on pilot schemes/demonstration projects/community events.
- We can help to share knowledge and good practice with councils through our many alliances.
- We have many local experts on carbon reduction who could be engaged in council strategies (for example Hampshire Climate Action Expert Group).
- We can help to collect information and promote consultations eg biodiversity surveys, best routes for cycle and footpaths.
- We can promote public engagement eg through Repair Cafes, recycling schemes, etc.

36. Some quotes from SECA members:

“Some of our councils have no plans to engage with the wider community”

“Our district council is not accepting the offer of help from community groups.”

“Local community and special interest groups from a cross section of society should be advising and being consulted as they have a wealth of knowledge, skills and experience to share”

37. Examples of good practice:

- Adur and Worthing councils have developed an excellent shared climate and nature plan between the councils and the wider community “Sustainable Adur and Worthing’ <https://www.adur-worthing.gov.uk/sustainable-aw/>
- Eastbourne Borough Council is collaborating via Eastbourne Ecoaction Network, a CIC, on engaging citizens to make Eastbourne carbon neutral by 2030 <https://ecoactioneb.co.uk/>
- Central Sussex Climate Network has held events to inform councillors and officers of the climate implications of their policies and supported climate officers to engage their councils and members on climate issues.

38. **Recommendations for action on community engagement:**

- **Good practice should be disseminated** and local authorities should be encouraged to set up climate assemblies, climate forums, partnerships etc
- Community groups need **attractive, simple Government schemes** to promote in their communities (some like the Renewable Heat Incentive have been too complex to get good take up).

CENTRAL PLANNING AND POLICIES CAN BE AT ODDS WITH ACHIEVING NET ZERO

39. Despite strong headline targets, national government policy is incoherent and inconsistent, and fails to address the urgency of reaching net zero. This can mean councils have to ‘swim upstream’ in creating their own policy responses.

40. Some examples of this are:

The requirement for new homes to be zero carbon by 2016 was dropped, despite widespread industry buy in. Councils are still waiting for clear guidance on future building standards, with Local Plans and Neighbourhood Plans hamstrung by the lack of clarity and clear leadership from above.

- The failure of the Green Homes Grant scheme.
- Inconsistent messaging around oil and gas exploration, which allow continued drilling in the South East despite widespread local opposition.
- Mixed messages on building new roads and expanding airports, based on out-dated modelling and purely economic considerations that fail to account for the climate emergency.

41. Quotes from SECA members:

“There is a reluctance to have strong local planning permissions, councils are waiting for central government to update building regulations”

“They are unable to demand higher building standards, even if they want to, due to developers appealing and cost going against councils”

42. Recommendations for action in planning and policy:

- Contradictions in central planning policy need to be sought out and corrected urgently, so that all national policies are aligned with and prioritise net zero.

FUNDING, RESOURCES AND SKILLS

43. Through our engagement with local authorities it is clear that their finances are under extreme pressure. Budgets have to be focussed on their statutory duties.

44. Some councils have been successful in bidding for funds, but this is a fragmented approach, and works only for some innovative councils. It does not help long term planning.

45. Most of the central funding that has been made available has involved bidding for funds on extremely tight timeframes, and for very narrowly constrained projects. This has often precluded effective planning and consultation, and ended up with projects which are unsustainable.

46. Many councils had previously built up a skill base in climate expertise, but this has been eroded in the last decade as funds have been cut.

47. Quotes from SECA members:

“There is generally a lack of broad funding support for ambitious climate goals at local level”

“The number of officers engaged on climate issues is very limited in our area and they are not always given the right level of resources and support”

“There is a general recognition that targets are needed, but a lack of capability/knowledge of ‘how’”

48. Examples of good practice:

- Some councils have set aside funds to support local climate actions : eg Horsham District Council’s “Wilder Horsham” Project and Community Climate Fund

49. Recommendations for action:

- That the funding, resources and skills available for local authority climate work are upgraded urgently to reflect the scale of the challenge

CONCLUSION:

50. There are three recent reports that make these issues and solutions clear “Local Authorities and the 6th Carbon Budget” (Climate Change Commission), “Power Shift” (UK 100) and “Local Government and Net Zero in England” from the NAO.
51. SECA calls for the Government to follow the recommendations of these reports urgently and join up central and local government in a national framework of climate action. It is alarming that this is not already in place.

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