

Written evidence from MySociety

About mySociety

mySociety is a not-for-profit social enterprise based in the UK and working internationally. We provide technology, research and data that give people the power to get things changed and help them to be active citizens. We work globally to support partners working on themes such as democracy, transparency, the climate crisis and community building in over 40 countries around the world. As one of the first civic technology organisations in the world, we are committed to undertaking rigorous research that tests our actions, assumptions and impacts, and working to make meaningful real-world change.

Our climate programme is focused on deploying data and digital services to support a faster, more informed and collaborative response to the climate crisis, enabled by local democratic institutions and processes – because climate change is a democratic as well as a technical problem. It is important not just for immediate action but for the long-term health of democratic institutions that they act effectively, fairly and transparently on climate and that they work with other institutions and citizens to do so.

The high-level outcomes the programme seeks to achieve are that:

- Citizens and civil society have improved local climate and civic knowledge, enabling them to engage more effectively in democratic processes and create political space for climate action.
- Local Government bodies are able to draw upon better information, learn from and engage with each other, and fully involve their constituents in order to develop and implement more ambitious and effective climate policies.
- An enhanced information ecosystem on local climate action is supporting enhanced public scrutiny and analysis, and informing the national picture.
- A community of interest around climate action and civic technology is developing and sharing open source approaches that target the local civic and democratic challenges of climate action.

Our [tool](#) for accessing and comparing Climate Action Plans, developed in collaboration with Climate Emergency UK, is promoted by the Local Government Association through their own [Councillors Workbook on the Local Pathway to Net Zero](#). We are currently working with our colleagues at Climate Emergency UK to crowdsource some simple analysis of the dataset of Climate Action Plans to understand key information about these plans, such as the extent of community and anchor institution involvement in their development, the proposed governance framework, skills and training components, and the inclusion of science-backed targets.

Summary

mySociety supports increased statutory efforts to achieve the target of net zero by 2050. In order to achieve this, and in order to monitor progress towards this goal, a clear framework across Local and Combined Authorities' approach and measurement must be a priority. Our work on accessing, comparing and monitoring Local Authority Climate Action Plans demonstrates clearly that there are wide disparities in how authorities are approaching their response to the climate crisis and to reaching net zero. If information/data on net zero efforts is not being collected, or if it is being collected variably across different authorities, if activities and initiatives are coded and evaluated differently,

and if net zero related policy development is not being coordinated, it will prove impossible to measure progress or demonstrate improvement. Where information is collected, but not published, it will hamper collaboration and coordinated efforts to reduce emissions. Equally, such failures in informational management will make it impossible for citizens and stakeholders to effectively hold their councillors to account or to work with local authorities to improve their performance.

Consistency and transparency in planning, data collection, measurement, reporting and publication are key to empowering councils and the wider community to work towards net zero.

If the Committee could take forward only one key action, it would be to work with local authorities to improve, standardise and coordinate Climate Action Plans.

Responses

1. What should local authorities' roles and responsibilities in reaching net zero by 2050 be? How clear are the expectations about the role of local authorities?

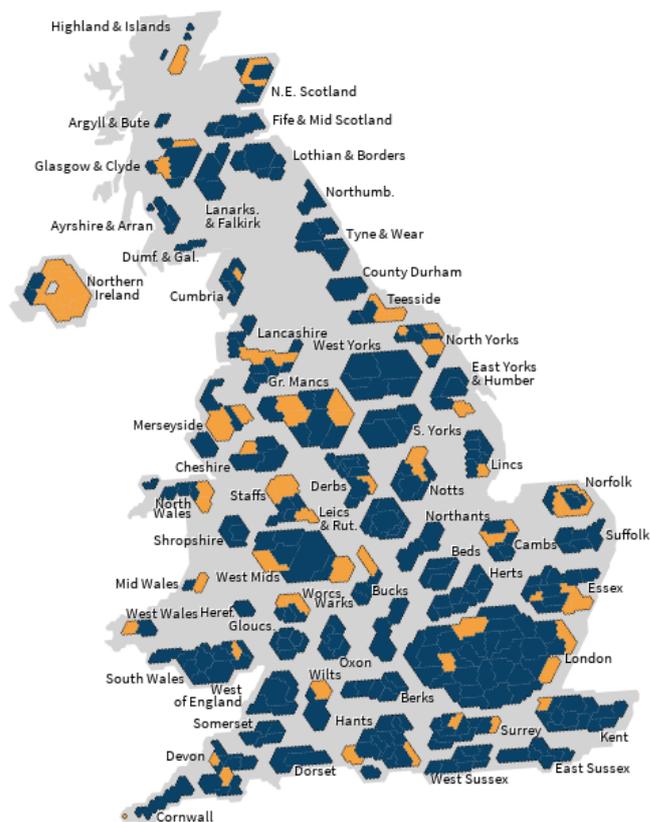
According to the Climate Change Committee Publication 'Local Authorities and the Sixth Carbon Budget', local authorities are directly responsible for approximately 2-5% of local emissions; however, through their policies and partnerships they have strong influence over more than a third of emissions in their area. This places local authorities in a prime, and crucial, position regarding the UK's transition to net zero.

A key tool to provide strategic governance of the move to net zero within local authorities is the Climate Action Plan. The majority of authorities (around 79%) have developed at least one draft of some kind of Climate Action Plan (CAP); however there are still a number of authorities that have not. These documents are drivers for change within authorities, and in service to achieving net zero mySociety recommends that every local authority should be responsible for developing, implementing and monitoring their own CAP.

UK lower tier authorities

Who has a climate plan? (as of 17 August 2021)

■ Yes ■ No



mysociety

Source: data.climateemergency.uk; House of Commons LA cartogram (Open Parliament Licence)

When we undertook a small discovery process around Climate Action Plans, the lack of resources for local authorities to work effectively on ambitious plans to reduce emissions was reflected across the literature and in our interviews. A background of funding cuts to local authorities since the financial crisis of 2008 has resulted in a long term retrenchment to statutory responsibilities. This has in turn been exacerbated by the Covid crisis. Programme and project management, business case development, emissions measurement and cost itemisation, specialist expertise and decision making capacity were some of the areas noted by government and civil society stakeholders as lacking due to funding gaps. A significant amount of the existing capacity at local authorities, and in the civil society groups supporting them, is being spent on looking for and applying for funding. The responsibility for making a Climate Action Plan needs to be accompanied by better funding for local authority climate response.

We found that the expectations about the roles of local authorities were not clear. The diversity of the scope and ambition of the plans developed reflects the absence of a clear policy framework, with different environmental agendas and varying levels of resource, commitment, capability and understanding having a greater effect on the quality and nature of plans.

Local authorities should also assume responsibility for being as transparent as possible about their work on reaching net zero. A lack of information is a key structural barrier to engagement with local authorities, and one that should be relatively easy to address. Councils are of course subject to the

Freedom of Information Act 2000 which can be used to access documentation, and this legislation has been extensively used by interest groups to secure information concerning local authority approaches to the climate crisis. However, it is a poor use of time and resources to require individuals or stakeholders to follow the FOI regime to access information on council net zero work that should reasonably sit within the public domain. mySociety recommends that local authorities should be responsible for the proactive publication of their linked work on the climate crisis in a clear and accessible form with clear layout and language.

Recommendation: Every principal or combined authority should have a funded responsibility for developing, implementing and monitoring a CAP

Recommendation: Every local or combined authority should be responsible for the proactive publication of their linked work on the climate crisis

2. What role can local community groups play in helping local authorities achieve their net zero ambitions?

One of the main recommendations of the Committee on Climate Change's report on UK local authorities and the sixth carbon budget is that the government should deliver a national climate communications and public engagement programme that can be tailored at a local level. Meaningful citizen engagement with the process of creating and acting on climate policy is potentially very powerful but challenging to maintain - both for the citizens, and for local government.

Local authorities vary in their experience and capabilities around citizen engagement. Some councils have convened citizens' assemblies or juries to help determine their paths to net zero. Others have initiated 'climate conversations', or more traditional consultation exercises, or are using their own networks of community groups as sounding boards.

Local community groups are key stakeholders in working towards net zero. Councils will find it easier to implement changes that work towards net zero if they have the consent and enthusiasm of residents. This consent is likely to be much easier to secure through collaboration with local community groups. Collaboration and coordination with external groups can amplify the work of local authorities in reducing emissions, and such groups are often a valuable resource for expertise and ideas. Working with local groups can encourage residents to understand and take ownership of changing policies, which may reduce the level of objection to change often experienced. Involving local groups in educational and community building activities that contribute to achieving net zero can also bring the community together in working positively for change.

There are challenges associated for both established and grassroots community groups: whilst established groups are potentially richer in resources and time, and perhaps have developed relationships with council stakeholders, it's challenging for them to demonstrate that their perspectives are representative of the broader community. In more grassroots efforts, in addition there is even more pressure on individual time and commitment, and there is a lot of diversity in experience and understanding of local government processes and policy, and in engagement skills.

Meaningful collaboration with local community groups in working towards net zero can only happen if groups are supported with access to information and to the relevant stakeholders within local authorities. mySociety recommends that councils should develop broad strategies to engage with local

community groups to work in concert with their Climate Action Plans, and for community groups to be invited to provide input and insight into future net zero planning.

Breadth of engagement and the representation of all societal stakeholders is key: democratically, in terms of the legitimacy of the plans developed and acted on, politically, to ensure that the high level of public concern is reflected in political action and practically, if the UK is to play its part in mitigating the worst effects of climate change and the unfair outcomes that will result.

Recommendation: Local authorities should be aware of what net zero work, and broader climate activity, is being conducted by local community groups in their area.

Recommendation: Local authorities should, as standard, invite a broad range of local community groups to input into new iterations of the CAP for their area.

Recommendation: Local authorities should, as standard, explore how they could work together with community groups to amplify their impact.

Additional points:

1. The parameters implied by the term ‘net zero’ are too narrow to encompass the broader work required by local authorities to combat the climate crisis. While emissions are a key measure in combating climate change, much valuable work may be marginalised or underutilised if terms such as ‘net zero’ serve to exclude non-emissions related climate crisis activity. Activities that primarily centre around slightly different approaches, such as active travel or the rewilding of spaces for biodiversity, may not be caught in the ‘net zero’ net, even though they may be contributing to that goal. Work in adapting to a changing climate should also be conducted and monitored by councils, and this is work that is not necessarily ‘mitigation’ or in the service of reducing emissions, but is nonetheless important in responding to the climate crisis.
2. While local authorities should be empowered to tackle climate change in the way most appropriate for their area, a level of coordination by central government could support and encourage a better and more consistent data, information and transparency regime.
3. Local authorities are slowly becoming overwhelmed with reports and guidance on moving to net zero. There is a high risk that the multiple central government departments with a net zero remit, plus reports, information and initiatives supported by parliament and non-governmental organisations and public bodies will create a level of white noise that actually reduces the ability of councils to respond coherently to the need to achieve net zero.

August 2021

References

Climate Change Committee Publication ‘Local Authorities and the Sixth Carbon Budget’
<https://www.theccc.org.uk/publication/local-authorities-and-the-sixth-carbon-budget/>