



PLACE-BASED CLIMATE ACTION NETWORK

Lancaster
Environment Centre



ENABLING RAPID CLIMATE ACTION: THE EXPERIENCE OF LOCAL DECISION-MAKERS

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INTRODUCTION

The UK has committed to ambitious carbon targets, and many local areas have declared a 'climate emergency' and set their own local targets. But how are these ambitions understood by officials and politicians at local level? How does rapid climate action feel to them, in the context of their working lives? How should local politicians and officials be supported, so that they can play their part in responding to the climate emergency?

Much research has been done into the technical solutions and policy proposals that will be needed to tackle the climate emergency. In this briefing, we report on research that focuses not on what needs to be done, but on how such changes can be made: how local politicians and officials understand and respond to the need for rapid climate action.

The research involved interviews with senior officers and councillors, as well as research workshops with wider city stakeholders, in three cities - Belfast, Edinburgh and Leeds (see box 1).

Our research method aimed to uncover the implicit understandings and practical knowledge, sometimes called 'phronetic knowledge'¹, of local decisionmakers. Rather than imposing assumptions or analyses from the outside, this approach focusses on learning, with participants, about the dilemma they face: the need to reconcile ambitious climate

action in response to a 'climate emergency', with the day-to-day procedures, cultural understandings and resources that local decisionmakers have available to them. The climate crisis, and the need for rapid action, challenges established ways of working. Yet local decisionmakers cannot simply impose radical change; they must work within existing limitations and find ways of moving forward.

In rushing to suggest 'solutions' or 'toolkits', many prescriptions for change do not stop to understand and learn from this practical wisdom. By contrast, in this research, we did not assume that targets can be met straightforwardly and unproblematically. Instead, we understood the process of change as messy and contingent, relying on the skills, knowledge and understandings of practitioners. The project therefore aimed to help practitioners think through how to navigate the medium term: the as-yet-unclear path from the immediate actions and limitations of the present, to achieving net zero in the long term.

1 Flyvbjerg, Bent, Todd Landman, and Sanford Schram. 'Important next Steps in Phronetic Social Science'. In *Real Social Science*, edited by Bent Flyvbjerg, Todd Landman, and Sanford Schram, 285–97. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

THE RESEARCH PROCESS

The research was carried out by a team at Lancaster University. It was framed by the idea of 'phronesis'. This approach emphasizes the importance of understanding the context of decision-making within institutions, and particularly the lived experience of the individuals involved. Rather than searching directly for solutions which might be implemented in the future, it calls for a careful and strategic exploration of the present situation. This enables researchers and practitioners to develop a fuller, more pragmatic understanding of how individuals and institutions are operating in the present, and to reflect on the ways that these practices are working or failing. It focuses on the unconsciously competent expertise and practical wisdom that comes from an intimate familiarity with 'what works' in particular settings and circumstances. By exploring the constraints and possibilities of the roles of local officials and politicians, the study goes beyond the challenges and opportunities for rapid climate action, to focus primarily on how they are encountered as part of participants' everyday working lives. This then encourages imaginative and constructive reassessment by institutions and individuals themselves of how they are currently working and what they could do differently to more effectively pursue their goals.

In each of the cities, three Council officials and two elected politicians were interviewed. Participants from each city included a mix of those with direct responsibility for climate strategy and those working in areas where action is necessary to drive carbon reduction, such as transport, planning or industrial strategy. The interviews were conducted as an exploratory conversation, covering the responsibilities of the individual's role; their sense of 'what

works' in policymaking; their views on how climate change is factored into policy decisions; and what is needed to allow rapid climate action. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analysed in two stages. The first stage drew out the stated and implied barriers and enablers of climate action. The second stage identified distinct patterns in participants' working strategies and their interactions with other actors.

Findings from both stages were summarised in a discussion paper, and each city was offered the opportunity of an online workshop in which the researchers, participants and other key city stakeholders could reflect together on the study's findings. Constraints and pressures due to the Covid-19 pandemic prevented Edinburgh stakeholders taking up the offer, but workshops were held in Belfast and Leeds. At the workshops, the interview findings were presented, and small-group discussions and creative visualisation techniques were used to encourage reflection and phronetic learning on the part of all participants, including the researchers. Participants compared the viewpoints held by different actors, in order to develop a deeper understanding of how climate-relevant decisions are framed and made, and to put forward proposals for change. The workshops were also recorded and transcribed, and enabled the findings from the interviews to be developed and refined before conclusions and recommendations were drawn out.

Anonymised quotations from interviewees and workshop participants are presented throughout this briefing to illustrate the key findings.

THE CITIES: AMBITIONS AND REALITIES

BELFAST

Belfast City Council declared a climate emergency in October 2019 and will shortly set a target date to achieve net zero emissions. Belfast is a member of the Resilient Cities Network, and has a Resilience Commissioner. This provides the framework for their response to climate change, as well as offering useful links to other cities. The recently-established Belfast Climate Commission, co-chaired by the City Council and Queen's University, brings stakeholders together to co-ordinate action, and recently published a net zero roadmap for the City. Linking to economic regeneration, through the publication of a 'mini-Stern' report highlighting the economic opportunities of climate action, has also been useful. Our interviews revealed a consensus about the need to link climate strategy and Covid-19 recovery in some areas, particularly transport. There was discussion of 'climate proofing' or 'screening' of all policies, following the model of equality assessments used in Belfast.

Our research in Belfast revealed a gap between stated intent and current policies and responsibilities, as well as a considerable variation in responses from interviewees, from, for example, those in a frontline role compared to those in a more strategic or overarching position.



Opinions differed over whether 'The Belfast Agenda', the overarching plan for the City, takes proper account of climate action. Interviewees pointed to difficulties with plans and policies which were developed before the current focus on the Climate Emergency, and so lag behind. Belfast City Council also has fewer devolved powers than local authorities elsewhere in the UK, with the complex governing structures involving the Stormont Assembly as well as wider UK governance making co-ordination more difficult.

EDINBURGH

The City of Edinburgh Council formally declared a climate emergency in May 2019 and committed to becoming a carbon-neutral city by 2030, and they are re-aligning and developing structures and strategies to reflect the 2030 net-zero target. In October 2019 they published a set of 37 short-term actions to drive reductions in their own emissions. The central team with responsibility for climate strategy is being expanded, and significant spending and other decisions have been made in support of the agenda, such as retrofitting council housing stock and investing in public transport (trams). There is strong high-level political and officer support for the climate agenda and understanding of the co-benefits and potential synergies between policy agendas. The Edinburgh Climate Commission was launched in February 2020 as an independent group (co-sponsored by the Council and the Edinburgh Climate Change Institute at the University of Edinburgh) which will work to accelerate climate action across Edinburgh. Wider stakeholder engagement has taken place through an online consultation (November 2019 – May 2020) and the ongoing interactive Edinburgh Talks Climate website, a Climate Change Youth Summit (February 2020) and a Civil Society Climate Roundtable (August 2020).

Interviewees, however, recognised risks that progress could be derailed by a perceived demand to prioritise jobs and growth at the expense of climate action, especially in



the response to Covid-19: if public and business support is lost, political support may follow. These pressures arise at a particularly vulnerable time as high-level ambitions are yet to be translated into detailed operational plans, with a current lack of clarity about consequences for service areas, Council operations and relations with the public and businesses. Despite potential synergies, tensions persist between priorities, departments, and political parties, and wider political dynamics (e.g. around Scottish independence, Brexit, and the divisiveness of the inter/national political climate) can make political collaboration more difficult. The Council's ability to deliver on the 2030 city-wide target is strongly constrained by policies and procedures set by Scottish and UK Governments, and the need for action by external actors: national governments, other city stakeholders and public behavioural change.

LEEDS

Leeds City Council formally declared a climate emergency in March 2019 with a stated ambition of working towards a net zero carbon city by 2030. Following a public consultation in a "Big Leeds Climate Conversation", a further target of more than halving emissions by 2025 was declared in January 2020, with spending plans for £200m to deliver on this target. The City Council committed to a series of early actions in response, including reduction of emissions from council buildings, purchase of 100% of electricity from renewable sources for Council, and procurement of only low emission vehicles by 2025. Climate action in and by the city was further supported by an independent Leeds Climate Commission with leadership from Leeds University, which co-organized the city-wide Conversation and a Leeds Climate Change Citizens' Jury. The latter reported in November 2019, setting an ambitious programme targeting emission reductions in the city from key sectors, such as transport and housing, as well as novel mechanisms for local powers and financing, including even a Leeds Green New Deal. Notably the Citizens' Jury also recommended stopping any further expansion in Leeds Bradford airport, an issue that remains challenging for Council decision-making and local politics. Most recently, Covid-19 has significantly disrupted Council business through 2020, pushing back some targets and further constraining budgets.

Interviews confirmed confidence amongst Council officers and elected officials in the Council's commitment to deep, expedited climate action. Also shared across interviews was a strongly positive assessment of how the Council works on climate issues, both within the institution itself, with strong leadership and cross-Council collaboration,



and with local partners, both business and civic. Solid leadership of one party (Labour) apparently also serves to enable a comparatively constructive political climate and long-term approach. Yet tensions and challenges remain. In particular, hard choices regarding concrete decisions (e.g. in transport policy affecting specific locations) and implementation of policies 'on the ground' were seen as an ongoing frustration, these being moments when latent opposition to prioritizing climate action emerges. In this regard, there was unease about how Covid-19, and associated economic challenges, could affect the prioritization of climate action, especially in a city still challenged by concentrations of deprivation. The city's comparative success to date on climate action also simply foregrounds more challenging issues that still lie ahead for other cities, e.g. regarding tackling consumption-based emissions. Frustration was also widespread regarding the lack of powers devolved to local government and/or clear support, fiscal and regulatory, from Westminster on this agenda.

UNDERSTANDING THE STATE OF PLAY

Across the three cities, common themes emerged from the research about the difficulties and opportunities that local decision-makers encountered or expected.

Increased political salience: The profile now given to climate change, including widespread media coverage, and increases in vocal public concern, have shifted what is perceived as possible and necessary for councils to do. Public support and strong senior political and officer leadership on climate action are vitally important, especially when particular policies or initiatives might be unpopular.

“The profile given to climate change has removed the scales from some people’s eyes or elevated it in terms of their political priorities”

The implementation gap: Despite ambitious strategic commitments, and a broad understanding that every aspect of the council’s work would have to align with the net-zero target, there was no real understanding of how this agenda will be incorporated into service delivery plans and reported against. There was a shared feeling of moving into uncharted waters.

“The price for most officers [of an ambitious target] is we can’t see the path to that”

Lack of support from national government: Local decision-makers say that there is huge potential to drive emissions reductions locally, but local authorities currently lack the powers, funding, and statutory responsibility to do so. Policies and procedures, often nationally imposed (e.g. in planning, housing and transport) severely restrict local government’s ability to prioritise carbon reduction.

“The main dilemma for any local authority is, none of this is statutory. We have no piece of legislation that says we need to do this.”

Organizational culture is crucial: A collaborative and aligned approach is needed both within councils (between officers and politicians, different departments, and political parties) and with wider stakeholders. However, our research uncovered radically divergent perspectives, even within institutions. For example, there were diverging views over whether a council’s strategic framework helped or hindered delivering the climate agenda; or whether local political configurations made progressive action easier or harder.

“Even though there is a lot more consensus now than there was even two or three years ago, we’re still not necessarily all pointing in the same direction”

Framing climate action as normal not alternative: Framing climate action in terms of its co-benefits - like reducing fuel poverty, generating jobs, and improving air quality and public health - is an important route to securing political and public support. Climate action has to be understood as the best, mainstream course of action or investment, rather than a ‘green alternative’. Politicians and officers agreed that once high-level political decisions have been made, officers need to present and frame evidence and options that work for the politicians.

“... positioning green action as just the best action to take. Not green, but actually the best choice... So the risk of not doing this is greater than the cost of doing it; the opportunity of it is greater than the uncertainty you face right now.”

The devil is in the detail: The widespread political, officer and public support for the ‘big ideas’ of tackling the climate emergency can quickly be reversed in specific, contentious instances, such as public resistance to reallocating road space for walking or cycling, or political decisions that support jobs but increase emissions. This can derail individual projects, and cumulatively threaten achievement of targets, take up significant officer and politician energy, and generate aversion to future interventions.

“It’s the difference between, a lot of people take on board the overall concept that we need to do something about it but they’re not necessarily taking that ownership or making that change themselves. I think that’s where we struggle to get buy in and support.”

Covid-19 risks and opportunities: The recovery from Covid-19 provides opportunities to drive change, building on learning from the response to the crisis and the potential of the stimulus package, but also risks the re-emergence of an ‘economy first’ approach. As emissions reduction is not a statutory duty for local government, it has been squeezed as an objective by austerity and is likely to be even more so during the recovery from Covid-19.

“As we’re beginning to think about coming out of Covid and recovery, people are saying the right things: we don’t want to go back, we want to build back better, this is an opportunity... [but] saying it and meaning it when jobs and growth are in question are two different things.”



The importance of place-based approaches and narratives:

Appeals to abstract or generalised quantifications and high-level science and policy were not seen as persuasive to publics or policymakers. Driving rapid change requires making explicit connections with place, and locally-specific challenges and opportunities. This requires powers and resources to be devolved to local level. This is not a matter of 'glorifying the local', but emphasises that implementing rapid climate action in specific locations is not simply a matter of applying national targets at a local level.

"We are going to have to tell compelling attractive locally understandable stories about climate action, and we can't just depend upon the language of science and science-driven targets and policy deadlines, these will not land... [we need a] way of indigenising this, localising it and using colloquial language and stories... to make this really local and tangible for people. I do think that the policy and science stuff, we need it but it ain't going to sell it."

Little outright opposition, but more subtle restraints on change:

A striking finding from our research was that none of the participants expressed opposition to acting on climate, and many noted that overt opposition was now rare, which they saw as a significant, and recent, change. However, more subtle restraints to change were described:

"I don't think it's all there, political buy-in... I can assure you a lot of the council officers I deal with on a daily basis have not bought into it."

We saw three different types of these 'restraints' in our research, direct, indirect, and attributed. Direct restraints were statements that prioritising rapid climate action could be detrimental to other priorities, or that targets are unachievable:

"We will be carbon neutral by 2030. Well that ain't going to happen. We could be carbon neutral by 2030 but we'd also be bankrupt. But we might get 85% of the way, sensibly. So maybe 2040 or 2043 might be a more sensible guideline."

Indirect restraints were statements that rapid climate action is not possible within established policy and procedures; that strategic ambition has not permeated down to operational processes; or that ambition does not take adequate account of the practicalities of implementation:

"The strategy says we're going to have a million trees or something like that, what does that actually mean?... there's no additional resource for any of that but there's just an expectation that we'll pick it all up."

Attributed restraints were statements that change will be impeded by the actions or attitudes of others (publics, politicians, officers or businesses), which in itself generates resignation that change will be delayed or diminished:

"In spite of the great words of the vision, there's practical things on the doorstep... They see the big stuff but they act on the small stuff and the small stuff they act on is often contradictory to the big stuff."

The cumulative effect of these restraints on change was summed up by one participant as:

"It's that non-decision making, or the quiet opposition, or the lack of active support, which I think is probably the undercurrent which is really stopping some of this from moving forward as quickly as it could."



HOW DO LOCAL DECISION-MAKERS UNDERSTAND AND RESPOND TO THE CLIMATE EMERGENCY?

Working with local officials and politicians across the three cities, we saw patterns emerging in how people engaged with the problem of rapid climate action. We categorised these patterns into four 'personas', presented below: Crusaders, Entrepreneurs, Pragmatists and Weavers. These personas were not articulated explicitly by interviewees themselves, but were drawn directly from their accounts (see box 'the research process').

Individuals may enact different personas at different times and in different circumstances, although they may have a disposition towards performing one or more particular personas. These personas were seen in both officers and politicians, with similar strategies employed by the two groups.

Crusaders see their mission as embedding rapid climate action in the work of the Council and beyond. They work at a strategic level, within or across departments and portfolios as well as with external stakeholders. They see their role as 'getting the message out' and 'changing the culture': driving a shift in strategic focus in order to establish climate action as a real and urgent priority for action that can't be ignored, sidelined or compromised away.

"I'm plugging away at that and that's going to take me a while to get that change to really be embedded in but it's a drip drip. I've got to persuade the officers in the council, I've got to persuade the elected members, I've got to persuade other people."

However, 'crusading' language and action can also alienate audiences, and risks the crusader being seen as disconnected from the mainstream, which can reduce their scope for impacting on policy agendas - and fear of this can constrain people from adopting 'crusading' stances:

"The approach is often counterproductive as well, I sometimes feel. The kind of campaigning, crusading approach sometimes can end up either boring people or alienating people."

Entrepreneurs are agile and use their knowledge of existing ways of working, agendas and situations to seek out opportunities to promote climate action. They look for synergies with existing programmes and priorities and show how they can be delivered together with climate action. They try to link the strategic to everyday routines and decisions, and try to address or avoid obstacles to implementation in sometimes indirect ways.

"How we weave the climate into that, in terms of that being perceived as an opportunity and a positive thing."

Such an approach however runs the risk of climate action getting 'lost' and diluted in amongst other priorities. It can generate a sense of climate being just another factor to be added to existing activity, rather than an existential threat:

"If you politically mainstream it that de-radicalises it, which is good because it means more people get around the table. But my sense is that within the policy articulation of this it's seen as, 'Oh, it's a normal policy process', when it is anything but."

Pragmatists recognise the importance of climate action, but also maintain a strong focus on pre-existing objectives and may resist what they perceive as the colonisation by climate of other agendas. They are often engaged with the details and decisions around implementation or scrutiny of policy impacts, and have a strong focus on process and procedure.

"My team do get quite frustrated that what seems like a good idea and gets put into a strategy isn't really thought through with all of the consequences because they're not responsible for that delivery side. It's easier to write a strategy that sounds good without actually then having to think about how it gets implemented"

This persona potentially generates barriers to action through a reliance on policy frameworks, procedures, and established custom and practice, that may take a long time to change in line with institutional ambitions:

"You've got senior civil servants who are dead competent civil servants but they're to a person they're pragmatists. So unless there's something that makes them change what they want to do or what they have to do, they're not going to change."

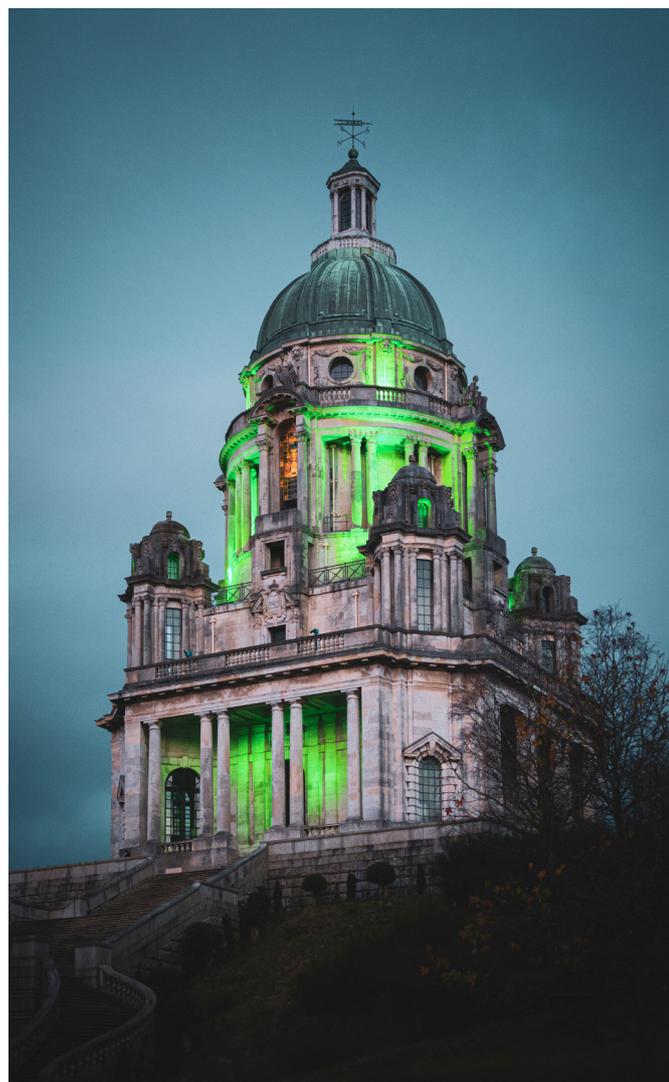


Weavers focus on collaboration and connections: between levels (macro and micro) and between stakeholders (within and external to the council). They aim to mesh together easily-agreed-to high-level aims with the disputed and contested concrete measures needed to achieve them. They are concerned with building and maintaining trust and support (from publics, politicians, officers and other stakeholders). They bring together ideas, approaches and people that may otherwise conflict and attempt to ‘weave’ solutions from the threads of otherwise potentially disparate positions.

“You draw those other stakeholders in, in multiple different ways into the conversation... so that policy is something everyone feels they collectively own”

However, this persona also has the potential to slow action down, as gaining and maintaining broad-based support is inherently time-consuming, and may even serve to underline tensions between essentially incompatible positions.

“We can get bogged down in years of community consultation and dealing with objections. Each issue gets magnified and sucks more and more energy and time into that, rather than just doing it.”



Linking the four personas together: These personas can be seen according to their primary focus: do they focus on what is to be done, or how it is to be done? They can also be seen according to their primary concern: setting the goal or direction; or implementation. The table below demonstrates the differences between the four personas.

		Primary concern	
		Goal/Direction	Implementation
Primary focus	What	Crusader	Pragmatist
	How	Entrepreneur	Weaver

When we discussed this analysis during the research workshops, participants saw the potential for using them as a way of thinking about individual and institutional responses:

“Those characterisations did really resonate with me when I think about types of people we work with in the council and how things are now ...it then presents the opportunity to be able to understand why someone’s behaving like that, potentially moving them into different ways of thinking and ... bake things in more effectively.”

At an institutional level, we suggest that the performance of each of these personas is necessary within local government to drive rapid climate action. Participants found it helpful as a lens through which to understand and respond to the actions of colleagues and other stakeholders, and relations within and external to the council, and to think through both organisational strategy and personal effectiveness:

“You need to take all of those approaches depending on who your audience is and the tailoring process that you need to adopt to really speak to them and to get across what it is that you need to do. I think it’s incredibly useful to set out those different areas, those different approaches.”

“It certainly would help me to think, as a senior leader, about how I can influence people’s thinking and behaviour and potentially use this as a way to help them understand how they’re working and encourage them to think in different ways”

WHERE NEXT? RESPONDING TO THE CLIMATE EMERGENCY

An extended quote from one participant on the process of making a climate emergency declaration and setting a net zero target helps to understand the gap between these ambitious, high-level statements and the everyday reality of local politicians and officials:

“That all happened in a number of weeks, going from ‘right, we want to be really meaningful and radical in this and we’ve got political sign-up to work out what that looks like’, to ‘the external environment is requiring us to jump straight to a target that we have no idea how to get to, no evidence as to whether it’s the right thing whatsoever, apart from a load of experts telling us that’s what needs to happen if we’re to take the climate emergency seriously’. So while we’ve been on that path to get there, we probably wouldn’t have got to 2030, we were pitching 2037 as radical, the politics overtook us and gave us that target.”

Despite recognition of the magnitude of change required, and considerable personal, professional and political commitment, the practical implications of these ambitions have not yet been grasped and, perhaps more significantly, the path to understanding and engaging with these implications is very far from clear. Participants in this study felt clear about the relatively small-scale, immediate actions that needed to be taken, and clear in general terms about the end-state to be achieved (a net zero city), but the all-important medium term, leading from one to the other, is still an enigma, an unmapped and unknown territory.

Meanwhile, this debate is happening in a room that is already noisy, with many other discussions, about the future of local government, financial constraints, and Covid-19 recovery, playing out simultaneously. When asked to draw a map of the future and explain their picture to the group, one workshop participant described a distant summit, but positioned herself at the bottom of the hill:

“Down here at the bottom, this is how it feels some days, like really noisy. So I’ve put treble clefs and bass clefs in there because there is a lot of noise going on in the city. There are a lot of other things like post-Covid recovery and a whole load of other priorities... there’s a little bit of coherence arriving but I think that shows the scale of it. So that’s what it feels like for me.”

Progress toward climate goals, then, depends not just on having the right targets and structures in place, but also on diving into this predicament and understanding it from the inside. It is this iterative, practical learning which may help to bridge the gaps between ambition and implementation, and between the immediate and the long term

WAYS FORWARD

This research did not aim to develop detailed policy recommendations or prescriptions. However, our analysis points to some ways forward, for government at both a local and national level, which would help local decision-makers to implement rapid climate action.

First, it is important for government, at both a national and local level, to acknowledge the rapid and far-reaching change that is needed. This allows a more open and honest debate about the ‘implementation gap’, and the fact that new ways of working will be necessary. An acknowledgement of the scale and nature of the issue frees up all parts of an organisation to respond to the challenge, and be upfront about the potential clash with existing procedures and priorities.

Second, a common theme was the need for national government to set a framework for local areas, making clear their responsibilities on climate, and resourcing them to respond, whilst leaving flexibility to allow local areas to develop their own responses.

Third, cities and other local areas should be prepared for the overall aim, of responding to the climate emergency, to conflict with existing procedures: the ‘devil in the detail’. Local areas could create a mechanism which would allow local officers or politicians to flag such conflicts, and work through their implications and potential solutions, rather than – as is often the case currently – trying to work around.

Lastly, our study has highlighted the vital role played by local politicians and officials, using their own experience and understandings to develop and advocate ways forward. Participants in this project found that their involvement, and the opportunity that provided to reflect on the challenges and dilemmas they faced in interviews and through the city workshops, was helpful. This sort of support could be provided more widely, separately from existing systems of management or strategy development, and could help to develop working cultures which allow for a full and frank discussion about how best to respond to the climate emergency.

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The [Place-Based Climate Action Network \(PCAN\)](#) is an ESRC-supported network that brings together the research community and decision-makers in the public, private and third sectors with the aim of translating climate policy into action to bring about transformative change.

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