

We've declared a climate emergency, now what?

Grantham Research Institute – PCAN Roundtable

Part of LSE Festival 2021: Shaping the Post-COVID World

The Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment, and the Place-Based Climate Action Network hosted a roundtable on Local Government Climate Emergency declarations at the beginning of March 2021. This took place as part of the LSE Festival 2021.

The roundtable convened leaders in local government, think tanks, academia, the private sector, and public policy, to discuss what these declarations mean for future climate governance and mechanisms for engaging stakeholders and the public, and to drive forward thinking in how the declarations can be platforms upon which further action is delivered

This is a summary of the roundtable, including presentations given, the discussion and key conclusions drawn. To facilitate open and candid discussion, the roundtable was conducted under the Chatham House rule, and so comments in the presentation Q&As and in general discussion are not directly attributed.

Key takeaways

A recognition of the challenges local authorities face in enacting climate policy is vital, especially regarding the unique and diverse issues that different local areas face. Supporting local authority cross-learning and cross-working is an important aspect of this, and could help spread best practice to allow fast scaling-up of action, while also retaining an ability to tailor policies to specific local contexts.

There is a vital role at the local level for wider networks and stakeholders – beyond Councils themselves – including other public sector actors, the private sector and citizens, in both boosting local authority resources for climate action delivery, and in making the case to national government for more local powers and resources to act.

Devolution of power and resources in climate policy is important, but should be achieved through a careful framework, that clearly sets out where different responsibilities sit at different tiers of government, mindful that all local policies must ultimately fit within and cumulatively add up to national-level emissions reduction and climate change targets. National government has a role in providing clarity and guidance on key overarching questions such as adoption of future energy technology, where lack of clarity and conflicting information is common.

Summary of presentations

Presentation 1: Research on climate emergency declarations

Funded by the ESRC Place-based Climate Action Network, conducted by Dr Candice Howarth, Prof Sam Fankhauser, and Dr Matt Lane, was presented at the roundtable. A broader national picture is featured in the PCAN Report on Local Trends in Climate Action in the UK which we will be launching on the 18th March.

We are seeing a proliferation of declarations of climate emergencies all over the world. The first was made in 2016 in Darebin, Australia; the first climate emergency declaration made in the UK was in Bristol in November 2018; and in May 2019, UK parliament declares a national climate emergency. At the end of 2020, in the UK, 327 of 404 local governments (including 8 combined authorities) or 72%, had declared a climate emergency, however only 62% of them have followed up with an updated on new climate action plan.

We are seeing significant differences in the scope, content, and ambitions in the climate emergency declarations. For example, the declarations predominantly focus on climate change mitigation, the net zero targets range from 2025 to 2050, and less than 12% of declarations mention adaptation to climate change. With a focus on London Boroughs, this research explored how the declarations came about, and what their purpose was.

- How the declarations came about ranged from actively from above (e.g. influenced by the active involvement of the higher ranks of power, through devolution or party political allegiances); passively from above (e.g. local scale declarations offered an opportunity to enact an opposition movement and draw attention to the inadequacy of climate leadership); actively from below (e.g. local activism and civil society - the most commonly cited motivator); passively from across (e.g. borough competition, domino effect).
- Four purposes of the declarations were identified: they are statements of intent (but not a framework or plan for taking action), they work to coordinate local agencies (e.g. facilitate more local collaboration to shape and deliver action), they stimulate local action (and help draw attention to and overcome local barriers), they act as a political gesture (and accept that local councils can only do so much)

Presentation 2: Work on Citizens and Politicians in Climate Emergency Declarations

This research is led by Prof. Rebecca Willis and is based on in-depth qualitative interviews with MPs, Rebecca's experience as Expert Lead for Climate Assembly UK, and her work with PCAN.

In the relationship between citizens and politicians around climate emergency declarations, there is a central stand-off in terms of public political positioning. Many of the politicians interviewed were – while privately invested in the climate change issue – publicly reluctant to speak out about it, because of a perception that they would lose public support in doing so.

Polling data though suggests that politicians are overestimating the political cost of attaching themselves publicly to climate change and climate emergency issues, as there is a majority of support among the public for action in these areas.

As a result of a relatively wide public desire for political action, coupled with individual politicians being averse to speaking out on this, a level of cynicism has emerged among some of the general public, with a view that the government and politicians simply do not take the issue seriously. This is problematic because climate change is a collective action problem, and so requires a social contract approach with government acting on behalf of citizens in their best interest. But while this breakdown

in trust and understanding between politicians and citizens on climate change persists, such an approach looks difficult, and as it stands we currently often see climate policy by stealth (such as through the decarbonisation of the power sector), without the public engagement and conversation that is really necessary. Until politicians can have a better understanding of where public attitudes are – and see that they are generally in favour of stronger action – we will probably continue to see a continuation of this climate policy by stealth.

Giving citizens respect and responsibility, and bringing them into decision making on climate policy will go a long way to bridging this divide, and deliberative forms of democratic engagement are a great way to do this. Climate Assembly UK has done this through convening a “mini public” of 108 individuals, that is reflective of UK society as a whole. Crucially this takes into account people’s lived experience, which is vital for a workable strategy, and can help to provide key answers to questions that high-level decision makers may not have considered otherwise.

There is a coherent demand coming from local government and from the deliberative processes for more powers, resources, and responsibilities for local areas to act on Climate Change. A key question this raises is why National Government is *not* devolving more of these powers, and what makes climate policy so top-down.

Going forward there are three key elements that are needed now:

- 1) Acknowledgement of the rapid and far-reaching change needed to stay on course for tackling climate changes and reaching net-zero: the implementation gap
- 2) National Government should set a national framework that can then be incorporated at local levels a serve as a framework for lower tiers of government to work from
- 3) There needs to be a focus on the *how* of implementation, and an acknowledgement and understanding of local experience in this, and how local communities and expertise can play a central role

Presentation 3: Creating a Carbon Budget Tool with Greater Manchester

This presentation is led by Prof. Carly McLachlan and centres on the carbon budget tool co-developed with Greater Manchester. It came out of the question – how do you embed the huge carbon reduction ambitions that come with moving to net-zero in all decision making?

This was especially relevant as carbon impact was often hard to understand for council project officers. As a result the tool we have developed provides the carbon impact assessment *for* the user whereas with the impact assessments in other areas the user would give the assessment. This takes the complication of coming to a carbon impact out of the equation.

The tool is being rolled out in May 2021, and although there are improvement to it that could still be made, it was felt that the most important thing was getting the tool into use as soon as possible, with improvements to then be added on with time. The key is to get something good out in three months, rather than something perfect in three years.

The tool produces a simple, colour coded dashboard report. The overall dashboard is made up of scores across different subcomponents, and importantly, a red score (i.e. high carbon impact) anywhere in the subcomponents means that the overall colour coding cannot be above amber – this means that poor performance in one area cannot be balanced out by good performance in a few others to push it under the radar; any areas of high impact will be flagged.

There is a tension between the demand for simplicity and the demand for precision – this tool for example will not give an exact carbon number.

Presentation 4: Croydon Climate Crisis Commission

Croydon declared a climate emergency and ecological emergency in 2019. The council then set up a citizens assembly, who produced a set of recommendations on the climate emergency, and reaching net zero by 2030. The Croydon Climate Crisis Commission is chaired by Miatta Fahnbulleh and its role is to turn the recommendations of the Citizen Assembly into a plan of action to be implemented, to reach net-zero by 2030 in the Borough.

A key foundation for the Commission is that the transition to net-zero in Croydon must be a fair and just one. This foundation was underlined by the Covid-19 Pandemic, as the economic impact highlighted the squeeze on living standards and precariousness of work for many. Therefore the green transition programme that the Commission is looking at will aim to re-gear the local economy and provide good jobs.

Citizen engagement has been a vital component, albeit one that has been more difficult in the context of the pandemic. The capacity of Croydon Council to help the Commission reach different parts of the community was stretched by all the other work they were having to do, as well as the Council's financial difficulties and leadership changes. But nevertheless the commissioners were able to set up and lead a number of working groups, made up of a cross-section of the community looking at different aspects of the transition.

Core aspects of the plan include: Key groundwork, Oversight mechanism, Green skills & jobs, Anchor institutions, Neighbourhood, Involvement of local people and businesses.

Lastly, another aim of the Commission and Citizen's Assembly is to equip the council with a set of devolution demands for National Government, so that they can make the case for greater resources and responsibility in enacting the transition.

The aim is for this to be a plan for the *Borough* rather than a plan simply for the Council. In this sense there are wider stakeholders across the Borough for whom the plan is relevant and who it is hoped will be involved in enacting it, and one of the Council's key roles is in holding these stakeholders together.

General discussion: Climate Emergency – now what?

1. Who most needs to act now to enable climate action to take place on the ground, and which level of government should drive this?
2. What are the challenges and barriers being faced by local authorities in developing and implementing post-declaration action plans?

Where does - and should - power sit?

- On the question of local vs. national government and why national government is not devolving more powers in climate policy, it was suggested that one major issue is national government being concerned that if they devolve too much responsibility to lower tiers, then the emissions reductions from various locally-enacted climate policies may not cumulatively add up to the national net-zero targets.
- It was suggested for example that local councils may take decisions to adopt green technology where the evidence base for that technology is actually weak. This could in turn expose them to

future risk in not meeting emissions targets, and undermining national-level targets. National Government has an important oversight role in preventing this.

- This shows the need for better, trusted sources of information for Councils, to help cut through the often-conflicting information they receive. It also shows the need for finding the right level of government for decision making across the different spheres of an issue, through some kind of national framework.
- Policy learning and emulation between local authorities was touted as a quicker and more effective way to bring change in some areas than waiting for national government to act. With over 400 councils in the UK, there will be evidence of good practice on climate – what is important is identifying that good practice and highlighting it for others to learn from.

The relative strengths of local and national government in facing up to the difficult trade-offs of climate policy was one area of contention.

- One view was that council leaders are good at making us face up to trade-offs, in a way that national politicians are not. Local government is forced to argue in public about trade-offs more often, whereas national government can avoid this public scrutiny more easily.
- This view was questioned though, and it was suggested that some of the deliberative methods used by local authorities can fall short in confronting and making decisions on trade-offs. The example of a proposed new coalmine in Cumbria was given – here was a case of local government not being able to fully face up to the difficult choices of climate policy, and instead making the perhaps easier choice to prioritise local jobs over emissions reduction.
- However in response, it was said that the Cumbria example actually shows the need for more devolution of responsibility to local leaders, because with devolution of responsibility for climate action *accountability* for the same would then follow. Because the council is not explicitly bound by national emissions targets, it can selectively ignore responsibility. If we had devolution of policy responsibility under a national framework that included responsibility for emissions targets, this sort of calculation would change, and local governments wouldn't be able to avoid these difficult trade-offs so easily.

Challenges for local authorities

The tension between the need for thorough democratic deliberation and involvement, and the need to scale up action rapidly was explored.

- The point was made that normally declaring a state of emergency will strengthen executive decision making, with urgent action needed, but that what we see with this long-term climate emergency is a requirement for more deliberation, and more deliberative democratic processes. How can we speed up these deliberative processes, so that we have decisions in months and not years?
- On the other hand, it was suggested that the danger of faster executive decisions that don't fully take into account people's views and especially their lived experiences, is that it can backfire hugely to the point that it actually stops policy moving forward.
- On this issue, a participant talked about how their Council sees a tension between climate emergency activists and social justice campaigners in their views on key next steps. One of

the challenges the participant faces is moving the Council from a desire for complete consensus, to an acceptance of consent in how they create and frame their next action plan.

- A key point raised is that the language of ‘emergency’ is something there is an awareness of beyond academia – in issues of social justice and democracy where the perception of rights being eroded by “emergency actions” is on people’s minds. There are two issues raised by this: firstly, is it ‘right’ to use emergency rhetoric, democratically speaking; secondly, is it helpful to do so in encouraging action, or does it generate unnecessary resistance?

The issue of scale and differing local capacity was also discussed.

- While there is a very broad appetite for action, it was noted that the capacity to deliver it differs hugely across local areas, and that there is a need to think about how we can achieve more uniform, effective action across areas when this difference in capacity exists. Climate adaptation was mentioned as being particularly dependent on specific local issues and conditions, making it particularly challenging in this respect.
- It was also pointed out that when we think about adaptation vs mitigation, we must remember these require very different skillsets – that there’s a big difference in thinking about emissions reduction for example in mitigation, and thinking in the risk assessment mindset required for adaptation.

A common view among participants was that sharing of best practice and partnership working is key for scaling up action across local areas, and several schemes around this that participants and their organisations are running were discussed.

- These included a project to work with 10 councils across a region, helping them to work together more effectively. It was felt that having them cooperate more systematically brings enormous benefits, far above simply copying case studies from each other, and that this method is vital in breaking through siloed thinking.
- Another participant noted that scale was a particular problem for them, as they are an organisation with a very large number of members to communicate best practise to and with. They had found Webinars have been helpful with that challenge so far, but they were also partnering with universities and councils along a “train the trainer” model which proved effective.

In summing up, three key issues were suggested in thinking about next steps:

- 1) Responsibility is more complex than just national vs local government. There are a multitude of ways for local actors to support local government, both in delivering action and in holding national government to account.
- 2) That said, devolution and where different powers and responsibilities lie is a key question going forward.
- 3) Recognising the unique place-based challenges that come with climate action is vital, and marrying this with the question of devolution is important.

For more research, analysis and discussion on the issues in this summary, click these links to visit the [LSE Grantham Institute](#) and the [Place-Based Climate Action Network](#) websites or by contacting Dr Candice Howarth at c.howarth@lse.ac.uk.