

The unacknowledged role of micro-level governance in net zero action

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INSIGHTS FOR POLICYMAKERS

- Parish councils offer a **transparent and democratic route** to micro-level climate change governance and action. Currently their work is mainly unseen by other governance levels.
- Parish councils should be **given a greater mandate for biodiversity/environmental and climate** related action. This would require formal participation rather than a reliance on wilful actors.
- Parish council staff would benefit from access to an overarching **county led communication campaign, sharing of expertise and county led orchestration of action.**
- Closer **collaboration of county and D&Bs with parishes** could generate examples of effective local community action.
- Funding for collaborative campaigns and actions, whilst still managed by D&B or County, should include **parishes as project partners.**

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Parishes are a tier of government which represent around 40% of the population and operate at a micro-local community level. The UK has over 13,000 parish councils, of which more than 10,700 are in England. Most parishes are in rural areas, representing communities of only a few hundred to several thousand people. Town councils are a form of parish council and usually represent more than 10,000 people, with the largest having annual budgets not dissimilar to small district or borough councils. All councillors give their time voluntarily and are supported by a parish clerk. Parish councils have a limited statutory remit but this does include consultation on local planning matters, local plans, responsibility for the management of parish owned land, street lighting and litter.

Case Study

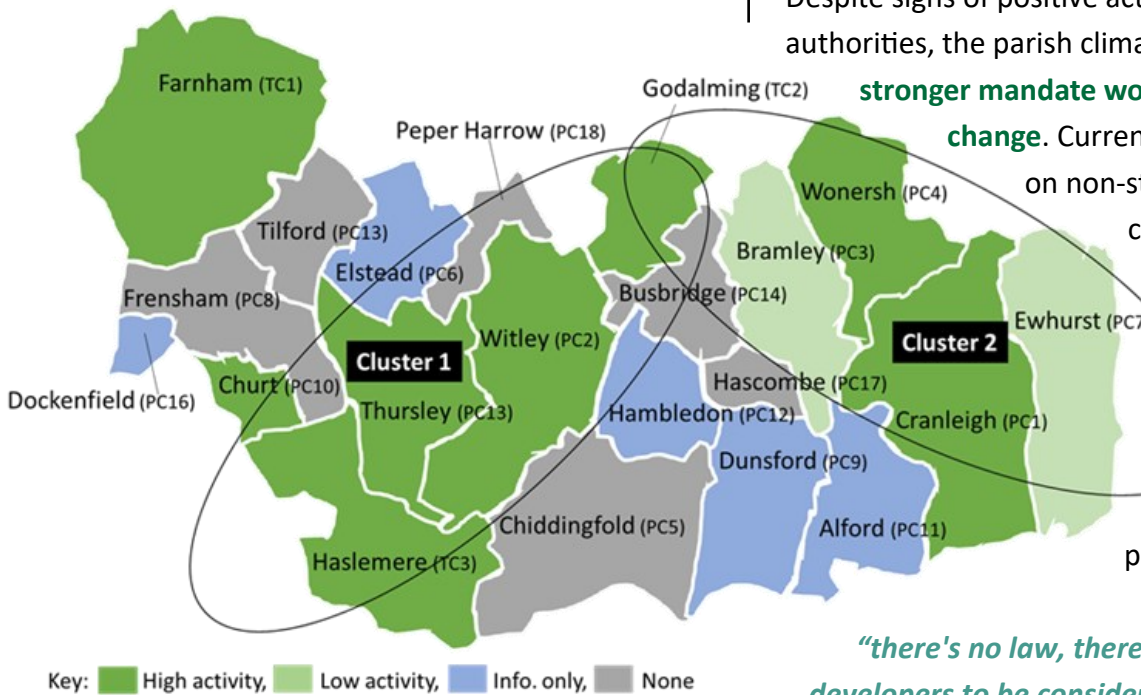
Climate action by parishes situated with the borough of Waverley, Surrey.

Analysis undertaken in 2021 identified almost half of the parishes were **engaged in taking climate action**, with 28% being high active. These included the 3 towns within the borough and the research suggests that there is a **scale of representation** below which action is currently failing to occur. Action included climate information websites, the creation of local small scale environmental funds, events, newsletters and local biodiversity enhancements.

Pro-active councils were talking to each other and there was evidence of

supportive clusters and networks developing (Fig. 1).

Fig 1: Levels of climate action undertaken by parishes based in the borough of Waverley, Surrey (2021).



Key: High activity, Low activity, Info. only, None

It was clear from both council minutes and interviews that action was being driven primarily by individuals with a commitment to climate action: we describe them as **wilful actors**. This drive appears to come from personal concern and they utilised skills developed through work or life experience to collaborate and take action. All those interviewed continued to search for information and further their knowledge.

Whilst forming local clusters, many of the parish activists **felt very isolated from other levels of governance**. With the exception of a Waverley Borough green councillor who visited several parish meetings to update on strategy and action plans, they had little insight into borough or county action, or simply even who to contact for information:

a “contact list in Surrey.....would be really extremely useful” (SPC1).

Interviews with other tiers of government,

undertaken during this research, also suggested that climate action in parishes is **largely invisible to those in national, regional and county tiers**.

Despite signs of positive action, just as with local authorities, the parish climate groups felt that a **stronger mandate would help them drive change**. Currently their work relies on non-statutory support and compliance; something, for example, they found highly problematic when reviewing planning:

“there's no law, there's no requirement for developers to be considerate, you know, to the climate.” (SPC1)

Most active parishes were addressing **carbon emissions and biodiversity**, with both feeling naturally linked. For rural parishes the environment was a primary driver to engage residents in action. The research identified through the work of parishes **signs of improvisatory governance**, developing networks and approaches to manage climate action. It was also observed that several parishes has undertaken a level of self determined **division of labour**, such as a focus on climate communications, but without any embedding within a wider county climate approach.

For greater detail on the research findings please read our open access paper:

[The Remaking of Institutions for Local Climate Governance?](#)

Acknowledgments: We gratefully acknowledge financial support from the UK’s Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) through the Place- based Climate Action Network (PCAN).