

May 2019



How can government help English councils act on climate breakdown?

Local authorities can take some action on climate change but they could do so much more if the government empowered and enabled them.

Contents

1. [Resourcing the low-carbon economy](#)
2. [Better buildings](#)
3. [Sustainable transport](#)
4. [Renewable energy](#)
5. [Reducing waste](#)
6. [Restoring nature](#)
7. [Conclusions](#)

Councils acting with their communities at local level will be crucial to tackling the climate emergency. So, it's very good news that over 70% of councils have already declared a climate emergency. To help them turn promises into action, we've created a local [Climate Action Plan](#) with 50 steps they should take.

But we're also very aware that over the last 10 years councils have suffered massive cuts in funding and lost many skilled staff. In addition, deregulation and changing government guidance have significantly hindered their ability to properly address climate breakdown. Responding to COVID-19 has put councils in an even more vulnerable position, with new responsibilities and greater community needs, combined with significant financial uncertainty.

New coalition highlights vital role of local action

Put simply, the government's legally binding target to reach net zero by 2050 won't be reached without action from councils. That's why Friends of the Earth has joined forces with local government, research and environmental organisations in a coalition that's produced a [blueprint for council action](#). It makes the case for vital support from national government for local action to meet climate targets and achieve a green recovery from the pandemic.

Councils are understandably focused on the COVID-19 crisis. But there are huge benefits in addressing climate change, nature restoration and the COVID-19 recovery together, including:

- improved access to nature for all
- tackling health inequalities such as fuel poverty and exposure to air pollution
- creating jobs fit for the future and giving people the skills to do them
- supporting resilient local low-carbon economies.

Our coalition promotes a set of key policy changes that the government should make to enable local authorities to do much more on climate change and the green recovery. These recommendations are based on extensive consultation with councils, so they're grounded in the direct experience of councillors and officers working at the local level.

As the blueprint is about enabling local action, it excludes actions that only central government can take, such as decarbonisation of the electricity grid.

Here's a selection of the key demands from the blueprint, alongside some of our own analysis.

Resourcing the low-carbon economy

Direct funding

The UK government will need to provide a proportion of the funds needed for a green recovery. For example, funds intended to boost economic recovery like the Shared Prosperity Fund and Industrial Strategy funds must be used to drive the transition to zero carbon.

Councils hold key relationships with training institutions, businesses and communities, making them well placed to deliver both economic recovery and a joined-up response to the climate and ecological emergencies. National economic recovery schemes should include place-based funding to enable spending in communities where the need is greatest.

COVID-19 has placed enormous financial burdens on national and local government. This makes it even more important to deliver a cost-effective response that also delivers on health. For example, supporting more active travel and better insulated homes.

Examples of direct-funding needs include:

- Low-carbon infrastructure – Friends of the Earth estimates that between £7 and £10 billion per year is needed to fund urban public transport and cycling across the UK. This can be raised by re-allocating transport budgets from climate “bads”, such as new roads, to climate “goods”.
- Skills – funding low-carbon skills development (including via the National Skills Fund and National Retraining Scheme) enables councils to align training with local low-carbon employment opportunities, like housing retrofits and heat-pump installation.

Increase powers to raise money

It would also be possible to raise more funds locally if councils were granted new powers to raise money themselves. For example, [the law should be changed so that local authorities can raise a significant proportion of funding for urban public transport from businesses through a local public transport payroll levy](#), as is widely used in France.

Enable local authorities to charge a parking levy

With many large retailers and leisure facilities out of town and poorly served by public transport, a levy on these businesses could fund public transport provision and segregated cycleways connected to them. This scheme would be similar to the [workplace parking levy successfully deployed by Nottingham City Council](#) to fund urban public transport.

Better buildings

Instead of an obsession with “build build build”, the government must ensure that councils have the powers and resources to scale up retrofitting existing housing, to end fuel poverty and cut emissions.

Making grants available to individual householders will help, but councils have a key role in retrofitting social housing (including energy efficient heating and better insulation) and facilitating it in private housing and commercial buildings, while securing high energy-efficiency standards in the public estate, including schools.

Where new building is needed, it's essential that councils have the power through the planning system to insist on zero-carbon development, and to involve their local communities in shaping their areas. Legally, Local Plans must set out how planning will mitigate and adapt to climate change, which will be hard to achieve unless councils have the powers to deliver. But [recent planning reform proposals from the government threaten to remove much of councils' control](#) over new development, and push back the delivery of zero carbon homes.

Reform planning policy to support zero-carbon buildings and places

It is vital that a reformed planning system can address crucial issues such as health and well-being and climate change. The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) must enable councils to achieve the radical reductions in greenhouse gas emissions that are needed. For example, by:

- Requiring all new homes and other buildings to be zero carbon by 2025.
- Requiring that suitable areas for renewable and low-carbon energy sources are identified and allocated in Local Plans.
- Requiring that development plans and planning policies set out measures needed to achieve zero-carbon developments and communities.
- Ensuring that new development is located near to new or existing high-quality public transport and services.
- Prioritising protection and enhancement of green space.
- Minimising life-cycle carbon emissions in demolition, construction, materials, and use by advocating circular economy principles for developments.
- Requiring new development to be resilient to extreme weather events.

Empower councils to introduce higher energy-efficiency standards for new buildings

Building Regulations must also be used to ensure that all new buildings are net zero. The new Future Homes Standard should set high standards that all developments should meet as a minimum.

But this shouldn't preclude local planning authorities setting their own ambitious standards to go further. This approach would avoid the need for costly retrofits of homes built under future standards.

Ensure councils and communities can require high housing standards

Permitted development rights remove a council's control over new development and exclude local communities' voices, so shouldn't be used for new housing. An example is allowing buildings to be converted to residential use without needing planning permission. This has allowed the development of [sub-standard properties poorly serviced by public transport and distant from amenities](#).

Yet the government is extending these rights to enable more types of buildings to be demolished and replaced with residential development without planning permission. Permitted development should only be used for very minor developments, such as building a garden shed, fitting solar panels or installing heat pumps.

Put local authorities centre-stage when transforming heating and energy efficiency

Councils should be required and empowered to produce a Local Heat and Energy Efficiency Strategy (as is being piloted in Scotland). As part of this, they should be given the responsibility and resources to coordinate an area-by-area energy-efficiency and eco-heating transformation programme.

Improve standards in the private rented sector and empower local authorities to ensure compliance

The government can take measures to speed up the retrofitting of existing buildings to a high standard of energy efficiency. As well as cutting emissions, retrofitting will help to end fuel poverty and improve the health of people living in badly insulated homes. Cold homes have health impacts that cost the NHS an estimated £2.5 billion each year. Good examples of retrofit systems include [Energiesprong](#) and [Passivhaus](#), which deliver cost-effective solutions.

To ensure that levels of energy efficiency are raised, the government should increase the Minimum Energy Efficiency Standard in the private rented sector – setting homes on the path to a minimum energy performance certificate (EPC) band C by 2030. Interim steps should also be set out – Scotland has a minimum of EPC band D by 2022, for example.

The maximum spending threshold for landlords should also be increased and should be able to be offset through reintroduction of the Landlord's Energy Saving Allowance. The standards should also apply to houses of multiple occupation and the social rented sector. Local authorities also have a key role in ensuring compliance, which they will be able to perform much better if they have dedicated funding and high-quality data.

Enable public sector retrofitting

Councils need a package of resourcing to enable them to bring all public sector buildings to a minimum of EPC band "C" by 2030, with social housing as a priority. This should be done through whole-house retrofits with immediate short-term support to reduce fuel poverty rates.

The government's promise of a fund of £2.9 billion for improving energy efficiency in schools and hospitals must also be fulfilled.

Sustainable transport

Support councils to increase cycling, walking and home working

Cycling provision in the UK is decades behind what it is in other parts of Europe. For example, two-thirds of journeys in Amsterdam are by walking and cycling, whereas in UK cities it's typically less than a third.

Cycling and walking bring significant health benefits as well as reduced carbon and local air pollution. Local authorities need support with expertise, as well as encouragement when they face challenges.

The government can support councils by establishing a dedicated funding stream at levels seen in countries like the Netherlands. And it can ensure it's straightforward to permanently reallocate road space to pedestrians and cyclists following the increase in active transport during COVID-19 travel restrictions.

[Cargo bike demonstration projects could also show how freight in urban areas can be shifted from vans to e-bikes.](#)

Enable the regulation of bus services and better coordination

Power should be devolved to local authorities, combined local authorities or transport bodies with responsibility for buses, so that they can re-regulate bus services. This would enable them to ensure a comprehensive network of frequent, reliable and affordable buses with a single ticketing system.

This should include devolution of bus service operators' grants so they can be targeted at low-carbon vehicles such as electric buses. Also, local authorities that wish to establish a municipal public transport operator should be allowed to do so, to better coordinate public transport networks and ticketing.

Renewable energy

Empower local authorities to support the transition to low-carbon energy

The government should make clear that planning authorities should reject applications for fossil-fuel extraction on climate-change grounds. And national planning policy needs to be more supportive of renewable energy, to facilitate the increase in supply that's needed. Planning policy should actively encourage new onshore wind developments in England, removing the current barriers in the NPPF.

In addition, as stated above, new development should be required to achieve net-zero carbon. This should include the installation of renewables within new developments, like heat pumps, solar power or micro-wind. It should be clear that appropriate development of renewable energy schemes should be supported in the green belt and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, if they don't conflict with the purposes of these areas.

Reducing waste

Waste management is only responsible for 4% of UK greenhouse gas emissions. But the extraction and processing of natural resources to make the products we buy produces large amounts of greenhouse gases and has other negative impacts.

The amount of clothes thrown away is a huge challenge to councils, with around 300,000 tonnes of textile waste ending up in household bins every year, which is then sent to landfill or incinerators. But well before that, the manufacture of consumer goods leads to high carbon emissions, and other problems, such as using large quantities of water, often outside of the UK. More sustainable consumption needs to be encouraged.

Similarly, the problem with plastic pollution needs to be dealt with by cutting the amount of plastic that's used, rather than treating it as a recycling problem for councils to deal with.

Support waste reduction

Phasing out all non-essential single-use products would help reduce pressure on council systems and cut impacts caused in the supply chain.

The government must deliver on its commitment to introducing full cost-recovery for products that end up in household waste. This should mean that funding of recycling and waste services shifts from councils, and therefore taxpayers, to product manufacturers and retailers. And more funding needs to be made available to councils for the collection of food waste.

Support sustainable consumption and production

Encouraging people to eat less and better meat and dairy products will not only cut UK emissions but will play a crucial role in cutting our impacts overseas. Cutting down on meat and dairy is also healthier.

[The government has a role in enabling behavioural change](#), for example by supporting councils to introduce more plant-based menu options, in line with the Eatwell Guide, in schools, hospitals, care homes and prisons, including through guidance on standards.

Restoring nature

Protecting nature sites and creating more nature-rich green spaces is essential to our own wellbeing as well as addressing the ecological crisis. Increasing the amount of green and blue infrastructure (like ponds) in our towns and cities also plays an important role in sequestering carbon and in helping places adapt to a changing climate, for example by reducing flood risk.

Help councils double tree cover

The government should increase funding to councils for tree planting and maintenance, including large-scale woodland and re-wilding programmes in appropriate locations.

Boost natural flood defences

The importance of green and blue infrastructure (including green spaces, green roofs, gardens, rivers, wetlands and ponds) should be recognised in the grant-in-aid formula for flood defence funding.

Ensure everyone has access to natural green space

Through planning policy and funding for parks services, the government should help councils to ensure that everyone has access to good quality nature-rich green space within 5 minutes of home.

This will include new green space in new developments, and targeted creation of space for nature in areas that are currently deprived of it. Creating pocket parks should be a part of this aim, including reallocating space from roads and parking places.

Conclusions

Empowering local authorities is not a “nice to have” – it’s essential. The response to Covid-19 shows how local authorities can be galvanised to respond to a crisis. Many of them are already developing plans to address the climate and ecological crises, but they urgently need the powers and resources to scale up action.

A joined-up approach is the only sensible way to respond to the recovery from COVID-19, by ensuring that the actions taken deliver more healthy communities and a healthy environment more resilient to future challenges.

This piece was first published in May 2019 and updated in August 2020.