

October 2019



20 actions parish and town councils can take on the climate and nature emergency

Parish and town councils may not be as powerful as local authorities but they can be a force for change in addressing the climate and nature emergency.

Contents

1. [Be a force for good](#)
2. [Demonstrate leadership through your own practical actions](#)
3. [Use your powers wisely](#)
4. [Acknowledgements](#)

This guide complements Friends of the Earth's template Local Climate Action Plan.¹ Action at the local level is essential to meeting the UK's legally binding climate target to reach Net Zero by 2050. More than half of the emissions cuts needed rely on people and businesses taking up low-carbon solutions – decisions that are made at a local and individual level.

In this guide we identify actions that parish and town councils can take on climate change and nature. Its purpose is to support those of the 10,000 local councils across England and 750 community councils in Wales who want to do their bit in addressing the climate and nature emergency.

For councils in England, the Centre for Sustainable Energy, working with the University of Exeter, have also produced a fantastic parish council carbon footprint tool <https://impact-tool.org.uk> to help you understand the sources of carbon emissions in your area. The National Association of Local Councils (NALC) has resources to help local councils tackle climate change including [case studies](#) of good practice.

[Use our data-driven tool to find out how your area is performing on climate and nature.](#)

Be a force for good

Encourage the formation of Climate Action groups

Communities across the country are coming together to take climate action in response to the climate and nature emergency. Climate Action groups will encourage and support you to take local political action, build positive community solutions, and join together to demand national action. Parish, town and community councils should encourage and support the formation of these groups. Friends of the Earth will provide resources, training and advice to Climate Action groups (see takeclimateaction.uk).

Support Local Plan policies that help to tackle climate change and boost nature

Use your role as a consultee to the local planning authority to seek strong policies in the Local Plan requiring the highest possible standards of energy efficiency for new housing and other buildings. Sites allocated for new housing should also be accessible by walking, cycling and public transport and avoid loss of local nature sites and green spaces.

Promote practical action by local people

People can often be at a loss about what they can practically do to reduce their own carbon footprint or support nature. An impartial local guide that provides information on accredited local businesses can be invaluable and help keep money in the local economy. The guide could include information on local accredited energy assessors² and renewable energy installers for solar panels, batteries, EV charging points and heat pumps³, eco-friendly retailers, green builders and landscape companies, etc. It can also encourage sustainable transport options.

Bring together groups of people for bulk purchases

The costs of installing solar PV, or other renewable technologies such as heat pumps, should be much lower if done in bulk, street by street, or area by area. A town or parish council can bring together local homeowners and businesses to develop such a scheme – it's a widely used model in the Netherlands and places such as Suffolk and Frome in the UK. Bulk purchases of energy audits or energy insulation is also possible. Transition Streets is an example of this approach.⁴

Develop and promote lift-sharing scheme

By convening local businesses and car-sharing schemes, such as the social enterprise Liftshare, it's possible to help local people reduce the carbon pollution from car use, save money and foster new friendships. An analysis by Liftshare suggested that 92% of people commuting to work in over 200 locations lived close enough to be able to share a car to work. Lift-sharing may often be a solution for people when public transport, cycling or walking to work isn't. Car-sharing schemes for non-commuting journeys should also be promoted.⁵

Use your voice

Decisions on infrastructure projects are largely made by local authorities, Local Economic Partnerships, or by national government. But too many of these decisions will increase carbon emissions and / or harm nature. Use your voice when possible to oppose high-carbon developments, promoting sustainable alternatives instead. Press local authorities and MPs to demand national

changes to bus services regulations, so all areas can regulate buses as London does, and urban profit-making routes can cross-fund loss making rural routes.

Demonstrate leadership through your own practical actions

Save energy

Ensure any council buildings are as energy efficient as possible and any street lighting uses well-directed LED lighting. Getting an energy audit is the first step. Loans for projects in England that have a payback of less than five years are available through Salix funding⁶. Projects with longer term paybacks should still be carried out.

Produce green energy

Install renewable energy generation, like heat pumps and solar PV, at council buildings. Heat pumps benefit from a government grant⁷ that will partially cover the cost. Several energy companies provide a smart export tariff, which pays for any electricity generated that isn't used by the building, including offering top prices if the solar PV is used in conjunction with a battery⁸. Funds can also be raised through Salix loans⁹ or through crowdfunding. Buildings using renewable energy should also be used as a showcase to help local people see these technologies first-hand, particularly less familiar technologies such as heat pumps. An electronic display showing how much energy has been generated and how much money and CO2 emissions saved is one way of demonstrating the benefits.

Reduce pesticide use and other harmful activities

It's possible to reduce activities that harm wildlife, from using peat-free compost to shunning pesticides and ensuring light pollution is controlled. Glastonbury Town Council has stopped using glyphosate weed killer and instead uses a hot foam system¹⁰. These steps alone are not enough to protect and restore nature but they're an important first step. To encourage others, promote the actions you're taking, for example use signage on council-owned land where you use peat-free compost.

Manage land for nature.

Parish, town and community councils can have responsibility for allotments, bridleways, burial grounds, commons and open spaces, and village greens. All of these can be managed to enhance nature, particularly through changing mowing regimes. Friends of the Earth and Buglife have produced a guide to developing an action plan for helping pollinators such as bees¹¹. Buglife's B-lines project aims to support the development of a network of wildlife friendly corridors¹². Friends of the Earth is piloting a crowd-funded postcode gardener project to help people green the streets where they live¹³.

Increase tree cover

Friends of the Earth is campaigning for the UK to double tree cover. The Forestry Commission and others have suggested that even urban areas should aim for at least 20% tree cover¹⁴. Parish, town and community councils should aim to double tree cover and, if necessary, go beyond this to reach the 20% minimum. Much of this will involve encouraging and supporting landowners to take part in tree planting. The Tree Charter, developed by the Woodland Trust, provides excellent guidance on how to increase tree cover. The National Association of Local Councils website provides case studies where it has been used¹⁵.

Buy green

Buying local can support the local economy and buying green can help protect the planet, rewarding businesses committed to a better future. Buying green electricity helps develop new renewable energy and ensures the council isn't supporting dirty energy financially. Friends of the Earth has identified [Ecotricity and Good Energy](#) as the greenest energy companies. Buying green can also extend to any food provided at events, including providing mainly plant-based food and less but better meat and dairy.

Use green transport

Employees and councillors should be encouraged to walk, cycle or use public transport or car-share. The council should provide bikes or electric bikes for staff as they carry out any work-related trips. It should also provide zero-interest loans for buying bikes. Where a car or van is needed it should be electric only.

Minimise waste going to landfill or incineration

In your own operations, ensure all your waste is recycled or composted, but also consider setting-up community recycling facilities for hard-to-recycle items when the local authority hasn't done so, for example in partnership with Terracycle.¹⁶ Bisley Parish Council has set up a community composting scheme. The best approach for waste minimisation is reuse (eg reusable cups) or avoiding unnecessary purchases.

Ensure money is invested wisely

Across the UK, local authorities are investing tens of millions of pounds each into fossil fuel companies, despite having declared a climate emergency. Although town council investments will be tiny in comparison, the council should still ensure any council funds are invested safely in low-risk sustainable banks or investment funds.

Use your powers wisely

Ensure you know the climate change or nature implications of decisions before you make them

It isn't credible to accept the need for rapid action on climate change and nature and then make decisions without knowing whether they'll be harmful or helpful. Requiring every decision to be well informed is common sense as well as good practice. This should extend to demanding that the planning authority provides you with this kind of information when consulting you.

Designate sites within the Neighbourhood Plan for trees, renewable energy and nature restoration

In practice, the development of 90% of Neighbourhood Plans is led by town and parish councils working hand in hand with their communities. The Neighbourhood Planning process is far from perfect and very time consuming, but it offers the community the opportunity to show it means business on protecting and enhancing the environment for future generations.

Use the Neighbourhood Plan to require new homes to be energy efficient, nature friendly, and located close to public transport and amenities.

Given the climate and nature emergency, it's unfortunate that the government doesn't require all new homes to be as sustainable as possible. Neighbourhood Plans will identify sites for future housing and should push for these to be zero-carbon (eg Passivhaus standard) and nature friendly, even though the local planning authority may seek to override this aim. Homes should also be fitted with renewable energy. Homes need to be located close to amenities and public transport to avoid car dependency.

Designate safe walking and cycle routes in the Neighbourhood Plan

Identify safe walking and cycling routes and where necessary work in partnership with district and county councils to deliver them. The Propensity to Cycle tool identifies the huge potential for increasing cycling in all areas of the country, particularly with good quality infrastructure, such as segregated cycleways and cycle parking, and with the use of E-bikes.^{[17](#)}

Use differential car-parking charges to support low-carbon vehicles

Any car parks run by the council should offer low cost or free car-parking to electric vehicles and dedicated spaces with electric charging points.

Acknowledgements

This list of actions has drawn on ideas kindly shared by others including Simon Pickering (Green councillor, Stroud), Robert Vint (Extinction Rebellion, Totnes) and Chris Gittins (Timsbury Parish Council). All three also kindly provided comments on an earlier draft, for which I thank them. Any mistakes or errors remain my own.

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Notes

1. Friends of the Earth, September 2019, Get your council to adopt our climate action plan, <https://takeclimateaction.uk/climate-action/get-your-council-adopt-our-climate-action-plan/>.
2. A register of accredited assessors is available at <https://www.epcregister.com/searchAssessor.html>.
3. To qualify for a government grant (Renewable Heat Incentive) to help with the costs of installing renewable heat such as solar thermal panels or heat pumps it's necessary to use a certified installer. The list of certified installers is at <https://mcscertified.com/find-an-installer/>.
4. See <https://www.transitionstreets.org.uk>.
5. There are a number of car-sharing schemes across the country, including national and local providers. Somerset County Council has a guide on setting up a community car-share scheme, <http://www.travelsomerset.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Car-Scheme-Toolkit-All-You-Need-to-Know-DW-Edit-2.doc>.
6. Website accessed 18 Sept 2019, <https://www.salixfinance.co.uk>.
7. Ofgem has guidance on the non-domestic Renewable Heat Incentive at <https://www.ofgem.gov.uk/environmental-programmes/non-domestic-rhi>.
8. For example, Octopus was the first to offer a tariff to pay for exported energy (which will be metered) <https://octopus.energy/outgoing/>. Other companies will follow suit.
9. See <https://www.salixfinance.co.uk>.
10. The company WeedingTech has produced a case study, but you might want to check on the current situation with Glastonbury Town Council, https://www.weedingtech.com/case_studies/glastonbury-town-council/.
11. Buglife and Friends of the Earth, Helping pollinators locally, <https://friendsoftheearth.uk/nature/helping-pollinators-locally>.
12. Buglife B-lines Hub, <https://www.buglife.org.uk/b-lines-hub>.
13. See <https://friendsoftheearth.uk/nature/10x-greener-towns-and-cities>.
14. Urban Forestry and Woodland Advisory Committee Network, England's Urban Forests: Using tree canopy cover data to secure the benefits of the urban forest, https://cdn.forestresearch.gov.uk/2022/02/fr_fc_treecanopydata_leaflet.pdf.
15. NALC website, The Tree Charter, <https://www.nalc.gov.uk/treecharter>.
16. Terracycle website, <https://www.terracycle.com/en-GB/>.
17. Propensity to Cycle tool, <https://www.pct.bike/>.