

07/05/2019

Why neighbourhood plans should tackle climate change

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Civil society has an important role to play in helping the UK meet its climate change targets – so why isn't mitigation mandatory in neighbourhood plans? Daniel Stone MRTPI makes the case for change

Anyone not living under a rock will have noticed the recent increase in public concern about climate change – whether it's Extinction Rebellion's high-profile actions in London, the school children on strike around the world, or dozens of villages, town and cities passing climate emergency resolutions. All are bottom-up demands for greater national ambition and action, and – in the case of teenage climate warrior, Greta Thunberg – an incredible example of speaking truth to power.

Several factors have provoked this. One is the lack of any meaningful action by global leaders to bring down emissions, despite decades of talk, and intergenerational injustice moving from being an abstract concept to being injustice for our children.

Another is the number of extreme weather events graphically portrayed on our TV screens, from terrifying heatwaves and wildfire in Australia to catastrophic flooding in the USA, India and Japan, to name just a few.

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A third is the report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), *Global Warming of 1.5 °C*, which includes the most frightening and clinical dissection of possible climate – and societal – breakdown, with a short 12-year countdown (now just 11.5 years) in which to sort it out. David Attenborough's intervention has helped, too.

On 1 May, Parliament responded, adopting a UK-wide climate emergency. And in their report the following morning, the Committee on Climate Change (CCC) recommended that our existing commitment to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 80 per cent by 2050 be upgraded to full carbon neutrality.

The truth is, though, that the government needs all the help it can get to make this happen. In the UK, we aren't even on track to meet our existing carbon reduction commitments under the Climate Change Act (80% reduction by 2050) and, as the CCC recognises, these commitments aren't enough anyway. Our buildings are ill equipped for the climate we have at present, never mind the climate to come with 1.5 or 2, or, heaven forbid, 3 or even 4° Celsius of warming.

What can the planning system do to address this?

In the report *Rising to the Climate Crisis*, the RTPI and the Town and Country Planning Association (TCPA) talk persuasively about the role local planning authorities can play in adopting climate mitigation and adaptation policies. They also stress the need for local plans to be carbon audited and achieve carbon reductions in line with the Climate Change Act. This requirement, already in place in planning legislation and guidance, would have far reaching effects, if only it were enforced.

Given that communities are already writing neighbourhood plans, and given that government needs all the help it can get, civil society can help. Or to put it another way, knowing what we know, is it really wise to write neighbourhood plans setting spatial planning policies for the next five years which don't take into account – and try to avoid – an existential threat that needs to be solved in the next ten? Is it sensible to adopt plans which tacitly assume that everything can go on unchanged when our children complain about not having a future?

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Don't forget that that most of the *technical* solutions to tackling the climate crisis are already there. What's lacking is the political will to apply them. Bear in mind, too, that the carbon emission reductions we've already achieved in the UK are the low hanging fruit, achieved mostly through moving away from coal for electricity production. Entirely decarbonising our society will require the informed consent of the public for some quite radical changes in how we live, travel and where we get our energy from.

Neighbourhood planning is an opportunity to nurture this consent. The development of a neighbourhood plan is a rare moment when a local community gets together to talk about the future. So why not encourage them to plan for the range of futures that might actually be ahead of them? Why not use the opportunity to normalise and localise discussions of climate change which are mostly so removed from daily experience?

In this way, neighbourhood plans can help expand the space within which politicians can safely work, bringing high hanging fruit into reach, and add to the efforts of national and local government in finding solutions. For the government and the 50-plus councils which have signed climate emergency resolutions committing them to achieving carbon neutrality by a specific date, it might provide some of the answers to the question "what now?"

The Centre for Sustainable Energy's [Low Carbon Neighbourhood Planning Programme](#) is already encouraging neighbourhood planning groups to consider their resilience to climate impacts and incorporate locally relevant adaptation and mitigation policies. We're integrating the IPCC report into our guidebook for neighbourhood planners and we give free hands-on support to groups seeking to push through climate friendly plans – including approaches they can use to build a mandate for ambitious policies.

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We're definitely making progress. Local people are increasingly ready to develop really ambitious policies, the constraint being what their examiner will accept. There's a reasonable list now of exemplar plans which push the envelope in terms of rolling out renewables, building climate resilient developments and fostering more self-sufficient settlements.

But so much more could be done. Unbelievably, there is currently no requirement or even encouragement for neighbourhood plans to address climate change, only a meaningless requirement to promote "sustainable development" with no cross-reference to the most serious threat to it.

What now?

To government (and the Committee on Climate Change) we'd say: neighbourhood planning could be an easy opportunity to harness the efforts of civil society in responding to the climate crisis and build support for the broader, more difficult changes needed.

The government should take two actions now:

1. Revise planning practice guidance to encourage neighbourhood plans to address climate issues and contribute to carbon reductions in line with the climate change act.
2. Link the general requirement for neighbourhood plans to contribute to sustainable development with the most urgent threat to it, climate change.

To councils we'd say: put groups in touch with CSE for free support and encourage innovative polices. Get in touch yourself if you want us to speak at an event.

To climate activists of all stripes we'd say: why not seize some of the policy levers already available to you (imperfect though they are) and hack the system to plan for the zero carbon future we need in your local community? We're already supporting groups around the country doing just this.

Daniel Stone MRTPI manages the Centre for Sustainable Energy's [Low Carbon Neighbourhood Planning Programme](#)

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