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Policy changes needed to enable local authorities in England to deliver on climate change

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

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Local authorities are not powerless on climate change. Our briefing '[33 actions local authorities can do on climate change](#)' shows that there are things they could be doing right now.

But it is also true that over the last 10 years local authorities 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 change.

This briefing identifies 12 policy changes the government should make **to enable local authorities to do much more on climate change**. It does not include actions that the central government is best placed to lead on, such as decarbonisation of the electricity grid or bringing forward the date for all new cars to be electric vehicles.

Overarching policy changes

Increase powers to raise money

Both through direct funding and through increasing local authority powers to raise funds.

The central government (Westminster) will necessarily need to provide a proportion of the funds needed, including through ensuring EU funds, the 'Shared Prosperity Fund', or Industrial Strategy funds are used to drive the transition to zero carbon.

But it is also possible to raise more funds locally through granting local authorities new powers. For example, the law should be changed so that local authorities can raise a significant proportion of funding for urban public transport through a local public transport payroll levy.

In the future road-pricing will also be an important tool to reduce carbon emissions and raise funds. Around £6 billion per year is needed to fund urban public transport and cycling across the UK.

Introduce a statutory duty to cut carbon pollution in-line with the Climate Change Act

Local authorities and combined local authorities should have a statutory duty to reduce climate change emissions and should be allocated local carbon budgets that are in-line with national carbon budgets, with the choice to go further if they choose.

Local authorities should also be required to develop a carbon plan and carry out an audit of all their plans to bring them in line with the carbon budget they are set. Regional bodies, such as sub-national transport bodies, also need this clear statutory duty.

Such a duty would empower those authorities that want to take greater action, and protect them from challenges from developers and others who want climate change to be down-played or ignored

Rewrite the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), National Policy Statements, and Planning Practice Guidance

This is necessary to make delivery of carbon reduction targets centre-stage in the planning system. For example, through:

- Mandating that development proposals that are not consistent with achieving local carbon budgets are rejected. This could include applications for new road schemes, retail, unsuitable residential developments, or aviation expansion;
- Requiring that suitable areas for renewable and local carbon energy sources are identified and allocated in local plans; and,
- Requiring that that development plans and planning policies set out measures needed to achieve zero carbon developments and communities.

The NPPF should lead to higher-density development that:

- is located near to new or existing high-quality public transport and services;

- protects and enhances green space;
- minimises life-cycle carbon emissions in demolition, construction, materials, and use;
- and are resilient to extreme weather events.

Currently the NPPF contains helpful pointers, but overall hinders the ability for local authorities to take action to achieve the radical reductions in greenhouse gas emissions that are needed.

Reform Local Economic Partnerships (LEPs) to be solely advisory bodies

This is to ensure all funding and decisions are made through local and regional democratic decision-making forums. This would reduce the democratic deficit that currently exists due to funding projects through unelected and unaccountable LEPs and gives local authorities much more control and ability to drive climate change emission reductions.

Buildings

Put local authorities centre-stage of transforming heating

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

In delivering these they will necessarily work with the gas and electricity network operators and the energy companies.

The funds for this transformation programme could be raised through a national “polluter pays” tax on the fossil fuel industry. Local authorities are ideally placed to lead this collective and cooperative effort.

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

Minimum energy efficiency standards in the private rented sector should be increased – setting them on the path to a minimum EPC band C in 2030, with interim steps (Scotland has a minimum of EPC band D by 2022).

The maximum threshold of spending by landlords should also be increased to at least £5000, and landlords should be able to offset this through reintroduction of the Landlord's Energy Saving Allowance (LESA). The standards should also apply to houses of multiple occupation and the social rented sector.

These are all important national actions, alongside other changes needed to address protections and availability of homes for renters.

But local authorities also have a key role in ensuring compliance, a role which is not yet being carried out. Local authority licencing of the private-rented sector should be encouraged and supported. It would enable local authorities to raise necessary finance to police these standards as well as ensure health & safety requirements are met.

Empower councils to introduce higher standards for new buildings

This requires reinstating the Code for Sustainable Homes nationally to require all new homes to meet the level 6 standard (net zero CO₂) or as a minimum supporting local authorities who seek to require this, in line with the proactive approach advocated by the NPPF. It also requires scrapping permitted development rights which has allowed the development of sub-standard properties poorly serviced by public transport and distant from amenities. Permitted development should only be used for very minor developments, such as garden shed, fitting solar panels or installing heat pumps. Non-domestic building should be required to be BREEAM outstanding or excellent.

Transport

Establish a new body, Walking and Cycling for England, to support local authorities to deliver excellent cycling and walking infrastructure and services

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

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 supporting encouragement when they face challenges.

Cargo Bike Demonstration Cities could also show how freight in urban areas can be shifted from vans to e-bikes.

Enable local authorities to charge a levy on parking at large retailers and leisure facilities

With many retail and leisure facilities out of town and poorly served by public transport, such a levy could fund public transport provision and segregated cycleways to them. This scheme is similar to the workplace parking levy successfully deployed by Nottingham City Council to fund urban public transport.

Enable the regulation of bus services

Local authorities, combined local authorities or transport bodies with responsibility for buses should be automatically allowed to reregulate bus services. This would enable them to ensure a comprehensive network of frequent, reliable and affordable buses with a single ticket system. Also local authorities that wish to establish a municipal public transport operator should be allowed to do so.

A new body, Local Public Transport for England, should be set-up to help provide local authorities with the skills and guidance to govern, plan and manage local public transport in an effective way.

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.

The restrictions that have led in practice to a ban on new on-shore wind developments in England should also be removed.

In addition, as stated above, they should be able to require all new developments to include low carbon energy supply, such as heat pumps, solar power or micro-wind, on site as part of or alongside new developments. New development should be required to achieve net-zero carbon.

Waste

Fund mandated weekly food waste collections

The government's commitment to introducing full cost recovery for products that end up in household waste is welcome, although the commitment still needs to be delivered in practice. This should mean that funding of recycling and waste services shifts from council tax payers to product manufacturers and retailers.

The move to mandate the collection of food waste is also welcomed and should lead to more anaerobic digesters producing more green gas. But funding needs to be made available for this.

Waste and Minerals plans should be aiming for a zero-waste circular economy approach, which includes using collected food waste to good effect.