

1 **The role of UK local government in delivering on net zero carbon commitments:**

2 **You've declared a climate emergency, so what's the plan?**

3

4 Peter Gudde¹, Justine Oakes¹, Peter Cochrane, Nicholas Caldwell, Nic Bury¹,

5

6 School of Engineering, Arts, Science and Technology, Waterfront Building, Neptune Quay,

7 Ipswich, IP4 1QJ UK, University of Suffolk

8

9 ¹Suffolk Sustainability Institute, Waterfront Building, Neptune Quay, Ipswich, IP4 1QJ UK.

10 University of Suffolk

11

12

13 **Abstract**

14 Local authorities in the United Kingdom are recognised by central government as key agents to
15 achieving the national net zero target aimed at stabilising global temperatures at or below 1.5
16 degrees in line with the Paris Climate Agreement. Since 2018, over 75% of local authorities
17 have declared climate emergencies committing to achieving net zero greenhouse gas
18 emissions. This paper presents the findings of a review of official public records published by
19 308 local authorities, City Regions and Combined Authorities declaring climate emergencies.
20 Significant variability and ambiguity were found in their scope of commitment, delivery planning
21 arrangements and funding plans. Few local authorities have embraced the concept of Citizens'
22 Climate Assemblies as a way of engaging civil society. A follow-up review showed that although
23 there is near uniformity of political desire to tackle climate change, action planning is very much
24 work in progress with tight delivery timelines for the majority, significant divergence in
25 approaches, and an unclear role for the citizen. The research concludes that without a local-
26 authority specific Net Zero duty and well-designed and financed delivery models, local
27 authorities will choose their own routes and finishing lines shaped by a complex ecosystem of
28 internal and external factors. A governance framework is proposed based on the concept of
29 local area climate contracts to bring together national and local Net Zero ambitions.

30

31

32 **Key words:** Climate emergency; local government; citizen engagement

33 **1 Introduction**

34

35 Local authorities (LA) in the United Kingdom (UK) have had a role in climate change for over
36 twenty-five years. In that time, many have employed public declarations as a way of showing
37 their intention to tackle climate change, from the Sustainable Development Local Agenda 21
38 commitments following the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, the Nottingham Declaration on Climate

39 Change in the early 2000s to the Local Government Association’s Climate Local Commitment
40 (LGA, 2020).

41
42 Over 75% of local authorities¹ in the UK have now declared climate emergencies, choosing to
43 make their own local commitment following the Inter-Governmental Panel on Climate Change
44 Special Report SR15 (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), 2018). Their
45 commitments are in response to public pressure to act and statutory obligations made by the
46 UK Government and Devolved Administrations to reduce carbon emissions to net zero (UK
47 Government, 2019; Scottish Parliament, 2019; Welsh Assembly, 2019).

48
49 The extent to which these declarations are successful is of profound importance to the success
50 of national climate change and energy policy, given that the shift from fossil fuel-based energy
51 use to low and zero carbon alternatives is the principal route to reducing greenhouse gas
52 emissions in the UK. This raises several related questions: How coherent is the local
53 government response to tackling climate change where the scope of each organisation’s
54 declaration is a function of different factors, constraints and political wills? Given that the
55 declarations constitute political ‘Statements of Intent’, how has this translated into action?
56 Finally, where do the local stakeholders fit within the declaration process or the subsequent
57 shaping and delivery of local area-based action?

58
59 This study therefore evaluates how local government has progressed its climate and energy
60 commitments through the perspective of climate emergency declarations. The study intends to
61 identify implications of the efficacy of climate action planning from the ‘bottom-up’ and looks to

¹ The term “*Local Government*” refers to local authorities, being statutory organisations delivering specific functions to the locality across which it has administrative responsibility. They have democratic representation comprising of councillors elected by the electorate of the area that they serve. Although technically incorrect, the terms “*Local Authority*” and “*Council*” have been used interchangeably in the paper.

62 propose a governance framework which could marshal 'town hall' political ambition and activity,
63 taking advantage of current research and initiatives designed to support local government in the
64 absence of coherent national policy or regulatory mandate to act.

65

66 The research has utilised publicly available original and secondary sources and as part of the
67 analysis makes specific reference to research undertaken by the UK Energy Research Council
68 and the Association of Public Excellence (ASPE).

69

70 The paper is structured as follows: section 2 provides background to the Climate Emergency
71 Declaration as a concept and its emergence as a citizen-led movement within the UK local
72 politics. This section then outlines current UK energy policy focusing on the role of local
73 government and concludes with a review of climate-related initiatives that have been
74 implemented over the last 30 years. The study methodology is presented in Section 3. Section 4
75 presents the study results and discussion. Conclusions are presented in section 5. Section 6
76 sets out the Policy Implications where a novel framework for a "Climate Contract" between
77 central government and the local area is proposed.

78

79 **2 Background**

80

81 *2.1 The Climate Emergency Declaration*

82

83 The environmental pressure group Climate Mobilization defines a climate emergency
84 declaration as '...a piece of legislation passed by a governing body such as a city council, a
85 county board of supervisors, a state legislature, or even a national government. It puts the
86 government on record in support of taking emergency action to reverse global warming' (The
87 Climate Mobilization, 2020).

88

89 However, the origin of the ‘climate emergency’ as a term used in academic or grey literature is
90 not clearly defined, although the need to treat the impact of climate change as an issue

91 requiring urgent action is commonly considered in research literature. The terms ‘climate

92 catastrophe’ (Budyko, 1999; Baranzini et al 2003; Hansen 2010), ‘climate crisis’ (Hasselmann,

93 1991; Lenssen & Flavin, 1996), ‘climate disaster’ (Doerell, 1999; Williamson et al, 2002) and,

94 although rarely adopted, ‘climate surprise’ (Streets & Glantz, 2000) have been used to describe

95 the impact of global warming on a range of environmental, social and economic systems.

96 Hansen et al (1998) talked in the late 1990s of the ‘loading of the climate dice’ to be noticeable

97 to people” (p.4114). Delina & Diesendorf (2013) referred to the lack of and ‘the need to develop

98 contingency plans now for possible future emergency climate mitigation’ (p.371) and the

99 existence of an ‘emergency situation’, drawing on historical accounts of national preparations for

100 World War II that public acceptance for climate change action at the time of the research was

101 divided and that ‘it [climate action] would be greatly assisted by an acute climate emergency’

102 (p.371). Galvin (2020) considered the social forces that channel and inhibit human behaviour as

103 a valuable area of research to develop ‘a tentative sociology designed for use in a climate

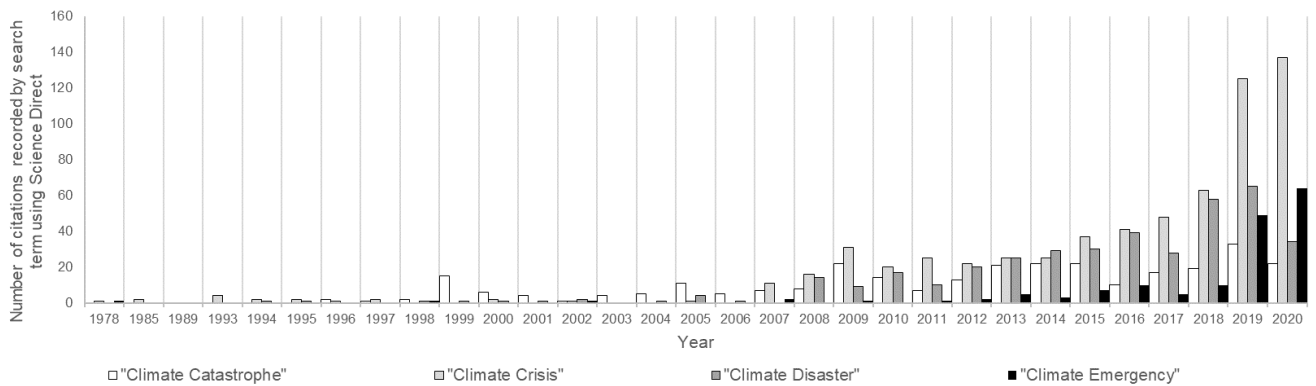
104 emergency’ (p.2). Specific references to ‘climate emergency’ in the academic literature,

105 however, become far more prominent from 2018 (Figure 1), while in popular literature and

106 media coverage it has gained common use, returning 11.6 million hits through a standard

107 search on Search Direct.

108



109

110 **Figure 1.** Citation frequency over time of climate-related terms in peer-reviewed literature (using Search

111 Direct accessed 7 April 2020)

112

113 Fifty years since the Club of Rome’s seminal report (Meadows et al, 1972) in which carbon

114 dioxide emissions were considered one of ‘the many disturbances’ that human activity ‘is

115 inserting into the environment at an exponentially increasing rate’ (p.78) the Club’s 2018

116 Climate Emergency Action Plan (Dixson-Declève et al, 2018) called on ‘governments, business

117 leaders, the science community, NGOs and citizens to rise to the challenge of climate action’

118 (p.3). Shortly after the Club of Rome’s 2018 publication, the international activist group,

119 Extinction Rebellion, established itself coherently using the term ‘climate emergency’ as its call

120 to arms, deliberately choosing this phrase to underscore the urgency of the need for

121 governments to act.

122

123 The Climate Emergency Declaration engenders the concepts of ‘crisis’ or ‘emergency’ with a

124 reframing of the science-based language and the need for urgent action typically driven by

125 citizen awareness, activism and protest as ‘a call to act’ (The Climate Mobilization, 2020). The

126 declaration accelerates the mission to decarbonise human activity beyond the 2°C global

127 temperature-ceiling to 1.5°C based on the associated modelling published in SR15 (IPCC,

128 2018). The focus is now not about carbon reduction but achieving ‘net zero’ carbon, although

129 terminology is used both with ambiguity and inter-changeability. Generally, but not without
130 exception, the declaration includes or is accompanied by a pledge to achieve net zero as an
131 end state by a specific date. Finally, in line with some of the citizen action that has been
132 observed across the world, they take a bottom-up, locality-centric approach. This may be a
133 reflection that, in the opinions of both activists and local politicians, national politics, politicians
134 and the associated institutions are not responding in a sufficiently robust way to the scientific
135 evidence.

136

137 *2.2 The recent rise of climate emergency citizen activism*

138

139 Although climate change protest is more than five decades old, the rise of climate emergency
140 activism is linked to the Paris Climate Agreement of 2015 and the subsequent publication of
141 Special Report SR15 (IPCC, 2018). The concept of the climate emergency as a citizen-driven
142 movement has been documented widely in the grey literature with public media attention on the
143 campaigning of the environmental activist, Greta Thunberg, and the direct-action movement,
144 Extinction Rebellion. The resulting international protests are therefore not a product of
145 conventional institutional frameworks, shaped and orchestrated by political parties, trade unions
146 or established non-governmental organisations. Rather, they have been citizen-led with several
147 factors contributing to the scale and form of the activities that have been witnessed since 2018;
148 the view that conventional political processes have failed to address climate change,
149 'disillusionment with the system at a time of growing distrust' (Pickard, 2019, p.5); the use of
150 social media to engage and organise mass protest; the role of key individuals who have
151 captured and engaged popular attention through broadcast media; and participation across all
152 ages in the UK, although the involvement of younger generations including protests by school
153 children using the mechanism of school strikes has been a notable characteristic (Fridays for
154 Future, 2020). Participation by younger people may, in part, be a function of broader

155 awareness of environmental issues compared to older generations, whether created through
156 institutional learning within the national teaching of geography and science at Key Stage 3 for
157 11- to 14-year-olds since 2013 (Department for Education, 2013) or wider exposure to the
158 impact of global environmental pollution on ecosystems and humans through popular media.

159
160 The role of Extinction Rebellion has been a key factor in the translation of climate emergency
161 from popular protest into institutional policy (DeSmog UK, 2019). Extinction Rebellion has
162 shaped the tone of citizen participation by publishing and advocating that governments and
163 other institutions 'tell the truth' about climate change by making a public climate and ecological
164 emergency declaration (Extinction Rebellion, 2017), by advocating the establishment of
165 Citizens' Assemblies as a means for 'ordinary people to investigate, discuss and make
166 recommendations on how to respond to the climate emergency' and by calling for urgent action
167 to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by 2025 (Extinction Rebellion, 2020). This
168 model of grassroots pressure is similar to that of a precursor pressure group, 360.org, described
169 as 'building people power' through multiple self-organising, local voluntary groups using digital
170 communications and online platforms' (Gunningham, 2019., p.197). However, in one respect
171 Extinction Rebellion has been able with to cross from mass activism and civil disobedience to
172 influencing government climate policy at both national and local level to achieve their aims.

173

174 2.3 *Carbon reduction and the energy transition in the UK*

175 In June 2019, the United Kingdom became the first country to sign into law a net zero carbon
176 emissions target, building on its previous obligated 80% reduction target established by the
177 Climate Change Act 2008. The Scottish and Welsh devolved administrations have taken their
178 own positions towards more stringent targets, with the Scottish Parliament introducing into law a
179 2045 target and the Welsh Assembly declaring a climate emergency setting a carbon neutral
180 public sector target by 2030.

181

182 Moving the UK energy system from fossil fuels to low carbon alternatives is a key part of the net
183 zero carbon equation. This is being enabled by a transition from a passive to an actively
184 managed energy system with increased deployment of distributed energy resources and
185 disruptive technologies (Ofgem, 2016, Royal Academy of Engineering, 2015). This transition is
186 occurring at a time when UK Government, the energy regulator (Ofgem) and energy sector
187 participants alike are searching for solutions to tackle the challenge of investing in the energy
188 system and the need to decarbonise to meet national and international obligations.

189

190 Meanwhile, more participants from within the community, public or non-energy-related
191 commercial sectors, are becoming active in the energy system beyond their traditional role as
192 energy consumers. This has been illustrated by the deployment over the last ten years of local
193 generation, with around 850,000 sites registered under the UK Feed-In-Tariff incentive scheme,
194 dominated by small-scale solar Photovoltaic (PV) installations (BEIS, 2019a).

195

196 *2.4 United Kingdom energy policy and the public sector*

197

198 United Kingdom energy policy is outlined in the UK Government's Industrial Strategy where
199 energy is described as one of the 'Grand Challenges' for the UK Economy, with the Government
200 seeing clean and affordable energy as a fundamental component of its strategic approach (HM
201 Government, 2017). Further, the Government states that 'clean energy, for example, is not just
202 an economic opportunity; it is also a moral duty in addressing Climate Change' (ibid. p.242).
203 Building on the Industrial Strategy, the Clean Growth Strategy sets out in more detail how UK
204 Government intends to shape the country's economy for the long term to meet its domestic

205 carbon reduction commitments set out in the Climate Change Act 2008 (HM Government,
206 2008).

207
208 In its recently published Energy White Paper, UK Government set out its long-term policy and
209 commitments to put the country 'on course to net zero' whilst acknowledging that the short-term
210 national policy agenda is critical with commitments 'to support a green recovery from COVID-19'
211 and 'create a fair deal for consumers' (HM Government, 2020, p16).

212
213 The public sector is identified in the Industrial and Clean Growth Strategies as a key agent;
214 firstly, through the development and implementation of national policy to deliver on the
215 Government's objectives and secondly, by leading specific activities, for example in the
216 transition to zero emission vehicles, improving the energy efficiency of its own building stock,
217 'demonstrating best practice, promoting transparency over emissions reporting and catalysing
218 markets in energy efficiency by implementing measures at scale' (HM Government, 2018,
219 p114). Following the publication of the Clean Growth Strategy, UK Government has supported
220 the development of regional energy strategies with local authorities seen as part of delivery
221 alongside other local and regional organisations.

222
223 The Committee on Climate Change (CCC) reported in 2012, and more recently in its
224 commissioned report in response to the publication of the UK's sixth carbon budget, that local
225 authorities are crucial to tackling climate change, both from the perspective of their direct
226 emissions and through the impact of their functions in affecting local greenhouse gas emissions
227 reduction, (CCC, 2012; Evans, 2020). Local authorities hold a particular and wide-ranging
228 sphere of influence in shaping energy planning and carbon reduction in their localities for the
229 long term. As Tingey and Webb (2018) observe, local government plays three key roles;

230 enabling, advising and investing in the energy future at local level meaning 'that they are
231 uniquely placed to contribute, and are critical to meeting the UK's carbon targets' (p.30).

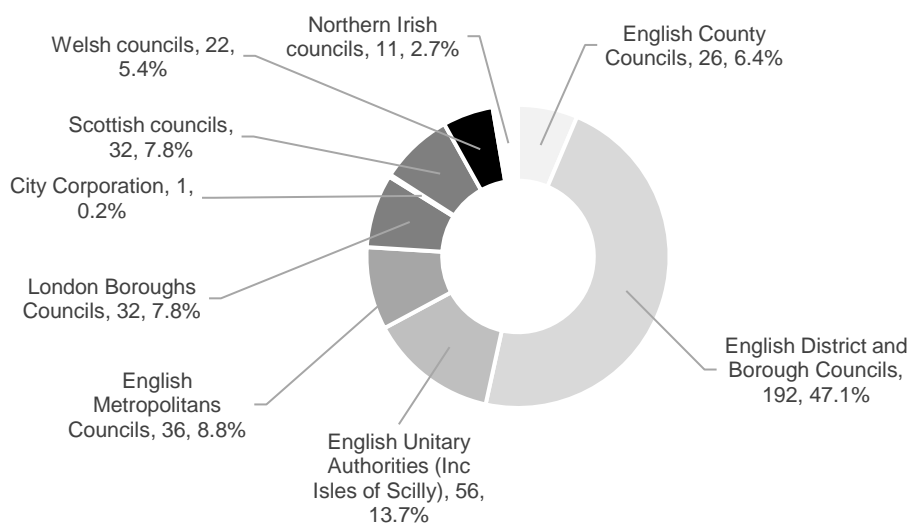
232
233 The policy-based mandate issued by Central Government to local areas to take forward the
234 energy transition and carbon reduction is summarised in the Clean Growth Strategy: 'Moving to
235 a productive low carbon economy cannot be achieved by central government alone; it is a
236 shared responsibility across the country' with local areas able to 'embed low carbon measures
237 in strategic plans across areas such as health and social care, transport, and housing' (HM
238 Government, 2017, p.118). However, this has only been translated into a clear legal
239 responsibility where Central Government and local administrative bodies under the directly
240 elected Mayor structure have agreed Local Devolution Deals as part of the additional powers
241 and responsibilities created by the Cities and Local Government Devolution Act 2016 (HM
242 Government, 2016).

243
244 *2.5 The structure of public administration in the United Kingdom and the role of local*
245 *authorities in mitigating climate change*

246
247 Public administration in the UK is hierarchically structured with Central Government and the
248 devolved administrations of Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales forming the top tier, a
249 complex structure of 408 'local authorities' (also termed 'councils') at the second tier and over
250 10,000 parish and town councils forming the third and lowest tier. The second and third tiers are
251 commonly referred to as 'local government' delivering a range of functions and services for the
252 communities with decisions generally taken by democratically-elected representatives. (Local
253 Government Information Unit (LGIU), 2020; Figure 2).

254

255 The local authority (Tier 2) structure is complex with responsibility and functionality split
 256 between County and District Councils or delivered by single entities (HM Government, 2020).



n=408

257 **Figure 2.** Local government by type across the UK (LGIU, 2020)
 258

259
 260 As defined by the Local Government Act 1972 (The National Archives, 2020a), the General
 261 Powers of Competence under the Localism Act 2011 (The National Archives, 2020b) or specific
 262 legislation, local authorities are responsible for ensuring the wellbeing of the people and places
 263 in their administrative areas. Depending on the prevailing structure, each local authority may be
 264 responsible for such functions as economic growth, spatial planning, transport, health and social
 265 care, education, housing, leisure and culture, fuel poverty, and environmental protection.
 266 Climate Change and energy touches all these areas of responsibility.

267
 268 Over the last three decades, local government has been an active participant in tackling climate
 269 change under various mandatory and voluntary initiatives (Table 1). However, the level of

270 ambition, the scope and effectiveness of delivery demonstrated by individual local authorities
271 within these initiatives has varied significantly and continues to do so.

Table 1, Initiatives that have influenced UK local government response to carbon reduction over the last three decades

Intervention/activity	Summary	Timeline	Scope of participation
RIO Earth Summit 1992 (United Nations (UN), 1987)	Local Agenda 21 plans.	Early 1990s onwards	Voluntary
Local Authority Energy/Carbon/Climate Change Strategies and Action Plans	Locally developed commitments to act to tackle Climate Change. There is no formal requirement or format used by local authorities for these documents.	1990s onwards	Voluntary
National Indicators and subsequently Memorandum of Understanding between the Local Government Association and the Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC, 2011)	NI 185 – Percentage CO ₂ reduction from local authority operations reporting linked to performance monitoring and reporting by Central Government. NI186 – Per capita reduction in CO ₂ emissions in the local authority area.	Early 2000s-2013	Mandatory under the Labour Government to 2010 then voluntarily under the 2010 Conservative Government
Key Line of Enquiry reporting (DCLG, 2012)	Introduced by UK Government and administered by Audit Commission to assess the performance of some public sector organisations.	Early 2000s-2010s	Mandatory for selected organisations under 2010 Conservative Government
Nottingham Declaration on Climate Change (LGA, 2020a)	The Declaration committed signatories to prepare an action plan to bring down their own emissions and those of their local communities.	2000 onwards	Voluntary
Voluntary Carbon Management Programmes (e.g. Carbon Trust, Energy Saving Trust)	Schemes run, for example, by the Carbon Trust and Energy Saving Trust aimed either specifically at local authorities or sectors in which local authorities participate e.g. fleet management, staff behavioural change.	Early 2000s onwards	Voluntary
Environmental and Energy Management Systems (e.g. the EU Eco-Management and Audit Scheme, ISO50001 Energy Management and ISO14001 management standards)	Management approaches to environmental performance improvement, covering energy and carbon emissions. These include ISO50001 Energy Management and ISO14001 management standards (ISO, 2020) and the EU Eco-Management and Audit Scheme (European Commission, 2020).	Mid 2000s onwards	Voluntary – All organisations can participate
Local Area Agreements (DCLG, 2010)	Funding agreements between central and local government to incentivise action at local level to meet national objectives.	Mid 2000s-2010	Mandatory for participating administrative areas under the Labour Government to 2010
Local Climate Impact Profiles (LCLIP, 2020)	.	Mid 2000s-onwards	Mandatory under the Labour Government to 2010
EU Covenant of Mayors for Climate & Energy (Covenant of Mayors, 2020)	The Covenant of Mayors is a European Union initiative with the ambition to bring together local governments voluntarily committed to achieving and exceeding the EU climate and energy targets	2008 onwards	Voluntary
Carbon Reduction Commitment (BEIS and Environment Agency, 2020)	Introduced to replace NI185 moving from a statutory requirement to a voluntary request for local government administrations to publish their GHG emissions inventories annually.	2010-2019	Mandatory for larger local authorities
Sharing information on greenhouse gas emissions from local authority own estate and operations (BEIS, 2013)	Launched by the Local Government Association as the successor to the Nottingham Declaration.	2011 onwards	Voluntary under Memorandum of Understanding
Climate Local (LGA, 2020)	Climate was originally a Local Government Association initiative to 'to drive, inspire and support council action on climate change'.	2012 onwards	Voluntary

Display Energy Certificates (HM Government, 2020)	DECs promote the improvement of the energy performance of buildings and form part of the implementation in England and Wales of the European Directives 2002/91/EC and 010/31/EU on the energy performance of buildings.	2015 onwards	Mandatory for larger public buildings
Regional Energy Strategies/Clean Growth Plans developed by Local Enterprise Partnership across England	Funded by BEIS through the Local Enterprise Partnership across England.	2017 onwards	Quasi-mandatory
UK100 (UK100, 2020)	UK100 is a network of highly ambitious local government leaders, who have pledged to secure the future for their communities by shifting to 100% clean energy by 2050.	Current	Voluntary

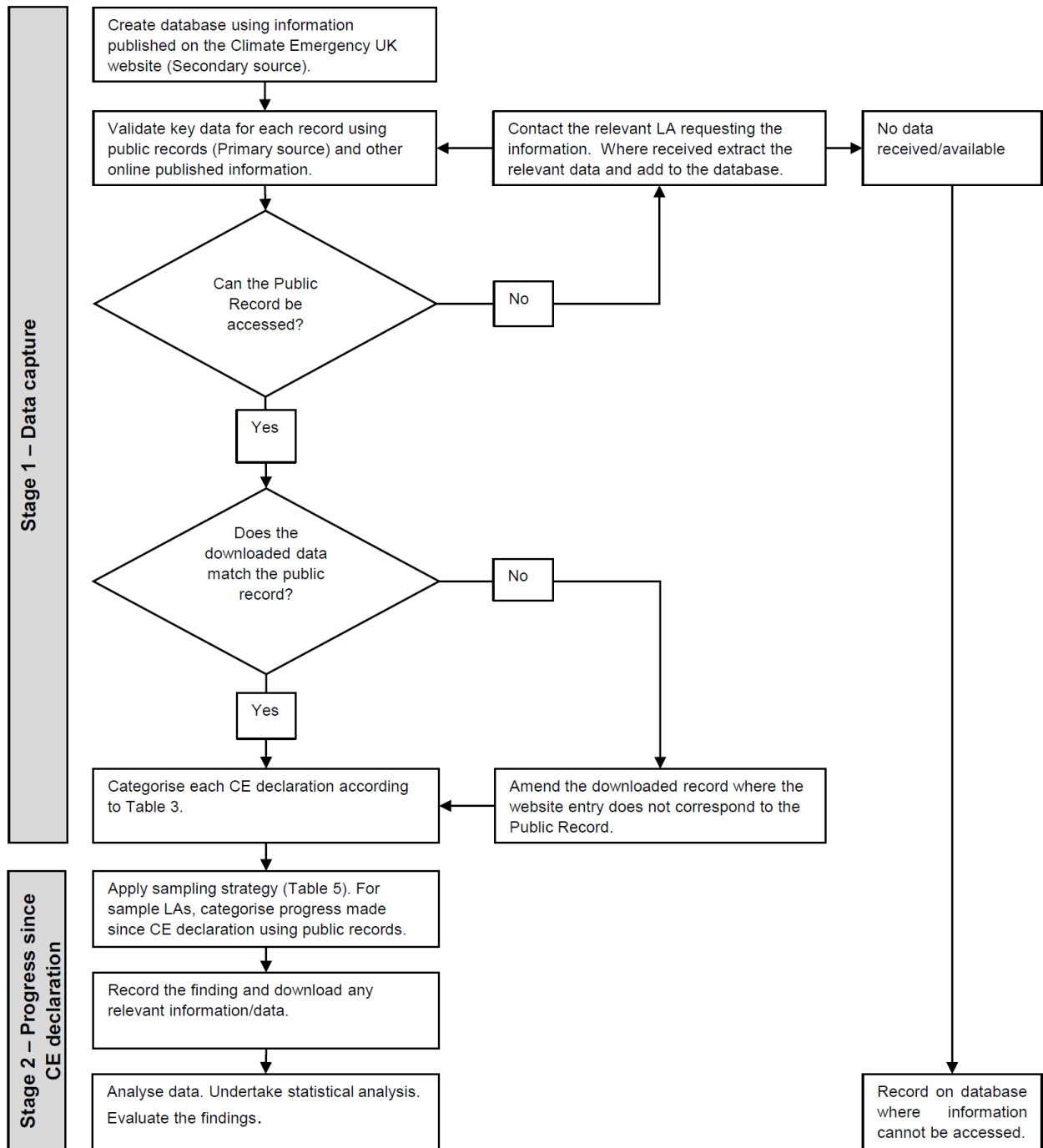
1 Much of this variability is a function of factors specific to the nature of local government and the
2 characteristics of the localities : the democratic process, the election cycle and party-politics
3 structure in the UK: the powers or duties with which a local authority is vested: the processes,
4 practices and conventions which frame local authority activity; a local authority's specific
5 corporate approach and structure with regards to policy and service delivery: its financial
6 standing, capacity and capability to deliver; the nature of the local area that each local authority
7 serves in terms of its physical geography, demography and the economic and social conditions
8 that prevail; finally, and of particular note, the level of public awareness and political activism
9 around the climate change agenda. This final factor has seen a sea-change in local political
10 activity within local authorities since 2018 which, when compared to the non-statutory initiatives
11 listed in Table 2 that have gone before it, could arguably only be matched in scale of activity by
12 the drive for action inspired by the Rio Earth Summit in 1992.

13

14 **3. Methodology**

15 The research methodology is outlined in Figure 3.

16



17

18 **Figure 3.** Research methodology. Outlining the two stages and criteria for inclusion in the final database
 19 and analysis.

20

21 Firstly, data recorded on the Climate Emergency website, <https://www.climateemergency.uk/>

22 was captured and categorised according to a range of features (Table 2). Using local authority

23 public records, a sample of local authorities was then analysed to assess what action planning,
 24 investment and public engagement has been undertaken since their declaration was made.

25

26 **Table 2.** Information gathered from published local authority meeting minutes

Themes	Categories used in the research
Scope of declaration	Council-only emergency declared Locality-wide emergency declared Council and wider community declaration Unclear as to scope of declaration No information published
Civil engagement	No information published No public engagement proposed Citizens' Assembly proposed Citizens' Assembly established Council/Agency-only group proposed Council/Agency-only group established Public/agency group proposed Public/agency working established Public/agency working proposed
Delivery planning	No information published Committed to developing a delivery/action plan Delivery/action plan published Proposals to review existing action plan Commitment to report back to Council
Financing delivery	No reference to financial impact/commitment Proposals to review financial impact Financial provision planned Financial provision published

27

28 *3.1 Methodology Stage 1 - Data capture and analysis of Climate Emergency Declarations*

29

30 The Green Web Foundation (2020) hosts www.climateemergency.uk, a database referencing
 31 local authorities which have declared climate emergencies. The database allows local
 32 authorities, as well as other organisations, to post details of their declaration (Table 3). The data
 33 capture was undertaken between February and November 2020, by which time of the 408 local
 34 authorities in the UK, 308 (75%) had elected to upload information.

35

36

37

38

39

40

41 **Table 3.** Information recorded on the Climate Emergency UK website (The Green Web Foundation, 2020)

42

	Details
Type of local authority	English County Councils, English District and Borough Councils, English Unitary Authorities (including Isles of Scilly), English Metropolitan Councils, London Boroughs Councils, City Corporation, Scottish councils, Welsh councils, Northern Irish councils (see Figure 3 for a breakdown)
Region	South East, North East, Scotland, Northern Ireland, East, Yorkshire, North West, South West, West Midlands, London
Political control	Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat, Green, Plaid Cymru, No Overall Control, Independent
Proposer of declaration by political affiliation	As above
Date declaration passed	The date that a Council committee, usually the Full Council or Cabinet, met and approved a motion to declare a Climate Emergency.
Target date	The date set to meet the scope of the Climate Emergency Declaration

43

44 The Climate Emergency UK database has been used since it provides the most comprehensive
 45 dataset available. However, it has limitations as an authoritative source; the database does not
 46 capture the totality of local authority activity and by using this information source this study does
 47 not take account of over one hundred local authorities that have not signalled their position via
 48 the website. Individual local authorities upload their own data with the study revealing a small
 49 number of inaccuracies. Some local authorities may not be aware of the database or have
 50 chosen not to include their information for a range of reasons.

51

52 Given these limitations, the research process included several data quality control and
 53 verification processes with each entry checked against council public records. Key meeting
 54 minutes for each council were reviewed and further information manually extracted and grouped
 55 according to the categories set out in Table 4. A small number of records (n=3) could not be
 56 accessed.

57

58 *4.2 Methodology Stage 2: Post-declaration activity*

59

60 Stage 2 of the research analysed local authority action planning. A semi-random sampling
 61 strategy was used to select local authorities based on their administrative type. Using random
 62 number generation, a percentage of local authorities were selected within each type. A
 63 limitation was the variation in population sizes, ranging from city regions (N=3) to district
 64 councils (N=124). A decision was therefore taken to adopt a minimum 10% sample size which
 65 meant that the whole population was sampled in the smallest categories (Table 4).

66

67 **Table 4.** Stage 2 sampling strategy

		Local Authority (LA) type						
		City regions	Combined Authorities	County Councils	District Councils	London Boroughs	Metropolitan Boroughs	Unitary Authorities
Population	278	3	6	19	124	24	31	71
Sampling approach		All selected	All selected	RANDBETWEEN Function used to select Excel row number within the data sub-set				
Sample size	42	3	6	4	12	4	6	7
Sample size (%)	15%	100%	100%	21%	10%	17%	19%	10%

68 Note: reference to N equals the size of the population while n equals the size of the sample

69

70 The sampling strategy was applied to the dataset on the 7 April 2020 with 42 organisations
 71 selected from the population in the database observed at the time of analysis (N=278). A data
 72 search was then undertaken of council websites and committee databases to find any records
 73 setting out how each declaration was progressing. Action planning, approaches to civil society
 74 engagement and what new financial commitments had been made were each assessed. The
 75 aim was to address two themes; firstly, the level coherence of the local government delivery;
 76 and how this was being translated into action. A chi-square test of association was performed
 77 to examine the relationship between particular variables.

78

79 A search was also carried out using the home page search function of each sampled local
 80 authority’s website using the syntax “Climate”, “Climate Emergency” “Climate Emergenc*”,

81 “Climate Emergency Declaration” with “Environment” used if no hits were recorded. The
82 purpose of this was to identify any published material aimed at the public. Key documents were
83 extracted and reviewed to support the analysis.

84

85 **5. Results and Discussions**

86 *4.1 Stage 1 – Climate Emergency declarations*

87

88 Based on the research, 308 (75%) of UK local authorities have declared a Climate Emergency.
89 Given the self-reporting feature of the Climate Emergency UK database, some declaring local
90 authorities may not be represented.

91 Despite the fact that local authorities have access to the same technical evidence, the IPCC
92 report SR15 (2018), they use a range of interpretations and interchangeability of terminology.
93 For example, the Greater London Assembly refers to being a ‘zero-carbon city’, the Greater
94 Manchester Combined Authority wishes Manchester to be a ‘carbon-neutral city’, the West
95 Midlands Combined Authority (2020) is aiming at ‘net zero carbon emissions’, while Gwynedd
96 wishes to become ‘*carbon-free*’. Some local authorities are explicitly interpreting the target with
97 reference to the Greenhouse Gas (GHG) Protocol (WRI, 2020), for example the Isle of Wight
98 Council and York City Council.

99

100 The bulk of local authority declarations were made between December 2018 and March 2020
101 (n=304) with the peak month July 2019 (n=106). This can be put into a contextual timeline with
102 external events, including Conference of Parties (COP21), the emergence of climate activism by
103 public popular figures and activist organisations and UK Government passing into law its Net
104 Zero target (Figure 3). The lack of declarations post-March 2020 may in part result from the first
105 COVID-19 pandemic lockdown when council committee activity practically ceased.

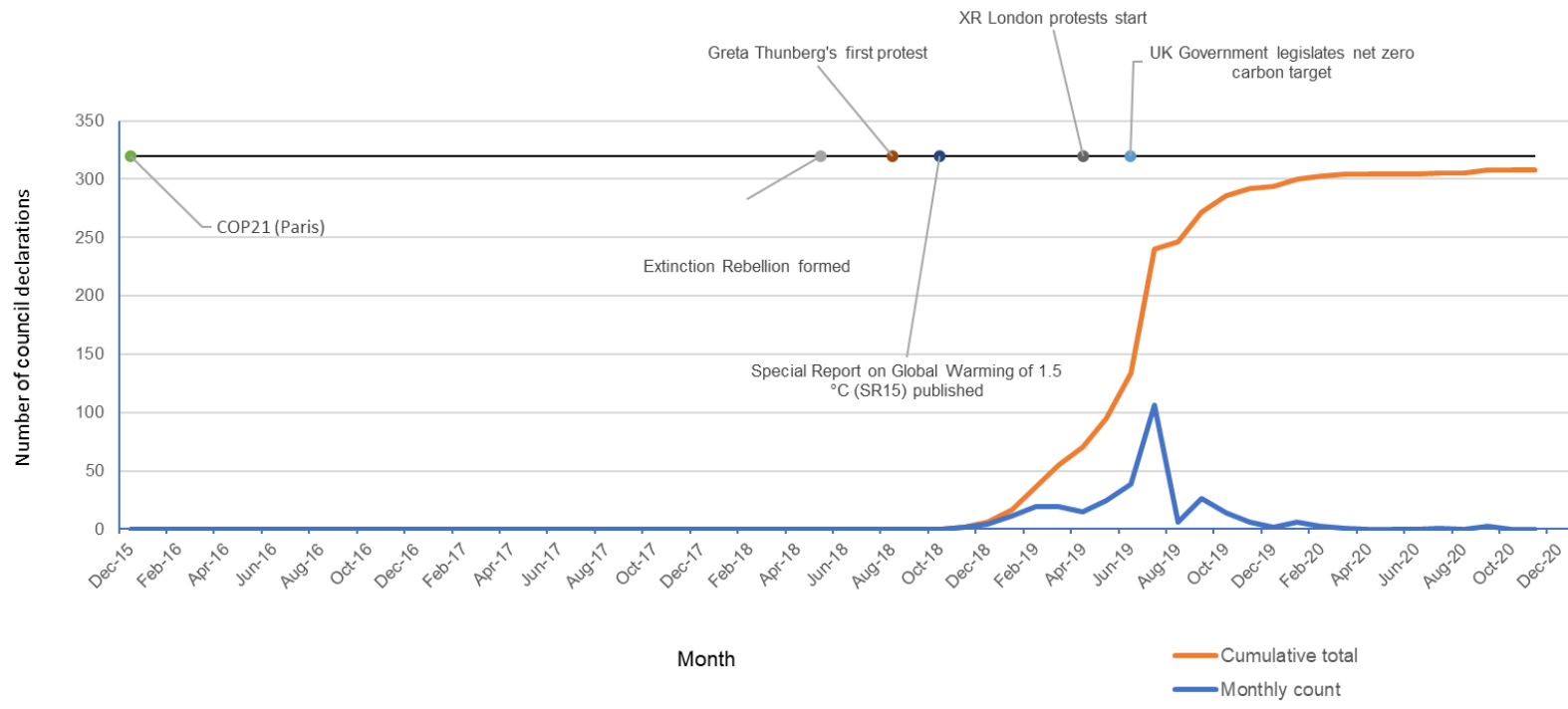


Figure 3. The UK Climate Emergency Declaration timeline showing the monthly counts of local authorities making a declaration (blue line) and expressed as a cumulative sum (orange line).

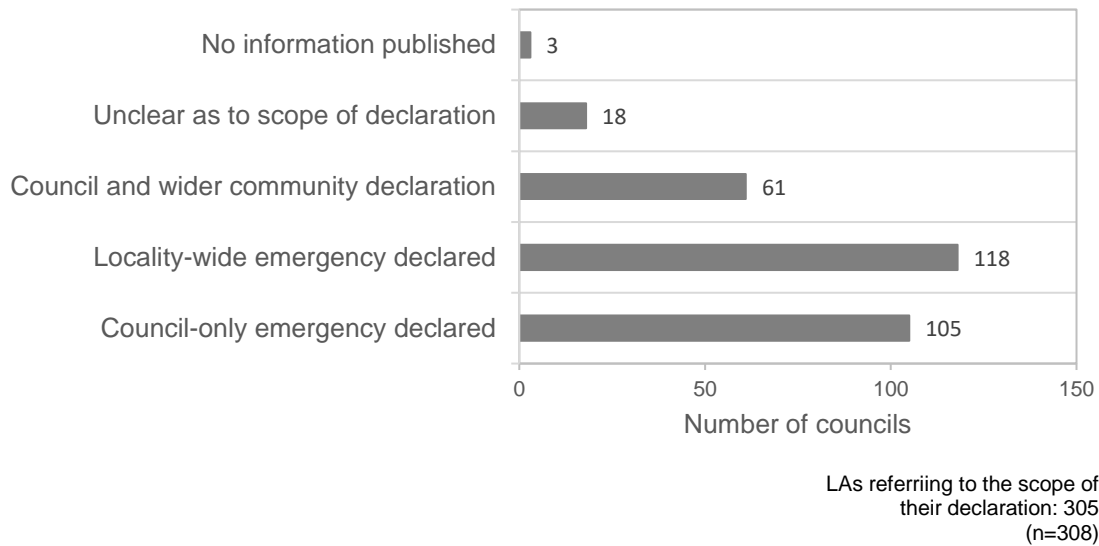
1 There is some evidence to show that declaring a climate emergency is influenced by political
2 affiliation in that all 97 authorities led by Labour, 23 led by the Liberal Democrats or the one
3 council led by Plaid Cymru have declared a climate emergency whereas only 80 out of 142
4 (56%) Conservative-controlled authorities, 100 of 132 (75%) authorities under No Over Control
5 and 7 of 13 (54%) Independent-controlled authorities have declared climate emergencies.

6

7 This generally reflects the position of main political parties in each of their 2019 General
8 Election manifestos (Conservative and Unionist Party, 2019; Labour Party, 2019; Liberal
9 Democratic Party, 2019; Plaid Cymru, 2019; Scottish Nationalist Party, 2019). It is also a feature
10 of local government political leadership being more diverse and parochial in nature with 145
11 (6%) of Councils being under no overall political control or under independent political
12 leadership.

13

14 One hundred and five (34%) local authorities declared a climate emergency relating solely to
15 their own operations while 179 (58%) included the wider community. Twenty-one (7%)
16 declarations were unclear about their geographical scope or provided no information; it could be
17 that these local authorities have implicitly included their administrative area in their declaration
18 although some may have deliberately chosen to remain vague (Figure 4).



19

20 **Figure 4.** Scope of climate emergency declarations made by UK local authorities

21

22 The question whether the type of local authority affected the scope of the declaration was
 23 considered. After merging the local authorities types into larger categories, a chi-squared test of
 24 association was undertaken; a p-value outcome of 0.351 indicated that declaration of scope was
 25 independent of local authority type.

26

27 A smaller study of their members by APSE Energy showed a relatively even split with a large
 28 minority of local authorities (48%, n=36) adopting a locality-wide approach. As APSE Energy
 29 state in their report, this will mean that ‘these authorities will need to focus on the leadership
 30 role...to encouraging the whole locality to engage with the net zero carbon agenda’ (APSE,
 31 2019).

32

33 Two hundred and thirty-seven have set a target date for achieving their declaration
 34 commitments with 179 (75%) local authorities selecting 2030 (Figure 5). The next most
 35 favoured target dates were 2040 (n=13) and 2050 (n=23). There are at least three reasons for
 36 authorities that could explain not setting a target date: some may be intending to gather further

37 evidence in order to set a target date, some may be defaulting to the national 2050 target, while
38 some may have felt it inappropriate to set a target date.

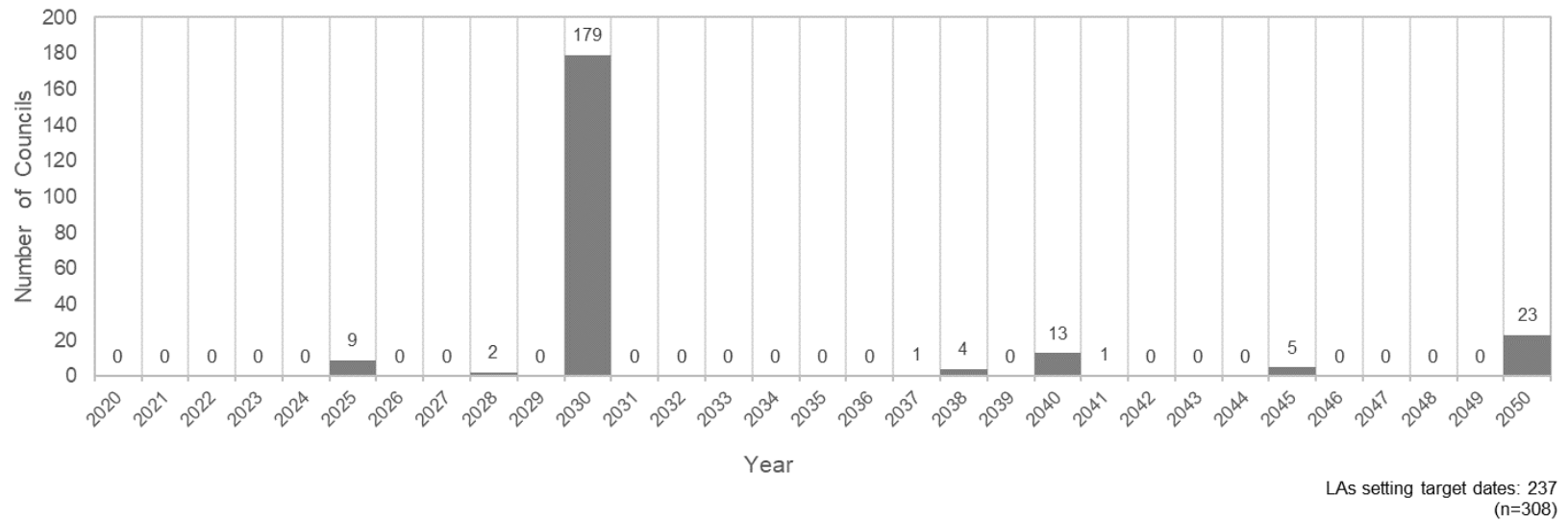
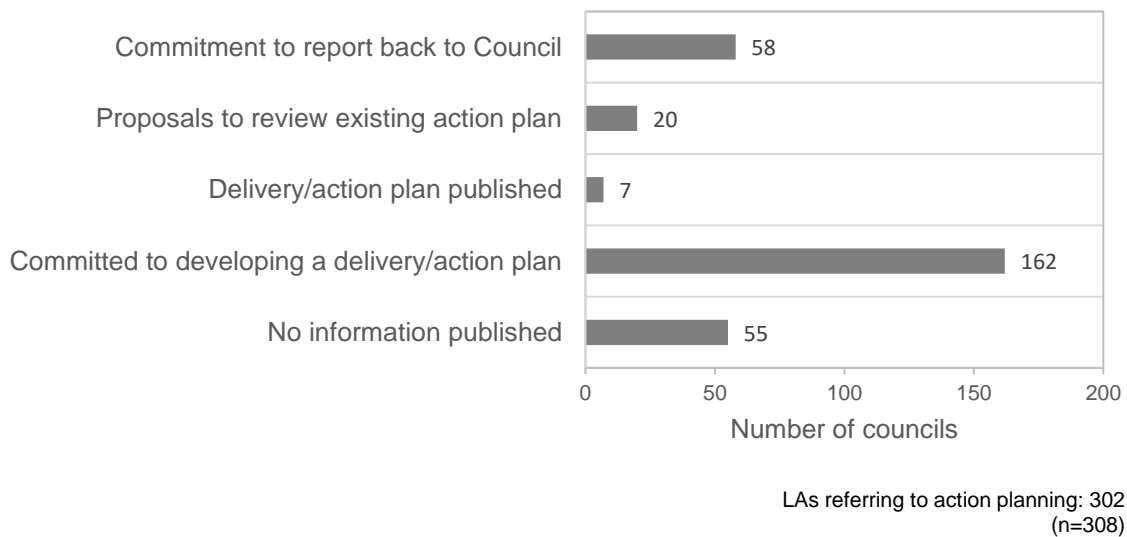


Figure 5. Target dates set by local authorities declaring climate emergencies (Source data: Climate Emergency UK website extracted November 2020)

1 This pattern of target-setting generally accords with APSE Energy’s research which revealed
2 that 42 member local authorities responding to their survey (64%) had set a 2030 target. It is
3 notable, therefore, that the response to the scientific evidence presented in SR15 is being
4 interpreted variously (IPCC, 2018).

5
6 Given the pressure on local authorities which have declared a net zero target, it is noteworthy
7 that 18% (n=55) had not incorporated any statement about delivery planning while 80% gave
8 some commitment to either developing an action plan, revisiting an existing plan or reporting
9 back to the councillors on their approach to delivery planning (Figure 6). Only 7 local authorities
10 (2%) stated that they had a published delivery plan which directly addressed their net zero
11 commitment.

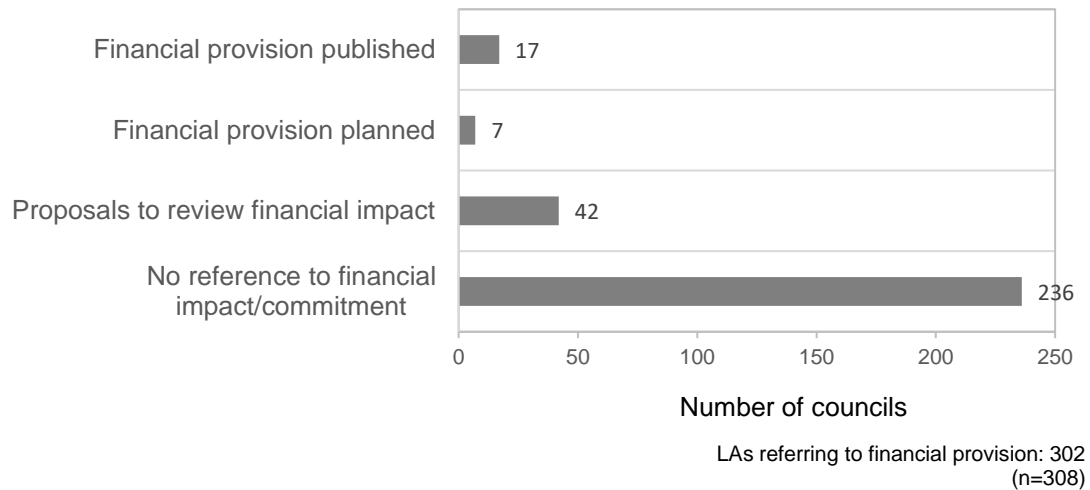


12
13 **Figure 6.** UK local authority delivery planning commitments

14
15 Where local authorities had set timescales in their declarations to deliver an action plan,
16 typically the development process was between 6 months to a year. The consequence is, that
17 for the majority, this leaves less than ten years to achieve net zero in sectors of society over
18 which they have little direct influence. The results accord with APSE Energy’s research which

19 found that, of the 81 member local authorities responding only 4% (n=3) stated that they had an
20 action plan (APSE, 2019).

21
22 Two hundred and thirty-six local authorities (77%) made no public statement about how they
23 would fund action, with only 17 (6%) publishing any financing activities (Figure 7).



24
25 **Figure 7.** Financing Climate Emergency delivery.
26
27 Of those which did refer to allocating funds, this primarily related to initial allocations to assist in
28 action planning; for example, Mendip Council committed to an £80,000 allocation to fund a
29 ‘Sustainability’ Officer Post while others like Adur & Worthing Councils and Canterbury Council
30 had allocated over £700,000 and £500,000 respectively (Adur & Worthing Councils, 2019;
31 Canterbury City Council, 2019).

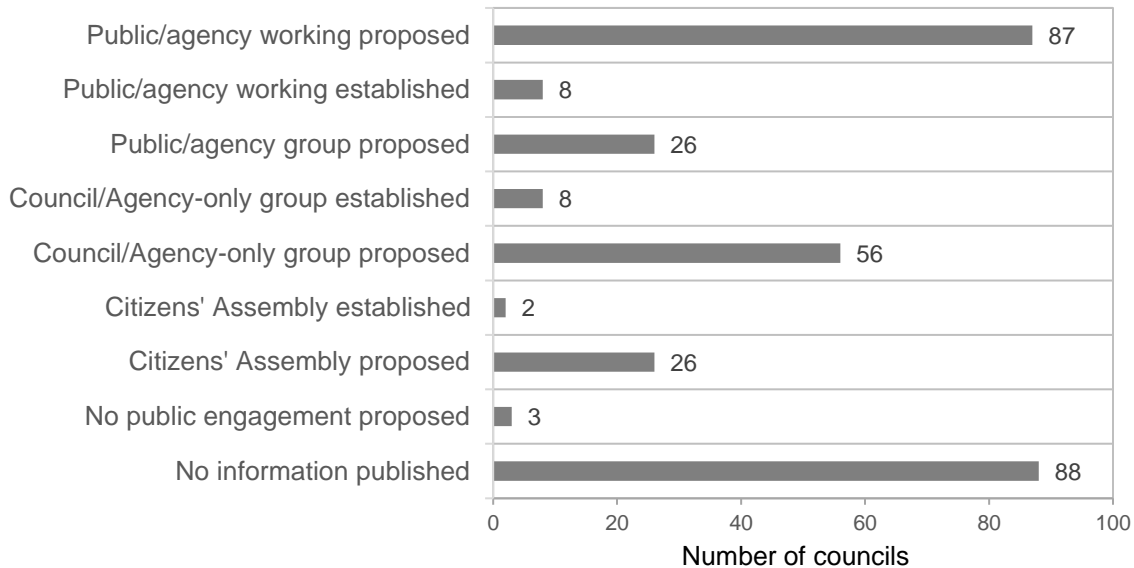
32
33 However, it is evident that some local authorities are either making or planning significant multi-
34 billion-pound investment over the next 20 years. West Midlands Combined Authority (2020) set
35 out its commitment to spend £15 billion in ‘local energy projects’ across the locality. Others, like
36 West Yorkshire Combined Authority and Woking Council, have acknowledged that additional

37 resources will be needed and state their intention to factor these into future business planning
38 (West Yorkshire Combined Authority, 2019, Woking Council 2020). Several local authorities
39 have already placed funds available for short term use (Ipswich Borough Council, 2019; London
40 Borough of Richmond-Upon-Thames, 2020; Malvern District Council, 2020; Wiltshire County
41 Council, 2020).

42
43 Encouragingly, 149 councils (48%) referred to building closer working relationships between
44 themselves, partner agencies and the wider community (Figure 8). Sixty-four local authorities
45 (21%) chose to either utilize existing internal or multi-agency groupings or proposed to establish
46 'Task and Finish' groups. However, 91 councils (30%) made no reference to or published any
47 information about public engagement. The APSE study showed the low uptake by their member
48 local authorities to bring the public into the action planning process with only 7 local authorities
49 out of 97 responding to their survey stating that they had set up either a Citizens' Panel or
50 Climate Assembly. A chi-squared test of association (again with authority types regrouped to
51 form larger categories) indicated that public engagement approach was independent of authority
52 type (p-value 0.678).

53
54 The role of popular activism has been a key factor in the rise of climate declarations in local
55 government. This is exemplified in many council meeting minutes with motions raised by either
56 a member of the public or a councilor supported by a popular petition (e.g., St Albans) or the
57 influence of Extinction Rebellion (e.g. Enfield).

58



LAs referring to engagement: 304
(n=308)

59

60 **Figure 8.** Approaches to stakeholder engagement

61

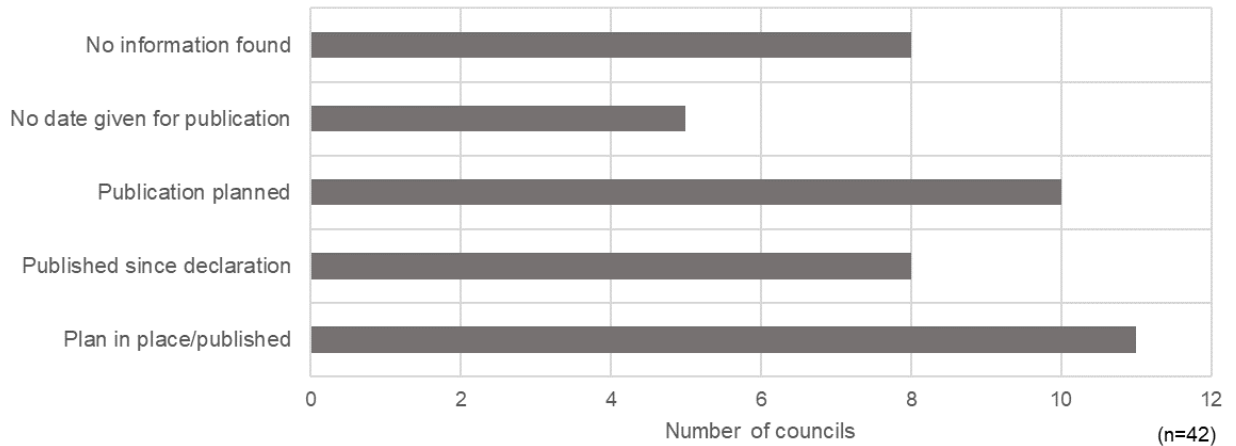
62 Five of the 9 large City Regions or Combined Authorities state that they have undertaken major
 63 public engagement events or established open routes to citizen dialogue around climate
 64 change. At district, county and unitary authority level, examples of public participation included
 65 establishing dedicated websites, undertaking collaborative discussions within the boroughs and
 66 districts and across the country 'to ensure that all communities, be they commerce, industry,
 67 agricultural, village, town or educational, are engaged with the process' (Derbyshire Dales
 68 District Council, 2020), running formal public consultations on draft action plans (North Ayrshire
 69 Council, 2019), using existing engagement programmes (London Borough of Hammersmith &
 70 Fulham, 2020) and establishing a Climate and Ecological Emergency Commission (ibid, 2020).

71

72 *4.2. Post-declaration activity*

73 The second-stage research revealed mixed progress in delivery planning. Of 42 local authorities
 74 sampled, encouragingly 29 (69%) have either existing or recently published plans or expect to

75 publish plans in 2020 (Figure 9). This leaves a significant minority (30%) where no evidence
 76 was found that a plan would be in place during the same time period. Of these, 4 local
 77 authorities are committed to a locality-wide 2030 target.



78
 79 **Figure 9.** Post-declaration action planning.

80
 81 Since declaration, there has been no consistent approach to public engagement with few local
 82 authorities establishing Citizen’s Climate Assemblies following the model developed by UK
 83 Parliament (Climate Assembly UK, 2020), one of the key demands of Extinction Rebellion
 84 (Extinction Rebellion, 2020). Exceptions include Camden (n.b. the first council to convene an
 85 assembly), North of Tyne and Devon. Other forms of post-declaration engagement include
 86 commissions (e.g. Hammersmith & Fulham, Doncaster), citizens’ juries (e.g. Lancaster, Leeds),
 87 convening climate summits (e.g. Derbyshire Dales), public consultations and surveys (e.g.
 88 Eden, Tonbridge & Malling, Edinburgh and North Ayrshire), and inviting citizens to participate in
 89 internal or agency working groups (e.g. St Albans).

90
 91 **5. Conclusions**

92 This is the first comprehensive review of local authority climate emergency declarations using
 93 source information available in the public domain. The research shows that although there is a

94 near uniformity of political desire to tackle climate change, local authorities are taking very
95 different pathways.

96

97 The results show that significant but variable progress has been made since the UK Research
98 and Innovation (UKRI) sponsored research (Webb, Tingey and Hawkey, 2017) reflecting recent
99 evidence presented in the report to the UK Government Committee on Climate Change on local
100 authorities and the Sixth Carbon Budget (Evans, 2020). Progress is more evident in larger,
101 metropolitan authorities which, although not explored in detail in this research, is likely to be the
102 result of their geographical size, scale of challenge, regional leadership and mandated strategic
103 delivery through the directly-elected mayor model and delivery mechanisms backed up by
104 significant resources.

105

106 The findings also reflect recent research identifying the shortfalls that exist in the ability for local
107 government to fulfil its role in delivering Net Zero (Kuzemko & Britton, 2020; Tingey & Webb,
108 2020); the role of local government in delivering Net Zero in a complex policy landscape,
109 fragmented and short-lived national funding programmes, challenging financial and knowledge
110 capacity, the materiality of the energy system amid a time of significant transition to address the
111 Energy Trilemma (Royal Academy of Engineering (2015) and significant pressures on services
112 caused by short term external shocks (e.g. BREXIT, COVID-19). Although there is a long track
113 record of climate-related activity in local government (Table 2), the problem still remains that
114 ‘despite political commitment, local authority action remains mostly small scale and piecemeal,
115 with high transaction costs and reliance on ‘wilful individuals’ (Tingey and Webb, 2020, p.8).

116

117 Central government and the devolved administrations have not created a consistent overarching
118 policy message nor delivery framework with each declaring different delivery timescales. In the
119 absence of a local-authority specific duty to tackle climate change along with well-designed and

120 financed delivery models, local authorities will choose their own routes and finishing lines
121 shaped by the complex ecosystem of organisational, societal, economic and environmental
122 factors described in section 2.5.

123
124 Post-declaration action planning by local authorities is very much ‘work-in-progress’ with tight
125 timelines for the majority to deliver on their commitments with the next twelve to eighteen
126 months will be vital to the success (Figure 9). There is a clear need for coherence and
127 collaboration between both local authority neighbours as well as local government, central
128 government and other stakeholders. There is a need also to evaluate how action planning is
129 proceeding and to what extent such diverse plans are making to achieving Net Zero carbon
130 communities. This will help inform both those involved in delivery as well as at national level.

131
132 Political commitments to tackle climate change as an ‘emergency’ will inevitably experience
133 dilution in the absence of strong leadership, clear planning and adequate resources. Attention
134 will be diverted to shorter-term agendas; the evidence is manifest in the range of initiatives that
135 have come and gone since the 1992 Rio Earth Summit (Table 1) and more immediately the
136 impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and BREXIT on local authority resources.

137
138 The scale of investment required to deliver net zero is a matter of concern as is the need for an
139 honest appraisal of achieving the targets some councils have set themselves. This is
140 exacerbated by the need for each council to take their community with them. There is
141 insufficient evidence that is the appropriate level of financial planning is happening as shown by
142 the low percentage of local authorities committing funds either at the time or post-declaration
143 (Figure 7).

144

145 The research period straddled the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the impact of which has not
146 only been of global significance to health but also to economic activity. The impact on local
147 government finances has been immense and far reaching, affecting local tax raising and
148 revenue generation and loss of grant aid (UK Parliament, 2020; Institute for Fiscal Studies (IfS),
149 2020; LGA, 2020). It is unclear how local government will manage the competing calls to fund
150 public services alongside climate emergency activity, with the funding challenge having a very
151 long tail.

152
153 The role of the citizen in the uptake of climate declarations has been significant and reflected in
154 council public records. The impact of a relatively small popular lobby has achieved a shift in
155 local political ambition. The risk is that while there is a lot of popular support that climate change
156 must be addressed (European Union (EU), 2019; BEIS, 2019b, UNDP, 2021), it is argued that
157 the wider population will not buy into the necessary action, much of it intrusive, if local
158 authorities cannot engage effectively to show the relevance of tackling climate change to the
159 individual citizen's well-being and personal circumstances.

160
161 There are some wider issues that also need to be considered, which will be both a challenge
162 and an opportunity to local authorities as they develop their role in decarbonising. Many of the
163 actions directly relate to society's use of energy as the energy system transitions to a more
164 decentralised, decarbonised model. Local authorities are responding to climate change by
165 engaging with this transition. This will need a shift to sustainability-biased economic and social
166 policies across all tiers of government.

167

168 **6. Policy implications**

169 The results and conclusions of this research raise the question: how can local authorities
170 achieve their net zero carbon commitments in the absence of a duty to act or a formal

171 governance mechanism, linking national and local ambition as part of a well-resourced,
172 coherent national plan and without fully engaged citizens?

173
174 In contrast to the continental model, UK local authorities have no formal role in the energy
175 system (Bulkeley and Kern, 2006). With Directive 2018/2001, the European Union has
176 emphasised the value of public administration collaborating in energy systems, for example
177 using the Covenant of Mayors or Smart Cities programmes (Official Journal of the European
178 Union (OJEU), 2018). In adopting the Directive, the European Union is legitimising local energy
179 communities as a way of reinforcing the Union's goal of promoting renewable energy to deliver
180 on its commitment to the Paris Agreement.

181
182 Similarly, climate emergency declarations could be harnessed by central government through
183 some form of local area 'climate contract' between the tiers of public administration. The
184 concept of climate contracts has been postulated in various forms ranging from bi-lateral and
185 multilateral international climate treaties to consumer transactions (Orts, 2011). Climate
186 contracts have a flexibility and plurality of approach (ibid.) that allows a local area to organise
187 itself to deliver to agreed outcomes.

188
189 A 'Local Area Climate Contract' is therefore proposed functioning within a new governance
190 framework of mutual cooperation based on agreed 'Climate Freedoms' (Figure 10). These
191 'climate freedoms' would be analogous to the flexibilities for Freeports proposed by UK
192 government (HM Government, 2020) and accords with recommendations from the Green
193 Alliance (Borrowman, Singh and Bulleid, 2020) and the latest report commissioned by the
194 Committee on Climate Change which has called for a 'Net Zero Delivery Framework' (Evans,
195 2020 p.8).

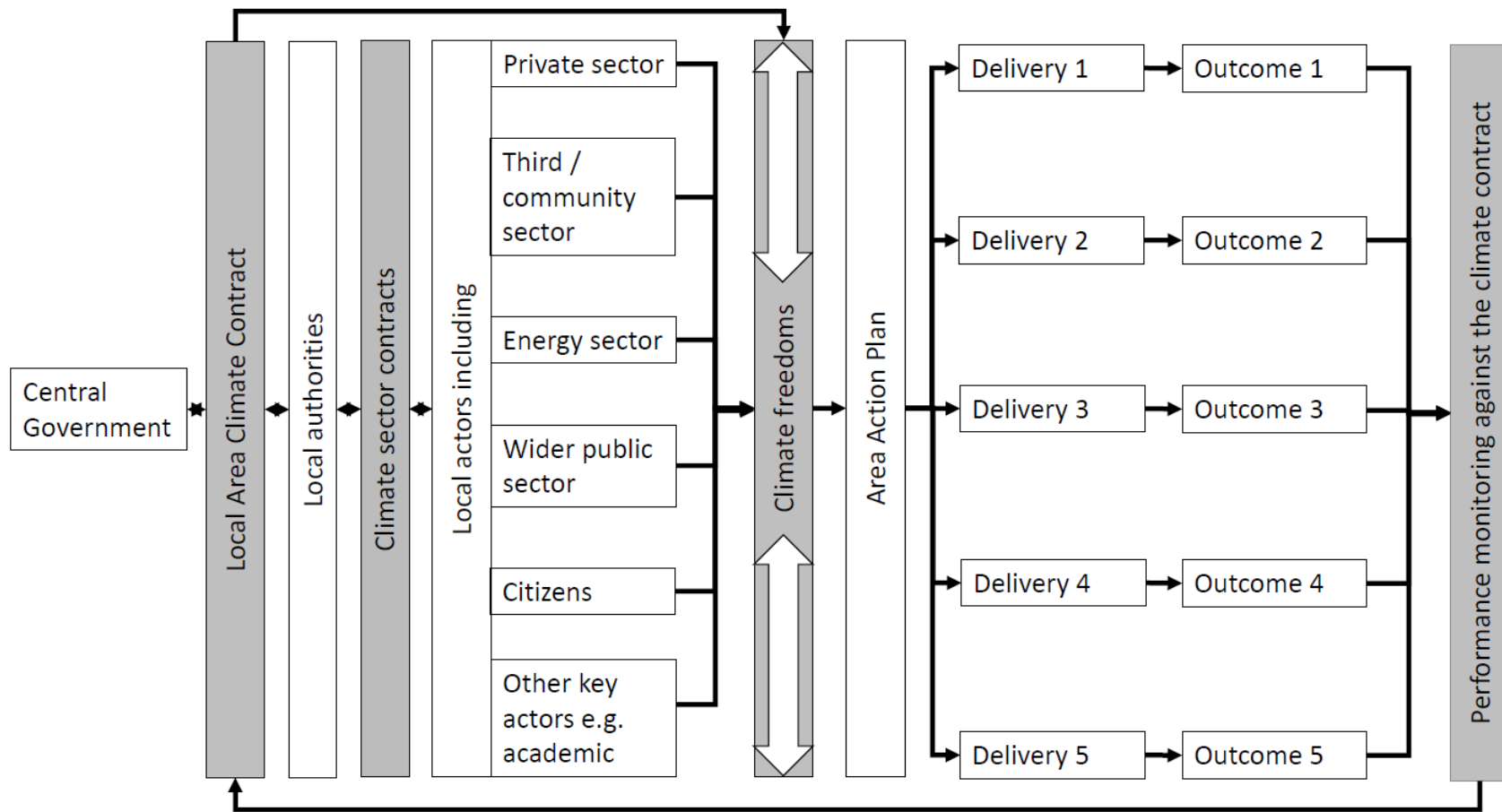


Figure 10: A proposed governance framework incorporating a ‘Climate Contract’ between central government and the local Climate Emergency area (Arrows represent flexibility around the climate freedoms that may be agreed based on local context and performance. Grey boxes denote proposed components)

1 Many of the barriers that restrict local authorities from acting in a way to address the Climate
2 Emergency could be either removed or mitigated through this two-way agreement. Within the
3 contract area, local authorities could be allowed certain flexibilities, for example: in the way that
4 initiatives are financed or funded; how governance structures are created and managed with
5 other stakeholders; in the ways the supply chain can be fostered to deliver infrastructure, goods
6 or services which reduce carbon emissions as well as generate co-benefits to the locality; or in
7 the way that any financial value is retained, through changes to national or local taxation or levy
8 mechanisms.

9

10 Central government would allow the 'climate freedoms' based on a set of pre-agreed conditions,
11 such as demonstration of long term cross-party local political commitment to deliver Net Zero,
12 well-defined action planning based on sound evidence, a statement showing commitment to
13 resource the action plan and an effective stakeholder engagement process to ensure effective
14 support and participation of the citizen.

15

16 The 'climate freedoms' would be underpinned by the equivalent of a duty to cooperate, as
17 suggested by Evans (2020), but taking this further to span the whole public sector in the
18 geographical area, including for example the health and social sector, not just the local
19 authorities. There would also be a mechanism to ensure that other organisations from the
20 private and third sectors actively participate and as necessary cooperate. Furthermore, the
21 freedoms would need to engender the concepts of fairness and justice as well as being tailored
22 to the local situation.

23

24 'Climate freedoms' would be agreed and continue to apply based on the performance of the
25 locality to deliver Net Zero, with the local authority acting as the co-signatory with central

26 government to the climate contract. Where the contract is not being fulfilled, one or more of the
27 freedoms would be either redefined or withdrawn.

28

29 Such a framework could reduce the burden on central government since it would benefit from
30 the additional unlocked capacity at local level. In turn, local authorities would be able to act with
31 more dynamism, leadership and flexibility. It would give confidence to those wishing to invest in
32 decarbonisation and the growth of supply chains in the locality. It would also strengthen the
33 relationship between the existing actors in climate and energy and those with which they
34 interact at local level.

35

36 This framework fits well within the concept of Local Area Energy Planning, which is under
37 consideration both within the current negotiations between the energy system operators and the
38 regulator, Ofgem, as part of agreeing their business plans under the RIIO-ED2 price control
39 agreement (Ofgem, 2020), and as part of emerging policy and technical support tools, for
40 example the ERIS Smart Local Energy Systems Toolkit for Local Authorities (Energy Systems
41 Catapult, 2020).

42

43 The framework also creates a space for citizens to engage and participate with both the state
44 and other parts of society, with the opportunity to reinvigorate the social contract between the
45 individual and the local authority (Willis, 2020). Although again not a solution in its own right,
46 putting the social contract component within this wider framework could help to bring the citizen
47 closer to other local area actors, given that 'addressing the threat of dangerous climate change
48 requires new thinking, in terms of ecology, human organization, and governance, including a
49 fundamental rethinking of how states and citizens interact with each other' (O'Brien, Hayward,
50 and Berkes. 2009).

51

52 Finally, the proposed framework responds to findings of local authority-focussed research that
53 shows a mixed response to the regulation of local energy planning, where in the absence of
54 other robust policy mechanisms some respondents argued for regulatory powers to deliver on
55 climate commitments which '*must vie with responsibilities that are statutory and non-negotiable*'
56 whilst others took the view that there was '*no substitute for political and officer commitment*'
57 (Cowell & Webb, 2019).

58

59 The proposed governance framework gives both central and local government policymakers a
60 flexible way to redefine their long-term relationship and their interactions with citizens and
61 stakeholder groups alike to help shape communities in line with national climate obligations and
62 local political ambitions.

63

64 There exists a moment of opportunity to test such an approach as the UK Government brings
65 forward its plans for COP26, wrestles with the challenge of building back better as a response to
66 the COVID-19 pandemic and develops new ways of local area-based Net Zero delivery activity.

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