

Debate on tackling climate change, protecting the environment and securing global development

House of Commons

10 July 2019



KEY MESSAGES

- Councils are the best placed to respond to the public's growing concerns about the environment and issues such as climate change. At a local level councils can bring together partners to deliver leadership and direction on the specific environmental issues in their localities.
- It is essential that as a nation we tackle climate change and protect our natural environment as we need to continue to improve air quality, protect against flooding, and ensure our transport, waste and energy policies are environmentally sustainable.
- The LGA passed a motion at its 2019 annual conference in support of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the role of local government in delivering them.¹ This included a declaration of a 'Climate Emergency' and committed to supporting councils in their work to tackle climate change by providing a strong unified voice for local government, and sharing best practice across all councils.
- The UK's Voluntary National Review of the Goals has estimated that 65 per cent of the 169 targets set out by the SDGs need local involvement. Delivery of the SDGs is a key part of tackling climate change.
- Several councils have published a specific SDG agenda and many more are incorporating sustainability issues into the wide range of services they provide. Over 100 councils have declared a 'climate emergency' and many have ambitions to achieve net zero carbon emissions by 2030.
- The ability of local government to take the lead on climate change is restricted by financial constraints on councils, a lack of devolved powers, challenges with monitoring and implementation and a lack of awareness of the agenda. A snapshot of this is the challenges faced by councils when tackling air quality and pollution. They do not have control over all roads, as some are operated by Highways England, limiting their ability to take action.
- The Government should use the Spending Review, and other key opportunities such as the Queen's Speech, to place councils on a more sustainable footing. Our *Councils Can*ⁱⁱ proposal sets out how a new localism settlement could strengthen communities and allow them to deliver on climate change, with locally-led public service reform.

Briefing

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FURTHER INFORMATION

Climate Emergency

The LGA has declared a climate emergency and we will work to support councils taking this step, and in some cases committing to specific timescales for achieving net zero carbon. Councils are already mitigating and helping communities to adapt to climate change on matters such as air quality, flooding, transport and energy. The LGA will work with our membership and Government to understand the additional powers and resources that councils will need to achieve their ambitions. We will keep members informed as this work progresses.

Local government and climate change

Many councils have produced climate change strategies to drive down Co2 emissions. For example, Manchester City Council's latest Climate Change Annual Progress Report published in July 2018 shows that the council's own carbon emissions have declined by 33.8 per cent since 2009/10 and that city wide carbon emissions are down 34 per cent since 2005. Across the city the Council is supporting schools and businesses to reduce their emissions wherever possible, developing planning policy, influencing contractors through procurement and commissioning; engaging in partnership working with social housing providers to improve social housing properties, working with the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) to develop energy efficient programmes to support private renters and owner occupiers; and working with TfGM, continuing to promote modal shifts by investing in sustainable transport infrastructure, and ensuring new developments are close to transport nodes.

Leeds City Council, working with the Leeds Climate Commission, is pursuing a 'science-based road map' to becoming carbon neutral. Leeds has declared a carbon emergency and has an ambition to achieve net carbon zero by 2030. It recognises that it will need funding and policy support from Central Government to achieve this. The council has committed a citywide 'conversation' throughout the year with residents, trade unions, public sector organisations, businesses and the third sector to develop a plan with the actions and milestones required to reach these ambitious carbon reduction targets.

The Sustainable Development Goals & Climate Change

The SDGs provide an overarching framework to measure progress on environmental sustainability policies. The SDGs are not an implementation plan and they will be applied differently between, and within, countries.

Given the breadth of the SDGs, they clearly need to be translated into a domestic and local context, identifying those most appropriate for action in each place. This necessitates local political leadership and civic engagement. The Goals should be a framework for discussion and not a means for Whitehall to impose targets on councils.

Local government leadership

Despite the ongoing challenges facing local government, councils take the sustainable development agenda seriously. This has been shown by several trailblazers who have made widely publicised commitments to achieving the SDGs. Perhaps one the best known is Bristol, who have developed the Bristol One City plan outlining how they want to create "a fair, healthy and sustainable city by 2050".ⁱⁱⁱ Each aspect of the delivery of the plan is mapped to the SDGs.

While not every council has an explicit SDG policy, they are already incorporating sustainability issues into the wide range of services they provide. More than 70 councils have declared a 'climate emergency' and pledged to halve carbon emissions by 2030.

Local areas are working within the context of the national industrial strategy have shown a renewed interest in the potential for creating inclusive or sustainable economies.

At the LGA General Assembly we passed a motion in support of the UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals.^{iv} This included a declaration of a 'Climate Emergency' and committed to supporting councils in their work to tackle climate change by providing a strong unified voice for local government in lobbying for support to address this emergency, and sharing best practice across all councils. It is essential that as a nation we tackle climate change and protect our natural environment as we need to continue to improve air quality, protect against flooding, and ensure our transport, waste and energy policies are environmentally sustainable.

A localised approach

A localised approach is vital to ensure a meaningful impact on climate change. At a local level councils can bring together partners to deliver leadership and direction on the specific environmental issues in the locality.

Local responses are likely to be determined by: the locally available datasets, a place specific process of civic and business engagement; locally-tailored set of priorities; and advocacy for the powers and resources in order to meet these priorities. In the case of London or one of the Mayoral Combined Authority areas, such a process might make use of the city-wide leadership platform provided by a directly elected Mayor, and, in turn, form parts of any bids for further resources and devolved powers.

Constraints on local government

Environmental issues are likely to move further up the new Prime Minister's priorities and local government must play a key role in tackling them. However, their current ability to lead is impacted by the financial pressures on councils, a lack of devolved, challenges with monitoring implementation, limited cross-government support for this agenda and a lack of awareness within the sector of the benefits it can provide to local activity.

A snapshot of this is the challenges faced by councils when tackling air quality and pollution. They do not have control over all roads, as some are operated by Highways England, limiting their ability to take action.

ⁱ Local Government Association

<http://lga.moderngov.co.uk/documents/s22163/Motion%20UN%20Sustainable%20Development%20Goals.pdf>

ⁱⁱ The Local Government Association, *Councils Can*, available at: <https://www.local.gov.uk/councils-can-2019-conference-paper>

ⁱⁱⁱ Bristol One City Plan. Press release (January 2019). <https://bristolgreencapital.org/bristol-launches-first-ever-one-city-plan/>

^{iv} Local Government Association

<http://lga.moderngov.co.uk/documents/s22163/Motion%20UN%20Sustainable%20Development%20Goals.pdf>