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# Is localism delivering for climate change?

Emerging responses from local  
authorities, local enterprise  
partnerships and neighbourhood plans

**Executive summary** Faye Scott

## Executive summary

The coalition agreement set out the government's localist intentions from day one when it stated that "The Government believes that it is time for a fundamental shift of power from Westminster to people. We will promote decentralisation and democratic engagement, and we will end the era of top-down government by giving new powers to local councils, communities, neighbourhoods and individuals."<sup>1</sup>

To this end many of the structures that shaped local authority activity have gone. The regional tier of government has been decisively swept away and many of the partnerships that tackle issues of local concern have changed significantly. The emphasis has been on freeing local authorities from central diktat and making them accountable to their citizens, alongside freeing communities to have more say in decisions that affect them.

These freedoms have come at the same time as radical budget cuts, leaving local authorities and communities with few resources to take advantage of them. And the freedom to determine priorities has come with very little clarity about the responsibilities that local areas should still have on issues of collective challenge, such as climate change.

### Climate change and localism

Local action remains central to tackling climate change. The Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC) and the Local Government Group (LG Group) have jointly acknowledged that "policies set at a national level affect the ability of councils to act at a local level, and that local action affects the ability of national government to meet its targets."<sup>2</sup> The local level has a key role in helping to meet goals such as an 80 per cent reduction in emissions by 2050 and supplying 15 per cent of the UK's energy consumption from renewable energy by 2020. Local action also has a powerful role to play in engaging citizens and developing sustainable communities.

This makes climate change a unique challenge in the context of localism. Meeting national climate change targets relies on local action, but the government's localist agenda makes it reluctant to set targets. If we are to tackle climate change successfully it is essential that we understand the implications of localism for continued local action.

### Our research

We set out to answer some key questions: In the face of rapid, radical change are local authorities continuing to work on climate change and how is action being encouraged? Is the government's aspiration that a partnership approach will develop between the centre and the local realistic? And what potential do new avenues like local enterprise partnerships (LEPs), local nature partnerships (LNPs) and neighbourhood plans offer for strengthening local action on climate change?

We spoke to councillors, local authority officers, chief executives, civil society organisations, statutory bodies, central government departments, and representatives of LEPs, LNPs and neighbourhood plan 'front-runners'. We conducted a survey of local authorities on climate change and ran four focus groups to gather civil society views.

### Our findings

The survey revealed a three-way split between local authorities, which has been strongly borne out by interviews and wider research.

- 37 per cent are deprioritising climate change or state that it was never a priority. Starkly worded submissions such as, "the sustainability function within my local authority has been deleted and the climate change function has been discontinued" illustrate the scale of the loss in certain places.
- 35 per cent remain firm in their commitment to climate change and believe that action could even increase in the context of localism.
- 28 per cent are narrowing their ambitions to focus on reducing emissions from their estate and ceasing work on wider environmental issues.

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Overall, the results suggest that climate change work has narrowed, is very weak or absent in 65 per cent of local authorities.

Local partnerships are clearly valued in tackling climate change but we found that many local authorities and civil society organisations are experiencing a partnership vacuum. Civil society perceptions that local authorities are turning inwards underline the evidence of local authorities narrowing their work on climate change to an internal focus or ceasing it altogether.

Responses to the question: “How (if at all) do you think the priority afforded to climate change by your local authority will change as a result of this new context?”:<sup>3</sup>

**“Barnsley’s work on climate change is now articulated in a way that makes the case for continued action even in tough economic times”**

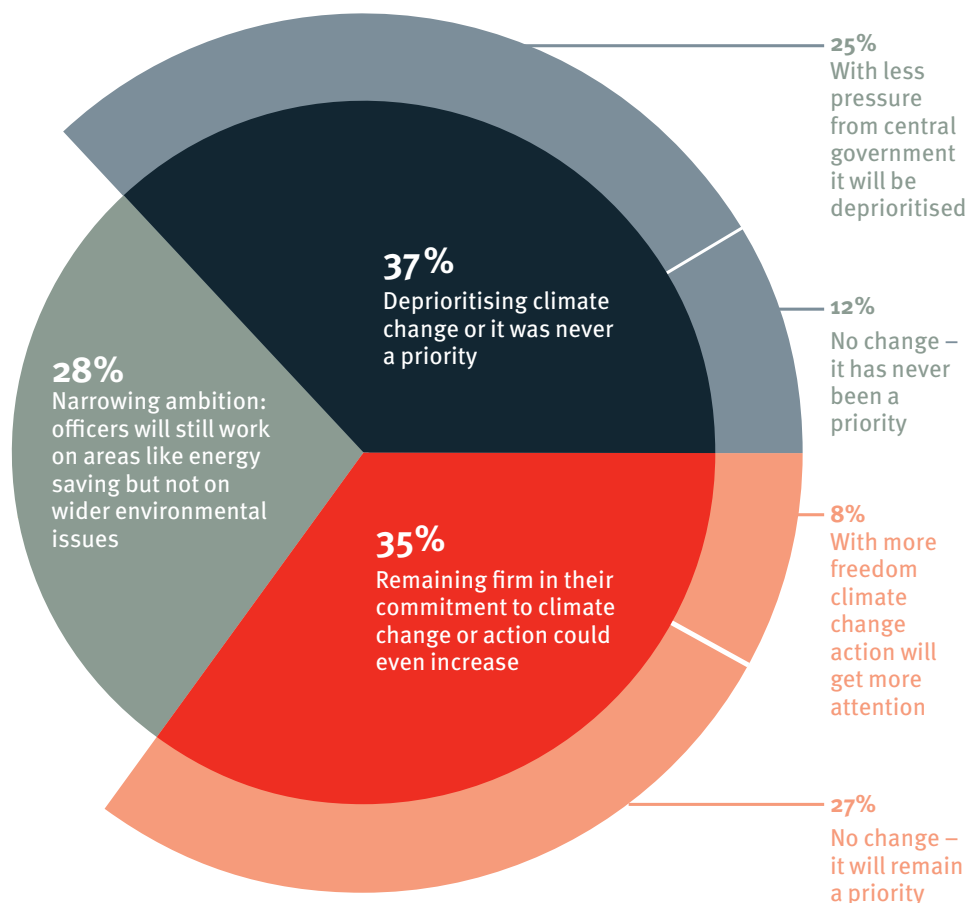
Local councillor

**“The post of corporate energy manager was created to reduce emissions from the local authority estate. An ex-member of the climate change team secured the post but it has no outward focus.”**

Local authority officer

**“Some services will be stopped completely, eg climate change work, work on renewable energy, natural environment policy and delivery.”**

Local authority officer



Finally, there was significant scepticism about the idea of citizens holding local authorities to account. Civil society organisations doubted whether the power dynamic can really shift and resources came up frequently. How can local citizens or civil society groups be expected to have the expert knowledge needed to assess data sets and decide whether progress is sufficient, assuming a local authority is still collecting data on the issues they care about.

**“Organisations I belong to do not have the time or expertise to hold local authorities to account. Local auditors, properly trained could make this ambition achievable. But I suspect this role will never be filled.”**

**Civil society organisation**

Taken together, these findings suggest that the foundations for a partnership approach to climate change are weak and raise serious questions about how the government’s localist approach can facilitate greater climate action.

### **Encouraging local progress**

Our evidence highlights the tension at the heart of the government’s approach to localism, which delegates new rights but not shared responsibilities. A range of measures aim to encourage and support local action on climate change but none of them are prescriptive. They include:

- **A revamped Nottingham Declaration**

This declaration provides a platform for local authorities and their partners to publicly declare their commitment to address climate change. Launched in 2000, it now has over 300 local authority signatories. The refreshed declaration will be “a mechanism for councils to demonstrate their commitment to continued action on climate change” and “enable them to sign up to locally appropriate targets and goals.”<sup>4</sup> Signing the new declaration will be voluntary and will enable benchmarking and the sharing of good practice.

- **Local carbon frameworks programme** This involved nine pilots and 30 local authorities. It explored how central government can support local authorities in optimising their carbon reduction strategies. Rather than informing a process of allocating local responsibility for emissions, as envisaged by the previous government when the programme was set up, the 43 projects will now be a “a portfolio of case studies”<sup>5</sup> for local authorities to draw on.
- **Revenue streams** Opportunities for local authorities to become Green Deal providers or to pursue revenue streams from renewables or decentralised energy are attractive in the current economic context. The government’s trailblazer scheme aims to demonstrate the Green Deal’s potential to local authorities and to resolve any obstacles they face in getting a scheme up and running. Local authorities that are already pushing ahead in these areas serve as useful exemplars.
- **The duty to cooperate** The localism bill will impose this duty on local authorities in the context of planning. They will have to collaborate around the strategic priorities set out in national planning guidance, one of which is to do with climate change. There is little clarity about what cooperation should entail or what its intended outcomes should be, so it is too early to tell what potential this offers as a platform for local authorities to work together effectively on climate change.
- **Permissive guidance on climate change** Local authorities will receive this guidance from central government. Its scope is not yet clear but the emphasis will be on demonstrating to local authorities what they could do and how to go about it rather than telling them to act. It will be complemented by guidance to local authorities from the government’s Committee on Climate Change.

### **New foundations for partnership action on climate change**

Although older partnerships are falling away, a variety of new partnerships are in play at the local level and offer important new routes to strengthening local action on climate change.

#### **Local enterprise partnerships (LEPs)**

In contrast to regional development agencies (RDAs), which had clear responsibilities for regional action on climate change, LEPs bring local authority and private sector partners together with the exclusive aim of securing local growth. They have developed proposals for enterprise zones, which will benefit from business rate reductions and simplified planning to accelerate development. Thirty seven LEPs have been set up and 24 enterprise zones designated. LEP priorities and the focus of enterprise zones offer useful insight into their potential as routes to low carbon progress.

Twenty nine LEPs refer to the low carbon economy or climate change at some point in their top line information, with ten of them going into some detail (see table on p29). For example, setting emissions reduction targets or elaborating on how they plan to realise their low carbon ambitions. Among the enterprise zones, four have a very strong focus on renewable energy, for example the Humber enterprise zone is a renewable energy 'super cluster'. A further seven intend to attract low carbon businesses to their enterprise zones and three make some reference to ensuring that their developments will be sustainable.

LEPs are potentially useful new routes to low carbon progress. They can articulate and pursue the economic benefits of action, build wider business and local authority buy-in and bolster relevant work within their LEP boundaries. The challenges are ensuring that they are equipped with the resources they need to seize this opportunity and ensuring that low carbon ambitions are shared by all LEPs, not just in those that look likely to lead the field.

### **The low carbon potential of LEPs will only be realised if:**

- they are tasked with responsibility for acting on climate change and accounting for its impacts as they develop their plans for securing local growth;
- central government recognises their potential to help secure the transition to a low carbon economy and supports LEPs in building their:
  - knowledge of their locality's existing competitive advantages in clean technology;
  - understanding of environmental and low carbon markets and the policy drivers for pursuing low carbon infrastructure as a route to growth;
  - ability to address the financial needs of clean tech businesses and projects and to build the fragile supply chains needed to support them.

#### **Local nature partnerships (LNPs)**

LNPs were only announced in June 2011 and, as a result, have far less shape than LEPs. Their creation was informed by the idea that "effective action to benefit nature, people and the economy locally happens when the right people come together in partnership."<sup>6</sup> Suggested members include local authorities, local businesses, statutory authorities, civil society organisations and land managers. Defra's vision for LNPs includes them demonstrating leadership and raising awareness of the benefits of a healthy natural environment, contributing a natural environment perspective to local development plans and working to secure the benefits and services secured from the local natural environment. It is envisaged that around 50 will be set up.<sup>7</sup>

**For LNPs to be an assertive voice on local environmental and climate change issues they will need to:**

- comprehensively assess climate change risks and avoid evolving too narrow a focus: conservation representation on LNPs should be balanced by broader environmental groups to enable this;
- influence LEP plans: their membership should be pitched at a level comparable with the seniority of LEP board members to facilitate reciprocal representation between LEPs and LNPs;
- influence the development of local strategic plans: to ensure they consider local natural environment and broader environmental challenges and facilitate the duty to cooperate on the natural environment and climate change;
- secure longer term support through innovative partnerships with local businesses and/or landowners.

As with LEPs, the key issue for LNPs will be resources. They are expected to become self-funding and have far fewer resources available to start them off than LEPs do. This will compound the challenges they face in becoming bodies with real influence on local development plans and LEP plans.

**Neighbourhood planning**

Neighbourhood plans are billed as giving communities “direct power” to plan their neighbourhoods.<sup>8</sup> Once adopted, they will be statutory planning documents. We looked at the front runners to understand their potential as new avenues for local action on climate change, while being mindful of the active debate about whether they represent a genuine handing down of power.

Neighbourhood plans won't be required to look at environmental sustainability, as they have to comply with strategic local plans, which already cover sustainability. But only 30 per cent of local authorities have a local plan.<sup>9</sup> Without one, neighbourhoods will only have broad and high

level national policy to refer to. Translating that into something relevant at the local level will be a challenge. It will also miss the opportunity for neighbourhoods to pursue sustainability far more creatively than a local plan process.

Neighbourhoods can look at meeting local energy needs through renewable energy projects, pursue sustainability by setting high environmental standards for new development and facilitate low carbon transport. Communities will need support to identify and take advantage of these opportunities, adding to the already significant questions about where the funding and expertise needed for successful neighbourhood plans will come from. The government has created a £3.2 million fund to support communities developing neighbourhood plans but it will not stretch to providing specialist support on issues like climate change.

It is also unclear how ambitious neighbourhoods can be on issues like climate change. There is a clear steer that communities can promote more development than their local plan, but not whether they can be more ambitious in other areas. The front runners are therefore important test beds for pushing boundaries on climate change within a planning context that is shaped around delivering economic growth and development.

Underlying all this is the question of whether neighbourhoods will see sustainability as important. Emerging evidence from front runners suggests that they will. Many have a strong advocate for environmental issues involved and are developing energy and sustainability plans.



### **For neighbourhood plans to strengthen local action on climate change:**

- local authorities must provide a steer about the need for neighbourhood plans to consider environmental issues and the long term resilience of their community in the face of risks like climate change;
- neighbourhood plans must be allowed to set out greater ambition than their local plan on tackling climate change, reducing emissions and securing low carbon development;
- local environmental groups should get involved in neighbourhood plans;
- neighbourhood planning forums must have their needs for resources and expertise met, either through dedicated support or by drawing on existing resources.

### **Risks and opportunities**

Having examined the implications of localism some clear opportunities are evident, but they come with risks. These are set out below. There are new routes for strengthening local action on climate change, but they rely on volunteerism, are under resourced and lack some of the key skills needed to fulfil their potential on climate change.

### **Opportunities for strengthening local action**

- Local authorities and LEPs leading the way on climate change and low carbon opportunities prompt increased action by those with an interest and, potentially, even among the laggards, especially if they demonstrate the economic benefits of action.
- New local authority business models and revenue streams incentivise local authorities to pursue sustainable energy.
- LEPs and LNPs provide positive local reinforcement of the low carbon transition;
- Communities build sustainability into their neighbourhood plans and use them to achieve ambitious sustainability outcomes.

### **Risks to local action**

- The partnership approach on climate change fails: poor performance on climate change at the local level ultimately leads to greater central government intervention to secure the local action that is needed to meet national climate change objectives.
- New partnerships fail to achieve their climate change and low carbon ambitions, or to develop them in the first place, because they represent business as usual interests, don't stimulate new activity, or lack the expertise needed.
- Lack of resources discredits localism, undermining opportunities like LEPs, LNPs and neighbourhood plans and preventing their low carbon potential being realised.

### **The way ahead**

Progress on climate change has always varied at the local level, even when structures were in place to drive action. Recent changes have significantly eroded the foundations of action. But localism's freedom to do more and the new partnerships it has created are opportunities that should be capitalised on.

Lack of resources has the potential to scupper the low carbon potential of all the new partnerships we discuss. The government has clearly stated ambitions for the transition to a low carbon economy and a partnership approach to climate change. It needs to recognise the potential of LEPs and LNPs to help with both these goals, and support them in playing their part. Without this, LEPs with low carbon ambitions will be hard pressed to realise them and the chance that the issue will rise up the agenda in other LEPs is slim. A central unit that provides support to maximise the effectiveness of LEPs is urgently needed. LNPs too will need support from the centre if they are to play an influential local role.

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Communities will need significant support in developing neighbourhood plans, especially if they are to make the most of opportunities for tackling climate change. Many local authorities will need encouragement to engage meaningfully with neighbourhood plans at all, let alone with their potential to tackle climate change. But they are an interesting new route. Approaches that aim to support local authorities in acting on climate change should highlight neighbourhood plan opportunities and share resources that will help communities and local authorities to include climate change in them.

Local authorities cannot be allowed to opt out of tackling climate change and LEPs should not be able to pursue their ambitions with no recourse to environmental impacts. By not requiring local authorities or LEPs to 'do their bit' on climate change the government has created a huge diversity of approaches. Some of these will be powerful. But as long as opting out is possible, climate change will not be tackled with the consistency and level of ambition that is needed if national targets are to be met.

We conclude that the government needs to be clearer that greater local freedom still entails shared responsibility on collective problems like climate change. This does not have to involve centrally imposed targets. It can be a process of setting out the collective challenge and leaving local areas to decide how to interpret and deliver against their responsibilities. Such an approach will still provide huge freedom and result in the diversity and creativity that localism should unlock. But it will remove the freedom to opt out and minimise the risk of greater central intervention further down the line. Green Alliance will be focusing on developing a workable approach to securing local action on climate change along these lines.



## Notes and references

- 1 HM Government, May 2011, *The coalition - our programme for government*
- 2 Department of Energy and Climate Change and the Local Government Group, 9 March 2011, *Memorandum of understanding between the LG Group and the Department of Energy and Climate Change*
- 3 Out of the 126 responses to the survey, 67 responded to this question. 12 respondents were from county councils, two from a metropolitan, 1 from a unitary, 41 from borough or district councils, 9 from town or parish councils, 1 from a membership body covering 22 local authorities (this was only recorded as a single response) and 1 anonymous response. Responses were collected between 6 May and 24 June 2011
- 4 Department of Energy and Climate Change and the Local Government Group, 9 March 2011, *Memorandum of understanding between the LG Group and the Department of Energy and Climate Change*
- 5 2 August 2011 letter from the Rt Hon Chris Huhne MP, Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change to Andy Atkins, chief executive of Friends of the Earth [www.foe.co.uk/resource/briefing\\_notes/huhne\\_petition\\_response.pdf](http://www.foe.co.uk/resource/briefing_notes/huhne_petition_response.pdf)
- 6 HM Government, June 2011, *The natural choice: securing the value of nature*
- 7 Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs webpage on Local Nature Partnerships [www.defra.gov.uk/environment/natural/whitepaper/local-nature-partnerships](http://www.defra.gov.uk/environment/natural/whitepaper/local-nature-partnerships) last viewed and updated on 26 September 2011
- 8 Department for Communities and Local Government, July 2011, *Draft National Planning Policy Framework*
- 9 Department for Communities and Local Government, August 2011, *Database on Local Development Frameworks: closure report – end December 2010*