

ENVIRONMENT AND SUSTAINABILITY

Who Is Measuring Local Authority Climate Action and Why Does it Matter?



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Councils may be climate leaders in their locality, yet knowing what councils are doing, or could be doing, is hard for the public to see. Some councils are getting close to 'maxing out' their powers on what they can do for climate action within current legislative and funding constraints, whereas others are only just getting started.

Following the success of Climate Emergency UK's Climate Action Plan Explorer (a database created with mySociety of all the councils' climate action plans and a one-stop shop for local climate-related data), Climate Emergency UK is now measuring local council climate action. We are creating Council Climate Action Scorecards, which will hold councils to account and enable us to understand what is really happening at a local level for climate action. This will further encourage best practice action led by campaigners and councils.

Implementation is hard

Since 2019, starting in Bristol, we have seen a wave of councils declare a climate emergency and set themselves a net-zero target, often because of local campaigns. The UK Parliament followed suit in May 2019. But what happened next? It is easy to set targets that commit to net-zero by 2030 or 2050, but much harder to implement the plans and policies that are needed to reach this target. This becomes even harder when UK Council budgets have been slashed year on year and councils are already working at capacity to provide statutory services such as housing, transport, schools, recycling and social care.

These challenges do not negate councils from taking systemic action, far from it. According to the Climate Change Committee's Local Authorities and the Sixth Carbon Budget Report, "Local authorities have powers or influence over roughly a third of emissions in their local areas".

Councils are crucial

Within all the services that a Council provides, there is a lot that they can do to create low-carbon services and communities. They can ensure that most materials can be recycled at the kerbside, implement cycle lanes, finance

bus routes to take cars off the road, build homes that are net-zero from day one and retrofit existing council housing stock. They can also work in partnership with businesses and residents to decarbonise their workplaces and homes.

Local campaigners have been at the forefront of getting climate on the agenda within councils, but the work does not stop there. Councils are complex and confusing at the best of times and even more so when serious climate action is new to many local authorities. It has become clear that for local climate action to continue at the scale and pace necessary, residents, councillors and officers want to learn from each other and want to know what their council could be achieving right now. And, by learning from other councils, this could be used to push their own councils further.

In January 2022, Climate Emergency UK released the Council Climate Plan Scorecards, which assessed the quality of all 409 UK local authorities' written climate action plans. This is a valuable tool for anyone who wants to understand how ambitious (or not) their council's climate action plan is. It also allows anyone to compare their council's score to other similar councils in terms of location, political control, deprivation, or geography (rural/urban) through the filtering tools.

Since launching, we have seen campaigners use the Scorecard results to lobby candidates in the local elections this year. Councils have told us that they are using the Scorecards to rewrite their Climate Action Plans (sometimes led by residents, as seen with Extinction Rebellion Southwark), and are considering any points that they missed out on in the Scorecards. We want to see the UK Government and the devolved assemblies also learning from these Scorecards too and providing the resources required to help all councils to create high-scoring Climate Action Plans and the necessary, subsequent actions.

Council Climate Action Scorecards launch

Next year, we will be releasing our Council Climate Action Scorecards, where we will be benchmarking all UK councils against a new set of metrics that will encompass the most important actions that councils need to take to decarbonise. This will include asking some questions about what councils are doing with their own estates (decarbonising their transport fleets and their own buildings) but most of these questions will seek to understand what councils are doing to decarbonise the wider community. For example, we will be asking if councils are providing support to homeowners to retrofit their homes, supporting residents to recycle more, ensuring that new homes are built operationally net-zero, creating active travel routes and working on emission reductions across other local partnerships and statutory bodies.

	TOTAL SCORE AVG	Governance, development and funding	Mitigation and Adaptation	Community engagement and communications	Measuring and setting emissions targets	Commitment and Integration	Diversity and Inclusion
COUNCIL NAME	70%	6/12 AVG	6/12 AVG	6/12 AVG	6/12 AVG	6/12 AVG	6/12
★ Adur District Council	90%	4/12	9/12	11/12	10/12	10/12	4/12
★ Stroud District Council	90%	5/12	3/12	7/12	7/12	7/12	6/12
★ Mid Suffolk District Council	88%	8/12	10/12	8/12	5/12	6/12	6/12
★ Harlow District Council	85%	2/12	6/12	10/12	4/12	4/12	7/12
★ West Oxfordshire District Council	80%	2/12	7/12	11/12	10/12	8/12	2/12
★ Wyre Forest District Council	78%	10/12	8/12	5/12	10/12	8/12	8/12
★ Blaby District Council	76%	11/12	4/12	9/12	11/12	10/12	11/12
★ Adur District Council	75%	6/12	7/12	10/12	5/12	11/12	10/12
★ Adur District Council	40%	12/12	6/12	11/12	11/12	4/12	11/12
★ Adur District Council	30%	12/12	11/12	3/12	2/12	3/12	11/12

Single Tier - Urban Councils Plan Scorecard

The UK Government and devolved assemblies are not providing the necessary support, direction and impetus that is needed for climate action, so councils and residents are forging their own way. For much of this work, local councils are not legally mandated to take action to reduce emissions. Yet they do, because they know action is needed to ensure a safe and healthy future for their residents, both within the UK and globally.

More must be done

Whilst this is commendable, without being able to see the national picture of council climate action, it is all too easy to fall into the trap of believing councils when they say that “this isn’t possible here” or “we’re leading the way on climate initiatives”. Although we cannot state this as a fact yet, as the Action Scorecards are not yet published, the Plan Scorecards and our research so far tell us that the reality is different. There are councils across the UK that have shown that much of this climate action is possible, yet there is no single council that is doing it all.

Not one council is meeting their carbon budget.

Our Scorecards are an accountability and transparency tool that aims to provide an in-depth understanding of what councils are doing to reduce emissions. The tool also answers whether it is enough, despite some councils being

ahead of the UK Government on climate action. Without the UK Government and devolved assemblies committing to long-term, non-competitive funding, alongside continued legislative support for local climate action, local authorities will fail to reach their net-zero targets. This failure will result in the UK failing to reach its national net-zero goals, which would only exacerbate the current and predicted climate breakdown.

The Council Climate Action Scorecards will not be published until next year, but the Plan Scorecards and our preliminary work on council climate action are evidence that councils, under the leadership of committed councillors and if given more powers, support and funding, would be able to take further climate action and start to bring about the systemic decarbonisation that we need. 🌍

