

# Local Authority Climate Emergency Declarations

Strategic and practical considerations for climate emergency declarations, targets and action plans



# 1. The APSE Energy View of Climate Emergency Declarations

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This document is a summary of an APSE Energy publication titled 'Local authority climate emergency declarations'. It is intended to provide a brief overview of what is included in the wider publication, which is free for APSE Energy members and available to purchase for non-members. You can access the main publication [here](#).

APSE Energy was established to promote the vision of the municipalisation of energy and a greater role for the local authority in the energy agenda within their area. The municipalisation of energy is an approach available to local authorities to contribute to tackling climate change, as well as many other outcomes.

There has to be an understanding of what declaring a climate emergency can do, when to use it and how it can be used. When a Council passes any motion it reflects the importance that the organisation places on the issue and it signals their intent to address it. It seems only logical that if the Council passes a climate emergency declaration that the same can be said for this agenda. The use of the term 'emergency' is significant and by definition this is not a normal motion. If that is the case then the actions that the Council takes should not be normal either.

An emergency declaration deserves the appropriate response for an emergency. If your house is on fire you can safely call it an emergency. There is an immediate reaction, people get out the house straight away without discussion or consideration of any options, external help arrives, substantial resources are employed to put the fire out and there is insurance in place to cover the losses that occur from such an event.

The local authority is in a different position of course. It cannot drop everything to tackle climate change. There are other legal duties and responsibilities it has to fulfil as well as locally identified priorities it has committed to addressing. So we understand that the meaning of emergency in the local government context is different in terms of the pace of action.

However it should not be different in terms of the resources allocated to the emergency. Those resources include:-

- **A platform** – the Council must recognise the importance of climate - that it will impact on demand and supply of services so it must be given a high profile. Senior and service managers need to be made aware and given time to consider the impacts on services. They should contribute ideas to how their services will change to address the issues identified;
- **Finance** – all problems require resources and that includes financial resources. The local authority needs to find funds to tackle the emergency. This could be internally or externally sourced, by working with the private sector on pilot projects, crowd-funding, grants and loans or joint projects. It is also important to explore options of investing to save, as engaging with the energy agenda can make and save the local authority a significant amount of money. Investment is about more than just looking at upfront costs, it is necessary to build in the cost of not acting as well as the financial benefits over time;
- **Training** – it is vital that those who carry out the Council's services – the van drivers, those advising benefit claimants to switch energy supplier, the person operating heating systems – understand the context they are working in and the potential impact they might have. This means putting a training plan in place and it is a measure that can be completed in the short term;
- **Engagement** – local authorities are able to bring public and private sector bodies together to act as a group. They can provide capacity and facilities to enable the local community to come together and they can raise the profile of the issue to ensure all have the chance to make a contribution to the debate – at community groups, schools, sports clubs, religious groups and other appropriate settings;



- **Advocacy** – as the only democratically elected organisation in the area the Council has a duty to take a lead on matters as serious as climate change. It should represent local issues at the national level and it should lead activity at the local level – setting an example, educating and investing.

Some Councils are already addressing some of these issues and have plans in place – but many do not. Ignoring this problem will not mean it goes away and it is better to tackle it earlier rather than later.

All of these will come together in an action plan which will be split into short medium and long term over up to 40 years, due to the nature of energy investments and the scale of the job at hand.

APSE Energy can support local authorities when declaring a climate emergency. It is important that the declaration is clear and simple, the local community and economy benefit, that Councils understand why they want to declare a climate emergency and what they intend to get out of it.

Those local authorities declaring a climate emergency and not taking note of the points above leave themselves open to political risk and criticism from all quarters.

The actions noted above can be done in isolation but they are much better approached in collaboration. All local authorities are looking at the problem of climate change and each will have experience and expertise to share with others. APSE Energy is already supporting this sharing of lessons and solutions and will continue to do so over the coming years.



## 2. Introduction

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In October 2018 the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) published a Special Report. The IPCC was established by the United Nations in 1988 as it was widely recognised that climate change in general – and global warming in particular - is a global issue that requires a global response. The IPCC publish detailed reports at periodic intervals. Its first Assessment Report was published in 1990, its second Assessment Report in 1995 and its third Assessment Report in 2001. These outlined the problem of climate change and indicated the level of scientific consensus on it. These were heavy tomes that were thousands of pages long and each time the IPCC concluded that the problem was getting worse.

From these reports, the IPCC concluded that the world needed to limit global temperature increases to no more than 2 degrees Celsius above pre industrial levels, in order to have any chance of reducing the risks of dangerous and irreversible climate change in the future. However, it recognised that the solutions to this problem will not be scientific, but political. Notwithstanding the fact that there is near unanimous agreement amongst the scientific community, only politicians can take the decisions necessary to make the changes that will make the difference.

In tandem to the IPCC is the work of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). This was adopted in New York on 9 May 1992 and was signed by 166 countries at the Rio Summit in 1992. This was the first time that multiple countries had come together to discuss the problem and start to seek solutions. Intergovernmental conferences are now held on a periodic basis and have become known by the city in which they are based. The Kyoto summit in Japan led to the first legally binding targets being accepted by countries for reduction of greenhouse gas emissions and a plan to reduce emissions to safe levels. However, key states such as the United States and China were not signatories to that agreement. The latest landmark summit was in Paris in 2017 as this resulted, at last, in a truly global settlement to which all major countries were subscribed. The Paris accord is currently being implemented, although the decision by the United States under Donald Trump to withdraw from it has been a blow.

Consistent IPCC reports and UNFCCC summits have come and gone. They attract publicity and media attention at the time but action by politicians to work towards the plans agreed at these meetings has been slow. But the IPCC Special Report of October 2018 was the strongest yet and seems to have hit a nerve amongst the public. Effectively, it said that the world has just 12 years to get a grip on this issue or irreparable damage will be done to our ecosystem that cannot be reversed.

It is an interesting point that the Special Report is not the first IPCC report, nor is it the first time that it has urged action. But it has had the effect of stimulating a rising wave of opinion that climate change is important and something that needs to be dealt with urgently.

The first stirrings of new action in relation to the IPCC report came from Australia, where Adelaide Council declared a climate emergency. This made local politicians and the public think about how they could create pressure for change and start to demand higher targets for emissions reductions, in line with the Special Report.

The movement shifted to the UK, where in November 2018, the Councils of two major cities, Bristol and Manchester, passed motions declaring a climate emergency and set targets aiming to be carbon neutral by 2030 and 2038 respectively. This was driven by grass roots pressure from the populace.

Since then, there has been a wave of climate emergency declarations in local government, with up to 80 Councils across the UK making declarations. A full list is featured on the [Campaign Against Climate Change website](#).



## 3. The legal framework

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The Climate Change Act 2008 for England, Wales and Northern Ireland and in the Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009 in Scotland, governs the legal responsibilities for this area, which rest with central government. The Climate Change Act 2008 was a world first in introducing a legally binding target for greenhouse gas emissions in the UK. This was a reduction in greenhouse gases of 80% by 2050, against a 1990 baseline. It is worth emphasising that at the time this target was chosen it was highly ambitious, although now it seems less so.

The mechanism of the Act works by introducing five yearly carbon budgets, with the Government having to set out how it will meet those budgets in advance. The Act also established the independent Committee on Climate Change to advise the Government on climate change issues.

There has recently been some criticism of Government policy not being ambitious enough, not being stable enough or sufficiently resourced to achieve the targets. This is a very relevant factor to the climate emergency debate. It is for this reason that the majority of criticism (such as Extinction Rebellion) is aimed at the Government.

On 12th June 2019 the UK Prime Minister Theresa May announced that the UK will cut emissions to net zero by 2050. Britain is the first major nation to propose this target. The previous target of a reduction of 80% by 2050 in the 2008 Climate Change Act, has now been amended to net-zero emissions by 2050. Scotland had already committed to reducing greenhouse gas emissions to net-zero by 2045, five years ahead of the UK government's target.

It is important to point out that every climate emergency declaration by a local authority is made on a voluntary basis. There is currently no legal requirement for local authorities to take general action or to meet targets in the 2008 Act. Many local authorities would consider that they have a moral duty to act, based on their traditional duties around well-being and health locally.

## 4. Climate emergency declarations

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The climate emergency declarations that have been made vary across the UK. There are clearly precedents being circulated, as many are similar or identical in wording. However, it is important that each local authority considers carefully what it is signing up to.

The following is a random selection of declaration motions for illustrative purposes and to allow some conclusions to be drawn:

### **Newcastle City Council**

In Newcastle's resolution, the preamble makes reference to the need for humans as a species to "reduce our CO<sub>2</sub>e (carbon equivalent) emissions from the current 6.5 tonnes per person per year to 2 tonnes or less as soon as possible..." It also records that current plans are not enough.

The Council endorses the view that: "All governments (whether national, regional and local) have a duty to limit the negative impacts of climate breakdown, and local governments that recognise this should not wait for national governments to change their policies."

So far as the resolution is concerned, this makes reference to a pre-existing document (the Newcastle Declaration on Climate Change 2010) which should be updated by "pledging to make Newcastle upon Tyne carbon neutral by 2030, taking into account both production and consumption emissions."

It states that it will work with partners to achieve this new goal. There are other statements about central government powers and resources and ending investment in fossil fuels. On the action front, the resolution requires Cabinet to report to full Council within six months on the actions it will take to address this emergency.

So short and to the point is the trend for this resolution. The duty the Council refers to is presumably a moral duty.

### ***Oxfordshire County Council***

Oxfordshire County Council's resolution was formed on 2 April 2019. It states that "Oxfordshire is doing its bit" by reducing the emissions from its own estate and activities by 3% a year. However, it recognises that this is insufficient.

The resolution then calls on the Leader to declare the climate emergency, pledge to make 'Oxfordshire County Council carbon neutral by 2030', seek powers and resources from Government and work with partners across the county and region to deliver this new goal and to report to Council within six months on necessary actions.

On a strict interpretation, the Council is only committing to make its own activities carbon neutral by 2030, not those of the wider area. However, the next sentence which refers to working with partners to achieve this suggests that the target may cover a wider area. Whether this is a Council commitment or a whole locality commitment, it shows that the Council is serious about reducing emissions and is taking a hugely important step. However, it is important to be clear about what the Council is signing up to.

### ***Nottingham City Council***

Nottingham is without doubt one of the leading authorities in the country on the green agenda. It has moved from the early days of the Nottingham Declaration to an authority that has made considerable progress towards zero carbon status.

Now, Nottingham has set the earliest known date for a Council net zero emission target, namely that it will become a zero carbon city in 2028. This was announced on 21 January 2019, after the city reached its 2020 goals two years early.

The progress has been driven by a sweeping low carbon strategy that covers areas ranging from public transport and community owned solar schemes, to retrofitting Council buildings and housing with energy efficiency technologies.

So Nottingham is also addressing climate change largely through the prism of energy, which is an attractive proposition to many local authorities and is further considered later in this publication.

## 5. Choosing a target

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There is a suggestion that some local authorities have passed climate emergency declarations without really thinking through what it is they are signing up to. At the time of writing of the over 80 local authorities that have declared a climate emergency, 42 local authorities have accepted a target to be zero carbon by 2030, the key date in the IPCC report.

A councillor speaker at the APSE Energy Summit 2019 emphasised (in a talk explaining why his authority had chosen a target of 2050) that, in his opinion, many of these local authorities currently have no plan to support their motion and therefore little evidence that any such target is realistic or attainable in their area.

So the starting point for any local authority considering making a declaration is, exactly what are we signing up to?

Below is a list of issues and considerations that the document deals with;

- Climate or energy?;
- Do you set a target with a scientific basis?;
- The definition of carbon neutral;

- A whole locality target or the Council's operations?;
- An achievable target or not?;
- Can and should the Council commit to a challenging target?;
- The Council's target or the agreed target for the Council plus partners? How to engage wider partners?;
- Do Councils have adequate data of current emissions?;
- Political risk;
- Capacity;
- Knowledge in the authority.

## 6. Developing an action plan to meet the target

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Once any target has been set by a local authority in relation to any functional area, it needs to develop an action or delivery plan, to illustrate how the outcome will be achieved. This area is no different.

The starting point in any action plan is to identify the target that has been set. The two main areas here appear to be zero carbon for the authority alone and zero carbon for the whole area of the authority. Each of these will need to be addressed differently.

Below is a list of considerations that the document details;

- Meeting an authority only target;
- Meeting an area wide target;
- Developing a plan;
- Monitoring progress;
- A communications strategy;
- Funding the Work.



# 7. Approaching climate change through the prism of energy

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Achieving 100% renewable energy by a defined date will go some way towards meeting emissions targets. This is because considerable emissions derive from electricity generation.

As energy is an area that many authorities have already undertaken work on, this may be a good starting point for the plan under the climate emergency motion. For this reason, a number of authorities are seeking to major on energy as a large part of their efforts towards the emissions targets.

There is a well-known hierarchy in energy which is use less energy, improve your energy efficiency and then create new energy from renewable sources. This is linear, because it is easiest and most cost effective to use less energy than it is to develop renewables projects.

However, if a local authority wants to put solar panels on a leisure centre, it is likely to consider the maximum amount of electricity that will be generated. It might then look at the amount of electricity used in the centre and this leads to consideration of how that electricity has been used and how this might be reduced. So the hierarchy is really circular i.e. wherever you come into the circle you will end up looking at all three issues.

The same is true of climate change. Whilst there is a lot more to climate change than just energy, actions in the energy space will lead to other areas, which all link together.

So any local authority unsure of where to start, would be well advised to start its own actions in the area of energy.

# 8. Conclusions

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The climate emergency momentum has raised some hard questions at local level. Local authorities are supportive of local action on climate change, but need to be realistic about what they can achieve. However, everyone agrees that they need to do something.

Having given this considerable thought in APSE Energy and in discussions with our members, the following is sensible advice in relation to climate emergency motions and plans:

- Develop a coherent and over-arching strategy;
- Embed this work into the entire culture and DNA of the organisation;
- Provide what the local authority does best – leadership – and avoid ‘talking shops’ at all cost. Local authorities need to play to their strengths and community leadership is at the heart of this issue;
- Be careful politically as to how you frame your motion;
- Choose a clear target so that it is completely clear what you are signing up to;
- Support this with a well thought through action plan with targets, a pathway towards them and specific actions providing steps along the way;
- If the authority does not believe that the target is achievable now, then say so and make clear that it is aspirational;
- Make demonstrable progress in the areas in which you control, such as work to the Council’s own estate;
- Be clear what success looks like;



- Encourage external monitoring and be transparent about progress. People understand that this is complex. If they don't, explain it;
- Put together a strong coalition of partners, with clear responsibilities in each area;
- Ensure all coalition members commit to a shared vision and play their part;
- Do the basics well and start with the easier areas, which may well be energy (renewable energy, energy efficiency and energy use);
- Lobby your national government for financial resources and other resources to realise your action plan.

## 9. APSE Energy

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APSE Energy is a collaboration of over 80 local authorities who are working towards the vision of the municipalisation of energy. Councils having a greater role in energy management within their locality might be something as simple as advertising cheaper energy tariffs that residents can sign up to. It can also involve more in-depth measures such as installing large scale solar farms or establishing a local behaviour change or education programme.

APSE Energy was established to help support local authorities to make the most of their assets in the energy arena and to help them keep up to date with the whole sustainability topic and take a leadership role within it.

We undertake an advocacy role, provide a series of briefings, newsletters, publications and other information, run a comprehensive programme of workshops, seminars and summits and offer expert consultancy support. As a result we can help fill gaps which exist within a local authority and provide a platform for those who are looking to showcase the progress they have made.

Part of being in membership of APSE Energy means being within a movement that is looking towards alternatives to the big 6 energy suppliers, addressing energy security, fuel poverty, emissions and cost issues, as well as promoting the Council as a local leader in the energy agenda and recognising it has a role to play in place shaping in general.

Those who know APSE will understand our unique position and recognise us as a trusted supporter and a credible brand, which is owned by our local authority members.

**To find out more about how APSE Energy can help you contact Phil Brennan, Head of APSE Energy at [pbrennan@apse.org.uk](mailto:pbrennan@apse.org.uk), or Charlotte Banks, Energy Research and Project Officer at [cbanks@apse.org.uk](mailto:cbanks@apse.org.uk), or call 0161 772 1810.**



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