

## **Voices, Spaces, and Scales of Environmental Governance in the South West of Britain: Exploring Climate Policy and Green Recovery**

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### **1. Introduction**

Climate action reached unprecedented heights in the UK during 2018. This was the outcome of a combination of factors that contributed to greater visibility of the case for climate action: the emergence of direct action movements such as Extinction Rebellion and Fridays for Future, mobilised in the aftermath of the IPCC Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5°C and followed by declarations of climate emergency by national and local authorities. Over 300 local authorities in the UK declared climate emergencies and adopted ambitious plans to deliver net zero by 2030 and 2050. At the same time the UK Government, following the recommendations of the UK Climate Change Committee (CCC), became the first major economy to set a legally-binding target of reducing UK's emissions by 78% by 2035 compared to 1990 levels (63% relative to 2019), leading to net zero by 2050.

The pandemic in 2020 disrupted this momentum, calling attention (and funds) to public health, as well as to a crumbling economy that needed urgent attention, thus impacting on the capacity for intervention on climate governance. Nonetheless, the world saw a drive for 'green recovery' which took the form of a series of documents (policy documents, reports, political speeches, declarations) produced and reproduced by international and national agents of climate governance.<sup>1</sup> COVID-19 crisis as 'a unique opportunity' to spur economic growth, create millions of new jobs and reduce global greenhouse gas emissions by a total of 4.5 billion tonnes by the end of the plan.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> European Commission (2020) 'A recovery plan for Europe' [https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/recovery-plan-europe\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/recovery-plan-europe_en); G20 (2021) G20 'Rome leaders' declaration' <https://www.g20.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/G20-ROME-LEADERS-DECLARATION.pdf>; UNEP (2021) 'Are we building back better? Evidence from 2020 and pathways for inclusive green recovery spending' <https://www.unep.org/resources/publication/are-we-building-back-better-evidence-2020-and-pathways-inclusive-green>; World Bank (2021) 'The World Bank Annual Report 2021 : From Crisis to Green, Resilient, and Inclusive Recovery' <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/36067>

<sup>2</sup> IEA (2020) Sustainable recovery <https://www.iea.org/reports/sustainable-recovery>

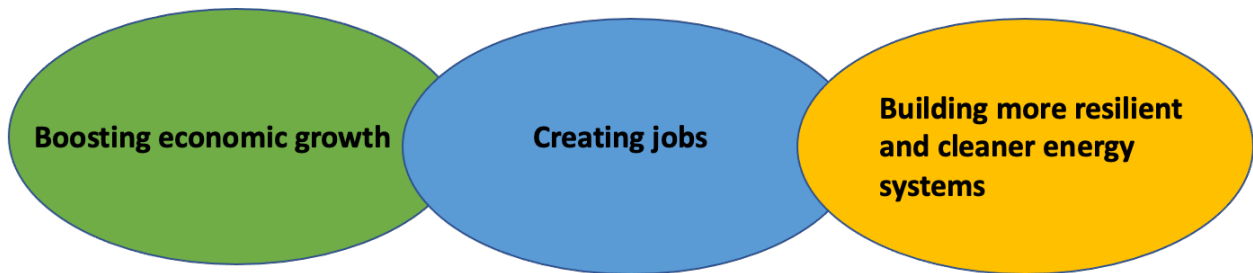


Figure 1. The three main goals of IEA's Sustainable Recovery Plan

In the UK, the national government endorsed this drive—at least on the rhetorical level—and integrated the idea of green recovery in policy documents published during the pandemic period.<sup>3</sup> In October 2021 the UK Government published its Net Zero Strategy, which explicitly brings to the fore the important role of devolved and local government in implementing the necessary changes to meet the national net zero target.<sup>4</sup> This approach is in line with CCC's assessment that 'the Sixth Carbon Budget can only be achieved if Government, regional agencies and local authorities work seamlessly together.' The importance of this emphasis on the role of political agents beyond the national government is notable, particularly because local net zero targets are often more ambitious than national targets.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, during the pandemic local authorities emerged as driving forces of climate governance, quickly adopting the rhetoric of green recovery and developing strategies and action plans to deliver ambitious visions for the post-pandemic era. Local governments have power or influence over one third of emissions in their local areas, as calculated by the CCC; therefore, collaboration between national and local governments is instrumental for the realisation of ambitious net zero targets. Nonetheless, a multi-level climate governance system includes

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<sup>3</sup> HM Government (2021) 'Build Back Better: Our Plan for Growth' [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/968403/PfG\\_Final\\_Web\\_Accessible\\_Version.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/968403/PfG_Final_Web_Accessible_Version.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> HM Government (2021) 'Net Zero Strategy: Build Back Greener' [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1033990/net-zero-strategy-beis.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1033990/net-zero-strategy-beis.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Climate Change Committee (2020) 'Local Authorities and the Sixth Carbon Budget' <https://www.theccc.org.uk/publication/local-authorities-and-the-sixth-carbon-budget/>

more than this collaboration; non-state actors play a key role in shaping local climate governance.<sup>6</sup> In particular, cities can contribute decisively to upscaling local climate policies to achieve rapid and deep decarbonisation.<sup>7</sup>

This research paper aims to assess how ‘place’ is presented and understood in national climate policy, explore the challenges for local and regional stakeholders in enacting change locally, and investigate how post-pandemic recovery approaches are interacting with local climate action. To identify and assess these issues, we review key recent national climate policy and green recovery documents, including specific policy documents relating to the sectors of transport, energy, industrial decarbonisation, and heat and buildings, as well as high-level policy documents relating to net zero and green recovery. We also present evidence collected via semi-structured interviews and a workshop with key place-based stakeholders which explored perceptions of how different people, identities, and cultures within cities in the South West of the UK are represented in decision-making on green recovery and climate policy. Finally, we assess the benefits of a place-sensitive approach to green recovery and climate justice. Accordingly, the paper aims to answer the following questions:

- What is the nature and impact of place-blindness in the context of climate governance?
- Which agents are prominent in local action for green recovery and which are missing?
- How can a place-sensitive approach contribute to addressing net zero targets?
- What kind of ‘guiding principles’ could help towards this direction?

## **2. Researching ‘place’ in climate policy**

In order to assess how national climate policy considers localities and the role of local authorities in the process of decarbonisation, this report analyses how place is constituted in key national documents (in relation to climate and Covid-19 recovery) and compares how four

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<sup>6</sup> Bulkeley H. & M. M. Betsill (2013) Revisiting the urban politics of climate change, *Environmental Politics*, 22:1, 136-154, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2013.755797>

<sup>7</sup> Fuhr H., Hickmann T. & Kern K. (2018) The role of cities in multi-level climate governance: local climate policies and the 1.5°C target, *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability*, 30, 1-6, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cosust.2017.10.006>

cities in the South of England and Wales are mobilising post-pandemic climate agendas. We draw on document analysis; a workshop in Sept 2021 with policymakers, activists and NGOs; and interviews with people involved in climate governance (officers and councillors) from Bath, Bristol, Cardiff and Exeter (two participants from each city). The aim of the interviews was to capture the views of local policymakers and officers on national climate policy, as well as to explore perceptions of how different people, identities, and cultures within cities are represented in decision-making on green recovery and climate policy. This included assessing views of the benefits of a place-sensitive approach to green recovery and climate justice.

### 3. Exploring place-based policymaking

As identified in the British Academy 'Where we live now' programme, in recent years there has been an increasing focus on place-sensitive approaches to policymaking in the UK. This emphasises the opportunity for the analytical category of 'place' to offer a 'a means of reconnection, more sensitive and appropriate policy-making, and better outcomes in terms of our individual and societal wellbeing' (British Academy, 2017).<sup>8</sup> A place-sensitive approach recognises that local people hold strong views about what the future for their area should look like and how success should be measured. Often these priorities are not the same as those set by the national government and, while ongoing processes of devolution have been pursued by Government for the last 10 years, there are enduring questions about how decision-making can be reconfigured to reflect the diversity of people's connection with place, and to enable diverse voices to shape the future of our cities, towns and villages.

Place-based approaches to climate policy tend to focus on the multilevel governing of climate, and the interactions between central government, local government, and the private sector.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> British Academy (2017) 'Where we live now: Making the case for place-based policy' <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publications/where-we-live-now-making-case-place-based-policy/>

<sup>9</sup> Burch, S., Shaw, A., Dale A. & J. Robinson (2014) Triggering transformative change: a development path approach to climate change response in communities, *Climate Policy*, 14:4, 467-487, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14693062.2014.876342>; Schroeder, H., Burch, S., & Rayner, S. (2013) Novel multisector networks and entrepreneurship in urban climate governance. *Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy*, 31:5, 761-768 <https://doi.org/10.1068/c3105ed>

However, these approaches often focus on the interactions between scales and sphere of governing with little emphasis on how ‘place’ is experienced differently within localities. This limits attention on questions of climate justice between and *within* our cities, towns and regions, how these relate to social and economic inequalities, as well as how the pandemic has impacted upon these issues.<sup>10</sup> As noted above, there is a strong drive for coupling economic post-pandemic recovery with climate action, and local authorities have already demonstrated commitment to this approach. In addition, there is increasing evidence that place-based approaches to addressing inequalities (particularly health and socio-economic inequalities) are most effective.<sup>11</sup> Finally, there is evidence that, although rapid decarbonisation will require deep changes across different communities, the impacts and benefits of decarbonisation plans will be distributed and experienced unevenly across different localities.<sup>12</sup> Our analysis highlights the siloed nature of national policy and the need for joined-up policy to address the challenges and potential debilitating effects of a transition to net zero for specific local communities and individuals.

### **3.1 How is ‘place’ constructed in national climate governance?**

In the UK, national policy papers produced during the pandemic have asserted the importance of a place-based approach to environmental governance and net zero, at least on a rhetorical level. Building on the Ten Point Plan (November 2020) which makes commitments for investing in clean technologies that will enable Britain to ‘lead the world into a new Green Industrial Revolution’, Build Back Better (March 2021), the Hydrogen Strategy (August 2021),<sup>13</sup> the Net

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<sup>10</sup> Moglia, M., Frantzeskaki, N., Newton, P., Pineda-Pinto, M., Witheridge, J., Cook, S., & Glackin, S. (2021). Accelerating a green recovery of cities: Lessons from a scoping review and a proposal for mission-oriented recovery towards post-pandemic urban resilience. *Developments in the Built Environment*, 7, 100052. <https://doi.org/10.1016/J.DIBE.2021.100052>

<sup>11</sup> British Academy (2017) ‘Where we live now’

<sup>12</sup> ADEPT (2021) ‘A blueprint for accelerating climate action and a green recovery at the local level’ <https://www.adeptnet.org.uk/documents/blueprint-accelerating-climate-action-and-greenrecovery-local-level>

<sup>13</sup> HM Government (2021) ‘Hydrogen Strategy’ [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1011283/UK-Hydrogen-Strategy\\_web.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1011283/UK-Hydrogen-Strategy_web.pdf)

Zero Strategy (October 2021), and the Heat and Buildings Strategy (October 2021)<sup>14</sup> all assert the importance of place-based approaches to net zero. They all also link decarbonisation action with the need for a ‘green recovery’. In this section, we provide an overview of the way these documents approach climate action on the national level and conclude that, despite acknowledging the need for more place-based policy, the documents constitute ‘place’ in ways that provide an oversimplified, flattened understanding of this term. The documents reduce complexity of places in three main ways. First, empowerment of local policymakers to develop and enact ambitious change is ultimately limited due to lack of devolved resources and lack of clarity on roles and responsibilities across and between national, regional and local levels. Second, there is no recognition that place is experienced differently across communities within a locality. Third, there is little scope to create processes for local learning to formally feed into other scales of policymaking.

<b>Document</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Approach to Place</b>
The Ten Point Plan for a Green Industrial Revolution	November 2020	High-level plan for a ‘green industrial revolution’ that does not refer to the role of place in delivering net zero
Build Back Better: Our Plan for Growth	March 2021	Asserts the importance of place for the government’s ‘levelling up’ strategy, and sets out plans for delivering regional economic growth
Decarbonising Transport: A Better, Greener Britain	July 2021	A place-based approach is recognized as the most effective way to approach transport decarbonisation
UK Hydrogen Strategy	August 2021	Low carbon hydrogen is identified as playing a critical role in the transition to net zero; small-scale place-based projects are presented as resolving key energy challenges
Net Zero Strategy: Build Back Greener	October 2021	Section on ‘local climate action’ emphasises the ‘essential role’ devolved and local government play in meeting national net zero ambitions. Document identifies the key

<sup>14</sup> HM Government (2021) ‘Heat and Buildings Strategy’ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/heat-and-buildings-strategy>

		priorities for supporting local action on net zero as setting clearer expectations for local places, providing resources for local places, and building capacity and capability at the local level
Heat and Buildings Strategy	October 2021	Local authorities are recognized as key players in decarbonising buildings to help reach net zero by 2050, although barriers to local action are acknowledged
Levelling Up White Paper	February 2022	'Systems Reform' chapter promises devolution to 'economic geographies', and identifies problems with previous initiatives in this area, including policy churn and weak institutions; siloed policy making, especially in central government; and weak local government.

Table 1. UK Government Policy Documents Relating to Environmental Governance, and their Approaches to Place

### **Build Back Better (March 2021)**

This document sets out the UK Government's plan to 'build back better' from COVID-19, by focussing on three pillars of growth: infrastructure, skills, and innovation. It asserts the importance of 'place' as part of the 'Levelling Up' strategy, noting that many people are rooted to their local area because of its civic identity and their social and family connections (53). For example, the document identifies infrastructure investment as fundamental to delivering net zero emissions by 2050, and highlights the importance of 'Investing in Places' as part of the UK Government's 'Levelling Up' strategy (p. 38). To deliver regional economic growth, it identifies investments such as the City and Growth Deals for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and intra-city transport settlements for eight city regions (38). The document highlights that working 'in tandem with local communities and businesses, empowered local institutions will help to drive forward change in their areas, setting strategic direction and delivering for places'. It cites actions such as refreshing the Green Book to improve the understanding of the impacts of policies on places and electing eight metro mayors across the country, and affirms the government's desire 'to devolve and decentralise to give more power to local communities' (p. 79).

**Decarbonising Transport (July 2021)**

This document outlines the government's plans to decarbonise the transport system in the UK. Acknowledging the importance of aligning the funding for decarbonising local infrastructure with the national net zero mission, the government commits to reform local transport infrastructure funding. In practice, this translates to funding being dependent on local authorities demonstrating how they will reduce emissions through certain investment plans [toolkit to support local authorities to be published by the end of 2021?]. A place-based approach is recognised as the most effective way to deal with transport decarbonisation, with 'each place' seen as having its own unique role to play in net zero efforts (p. 147). 'Local leadership and ambition' are seen as key forces to achieve net zero futures, with the central government having the role to support and encourage local authorities.

**Hydrogen Strategy (August 2021)**

The UK Government sees low carbon hydrogen as having a critical role in the transition to net zero. 'Place' is here constructed as the location of experimentation and innovation, where relatively small-scale projects are presented as resolving energy challenges. Despite acknowledging the need for engagement with a broad range of local and national stakeholders in developing the necessary network infrastructure, the argument put forward in the document demonstrates support for 'market-driven' solutions, that said engagement should not delay or disrupt. Failures and barriers identified in small-scale, local projects can be overcome by the deployment of hydrogen in larger markets. Finally, there is reference to the importance of liaising with local communities to raise awareness around the role that low carbon hydrogen can play in achieving net zero.

**Heat and Buildings Strategy (October 2021)**

This document sets out how the UK will decarbonise homes and commercial, industrial and public sector buildings, as part of achieving the net zero target by 2050. In practice, the achievement of this target requires that all heat in buildings will need to be decarbonised.



The transition to Net Zero is framed as ‘a huge economic opportunity for the UK’ (p. 42), in terms of new employment opportunities, carbon savings, greater comfort, improved health outcomes, and reduced energy bills. Local authorities are recognised as key players in the process of ‘implementing and enforcing national regulations and policy’ and ‘engaging with businesses and constituents’ (p. 132). They are also allocated responsibility to identify areas of support to help households and businesses to decarbonise, as well as engaging with the public through existing communication channels to raise awareness about decarbonisation opportunities (p. 136). The document affirms the existence of barriers to local action and iterates the Government’s commitment to ‘use local expertise to deliver solutions that are suitable for local areas’ (p. 134).

### **Net Zero Strategy (October 2021)**

The Net Zero Strategy incorporates a section on ‘local climate action’, which reiterates the ‘essential role’ devolved and local government play in meeting national net zero ambitions (p. 261). It identifies the key priorities for supporting local action on net zero as setting clearer expectations for local places, providing resources for local places, and building capacity and capability at the local level. The Net Zero Strategy recognises concerns about the central-local relationship on net zero delivery and commits to setting clearer expectations on how central and local governments interact. The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) will take overall responsibility for improving coordination with local government and other local actors on net zero. A Local Net Zero Forum will be established to bring together national and local government senior officials to discuss policy and delivery options on net zero. The Government has committed to explore how they ‘could simplify and consolidate funds which target net zero initiatives at the local level’. There is a commitment to continue the Local Net Zero Programme, including the continuation of the Local Net Zero Hubs (previously known as the local energy hubs) across England. The document advertises that the Government is enabling local areas to tackle net zero goals through the introduction of UK-wide growth funding schemes, such as the Community Renewal Fund, the Levelling Up Fund, and the Towns

Fund; the UK Infrastructure Bank (UKIB) will offer loans to local authorities for projects of at least £5 million. The UKIB will also develop an expert advisory service to help local authorities develop and finance projects, although no timescale is stated for this. The Net Zero Strategy also expresses the desire for local communities to take action to transition to net zero, highlighting the benefits of these communities collaborating with local authorities. However, the report acknowledges that ‘there remain significant barriers to maximising place-based delivery on net zero’ (p. 261). It also flags that there are currently no net zero statutory targets on local authorities or communities in the UK, and states that ‘we do not believe that a new general statutory requirement is needed’.

### **Levelling Up White Paper (February 2022)**

The ‘Systems Reform’ chapter promises devolution to ‘economic geographies’, and is based around five ‘pillars’: a mission-oriented approach to setting policy; a reorientation of central government decision-making; greater empowerment of local government decision-making; a revolution in data and transparency at the subnational level; and enhanced transparency and accountability of this new regime. However, the chapter also identifies obstacles and problems with previous initiatives in this area, including policy churn and weak institutions; siloed policy making, especially in central government; weak local government; poor evidence base and local data for informing decisions; and little transparency on progress or metrics for success.

### **3.2 Agents of green recovery**

Our review of the climate policy-related documents produced during and in the immediate aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic shows that a place-based approach currently entails focus on local authorities, but not other local agents of climate action. It also shows that a place-based approach remains somewhat superficial, to the extent that even when particular places or cities are mentioned in national climate policy documents, there is no consideration for the people and cultures within them, other than in the context of the impact that the net-zero transition will have on employment. Although local authorities are constituted as important agents of change in the road to decarbonise the UK, this agency takes an

oversimplified form. Furthermore, in reality local authorities lack the actual power to implement ambitious green recovery plans. Therefore, it seems that central government delegates responsibility to local authorities, while at the same time negating them the agency and resources to implement change. The transition to net zero will be a complex process; simply passing much of the role for navigating this complexity to local governments does not represent actual place-sensitive policymaking.

#### 4. Enacting place-sensitivity in real places

While the language of place-based climate policy-making is well established in national policymaking, and local governments have long been important actors in emission reduction plans, it is as yet unclear if and how the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced climate action in specific places. This section reflects on the approach to local climate policy being adopted in the four cities of Cardiff, Bristol, Bath and Exeter. It draws upon analysis of local policy documents, a workshop with local policymakers, activists and NGOs, as well as interviews with local Councillors and officers involved in climate policy.

The following tables summarise the key climate emergency and covid recovery documents in the four cities. They demonstrate the short period of time over which these complex areas of policy and action planning have been developed, and highlight variety across the cities' approaches. Of particular note are the variety of consultation approaches and cross-sector partnership bodies which are involved in both climate and pandemic responses.

Bath & NE Somerset	Date	Key features
Climate Emergency Declaration	March 2019	Carbon neutral by 2030 Climate Emergency cabinet role

Climate and Ecological Emergency Action Plan	Jan 2021 (updated)	
One Shared Vision – Covid recovery response	June 2021	Based on extensive consultation using alternative scenarios for the future of the area.
Renewal Programme	Ongoing	An Economic Recovery Board was established in 2020, One Shared Vision (see above) aims to bring together social and economic priorities with green recovery and net zero.

Bristol	Date	Key features
Climate Emergency Declaration	Nov 2018	Carbon neutral (in-house operations) by 2025 Carbon neutral (other emissions) by 2030 Climate, Ecology, Waste, Energy cabinet role
Mayor's Climate Emergency Action Plan	2019	
One City Climate Strategy	March 2020	Produced through 'Bristol One City' cross-sector partnership
Bristol Citizens' Assembly report - How do we recover from COVID-19 and create a better future for all in Bristol?	2021	Following a consultation – 'Our City, Your Future' - , Assembly sessions were held early 2021. Climate focus had been anticipated but pandemic caused a pivot towards post-covid recovery.
Bristol One City programmes (cross-sector partnership)	Ongoing	Strategies updated to include Citizens' Assembly and incorporate Covid recovery: Economic Recovery and Renewal, One City Plan, One City Climate Strategy

Cardiff	Date	Key features
Climate Emergency Declaration	March 2019	Carbon neutral by 2030
One Planet Cardiff Strategy	2020	
Greener, Fairer, Stronger: City Recovery and Renewal Strategy	May 2021	The basis for a survey and a series of consultation events June-October 2021. An earlier economic renewal document was released in 2020.

Exeter	Date	Key features
Climate Emergency Declaration	July 2019	Carbon neutral by 2030 Net Zero 2030 cabinet role
Net Zero Exeter 2030 Plan	June 2020	Produced by Exeter City Futures – a cross sector Community Interest Company – adopted by Exeter City Council
Building Exeter Back Better	Oct 2020	Produced by Exeter City Council with council-led partnership Liveable Exeter. The result of work and consultation by seven cross-sector recovery groups.

#### 4.1 Integrating post-pandemic recovery plans with local climate action

The policy documents relating to the Covid-19 pandemic in the four cities invoke the language of green recovery across all four locations. Indeed, and despite differences in size and economic strength, all four local authorities adopted local net-zero strategies that emphasised the importance of seizing the opportunity of the post-pandemic recovery to enact more ambitious

climate plans and targets.<sup>15</sup> Nonetheless, with the pandemic becoming less of an immediate priority (at least for now), we notice a shift from this integrated approach of ‘green recovery’ towards a more specific focus on net zero implementation. Interviewees across the cities emphasised this shift and articulated the need to embed long-term approaches to net zero. It is notable that the period of activism leading up to climate emergency declarations, led by Extinction Rebellion and Fridays for Future, was consistently seen as significant in pushing councils to be bolder and more ambitious. Perspectives varied though, on the impact of COVID-19 hitting so soon after this period, on climate action. In the context of net zero plans, the pandemic could be seen as an event within a longer process, as in the case of an officer engaged in local climate governance for over a decade.

It was a deliberate decision not to put too much weight on COVID recovery, right? Because net zero is a 30-year challenge and whilst COVID presents an opportunity to reset some things in society, it was the opinion of [city] that the COVID recovery is likely to be quite short term in comparison to what we need to do for net zero. (Int01, talking about Climate Assembly)

By contrast, a politician who had been closely engaged in climate campaigns, expressed huge frustration that lockdown reduced the visibility of the climate emergency and diverted resources from it; an element of this frustration being the conviction that, while COVID and climate emergency were largely addressed in policy and discourse as separate, they were in fact inseparable from each other.

It kind of really brought home the urgency of what we had to do, and yet my hands were completely tied. (Int03)

New demands on officer time related to the pandemic, compounded by the stresses everyone was experiencing, took focus and resources away from climate emergency in the short term. One council leader advised that acting on climate too soon after the first lockdown would be ‘in

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<sup>15</sup> Britton, J., Berglund, O., Robbins, C., Hatzisavvidou, S., Shackleton, D. (2021) ‘A Green and Just Recovery across Bath, Bristol, Exeter, and Cardiff’ <https://green-recovery-cities.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Green-Recovery-Workshop-Report.pdf>

poor taste'; meanwhile activists, who had very recently won their demands for climate emergency declarations, were frustrated by a perceived lack of action.

#### **4.2 Top-down covid policy and pushback**

Government COVID-19 recovery funding demanded quick responses from local councils, and those with 'oven ready' projects were at an advantage. The ability to respond within the timescales demanded by central government was interpreted both as a reward for having done the hard work of consulting on and preparing climate actions over a long period (Int01), or as disadvantageous to smaller councils with less officer time to draw upon and fewer projects in the pipeline (Int02, 03).

What had happened was that the government put through the opportunities to bid very, very quickly. Short notice. And, of course, if you're Cambridge or somewhere, what I assume is that you've got shelves and shelves of cycle tracks you know, almost ready to go and you just take one down off the shelf and pop it into the government and it's all ready to go. (Int03)

In the absence of projects that had been worked up pre-pandemic, rapid response sometimes led to projects going forward with little consultation. A combination of factors, particular to the pandemic, could lead to these projects being poorly received.

Consultations, even if they happened, would have happened in a different way from normal. So I think lots of people came out from lockdown and found changes to their place, their environment that they weren't expecting, they hadn't engaged with for whatever reason... and some of those things went through fast. I can completely see it, because when I was at home...walking around with no cars on the road, thinking 'God we have to hold on to this, we have to keep this', was in my head... and so presumably, some people in government were thinking the same thing. And that's why they encouraged people to bang through these transport things very quickly. But that certainly had a backlash in some places. (Int03)

#### **4.3 A justice focused approach to climate**

Analysis of local policy documents, as well as discussion in the stakeholder workshop, showed that concepts like care, wellbeing, and justice were integral to discussions of recovery in immediate responses to the pandemic. However, there is limited evidence that this expansive approach is being integrated into climate policy over the longer-term.

In the early stages of the pandemic, narratives of ‘green recovery’ were seen by many local stakeholders as having the potential to provide a new route to connect concerns regarding climate, inequalities, and prosperity; with scope to facilitate a justice-based approach to local climate action. However, limitations in national approaches to place-based climate policymaking, and a lack of established spaces to bring together local government, community leaders, and climate activists, appear to be resulting in this focus on ‘just’ approaches to net zero fading.

Our interview participants tended to focus on delivering net zero plans, and while they recognised the importance of inclusive approaches, these were not generally their main preoccupation. There was a quite consistent view that those individuals and NGOs who engaged with local climate governance tended to be the ‘usual suspects’, and that reaching beyond these groups was difficult.

To engage people who aren't engaged in this agenda... 'cause otherwise we're just talking to the same people all the time. And the same people are kind of feeding in. Those sorts of insights that could inform...the justice side of it aren't coming through. (Int01)

An account of a climate citizen’s assembly suggested this method of engagement did not serve to broaden or shift the parameters of the local response; the resulting report being described instead as ‘not particularly ground-breaking at all’, despite council members’ worries that it would be ‘too extreme’.

Justice as a point of reference emerged particularly strongly within the context of discussions on jobs and the workforce required to deliver decarbonisation plans. One of the interviewees mentioned the division within trade unions between those representing workers more



immediately affected by forthcoming and potential changes and those who are on board with these changes. A potential avenue here would be a kind of partnership between councils and trade unions.

When asked how social researchers might support work towards inclusion and climate justice, our participants suggested that support to engage council service users and non-environmental community groups would be welcome. They recognised that those most at risk from the effects of climate change were among the least likely to engage and that this should be addressed.

#### **4.4 Limits of traditional engagement routes in exploring place-based dynamics**

We can thus identify a number of limits to place-based socially just and ecologically sustainable policy in the ways that local authorities have engaged citizens during this period. There has been limited consultation on some measures related to the pandemic (e.g. transport) due to the rapid nature of policy, which has led to some pushback. One interviewee had been involved in a public call for evidence in support of net zero plans: they had hoped this would elicit very place-specific, ground-up proposals that could be put into action, but expressed disappointment that, while the volume of responses was high, they tended to be generic. Another highlighted the specific challenges of delivering net zero within the constraints of Bath as a World Heritage city.

Climate assemblies, which many activists, academics and commentators have put much faith in, have also disappointed, with one interviewee reporting that recommendations were not radical and indeed reproduced established themes and approaches in climate policy making. Whilst deliberative approaches such as climate assemblies can play important roles in developing public trust and creating a social mandate for action,<sup>16</sup> the research conducted here

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<sup>16</sup> Bryant, P., & Stone, L. (2020). Climate assemblies and juries: A people-powered response to the climate emergency. *Shared Future/PCAN*. <https://sharedfuturecic.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Shared-Future-PCAN-Climate-Assemblies-and-Juries-web.pdf>; Devaney, L., Torney, D., Brereton, P., & Coleman, M. (2020). Ireland's Citizens' Assembly on Climate change: Lessons for deliberative public engagement and communication. *Environmental Communication*, 14(2), 141– 146. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17524032.2019.1708429>; Wells, R.,

reveals the need to create new ways to address inequalities and the climate emergency together – and incorporate the voices of previous marginalised communities.

#### **4.5 Scales of action**

The Government's levelling up agenda was mentioned in our interviews as an opportunity for authorities not previously eligible for EU regional funds to gain support for low carbon projects and to devolve decision making.

Things like the county deals will help, and funding packages like the Shared Prosperity Fund because it's decentralizing decisions around housing, transport skills, business support...so it's addressing more your local Issues rather than what central government think are the issues for your particular area, but even issues that we have in X are very different to what they have even in Y, which is our neighbouring local authority.

There was also a perception that the shift from EU to nationally administered regional funds, while potentially creating opportunities, also presented challenges. There are concerns around the fact that the cities in our study area are not electoral priorities for the current government and therefore local authorities might find accessing the funds difficult.

One of our study areas includes a two-tier system of county and district councils; the levelling up County Deal was expected to result in a new combined authority to oversee funds, adding another dimension to scales of governance here. In this area there is also county-level coordination of climate emergency action and policymaking: this approach was valued for its role in enhancing networking and cooperation but was also seen as potentially tying progress to the slower-moving authorities.

Other than levelling up, national policies raised as potential opportunities included a focus on renewables promoted by the Industrial Strategy; although in this context there was awareness

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Howarth, C. and Brand-Correa, L.I., 2021. Are citizen juries and assemblies on climate change driving democratic climate policymaking? An exploration of two case studies in the UK. *Climatic Change*, 168(1), pp.1-22 <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10584-021-03218-6>; Willis, R., Curato, N. and Smith, G., 2022. Deliberative democracy and the climate crisis. *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change*, p.e759 <https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.759>

of some instability, 'depending on who's in charge', and that the strategy had 'morphed into new strategies', which could support the development of hydrogen generation, urban renewables and associated skills.

The planning system was seen as presenting opportunities and constraints, for example seeking enhanced building standards and net zero policies to be included in the renewal of local plans. In the case of Bath, planning-related matters limiting the adaptation of historic buildings was a particular challenge. There was strong critique from one interviewee of the effective moratorium on onshore wind, which has been achieved through the planning system since 2015.

Overall, the interviews revealed a need and urgency to upscale climate action and to move from small to large scale implementation of changes. Although it is recognised that small projects and interventions can contribute to job creation and therefore bring social value, a more transformative approach would require a far more systematic and co-ordinated approach to education and skills.

## **5. Conclusion**

### **What are the main takeaways**

Our analysis evidences that despite the attempt to integrate place-based approaches to climate governance in strategies and plans set out during and in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, in reality this attempt is inadequate. This is the result of an over-simplified and flattened conception of place in much national policy, which despite emphasising the need for more attention to particular places and providing some important tools to support local climate governance, has two linked shortcomings. First, the existing approach provides local policymakers with limited empowerment to develop and enact ambitious change. For example, there is limited allocation of devolved resources on climate-related issues, as well as lack of clarity on roles and responsibilities across and between national, regional and local level.

Central government itself has identified the need to focus on these issues with the Net Zero Strategy (2021) suggesting that clarifying expectations of the local level and providing resources

and capacity building should be the focus for supporting local action on net zero. Nonetheless, there is no actual enactment of these suggestions in practice. Second, there is a profound lack of recognition that 'place' is experienced differently across communities within a locality. The pandemic and increased focus on just transitions provide an opportunity to embed a richer conception of place into local climate policy. This involves developing new ways to bring a wider range of voices into climate policy at the local level. As several of our interviewees highlight, continuous years of sustained austerity policies, in combination with lack of support by central government, have taken a severe toll on local authorities' ability to implement more ambitious climate agendas. In some cases, the gap is filled in by private sector investment, as in the case of decarbonising energy systems. However, it was pointed out that with some markets not being mature (i.e. profitable) enough (e.g. in the case of insulation), the state is still the most important actor.

### **Key points and policy recommendations**

- Multilevel climate governance beyond local authorities and businesses, to include other actors with access to or control over land and resources (such as farmers, the Church of England, universities, developers, utilities, canal trusts, railways etc.) as well as utility providers (particularly electricity networks, on whom a lot of the place based transition will depend – e.g. for EV, solar, and electrification of heating) and financial organisations.
- There is need to counter in the full variety of aspects of life that matter to individuals and communities. The current overemphasis on 'jobs' presents a very limited understanding of the aspects of social and economic life that shape people's sense of belonging to a place. An actual place-based approach would reconsider how the transition to net zero impacts not just employment, but also livelihoods in a broader sense.
- Local approaches to climate policymaking often lack engagement with diverse local voices and communities, limiting perspectives on care and justice in processes of

change. The range and richness of community leadership and activism could, however, provide a significant resource.

- The framing of 'just transitions' could provide a useful lens through which to engage in local conceptions of 'place' and how different communities might be affected by, and engage with, the journey to net zero.
- The implementation of a 'just transition' would require a partnership between LAs and trade unions.
- Considering that LAs currently lack the agency to implement change, more support is needed from central government, especially with regard to stepping in on sectors where market interventions are still deemed unprofitable.
- There is need and scope to create processes for local learning to formally feed into other scales of policymaking. This draws on Bath experience of delivering climate action in heritage setting, as well as Exeter as area of rapid growth).