

CLIMATE ACTION FOR SMALLER COUNCILS

Revised Draft Guidance June 2023

Many parish councils have the minimum five councillors together with a part-time parish clerk. These are the intended audience for this guidance, as well as parish meetings that may only gather once a year.

CLIMATE ACTION BACKGROUND

Climate action is often described under three headings:

- Mitigation – reducing the carbon emissions that contribute to global warming.
- Adaptation – responses to the climate changes that are already happening.
- Nature Recovery – including offsetting the impact from past development.

FIRST STEPS - WHAT CAN EVERYONE DO AT ONCE?

- Forge links with any initiatives by your local planning authority as well as any voluntary sector networks in your county.
- Contact neighbouring parishes to discover what action they are taking that you might support in some way.
- Contact existing local climate action groups, offering support in terms of publicity and meeting space if not actual funding.

COMMENTING ON PLANNING APPLICATIONS

Whether or not a council leads on climate action, it can ask telling questions when presented with local planning applications (see Appendix 1).

Local councils can also get involved with consultation on their planning authority's Local Plan, to help encourage the inclusion of policies that would support such critical comment of planning applications from developers.

Local councils can of course develop their own neighbourhood plans, and the Centre for Sustainable Energy has published guidance¹ on potential policies to include.

ASSESSING OUR OWN COUNCIL ACTION

Some things may be done by way of leading by example:

- Review the council's own property (there may not be any of course), landholding and operations to see if carbon emissions could be reduced.

- Consider how nature recovery might be supported on green spaces we control, bearing in mind the duty to consider biodiversity in our actions that is reconfirmed for all local councils under the Environment Act 2021 and to which recent Government guidance² is asking for a considered local response by the end of 2023.

South Gloucestershire Council has published useful guidance³ on developing a nature recovery action plan.

WORKING WITH OUR LOCAL COMMUNITY

Smaller councils cannot be expected to do it all on their own:

- Open a dialogue with the wider community, either through the annual parish meeting and/or other channels including social media and the council's own website, to identify and encourage local support for climate action.
- Note which local issues have already been identified that could have a project-based response that supports climate action in some degree, such as public buildings facing high energy costs that might host solar panels.
- While reviewing your local council area, consider which of the wide range of common climate action projects (see an emerging list at Appendix 2) might provide long-term benefit to your local community.
- Set up a working group with representatives from the local community to assess the practicalities of a local action plan and seek the necessary funding.

Declaring a climate emergency is also something a local council can do (see Appendix 3), but that commitment is hollow without some action on the ground.

CONTEXT – POLICY

Apart from the biodiversity duty, the only clearly related statutory responsibility for local councils is to seek to create new allotments in response to local demand⁴. By encouraging local food production allotments can help reduce the amount of carbon emissions from distribution by supermarkets as well as providing allotment holders with healthy eating and healthy exercise!

Other powers exist to allow parish councils to take a range of actions if they so choose (see Appendix 4). This includes the power under the 1972 Local Government Act to support district, county, unitary and borough authorities in their own statutory duties⁵.

Overall, it is not necessary for councils to declare a climate emergency before commencing climate action. Further guidance is available on how to incorporate environmental concerns within a council's regular activity⁶.

CONTEXT – RESOURCES

There will clearly be an upper limit to what parish clerks can achieve on their own in addition to their regular work, and councillors will also have other work or family commitments.

This being the case, all councils will need to work with their local community, including the business community, rather than trying to do it all on their own. There may also be the opportunity to collaborate with neighbouring councils, even to the point of developing joint climate action projects.

BUILDING A LOCAL ACTION PLAN

Here are some early steps:

- **Prepare the ground at your council** then put forward a motion to declare an emergency or pledge to net zero – don't worry too much about the wording, the pledge for action is the thing.
- **Focus on the action plan:**
 - Keep it simple.
 - Don't take on too much yourselves - use the work which is already going on in your community.
 - Start with where you are, you can build on your plan later.
 - It needs only to be an umbrella to gather under and as an aide memoire of what was promised and why.
 - Write your action plan for your community so that everyone can understand and relate to it.
- **Joint community/working groups** work well – harness the community resource and use the council to guide, advise and fund.

Declaring a biodiversity crisis as well as a climate crisis helps to draw out those with specific interest in wildlife – but any declaration is worth nothing without an action plan behind it, in fact it is only a gateway to identify and encourage action.

There are many draft action plans on the internet. NALC's summary of possible topics may be a helpful start⁷. You can cherry pick what looks attractive to you from this list and from other sources, then add further items later.

To do the job properly try <https://saveourshropshire.org/sos-shropshire> or there's a very simple quick one from a small Derbyshire parish council at Appendix 5. Whichever one hits the spot for you – it's your action plan!

What we know is that councillors and parish clerks are already busy and there is not an infinite amount of resource available to construct and fulfil an action plan. It can seem quite daunting and a lot of work, but it doesn't need to be.

Remember that it's not the plan that matters, it's the action. Any action on the ground, however small or trivial, is better than an elaborate plan on paper which doesn't translate into your parish's activities. Don't sweat the bureaucracy, put something simple together and get going! You can refine your plan later once you get into the swing of things.

If all you have going on in your community is enthusiasm for a village orchard and some thoughts about a repair café – start there. Your plan doesn't have to be comprehensive and include every climate action activity possible. Once you get going you will find that the list grows by itself.

Another key point is that most people who stand for council are not website searchers, project managers or blue-sky thinkers. They won't go looking for answers and they will recognise what they know. So, keeping things very simple and easy to relate to works well. Your council will understand tree planting, roof insulation and wildflowers in the verges. They might not relate so well to key performance indicators, risk registers and progress meetings. Still, every action plan is different, reflecting the community it is for, so whatever works for you is best.

It's helpful if there is one person involved who can keep the show on the road behind the scenes, updating the plans and prompting people to get things done, but for the most part the action plan works well if it is a focused part of the community's day to day activities.

For example, one small council's (population 1,109) first action plan ran to 23 pages. It had contributions from all the village climate groups' leaders, with a three-year plan, funding requirements and key targets as well as links to outside groups. Nobody read it. A short two-page large font summary was prepared for an event, to pin up on a noticeboard; it attracted so much attention that it has been used as the basis for the action plan-based climate work ever since.

It may be helpful to put a standing item on the council agenda to discuss progress on climate action, even when there isn't any, and publish any activity on the local noticeboard and website. Keeping the action plan in the public eye is important.

FINDING THE RESOURCE

Current thinking to solve the problem of resource is to set up working groups comprising community members and parish councils. In one small parish council, a community/council group was set up to solve the problem of river flooding. On investigation it turned out that the village could yield:

- Someone working for the local wildlife trust.
- A planning lecturer
- An expert in aggregates from the local quarry
- Two residents who had made their own flood defences and could take the other residents along with them.
- A willing council member.
- And the two flood wardens, one of whom turned out to be a structural engineer.

These residents, who are mostly not involved with the council at all, were found via a process of word of mouth and a WhatsApp group inviting interest. The project is now well under way and has achieved things not within the reach of individuals. Not only does that project mitigate the impact of flooding, but it is introducing a visible, climate action promoting wildlife corridor along the riverbank, and reconnecting a flood plain which will absorb carbon. There are reports back to council monthly, but the work is all being done by the group, with the council providing some small funding where required (the larger funding is being found by the group itself).

Another example is a self-start tree planting group, which has planted over 2.5 km of trees in 2022/23. The local parish council heard about it and offered support. It helps it to buy equipment and find land to plant on. The current focus is on working with National Trust to plant trees where ash dieback is already creating bare hillsides, with the council able to bring some authority to negotiation with the Trust.

Another small council has negotiated with its district council to manage verges so that wildflowers can grow; the district council has changed its mowing schedule and posted Bee Kind notices and a group of residents do the sowing and maintenance. The verges look spectacular and there is a measurable increase in insects and small wildlife spotted. Council input was about two hours, talking to the district council and then to a resident who is a horticulturalist; the rest did itself.

Elsewhere community/council groups are looking at installing electric vehicle charging points for residents, debunking myths and providing information on what you need to know to move into the electric vehicle market.

FORGING THE PEOPLE LINKS

Several individuals and organisations can help:

- **The Parish Clerk.** The role of the parish clerk cannot be underestimated; parish clerks tend to know everyone in a small community and can put one group in touch with another with very little effort. Without getting involved in community/council groups, they can identify the people who could usefully be involved and put them in touch with each other. So for relatively little effort they can have a big impact on the opportunities for climate action.
- **Schools and parents.** Climate change action can be fun. Getting the local school involved (which will already have its own climate projects) provides parent power resource as well as an easy way to involve the community.
- **Individual volunteers in your community.** As with the examples above, your parish may contain all kinds of people with specialist knowledge that are prepared to get involved. As well as through your usual media channels and by contacting existing green and climate groups, you could make climate action a feature of your annual parish meeting.
- **Your district council.** Most district councils have declared a climate emergency. If yours have then they can support you in lots of ways. They may have a climate officer in which case, get in touch and have a chat about what their priorities are and how they match up to yours.

FURTHER ADVICE AND INFORMATION

There are a huge number of agencies and organisations offering help and advice on climate issues:

- **Wildlife Trusts.** The national network of Wildlife Trusts, patron HM the King, <https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/> which run broadly on a county basis, is an immeasurably useful mine of support, funding, expertise and encouragement. Get in touch via their website and tell them what you are planning.
- **Local climate groups.** There is likely to be a climate action group nearby; Hope Valley Climate Action is a good example of one of these and their website has information which translates across the country <https://hopevalleyclimateaction.org.uk/>. Organisations such as this, which are run by locals for the locality, can offer things like temporary bank accounts to manage funding (which you can tell your community groups about), as well as day to day information about trees and insulation and so forth.

- **Other weblinks** – work is under way to develop a central source making links to existing advice easy, meanwhile many links are already posted at www.thecommunityworks.co.uk/local-councils/ .
- **Training advice.** Save our Shropshire who run Carbon Literacy Trust training have a website brimming with information.

MEASURING AND MONITORING

Once an action plan is under way, it will be important to monitor the progress of individual projects and publicise successes locally. This will not only keep people informed but potentially encourage more people to join in.

If one of your plan's aims is to reduce carbon emissions (and perhaps support the biosphere if you have included that in your declaration) then you will need to measure how successful you have been so far.

Measuring carbon feels a bit daunting, but there are many easy-to-use carbon measurement tools such as at <https://footprint.wwf.org.uk/> which shows you how much carbon you use as an individual and as a community. It's very quick to operate and very eye-opening. Try it on your councillors and see how they compare to your community's average, and how your community measures up to the national average, and the world average.

LOCAL MESSAGES

Reducing carbon emissions is closely linked to individual decisions. The key message to share is that we all use an amount of carbon in our lives, and to reach net zero (i.e. not making global warming any worse) we ALL have to reduce our carbon use to nothing. Just recycling your plastic straws won't do it.

If people aren't reaching net zero as an individual, they need to do more. Airline flights, transport, heating and food are the bigger hitters. We can each use less carbon by flying much less, eating beef and lamb only occasionally (livestock produce the powerful greenhouse gas methane), driving an electric vehicle and insulating our homes. And we can each work to take carbon out of the atmosphere by getting involved in tree and hedge planting in our gardens and communities, wildlifing and wildflowering gardens and verges, switching to renewable energy and contacting our MPs to support climate legislation.

That's the message for all councils to get across; that it can be done, and we can still avoid the worst repercussions of climate change if we all step up and get involved.

REFERENCES

1. www.cse.org.uk/resource/neighbourhood-planning-in-a-climate-emergency/
2. www.gov.uk/guidance/complying-with-the-biodiversity-duty
3. www.beta.southglos.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/Local-Nature-Action-Plans-guidance-for-town-and-parish-councils.pdf
4. www.thecommunityworks.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Creating-New-Allotments-March-2023.pdf
5. www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1972/70/section/101
6. www.slcc.co.uk/new-environmental-planning-guidance-available/
7. www.nalc.gov.uk/library/our-work/climate-change/3598-what-can-local-councils-do-on-climate-change-2021/file (page 10).

APPENDIX 1 – QUESTIONS TO ASK OF PLANNING APPLICATIONS

1. Does the proposed design aim to minimize energy requirements?
2. Does the application justify any use of carbon-intensive materials such as steel, brick and cement?
3. Are the general waste reduction principles of 'reduce, reuse and recycle', with use of reclaimed or recycled materials apparent in the application?
4. Does the application address standards for energy efficiency, for example by specifying a high standard of insulation for new homes, with an estimated energy performance certificate (EPC) level of C or above?
5. Are new homes to be fitted with a source of renewable energy, such as solar thermal or heat pump heating, or photovoltaics? (Applications for homes with fossil fuelled boilers should not be supported).
6. Are sites allocated for new housing easily accessible by walking, cycling and public transport links to the town centre and local amenities including schools and sports facilities (and does the application specify locations for cycle storage)?
7. Does the application avoid loss of local nature sites and green spaces and includes plans for their maintenance where relevant (such as tree watering)? (Significant developments should include areas that enhance local nature, through allowing habitats to establish and creating corridors between existing areas of habitat).
8. Where the application includes a new open space, does it include sufficient new native tree coverage and other plant life?
9. Does the application support low-carbon vehicles, for example, with electric vehicle charging points easily accessible?
10. Does the application specify that LED lights are to be used?
11. Does the application propose building on a flood plain or would otherwise significantly change surface or sub-surface hydrology, including impacting on other homes and buildings?

Does the application include where appropriate water saving measures such as using water butts, toilet flushers that save water and runoff water in concrete areas?

APPENDIX 2 – SOME CLIMATE ACTION PROJECT OPTIONS

These may be led by local councils on their own or delivered in partnership with other local councils and the local community, including local businesses.

TRAVEL

- Installing electric vehicle charging points.
- Car sharing scheme
- Encouraging active travel
- Expanding the network of bicycle lanes and footpaths
- Supporting homeworking by providing wi-fi enabled spaces and warm spaces.

ENERGY

- Switching to a sustainable energy supplier
- Generating sustainable energy, either by building or a larger scheme
- Energy efficiency (e.g. insulation)

BIODIVERSITY

- Tree and shrub planting
- Rewilding/wildlife friendly planning (from verges to larger areas)
- Working with local landowners to manage land for wildlife.
- Cutting the use of pesticides

FOOD DISTRIBUTION / REDUCING WASTE

- Create new allotments / community orchard.
- 'Buy local' campaign.
- Local produce markets
- Community fridge

INCREASING LOCAL RESILIENCE

- Skills and training (e.g. training people in the community to do retrofits/energy efficient measures)

APPENDIX 3 – DECLARING A CLIMATE EMERGENCY

It is straightforward to declare a Climate Emergency. It's not a formal process and it doesn't get registered anywhere, so you can do pretty much say what you like, so long as it is agreed by the council and minuted. If you are a clerk, get one of your councillors to put forward a motion at a full council meeting.

Here's a possible form of words:

[YOUR COUNCIL} is declaring a CLIMATE EMERGENCY [and a BIODIVERSITY EMERGENCY] acknowledging that humanity is currently in a state of climate [and biodiversity] crisis.

Most current declarations were made when the idea first came up around 2019, and more recently councils are declaring that they will achieve net zero (i.e. minimal carbon emissions) by 2030 or 2050. It depends on the sort of council you are which works best for you. Very small councils with no buildings, playgrounds, cemeteries, development etc may find it harder to measure the carbon involved and find a broader declaration more meaningful.

Before you get to the point of putting forward a motion it's worth making sure you have enough support on your council. Lobby a few of the forward-thinking councillors beforehand to make sure you get the vote through. It will be difficult to return to it in short order so it's worth doing the initial work beforehand.

The Carbon Literacy Trust/Save Our Shropshire have quick-access information which you can use to persuade your Council that *doing nothing is not an option*.

APPENDIX 4 - LOCAL COUNCILS' POWERS & OPPORTUNITIES AROUND CLIMATE CHANGE

There is a certain amount local councils can do themselves. Beyond that they can still support action by other people at other levels of society and government by encouraging or campaigning.

STATUTE	GENERAL	MITIGATION	ADAPTATION	NATURE RECOVERY
Allotments and markets: (Small Holdings and Allotments Act 1908, ss 23, 26 and 42; Food Act 1984, s. 50)	This allows the promotion of local produce and healthy eating	This can help to reduce food-miles	Allotments powers also enable the provision of communal food-growing sites and initiatives, run by associations and cooperatives.	
Burials etc: (Open Spaces Act 1906, ss 9 &10; Local Government Act 1972, s.214; Parish Councils & Burial Authorities (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1970 s.1)	This can allow practices such as green burials, eco-friendly management etc			
Commons, ponds, open spaces, recreation etc (Open Spaces Act 1906, s.15; Highways Act 1980, ss 47)	Scope to practise good environmental management, accommodate recycling facilities etc on the council's land	Scope to plant trees on, and maintain, highway verges (and ask for tree preservation orders on all existing mature trees)		Scope to plant trees on, and maintain, highway verges (and ask for tree preservation orders on all existing mature trees)

STATUTE	GENERAL	MITIGATION	ADAPTATION	NATURE RECOVERY
Community centres and other public buildings (Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1970, s.19. (Local Government Act 1972, s. 133)	Work towards being carbon-neutral by reducing the council's carbon emissions and using renewable energy sources	Scope to embrace/ include on-site green energy, energy-conservation, electric car charging-points, recycling points etc		
Community energy (s20 of the Climate Change and Sustainable Energy Act 2006)	<i>The 's 137 expenditure limit' is a severe constraint on making capital investments in energy schemes</i>	Councils can encourage or promote the local production and use of renewable energy, and also energy conservation, subject to the section 137 of the LG Act 1972 annual spending limit	<i>Restrictions currently on the ability to 'sell' the energy directly to local consumers.</i>	
Highways and sustainable transport (Highways Act, ss 43, 50, Parish Councils Act 1957, s.1; Local Government Rating Act, 1997, s.25, 28 & 29; Transport Act, 1985, s.106A)	Scope to promote rights of way routes, walking and cycling	Scope to use 'car park' powers, to provide useful facilities such as on-site electric vehicle-charging points and cycle racks	Scope to make more use of powers to support community bus services, and to run or support car- sharing	

STATUTE	GENERAL	MITIGATION	ADAPTATION	NATURE RECOVERY
Litter and environmental crime (Litter Act 1983, ss 5.6, Cleaner Neighbourhoods and Environment Act, 2005)	Scope to provide refuse and waste receptacles and publicity, including recycling.	Scope to discourage and prosecute littering and dumping.	<i>Currently there is no specific power to promote or run waste-recycling or resource re-use activities.</i>	
Neighbourhood planning (Localism Act, 2011; Neighbourhood Planning Act, 2017 and National Planning Policy Framework,)	There is a continuing need to ensure that Neighbourhood Plans have 'teeth', and that they can be more than just land-use allocation policies	Scope to include environmentally friendly planning policies re design, routes, landscaping etc.	Encourage climate-friendly activities such as repair cafes, food banks, and recycling	
Newsletters and websites: (Local Government Act 1972, s.142)	Scope to use to promote good environmental practices, resource-sharing etc.			
Community support and engagement (Local Government Act 1972 ss. 111, 140 etc)	Scope to encourage and support volunteers and the wider community with grants, loans, insurance protection, publicity, surveys, good-practice advice etc	Run a yearly schools' competition for ideas to make the town carbon neutral, establish a forum including businesses, local organisations and residents to develop such ideas	Adopt a "Refill" scheme, making it easier to reuse and refill plastic bottles with free tap water in the town.	Hold open meetings for residents on how to increase biodiversity in their garden, encourage pollination corridors by use of "bee squares"

STATUTE	GENERAL	MITIGATION	ADAPTATION	NATURE RECOVERY
General powers (Local Government Act 1972, s 137; Localism Act 2011, ss 1–8) .	<i>S 137 annual spending level is limited, and the General Power of Competence is exercisable by relatively few councils</i>	Scope to spend money and/or undertake work on a wide range of beneficial activities which are not prescribed in other legislation	Scope to spend money and/or undertake work on a wide range of beneficial activities which are not prescribed in other legislation	Scope to spend money and/or undertake work on a wide range of beneficial activities which are not prescribed in other legislation
Subsidiary powers (Local Government Act 1972, s111):	A very useful enabling power, for a council to do anything (that are not constrained by other legislation) which is calculated to facilitate or is conducive or incidental to the discharge of any of its functions			
Permitted development rights (Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) (England) Order 2015, part 12)	Councils may erect and operate, without the need to seek planning permission, a wide variety of small buildings, equipment and other structures on their land, for the purposes of any of their functions or public services.			This can include a range of small ‘green’ developments.

STATUTE	GENERAL	MITIGATION	ADAPTATION	NATURE RECOVERY
Power to comment on planning applications as statutory consultee (<i>Town & Country Planning Act 1990?</i>)	Most planning applications in the parish or town will be sent by the planning authority for comment	Ask that any new building is well insulated and produces as much of its own energy as possible	Caution around any development on low-lying land due to flood risk, and encourage tree and food planting on site	Object to any proposal for development on green field land on the basis of no community benefit – such land is required for food production
Power to work with higher level councils (<i>Local Government Act 1972, ss. 101 & 136</i>)	Section 136 could help with expenditure on a wider range of activities but perhaps more important is to explore Section 101 in detail with districts/ boroughs/ county councils to look at delegated or shared services .			
Power to acquire land (<i>Local Government Act 1972, ss 124, 126 & 127</i>)	Gives Parish Councils the power to acquire by agreement, to appropriate (to dispose of) land – there is no restriction on the use of that land.			

STATUTE	GENERAL	MITIGATION	ADAPTATION	NATURE RECOVERY
Car sharing schemes (<i>Local Government and Rating Act 1997 s.26</i>)	Gives Parishes the power to establish and maintain a car sharing scheme that benefits the council's area or to assist others in doing so. Now that could be limited to electric cars!			
Improve local biodiversity (<i>Public Health Act 1936 s.260</i>)				Gives the power to maintain or improve ditches and ponds – or pay others to do so. Ponds can be important for local biodiversity.
Maintain and enhance biodiversity (Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 s.40, confirmed by the Environment Act 2021; Environment (Wales) Act 2016 s.6)				Gives a duty to have regard, so far as is consistent with the proper exercise of a council's functions, to the purpose of conserving biodiversity

APPENDIX 5 – SAMPLE ACTION PLAN FROM A SMALLER COUNCIL

Each of the listed actions in this Derbyshire parish has one or named project leaders.

Emergency	Project	Action	Benefits
Climate	20s Plenty	20's Plenty stickers and joining the local area-wide movement	Reducing carbon pollution by 28%; reducing noise pollution and increasing safety
	Travelling Light Sustainable Travel	Support for a major initiative to encourage bike travel, car sharing and electric vehicles	Reducing carbon and encouraging healthy lifestyles, reducing traffic noise and congestion
	Homeworking	Providing wi-fi enabled warm spaces which are welcoming to homeworkers	Less travel to work
	Shop Local	Supporting our local community shop	Fewer food miles, organic and local food supply
	Electric Vehicle Charging Points	Providing advice on buying and keeping electric vehicle charging points in the village	Fewer particulates in the air, less traffic noise
	Church/shop green heating project	Solar panels on the church roof, working to provide new green heating in church. Solar panels for bridge lights	Making the most of the church's south facing roof for solar. Blazing a trail for green energy heating in churches
	Retro-insulation of homes	Advice on loft and wall insulation, air source heat pumps, solar panels	Heat leak detector for loan to residents Advice Funding Examples

Emergency	Project	Action	Benefits
Biodiversity	Tree planting	Planting trees and hedges throughout the parish	Carbon reduction, encouraging insects and birds
	Wildflowering verges	No mow May, and sowing wildflowers	Encouraging insects and birds
	Wildlifing gardens	Possibility of secret wildlife gardens in the village	Encouraging residents to think about wildlifing their gardens
	Bats	Preserving our church bats during reroofing	More bats, or certainly not fewer bats
	Herbicides	Work with the local planning authority to find alternatives to glyphosate	Protecting wildlife and people. Where can you use it? Where not?
General	Leaflets	Topical information on environment issues in the parish newsletter	Electric vehicle cars, insulating your home, changing to sustainable energy - all made easy