Building national resilience to the climate crisis: the case for Resilience Development Corporations in England.

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The need for a new approach

As a nation we are critically unprepared for the impacts of climate change. This failure is largely about political leadership and prioritisation, but it is expressed in practical terms by a failure to organise ourselves to meet the scale of the challenge. The result is that, as the climate crisis intensifies, we will be made poorer and more vulnerable than we need to be. We do not have the resources necessary to support emergency planning but the biggest deficit is our lack of a long-term strategic pathway to building national resilience. Both responses are vital in sustaining the well-being of places and people.

Therefore, our ambition should be:

- To set out a framework to secure national resilience to climate impacts;
- To develop the policy, legal and governance instruments to deliver this framework.

The climate crisis

The impacts of climate change are happening faster and with greater intensity than we expected. Severe weather has already become more frequent, including intense rain, heat waves and sea level rise. In practice this means increased tidal, river and surface water flood events, along with temperature spikes, particularly in our larger urban areas.

One indicator of this problem is sea level rise: we are now meant to be planning for 115 cms by 2100 on the east coast of England[1]. Observable sea level rise has been happening faster than anticipated. A working average for sea level rise is now 5mm per annum, with worse to come as current Environment Agency estimates do not include the breakup of the West Antarctic ice sheet, so sea level rise figures will be revised upwards. The best estimate is now 200 centimetres by 2100. Sea level will go on rising after 2100, so the viability of places needs be seen in this long-term context.

There is now a limited prospect of stabilising global temperatures in line with the Paris Agreement (at 1.5-2°C above pre-industrial levels[2]), so while we must make radical carbon reduction now, we are locked into multiple and severe climate impacts.

The adaptation problem

The vital job of radically de-carbonising our economy is complex, but because it involves defined sectors which have similar characteristics everywhere, such as energy systems, it is more susceptible to a smaller number of nationally organised policy levers. In stark contrast, adaptation requires the radical remaking of places, and its impacts are much more variable and complex, for four main reasons:

[1] *Understanding the Risks, Empowering Communities, Building Resilience: the National Flood and Coastal Erosion Risk Management Strategy for England. Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs/Environment Agency*, Sept. 2011. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/228898/ 9780108510366.pdf

[2] *Frequently Asked Questions. FAQ on the Paris Agreement. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*, Dec. 2018. http://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/ sites/2/2018/12/SR15_FAQ_Low_Res.pdf

1. **Place**. Climate impacts play out very differently across the diverse physical and social geography of the UK. Urban and rural areas, upland and coastal places: all require different and fine-grained responses.
2. **People.** Climate impacts affect different people in different ways, with consequences that are particularly significant for social groups least equipped to be resilient. Adaptation solutions also have direct and lasting impacts on everyday lives, so taking action means working with communities and communicating an effective narrative for change.
3. **Space.** Building resilience requires interlocking measures, from major spatial-scale coastal realignment to the detail of the way that buildings are wired. The interdependence of decisions on such matters is vital in determining long-term solutions, and is often driven by catchments and coastal systems which do not fit with local government boundaries.
4. **Time.** Building resilience requires thinking about the very long term – and at least 100-year planning horizons. This implies new ways of thinking and working. Time is also running out for us to begin building resilience, so we need to act now and radically

What's the problem with our current approach?

The UK is very badly organised to meet the challenge of climate change. The key areas of dysfunction are:

Institutional fragmentation. There are multiple national and local agencies with a stake in adaptation but no single entity with oversight of the complete agenda. The Environment Agency has no formal remit to deal with heat stress, nor does it have responsibility for all aspects of flood risk. Most significantly, there is no single agency for the delivery of the multiple actions that are needed to build national resilience. Local planning authorities are the closest proxy we have, with the powers to both plan and control development, yet their boundaries are very poorly aligned with the functional geography of, for example, flood risk. In the absence of any coherent strategic planning framework, co-operation between districts in similar areas of vulnerability is institutionally and politically difficult and, in some cases, non-existent. Through this complex picture, although we have all the necessary data, we are action poor as we do not have a clear delivery pathway to drive change on the ground with sufficient powers and speed to meet the climate challenge.

Austerity: Since 2010 a lack of resources has impacted severely on the skills and institutional capacity of all the key players relevant to building resilience. However, this is most acutely expressed in local planning authorities of top-tier flood authorities. The resources to develop and retain staff, as well as commission relevant supporting evidence, are inadequate.

Skills: There is a widespread lack of the key relevant adaptation skills, particularly in planning, but also in the wider built environment sector in terms of design and construction.

Deregulation: Those on the front line of securing adaptation in local government have much less power of built environment than they did a decade ago. The rapid expansion of permitted development is a key example, allowing commercial property to be converted to housing units without the need for full planning permission. Nor do local authorities have the ability to insist on a wider range of adaptation measures.

Lessons from the past

As we are seeking to drive transformative change with the rapidity the science demands[3], we should consider what has worked when we have needed such a response before.

The most successful model we have for delivering the kind of complex change in a very short time scale lies in the war time and immediate post-war experience of managing land and development. A detailed

[3] This proposal is not principally about emergency planning. There is an important and separate question as to whether our emergency responses are adequate. This proposal is about building medium and long-term resilience through strategic planning process under an effective delivery mechanism. It would of course, be vital for these proposals to work closely with emergency planning.

examination of this history illustrates how rapid change was made possible. The most striking example of this experience was the development of the post-war New Town Development Corporations. These bodies were designed to manage large-scale demographic change and reconstruction in an era of acute housing shortage. They were designed to both deliver numbers and quality and inclusive communities at the same time.

The record of these Corporations is impressive. A designation process that lasted from the mid-1940s to the late 1960s resulted in the building of 32 New Towns. These places were delivered at scale in a very short time and now house 2.8 million people[4]. The experience of building the New Towns offers a rich and varied range of learning, but in essence the genius of the Development Corporation idea was to create a public body as master-developer with a wide range of powers to do everything necessary to deliver a new town. These powers included the ability to compulsorily purchase land at current-use value, enabling the Development Corporations to capture land values to pay down debt and recycle increasing values into the development process[5]. There continues to be an active debate in government about the application of Development Corporations to regeneration and housing growth but their potential to deal with environmental crisis has largely been ignored.

What's the core of our solution?

A National Resilience Act, creating Resilience Development Corporations

The key suggestion of this paper is to take the framework of a Development Corporation and repurpose it to provide a strong planning delivery mechanism for building resilience in specific places. Each Corporation would have a clear founding purpose and legal power to do everything necessary to secure the resilience of a particular locality. Unlike the New Towns, each designation would be based on an area of functional geography that shared key vulnerabilities and where joint planning and delivery had added benefits. The process of designating such corporations would require both parliamentary consent, a public inquiry and the approval of the Secretary of State. Responsibility and backing for the Corporations themselves would remain a function of central government.

This would require the creation of a modified legal framework based on the New Towns legislation. This creates an opportunity to modernise Development Corporations in order to reflect the importance of community participation, long-term sustainable development, and clear and specific goals on climate adaptation and mitigation. Each designated Resilience Development Corporation (RDC) would have powers to plan and control development and compulsorily purchase land, in addition to the power to implement resilience measures – from major flood defences and the relocation of settlements, to detailed building standards. Their scope might include new powers over upland land management where it directly relates to managing flooding or reducing carbon dioxide levels by protecting and enhancing carbon sinks.

RDCs would not be intended to replace all the planning functions of the local government, but they would take on a significant element of their powers. They would be layered over the top of existing structures, unifying and co-ordinating their powers where these are related to climate resilience. Initially there would be seven RDCs in England:

- Blackpool and the Lancashire coast;
- the South Pennines between Manchester and Leeds/Bradford;
- Hull and the Humber estuary;
- the Humber to the Wash (including the River Don catchment);
- the Wash to the Thames;

[4] There is further information on the achievements of the New Town Development Corporations in *New Towns and Garden Cities – lessons for tomorrow. Stage 1: an introduction to the UK's New Towns and Garden Cities,* Dec 14 https://www.tcpa.org.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=1bcdbbe3-f4c9-49b4-892e-2d85b5be6b87

[5] There is further information on the powers of New Towns Development Corporations in *'Garden City Standards for the 21st Century: Practical Guides for Creating Successful New Communities. Guide 2 – Finance and Delivery,* Nov 17 https://www.tcpa.org.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=d4eb68bb-95c3-4b8d-b9b9-a6cb080d76bb

- Portsmouth and Southampton;
- the Somerset levels and the Severn estuary.

The board membership of the RDCs would need to reflect existing institutions such as the Environment Agency and drainage boards as well as the voice of communities. A citizen's assembly would work alongside the RDC's and nominate a proportion of the board members. Each RDC would have a fixed life depending on the scale of the challenge in a locality and would eventually be wound up so the planning powers would be returned to local authorities.

The idea of RDC's acting as master-developers, co-ordinating change and drawing down central resources, could offer a powerful incentive for local authorities to agree to such a proposal. It would provide a more effective and efficient way of driving change so long as the power of the RDC was balanced with new opportunities for genuine participative governance. But such proposals are not intended to win a popularity contest, and would be acceptable only if they could demonstrate how they could secure the long-term future of communities. Above all they would provide the community with certainty about their own future, and investors and insurers with the confidence to continue to invest and support vulnerable places over the long term.

A new National Resilience Act would be needed to provide for the establishment of RDCs and set out the detail of their designation, operation, and governance. The Act would place duties on Ministers to prepare national policy to support the RDCs. It would be accompanied, either in law or in policy, by the establishment of a Department for Climate Resilience which would unify all those functions necessary for national resilience that are currently spread across government. Finally, the Act would amend the statutory basis of the Environment Agency to give it an overall technical responsibility on climate adaptation including heat stress.

Contact

If you would like to know more about how the TCPA is developing this idea, or if are you interested in contributing to the discussion please contact:

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