

# the ethics of climate action



This column has always been a mixture of headline climate science and what we hope is useful technical detail on how the planning system can address climate change. We have recorded both the opportunities to produce resilient and carbon-zero places and the growing global impacts of climate change.

These impacts have now reached a level such that the future viability of entire nation states, such as Pakistan, hangs in the balance. Climate change is driving inequality, food poverty, and political uncertainty. Direct impacts such as the loss of the Greenland ice sheet will make a reality of the current high-end estimates for sea level rise. These grim facts have to be set against the more positive news that we already have enough planned global production capacity of photovoltaics to deliver on our United Nations carbon targets. The fact that most of that production capacity is in China is perhaps not so sensible.<sup>1</sup>

We are now entering a period of technical opportunity but political inertia. In the UK, the new government is committed to a low-tax, low-regulation economy and is seeking to approve a substantial amount of new hydrocarbon fuel production, most notably through relaxing the ban on fracking. These measures are largely political theatre and will do nothing in the short or medium term to reduce gas prices. The only tangible effect will be to set back our long-term progress in meeting our critically important carbon reduction targets. The new government will certainly embark on a round of planning deregulation, and, since much of the English planning system has already been wrecked, the impact on what remaining safeguards we still have will be severe.

In this critical battle between the fantasyland of economic ideology and the reality of the climate science, there is clearly only one outcome. The problem is the extreme level of damage that will be

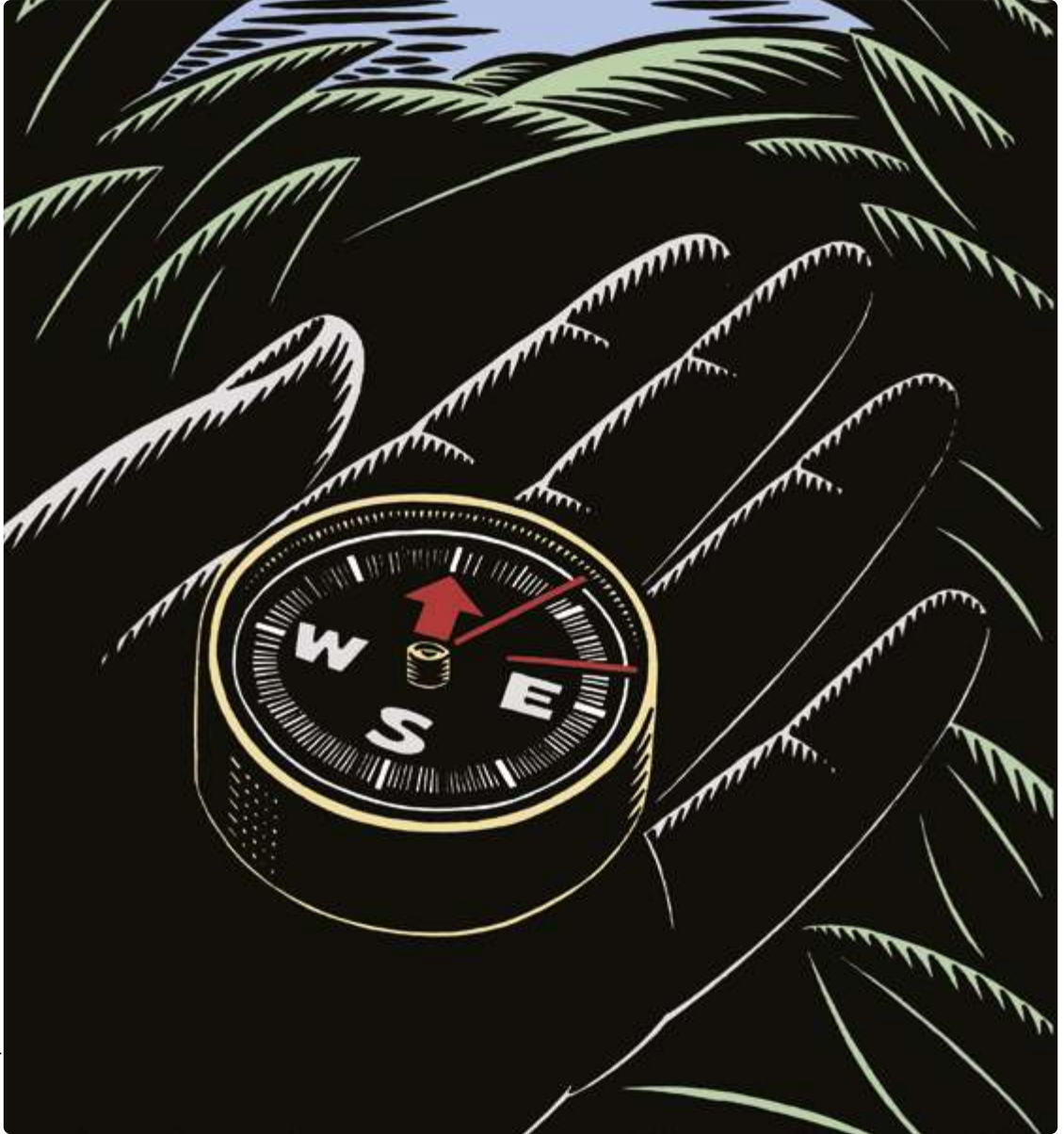
done before the political costs of climate change set us back on a sensible course of a planned response to the climate crisis.

We know that empirical evidence is not the foundation of the new government's approach to policy-making. Those with inflexible ideological assumptions are not partial to reality, and their navel-gazing rarely produces practical solutions to the world's pressing problems. The power of the available climate science is unlikely to have any effect on the Liz Truss administration. Perhaps more surprising is fact that the Treasury is ignoring the economic evidence of the impact of the climate crisis, which now forms a central theme of the Bank of England's strategy.

It is of great concern that many of our core financial institutions are ill-prepared for the inevitable severe shocks locked into the climate system. Both insurers and mortgage lenders rely on the planning system to ensure that new development is resilient to future climate impacts. It has come as an unpleasant surprise to both sets of institutions to realise that planning is increasingly unable to fulfil that role. The result is a spectacular regulatory failure which will result, first, in much higher insurance premiums for any development built after 2009 and therefore not subject to the government's flood reinsurance scheme, and, secondly, in dramatically reduced mortgage offers on property vulnerable to flooding. Assumptions, it turns out, are the mother of all screw-ups, and the failure of the key financial institutions to understand that a sustained period of planning deregulation has left their assets exposed represents a national economic time bomb.

The assumption made by our new government that further deregulation can be achieved without undermining the foundational financial institutions of the country is a classically stupid piece of public policy-making in which those in power harm both others and their own reputation on economic prudence. Casual knockabout comments from businesses about 'red tape' and 'planning bureaucracy' mask the fact that the core financial institutions of this country rely on sensible proportionate regulation. Without planning, our economy would collapse.

None of the government's initial announcements, including September's mini-budget, do anything to address the problems of climate mitigation and



Clifford Harper

**Planners will need to rely on their professional ethics in plotting a way forward in the face of the mounting climate crisis**

adaptation. As a result, our nation remains critically unprepared for climate impacts. But the withdrawal of government from sensible public policy-making on climate change also leaves a specific set of questions for the planning profession.

Planning as a broad-based idea about managing change is plainly vital to securing our future. In principle, it provides the analytical tools, technical solutions and democratic basis to navigate crises, and has a clear pedigree of doing so. But since 2010

the government has hobbled the system. It has failed to set the strategic policy necessary to tackle climate change, radically cut funding to the public planning service, and left a crisis of skills, capacity and, perhaps above all, morale. In this context there is no doubt development has taken place which has added to the climate crisis in carbon terms and created long-term risks by creating places and buildings that will not be resilient over the long term. One example of this problem is the failure to grasp

the need to relocate vulnerable populations. Planning practitioners, like the communities they serve, have been abandoned by government. Left with insufficient powers and administering a broken system, what is the planner meant to do?

I'm tempted to say that survival until the politicians come to their senses is the most sensible course. But, unfortunately, time is running out on this strategy, given the severity of the climate crisis, and so we have to focus on the one thing left to us as planners in dark times—and that is our sense of professional ethics.

The ethical framework of the professional planner is the last bastion of both professional self-respect and the way in which we confront a wider obligation to defend the cause of democratic town planning. During work on the Raynsford Review of Planning in England we were struck by the gap between the planning education of planners and their professional practice. Taught to be multi-disciplinary and creative saviours of the planet, they were in reality destined either to be traffic wardens of land or to relentlessly pursue the bottom line.

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Given how important planning remains to people's health and wellbeing, the Raynsford Review report<sup>2</sup> suggested that a new duty to 'do no harm' should be introduced, drawn from the medical profession. This suggestion was roundly rejected by the profession at the time, who were unable or unwilling to confront the difficult ethical choices that it would imply. However, I want to suggest that 'do no harm' is a vital aspect of being a professional planner and a critical principle in dealing with the climate crisis.

If we accept that the climate crisis is the most important challenge to human survival, and by far the biggest barrier to social justice, then we should be muscular in exercising our professional ethical judgement in decisions that have direct consequences for climate outcomes. There can be no hard-and-fast rules for each person and how they confront these choices, but I would strongly urge planners to boycott any decision, such as on applications for fracking, which will do demonstrable harm to the vital objective of net zero. I would plead with those in private practice not to represent clients attempting to reduce carbon reduction commitments in Local Plans or promote speculative development plainly lacking in long-term climate resilience.

Of course, if we don't participate in these decisions others will be drafted in who will—but the point is that the decisions won't have been made in our name.

I want to celebrate those in the profession already making these choices and say to all the rest that it's time we rediscovered the fearless independence of the true professional. It's time we collectively got off our knees and made a personal and collective stand. After all, we have little left to lose. And while I know this call to arms will be dismissed by many as simply desperation, I would simply ask this question: if not now, then when?

● **Dr Hugh Ellis** is Policy Director at the TCPA. The views expressed are personal.

#### Notes

- 1 A Morton: 'Reasons for (cautious) optimism: the good news on the climate crisis'. *The Guardian*, 11 Sept. 2022. [www.theguardian.com/environment/commentisfree/2022/sep/12/reasons-for-cautious-optimism-the-good-news-on-the-climate-crisis](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/commentisfree/2022/sep/12/reasons-for-cautious-optimism-the-good-news-on-the-climate-crisis)
- 2 *Planning 2020 — Final Report of the Raynsford Review of Planning in England*. TCPA, Nov. 2018. <https://tcpa.org.uk/resources/the-raynsford-review-of-planning/>