

# Planning for the Climate Crisis

## A Guide for Local Authorities

### Introduction



**Planning for the Climate Crisis: A Guide for Local Authorities**

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Fifth Edition

This replaces the fourth edition of the guide which was published in 2023.

Cover image: Flooding in Brechin, Scotland after storm Babet in 2023. Source: Iain Masterton / Alamy.



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# The vital role of planning



**Climate change is the greatest challenge facing our society. As the world faces the stark reality of 1.5 degrees warming,<sup>1</sup> every decision we take must count towards securing our long-term survival.**

This means every effort must be taken to radically reduce the carbon emissions from development, and to use the levers of the planning system to urgently redesign and retrofit places so communities are able to deal with the severe climate impacts that are already locked in.

The RTPI and the TCPA believe that climate change should be the top priority for planning across the UK. This is simply because the impacts of flooding, overheating and other consequences of climate change stand in the way of the creation of vibrant communities and a sustainable and just society.

The core purpose of planning is the creation of healthy, sustainable and resilient places that are fair for everyone. It is not possible to achieve this aim without addressing both climate change mitigation and climate change adaptation. Many of the adverse impacts of climate change, such as extreme heat, flooding or water scarcity, vary spatially but will result in costs to businesses and householders. Solutions to these problems need to be developed locally, and planning is uniquely placed to deliver these democratically, working with communities to drive the change vital to their survival. Planners should be particularly concerned with limiting the damaging outcomes of climate change on the most vulnerable and those least able to respond.

In this guide, we acknowledge that efforts to address climate change through planning have been hampered by chronic under-resourcing of local planning authorities and weak policy at a national level that has often been delayed, inconsistent, and de-prioritised. However, there are clear opportunities to act now, and strong legal and policy requirements remain in place.

## Economic resilience and climate action

**Responding successfully to climate change will not only protect people and wildlife but will also define future economic progress. Only those places that can demonstrate climate resilience will be able to secure investment and insurance in the future.**

Already, many homes and businesses in the UK face financial hardship because repeated flooding, rapid coastal erosion or other risks such as subsidence puts the cost of insurance out of reach. Currently, the Flood Re scheme guarantees insurance cover to households built before 2009, but those built since are not covered because it is assumed by the insurance industry that the planning system will only allow development in the right locations and of the right design to be resilient to the impacts of climate change.

However, for many properties this is not the case, and a significant minority of homes built since 2009 will not be resilient over the long term. Furthermore, the Flood Re scheme was designed to facilitate a transition phase, so that when the scheme wraps up in 2039 affordable flood insurance can be secured through the market. The resilience of the housing stock to the risk of flooding needs a major upgrade if this is to be achieved.

This is one example of how decisions made by planners today influence the economic resilience of households and communities in future. As climate risks increase, securing the long term safety of communities is an urgent priority for planning.



Figure 1: Flash flooding in London in 2019. Source: Muratart / Shutterstock.com



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## About this guide

This guide is written by the Town and Country Planning Association (TCPA), in partnership with the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI). The aim of the guidance is to give the reader the confidence needed to act locally now, by making best use of existing policy and legislation, and drawing inspiration from local authorities that are driving innovation and placing climate resilience at the heart of planning practice.

The guide provides an accessible introduction to the broad issues and key policy areas involved in planning for climate change. It is designed to inform the preparation of strategic and local development plans being developed by local and strategic authorities in the UK and is intended to help planners and politicians play their full part in tackling the climate crisis through local planning. Many of the policy areas covered in this guide will also be relevant at the community level, and we hope the guide will also be useful for communities to inform their vision for their local neighbourhoods.

The resources are grouped into under three headings: **Introduction and Context**, **Climate mitigation**, and **Climate adaptation**.

The topic guides cannot cover the full breadth of all the planning policy issues raised by climate change, nor all the detail of technical policy considerations which may need to be addressed at a local level. Instead, the guides focus on the broad approaches to handling carbon reduction and climate adaptation through the planning system, aiming to provide a foundational understanding of how local authorities can utilise planning to address a range of priorities for climate action.

Readers should also be mindful that the guide has been developed at a time of ongoing planning reform. Whilst the TCPA and RTPI will strive to keep the guidance up to date, users should be mindful of the date of last update when using the guides.

# Planning for the climate crisis – index of topic resources

## Introduction and context

- 1) [Introduction to planning for the climate crisis](#)
- 2) [Legal and policy background: England](#)
- 3) [Legal and policy background: Northern Ireland](#)
- 4) [Legal and policy background: Scotland](#)
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## Climate mitigation

- 6) [Carbon literate planning](#)
- 7) [Accelerating the delivery of net zero buildings part one: operational energy](#)
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- 9) [Promoting sustainable transport through planning](#)
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- 12) [Planning to support retrofit](#)

## Climate adaptation

- 13) [Planning for long-term adaptation](#)
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- 17) [Designing places for climate resilience](#)
- 18) [Planning to mitigate overheating](#)

## Climate action - an overarching development plan priority

**The topic resources that form this guidance present advice on the range of policy issues that can be addressed through development plans to support action on climate change. However, the power of these policies will be significantly enhanced by a powerful overarching objective on mitigation and adaptation in the development plan.**

This objective should inform the plan's overarching strategy, which drives a spatial response to addressing climate change, for example through the location of development, mix of uses, densities, energy and transport strategies as well as technical requirements for buildings and design. This should be set within the wider objective of planning to secure sustainable development, based on the UN Sustainable Development Goals and Indicators.<sup>2</sup>

Where local plans have developed climate action plans and set net zero carbon targets that are more ambitious than national targets, these should support the narrative and justification for climate policies in the development plan, which is a key lever to delivering local priorities. The topic resources that form this guide include examples of local authorities that have supported an accelerated pathway to net zero through ambitious local plan policies.

To make sure that climate change is positioned as key priority of the plan, local planning authorities should:

- Ensure that climate action is embedded throughout the plan policy narrative.
- Ensure that climate mitigation and adaptation policies are developed in an integrated and holistic way which secures maximum benefit for communities.
- Take a target-led approach to policies on mitigation and climate resilience, ensuring, for example, that there is direct reference to the 2008 Climate Change Act carbon budget regime.
- Ensure that requirements placed upon development are clear and precise wherever possible, to create certainty for the community, the planning team and applicants.
- Make reference to relevant local commitments and targets (for example, where a climate emergency has been declared by the local authority) and provide evidence of the local plan's contribution to achieving these.

## Enabling good decision making

An effective and up-to-date plan is vital in ensuring that decisions fully reflect the need to manage the climate crisis. The effectiveness and efficiency of development management depends upon the quality and precision of development management policies. These should always aim to set precise requirements for action on climate mitigation and adaptation.

‘Good’ development management is a balance between efficient process, policy-compliant outcomes, and effective delivery.<sup>3</sup> Since climate change action is a key legal and policy outcome, it is important that there is an organisational culture that places the climate emergency as a significant material consideration in all decision-making. Where applications are made for development are contrary to the development plan, or where a plan is absent or out of date, it is vital that consideration of climate impacts are fully applied to development management decisions.

To ensure climate change is properly considered through development management, local authorities should:

- Make sure that climate change adaptation is fully considered in all development decisions, and climate impacts are considered over the whole lifetime of the development.
- Set clear expectations for the information they require from applicants on climate impacts and ensure that this information is accessible to applicants and the community. These requirements should be made clear in the pre-application process.
- Ensure applicants are aware of and have access to local evidence on climate change risk, including areas vulnerable to increased flood or heat risk.
- Local planning authorities should ensure that new development does not increase the climate impact risks to existing development or constrain future adaptive pathways designed to deal with overheating or flooding.
- The cumulative impact of minor decisions must be fully considered. For example, the paving over of gardens and loss of green space in relation to issues such as overheating and surface water flooding.

## The importance of community involvement

There is widespread public support for action on climate change, and the planning system offers opportunities for genuine community participation in the decisions which will define our long term survival.

It is vital that communities are at the heart of local policy debate, so that local knowledge can be taken account of to help shape decision making, particularly where development plan policy will determine the future viability of vulnerable places. Effective action on climate change should bring multiple benefits to a community, and this should be nurtured and enabled.

Many of the initiatives that can be taken to address climate change are simply 'win-win' actions for communities and can help to shape low-carbon resilient places with high-quality design and access to the natural environment. For example, community-owned renewable energy projects can reduce carbon dioxide emissions, with direct benefits to consumers and the local economy. In many cases, communities have been more accepting of development when it meets the highest possible environmental standards.

Neighbourhood planning is an important tool through which communities can express their aspirations for future development. The scope of adopted neighbourhood plans has been patchy in relation to climate policy, and some communities have encountered difficulties in navigating the viability test when seeking to set, for example, high energy efficiency standards for new homes. However, there are some examples of neighbourhood plans that have tried to address climate change and demonstrated the huge potential of neighbourhood planning to add to, and reinforce, climate change policy at a local level. The Centre for Sustainable Energy (CSE) has produced useful guidance on how communities can make the most of the renewable energy opportunity.<sup>4</sup>

Community led development, such as community land trusts, regenerative farming and community growing schemes are often based on principles of low impact sustainable living. Development plans can promote and support communities that want to reduce their environmental footprint. This can be done, for example, by identifying land for self-build homes that meet high environmental standards, or in more rural areas setting criteria under which residential development will be permitted where it supports low impact, regenerative land use.

## A note on viability

Planning Practice Guidance (PPG) is clear that the focus of viability testing should be at the plan making stage, rather than for individual applications.<sup>5</sup> It is important that the costs of meeting policy requirements are integrated into the viability testing for the plan.

The following principles and considerations should be applied to achieve an effective assessment of the costs of policies that address climate change:

- For many building level interventions, such as high energy efficiency standards, it is much cheaper to apply at the build stage rather than retrofit later.
- Some requirements in policy are pre-conditions for permission, and therefore non-negotiable costs. This might include property flood resilience measures in areas of flood risk.
- Many of the policies set out in this guide can yield tangible and long-term cost benefits to individuals through cheaper energy bills and access to affordable insurance. This will have an impact on property value, and this should be factored into the viability assessment.
- Policy should be clearly expressed so developers can understand cost implications.
- Evidence on viability should be transparent and accessible to all parts of the community, so that local aspirations can be accurately judged against development values over the long term.

Where there are costs to the private sector in ensuring both radical reductions in carbon and long-term resilience, they should be reflected in reduced land prices. This aligns with the PPG which states that:

*'The price paid for land is not a relevant justification for failing to accord with relevant policies in the plan.'<sup>6</sup>*

If local development plan policy is challenged on the basis of viability, local planning authorities **must ensure that the plan would still comply with the legal duty to address climate change** if the climate-related policy were to be removed. It is important to remember that viability testing is a policy requirement which has no legal basis. The duty on plan making to address climate change is, by contrast, a statutory requirement, which cannot be outweighed by policy guidance.

## Further resources

The **TCPA's Practical Hope community guides** and case studies are aimed at local communities wanting to take action on issues such as retrofit, overheating and flood risk. They provide practical advice and showcase action that communities can take. Link: <https://www.tcpa.org.uk/collection/practical-hope-inspiration-for-community-action/>

The **Locality** website hosts a range of resources providing advice to neighbourhood planning groups on addressing climate change. These include:

- 'Neighbourhood Planning in a Climate Emergency', written by the **TCPA** and the **Centre for Sustainable Energy**. <https://neighbourhoodplanning.org/toolkits-and-guidance/how-to-write-a-neighbourhood-plan-in-a-climate-emergency/>
- Neighbourhood Planning and the Environment, by the **Environment Agency, Forestry Commission, Historic England, and Natural England**, for Locality. <http://neighbourhoodplanning.org/toolkits-and-guidance/consider-environment-neighbourhood-plans/>

The **RTPI** resource called 'Five reasons for Climate Justice in Spatial Planning' outlines how and why policy makers must consider different levels of vulnerability to climate risk in setting policy. Link: <https://www.rtpi.org.uk/new-from-the-rtpi/five-reasons-for-climate-justice-in-spatial-planning/>

## References

<sup>1</sup> Climate change: World likely to breach 1.5 °C limit in next five years. United Nations, 28 May 2025. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/05/1163751>

<sup>2</sup> The Sustainable Development Goals. United Nations. <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

<sup>3</sup> Good Development Management. Planning Advisory Service, Jun. 2019. <https://www.local.gov.uk/pas/development-mgmt/good-development-management-practice>

<sup>4</sup> See the CSE website for resources aimed at communities: <https://www.cse.org.uk/my-community/engagement-planning/>

<sup>5</sup> Planning Practice Guidance: Viability. MHCLG, December 2024. <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/viability> (Paragraph 002)

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.