

# Facing up to a challenged planet

A mural hanging in Norwich City Council chamber is a vivid portrayal of the challenges posed by climate change and its impacts in the past, the present, and the future, says **Cllr Alan Waters**

There is a growing awareness that climate change and the impacts of global warming represent an existential threat. Norwich City Council has made significant progress on reducing carbon emissions, but we know the choices we make as a city now will be vital to securing a sustainable future.

By placing a 10-metre-wide climate mural in our council chamber, decision-makers in Norwich have an ever-present reminder to take urgent action.

Since we started measuring our impact on the climate in 2007, emissions from our city council buildings have fallen by 72%. But the determination to meet our 2030 net zero targets forms only part of the challenge and focusing on emissions reduction alone won't be enough.

In 2019 we saw a step change with the council's formal declaration of biodiversity and climate emergencies and recognition of the link between the climate emergencies and the socio-economic emergency. Like Covid, the overlapping climate, energy and cost of living crises are disproportionately impacting on those with the lowest incomes, exacerbating existing inequalities.

With limited budgets, every pound must be spent as effectively as possible. Social value generation is now a key concept at the centre of our council's evolving action plans – a multi-criteria approach to targeting investment based on a carbon cost efficiency metric to ensure funds are efficiently employed to reduce climate impact and deliver social good.

The council recently outlined investment plans to spend £290m decarbonising Norwich's social housing stock, the latest milestone on our journey to address the climate emergency that has included the Sterling prize-winning Goldsmith Street development – built to Passivhaus standards

– and the two megawatts of solar installed through our group buying scheme.

These achievements sit alongside a system-wide approach to the cost of living crisis including: reducing fuel poverty through a new Sustainable Warmth Strategy and Action Plan 2022-25, a three-year Real Living Wage City campaign, and the work of our Good Economy Commission – aiming to end in-work poverty and build a sustainable economy that benefits everyone.

I am proud of the progress we are making, but the challenges we face are not something that a local authority, or any one organisation, should tackle alone. The power to find solutions lies in local communities, including the vital voice of young people, with the city council using its convening role in bringing people and organisations together.

The Norwich 2040 City Vision works with strategic partners to develop a long-term vision for the city, while the Norwich Climate Commission draws its expert membership from public, private and civic sectors to help shape the city's approach to sustainability. These collaborations are what will ultimately deliver our goal of a net zero Norwich by 2045.

If Government is serious about meeting its own climate targets, it needs to take note of the innovation taking place across local government and stop making decisions in Whitehall silos. It must be understood that spending decisions have knock-on consequences. For example, cuts to financial support, de-regulation of employment rights, or failing to provide good quality affordable housing all have consequences that also make it harder to tackle climate change. The scale of the challenge requires long-term investment and sustainable funding, along with increased powers and resources for councils. A genuine devolution.



The climate mural that hangs in our council chamber is the outcome of a close collaboration between the artist Gennadiy Ivanov, Norwich City Council, the University of East Anglia Climatic Research Unit (CRU), the Transitions Art-Science Project, and Global Water Futures, an international research programme based at the University of Saskatchewan in Canada.

Entitled *A Climate Mural for Our Times*, it charts global

## Tackling places' patchwork response to net zero

Local areas with the most vulnerable communities and the biggest risks are currently being left behind in the drive to net zero, say **Heather Brown** and **Scott Butterfield**

Climate change will be one of the greatest challenges to public health in the 21st century. With the UK's warmest 10 years on record all happening since 2002, the 'global weirding' of weather will increasingly have real-life consequences in our communities. And with the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change indicating current government pledges would see temperatures rise well above the

1.5°C, local government increasingly needs to plan for more frequent extreme weather events and their effects on wellbeing, in addition to pledges to reduce emissions

The Government's net zero strategy published in 2021 states that 82% of all UK emissions are within the scope and influence of local authorities. However, it also suggests that no statutory requirement is needed, citing 'the existing level of local commitment with the sector, and because it is difficult to create a uniform requirement that reflects the diversity of barriers and opportunities local places experience'.

Chris Skidmore's Net Zero Review rightly identifies the lack of a statutory duty and inconsistent target setting as barriers to effective implementation, but falls short of calling for specific funding to focus instead on reducing competitive bidding processes.

Lancaster University's recent study funded by the

National Institute for Health and Social Care Research combined data collated by Climate Emergency UK (CEUK) to rank local authorities with statistics on area level deprivation, healthy life expectancy, house prices, and age profiles at the local authority level. This allowed us to explore how local characteristics may be related to the quality of the plans, and what this may mean for inequalities and levelling up in the future.

It found an association between the quality of the climate action plan, the quantum of central Government funding, and local house prices.

We also found higher male life expectancy and house prices were associated with better collaborative partnerships to jointly work towards net zero with community stakeholder groups such as the voluntary, faith, health, educational organisations, large and small businesses and anchor institutions such as the NHS and universities.





*A Climate Mural for Our Times hangs in the chamber at Norwich City Council*

temperature over time (66 million years BC through to the end of the next century) represented by the hues of the sky that are informed by CRU's 'state-of-the-art' climate science. The mural also features images of the impacts of climate change on the local landscape and its human inhabitants.

We believe that this is the first time art and leading-edge science have been combined to give such a vivid

portrayal of the challenges posed by climate change and its impacts in the past, present, and the future.

Through his painting, JW Turner, the 19th century artist, taught people to understand they were living through an industrial revolution. Our climate change mural serves a similar purpose – both as a call to act and avoid the worst effects of the climate crisis, but also demonstrating how local people and organisations can coalesce around a local council

prepared to lead its communities in response to the climate and biodiversity crises. We hope it will not only help focus minds in the council chamber, but reach new audiences and create the consensus to enact positive change. ▶

*Cllr Alan Waters is leader of Norwich City Council*

@NorwichCC

On the other hand, having a greater percentage of the population over the age of 65 was associated with having a lower quality plan. Urban areas were more likely to score higher on CEUK's diversity and social inclusion and education, skills and training categories – an implementable plan to ensure that the community has the skills to transition to a green economy – while more deprived areas on average scored lower in this area. It is worth noting that local political will is important, as there were some more deprived areas such as Blackpool, Dundee, and Slough who bucked the trend.

This speaks to the continued challenges in local government finance, with our findings showing areas with the greatest reductions in central Government funding between 2010-19 are associated with lower quality climate action plans.

Those areas which are more economically challenged and receive less income from business rates and council taxes are potentially at risk of failing to mitigate their own emissions, impacting on the Government's binding national targets. But they are also in a weaker position

to adapt to the new realities of climate change, with the most vulnerable communities bearing the brunt of the challenges arising.

## Having a greater percentage of the population over the age of 65 was associated with having a lower quality plan

Without additional resources and many local authority budgets stretched to breaking point, implementing these climate action plans gets pushed down the agenda. This leaves us with a piecemeal and patchwork response to climate change.

Those local authorities where both residents and businesses are feeling the worst of the cost of living crisis are the ones least likely to be able to respond to climate change.

As Mr Skidmore highlights, the green transition offers an amazing opportunity to help areas upskill their community, creating the green jobs of their future. Without investment, this means that climate policy as it currently is at the local government level risks contributing to increasing inequalities, levelling areas down rather than up.

National leadership and increased funding for local authorities is a prerequisite of a meaningful UK response to the challenges of climate change. Local knowledge is integral to delivering real change on climate issues, but areas with the most vulnerable communities and the biggest risks are currently being left behind. ▶

*Heather Brown is a Professor of health inequalities at Lancaster University, and Scott Butterfield is strategy and climate lead at Blackpool Council*

@LancasterUni  
@BpoolCouncil