

COP26: a once in a generation opportunity for local government

The commentary around COP26 focuses on the macro politics of the world's largest emitters, and the challenges for developed and developing countries in meeting their pledges under the Paris Agreement to achieve net-zero by 2050.

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"This is the moment. Glasgow is the last, best opportunity we have and the best hope that the world will come together and build on Paris."

These are the words of John Kerry, US Climate Change Envoy, earlier this month. He went on to say that COP26 (due to take place in Glasgow in November 2021) must kick start a decade of action to address the climate crisis.

A shift in perspective: macro to micro

Much of the commentary around COP26 focuses on the macro politics of the world's largest emitters, and the challenges for developed and developing countries in meeting their pledges under the Paris Agreement to achieve net-zero by 2050.

That focus on the global makes it very hard to think of COP26 as an opportunity to identify local government's role in tackling climate change. But that's precisely what the UK's hosting of COP26 presents – an opportunity to focus on how local government level changes can contribute to a global response.

Conference strategy

Given that COP26 has the potential to shape the global response to the climate crisis, it would be reasonable to assume the government had a clear strategy for the conference, implementation of which is well underway...

It's hard to locate the government's aims or priorities for the conference, but Alok Sharma, COP26 President, said that there were four areas of focus: a step-change in mitigation; for countries to strengthen their adaptation plans; to get finance flowing and an increase in international co-operation.

He went on to explain that the international co-operation aim is underpinned by *"five campaigns on nature, adaptation and resilience, clean energy, zero-emission vehicles, and finance."*

On 5 March 2021, the Business, Energy, and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) Committee issued an interim report on net-zero and COP26. It concluded that the government's ambitions for the summit need to be clearer. It noted a lack of detail about measuring success against the headline ambitions. It suggested need for greater focus on agreeing deliverable policies to keep global temperature rises as close to 1.5 degrees above pre-industrial levels as possible.

What should the government priorities be for COP26?

The BEIS Committee commissioned a report from the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST), which gathered expert views on COP26 principles and priorities. The report identified six suggested areas of focus. Of most relevance to local government are suggestions for the UK to lead by example by announcing an ambitious domestic climate policy before the conference - engaging diverse stakeholders, and the public.

Several other commentators and stakeholders echo these suggestions.

On the same day as the BEIS Committee released its interim report on COP26, the Public Accounts Committee released its report on the government's progress towards achieving net-zero by 2050. It concluded that the government lacked a plan for achieving this objective by 2050.

Global policies, local delivery

The Constituency of Local and Regional Governments has called for a "Multilevel Action COP26". This should be based on the premise that all levels of government are vital to achieving net-zero by 2050. The Local Government Authority has made a similar call linked to COP26 - given decarbonisation must happen everywhere, every place, community, and household.

More generally, in its report published on 9 December 2020: *Local Authorities and the Sixth Carbon Budget*, the Climate Change Committee highlighted that more than half of the emissions cuts needed, rely on people and businesses taking up low-carbon solutions. These decisions are made at a local and individual level where local authorities can better control and influence.

With these factors considered, conclusions about UK activity in the run-up to COP26 seem obvious. Ambitious plans to cut carbon emissions, alongside financing and empowering local government to deliver measurable outcomes. This would mirror the precise recommendations of the Climate Change Committee report Local Authorities and the Sixth Carbon Budget.

Opportunity knocks

Local government should be knocking at the door of Number 10 to offer a solution which will contribute to a successful COP26. This would address concerns raised by the Public Accounts Committee, the BEIS Committee, and the Climate Change Committee. This is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to ensure local government is given the resources it needs to drive decarbonisation. It should be grasped with both hands.

For more information on how local authorities can drive decarbonisation please contact [Laura Hughes](#), [Richard Barlow](#) or [Ben Standing](#).

This article was first published by The MJ on 22 April 2021.

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