

## FINDINGS

# SOCIALLY JUST ADAPTATION TO CLIMATE CHANGE

This study explored local approaches to climate change across the UK, and the extent to which these take social justice issues into account. While climate change adaptation has risen up the national policy agenda, more needs to be done to implement socially just adaptation responses at the local level.

### Key points

- Socially just adaptation is a complex concept and will take time to become embedded in policy and practice. As a continuous process, climate change adaptation is not as straightforward to plan or deliver as mitigation.
- Socially just adaptation responses require, first, an understanding of which groups are most vulnerable to climate change impacts and, second, adaptation to ensure the needs of these groups are met. Social issues related to adaptation are both diverse and contextually specific.
- While national and local policy and practice are beginning to recognise the importance of embedding social justice in adaptation, this is not being realised across the board. Public sector funding cuts have reduced the priority of, and resources for, local climate change responses.
- Social vulnerability to climate change tends to be interpreted in terms of spatial exposure or health rather than broader factors affecting people's ability to prepare for, respond to and recover from extreme weather. Local authority adaptation plans focus mainly on building adaptive capacity rather than delivering direct adaptation actions.
- There are some excellent examples of just adaptation across the UK but more needs to be done to ensure this is more widely adopted. Information sharing is crucial to promote good practice.
- Opportunities to support just adaptation include new mechanisms and funding streams, such as Local Nature Partnerships, neighbourhood planning, the transfer of health responsibilities to local authorities and the Community Infrastructure Levy. The National Adaptation Programme due to be published in 2013 provides an opportunity for government to set out its expectations.

### The research

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# BACKGROUND

This study focused on planning and decision-making at the local authority level with regard to adaptation to climate change impacts, such as the urban heat island effect, heatwaves and river and coastal flooding.

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The study had two key aims, to:

- explore existing approaches to local adaptation to climate change impacts and how these take account of social justice issues;
- support the development of just local responses to climate change by making recommendations for policy and practice.

## What is socially just adaptation to climate change?

The study took the Defra definition as its starting point: 'Adaptation means changing our behaviour to respond to both the projected and current impacts of climate change'. Ensuring socially just adaptation responses requires, first, an understanding of which groups are most vulnerable to climate change impacts, and second, appropriate adaptation to ensure that their needs are met.

Social issues related to adaptation are both diverse and contextually specific. They encompass both procedural justice (empowering communities to overcome a lack of social capital and institutional barriers to involvement in decision-making) and distributive justice (distribution of income, assets and opportunity).

### Just adaptation principles, as identified by the study team

- Taking into account current and future climate change impacts.
- Understanding factors that contribute to vulnerability.
- Identifying the distribution of vulnerable groups likely to be affected and recognising that vulnerability is dynamic and changes over time.
- Involving the communities most likely to be affected in developing and delivering plans and activities related to adaptation.
- Assessing the potential adverse implications of climate change for vulnerable groups and identifying targeted adaptation activities to address vulnerability.
- Developing responses that build adaptive capacity, support adaptation actions and consider both physical infrastructure and service delivery.
- Being aware of the trade-offs that can arise in striving to achieve socially just adaptation and minimising the negative impacts for exposed communities.
- Assessing all adaptation options to ensure that the most beneficial are taken forward in each case

## Policy context for just adaptation

The UK is at the forefront of climate science and, through the Climate Change Act, 2008, is the first country in the world to build a risk-based approach into legislation. The impetus for addressing climate change impacts in the UK came from the Stern Review (2006), which argued that adaptation measures were crucial to address unavoidable climate impacts. Key elements of the current policy backdrop include the UK Climate Change Risk Assessment (Defra, 2012), the National Adaptation Programme due to be published in 2013, frameworks and plans in Scotland and Wales, the Localism Act and the National Planning Policy Framework.

Most national policies make reference to the social justice implications of climate change, but these are generally focused on spatial exposure, such as communities living in flood risk areas, and health impacts of

hotter weather, particularly for older people. Most fail to consider wider aspects of social vulnerability, such as the ability of individuals and groups to prepare for, respond to and recover from climate impacts, taking into account wider social factors, such as income and the depth and extent of people's social networks.

## **Just adaptation – planning and practice**

A review of local authority adaptation planning, undertaken in spring 2011, revealed a variety of plans in terms of content, detail and progress, with a limited number evident in the devolved administrations. The review identified many examples of building adaptive capacity through research, but few direct actions. Where actions had been taken, they tended to focus on water and drainage management, probably in response to the Pitt Review. Social justice was not a priority in adaptation planning. Some local authority plans did not differentiate impacts at all and viewed residents as having common needs and issues relating to adaptation. Others referred to the vulnerability of communities only in the context of spatial exposure. A recent Green Alliance report, based on a survey of local authorities, suggested that addressing climate change remains a priority for just 35 per cent of those that responded; it is likely that the proportion committed to socially just adaptation is much lower.

## **Local authority case studies**

Three case studies were undertaken in Highland, Islington and York local authority areas, which take their climate change responsibilities seriously and are keen to promote, plan for and implement just adaptation. Building adaptive capacity is well-developed and there is some evidence of follow-up action. However, these processes tend to be led by climate change/sustainability departments with less evidence that just adaptation is built in to the plans of other council departments or voluntary and community sector bodies.

Public sector funding cuts have impacted on the priority given to adaptation; this was particularly evident in Islington where resources for adaptation have been reduced. Priority was being given to emergency responses to more immediate extreme weather effects, rather than longer-term strategies.

A key finding from the case studies is the importance of targeted and tailored responses to address the needs of vulnerable communities. Trusted service delivery and advocacy organisations (both public sector and voluntary/community organisations) are best placed to engage vulnerable groups and help achieve ownership. This approach has been adopted in the community planning pilot in Gairloch and Loch Ewe, Highland. The case studies also highlighted the importance of technical solutions such as geographic information systems to target areas at 'spatial risk'. These offer the potential to use up-to-date local data as this becomes available. But the resulting maps need to be used sensitively, recognising that exposure is dynamic rather than static.

Finally, the case studies provided evidence as to how far specific elements of social justice were becoming embedded in local responses:

- Future climate change impact planning is evident through mechanisms such as local climate impact profiles.
- Practical action tends to be focused on those who are spatially exposed or vulnerable for health reasons rather than wider considerations of social vulnerability.
- There is limited awareness of trade-offs and the distribution of costs and benefits in actions taken (or not taken) and how these can impact on vulnerable communities.
- A consideration of options has been built into adaptation planning, but this has not focused on outcomes for vulnerable communities.

## **Conclusion**

Just adaptation is a complex concept, which will take time to embed into policy and practice. As a continuous process with no specific metrics or targets, climate change adaptation is not as straightforward to plan for, or deliver, as mitigation.

At central government level, climate change adaptation has risen up the policy agenda, though is somewhat overshadowed by current economic priorities. The issue is not yet sufficiently reflected at the

local level due to public funding cuts and a focus on other, apparently more immediate, priorities. The National Adaptation Programme provides a real opportunity to take forward this agenda and clarify the roles and responsibilities of local authorities and other local actors.

National priorities for just adaptation can only be achieved through local action. More needs to be done to share good practice, encourage commitment and action, and enable effective delivery. Using the language of community risk and resilience, and highlighting immediate and longer-term cost savings, should help ensure that socially just adaptation has resonance at the local level. Opportunities for optimising adaptation at this level include the increased focus on localism, the low carbon priority within Local Enterprise Partnerships, Local Nature Partnerships, neighbourhood planning, transfer of public health responsibilities to local authorities and funding mechanisms such as the Community Infrastructure Levy.

Information sharing is crucial to demonstrate what can be achieved. This could be through routes such as the Local Government Association's Knowledge Hub, or their emerging Climate Local framework. There is also a need to work collaboratively with agencies responsible for promoting social justice more widely, such as health, housing and civil society organisations, including the pooling of resources and joint planning. A forward-thinking approach is needed, recognising that current actions are often insignificant compared to the scale of the challenge. In assessing risks and developing responses, vulnerable communities need to be identified early and involved in planning and delivery. This can be directly or through voluntary/community sector advocacy organisations.

Finally, in comparing theory (the socially just adaptation principles identified earlier) with practice, it is evident that:

- Current and future climate change impacts are largely accepted at a political and public policy level, but action on the ground often focuses on emergency planning responses to severe weather effects rather than developing adaptation responses to projected future climate change.
- Where adaptation planning and practice address social vulnerability, the focus tends to be on location or health, rather than looking at vulnerability more widely. Community-based approaches to adaptation planning are a positive and effective mechanism in this respect.
- The study did not highlight any examples of, or responses to address, the issue of trade-offs between costs and benefits. This is central to embedding socially just adaptation and should be considered in the development of the National Adaptation Programme and through local adaptation plans.

## About the project

The study involved a literature review concerning climate change adaptation and social justice and a survey of local authority practice. Three case studies were conducted in the Highlands, Scotland, the London Borough of Islington and in York to investigate the degree to which climate change adaptation practice takes social justice implications into account. Finally, a broader review of adaptation practice, including the use of adaptation tools, was undertaken and recommendations made to help plan and implement just adaptation responses.

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## FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

This *Findings* is part of JRF's research and development programme. The views are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the JRF. The main report, **Socially just adaptation to climate change** by Rachel Brisley, Jean Welstead, Richard Hindle and Jouni Paavola is available as a free download at [www.jrf.org.uk](http://www.jrf.org.uk)

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