

Are we Copping Out ahead of COP26?

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As the IPCC declares a 'Code Red for humanity' in its latest [Climate Action report](#), perhaps we, in the UK, are comforted by the ambitious targets we've set as a nation in seeking to hit net zero emissions.

With COP26 being held in Glasgow this November, it's reassuring to note our Sixth Carbon Budget targeted 78% cuts to greenhouse gas emissions by 2035 [compared to 1990 levels](#). And [in June 2019 the UK became the first major economy setting a legal requirement for all greenhouse gas emissions to be reduced to net zero by 2050](#).

Sadly, however, government's ambitions have yet to be matched by sufficient actions. Baroness Brown of Cambridge, whilst Deputy Chair of the Climate Change Committee, the independent non-departmental body advising government, stated: "[our actions have not kept pace with our intentions...with too many in government appearing to put off adaptation until tomorrow and failing to recognise the time for urgent action is now.](#)"

[The Glasgow Climate Clock](#) was launched to highlight the need for urgent action. Projected as an illumination onto Glasgow's Tolbooth Steeple, it is counting down the time remaining until our 1.5°C carbon budget is depleted, and its highlighting that we have just under 6.5 years remaining and that only 12% of global energy is currently generated from renewables.

The public have embraced the need for more sustainable lifestyles, even recognising this might mean some higher costs need to be paid. A recent YouGov poll showed [two thirds \(67 per cent\) of the British public want to see the UK as world leader on climate change](#), with 65% of people wanting to see a shift away from government subsidies to domestic oil and gas companies with this funding moved into supporting renewable energy and increasing the energy efficiency of people's homes. Just 7% of people questioned opposed such a shift.

The latest IPCC report, approved by 195 governments, states it's still not too late to limit global warming to the 1.5 degrees centigrade level recognised as safe, but that much more effective action needs to take place now and that the next 10 years are critical.

UN Secretary-General António Guterres called the IPCC's report a 'Code Red for humanity' noting, "We are already at 1.2 degrees and rising.... This report must sound a death knell for coal and fossil fuels, before they destroy our planet... Countries should also end all new fossil fuel exploration and production, and shift fossil fuel subsidies into renewable energy. By 2030, solar and wind capacity should quadruple and renewable energy investments should triple to maintain a net zero trajectory by mid-century."

[The IPCC's 2018 special report](#) highlighted a carbon budget for humanity over the next 20 years of 420 Giga tonnes of emissions (Gte).

[Professor Tim Jackson at the Centre for Understanding of Sustainable Prosperity \(CUSP\)](#) at Surrey University has produced a 'fair UK budget' of carbon emissions drawing on the IPCC budget and taking into account the UK's historical emissions along with the need for development of the world's

poorest countries. On this basis the UK's remaining carbon budget stands at 2.5 billion tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions.

As a county councillor in Worcestershire I recently calculated our carbon budget for Worcestershire would, on this basis, be 20mte. At 2017 emissions levels our budget would be fully used up by 2027.

Worcestershire County Council is amongst the 300 councils across the UK to have declared a Climate Emergency, with our County Council notably having committed to net zero emissions on its own activities by 2050.

However, many councils are still investing billions of pounds from their pension funds into the fossil fuel industry. [Research indicates that councils in Greater Manchester, Strathclyde, West Yorkshire and the West Midlands have up to 25% of their pension investments invested into fossil fuel related activities.](#)

Whilst Worcestershire County Council has committed to reducing its own emissions, on 9th September 2021, with COP26 just seven weeks away, the leadership refused to debate a Notice of Motion tabled in council papers and circulated ahead of the meeting, seeking to put in place the means of developing a countywide plan to help our county keep within its remaining carbon budget targets.

Other councils have forged ahead as signs the climate crisis have deepened.

[One of the most ambitious English councils, Nottingham](#), set a target for the whole city to be carbon neutral by 2028. They cut their own CO2 emissions from 2005 levels by one quarter by 2020; implemented a scheme to make sure every new council house was built with solar panels; established one of the UK's largest electric bus and biogas double-decker bus fleets. They invested in solar panels for their waste collection depot to charge their fleet of electric refuse trucks and street sweepers. By initiating the Workplace Parking levy, Nottingham City Council provided the base finance for investment in their tram network through £9m income generated each year.

[Bristol City Council](#) has committed to making their council carbon neutral by 2025 and the whole city by 2030. Their implementation plan commits them to a 200% increase in renewable energy and to ultra-low emissions public transport use. They have committed to a new waste centre and to improving recycling rates as well as to installing solar panels on 10,000 council houses and retrofitting 7,000 homes along with a dramatic reduction in single-use plastics.

But whilst some councils, like Nottingham and Bristol, have been ambitious, Cumbria County Council has been caught, like a rabbit, in headlights. They initially granted planning permission for the Whitehaven coalmine in October 2020 on the basis of 530 jobs to be created in mining [coking coal underneath the Irish sea, only to later suspend planning permission to further 'consider climate policy' implications.](#) Local MP Tim Farron, had furiously lobbied government to call in this decision, stating that allowing it to go ahead would be a "[complete disaster for our children's future](#)".

It wasn't only the County Council that found itself nonplussed. Robert Jenrick, local government secretary, had, at first, refused to call in this decision, later changing his stance following a letter sent via the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government, to the county council outlining the need for a public enquiry. The Ministry cited the Climate Change Committee's latest report which had stated that the mine would give a '[negative impression of UK's climate priorities](#)'. With Boris Johnson making bold commitments about '[coal, cars, cash and trees](#)' ahead of COP26, the Whitehaven fiasco highlights the difficulties of moving to net zero without sufficient leadership in government and, at local level, the ability to access investment for green job creation. Without this,

local councillors will continue to feel understandably torn. [As Emma Williamson, county councillor for Kells and Sandwith, said:](#) “Climate change is here, that is undeniable, but so is poverty and deprivation in Copeland. We need urgent investment now.”

Whitehaven shows it’s clear that if we’re not to be seen as ‘copping out’ on our climate obligations ahead of COP26, we need greater ‘coordination, cash, leadership and clarity’ if we are to deliver on our pressing climate commitments.