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Local Climate Policy-Making in the UK

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While local climate policy involves a whole range of organisations that we might not normally consider to be important, central government's approach towards municipalities plays a crucial role in shaping policy.

Climate change is a notoriously difficult issue for policy-makers to address. This is largely because a whole range of human activities contribute towards it, and therefore a variety of different actors (government bodies at all levels, businesses and private citizens) need to change their behaviour to deal with it effectively. Essentially, these actors are all responsible in some way for developing and implementing climate change policy – yet they are unlikely to agree on the best way to tackle the problem.

The complex world of local climate 'policy'

Governments (whether at the local, regional, national or global level) do not have the capacity to mitigate or adapt to climate change without the support of non-state actors. Public officials need to work with businesses, non-governmental organisations and citizens to develop policies that are both realistic and effective. This means that traditional and commonly-held understandings of 'policy', which tend to refer to politicians taking decisions and public officials implementing them, do not apply. Instead, 'policy' is essentially a function of complex and often messy interactions between state and non-state actors, rather than a top-down instruction from an elected representative.

Related to this, the austerity and 'localism' agendas mean that councils in the UK now receive less funding, policy advice, information and legal support from

the UK and devolved governments than they did prior to 2010. This means that local authorities are less able to develop and implement effective policies. As a result, they rely increasingly on local organisations (e.g. universities, major businesses and voluntary groups) for these resources – as well as the providers of other public services, such as health, utilities and transport. As the democratically-elected local body, the council should try to provide leadership and co-ordinate the activities of all these other actors, but various factors can make this difficult to achieve:

1. Other actors may be much better placed than the council to gather some of the policy-relevant information concerning how best to reduce carbon emissions or the potential impact of severe weather events within the locality. For example, private landlords are probably in a far better position to assess the feasibility of installing renewable energy generating facilities or improved insulation in their properties. Similarly, transport and utility companies may know more than the council about how a major storm or severe flooding would affect the viability of their key infrastructures. Even if they are keen to share this information with the local authority, it might not come in a format that is easy for the council to process and incorporate into its strategy. In addition, the council may not be in a strong enough position to persuade these other organisations to act in the interests of the locality. Each organisation is more likely to consider how climate risks might affect their own operations, rather than the functioning of interdependent systems (e.g. those that support food distribution, utilities, transport or the emergency services) that cut across the locality and underpin contemporary living.

2. Councils are not necessarily the most powerful actors within their communities: large local businesses, developers and other organisations can often exert significant influence over local policy-making. There is a risk that these non-state actors might exercise too much influence over governments, resulting in policies are insufficiently ambitious to address climate change effectively, and/or raising concerns about democratic accountability. The fragmented nature of local governance, along with the policy of austerity localism in England, has increased private companies' power *vis à vis* local authorities, and therefore risks exacerbating this situation. For example, my new book argues that English councils receive less support from central government than their German counterparts, which means that they are unable to exercise as much influence over local climate policy.

3. Councils face several dilemmas when deciding whether to invest in infrastructure that would reduce the impact of major weather events. The frequency and severity of these events will increase as the climate changes, but they are nonetheless highly unpredictable. In addition, the costs of dealing with severe weather is largely borne by private businesses, insurance companies and citizens, and it is often unclear where responsibilities lie to mitigate the risks. In terms of flooding, for example, local authorities are not legally required to protect housing, and therefore many councils urge residents to buy and deploy sandbags. Yet councils in England and Wales have a statutory duty for flood risk management related to small watercourses and surface runoff, and the public expects the state to provide flood prevention services to protect them and their property. All of these factors make it very difficult to calculate the cost of 'doing nothing'

and therefore to develop a business case for adaptation initiatives such as flood resilient infrastructure.

The very nature of issues such as climate change mean that public bodies need to work with private and voluntary organisations to implement policy effectively. Democratic governments cannot simply pass radical legislation without consultation and expect businesses and citizens to comply with it. Nonetheless, in order to ensure that climate change initiatives are sufficiently ambitious, and decision-makers are democratically accountable, government bodies need to have the capacity and authority to take the lead. This may be particularly important in localities that do not have long-standing civic institutions (such as universities) or active voluntary groups within their areas, which might otherwise take on some of these responsibilities.

Comparing local climate policy-making in Germany and England

My new book, which compares Newcastle upon Tyne with its German 'twin town' of Gelsenkirchen, shows that German municipalities have this capacity, because they receive substantial resources from higher levels of government. This support comes in various forms:

- *Financial* – Gelsenkirchen received a large grant from the federal government to implement its climate change strategy. This enabled the council to employ two extra officers to supplement the existing climate change team. Newcastle has suffered from significant funding cuts in recent years and employs far fewer members of staff to work on its climate change initiatives.
- *Legal* – the legal framework for sustainable development in Germany is much stronger than in England. As a result, German local authorities have to

insist that new or refurbished buildings meet stringent energy performance criteria – whereas English councils that are keen to attract investment may allow developers to build to lower sustainability standards.

- *Functional* – Gelsenkirchen Council has retained control over a broader range of local services than Newcastle, which no longer has direct responsibility for utilities, public housing, local transport and a growing number of local schools. This gives the German council more influence over its community and makes it easier to incorporate other local services into the city's sustainable procurement strategy and overall climate change approach.

- *Advisory* – Gelsenkirchen received a lot of advice from the state government (through its regional arm, the *Bezirk*) to assist with drafting its bid for regeneration funding. This helped to finance the redevelopment of Hans-Sachs-Haus (the new town hall), which was refurbished to very high sustainability standards. For its part, Newcastle relies heavily on a local university and voluntary groups for many of its climate change initiatives, such as the Science Central development (recently re-branded as Newcastle Helix)

- *Political* – there is broad support across different levels of government in Germany for the *Energiewende* ('energy transition'): specifically, the need to move away from nuclear energy and fossil fuels and rely more on renewable sources. The federal government has also linked climate change with other policy areas, particularly the idea that supporting green industries would benefit the wider economy, and introduced generous subsidies to encourage small-scale renewable energy generation. The UK Government has lacked this clarity and urgency, and has reduced its subsidies for renewables significantly. In addition, public bodies in Germany have a long tradition of collaborating on policy-making and implementation, particularly

across levels of government. This empowers German councils to act quite literally as local *authorities* within their communities – whereas their English counterparts do not have the same status, which weakens their ability to influence other local actors.

Concluding thoughts

Overall, we can see how 'policy' is complicated, messy and involves a whole range of organisations that we might not normally consider to be important. This applies not only to climate change, but also to a range of other contemporary challenges. Nonetheless, the attitude and approach of central government towards municipalities plays a crucial role in shaping local climate policy. Where higher levels of government do not provide much support to local authorities, and/or various subnational government functions have been outsourced, 'hived off' to external agencies or privatised, then the local council must seek out additional resources from elsewhere in order to achieve its objectives. This could result in private sector actors gaining too much influence over decision-making, which might 'dilute' the resulting policies and mean that they are unable to join-up activity properly at the local level. Such eventualities could mean that local authorities are unable to address the issue effectively.

The contrasting cases of Gelsenkirchen and Newcastle show how higher tiers of government shape the context within which councils operate and ultimately influence local climate policy. This has wider implications: if public bodies have insufficient resources, they may lack the capacity to implement central government policies. Although devolving austerity to the local level may insulate ministers from some of the public backlash against service cuts, governments also need to consider how financial and other constraints make it more difficult for local authorities to deliver central priorities. This applies not

just to climate change, but also across a range of other policy sectors, including housing, national security, resilience, social care, transport, trading standards and public health.

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