

nalc

Publication

What can local councils do on climate change

National Association of Local Councils

www.nalc.gov.uk

Published by
National Association of Local Councils (NALC)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The National Association of Local Councils (NALC) issued a survey between October 2020 and January 2021 to discover what local (parish and town) councils were already doing on climate change and what the barriers were stopping them from achieving more.

The council received 211 respondents.

This publication is based on the responses to the survey and is aimed at helping local councils to implement climate friendly services and projects in their community.

NALC would like to thank then Climate Change Task and Finish Group members for their help in issuing the survey, analysing the responses and supporting the project in general.

CONTEXT

In October 2019, NALC organised a climate change panel session at its annual conference and declared a climate emergency. NALC is delighted that lots of town and parish councils have since followed suit in declaring their own climate emergency. As approximately 30% of England is parished, NALC believes that tackling the effects of climate change should be a priority for all local councils.

Earlier on this year, NALC released its climate change case studies report. The aim of this publication was to demonstrate the work that local councils and county associations are doing to tackle climate change and share best practice.

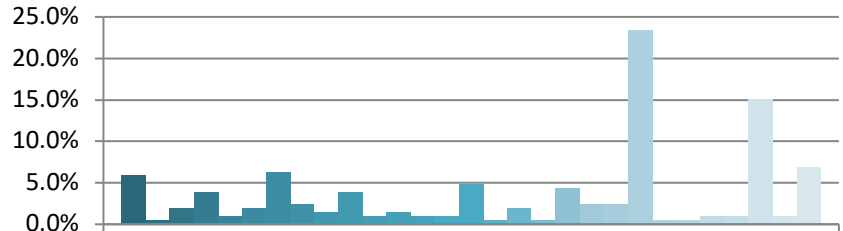
At present, national climate change policy under the Climate Change Act commits the UK government to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by 2050 (compared to 1990 emissions levels) as part of the Paris Agreement. The upcoming COP26 conference in Glasgow will aim to sense check this agreement outlining ambitious targets for greenhouse gas reduction by 2030, for which the UK has a reduction target of at least 68% (Source: GOV.UK).

At the local level, the LGA, who represent county, district, metropolitan, and unitary authorities across England, have also declared a climate emergency. In addition, this body has set up a climate change hub to support these councils in the delivery of carbon reducing actions as part of the 2050 net zero goal.

The focus of this climate change survey however, is to paint an accurate picture on how climate change is being tackled by town (and parish) councils and identify the challenges that they face when attempting to execute these actions.

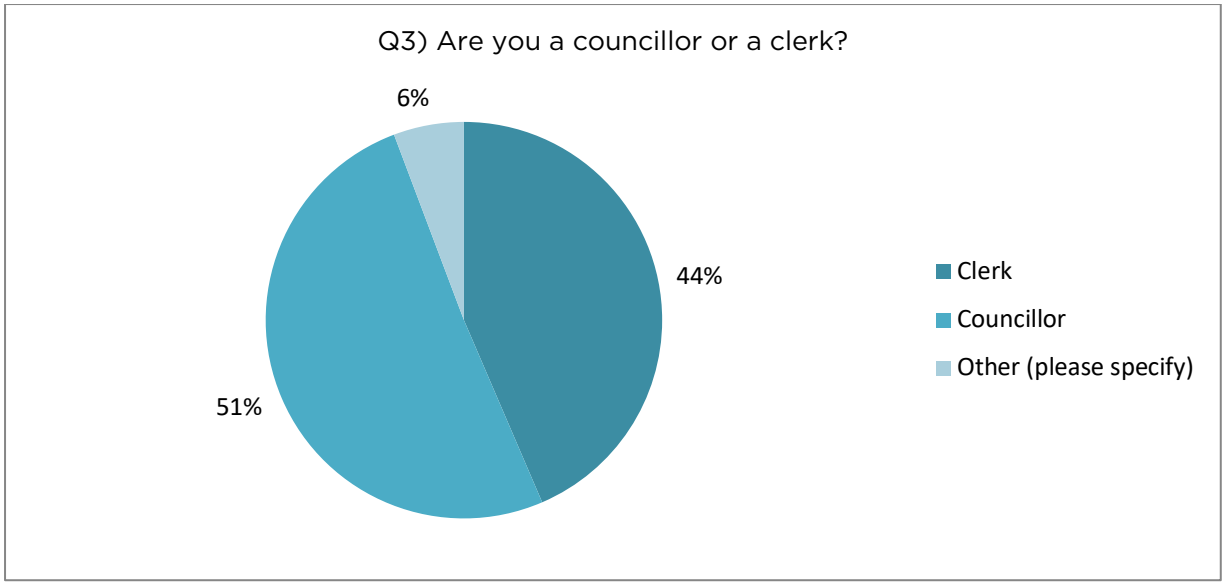
CLIMATE CHANGE SURVEY

Q2) Please enter your county association

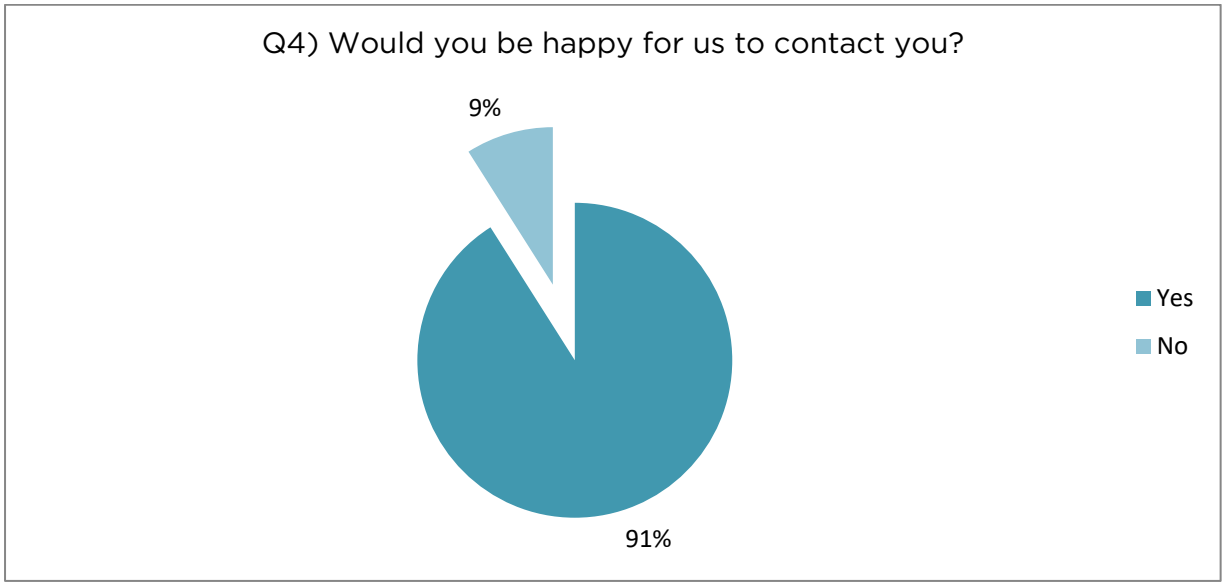


	Local Council Association
Avon	5.9%
Berkshire	0.5%
Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes	2.0%
Cheshire	3.9%
Cornwall	1.0%
Derbyshire	2.0%
Devon	6.3%
Dorset	2.4%
East Riding and North Lincolnshire	1.5%
Essex	3.9%
Gloucestershire	1.0%
Hampshire	1.5%
Herefordshire	1.0%
Isle of Wight	1.0%
Kent	4.9%
Leicestershire and Rutland	0.5%
Lincolshire	2.0%
Norfolk	0.5%
Northumberland	4.4%
Oxfordshire	2.4%
Shropshire	2.4%
Somerset	23.4%
Staffordshire	0.5%
Suffolk	0.5%
East Sussex	1.0%
West Sussex	1.0%
Wiltshire	15.1%
Worcestershire	1.0%
Yorkshire	6.8%

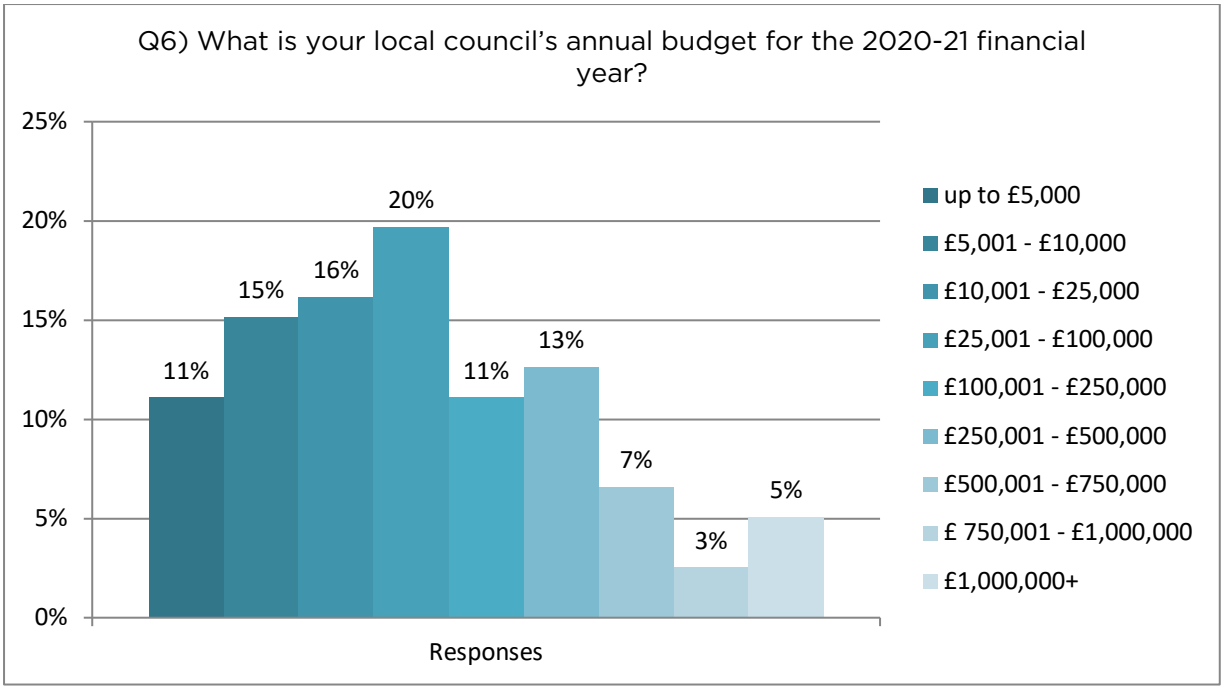
- NALC received 211 responses to its Climate Change Survey. Somerset Association of Local Councils returned highest percentage of council responses with 23.41% of the overall response rate.



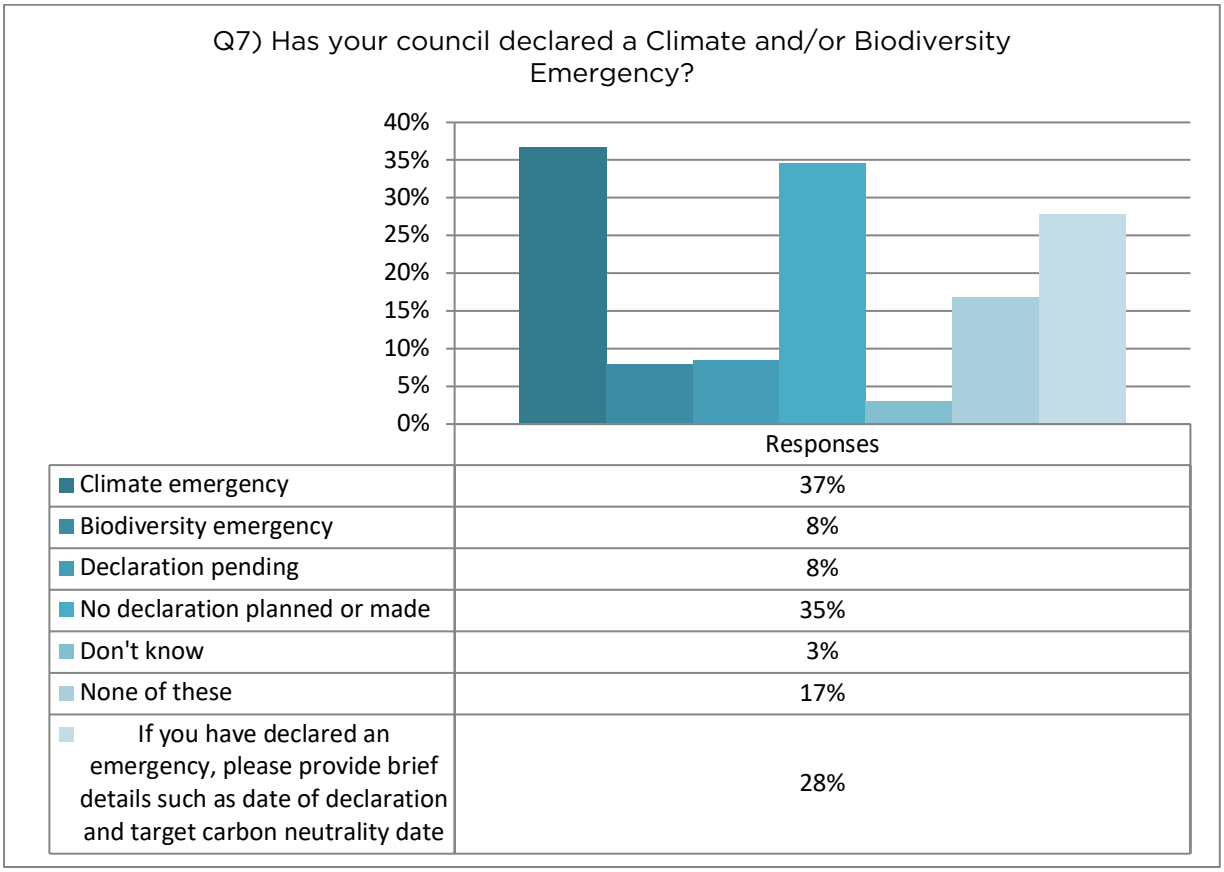
- 51% of responses were returned by councillors; 44% by clerks and 5% by others. Therefore, councillors are very active in the climate change space in our sector.



- 91% of respondents said yes and 9% of respondents said no. The majority of respondents are happy for NALC to contact them again regarding this survey.



- 20% of respondent councils were medium sized with budgets of between £25000 and £100,000; 42% of respondent councils were smaller in size with budgets of less than £25,000; and 38% of respondent councils were larger in size. This indicates that climate change is a concern to all sizes of local council.

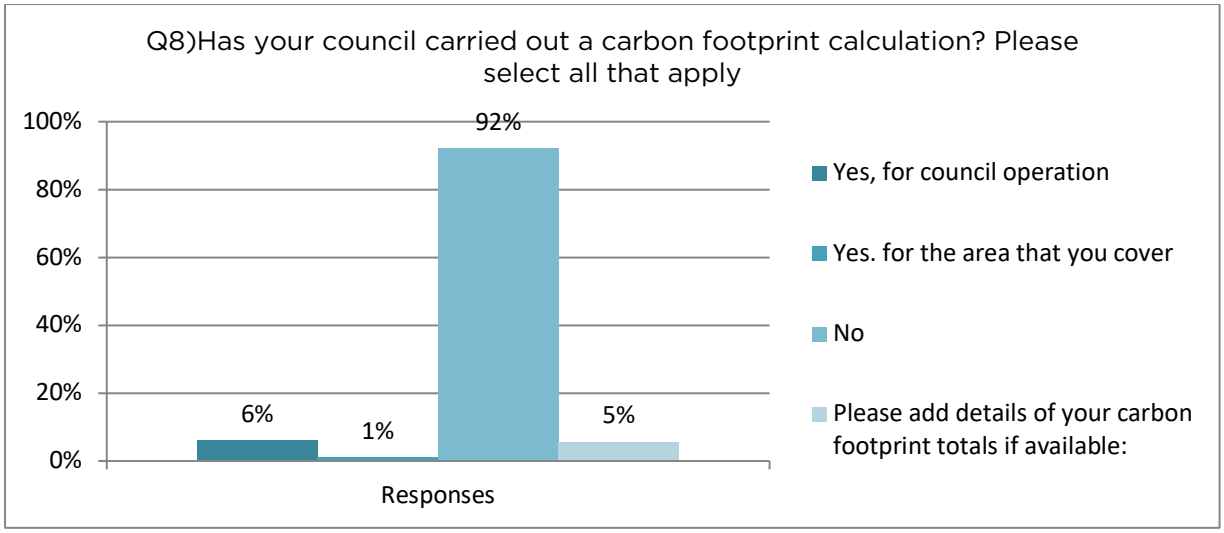


Climate emergency	37%
Biodiversity emergency	8%
Declaration pending	8%
No declaration planned or made	35%
Don't know	3%
None of these	17%
If you have declared an emergency, please provide brief details such as date of declaration and target carbon neutrality date	28%

- 37% of councils have declared a climate emergency; 35% said no declaration had been planned or made; 8% said they had declared a biodiversity emergency and the remainder did not know or were none of the above. This shows us that far more councils have declared climate than biodiversity emergencies.
- There is a financial link to note; 74% of respondents with annual budgets over £250,000 had declared a Climate and/or Climate & Biological Emergency, compared to only 23% of Councils with Annual Budgets below £250,000. This may suggest that smaller councils feel there is less they can do.

Basic information

- Friends of the Earth – 20 things you can do (www.policy.friendsoftheearth.uk/reports/20-actions-parish-and-town-councils-can-take-climate-and-nature-emergency)
- How to declare a climate emergency (www.climateemergency.uk)
- Zero Carbon Britain (www.cat.org.uk/info-resources/zero-carbon-britain/research-reports/zero-carbon-britain-rising-to-the-climate-emergency)
- Adapting to climate change: a guide for local councils (www.assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/218798/adapt-localcouncilguide.pdf)
- Local councils' powers to address or reduce climate change: existing powers and future opportunities (www.nalc.gov.uk/library/our-work/climate-change/3341-climate-change-lc-powers-sept-20)
- The Good The Bad and The Leading Lights (www.nalc.gov.uk/library/our-work/climate-change/3312-the-good-the-bad-and-the-leading-lights)
- Centre for Public Scrutiny: 10 questions to ask if you are scrutinising climate change (www.assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/218798/adapt-localcouncilguide.pdf)



- 92% of councils said no; 6% said yes as part of council operations; 1% said yes for the area that they covered and 1% did not answer. We find that almost all local councils have not completed a carbon footprint calculation.

Carbon calculator:

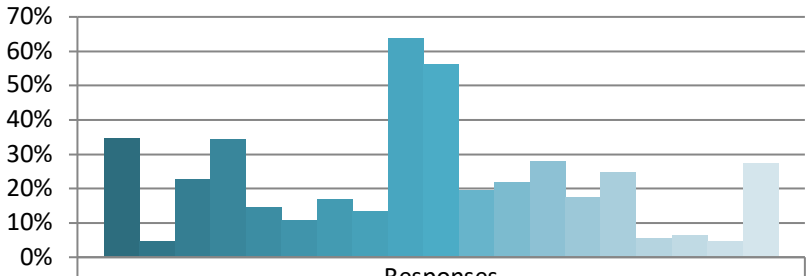
Carbon footprint is widely defined as the amount of carbon (usually in tons) that is emitted during a process or by an organization or entity.

(Source: Encyclopedia of Corporate Social Responsibility, 2013)

Below are a list of tools for calculating carbon footprint at the community and individual level:

- Centre for Sustainable Energy (www.impact-tool.org.uk)
- WWF How big is your environmental footprint? (www.footprint.wwf.org.uk)
- Giki Zero (www.zero.giki.earth)
- Fownhope tool – The Great Collaboration (www.greatcollaboration.uk)

Q9) What carbon-reducing measures are you working on in the community? Please select all that are applicable.



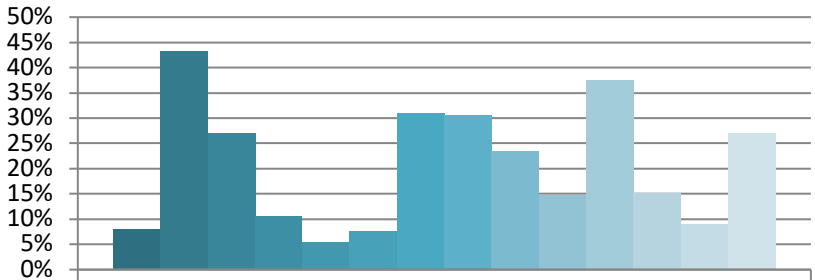
	Responses
Electric Vehicle charging points	35%
Car sharing scheme	4%
Encouraging active travel	23%
Expanding network of bicycle lanes and footpaths	34%
Supporting public transport (e.g. subsidising rural bus service)	14%
Incentives for switching to a sustainable energy supplier	11%
Generating sustainable energy	17%
Energy efficiency incentives (e.g. insulation)	13%
Tree and shrub planting	64%
Rewilding/wildlife friendly planning (from verges to larger areas)	56%
Working with local landowners to manage land for wildlife	19%
Cutting the use of pesticides	22%
'Buy local' incentives	28%
Local produce markets	17%
Working with local businesses	25%
Community fridge	5%
Skills and traning (e.g. training people in the community to do retrofits/energy efficient measures)	6%
Don't know	4%
Other (please specify)	27%

- 64% of respondents are planting more trees and shrubs; 56% of councils are rewilding; and 5% of councils are operating a community fridge. This suggests that most local councils are fighting climate change by planting and rewilding more in the open spaces they manage.
- 80% of councils that have declared a climate and/or climate & biological emergency are working on tree & shrub planting; 69% are rewilding; 58%

are working on EV charging points; and 49% on expanding cycle lanes & footpaths. This suggests that awareness of land use and transport carbon-reducing actions are relatively high among councils.

- However, only 24% are working on renewable energy; 16% are working on energy efficiency; and 12% operating a community fridge. Suggesting that councils are less aware of actions towards carbon reduction in energy generation, consumption and food.

Q10) What carbon-reducing measures are your council working on within their own operations? Please select all that are applicable.



	Responses
Switching the council fleet to electric	8%
Home working options for staff where possible	43%
Encouraging active travel (walking and bicycles)	27%
Encouraging use of public transport	11%
Car sharing scheme	6%
Divesting to sustainable banking	8%
Favouring locally sourced products and services	31%
Improving the energy efficiency of council buildings	30%
Switching council buildings to a sustainable energy supplier	23%
Generating your own renewable energy	15%
Using land to draw down carbon (e.g. tree planting and rewilding)	38%
Sustainable procurement	15%
Don't know	9%
Other (please specify)	27%

- 43% of councils were improving homeworking options or their employees where possible; 38% are using land to draw down carbon (e.g. tree planting and rewilding); and just 6% of councils responding were promoting car sharing schemes. This shows us that most local councils are finding it easier

to reduce carbon in their own operations by promoting home-working and by rewilding.

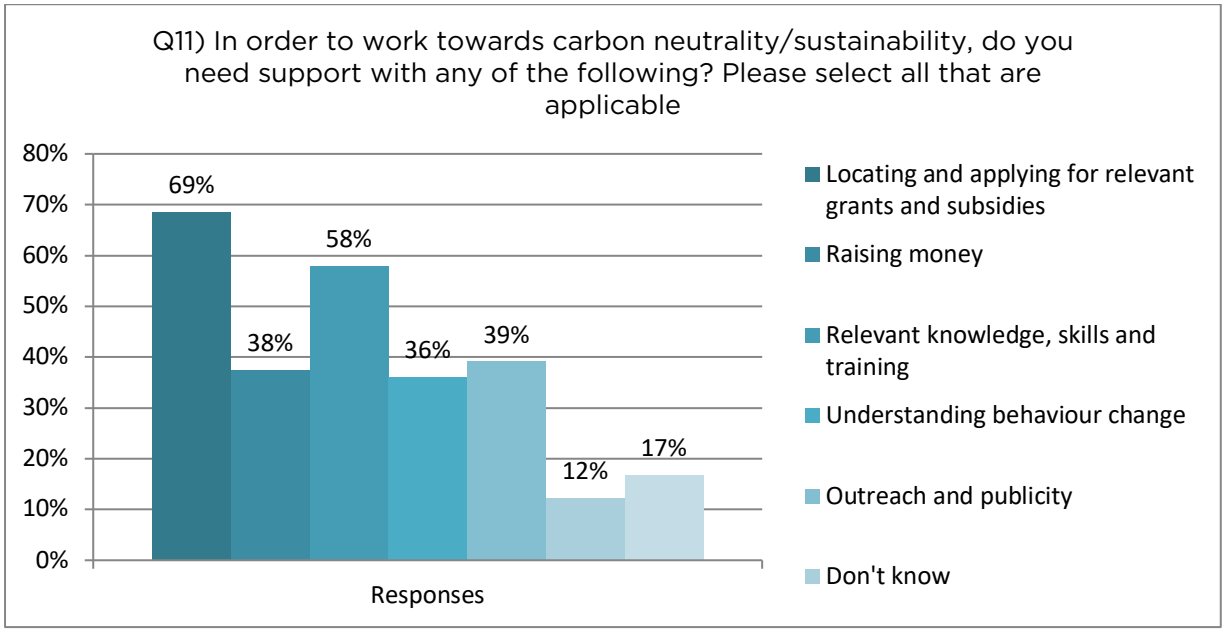
- 57% of councils that have declared a climate and/or climate & biological emergency are encouraging home working; 53% are improving the energy efficiency of their buildings; 45% are switching to a sustainable energy supplier, 49% use their own land to draw down carbon; and 45% favour locally sourced products & services. This suggests that councils find it easier to think broader land use and transport within the scope of their own operations.
- However, the percentages taking these initiatives are skewed towards councils with annual budgets above £250k, which indicates both that councils with more staff are able to change their own operations faster, and that larger councils have a wider range of operations to improve.

Carbon reduction

Carbon reduction is the process by which an organisation reduces its greenhouse gas emissions through efficiencies.

This is not to be confused with carbon offsetting, which is the process in which an organisation can offset its carbon emissions by funding carbon-saving initiatives.

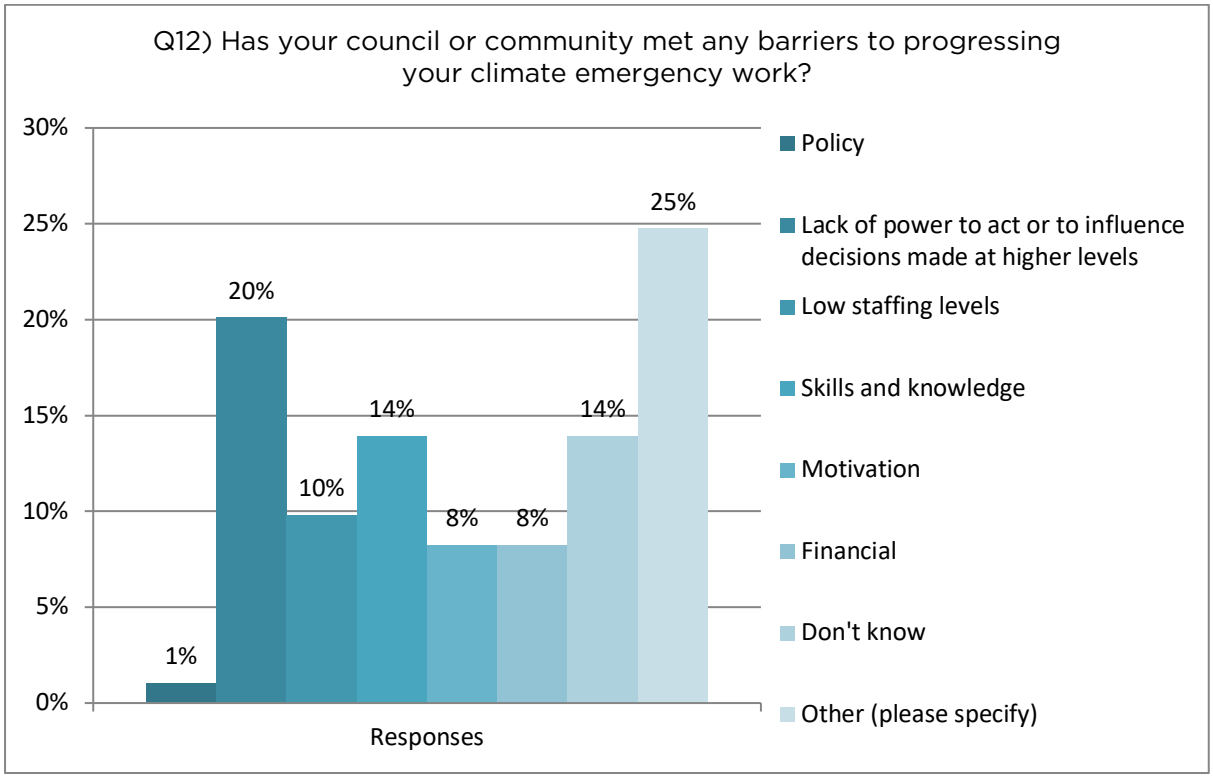
- Carbon offsetting (www.theguardian.com/environment/2011/sep/16/carbon-offset-projects-carbon-emissions)



- 69% of respondents stated they needed locating and applying for relevant grants and subsidies, 58% of councils said they needed support with relevant skills and training; 39% said they needed help with outreach ad publicity; and 12% of councils did not know what support they needed. This

data suggests that the majority of local councils require training, guidance and further information about how to work towards carbon neutrality or sustainability.

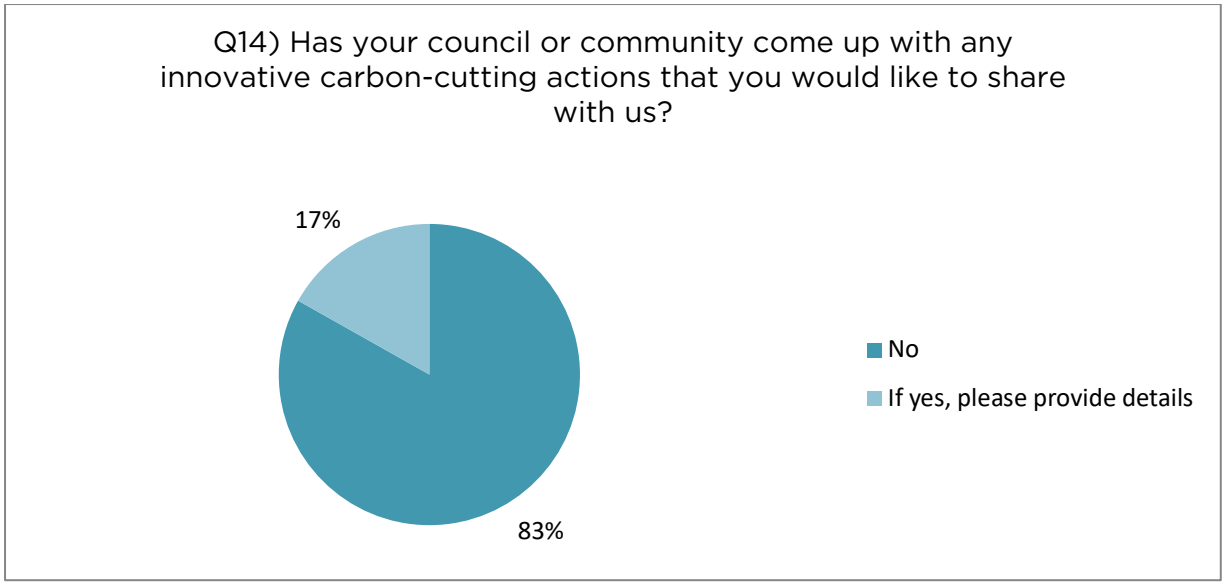
- 85% of councils that have declared a climate and/or climate & biological emergency report that they need support locating and applying for grants and subsidies; 66% seek relevant skills and knowledge; 54% with outreach and publicity; 51% with understanding behaviour change; and 46% with raising money.
- Among councils that have not declared a climate emergency, 55% report needing support for locating and applying for grants; and 47% seek relevant skills and knowledge. This may suggest that signposting for funding and training ay increase the impact of councils in tackling the climate emergency.



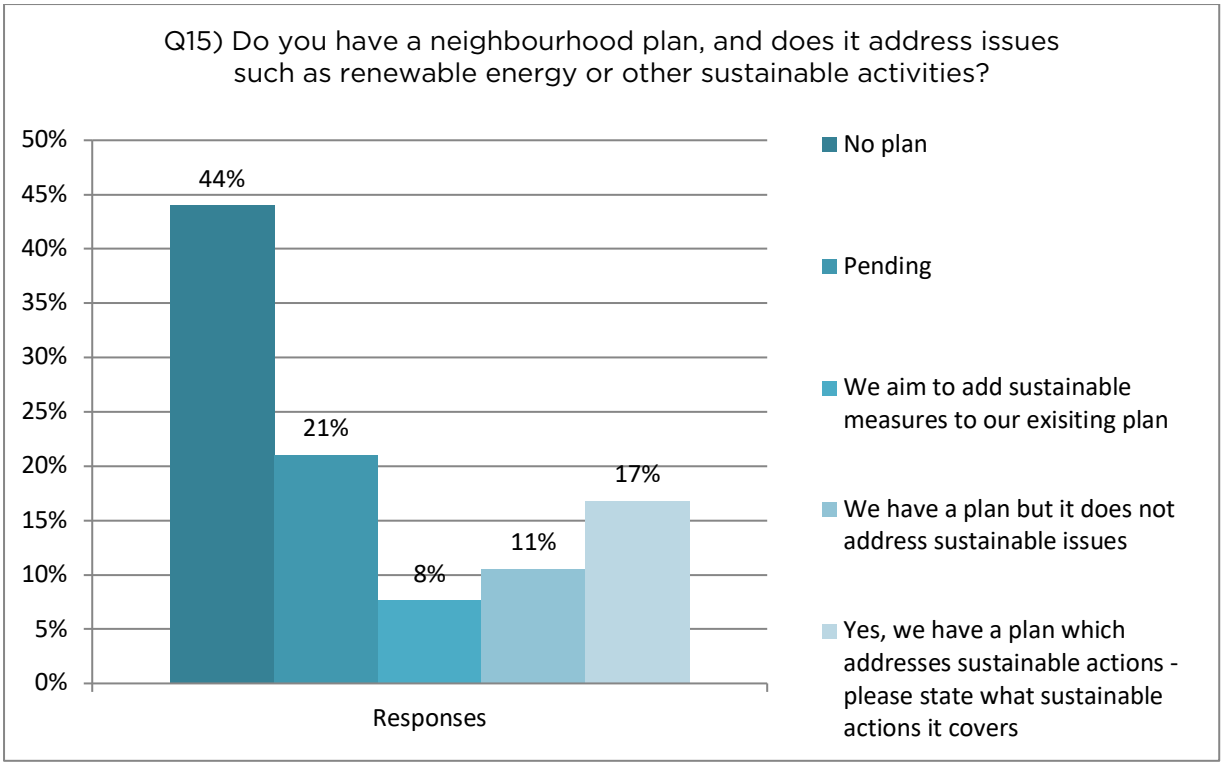
- 20% of councils said that they lacked power to act or to influence decisions made at higher levels; 14% said they lacked the skills and knowledge to make a difference and only 1% said that policy was a barrier. This speaks volumes that many local councils do not currently feel empowered to progress their climate emergency work.
- 26% of councils that have declared a climate emergency report a lack of power to act or influence decisions made at higher levels; 14% reported lack of skills and knowledge; whilst 26% reported other barriers including the COVID-19 pandemic.

Q13. Please provide details of any ways you may have overcome these barriers to your climate change activities

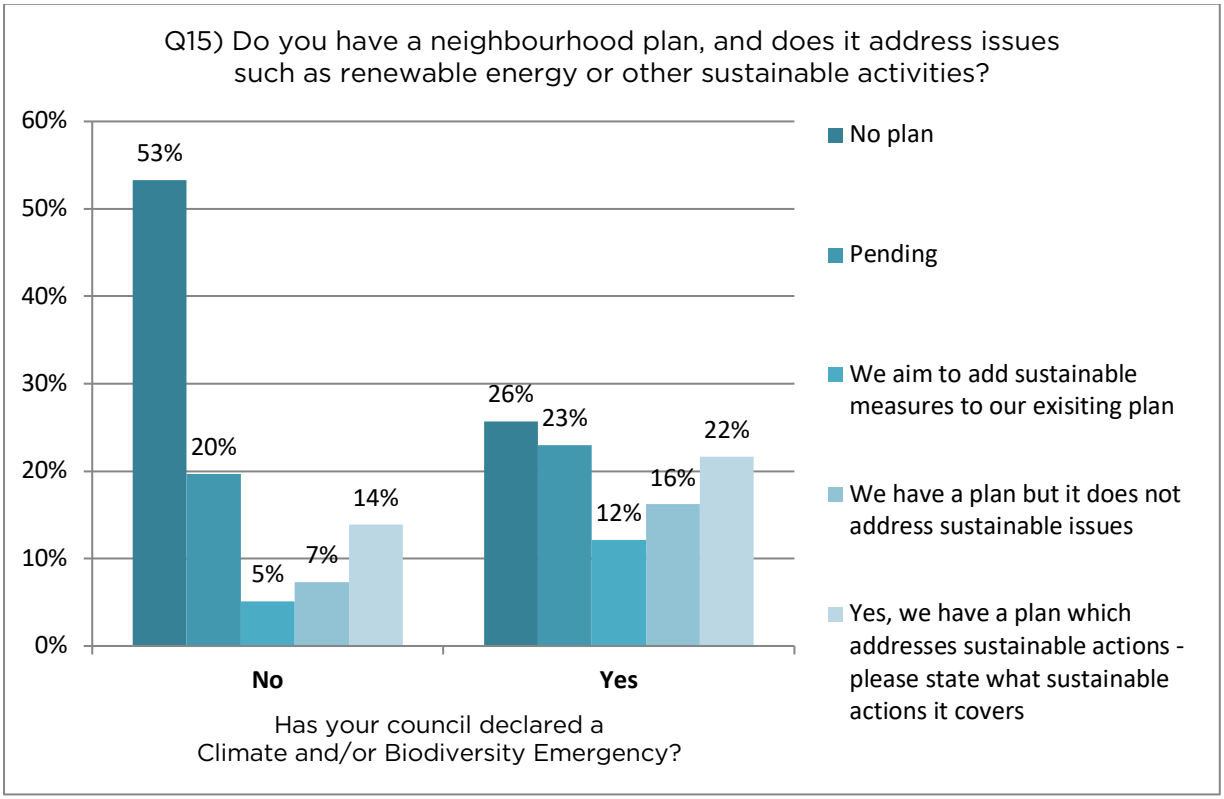
- 62% of survey respondents answered this question
- “Focused on forging connections and relationships within our principal authority to work together on these actions.”
- “Our PC Environment Group has a terms of reference which allows our EG to lobby the LA and Government and to also work with other groups in the county”
- “Set up a council subcommittee with several members from local environmental groups. Working as a mix of council badged initiatives and supporting these other groups.”
- “Lobbying local MP; emailing relevant Ministers of State; working with regional activists; co-opting local residents (several working for Natural England, one former Head of British Antarctic Survey and expert on ocean bio-chemistry, and myself a former DEFRA manager working with the PS and management board; my contacts in the Houses of Lords and Commons.”



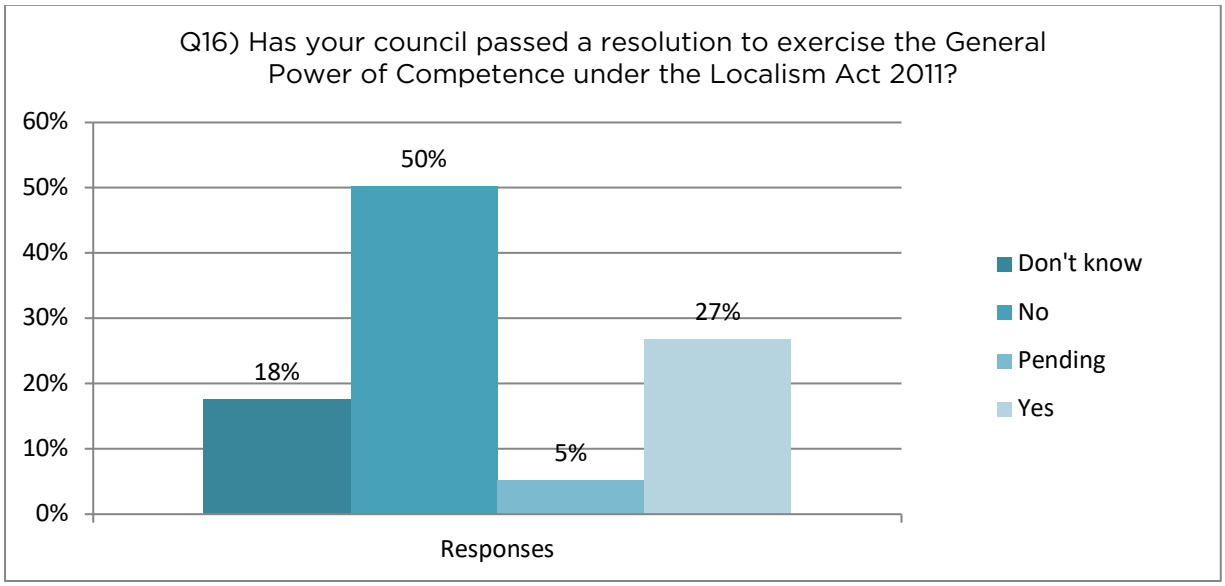
- 83% of councils said they had not engineered new carbon cutting solutions yet; and 17% said they had. This data tells us that far more local councils could come up with innovative ways to cut carbon in their areas with more training and guidance.



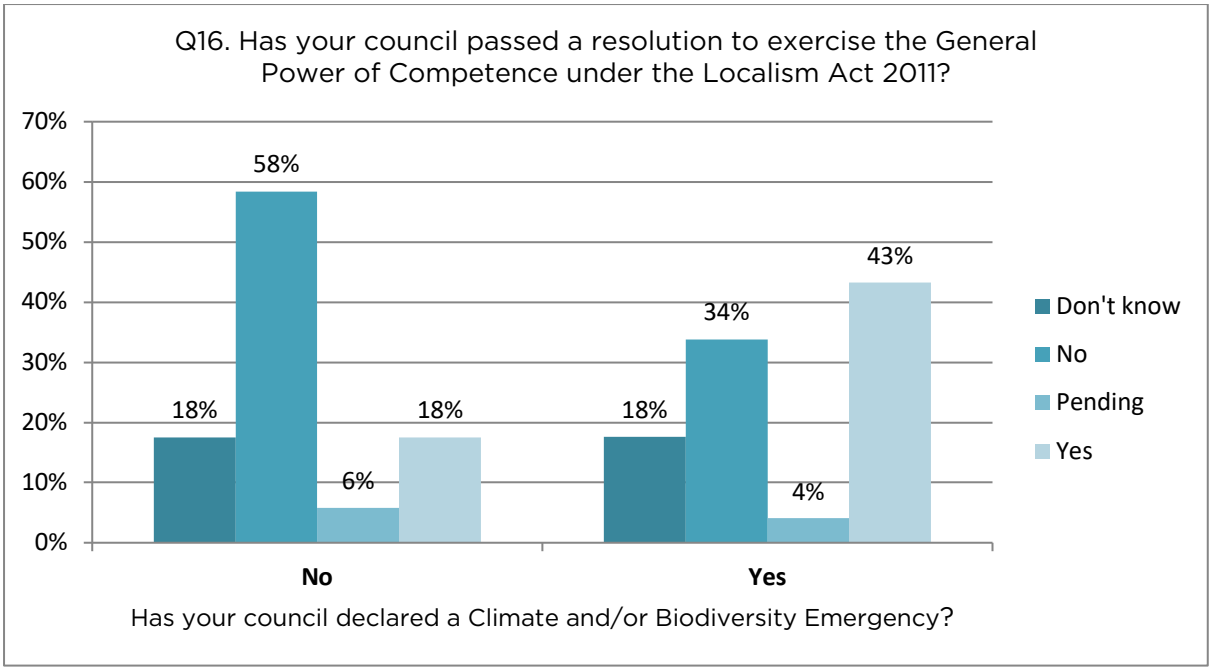
- 44% of councils stated they had no neighbourhood plan, 21% said a neighbourhood plan was pending and 8% said they intended to add sustainable measures to their existing neighbourhood plan. This shows us the relevance of neighbourhood planning to climate change for local councils is waning.



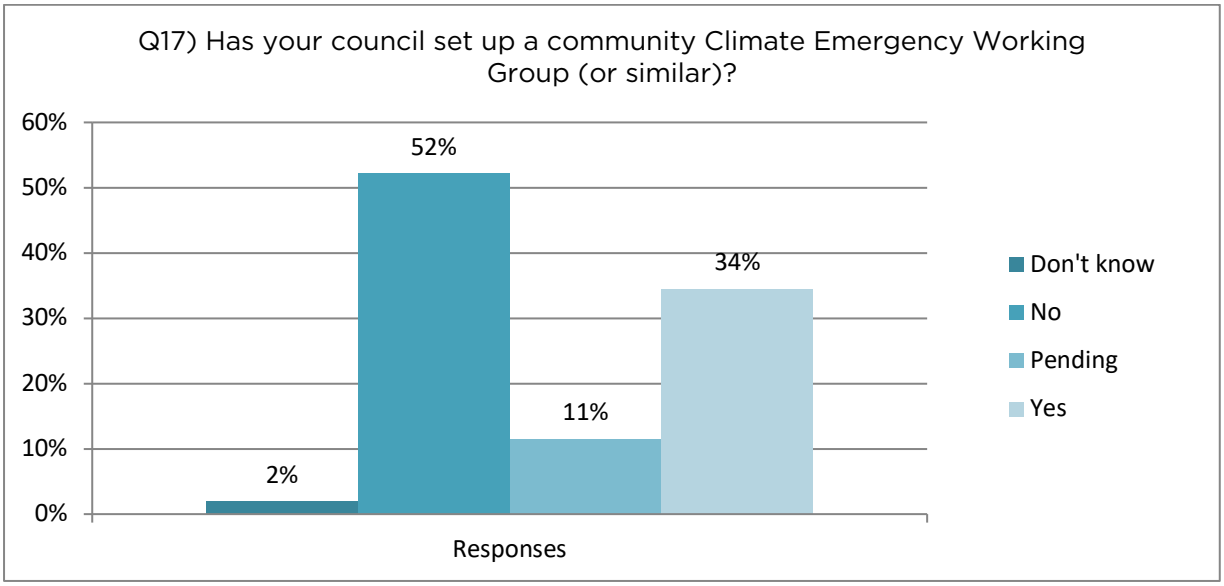
- 53% of councils that have declared a climate emergency have a neighbourhood plan, compared to only 26% of those councils who have not declared.
- However, the relationship between whether neighbourhood plans address sustainability issues, and whether or not a council has declared a climate and/or climate & biological emergency, is weak. This is perhaps a symptom of neighbourhood plans being a slower process.



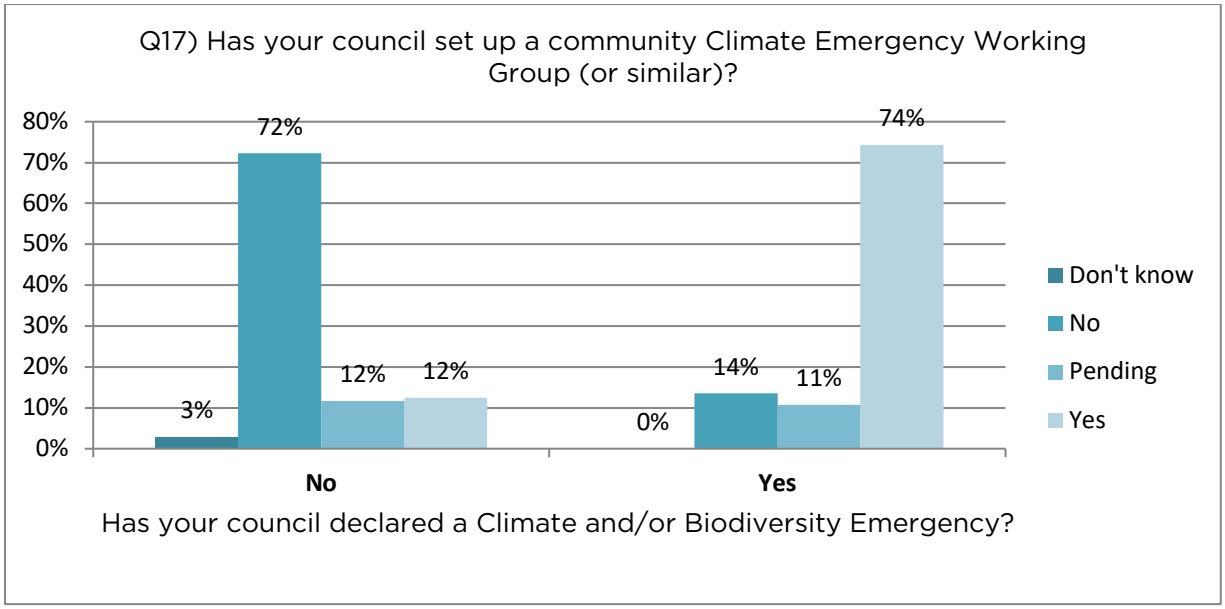
- The General Power of Competence gives Councils the power to do anything an individual person can do, provided that is not explicitly prohibited by law. Local Councils can declare the General Power of Competence when they meet two tests: (1) having a CiLCA qualified Clerk, and (2) 2/3 of Councillors are publicly elected
- 50% of local councils said they had not; 27% stated they had and 5% stated this was pending. The lesson here is that most local councils do not think that the General Power of Competence is relevant to the climate change agenda.



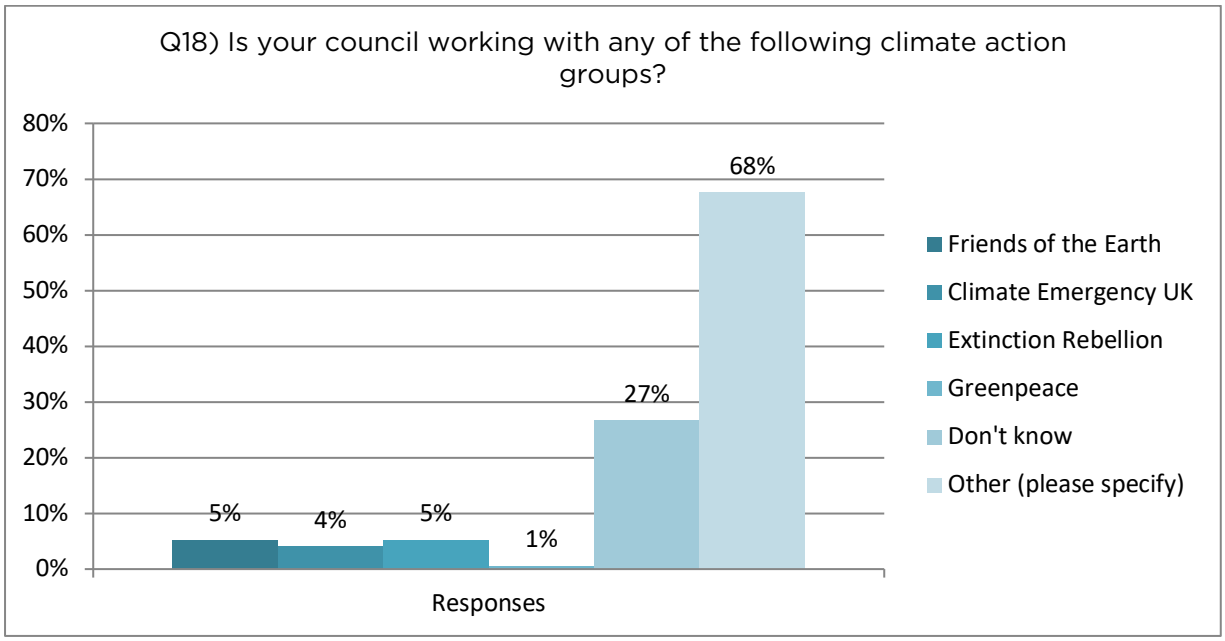
- However, 43% of councils that have declared a climate emergency report having the General Power of Competence; compared to 18% of those that have not declared.



- 52% of respondents stated they had not; 34% stated they had and 11% that this was pending. The data here indicates that most local councils have not thought it relevant to set up a climate emergency working group or similar to fight climate change in their area.

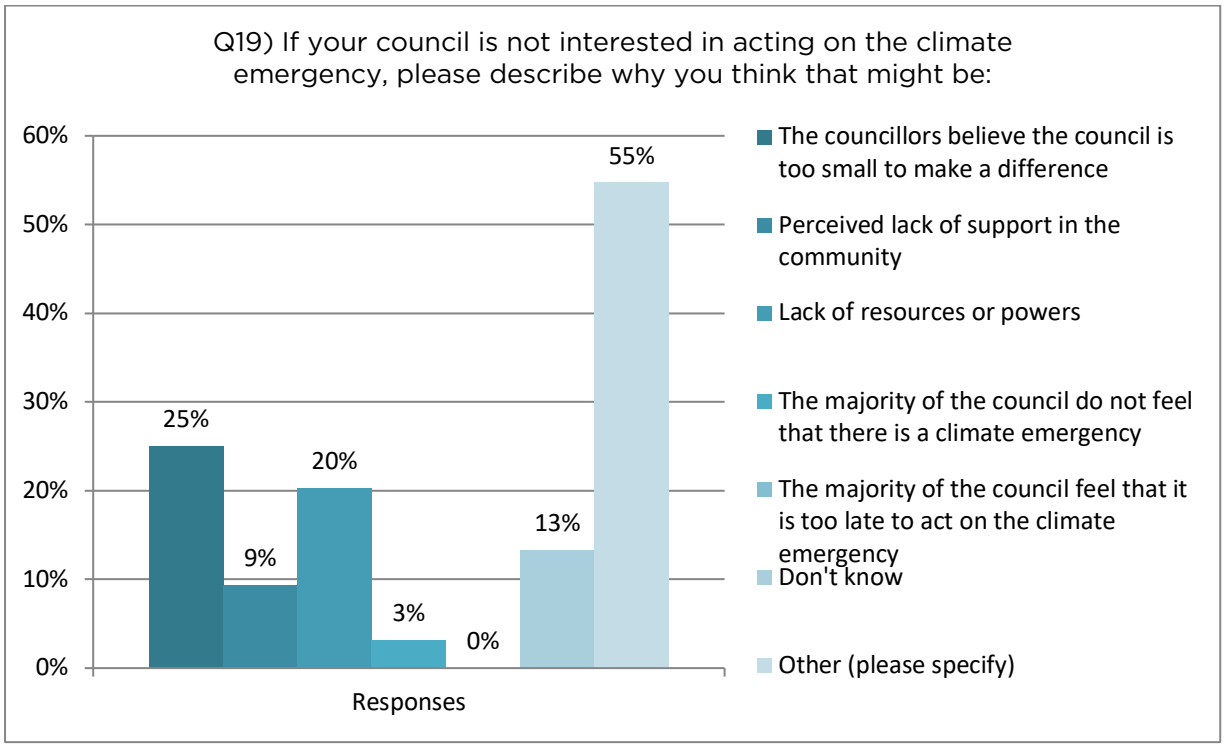


- 74% of councils that have declared a climate emergency have set up a community Climate Emergency Working group; compared to 12% of those wo have not declared. This indicates that these working groups are popular tools for councils to turn climate emergency declarations into constructive actions.



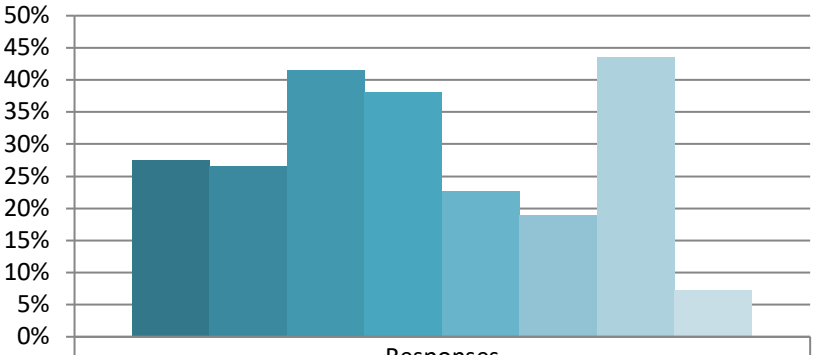
- 5% of local councils have engaged with Friends of the Earth, 5% with Extinction Rebellion; and 68% have engaged with more minor local climate change splinter groups in their areas. This tells us that there is no linearity as to whom local councils have engaged with on the climate change agenda.
- 31% of councils that have declared a climate emergency are working with at least on local climate action group; compared to 17% for councils who have not declared.

- The most frequently reported national groups amongst councils who have made a declaration are Friends of the Earth (12%) and Extinction Rebellion (11%). This shows that national groups have not been uniformly effective in engaging with local councils but there is also local diversity in climate action engagement.



- 25% of councils stated that they thought their councils would be too small to make a difference; 20% that they lacked resources or powers; and 9% stated there was a perceived lack of support in the community. There are variety of reasons creating an impression that local councils do not currently believe they can make a difference to the climate change agenda in their areas.
- 23% of councils that have not declared a climate emergency reported that they were too small to make a difference (equally, they all held annual budgets under £250,000); whilst 17% felt they lacked resource of powers.

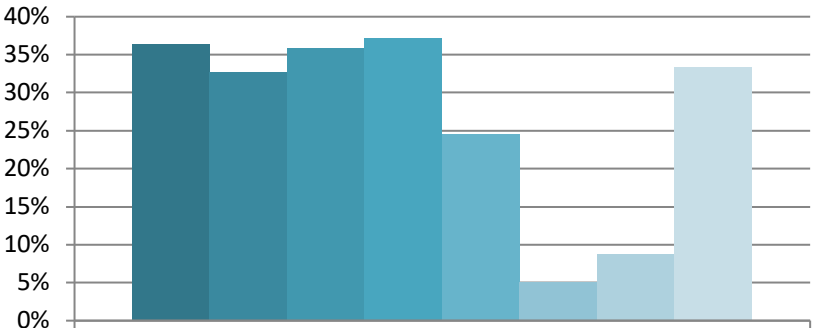
Q20) What is the most significant change that you would like to retain after the COVID-19 pandemic?



	Responses
Increased home working	28%
Supporting residents to cycle and walk more	27%
Community spirit	42%
Appreciation of local green spaces	38%
Increase in use of technology	23%
Reduction in the use of paper	19%
All of the above	43%
Other (please specify)	7%

- 42% of councils stated community spirit; 28% stated increased home working; and 19% stated a reduction in the use of paper. This tells us that local councils want to see retention of some of the more green friendly legacies of the COV-19 pandemic.
- The responses here were consistent regardless of whether or not councils had declared a climate emergency.

Q21) If your council has no plans to act on the climate emergency, what might help to change the councillors' minds? Please tick as many boxes as are applicable.



	Responses
Climate change awareness resources	36%
A package of advice on how to declare a climate emergency	33%
Financial support	36%
Teaming up with your neighbouring councils	37%
Teaming up with community groups	25%
You believe the council is not interested in acting on the climate emergency even with support	5%
Don't know	9%
Other (please specify)	33%

- 37% stated teaming up with neighbouring councils; 25% stated teaming up with community groups; and 5% stated that they did not believe their council was interested in fighting the climate emergency even with support. The data suggests that local councils seem to think that they can make more of an impact at the local level by fighting climate change at scale combined with other local councils and community groups; otherwise they feel their impact to be negligible.

Climate action plans

- Climate emergency UK (https://www.climateemergency.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/V8-Checklist-for-Council-Plans-21072021-new.docx.pdf)
- Frome Parish Council (www.frometowncouncil.gov.uk/your-community/sustainability-and-resilience/climate-emergency/fromes-climate-emergency-strategy)

Design greener housing

- Local Plans and the Climate Emergency (www.campaigncc.org/node/1908)
- How do we use Neighbourhood Planning to fight climate change? (www.sharedassets.org.uk/landexplorer/how-do-we-use-neighbourhood-planning-to-fight-climate-change)
- Neighbourhood planning in a climate emergency (www.cse.org.uk/news/view/2430)

Energy

- ACRE on community renewable energy projects (www.acre.org.uk/news/2013-07-11-new-renewable-energy-guide-for-communities)
- Renewable energy companies (www.consciouscreatives.co.uk/environment/top-5-renewable-energy-companies)
- Local councils can now win funding to develop renewable projects (www.carbonsmart.co.uk/supporting-parish-councils-to-win-funding-and-develop-renewable-projects)
- Salix interest-free funding for energy efficiency projects (www.salixfinance.co.uk/P3_PSDS)

Electric charging points

- Grant schemes for electric charging points (www.gov.uk/government/collections/government-grants-for-low-emission-vehicles)

Green travel

- Green transport (www.visitengland.com/plan-your-visit/sustainable-travel/green-transport)
- Cycle to work scheme (www.cyclescheme.co.uk)

Flooding

- The Flood Hub (www.thefloodhub.co.uk/am-i-at-risk)
- Environmental Agency (www.gov.uk/check-flooding)
- Local Government Association

(www.local.gov.uk/topics/severe-weather/flooding/flood-and-coastal-erosion-risk-management/flood-risk-and-flood-risk)

Plastic reduction

- How to go plastic free (www.friendsoftheearth.uk/plastics/living-without-plastic)

Trees and biodiversity

- Tree packs – Woodland Trust (www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/plant-trees/schools-and-communities)
- Rewilding (www.rewildingbritain.org.uk/start-rewilding)
- The Wildlife Trust Biodiversity net gain briefing (www.wildlifetrusts.org/sites/default/files/2019-02/Net%20gain%20final%20briefing%20for%20Wildlife%20Trusts.pdf)
- Biodiversity offsetting and net gain (www.friendsoftheearth.uk/nature/biodiversity-offsetting-and-net-gain-licence-trash-nature)
- Plantlife- Road Verge Campaign (plantlife.love-wildflowers.org.uk/roadvergecampaign)
- Responding to the Climate Emergency with New Trees and Woodlands (www.nalc.gov.uk/library/our-work/climate-change/3433-responding-to-the-climate-emergency-with-new-trees-and-woodlands)

CONCLUSION

This report demonstrates a mixed picture at the local level but it has helped us to compile some recommendations for local councils and NALC going forward.

Councils are implementing carbon reducing measures for their communities (tree and shrub planting, rewilding, electric charging points) and in their own operations (home working, carbon draw down from land use, improved energy efficiency).

Furthermore, a promising number of councils have declared climate and/or biodiversity emergencies. There is an identifiable trend between councils who have made such declarations and the likelihood to take positive action against climate change, such as sustainable neighbourhood plans, establishing working groups or using the General Power of Competence in climate policy.

However, the report highlighted a number of challenges. A large proportion (92%) of reporting councils have not completed carbon footprint calculations. These calculations are useful in identifying efficient measures that councils and their communities can take to offset their footprint.

The overwhelming barrier to overcome is that many councils believe they are simply too small to effect change as they lack finance, expertise, and the power to influence. Finance emerges as a key variable, when considering that councils with a higher annual budget reported higher levels of climate and/or biodiversity declaration. Furthermore, councils have asked for support to: apply for grants/subsidies, raise funds, improve expertise and boost outreach.

NALC's suggested next steps are:

Local councils

- Continue to declare climate and/or biodiversity declarations where possible as this leads to a higher level of climate action e.g. climate working groups, and sustainable neighbourhood plans.
- Conduct carbon footprint calculations at the community and individual level with resources provide by NALC.
- Utilise carbon footprint calculations to identify where councils can make changes to reduce carbon emissions within the community or their own operations.
- Councils should aim to set up climate working groups to forge connections with other councils, principal authorities and climate action groups to share best practice and lobby MPs.

NALC

- Provide resources for councils to conduct their own carbon footprint calculations.
- Provide support and guidance for councils who are seeking funding, grants and expertise to implement their own climate policy.
- Facilitate connection between councils who are interested in sharing best practice and tackling climate change action together.
- Lobby the government to raise awareness of the climate emergency at the local level and encourage greater accessibility to funding.