

Newham Council connects climate and social justice in the UK's first local authority Just Transition Plan

London Borough of Newham
Friday 15 March 2024

Summary

Climate change affects everyone in different ways, yet so often climate plans fail to reflect the interconnected nature of different environmental, economic and social issues. Newham Council recognised the need for a different approach to how it develops climate policy in the future, which puts its residents at the forefront. The new Just Transition Plan will do that by ensuring that any local climate policy making carefully considers the impacts on local residents and their livelihoods.

“Building on our previous climate change strategy, we are calling for a just transition in Newham, addressing the unequal impacts of climate change where low income and disadvantaged groups, contributing least to the climate emergency, disproportionately pay the highest costs for climate adaptation.

Our plan sets out how we are building a fairer Newham, with the health and wellbeing and future of our people and planet at its heart. With the threat of climate emergency felt more in our borough than almost anywhere else in the UK, we've already witnessed devastating impacts which are set to increase as the climate crisis worsens. With this plan, we are taking action today.”

Mayor of Newham, Rokhsana Fiaz OBE

The problem

Despite being amongst the lowest carbon emitting boroughs in the UK (per capita emissions), Newham is one of the London boroughs most exposed to extreme flood and overheating risks due to climate change.

These risks are further exacerbated by Newham's demographic and socio-economic picture. More than half of its residents were born outside of the UK (Census, 2021) and around 20% of the population are under the age of 16, making it the youngest and most diverse borough in London. A quarter of Newham residents earn below the London living wage, and one in two children live in poverty, with an increasing number of residents living in temporary accommodation and non-secure housing. These issues became even more apparent during the Covid-19 pandemic, where Newham's mortality rate was more than double England's average.

While the social, environmental and economic challenges it faces are many, Newham became one of the first boroughs to declare a climate emergency in 2019. The Council subsequently set out its Climate Emergency Action Plan. Like many other councils, this initial plan primarily focused on the council's own operational emissions, rather than area-wide emissions, which are typically much more politically challenging for local authorities to have an influence over.

It was identified that a different approach would be needed to deliver Net Zero across the borough. Instead of fixating solely on decarbonisation, it was recognised that a new approach was needed to reflect the interconnected sustainability issues affecting the local community. Through ensuring climate mitigation policies are applied fairly, and matched with adaptation policies that protect residents, there is a significant opportunity to build public support for change.

The solution

Newham will be transformed by the actions needed to achieve Net Zero by 2030. To ensure this transformation includes everyone across the borough in a fair and equitable way, the council is re-framing the existing climate action strategy to incorporate just transition principles.

This plan will act as a blueprint to address the unequal impacts of climate change on society and build a fairer borough that has lower emissions, is more equitable and is future ready.

The plan builds on the London Sustainable Development Commission's [2023 Just Transition report](#) and the principles it sets out, based on a newly developed 3-6-5 framework, featuring:

Three Principles are used to guide council actions on their ability to:

1. Increase equity.
2. Reduce emissions.
3. Build long-term resilience.

Six Futures to focus the council's areas of work. These are:

- Homes, workplaces and schools are comfortable, healthy, and efficient.
- The energy system is resilient, equitable and not dependent on fossil fuels.
- Residents walk, cycle, or use public transport and goods are safely moved without polluting streets.
- Sharing is increased and waste is reduced, building a sharing and circular economy.
- Residents eat well and sustainably.
- Newham neighbourhoods are resilient, connected, and green.

Five Enablers articulate how the council must work to deliver the 'futures'. These are:

- Growing the Council's climate action capacity and effectiveness.
- Targeting and increasing investment.
- Partnering with Newham's anchor institutions.
- Enabling civic and place-based action.
- Working beyond Newham's borders.

This innovative and comprehensive plan has brought together global thinkers and collaborators through Newham's partnership with leading sustainability consultants Arup and Dark Matter Labs. By putting residents first, this plan will help generate the local support required to deliver the council's decarbonisation initiatives and ensure a brighter, cleaner, future for everyone in Newham.

Timeline

The plan was created in just over six months and was strategically timed to integrate the principles into budget cycles and elections. The timeline was as follows:

- February 2023 – New Director of Climate Action joins the Council.
- May 2023 – Partnering consultants, Arup and Dark Matter Labs, were commissioned to support the development of the Just Transition Plan.
- July 2023 – Initial research was undertaken by consultants, involving stakeholder meetings with internal and external partners.
- September 2023 – A Senior Leadership Forum meeting sought feedback from 150 senior Council leaders, including the Mayor and Chief Executive.

- December 2023 – The Mayor of Newham, Rokhsana Fiaz OBE, and her Cabinet approved the plan, and plans were launched publicly via the council website and social media during COP28.

Stakeholders

The development of the document involved a wide range of stakeholders.

Sustainability consultants

The plan was developed in collaboration with global consultants, Arup and Dark Matter Labs, who were commissioned using the [GLA Architecture and Urbanism framework](#). This enabled Newham to work at pace and combine the skills of both a large and small organisation.

Internal collaborators

Climate Action Working Group – a steering group was set up with regular bi-weekly meetings to help co-produce the plan. This involved 35 council officers across various service areas including public health, planning, regeneration, housing, inclusive economy and environmental control.

Senior Council leaders – political leaders, including the Mayor of Newham and Chief Executive, were involved through scheduled workshops and events.

Anchor institutions

Local institutions - we collaborated with local Newham Institutions, including the University of East London (UEL), University College London (UCL) and the Royal Docks Team

Regional institutions – we engaged with the Greater London Authority (GLA) and London Councils.

Resident involvement

[Citizens' Climate Assembly 2020](#) – The outcomes of the assembly informed the plan and priority areas selected. Recommended areas included housing, education and awareness, technology and energy, transport and travel, food and recycling, and the natural environment.

[Youth Citizens' Assembly on Climate Emergency 2019](#) – A previous report from the youth assembly was embedded into the formation of the plan.

Impact

The full impact of the new plan is still to be seen as it was only recently launched (5 December 2023). Ongoing coordination with the Cabinet will align the plan with the development and implementation of the new budget in February 2024, and will ensure the plan sits appropriately ahead of the six budget cycles until 2030.

As a result of the wide engagement conducted during the formation of the plan, there is now greater support for Net Zero across a broader range of council departments including our social care and housing teams. There is increasing recognition of the interconnected nature of Net Zero policy and initiatives and the co-benefits which exist between them and wider policy objectives. Embracing these synergies is already presenting good opportunities for cross-departmental working for the betterment of the local community.

This plan sets Newham up to deliver against its area-wide carbon reduction targets. At present, the council's emissions amount to over 170,000 tCO₂ annually, whereas the borough's total emissions are over 1 million tCO₂ annually – equivalent to roughly 850,000 return flights from London to New York. With this new plan, Newham is better placed to engage its residents across the borough in a just transition to Net Zero.

The plan also highlighted the need for taking action now. The current projections show a dangerous rise in the use of materials, consumption of energy, and greenhouse gas emissions which will not only increase the effects of climate change, but also place higher financial costs on the economy. The plan addresses this urgency

through reimagining our material and ecological interconnections with new economic growth and innovation models.

Lessons Learned

- Reframing the climate action plan around just transition has helped break down silos within and outside the council and encouraged the engagement of a wider range of stakeholders. Making it into a council-wide issue, coordinated via the Climate Action Working Group, has helped secure long-term buy-in to deliver the plan.
- Considering the community voice has helped to identify Net Zero delivery pitfalls and plan for them before they become problems.
- The relationship with partners Arup and Dark Matter Labs made it possible to progress at speed, engage all key stakeholders and ultimately deliver a successful plan.
- Recognising the need to make climate relevant to residents, communities, and organisations through a systems-change approach and accessible language to ensure greater inclusivity and collaboration.
- The importance of emphasising the co-benefits of accelerated and integrated adaptation and mitigation and how this will impact every aspect of residents' lives from reducing bills to creating greener spaces.

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Overall, the plan was funded by the council using existing internal Climate Action Directorate budget.

By using the GLA Architecture and Urbanism Framework, single payments could be made to Arup and Dark Matter Labs, easing collaboration across the partnership.

A critical next step is to secure funding for the delivery of the plan, prioritising key action areas. All opportunities are being explored, and to coincide with the launch of the Just Transition Plan, the Mayor of Newham, Rokhsana Fiaz OBE, [wrote a letter](#) to the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero. This asked the Government to rethink its funding of the retrofit sector and provide an estimated £800m of funding required to retrofit Newham's council housing stock.

Next steps

Following the launch of the plan on 5 December 2023, the real work now begins. Next steps will involve:

- Continued meetings of the Climate Action Working Group to support the implementation of the plan.
- Communicating the plan to a range of partners and stakeholders, with a view to explore collaboration opportunities.
- Creation of toolkits to support the implementation of just transition principles in the development of projects across council departments.
- Delivery of actions within the plan internally in the Climate Action Team and across council departments and stakeholders, including continued work with local schools and educational institutions.
- Running demonstration projects in line with the plan, especially around ideas of climate contracts with local anchor institutions, large neighbourhood retrofit pilots and expanding our work around community-owned energy amongst many other initiatives.
- Amplifying our communication strategy to involve and regularly update residents and stakeholders through our website and upcoming launch of a new Climate Action Newsletter.

Links, contacts, and credits

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