



Local Authorities: Why more information doesn't lead to more adaptation action

UK climate policy has focused its attention on preparing for and adapting to a changing climate. Local Authorities (LAs) play a vital role in ensuring critical functions, such as transport, housing, social care and flooding, are well adapted, in line with the Government's National Adaptation Programme (Defra 2013). Scientific information can help inform long-term planning. Thanks to considerable Government investment in scientific research the quality and accessibility of climate information has greatly improved.

Project ICAD research has found that whereas a decade ago LA staff were unable to find scientific information that they could understand and use, they are now engaging with the 'right' kind of information. However, better knowledge has not translated into tangible adaptation actions. LAs face substantial difficulties in implementing adaptation plans. Budget cuts and a lack of support from central government have sapped institutional capacity and political appetite to address climate risks. Unless these institutional barriers are addressed, local government will struggle to adapt.

1. How informed are Local Authorities about climate change?

In 2003, LA staff struggled to understand and use official, scientific, climate information from the **Met Office** and **Defra**, often relying on heavily digested, unofficial sources such as **newspapers** instead. Ten years later, they are now much **better-informed**, and **more confident**, about their own personal knowledge of climate change and their ability to access and use the 'right' kind of climate information (e.g. the UK Climate Projections 2009).

2. Which climate impacts most concern Local Authorities?

Flooding was the biggest concern for LAs, either as a result of very **intense rainfall** or **continued wet weather**, reflecting the new responsibilities set out under the Flood and Water Management Act 2010. **Heatwaves** were also seen as a large risk although few LAs had experienced them, whereas **heavy snowfall** experienced by many, was only perceived as a small risk. These perceptions align closely with

the risk prioritised in Defra's Climate Change Risk Assessment (2012).

3. What actions have Local Authorities taken to adapt?

LAs are **struggling to move** from adaptation planning **to its delivery or action**. Where adaptation has survived it's often been tied to statutory duties, such as flood risk management, or efforts to reduce community vulnerability through buddy schemes (e.g. snow angels). **Outside of statutory requirements very little is happening** on the ground in English, Scottish or Welsh LAs, despite the different policy landscapes found in each of the devolved administrations.

4. What are the barriers to adaptation?

Better understanding of climate science has not automatically translated into more adaptation activities. **Funding** remains the main **barrier**. Cuts to LA budgets have coincided with LAs taking on more responsibilities. Adaptation activities, as a result, have been scaled back

and climate officers have been made redundant. Indeed, **concerns about staffing levels** were the second most important barrier identified. Adaptation, therefore, **has been deprioritised**, with some LAs reporting that **adaptation policies have even been retracted**.

5. Can adaptation be re-prioritised?

Where adaptation has gone furthest is when it has been **rebranded as resiliency to extreme weather** and is able to demonstrate immediate relevance, with costings based on recent events. This can help avoid antagonising climate sceptics and serve to build institutional support. Yet with the frequency and intensity of weather extremes expected to change, current risks may not always be a good guide to future ones and may impede building long-term adaptive capacity.

LA are encouraged to **adapt only when it makes business sense to do so**. To do this, LAs need new kinds of information, particularly those that can offer **economic analyses** for climate adaptation. One example is Kent County Council's 'Severe Weather Impacts Monitoring System' (SWIMS), which traces all costs associated with individual weather events. Off the back of this, a business-case can be built to focus action and highlight immediate savings.

Central Government needs to show more leadership to **raise the profile of adaptation** within LAs, and keep it as a high priority. Voluntary programmes such as 'Climate Local', although welcome, fail to get LAs to commit to anything they weren't already doing. **More resources** and **political support** are needed to incentivise investment. Striking a careful balance between **monitoring** long-term planning and encouraging **local flexibility** will also be key.

How can policymakers help Local Government adapt to a changing climate?

- Central Government needs to provide stronger leadership on climate change adaptation to increase its political visibility and urgency amongst Local Government.
- Funding should be made available to help LAs monitor the financial implications of extreme weather on their functions to enable them to build a business case for action.
- Locally applicable methods for economically assessing the impacts of climate change and the benefits of adaptation are needed.
- Given the large uncertainties surrounding future climate at the LA level, methods other than cost-benefit analysis should be encouraged to avoid maladaptation, including: cost effectiveness analysis, multi-criteria decision analysis and robust decision-making.



Further info:
Project ICAD,
Informing Climate
Adaptation Decisions,

is a European Research Council funded programme, which explores the different needs and experiences of those involved in producing and using climate information for UK adaptation decision-making. <http://www.icad.leeds.ac.uk/>

Open Access Article:

Porter, J. J.; Demeritt, D.; Dessai, S. (2015) 'The right stuff? informing adaptation to climate change in British Local Government' *Global Environmental Change*, 35, 411-422.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2015.10.004>

Key contact: Professor Suraje Dessai, Principal Investigator, School of Earth & Environment, University of Leeds. Email s.dessai@leeds.ac.uk

This research was supported by the European Research Council under the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme for Research (FP7/2007-2013), ERC Grant agreement 284369



How to cite: Porter, J. J.; Jopson, S. J.; Demeritt, D.; Dessai, S. (2015) Local Authorities: Why more information doesn't lead to more adaptation action. ICAD Policy & Practice Note 2, University of Leeds.