



How do we connect climate policy to Londoners' social, racial and economic justice priorities

Executive summary:

LSE hosted a series of events over summer 2025 focused on how to connect climate policy to Londoners' priorities for social, racial and economic justice. Bringing together perspectives from community groups, campaigners, charities, and policymakers, and grounded with LSE research and expertise, the events looked to help better understand Londoners' priorities, interrogate whether policymakers are aware of these, and how they, and the communities they serve, think climate action does and can connect to these priorities.

Key conclusions from this fascinating and insightful series, organised alongside the Greater London Authority (GLA), include:

- Connecting action on climate change to Londoners' social, racial and economic justice priorities requires moving away from the language of sacrifice and towards a much more positive vision that addresses both justice and climate priorities together.
- To do this, climate action must be approached in a more holistic way that recognises it as both a significant piece in the puzzle of issues Londoners are facing and as an integral part of the solution to those problems.
- This means, instead of treating climate as a distinct policy area, it should be integrated into every policy area—from housing to health to education—while simultaneously ensuring that every climate initiative addresses Londoners' social, racial, and economic justice priorities.
- This has significant implications for how government is organised, how it engages with communities and why it needs to do more to empower those communities to take action.

Introduction

The following is a summary of three roundtables organised by the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) in collaboration with the Greater London Authority (GLA). The subject of these roundtables was how we connect climate policy to Londoners' priorities for social, racial and economic justice.

There is a growing body of anecdotal and statistical evidence that people in Britain both believe in and are concerned by climate change and yet do not prioritise it as a policy area in which they wish to see action.¹ As the introduction of the Ultra Low Emissions Zone (ULEZ) and Low Traffic Neighbourhoods (LTNs) in London have shown, policies with clear

¹ 84% of people in Britain believe in climate change (YouGov, April 2025) and 72% are worried about its impact on the UK (Ipsos, April 2025), but recently polling showed just 16% identified it as one of their top three concerns compared to 58% for immigration, 51% for the economy and 29% for health (YouGov, August 2025).

environmental and practical benefits can still face significant opposition when different parts of society do not feel their concerns or needs are reflected in these changes.

We organised these roundtables in response to this context. Our objectives were to more clearly understand what Londoners' social, racial and economic justice priorities are; how far climate policymakers are aware of these; and how they, and the communities they serve, think climate action does and can connect to these priorities.

The roundtables were structured as follows:

- The first brought together perspectives from community groups, charities, experienced activists and organisers.
- The second brought together perspectives from policymakers, sector professionals, third sector and advocacy organisations, and academics.
- The third was chaired by the Deputy Mayor of London for Environment and Energy and brought together activists and organisers working at or with charities covering London, Bristol and across the UK; academics from LSE and King's College; and directors of Environment at two London local authorities and at London Councils.

The first and second roundtables took place under the Chatham House Rule, to encourage everyone to speak freely. The third roundtable was informed by summaries of these discussions and brought together a mixture of perspectives to reflect on the similarities, differences and surprises they found.

In writing this summary, we've focused on a common theme from all three discussions: policymakers must take a more holistic approach to climate action, treating it not as a separate policy area but instead as both a significant piece in the puzzle of problems Londoners are facing and as an integral part of the solution to those problems.

The need for a holistic approach

- A clear message is that individuals, households and communities in London feel overwhelmed with immediate and material challenges. Examples include the problems posed for many Londoners by the cost-of-living crisis, the housing crisis and the sense of an increasingly hostile attitude towards immigration and immigrants.
- Although London has seen numerous successful climate-focused policies over the last two decades, such as high environmental standards for new buildings through the London Plan or rising rates of active travel, particularly cycling, many Londoners do not know, recognise or feel they benefit from climate action.
- There is also a perception that caring about or being able to prioritise climate action is a privilege. It was noted that the area is viewed in some communities as being the preserve of white, middle-class and liberal or left-wing people. Not enough value is placed on alternative perspectives, like those of some diaspora and global

communities and their direct experiences of adapting to the consequences of climate change.

- Climate action and policy is an increasingly polarised issue with the current debate focused not on whether climate change is real but how much we, as individuals and as a society, can and should take action on it, especially when there are other pressing issues to tackle.
- As evidence for this, one participant who funds different charities and organisations shared that they found radically different positions on, say, ULEZ between groups working on an anti-poverty agenda. A participant who leads a community organisation also shared that they had been challenged by staff and their funders when they wanted to focus on climate on the grounds this wasn't relevant to their work.
- Connecting action on climate change to Londoners' social, racial and economic justice priorities therefore requires recognising that some Londoners are less willing and able to make sacrifices for climate action. Climate action must therefore be approached in a more holistic way that recognises it as both a significant piece in the puzzle of issues Londoners are facing and as an integral part of the solution to those problems.
- This means integrating climate considerations into every policy area—from housing to health to education—while simultaneously ensuring that every climate initiative addresses Londoners' social, racial, and economic justice priorities. Where community benefits are currently framed as co-benefits of climate policies, a holistic approach requires making community benefits the primary objective, with climate benefits communicated as an equally important outcome.

What a holistic approach means for government

- Policymakers from the second and third roundtable identified the structure of government itself as a significant obstacle: while climate is a cross-cutting issue, government often understands and acts on it in isolation from other issues.
- Currently local, regional and national government are organised around increasingly specialised teams in different departments working on particular areas of policy. This structure makes it harder to take a holistic approach and participants also highlighted that government is so process driven that it struggles to act or react to situations and opportunities in a dynamic and fast-paced way.
- Crucially, these organisational nuances are not recognised by the public: for example they see only the council, not its different teams and departments. Participants in the first and third roundtables emphasised the frustration created by a council official not being able to help someone with an issue because they are not in the right team. Moving to a more holistic approach is therefore also an opportunity to bring government closer to how the public understands it.

- Participants also discussed the need for a more holistic approach in narratives from government about climate change and climate action. 'Green' jobs were identified in particular because the concept is ambiguous and promotes the idea that the changes climate action requires will not significantly change people's lives (i.e. that a green job can be a one-for-one replacement for a job in a carbon-intensive industry).
- While it's important for government to make clear that there will be good, new jobs in the energy transition, a more realistic framing is required that recognises and prepares people for the fact that there will be real changes in their lives. Job losses with Port Talbot's transition to green steel and the closure of a 120-year-old car factory in Luton despite it producing EVs were cited as examples of this.
- Finally, participants identified that a holistic approach from government requires it to focus on leveraging its unique strengths to greater effect. These include its ability to drive large-scale projects and policies (e.g. public transport such as the Elizabeth Line), its ability to provide leadership and build narratives, and its ability to create and implement the rules and regulations that govern society.

Why a holistic approach means empowering communities to take action

- Alongside the core strengths identified above, a holistic approach also means government must be more comfortable with empowering communities, charities and organisations and working in partnership with them to deliver change.
- This approach offers practical benefits as giving more power to communities means government can better deliver in areas where it is less effective or less able to act or react rapidly. But participants across all three roundtables also emphasised the importance of giving communities a sense of empowerment as a way of rebuilding support for climate action.
- As one participant noted, not every change necessary for climate action will have universal support, but these changes can still be accepted and supported if people trust the system and believe the process genuinely took their views into account.
- This requires providing better political education from a young age. Participants in both the first and second roundtable agreed that many people do not understand the differences between levels of government or what each is responsible for, making it harder for them to effectively participate. However, participants noted this doesn't just apply to the government: making clear the contribution of different industries to climate change and climate action is also an important part of this education.
- There are real, practical examples of how empowerment and partnership can make government more effective. One participant shared how the local authority they work at partnered with a charity to more impactfully reach out to those at risk of fuel poverty. Sharing data with the charity helped better target where to send their staff to advertise their services: this approach led to 350 referrals for support in a month, compared to the usual 60 over the course of a year.

- Yet empowerment is not just a means to end but an end in-and-of-itself. For example, one participant shared that the local authority they work at has trialled handing complete control over small projects like community gardens to local communities. Empowerment meant they could innovate and create something for themselves without navigating complex bureaucracies or delays. Crucially, they drew value not just from what they created but also from the process of creating it.
- Nonetheless, effectively empowering and partnering with communities still requires an active and involved government. A key example relates to heat networks. Participants shared their concern that the sector is essentially unregulated and the potential for abuse could undermine the technology before most people engage with it. While national legislation is in development, participants argued regional or local government can and should be able to do more, now.
- Participants also emphasised that government will have to make significant investments if a model of empowerment and partnership is to be effective. Community groups, charities and organisations often face severe financial insecurity, stuck in a continual cycle of competing with each other to secure project funding for a specific period.
- If funding is secured, the infrastructure built and staff hired to deliver the project often depart when the funding ends. This damages the trust and connections with Londoners and communities that the project managed to build. In future, funding should encourage collaboration between groups and do more to support core operations and ongoing engagement to create more enduring impact. Crucially, this funding represents an investment in stronger, happier and more resilient communities.

What a holistic approach means for community engagement

- Community engagement by government or organisations typically means bringing members of a community into a physical or digital space to discuss a particular issue. A more effective form community engagement means moving from consultation on a policy or project to something more holistic and deliberative, or from a one-way method of getting feedback to a two-way process of collective reasoning. LSE research shows the benefits this approach offers.²
- Participants gave valuable insight into what effective engagement requires. For example: where possible, let the community shape and lead the conversation; make sure those leading the engagement have an excellent understanding of the needs, values and expectations of the community they engage with; and provide a safe space, good food and compensation for time spent to show the value you place on their time and opinions.
- At a broader level, participants across all three roundtables agreed that there is a need for a more positive and holistic narrative around climate action.

² <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0967070X25002306>

- Participants argued there is too much emphasis on ‘fighting’, ‘loss’ and ‘destruction’ and on individuals’ contribution (or lack of it). Stigmatisation of certain forms of low cost or necessary material consumption (cheap clothes or flights abroad) were viewed as particularly unhelpful and unfair by some participants. This is because they drive disengagement for people who feel they can never meet these standards: for example, they may need to fly to see distant family.
- Novel ways of starting the conversation about climate are needed. Participants in the first roundtable noted questions like ‘how do you sustain yourself in London’ as a way of inviting people to share their concerns in a way that reflects their priorities while also subtly setting up talking about climate change. The potential for using other mediums such as podcasts to create space for these conversations was also discussed.
- It is essential for political leaders to dynamically connect people’s lived experiences to the need for climate action. The recent heatwave was seen as an excellent opportunity to start a conversation about resilience, adaption and how government is and can support communities and individuals to take action.
- Some of the most compelling arguments against climate action emphasise the cost to the individual. Participants across roundtables agreed countering this requires talking about the cost of not taking action and moving the conversation to emphasise the potential in collective action.