



The Association of Directors of Public Health

Policy Position: Climate Change

Key Messages

- Climate change is the single biggest health threat facing humanity. It is endangering the environment around the world and causing damage to the economy. It is affecting the present and future social and environmental determinants of good health – shelter, water and food supply.
- Climate change is a transboundary public health crisis which requires complex, urgent solutions on a local, national and global scale. The actions and decisions made in these ten years will have impacts now and for thousands of years.¹
- The UK is not on course to reach global targets to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by 45% by 2030 and reach net zero by 2050.^{2 3} Governments across the UK must set a clear and funded plan to reach the global target according to the World Health Organisation (WHO)'s guidance.⁴
- The climate change emergency must not be tackled in isolation. There should be policies to tackle related issues of antimicrobial resistance, emerging infectious diseases, and the biodiversity crisis.
- Climate change impact must be considered in all policies and services and at the same time, human and planetary health and equity must be placed at the centre of climate policies.
- Climate change action can generate co-benefits to health and the economy through improved environment, more sustainable diets and lifestyles as well as increased green job opportunities.

ADPH Recommendations

National

A whole system approach: Effective collaboration and shared leadership is needed internationally, nationally and locally between different sectors in climate change mitigation and adaptation. Incorporating local and national climate action into unified frameworks can ensure coherent policy.

Funding: Governments across the four nations must allocate flexible, non-competitive climate change funding to local public health authorities¹, ensuring more effective, longer-term interventions.

Climate change mitigation: Governments across the four nations and national public health authorities² must set out a clear and funded plan to reach the global target according to WHO's guidance.⁵

Climate in all policies: Climate change impact must be considered in all policies and services and at the same time, human and planetary health and equity must be placed at the centre of climate policies.

Health inequalities: Climate change disproportionately affects vulnerable groups. It is therefore essential for all climate change policies to consider their impact on health inequalities.

¹ By local public health authorities we mean bodies with statutory local responsibility for public health functions (eg upper tier local authorities in England, Health Boards in Scotland and Wales, Public Health Service in Northern Ireland). These differ across the UK, Crown Dependencies, and associated territories. We have published a separate [headline explainer](#) on public health in each of these systems.

² By national public health authorities we mean bodies with statutory national responsibility for public health functions (eg UKHSA and DHSC in England, Public Health Scotland in Scotland, Public Health Wales in Wales, Public Health Agency in Northern Ireland). These differ across the UK, Crown Dependencies, and associated territories. We have published a separate [headline explainer](#) on public health in each of these systems.

Active travel and low emission vehicles: Governments across the four nations must prioritise and invest in infrastructure that supports active travel and the use of low emission vehicles. Public transport should be safe, accessible and affordable to reduce car usage.

Climate change adaptation: Early and long-term adaptation plans must be in place to build resilience, prevent irreversible changes to ecosystem and the environment and reduce the climate change impact on public health, our health services and the economy.

Air quality: Climate change affects indoor and outdoor air quality and could detrimentally affect human health. More detailed recommendations could be found in ADPH's position on air quality.

Research: Research is needed to identify high impact public health interventions to protect vulnerable populations and interventions that have the greatest co-benefits for both climate change and health.

Training: A comprehensive strategy is required to ensure that current and future public health workforce has the climate and environmental knowledge and skills to meet the challenges of the climate emergency.⁶

Local

All statutory agencies must adhere to the UK Government's guidance on climate change and the environment, which contains recommendations based on most recent evidence.⁷

Anchor institutions and voluntary and community sector organisations have major roles in place making. They must improve environmental sustainability and biodiversity through their impact on their 20-minute communities. They must also evaluate their procurement practices and energy usage to reduce emission.

Climate change, water and air quality data must be available to local public health authorities and other local partners so that they could effectively respond to the public health impacts of climate change.

Background

The health of more than 12 million people in the UK is vulnerable to the effects of climate change with its associated economic damage projected to cost more than £8 billion per annum by 2050.^{8,9}

Climate change refers to long-term shifts in temperatures and weather patterns, including meteorological impacts and extreme weather events such as heat waves, droughts, flooding, and air quality decline from air pollution. It presents risks to biodiversity and soil health as well as the supply of food, goods, power and vital services. It also presents risks to human health, wellbeing and productivity.¹⁰

Climate change disproportionately affects vulnerable groups, including women, children, ethnic minorities, older populations, and those of a lower socioeconomic status or with an underlying health condition. The impacts of climate change driven events are already recognisable - flooding currently costs the UK economy an estimated £2.2 billion each year and approximately 1.8 million people live in areas with a significant risk of flooding.¹¹ In 2022, 2,800 excess deaths were recorded during heatwaves and heat-related mortality is expected to increase by 257% by the 2050s from the current figure of around 2,000 deaths per year.^{12,13} Poor mental health outcomes also arise from eco-anxiety, as three in four adults in the UK reported feeling worried about climate change and it was the second greatest concern of adults in Great Britain, after the cost of living.¹⁴ Imminent action is needed which can generate co-benefits to health and the economy through improved environment, sustainable lifestyles as well as green job opportunities.

Policy Context

What are the global health policies on climate change?

In 2021, the Alliance for Transformative Action on Climate and Health (ATACH) was set up to realise the COP26's ambition to build sustainable health systems.¹⁵ The Adaptation Action Coalition was also formed which launched the Climate Resilience Health Systems Initiative with the vision that by 2030 all health systems worldwide would have strengthened climate resilience.¹⁶ In 2022, the WHO and the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) launched the first global knowledge platform on climate and health.¹⁷

What are Government's actions on the public health impact of climate change?

The Climate Change Act 2008 sets out a policy framework to reduce emissions and ensure the UK adapts to climate change. This includes commitments to produce a UK Climate Change Risk Assessment (CCRA).¹⁸

In 2019, the Health Minister announced up to £56 million research funding on the potential health effects of climate change, air pollution, antimicrobial resistance and global pandemics.¹⁹ In 2021, Public Health England published the third Health and Social Care Adaptation Report with the NHS to outline next steps to build resilience and adapt.²⁰ In 2022, UKHSA launched a new Centre for Climate and Health Security to lead its efforts on health protection in the context of climate change in England.²¹

In Scotland, 'Securing a green recovery on a path to net zero: climate change plan 2018 – 2032' set out the Scottish Government's pathway to its targets set by the Climate Change Act 2019.²²

In Wales, the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act (2015) places a duty on public bodies to improve the wellbeing of Wales – ecological resilience and the capacity to adapt to climate change is a key part of this. Public Health Wales released a long-term strategy 2018-30 'Working to achieve a healthier future for Wales' which identified action on the impacts of climate change as one of its strategic priorities.²³ Wales also has a dedicated Minister for Climate Change, whose portfolio includes housing and transport.²⁴

In Northern Ireland, the 'Green Growth Strategy for Northern Ireland' has been developed. It is committed to developing the nation's first Climate Action Plan which sets out plans to achieve emission targets.²⁵

ADPH Position

A whole system approach to climate change

Climate change is a complex, global and urgent problem that requires imminent solutions. Education and behavioural change at an individual level is insufficient to tackle the problem of climate change. A whole system approach is necessary with collaboration at international, national and local levels between different sectors and organisations. Shared leadership and effective partnership across transport, planning, health and education are required to bring down current and future climate change mortality. Climate change policies must also consider interrelated issues of health inequalities, antimicrobial resistance, emerging infectious diseases, and the biodiversity crisis.

Public health has a key role in delivering an evidence-based response to climate change through making use of the full diversity of its expertise and disciplines (eg Health Protection, Health Services and Academic Public Health). There should be a unified target across local public health authorities to achieve global targets.²⁶ Local public health authorities should also utilise its commissioning function to support services that could enable effective climate change mitigation and adaptation. A strategy is required to ensure that

current and future public health workforce has the knowledge to meet the challenges of climate change.²⁷

Climate change, water and air quality data must be available to local public health authorities and other local partners so that they could effectively respond to the public health impacts of climate change. Comprehensive data could also allow professionals in health protection to support work on environmental hazard management with transport, spatial planners and Environmental Health Officers.

More funding needed to address the public health impact of climate change

Local public health authorities have faced significant funding cuts throughout recent years, with the Covid-19 pandemic causing greater constraints. Research has demonstrated that cuts to public health funding may generate billions of pounds of additional costs to health services and the wider economy.²⁸ The lack of ring-fenced funding for reaching climate goals may result in local public health authorities falling short of their commitments or projects being delayed in favour of completing their statutory duties. The Government needs to allocate flexible, non-competitive funding, allowing local public health authorities to adapt their investment to local needs, ensuring more effective interventions are implemented and longer-term, sustainable projects are created.²⁹

Local funding is also important to address the impact of climate change. The National Lottery Climate Action Fund supports communities throughout the UK to take action by offering grants, totalling £100 million across a 10-year period. In Scotland, the Government is taking a strategic regional approach and is investing £4.3 million in 2023 and 2024 to expand its network of community climate action hubs.³⁰ It has also further invested in the Climate Justice Fund which funds equitable global development to ensure climate change does not disproportionately impact those in the Global South.³¹ The success of the local grants highlights the importance of local action and funding in tackling climate change.

Cuts have also been made to international climate change funding, with the UK failing to pay over \$300 million to two major climate change funds – missing the deadline to pay \$288 million to the Green Climate Fund, a fund aimed at mitigation by ‘investing in low-emission and climate-resilient development’.³²

Climate change and commercial determinants of health

Industries (eg car and fossil fuel companies) affect the way we perceive climate change. It was estimated that the world’s five largest publicly owned oil and gas companies spend about £162 million a year to influence climate policy.³³ Some industries and businesses are reported to use tactics such as denial, distortion and distraction to shed doubt on public understanding of climate change risk. Effective climate change policy should be evidence based supported by data and research. This can create the basis for just transition to a green economy that is low carbon and socially inclusive and favours economic growth.³⁴ The climate change impact on health and equality must be highlighted. Climate change should be considered in all policies and services, whilst health and equity should be central to climate policies, as has been modelled in the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act in Wales.³⁵

Climate change and health inequalities

Climate change has a disproportionate impact on vulnerable groups. It is therefore essential for all climate change policies to consider their impact on health inequalities. More resources are needed to improve the capacity of health systems to manage the surge in health protection issues arising from climate change and to ensure that healthcare is affordable, effective and timely. Prioritising equity, inclusion and just transition processes can enable adaptation and mitigation actions and climate resilient development.

Mitigation – Measures should be taken to reduce GHG emissions

Phasing out fossil fuel use and extraction

Currently, the energy sector is heavily reliant on fossil fuels. According to European commission's report, the UK offers the biggest subsidies to fossil fuels in the European Union, amounting to £10.5 billion per year, significantly more than the £8.3 billion on renewable energy.³⁶ It is well-evidenced that withdrawal of fossil fuels is essential to prevent warming in excess of 1.5°C and to protect the health of current and future generations. Governments must end the expansion of new fossil fuel infrastructures and phase out existing use. The funding and installation of new zero-carbon generation technologies is required to meet new energy demands which could potentially contribute up to 90% by 2050.²⁷ Incentives should be offered at different levels (eg the Climate Change Agreements Scheme or the Green Deal in England).^{37 38}

Promotion of public transport, active travel and use of low emission vehicles

According to studies, trips up to 16km in length are responsible for 40% emissions from vehicles, a distance for which a shift from car to active travel is possible.³⁹ In order to move towards lower emission vehicles and active travel, it is crucial to put in place wider pavements, more green space, and better infrastructure for walking, cycling and electric vehicles. Public transport should be expanded to cover the whole of the UK and should be reliable, regular, safe, cheap and efficient. Where possible, light vehicles and public transport should be electrified. Northern Ireland should increase their provision of charging devices for electric vehicles, to be at least in line with the UK average.⁴⁰ Rises in vehicle excise duty could be an effective measure. 71.3% of Directors of Public Health (DsPH) support incentivising the use of low-emission vehicles and adjusting the duty to reflect the impact of diesel vehicles on levels of nitrogen dioxide in the atmosphere.⁴¹ 81.2% of DsPH prioritise active travel in terms of transport policy and investment decisions.

Adaptation – Long-term and short-term plans to adapt to the changing climate

Long term adaptation to help communities prepare for climate change

Governments across the four nations and the public health sector have an essential role to enable and enforce good long term, early adaptation actions to reduce vulnerability to climate variability and prevent irreversible changes such as the loss of species or ecosystems. It is especially crucial to build resilience of the health and social care system and help communities prepare for climate change.

Delayed decisions or the failure to consider long-term risks could result in 'lock-in' and maladaptation, leading to higher costs when larger and faster action is needed later. According to CCRA3, the UK is falling behind on climate change adaptation. Without further adaptation, the number of risks costing £billions per year is likely to triple by the 2080s, even if global efforts are successful in limiting warming to 2°C above 1850-1900 levels. Immediate, funded, long-term planning and actions with shared leadership and collaboration across all sectors and all levels of Government at local, regional and international levels are required for effective climate change adaptation. As adaptation options often have long implementation times, long-term planning increases their efficiency.

Enhancing supply chain resilience

Climate-related collapse of supply chains and distribution networks presents risks to the supply of food, goods, power and vital services which are all crucial determinants of health. Governments across the four nations plays a key role in systematic risk assessments and supplying information and advice through implementing stronger reporting requirements for businesses and infrastructure providers. Governments,

businesses and infrastructure providers should learn from Covid-19 and implement long term plans to enhance supply chain resilience and build capacity to manage, diversify, and share supply chain risks.

A climate-resilient power system is also necessary, as electricity will become the UK's dominant energy source to reduce GHG emissions. Governments across the four nations should collaborate with the industry and the regulator (Ofgem) to review the approach to electricity system design and risk assessment.

Future proofed and climate resilient housing and infrastructure

Local planning and building designs should consider projected climate changes and should be sustainable and energy efficient. This could be achieved through Local Area Energy Planning (LAEP) which facilitate collaboration between local leaders to increase energy efficiency.⁴² This can also be done by encouraging insulation and the use of smart meters as well as renewable-powered heating systems. Coal should be phased out and there should be a move away from burning solid fuels.

To reduce the impact of extreme weather, buildings should be moisture safe and have good ventilation as well as high levels of thermal efficiency (warm in winter, cool in summer). Local planning should ensure adequate green space. This could be supported by updated planning policies and building regulations.

Biodiversity, environmental conservation and food security

Climate change poses a major threat to UK biodiversity.⁴³ It impacts present and future food security and human health.⁴⁴ The UK agriculture industry must adopt sustainable farming practices to promote biodiversity, reduce GHG emissions and support a more nutritious plant-based diet for the population. Rural land frameworks to assess optimal land use, dissemination of best practice and agricultural payments to support natural carbon removal are all effective measures.⁴⁵

Climate change also presents risks to soil health because of extreme weather such as flooding and drought. Soil is crucial in maintaining food and timber supply. It can store carbon and support the ecosystem. The UK agriculture industry should improve water management and adopt soil-friendly farming practices (eg no-fill and precision farming) to reduce pollution and erosion. More investment should be dedicated in soil monitoring. Strategies should also be in place to plant trees, restore peatland and conserve wetlands.⁴⁶

Research and evidence on climate change and health

Research is needed to identify high impact interventions that can protect vulnerable populations from the the adverse impacts of climate change and are likely to have the greatest co-benefits for both climate change and health. Research is needed to investigate the effectiveness of climate change adaptation measures on population protection. Research should also focus on how changes to the built environment can promote the use of public transport and active travel and the policies needed to achieve this.

About ADPH

The Association of Directors of Public Health (ADPH) is the representative body for Directors of Public Health (DsPH) in the UK. It represents the professional views of all DsPH as the local leaders for the nation's health.

The Association has a heritage dating back over 160 years and is a collaborative organisation, working in partnership with others to strengthen the voice for public health. It seeks to improve and protect the health of the population through collating and presenting the views of DsPH; advising on public health policy and legislation at a local, regional, national and international level; facilitating a support network for DsPH; and providing opportunities for DsPH to develop professional practice.

This policy position statement has been developed in collaboration with the ADPH Council and the ADPH Healthy Places PAG.

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