



THE UNIVERSITY
of EDINBURGH

Climate action, city regions and central government: a comparative analysis of the UK City Deals

Summary

June 2021

Connor Smith, Dan van der Horst, Matt Lane & Mags Tingey



Key messages

- 19 of the 35 City Deals include measures on climate change mitigation, but only one addresses climate change adaptation.
- Most measures build on existing initiatives or focus on individual projects or specific issues; there is a lack of joined-up approaches.

Despite the existence of national and international climate targets and agreements, there is widespread recognition of climate action inertia; many central governments – particularly those from the Global North – are struggling to transition their economies away from fossil fuels to the extent, and at the pace that was agreed during the Paris Accord negotiations. In the United Kingdom, the government's own advisors have [criticised the inadequate headway](#) made by successive ruling parties and coalitions. Within this context, attention is increasingly turning to subnational institutions and actors (particularly local government) and the potential roles which they could play in driving climate action at local and regional levels. Shining a light on local climate action can help us to understand the scope for innovation and leadership in climate action, the emergence of place-based opportunities and the various barriers and challenges that local and regional actors face. From a practical point of view, the underlying rationale for research in this domain, is to learn from local initiatives and to help share that learning across actor communities and local to central government, so that good practice in climate action can be replicated and scaled up, thus accelerating the low carbon transition.

Our research

The aim of this study was to identify and understand variations in subnational priorities and ambitions related to climate action.

We focused on the City Deal, which across the United Kingdom has constituted a substantive programme of subnational development over the past decade. With 35 Deals concluded to date, this is a particularly suitable programme to explore through comparative analysis as the ambitions were set by central government (e.g. stimulate economic growth), yet allowed some flexibility for subnational actors to negotiate and deliver upon local and regional priorities. Furthermore, the programme reflects approaches favoured by successive UK governments, including deal-making and the clustering of local authorities.

We used a thematic analysis to identify the developmental priorities of each City region, and scored their relative importance. This is summarised in the 'heatmap' below, which allows high level comparisons between the 35 City Deals. Secondly, we sought to understand observed variability in these priorities. We did this by grouping city regions according to key socio-economic and spatio-temporal characteristics and assessing if these could be associated with the thematic priorities. Finally we examined how climate action was explained or justified in the City Deal document, to understand some of the common factors.



Our analysis

Our findings show significant diversity between the Deals. Some show strong engagement with climate action but others fail to mention it. However, overall, concerns for climate mitigation and adaptation were far outweighed by other local/regional priorities, most notably **Growth, Finance, Investment and Trade**, but also **People and Skills, Science and Innovation, Transport and Housing**. In Deals where climate action was found to be a priority, the scope was often restricted to specific projects (e.g. low-carbon pilots, energy efficiency retrofits) as opposed to more holistic or embedded approaches. Climate change adaptation was notably absent as a priority, with the exception of Greater Brighton. It is only included in the table because we took a comprehensive look at climate action in the City Deals documents, i.e. considering both mitigation and adaptation.

Table 1: Heat map to illustrate the prominence of themes found in the 35 City Deal documents. The eight themes have been ranked left to right, from most prominent (dark green) to least prominent (light green). The left hand column of the table follows the order of 1st wave, 2nd wave, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland deals – each region is hyperlinked to relevant online documentation

City Deal	Year	Growth, finance, investment & trade	People and skills	Science & innovation	Transport	Housing	Climate change mitigation	Culture & tourism	Climate change adaptation
Bristol City Region	2012	4	3	2	3	2	1	0	0
Greater Birmingham	2012	4	4	4	2	4	4	0	0
Greater Manchester	2012	4	4	2	4	4	4	0	2
Leeds City Region	2012	4	4	0	4	2	3	0	0
Liverpool City Region	2012	4	4	2	3	2	3	2	0
Newcastle	2012	4	4	2	3	3	4	0	0
Nottingham	2012	4	4	3	3	0	3	0	0
Sheffield City Region	2012	4	4	3	3	2	2	0	0
Black Country	2014	4	4	2	2	2	0	2	0
Greater Brighton	2014	4	2	4	2	2	2	0	3
Greater Cambridge	2014	4	3	2	4	4	2	0	0
Coventry and Warwickshire	2014	4	4	3	2	2	0	0	0
Hull & Humber	2014	4	4	2	2	0	2	0	0
Greater Ipswich	2014	4	4	3	0	0	0	0	0
Leicester & Leicestershire	2014	4	4	3	0	2	0	0	0
Greater Norwich	2014	4	0	3	4	4	0	0	0
Oxford & Oxfordshire	2014	2	2	4	3	2	0	0	0

Prominence in city deal documentation:

- 0 No reference
- 1 Passing reference
- 2 Featured more than once
- 3 Important to strategy
- 4 Fundamental to strategy

City Deal	Year	Growth, finance, investment & trade	People and skills	Science & innovation	Transport	Housing	Climate change mitigation	Culture & tourism	Climate change adaptation
Plymouth and the SW Peninsula	2014	4	4	2	0	1	2	0	0
Preston, South Ribble & Lancashire	2014	4	0	0	4	4	0	0	0
Southampton & Portsmouth	2014	4	4	1	0	2	0	2	0
Southend-On-Sea	2014	4	2	4	1	1	0	2	0
Stoke-On-Trent & Staffordshire	2014	4	4	2	1	1	4	0	0
Sunderland and South Tyneside	2014	4	4	0	2	0	0	0	0
Swindon & Wiltshire	2014	4	4	2	0	2	0	0	0
Tees Valley	2014	2	2	4	1	0	4	0	0
Thames Valley Berkshire	2014	2	4	2	0	0	0	0	0
Aberdeen City Region	2016	4	2	4	4	0	0	0	0
Inverness & Highland	2016	2	4	4	2	4	2	2	0
Edinburgh & South East Scotland	2018	4	2	4	2	4	2	2	0
Glasgow & Clyde Valley	2014	4	4	4	4	1	0	0	0
Stirling & Clackmannanshire	2020	4	2	4	2	2	2	2	0
Tay Cities Region	2020	4	2	4	2	2	2	2	0
Cardiff Capital Region	2016	4	2	2	4	2	2	1	0
Swansea Bay City Region	2017	4	2	4	0	2	2	1	0
Belfast City Region	2019	4	2	4	2	0	0	2	0

Prominence in city deal documentation:

- 0 No reference
- 1 Passing reference
- 2 Featured more than once
- 3 Important to strategy
- 4 Fundamental to strategy



Our findings also showed that all city regions that did prioritise climate action (with the exception of Cardiff Capital Region), were drawing on one or more of the following six factors to narrate, explain or justify their climate action ambitions:

- overcoming barriers or tackling issues
- building on past projects or current initiatives
- taking advantage of geographical specificities/ natural resources
- leveraging, or building upon, existing material assets
- leveraging strong partnership with, or existing investment by, private sector
- leveraging existing knowledge-based assets

In Deals where climate change mitigation is fundamental or important, the most common factor is building on past projects or current initiatives (cited by 9 out of 11), followed by taking advantage of geographical specificities or natural resources (cited by 6 out of 11). In Deals where climate change mitigation features less prominently, overcoming barriers or tackling issues is by far the single most important factor (cited by 6 out of 8). It could be argued that most factors relate to existing assets and therefore represent continuity in regional policy making, whilst overcoming barriers or tackling issues is more problem-driven and could potentially represent a more disruptive approach or innovative policy within the regional context. On the other hand, the Deals which embrace multiple factors, have the potential to represent more joined up thinking.

Table 2: The key factors behind the climate action ambitions found in the City Deals documents.

Region	Building on past projects & current initiatives	Taking advantage of geographic specificities/ natural resources	Leveraging, or building upon existing material assets	Leveraging strong partnership with, or existing investment by, private sector	Overcome barriers (e.g. to growth) or tackle issues (e.g. fuel poverty)	Leveraging existing knowledge based assets
Deals where Climate change mitigation is fundamental or important to strategy						
Birmingham	✓					
Manchester	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Liverpool		✓			✓	
Leeds	✓					
Newcastle	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Nottingham	✓		✓			
Stoke-on-Trent	✓				✓	
Tees Valley	✓	✓	✓			
Stirling & Clackmannanshire	✓				✓	
Tay Cities	✓	✓			✓	
Swansea		✓	✓		✓	
Deals where Climate change mitigation featured but was not fundamental or important to strategy						
Sheffield						✓
Greater Brighton				✓	✓	
Plymouth & the South West					✓	
Hull & Humber		✓			✓	
Greater Cambridge					✓	
Inverness & Highlands					✓	
Edinburgh and South East					✓	
Cardiff Capital Region						

Energy demand solutions

Concerning energy demand solutions, energy efficient housing constitutes the most prevalent solution identified throughout the Deal texts. This takes the form of both housing retrofit (e.g. Manchester and Birmingham), and new-build housing (e.g. Swansea and Inverness/Highland). However, our findings suggest that - more often than not - there is a disconnect between housing ambitions on the one hand, and climate action ambitions on the other. Joined up thinking which seeks to marry presently unconnected priorities is frequently missing from Deal outcomes when considered as a whole.

What next?

In summary, whilst the City Deal was not originally designed to prioritise climate action, it is important to note that during the last decade this policy did not seek to remedy this omission. This could be seen as a clear failure in joined-up policy making in central government, since the City Deal was a substantive policy, developed at a time when the UK already had legally binding emission reduction targets and the importance climate change adaptation and mitigation were already well understood by scientific and policy expert communities. The fact that some City Deals did embrace climate action and others did not, suggests strongly that (notwithstanding the lack of central government push) there was important scope for more local ambition. We observed strong variation with regards to climate action and the fact that many City Deals did not capitalise on this opportunity, would seem to represent evidence of policy failure at the local/regional level.

Going beyond the methodological restrictions of this desk-based comparative policy document analysis, follow-up research is needed to shed more light on those policy failures, not only to understand why opportunities were missed in the past, but also to try to remedy existing strategies and (where still possible) find out how to adopt some of the good practices found in some of the deals, into the existing plans of others. Having shared our findings in this working paper, we welcome constructive feedback, scrutiny and further discussion on these matters at this crucial time when climate action needs to be accelerated at both the national and the local level.



Authors

- Connor Smith | University of Edinburgh
- Dan van der Horst | University of Edinburgh
- Matt Lane | University of Edinburgh
- Mags Tingey | University of Edinburgh

Connor Smith: csmith42@ed.ac.uk

Dan van der Horst: dan.vanderhorst@ed.ac.uk

This report should be referenced as:

Smith, C., van der Horst, D., Lane, M. & Tingey, M. 2021. Climate action, city regions and central government: a comparative analysis of the UK City Deals – summary. Centre for Research into Energy Demand Solutions. Oxford, UK.
ISBN: 978-1-913299-10-1

About CREDS

The Centre for Research into Energy Demand Solutions (CREDS) was established as part of the UK Research and Innovation's Energy Programme in April 2018, with funding of £19.5M over 5 years. Its mission is to make the UK a leader in understanding the changes in energy demand needed for the transition to a secure and affordable, low carbon energy system. CREDS has a team of over 100 people based at 15 UK universities.

CREDS is funded by UK Research and Innovation, Grant agreement number EP/R035288/1

ISBN: 978-1-913299-10-1

 CREDSadmin@ouce.ox.ac.uk

 www.creds.ac.uk

 [@CREDS_UK](https://twitter.com/CREDS_UK)

 www.linkedin.com/company/credsuk/



**UK Research
and Innovation**



**Engineering and
Physical Sciences
Research Council**



**Economic
and Social
Research Council**