

Engaging with regional and local authorities on climate change

How can unions raise the profile of climate change in the workplace?

One option is to be aware of issues in your community that could influence tactics and priorities. Organisations that will have an important bearing on climate action are regional and local authorities. Below we list some points to consider:



1. Policy – Has your regional / local authority issued a climate policy? Most authorities will have a document and a search of the website should reveal it.
2. Climate emergency – Has the organisation declared a climate emergency? Most authorities have made some level of commitment. This may be gesture politics, but it can be used as a pressure point if the actions fail to reflect the seriousness of the issue.
3. Targets – Does the policy contain specific targets? This could be ‘carbon neutral’ by a certain date, or ‘net carbon zero’. There is a difference - net zero is a stricter standard aligned with Paris climate targets. Check whether the commitment is for just the council operations or wider across the whole geographical area. There may also be other associated targets. For example, London Borough of Wandsworth has a target of being ‘the greenest inner-London borough’.¹ The Mayor of London has declared that London will be the ‘greenest capital city’ by 2050.
4. Contacts – Do you know the key contacts to link up with? Find out who the council officer is leading this work. Find out who the lead councillor and opposition counterpart are. Check contacts for local community organisations and individuals active on this issue.
5. Skills and training – Does the council strategy contain any reference to vocational education and training? This may be relevant for staff in your workplace that may need to access upskilling or retraining for new or changing posts. The devolution of the adult training budget means local authorities have a role to play to ensure that skills for a zero-carbon economy have been addressed. Local Enterprise Partnership (LEPs) have been set up between LAs and local businesses and they should be promoting this. It will be one way to press for support for apprenticeships and other course programmes. Check if your employer or sector is represented on the LEP.

6. Research – Can you get extra capacity to research topics of interest by linking up with staff and students from local universities and colleges? The climate policy may provide an engagement opportunity. Policies in areas like housing and energy efficiency options provide considerable scope for interventions backed by local research. Many Further and Higher Education institutions are eager to show that they are linked up to employers and their local community. An aspect of climate policy that you want help with to explore could lend itself to this.
7. Actions – Are the actions contained in the strategy likely to achieve the targets? A common weakness of climate strategies is that the actions identified fail to reflect the scale of ambition. Identify the strengths and weaknesses and consult with others to present an alternative. Environmental performance will be a factor in local elections. There may be leverage in obtaining improvements by exposing gaps between ambition and reality.
8. Consultation – Were the public engaged in the production of the strategy? Check whether a working group has been set up to monitor and influence the strategy. If there is try and get union representation, if not organise with other groups to call for stakeholder engagement.
9. Union engagement – Is there a joint union campaign that you can join or help to set up? Check if your local trades union council or regional TUC are active on this issue. Make sure that social justice / equality issues like fuel poverty and unequal access to training and employment are covered. A common weakness of local authority strategies is a failure to prioritise issues that can make the biggest reduction in carbon emissions. A typical example is a lack of comprehensive policies on housing, renewables, and energy efficiency. Be ambitious. Press for direct labour schemes that also address employment issues in the supply chains. Unions and progressive local authorities can help to foster a radical municipal vision. ²
10. Communication – Have you discussed this in the branch and informed your union of progress? Make sure that progress and setbacks are reported to the branch. Reflect on the potential impact of any local strategy on your members including their terms and conditions. Use local and regional forums to exchange information and request advice. Report progress to union regional and national officers to help with the circulation of case studies and further guidance.

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References

- ¹ *A detailed assessment of the LB Wandsworth plan has been carried out by Greener Jobs Alliance and Battersea and Wandsworth TUC. It is available at <http://www.greenerjobsalliance.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/BWTUC-Comments-on-the-Wandsworth-Environment-and-Sustainability-Strategy-4.pdf>*
- ² *The Preston Model is often used as an example of a progressive model focused on strategies that support the local economy and jobs. <https://www.preston.gov.uk/article/1791/The-definitive-guide-to-the-Preston-model->*