

Environment and Climate Change

Introduction:

As Communities 1st and our member organisations, we are dedicated to fostering vibrant, inclusive communities. This briefing paper embodies that dedication, shifting our focus to a critical element of our shared mission: Environmental Stewardship and Climate Action. The challenges in this sphere are intricate and expansive, stretching beyond mere environmental conservation to include climate resilience, sustainable development, and the safeguarding of community resources. These challenges, if not proactively addressed, can exacerbate inequalities and undermine the sustainability of our communities.

This document forms the fourth instalment in our series of local dialogues. Building on the enriching conversations from our previous discussions this paper aims to extend our inquiry into the area of environmental and climate challenges. Our objective is to leverage the collective insights and expertise of our members to comprehend and tackle the environmental and climate-related issues facing our communities. Through this collaborative approach, we aspire to develop robust strategies and policy frameworks that enhance the environmental resilience, inclusiveness, and long-term sustainability of the communities we support.

Discussion Point:

Climate change presents significant risks to health, homes, and support systems, e.g. health services, food security, education etc. Experiences such as the 2022 heatwave, which caused record high temperatures and significant excess deaths, highlight the urgency of addressing climate change. The increased frequency and severity of heatwaves, flooding, and droughts necessitate proactive adaptation strategies.

Global temperatures are estimated to have risen by approximately 1°C due to human activities, with a trajectory towards a 2°C rise. This increase exacerbates the frequency and severity of extreme weather events, impacting the UK's health, infrastructure, and housing sectors.

Climate risks disproportionately affect low-income households and ethnic minority groups within the UK. These groups often lack the capacity to adapt to extreme weather conditions due to socioeconomic factors and living conditions. For example, individuals in manual occupations or residing in densely populated urban areas in the UK face higher risks from heatwaves due to the urban heat island effect.

Extreme weather conditions pose significant health risks, including heatstroke, heat exhaustion, heart attacks, and mental health issues. Vulnerable groups, such as the elderly, children, and people with disabilities, are particularly at risk. Additionally,

occupational hazards related to heat exposure are prevalent in non-unionised workplaces and low-income sectors.

Councils and Local Authorities hold significant powers relevant to adaptation, including in areas like planning, housing, and local roads. Despite the declaration of climate emergencies by many local authorities, adaptation remains underemphasized in council policies. A lack of resources and skilled professionals in climate adaptation poses a challenge to these efforts.

Learning from international and national examples, such as Paris' network of 'cool spaces' and Newcastle's blue and green infrastructure, local authorities can implement effective climate adaptation initiatives. These include sustainable drainage projects and campaigns to enhance public access to drinking water, especially during heatwaves.

Key Questions:

1. In your experience, which groups within our community are most vulnerable to the effects of climate change, and what are the main challenges they face in adapting to these changes?
2. What resources (financial, human, informational) does your organisation currently have, or lack, to effectively address climate change issues at a local level?
3. Can you share any experiences or case studies where your organisation or community members have been directly impacted by climate-related events such as heatwaves?
4. What adaptation strategies do you think would be most effective in our local context for mitigating the impacts of climate change, particularly for the most vulnerable?
5. What are the best ways to engage and include low-income households and ethnic minority groups in our climate change initiatives?
6. Looking forward, what is your vision for how our local VCFSE sector can contribute to a sustainable, resilient community in the face of ongoing climate challenges?

Conclusion:

This paper looks at the multifaceted nature of climate change impacts on our local communities, encompassing environmental, social, economic, and infrastructural aspects. It underscores the imperative for collective action and heightened awareness in these domains. As Communities 1st and its member organisations, we stand ready to confront these challenges head-on.

This document is a continuation of our ongoing dialogue on critical community matters, particularly focusing on environmental and climate change challenges. Through collaborative efforts and thoughtful discussions, we can enhance the local VCFSE as influential contributors to policies and actions that significantly enhance the resilience and sustainability of our communities.