Friends of the Earth

Climate ACTION PLAN

FOR THE NEXT MAYOR OF THE WEST MIDLANDS

10 priorities to protect people and planet

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We're facing a climate and ecological emergency – the biggest threat we've ever seen to humanity's existence. The latest report from the UK's Climate Change Committee shows that we urgently need to ramp up delivery of the solutions, and that many of these solutions will require local action. The UK is also failing to build resilience to the worsening impacts of climate change, putting people at growing risk from extreme weather, health issues, food insecurity and more.

Whoever is elected as the next Mayor can't single-handedly solve the crisis, but they must use the powers they have to make as big a difference as possible. They have a very important role to play in providing a guiding vision for the area, and will need to work with councils, businesses, local communities and the national government.

Tackling the climate and nature crisis must be done in a way that benefits everyone, no matter their income, race, age or background. It's important to address the sheer scale of inequalities that exist.

People who are most marginalised – both here in the UK and across the world – have done the least to cause climate breakdown but are the least able to recover from its impacts.

People on lower incomes and people of colour suffer most from the lack of nature and green space in our towns and cities. This is also true of air pollution, despite a lower proportion of people on lower incomes and people of colour owning cars than others.

Young people's futures are most at risk from climate breakdown and the decline of nature, and they're also economically disadvantaged, for example by the cost of housing.

The West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) has had a Climate Action Plan in place since September 2021 and seeks to be net zero by 2041. Its first Five Year Plan will run until 2026. Some progress has been made, as acknowledged by Climate Emergency UK's Council Climate Action Scorecards, which assessed all UK councils on the actions they've taken towards net zero. However, action needs to be accelerated in several areas such as retrofitting buildings, transport, developing renewable energy within the region and saving energy.

The next Mayor must build on existing commitments across the area, accelerate delivery of the actions committed to and tackle inequalities. They must also regularly report on progress towards carbon reduction and nature restoration goals.

This Climate Action Plan will help the next Mayor do this using the devolved powers and funding granted to them. They'll also have an important role in influencing and co-ordinating action by constituent local authorities, local businesses and other stakeholders.

Even with the additional powers and resources already granted to WMCA, as well as those that will be conferred by the Trailblazer deeper devolution deal, we acknowledge that some barriers to action remain due to unhelpful national policies, continued reliance on competitive funding streams and inadequate powers to raise funds locally. To address this, the next Mayor should use their voice to campaign for national government to put the climate crisis at the heart of devolution deals and give local government the powers and resources needed to act at the scale required.

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10 priorities the next Mayor of the West Midlands should commit to

The 10 priorities listed below build on those we set out for the mayoral elections in 2021. In the following section, we explain in more detail what each means for WMCA in practice.

1. Ensure all plans, programmes and investment decisions are in line with what's needed to address the climate and ecological emergency and are aligned with international, national, regional and local carbon reduction targets.

2. Ensure that the voices of those most impacted by climate breakdown and nature loss are heard and given centre-stage in decision making.

3. Support new green jobs. Protect workers and communities through a just transition to a low-carbon, nature-rich, circular economy, including linking skills training to low-carbon jobs.

4. Ensure new housing is zero carbon and served by sustainable transport using their strategic planning powers and influence on constituent local planning authorities. Use brownfield regeneration and affordable housing funding to deliver zero-carbon homes in locations accessible by public transport and active travel.

5. Take a leading role in bringing existing homes in the area up to high energy efficiency standards to reduce emissions and put an end to fuel poverty. Ensure that existing homes are protected from extreme weather events.

6. Set targets to at least double public transport use, cycling and walking within the next 10 years by improving infrastructure and the affordability, connectivity and reliability of services, including franchising the bus network. Set out a plan to achieve World Health Organization (WHO) air quality standards by 2030, and make the West Midlands safer for vulnerable road users and responsible drivers.

7. Accelerate the development and implementation of a Local Area Energy Plan (LAEP) with a clear focus on increasing the supply of clean, renewable energy, including supporting community energy initiatives and the roll-out of heat pumps.

8. Produce a Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) for the area that increases tree cover, eliminates green space deprivation to tackle health inequalities, helps the area become more resilient to the impacts of climate change, and protects and enhances nature. This includes contributing to the national aim of protecting 30% of land for nature by 2030.

9. Lead the development of a circular economy strategy for the region with local businesses and local authorities to cut waste and resource consumption, reduce reliance on incineration and landfill, and boost the green economy.

10. Demand all work on HS2 is ceased immediately and review how the project could deliver much more for the West Midlands if it were to go ahead. This would include better integration of new and existing infrastructure, as well as services that are compliant with the WMCA's climate emergency declarations and defend nature in line with the LNRS. If the project proceeds, ensure there's much more inclusive governance at the WMCA level.

What this looks like for the West Midlands

1 Ensure all plans, programmes and investment decisions are in line with what's needed to address the climate and ecological emergency and are aligned with national, regional and local carbon reduction targets.

All decisions need to be in line with what's needed to address the climate and ecological emergency. Commitments to tackle the crisis are meaningless if they're contradicted by spending on and support for high-carbon activity. All plans and investment spending must align with the need to cut emissions and increase the resilience of the area to climate impacts. Local government pension schemes must also stop investing in climate-wrecking gas, oil and coal companies.

Practical action

The Mayor must ensure that spending of the mayoral investment fund, and any devolved funding pots under their control like the Shared Prosperity Fund, is aligned with moving to a low-carbon economy.

The Mayor should ensure that all plans, including the Local Industrial Strategy, set the area on a path of fair transition to clean, green industry that will help cut climate change emissions and boost growth in green jobs.

This also means ending the promotion of or investment in high-carbon infrastructure such as HS2, the Interchange Station in the Meriden Gap green belt, new roads or road expansions, and any further expansion at Birmingham Airport. The WMCA should implement bus franchising across the area. Additional actions to promote low-carbon transport and buildings are set out in the relevant sections below.

The Mayor should make public statements calling on the local government pension scheme to divest from fossil fuels. They should engage directly with the local authorities that control these funds, encouraging them to make immediate commitments to divest from all fossil fuels.

2 Ensure the voices of those most impacted by climate breakdown and nature loss are heard and given centre-stage in decision making.

The Mayor should recognise that those who've done the least to contribute to climate breakdown are often the most vulnerable to its impacts.

In the West Midlands area, 499 neighbourhoods have been identified by researchers as being particularly vulnerable to surface flooding due to their location and the demographics of the community (for example, age or income). In addition, 301 neighbourhoods have been identified as being particularly vulnerable to the impacts of extreme heat. Flooding and extreme heat will both be exacerbated by climate breakdown.

Practical action

The Mayor must commit to involving all citizens, but especially young people and the most vulnerable communities, in decision making and action planning.

The Mayor must also recognise the impact of decisions made today on the wellbeing of future generations and commit to having youth representation on the governance structures within the region.

Deliberative democracy approaches, such as citizen juries, citizen assemblies, and participatory mapping and budgeting, should be used, especially for complicated or contentious choices.

Climate change adaptation and nature restoration spending should be focused on the most vulnerable communities.

3 Support new green jobs. Protect workers and communities through a just transition to a low-carbon, nature-rich, circular economy, including linking skills training to low-carbon jobs.

Green jobs and training will both be necessary to achieve any credible sustainable vision and economic plan for the region. The green economy is already the fastest growing part of the UK economy, and action in this area will benefit the region.

Mayors will need to make sure they understand the projected demand for green skills in their areas, including for fitting insulation and heat pumps, installing electric vehicle charging points and restoring nature. These skills should be a key focus of adult education budget spending.

Practical action

The Mayor should invest in green jobs, apprenticeships and sustainable enterprise. This means prioritising investment in sectors such as renewable energy, housing retrofit, sustainable transport, nature restoration and the circular economy.

The Mayor should use their control of the area's adult education budget to ensure the labour force has the necessary skills to enable the transition to a low-carbon economy.

The new Trailblazer deal gives the WMCA Mayor greater powers and resources than local governments have in most other parts of England to ensure that future skills training and adult education are aligned with the transition to a low-carbon economy. This includes addressing the significant skills gap in housing retrofit to upgrade the energy efficiency of homes in the area.

The Mayor should also work with youth representatives, starting with the Young Combined Authority, trade unions, colleges, training providers, businesses and the youth climate movement to devise an ambitious programme of skills training and apprenticeships for the green economy.

4 Ensure new housing is zero carbon and served by sustainable transport using their strategic planning powers and influence on constituent local planning authorities. Use brownfield regeneration and affordable housing funding to deliver zero-carbon homes in locations accessible by public transport and active travel.

It makes no sense to build new homes today that will need retrofitting in the near future or that are dependent on cars for transport. Although mayoral authorities don't make planning decisions, they can set out spatial development strategies for their areas, which can set environmental standards for new development. The Local Plans of the constituent local authorities will then need to be consistent with these strategic policies.

Practical action

The Mayor should use the spatial development strategy to ensure planning policies in the area are fully aligned with national carbon reduction targets and carbon budgets – including requiring new housing to be zero carbon.

The Mayor should also co-ordinate spatial and transport planning at the regional level to ensure that new developments are accessible by sustainable transport, and have access to nature-rich green space.

Funds for new housing such as the Brownfield Housing Fund must be used to deliver affordable, healthy homes that are built to high energy efficiency standards, are protected from overheating and flooding, aren't built around transport by car, and result in an overall gain in green space and biodiversity.

5 Take a leading role in bringing existing homes in the area up to high energy efficiency standards to reduce emissions and put an end to fuel poverty. Ensure that existing homes are protected from extreme weather events.

Most of the buildings that people will use over the next 50 years have already been built. Only 39% of homes in the West Midlands are currently well insulated. This represents a shocking waste of energy, with high greenhouse gas emissions and unnecessarily high energy bills, especially for more vulnerable low-income renters.

91,880 homes need to be insulated every year in the West Midlands to ensure all homes are properly insulated by 2030. It's estimated that it'll cost a total of £4.8 billion to get all homes to EPC band C. A significant proportion of this will need to be publicly funded because a large proportion of householders are unable to pay themselves. In addition, the transition from gas-fired boilers to eco-heating systems needs to be well underway in our homes. In the West Midlands, at least 27,090 heat pumps need to be fitted every year until 2030.

As well as ensuring that homes are well insulated to end fuel poverty and improve health, we need to move to electric heating that's powered by renewable sources. Hydrogen isn't a sustainable or effective solution for heating homes and shouldn't have any place in the West Midlands' net zero plans. In October 2023 the National Infrastructure Commission recommended government "should rule out supporting hydrogen heating to enable an exclusive focus on switching to electric heating".

Practical action

The Mayor will be in receipt of direct funding for retrofit as a result of the Trailblazer deal. They'll therefore have a key role to play in working with local authorities, housing associations and other partners to retrofit cold homes that are expensive to heat. The Mayor is uniquely placed to co-ordinate a street-by-street retrofit programme across all types of housing tenures, prioritising neighbourhoods with high levels of fuel poverty.

Mayoral authorities should also support private homeowners and landlords who are able to pay for retrofit themselves – for example by establishing retrofit hubs for energy saving advice as well as information on financial support and reliable suppliers.

The Mayor should take a leading role in protecting against extreme weather, working with partners across the area to ensure that homes are more resilient to the impacts of climate change such as flooding and overheating.

6 Set targets to at least double public transport use, cycling and walking within the next 10 years by improving infrastructure and the affordability, connectivity and reliability of services, including franchising the bus network. Set out a plan to achieve World Health Organization (WHO) air quality standards by 2030, and make the West Midlands safer for vulnerable road users and responsible drivers.

In mainland Europe, many places provide much better and more integrated public transport. As a result, levels of public transport use are much higher than in the UK's combined authority areas. Far too few journeys are being made on public transport in the West Midlands area. For example, only 18% of commuter journeys are made using public transport. Bus services have declined by 37% when compared with 2010 levels, which is likely to disproportionately impact those on low incomes.

The West Midlands must dramatically transform transport infrastructure and travel habits so that using public transport or cycling and walking become the default. Everybody should be able to live decently and get about without having to own a car. In the West Midlands, 28% of households don't have access to a car or van. Access to decent car alternatives is a social justice and cohesion issue, as well as an environmental issue.

Enabling people to get around with minimum impact on the environment will also bring about big improvements in air quality. WHO standards are set to reduce the health impacts of air pollution – they're evidence based and regularly updated in line with new research. Our analysis shows that air pollution is a real problem across the area. WHO guidelines for the toxic gas nitrogen dioxide (NO_2) are breached in at least 1,574 locations, and there are 1,145 schools in neighbourhoods that have concerning levels of air pollution.

While trams can play a role in enabling people to use mass transit public transport, Midland Metro is proving expensive and is providing a conflict with the utilisation of former railway corridors. A thorough evaluation of the value for money of this network, as well as its contribution to both the mass transit networks and the safeguarding of rail corridors for potential future use by heavy rail, should take place before any further developments are taken forward.

In 2023 many West Midlands residents raised concerns about speeding and dangerous driving. A road safety summit was held, and this now needs to be translated into action. Steps are required by decision makers and drivers to reduce the number of KSIs (road users killed or seriously injured) on our roads. There may be technological solutions to this, but known solutions include greater enforcement of speed limits, designing roads to limit speeds, introducing more low traffic neighbourhoods, and reducing the need to travel (RTNTT), for example through "15-minute neighbourhoods".

Practical action

The Mayor should use the additional franchise powers gained by devolution to rapidly re-regulate buses. This would give WMCA greater control in bringing about the improvements needed than it currently has in the existing Enhanced Partnership. The Mayor must ensure that services are improved and delivered by electric buses, fares are affordable, and routes match what local people need. In addition, there needs to be better join-up across different modes of public transport, such as unified ticketing systems.

The Mayor has a key role to play working with local authorities to co-ordinate the provision of joined-up active travel infrastructure. The West Midlands needs to do much better on providing safe cycling routes. Research shows that with good cycling infrastructure, such as segregated cycleways, and the uptake of e-bikes, 28% of commuter journeys in the region could be made by bike. A comprehensive network of safe, segregated cycle routes should be the goal – like those in Copenhagen, Denmark, where 49% of journeys for work and education are made by bike. Efforts should be made to build community support for these changes and to consult in advance about new routes and measures. The Mayor must protect the health of local people and commit to taking the necessary action to ensure air quality standards are met across the whole region. This will require measures to stop the use of the most polluting vehicles and to encourage the take-up of electric vehicles, as well as measures to facilitate alternative ways to travel.

Additional money to achieve this transformation in transport can be raised through schemes like the Workplace Parking Levy successfully pioneered by Nottingham City Council.

7 Accelerate the development and implementation of a Local Area Energy Plan (LAEP) with a clear focus on increasing the supply of clean, renewable energy, including supporting community energy initiatives and the roll-out of heat pumps.

A rapid growth in renewable energy is needed to wean the UK off electricity produced by fossil fuels and to increasingly provide the electricity needed to heat homes, cut fuel bills and power transport. By making space for renewable energy like rooftop solar panels and onshore wind turbines, a proportion of this clean and affordable energy can be provided in the West Midlands.

Currently 88,608 MWh of onshore renewable energy is generated in the West Midlands each year – a very small fraction of what's needed. This is only enough to power the equivalent of 32,820 homes.

Practical action

The Mayor should accelerate the development of a LAEP for the region and lead its implementation. The LAEP must be focused on delivering sustainable energy infrastructure and renewable energy production in partnership with local authorities, communities and energy utilities. Community ownership of renewable energy should be particularly encouraged and supported.

The LAEP should be linked to the spatial development strategy and Local Plans for the area to ensure that opportunities for new renewable energy generation are identified. The LAEP should also identify priority locations for the roll-out of heat pumps, including where grid infrastructure can handle these now and where they need to come later.

In addition, all public purchasing of energy should be from 100% renewable power. While we see discussions on a hydrogen economy gathering pace, this concept should be viewed through a critical lens, and "green" hydrogen – which utilises renewable electricity in its production – should be the only form of hydrogen that's considered.

8 Produce a Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) for the area that increases tree cover, eliminates green space deprivation to tackle health inequalities, helps the area become more resilient to the impacts of climate change, and protects and enhances nature. This includes contributing to the national aim of protecting 30% of land for nature by 2030.

Nature in England is in decline. Pressures from farming, pollution and badly located development continue to put our wildlife at risk and undermine the functioning of healthy ecosystems.

Access to quality green space is essential for people's physical and mental health. Green space, trees and other "green infrastructure" are also essential for nature. Friends of the Earth has used official data on green space, gardens and open access land to identify the neighbourhoods most deprived of green space in the region. Results show that low-income communities and people of colour are worst off when it comes to access to green space. In the West Midlands area, there are 60 neighbourhoods rated E (most deprived).

Practical action

WMCA is responsible for developing a LNRS by March 2025. This should contribute to the 30x30 biodiversity principles (to protect 30% of land for biodiversity by 2030) agreed at the international biodiversity summit in December 2022, which the UK signed up to. This focus will also help deliver WMCA's ambitions for healthy communities, improving access to nature-rich green space and enabling citizens to benefit from increased physical and mental health.

The LNRS will need to set out how it'll protect and manage nature sites that are important for people and wildlife, as well as restore nature and ecosystems across the area. This includes planting more trees and woods on land owned by local authorities and in partnerships with local landowners. Friends of the Earth has produced a map identifying where new woodlands could be planted outside of urban areas.

The Mayor should also aim to eliminate green space deprivation. This means ensuring everybody has access to enough quality green space. In some areas this might mean opening up school grounds outside of school hours or converting some streets or carparks into public green space. It also means increasing tree cover with more street trees.

9 Lead the development of a circular economy strategy for the region with local businesses and local authorities to cut waste and resource consumption, reduce reliance on incineration and landfill, and boost the green economy.

The West Midlands should aim to create a zero-waste, circular economy – in which resources are used for as long as possible, have the maximum value extracted from them, and are recovered and regenerated at the end of their service life.

Only 30% of household waste in the West Midlands is reused, recycled or composted. Incineration, also called Energy from Waste, isn't a sustainable alternative as it's more carbon polluting than even gas-fired power stations, and it also contributes to local air pollution.

Practical action

The Mayor should work with businesses and community groups to increase the reuse and repair of products in the area, including influencing businesses to select more sustainable materials, improve the design of products and extend product life cycles. Circular economy principles should also be applied to local authority procurement of goods.

The Mayor should also support and co-ordinate local authorities in the area to ensure 70% of household waste is reused, recycled or composted by 2025, and to achieve zero waste by 2030. This needs to include initiatives to reduce food waste and introduce doorstep food waste recycling across the region, and make it easier for people and businesses to stop sending waste to landfill or incineration.

10 Demand all work on HS2 is ceased immediately and review how the project could deliver much more for the West Midlands if it were to go ahead. This would include better integration of new and existing infrastructure, as well as services that are compliant with the WMCA's climate emergency declarations and that defend nature in line with the LNRS. If the project proceeds, ensure there's much more inclusive governance at the WMCA level.

Recent announcements on HS2 have called the whole project, which is climate damaging and resource consuming, into question. It's led to the destruction of huge areas of biodiversity and adversely affected many communities along its destructive path. HS2 should be halted immediately.

Practical action

The Mayor should withdraw any support for this project immediately. If, after a thorough review of Phase 1, it was determined that some of the infrastructure already developed could be of use, then it should be integrated into existing transport networks as efficiently as possible.

This would involve scrapping the car-based development at Interchange Station and the vastly over-capacity station at Curzon Street. It would also involve taking any related services into Birmingham New Street, where connectivity with the rail, bus and metro networks can take place. The train sets should be much more compatible with current stock and speeds should be reduced so that enhanced overall operation would be possible on this piece of infrastructure and the rest of the network.

Methodology

Friends of the Earth has drawn on official sources of data to identify progress on climate and nature issues in metro mayoral areas. Where official data sources aren't available, we've relied on alternative quality sources. Below we list our data sources and explain what analysis of them we've carried out, if any.

Extreme weather

Professor Sarah Lindley at the University of Manchester has carried out an analysis for Friends of the Earth to identify which small neighbourhoods – Lower Layer Super Output Areas (LSOAs) with an average population of 1,700 – are both likely to be exposed to extreme weather and have demographic/ neighbourhood characteristics that make the population particularly vulnerable. More detail is available on extreme heat and flooding.

Homes

The number of poorly insulated homes is based on government data on energy performance certificates. There are a range of data sources on the cost of bringing properties up to a decent standard (EPC C level), including the English Housing Survey. The actual costs will be influenced by the approach taken. For example, Friends of the Earth is advocating a street-by-street approach, which is likely to bring cost savings compared with approaches that require retrofitters to consistently travel between jobs. The target number of heat pumps to be fitted is based on the number recommended by the Climate Change Committee for the whole of the UK, adjusted for the number of homes within the metro mayoral region.

Transport

The proportion of commuter journeys by different travel modes is based on 2011 Census data. Unfortunately, more up-to-date data isn't available. However, the situation today is unlikely to be significantly different because of bus service decline outside of London. The data on bus service decline is from an analysis by the University of Leeds for Friends of the Earth. The data on access to a car is from the 2021 Census. The data on the proportion of commuter journeys that could be made by bike is from the Propensity to Cycle Tool.

Air pollution

Air pollution data is based on a Friends of the Earth analysis of modelling data at 1 km^2 published by the government. Our analysis involved using geographical boundary data for small neighbourhoods (LSOAs) to calculate an average level of air pollution within the neighbourhood and compare this with WHO limits. We've also identified the number of schools within areas with high air pollution levels using government data on school locations. More detail is available on air pollution.

Renewable energy

The amount of onshore renewable energy generated in the region is identified by government data. The calculation of how many homes-worth of energy this equates to is based on typical household consumption figures published by the energy regulator Ofgem. In future, more renewable electricity will be needed to heat homes and power transport, reducing the usage of fossil fuels. Total energy consumption will reduce in the future as electric heat pumps and electric cars are much more energy efficient than equivalents powered by fossil fuels.

Green space

Friends of the Earth has identified the neighbourhoods deprived of green space by combining government data on public green space, garden size and open access land and ranking neighbourhoods on a scale of A-E. Within this Climate Action Plan, we've referred to E-rated neighbourhoods as green-space deprived. More detail, including the methodology, is available in the full analysis, which was carried out in 2020. The underlying government data we relied on isn't

perfect, so ground truthing is necessary. Natural England is working to improve the data and is expected to publish more data in spring 2024.

Waste

Data on household waste recycling is from government data.