Sustainability First Writing Competition
"How do we achieve meaningful social changes in the UK to tackle the climate crisis and develop a fairer society?"

A Case for Community

Neoliberalism teaches us to think of ourselves as independent individuals. We are free to follow our own will and desires in a world full of opportunities, where we make our own luck. This ideology does not only wrongly attribute poverty to personal failure, but also has fooled us into thinking that we have to tackle the climate crisis as individuals.

Presented with endless green consumer options, we are made to believe that our only means of influence reside with our economic choices; I can choose oat over cow milk, buy local and organic vegetables, replace my diesel car with an electric one, or restrain from fast fashion, flying, and even having kids? A system, in which money is our vote, is inherently rigged and deeply unjust, considering rising inequality in the UK. Thankfully, consumer choice is not all there is, we have each other and the power of community.

I argue that to tackle the climate crisis and develop a fairer society in the UK, we need to build strong and purposeful communities[1] and create a sense of togetherness as citizens and custodians of our environment. The COVID-19 pandemic has revived a great community spirit across the country, presenting UK leaders with a unique chance to channel this momentum to 'build back better' and drive 'green recovery'. Throughout this essay I will highlight why communities are key to achieve climate justice and present practical solutions for policy makers and business to support communities. Recommendations will address three key areas 1.) the UK's social welfare system 2.) infrastructure and planning 3.) engagement and decision-making.

Social Welfare and Community Service

From communal gardening projects to food banks, off-grid renewable energy installations to local cycling campaigns, and anti-crime organisations, along with volunteering groups helping the elderly and vulnerable – communities and their initiatives already play a key part in the UK's environmental movement and social welfare system, and they need help.

As a first step to empower communities, I suggest the introduction of a nation-wide community service scheme that is, to a capacity, mandatory but paid. This is inspired by countries that still have compulsory military service. In most conscription systems today, recruits are given the option to opt out of military and deliver community service instead, in which they are put to work in food banks, prisons, care homes, or other social institutions that require help. The pandemic has often been described as the war of our times, and, coupled with the unprecedented scale of challenges we're facing with the climate crisis, we

[1] For the purpose of this essay, communities are understood as a group of households with a sense of union, anchored in a specific geography and its traditions. In terms of scale, communities stand between the individual and the government and commonly hold a degree of self-determination over their shared infrastructure and local resources (such as water, energy, and food).

may require a new kind of Army. Not the kind training in 20th-century-style warfare, but rather one that learns to look after their communities and resources, to fight for a just climate future.

The scheme would be funded by the government, and employees be granted paid leave to complete the service. Participants would be drawn from a specific age group (e.g. 18-25), and service could be spread out across one or two years to allow for flexibility and to avoid prolonged absence from workplace that could negatively impact businesses and careers.

A community service scheme in that vein, would allow for the quick and flexible mobilisation of a workforce to support the daily business of community organisations, such as care homes, schools, prisons, organic farms etc. Similarly, this workforce could be deployed for more immediate crisis management, such as flood-damage clean-up, or stacking shelves during a pandemic. The Youth Climate Movement has highlighted that many young people want to take action for climate justice. Community service would give young people a chance to do so and foster a culture of togetherness in the care for society and the environment.

Beyond a national community service, UK's communities can further be supported by strengthening the welfare systems at its core. With the goal to redistribute wealth and reduce pollution, tax and utility tariff need to be reformed to integrate progressive structures in relation to both household income and environmental impact. Despite progressive income tax in the UK, household inequality is steadily rising[2], screaming for stronger tax charges on the top earners. Council tax, currently still regressive, must also be designed in a progressive fashion to ease financial pressure of lower income households. Simultaneously, council tax could favour households in areas disproportionately affected by negative environmental externalities, such as proximity to waste management sites or busy roads with higher air pollution. This way, tax could reflect a more holistic take on fairness, integrating both income and exposure to 'environmental bads'.

Heading into a recession, it is likely that we will see more fuel and water poverty. The Energy Research Council exposed that the poorest households are spending more than 10% of their income on utility bills, whereas the richest households only spend 3%[3]. Similar to council tax, utility tariffs could be designed progressively to reflect both household income and the amount of shared resource consumed. This would redistribute wealth and disincentivise heavy consumption of the resource and present an alternative to the energy policy charge. The energy policy cost is a means to raise funds for emission reduction schemes and is currently added as a static 13% surcharge on top of every household's energy/gas bill[4]. In addition to improving tax and tariff structures to 'level-up' on the household-level, government must also look to tackle businesses.

Historically, there has been a disproportional focus on the consumers to reduce their carbon footprint, while for businesses, it has been too cheap to pollute under the EU Emission Trading Scheme for too long. A corporate carbon tax is more straightforward and effective in reducing

[2]https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/personalandhouseholdfinances/incomeandwealth/bulletins/householdincomeinequalityfinancial/financialyearending2020

[3] https://ukerc.ac.uk/news/progressive-policy-could-reduce-energy-bills/

[4] https://ukerc.ac.uk/news/progressive-policy-could-reduce-energy-bills/

emissions and charging the polluter[5]. Raised tax-funds must be channelled towards small and purpose-driven businesses, that represent the cornerstones of communities, local employment, and environmental protection, such as small-scale organic farms for instance. In summary, the above suggestions are tools to create a more equal society, which will foster more homogenous communities and strengthen them on a basic welfare-level.

Having established how government can support community welfare through a national service and tax reform, let us explore the immense potential of communities in the creation of a greener and fairer society, when put at the heart of infrastructure and planning. To support economic recovery, the government has budgeted to spend £27 billion on infrastructure projects in 2021-2022 alone[6]. An additional £12 billion will be invested in green technology and solutions for climate resilience[7]. Put simply, large sums of money from government and private investors, will flow into shaping our physical space, which will define how we interact for generations to come. However, government strategies such as the National Infrastructure Strategy and the Ten Point Plan, maintain a focus on the national scale and lack a meaningful integration of the concept of community in regards to green energy projects, infrastructure, and urban planning.

Genuine community-focused planning, incorporating principles of circularity and decentralised resource management, could reduce emissions from travel, accelerate implementation of off-grid renewable energy systems, and build resilience by avoiding sole reliance on a centralised provision system, which can easily be disrupted by pandemics or extreme weather events. Being organised more locally, will also have positive implications for distributive justice. For instance, national energy projects, such as Hinkley Point C, commonly centralise the associated risks and environmental impacts in one geography, disproportionately affecting the local population. However, most importantly, community-focused planning can work as an enabler for communities to come together to drive a fair climate future.

A good example of such planning is a co-housing project in Zurich called ‘Kalkbreite’. The building hosts up to 250 residents and consists of 82 flats, all of which are catering to the needs of different household types, including shared-living flats for students, appartements for families, or accessible-housing for disabled and elderly people. The idea is to attract people from all backgrounds and ages to form a diverse community. Coming together is encouraged through shared infrastructure including a garden, laundry facilities, communal rooms for events, coworking space and even a library. Due to imminent proximity to public transport links and excellent bike storage facilities, residents are not allowed to have a car. The building has also won an award for its energy efficiency and overall low environmental impact. Sharing amenities, as opposed to every household having their own, also reduced environmental impact per resident. From a social and community perspective the project was a success, in facilitating social bonds, mutual support structures (e.g. care for children and elderly) and community initiatives (e.g. veg-box scheme, community garden, working group

---

[5] MacKenzie, D., (2009), “Constructing Emissions Markets” *Material Markets: How Economic Agents are Constructed*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

[6] National Infrastructure Strategy, UK, 25th November 2022

[7] Ten Point Plan For a Green Industrial Revolution, UK, 18th Nov 2020

tackling waste reduction in the building etc.)[8]. This example shows how design can function as an enabler for communities to come together – an opportunity we can't miss.

Such holistic, community-cantered planning not only is required on a 'building'-level, but also on the level of neighbourhoods and regions to drive a decentralised and system that truly serves the needs of communities. This will need the coming together and close collaboration of government, regulators, the private sector, and, most importantly, communities themselves, which leads on to my next point.

Community-led projects have repeatedly proven to be more effective than top-down measures. Considering the vast allocation of public funds for projects over the next years, communities' engagement in decision-making and planning has never been more important. In fact, in the example of 'Kalkbreite', the planners have involved the local community and housing cooperative in a participatory process to tailor the design exactly to their needs and high demands in social, economic, and environmental sustainability.

The involvement of communities not only is imperative when it comes to housing and construction, but in any field where private companies are in charge of delivering a public service such as waste management, telecom, and utilities. To encourage long-term and purpose-driven value-creation in the private sector, companies must create community-engagement groups to facilitate a meaningful conversation about, and understanding of, local needs and people's ideas of fairness.

Beyond the private sector, government and regulators need to address this democratic deficit by putting in place processes to involve communities in policy formation and decision-making. Community ought to have an input on the allocation of funds, on neighbourhood planning, off-grid energy project, and adaptive-planning for climate resilience.

In conclusion, communities already play a vital role in the UK's drive towards a fair climate future. However, to unleash their full potential, we need to make the right changes now. I have proposed a national community service scheme and tax reform as a way to strengthen social welfare and thus the communities that are at its core. I have also demonstrated that infrastructure and urban design can act as an enabler for communities to come together and argued that government and planners more seriously integrate community in their planning. Lastly, I have urged for the consultation of communities though engagement groups and political processes. All suggestions are aimed at enabling the coming together and flourishing of UKs communities for justice and our climate. In front of us is an opportunity to create lasting social change together – community is our chance, our silver lining.

(1943 words)

[8] https://www.shareable.net/the-kalkbreite-participative-housing-planning-in-zurich/