

The messy politics of Local Climate Assemblies

Research Briefing, June 2023

Summary

Many Local Authorities in the UK have run local climate assemblies (LCAs) such as Citizens' Assemblies or Juries, with the goal of developing citizen-led solutions to the climate crisis.

This briefing summarises findings from a [published journal paper](#) authored by the Climate Citizens team. We argue that a 'convenient fiction' often underpins the way Local Authority actors explain the rationale for running LCAs. This 'convenient fiction' smooths over and presents as linear a process that is messy and political. It is important to surface the messiness and political tensions that underpin the origins and aftermath of LCAs. This helps broaden understandings of how LCAs can contribute to change and helps actors to understand how they can productively orientate within the politics of LCAs.

1. Introduction

Since 2019, dozens of UK Local Authorities have commissioned Citizens' Assemblies, Citizens' Juries, or similar processes to develop citizen-led solutions to the climate crisis – we refer to these as LCAs (local climate assemblies). The proliferation of LCAs is part of a wider ['wave' of citizen deliberation](#) which aim to deepen democracy by giving citizens the opportunity to discuss complex policy problems including climate change.

LCAs involve recruiting citizens who are demographically representative of a place to form a Citizens' Assembly or Jury. The LCA gathers for multiple meetings to hear from experts and deliberate about how to achieve net-zero. Once recommendations are developed, they are presented to the Local Authority which responds to and usually commits to taking forward some or all of the recommendations.

2. A convenient fiction

This story about LCAs is often told (we also present it in diagrammatical form below):

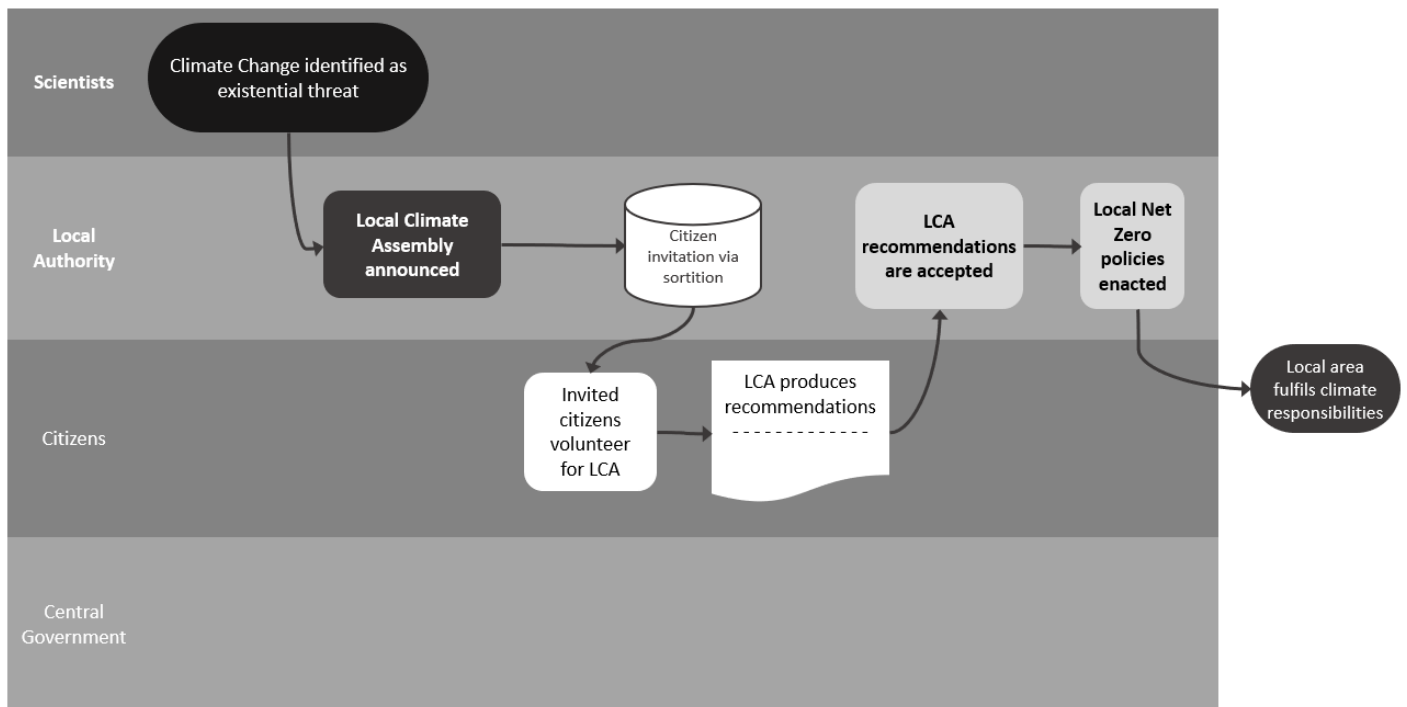
Step 1: Climate change is identified as an existential threat by scientists

Step 2: Local Authority announces a LCA after declaring a Climate Emergency

Step 3: Citizens are invited to participate. The LCA develops its recommendations, which the Local Authority then combines with its own climate policies

Step 4: Net zero policies are enacted locally

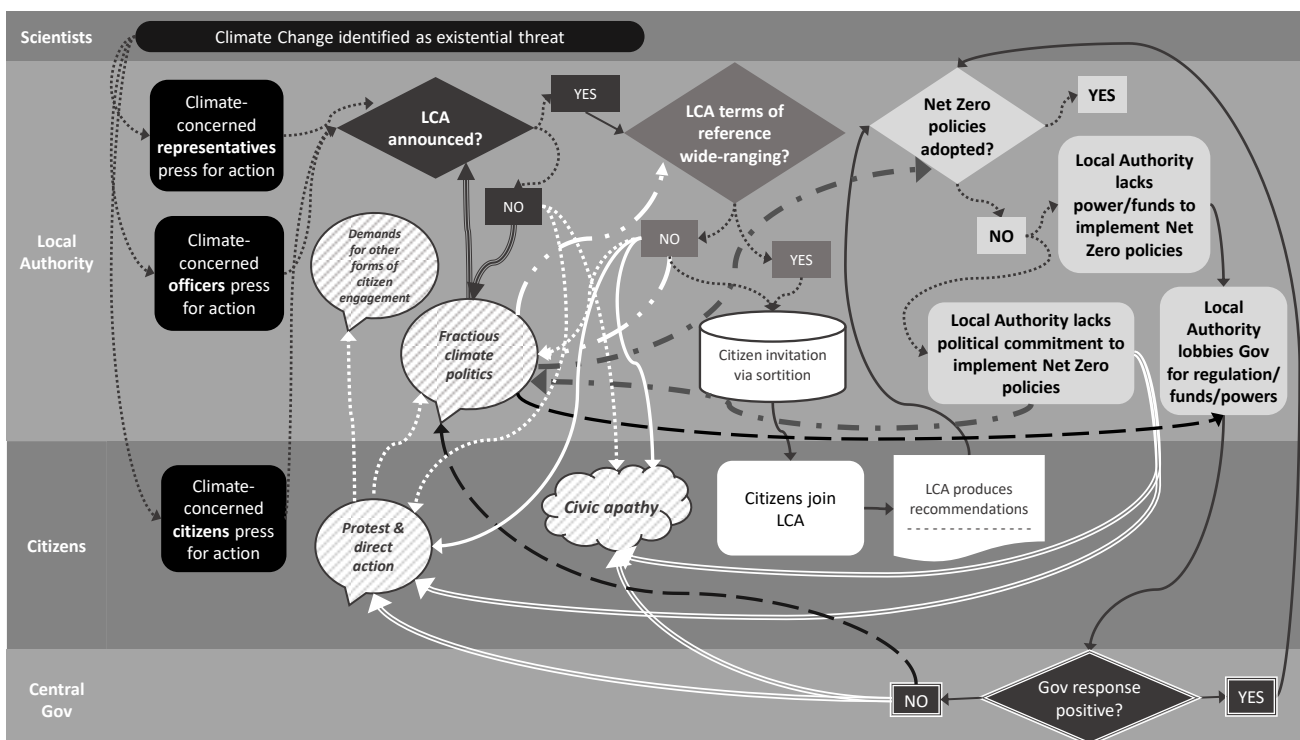
Step 5: The local area has fulfilled its climate responsibilities



Presenting LCAs in this way might be perceived to be tactically helpful. For example, it provides a clear rationale about why LCAs are worth setting up. But it risks generating unintended consequences and missing the political potential of LCAs.

3. The messy politics of Local Climate Assemblies

The diagram below is an alternative depiction of the origins and potential aftermath of LCAs. In the text below, we will guide you through this diagram.



3.i. The origins of LCAs

In contrast to the previous diagram, this diagram explicitly recognises the political nature of the origins of LCAs. On the left hand side, we draw attention to the role of citizens and different actors within Local Authorities who acted politically within councils to successfully press for LCAs.

In some areas, climate-minded representatives acted within councils and joined forces with citizen groups to press Local Authority leaders to pass motions in favour of introducing a LCA. This created an atmosphere of pressure which helped generate momentum for implementing climate action plans, including LCAs. The result was genuine political commitment to local climate action. In other contexts, there was little buy-in for LCAs from Council officers and representatives, and motions in favour of introducing LCAs seem to have been generated by intense pressure from lobbying by citizen groups. Some council leaders failed to make a clear commitment about the extent to which they intended to implement LCA recommendations – their decision to run a LCA was a capitulation to citizen demands, rather than a belief in the transformative potential of them.

3.ii. The aftermath of LCAs

In the diagram the flow chart moves to a decision point on the top right-hand corner with the following question: '[Are] net zero policies adopted?' It then splits into two potential outcomes – 'yes' or 'no'. In the short-term, Local Authorities are unlikely to adopt wholesale the policies recommended by LCAs, for two reasons.

First, Local Authorities face a shortage of statutory powers and funding. This begs the question of why Local Authority leaders committed to running LCAs if they lacked the power to take forward LCA recommendations. Some saw in LCAs an opportunity to develop an evidence-base to lobby central government for the decentralisation of powers and resources. This has the potential to generate two outcomes, illustrated in the diagram. One is that government responds positively, devolving powers and resources that facilitate the adoption of net zero policies. The other is that national government ignores such calls, tying the hands of Local Authorities and risking citizen backlash.

A second reason is that, as already stated, some Local Authority leaders were pressed into running LCAs without thinking through how they intended to use LCA recommendations. Lack of commitment to fully working through the implications of running a LCA may lead to timid climate action and policymaking, also feeding potentially back into citizen discontent or apathy.

What is the benefit of understanding LCAs as inherently messy and political processes? In the section that follows, we outline three implications.

4. Implications

4.i. Expectation management

Imagining LCAs as presented in the 'convenient fiction' (the first diagram) suggests an objective point in time from which one can judge a LCA to be a success or a failure. This places an undue burden on LCAs to 'prove their worth'. Understanding LCAs as messy and political helps clarify that they cannot side-step the complexity of political decision making and are not discrete interventions with a definite pre-determined outcome. Climate policy-making is inherently complex and difficult, and will take time to work through.

4.ii. Broader understanding of LCA impacts

The messy model shows the different ways in which LCAs can generate impact. Individual LCAs, or the wider popularity of LCAs, could contribute to political pressure to devolve more power and resources to the local level. Such impacts could materialise even if specific LCA recommendations are not immediately acted upon.

More broadly, the messy model shows how LCAs are part of an ongoing and open-ended process of political change. Understanding LCAs on these terms might help build political support for running other deliberative initiatives in the future. This would be welcome if they lead to positive change.

4.iii. Help actors to orientate within the process

Citizens, Local Authority actors and other relevant groups can use the messy diagram to help improve their practice. The diagram clarifies that LCAs are not just a source of policy ideas, but a potential tool for overcoming feelings of civic apathy, or increasingly fractious politics.

This understanding may influence how council officers and representatives interpret and communicate the process, and plan follow up work that builds on the good will generated through LCAs. Local Authority actors could use the diagram to identify points in time when they could design further interventions to advance net zero political objectives, like rolling out citizen engagement activities to build support for new funding arrangements for specific decarbonisation activities.

Actors outside of councils campaigning for LCAs might use this analysis to gain a better understanding of the barriers officers and representatives face. This more nuanced understanding may help in the process of relationship and coalition building that is central to political change.

This is a summary of [a paper](#) published in the journal *Climatic Change* available free online.

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ESSAY

The messy politics of local climate assemblies

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Abstract

In recent years, many local authorities in the UK have run local climate assemblies (LCAs) such as citizens' assemblies or juries, with the goal of developing citizen-led solutions to the climate crisis. In this essay, we argue that a 'convenient fiction' often underpins the way local authority actors explain the rationale for running LCAs. This convenient fiction runs as follows: LCAs are commissioned as a response to the climate threat, and local decision-makers work through LCA recommendations to implement appropriate policies in their locality. We suggest that this narrative smooths over and presents as linear a process that is in fact messy and political. LCAs emerge as a result of political pressure and bargaining. Once LCAs have run their course, the extent to which their recommendations are implemented is dependent on power dynamics and institutional capacities. We argue that it is important to surface the messiness and political tensions that underpin the origins and aftermaths of local climate assemblies. This achieves three things. First, it helps manage expectations about the impact LCAs are likely to have on the policy process. Second, it broadens understandings of how LCAs can contribute to change. Third, it provides a clearer model that actors can use to understand how they can best help climate action.