

postcards from the edge



There was a certain funereal character to the gathering of a handful of activists protesting on the beach at Lowestoft in Suffolk in early December. The town is on the frontline of climate impacts, and the eyes of many of its residents had been on the COP 28 negotiations in Dubai.

Even before the final wording of that agreement had been signed there was a sense of the gulf between the half-measures and warm words of international agreements and the existential struggle of real people in communities along the east coast of England. Of course, their struggle is as nothing compared with that of the many island nation peoples whose lives and cultures are being extinguished by our collective failure to radically reduce carbon emissions and stabilise our climate. But they have this in common: in each case, people and places are becoming the collateral damage of global political failures driven by the vested interests of the petro-chemicals industry and the petro-states that it controls.

Given the weakness of the COP 28 agreement, it is now scientifically inconceivable that we can stabilise global temperatures at 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels. Pushing out beyond that to 2°C and above takes us into new realms of scientific uncertainty—

but what we do know is that the most extraordinary and radical action will need to be taken to save places such as Lowestoft, Great Yarmouth, Skegness and Hull from the fate which so obviously presents itself.

While the gathering on the beach in Lowestoft may have appeared bleak, it also offered a mixture of lessons and inspiration for our joint work together in combating climate change in 2024. On the one hand, it served as a reminder of just how disconnected local communities are from the highly technocratic process of understanding and responding to flood risk and coastal change. Communities are bombarded with probabilities and assessments of risk in a complex web of documents and designations, ranging from Shoreline Management Plans to plans identifying Coastal Change Management Areas, Strategic Flood Risk Assessments, and climate change flood risk allowances. Lay on top of that bankrupt local authorities and an Environment Agency chronically short of staff and it is not surprising if people feel bewildered and helpless about their future.

Lowestoft has received investment to upgrade some aspects of its flood defences, but, like many other areas, these defences are short-term and piecemeal solutions to the acute and systemic problems of sea level rise and severe weather events. The result is that no-one feels confident in these new measures or understands how long they will defend the town. The British may exhibit the fine characteristic of hoping for the best, but we should recognise that all the components of a major disaster on the country's east coast are now in place—a lack of investment in new flood defences, a lack of investment in maintaining existing defences,



Bleak prospects—a message from Lowestoft

institutional complexity, a lack of skills and resources, and, above all and most importantly, a complete failure of national leadership to prioritise planning for climate adaptation.

It was with the people of Lowestoft in mind that we read the latest version of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) issued in December 2023, which contains nothing of the long-promised review of policy on climate change—an issue that the government seems willing to kick repeatedly into the long grass.

Our sombre mood at the close of 2023 was magnified as we digested the repercussions of a new Written Ministerial Statement on Local Energy Efficiency Standards,¹ which effectively bars local authorities from taking forward the sorts of innovative policy approaches to net-zero buildings that have been celebrated in Bath and North East Somerset and Cornwall. Many local authorities are advancing comparable policies and have invested considerable resources to demonstrate that they are both affordable and deliverable. This sudden curtailment of their opportunity to represent local priorities is a significant blow—an undemocratic act that will ultimately result in unnecessary carbon emissions and higher energy bills for residents from Oxford to Essex, Bristol to Cambridgeshire, and in many of London's boroughs.

This is a betrayal both of local communities who have been pushing for local innovation to radically cut carbon emissions, and of our national statutory commitments to cut carbon emissions set out in the 2008 Climate Change Act.

The curtailment of local action on climate change, married with the lack of an overarching priority in the NPPF to adapt to and mitigate climate change, means that our national planning policy effectively represents a death sentence for countless communities in vulnerable areas in England. It is simply not good enough to say that new versions of the NPPF to be adopted at some future date might finally get round to addressing effective climate mitigation and adaptation. Just as it is not good enough to repeatedly delay and weaken the obligations on housebuilders to deliver against our net-zero obligations.² The climate science is absolutely clear that there is no time for such delays.

In any event, we can have no confidence that future national policy will prioritise climate action, given the chilling lack of interest from the current Ministerial team in the future survival of vulnerable communities.

The trip back from Lowestoft through that uniquely vulnerable landscape of the Norfolk and Suffolk coasts set off reflection on the kind of responses

that we will need to make in 2024—responses ranging from the personal to the professional. The young planner who asked if there is any hope at all for their generation needs an answer.

Let's be clear that, despite the weight of climate anxiety across the generations, we have an absolute obligation not to give up. Instead, we must re-commit ourselves to doing everything necessary to secure a sustainable future. In doing so, we must recognise that as planners we have a special responsibility to help communities understand honestly and openly the scale of the challenges that they face. At the same time, we are obliged to use every last breath to provide hopeful pathways to build resilience to meet these challenges. The people on the beach at Lowestoft cannot afford to despair, and neither can we.

Both communities and the planners who serve them must be courageous in confronting the reality of climate impacts. We must be equally brave in challenging national government. If those in government refuse to help in this existential fight, then we must ignore them. In practice this means ensuring that plans and individual decisions are made through the lens of the climate crisis. It means taking risks to secure radical reductions in carbon emission and being clear that this is a life-and-death issue. We must be open and honest about the need for radical adaptation solutions in some places, including where necessary the relocation of whole communities to give them a sustainable future.

We must have the personal and professional determination never to give in and never to give up. If ordinary people in Lowestoft have the guts to stand toe to toe with their future, then so should we. 2024 will present the greatest political, moral and technical challenge that town planners have ever had to deal with. We have to rise to that challenge, knowing that it is better to have fought and lost than to turn our back on the fate of future generations.

● **Dr Hugh Ellis** is Policy Director and **Celia Davis** is a Projects and Policy Manager at the TCPA. The views expressed are personal.

Notes

- 1 *Planning — Local Energy Efficiency Standards Update*. Statement UIN HLWS120. Written Ministerial Statement to the House of Lords by Baroness Penn. Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 13 Dec. 2023. <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2023-12-13/hlws120>
- 2 The UKGBC has highlighted key weaknesses of the Future Homes Standard, for example — see 'Future Homes Standard draft sets energy efficiency standards lower than many homes built today'. News story. UKGBC, 13 Dec. 2023. <https://ukgbc.org/news/future-homes-standard-draft-sets-energy-efficiency-standards-lower-than-many-homes-built-today/>