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Governing adaptation to climate change: an analysis of England's National Adaptation Programme

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Leaders in adaptation policy?



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“As a result of its prolonged government interest in adaptation, the United Kingdom is one of the more advanced OECD countries in terms of climate research and progress in designing and implementing adaptation policies” (Mullan et al. 2013)

UK Climate Impact Programme (UKCIP) established in 1997 to help stakeholders understand the impacts of climate change, later becoming a stakeholder-led “boundary organisation” (McKenzie Hedger 2006, Lorenzoni et al. 2007)

Massey and Huitema (2013) claim that adaptation in England can be considered a policy field given multiple, clear examples of substantive authority, institutional order, and substantive expertise relating to adaptation

The adaptation landscape in the UK since 2008



Adapting to Climate Change (ACC) Programme (2008-2011)
Climate Change Act 2008
Adaptation Sub-Committee
UK Climate Projections 2009
Adaptation Reporting Power (Phase 1: 2009-12; Phase 2: 2013-)
Climate Change Risk Assessment 2012
National Adaptation Programme (2013)

Devolved adaptation – England, Scotland, Wales and NI

From UKCIP to the Environment Agency

Economic recession and change in government (growth agenda and austerity) – from a hands on to hands off approach

The National Adaptation Programme (NAP)



Vision: “a society which makes timely, far-sighted and well-informed decisions to address the risks and opportunities posed by a changing climate”

Drawn up by the government, industry and other non government organisations working together

Contains a mix of policies and actions to help us to adapt successfully to future weather conditions (31 objectives; 423 actions)

Adaptation supports growth

If adapting to climate change is in the private interests of an individual and an organisation then it should occur naturally and without the government’s intervention (see Economics of the NAP Annex)

Changes in the adaptation discourse?

From adaptation to resilience:

The NAP defines resilience as “the ability of a social or ecological system to absorb disturbance while retaining the same basic ways of functioning, and a capacity to adapt to stress and change” (p.111).

But it does not specify what resilience implies for adaptation, beyond assuming that they are linked (p.10, Annex)

Adaptation is big business:

Global leader in the adaptation industry and home to “expertise in weather forecasting, flood modelling, infrastructure and insurance”

A growth agenda for the UK plc, already contributing £2.1billion to the UK economy and forecast to grow 5% year-on-year, as the international market for adaptation is valued at £66 billion (k-Matrix 2012)

Private adaptation

NAP key assumption: “[i]n the absence of factors which may lead a market to function inefficiently, a household or organisation will choose to adapt if the benefit of doing so exceeds the cost” (Annex, 2013, pp2)

There is a large literature (e.g., in behavioural economics) that suggests that actors frequently fail to behave rationally and in their self-interest because of perceived unfairness (de Quervain et al. 2004), temporal discounting (O'Donoghue and Rabin 1999), framing effects (Tversky and Kahneman 1981), ambiguity aversion (Ellsberg 1961) and other factors.

The NAP frames adaptation too much around efficiency and too little around effectiveness, equity and legitimacy (cf. Adger et al. 2005).

UK household adaptation

Systematic review conducted to understand what actions UK households have taken in response to, or in anticipation of, a changing climate; what drives or impedes these actions; and whether households will act autonomously.

- UK households struggle to build long-term adaptive capacity and are reliant upon traditional reactive coping responses
- Coping responses are less effective for some climate risks (e.g. flooding); cost more over the long-term; and fail to create household capacity to adapt to other stresses
- The adoption of more permanent physical measures, behavioural changes, and acceptance of new responsibilities are unlikely to happen autonomously without further financial or government support

Porter, J.J., Dessai, S. and Tompkins, E.L. 2014. What do we know about UK household adaptation to climate change? A systematic review, *Climatic Change*, [doi10.1007/s10584-014-1252-7](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10584-014-1252-7)

What role for government in adaptation?

The NAP emphasises a collaborative approach and partnerships among a range of actors expected to have a role in the delivery of adaptation, as “the government cannot act alone” (NAP, p. 1)

The collaborative approach, the belief that adaptation will occur ‘autonomously’, and the removal of mandatory adaptation reporting powers by the Secretary of State, suggest a weaker commitment and willingness to exercise governmental powers to ensure effective adaptation

For example, the abolishment of NI188 could be considered as evidence of regression or policy dismantling in the area of adaptation (c.f. Jordan et al, 2013)

Lack of substance and leadership?

Many of the NAP actions are listed as aspirations rather than as concrete actions, e.g. “Communities and civil society groups to take action to build resilience to extreme weather events and impacts of climate change” (p. 148).

Where does the responsibility and accountability for delivering adaptation lie and how is the evaluation and monitoring of the NAP to be done?

Virtually no media coverage and government fanfare surrounding the launch of the NAP (no press release; SoS abroad)

Climate sceptic SoS; de-prioritisation of adaptation at Defra (significant reduction of staff working on adaptation post NAP launch).

The English NAP in a European context

Shares some similarities with the underlying ethos of the Danish NAP, with its focus on collaboration, growth, ‘localism’ of adaptation and consequently the drive for individuals and business to take the lead on adaptation - government as an enabler rather than a direct actor and leader

NAPs from Germany and France clearly emphasise the role of government and legislative and legal means to ensure the implementation of adaptive measures. The German NAP even states that ‘All activities under the Action Plan will be funded [...] from the budgets of the respective governments’ departments [...]’ (BMU, 2011: 7).

English NAP too vague on details compared with NAPs from Austria, France, Germany or Finland

The NAP was a missed opportunity to reassert the UK as a leader in adaptation policy

Too much faith is put on private autonomous adaptation; can't government do more to enable others to take action?

It's unclear how much stakeholder buy-in the NAP has (700 organisations attended workshops + 2 informal consultations)

There is a lack of transparent allocation of responsibilities and substantive and concrete policies, measures and solutions.

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