

Institute for Public Policy Research



CAMBRIDGESHIRE FENS CLIMATE PANEL

**BRIEFING AND
RECOMMENDATIONS**

**IPPR and the Cambridgeshire
Fens Climate Panel**

October 2021

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IPPR
14 Buckingham Street
London
WC2N 6DF
T: +44 (0)20 7470 6100
E: info@ippr.org
www.ippr.org
Registered charity no: 800065 (England and Wales),
SC046557 (Scotland)

This paper was first published in October 2021. © IPPR 2021

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

The recommendations in this document are made by the Cambridgeshire Fens Climate Panel. Additional content was provided by IPPR's Stephen Frost and Becca Massey-Chase.

Stephen Frost and **Becca Massey-Chase** are the co-deputy heads of the Environmental Justice Commission.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We thank the Cambridgeshire Fens Climate Panel for their insights and engagement with the process. It was a pleasure to spend our weekend with you.

IPPR thanks the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Independent Commission on Climate for commissioning this work and for the commitment they have brought to acting on the panel's conclusions. In particular, we would like to thank Adrian Gault, Rhiannon Osborne, and Ben Szreter for their help in planning the event and for taking forward the recommendations made by the panel within their work.

We are grateful for the crucial support of the oversight board and the invaluable contributions of our speakers to the deliberation process.

We are very grateful to Dr Laurie Friday for all her help in making the event possible and to Dr Ethan Aines and Bianca Voicu of Cambridge Zero for excellent facilitation support at the event.

We would also like to thank IPPR colleagues who have contributed to the running of the panel, including Emma Killick, Luke Murphy and Lesley Rankin. Our thanks also go to the Sortition Foundation for their support and guidance, in addition to participant recruitment.



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IPPR (2021) *Cambridgeshire Fens Climate Panel: Briefing and recommendations*, IPPR.
<http://www.ippr.org/research/publications/cambridgeshire-fens-climate-panel>

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SUMMARY

Over the centuries the landscape of the Cambridgeshire Fens has been radically altered by human activity. Very little land remains that has not been impacted by agriculture or people's needs for housing and transport infrastructure. The Cambridgeshire Fens Climate Panel is clear that the coming years will see more changes to the fens and that this will bring significant challenges and opportunities for those who live there.

There is hope that the future could bring more abundant wildlife and an improved quality of life for local people. There is concern that the response to the climate crisis will be too slow and that the disadvantages that many living with the fens face will be further entrenched.

The panel want the impact of the climate and nature crises within their area to be better understood and information on them to be clearly communicated so that more people can play their part in the response to them. It calls for practical support to be provided, especially for those on low incomes, to ensure that no one is left to carry the burden of action on their own.

The panel was clear that decision-making should be governed by a commitment to do as little harm as possible to the natural world. It recognised that responding to this challenge will be as much about deciding to stop doing things that are known to cause environmental harm as much as it is about investing in new technologies and infrastructure to help people and businesses make positive changes in their own lives.

The Cambridgeshire Fens Climate Panel's definition of a 'fair' response includes an understanding of the global consequences of local actions. To ensure that the unique needs of the area are taken into account within the response to the climate crisis, the panel wants to see decisions made locally and with the community, in combination with a joined-up approach across the wider region.

FOREWORD

from the chair of the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Independent Commission on Climate

The Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Independent Commission on Climate was established by the Combined Authority to review the ways that climate change is impacting the local economy and communities, and to determine what should be done so that the region can adapt to and mitigate these effects.

The commission has been talking to citizens across the region about what action on climate would feel fair and possible to them. We are putting a special focus on the Cambridgeshire Fens because they present such an important and unique part of our region.

The Cambridgeshire Fens face particular challenges in tackling the climate crisis, as well as in addressing the area's wider needs. There must be a long-term plan for reducing emissions from degrading peat and ensuring the land is used in a way that supports nature to thrive. At the same time, we must enable and support local food production and farming, which is so key to our rural economy and food security. Access to affordable, reliable public transport is sparse, and many residents depend on cars, resulting in high transport emissions. Water shortages and flooding are already a reality. Implementing the changes needed for climate action cannot fall to the high numbers of people living in the fens on low incomes and those who are unable to afford to make changes to how they live without support. Instead, we hope that with the right support, climate policy can help to reduce emissions, protect the incredible natural landscape of the Cambridgeshire Fens and bring benefits to all of its residents.

Across the Combined Authority, our emissions per head are above the national average, and falling more slowly. It is critical that we reduce our emissions urgently and in a way that responds to the complex challenges and opportunities of this unique part of the country. To do this well means hearing the voices of people who are too often left out of policy-making. The residents of the Cambridgeshire Fens are, by nature of their daily lives and experiences, experts in their local area, the surrounding environment and how we can design climate policy that is appropriate to their needs.

The Cambridgeshire Fens Climate Panel provides 10 guiding principles for ensuring the response to the climate crisis is fair to the people who live in the fens and beyond. The panel wants to see bold and ambitious leadership alongside the opportunity for everyone to play their part. The commission has taken the recommendations to heart and will work with the Combined Authority to do justice to the panel's ambitions for the region, as well as provide further opportunities for citizens across the region to input into climate policy.

We thank the panel for this essential contribution to our commission's work and their clear commitment to deliberative democracy. The following briefing will also be shared with policy-makers and stakeholders in the region and beyond, as decision-makers at all levels grapple with implementing a just transition.

The Baroness Brown of Cambridge DBE FREng FRS

ABOUT THE CAMBRIDGESHIRE FENS CLIMATE PANEL

The Cambridgeshire Fens Climate Panel was commissioned by the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Independent Commission on Climate (CPICC) to examine the question:

“How can responses to the nature and climate crises be fair for people in the Cambridgeshire Fens?”

This climate panel makes an important contribution to the work of the CPICC. The findings are informing the commission’s work on a just transition for the combined authority and the principles that should underpin a fair response to the challenge of reducing carbon emissions.

This report documents the panel’s considered view on principles for a just transition in the Cambridgeshire Fens and beyond, captured in the participants’ own words. It is accompanied by a summary of the ideas for involving people in the response to the climate and nature crises. This report also contains brief descriptions of the panel’s deliberations across the different themes and topics that were considered.

Climate panels bring together a randomly selected group of people, who broadly represent the entire community. Together, the participants learn about an issue, discuss it with one another, and make recommendations about what should happen and how things should change, drawing on the group’s practical knowledge and experiences.

Participants for the Cambridgeshire Fens Climate Panel were selected through a recruitment process that began with invitations posted out to 4,000 randomly selected households within the area. Of the interested respondents, a group of 20 residents was selected to reflect local demographics.

For personal reasons, three had to drop out at the beginning of the process. The 17 remaining residents came together online for nine hours of deliberation across two sessions on one weekend. Collectively, they were representative of the Cambridgeshire Fens in terms of age, ethnicity, gender and level of education, and started the process with a range of attitudes towards climate change.

IPPR and CPICC were supported in the event’s design by an oversight board made up of local stakeholders, including representatives from local government, academia, business and the third sector. The panel heard from 13 speakers over the course of the weekend. These speakers provided the panel with a grounding in the climate and nature emergencies, the local context, principles for a just transition, farming and how we use the land, and transport.



OVERSIGHT BOARD

Nick Allpress, Allpress Farms

Dr Tina Barsby, National Institute of Agricultural Botany

Paul Burrows, flood and coastal risk manager for Environment Agency, East Anglia Area

Lorna Dupre, Cambridgeshire County Council

Dr Shailaja Fennell, University of Cambridge

Ryan Fuller, Huntingdonshire District Council

Adrian Gault, consultant to CPICC

Julia Huffer, East Cambridgeshire District Council

Julie Jeffryes, Healthy Fenland Project

Dame Julia King, chair of CPICC

Dr Emily Shuckburgh, Cambridge Zero and CPICC

Bridget Smith, South Cambridgeshire District Council

Sarah Smith, Wicken Fen National Trust

Steve Tierney, Fenland District Council

Rob Wise, NFU East Anglia

SPEAKERS (PRESENTED IN AGENDA ORDER)

Chair: Becca Massey-Chase, IPPR

Dame Julia King, chair of CPICC

Mayor Dr Nik Johnson

Stephen Frost, IPPR

Gwen Buck, Green Alliance

Dr Amy Munro-Faure, Cambridge Zero

Dr Roger Mitchell, Cambridge Conservation Forum

Paul Burrows, Environment Agency

Hannah Stanley-Jones, Anglian Water

Luke Murphy, IPPR

John Shropshire, G's Fresh and CPICC commissioner

Dr Lydia Smith, National Institute of Agricultural Botany

Greg Archer, Transport and environment and CPICC commissioner

Mehmet Ahmet, Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority

ABOUT THE CAMBRIDGESHIRE FENS

The Cambridgeshire Fens are part of the low-lying landscape of the east of England. With much of the area lying below sea level, these historic wetlands have been largely converted into agricultural land through complex drainage systems. The fens make up four per cent of the UK's land but produce seven per cent of the UK's food including one third of the UK's vegetables (CPICC 2021).

Alongside food production, farmers in the fens have a crucial role in managing this fragile and important environment. The fens are home to almost a quarter of the lowland peat areas in England and Wales (CPICC 2021). These carbon-rich ecosystems can store and sequester more carbon than any other type of terrestrial ecosystem (International Peatland Society 2021); however, damaged peatlands are a major source of greenhouse gas emissions. Drainage of lowland soils in the fens for agricultural use has dried out peatland and led to the release of previously stored carbon into the atmosphere. Less than one per cent of original undrained fen remains (Fens for the Future 2021).

The area is at high risk from the climate crisis, including from flooding, water shortages and heatwaves. The wider Cambridgeshire and Peterborough region also has some of the highest per person emissions in the UK: almost 25 per cent above the per capita emissions across the UK as a whole (CPICC 2021). At this level of emissions, the region only has about six years remaining before it will have exhausted all of its 'allowed' share of emissions to 2050, if it is to play an equal part in delivering the UK's net zero target (ibid). Transport is a particularly high emitter, influenced by the distribution of work, current public transport service levels and the poor coverage of public electric vehicle charging – among the poorest in the UK (ibid).

The areas at the heart of the Cambridgeshire Fens face economic challenges including a low level of residents with basic and intermediate skills or degree-level education, high dependence on lower value manufacturing and processing industries, and lower than average employee earnings (Cambridgeshire Insight 2017). There is a high number of Incapacity Benefit and Jobseeker's Allowance claimants and relatively high numbers of unemployed people (ibid). Jobs are made less accessible by businesses being spread out, insufficient public transport and high levels of traffic congestion.

The fens is home to a wealth of different animal and plant species, including 27 per cent of UK Biodiversity Action Plan species – those most threatened and requiring conservation action – and seven species which are largely restricted to the fens in the UK (Mossman et al 2012). A recent biodiversity audit identified more than 13,000 different species in the fens, including 1,932 priority species (ibid). It is an area internationally recognised for its biodiversity and parts of the fens have been designated as Special Areas of Conservation and Special Protection Areas (ibid).

PRINCIPLES FOR A JUST TRANSITION

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE PANEL¹

We believe that in order for responses to the nature and climate crises to be fair for people in the Cambridgeshire Fens, they must follow these principles.

- 1. Provide clear, inclusive communication on the climate and nature crises and the challenges and opportunities facing the Cambridgeshire Fens.** This means providing regular and up-to-date, fact-checked information and being transparent. We can't give people responsibility if they don't know how to change. It also means listening and feeding back – communication being two-way.
 - **Do more to engage young people** – from teaching more about sustainability in schools to ensuring that young people are made to feel that their futures matter and people care about them (this in turn will make them more likely to want to protect the world around them).
 - **Give people direction and guidance that is relevant to where they live.**
 - There should be more **transparency** about investment decisions and where information comes from (who is providing/paying for it).
 - **Communication needs to be regular.** It needs to be out there in front of people – it should be on the side of the bus; it should be everywhere.
 - A **network of climate and nature champions** could support with getting the information out there.
 - **Provide the public with a timeframe for changes**, so people know when to expect to see things happen. This will help people to be engaged and interested, and it also helps the public to hold decision-makers to account.
- 2. Provide practical help to support people to make good decisions**, including guidance, financial support and support for local networks.
 - Good choices need to be **affordable, convenient, safe, reliable and attractive**. This is particularly relevant for the changes people are being asked to make to how they travel, but aspects of this also relate to both changes in diet and how homes are heated.
- 3. Do no harm.** Like doctors, all people and organisations should do as little harm as possible to the natural world. For example, developers should make sure they are taking account of existing habitats and biodiversity.
 - **Sustainability** should be considered for everything. Houses need to be built differently to reduce emissions and whole communities need to become more sustainable, so people can reach what they need locally or travel sustainably to access it. Every aspect of planning must think about sustainability – not only the infrastructure but also the location (from creating new businesses to renovating a house).
- Decisions should be made locally and with the community, in combination with a **joined-up approach** across the wider region.
 - **Priorities of local people** should be considered; each local place has a variety of different issues.
 - Lots of **different people** live in the fens – they all need to be thought about.

¹ The panel's recommendations were produced over the course of both days. Initial ideas were captured in small groups at the end of the Saturday and then finalised and added to by the whole panel (over the course of two group discussions) on the Sunday. The final wording was agreed by the full panel in plenary.

- Ensure **local accountability and responsibility**, and that responsibility does not sit with a handful of people.
 - We should be **guided by what our strengths are locally** and use these as much as possible (for example, use the universities’ research, high-tech, bio-tech companies, agriculture).
 - **Local decision-making is key**, but there still needs to be joined-up approaches across local areas. Some processes can be made more efficient at a larger scale, for example, and **areas can achieve more by working together** to increase purchasing power etc; then the local councils can focus on local issues.
- 5. Protect those on the lowest incomes.** The poorest are already suffering from the current system; they are too often targets, so they must be protected.
- **The poorest in society can’t carry the burden for everyone else** (from transport to changes to domestic heating).
 - **No one should be disadvantaged** – people (individuals and companies) should be appropriately compensated for measures taken.
- 6. Respect the natural world and the environment.**
- **Value open and green spaces near where people live.** They help people appreciate nature more and by understanding nature, you might be encouraged to do more for nature. This can connect people more to the actions they can take that make a difference – including understanding how things are grown and how what they eat makes an impact.
 - **Respect people, animals and environment**, recognising that we are fundamentally **interconnected**.
- 7. Actions must be fair locally, nationally, and internationally.**
- Take into account the **global consequences of local decisions** (from welfare and animal rights to the use of precious natural resources).
- 8.** We want to see **bold ideas and leadership** – big ambitious projects that could have a big impact. We shouldn’t be tinkering with small things, but thinking in a joined-up, big picture way.
- **Focus on the areas where we can make the biggest differences** – transport and industry emissions are above national average – this should be reflected in investment.
- 9. Everyone has a role to play.** The government must play their part, but we all need to play our part too – small actions can add up to a big difference.
- **Support more grass-roots local community initiatives** (such as Eco Ely).
 - **Ensure the farmers are on board** – they have to play a key role.
 - **Give people opportunities to make a difference** – when you have the opportunity to do something small and see the difference it makes, it can lead you to want to do more.
- 10. Those causing the biggest issues pay.**
- **Companies that pollute the most should be charged a levy** according to how much they pollute to **subsidise green companies**.
 - **Farmers are often dealing with a problem rather than causing it and shouldn’t be punished for having to manage challenging land** – such as dealing with peat. **They should be supported to reduce natural carbon emissions.** There is more they can do to improve their practices, but if you take income away from them then they won’t have the money to invest in improving things.

DEVELOPING THE PRINCIPLES

Across both days of the weekend event, the panel discussed what ‘fairness’ means to them. At the heart of these conversations was the idea that “we don’t all start from the same level”; we need to “get people up to same level, not give everyone the same”: “At work, I’m a teacher... and I don’t treat every child in my class the same. They’ve all got different needs. And I think it’s the same as the country really. That every council, every district, has a different need and so they need a different amount of investment”.

“It’s a common misconception that equality means the same; equality doesn’t mean the same. It means looking at the needs of people and giving them the right opportunity linked to their needs.”

Participants were concerned that the area in which they live had been historically underinvested in, and this had led to a need for greater investment now. One participant said: “The fens will need more investment, and that – I think – is fair... the fens might need more money to make it fair, so everyone can have what they need to avoid the worst case scenario”.

Concerns for how people on low incomes would be affected also shaped the panel’s just transition principles. Participants talked about “making sure those who are not well off can afford what it’s going to cost” to make the changes needed to tackle the climate crisis. Too often, “the people who can least afford the burden, get the burden”.

One participant said she felt that, because she was poor, it was like she was “stuck in the boiler room of the Titanic”. She wanted everyone to be involved in taking action on the climate crisis but said that, at the moment, it feels like only a very small number of people are in charge “with most people stuck in steerage [on the sinking ship]”.

The panel talked about people’s ‘hierarchy of needs’ and how the most pressing concerns for many were around things like having enough to eat and feeling safe: “Priorities of lower income people will be different to those with more money – food is most important, not loft insulation. Short-term concerns will be most important”.

Safety was a theme that they returned to regularly throughout the weekend’s deliberations. One participant felt that:

“One of the first needs is for security and safety. So some of the goals won’t work unless we have this first step in place.”

The group considered how environmental and social issues interrelate. From how investing in services for young people could help them feel like their futures matter and that they want to protect the world around them, to how reducing fly-tipping and litter can build pride and protectiveness over an area, participants felt that “many of these problems are linked, not separate”. Climate change is “related to... wealth inequalities, health and wellbeing. Tackling climate change will have effects across every area of people’s lives” and on this basis “will also need joined-up action”.

There were mixed views in the group on how much individuals have the responsibility and capacity to lead change. Some reflected that “it’s down to individuals as much as governments to make changes”. Others argued that individuals’ choices and actions were shaped strongly by their political and social environment, that there needs to be more systemic change: “In my opinion, the crises are fundamentally driven by global economic systems

that demand infinite growth in a world with finite resources... the solutions require both local and global change”.

Participants asked, “Who has contributed the most and benefitted the most?”, recommending that those who have contributed the most “shouldn’t get away with it”: “higher accountability would help address the inequality”.

Overall, there was broad consensus that “we need government (at all levels) to be involved if we want to make significant changes” and that action needs to happen at every level, from the personal to the political.

There were many within the panel who believed that small actions – “that small contributing factor that someone can do that makes them feel like they are doing something” – can be “a catalyst for some people... it might start a transition for them of ‘oh actually, I can do my little bit’ and that might make them more interested”.

For individuals to make changes, the group strongly believed that they need more information, so that they can make the right choices for the environment. They want leadership and clear guidance: “People don’t know how to deal with it. And we need inspiration to start the changes that we need”.

One participant summed up:

“Education is key... I think it probably is the most important thing: communication.”

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

SUMMARY OF THE PANEL'S IDEAS FOR INVOLVING PEOPLE IN THE RESPONSE TO THE CLIMATE AND NATURE CRISES

Go to where people are. Make it as easy as possible for people to take part in decision-making. In particular, think about going into parishes and hosting discussions in village halls, making it as relevant as possible to the areas that people care about. Key to engagement is making people feel it applies to them, that they are shaping something that will impact them and feel that their input will be respected. Use every available medium to share the message – newspapers, high streets, online, radio.

Make consultations regular and joined up. Rather than having lots of things going on at once that feel disconnected and aren't supporting each other, bring consultations together (physically or virtually) to ensure the links between things are clear and easy to follow.

Ensure it is accessible. Don't overwhelm people with too much information and jargon. Make sure things are clearly explained, make the activities themselves appealing and like people want to continue to be involved. Provide financial incentives where appropriate to support more people to take part.

Make the most of councillors and existing institutions. Support them to make the best decisions they can. Getting the balance right between acting quickly and ensuring people are consulted is key – there's no easy answer to this. These institutions aren't foolproof, but they're the best we've got. Engagement in local politics and decision-making should be higher and we should learn from other places to develop our approaches to this – including experimenting with direct democracy and panels (like this one).

Engage young people. Share trusted information on social media and within schools. Make it possible for young people to take part in decision-making in a way that will suit them. Recognise the role that young people and schools can play in reaching families with information about these topics.

Involve workers in the changes that impact them. Companies should work with their employees on these plans and support them in making changes to their lives where they can.

Always provide feedback. This is about building trust and respecting people – that means telling them what happened and why. The time, thoughts and energy of those who take part has to be respected.

DELIBERATING ON INVOLVING PEOPLE

In the final hours of the event, the panel discussed what they thought good community engagement could look like:

“It starts with listening more to people. People often have solutions themselves, but when they feel things are imposed upon them, they think: ‘This isn't fair!’”

Participants discussed the importance of the community being listened to and involved: it's "very dangerous for a community to feel they're being done to" and you need to "give them the respect they deserve and properly listen to them".

They wanted this involvement to take many forms. There was support for more deliberative processes: "panels like this test the water of public opinion". There were also concerns about the number and sequencing of consultations in the area. Giving the example of a transport consultation on options to improve the Ely to Cambridge stretch of the A10, one participant felt that the ordering of consultations did not always make sense to her and that she felt it undermined her ability to contribute, as there were "new consultations before others have reported". She said: "Involving people is important, but must not have a tsunami of consultations. In the Cambridge area we have so many that people are just losing interest". This sentiment reflected a wider concern that consultation and engagement must feel meaningful to residents.

Part of this is about providing feedback: "People need to feel that... their opinions will be respected, and they will get feedback on their suggestions, even if it is not positive". Participants wanted it to be clear when and how they could input into decision-making and they wanted it to be explicit what level of influence they could have over any given decision. Some participants were also concerned that consultations did not slow down urgent action on the climate crisis:

"We need to make sure we don't hinder the actual action, by consulting about each decision."

They wanted to see clear leadership from their elected representatives: "All local councils should have an idea of the stand they're taking on climate change and should be able to represent the community".

Reflecting their deliberations on fairness and a just transition, the panel were concerned about the need to be mindful of who "falls through the net, especially in terms of those people who will be most affected".

HOPES, CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Across the opening day of the panel's deliberations, the participants were asked to consider what they liked most about living in the Cambridgeshire Fens and what were their hopes for the future. On the second day, they then considered specific challenges and opportunities related to both changing how the land is used and transport.

When discussing what they liked most about living in the area, panel members kept coming back to the landscape: "How flat it is... looking out is beautiful", "You breathe". Being able to get out into the countryside was appreciated by many members of the panel, from college students to those who were retired, and the flatness suited those who cycled within the fens. One panel member said that the rural landscape provided "quiet for my young son, a nice place for him to grow up" yet they also benefitted from "still being well connected to the rest of the country" by both rail and road.

Those living in towns within the fens felt they had access to many of the services they need: "Closeness to lots of things in Wisbech... doctors' surgeries and things like that"; "Lots in walking distance in Ely. It is great for young families".

The panel members' conversations about their hopes for the future of the Cambridgeshire Fens touched on a wide range of aspects of people's lives: including the desire to see good local work opportunities, warm and insulated homes, and less rubbish on the streets and in green spaces. They wanted to be able to easily and safely connect to the things they need, with good public transport, better cycle routes and more charging points for electric vehicles. Good, sustainable connections were seen as vital: "We have to accept it's not always going to be viable to have everything, jobs, in the village".

The panel discussed how important it was to them that the natural landscape of the fens, and the wildlife within it, was protected. They were concerned about species going extinct within the fens and the loss of habitats. One participant was worried by the changes she had seen over the last 40 years: "This area of the fens, it's in deep trouble".

As picked up in both their principles and discussions on community engagement, participants hoped they would see "more and better leadership and communication", and for community participation to be easier.

Another participant hoped that the region would "make use of the strengths that we have locally", capitalising on skills and knowledge within the area and also on natural resources:

"I would like to see any response guided by an understanding of what our strengths are locally and using those as much as possible. So, for example we have two universities within the reach of the fens, including a very research-intensive university. We've got huge amounts of high-tech and bio-tech companies locally..."

Participants believed that climate policy should be tailored not only to the strengths of the area, but also to the challenges: "Coming up with a solution

that tackles the problems that are specific to this area". They wanted to see energy directed at tackling the sectors with particularly high emissions, seeing these as the opportunity to make the most difference, not just locally but also towards the whole of the UK.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR FOOD AND FARMING

SUMMARY OF THE PANEL'S DISCUSSION ON FOOD AND FARMING

Changing how the land is used, and its connection with what we eat, felt complex, and both landowners, particularly farmers, and consumers will need clear information on the right things to do to make the most positive impact on the environment that they can.

Farmers will be key to the local response to the climate and nature crises and will need to be central to the decision-making process about the future of the fens.

Support provided to farmers can help avoid costs being passed to consumers and protect those on the lowest income. It needed to be recognised that farmers face significant business pressures and that the production of good, sustainable food is not properly valued.

Farming has changed a lot in the last few decades and the larger farming businesses felt disconnected from the day-to-day of village life in the fens. Greater connection between residents, the food they eat and the people who produce it would help with changing mindsets and behaviours.

The panel agreed on the important role farmers have to play in tackling emissions in the Cambridgeshire Fens. Although individuals within the panel highlighted how some farming practices contributed to reducing the space for nature in the region, it was clear that:

"You need farmers on board to make any change possible."

Farmers within the fens, particularly those operating on a small scale, were seen as needing support to take action to reduce emissions, and the panel felt that those working on the land should have a greater role in the decision-making that would affect them: "In the fens, it should start with the farmers, it is 98 per cent farmland. if you can't get the farmers on board then you will never get anywhere".

There was particular concern that many farming businesses already struggled to make a profit, without the addition of new demands on their time and resources. The challenge lay in ensuring that sustainably produced, local food was valued appropriately and that farmers could plan the future of their lands with certainty. Addressing this may lie beyond the scope of public authorities in the region, but where support could be provided to local farmers, it would help avoid the costs being passed on to the public: "Cutting emissions will cost and farmers will need help with that or the costs will be passed to consumers. We need to be proactive in getting help to small farmers who can't afford to spend time applying for grants".

Amid these conversation on the challenges for farmers, one panel member reflected on the positive impact for nature that could be achieved through relatively small changes to how farms operated: "The edges of the fields will be the only places for nature to live, breed and overwinter. Some simple changes will make a massive difference".

Changing the public's relationship with food and building understanding of the impact it has on the environment was seen as key. Many panel members agreed that the lack of knowledge about how farming worked was a growing issue for the region, and the wider country:

“Our increasingly urban environment is separating people from land... many children know little about farming and what is grown or raised.”

Even for those who already thought about the environment when making purchases, the trade-offs involved in considering the impact of different food at different times of year was too complicated – very few were clear on where to shop and what to buy. It was felt that there was an opportunity to do more in schools to raise young people's awareness of these issues, both within lessons but also by providing a good example through school meals.

The discussions about people's approaches to purchasing food touched on wider issues with modern lifestyles: “Is consumption too high? Are expectations being driven by affluent, unsustainable lifestyles?”. Given that relatively small changes in how people purchased their food could make such a big difference, one panel member wondered when this shift in attitude happened: “Why do people keep buying imported produce, when did we stop eating what was available at that season?”. The scale of food waste and its implications for how intensively we farm the land was also discussed among panel members: “Food waste is a real problem in this country (I think about one-third of the food that is bought is wasted!), so tackling that could allow us to use lower-intensity farming methods”.

Many within the panel were optimistic about the potential for changes in how land is managed to reduce emissions in the Cambridgeshire Fens and for this to make a significant contribution to the UK's net zero ambitions: “Because so much of the land around here is agricultural land, it means that that is one of the things that is causing a lot of our carbon emissions at the moment, but it also means we have the potential to have quite a big impact if we do something to address that”.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR TRANSPORT

SUMMARY OF THE PANEL'S DISCUSSION ON TRANSPORT

Existing transport infrastructure and services within the fens were felt not to be good enough to provide people who currently drive with alternatives to using their cars – improving this will require big changes and large-scale investment. The priority should be providing access to decent cycle routes between villages, towns and cities and for improving public transport through more low-cost and convenient buses. The services brought in should be designed to meet the needs of the fens; not replicating what works in more built-up parts of the region.

It was felt that, if they were more affordable to buy, then many people would find electric vehicles attractive for local journeys as it would make these much cheaper. However, there were concerns about the wider implications of the shift to electric vehicles, particularly in regard to the resources used in their production.

Once it was clear that people had good alternative options for how they travel then disincentives to owning and using a car could also be needed to shift behaviour. Beyond just the cost of purchasing a car, it might be that additional parking charges or other fees could nudge people away from thinking of cars as the best way of getting around.

The needs of the most vulnerable people should always be considered in the design of transport schemes. People with disabilities who need to use a car to access services need to be able to and streets need to be safe for children and people with disabilities to comfortably use.

The differences in the needs between urban and rural areas were central to the panel's deliberations on transport, with suggestions that too often discussions are "removed from the reality of rural living". Many participants felt that provision for active travel, particularly cycling, was poor, with a lack of safe cycle routes outside the major cities and towns. It was felt that:

"More needs to be done to make these things available to people in rural areas."

Several suggested that if there were more safe cycle routes, people would use them: "That question of supply and demand is already understood with roads – it's known that the more you build roads to increase capacity, the more people use them – so you can never provide 'enough'. This has already influenced road-building, so maybe we should use the same principle with cycle infrastructure (ie if you build it, people will use it)".

To increase cycling in the fens, there will need to be "joined-up policy, lots of investment in infrastructure, changes in road rules to favour cyclists". Some suggested e-bikes would really help in the fens where "everything is so dispersed". One participant suggested the focus should be on getting "between places", especially "from smaller hubs". Talking about their previous commute to work, one said: "If there was a safe cycle route along the A10, I would definitely have used it".

Low population density across rural communities was seen as a key challenge for public transport provision. Many reflected on slow and infrequent services. Several asked what could be done to incentivise public transport use:

"There are always two things: low cost and convenience. If you don't have those, you will get an alternative."

Expensive and poor service were seen as major barriers and a common problem: "The number 9 bus takes over an hour to get to Cambridge because it stops too much, it's hourly, it stops at 7pm. So if you want to get back from Cambridge, you need to be on the bus at 6.20".

"I live in Soham and occasionally commute into Cambridge. To do so by public transport takes a minimum of 90 minutes each way (drive to Ely and then train to Cambridge) and costs £8 (to park the car in Ely and the train fare to Cambridge). By driving, I can do the journey in as little as 45 minutes each way (traffic dependent) and costs a few pounds in fuel... People are unlikely to choose a more expensive and time-consuming option on a regular basis, particularly when many people have busy lives and combine working with family life, looking after children etc."

A rail link in Wisbech was also given as an example of how public transport could be more joined up.

Buses were seen as vital to support elderly people in getting about. One participant felt he was too old to manage a bike and felt investment in public transport would benefit the most people. Another said: "People are so disadvantaged in places that are farther out. Bus services have been cut down. Elderly people can't cycle, so there is an even greater need for buses".

A couple of participants suggested that solutions could be found in community transport schemes: “Maybe a village-based taxi-type service, run by a council or bus company, with keyholder-type drivers”. Another reflected: “You can be on a bus and still stuck in traffic. You need less traffic”.

Overall, participants wanted to see traffic reduced. Described as ‘the flip-side’ to increasing the provision of alternatives, participants talked about the need to create a disincentive to use cars: “In Ely, they have free parking. Even a small charge could put people off”. It was felt by one panel member that the key to getting people out of their cars would be in providing more local services: “Instead of trying to swap those car journeys to other transport modes, should we be trying to replace them all together by ensuring that more people have jobs, shops and leisure activities nearer to where they live?”.

Electric vehicles were seen as having the potential to reduce the cost of people’s travel and work well for local journeys. There were concerns about longer journeys and the vehicles’ range. One participant described how she would love to convert her motorhome into an electric vehicle but that she has been homeless for six years and so it just doesn’t make sense for her.

Many talked about the importance of considering the needs of the most vulnerable people in the design of streets and transport infrastructure. Participants commented that it often felt like people with disabilities are left out of the conversation about the changes and we need to ensure they are not cut off from the things they need. There was broad consensus that there need to be “accessible transport options for everyone – not a one-size-fits-all approach”. One participant simply said that he “would just like to have transport”, as his area is “really poorly connected”.

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APPENDIX: EVALUATION

The panel members were invited to complete a short evaluation survey after the final deliberations. Eleven jurors (65 per cent) completed this survey. Results are presented as a percentage of total responses.

Below is a summary of the survey responses.

ENJOYMENT

Panellists were asked to score their experience based on a rating of 1 ('not at all') to 10 ('enjoyed every part of it').

The average response was 9.3 out of 10. The lowest score given was a 7.

DESCRIBE THE EXPERIENCE

Panellists were asked what three words they would use to describe the experience.

The top responses were 'informative', 'interesting', 'enjoyable', 'enlightening' and 'inspiring'.

FIGURE 1: 'THREE WORDS TO DESCRIBE THE EXPERIENCE' WORD MAP



Source: Panel member responses

QUALITY OF THE PROCESS

Panellists were asked to rate their level of agreement with statements related to the quality of the process. The below presents the level of agreement for each statement.

TABLE 1:

Statement	Response
The purpose of the panel was clear to me	100 per cent agreed or strongly agreed (11 of 11 respondents)
The process was impartial	73 per cent agreed or strongly agreed (8 of 11 respondents)
The evidence presented was balanced	82 per cent agreed or strongly agreed (9 of 11 respondents)
The evidence was accessible to me	91 per cent agreed or strongly agreed (10 of 18 respondents)
There were enough opportunities for me to share my views	91 per cent agreed or strongly agreed (10 of 18 respondents)
I felt comfortable sharing my views	100 per cent agreed or strongly agreed (11 of 11 respondents)
The panel was representative of the local area	82 per cent agreed or strongly agreed (9 of 11 respondents)

Source: Panel member responses

Commentary

The panel was positive about the quality of the process, with one participant stating: “The panel was well planned and orchestrated”.

One panellist felt that although the “objective was fixed” (in other words, “to tackle climate change”), the “process was impartial”. It was generally felt that there were “plenty of opportunities” to get views across but more time would have been beneficial.

Although the panel was seen as broadly representative, two respondents wondered if more could have been done to engage people representing a wider range of ethnicities.

AMOUNT OF TIME

The panel were asked whether enough time was provided for the following: ‘learning and hearing from speakers’, ‘discussion and deliberation’ and ‘decision-making’.

Most panellists were happy with the amount of time provided for learning (100 per cent, 11 of 11 responses), discussion (82 per cent, 9 of 11 responses) and making recommendations (82 per cent, 9 of 11 responses).

Panel members were asked to consider whether there was a specific activity they felt more time could have been given to. It was generally felt more time for discussion would have been helpful. One panellist noted that the topic of transport would have benefitted from more space within the agenda: “The question of transport seemed to me the one that was the most challenging both generally and specifically for many of the participants and it would have been good if there had been the flexibility to give this more time for discussions and formulating recommendations”.

SUPPORT

10 panellists felt they had received enough support and information before the first meeting to take part effectively, with one respondent saying 'maybe'.

All jurors felt supported in using the technology on which the meetings were hosted. One, who had only used Zoom once before, said: "given everyone was working from home it was a smooth operation and well organised".

IMPROVING THE PROCESS

Suggestions on improvements to the process varied, with some thinking the current format was good, and one saying: "Apart from being in person (which obviously isn't possible due to the situation) nothing that I can think of". Feedback largely focussed on the need for a bit more time for some activities and suggestions on how to use the time better.

In order to make the most of the time available, one panellist thought that it would be helpful to provide more upfront information: "Give an overview of what will be covered prior to joining in the same way as the two 'homework' questions were set to allow some extra thinking time".

Others felt they would have liked to have "known more about the other participants" and had "more question time with some of the speakers", as "they were very interesting and I'd love to have further discussions with many of them".

One panel member thought "more frequent short breaks" would have been good, particularly in the morning sessions.

ONE THING LEARNED

The panel members were asked: "What one thing have you learned as part of the panel that you would like others in the Cambridgeshire Fens to know?".

The responses to this varied, but centred on the increased knowledge of local impacts of climate change and the opportunity to respond as a community to this challenge. For example:

"The extent of land expected to be likely to flood if insufficient climate change fixes are applied."

"The consequences of climate change on rain patterns in the region and the expected results of this."

"That by using their car less they will make a big difference to the environment."

"How much we drive compared to the rest of the UK."

"That there is still time to make a difference."

"That we are, as the public, being listened to so when given the opportunity to speak, we should."

"That a broad spectrum of the community has concerns about climate change and an interest in finding solutions to address the problem."

QUALITY OF SPEAKERS

Panel members were asked to rate, on a scale of 1 to 5: "How helpful were the speakers in developing your knowledge of the steps needed to address the climate and nature crises in a way that is fair to everyone?".

The average score for speakers was 4.6 (out of 5) with the lowest score given being a 4.

CHANGING OPINIONS

When asked whether their opinions had changed during the process, three panel members said yes, five said maybe and three said they hadn't.

For those whose opinions changed, they highlighted the conversations about water and agriculture as being key to this. One noted the scale of the challenge became more apparent over the course of the weekend: "The large number of steps that need to be taken became more and more apparent during the speakers' presentations".

SHARING KNOWLEDGE AND PERSONAL CONFIDENCE

Panel members were asked whether "being part of this process made you more confident in sharing your knowledge and opinions about the climate and nature emergencies". Nine jurors said it had and two said maybe.

IMPACT ON THE JURORS

Most panel members felt that the process had an impact on them. When asked to rate, on a scale of 1 to 5, the 'extent you think being part of the panel has had an impact on you', the average score was 4 and the lowest score was 1.

The panellists were asked how they would describe this impact and their responses touched on a wide range of topics, including a much greater awareness of the climate and nature crises and what is contributing to them:

"I am much more aware of my consumption and my carbon footprint."

"Previously I had been focussed mainly on the impact of transport and domestic heating on climate change but through the speakers and the facilitators I found the issues are considerably broader."

For one panel member, the information and experience had little impact because they had: "Seen the issues for some 40 years so it doesn't shock me".

But for many, the process was rewarding and provided them with inspiration to engage more with both the local community and environmental issues:

"It gave me a sense of worth and I received a lot of information I did not know."

"I have been thinking about the panel and discussing the issues widely, which I would not have done previously. I was particularly affected by some of the experiences shared by other participants."

"I have felt inspired. It has shown me more people are likeminded and are desperate to help. Since the panel, I've also looked into a few avenues as to how I can serve the community and further to support this important cause."

"I feel more invested in what I can do to make a difference to my community."

LIKELIHOOD OF TAKING PERSONAL ACTION

Panel members were asked whether ‘being part of this process made you more likely to take action on the climate and nature emergencies’. 10 panellists said yes, one said maybe.

For several panel members, it was their day-to-day habits that would change:

“Reduce water usage, support climate change initiatives generally.”

“Reduce car usage and energy usage in the home.”

“I will walk more and use less water.”

“Less water usage, more organic consumption, communication with others about these issues.”

“I’ll try and take public transport wherever possible.”

Others picked up the theme from the previous questions and talked about the desire to do more locally:

“Engage locally (I shall chat to our two local councillors), look for more that I personally can do and where feasible support large initiatives for water storage which seemed one of the most important actions for this region despite the massive investment that would need.”

“Attend future forums, community groups etc.”

OPTIMISTIC ABOUT THE FUTURE

Panel members were asked whether the process had made them more or less optimistic about the future. Six panellists (55 per cent of responses) said they were more optimistic, three felt no different (27 per cent) and two felt less optimistic (18 per cent).

Those with the lowest scores said that the scale of the challenge was their key concern, alongside a mixed view on which countries would play their part in addressing these issues:

“The climate issue cannot to be resolved by a local community – it’s a global issue.”

“The impact of climate change is commutative year on year and is likely to continue regardless of human intervention.”

“While the UK may achieve our climate change targets I have grave doubts other countries will.”

“The UK is a country of all talk and no action, I will see it when I see it.”

But others took hope in what they had heard and experienced over the weekend:

“I feel the public are being listened to and are being fairly treated in the panel.”

“Coming up with solutions shows that there is hope of at least partially reducing the worst climate change impacts.”

“It was good to learn of some of the things that are being done and to realise that this topic is being tackled so seriously and that maybe people’s views are being included.”

“I wasn’t aware of the ideas, strategies and technologies that were already happening. While I think there is still so much to do, knowing that some very clever people are already working on it makes me feel a little more comfortable.”

“Because people with new ideas and people for whom this is not just a working day but a day when they can change the future are given a chance.”

“I feel more optimistic having seen that work is being done locally to address the climate change issues.”

One provided a balanced summary of how they had been left with mixed feelings on the future, and felt: “More optimistic because it feels like something is going to be done; less optimistic because so much has to be done”.

FINAL THOUGHTS

At the end of the survey, panel members were provided with space to share any thoughts not covered elsewhere. This was largely used as an opportunity to thank the team involved in convening the panel and highlight their enjoyment of the process:

“I thought the panel was very well organised, more interesting than I anticipated and the facilitators did an excellent job keeping the conversation on topic and on schedule.”

“It was a positive experience for me and I will welcome any further information and involvement. Thanks to all the staff... it was very well organised and I felt very supported in the process.”

“Just thank you to the organisers, speakers and other participants for a thoroughly enjoyable and informative weekend.”

One gave an additional note on the value of the panel process, saying: “I believe the climate change panel idea is a good way of engaging the public to get the views of ordinary people and from what I saw the selection seemed to be a broad cross-section of Fenland population”.

And one added a last point on the urgency of action:

“We have to think about giving up some things now, while we have time, or to continue weaving and give up EVERYTHING after a while...”

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