

‘We all know that we need to do more to respond to climate change – but what should social care be thinking about and doing?’

An Ask IMPACT guide
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Contents

Introduction 1

The human impact of climate change 2

How well prepared is adult social care? 4

Parallels with lessons during COVID-19? 5

Two strategies 6

Key challenges 7

How to respond 8

Useful resources 11

Introduction



In 2024, IMPACT ran a UK-wide event for members of our Assemblies - which meet biannually and help to steer our work - [thinking about the future of adult social care](#).

This was delivered in conjunction with Scottish Care, using techniques from the European School of Innovation and Design at Glasgow School of Art to lift ourselves out of the 'here and now' and to think about long-term priorities and changes.

This was the first time that Scottish Care and partners transferred such an innovative and creative way of working - which usually happens face-to-face - online, and the first time they had run discussions like this with such a diverse group of people from all four nations of the UK.

People taking part, from all over the UK and from all sorts of different backgrounds and perspectives, felt that climate change was a really important issue for adult social care and called for an Ask IMPACT guide on the topic.

Adult social care systems across the UK are made up of people, buildings, infrastructure networks, supply chains, equipment and service provision from numerous providers. There are also lots of people and lots of travelling; for example, when a home carer is travelling across a large local authority to support lots of different people in their own homes. Services and buildings might also use high amounts of energy. All of this may contribute to climate change.

Some people who draw on care and support and their families may also be at increased risk during future climate emergencies, whether this is to do with flooding, changes in air quality, and/or extreme weather events/extreme heat - yet there seemed little evidence that the sector is preparing for this sort of future.

This guide asks:

1. What are the challenges that the social care sector needs to address in the face of climate change?
2. What can the sector do to address some of these challenges?

All Ask IMPACT guides are reviewed by a panel that includes people who draw on care and support, practitioners and researchers. Their thoughts and comments are woven into our summary, particularly in terms of the emphasis we place on lived experience and co-design.

The human impact of climate change

In the UK, climate change is leading to more extreme weather events such as heatwaves, an increasing likelihood of wildfires, and increased/sudden rainfall leading to flooding. All of these can negatively impact the health and well-being of the general population – but some groups of people who draw on care and support and their families might be particularly badly affected by these changes and adverse events.

As [Inclusion Scotland \(2021\)](#), sets out:

Around the world, disabled people are being hit hard by extreme weather events. Bigger wildfires, longer droughts, and more intense storms and floods can be catastrophic for some disabled people, who are more likely to be marginalised by poverty and other social barriers that make them less likely to be evacuated safely, more prone to health risks and less likely to have insurance that protects their assets and homes.

As the Covid-19 pandemic has shown, disabled people are often among those most adversely affected in an emergency, sustaining disproportionately higher rates of morbidity and mortality, and are among those least able to access emergency support.

Around the world, sudden-onset natural disasters and extreme weather events such as heatwaves and floods can seriously affect disabled people's access to food and nutrition, safe drinking water and sanitation, health-care services and medicines, education and training, adequate housing and access to decent work.

This is not just an issue for disabled people in the developing world. We saw in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in America that federal and community evacuation warnings, shelters and emergency transport were not accessible to disabled people, and as a result, significant numbers of disabled people drowned in their own homes or in nursing homes.

Although much of this guide is about 'systems', 'services' and policy and practice guides, this all matters because of the sheer human cost and impact of these issues.

Above all:

1

Lots of care and support already feels fragile, and climate change could make this worse.

2

If it does, then it is disabled and older people who will suffer more than most.

3

Any potential solutions have to focus on the real-world impact on people's lives and have to be co-designed with people who draw on care and support and carers, otherwise they simply won't work.

How well prepared is adult social care?

Unfortunately, social care does not seem to be starting from a good position.

In April 2025, the [Climate Change Committee](#) (p.14-15) report to Parliament graded the progress in preparing for climate change in the 'Health and Wellbeing' area to be "insufficient" for delivery and implementation, and "limited" for policies and planning.

[Ferguson and Giddings \(2025\)](#) undertook a small-scale study of UK social work professional practice and standards to see if they mention the climate emergency. They found that whilst there is an increased awareness of climate change and its implications, there is still relatively little literature. They also found that the climate emergency is not well represented in relevant professional and regulatory standards, and most workers gain their knowledge of climate change from other areas of their lives rather than from social work education.

Given that social work and social care focus on groups of people who face particular disadvantages and inequalities, a growing number of people think that social care should have a role to play in tackling the implications of climate change and amplifying the voices of the seldom heard groups who could be most affected.

However, some local Councils might be starting from a fairly low base. As an example, an [online review carried out as part of an IMPACT internship](#) found that very few Councils in England seemed to have detailed, easily accessible and publicly available strategies and action plans around adult social care and climate change.

Many disabled people already feel forgotten in crisis situations, and there is a risk that this lack of preparation could make them feel like even more of an afterthought.

Failing to prepare means that it will be left to individuals and families to cope as best they can – but we need to plan how best to respond at a system level.

Parallels with lessons during COVID-19?

As with the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change is a 'system stressor' which impacts people who draw on care and support, carers, staff and the sector as a whole. There may be lessons from how public services responded to the pandemic - especially around prolonged periods of disruption to planned services:

"The COVID-19 pandemic may have long term implications for the resilience of the health and social care sector. The pandemic has caused an additional stress on the health and social care system due to increased demand... and additional pressures on local finances (likely to last longer term).

More positively, the impacts of COVID-19 may have raised awareness of the importance of understanding major threats that can disrupt lives and livelihoods, including low probability, high impact flood events." ([UK Climate Risk, 2021](#), p.2)

IMPACT has already published a [guide](#) to lessons learned during the pandemic about how to manage change - some of which may be helpful here.



A similar point has been made by LSE's Adelina Comas-Herrera, who has drawn out lessons from COVID that may also be relevant to debates about climate change.

We also need to be really honest about what COVID was actually like for disabled and older people, so many of whom had to deal with cancelled care packages, staff shortages and feeling like an afterthought. While some people saw innovative support, others felt that their needs had been overlooked. Climate change could disrupt and affect people's lives - and widen inequalities - in just the same way.

Two strategies to manage climate change

1

Mitigation is about actions such as reducing the emission of greenhouse gases (for example, through use of renewable energy or low-carbon transport). As but one example, the Welsh Government has a policy for decarbonising social care.

2

Adaptation is about building resilience into the care system to reduce the impacts of climate change. Even if mitigation is carried out, the effects of climate change in the near future mean adaptation is necessary. Away from the specifics of social care, a previous government's national adaptation programme set out potentially relevant examples of adaptation measures such as building new flood defences to protect against rising sea or river levels; planning for more green spaces in urban areas to help keep them cool and planting more drought-resistant crops; and building infrastructure that can withstand expected climate impacts such as extreme heat and flooding. All options also need to be tested against the real impact on people's lives, so that disabled and older people don't have to carry the burden of the potential solutions.

Key challenges

The sources reviewed for this guide identify a series of key challenges, including (to name but a few):

- The impact of higher temperatures on the health and well-being of people who draw on care and support and people with long-term health conditions, coupled with poor building design (which can make it harder to manage more extreme heat, whether in people's own homes or in social care services). While people are often aware of the dangers associated with very cold weather, they might be less familiar with the risks of very hot weather.
- The risk of flooding, whether to people's homes or to service settings such as care homes, hospitals and GP surgeries.
- The possible disruption to social care delivery caused by extreme weather, a lack of planning in advance for adverse weather events, and the organisational impact of having to respond to emergencies.
- Reduced access to healthy, safe and affordable food.
- Potential periods of water scarcity.
- Threats to air and water quality.

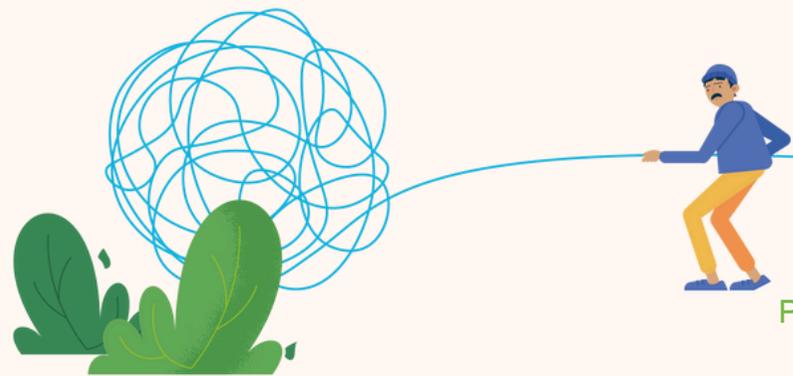
All these really, really matter, and are likely to have a particular impact on people who draw on care and support.

As a member of the IMPACT Co-production Advisory Group reviewing this guide, pointed out (just on the example of heat waves):

For many disabled people a heatwave is not just uncomfortable, it can be dangerous and it can make everyday support fall apart. Many disabled people already struggle to regulate temperature or cope with fatigue, so a spell of extreme heat can knock someone sideways. Poorly designed buildings turn into ovens, and people end up trapped in their own homes because it is simply too hot to move about or because their equipment will not run safely. These are not rare or dramatic moments; they are becoming yearly occurrences for some of us.

Other reviewers highlighted the impact that climate crises can have on connectivity - both people being stranded without support in floods or other emergencies, as well as the isolation that can result from electricity and IT/internet connections going down.

Despite this, all the evidence suggests that other, more short-term priorities and pressures are at the forefront of social care and people's minds - planning ahead to mitigate and adapt to the impacts of climate change has traditionally been less of a priority.



How can adult social care respond to these challenges?

In response, the sources reviewed here suggest a number of possible practical actions, including:

Promoting awareness of the risks associated with very hot weather, thinking about the future design of buildings, and sharing good practice and insight from local case studies around how best to address the risk of overheating in existing homes and services. As an example, the Mayor of London and partners have audited and developed a checklist to reduce the risk of heat-related premature deaths in care homes. Away from climate change, West and East Midlands ADASS have worked to help social care staff to identify the signs that someone with a learning disability is deteriorating and work with NHS staff to get the person the care they need. While this is about tackling health inequalities, a similar approach could perhaps be taken to respond to the risks of extreme heat.

Understanding which current services might be most at risk of flooding, taking preventative action to improve the defences and resilience of current buildings and making sure that future services are situated in as safe a place as possible (for example, avoiding areas likely to flood).

Better planning to understand local risks and ensure that key people are ready to respond in an emergency – lots of services have plans in place as to how they would respond in the event of a terrorist attack or a major incident, but we should also be ready to respond to a flood, wildfire or heatwave/drought. Plans should include which groups of people to prioritise, how best to communicate essential information in an emergency, how different agencies may need to work together across boundaries and how staff will respond if travel is significantly disrupted.

Improve extreme weather alerting systems, working with practitioners and those with lived experience to better understand the needs of particular groups and individuals, and co-producing the responses that might be needed. If urgent actions are needed in an emergency, it makes it even more important that likely responses are planned and co-produced in advance. This may mean that work is needed in advance with groups of people who may be most affected or who are the most marginalised and discriminated against, to ensure that everyone understands the risks we face and can be involved in developing solutions together.



Broader policies to tackle air pollution, ensure food security/safety and maintain water quality/supply.

Active policies to reduce the sector's carbon footprint. As but one example, IMAPCT has worked with a number of areas across the four nations of the UK, seeking to develop more neighbourhood-based approaches to the delivery of care and support. Whilst this might bring a number of benefits, larger cities have been seeking to do this at least in part in order to have a lead, locally-based provider and to reduce excess car journeys across the city, as home carers move from area to area to support people in different neighbourhoods.

Joint working with planning colleagues and other local authority functions to make sure that future development is more sustainable than in the past.

Building environmental considerations into commissioning and procurement processes and into national policy in more meaningful ways. Wales, as an example, has celebrated 10 years of the Well-being of Future Generations Act 2015 – seeking to improve the long-term social, economic, environmental and cultural well-being of Wales so that future generations have at least the same quality of life as now.

Prioritising and making space (and financial provision) for training and awareness-raising with front-line staff.

Beyond these specific actions, there may be three additional more cross-cutting themes to bear in mind:

1

Prioritisation: none of this will happen unless tackling climate change is seen as a priority (now and not just in the future).

2

Integration: making sure that attempts to promote a more sustainable future are joined up across different policy agendas, sectors and organisations.

2

Empowerment and co-production: while national action that is beyond the control of individuals is required, there is also scope for a more bottom-up approach which engages, harnesses and builds on the contribution, passion and commitment of individuals and communities. Given that those who may be most affected are often the most seldom heard, this may involve sectors such as social care working to make sure that people who draw on care and support, their families and local communities are able to be actively involved in these debates and in creating a better future together. As with all change in social care, co-design is crucial – otherwise we won't properly understand the issues or impacts, we won't design good solutions that actually work in practice, and we run the risk of making changes that themselves could disproportionately affect disabled and older people.

Useful resources

Although these issues have often not been centre stage in debates about adult social care, there are a growing number of resources and conversations which can help.

Alongside research, IMPACT sees ‘evidence’ as including insights from lived experience and from practice knowledge – and this guide/the resources below include a mix of these different types of knowledge.

Lived experience

Published by Australian researchers (and therefore outside our UK-focused review), [Watfern and Carnemolla \(2025\)](#) call for more inclusive climate action, arguing that people with learning disabilities will be disproportionately affected by climate change yet are rarely included in conversations about more just environmental futures.

A similar point is made by Disability Rights UK – who argue that disabled people will be hardest hit by climate change but may often have limited access to knowledge, resources, and services to effectively respond to environmental change. They call for disabled people to be involved in all debates and in shaping solutions, and put forward a series of practical [policy asks](#).

They are also working on a project called [‘Everyone’s Environment’](#) (with NPC and Re-engage), which summarises the potential impact on disabled and older people with some really powerful images and pictures.

The disabled people’s organisation, [Inclusion Scotland](#), has a report on climate change, disabled people and climate action.

Policy and practice resources

Guidance and tools from the UK Health Security Agency on topics such as the [flood-health action care for health and social providers and guidance for social managers on supporting people before and during hot weather](#).

Strategies for [decarbonising social care in Wales](#).

[Regulatory frameworks](#) to assess how social care providers reduce their environmental impact, adapt to climate change and manage risk.

A [climate adaptation toolkit](#) to help build climate resilient health and social care in Wales.

Materials from the [Climate Action and Social Care Collective](#) in Scotland to explore climate action in the context of social care.

Work by the Mayor of London and partners (including a practical checklist) to reduce the risk of [heat-related premature deaths in care homes](#).

In IMPACT’s scoping review of English local authority social care and climate change strategies and plans, one of the most prominent and easily searchable examples was from [Solihull](#).

About this guide and IMPACT

Ask IMPACT materials are designed to be trusted, accessible and practical. They are based on reviewing evidence – including research, lived experience and practice knowledge – that is captured on academic databases and on the websites of adult social care policy and practice organisations.

The HSMC Knowledge & Evidence Service (KES) is a specialist information service providing a range of research, communications and information literacy skills services to the health and social care community.

To find out more about KES, or about the searches behind this guide, you can contact them at: hsmc-kes@contacts.bham.ac.uk.

IMPACT is Improving Adult Care Together, the UK centre for implementing evidence in adult social care. Working across the four nations and with co-production at its heart, IMPACT draws on insights from research, lived experience and practice knowledge to make a difference to front-line services and to people's lives.

Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the Health Foundation, it is being led by Professor Jon Glasby at the University of Birmingham, with a Leadership Team of 13 other academics, people using social care services, and policy and practice partners – along with a broader consortium of key stakeholders from across the sector and across the four nations of the UK.

