

# Blog

## The Housing Quality Network

December 2019

### The end of the world as we know it?

It's been quite a year in the climate change debate – Greta Thunberg lecturing world leaders, the hottest ever temperature in Europe, and flooding across many parts of the continent.

Most people know that urgent action is needed if we're to limit the global increase in temperature to 1.5 degrees centigrade – the figure set by the United Nations as a tipping point – but many people in the west are sceptical. They ask: what about China and India? They produce much more greenhouse gas than we do. Even if everyone in the UK reverted to a stone age lifestyle it still wouldn't save the planet.

Well, the UK was the first country to industrialise and we've over two centuries of carbon emissions to make up for, and we've a moral duty to lead the way. That's why the government has set a target of net zero greenhouse emissions by 2050. The main greenhouse gas is carbon dioxide, but methane, nitrous oxide and ozone also contribute to global warming. This means that UK homes will need to become carbon neutral by 2050, with no home heated by gas, oil or coal, but instead connected to district heating schemes, solar panels, heat pumps and 'green' forms of energy. It means no new homes can be connected to the gas grid after 2025.

Given that 80% of the homes that'll exist in 2050 are already built it also means a huge programme of investment to retrofit existing homes, to improve insulation, change heating systems, and move to low energy lighting. It'll also involve a much wider use of smart technologies, like smart meters and movement sensors so that energy use can be reduced.

On top of this, we'll need to invest in making new and existing homes better connected for cycling, walking and public transport. By 2030, petrol and diesel cars are likely to be phased out, so we'll need more charging points. We also have to save water. In the UK we consume about 150 litres per person per day, more than most European countries. Why is this important? Because it takes energy to deliver water to our homes, and water will become increasingly precious. That means better use of grey water systems, and showers instead of baths. Climate change will also mean hotter summers, stronger winds and heavier rainfall, so we'll have to invest in robust fences, roofs and rainwater goods.

All this amounts to a stonking shopping bill of billions of pounds. The question is: are we up for this challenge?

Sadly, no, according to the government's Committee on Climate Change.

In February 2019, the committee published a report called *UK Housing: Fit for the Future?* and concluded that UK housing is largely unprepared for dealing with climate change. This year, [HQN's own member survey found](#) a disappointing level of commitment to genuine action on climate change. Many respondents felt that their organisation was not showing any leadership on the matter. Almost three quarters felt their employer was not doing enough to cut carbon emissions, and only half of the organisations polled had an up to date strategy.

This is worrying because heating and hot water for UK homes make up 25% of total energy use and 15% of our total greenhouse gas emissions. An additional 4% of greenhouse gas emissions are the result of electricity used in UK homes for appliances and lighting. The average home emits 2.7 tonnes of carbon dioxide a year, equal to three hot air balloons. This means that the housing sector has a massive part to play in tackling climate change.

To help you, [HQN has published a toolkit on climate change](#). This isn't just about building new homes and retrofitting existing ones. It covers every aspect of your organisation's culture and activity, starting with the spread of your homes and whether a leaner, more compact structure would be beneficial.

Perhaps stock disposals, swaps or mergers will help to reduce your carbon impact? It also covers your role as an employer in reducing the carbon footprint of your staff, encouraging them to change their lifestyles, and your role in procurement, making sure that your contractors and suppliers are signed up to your ethos and targets. Additionally, it covers your role as a landlord and how you can engage with your residents to see how they can help you to move this forward.

But, above all, this must start at the top with your board or committee. They must show that they're taking this seriously. Only then will the message spread across the whole organisation that the issue needs urgent attention. Regrettably, only half of the respondents in our survey said that they had a lead or champion on climate change, and this is often delegated to a sustainability officer or similar post. So, if you're reading this and you feel passionately that your organisation isn't doing enough, then we encourage you to give it a metaphorical kick up the backside. You'll have our full support in doing so.

## About the author

**Colin Wiles** has worked in affordable housing for almost forty years, for local authorities and housing associations. For the past eight years he has worked as a consultant, working on a range of projects for dozens of clients across the sector. He specialises in governance, service reviews, research and policy work. Colin has written extensively on housing and planning issues for Inside Housing, 24 Housing and The Guardian. He is a co-founder of SHOUT, the Campaign for Social Housing.