

Climate Targets Briefing Paper

1. Introduction

Current Green Party of England and Wales (GPEW) climate policy is tightly aligned with the Paris Agreement and the annual Conferences of the Parties (COP). Lack of progress, and the latest science, show that those processes have clearly failed and the 1.5C aspirational target of the Paris Agreement is increasingly out of reach. This motion proposes to loosen our policy links to those slow-moving agreements and to clearly set out that the UK will accelerate fossil fuel reductions and climate mitigation. This approach will have multiple benefits in terms of technology development, improved industrial capacity, domestic employment and in demonstrating international leadership. This does not negate the GPEW's internationalist view but is simply a recognition that the current system will not deliver on the timescale required.

The following is additional briefing information about the motion (see [1]) and the need for it.

The Climate Emergency Policy Working Group (CEPWG) is proposing this motion to Autumn 2024 conference and is endorsing it for accreditation.

2. Policy Changes

This section provides briefing information for each individual policy change (see [1]) proposed and why we are proposing to change it.

CC013 International Governance

This policy has been changed to downplay the support and dependence on the UNFCCC (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change) processes along with the yearly meetings of Conference of Parties (COP).

Despite years of COP meetings, worldwide emissions continue to climb and are not forecast to reduce significantly by 2030 (see [2]). Oil nations and other lobbyists now dominate the COPs and put forward narratives that are contrary to climate science – such as UAE's Al Jaber questioning the necessity to phase out fossil fuels to achieve climate objectives (see [3]).

The Green Party policy is also proposed to be changed to reduce the support and reliance on the IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) science in setting the frame for policy in [7]. The IPCC carry out a very useful function in collating the latest scientific view on the science. But this does take time and by the time it is published, every five years, it can be out of date (see [4]). The IPCC in their most recent Summary for Policy Makers, [6] Table SPM.2, still shows a carbon budget available that keeps warming to 1.5C in 2100. There is more on the 1.5C temperature target below.

By contrast, Hansen et al, Global Warming in the pipeline (see [5]) shows a markedly different view. [5] presents a very much more dire state of affairs for the climate, with “equilibrium global warming for today's GHG amount is 10C”.

It is difficult to reconcile the Hansen view and the IPCC view. While the Green Party do not have the scientific expertise to judge which of these is likely to be right, with current policy [7] we have made choice to align with the more optimistic IPCC view.

The Precautionary Principle is mentioned a number of times in the Policies for a Sustainable Society (PSS) (see [7]). In particular policy ST301 applies to technologies that risk catastrophes, which surely applies to today's fossil fuel technologies and the impending climate catastrophe.

Given different scientific views, we propose to shift the Green Party basis of policy to allow consideration of climate science that is considerably less optimistic than the IPCC consensus. This aligns with the Precautionary Principle.

A further issue with IPCC output is that in Working Group 3, it is heavily based on Integrated Assessment Models with particular scenarios that “perpetuate stark global inequalities” [8].

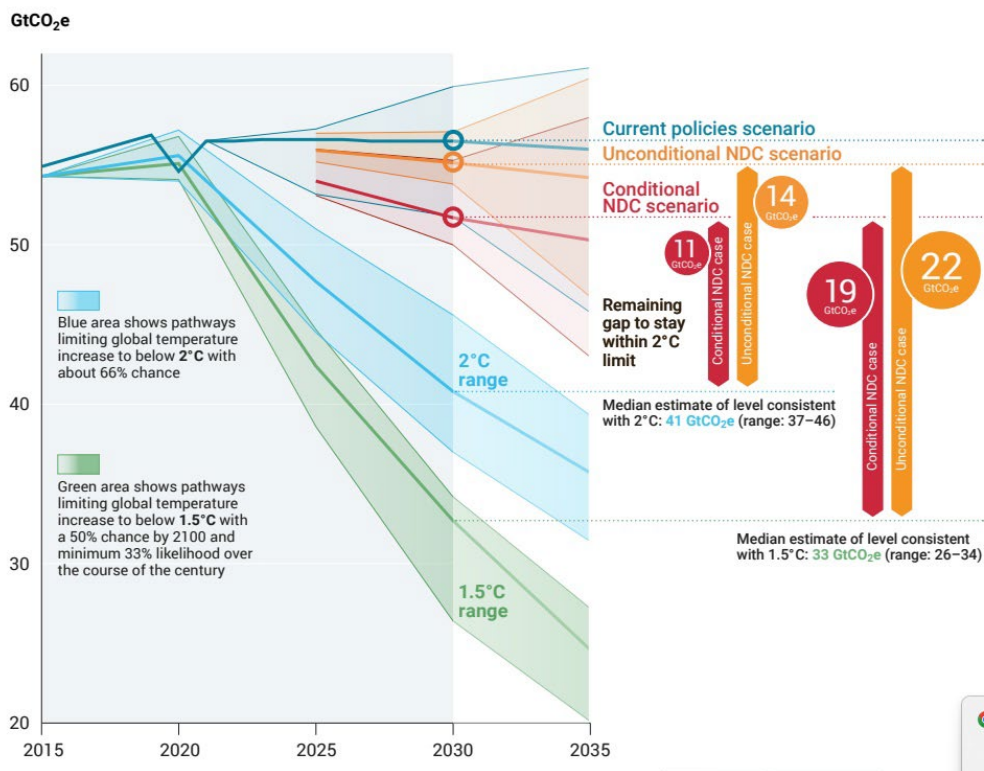
Another criticism of IPCC science is that nearly all of their 1.5C scenarios rely on overshooting 1.5C and then bringing temperatures back below 1.5C by 2100. This is supposedly achieved by large negative emissions in the second half of the century having reached net zero in mid-century. See [14] figure SPM.5.

This in turn relies on future generations capturing CO2 from the atmosphere using such technologies as Direct Air Carbon Capture, Bioenergy with Carbon Capture and Storage (BECCS) and by nature capturing more CO2 (eg by forests). There are questions about how well such technologies and nature based solutions will work in practice and at such a large scale. So the supposed 1.5C scenarios proposed by the IPCC ([14]) may well not be realistic. This is before considering the morality of the current generation continuing to choose to emit now and leaving future generations to clear up the mess later (see Future Generations Act below).

CCO14

Old Point 1. Previous policy was for the Green Party to be an advocate for the Paris Agreement ([11]). This Agreement relied heavily on each nation making its own voluntary contribution towards meeting climate goals ([11] article 3). These are known as Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs). Each five years countries are expected to increase their ambition ([11] Article 4).

This agreement is nearly ten years old now, and despite countries setting these NDCs, global emissions are still rising (see figure ES.4 of [2] below). Just setting NDC targets is not enough; they have to be turned into policies and they have to be strong enough. If the current NDCs are implemented, then emissions are forecast to fall a bit by 2035, but nothing like enough to be in the range compatible with 1.5C or 2C temperature increase. But with current policies, emissions will be much the same as today as they were in 2015 and would be in 2035. This is shown in [2] Figure ES.4 reproduced below.



So instead of countries increasing their NDC ambition, they end up reducing the ambition of their NDCs as their policy implementation has been too weak to meet the previous NDC.

Note that if Hansen et al science was applied to the figure above with current policies, greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere will continue to increase putting us on the road to 10C temperature rise.

While the Paris Agreement may be the only international agreement that there is, the Green Party can no longer go on advocating an agreement that may well not reduce yearly emissions from 2015 to 2035. So this advocacy is being removed from policy so we are in a better position to critique it, rather than advocate for it. But we still want to advocate for parts of it, but with much more focus on actual implementation.

New Point 1. We do want the Green Party position to be clearly facing up to the situation we are in and not living on the “Hopium” (false hope) of the Paris Agreement. Neither do we not want to be “Doomers” (messaging that can depress and demoralize the public) position either.

We propose to add a new point 1 to CC014 to express that every fraction of a degree temperature rise avoided does help. A longer form of the policy statement and its framing is included in the overall Climate Narrative section below.

New Point 2. The sector-by-sector policies to address the emissions reductions are largely included in other chapters of the PSS [7], such as Energy, Food, Housing, Land and Transport. This motion does not strengthen these policies, but it is recognised that these policies are insufficient to be compatible with 1.5C temperature targets. This motion is just to adjust the framing of the policy targets within a revised view of the science and failure of international governance. Further strengthening of the sector policies are required. See more in the Climate Narrative below.

Point 2 also addresses climate finance ([11] article 9), capacity building ([11] article 11) and technology transfer ([11] article 6). Although policy removes the Green Party advocacy of the Paris Agreement, these aspects of the Paris Agreement are still important. In particular for Climate finance we have other policy, [7] IP254, that is clear on the commitment required from “developed countries” (using terminology of the Paris Agreement), such as the UK.

Point 3 reiterates the part of the Paris Agreement relating to Loss and Damage ([11] Article 8). Even if we are not advocating the Paris Agreement, we are still advocating for addressing Loss and Damage. This is addressed further in PSS ([7] IP254). Evidence continues to accumulate about the scale of climate damage, including the recent report from the Potsdam Institute [9]. The challenge is going to be to address this loss and damage in an equitable way. For both Climate Finance (point 2) and Loss and Damage (point 3), it is considered a success that these were in the Paris Agreement, but the implementation of the agreement has not matched the ambition (see [10] and [13] that has UK’s contribution to Climate Finance “Highly Insufficient”).

Point 4 reiterates the part of the Paris Agreement ([5] Article 5) relating to sinks and reservoirs of greenhouse gases. It stresses that our advocacy should be based on actions within the UK. Policy. PSS in this respect has recently been enhanced in both the Land Chapter (eg for peat [7] LD402) and Wildlife and Habitats (to align with the Convention on Biological Biodiversity [7] WH103). There is also a stress in policy on reduction of UK reliance on land in other countries that will reduce the international pressure on carbon sinks and reservoirs. This includes policies that have recently been enhanced in land use and forestry (see [7]) to stress more self-sufficiency in the UK for food and wood products.

Point 5 continues to stress the importance of restricting the import of high carbon goods. This aligns with policy CC016 that focuses on consumption emissions (see clarification below) - as opposed to production emissions. The UK consumption emissions include a high amount of imported emissions from such high carbon goods. Green Party Policy (PSS) relies

on the restrictions of advertising of such goods ([7] CC121 enhanced to ban them in Autumn 2023) and on the Carbon Border Adjustment Tax ([7] EC947) to increase their price substantially. The wording is such as to emphasize the actions that the UK can take without waiting for international collaboration.

CC016

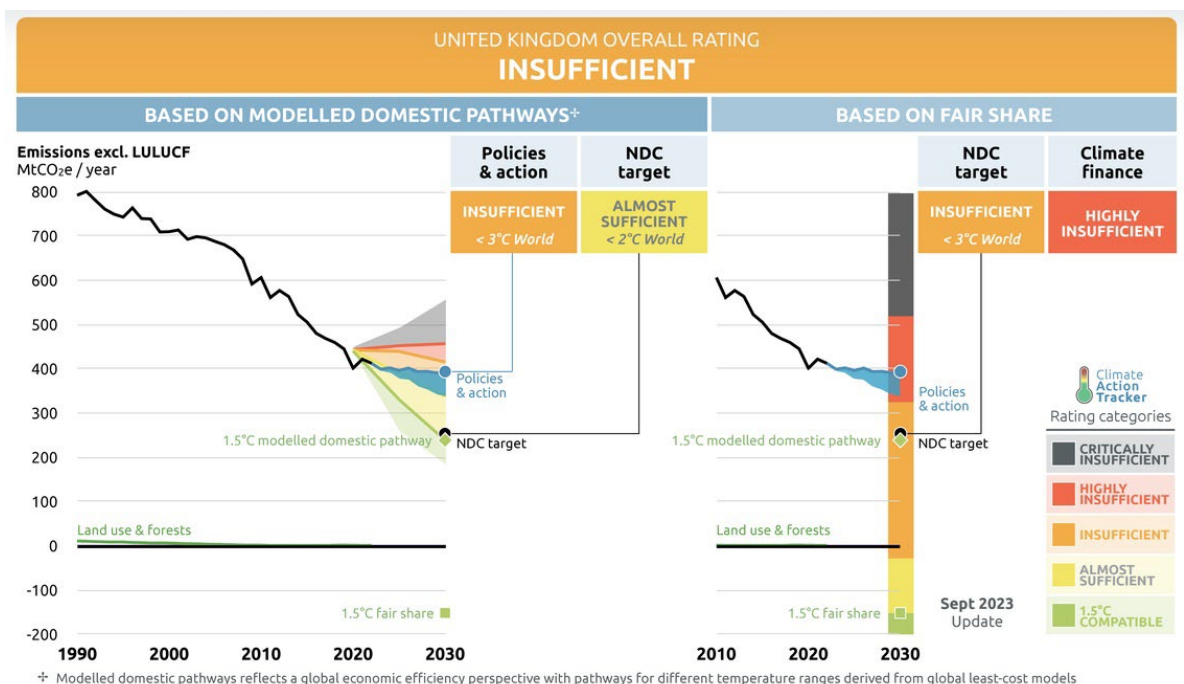
This policy is clarified to be clear that it is addressing consumption emissions rather than production emissions.

CC110

Point 1 and 3 proposes to address accountability to future generations. Although there are numerous mentions of future generations in PSS [7], particularly in the Core Values and the Philosophical Basis, there is currently no explicit policy to have a Future Generations Act equivalent to that in Wales (see [12]), for the whole of England and Wales. Despite this the Green Party has promoted such an Act ([14]).

While the Welsh Act is not just to address climate policies, such an act is particularly important consideration for assessing the policies relating to climate. In particular, such an act would ensure that we are not making choices to continue to emit greenhouse gases now by putting a very large responsibility on future generations to both emit less and remove greenhouse gases from the atmosphere later assuming on the availability of technologies that may not come to pass. This is the current approach as proposed by the IPCC (see above).

Point 2 removes the clause about 1.5C as this is now not possible. Even if 1.5C is not possible the Climate Change Committee need to set budgets on the basis of what is required to limit temperature rises based on global equity and climate science. The link between CCC targets and meeting particular climate targets is already broken – although this is not well advertised. An independent body, Climate Action Tracker (see [13], reproduced below), assess policies and targets for each country including the UK. They assess that the UK 1.5C fair share of emissions is minus 150 MtCO₂e in 2030, whereas the CCC have advised the government that an NDC of plus 250 MtCO₂e/year is sufficient. Clearly there is a large difference in interpretation of what is equitable between the CCC and Climate Action Tracker.



The Committee on Climate Change has changed their name to the Climate Change Committee (CCC) some time ago. We are using this motion to update this (See [19]). Point 4 reinforces their role in looking at sectoral limits for emissions.

LP403 and FA301

Most of the PSS does not contain the phrase “net zero”. These two policies are an exception. The term “net zero” has received justifiable criticism as it has been used to just continuing to emit while having offsets which net them out. Sometimes negative emissions have a place but they are very minor compared with having to reduce emissions. With the term “net zero” often more attention is paid to the “net” than the “zero” – whereas from a number point of view “net” is very small and the achievement of “zero” is very much larger.

Some commentators label “net zero” means “not zero” as a façade to disguise inaction – see [20].

For this reason the “net zero” in these two policies is being replaced with “zero”.

3. Costings

This motion has no direct cost impacts as it does not propose any further measures to reduce emissions. This motion just reframes the climate science, the governance and the context of existing policies to reduce emissions. This motion [1], when passed, may be used in support of proposing new climate policies to reduce emissions. Any costs for those new policies will be addressed within briefing papers for those motions.

4. Campaigning

This motion is relevant to any climate campaign that the Green Party supports. In particular:

- It should be used to be cautious about any campaign that is associated with meeting 1.5C climate targets. Such support may provide false hope as this target is no longer credible
- It should be used to be cautious about any campaigns linked round the annual COPs. It is possible that providing support will endorse what is now, in some ways, a corrupt process
- It should be used in any campaign that implies the Green Party has a plan to answer the Climate Emergency. It is clear from this framing that we do not have policies to do this. They may be better than other parties.

5. Counter arguments

This motion removes the under-pinning of the Green Party climate policy on the UNFCCC, IPCC, the Paris Agreement, 1.5C target and annual COPs. It could be argued that this motion does not put anything substantive in its place. Some would argue that we should continue to persist with this failed or failing framework until we have something better to replace it with.

6. Climate Narrative

There follows a climate narrative that can be used to explain the Green Party position. This is too long to include in policy. It may not be apparent from the briefing above how it all fits together and this pulls the strands together into a narrative.

Green Party policy is written against the background of increasing periods of days, months and even years when world temperature rises have breached 1.5C over pre-industrial times.

Despite all the efforts of such bodies as the United Nations, nations, local governments, corporations and individuals, levels of greenhouse gases emitted and levels in the atmosphere are still increasing and with it a rapidly increasing earth energy imbalance.

The impact of the increase of the level of warming is becoming better understood and is generally agreed to be worse, rather than better, than previously thought.

The Green Party, following the science, does not think that net zero by 2050 of production emissions in the UK is a responsible and equitable policy response to where we are now. By 2050, some scientists warn that world temperature rises will be most likely more than 2C over pre-industrial times.

The Green Party has a policy target of zero CO₂ consumption emissions in the UK in a decade. Even this target is now an insufficient UK response as its fair share to even have a 50% chance of keeping temperature rises below the 1.5C target.

Unfortunately, although Green Party policy presents a very radical policy set, it does not propose sufficient policies to achieve the policy target of zero CO₂ consumption emissions for the UK in a decade. We have to continue to look for further policies that would supplement this radical policy set – not water them down.

At this stage, the climate science tells us that every 0.1C rise in temperature rise that we can avoid may well be crucial in avoiding tipping points in the climate system. Going over such tipping points can lead to vastly accelerated warming, extinctions of species, multi-metre sea level rise and uninhabitable areas. We must avoid these at all costs.

So breaching any particular target, such as 1.5C, 2C, or how much emissions in a particular year, is not a reason to give up climate policy ambition. We must take every action to avoid the tipping points.

7. 1.5C Temperature Target

The 1.5 C temperature target was first introduced in the Paris Agreement [11]. This was due to extensive lobbying by island states (eg Marshall Islands) that will be badly impacted by sea level rises above that – in some cases threatening to leaving whole countries below sea level [15].

The wording in the Paris Agreement is “Holding the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels and pursuing efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels, recognizing that this would significantly reduce the risks and impacts of climate change;”.

Even 1.5C temperature rises does have impacts as we see today, especially in terms of frequency of high impact weather impacts with associated loss and damage, as well as major damage to coral reefs (see [18] eg Figure SPM.2).

This is not precise enough and has received further clarification:

- What is considered to be pre-industrial?
- What probability of achieving the targets is acceptable?
- Over what time period is a particular temperature target to be measured?
- In what year is the temperature target to be judged against?

The baseline given for pre-industrial is often 1850 to 1900. That is not because that is truly pre-industrial, but that this is a period for which there are good enough temperature records to do comparisons. By revising the baseline in this way may possibly result in current temperature rises being understated by 0.1C. Furthermore, different scientific bodies measure the rise from the same baseline differently.

When predicting future temperature rises, there is quite a lot of uncertainty in the science. Even the earth's response to a certain increase in CO₂ in the atmosphere has quite a large range. So often the 1.5C target is quoted with a 50% probability and the 2C target with a 66% probability. This sort of probability figures would be completely unacceptable if taking other risks (eg an aircraft crashing or a nuclear power station exploding). This narrative again tends to understate the need for action.

There is considerable natural temperature variation from year to year – especially in El Nino years. So having world average air temperatures over 1.5C for one day, one month or one year is not sufficient to say that a temperature limit has been exceeded. How the IPCC propose to measure this is to take an average over 20 years and then take the mid-point is over 1.5C. This way of measuring, while being scientific, means that it can only be announced that 1.5C has been breached ten years after it has happened.

From an IPCC point of view, whether 1.5C or 2C limit is deemed to have been breached is whether it has been in 2100. This allows over-shoot – in other words the temperature goes over the limit but returns to it by 2100. The reduction will be achieved, in the second half of the 21st century by removing CO₂ from the atmosphere as described above. This formulation again supports government narratives that we are being ambitious enough in reducing emissions to meet Paris Agreement targets, but meanwhile adding to the risks that we go over tipping points in the meantime.

These issues are further explained in BBC article [16] and Climate.gov [17].

References

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