Climate Majority Project

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SAFER

*STRATEGIC ADAPTATION FOR EMERGENCY RESILIENCE

Making climate adaptation mainstream

Written by

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What do people in the UK picture when they think of climate change?

Too often, they can't picture it at all: an abstract story of invisible gases, distant timelines, and carbon footprints. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this 'colourless, odourless' representation of climate has struggled to inspire the scale of mobilisation that climate breakdown demands. To mobilise a majority, climate action must become something people can feel as well as understand – not just a different story, but a different way of living.

Until recently, **climate adaptation** has been sidelined within the broader environmental movement, dismissed as a distraction or even a threat to urgent mitigation efforts. **This rationale report equips advocates with narrative tools to challenge this mindset, reframing ecologically sound adaptation as a legitimate and foundational form of climate action.**

Climate impacts are no longer a distant threat; they are a present reality, with worse still to come. In this context, adaptation is set to become a pillar of environmental policy, grassroots organising, and public advocacy. While some naturally fear that this signals a retreat into fatalism, the opposite is true. Adaptation, done right, is not about giving up on curbing emissions. In fact, the instinct to protect our communities from climate risk – while grounded in local self-interest – can become a powerful driver of emissions reduction and global climate justice, **by sparking a wider public reckoning with climate realities**. From atmosphere to neighbourhood, from hypothetical to here-and-now, adaptation can bring both threat and response into focus – transforming public engagement with the great crisis of our times.

Rupert Read | Rosie Bell | Liam Kavan-

Adaptation remains the Cinderella of climate change, under-resourced, underfunded and often ignored.

The Committee on Climate Change

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Foreword

Climate adaptation has regularly been misunderstood as a concept and deprioritised as a policy.

Too often it's seen as an admission of defeat – something to resort to when efforts at climate mitigation, or emissions reduction, are failing. Even some at the heart of the climate movement view it as a distraction from the urgent task of decarbonisation. For successive governments, it has been the Cinderella of climate change: under-resourced and underfunded. Unsurprisingly then, as the Climate Change Committee said in its most recent report, progress on adaptation 'is either too slow, has stalled, or is heading in the wrong direction'. When adaptation measures are pursued, they frequently take the form of short-term fixes like flood barriers, or piecemeal reactive measures that can come at a high carbon cost - and, crucially, maintain an attitude of preservation towards a broken political economy.

This groundbreaking report sets out a route to changing all that. It shows that, far from being a distraction from decarbonisation, strategic adaptation can act as a catalyst - transforming perceptions of climate breakdown from an abstract threat to a lived and shared reality. Rooted in the immediacy of local community resilience rather than the abstraction of greenhouse gases, strategic adaptation can become a powerful tool to raise engagement among the majority. It's about grounding climate action in real communities and real lives, restoring collective purpose and identity in the face of a common threat, and galvanising public support for the radical climate intervention we so urgently need.

At a time when the populist right is deliberately weaponising climate action as the next stage in their endless culture wars, adaptation can deliver a different kind of transformation too: a depolarising approach. Here is a way of doing politics that moves beyond culture wars, through programmes that are local, collaborative, and respectful. Indeed, its potential to become a bulwark against further attacks on climate action might turn out to be one of its most important contributions. As well as strengthening them against natural disasters, Strategic Adaptation can offer communities new ways to bind together - fostering their inner resilience, connecting with the previously disengaged or sceptical, offering authentic hope and, over time, earning the permission to dream bigger, together. As the climate emergency accelerates, that task is more urgent than ever. For all these reasons and more, I strongly commend this report to you.

Caroline Lucas
writer, campaigner, and former Green Party Leader

Executive summary

Until recently, adaptation has often been delegitimised as a form of climate action.

This rationale report aims to provide advocates, campaigners, and policymakers with a set of narrative tools to reposition adaptation as a foundational component of climate action.

Readers are encouraged to consider all the rationale offered here as an integrated whole - but they may also wish to navigate directly to the segments that apply to their area of work or campaigning, to reflect upon how best the case for adaptation can be made to their communities, stakeholders, and audiences.

Introduction

Climate advocacy has historically prioritised decarbonisation over adaptation. Alongside the urgent need to cut emissions at source, advocates have also felt concern that focusing on adaptation could weaken political will for mitigation. While adaptation has long featured in international climate diplomacy, especially regarding the Global South, it has remained marginal in mainstream climate activism and policy, particularly in the Global North. Yet as climate impacts intensify - surpassing the 1.5°C warming threshold with no signs of emissions slowing - the need for adaptation is undeniable, not least to strengthen the urgent case for emissions reduction. Adaptation can no longer be treated as a last resort, but must become a pillar of integrated climate action.

Strategic adaptation, focused on precaution and transformation rather than mere crisis response, can foster climate awareness and agency among disengaged communities, counteract political opportunism, build resilience at local levels, and ultimately mobilise public support for system change.

Executive summary

1. Climate Movement lens: adaptation campaigning as a route to widespread mindset shift

1.1 Overcoming 'soft denial'

While outright climate denial has declined, 'soft denial' persists: an assumption that current mitigation efforts will prevent serious climate damage. Committing to adaptation challenges this complacency by dismantling illusions of safety.

1.2 Adaptation as a catalyst for response to climate reality

Visible, concrete action to address local, tangible threats makes climate breakdown real for communities, bridging global issues with daily life.

1.3 Broadening engagement

Climate action with a sole focus on decarbonisation has become prone to political polarisation, limiting public participation and engagement, especially among working-class and marginalised communities. Adaptation can offer a more inclusive narrative and counter perceptions of climate action as elitist or irrelevant by addressing immediate concerns like rising energy costs, food security, and community resilience.

1.4 Steering the adaptation narrative

As impacts worsen and adaptation attracts mainstream attention, the risk grows that political opportunists and vested interests will co-opt the agenda in ways that undermine decarbonisation and exacerbate inequality. Climate advocates must lead in mainstreaming long-term, strategic resilience as an alternative to short-term, reactive, fragilising measures.

1.5 Co-benefits of adaptation

Adaptation activity can improve quality of life, from home economic benefits to community cohesion, countering the social fragmentation and poor mental health that can drive unsustainable behaviour. Adaptation to preserve ecological health and strengthen social bonds supports 'antifragility', allowing communities to recover from shocks and find renewal.

2. Decision-maker lens: adaptation as a policy priority

2.1 Domestic policy

2.1.1 Protecting citizens

In the UK, accelerating climate impacts present many severe risks to unprepared citizens and systems. A national adaptation strategy is needed to protect communities and infrastructure. Given the unpredictability of climate impacts, flexible resilience approaches are required that prepare for a range of scenarios.

2.1.2 Delivering government

Without adaptation, climate impacts will undermine economic productivity, public services, and national security, with the potential for cascading factors to jeopardise basic support systems. Adaptation is needed if government promises are to be kept.

2.1.3 Establishing the limits of adaptation

Climate impacts will exceed our capacity to adapt. Serious national commitment to adaptation will quickly reveal its limits, strengthening the case for mitigation.

2.2 Global dilemmas; foreign policy

2.2.1 Navigating collective action problems

Adaptation does not suffer from the same collective action issues that inhibit global decarbonisation. While mitigation only works if billions of others join in, adaptation action directly benefits participants. Local collaboration in the face of a common threat can also help strengthen collective identity.

2.2.2 Geopolitical stability and immigration

Supporting adaptation globally can help keep vulnerable regions resilient and habitable, reducing displacement pressures and associated social tensions.

2.2.2 International precedent and soft power

The UK has historically played a leadership role in climate policy. It cannot change the priorities of other nations unilaterally, but its level of visibility may allow it to influence by example on adaptation action.

3. Defining adaptation

Not all efforts to adapt reduce vulnerability - some fail, or even worsen risks. Clear definitions aligned with environmentalism and climate justice are urgently needed to prevent maladaptation and mainstream strategic approaches.

3.1 Adaptation frames in brief

Reactive Adaptation: short-term responses to immediate climate impacts, such as flood defenses.

Deep Adaptation: preparing for systemic collapse scenarios, including relocation or managed retreat.

Transformative Adaptation: long-term systemic changes integrating decarbonization and resilience-building, such as wetland restoration or local food systems.

Strategic Adaptation (proposed approach): a holistic framework combining elements of all three, prioritizing local resilience and ecological health

Executive summary

3.2 Locally focused and attuned

Adaptation requirements vary greatly according to local geography. Adaptation must be local, community-led, and tailored to specific regional needs, which can naturally help build solidarity and bonds of community.

3.3 Foregrounding inner-outer resilience

Climate adaptation goes beyond physical interventions to include psychological and community resilience. Climate grief, anxiety, and social fragmentation can undermine engagement and action, creating a vicious cycle. Strengthening community bonds enhances collective resilience, fostering trust, mutual support, and climate action. Communities that integrate inner resilience can cope and recover better in crises.

4. Advocacy routes: key themes and activities

4.1 Biodiversity and ecosystem resilience

Restoring ecosystems such as wetlands and woodlands enhances flood resilience and carbon sequestration. Integrating conservation with local adaptation efforts strengthens environmental and community resilience.

4.2 Retrofit and energy efficiency

Retrofitting homes and infrastructure combines adaptation with decarbonization, enhancing resilience to climate extremes while improving energy efficiency.

4.3 Business transition

The private sector must integrate adaptation into long-term planning. Insurers in particular can drive resilience by incentivizing climate-proof investments. Engaging businesses in strategic adaptation promotes sustainable practices while shifting mindsets beyond reliance on tech solutions to climate change.

4.4 Food security

Local food systems must be strengthened to reduce reliance on fragile global supply chains. Local food initiatives are often ahead of government in building resilience.

4.5 Water as a keystone resource

Water scarcity poses one of the greatest climate risks. National strategies should include investment in water conservation, rainwater harvesting, and flood-resilient urban planning.

4.6 Inner resilience and mental health

Building individual and collective inner resilience is a category of transformative adaptation and strengthens overall inner and outer adaptive capacity. Existing initiatives work to resource climate distress and build agency in community, and advocacy should build on these.

4.7 Resilient communities

Community-led adaptation can foster wellbeing and grow local capacity to withstand climate shocks. Strengthening social ties enhances both disaster response and long-term resilience. Advocacy should focus on amplifying and replication the work of local community resilience initiatives.

4.8 Possible futures: engaging collective imagination

Adaptation entails active imagination of alternative futures. Arts, media, and education, as well as environmentalism, have a role in helping society re-imagine resilient, sustainable ways of life through times of hardship.

5. Policy recommendations and actions

5.1 Develop and fund a National Adaptation Plan

The UK needs a comprehensive adaptation strategy, including flood defenses, resilient infrastructure, food and water security measures, and community preparedness initiatives.

5.2 Citizens' adaptation toolkit

A public information campaign should provide households and communities with practical, locally relevant guidance on climate preparedness and resilience-building.

5.3 Citizens' assemblies on adaptation

Deliberative democracy initiatives can ensure that adaptation policies reflect local needs and foster widespread public engagement.

Conclusion

We are entering a permanent global emergency. Adaptation is inevitable, but how it is framed will determine its impact. A reactive, piecemeal approach risks entrenching inequality and prolonging unsustainable practices. Instead, Strategic Adaptation adaptation is a powerful, proactive response that builds resilience, helps decarbonise and restore nature, protects the most vulnerable, and strengthens support for systemic change.

Climate advocacy and policymaking urgently need a shift in mindset: adaptation is not doomerism but a necessary and empowering response to climate breakdown. Integrating adaptation with decarbonisation and ecological restoration offers the best hope for limiting harm.

Introduction

Until recently, adaptation has been sidelined within the broader environmental movement and institutional landscape - often dismissed as a distraction or even a competitor to urgent mitigation efforts.

Amid escalating climate impacts and poor progress on emissions cuts, this mindset must change urgently. **The report that follows is intended to equip advocates with narrative tools to reframe adaptation as a legitimate and foundational form of climate action.** To campaigners and policymakers, it offers a set of detailed arguments that they can use to challenge the assumption that adaptation approaches undermine decarbonisation - and to position adaptation as critical to an integrated climate response.

Background

From global institutions seeking multilateral solutions, to activists demanding government action and public mobilisation, the field of climate advocacy has until recently focused overwhelmingly on decarbonisation (also known as climate mitigation, this is the effort to reduce emissions of heat-trapping greenhouse gases to prevent further global overheating).

Since the early days of climate diplomacy, conversations around climate adaptation have been prominent at the intergovernmental level, particularly regarding escalating climate impacts in the Global South and the need for 'loss and damage' compensation. However, for just as long, powerful interests have sought to fight decarbonisation by any means possible. Adaptation narratives have been deployed in the past to suggest that prevention is unnecessary – and not only by vested interests.[1] Accordingly, in the COP arena where a strategy of 'stubborn optimism' guards the space of decarbonisation, the role of adaptation is circumscribed in policy and messaging.[2] Similarly, driven by a laudable refusal to accept possible dire outcomes for populations on the front lines of climate breakdown, climate advocacy and activism has treated adaptation with suspicion. Adapting to impacts signals failure to prevent impacts – and accepting failure can sound a lot like giving up. Adapting to impacts in the Global North furthermore might suggest abandonment of populations in the Global South, who are less culpable when it comes to climate damage and mostly at far greater risk. If we want to prevent climate impacts for those worst affected, we don't prioritise adaptation, especially not somewhere like the UK.

1 As Ostrander (2022) reports, in earlier days of climate and adaptation research, some researchers suggested that human innovation was equal to climate threat and emphasised developing technologies over mitigation strategies. See e.g. Ausubel (1991).

2 'Stubborn optimism' is a strategy aimed at dismantling a sense of powerlessness, orienting mindsets and behaviour towards success, and refusal to allow failure into the space of possibility. See e.g. Rivett-Carnac (2021), Figueres (2024), Global Optimism (2025), Balch (2018).

This report suggests that on the contrary, for the sake of decarbonisation *and* the protection of vulnerable populations, climate advocacy can no longer afford to *de*prioritise adaptation. As such, **a shift is urgently needed across climate thinking, advocacy, policy and action: from treating adaptation as a forbidden last resort, to recognising it as a core element of an integrated approach to climate breakdown, deserving parity of attention with decarbonisation.**

Towards an integrated narrative, to transform mainstream engagement

Thirty years since the UNFCCC came into force, the difference between success and failure on climate can no longer be treated as binary. We are now forced to admit that, despite our best hopes and efforts, there is a grave degree of climate damage that we have already failed to prevent. On current trajectories, much worse is to come.[3] At the time of writing in early 2025, for over a year, global average temperature rise has exceeded 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels – the limit agreed in Paris 2015. The milestone comes ahead of schedule, with no encouraging sign of emissions slowing down. Accordingly, from devastating floods to wildfires, escalating impacts are increasingly visible, even in the complacent Global North. The need to adapt on climate front lines is clear and present.

This grave admission is necessary in order to operate from a space of realism, but it is not equivalent to giving up on decarbonisation. We must do everything in our power to limit emissions. But crucially, this *includes* serious, tangible, local adaptation. Far from competing with emissions reduction (either/or), prioritising adaptation in the Global North can unlock badly needed public support for serious response to global emissions (both/and).[4]

Climate is rightfully a popular issue, but fifty years of campaigning have not succeeded in galvanising the public support urgently needed to drive adequate decarbonisation. While high-level efforts towards decarbonisation are vital, they can seem intangible and remote, even to communities who have already felt climate impacts. As we'll discuss, adaptation is by contrast local, concrete and tangible. It can transform climate breakdown from the status of a story or abstract belief to a lived (and shared) reality; and signal to concerned citizens that others are taking action. It also represents a powerful, depolarising route to raising engagement with climate action among the majority – and particularly among disengaged groups. The participation of these groups is completely necessary to build a mandate for adequate climate action across society: to mobilise the climate majority.

As impacts worsen, all sorts of forces and constituencies will gravitate towards adaptation messages, including opportunistic political actors. It's urgently necessary to establish some control of the adaptation narrative on behalf of the climate movement and climate justice while the opportunity remains. This includes adequately defining adaptation, and emphasizing

Important terms

See also Appendix III *Notes on Terminology*.

climate impacts

Extreme weather events such as floods, heatwaves, droughts, storms, and wildfires, and long-term climatic changes such as an increase or drop in local temperature, along with the damage these cause to life-supporting systems and structures (ecology, infrastructure, homes, and health). Cascading impacts such as local and national crop failures, disruption of international supply chains, food and resource shortages, water fragility, business and economic disruption, harm to health, failure of societal systems, and pressure upon social order.

decarbonisation

Reducing heat-trapping greenhouse gas emissions with the aim of preventing further global overheating. Sometimes described as climate mitigation – though technically, mitigation is a broader category than decarbonisation.

3 See McGuire, B. (2022). *Hothouse Earth: An Inhabitant's Guide*. Icon Books.

4 The link between local adaptation and support for 'mitigation' has been proposed for twenty years or more in social resilience literature. See e.g. **Adger, (2023)**.

Important terms

See also Appendix III *Notes on terminology*.

local climate adaptation

Taking action to adapt and prepare for the broad, cascading impacts of human-triggered climate change. Protecting households, neighbourhoods, communities, infrastructure, and resources through re-engineering and 'ruggedisation', ecological regeneration and inner resilience.

Detailed definitions of adaptation types follow in section 3.

inner resilience

In addition to outer adaptation considerations named above, inner capacities, from emotional regulation to social cohesion and trust, are key to resilience in the face of climate impacts. Beyond individual coping with challenges such as grief and anxiety, collective inner factors including trust and belonging enhance material preparedness and recovery, and inner resilience is core to transforming adversity into beneficial outcomes.

inner-outer resilience

A holistic framework for climate adaptation: the integrated psychological, social, and material factors that enable individuals and communities to adapt to climate challenges. Individual and collective capacities from emotional regulation to social cohesion and trust profoundly interact with resilience to outer factors like climate damage and resource disruption. Strong social bonds enhance preparedness and recovery, while secure external systems support emotional and social stability. See section 3.3.

adaptation that helps and does not hinder mitigation. Strategic and transformative adaptation measures actively integrate decarbonisation, ecosystem restoration, and adaptation. They can improve quality of life on many dimensions, not least strengthening bonds through shared concern and collaboration.

Importantly, this report advocates a shift in thinking about the relationship between adaptation and other climate priorities. It does not seek to alter the fundamental aim of climate campaigning. More than ever, every fraction of a degree of overheating that can still be prevented is critical, with millions of lives, whole ecosystems, and tipping points of irreparable harm hanging in the balance. Likewise, it's still true that nations in the Global South will likely bear the brunt of harm soonest, despite the culpability of long-industrialised nations in the Global North. But it's time to accept that complacent nations in the Global North are not immune to catastrophic damage. And that, for this same reason, strategic adaptation close to home has a better chance of making the climate threat real to the UK's voting public than any story we can tell about global warming. Global justice may likewise be better served by a concrete adaptation focus. Accepting the need for local adaptation will heighten the moral imperative for funding and supporting others to adapt.

Narrative tools for adaptation advocates

While the widespread mindset shift we require will only arise in the context of real-life action, this report is intended to supply foundational rationale and useful language to early advocates. The pages that follow offer a selection of interconnected narratives, demonstrating the alignment of adaptation with priorities of climate activism, electoral politics, and local and global collective action on climate. For advocates and decision-makers alike, it helps build the case for adaptation as an urgent priority and a primary lens. To facilitate analysis, aspects of adaptation advocacy and policy are explored separately; however, these should never be considered separate. For adaptation to meet its transformative potential, efforts to shift mindsets, adapt locally, and generate intelligent policy must co-arise, each supporting the other.

Readers are encouraged to consider all the rationale offered here as an integrated whole, but they may also wish to focus primarily on the segments that apply to their area of work or campaigning, to reflect upon how best the case for adaptation can be made to their communities, stakeholders, and audiences.

1

Climate Movement lens: adaptation campaigning as a route to widespread mindset shift

The climate adaptation field is large and growing, but unlike the movement for decarbonisation, it is still scattered. Relatively little resource been devoted to movement-building, but collective awareness between groups and organisations in this area is growing. To support the field to coalesce, a cohesive narrative is required within the campaigning space, that eases potential antagonism and integrates adaptation as foundational to climate advocacy.

Narrative overview A focus on adaptation can broaden engagement with environmental issues and build a mandate for deep system transformation. Strategic campaigning should therefore adopt localised adaptation as a primary lens within an integrated decarbonisation-adaptation focus, aiming to raise the general profile of adaptation as a priority in global and local climate response – to parity with the case for decarbonisation.

1.1 Overcoming 'soft denial'

Adaptation helps dismantle the ongoing public narrative of soft denial that dampens support for emissions reduction. This narrative shift is a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for widespread public engagement.

See the Four Dimensions of Climate Action below.

Scientific consensus and public awareness of climate science have significantly shrunk the space of outright climate denial in public discourse. However, a widespread disposition of soft denial rests on a public narrative that leaders have climate decarbonisation in hand, and will produce the policy or the technology to rein in the threat just in time, without any need for systemic change.

Over time, institutionally sanctioned climate decarbonisation targets have become enmeshed in this worsening situation. Since 2015, the preferred aim of multilateral climate policymaking has been to limit global overheating within 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels – beyond which highly dangerous tipping points become more likely and climate chaos will escalate. Because the outcomes of overheating exceeding 1.5°C are known to be dire, leaders have understandably considered their decarbonisation target both primary and sacrosanct. Accordingly however, despite the same target becoming ever more unrealistic as emissions rise, the public narrative (*we must and shall achieve 1.5°C*) has not shifted, contributing gradually to a condition of widespread soft denial.

Communicating optimism

Global temperatures throughout 2024 and 2025 have shown clearly that decarbonisation is nowhere near on target. Average global temperature increase has already exceeded 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels for a calendar year, shocking scientists. Evidence now strongly indicates that

the world has crossed a dangerous planetary boundary.[5] However, soft denial among the general public is further maintained by commentary that promotes wilful optimism about climate mitigation.[6] Communicators often cite a belief that overly negative climate news will tip citizens into demotivating doomism and despair.[7] Most experts are well aware that the 1.5 target is long gone and that current trajectories entail some degree of systems failure. However, some still don't feel able to *say* so, thanks to consensus on optimistic communication. An institutional and media regime of wilful optimism is a powerful factor maintaining public silence around climate (and collapse) concern.[8,9]

Because the subject of climate-driven extreme chaos and collapse is still largely taboo, public *conversation* has not yet become widespread.[10] Common concern about ecologically driven collapse[11] therefore exists alongside a *lack* of awareness of how widespread this concern is – a situation known as pluralistic ignorance. This is not to say that the public knows exactly how severe the threat is, but they certainly fear it is worse than they are told.[12]

Denial maintains inaction

Not only is the hope of staying within the institutionally sanctioned 1.5°C limit now tragically unrealistic, but insisting otherwise *actively undermines* the decarbonisation and adaptation work that remains possible.[13] **Soft denial fatally inhibits the public reaction that is badly needed to galvanise high-level response to climate breakdown.**

Regarding **decarbonisation**, without public acknowledgement that current efforts are drastically insufficient, decision-makers and the voters they answer to will not experience sufficient pressure to multiply those efforts.

Regarding **adaptation**, the ongoing 'safe' fantasy of 1.5°C delays preparation for impacts and resilience building. To behave as if we don't expect dramatic disruption to ecological and socio-political systems is extremely reckless.[14]

This matters most for those who will feel damage most acutely – primarily large populations in the Global South, but also many less affluent inhabitants of the Global North. Climate justice is no longer compatible with insisting that 1.5°C can still be achieved. Justice can only now be served

5 Rockstrom describes '1.5' as a planetary boundary. See Harvey (2021).
6 See e.g. Mann et al (2017) and Knowlton (2017).
7 The forthcoming *Mobilising Majorities* report from the CMP discusses APAC (Avoid panic at All Costs) messaging in more detail.
8 Research from the CMP and partners demonstrates citizens' appetite for truth, even where no 'solution' is obvious. See. e.g. Lopatin and Farstad (2018).
9 CMP's Climate Courage campaign advocates measures to support those processing difficult climate realities, building pathways to action. See Sections 4.6 and 4.7.
10 See Andre et al. (2024), also our forthcoming Mobilising Majorities report for further analysis.
11 A full 52% of Britons harbour fears of collapse. See e.g. Fondation Jean Jaures (2019) .
12 See e.g. People Get Real.
13 See e.g. Greenfield (2024).
14 See Read (2024).

through massive investment - not only in decarbonisation, but crucially in adaptation, and compensation for loss and damage.[15]

At the CoP events, among the majority of NGOs, the business world and most other official seats of power, the wilful optimist narrative is still influential. However, signs of change are emerging. For example, at CoP29 in Baku, evidence of a narrative shift became apparent, with some delegates openly discussing the failure of the process.[16]

Puncturing denial through adaptation

To motivate the action now needed, to summon the maximum energy available to work towards the best possible outcomes, leaders and citizens alike must acknowledge the real depth of the challenge.[17] **Adaptation can become a vital catalyst, by helping to dismantle the narratives maintaining denial.** Adapting to potential and actual harm is incompatible with the belief that harm will be avoided, that climate breakdown will go away.[18] When it comes to puncturing pluralistic ignorance, emissions-reduction activity may be less important than adaptation. Adaptation tells us that others share our perception of *tangible impacts* and are responding.

1.2 Adaptation as a catalyst for response to climate reality

Salience of threat and agency

The language of climate discourse, while scientifically grounded, is experientially abstract: rising CO_2 concentrations, distant temperature thresholds, complex climate models. Some researchers use terms like 'hyper-object'[19] or 'diffuse object'[20] to explain the difficulty people sometimes have in grasping the reality of climate breakdown. Greenhouse gases, they note, are not directly perceptible – they are dispersed, gradual in effect, and invisible. No wonder, then, that a popular mandate has not emerged to support top-down decarbonisation initiatives, and that the climate movement has thus far struggled to recruit many active participants beyond the 'usual suspects' of activism.

While this account offers some explanatory value, it's not the whole story. It still implies the problematic **information deficit model** – the idea that, given enough information (in this case about the gravity of climate threat), people will act appropriately.[21] In reality, even the 'right' information is only part of

15 Consciously or otherwise, a driver of continued faith in 1.5 among policymakers is avoidance of paying for adaptation; particularly in the global South, but also in vulnerable, lower income areas in the global North. See Section 2.2.1.
16 See also Carrington (2024).
17 Grasping the truth about climate requires not only facts but adequate strategies for processing the very difficult emotions that accompany them. The collective work of 'inner adaptation' is a vital and neglected dimension of adaptation work and climate action in general. See e.g. Read et al. (2024) chapter 14. See also Sections 3.3, 4.6 and 4.7.
18 In turn, this psychological dynamic is crucial to understanding resistance to adaptation.
19 See Morton (2013).
20 See Hutchinson (2013).
21 E.g. O'Neill & Day (2009).

the journey toward climate engagement and responsiveness. We'll suggest that adaptation can get us a lot further.

First, whether we're talking about rising CO2 or towns submerged by flooding, reported information does not function in the same way as direct experience in persuading people that a given state of affairs is real. For the majority in wealthy countries where impacts still seem far away, even the most scientifically robust climate warnings fail to generate sufficient urgency. **Moreover, the *absence* of visible, large-scale adaptation efforts reinforces the perception that climate threats are exaggerated.** If these threats were as severe as scientists claim, the reasoning goes, governments would be acting. The fact that adaptation remains an afterthought signals, implicitly but powerfully, that the danger is not real enough to require immediate response. Conversely, witnessing pragmatic efforts to adapt within our own communities can persuade us of the reality we're adapting to. Unlike decarbonisation, action centred upon adaptation is visible and concrete, anchoring reported global challenges in regional and local realities - thus highlighting connections between increasing local effects and their complex causes.[22]

Perhaps more importantly, adaptation has potential to create not only a stronger signal regarding climate reality, but a social context in which that signal can be received without creating the distress and overwhelm that leads many to deny or ignore it. People have many unconscious motivations for ignoring available facts; among them, fear, and the uncomfortable cognitive dissonance we experience when new information contradicts our existing beliefs. Dozens of studies observe the overwhelm and disengagement that arises from frank discussion of climate realities. But they do not account for the possibility of supportive conditions that can mitigate distress, and allow the high stakes to motivate us.[23] By allowing us the chance to respond actively to the concrete climate threat, within communities where we feel high co-concern, belonging and mutual support, adaptation helps to build the conditions necessary for a motivated climate response.

22 Within this campaigning space, there is a task to help draw these connections with sensitivity. See Read (2018).
23 E.g. O'Neill & Nicholson-Cole (2009).

Four dimensions of climate action

Awareness about the reality at stake is, we argue, just one of four dimensions that must co-arise to mobilise serious climate action.

1

Available facts; basic comprehension of climate reality.

Adaptation supplies physical evidence of the circumstances.

2

Access to meaningful climate action as a channel for the energies provoked by this knowledge.

The importance of action is widely acknowledged, but adaptation is vastly more effective as an outlet than the actions typically on offer.

3

Individuals feel part of a rising movement capable of doing what is needed to address threats.

Adaptation will build this dimension by amplifying the concerns of the climate majority and building self-awareness.

4

Members of the majority support each other through inevitable emotional struggles on the difficult journey to change.

This support takes place most effectively and naturally within communities, once again suggesting adaptation as an important enabler of motivated action.

A forthcoming report from the Climate Majority Project, the third in this series, will explore the relationships of these dimensions in more detail. We suggest that if climate reality threatens to overwhelm us, it is because no movement has yet convinced us of being 'enough' to respond effectively. The current report argues that adaptation can catalyze such a movement.

While adaptation is a vital catalyst to the four dimensions of climate action, we warn that it cannot fully address concerns. Any serious engagement with the realities of adaptation will show that it is necessary, and can usefully reduce climate risks, but only partially. See section 2.1.4.

1.3 Broadening engagement

In the industrialised Global North, working class people are among many groups under-represented in the wider climate movement.[24] Among contributing factors, decarbonisation-heavy campaign messages highlighting individual consumption and 'carbon footprint' have not appealed to less affluent groups. Some media have further weaponised class issues to brand climate action as an elitist project that dishes out blame, makes life worse for working class people, and attacks free choice and traditional values – feeding a vicious cycle of low engagement and under-representation.[25]

Working class disenfranchisement in climate action is disastrous, when majority mobilisation is needed to mandate radical policy action.[26,27] Nor does it reflect the historic and ongoing commitment to environmentalism among working class groups.[28] Large sections of the population may thus be better included by reorienting campaigning strategy, rhetoric and action around adaptation, and thereby reconnecting environmentalism with material concerns. Adaptation will be vital, both to increase people's agency amid coming impacts *and* grow support for change.

The vulnerability of environmentalism to polarising critique is greatly reduced by a shift in emphasis, from '*reduce your carbon footprint*' to '*let's make sure everybody can protect themselves from the coming damage (as far as possible)*'. From this angle, the climate movement doesn't seek to limit freedom but rather to preserve it and protect quality of life amid escalating climate decline.

Ideas and practices like adaptation, resilience-building, and collective preparedness have potential to engage and empower people whose living standards will be most impacted by climate damage, whether they face rising bills, cold, damp or uninsurable homes, water damage, or any other immediate risk. Effectively managed, adaptation messaging can offer competition to populist parties such as Reform UK, whose appeal rests heavily on declining living standards.[29]

Essential to the nation's journey of collective resilience-building is understanding – on the part of climate policymakers, 'experts', and campaigners alike – of the particular strengths and struggles of affected communities. Advocacy should begin by meeting people where they are. Many are impacted by spiralling living costs and are deeply concerned about their children's future. If a majority can be recruited to (reformed) climate issues on this basis, the climate movement increases its democratic capacity to advocate for both decarbonisation and adaptation – not to mention climate justice.[30]

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24 See e.g. **WCCA (2023)**. CMP is working with the Working Class Climate Alliance on a year-long series of dialogues.

25 Class-inflected, parodic representation of environmental activism in right-wing media is a well-documented phenomenon. **Mckinstry (2019)** exemplifies the genre.

26 A forthcoming report, co-authored with Caroline Lucas, discusses the tendency of Right populism to undermine climate action, and the positive potential of **Climate Popularism** centring adaptation and realigning environmentalism with the interests of working class and low income groups.

27 It also leaves people vulnerable to harmful conspiracy theories. See e.g. **O'Sullivan (2025)**.

28 See e.g. Bell (2020).

29 See e.g. **Sky (2025)**.

30 To benefit these communities, much adaptation must be locally focused. See Section 3.2.

1.4 Steering the adaptation narrative

The struggle to define adaptation will be a defining struggle of the coming decade. Unavoidably, policy-makers across the political spectrum will soon become aware of the climate threat and turn towards the adaptation space. In the UK, for example, this process has already begun, with areas of the civil service working urgently on preparedness, mostly out of view of the media and even ministers. As living conditions continue to decline and institutional adaptation response becomes a democratic focus, a credible Strategic Adaptation movement must be ready to counteract the political appeal of hard-right 'populist' parties and leaders, and the media that promote them. Robust, coordinated effort will be necessary to steer the narrative of adaptation – its purpose, design and implementation - toward just ecological and social outcomes.

Some figures within the alt- and hard-Right are already turning away from hard climate denialism. In seeking a 'fortress' approach to adaptation, thoroughly divorced from decarbonisation,[31] they have obvious allies in the fossil fuel industry.[32] If this coalition is not opposed by competing visions of adaptation while traditional power and the wider public are waking up to the necessity, then 'fortress' adaptation gains a great advantage. With a record of undermining democratic principles to advance a polluting agenda unlikely to transform in the era of adaptation, the fossil fuel lobby has long been shifting away from outright climate denial towards a strategy of 'deception, disinformation, and doublespeak'.

As climate decline intensifies, the risk grows of becoming locked into a vicious circle, with the majority of resources pulled towards disaster response and little time or money left for proactive, preventative resilience-building (let alone decarbonisation). In disaster contexts, leaders of many political stripes will likely reach for reactive adaptation methods, such as dredging and hard flood defences. Decarbonisation has always been hurt by politicians focused on short-term popularity, and reactive adaptation can easily become tomorrow's distraction. Populist leaders are likely to favour this kind of adaptation, reinforcing the dichotomy of adaptation-instead-of-mitigation and normalising approaches that are high-emitting, expensive and fragilising. This trend is already visible in the shift from outright climate-denialism to adaptation-focus in the Australian Right, and some policies and messages of the Reform UK Party. To pre-empt this risk as far as possible, alternative strategic approaches to adaptation must be developed and mainstreamed – see section 3.

1.5 Co-benefits

Direct benefits from locally focused climate adaptation extend far beyond damage reduction. Improvements to quality of life potentially arising from adaptation measures extend from economic and physical health benefits to transformation in psycho-social wellbeing. Consider, for example, the benefits of retrofit activities such as insulation on energy use, impacting

31 E.g. the Fossil Fuel-funded US National Center for Policy Analysis wrote: 'growing consensus on climate change policies is that adaptation will protect present and future generations from climate-sensitive risks far more than efforts to restrict CO2 emissions.' NCPA (2005)..

32 See Stephenson (2019).

both home comfort and outgoings, or of localisation on air quality, diet, exercise and mobility.

Meanwhile, efforts to promote local resilience and self-sufficiency, from food and energy to mental health, will repeatedly bring communities together. Where communities have suffered fragmenting effects, collaboration in the face of common threat can strengthen bonds, embed mutual aid, build trust, and reduce the social fragmentation that is itself a critical driver of unsustainable behaviours at a global level. Adaptation efforts can build and restore the sense of a collective that is foundational to tackling collective action problems. As climate disasters mount, the best chance of limiting acceleration towards collapse is to turn towards community and grow solidarity. And across the UK, citizens demonstrate a hunger for more community.[33]

To support effective local adaptation, communities require particular skills and democratic frameworks. For example, following the example of the People's Plan for Nature, a crowdsourced, local and national initiative to develop a People's Plan for Climate Resilience could foster collective intelligence on local resilience, deepen citizenship and grow communities' deliberative skills.

Antifragility

While the idea of resilience can be taken to mean 'robustness', it may be better understood as the ability to change (rather than simply fortify) in response to change. For human societies, like all other natural systems, the capacity to create something new and vital out of the collapse of the old has forever been crucial to survival and flourishing. Likewise for individuals, wisdom traditions from ancient Greece[34] to Christianity, Buddhism, psychotherapy and permaculture[35] identify the experience of crisis with the seeds of renewal. In the absence of appropriate action, this attitude can be dismissed as grasping for silver linings or even a callous accelerationist view. However, in the age of consequences that we currently inhabit, an understanding of **antifragility**[36] can help us mobilise the aspects of our culture and being that benefit from shocks, mistakes and volatility, and change what needs to change in order to thrive in new conditions.

The possibility of antifragility expands the frame of adaptation beyond ideas of robustness and disaster recovery, to a vision infinitely more hopeful and regenerative. In simpler terms, with the necessary inner and outer resources, falling to pieces can bring out the best in us[37] – creating a chance we would never otherwise have chosen, to let go of what is broken and rebuild better.

Acute climate impacts, by suspending the normal structures of lived existence, can bring amid the chaos an astonishing opportunity to remake

33 See e.g. Orgad et.al. (2024).
34 For example, Aristotle's *Poetics* describes tragedy as leading to catharsis – a purification or renewal of the soul.
35 See e.g. Mollison (1988).
36 For a full-length exposition see Taleb (2014).
37 Solnit (2022) explores a human tendency towards spontaneous kindness and resourcefulness in the aftermath of major disasters.

whole ways of life for the better. However, wishful thinking isn't enough to make transformation happen. Antifragility isn't just an innate capacity. The more ecological health and material resources that we can preserve intact, the greater will be our agency to protect what remains, recover and begin again. The stronger the bonds that we cultivate ahead of time, the greater the strength of our communities to weather the storms ahead and envision a better future together. Early, effective, inner-outer adaptation is foundational to our antifragility.

2

Decision-maker lens: adaptation as a policy priority

UK Communities are unprepared for climate impacts, and homes, livelihoods, and lives are at risk from climate damage in the short to medium term. An enabling national policy framework is urgently needed, including sufficient funding for local authorities to support adaptation measures from flood defenses to inner resilience.

Narrative overview Focus on adaptation in the UK is not only aligned with citizens' priorities, it is essential to deliver promised programmes of government and to maintain the confidence of electorates amid escalating disruption. From a global point of view, supporting adaptation at home and more widely can help tackle the collective action problems inhibiting multilateral mitigation approaches, and it can support geopolitical stability.

2.1 Domestic Policy

2.1.1 Protecting citizens

The age of climate consequences has begun. Without significantly more and better-resourced adaptation efforts, countless citizens will suffer unnecessarily from the impacts of climate breakdown. Here in the UK, initiatives for adaptation of communities, homes, and infrastructure to the local effects of dangerous human-triggered climate change are beginning to emerge. However, their scale and visibility is tiny compared to the urgent national (and global) need.

A widespread assumption that countries like the UK are immune to severe climate disasters, even partial climate-driven collapse, is highly complacent. Climate consequences are already here in the UK, and they will get worse – with lack of preparation leaving citizens more vulnerable. Already, escalating flooding threatens homes, infrastructure and agriculture, as well as stressed water systems. Heatwaves and pollution threaten public health, affecting the vulnerable first and pressuring health services. Nor is the UK immune to climate damage felt abroad – from international supply chain disruption causing shortages, to economic shocks and cascading psycho-social issues. Localised adaptation measures of many kinds will be necessary to protect those most at risk – particularly but not limited to those most economically vulnerable.

Furthermore, thanks to nonlinearities inherent in climate breakdown, we can't comprehensively predict what impacts we will face here in the UK, or what kind of adaptation they will require. We don't yet even know whether we're expecting a much hotter or a much colder climate. The latter is a distinct and growing risk: failure of Atlantic Meridional Overturning Circulation[38] following massive Arctic ice-melt could trigger a temperature drop of up to 10°C. Future uncertainty is compounded by present uncertainty as to the speed and effectiveness of climate response. We don't yet know whether to expect societal collapse at some scale, or in what timeframe.

38 NOAA (2023).

As such, here in the UK and across the world, we will require not only adaptation to specific actual and expected impacts, but leadership approaches that are permanently *adaptive*. We must loosen cultural attachment to certainty and become more comfortable with not knowing, preferring flexibility, all-hazards precaution, and redundancies in our systems.[39]

2.1.2 Delivering government

As a recent report by the Climate Change Committee has made explicit, government efforts towards national adaptation measures in the UK are thoroughly inadequate,[40] with the recent (third) National Adaptation Programme falling far short of requirements. The report notes that 'evidence of the UK's inadequate response to worsening climate impacts continues to mount', and 'its key failure remains the absence of a credible vision for a well-adapted UK, resilient to the climate risks now facing British people and businesses'. [41]

Without adequate climate adaptation, most other policy priorities risk being fatally undermined by first and second order climate impacts.

For example, without a firm commitment to adaptation and funding measures, economic productivity and confidence in UK markets will decline as floods and other extreme weather events cause widespread damage, and chronic uncertainty.[42] Public services and infrastructure will struggle under the weight of climate impacts, and recovery costs will escalate. Public health will deteriorate as, for example, flooding leads to increased risks of waterborne diseases, mental health crises, and wider disruption to other health services and damage to homes and property. National security will face risk across multiple dimensions, from food and energy to geopolitical instability.[43]

Indeed, decarbonisation efforts at a national level could themselves be undermined by damage to new green infrastructure. Current and future transmission networks including pylons and other electrical infrastructure, central to the governing Labour party's clean energy mission, are not hardened or prepared against the colder weather that could result from collapse in the SPG or AMOC.[44] See Section 5 for relevant policy recommendations.

As climate chaos intensifies, it is a matter of time before 'a perfect storm' of interacting impacts gathers, sufficient to jeopardise basic support

39 On precaution see e.g. **Read (2016)**. On All-hazards approach see Allen (2019).
40 And even fragilising—actively setting back resilience by e.g. continuing to build in flood-vulnerable areas.
41 See **CCC 2024**.
42 Although flood defences were included in the 2024 Labour budget, reference to 'significant funding pressures' leaves measures open to review (**Carbon Brief (2024)**). While implementation of plans is a local task, a supportive national policy framework and funding is necessary. To reduce flood-funding would be absurd. See **CCC (2023)** for further recommendations.
43 See e.g. **Laybourn et al. (2024)**.
44 **NGET (2021)**.

systems.[45] UK policy-makers are in position to realise this now, and when climate disasters strike, lack of preparation will become obvious to voters. As one former civil servant observes, the public has entrusted the Government not with looking on the bright side, but preparing for the worst.[46]

Thus, the UK has much to learn from other countries that have already begun work on adaptation. For example, Colombia's 'Green Corridors'[47] that shelter street vendors and pedestrians, Spain's adjustment of the working day to avoid the hottest hours,[48] or Berlin's 'Heat Aid' scheme for the homeless.[49]

2.1.3 Establishing the limits of adaptation

Governments delaying adequate decarbonisation (and adaptation) measures operate on a tacit assumption that climate damage will be managed, when the time comes, through adaptation measures. Sadly, not even a stunningly effective adaptation agenda, and a rapid worldwide transition towards strategic adaptation would prevent unprecedented disasters causing damage and loss of life.

Adaptation cannot offset all risks – for example, 'hurricane-proofing' is not possible and becomes deeply inadequate if impacts worsen rapidly. Any serious enquiry or effort to adapt on the part of the Government will reveal the limits of adaptive possibilities, building the urgent case for prevention through serious decarbonisation. Such efforts are also necessary to build the common sense appeal of Transformative Adaptation measures that are themselves low-carbon and ecologically sound. (See section 3.)

45 See Laybourn-Langton et al (2019).
46 See Sharpe (2023).
47 See e.g. **Moloney (2024)**.
48 See e.g. **Edmond (2023)**.
49 See e.g. **Wehrmann (2022)**.

case study

AMOC breakdown and the limits of adaptation

The breakdown of the Atlantic Meridional Overturning Circulation (AMOC) could become the most significant impact of anthropogenic climate change in the UK. AMOC, the system of ocean currents that transfers heat from the tropics toward higher latitudes, is the reason why the UK's climate is not more like places at similar latitudes, such as southern Canada or Moscow. However, evidence suggests that global overheating is weakening AMOC, and may cause it to start breaking down as early as the next decade. We can't be sure if or when this will happen, but uncertainty is in the nature of the adaptation challenge.

AMOC breakdown would cause massive, likely irreversible disruption to Britain's climate, with some parts of the country experiencing a drop of up to 5°C in average temperature. More concerning, scientists suggest, is the prospect of greatly reduced and less predictable rainfall. UK agriculture, falling short of self-sufficiency in food production even now, would be radically disrupted. Combined with disruption to agricultural markets elsewhere in the world, the UK faces a serious risk of food insecurity. AMOC collapse would also bring heightened susceptibility to both flooding and droughts. Infrastructure, such as coastal defenses, transport networks, and energy grids, could face new stresses as rising sea levels combine with altered ocean currents, intensifying storm surges.

Policymakers, local communities, and businesses have good reason to consider adaptation strategies for AMOC breakdown ahead of time – all the more urgently as scientific climate reports continue to worsen. *None can assume that there will be sufficient warning to respond safely once breakdown becomes certain.*

Reflection on the AMOC risk should bring home a core insight of this report: while adaptation measures can bring direct benefits at the local level, **they cannot replace decarbonisation**. A serious contingency plan for AMOC breakdown is required at local, national, and international levels, but only coordinated decarbonisation can prevent devastating impacts of this nature and worse.

2.2 Global dilemmas and foreign policy

2.2.1 Navigating collective action problems

Multilateral efforts to mitigate climate breakdown suffer heavily from a 'collective action problem'. In short, whereas all would ultimately benefit from working together to cut dangerous emissions, individual countries (and corporations) may feel incentivised to act selfishly while others take the strain. Furthermore, no individual country can, by itself, secure a safe future by virtue of its own emissions reduction. The issue is exacerbated by the fact that vulnerability to climate impacts and their likely timeframes vary between countries. Thanks to the same intangibility named above, those who feel less vulnerable may not perceive what they stand to gain by acting collectively to mitigate – especially if they lean towards shorter-term priorities.[50]

Conversely however, the tendency for wealthy countries to cling to impossible decarbonisation targets, directing the majority of funding towards decarbonisation and mostly ignoring adaptation, may point to an underlying selfish motivation. After all, admitting the need for adaptation could entail significant support of climate-vulnerable populations abroad. For a theoretical, purely selfish nation, it might well seem like common sense to direct the efforts of others towards decarbonisation and play down the need for adaptation. '*We won't feel the direct benefits of their preparedness – but we might be asked to pay for it. But if we (they) all agree to reduce emissions, we benefit*.' Promoting adaptation might furthermore come too close to accepting culpability for the damages caused by emissions, inviting litigation from more vulnerable countries.[51]

Climate approaches that foreground direct investment in adaptation are less prone to collective action problems than purely decarbonisation-focused strategies. Adaptation avoids one of the deepest motivational challenges faced by decarbonisation: for everybody, even the biggest polluter, their 'unilateral' decarbonisation will not noticeably affect their own exposure to climate chaos. Many people struggle with taking action while knowing they cannot reliably protect their own communities or assets, and want assurances that others will play their part. This is particularly true of people who are not moved by abstract moral arguments. By contrast, adaptation offers visible, direct benefits at the local level, **even when undertaken independently**. Its effects can be seen and felt in the short to medium term – protecting lives, property, and livelihoods in tangible ways.

Because adaptation does not require global coordination (or even government support) to be effective, widespread uptake is far more feasible. Paradoxically, then, this locally led, 'self-interested' action can strengthen our wider basis for collective action. The visible spread of local adaptation

50 The collective action problem may be our greatest obstacle to adequate, coordinated climate intervention. But we should not assume that it can't be resisted. When it comes to system solutions, innovation rarely targets such psychological and cultural barriers to outer change, and a great deal more could be done to bring strategic attention (and intervention) to the psychology of collective action. See **Bristow et al. (2024)**.

51 Lisa Schipper, a delegate at multilateral climate negotiations from the 1990s recalls: 'more developed countries in the Global North tried to skirt [Global South adaptation] discussions out of worry for their own financial liability … anything that would give the impression that they're responsible, was like, 'Oh, shut that door.'' See Ostrander (2022).

signals to people that others share their fears, strengthening solidarity and the motivating belief that others are likely to act. Taking protective measures helps make the climate threat psychologically real and socially salient, reinforcing the collective incentive to decarbonise and debunking the soothing assumption that convenient, incremental measures will eventually save the day (recall section 1.2 above.)

Our analysis compares decarbonisation to adaptation in relationship to the wicked collective action problem – but we don't mean therefore to elevate one above the other. Rather, we stress that in helping weaken collective action problems, popular adaptation approaches can help ease the most serious barriers to coordinated decarbonisation. This is not to revive the false opposition of adaptation vs decarbonisation, or even to suggest that these are merely complementary approaches. They are, more fundamentally, symbiotic. Section 3.1 explores the conditions for their generative relationship in greater depth.

2.2.2 Geopolitical stability and polarised attitudes to immigration

Beyond an unhelpfully narrow question of who foots the bill, supporting adaptation in vulnerable countries *is* compatible with wealthier nations' 'enlightened self-interest.' The stability of all is supported by funding countries on the climate front line to prepare, adapt, and avoid displacement. As impacts escalate, particularly in the Global South, wealthy countries like the UK may be able to help protect great numbers of people from losing their homes by supporting them to adapt safely at both community and national levels.

This logic must be handled with the utmost care to avoid xenophobic hijack. However, immigration is among the most polarising flashpoints in UK politics.[52] In Germany, support for the Alternative für Deutschland party has risen alarmingly since the 2015-16 refugee crisis, threatening Germany's anti-far-right 'firewall',[53] and emblematic of a growing political wave in several European countries.[54] The cultural and economic pressure fuelling this issue is likely to snowball as climate breakdown threatens to make whole regions uninhabitable. In this context, adaptation funding may represent a rare example of political common ground: supporting vulnerable communities to adapt is compatible both with their well-being *and* political trends that want less immigration. Pragmatic humanitarianism advises gathering support from all corners, without expecting (unrealistically) that all motivations are *universalist*.

For example, systematic worldwide programmes of greening cities[55] or of climate-proofing agriculture through methods like 'solar-shading' or

52 See NCSR (2024).
53 In 2016, Chancellor Merkel was forced into a u-turn after nationwide protests in response to her appeal to accept large numbers of refugees fleeing humanitarian crisis into Germany. This episode is seen as crucial to the rise of the far-right AfD, who came second in recent polls (Feb 2025) with 20.8% of the vote. See Pace (2025).
54 See e.g. Smith (2024).
55 Urban greening interventions can produce surprising drops in ambient temperature, making cities far more liveable. See e.g. Mooney (2025) and Banta & Swain (2024).

agrivoltaic[56] can significantly improve quality of life in affected regions and reduce key 'push' factors that lead increasingly to large-scale climate migration. Naturally, such interventions are themselves beset by collective action problems. Who pays for the greening of cities in vulnerable areas? Nonetheless, the logic of 'enlightened self-interest' applies to adaptation funding for the distant and vulnerable, just as there is a logic in funding decarbonisation in distant countries. This logic applies just as well, of course, to food security and economics. Humanity has created a world economy and a world food system, and the UK is deeply enmeshed in both. Collapse anywhere across the world will help to create insecurity everywhere. Leaders and the public must be encouraged to recognise their interest in worldwide adaptation – and here, too, the UK may choose to use its influence and set a precedent among other wealthy nations.

2.2.3 International precedent and soft power

Britain is one of the most visible nations on the world stage, being the originator of the current international 'Lingua Franca', among other historic factors. The country has also historically taken pride in international leadership on climate action, becoming the first country to set legally binding emissions reduction targets in 2008. Progress to deliver on ambitious goals has stalled;[57] nonetheless, the country's continued visibility maintains potential to influence other wealthy nations in the Global North by example. The UK's soft power has declined since 2016, but remains prominent,[58] and the current Government considers its revival a priority.[59] A UK electorate embracing climate adaptation has significant potential to generate imitation.

56 See **Lebreton (2023)**.
57 See **CCC 2023**.
58 See e.g. **Malhotra (2024)**.
59 See e.g. **Gov.UK (2025)**.

3

Defining adaptation

Not all efforts to adapt succeed in protecting citizens – many fail, and some are actively *mal*adaptive, heightening direct vulnerability and/or deepening environmental harm.[60] Furthermore, as impacts worsen, all sorts of forces and constituencies will gravitate towards adaptation messages, including opportunist political actors. It's urgently necessary, therefore, to establish clear definitions of adaptation that align with the priorities of environmentalism and climate justice while the opportunity remains.[61]

Without delay, we need to talk about what we mean by 'adaptation'. Straightforward clarifications are necessary. For example, underlining its connection with actual and future climate impacts and adapting to the effects of climate destruction, rather than adapting to use less carbon – but this is only the beginning. Of particular importance will be adaptation focused at the level of community, the minimum unit of humanity with any prospect of self-reliance.[62] We will need *kind* adaptation that does not compromise the needs of some for others, and *fair* adaptation that doesn't leave people or communities behind. We will need adaptation approaches that prioritise our collective inner strength as well as our outer vulnerability.

3.1 Adaptation frames in brief

Climate adaptation takes many forms, some protective, some maladaptive. As impacts accelerate, it's important to distinguish between these three categories.

Reactive Adaptation (shallow/defensive/incremental adaptation): short-term focused measures in response to actual impacts, such as building flood barriers in areas that have previously flooded. Reactive measures seek to protect the current system and do not necessarily aim to avoid further ecological destruction, for example, energy-hungry space cooling. Reactive adaptation does not aim for any adaptive mindset shift, but mostly represents efforts to fortify business as usual in deteriorating conditions. The current mainstream concept of adaptation. Reactive adaptation tends to predominate in disaster contexts.

Deep Adaptation: radical adaptation measures for expected failure of existing societal structures, e.g. reducing scale of coastal cities and moving populations inland, and preparing people psychologically for potential collapse. Deep Adaptation approaches are largely theoretical (at least in the Global North) but will likely grow in practical application as awareness of probable collapse grows.

Transformative Adaptation: systemic changes to protect against impacts while addressing root causes of climate risk.[63] Adaptation measures rooted in deeper system change and mindset shift towards new ways of life. Transformative approaches don't disregard carbon cost when protecting against damage, but actively decarbonise and protect and restore nature

60 See e.g. Lisa & Schipper (2020).
61 Includes overcoming the outdated mindset, influential both within the hard Right and in some climate activism, that treats adaptation and decarbonisation as antagonists.
62 See also Appendix III: Six modes of adaptation.
63 See e.g. Lisa & Schipper (2020).

where possible, ultimately helping orient towards ecological civilisation.[64] For example, restoring wetlands/mangroves, or localised food production using less industrial methods, with less dependence on the far-away. Importantly, Transformative Adaptation is itself fundamentally changeable, aiming to respond to ongoing changes of environment, resources, capabilities, and so on.

Limits of existing frames

Both reactive and deep adaptation are important on their own terms, but where either dominates future policy, the result may be harmful. For example, reactive adaptation is often piecemeal, can come at a high carbon cost, and prolongs an attitude of preservation towards a broken political economy. As climate disasters become more common, reactive adaptation approaches may dominate, but could ultimately end up increasing vulnerability (maladaptation).[65] Deep adaptation, in its catastrophe-led framing, can be intimidating to new audiences—and risks unduly abandoning the possibility of transformation to preserve existing value. Approaches that transcend both are badly needed. Transformative Adaptation does so, but does not explicitly account for the practical defensive value of reactive adaptation measures and their potential role in fostering a necessary mindset shift. Furthermore, its current platform(s) may appeal more intuitively to a 'progressive' audience than policymakers or mainstream citizens.

We propose a fourth frame, **Strategic Adaptation**, integrating elements of all the above, in a holistic theory of change accessible to policy-makers and change-makers.

Strategic Adaptation

- prioritises localised resilience measures
- frames all effective adaptation as simultaneously protecting local communities and helping shift mindsets on climate
- uses adaptation awareness to build the pragmatic case for decarbonisation nationally and globally
- promotes transformative, nature-friendly, and ecosystems-based action
- aims towards better social outcomes for local populations

A pragmatic approach sensitive to local circumstances, Strategic Adaptation may include deep, reactive and transformative adaptation wherever they are available and helpful, while remaining alert to 'collateral' damage that may inhere in purely reactive or deep adaptation approaches.

As damage worsens, demand for protection is already increasing,

64 See for example Read, Phillips and Scott (2024). For the United Nations official' definition of transformational adaptation, see UNFCCC (2024). See also Appendix III: Notes on Terminology Foster (2019).

65 For example, by encouraging rebuilding in chronically flooded or fire-vulnerable areas

from businesses and other citizens, both rich and poor. Leaders are unsurprisingly reaching for the basic tools of reactive adaptation. Furthermore, without a strategic adaptation lens, pressure to rebuild fuels an ongoing carbon-hungry cycle, which favours the priorities of those rich enough to rebuild.[66]

In order to avoid a fragilising cycle of merely 'responding' to disasters, communications efforts are necessary to translate this citizen pressure into a strong case for strategic and transformative adaptation approaches. As reactive adaptation is gradually recognised as insufficient, Strategic Adaptation must be visible as an obvious better option. This will require urgent mainstreaming of strategic approaches, and a substantial body of innovation and proof of practice made accessible.[67]

3.2 Locally focused and attuned

Sensitivity to local needs is essential to Strategic Adaptation and resilience-building. Whereas decarbonisation is a global challenge, adaptation and preparedness challenges vary according to local (geographic and social) needs and can benefit from the support and collaboration of direct beneficiaries. Highly local design and implementation are paramount. Consider, for example, the difference between adaptation challenges in Spanish drylands and Spanish temperate rainforests.[68]

Furthermore, as researchers have pointed out, insufficiently localised, top-down approaches to adaptation may reinforce the unsustainable status quo *and* deepen existing patterns of social inequality, generating significant social resistance.[69] Context-sensitive adaptation initiatives led by local stakeholders are highly necessary to avoid not only tension in implementation, but also maladaptation born of irrelevant, unsuitable, and insensitive general approaches.

Few national governments are comfortable allocating large funds for local governance. When it comes to international adaptation funding, donor governments prefer to give to national governments, or sometimes to large NGOs. Beneficiary governments are often reluctant to release control of funds to community level, usually dictate how funds should be spent, and should therefore be encouraged to prioritise local adaptation initiatives. Until prejudice against the local is overcome, adaptation, with its distinctively local parameters, will never be taken seriously enough.

Adaptation at home

From national strategic adaptation to community resilience and household ruggedization, attending to 'home' adaptation interests is not only justifiable but essential, not least because those in a condition of preparedness remain more able to help others more vulnerable. At the national level, while it

66 See e.g. Lozano (2025).
67 Adaptation focus should be considered a universal 'backstop'. If adaptation efforts prove inadequate, then the response should be more or different adaptation. For example, should the government fail to produce a National Adaptation plan, a grassroots plan should be developed. If transformative adaptation fails, deep adaptation approaches will be required.
68 See e.g. Glendon (2025).
69 See Brink et al. (2023).

would be most unjust to advocate 'lock, stock' completion of adaptation at home before offering assistance to others who will feel impacts more acutely and sooner, both aid and decarbonisation are contingent on avoidance of derailment risk.[70] Therefore, attention is also due to resilience closer to home.

3.3 Foregrounding inner-outer resilience

The concept of climate adaptation typically calls to mind 'physical' interventions, from flood defences to innovations in crop growing. However, equally crucial in the face of current and coming challenges is inner, psychological resilience – of individuals but particularly at the level of community. It is perhaps even more important to discuss inner resilience publicly, because this dimension is so little discussed.[71]

For individuals, difficult emotions such as climate grief and anxiety, as well as broader psychological impacts of interrelated crises, from geopolitical instability to social fragmentation, take a toll on mental health that should be considered among climate impacts. Experience of emotional overwhelm can furthermore exacerbate unsustainable, even addictive behaviours, and dampen engagement with climate reality and support for system change – a vicious circle between mind and climate.[72]

Interventions are possible that prioritise emotional resilience for individuals, and training and provision should be funded to support necessary programmes.[73] But among the most important solutions to inner climate impacts are to be found within community.[74] Simple social connection is a known promoter of wellbeing, supporting agency[75] and reducing depression and anxiety.[76] Conversely, when considering the preparedness in the face of first and second order climate impacts, from home and infrastructure damage to energy disruption, supply scarcity and worse disasters, building the inner resilience of communities is paramount. Much research demonstrates the role of social cohesion following disasters.[77] Communities with robust social networks and strong bonds of social connectedness, good will, trust and belonging, are better able to take organised action in the face of damage, maintain social order, mitigate distress, and recover. In turn, as discussed in section 1.5, collaboration around 'outer' local adaptation initiatives can help build the bonds that support inner resilience: a virtuous cycle. For these reasons, inner and outer resilience should not be considered as separate domains, but rather two essential dimensions: inner-outer resilience.

70 See Laybourn (2023).
71 A forthcoming CMP report detailing *Four Dimensions of Climate Action* makes this case in detail.
72 See e.g. Bristow et al. (2022).
73 See e.g. Cunsolo et al. (2020).
74 See e.g. Clayton et al. (2017).
75 See e.g. Vella-Brodrick et al. (2022).
76 See e.g. Wickmanarante et al (2022).
77 Aldritch & Meyer (2015).

4

Advocacy routes: consilient themes and activities

Adaptation is a complex task: interacting with many dimensions of climate action, system change and ways of life. The task of raising engagement with adaptation in the UK will be served by demonstrating its alignment with existing channels of advocacy, and emphasising its foundational value. Based on the insights above, a number of strategic advocacy channels are suggested. Further research is proposed to support the wider task of mapping existing initiatives.[78]

4.1 Biodiversity and ecosystem resilience

Britain is chronically nature-depleted, directly influencing locally felt climate impacts. For example, vanishing wetlands and poor upland management greatly increase vulnerability to flooding. Adaptation priorities must include rebalancing and restoring ecosystems to help communities become resilient and even anti-fragile. 'Agriwilding' furthermore integrates rewilding with food-growing,[79] with potential to soften the 'culture war' resonance sometimes associated with rewilding (in particular, hostility between rewilding and agricultural communities). Agriwilding may be an important agent of depolarisation and a 'win-win-win' in Transformative Adaptation terms (good for nature, good for food resilience, good for cultural relationships).[80]

4.2 Retrofit

An obvious focus for Strategic Adaptation, retrofit combines home and neighbourhood adaptation with decarbonisation and bridging local resilience priorities with 'climate jobs', which are important in serving the needs of target demographics and achieving a just transition. Groups such as Retrofit Balsall Heath[81] and Civic Square[82] are demonstrating strong local leadership in this area, integrated with wider local resilience and regenerative practices.

4.3 Business transition

Within business and finance, the 'Race to Zero' is severely off track. The 'Race to Resilience', a poor relation thus far, urgently requires resources and attention. Businesses will depend for survival upon muscular policy to prevent climate damage. A business sector focused on the adaptation challenge will accelerate an economic mindset shift beyond soft denial and tech solutionism. Business voices must be supported to lobby for the regulation they need to survive.[83]

78 See appendix V for CMP activities in these areas.
79 See e.g. **Hosking (2020)** and **Wilder Podcast (2025)**.
80 See also 'Ecosystem-based adaptation', a key dimension of Transformative Adaptation. **UNEP (2024)**.
81 See **Christophers (2025)**.
82 See **Civic Square (2024)**.
83 Another graduate of the CMP incubator, the 'General Counsel Sustainability Forum' explicitly promotes an adaptation agenda to business GCs. See **GCSF (2021)**.

As a gatekeeper to high-risk practices, the insurance sector has a particularly critical role to play in business transition. Insurers are themselves empowered and incentivised to influence adaptation, through strategic measures such as lower premiums for customers who undertake resilience-building.[84,85] Many such innovations will become commonplace in the insurance field, which in turn has high leverage in business and finance. Insurance also wields considerable lobbying influence, and power to communicate the depth of the crisis and attendant risk.[86]

4.4 Food security

The UK is alarmingly far from food security, let alone food sovereignty. As climate breakdown unfolds, on top of shortages, we risk a number of ecological vicious circles unless action is taken early to prepare and adapt. For example, panic measures in response to scarcity could lead to ecologically damaging reactions: intensified pesticide use and clearing wild land for crops, and so on. Such outcomes would quickly lead to far greater fragility in our food system through the collapse of pollinator populations and soil depletion, for example.

The UK still has no coherent food policy. In considering building resilience, experts highlight the example of grassroots initiatives that are often working ahead of central government to ensure communities are resilient to shocks to food supplies.[87] Advocacy should focus both on the abysmal lack of government preparedness, and on growing participation in leading local initiatives. As conditions become increasingly precarious, local food initiatives can grow engagement by foregrounding communities' resilience to disrupted food supplies.

4.5 Water as a keystone resource

Among the resources foundational to societal functioning at any timescale, water may be under the greatest threat from climate impacts. In the UK, whether our future is hotter or colder, water will likely become more scarce, with increased drought and existing systems highly stressed and leaky, insufficient reservoir capacity, and difficulty absorbing heavier downpours. Water scarcity naturally has consequences for crop growing and food security.

Poor water husbandry magnifies the chaos brought by both drought and flooding from heavier downpours, which we have seen across the globe (including Britain) in autumn 2024. Water storage and water husbandry are likely to become increasingly important political priorities, and communities will play their role until adequate political leadership emerges. Citizen science (e.g. vulnerability data) will be important, alongside simpler efforts to collect rain and grey water.

84 For example, wildfire-resistant roofing.
85 The CMP's confidential Insurance Working Group is working directly with insurers to develop approaches that build ruggedisation into policies.
86 See Read et al. (2024).
87 See Lang (2025).

4.6 Inner resilience

Difficult emotions such as climate grief and anxiety should be understood as climate impacts. More generally, building collective inner resilience is an important example of Transformative Adaptation, necessitating funded programmes to build inner capacities in the context of climate.[88] Furthermore, as climate damage affects daily life, from supply scarcity to homes and public services, the inner resilience of citizens will matter more and more to public wellbeing, and its cultivation must be considered the proper territory of climate adaptation. (See section 3.3).

Advocacy should build on and support the growing work of initiatives that resource climate distress, helping people impacted to process difficulty and find routes to agency and empowerment, and to build on existing ties with the Government via mental health and education policy approaches.

4.7 Resilient communities

As discussed in section 3.3, inner resilience is only in limited ways a matter of the individual. It is best fostered by strengthening direct community and restoring a sense of social trust, belonging, and collective care. From local food and energy initiatives to disaster preparedness, practical participation in transformative local adaptation can mutually strengthen communities by building relationships of co-concern and collaboration.

Local communities are currently largely unprepared, but will take an important role as 'first responders' in climate disasters.[89] Many are already feeling the effects of the climate crisis, even on recreation, from sports practice to outdoor festivals and events cancelled due to sudden downpours and flooding.[90]

Advocacy should focus on amplifying and replicating the work of local community resilience initiatives that nurture relationships, counter fragmentation, and collaborate towards local adaptation needs. Communities also require resilience skills-building, from retrofit, rescue and repair to deliberative democratic frameworks.

4.8 Possible futures: engaging collective imagination

Successful transformative adaptation will depend on collectively imagining possible futures: a democratic capacity that receives little attention in today's society. In reviving this critical inner capacity, some element of 'imagination activism'[91] must be considered a foundational advocacy approach.

Imagination is a capacity sometimes treated as fanciful or unserious, when

88 Mindfulness practice has found the mainstream in recent years, and there is great interest within the teaching community to tailor training to climate response, both around eco-anxiety and helping people find their role in the transition. Important innovations include the Inner Green Deal's **Mindfulness-based sustainable transformation**.

89 See e.g. **Mackie (2024)**.

90 See e.g. **Met Office (2024)**.

91 Imagination activism inverts the 'great no' of traditional activism, aiming to harness the imagination and vision to build new systems rather than fighting the old. See e.g. **Tickell (2022)**.

in reality it is an essential and often undervalued skill, even properly a mode of perception.[92] Imagination is always active in creating social realities; however, in today's world, its energy is often preoccupied with imagining the inevitability and intractability of current systems. What we need, therefore, is not to 'introduce' imagination as if it weren't already operating, but draw attention to its existing power and reclaim imaginative *agency*.[93]

The modes of radical imagination relevant to adaptation range from concrete infrastructure, architecture, engineering and technology, to artistic interactions with the social imaginary through story. For example, 'thrutopias' are stories that do not cling to business as usual, avoid the difficulty in humanity's future, *or* descend into doomism, but instead imagine ways through hardship: a narrative form of Transformative Adaptation. The art world has an important role in helping thrutopian vision to mature, and normalising adaptation.

Before long, citizens will be called upon to imagine new directions for their society. To foster shared consideration of guiding values and move towards consensus, supported conversations are required that can 'include and transcend' narrower ideologies (including progressive ideology, its relationship with decarbonisation approaches and utopian outcomes, and enduring suspicion towards adaptation approaches) while preserving their value, and opening imagination to possible futures.

92 See e.g. McGilchrist (2021).
93 For example, Moral Imaginations is an initiative dedicated to mobilising imagination for collective decision-making.

5

Policy recommendations and actions

A sketch of policy considerations is offered here as a basis for urgent, more detailed enquiry by decision-making bodies. This outline is intended to demonstrate how some adaptation priorities might translate into a policy context, but not to suggest that policy can act separately from the wider mindset shift that is central to this report. Successful and appropriate adaptation policy is urgently necessary, but as one of several important elements within a widespread societal shift towards holistic climate thinking: embracing strategic adaptation and co-arising with grassroots agency and leadership.

As a whole policy area, work surrounding adaptation must move beyond piecemeal, reactive structural repair and defence. To meet the grave challenges ahead, adaptation must urgently be redefined and delivered as a strategic, preventative, systems-focused intervention that supports social and ecological, as well as structural resilience (see Section 3).

5.1 Develop and fund a serious National Adaptation Plan

A national strategic adaptation plan is required to support the design, implementation and funding of locally appropriate adaptation – future-proofing government investments and protecting national security.[94] This supportive policy framework would outline the measures and funding needed to adequately protect all essential programmes of government (and campaign promises)[95] in the face of climate damage.[96,97] It would include:

1. Immediate investment in flood defences and flood-resilient infrastructure – particularly upstream measures (e.g. restoration of peatlands and wetlands, aka 'ecosystem-based' adaptation) and transformative measures at potential points of impact (e.g. creation of 'sponge' cities with streets and gardens that mop up rain water, reducing flash floods).
2. Strategic financial support for local authorities and communities to implement precautionary local adaptation measures.
3. A national strategy for climate resilience in housing, food, water, transport, and energy systems.
4. Strategic investment in inner resilience at community level.
5. Integration of climate adaptation into all national policy areas, including planning and development and public health.
6. Steps to ensure that provision and resilience infrastructure is in line not just with relative climate risk, but also social and economic vulnerability.
7. Communications to raise the profile of all these measures.

94 See e.g. Laybourn et al. (2024).
95 See e.g. Labour party (2024).
96 See e.g. Lucas 2024.
97 See Boyd et al. (2024)

5.2 Public information: citizens' adaptation toolkit

Families and neighbourhoods need information and resources to access locally appropriate adaptation. These should include simple handbooks delivered to every household in the country,[98] outlining preparedness measures and directing to regionally appropriate help for families and neighbourhoods (such as access to drinking water). Where appropriate, this initiative should extend to providing physical items, such as flood-defence kits for homes in at-risk areas.

5.3 Citizens' assemblies

Beginning at local level, citizens' assemblies should bring together representatives of affected communities to deliberate on local resilience and adaptation needs. Their findings should form the backbone of funded local government approaches to adaptation, and inform the developing understanding of adaptation needs at a national level. Assemblies should be nationally funded, with provision for facilitation where appropriate, and locally led.

98 Modelled on communications campaigns in several Nordic countries, providing information for citizens on preparation and raising awareness of potential crises. See e.g. Maxia (2024).

Conclusion

We're entering a permanent global emergency, whose impacts will be felt most acutely through local emergencies. Strategic Adaptation is an absolute necessity, both in order to increase resilience locally, *and* to translate emergent impacts and response into the strongest possible case for 'higher' level decarbonisation. Humanity's future will contain harm at a scale difficult to comprehend. But we can prevent many degrees of worse harm if, integrated with urgent decarbonisation, we build preparedness and resilience to current and deepening impacts.

Adaptation as an approach to climate transition is growing in influence.[99] In coming years, the need for societies to prepare for climate threats, build resilience, and maintain humanity by protecting those most vulnerable, will only increase. However, as 'long emergencies' such as climate breakdown produce acute disasters, compounding other crises from pandemics to armed conflict, we risk a vicious cycle. If a dwindling pool of resources is sucked into ever-growing *reactive* adaptation and disaster-recovery costs and decarbonisation is deprioritised, our trajectory towards collapse grows ever steeper. Without a serious Strategic Adaptation movement from grassroots right through to national leadership, we will not escape it.

As such, whether we're talking about campaigning, diplomacy or policy it should be very clear that strategic adaptation is the opposite of surrender to climate doomism. This *isn't* the end of the world, but the threat we face grows with every day that citizens simply wait for decarbonisation to happen; feeling small and helpless, lacking an effective and coordinated response and neglecting our own power. To maintain exclusive focus on high level decarbonisation is totally inappropriate to the structural and social challenges of climate response. Channelling collective energy into strategic preparedness can simultaneously protect communities and foster ecological restoration. And as we have argued, the best advocacy for decarbonisation is widespread adaptation, led by communities, businesses and sectors.

Fostering such a change requires a simple yet profound narrative shift throughout the field of climate action, from institutional approaches to advocacy and activism. To date, climate consciousness has largely meant attention to decarbonisation. Its definition must now expand to include adaptation. Adopting a new story is a matter of collective imagination, yet in a materially focused society, facing physically manifest problems such as climate breakdown, exercises in imagination are too easily dismissed as unserious. If we're serious about our own survival, we can no longer afford this attitude. Business as usual is maintained by failure to powerfully imagine the alternative.

As such an alternative, Strategic Adaptation seeks to prevent single disasters from becoming catastrophes, and multiple disasters from eroding our capacity to respond, transform, and look to the future. It seeks to transform adversity into opportunities to enrich community, and allow society to choose more beautiful futures.

A majority waits to be mobilised by climate action that can inspire its imagination. For many, this journey will finally begin with adaptation.

99 See e.g. Scully & Shalant (2023) and UNDP (2024).

Appendix I: some questions answered

'Is the UK sufficiently vulnerable to climate impacts to prioritise adaptation?'

As discussed in Section 1.1, the widespread assumption that countries like the UK are immune to severe climate disasters, even partial climate-driven collapse, is highly complacent. The UK may be vulnerable to extreme impacts, for example, the potential failure of Atlantic Meridional Overturning Circulation[100] discussed in section 2.1.3.

The related assumption that wealthier countries in the Global North are more robust and functional than countries in the Global South is arrogant and inaccurate. Similar assumptions at the beginning of the Covid crisis that 'developed' countries would be most resilient, and that the UK was among the countries best-prepared for a pandemic,[101] were misguided, as the Covid inquiry starkly demonstrated.[102] The UK coped far far worse than many West African and East Asian nations. Vaccine hoarding may have been the only strategy preventing the death toll from running into several hundreds of thousands. The USA was among the worst-performing countries in the world.

When it comes to climate impacts, an assumption of resilience would be even more dangerous. For example, the UK is nowhere near self-sufficient in its food supply and is vulnerable to both disrupted agriculture and international supply disruption.

The UK entertains hubristic vanity around solid organisation and good leadership. In reality, our communities are weakened and social support structures hollowed out – and we underrate our exposure to disruption of the complex technologies that we rely on.

A globally leading voice on the cultural psychology of climate breakdown, Amitav Ghosh takes the view that wealthy countries' immense climate-vulnerability is all the more dangerous because it remains largely unacknowledged.[103]

Nothing is more important at this time than acknowledging the vulnerability of humans everywhere – Global South *and* Global North. To shift mindsets on climate reality, to encourage resilience, to fuel assistance and compensation, to drive decarbonisation, and to avoid if possible the harshest scenarios of societal collapse.

'How can adaptation approaches help depolarise climate action?'

Much emerging evidence suggests that while the idea of decarbonisation has become entangled in culture wars, polarisation around adaptation could still be avoidable if care is taken.[104]

100 NOAA (2023).
101 Gov.UK (2011)
102 UK Covid-19 enquiry (2024)
103 See UEA (2024) at 1hr 37m
104 See e.g. Boyer (2024), Chrobak (2024) and Fisher (2024).

Importantly, as discussed at length elsewhere, whereas support for decarbonisation often involves agreement on the existence of a threat that is diffuse and intangible, adaptation entails uniting around a common experience of threat. Its basis is not only shared experience but shared danger, a factor with a historic tendency to overcome smaller differences and foster collaboration.

Among a public increasingly united on the need for adaptation, some of the most significant opposition to adaptation has come from within progressive activism, which remains attached to decarbonisation as a primary frame.

In 2019, the climate movement's radical flank, including Extinction Rebellion and other new groups, made huge strides in raising climate awareness among the general population. Sooner than hoped, however, participation in XR slowed. Two factors are very important here. Firstly, later unpopular tactics and a radical public image played a part in a worsening spiral of public disapproval and vilification by a hostile media. Secondly, heavy focus on decarbonisation meant that while the alarm was raised, the threat remained intangible to many. While the second may seem less obvious, it's likely that the inaccessibility of the decarbonisation agenda fed into a general sense of alienation from 'ordinary' citizens that depressed participation and helped hostile media frames find a mark.

Consensus is growing behind adaptation as a necessity. If the climate movement can be influenced to enact and advocate for adaptation – more tangible and more accessible to the majority – strong potential exists to reduce polarisation in the field of climate action.

'Won't Solar Radiation Management (SRM) solve global overheating, making local adaptation unnecessary?'

Some simpler forms of local and regional SRM are likely to be very useful in the years to come, for example, systematic programmes to use heat-reflecting white paint that keeps buildings cool.

However, in the context of decarbonisation-failure, momentum is likely to gather behind reckless planetary-scale climate-engineering methods such as Stratospheric Aerosol Injection (SAI). In promising to hold down global temperatures despite the failure to hold down emissions, SAI is a unique 'solution'. However, its consequences are potentially catastrophic, and it's important to keep discussing why – not least the 'moral hazard' of legitimizing ongoing carbonisation, leading to ocean acidification. In contrast to Strategic, Transformative Adaptation approaches, SRM should always be framed as a last resort; SAI a desperate, reactive mistake, never a 'policy option'.

'It makes sense to hope that, following specific, tangible crises, community adaptation efforts could help catalyse mobilisation. But in areas where the effects of climate breakdown are much more geographically widespread and slower to appear, doesn't it remain a huge challenge to catalyse mass mobilisation?'

1. Communities that will not face some kind of adaptation challenge are few, if any. Some of these challenges will be unique to their locale, others shared widely. What matters is understanding locally relevant risk that could be reduced by more organised citizen monitoring and prevention, and better localised policy. These range from rural fire risks requiring change in upland land management to flash-flood vulnerable suburbs requiring more semi-permeable road surfaces and changes to front gardens and vulnerability to extremes of heat and cold.

2. Unavoidably, the effects of climate breakdown will be experienced to different degrees in different geographic locations. Strategic campaigning should therefore focus first on 'low-hanging fruit': areas where impacts are most obvious. For example, in 2025, we aim to work directly with the emerging organisation Flooded People UK, breaking new ground by organising the growing number of communities that are vulnerable to flooding.

'Adaptation may be the way to go locally, but can it really have any decisive relevance on the global stage, in terms of tackling the great climate coordination problem?'

To date, international agreements have failed primarily because they do not have the backing of engaged populations. Because most people feel so little power to affect their climate future through climate action, they do not engage fully. Climate adaptation will help to drive engagement with the reality and profundity of the climate threat on multiple scales, including across the nation and the globe, and thus adaptation can build the popular will that is required for coordination. A population that has thought and felt their future challenges will be much more likely to force national governments to create a meaningful, sufficiently serious international agreement, probably at first between coalitions of the willing, i.e., between far less than all countries at once. By empowering populations to accept climate reality, *adaptation efforts are among the most powerful means of reaching international agreements that have eluded willfully optimistic international climate organisations.*

Appendix II: Integrated CMP activities

A number of ongoing activities from the Climate Majority Project and partners deliver on advocacy themes emphasised in this report:

Strategic Adaptation for Emergency Resilience (**SAFER**) is a campaign aimed specifically at mainstreaming adaptation within UK climate advocacy and policy. Its campaign objectives include:

1. **Promote adaptation at a local level, with global implications**
   Helping communities become resilient and protected.
2. **Strengthen the adaptation field**
   Helping to amplify, integrate, convene, and multiply existing adaptation groups and resources.
3. **Demand a national policy framework**
   Call on the government to adopt an enabling national policy framework, including sufficient funding for local authorities to support local adaptation measures.
4. **Accelerate a widespread mindset shift, transforming climate engagement**
   Once tangible adaptation becomes part of daily life, climate breakdown becomes a reality.
5. **Empower and accelerate decarbonisation**
   Adaptation is a vital, deep leverage point in growing support for climate 'mitigation' – and protecting mitigation measures, such as renewable energy infrastructure.
6. **Steer the adaptation narrative**
   Defining adaptation explicitly, thoroughly, and ethically, in particular to stop short-sighted adaptation vs mitigation framing from dominating.

Grant-funded by Open Society Foundation, and with funding to come soon from the National Lottery on the inner resilience side, SAFER campaign dialogue events will focus on bringing citizens together to imagine a world beyond business as usual, that can inspire across political divides through the lens of the climate crisis. Through methodologies such as depolarising dialogues, this work will support collective exploration of varied approaches to transition and adaptation among a majority considering new direction(s).

SAFER is integrated with:

Climate Courage: a campaign from the Climate Majority Project working strategically to support initiatives that resource climate distress, helping people impacted to process difficulties and find routes to agency and empowerment. Currently, the campaign is focused on education settings, with later phases targeted towards the general population.[105] An

105 Beyond 'obvious' therapeutic approaches, the category of activities that support resilience to anxiety and grief, and help people to express or cope with their feelings is extremely broad. From creative expression such as making music, dancing, writing or martial arts, to community work, time in nature, or even gathering around a fire.

Inner Climate Response Alliance is in its early stages of development; a collaboration between the Climate Majority Project, the Climate Psychology Alliance, and the Mindfulness Initiative, to support policy development through parliamentary liaison.

Regulate Us: a campaign from Market Shapers, CMP's business strand,[106] supporting business people to raise their voices for adequate regulation on decarbonisation and adaptation.

106 Another graduate of the CMP incubator, the 'General Counsel Sustainability Forum' explicitly promotes an adaptation agenda to business GCs. See GCSF (2021).

Appendix III: Six modes of adaptation

From the inner lives of individuals and communities to global infrastructure, climate resilience and preparedness can be approached at many different levels, all of which interact with and affect each other. Here we identify six broad leverage points: inner resilience, household ruggedisation, community adaptation, business and sector adaptation, national adaptation and international adaptation.

Inner resilience: Climate breakdown is psychologically gruelling in myriad ways, and as such, should be considered an impact in itself, requiring dedicated support approaches. Conversely, inner and outer resilience depend on collective inner capacities and competencies that can be nurtured and that should be considered a vital part of adaptation. (See also Section 3.3.)

Household ruggedisation: AKA prepping. Among those with sufficient personal resources, prepping may offer short-term resilience to specific impacts such as shortages. However, its most valuable function is to demonstrate its own limits and the need for adaptation at the level of larger groups.

Community: Communities are the smallest units of humanity that can become meaningfully resilient beyond the short term. Historically, the collaborative bonds among local communities have been far stronger than in today's fragmented, digitised society, highlighting vast potential for regenerative practices benefiting both social wellbeing and structural robustness. Community adaptation is a critical focus of the SAFER campaign.

Business and sectoral adaptation (See also Section 4.3.)

National adaptation: SAFER campaign activities include pressure upon the Government to link policy priorities with a foundational need for climate adaptation, implement national adaptation policy, and support devolved measures through adequate funding.

International adaptation: Chiefly, financial and policy support for adaptation in the Global South.

What about personal adaptation?

A sixth implicit 'level' at which adaptation can be undertaken, particularly among 'early adopter' readers, is the personal. Within a decarbonisation-centric climate movement, a shift to accepting the need for adaptation is underway, but at a personal level, this can bring emotional and ethical difficulty, from fear to guilt, dissonance and denial. Turning constructively towards adaptation may require intention and attention. Once the turn is achieved, many more questions remain. At what level can (y)our talents and resources best support the monumental task of a global-local turn towards adaptation? Professional activity? Artistic output? Community role? Advocacy? Philanthropy?

Appendix IV: Notes on terminology

Climate change, climate breakdown, climate emergency, climate chaos, collective action problem, wicked problem, predicament ...

Within public climate advocacy, the term 'climate change' has long been superseded by stronger alternatives like 'climate breakdown', 'climate emergency' and 'climate chaos', which better express the urgency and depth of the challenges facing life on earth.

In systems thinking, climate is often now described as a 'wicked problem' and a 'collective action problem', however, descriptors including any formulation of the word 'problem' still tend to *understate* its novelty, danger and difficulty.[107] The climate challenge defies straightforward articulation and requires a complex, costly, and highly disruptive international effort across social, political, economic, technological, and cultural domains. Even if such an effort happened, it would be misleading to suggest that the climate crisis could ever be 'solved'. We have entered a new unstable condition, permanent within the horizons of the current civilization: a predicament.[108]

107 We welcome discussion of suitable terms/frames. Exploration of framing challenges will continue in forthcoming work.
108 See Goldthorpe (2023) and Hine (2023).

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