



**Civic University**  
Network

# Connecting Climate:

How Civic University  
Agreements can be  
used to prioritise the  
climate action  
agenda



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# Introduction

Universities play a leading role in mitigating and adapting to climate change, reversing biodiversity loss, educating students, and working with communities to build a sustainable future, and the [Civic University Network](#) supports them to do so.

The Network's Civic Impact Framework identifies environment, climate, and biodiversity as a core area in which universities can make a positive impact with their places and communities. It challenges universities to consider how they can fully account for their carbon emissions, work with local partners to create a shared vision of a sustainable locality, and support staff and students in modelling the environmental behaviours they want to encourage.

Climate is central to our civic obligations and responsibilities, and a key method by which universities can fulfil their commitments is through the production of a [Civic University Agreements](#) (CUA).

CUAs can be seen both as a long-term normative concept – an expression of purpose and mission – and as an appropriate response to current challenges. They are strategies which cement how universities can make a positive impact on their locality, rooted in a robust and shared analysis of local needs and opportunities, and co-created with local partners.



## What is the [Civic Impact Framework](#)?

The prototype Civic Impact Framework has been developed by the Civic University Network (CUN), to help universities across the UK build the wellbeing of their communities through their everyday activities and core business of learning, teaching and research. The framework has three main purposes:

- to help universities celebrate and tell the story of the action they are taking to benefit their localities
- to encourage universities to map their civic activities comprehensively
- to encourage them to do better still, by creatively asking 'what if?' questions, generate imaginative and ambitious responses, and reflect with their peers on achievements and opportunities

National, regional, and local efforts to address the global issue of climate change have intensified in recent years, coinciding with further research and clearer picture of the consequences and scale of this emergency. [UNESCO notes](#) that climate change is increasingly recognised as the driver of biodiversity change with the most rapid increase in impacts and related cascading effects on human livelihoods.

Many universities are already embracing ambitious net zero and climate action targets, including signing up to initiatives such as the [UN Race to Zero](#). This is important because every sector has a responsibility to act, and universities are no exception. Civic University Agreements can also be a useful tool for publicly signalling ambition and articulating a university's priorities and purposes when it comes to responding to the climate emergency.



This report aims to capture some of the emerging trends and approaches of universities who are using their CUAs for this purpose. It is intended as a useful prompt for universities who are developing their plans to consider how best to embed climate commitments into their CUAs, and also aims to act as a springboard for further cross-cutting conversations about how the Civic University Network can support Members to better connect their civic ambitions to their climate responsibilities.

**'Climate is the domain most explicitly cited within the agreements reviewed'**

# Climate priorities

How are universities and their partners responding to the climate emergency through their CUAs? What commitments are they making? How far do they go to address this global challenge?

A review of all published Civic University Agreements, accessible online at the time of writing<sup>\*</sup> found that they all explicitly name environment and climate as a priority, with 13 common themes emerging (see table below for a breakdown). As many universities are still developing and formalising their CUAs, the following analysis of common themes and foci will ideally aid those discussions through the sharing of best practices within the Network.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, climate is the domain most explicitly cited within the agreements. 90% of agreements reviewed commit to generating research, knowledge, and expertise. Whether using this to support the city/region's carbon neutral targets (80%), support other organisations' sustainability efforts (50%) or work in collaboration with signatories and partners (50%), universities acknowledge that as anchor institutions they have a responsibility to facilitate partnership working and share their insight and resources towards reducing their negative climate impact.

Theme	Proportion
a. Offering, research, knowledge, and expertise	90%
b. Supporting city/region's carbon neutral targets	80%
c. Supporting other organisations' sustainability efforts	50%
d. Working in collaboration	50%
e. Sustainable infrastructure	40%
f. University has/is developing individual net carbon zero targets	40%
g. Change community behaviours	30%
h. Focus on sustainable travel	30%
i. Sharing best practice	30%
j. Addressing it in teaching	20%
k. Biodiversity focus	20%
l. Minimising own impact	10%
m. Sustainable food chains	10%

<sup>\*</sup> The Civic University Network found CUAs signed and published by 16 universities at the time of writing (November 2021).

# Net zero

Net zero targets are useful components of CUAs, particularly for signalling tangible intent. Looking across the publicly available CUAs, net zero targets are persistently mentioned as necessary, ambitious and time bound objectives to strive towards as well as influential tools for measuring impact and progress. 80% of agreements reference commitment to support existing targets set by local or regional leadership groups such as local authorities, mayoral offices, and task forces.

While the majority focus on adhering to existing targets, less than half of agreements (40%) reference the importance of having individual institutional net zero targets. It is important, however, to note that climate priorities and commitments may only be available in other institutional documentation and not necessarily highlighted within published CUAs.



## Encouraging community involvement

The [UPP Foundation](#) suggests that for universities to be truly civic, they must understand, support, and engage the community they operate in. Sharing expertise and raising awareness of the climate crisis within their community is incredibly important. Some agreements take this a step further and promise to change community behaviours. For example, [Universities for Nottingham](#), the joint CUA created by University of Nottingham and Nottingham Trent University, mentions that *'the Universities will develop joint programmes to change behaviour across our staff, students and community, ensuring the lessons learnt are passed on to all in the region'*.

Other agreements also acknowledge the influence they have on their own student and alumni body and plan to capitalise on this in various ways such as: *'creating programmes of engaged research and activism, including student and graduate-led projects'* ([Keele Deal Recovery](#)) and addressing it in teaching by looking to *'ensure that our institutions fully embed the low carbon knowledge and training required for students to be work-ready for their future careers'* ([Greater Manchester Universities Civic University Agreement](#)).

# Specific climate challenges and solutions

Many universities highlight the significance of sustainable infrastructure across distinct geographical tiers:

## within their campus

*'Invest in low and zero-carbon infrastructure (physical and digital), building design and energy management practices within the University campuses'*  
([Universities for Nottingham](#))

## within their locality

*'support transformation of the city of Exeter's infrastructure'*  
([University of Exeter CUA](#))  
&  
*'support the development of a sustainable travel and transport strategy for Lincoln'* ([joint CUA by The University of Lincoln & Bishop Grosseteste University](#))



## within their region

*'explore potential for a broader sustainable innovation zone in North Staffordshire'*  
([Keele Deal Recovery](#))

Some universities use their CUAs to acknowledge that decisive action needs to be taken in multiple areas, for example by: *'focusing not only on our physical estate but also on our student offer, supply chains, sustainable travel, and research leadership'* ([Sheffield Hallam University CUA](#)) and considering initiative around *'reducing waste and recycling, [...] tree-planting schemes in appropriate locations and trial the establishment of wildlife meadows'* ([joint CUA by The University of Lincoln & Bishop Grosseteste University](#)).

Keele University reference the global food chain challenges raised by the Covid-19 pandemic and looks to utilise its expertise and leadership in the area with one of its objectives being *'to develop a local programme of engaged research on food security to inform local and national responses to sustainable production, environmental stewardship, food equity and access to good food'*. ([Keele Deal Recovery](#))



# Civic Impact Framework

The Civic Impact Framework (CIF) is devised to inform the design of universities' internal processes and strategies in the first instance, and can also be useful to enhance or assess existing climate action plans.

The framework gives universities a tool to enable them to engage in conversations with colleagues and partners about what a truly civic university might look like, and what the journey might involve. It aims to help universities ask the right questions about their civic activity. The better the data they can draw on, the more informed responses to these questions will be. By asking the questions below and gathering appropriate data, universities can start to develop locally appropriate metrics and indicators.

**In practical terms, this framework is envisaged as a discussion-starter and checklist, with six phases of progress, that can be applied across a range of institutional activities, either within one domain, such as environment, climate and biodiversity, or all together.**

## The six phases of progress for environment, climate and biodiversity

### 1) Mapping

where are we now?

Is our university on course to be carbon neutral in line with national and international commitments? What is our impact on biodiversity? Are there genuine links between our research and teaching and environmental responsibility? Are we eliminating waste?

### 2) Partnering:

where do we want to go, and with whom?

What is our vision of a sustainable university and who has informed it? Which partners will we work with to make it happen? Who outside the university is impacted by our activities and how will we ensure they bring environmental benefits? How will we work with our students to create the world they want?

### 3) Agreeing:

who will do what, and when?

Is our environmental vision and performance articulated at the highest level? Who will be responsible for ensuring our university sets an example for our city or region? How will they encourage and enthuse staff and students to play their part?



#### 4) Resourcing:

how are activities supported?

What resources are needed to embed environmental responsibility and improvement in all our activities? How will we ensure it is not an afterthought in planning and decision-making? How can we actively manage our investments to achieve environmental impact?

#### 5) Evaluating:

how are we doing?

What do we need to measure to ensure we are making genuine gains on carbon neutrality, biodiversity and wider environmental impacts? How do our activities align with the Sustainable Development Goals?

#### 6) Learning:

What will we change, and how?

How will we embed environmental learning and improvement in all we do, including teaching and research? How will we monitor and take action where we fall short? Are we supporting communities of practice that share learning regularly?

**The framework also provides illustrative indicators which showcase possible answers to these questions. To find more about the framework and explore all seven domains, their questions and indicators, [download it here](#).**

### Other useful tools and frameworks

#### Sustainable development

- The Times Higher Education (THE) Impact Rankings, based on performance against the UN Sustainable Development Goals, are [introduced here](#).

#### Environmental Sustainability

- The Environmental Association for Universities and Colleges (EAUC) has produced a '[sustainability leadership scorecard](#)' for universities and colleges designed to track institutions' environmental performance.

- The Climate Commission for Higher and Further Education Students and Leaders, supported by EAUC, the Association of Colleges, GuildHE and Universities UK, has produced a [Climate Action Toolkit](#).

- The Higher Education Policy Institute published its first ever report on climate change. [Beyond business as usual: Higher education in the era of climate change](#) outlines how universities and colleges can help lead the UK's strategy for tackling climate change.



#### Potential supporting data

- Carbon measurement
- HEBCE returns
- Board and senior leadership papers
- Estates and facilities plans
- Ecological audits
- Investment strategies

# Get involved

Universities play a leading role in mitigating and adapting to climate change, with many embedding environmental priorities at the heart of Civic University Agreements.

Our hope is that this report will stimulate conversations, inspire institutions starting out on their civic journey, and equip everyone with the tools to make a difference. However, if we are to create lasting and meaningful environmental change, there is much more we can all do. Help us by getting involved.

## Is your institution doing some interesting civic work to address climate change?

We are planning to share best practice across the network and would be interested in seeing your case studies, which can be submitted [here](#).

For CUA development support, events programme and much more, explore the Members' Area [here](#).

### Not sure where to start?

The Civic Impact Framework provides six phases of progress that you can use to kick off conversations and inform your institution's internal processes and strategies. Why not use the framework to begin your journey to creating a Civic University Agreement?

### Looking to revitalise your university's climate commitments?

Try developing a self-assessment of your current progress against the six phases of progress of the Civic Impact Framework's [environment, climate & biodiversity domain](#). Are there questions your institution struggles to address that could inform your next steps?

### In need of inspiration?

This report identifies several universities who are leading the way by making climate commitments a core part of their Civic University Agreements. Gather inspiration by exploring the CUAs highlighted in pages 4-7 of this report.



# Next steps

This report is an initial review of the progress made by members of the Civic University Network on addressing the climate domain in their CUAs. The network is committed to supporting universities across the UK in reaching their climate action and sustainability goals, through sharing best practice, connecting conversations, and supporting universities through initiatives like the development and delivery of CUAs.

Over the next year the Network will:



Share members' best practice in addressing climate issues, using the [Members' Area](#)

Develop and deliver opportunities for engagement on climate topics via online/in person events



Support members to utilise the [Civic Impact Framework](#)

Support members to develop CUAs which include climate as a key priority



## Get in touch



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